What's Eating You?

by TheSpazzBot

Summary

As far as accepting one’s death goes, Eren Jaeger thinks he’s doing pretty well. Except for the fact that he should have turned days ago. Why was his bite healing, when he had witnessed several others’ turn them into the soulless monsters now consuming the streets? It doesn’t help that he has been separated from everyone he could call a friend, only to be found by a mysterious group of survivors. Including one who has a personality not far off from the creatures he is trying so hard to avoid.

Great.

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Also titled, "Sarcastic Eren Is My Reason for Living".

Notes

Please note that this is NOT a spoiler free fic. There will be manga/anime spoilers (including those from A Choice with No Regrets).
Chapter 1

It has been seven days. A whole week has passed since that bastard took a chunk out of my forearm. I’m confused; it never takes this long to turn. This shitstorm has been raging long enough for me to discover the effects of a bite. So why wasn’t I dead or, more accurately, undead?

I’ve been spending the past seven days holed up in some flimsy, wooden shack that I still can’t believe I found. It even has a cot. That’s right, a cot. Yuck it up, Kirstein, because I might be royally fucked as far as my humanity goes, but at least I’m going out comfortably. To be honest, I can’t even recall the last time I slept on anything that didn’t leave my back rebuking my every move the morning after. My luck has been shit since ever since I can remember. I never won any radio contests, not once did I get out of a speeding ticket, and I most definitely never found that missing twenty in my pants pocket. So why Mr. Higher Power decided to grant me a break during the zombie apocalypse, I’ll never know.

I have a gun, but I snub the idea of putting a bullet in my skull. It is not the right time. Somewhere down the line, I made a deal with myself that if I was bitten then I would wait until I knew I wouldn’t wake up once my eyes closed to end it all. Well, wake up human. On the second day, I almost did it. I had the barrel against my forehead, right between my eyes, but somehow I knew it wasn’t time.

I refuse to leave this hovel. It’s going against all that zombie survival guide shit, I know. But, honestly, how far did Max Brooks’ advice really get me? I look down at the teeth impressions on my arm.

Oh, right.

I should have listened to Jean.

Wait, what?

Fuck, maybe I am dying.

Maybe it’s the isolation that’s making me delirious, but, truthfully, I’m probably at that final stage of grief. Acceptance, I think. Yeah, I’m blaming all this misplaced remorse on that because fuck Jean.

I should have stayed with the group, and not tried to play hero. There were a lot of things I should have done, but I couldn’t just stand there and turn my back just to let another friend become… Shit.

I allow a hollow chuckle to escape my lips because look at all the good that came out of my one man escapade. Shit, Marco is dead and probably munching on a human buffet. And I’m just waiting patiently for death that sure is taking its sweet time.

I feel like this should be bothering me more than it is. But I can’t even find it in myself to be upset anymore. I guess numb is the word for it. And, to be honest, the reality that I would not see my friends again had already sunk in three days ago.

Acceptance.

Closing my eyes, I lean my head against the wooden wall. Perhaps, I should just go to sleep. Take a
little reprieve from the hell on Earth. The more I think about it, the more appealing the idea sounds. But I suppose I should try to be a little rational considering that the barricade I have set up against the door only consists of a wooden chest that had been emptied long before I got here. Basically, it is shit fortification. Well, I guess that shit fortification has held up since I arrived, but does it really matter anymore? I am as good as dead with this bite.

I mean, no one logical will believe me if I say I am immune. Hell, I don't even believe myself. *Immune.* Scratch what I said before, I am delirious.

From the window, a small stream of sunlight reflects onto my face. I slowly open my eyes and grimace as I glance down my arm. The bite has scabbed over in a yellowish hue, but the skin surrounding the mark hasn't lost its flaming red tint. The wound is still tender as I run my fingers over the abused skin. The gash alone doesn't even look normal. Well, as abnormal as a week old zombie bite can look. In all the cases I had seen, it only took around six hours, sometimes less, for a bite to start deteriorating the surrounding skin. So, why was mine healing?

I suppose it wouldn't be that far off to assume that maybe the bite is just reacting abnormally to my skin. I'll probably be moaning and aching for guts in a few hours.

I let out a deep breath that I hadn't realized I'd been holding. Did I really want to die? Well, no. What I wanted was to be back with Mikasa, Armin, and the rest of the crew. Wait, no that wasn't it. What I wanted was for everything to go back to the normalcy that everyone took for granted. To be able to complain about trivial things, like my mother asking if I remembered to put on deodorant, or Shadis sending Jean and me to detention. Again.

You don't know what you have until it's gone.

*Wait, no shit that was cheesy.*

I have never been poetic or profound, and now doesn't seem like the most opportune time to start. But, hell, if there was ever a need for romanticism, I suppose it would be during the dawn of the dead.

Jesus, this is a mess. I run a hand through my brunette hair that is always in a constant bedhead state. Catching a glimpse at the ugly pattern on my arm, I wonder how the hell I got out of there with only one bite. My luck obviously had gone through some sort of christening right before the end of the world. Scoffing, I think about how insane it sounds to be thankful for this. For this practical death sentence. But I guess it doesn't hurt to be optimistic.

My stomach releases an angry howl, and I realize I haven't eaten today. I have been trying to ration what is left of my food supply, which is, frankly, not much to begin with. But I don't want to risk leaving the shack only to come back to find my recent address filled with unwanted visitors. Because let’s be honest:

*People aren't nice during apocalypses.*

I groan as a reach for my backpack sitting next to me. Pulling it across my lap, I jerk down the zipper of the front pocket to pull out a plastic container of peanut butter. I turn the lid until the sweet, sweet smell of expired peanut bliss fills the air. This beauty had been my pride and joy of our last supply run, and I have been nursing it for a good two weeks, savoring every taste. All good things come to an end, *poetry bullshit,* and from the looks of the container, this is going to be the last dance I will share with my dear friend, peanut butter.

As I dig my fingers into the vat to swipe up the last bit, I murmur to the can, “You may be gone in
body, but you will always be in my heart, friend.” With that, I take my last taste.

I shouldn’t be forming emotional bonds to peanut butter, dammit. I think the lack of seeing a human form that didn't want to eat me for a week has taken a toll on my mental stability. What would everyone think of me right now? I sigh as I think about the look of concern that would be undoubtedly plastered on Mikasa’s face. I close my eyes for a second time, trying to will away the horrified expressions my friends had worn as we were separated.

Moaning, I lift my body from the floor and head over to the cot. The first night I spent here, I realized I probably shouldn't have put such a high expectation on this thing feeling the least bit relaxing. It is better than the floor, although not by much.

I plop down, and the cot’s springs scream at me.

“Fuck off,” I mumble. I feel like at any moment all these inanimate objects may start replying back to me. And I decide that when that happens, I am either full blown crazy, or this is a really fucked up Disney movie. I would want to go with the latter, but truthfully, my good luck can only run so deep.

It sounds cliché, but I did not realize how tired I was until I fully reclined onto the cot. What usually evades me for hours closes around me in mere seconds, and I’m gone.

“Eren, did you remember to put on deodorant?”

Annoyed, I poke my head into the kitchen and look at my mother. “The answer is always the same, mom.” She shoots me a glare, which I bounce back to her with an eye roll. “Yes, Jesus.” I constantly have to remind her that I am, much to her disbelief, eighteen years old; and, for the most part, I can take care of myself. Of course, it falls on deaf ears. She may agree that, yes, I am eighteen, but that’s only because I have the birth certificate to prove it. I know she will never admit that I just might able to function without her assistance.

I take a seat on one of the tacky bar stools my mother refuses to give away. I stopped trying to convince her when she brought up the point that I once kept a turkey sandwich under my bed for over a year.

“Where’s Mikasa? She’s usually up before you.”

“Ah, she was up late studying for some exam,” I tell her as I bring my elbows to rest atop the counter. And wait. Exam? Study?

Oh shit.

My mother picks up on my grimace. “You didn't study, did you?” I don’t understand why she even asks. It’s practically a rhetorical question by now. I bang my head on the counter top. Fucking. Distracting. YouTube. Cat. Videos. I could say I forgot, but dammit if Mikasa didn't remind me twenty times last night about the test; so, that excuse is out. I would have failed even if I did study. Shadis fucking hates me, I have a feeling it has to do with the fact that I pointed out his lack of eyebrows on the first day.

Before I can even grace my mother’s question with its obvious answer, Mikasa magically appears in the equally tacky bar stool beside me.

“Good morning, Mikasa. I was just asking Eren about a test?” Mikasa turns to me with a face full of
disappointment before she shakes her head. And, hey, it's not my fault that my mentality likes to zone out useless information like 'test' and 'study'. If anything, I'm still playing those damn videos.

She turns back to my mother, “It’s not going to be impossible to pass if you didn't study. I just wanted to ensure a good grade.” My mother smiles warmly at Mikasa, and then turns to me, anger ebbing into something that appears to be stress.

“Make sure you both come home after school today.” My mother looks at me expectantly for an affirmation that I heard her. She’s been using this technique since I learned how to become a little smartass. It was one of her ways of rooting out my future excuses of ‘not listening’ or ‘not paying attention’. This woman literally had me pegged the day I was born.

I meet her gaze and nod wearily, adding a conformation, “Hmph.” Her eyes narrow, but a small hint of a smile graces her lips. It’s probably because I’m putting up less of a fight than usual. I give her a tiny smirk of my own, even though I know she realizes I am less than thrilled of having to spend the evening with him.

She sighs, “Eren, I know that—”

I cut her off, “No, mom. Really, it’s fine. I’m fine. He’s fine. We are all fine.” I give her a genuine smile to try and reinforce my statement, but she knows me too well.

“Anyone who say fine that many times is not, indeed, fine, Eren,” She deadpans.

“Okay, fine.” I emphasize it just to be a brat. “I’m good.” My mother huffs, knowing that’s all she’ll get from me. She should be grateful, because usually these conversations do not earn her than an occasional grunt from me.

“Bye, mom.” I sigh and make my way to the front door, picking up my backpack along the way. Mikasa gathers her belongings and rushes to meet me. I throw one last look at my mother as she waves us off before opening the door and heading out to meet up with Armin.

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I see Armin standing at the bus stop corner. It was where Mikasa and I first met him, several years ago when we still rode the bus to school. Before our senior year, we came to a collective decision that the school bus was a piece of shit and that we were going to be seniors, dammit. Our bus days were over.

In hindsight, we probably should have probably waited to become bus revolutionaries until one of us had a car. My rebellious nature praised my actions, but every weekday, my legs were dying a silent death with each step.

I needed to start working out.

We decided that in order to stick it to the man even further, we would continue to meet up at the old bus stop. Truthfully, it’s because the bus stop was the easiest place to meet up, but we liked to believe it was because we were making a statement.

“Eren! Mikasa!” Armin yells gleefully. I was always jealous of how optimistic Armin always was in the mornings, or in general. I still don’t understand how we became such close friends considering I can be quite the asshole.

“Hey, Armin.” I nod. Mikasa smiles replying with a similar greeting.
“Did you guys study for the test?” Armin grins when Mikasa sends me a knowing look, inadvertently answering his question.

I groan, pushing a hand through my already disheveled hair, “Please, Armin. Don’t remind me.” He just giggles in response as we start our path to the school.

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We were halfway to the place some liked to call our high school when we hear it. It was a low pitch groan. I turn a questioning glance towards Armin and Mikasa, but they seem just as confused. We walk a few more steps when the groan reenters our ear waves, this time sounding more desperate.

I look at my friends, “I think someone’s hurt. Should we call someone?”

Armin glances at me warily, “I don’t know, we should probably see what has happened before we call anybody. Anyways, your dad’s a doctor, Eren. If it’s nothing serious, I’m sure you could help.”

I wince at the mention of my dad, “You act like he has actually attempted to be in my life.” I snap as I step closer to the noise. Armin flinches at my tone, but continues following behind me. Suddenly, an awful smell began to assault the airwaves. I hold back a gag, as I turn to judge my friends’ expressions. They both look as disgusted with the smell as I am. Mikasa exchanges a worried glance with me before I break eye contact to push forward.

Bright specks of red begin to litter the grey sidewalk. My eyes widen as the red begins to grow larger and larger with each forward step. The groan was extremely close now, all we had to do was turn the corner and…

Oh my God.

He is eating him. No. He is fucking devouring him. The man’s arms are painted with red up to the elbows, as he continues to grab handfuls of the victim’s innards. Holy shit, what am I watching? I am too entranced by the gruesome scene to even look to regard if my friends held the same hypnotized expression. I cannot tell if the culprit of the groaning was the one currently feasting or the unfortunate prey. The groans coming from the man consuming the flesh were animalistic. Terrifying. I let out a gasp, and the man slowly turns his head to face his audience.

Part of his jaw is missing. Strings of muscle and nerves hang loosely from his face. Despite his obvious injuries, he does not appear to be in pain. If he is, the thought seems far from his mind. Right now, the only thing I see in his eyes is the desire to kill. To eat. When he starts to stand, I grab Mikasa and Armin’s hands and drag them back to way we had came.

No one says a word.

We just run.

Once we stop, we are back at the bus stop. Armin’s face is streaked with salty tears, and Mikasa looks almost as blank as when she first discovered her parents were dead.

“I-I don’t know what that was. I d-don’t know what to do.” Armin stutters through his tears. I am still in a state of disbelief, and I simply nod my head.

“We are going to go home, make sure your mom is okay, and then we will call police.” It takes me a second to realize Mikasa is directing this towards me. Again, I simply nod my head.

“Stay with us Armin, I don’t want you going off alone with something like that roaming the streets.”
Armin looks ready to question Mikasa, he did have his grandfather back home. However, her glare was not one open to negotiation. “We can check on your grandfather after, I promise.” Armin seems to have descended into the same mental state as me, nodding his head at Mikasa. She tugs on both of our hands as she rushes us back home.

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There wasn’t just one monster. They are everywhere, feeding on anyone unlucky enough to wander into the reach of their claws. I recognize one of them; she was one of those neighbors I only saw on rare occasions at the grocery store. Our conversations never lasted longer than a cordial greeting. Now, she is covered in red, in human blood. One of her hands seems mangled, twisting in a direction I know should not be humanly possible. She is standing a few houses down in the middle of the chaos, hunched over, and breathing heavily. Even from this distance, I can see the bloodlust clouding over her eyes.

Somehow, we successfully maneuver our way back home without an incident. When Mikasa releases our hands, Armin is still a mess, blue eyes lined with tears, and I am still unresponsive. Mikasa sighs, and begins to push one of our large bookcases in front of the door. She was always so calm and collected, even in a situation like this. I look at her with jealously, wishing that I could be blank. At least for today.

I turn to hear the thumping of shoes running down stairs only to see my mother frantically glancing us over. Her eyes are wide with panic, and I know she has a million questions she wants to ask us, but one stands proudly above them all.

Mikasa, as observant as ever, catches on to this quickly, and replies, “We are all fine.” There’s that word again. Fine. And I immediately despise it, purging it from my vocabulary; because no, Mikasa, we are not fine. We just witnessed the genocide of the neighborhood, we are not all fine. My emotions are obviously being plastered across my face, because my mother shoots me a worried glance. Again, I nod. Disagreeing to Mikasa’s lie would only cause my mother more anxiety. And if she starts to worry more then I’m afraid she might just keel over right here.

“We…we need to leave.” My mother is shaken, she must have seen just as much, if not more, as us. The three of us follow her to the garage where she starts the car with a shaking hand.

On the road, my mother tries to skillfully avoid the creatures, but to no avail. Several of them make attempts at the car, and mother ends up hitting some with the full force of a 2003 Lexus. She is silently crying as I watch her from the passenger seat. Mikasa and Armin are huddled as tight as possible in the back, clenching to each other like a lifeline.

We pass the road to Armin’s house. He doesn’t say anything. He just grasps Mikasa’s hand tighter. I hear her, almost inaudibly, whisper, “I’m sorry.”

It all happens so fast, I almost think that it doesn’t happen at all. Everything is in slow motion as another vehicle collides with the side of our car. We are spinning, spinning so fast that it doesn’t seem real. Almost like I’m in a reverse time warp and I’m going back in time. Back before I saw that monster. The car slows to a stop, and I realize that the time warp failed. We are all still in a nightmare. A bright red stripe now decorates my mother’s forehead. She is still gripping the wheel, white-knuckled. I turn to see Mikasa and Armin are no worse for wear. A car accident really isn’t the worse thing that’s happened today.

Suddenly, Mikasa’s is charge again, and I don’t think that she ever left the position. She is ushering us out of the damaged car like she’s done this a million times. Once we are out of the car, it is like we
have stepped into a warzone.

“Shit.” My mother whispers. I don’t think she wants me to see her in such disarray. But I don’t care, we have Mikasa, so mother doesn’t have to be the strong one.

We skirt along the sidewalk, avoiding the crazed eyes of the monsters in the street. I don’t know where we are going. I don’t think any of us know. And, suddenly, this seems like the dumbest plan I’ve ever allowed myself to be a part of. Even dumber than the time Connie and I decided that if we skipped class, Shadis couldn’t give us the homework.

I stop.

For a moment, I think they are going to just continue without me. Armin notices first.

His voice still thick with tears, “Eren, what are you doing?” The other two turn and look on with questioning glares.

My mother speaks, “What do think you are doing, Eren?” Desperation coats her voice; it is silently begging me to abandon whatever plight I have decided to join. When I don’t reply, she starts again, “What are you doing?” This time, she raises her voice, similar to the tone she takes when she catches me eating in bed.

The groan is what alerts me that they are there. My mother’s eyes are what confirm it. She screams my name, but it gets lost in translation. I’m currently hypnotized by the seven or eight monsters that seem intent on killing me. Their eyes are feral as they glance at me. I try to show no fear, but they are inching closer by the second, and I can’t move. Frozen.

My mother along with Mikasa and Armin have gathered closer to me, and I want to tell them what a mistake that was; because now we are just one large target instead of four small ones. The monsters have made a half circle around us, cornering their prey. My mother makes the decision before we can even stop her. She is throwing us out before the circle surrounds us completely. Before she can even retract her arms, they have grabbed her.

And she screams.

My eyes spring open, wide awake, only to be met with a familiar groan and an inconsistent banging at the door. My eyes still blurry and my heart still racing, I glance to the door.

Fucking walkers. I praise Mr. Higher Power for allowing me to become a light sleeper once this whole thing started. Or maybe he’s just a dick who gives me nightmare about the past. Hmm, it’s something to think about, but I don’t really want to screw up my luck yet. So, for now I am going with good guy, and hopefully, he’ll forgive me for thinking the wiser.

I guess I should take care of Loudmouth outside, but I probably have four bullets to my name and a really blunt hunting knife. Perfect. Ah, it’s better sooner than later, I suppose. As I get up to go impale the zombie with my safety scissors, I hear another noise. This is the most terrifying sound of all.

People.

And not the mindless ones.

I have tried to tell myself on multiple occasions that this assumption is wrong, but unfortunately, I
I have had more girlfriends than right assumptions. And shit, shit, shit they are fucking close. I don’t know how many there are but I can hear more than one voice. My chances of survival are feeling slimmer by the instant, and I’m starting to wonder if I should just go down fighting. You know, take as many with me as possible? That seems valiant, a lot more so than just being shot in the back of the skull.

But I want to live. For the first time in seven days, I want to see the sunrise again. I’m glad it’s taken an I-am-going-to-die experience to finally embrace life, but dammit, I want to survive.

I roll under the cot, knowing full and well that at the right angle, they can probably see me without obstruction. I’ve been lucky so far, right?

Maybe they’ll just leave.

That hope dies along with the walker that was so eloquently banging on my door. I am almost prompted to get out and thank them, but something tells me that would not go over well. I hear the door being pushed against the empty chest, and if I die in the next few minutes, the only question I want answered is how the hell that dumbass zombie didn't get in here because, damn.

Shit fortification, remember, Eren?

Ah, fuck my sarcastic conscience.

I am startled out of my daze of self-hatred when my eyes spot something on the floor. My fucking backpack complete with an empty peanut butter container. Fuck every sentimental thing I ever said to you, peanut butter. It was all a lie. Because, if they weren’t looking for someone then, I can bet that they sure are looking for someone now.

There seems to be only one person scanning the inside of my hovel, and I am starting to think that since, yes, I am obviously delirious, that I was hearing things when I thought that this was a group, not a lone ranger.

I slide my hand around the handle of my knife and slowly pull it out from my waistband. This is stupid, I should just let him or her or it go and carry on with my life as a hobbit in metaphorical peace.

Of course, right as the heavens start practically reserving me a spot for my kind soul, this asshole starts rifling through my backpack. Whatever. I tell myself I can take someone being nosy, because in that situation, I would be the same.

What I can’t take, however, is when this dickhead pulls out the wallet from my backpack and starts pulling out the pictures located inside to give them a once over. I don’t even care if the pictures are put back, I am going to kill this motherfucker with my blunt ass knife. I crawl closer to the edge of the bed, about to roll out and start my life as a sociopath when someone else enters the room.

Dammit, shit, fucking, dammit.

I don’t know whether I should be happy or upset that this person practically saved me from mentally unhinging, but right now pissed is the only feeling I want to resonant with.

“Oh, look at that, this is someone’s home.” A female voice says, with enthusiasm.

“This isn’t a home, it’s a piece of shit.” A male replies, voice dark, almost cryptic. My back is pressed as close to the wall as possible, because I am now one hundred percent sure my knife would
not give either of them a paper cut.

“Ah, I think it’s rather homey. In an apocalyptic sense.” I can practically feel the optimism oozing out of her voice. Apparently so can Mr. Grumpy, because he is quick to reply with a derogatory statement about the woman and zombies.

She sighs, “Well, if you’re done, then I think we are going to head out. There is nothing really useful here, besides that backpack. But I don’t feel right leaving someone defenseless. You know Erwin doesn’t like us lingering somewhere for too long.”

He replies with a “Tch.” And I hear the woman’s footsteps echo as she leaves the hut. After a couple minutes of silence, the man finally starts to make a move to exit. I let out that breath I’d been holding. He stops at the doorway, turns and walks forward until the tips of his boots barely skirt under the bed.

Shit.

And, suddenly, he speaks.

“I can see you, asshole.”

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to write sarcastic Eren and dammit I did.
I loved writing this, so I hope you like reading it! (: 

Thanks for reading!

Tumblr:
http://fuzzyporcupine.tumblr.com

If you spot any grammar mistakes, let me know!

FANMIX
ALL FANART
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

I hate chapter summaries, because I think they spoil parts of the chapter soooo...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

My first reaction is not to speak. I mean, maybe he is just as delusional as me.

“I said,” I hear the hammer of a gun being pulled back, “I can see you, asshole.”

Wishful thinking my ass.

Well, this is where I die. Heaven, please disregard all the shit I just mentioned about murdering this man with a blunt knife.

He clears his throat, and I take that as an indication that maybe I’ve been praying too long. When I finally come out, the back of my skull is politely introduced to the barrel of a gun.

Facing the ground, I ask, “So, are you going to shoot me?” I can’t help the slight tremor that radiates throughout my voice. I wasn’t expecting this. I specifically stayed in this shitty hobbit hole in order to avoid contact with the intelligent side of the human race. I thought that’s how it worked. Or maybe I should have read that zombie survival guide more carefully.

Either way, the fact that I am asking this man if he is going to shoot me is pointless. Of course he is going to shoot me, I have been bit. That’s rule number one of zombie survival. You aren’t supposed to take any risks.

“That depends,” the man begins, “what’s your name?” He obviously got as far into the book as I did.

I attempt to lift my head to reach his gaze. If I am going to die, then dammit, I want to know who killed me. Surprisingly, he brings the gun to rest under my chin, allowing me to meet his eyes and holy shit.

If there is a man on earth made for this apocalyptic tour de force it is definitely this guy. Hell, I bet he killed people before it became a trend. Grey eyes tapered into a narrowed glare, pointed jaw tightened, and knuckles white against the black metal of his gun, this man looks like someone you would meet in one of those dark alleys your parents always warned you to stay away from.

I stare at him as I try to think of something witty to say. I don’t want to die, but fuck if I am going to let some asshole dictate my final moments of life. I meet his stare, as overcast eyes bare no emotion besides maybe annoyance.

Gathering my courage, I answer him, “You should know, considering you went through my fucking wallet.” I want to go out with a bang, and I am 99% sure this guy is five seconds away from killing me whether I sate his curiosity or not.

His eye twitches.
I change my mind; I am 0.01 seconds from having my brains splattered alongside my ex-bestie, peanut butter.

“Tch,” he grits his teeth, a truly murderous expression forming on his already intimidating features, “I was trying to be polite, you fucking twat.”

I raise my eyebrow, because I am honestly confused. “I think your definition of polite might need some work.”

“I didn’t kill you. I think that’s pretty fucking courteous,” he deadpans. I scoff, shaking my head. Fuck this guy. I don’t know how the people with him haven’t already left him behind. Yeah, fuck this guy.

Prick.

“Thank you, Prince Charming,” I snort.

He lifts the gun to my temple, my obvious sarcasm being lost on him. “Name?”

I glare at him with what I hope is an expression of pure hatred, but I know my face has never been able to pull off that whole ‘about to murder your family’ guise. I see a hint of amusement in his eyes as he internally laughs at me. It’s gone as soon as it appears, though, and he is back to perfecting the art of mimicking a fucking corpse. Shit, this is obviously not the kind of guy who will let bygones be bygones. He looks like the only thing he is about to budge is his finger on the trigger, so I swallow my pride.

“Eren,” I sigh. That is all he is getting. The aftertaste of my name already feels bitter in my mouth. His eyes narrow, and thankfully, lose the homicidal afterglow.

“Hmm, what are you doing exactly, Eren?” He says my name like it is poison on his lips, and I am not exactly sure how I should answer this. I know how I want to answer it, but I think that remark would probably place me back at the top of this asshole’s hit list. The witty quip sticks in my throat; but before I can push it back down where it belongs, it rises with fervor through my vocal cords.

“I think that’s pretty obvious, don’t you? Unless you’re one part blind, other part stupid. From what I can tell, I’m currently being held at gunpoint by some dickhead who, by the way, is far less intimidating than he looks.” I shouldn’t have said that.

Holy shit. I shouldn’t have said that.

He is fucking seething. I haven’t seen someone this mad since Jean stole food off Sasha’s plate. I am just waiting for the steam to start pouring from his ears.

No, that’s a lie.

I’m waiting for the darkness. It’s coming soon; I can tell he is going to pull the trigger any second now. So, I close my eyes and wait for oblivion, hoping Mr. Higher Power remembers the time I bought that homeless guy a burger.

Suddenly, I am ripped up by my shirt collar and thrown onto the cot. I am disoriented. I was expecting to die, and…

Oh, wait, here we go.

His hands find purchase around my neck, and he starts to squeeze.
Hard.

The way he is trying to take me out sickens me. It is so violent and immoral. I should be used to these types of actions by now, but fuck, I am not used to this. Although, I am giving myself a mental gold star for knowing this guy was a fucking murderer before shit went down. Because that is what he is doing to me at this very moment, he is murdering me. The apocalypse has made men do a lot of things; but this, the way he is watching the life seep from my eyes, is not learned behavior. But I guess it's my fault. I've never known when to shut up, and mom always said my mouth would be my downfall.

Mom.

My fight or flight instinct has apparently taken a vacation, because no matter how much I struggle, his grip just increases.

My eyes begin to roll back into my skull, and Mikasa’s face fills my vision. I am treated to scenes of her trying to teach me the self-defense she’s learned from her classes. Of her showing me how to take down an intruder who attacks from behind. Of her demonstrating how to escape a chokehold. Of her displaying how to handicap an attacker who is attempting to strangle you.

Wait, what?

I am unsure if this is my life flashing before my eyes, or if it’s some bizarre omen from Mr. Higher Power. Because, I swear, my life did not just consist of having my ass being handed to me by Mikasa and her damn ninja skills. Either way, I am confused with the information provided. And I am supposed to use those moves? I might need to hit rewind, because I was spending more time bewildered than paying attention. Classic Jaeger, what can I say?

By the way, am I dead yet?

After the Mikasa Show ends, my vision turns jet black. I am going to assume I am dead, and this is purgatory. Well, dammit.

Fuck you, Mr. Higher Power. You were about as useful as third nipple, and I wash my hands of you, good sir.

I close my eyes, not wanting to deal with this suffocating darkness. I go to cross my arms in front of my chest in order prove that, no, I am not eighteen anymore, I’m twelve. But I realize there is something grabbing my right wrist, forcing my arm away from my body.

I open my eyes.

He is looking intently down at me, black hair disheveled, breathing heavily. I stare up at him wide-eyed, because now I am certain that Mr. Higher Power was a little more pissed than I once believed.

This must be what Hell is. I am being forced to spend an eternity reliving my death, and looking into the icy, grey eyes of my killer.

Dammit.

I wait for his hands to take place on my neck again; I am not even going to fight it this time. But his eyes continue to pierce me, seemingly searching my features for some kind of answer. He begins to shift his eyes from my face to my arm, looking as if he is putting together a puzzle that is missing a piece.
What the fuck is going on?

I don’t understand what’s happening. Where is my everlasting suffering and all that shit? I have been lied to dammit. This Hell thing was just a rouse Mrs. Springer told me to keep me from hiding her lawn gnomes in the bushes.

Suddenly, the man speaks, “What happened to you?” It seems strained, like he can’t believe what he is asking. Well, you and me both, buddy, because these vague, cryptic questions aren’t necessarily helping me out.

He can obviously tell that I’m not following him. Rolling his eyes, he once again directs his gaze to my arm, more specifically, my forearm.

Oh, that.

But, wait, why should I care about the bite? I’m dead. What is he going to do? I obviously look smug, and my impotence to form an answer to his question has him (somehow) further pissed off. He roughly grabs my chin with his free hand, and he jerks my face towards the bite.

“This! You’re fucking bit, but you’re not…” He releases my chin, so I can turn my attention towards his face. “You’re not dead. I… You should be dead! What the fuck is wrong with you?” He still has my wrist in his hand, and he has resorted to shaking the limb, using it to punctuate every word.

What can I say? I don’t even know if this is real, or just some fucked up part of Hell that is offering me a fake chance at redemption. So, I don’t say anything.

He breathes in harshly, ready to make another verbal attack, but stops, suddenly. I must look petrified. I’ve been told my wide eyes tremble when I am scared, and he is looking directly into them. My fear seems to be cooling his fury, slowly but surely. It is only when his anger has pacified that I realize he is straddling me.

Yes, this is Hell. Mrs. Springer was right.

Something snaps. I start thrashing underneath his weight. “Let me go!” I don’t care how juvenile I sound. I want to be as far from the man as humanly possible.

And damn. If the gods were taking bets on who would last the shortest in Hell, I would definitely be the number one pick.

He tightens his hold on both my wrists. “Stop fucking struggling, dumbass!” He demands, all his former anger restored. I’m out of breath, and I don’t have the energy to keep fighting. So, I just let go.

Relax. Do those breathing exercises Mikasa told you about. Just stop fucking thinking about the shitty situation you currently inhabit.

When he realizes I am going to cooperate, his hands loosen their grip, but his face does not soften.

“Answer my question.” I look at him, then out the window.

Wait.

“Where are your friends?” I ask. He laughs, it’s dry and humorless.

“Answer my fucking question.” The way he says it seems final. Like I am a caged animal with no
way out, and he is the keeper. There is only one road, his, and I have to follow it. And I hate him for it.

“I don’t know.” It’s honest, and I hope that he can tell. I actually don’t want to go another round twenty questions with this asshat.

Surprisingly, he seems to accept that answer, vague as it is. I am shocked. This seems way too easy. I almost want to question it, but, for once, I stop my mouth from working faster than my brain. I am not a glutton for punishment by any means, and I don’t want to give this asshole reason to think otherwise.

He gives me one last piercing glare before sliding off me. I don’t know what I’m expecting to happen now. Obviously, I would like to be left alone. I can go back to self-medicating with inanimate objects. On the other hand, something tells me this was just the beginning, that this guy is far from finished with me.

Why wouldn’t he be? He unintentionally discovered I was immune, dying slower, whatever it was. If this apocalypse was a chess game, he just hit checkmate. Of course, he could also still be pissed and decide to shoot me. Believe me, I do not put that past this guy.

He stands in front of the doorway, arms crossed, expectant. I just keep a narrowed glare on him, even if the only thing it’s affecting is my own ability to see. He clears his throat for the second time today. No, I know where this is going, and fuck him.

It’s like he can read my thoughts, because his gaze darkens. I’m sure that stare would make anyone else think twice about disobeying, but I repeat, fuck him.

“Fuck you,” I finally say aloud. He doesn’t look angry, surprised, upset, nothing. He looks blank. Damn, he should meet Mikasa.

Apparently, his hourglass of patience dropped its last grain of sand, because before I know it he is crossing over to where I sit.

He grabs my flannel shirt collar, once again, and yanks me up. Now that I am standing on even ground with him, I realize I am taller than him. Not by a substantial amount, but enough to make me smirk in biological victory. But wait, this isn’t victory.

I’m being manhandled by a midget.

He catches my tiny grin fade, and if he knows what I was smirking about, he doesn’t comment. He pushes me next to my backpack, and I can only assume that means grab it.

I should struggle. I don’t want him to think he has won. And as soon as the thought crosses my mind, he yanks me down to speak into my ear, “I swear if you run, I will personally break every bone in your body, Eren. See if that heals.”

I shiver. Fucking asshole. I’m not going to run. I am broken, the bruises I feel circling my neck signify that. I bet they look like a collar, like a dog. It makes me cringe.

He grabs me by the upper arm and roughly escorts me through the doors of the shack.

“Christmas came early, assholes.” He speaks in a deadpan as he grabs my backpack from me. Only then, do I realize that his friends have been out here the entire time. One of them has the nerve to meet my gaze. He is a tall, blonde man whose face, even after this tragedy, looks somewhat hopeful. Hidden within his eyes is a swirl of compassion and sympathy. I can barely make them out, because
those same eyes are almost overpowered by the caterpillars resting above them. I continue to glare until he breaks eye contact to turn a disapproving gaze to the man still holding firmly onto my arm.

“Levi, what the fuck did you do to him?” The man’s eyes are trailing over the bruising flesh around my neck. I gasp at his words and involuntarily tense. I want to appreciate his concern. But I also feel like telling him to shove it backwards up his ass, because there is no way the sound of my almost murder did not reach his ears.

The man, Levi, regards him coolly, “You aren’t going to give two shits about what I did to him once you find out his big secret.” The air in my lungs freezes like it’s been exposed to something subzero.

“We heard.” It’s a different voice this time, calm and collected, but not cold. Controlled. I turn towards the noise only to face a man who has decided to run his eyes up and down my frame. I feel a little exposed, the man calculating in his inspection of me. I don’t look healthy, but that’s a given for everyone during Zombie Meltdown 101. I’m dirty, well, no.

I’m filthy.

The remnants of my last kill, via my handy dandy hunting knife, are still plastered across my shirt. A shirt that looks about as fucked as I am, because damn. Here’s to praying that these friends are a little more welcoming than Levi.

There is a woman, who I assume was the one who also entered the cabin, standing adjacent to the calm man. She is shaking. However, she does not look scared at all. She looks... excited? Almost like a dog that is waiting for a treat. Her gaze almost looks hungry. I can tell she’s holding herself back, but from what? From me?

Oh shit.

These people are cannibals. I refuse to believe otherwise. And they are going to eat me. Fuck. It makes sense, the reason they didn’t stop Levi from killing me. You know, I always thought the inhuman would be the ones consuming my flesh, but if these assholes want a piece then so be it. I hope whatever zombie virus running through my blood kills them slowly.

In my daze, I fail to notice that Levi has apparently taken it upon himself to start giving me a pat down.

There are a shit ton of things I have put up with today. Running out of peanut butter, losing my home, getting found by cannibals; but getting a pat down from the asshole that just attempted to send me to the other side is not going to be one of them.

He is no longer holding onto my arms, but skimming along my hips, checking me for weapons. I assume he thinks I’m no longer dangerous, that I am taking his former threat to heart. Well, this is the apocalypse, buddy. Everyone’s dangerous.

Viva La Fucking Vida, asshole.

I throw my elbow back as hard as I can, and somehow, I manage to connect with his head. His touch on me falters, and I can hear the others readying their weapons. I’m not going to get out of this, unless getting out means a ticket to Hades’ block party.

“Motherfucker!” I try to run, because I am beginning to think all the shit he pulled in the shack was just child’s play compared to what he is about to do to me. A boot clad foot collides with the middle of my back, and I am sent sprawling facedown. I attempt to lift my head, but a heavy boot takes residence on my neck, forcing my face into the dirt. I don’t know what to expect, but it is definitely
not rescue.

“Levi! Stop!” I recognize the blonde man’s voice, and suddenly, Levi is being pulled off me.

I roll over onto my back, staring up into the sky that is devoid of clouds. The branches of the trees surrounding me obscure the image a bit, but I like to think that it adds something beautiful to the other words plain, blue sea floating above me. The head that pops in to view, however, destroys the picture.

I spin up onto my knees, and attempt to go Houdini; but this guy is three steps ahead of me.

He grabs my flannel shirt collar, and pulls me back into him. I am whipped around onto my knees, strong hands grasping my shoulders, holding me in place.

“Look,” he starts, “we don’t want to hurt you.” And that is this most bullshit line I have ever heard from a group of cannibals, and I have met a group of cannibals before. At least they were straightforward, though. Disbelief is probably radiating from my face, Mikasa always told me I was easy to read. He picks up on it, and allows me a small smile. If he thinks that makes me feel any better, he is more wrong than Connie when he said McDonald’s used real chicken. “I know we have given you no reason to believe us,” he glances down at my neck, “but I swear, we mean you no harm.”

I don’t want to believe him. Every inch of me is saying, ‘Fuck this guy and his eyebrows.’, but some small part is giving into his testimony.

As I back out of his grip, the man slips from his crouch to stand beside me. Only then do I realize I am almost surrounded. The crazed woman stands on the other side of me, nervously jumping from one foot to the other. The calm man is next to her, looking inquisitively in my direction. And then there is Levi, who is now sporting a gash on the side of his forehead. Directly across from me, he is leaning against the shack, glaring daggers in my vicinity, his rage almost palpable from here.

The man notices the obvious discomfort Levi’s stare is bringing.

“He won’t hurt you, again. I promise. Levi will not touch you.”

Finally, Levi shifts. “Oh, fuck you, Erwin.”

I wish I could doubt Erwin’s promise, but the man says it with finality. Like he knows Levi will obey. I am starting to think maybe I am not the only one who is wearing a collar.

“You won’t touch him. I don’t care what little vendetta you now have. If what you said was true, then he could be the answer to this nightmare. And anyways, it was about time someone gave you a taste of your own medicine.” I am about to remind him that an elbow to the face does not quite measure up to an attempted murder, but Levi’s silence deafens my voice.

And just like that the attention is all back on me, as if it never left.

Erwin’s gaze looks anxious, like he is not sure what I will choose. But do I even have a choice? I don’t even know what my options are.

“Are you cannibals?”

Well, Eren, that was not going to be my first question of choice, but hey, why not?

The man laughs, like the idea that cannibals exist is as believable as mermaids and dragons. Well,
“No,” he chuckles, “no, we are most definitely not cannibals. Although, now that you mention it, Hanji does look a little hungry for you.” My gaze snaps back to the woman.

She is back to shaking erratically, the glasses on her face trembling under the quake. I am stuck on the line of afraid and concerned.

It’s like my stare has lit a flame underneath her. “I’m just so intrigued! How did this happen? Did it hurt? How long has it been? Did—”

“Hanji.” Levi’s voice silences her immediately. I would say he wanted to spare me the barrage of questions, but his glare towards me hasn’t softened in the slightest. The calm man puts a hand on her shoulder and gently squeezes. They must be used to these outbursts.

I am feeling uncomfortable, and not just because Levi’s eyes are shooting holes through my frame. I don’t like everyone’s stare on me, acting as if I am some bizarre circus show. And, suddenly, I’m back to feeling exposed and helpless.

“I know this is confusing, and you probably just want to go back to your…” Erwin grimaces as he glances at the hovel, “… home. But you could help a lot of people if what Levi says is true. Hell, you could save humanity.” I must look unconvinced because Hanji decides to add a title to try and gain my favor.

“Humanity’s Last Hope.” She beams, poking my shoulder teasingly. It’s catchy, I’ll give her that.

“Oi, shitty glasses,” Hanji looks curiously in Levi’s direction, “if I can’t touch, neither can you.” Levi glowers. I don’t know if he’s being serious, but he doesn’t seem like the type who would enjoy anything that involved switching facial expressions.

“And it’s a shitty name,” he adds. Ah, yes. He’s serious.

I am prepared to defend my new title, but an unmistakable groan suddenly emerges from the foliage. Shit.

I was beginning to wonder how long it was going to take them to find us, considering the ruckus we had been causing.

Levi pushes himself off the shack and casually strolls over to the walker. It is not a particularly dangerous one, considering one of its legs is no longer attached to its body. But it still has teeth.

The biter is crawling awkwardly on the ground, dragging its body with haggard arms. Those appendages reach hungrily for Levi, straining to obtain his flesh. Its teeth clamp down, over and over again, producing a sickening clack.

Levi raises his boot and brings it firmly down upon the lurker's head. Still moaning, the walker twitches faintly on the ground.

“Tch.” Levi, again, raises his boot and slams it into the already cracked skull. He keeps at his assault until the head is nothing more than a liquefied mush.

I guess I should be horrified at the display, but the apocalypse has a wicked way of making overkill seem almost normal. Shit, or maybe he is just psychotic.
Wait.

He is fucking crazy. He tried to murder me less than thirty minutes ago, if I am correct.

Levi whips out a handkerchief from his pants pocket and starts meticulously scrubbing at his shoe. I am hypnotized by the bizarre act. Then, I realize that his entire form is almost spotless. Besides a few smudges of dirt on his face, he looks clean. The word sounds strange in my mind. *Clean.* The chance of finding someone who is unsoiled is listed as far and not fucking happening in Armageddon.

So how?

I glance around to his friends, and I find they are also tidy. Washed is a better word for it. No greasy hair, no ripped clothes. Taken care of.

A hint of jealously pricks at the back of my skull, and I suddenly want someone to shelter me. I want what they have, if I am picturing it right.

*I need it.*

I feel a hand rest on my shoulder. I’m given a reassuring squeeze, an inaudible ‘It’s okay’. I turn my head to discover the owner of this hand when I notice my vision is blurry.

Wait, have I been crying?

Sure enough, I feel the warm streaks on my face. I clear my eyes to find Erwin still hasn’t removed his hand. I must look more pitiful than I thought.

Finally, he speaks, “Do you want to come with us to our camp?” It sounds promising, but I don’t know where *camp* is. I only know that these people are offering me a place at it. I now know my options.

1. Go with Erwin and the others to a place that obviously doesn’t filter its entry process.
2. Stay and play house with my empty peanut butter container while I wait for something better to come along.

I didn’t need to think twice.

“I’ll go.”

Chapter End Notes

EDIT: I AM TAKING COMMISSIONS. If you are interested, I have a post with the rules and more information listed on my Tumblr [here](#).

And so the story progresses....

Another 13 page chapter! Woooohooo! I hope this wasn't too dialogue heavy. And I made a Breaking Bad reference. Next chapter should be up soon, but I have finals these next two weeks. Also, just clarifying this is a slow build. Because I love slow builds (:)

Thanks for reading!
Tumblr:
http://fuzzyporcupine.tumblr.com/

FANMIX
ALL FANART
Erwin had a watch. I didn’t want to say I was jealous, but…

**HOLY FUCKING SHIT, ERWIN HAD A WATCH.**

And I was jealous.

*So jealous.*

It doesn’t seem like a big deal, but when humanity is practically chucked out the door without as much as a ‘Sayonara, sucker. Don’t die.’ little things like watches remind me that there is still some reminisce of the life we all left behind.

I said I wasn’t poetic, but here I am. Spouting bullshit like those hipsters that demanded snaps at poetry hour.

God, why is my mind acting so pretentious?

In my stupor, Erwin has apparently taken note of my salivating.

“Do you want to see it?” He asks. I stare at him dumbfounded. Another thing about the apocalypse is that people became a lot greedier. They know it’s a free for all, so their levels of protection for something as simple as a pair of fingernail clippers turn from ‘meh’ to mother bear status real quick.

“Oh,” I start, eloquent as always, “can I?” He smiles warmly, and starts to unbuckle the watch from his wrist. Holding it between two fingers, he motions for me to extend my hand.

As soon as the stainless steel touches my skin, I clasp my fingers eagerly around it. I must look like a kid at one of those overpriced candy shops, because Erwin is observing me like I’m the son who he is going to happily purchase that $6.99 bag of candy for.

I realize I am eighteen, and still a teenager.

Where was my lack of enthusiasm and ‘angry at the world’ persona? There was probably a lot more ‘teenage-esque’ way of showing interest in the watch. Maybe like, ‘Nice watch, old man. Win it at a bingo game?’ Dammit, I am losing my edge.

“You can keep it, you know? I think there is another spare at camp.”

I am no longer a teenager.

Or a human.

I am a fish, because I am currently gaping at Erwin.

He chuckles, “What? Do you not want it?” Am I supposed to answer? Because yes I fucking want it. But this is not something you just give away. Or maybe I have just been living on the shitty side of the apocalypse. Maybe we will get to camp, and everyone will be sunbathing and listening to *If You Like Pina Coladas.* And, hey, I haven’t had any kind of keepsake since before all this shit went down, and I would be lying if I said I didn’t miss my things.
“You’re not supposed to get attached to the pets, Erwin.” Shit, it was almost like I had forgotten fucking Ebenezer Scrooge was my traveling companion.

“It’s called being nice, Levi. You should try it sometime. I’m sure there some space in your schedule. And Eren is a member of the group now, remember that.” Erwin quips.

“Let me look,” he says as rolls out an imaginary sheet of paper, “Nope, ‘Be an Asshole’ seems to be the only thing on board for today.” Even though I shouldn’t, I chuckle at that. You know Levi seems like a lot of things, but at least honest is one of them.

Or blunt.

*Bluntly honest.*

“Do you even know how it works?” I realize he is speaking to me. I want to be childish and ignore him, because the bastard almost killed me. On the other hand, who knows how long I will have to inhabit the same space as him. Levi seems about as keen of me as I am of him.

“I’m not stupid. It’s a fucking watch, not the Pythagorean Theorem.” He seems stunned, and I would like to remind him that sarcasm just doesn’t go away.

“That’s basic math, dipshit.” Whatever. I attempted to be friends. Well, no. I attempted to be frienemies. Like Jean and I. But, shit, Levi has Jean’s personality looking like goddamn Mother Teresa’s.

*Fuck Levi.*

“Look, I’m sorry if your ego took a nosedive when my elbow connected with your thick skull. But you know what; we are on the same side. Until I start craving brains, would you politely tone it the fuck down?” I have to catch my breath, because oh shit, you just got burned, you fucking cretin.

Everyone seems a little stunned, even Erwin. Either, no one expected me to speak up, or no one, besides Erwin, has ever stood up to Levi. I am guessing it is a little bit of both. Instead of replying, Levi just elbows past me.

*Wait.*

Did I just fucking hurt his feelings?

Everyone has seemingly forgotten about it and is already walking to trail behind him. I sigh and begin to follow along.

---

If the time on the watch is anything to go by, we have been walking for just over two hours. The sun has already lowered under the horizon, its dying light the only thing illuminating our path. I begin to wonder how far away their camp is. No, *my camp is*. It feels nice to be part of something again. Even if it is filled with people who want to kill me. No, that is not right, either. Only one of them wants to kill me, I think. And damn, Mikasa would be proud at how well I’ve kept these friends.

Levi has not spoken to anyone since I confronted him. He hasn’t even turned around. It starts to make me regret being such an asshole, but he fucking started it. That’s right, I am pulling the lamest excuse in the books. Sue me, it’s the apocalypse and I am allowed to not give a shit about the legitimacy of my excuses.
But now that I think about it, no one has really been speaking. Every so often, I catch Hanji mumble a couple of words to Guy Whose Name I Still Don’t Know, but other than that, silence. And it’s not comfortable. It reminds me of those scratchy sweaters my mom would buy me, the ones I felt bad if I didn’t wear. Well, maybe they like scratchy sweaters, because no one else seems to mind the silence. Besides, maybe Levi, but the only thing he has graced me with these past two hours is his backside. Asshole.

Finally, someone speaks.

“I think we should make camp.” Erwin suggests. No one argues, so we start setting up for the night. Erwin and Hanji have these backpacks that somehow morph into tents. I have no words to describe them, so tent backpack thing it is.

They continue setting up, when I realize, I have no idea where I am going to sleep. It seems like an awkward thing to bring up, even though it’s just sleeping arrangements. I mean, shit, it’s not like I am asking someone… wait what? My cheeks go red at the thought, because, yes, I am obviously still in seventh grade.

Levi starts pulling a string laced with tin cans around the trees. Ah, Zombie Protection 101: The Can Line. Stupid name, I know, but when you put Connie in charge of labels, those are the results you end up getting.

Before I know what I’m doing, I have marched over and rooted myself to the spot in front of Levi. He is crouched, so he has to look up at me, but he would be doing that anyways…

Wait, this is not the time to be an asshole. Forgive and forget, friend. Forgive and forget.

Before he has a chance to be a dick, I ask him, “Do you want some help?”

He doesn’t say anything at first, merely staring cryptically at me through dark bangs. If anything, his glare darkens, “I’m putting up a tree line. My thick skull should be able to handle it, right?”

Ouch.

This is the problem I have discovered comes with being an jerk. Or maybe other assholes aren’t faced with this challenge, just me. For example, I am pretty sure Levi is not going to toss and turn at night wondering whether or not he hurt my feelings. It's probably just me.

I resort back to my fish-like ways, not knowing the right thing to say. I have never been good talking to people, so it was actually to my advantage when the majority of them lost the ability to speak.

“I…” I start, but this whole apologizing shit is harder than it looks, especially when you are not sure why you are the one doing it in the first place. “I’m sorry.” It finally comes out, and my body instantly feels cleansed, like the monkey is finally off my back.

Levi doesn’t respond, but his gaze softens. That is all the confirmation I need. Levi doesn’t seem like the type to be freely handing out apologies anyway.

I reach down to grab some of the line, but his hand stops me.

He has my wrist enclosed in a tight grip, not as harsh as before, but it is still enough to remind me of the feeling I experienced at his hands hours before. I tense up unintentionally. I hope he doesn’t notice, because I do not want Levi thinking I am scared of him. Because I am fucking terrified of him. But I fail to see how allowing Levi this information would benefit me in the long run. I would seem like the biggest bottle of hot air, blowing all those heated words in his face. When, in reality, if
he backed up his claims, I would be mewling on the ground. Hmm, does that make me a coward?

I hope not.

Of course, he notices my fear. And, dammit, Mr. Higher Power obviously revoked my luck privileges after that last stint. Ah, I was sort of an asshole.

He releases my wrist like it is hot to the touch. “I said I can handle it. Go help Erwin and Hanji with the tents.” He forces it out, and for the first time I hear a hint of emotion in his voice that isn’t anger or annoyance. I nod my head, and I leave without another word.

Guilt is a strange feeling. I want to be mad, angry. But I can’t. I just feel like some mini Eren is punching me in the gut from the inside.

_Stupid, stupid._


And wait, I don’t even know what these things are. How the hell am I supposed to help?

I manage to make my way over to where the duo is currently setting up the strange contraptions when Hanji notices me.

“Eren!” She yells in a whisper. She has calmed down a lot since our first encounter, but she still seems to radiate unadulterated insane. Maybe it’s the messy brown hair tied into an even messier ponytail. Or maybe it’s the way her eyes practically bulge from their sockets when my name is brought up. No, I think she’s just crazy.

“Eren!” She repeats again, “How are you?” It’s awkward. That line was my go-to if I happened upon a distant aunt in the shopping mall. I even used it on dates. _Bad, bad idea._ Needless to say, I hated the phrase. It was like filler to a conversation you really didn’t want to have.

_Damn._

Maybe she genuinely cares, and I am just an over analyzing bastard.

Probably.

“Uh, I’m okay considering, well, you know.” Apparently this is funny, because she starts laughing so hard, she has to clench her sides.

“I, yeah, I know.” She says between breaths. “How’s Oscar the Grouch doing? I saw you talking to him. Finally put it to rest?”

“I, uh, I guess?” I answer awkwardly, scratching the back of the neck. Why were her questions so difficult to answer? I mean, geez, she’s not asking if I killed a man last Sunday.

“Are you okay, Eren?” This time it’s not Hanji, but Erwin, who is directing a question towards me.

“I’m good, it’s just weird. I was alone for so long, and then, magically you guys showed up.” I was alone for seven damn days. Jesus, I’m acting as if I was tossed into the wild as a child. Next thing you know, I will start howling like my wolf brethren.

“Well, I’m glad. I realize it’s hard to get adjusted to something new. But I think we’ve all had to go through it at one point or another.” He smiles.
“Heh, yeah.” I run my hand against the back of my neck again, because I’m starting to feel more awkward than before. Then, I remember.

“Oh, yeah. Levi told me to come help you guys out with the uh, tent thingies.” Erwin and Hanji both exchange glances before she picks up into another bout of manic laughter.

Honestly, I wish people would have told me I was this funny. I knew Jean was bullshitting when he said that ‘Three Strippers and a Rabbi’ joke was dumb.

“I can hear you assholes a hundred feet out.” Ah, I know that voice. I turn around to see Levi casually strolling up to us.

He continues, “I thought I told you to help them set up the tents? Who has the thick skull now?”

I begin to reply, when Hanji breaks me off.

“We were almost done, party pooper. By the way, do you know how much longer Mike is going to be?”

So, his name was Mike? Hmm. As I put a face to a name, I decide it suits him. His name is simple, to the point and so is he.

“I’m not his keeper.”

“I’m right here.” See, like I said, simple and to the point.

Erwin coughs, “Okay, now that’s settled, let’s finish setting these up. Then we can eat.” The mention of food has my stomach doing flips. The walk here was filled with me splitting a half bag of jerky with Erwin, and the prospect of actual dinner has me grinning.

“What are you smiling about, brat?” Levi asks.

I turn to him, smirk not fading. “Sorry, it’s just I am really hungry and actual food sounds amazing right now.”

“Hey, my jerky takes offense to that.” Erwin laughs. I smile, because I am actually happy. It may be some weird misplaced happiness, but it’s there. I haven’t felt like this in months. Like things may finally be coming together. It feels like I have a little family here, although I just learned the name of one, the other hates me, and one might be mentally senseless. But, hey, it already sounds like my family I left back all those months ago.

Wait.

What am I doing?

It’s the fucking apocalypse, and I am replacing my family with strangers. Strangers who I know nothing about. Fuck, I don’t even know who they are. The only things I have been going on is the what I have witnessed firsthand. Hell, Erwin might be batshit insane and Levi might really have a heart of gold.

No, Levi’s an asshole, that’s the truth.

Still.

This isn’t right.
Sorry, humanity, but you chose the wrong person.

I want nothing more than to rip each and every zombie limb from fucking limb, but I know what my dreams cost. I *know* how many lives I’ve sullied trying to perform the impossible. I have moved on. I have *accepted* things aren’t going to change.

Acceptance.

The last thing I need to do is fool myself into thinking that I am the answer to all this. That I can somehow solve this rotten disease that has swept up everything I love. I can’t go back there. Not when I have pulled myself so far out.

But I can’t just leave can I?

“…and we will need someone on first watch…”

“I can do it.” I answer without a question. They all look at me, confused.

“I’m just…,” I falter, “…so excited about this camp. I don’t think I will be able to sleep anyway. So, it is the least I can do.” Everyone seems to agree, but I think it’s the weariness answering for them. Everyone but Levi, that is. He stares at me, and it’s like he already knows what I am going to do.

Let him know.

Let him realize the coward I am. He hates me anyway, so he should be praising whichever lord he believes in that I’m leaving.

He doesn’t say anything.

---

Everyone’s been asleep for about thirty minutes. Right after the tents were set, we cooked the squirrel Mike caught. And if there is one thing that makes people tired, it’s greasy food. Therefore, everyone was out like a light.

Erwin told me that when my shift was finished, he would come and relieve me. He is sharing a tent with Hanji, and he made it pretty crystal that Levi would not be anywhere near me in my sleep.

I sigh. I still have about an hour before Erwin is going to show up. I could follow through with my plan, or I could stay here. *With strangers.*

What would Armin do?

He’d probably tell me I was an idiot for getting bit in the first place.

Fuck, I’m leaving.

I’m leaving, and I am going to find my friends.

I lift myself from the ground, and grab my backpack careful not to make any noise. Once I hit the Can Line is where the real fun begins.

Levi’s work looks nothing short of perfection. There’s a stiff line that stretches straight across my chest, and another that stretches past my ankles. Both lines have cans that are stretched sparingly throughout the two links. It's used to alert the camp if a walker draws near. If the zombie stumbles into the line, the cans clank together with a chain reaction. It's not the most reliable piece of walker
repellent, but it works.

This is going to be like an extreme version of the limbo.

Meh, I’ve had worse.

I throw my bag through the space in between. That’s the easy part. Now, my turn. Letting out a deep breath, I shimmy in between the two lines. Movements precise, I manage to get through without alerting the camp.

Praise Jesus, Buddha, and Miley Cyrus. I am free. Theoretically.

It’s pitch black, and Erwin’s watch isn’t a fucking communicator, so I don’t have any source of light besides the moon. I sigh as I start off in a random direction that I’m hoping is going to lead me back towards my piece of shit shack.

I’m coming home, peanut butter.

---

I’ve been walking aimlessly for about five minutes when I realize this was a dumb decision. But, really, I haven’t necessarily been rewarded for my five star choices. I stop, thinking that maybe I should see if I walk back just as aimlessly that perhaps I will reach camp before Erwin finds out.

It appears out of nowhere. Pushing me to the ground, teeth bared, the walker makes to rip my face off. The trees obscure the moonlight, but I can see the bastard clear as day. Half of its facial features are no longer recognizable due to the rot. Its eyes are focused, their goal, deadly. Not as lethal as its teeth, though, which are inching closer and closer to my neck.

Adrenaline pours through my veins as I throw the zombie off me. Scrambling with the little time I have, I rip my backpack’s zipper open.

Fuck.

I know I put it there. It was fucking here!

My gun and my knife are gone and–

That motherfucker.

I know who did this. I fucking know.

Before I can curse his name to the heavens, the biter is back on me. This time, however, I use my backpack as a shield. It hardly any use, as it forces me down onto my back. I am certain I am going to die, but this time Mikasa’s tutorials aren’t going to be there to save me.

It leans in closer, closer, almost there–

A slickened sound feels my ears, and I realize the walker has stopped its approach.

It’s dead?

What the hell is going on?

This better not be another omen from Mr. Higher Power. Those things are a piece of shit, and I don’t care if he hears me.
And why is there a knife protruding from between the monster’s eyes? I know it can’t be mine, that asshole robbed me and hypothetically left me to dry.

The corpse is heavy on my body, and I struggle to roll it off. Leaning up, I see a pair of legs, which I assume belong to my savior.

“Th- thanks. You saved my…” I look up, “MOTHERFUCKER!” I go for his legs before he can reply. Too bad I am a shitty fighter, because he easily maneuvers me onto my back before I can even say ‘shit’.

“Shit.”

Levi is glaring down at me, and the position he’s in is not lost on me. He’s straddling me again. What, did he want to kill me himself? Couldn’t let the zombie do it?

“Get off of me, you fucking asshole.” I try to buck him off, but to no avail. His has my wrists in a vicelike grip, refusing to budge.

“I knew you were leaving.” He deadpans.

I laugh dryly, meeting his gaze, “Did you now? So, what? Couldn’t stand to see Brainless over there take your kill? Going to finish what you started?” I am openly mocking him now, but I want him to be as mad as I am. Somehow this anger is feeding me, making me feel whole. Like I am not complete with this disdain.

“No, I came to stop you, to bring you back.”

I am a little surprised, and my anger falters. But then I remember that he is straddling me, and as soon as it left, it’s back with a vengeance.

“So, you what? Took my fucking weapons? I could have died, dickwad. Were you even going to tell me you swiped my shit? Or were you going to wait until I needed them so you could act like the O’ Mighty Hero? Well, excuse me, Your Majesty, but you’re a shitty person, and saving me won’t make your mother love you. Oh, and p.s. your plan sucked.”

Levi’s poker-faced as he continues to stare me down through an impassive glare. “It worked, didn’t it?” He has me there, and even though I am fucking irate, I stay silent. I don’t know how he has gotten better at controlling his anger, because that kind of shit doesn’t go away in less than 24 hours, believe me I would know. With zombies comes witchcraft and wizardry, I suppose.

“We are going back, c’mon.” He releases me and starts remove himself from my body. Thank you, Jesus. Once, he’s standing, he looks down at me. Again, I can’t place the look in his eyes. Unfortunately, I don’t have long to decipher it, because he is already turning around making towards camp. What a gentleman, not even helping the lady up.

Wait, no.

I’m a man. I am a fucking man, and I do not need his help.

I grab my backpack and sling it over my shoulders. Pausing, I turn to look behind me. Trying to imagine where Mikasa and Armin are. If they are safe, dead, undead.

I hear the hammer of a gun being pulled back.

“Didn’t you hear me the first time?” He says blankly. I wasn’t even thinking of running again, but
shit, now I just want to give the asshole a hard time.

He sighs, lowering the gun, “C’mon, princess. We are taking you back to the fucking castle.” Grabbing my upper arm, he drags me in the direction I am assuming camp is. Unless he is selling me off to the black market. Wait, does the black market still exist? Hell, what could he even get for a skinny smartass like me?

“I thought you were on a ‘no touch’ order.” I ask, just trying to get a rise.

He squeezes my arm, “I am. I won’t tell if you don’t.” Did he just make a joke?

And what?

Of course I am going to tell, Levi’s an asshole. And what the fuck does he even mean? What does he have on– Oh wait.

I am an idiot.

One word about this whole ordeal will lose any trust I might have gained with the group.

Shit, Levi’s one sneaky motherfucker.

“Whatever. I wasn’t going to tell anyway. I just like being an asshole.” I’m lying, well, not about the asshole bit, but I don’t think he cares anyhow.

“Oh, really? You seemed real sure that ol’ Papa Bear was going to protect you a few seconds ago.” Papa Bear? What the actual fuck? My confusion must have spread to my face, because Levi smirks. I can barely see it, but it’s there. Somehow, it makes him a little more threatening. Like a hunter who has cornered its prey.

And he has me surrounded.

“I don’t know what you are talking about.” And shit, isn’t that what people say when they do know what you’re talking about? I sigh, I know a hole when I’ve dug it and this one’s pretty damn deep.

Levi makes a noncommittal grunt, and I can’t tell if he believes me or not. I’ve never lied to him before, so I don’t see why he wouldn’t trust me now. But oh wait. I did. I did just lie.

Damn it all to hell.

“I am being serious.” At that, he stops, and turns his expressionless gaze to me.

“I believe you.” I probably look more like an idiot than usual, open mouthed and speechless. He rolls his eyes and continues moving.

“Oh… okay.” I am feeling flustered, and I don’t know why. Levi has a way of getting under my skin, like no one I’ve ever met. I want to hate him, and I do. But part of me forgives him. For almost killing me, pissing me off, taking my weapons, I am not entirely sure. Possibly all of it.

Then, it hits me.

Eren, don’t say what you are thinking.

“I… I know you mean Erwin.” He doesn’t seem fazed when I tell him. Knowing Levi, he probably just wanted the satisfaction of hearing me admit it.
“Sadistic bastard.”

“I thought you didn’t know what I was talking about?” He questions, but his tone is mocking. Maybe watching me suffer under this interrogation is his silent retribution for the insults I cast at him earlier.

_Dammit, Eren. Just drop it and leave it alone. Do not answer this question._

“I knew you were talking about him. I just… I didn’t know what you meant with the implications is all.”

_You fucking idiot._

I feel embarrassed talking about this, because this might not even be what Levi was inferring.

He laughs dryly, “You’re saying I was implying you were fucking him. No, that he was fucking you, because there’s no way your scrawny ass tops. You’re a perverted little shit aren’t you? Sorry, kid. Erwin’s as straight as a Popsicle stick. He isn’t going to be jumping the fence for some lanky brat anytime soon.”

I can feel the heat pulsating from my face. I can’t tell if it’s from anger or embarrassment, probably a mixture of the two. I have to reply quickly; because if high school taught me anything, it’s that when silence is the answer, people assume the worst.

Levi is still going, “And damn. Even if he does swing on both sides, he must have been pretty quick, because you both have had hardly any time alone.”

“Wh-what? N-no.” Stuttering is always a great sign of innocence, great job, Eren.

“No,” I say firmly as possible, “it’s not like that at all. You’re the fucking pervert for even making me bring it up. And I’m not even gay!” I feel like all my lines of defense I just spewed are meaningless, because Levi’s pointed glare cuts right through them.

I think he can tell I’m upset, because he starts, “Look, I was just joking. I don’t give two shits which direction your arrow points or what makes your sun rise.” How can he say these things so bluntly? I am starting to wonder if I am going to have a stroke just from the temperature my face is currently residing at.

“Whatever, just drop it.” I mumble, trying to sound as aggrivated as possible. I don’t think I even need to try. Levi has found my Achilles’ Heel.

Dare me to hide Shadis’ lucky mug? I can do that. Ask me to run naked down the street? I’m your man. Smash in a few dozen zombie skulls? In my sleep. But even think about talking to me about sex? I shut down like the interstate during rush hour.

I know it was just a joke, but for some reason it hits me hard. Shit, I shouldn’t be getting this upset. I should have just laughed it off, and just accepted that maybe Levi’s friendship entails a certain amount of humiliation.

_Wait, no. We are not friends. I don’t want to be friends._

Back when I was with the crew, Jean would make all kinds of accusations about my sex life, or lack there of. Sure, I got pissed, but I could always brush it off. Not this, though. Levi’s taunts have somehow stained me, refusing to just go away.
Fucking asshole.

He takes my wish to heart, and for the rest of the trek back he doesn’t bring up any semblance of the word, ‘sex’. I mean, shit, this is the fucking apocalypse. No one has time for carnal pleasures; it’s about survival, now.

Once we hit the Can Line, he stops me.

“You really don’t want to be here?” Should I even grace this with an answer? I have done a great job ignoring the fucking midget ever since he decided to drop Mission: Sexytime with Eren.

I sigh, “No, not really, but what choice do I have?” I push past him as I throw my bag into the camp.

I don’t want his answer. I want to get back inside, and play out this miserable role Erwin has so graciously set upon me.

As I am about to slide in between the lines, Levi’s hand grabs my wrist.

“What the he- “

He is not looking at me when he starts, “Don’t ever think that you do not have choice. You will always have a choice; no one can take that from you. Especially not me, Eren.” He finally meets my eyes, “If you want to leave, I won’t stop you.” I gasp, dropping my gaze.

I don’t know what to say. I want to call bullshit, but that seemed real. Personal, almost. He is offering me hypothetical freedom from the group. Or at least freedom until Erwin undoubtedly finds me. Would he look for me? My gut is telling me yes, because my blood seems almost engineered to fight this disease. I’m valuable.

Shit.

I'm in too deep to even back out now, so no, Levi, I don't have a choice. I'm pretty sure my only options are if I will go quietly or not. But maybe I have this whole scenario wrong. Perhaps Erwin really is the embodiment of trust and friendship. Maybe he won't mind that I decided to hitch a ride to Self Pity Express. He could respect my decision to say fuck the human race. Something, however, tells me that he is a 'the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few' kind of guy. Nonetheless, I'm pretty sure Levi will stick to his word and let me go.

As I meet his stare, I sigh, “I staying, okay?”

He nods, releasing my wrist and turning his gaze away from me. As I bend down to fit between the wires, I look up to catch a glimpse of his face.

Misery.

He looks sickened.

And, for not the first time today, I’m thinking I made the wrong choice.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, longest chapter yet!
I hope this chapter opens the floodgates, in a sense, for some background opportunities on Levi. Or at least how he ended up with Erwin's outfit. :3 And FLUFF! Well, about as much fluff as you can expect during the zombie apocalypse, but still FLUFF. I'm praying this wasn't too rushed, because I LOVE SLOW BUILDS. Plus, I want this to be a fairly long story, and I have a lot planned, so there's that. I'll stop here, though, because I don't want to give too much away.

And, again, my output rate will probably begin to slow down since Finals Week is steadily approaching. I already had this chapter finished, but now I am starting from scratch so, yeah.

Tumblr:
fuzzyporcupine.tumblr.com

Please let me know if you spot any errors, because this chapter was hastily proofread.

FANMIX
ALL FANART
Waiting on Erwin is awkward. Thanks to a certain asshole by the name of Levi, I now have several unappealing images of the man rolling around in my head. Shit, I wanted to get the little bastard back for all this, but that last look on his face warned off any attack I could have possibly posed.

*What happened to you, Levi?*

I want to know his story, how he ended up here. Call me curious, but I think I deserve as much from the man who just made my face turn twenty different shades of red. Or maybe I don't. Maybe I should just be happy with the fact that I'm not public enemy number one in Levi's eyes anymore... well, that notion is still up for debate, because I highly doubt that the man is going to invite me out to frolic in the daisies anytime soon.

“Eren?” I hear Erwin’s voice call, and it’s like the angels have opened the gates to proverbial heaven. It’s not that being on watch is boring, but *being on watch is fucking boring.* “Glad to see you are still in one piece,” he chuckles as he makes to take a seat beside me near the fire, “Anything happen?”

Well, yes, Erwin. A shitstorm of things happened. None of which you need to know about.

“No, nothing unusual.” I reply quickly, probably too quickly; but Erwin doesn’t seem the wiser.

“Good to hear. You can take my place in the tent, but just be warned, Hanji is an… eccentric sleeper.” His face twists into a painful cringe that lets me know how much experience he's had sharing a tent with the woman. It almost makes me want to just rough it out here. Almost.

I laugh, bringing a hand around to rub the back of my neck, “I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

A smile paints his face, “Ah, it’s good to see you already have our personalities down to a 't'. ” I know he doesn’t mean it spitefully, but I can’t help the nervous ping that bolts through my chest.

Actually, Erwin, I know nothing about any of you.

Hanji’s sleep habits weren’t that hard to predict. She is crazy, and I did not doubt the woman’s insanity stopped just because her eyes had closed.

“Something wrong?” Erwin must have been a detective before shit went down, or at least a cop. His intuition is frightening, or maybe I am just too easy to read.

“You were a cop.” He looks confused, thick eyebrows pinched together as if I am a puzzle that he's having a hard time solving. “Before the end of the world, I mean.”

Erwin chuckles, deep and booming, not unlike that one uncle that would sometimes show up for our family Christmases, “Close but no cigar. Actually, I was a school counselor.” Close? Erwin must have perception issues if he thinks a gun wielding lawman has anything in common with an underpaid shrink. Nonetheless, at least his constant comforts make sense now.

“So, that’s why you always ask how I’m feeling?” I ask with a smirk.

“I suppose you can think of it that way, sure. I’ve never really let go of my training, and I guess it’s
just seeped into my new life. But I do truly care about every member of my group.” I feel like I might have hit a nerve, but it’s hard to tell because I couldn’t see Erwin wearing anything besides his perpetually content facial expression.

“I’m sor-“ I start, but he quickly interjects.

“I know what you meant, it’s fine.” He smiles, teeth bright against the backdrop of the night.

*I hate that word.*

*Fine.*

*I fucking hate that word.*

I take that as my cue to leave, so I move to rise from my spot. Nodding my head towards Erwin in an unsaid, ‘goodnight’, I make my way over to the tents. Grabbing the tent flaps, I brace myself for the worst. Taking in a deep breath, I pull open the doors and quickly shuffle inside. It’s not as bad as I expected, but it’s still pretty damn brutal.

Hanji’s entire body has taken up refuge on the tent floor. She’s spread eagle, leaving absolutely no room for another human.

As I shake her shoulder, I am hoping she is a light sleeper so maybe I won’t have to drag her spider form to its rightful side of the tent. Of course, none of my prodding works. I’m just going to have to do this the hard way.

Prepare to meet your match, Hanji.

I lift one of her arms in an attempt to secure it to her body, but it flails outward as soon as I’ve laid it beside her. *Shit.* Again, I try to secure her arm, but it is like the thing has a life of its own. Every time I get it to lie beside her body, it flings itself at me with a vengeance.

After several failed attempts, Hanji finally accepts defeat.

*Finally.*

As I nestle deep into the blankets, something begins to prod at my subconscious. It’s like an annoying gnat that is constantly flying around my head, buzzing in my ear with the remnants of what I have said. Of what I told Levi.

*I’m staying, okay?*

I have made my choice, right? Still, the look in his eyes haunts me until it’s all I can see. I clamp my lids shut, and it is there silently judging my decision. Besides its obvious misery, his look held another emotion: jealousy. As if he was envious over the fact that I *could* leave. Was he stuck here? I would ask, but Levi seems about as likely to discuss his past as he is to stop acting like a heartless bastard.

*Not happening.*

But he isn’t heartless, is he?

A bastard, yes. But heartless?

He saved me.
Wait, no. Scratch that.

He set me up for an almost surefire disaster, swiping my weapons. If he hadn’t been following me, I would probably be having a conversation with my zombie cohorts about which type of human tastes the best. But, he did give me a choice to leave. That storm of emotions would not have swirled in those eyes if they lacked compassion. The man is an enigma, but I have known him for less than 24 hours. I shouldn’t feel so compelled to crack Levi’s egg. I should just let my cards play out, wait, and hope for the best.

But what am I hoping for exactly?

---

I have been staring at the same spot for hours now. Every time I attempt to sleep, my vision is filled with those pleading grey eyes. It’s miserable, and I’m starting to develop withdrawals from my old friend, Mr. Peanut Butter. And call me crazy, but talking to those inanimate objects was really comforting. They didn’t argue, didn’t look at me like I was an idiot, didn’t fucking take my weapons. Okay, maybe I am still a little bitter about that. But, regardless, I feel like shit.

In the darkness of the tent, I cannot see anything besides Hanji’s outline, which is still trying to maneuver itself into its original spread eagle position. I have had worse sleeping arrangements. I distinctly remember the time when Jean and I had to share a closet during one of our supply runs. Ugh, that was a six, long hours of pure agony.

Suddenly, one of Hanji’s arms flies into my vision.

Shit!

“Oh, fuck,” I moan, grasping my nose. I can feel the warmth begin to seep out my nose, so I assume that this sleeping Neanderthal has just given me a nosebleed. Fan-fucking-tastic. I place the back of my hand against my nostrils to hold off the bleeding as I try to exit the circus act otherwise known as ‘sleeping with Hanji’.

A cool breeze greets me as I step out of the tent, sending shivers down my spine and politely reminding me that in a couple of months this place will no doubt be frosted with snow. The fire has died down to a small glow, and I can’t make out who is on watch. As I step closer, I realize no one is there. What? Then, I hear the rattling of metal, and a telling groan. Ah, whoever is on watch probably went to take care of… that.

Speaking of taking care of things.

My nose is throbbing something awful, and the blood is now starting to seep in between my fingers.

“Oi, what the fuck do you think you’re doing out here, dumbass?” I hear Levi call from behind me. And it figures that he would be the one assigned on watch right now.

Yeah, my good fortune card has definitely been revoked.

My nose is full of fluid, and it is difficult to form the words. “Huh gee hit muh nowze.” I’d be surprised if he could understand me without putting two and two together. The fact that I'm coming from Hanji’s tent, the history of her sleeping patterns. I mean, he doesn't have to be Sherlock Holmes to figure it out, and when those thin eyebrows rise up incredulously, I realize that he's pieced it together.
And you are just content on slowly bleeding out right here?” He asks, sarcastically.

Well, no, I'm not. Actually, I was in the process of doing something about this before you, Mr. Big Bag O’ Fun, showed up.

“I wuz twaie en fo fic et, ahss ho.” I narrow my eyes at him in a display of anger, because I am already suffering with the throbbing radiating from the middle of my face. I don't really need to add a headache from listening to his insults on top of this.

“Tch, you can’t even take care of a bloody nose?” He is quickly striding up to me, and before I have time to say anything, he is running his eyes across my face.

“Move your hand, genius.” I grimace as I drop it from my nose. Obviously, Hanji hit me harder than I thought.

“Unbelievable, it looks fucking broken.”

Wait, what?

“Wut?”

Levi sighs, aggravation encasing his features, “Do you understand the English language, or do I need to add a dictionary to our supply list?” I choose not to reply, electing to just taper my eyes dangerously at him.

Of course, he looks unaffected by my murderous glare.

He reaches into his pants pocket and pulls out a familiar handkerchief. Grabbing my chin, he starts to softly rub the material under my nose. For being such a cold man, his touch is scalding. Tired eyes narrowed, he is intently focusing on the skin my blood has stained. He is gentle, a characteristic I didn’t think I would ever associate with Levi.

Suddenly, his hand drops from my chin. He meets my gaze, his head causally tilted to the side. Slowly, he brings both hands up to cradle my cheeks. I don’t feel in control of my body as he starts to frame my face with his fingers. I am frozen. Oh my god, what is going on? He keeps his eyes linked with mine as he runs his thumbs along my cheekbones, up to the bridge of my nose, and...

“Fuck!” I scream as he pops my nose back into place. I rip my face from his hands and begin to comfort my aching nose. Levi lets out a short, dry laugh. I shouldn’t be surprised that my pain amuses him.

Sadistic bastard, remember?

The tents are shuffling, and soon the other members of our outfit are joining us.

“What happened?” Erwin sounds worried, like he is ready for the worst.

I have to admit, it is quite the scene they have stumbled upon. Me, bent over holding my nose in obvious pain. And Levi looking like the cat that swallowed the canary.

Erwin makes quick work of the scene, and soon his eyes are tapered towards Levi in an accusing glare.


Levi sighs, “The scream you heard was from me setting it back in place. I haven’t hurt the kid…”
intentionally. If you don’t believe me, ask the kid. I’m sure he’d love to reiterate his adventures with Rambo.”

All eyes turn to the woman, whose eyes are no longer crazed, but wide and confused.

“I… Eren, I’m so- wait,” the manic look in her gaze returns, “How did it feel? Was it already healing when you set it? Can I break it again and test the results?”

I must look horrified.

“I think the brat has had enough for one night, Hanji.” For once, I am thanking Levi’s quick thinking. She sighs despairingly, and walks back inside the tent.

“Oi, shitty glasses, it’s your watch.”

She sticks her head outside the flaps, “What? I still have at least an hour left.”

“Yeah, but I had to touch the little shit’s bodily fluids.” I hear her huff, as she marches out of the tent to take a seat beside the dying fire.

He turns his gaze to me, “C’mon, Bright Eyes, it’s bedtime.”

As he heads in my direction, Erwin stops him with a hand on his shoulder.

“I think Mike’s got it covered, Levi.”

Mike grunts affirmatively and walks over to place a hand on my shoulder. I raise my head to greet his eyes as he nods his head towards the tents. I take it that Mike’s waves of communication do not stretch past the occasional grunt, so I don’t question it.

I can feel Levi’s eyes follow me as I walk towards the tents, their ashen stare piercing through my resolute to continue walking. I rotate my head to meet his gaze, but I find that he has dropped his glare to the ground below him. So, I turn my head back around and refocus my eyes back onto the tents.

I am silently praying that Mike will be a better sleep companion than Hanji. But, then again, I’m pretty sure a baby dinosaur would be a better roommate than that woman.

As expected, Mike doesn’t say anything when we enter our sleeping quarters. He simply finds his way to his side of the tent and lies down without a word. I’m standing awkwardly in the entryway for a few seconds before I realize he is already asleep.

I sigh as I maneuver over to my side. As I bring my body down, I can’t help but feel a little tense. I think Hanji has forced me to develop a bed partner phobia.

Mike’s snoring is surprisingly relaxing, but before I can drift into unconsciousness, I hear a familiar voice echoes outside my tent.

“I didn’t fucking touch him, Erwin.”

Levi?

“Really, Levi? Because it looked like you had just handed him a haymaker.” There is something else marking Erwin’s usual steadfast voice. Concern?

the last run. I can’t cover for you again. And Eren… Eren could solve this. We need him on our side, and I don’t personally believe that beating the boy shitless will help convince him.”

“I didn’t fucking touch him, Erwin. Believe me or not, I don’t give a shit. As fun as it was to stroll down memory lane with you, I think I’m going to bed.” I hear boots crunching the leaves of the underbrush as Levi stomps over to what I assume is his tent. Erwin releases another sigh, his footsteps echoing as he starts the trek to his sleeping quarters.

Erwin had told me that he cared about every member of his team, but his concern always seemed to be something that was underlined. It was almost calculating in the way he always knew when someone was upset or angry. But, the conversation he just had with Levi didn’t sound cunning in any sense of the word. Erwin sounded genuinely worried for the stone-faced man.

I turn onto my side as I wonder what Levi could have possibly done to warrant such concern from Erwin. Hell, on the last run someone probably made fun of his height and he put a bullet in the person’s skull.

What am I thinking?

My imagination is getting ahead of me… or was it?

It hadn’t even been 24 hours since Levi had his hands wrapped around my neck with intent to kill. I run my fingertips over the purpled flesh. If he hadn’t noticed the bite, he would have finished the job. He would have killed me.

I shiver thinking about being sent back to purgatory.

A familiar question pops back into my mind.

What happened to you, Levi?

As my lids finally close, the last thing I see before I succumb to sleep is a pair of overcast eyes.

---

“Wakey, wakey! Eggs and bakey!”

Hanji’s voice is like nails scratching on a chalkboard. I have never been a morning person, and the promise of nonexistent eggs isn’t really doing anything to change that.

My arms stretch over my head as a yawn scrunches my facial expression. As I sit up, I notice Mike has already started his morning. Due to my light sleep, it’s strange that I wasn’t awakened when he rose. Either I was really out of it, or the man is a ninja. I am going with ninja, because Mike seems like one of those silent but deadly types.

I step outside to see that the sun is just rising over the horizon. Looking to my (Erwin’s) watch, I notice that it’s just after five. Why we have to get up at the asscrack of dawn, I will never know.

“Good morning, Eren.” Erwin’s voice sounds too cheery for someone who I know got about as much sleep as I did. In recognition of his greeting, I nod my head in his direction. My body has trouble forming coherent sentences when I first wake up, so I figure I should spare myself the embarrassment.

“Sleep well?”
Hanji interrupts before I can offer another head nod, “Oh, Eren, I meant to apologize. I know I am a wild sleeper, but I have never broken anyone’s nose.”

“It’s k.” I mumble. Thinking about it, my nose is throbbing again. That also reminds me…

“Levi?” Erwin and Hanji chuckle at my inability to be coherent.

Erwin answers, “He’s out with Mike hunting, they should be here soon.”

So, that’s why we are up so early. Well, that’s why they are up so early. Why am I awake again? I motion to head back to the tent to catch some extra sleep, when Hanji grabs my wrist.

“Eren, I know you are probably tired, but I woke you up so we could talk about your… um bite before we set off.” I give her a look of incredulity because this surely could wait until we get to their base.

“Please? You don’t even have to tell me how it happened, if you don’t want to… I just want to know what happened following it. I’m really curious, and-”

“Hanji, maybe we should let Eren rest a little more. I don’t think he is fully capable of forming a complete sentence right now.” Did I mention that I really like Erwin? No? I really like Erwin.

“Oh, come on, old man. He looks awake to me.” Hanji seems just as likely to let me go back to sleep as she is to drop the topic.

I sigh, taking a seat on the ground.

“Yay!” she squeals. And, I have to wonder how her voice hasn’t alerted the entire zombie population by now.

“Oh, come on, old man. He looks awake to me.” Hanji seems just as likely to let me go back to sleep as she is to drop the topic.

I shrug, my mind still not on a communicable level.

“Hmm, okay. How did it happen?” My mind zaps out of its daze, and I suddenly don’t want to answer any questions.

“I…I” My response would not come out. It was a simple question, and I knew the answer. It was just stuck in my throat.

Tell her the truth, Eren. Tell her how you couldn’t save him. Tell her how it happened.

Hanji is waiting for my reply with baited breath, obviously unaware of my discomfort. Erwin, on the other hand, picks up on it almost as soon as his eyes meet mine.

“I think you should try a different question, Hanji.” Erwin states.

“Wha… why?” Hanji questions him, redirecting her gaze to me. I am worrying my bottom lip between my teeth, trying to conceal the emotions that are attempting to crawl out of me.

“Oh, um, well, how long did it take for you to realize you were immune?” This question is not any less discomforting, because now instead of Marco’s face filling my mind, it is the barrel of a gun I see. I remember how close I came to ending it all.

“I…” The words aren’t forming. “I… didn’t.” Hanji looks confused at my answer. I want to tell her how I spent two days running from the walkers, thinking any minute I going to join them in their
lifeless charade. How I spent the rest of my time in some rickety shack waiting on an end that never came. How I started turning towards inanimate objects for friendship, because I was so… desperate for some kind of communication. I don’t tell her any of that, though.

“I never knew if I was immune. I still don’t.” And, that is the truth. Honestly, I don’t see how they are all so trusting that I still won’t turn. It must be Erwin. He believes in me, so the rest follow suit.

Trust is a strange thing to give out so freely nowadays. It seemed that as soon as people started eating each other, humanity was lost. It sounds like a silly thing to say. Of course humanity vanished when the walkers appeared. But that’s not it. Living people lost their humanity. Everything was tossed out the window when people realized this wasn’t a drill. That this thing wasn’t just going away.

So, why was trust such a big deal? Trust meant two things: life or death. There was no other alternative. If someone trusted you, you lived. If someone didn’t trust you, however, it made you no better than the zombies eating remains off the streets. It did not even take a week of this hell for me to realize that. After… shit.

After that, I decided that I could not trust anyone whose name was not Mikasa or Armin. Sure, I traveled with my friends, but did I trust them fully? No. So why was Erwin so willing to let me in? What did I do to deserve such faith? I still wasn’t sure. Maybe it was because I was ‘immune’ if that’s what they wanted to call it. Did I trust him? Did I have faith in any of them? I wasn’t sure of that, either.

In my daze, I fail to realize that Levi and Mike have returned with breakfast.

Levi drops a freshly killed rabbit in front of Erwin. “Bon appetite, assholes.”

“Run into any trouble?” Erwin asks as he pulls out a knife to start preparing the rabbit.

Mike answers, “Not any more than usual.”

“Good to hear. Eren, Hanji, why don’t you both start taking down the tents? Levi, you and Mike can go over our supply lists while I finish breakfast.”

What?

“I-“ I start, but Hanji has already grabbed my wrist and is pulling me in the direction of my inevitable doom.

Hanji finally releases me when we reach the tents, and I realize I still don’t know how these things work.

“Oh, Hanji…”

“Don’t worry about helping me. This is usually a one person job anyway. You can just answer some more questions while I work. Sound good?”


“I guess.”

“Great! Okay, so how’s your nose?”

“Umm, it is still tender. You did break it, you know?” I rub my nose carefully at the thought.

“Hey, I apologized so I have been absolved, Mr. Sociable.”
Her nickname for me hurts a bit. I realize I probably have not been acting very thankful. I mean, they did pull me out of a shit hole. The least I could do is thank them, which I am pretty sure I haven’t even attempted to do. All I’ve done is use their resources and argue with Levi.

“Ah, I’m sorry. I really am grateful even if I don’t act like it.” Hanji does not seem to have expected these words and looks completely bewildered.

“Don’t be silly, silly! If anything, we should be thanking you for coming with us. So, on behalf of the group of assholes, I thank thee Sir Eren.” She bows extravagantly and I can’t help but chuckle.

She lifts her head, smile stretched across her face, “So, did it heal faster than normal?”

“I’ve never broken my nose before, but I don’t think so. Even my bite is healing at a normal pace. I mean, if there is a normal pace for a zombie bite.”

Hanji has already packed up one of the tents. I understand how this is only a one man job. Erwin must have wanted answers just as badly as Hanji.

“Hmm, that’s interesting. So it truly is just your blood then? You weren’t bitten by a radioactive spider at a young age? Been swimming in any glowing sludge lately?”

I chuckle, “Hanji, I hardly think I classify as a superhero.” This woman truly is something else. “And that’s a no to your radioactive spider theory.”

“But, you have been swimming in chemical sewage. Interesting.”

“What? No! I meant-“

“I’m just joking, Eren.” Hanji chuckles. I smile back at her. I have come to the realization that once Hanji’s curiosity has been sated, she almost acts human.

Almost.

---

I can’t remember what month it is, but I think it is past September. The wind chills my frame as I pull my arms into my chest. I always packed light when we went on supply runs, so the only articles of clothing I have are the ones on my body. Unfortunately my thin, ripped thermal and cargo pants aren’t doing a good job at keeping my warm. Hanji notices my shivering.

“When we get to camp, we will get you some hot chocolate. And a jacket.” She smiles.

I should be thankful that she’s offering me some new clothes, but she lost me when I heard the words ‘hot chocolate’ leak from her lips.

“You guys have hot chocolate?”

Her smile widens, “You betcha! That and tea. Levi didn’t get to bring any this run, so he has been more of a dick than usual.”

“I am literally standing right next to you, moron.” Levi quips.

“Hey, it’s the truth, and you know it.”

When Levi doesn’t reply, Hanji continues, “We have a pretty nice setup back at camp. Our leader found this abandoned town a couple of weeks after the infection hit. His group built a sort of
barricade around it. It's mainly just odds and ends piled together. I know it doesn't sound like much, but it has kept us safe from the walkers. What the President has accomplished is really impressive."

“You think they’ll just let me join, no questions asked?”

This time Levi answers, “Just be prepared for anything.” I notice he is walking beside me, now. It’s the first time he has spoken to me since last night, and I would be lying if I said I wasn’t glad he broke the tension.

“Okay.” I answer, uneasily.

“You’ll be alright, kid.” I take his words with a grain of salt, because they did let Levi into the group. I shouldn’t be worried; being worried will get me nowhere. “Word of advice, though,” Levi starts, “Don’t be an asshole and cover that shit up.” I notice he is pointing to my bite.

_Fuck, how did I forget?_

I reach into my backpack and pull out a roll of gauze. I start to tentatively roll it around my arm before Levi stops me.

“Stop, fuckwit, that looks terrible.” He pulls out a knife from his waistband and grabs my arm. I flinch, not knowing what to expect.

“I’m not going to chop your fucking arm off, brat. Although, now I sort of want to.” He says with a dangerous glimmer in his eye.

“Will you just get on with it?”

“Tch.” He grabs my shirt sleeve and begins to run the knife through it, cutting the sleeve just above the bite. When I look at him confused, he tells me, “It’s so there isn’t an obvious fucking bite hole in your shirt, dumbass.” Oh, that makes sense.

Next, he grabs my arm and starts to wrap up my wound. It’s almost medicinal, the way he is doctoring me. It reminds me of the way Mikasa would bandage me after every schoolyard fight.

“Done.” I look down, and my arm has been completely wrapped from wrist to elbow. Again, I look at him questionably.

“How would it look if I just bandaged your bite, hmm? This already looks suspicious as it is.” He says as he flicks my bandaged arm.

"Think with that pea you call a brain for once.”

Asshole.

I roll my eyes at him. What I would give for one nice conversation with Levi, one that wasn’t laced with venom and insults.

_Wait, what?

I need some more sleep. I’m blaming these thoughts on Hanji, since she is the one that got me up to greet the sun.

Speaking of the woman, she is currently jumping up and down hysterically.

“Eren! Eren, look!” I turn to where she is pointing, and I see it.
Walls that have to be at least fifteen feet high.

Is this the place Hanji was talking about?

“Eren, we are here! Isn’t it exciting?”

Well, that answers my question.

“Hanji, tone it the fuck down. Keep it up, and we are going to have every walker within a mile radius on us.” Levi chastises.

“Stop being such a grouch. I am sure you are just as excited.”

“You’re damn right I am glad we are back, but you don’t see me raving like a fucking lunatic.”


Soon, the walls become clearer, and I can see that Hanji was right. They are made of debris. Cars, metal, it looks like a junkyard fence. The closer I get, the sharper the walls become, and I can see that there are also plates of metal plastered to the structure.

There are a couple of zombies banging aimlessly on the walls, but before we are able to take action, the biters are taken out by some unknown force.

Then the walls open.

Erwin turns to me, “Welcome to Stohess, Eren.”

Chapter End Notes

And so the plot progresses! The story is starting to come together, and I am so excited! I've tried to use the past two chapters as somewhat character development chapters with a little added plot. So, if anyone want to know why it's moving a little slow, that's why.

*whispers* sloooww buillldd.

Anywho, I hope everything is understandable so far. And that you are all enjoying it!

Thanks for all the kudos/comments!
They make me happy :3

Tumblr:
fuzzyporcupine.tumblr.com

If you see any grammar mistakes, let me know! And, if you have any questions, I will try to answer them to the best of my ability without spoiling anything.

FANMIX
ALL FANART
I don’t know what to expect from this world anymore. I mean, hell, it’s already surprised me enough with its admittance of the walking dead. Walls of debris separating like the Red Sea really shouldn’t shock me.

The metal plates I had spotted had transformed into makeshift doors, opening up right before my eyes. The gates groan painfully as they are forced open. Obviously, they weren’t unfastened often.

Erwin and company are already traversing ahead, leaving me in my amazed trance. I snap out of my fascination long enough to catch up to the group.

“Impressed?” Hanji asks me, excitement radiating from her.

I can’t even form words to tell her, so I settle for a rapid nodding of my head. She laughs raising a hand to ruffle my hair.

Once we step through the entryway, it is like I have entered another world.

Everything here looks untouched. It looks normal. I can hear children’s laughter, dogs barking; even the birds seem to twitter in delight from above. It is almost like there aren’t man eating monsters right behind these walls. This must be a dream. Nothing this serene could be real anymore. Not in this world.

I go to pinch myself, but my fingers are blocked by the bandage.

The bandage.

The bite.

This isn’t a dream, but maybe it is paradise.

I am snapped out of my fantasy when I hear the reverberation the doors being yanked shut, their hinges protesting every pull. Suddenly, a familiar noise fills my ears. I catch the sound of guns being cocked back into firing position. The weapons aren’t being aimed at Erwin. Not Hanji, Levi, or Mike.

But me.

Instead of a utopia, I am now looking down the barrels of several firearms.

“Weapons down.” I’ve never heard this voice before. It sounds aged, tired. The owner of the voice is obviously important too, because as soon as the command is issued, all of the guns are lowered to face the ground.

A man pushes through the armed civilians who have circled around us. His face is wrinkled and hardened. A strong, grey beard encases his chin, rising up to blend seamlessly into his hair which is swept back stylishly out of his face. The man emanates power like a burning furnace, and I can’t help but feel intimidated.

His eyes scan our outfit finally closing in on me. He stares at me like he is trying to piece together
why I am currently within his walls. A shiver resonates through my frame, and I am starting to think that maybe I should have taken Levi’s offer of escape.

“President Zackly.” Erwin says, with a salute. His greeting pulls the man’s, Zackly’s, questioning glare away from me; and not for the first time, I am silently thanking the blonde man. Erwin’s salute is odd. His right hand has been pulled into a fist and thrown across his chest. It looks unconventional, like it was morphed from an idea that keeping some semblance of order would help keep our humanity.

“At ease, Smith.” Zackly, turns his gaze back to me, “And who is this?” I am expecting Erwin to answer for me, but as the seconds pass, I realize I have the floor.

And, fuck, if there was ever a time to develop stage fright now certainly wasn't it.

“I…” Shit, this was worse than having to give those presentations over books I had obviously not read… and I wondered why Shadis hated me.

“His name is Eren.” I hear Levi’s voice, and out of the corner of my eye I see him beside me. He is standing to attention, hands behind his back.

“Levi, let the boy answer his own questions.” Zackly turns his attention back towards me, “Eren, what are you doing here?”

I have no idea what this guy wants to hear. The truth? No, the truth would probably get me killed. But then again, it’s going to come out eventually, right?

“I… I was bit.” The guns that were facing the ground are raised again. Levi steps closer to me, almost shuffling me behind him.

Is he protecting me?

No, I can’t let someone else die because of me. I won’t let Levi become another Marco.

I take a deep breath, and I tell myself to block out the deadly objects right in front of me. I only focus on Zackly’s wrinkled, calculating face.

“I was bit, and I have not turned.” This definitely doesn’t seem to be the answer anyone was expecting. Zackley’s eyes widen, and the citizens who are holding the firearms falter.

“How long?”

“A little over a week.”

Zackly doesn’t reply immediately. It’s almost like he is digesting what I just said, trying to cipher if my words are a frozen dinner or a five star meal.

He finally speaks, “I see. I am assuming the wound is under there.” His gaze is zeroing in on the white bandage wrapped tightly around my arm.

I want to ask Levi why exactly I needed to wrap my bite if Zackly was going to see so clearly through my charade, but then I think that Levi probably didn’t anticipate me giving myself away so early.

“Yes.” I am sticking with short answers. My mouth has never proven to be my friend, and this conversation seems like one I really don’t want to fuck up.
He brings a hand up to brush through his mustache in thought, “Well, if Erwin brought you here then you obviously aren’t dangerous.”

“I can protect myself need be.”

Remember what I said about my mouth not being my friend? Yeah, I must have forgotten to mention we are mortal enemies, plotting to ruin each other one smartass line at a time.

Zackly laughs, because apparently my threats aren’t as intimidating as I thought. “That’s good. That’s good. You will fit right in then.”

Fit right in? What?

Hanji sounds positively enthralled when she roars, “Yahoo!”

Mike claps a hand on my back, with a smile. He looks proud of me, and I feel like for the first time in forever, I have done something right. His smile is contagious, and soon everyone else is following suit with a grin of their own. Well, except Levi. That cold, cryptic gaze seems almost permanently plastered on his face.

The muscles in my mouth give in, and just as quickly, I am wearing a smile so large that Zackly can probably see every tooth in my mouth.

It hits me like a one of Mikasa’s infamous overhands, and I realize:

*I’m not alone anymore.*

---

The view from the entryway did not do Stohess any justice. Maybe it has been too long since I have seen a city that wasn’t littered with decomposing corpses, but I think the town is beautiful. It’s small, but quaint, having only one road which is lined with buildings on both sides.

The walls detract from the otherwise picturesque village, but I suppose that is the world’s way of reminding the townsfolk what is on the other side.

Zackly has taken it upon himself to give me a tour of the small haven, starting with the small diner that sits on the street corner. It blends in nicely with the rest of the town, but yet, there is something unique about it that set it apart at the same time.

*Shit, I don’t think I could be any more ambiguous. I think Levi is rubbing off on me*

The restaurant sports a vintage sign that hangs proudly above the entrance reading, ‘Hugo’s’. As I walk through the creaky wooden door, I notice a sign that boasts “Best coffee this side of Shiganshina!” A sickening feeling burrows its way into my stomach as I think of home. The last time I was there, I witnessed my mother being torn limb from limb while Mikasa pulled my screaming form away from the carnage. I still don’t know how we made it out of that warzone alive.

“This is where we have our meals. We eat three times a day, and everything is rationed.” He pauses, allowing me a chance for questions; but I am still in awe. I hope this isn’t a dream, because that seems like the kind of bullshit Mr. Higher Power would play on me.

“Did you hear me, Eren?” I notice Zackly has asked me something, but I have been too captivated by my dream world to pay attention.
“I think you might need to repeat it, the brat is off in Wonderland.” For some reason unbeknownst to me, Levi insisted that he accompany me on the tour. ‘He is a little shit, and someone has to make sure he doesn’t get lost.’ Asshole.

The worst part is that no one seemed to disagree. Erwin left to go over some supply run strategies, Hanji stated she had some business to take care of in her room, and Mike went to do… umm whatever Mike does. Which left me alone with Mr. Personality and Zackly.

I narrow my eyes at Levi, but as expected, they have their usual effect on the man.

Zackly chuckles, “Eren, I asked if the meal plan sounded good to you.” I don’t know why he is asking me. It’s not like my opinion really matters, does it? And anyway, I could care less if the food is rationed. Just the thought of having three consistent meals a day makes me happy.

“Oh, uh, yes sir.” I reply, stretching my arm behind my head to rub at the back of my neck. He chuckles again, and wraps an arm around my shoulder.

“Come on, let’s show you where you’ll be sleeping.”

---

My room is small, drab, and dark. But it’s my room. I haven’t had a place to call my own since before people started munching on brains. The area isn’t furnished with anything besides the bare essentials: a bed (please be comfortable), a writing desk, a chair, and a small dresser. The room could use some decorating, but it hits me that I don’t have any personal effects. The only thing I own is an old, weathered backpack and Erwin’s watch. And I am pretty sure sitting the dirty knapsack against the wall doesn’t count as interior decorating.

I hear a knock, and I turn to see Hanji leaning against the doorframe, a bundle of clothes in hand.

“Can I come in?” She asks like she hasn’t already stepped through the entryway into my room.

I smile, “Make yourself at home.”

She looks a little awkward holding the bundle of clothes, like she is not sure what to do with them. Finally, she opts to dump them onto the bed. Well, I would have chosen the dresser, but I guess everything is unorthodox with Hanji.

“So, how do you like the great, big world of Stohess so far?” I go to answer her, but I pause. I love it, so far, I really do. But how could I possibly put all these feelings into words?

Amazed.

Thankful.

Not alone.

“I… I am so happy, Hanji.” Her smile brightens up my shadowy room, leaving a warm afterglow in its wake.

I continue, “It’s not what I expected at all. It’s ten times, no a hundred times better. It’s almost like people aren’t eating each other out there. I’m… I’m just glad you guys found me.”

“Ditto.” She grins, “Anyway, I found some clothes that seemed your size. I had to guesstimate, so I just picked things that I thought would be too big for Levi.”
“Isn’t that everything?” It’s a lame joke, but I remember that Hanji finds me absolutely hilarious.

Still laughing, she starts, “Oh my god, Eren. Warn me next time.”

Wiping her eyes, she continues, "As I was saying, if they don’t fit just give them back to me, and we will find you something else, okay?"

“Alright.” She makes to exit my room when I stop her, “And Hanji?”

She whips her head back towards me, messy ponytail swinging at the top of her head. “Thanks.”

Hanji doesn’t reply, but instead offers me a quick upturn of her lips as she exits.

With Hanji gone, I shut my door and allow my eyes fall to the pile of clothes she unceremoniously tossed upon my bed. I sigh as I shuffle over to the wardrobe.

As I pilfer through the heap, I am surprised that all of the clothes actually look like they are in fairly good condition; some even look new. I pull a shirt out at random, and it ends up being a graphic tee. I look at the saying plastered across it, and I immediately throw it back into the pile with a look of disgust. It was one of those tacky shirts stating, *Cool story, Babe. Now make me a sandwich.* which seemed to be the mating call of all douchebags. I am 99 percent sure Jean had one.

I go to grab another shirt when there is a knock at my door.

Yanking on the handle, the last person I expect to see on the other side is Erwin, but if I have learned anything in the past 24 hours it’s to expect the unexpected.

“Oh god, not with the cheesy one liners again.

“Good, uh,” I look down at the watch on my wrist to check the time, “evening, Erwin.”

He smiles, “Glad to see you are getting more use out of that thing then I did.” He peers over my head, taking in my murky room. "It’s… nice.”

I sigh, looking around my room, “I know it’s not the Hilton, but it’s better than anything I have had since we started becoming an endangered species.”

Erwin smiles, “I’m glad you like it so much. I’m sure you’re going to really enjoy it here. But, before I forget, President Zackly wanted me to remind you that dinner is going to be served soon. After we eat, he wants to finish the tour.”

I am a little surprised that Zackly sent Erwin all the way up to my room just to remind me of something the man himself told me not even thirty minutes ago.

“Umm, okay. Sounds good.” I give Erwin an uneasy smile as he bids me goodbye.

Maybe this is routine, and I am just overthinking it. I have been doing a lot of that lately, haven’t I? I should not be questioning the methods in which Stohess is run; obviously, whatever they are doing has worked for the past few months. So, if that means reminding the new guy when dinner is, then so be it. Still, it makes me feel like a child who has to constantly be reminded to brush his teeth. *Actually, it reminds me of mom.*

That painful twinge is back.

It has been how many months now? Long enough to get over it, but does someone ever really get over the death of a parent? As much as she’d like everyone to believe, I don’t think Mikasa ever
really got over the death of hers. So, I suppose it’s normal to feel like my chest is going to burst every
time I am reminded of her.

*Wait, that doesn’t sound normal at all.*

I would talk to Hanji about it, but I really don’t feel like being psychoanalyzed by the woman. It is
times like these I miss Armin the most. He remembered how to do the one thing many people
scrambling around during the apocalypse forgot: how to listen. Sure, he would call me out on my
bullshit, but he at least let me tell him my convoluted plan before he reminded me why I never
strategized.

I really missed that blonde coconut, hell, I missed them all. Even Jean. The asshole had a personality
that tended to grow on you. Like a tumor, but still. I hope they are safe. God, I hope they are safe.

I walk back over to the bed, and pick up where I left off sorting through the seemingly endless pile of
clothes. How did Hanji manage to collect this many articles of clothing? Was it Zackly’s doing?
Somehow, I can’t imagine the man being concerned with my fashion choices.

I look down at my watch and notice that Erwin was right, dinner is starting soon. I want to change
from the rags I have been calling an outfit, but I am still filthy. Call me crazy, but I feel wrong
changing into another set of clothes that I would surely dirty within minutes of wear. I elect that
when I find Zackly, the first thing I am going to ask him is where the showers are.

*Showers.*

*Clean.*

*Home.*

---

As I walk into the restaurant, the succulent aroma of meat engages my senses until I feel
overpowered by the strong smell. I can’t be sure but the scent reminds me of the deer Mikasa would
sometimes be lucky enough to catch. It had been a long time since I had eaten anything that was not
cooked hastily, if it was even cooked at all. But alas, that is the life you live when you are on the run
from hoards of the undead.

Dinner is in full swing in the tiny eatery. All around me are hungry civilians munching on
overcooked deer (?) stew, talking and laughing as though life hasn’t changed. I wonder how long
some of them have been here. How much have they seen? I remember Hanji told me that Stohess
was established not long after World War Z arrived, but she said Zackly had a small group. There are
at least fifty people alone partaking of the evening meal, not including those who are standing watch
on the wall.

I am snapped out of my haze when my eyes notice the line formed in front of a small window that
separates the dining room from the kitchen. Then, I remember I came here for dinner not to analyze
the residential Stohessians. *Stohessians? What?*

I guess it is just a bad habit I need to get rid of. Over analyzing, under analyzing, *analyzing in
general. I need to accept that these people have probably had just as much fun as I have through this
apocalypse. I need to make friends.*

*Yeah, let’s take things one step at a time, Jaeger.*

The line moves quickly, and before I know it I am standing awkwardly behind the window staring
into a set of brown, unforgiving eyes.

“Er, hello? Table for one?” I jest, but the woman behind the window either doesn’t get my joke or is one hundred percent done with my bullshit. With the way her beady eyes stay trained on my face as she loads my plate, I am going with the latter.

My plates slides across the window into my chest; and I can’t help but feel like if I was going to make an enemy, I probably should have chosen someone who wasn’t dealing with my food.

I might want to let Erwin know that if I suddenly die from food poisoning, it was the evil lunch lady who did me in.

“Ah, thanks.” I feel her eyes follow me eerily as I make my way from the window.

I glance down to my plate to see what Gordon Ramsey has so graciously prepared for me. It looks… edible at best, but if my mom’s meals taught me anything it was not to judge a book by its cover.

*I am obviously a philosopher in an eighteen year old body with the amount of bullshit phrases I am spewing.*

As I look for a place to sit in the busy restaurant, my eyes fall to a recognizable undercut. Levi is sitting alone in one of the diner’s booths, quietly sipping out of a coffee cup. His isolation shouldn’t surprise me, given he is sporting a five star personality. Obviously, the people of Stohess find him as personable as I do.

I should go sit at a table, make some new friends; rejoice in the fact that my choice of conversational partners has expanded from someone other than a mute, a lunatic, and an asshole. Of course, I don’t listen to the inner voice in my head, and I begin to make my way over to Levi’s booth. Nine out of ten times, my inner thought process is wrong. So, I am silently praying that this choice doesn’t land in the tenth percentile.

I should not feel the urge to make sure Levi is okay. I mean, why wouldn’t he be? He is a lone wolf, bred for solitary. As I close in on Levi, I can’t help but feel the man is going to make me regret interrupting his seclusion.

When I reach his booth, it takes him a moment to realize I am there. Or maybe he is just ignoring me, hoping that if he doesn’t feed into my curiosity I will eventually go away. He should know me better than that.

With a tired sigh, he finally acknowledges my appearance, “What?”

Yeah, he was definitely hoping I would just take the hint and leave.

I don’t know how to start, so I answer with the first thing that pops into my head. Always a great idea. “You looked, umm, lonely.”

Actually, he looked quite content with his isolation, like he did not expect anything different. So, was that loneliness? I’d like to think so.

His gaze is now narrowed dangerously, like I have figured out some secret he wanted to keep hidden, “So, you think that out of everyone here, your company is the one I want the most?”

*Uh oh.*

I don’t know how to reply. I feel like I have poured salt onto a wound that I didn’t even know
existed. Maybe he had accepted that people just didn’t want to be around him. And here I was, the great Eren Jaeger, basically pointing a neon sign at the fact that everyone liked to avoid him.

Smooth.

“I was just trying to be nice.”

He scoffs, “You have been hanging around Erwin too long. Nice doesn’t suit you.”

My hands tighten instinctively around my plate. All that anger Mikasa and Armin helped me learn to control was rising steadily to the surface.

“See that?” He says directing his gaze to my trembling hands, “That suits you.”

Somehow, Levi pointing out my anger does nothing to absolve it. If anything, it heightens the feelings of resentment I want to direct at the short bastard. Preferably with my fist.

That’s probably what he wants, though. For me to lose control. I glance at his forehead to see that elbow I gave him has swollen up nicely on the side of his head. He is more than likely looking for some reason to get me back for giving him that goose egg.

Well, I refuse to play your little games, you pint-sized asshat.

“Whatever.” I say as I make to leave him to his misery.

Levi’s voice stops me, “Oi, you little shit, I didn’t say you had to leave.” I swear the man is determined to give me mental whiplash. One minute he hates me, the next he is inadvertently asking for my company.

I sigh as I slide into the seat opposite from him, placing my plate down in front of me. I am sitting there, awkwardly pushing around my deer (?) stew for a few moments before I irritably huff. Is he content to sit in this uncomfortable silence?

Well, I’m not.

“So… how was your day?” He pauses mid-sip to look at me with an expression I can only describe as: Are you fucking serious?

Sighing, he places his cup back on the table, bringing his arms together to rest his face in his palms. “It was fucking pure, unadulterated bliss. I gardened, got my nails done; hell, I even walked in the rain.” My mouth is hanging open, rather unsightly. “We are not a married couple in a goddamned sitcom, so stop acting so concerned that I didn’t end up as walker shit.”

I want to tell him that I do care if- Wait, what? Since when did I start caring for the well-being of people who have attempted to kill me?

Well, there was that one time Mikasa tried to disembowel me…

Whatever, keep your friends close and your enemies closer, I guess.

A few minutes go by, and neither of us have spoken, and I will be damned if I am the one to break this prickly silence.

Levi has since picked up his cup of what I am assuming is tea. Hanji told me that Levi and tea were practically an item. Hanji has gone back to acting like I am not sitting directly across from him. He holds
his cup weird, with one hand clasping over the top instead of gripping it around the glass. I would mock him for it, but he would only turn the teasing on me for acting like such a child.

Suddenly, Levi’s cup is deposited back onto the table with a loud enough bang to snap me out of my daydreaming. I notice that I have been staring at my deer (I have confirmed) stew for the past few minutes, all the while being painfully aware of the silence.

Levi clears his throat like he is about to speak, but I interrupt him, “So, what? You just want to sit in silence?”

Wait, dammit. I forgot I was supposed to… forget it.

“Is quiet time such a hard concept for your inept mind to grasp?”

“No, but-“

“Then shut the fuck up, and finish your dinner.”

Well, okay then.

I don’t want to argue, so I begin to grudgingly push my stew around my plate. My food’s probably cold by now; I have only taken one or two bites since I sat down. And, yes, it tastes about as good as it looks.

As I look up from my ‘dinner’, I notice that Levi is still nursing his drink. I realize, however, that he does not have any stew. Maybe he pissed off the lunch lady as well when he first arrived, and he has decided death by rotten stew is not the most poetic way to go.

“Aren’t you going to eat?”

Levi sighs, no doubt getting ready to chastise me for interrupting his precious silence, “Why are you over here?”

I didn’t expect that.

The question takes me by surprise, and I have nothing to offer him besides an eloquent, “What?”

He repeats his inquiry, adding a few more details, “Why did you come over here to sit with me?”

By the time he repeats himself, I already have an answer, albeit not a very good one, but an answer nonetheless. “I already told you, you looked lonely.”

He replies quickly, “I don’t look lonely.” The defensive tone of voice sounds odd and out of place from his usual draw of bored and disinterested. From what I know about Levi, he doesn’t seem the type to let trivial things such as seating arrangements get under his skin. But I also thought he was always truthful, and his last sentence was obviously false.

Denial is not healthy, my friend.

I scoff, “You’re right. You look like an angry, wet hen.” I’m laughing now, because the face he has pulled is having trouble deciding if he is offended or amused.

Judging by the way he hasn’t attempted another homicide, I am guessing it’s the latter.

“I don’t look lonely.” He reiterates, this time with a stubborn undertone. Obviously, he is not going to admit he is wrong, so I decide to let it go… after this.
“Not anymore.” I smile.

His lips upturn in a small smirk that’s gone just as soon as it appears, and he echoes me with a mumble that tries to sound more annoyed than it actually is, “Not anymore.”

Chapter End Notes

And I am officially over 20,000 words! Whew.

Thanks, as always, for all the kudos/comments!

Tumblr:
fuzzyporcupine.tumblr.com

If you see any grammar mistakes, let me know! And if you have any questions, I will try to answer them to the best of my ability without spoiling anything.

FANMIX
ALL FANART
True to his word, Zackly was waiting for me as soon as dinner was finished. Several of the survivors were staying behind to help clean and wash the dishes. If it wasn’t for the fact that the kitchen was controlled by the resident troll, I would have happily helped. Levi seems to have the same idea as me, as he follows quietly behind me.

As we step out into the chilly night air, Zackly is patiently waiting; body leaned against the side of the building. The burly hunting jacket he is wearing seems to be doing an adequate job of protecting him against the harsh wind chill.

Zackly notices my obvious shaking, “Eren, I thought Hanji told me she delivered you some new attire.” So, he was behind the enormous pile of clothes. Well, I didn’t expect that.

“Yeah, umm, to be honest I feel a little dirty, and I didn’t want to ruin the clothes.”

Levi scoffs, “A little?” I turn my head to see that he is currently running his eyes up and down my frame, a look of disgust upon his otherwise emotionless face. “Gross.”

“I don’t know if you remember, but this is the apocalypse. Being clean didn’t quite make it to the top of my to-do list… but,” I turn my gaze to Zackly, “a shower would be really awesome right now.” By really awesome, I mean I would be willing to sacrifice a virgin to ensure just five minutes of clean water.

Ha, you could sacrifice yourself, Eren.

Did I mention that my self-conscious is an asshole?

Zackly chuckles at my eagerness, “Do you think you could manage until we finish seeing the sights, as they were?” I nod my head without hesitation, grateful for the promise of a shower.

“Leave us, Levi.” Zackly’s command is stern, not open for negotiation. Levi falters for a moment, eyes moving quickly between Zackly and me. “Now.” He turns to leave; but as he makes his exit, his eyes meet mine. His face may be unreadable, but his eyes give him away. They carry an unsaid warning within their swirling, smoky sea.

What are you trying to tell me, Levi?

Unfortunately, I was not born a mind reader, so I watch Levi make a hasty retreat in the direction of the Super 8 that marks our sleeping quarters. Zackly begins to walk in the opposite direction, and I quickly follow behind.

“I’m surprised at you, Eren.” I didn’t expect Zackly’s offhanded comment, so I merely stare at him, broadcasting a look of confusion. “You seem like a smart boy, and smart boys don’t typically associate with men who attempt to kill them.”

“I…”

“I’m not angry, Eren, neither am I your father. I don’t think I have the authority to tell you who you can or cannot play cards with.” He pauses, giving me a chance to rebuke his comments. I stay silent.
This overwhelming urge to ask Zackly what he means is poured over me. Obviously, he has found out about Levi’s attempt to murder me, but that didn’t seem to be at the forefront of his warning. His concern was almost foreboding, as if he was cautioning me that this was not the worst Levi could do. *The worst Levi had done.*

My silence speaks volumes, and Zackly translates them all wrong.

“I know Levi tried to kill you. Erwin did not even have to tell me that. One look at the bruises circling your neck, the lump on his head… well, one can put two and two together. Of course, Erwin reassured me when questioned, but that was just a necessary procedure.”

No, this isn’t right. I wasn’t playing mute in order to prevent knowledge of the attack. I assumed when Zackly brought it up, that he had already drawn his own conclusions. I stayed silent with the hopes that maybe, just maybe Zackly would tell me why Levi was so dangerous. Why he wanted me to stay away. Is that why no one made an attempt to speak to him at the diner? Has Levi been blacklisted by all of Stohess?

I feel cornered, like a mouse caught in a trap. I fear that anything I might say will be used against Levi, but Zackly knows it all right? Hell, the man probably knows more about Levi than the stone faced bastard himself.

But why would Levi be in trouble? Why would anything I say about him matter?

“I wasn’t trying to hide it, I just…”

“I know, Eren. It’s fine, don’t worry. It’s fine.”

*That word.*

“Enough of such dreary topics, let’s continue the tour like I promised, hmm?”

---

Stohess is a lot bigger than I first thought. Besides the diner, the town comes complete with a hotel, a clinic, and a mother fucking armory. And it is loaded. For a second, I think that Zackly only brought me here to intimidate me, but I realize he probably only wanted me assured that I was safe within these walls. But how the fuck did he acquire all this weaponry?

I can’t help but allow the question to slip from my lips, “How?”

“The weapons?” If he is trying to tease me with an answer, it is working. “Some of our group were military. They stumbled on our town a couple months after the infection spread. You know Marlowe, Boris?” I shake my head because I have no earthly clue who the man is speaking of. Maybe I should have tried to be more sociable instead of trying to get on Levi’s good side; that is presuming he even has one. I would think it would be more like a tolerable side if anything.

“Ah, well, they brought us most of these goods. They had a tank, too, nasty sonofabitch that was; but it was lost with the rest of their squad.” I have a hard time believing that someone could lose a tank, but then again maybe Marlowe and Boris were idiots.

The clinic is the last stop on this short excursion. As I walk inside, I feel smothered, like the walls are closing in on me. Everything inside the office is white, giving off the stereotypical hospital feel. But that is not what’s suffocating me. Something is wrong here. Something…

“So, this is our clinic. Nothing too fancy, but it gets the job done. We will be bringing you here once
you get adjusted. See if we can whip out a cure from you.”

Well if that didn’t sound terrifying, I don’t know what does.

Zackly sees my expression and starts chuckling, “I’m only joking, Eren. But if you don’t mind we will want to run a few experiments. Basic protocol like blood samples, no Chinese water torture just yet.” I know he’s only joking, but that does not make me feel any better. This place just feels too ominous, like something horrible happened here.

And no, I don’t believe in the Korean ghost shit that sends a thousand curses onto unlucky passersby. This feels real. Frightening.

Before I have too long to think about it, Zackly is directing me to the showers.

Sneaky bastard knows how to distract me.

---

The water feels heavenly against my body. I would be content to stay here forever, letting the water soak away all the dirt and tarnish resting against my abused skin. As I run my fingers down my body, I can feel each rib poking roughly against my skin. Should it surprise me that I am one of the lucky ones? I’ve seen some terrible shit. Worse than the zombies. I’ve seen people who are so malnourished that in a world full of walkers, the starvation is what took them out. And that is a slow, painful way to go. And, shit, you still end up coming back as a walking corpse. You can’t win in this world.

Though, it is funny the things you take for granted. I never thought it would be months before I would be able to have a hot shower. This sure as shit beats bathing in the creek. That was the definition of awkward. It’s not like I’ve only seen my own naked figure, it’s just when you’re having to constantly make sure a zombie doesn’t catch you in your birthday suit, weird things are bound to happen. Like Jean convincing Marco that they’ll finish quicker if they help each other wash. Ugh.

Believe me, I am scarred for life.

Zackly told me that my shower time was not limited, but that we only had so much hot water. I decide to be a good sport and end my temporary heaven. I was told that someone went to fetch me some of the new clothes, and I am silently praying that whoever chose my outfit did not pick the douchebag t-shirt.

Please, god just let me have one thing.

Apparently, that’s one thing too much, because I am walking out of the showers looking like I belong on one of those trashy teen reality shows. Sooner or later I’m going to start using phrases like, ‘That’s what she said’ or ‘Be real, bro’. I’m telling you, Jean had this thing down to an art.

As I near the hotel, I see a familiar figure leaning against the building, a waft of smoke appearing from his direction. Sure enough, Levi is propped up carelessly against the wall, drowning his troubles with nicotine. Cigarette hanging precariously from his lips, he looks like one of those rebellious kids whose favorite pastime activity was getting high under the old railroad bridge.

“Where did you get that?” I decide he is not going to start the conversation, so I take the initiative.

He brings his hand up to cradle the cigarette carefully between two fingers as he blows out a cloud of
smoke in my direction. “Nice shirt.” My middle finger flashes in front of his face.

“And I have a small stash that I pull out whenever I’m feeling stressed.” He says it so nonchalantly, looks at me like it's a physical burden to explain to me why he has the privilege of killing himself early with nicotine. Asshole.

“Oh.” I choose not to comment on the shirt, hopefully he’ll just forget it’s there.

Wait, what? No, I meant- wait, I am not going to argue with my sub-conscious.

I walk closer and lean beside him against the wall. “You’re stressed?”

He tilts his head back and closes his eyes, looking deep in thought. I start to think that he is not going to answer my question, but then he angles his head in my direction. “Is this going to become a regular thing?” He asks as he takes another drag.

I answer before I have time to process what he just asked me, “What? Me hanging out with you?”

His face twists into a look of confusion, “No, I meant me having to repeat everything. And wait, please enlighten me about how we have been ‘hanging out’. When exactly have these acts of camaraderie been happening?” I open my mouth, but before I can release the words, he interrupts me, “And I swear to god, if you say ‘now’ I will fucking draw and quarter your sorry ass.”

Well, I’m glad one of us is a mind reader.

I change the topic, “Why doesn’t Zackly want me around you?”

Scratch that, Levi is not physic.

He tenses quickly before trying to relax back into his normal disposition.

“Fuck if I know, kid.” His mouth opens to continue, but he pauses like he is unsure if he really wants to say what he is thinking. Unfortunately, he resumes his speech, as he flicks his cigarette onto the ground, “I don’t even want you around me, so do yourself a favor and take his advice.”

That shouldn’t have hurt as much as it did. A remark like that should be expected from someone as blatant as Levi. I mean, we are not friends, are we? I should not feel upset that he confirmed what I already knew. But this pain hits me directly in the chest, not unlike the tearing that rips me apart when I think of my mother. The hurt rapidly boils over to anger, and before I know it I have thrown myself off the wall.

“What did you do?” I ask with a demanding undertone. It’s an ambiguous question, but his body language tells me he knows exactly what I am talking about. His eyes are turning into dangerous silts, warning me that I am traveling into hazardous territory. But I don’t care. I have never thought things through, so why start now?

“What did you do? Why is everyone so… afraid of you?” I question again, this time softening my tone.

He lifts himself off the wall and elbows past me, refusing to reply to my question. But I don’t let him get far. Before he can reach the doors to the hotel, I have one hand locked around his upper arm, spinning him around to face me.

His eyes are pleading, begging me not to reopen this wound. I ask again, anyway.
“What happened to you?” That’s it. That is the final straw. My words have flipped the switch that Levi has tried to keep concealed, buried under his emotionless mask. He morphs into something angry, something broken. Levi reaches up and wraps his fists in my shirt collar before throwing me against the wall.

His eyes are feral, rage forming a cyclone within. “You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about and neither does that old bastard. You don’t know a damn thing. You have no right. No fucking right. You are just a shitty brat who-

“Fucking let me go! You’re hurting me, asshole!” I knew he was strong; but his rage must send him into an inhuman state, because he currently has me lifted off my feet, back pressing harshly into the wall.

My pleas zap the power from his grasp, and he releases my collar. I drop the ground with a thud. Levi is looking down at me, and I almost expect him to offer me a hand; but then I remember that he just threw me up against a brick wall. Before he can even think of offering me assistance, I am pushing myself up from the ground. I shove past him, my shoulder colliding with his. He doesn’t say anything; but I tell myself it is okay, because I didn’t expect an apology anyway.

Zackly was right, I’m just glad it didn’t take me long to realize.

Fuck being friends with Levi.

Fuck trying to be nice to Levi.

Fuck Levi in general.

He is no different than those creatures I have tried so hard to escape.

I don’t look back as I enter the hotel. All the while, a pair of charcoal eyes watches me as I go.---

I wake up feeling miserable at best. Memories from the night before are still swirling in my head. Last night, I had convinced myself that Levi was, without a doubt, the biggest prick in existence. I was running on anger, on pain. But so was he.

I should have known better. I should have known that he was not just going to open up to me like we had been friends our entire lives. Hell, we were never friends. I mean, what gave me the impression that Levi was going to suddenly transform into an open book? Was it the fact that he allowed me to sit with him at dinner? Because, shit, if that’s it then I am a lot worse at reading people than I thought. But it’s the other way around isn’t it? I’m the open book full of emotion, ready to be studied by anyone with enough interest. Levi’s the locked chest whose key has been lost for years. I wear my heart on my sleeve, while Levi seems to not even have one.

So, which one of us was the real asshole? Who was the one in the wrong?

My aching back wants to argue that Levi was at fault, but the guilt eating at my chest begs to differ. Fuck, I just wanted to be his friend. But wait. I had adamantly refused the thought of friendship every time the idea blossomed in my mind. What is wrong with me?

I groan as I run my fingers through the chestnut locks strewn across my forehand. Now really does not seem like the most opportune time for me to be having an identity crisis. It’s just… it’s Levi’s fucking fault I am acting like this. That has to be it. I have just never had to endure someone so… so… shit. I roll my face into my pillow and release a silent scream. Friendship shouldn’t be this
fucking difficult. Wait, not friendship. *Acquaintanceship.* Is that even a word? My mental spellcheck doesn’t clock in until after I have breakfast, so it’s really anyone’s guess.

*Fuck my life, and fuck that stupid midget.*

Wow, really?

I need to get up before I transform back into my thirteen year old self. I shiver, because I really would prefer to not go through puberty again.

I glance at my watch, remembering that Zackly said breakfast started at six. It’s already thirty minutes past, and I really don’t feel like eating anyway. I decide that I will give myself one morning, just one morning, to sulk. If I think about it hard enough, I have multiple reasons to not go down to breakfast.

One, Satan in the flesh probably didn’t forget about me overnight, and I honestly don’t feel like dying today. Two, I can’t stomach the possibility of running into Levi. I have no doubt that, right now, he is probably sitting in the diner alone, slowly sipping his morning tea. And he is probably just dandy with that. If anything, I guarantee that he was glad the fight happened. Happy that I am out of his hair.

Yeah, going back to sleep sounds really nice.

I sigh, throwing my covers unceremoniously to the side. I toss my legs over the side of the bed, and pull my face into my hands.

I have more important things to worry about than if Levi is my friend or not.

Like for instance, why do the hotel rooms not have showers? That’s fucking weird. I know that Super 8s had shoddy standards, but I have never heard of a hotel room that didn’t have a shower.

As I throw on a black thermal and some blue jeans, I am trying to remind myself that this is my ‘woe is me’ morning. But I stopped listening to myself after I walked over to Levi’s booth yesterday.

Hanji did a decent job picking out my size. The clothes would fit my old weight perfectly, but now, they hang loosely around my chest and hips. I can manage.

I contemplate bringing my backpack with me, but I decide against it. Zackly seemed sure, yesterday, that he had weaponry covered in case of an attack. As I step out of the hotel, I can’t help but feel like I should go back for it.

I need to stop being so paranoid.

I need to learn to trust again.

I need to…

The recognizable growl of a walker stops me dead in my tracks.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck. No, no, no, no.*

I turn to go back inside to grab my backpack, but I realize that it wouldn’t do any good. That asshole never gave me back my weapons. Shit, what do I do? Zackly didn’t cover this. He did not tell me what to do during an attack. He made me feel safe. Lies. Lies. *Lies.*

I need to run.

I need to find shelter.
I need to survive.
Survive.
Live.
Survive.
Live.

I repeat the words in my head like a mantra. Chanting them over and over until those are the only words I know. In my paranoia, I recognize that the bloodcurdling screams that usually follow the growls haven’t come yet. Actually, it’s quite the opposite. There is laughter. Children’s laughter.

What?

Have I officially lost it?

The sound beckons me, and I follow without hesitation. A pang of fear strikes my chest, but I don’t stop. I can’t stop. Why should I be afraid? There’s nothing to be afraid of. Hannes once told me that fear wasn’t a real emotion. Of course, this was after he wiped the tears from his own face. Pain. He said that was real, but fear? Fear was a make believe feeling your mind created. He told me that the mind works faster than the body, that the mind recognizes danger and creates fear. I believed him. What can I say, it was a good explanation.

I see the source of the noise.

It’s a group of people, actually no. It’s the entire community of Stohess. They are gathered around a large tree whose leaves have since become causalities of the upcoming winter. As the laughter becomes louder, so does the growl. I can’t put the pieces together. I don’t understand.

As I close in on the group, I do not recognize anyone. I look for a familiar face, but I only see an ocean of foreign expressions. I push through the group, desperate. Desperate for what, I don’t know. Answers? A friend? Probably both.

More laughter.
More growling.

The people around me do not look concerned. If anything they look amused, content even. Like this is normal. But nothing can be called normal anymore. Or maybe I have lost all faith in this world. When did I become so pessimistic? What happened to that boy with the bright eyes, who wanted nothing more than to succeed in a world that stopped at nothing to cut you down? Where did he go?

I’m still here.

That’s right, I’m still here. I’ve changed, but I’m still here. So, let these people have their amusement. Don’t let me spoil it. But that doesn’t mean I can’t question their sanity.

I push through the last row of people and I see… it.

Ok, scratch that. Fuck their amusement.

The lurker is tied up in a hangman’s noose, swinging freely in the wind. The children are running around it, avoiding its grabbing mitts. They wield large sticks, and they are hitting it. It’s like some fucked up piñata. And I don’t want to break it to them, but candy is not going to be coming out of
that thing.

The walker’s limbs are broken in several places where the sticks have landed. It growls in pain, hunger, misery, I am not sure. But it roars, crying out as its body is beaten. I am hypnotized by the sight, not unlike the first time I saw one of the creatures. And I share the same feeling: disgust. I am sickened. What kind of fucked up entertainment is this? What kind of monsters are they creating here?

Blood is littering the ground beneath the beast as its flesh is ripped apart. Soon, its rotten limbs start to fall, and before long it is nothing but a torso and a head. Even when the limbs hit the ground, the children do not stop their torment. They strike the fallen limbs over and over until they are nothing more than mutilated piles of gore. Is this therapeutic for the people of Stohess? Because, shit, I feel like this is the wrong way to deal with anger.

I look away from the scene, and I regret it the moment my eyes collide with a pair of flashing greys. His gaze is fixated on me from across the circle of people, for how long I am unsure. I was too entranced by the horror show playing out in front of me to notice. Levi’s glare is unreadable, blank. For some reason, his stare make me feel sicker than the disfigurement of the walker.

I turn around to leave the group, because this is some Wicker Man shit that I am nopeing right the fuck out of.

“Ah, Eren, we missed you at breakfast.” I turn to see that Zackly is standing right next to me, completely unaffected by the gruesome scene.

I have never been good at small talk, and I can for sure say now that it doesn’t improve when I am standing in front of a zombie maiming. “I… uh… I didn’t feel well.”

“Ah, that’s a shame. Greta made an absolutely to die for soup this morning.” So that was the ogre’s name. It suited her. And, woah, *wait just one fucking minute*. To die for? Either the Wicked Witch of Stohess told Zackly about her plans to murder me, or he really thought the soup was delicious. I am betting either way that meal would have been my last this morning.

“Enjoying the show?” Is he seriously asking me this? I have seen friends and family torn to pieces by these monsters. The last thing I want is to be in close proximity with one. Haven’t they ever heard of ‘when you play with fire, you get burned’ or is my mind just full of these useless phrases?

“Don’t look so glum. It’s all in good fun. As a matter of fact, I was just about to choose someone to give the killing blow. How about it, Eren?” No, fuck you, old man. I will not be pulled into this town’s twisted fetish. “Think of it as your initiation into Stohess.” Before I can reject, a baseball bat is pushed into my hands and I am being forced out into the killing ground. A man cuts through the noose that is holding the zombie in place, and the creature falls to the ground in a heap. It struggles on the ground, moaning and keening. The hungry glaze in its eyes is still there even on the precipice of death. Arms shaking, I raise the bat above my head. This is wrong. Walkers are meant to be killed, but with mercy. They are still *somewhat* human, right? I look into the beast’s eyes and I realize that I can’t. I can’t do this. The bat is still swaying above my head, waiting patiently for its chance to end the biter’s life.

Suddenly, a gunshot sounds and the walker goes limp. There is a collective gasp among the people, and I notice that someone has shot the zombie in the head. I slowly lower the bat and let it slip from my fingertips, falling to my knees. The sound of the club echoes throughout the camp, and I become aware that everyone is deathly silent. This has never happened, has it? No one has ever questioned the morality of this. No one has ever stopped to think that this ‘game’ makes them just as bad as the walkers. They just follow along, grateful that they are still alive. Grateful that they are given an outlet
for all the rage they want to unleash. But wait. I didn’t shoot the zombie, someone else did. Who?

“Tch.” Levi stands over me, remnants of the dead biter plastered across his jeans, my gun in his hands. I want to thank him, but I remember we are probably not on speaking terms anymore. I turn my gaze to the ground, but the sound of a hard smack brings my attention back to the man.

Zackly is standing in front of him, open palm slowly sinking back to his side. Levi’s head is tilting in an awkward angle to the side. His cheek is flaring a bright red, painfully contrasting the paleness of his skin. I stare up at the scene, open mouthed and horrified. To my surprise, Levi accepts the abuse, standing silent in Zackly’s presence. Hanji is rushing up from the crowd, arms wrapping around Levi’s shoulders as she escorts him away from the scene.

I call out his name.

He doesn’t turn back.

Not once.

Chapter End Notes

And so God said, "Let there be angst."

Thanks, as always, for all the kudos/comments!

Tumblr:
fuzzyporcupine.tumblr.com

FANMIX
ALL FANART
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It’s been twenty four hours.

Twenty four hours since I witnessed the depravity of the human race.

Twenty four hours since Hanji dragged a certain man from the maiming.

Twenty four hours since I had seen Levi.

I almost want to seek him out and apologize, but there are a few problems with that plan. One, I have no clue where I would find him. Two, I don’t know what I would be apologizing for. For having to save me? For Zackly’s cruelty? I am not sure. The only thing I am positive of is that I need to talk to somebody. Hell, I will even settle for Mike right now. Actually, he would probably be the best option. He would just let me rant, adding an occasional grunt when necessary.

I sigh as I lay back on my bed. Zackly had immediately dismissed us after the Levi incident. He hadn’t offered me one word of explanation about the whole scenario, and that just left me to draw my own conclusions. None of them were good.

I didn’t know what to do after we were dismissed, so I simply went back to my room and locked my door. I haven’t left other than to join the community for meals and to relieve myself. I had figured that Levi would at least make an appearance during meal hours, but each time he never showed. Each time, I sat in that stupid booth thinking any minute he was going to slide in, coffee cup in hand. Each time, I ate alone.

I close my eyes, trying to formulate a plan. Shit, Armin was right, this is why I never strategized. I need to find Hanji. If Levi didn’t want to see anyone, okay. I just need someone.

A knock on my door has me almost jumping out of my skin. I quickly shuffle over to answer it, unlocking the door.

Erwin is standing, tall and sturdy, in front of my entryway. “Mind if I come in?” I don’t answer, opting to just leave the door open as I turn away. There’s that teenage angst I’ve been lacking. Hopefully, he will get the idea. The sound of his heavy footsteps lets me know that he took the hint. I sit on the bed as he pulls out the chair from my writing desk.

“I think we need to talk about what happened.” What was there to talk about? I witnessed a group of people condoning the torture of a walker. No, I think I got it. When I don’t answer he sighs, “I know it was… hard to watch, but the people here, they are-“

“Monsters?” I interrupt. I still haven’t looked him in the eyes, fearing that once I do all my perseverance will crumble.

“Eren, I’m sorry you had to see it, but that is how these people cope. I don’t approve of it, either. If you noticed, I didn’t attend. But just because we don’t approve doesn’t mean it will stop.” I finally meet his stare. Erwin is a good man. I can see in his eyes that he knows the ritual is wrong, but he is right; we can’t stop it.

“It’s okay, I understand.” I answer him as I grip the bed sheets, because everything I am saying
sounds wrong. Like my body is rejecting the words coming out of my mouth.

“I heard about Levi, too.” I can’t help the involuntary gasp that escapes my lips. I can’t hold Erwin’s gaze if this is what he wants to discuss, so my eyes travel back down to the floor. “He was very brave, but there is a time and place for everything here.” He leaves certain things unsaid, like he wants me to fill in the blanks. “I thought you should know that I talked to him about what happened, and he doesn’t blame you.” A wave of relief crashes over me with the knowledge that Levi isn’t angry at me for what happened at the maiming.

Wait.

Erwin never said he wasn’t angry. He just said Levi didn’t blame me. For all I know, the man has a dartboard with my picture in the center of it.

I need to see him.

I need to confirm my beliefs.

*Er, not about the dartboard... but the 'not angry at me' bit.*

“Do you know where he is?”

Erwin smiles like he expected this, “Room 26, floor three.” I don’t even bid Erwin goodbye as I scramble to exit my room. I head to the flight of stairs located at the end of the hall. I am only a floor below him, so it doesn’t take me long to reach his level. My eyes scan each room number, looking frantically for 26.

26.

26.

26.

Brass numbers looking like a beacon, I finally find the room. Taking a deep breath, I bring my knuckles to rap at the door.

No answer.

What? Erwin would not have lied to me. Would he? I knock again, this time sounding a little more desperate.

Again, silence. Nothing but the echo of my knocking fills the hall.

I refuse to believe that Erwin sent me all the way down here just knock aimlessly on a door. I try one more time, this time resorting to banging.

“I swear to fuck, Hanji, if that’s you again I will shove your shitty glasses so far up your-“ Levi pauses when he whips open the door to reveal my face. He looks me up and down once, twice, before he promptly motions to slam the door shut on me.

“What the fuck do you want?” He says through the crack.

“I came to… shit, can you please surrender my foot?” Levi lets up on the door, allowing me to lean against the doorway. “I came to… umm check on you.” It sounds awkward coming off my lips, and
if Levi’s face is anything to go by, he thinks just as much. He raises an eyebrow at me in disbelief.

“I’m fine, now leave.” I cringe at his word choice, but I don’t make to move from my spot. Levi obviously doesn’t appreciate my determination, because before I can react, he is slamming the door on my foot again.

“Oh, you fucking prick!” Well, this is not going how I expected. But did I even think I would be seeing this bastard today? No, so, I guess I should be grateful… even if he doesn’t seem to welcome my concern. “Can you stop being a dick for two seconds, so I can say something?” He has the door almost closed again, and the only thing I can see is his narrowed glare through the crack, reminding me of a housecat that’s scared of company. I guess he finally gets that I’m not leaving, because he throws the door open in defeat.

“Fine, but take your fucking shoes off, you pig.” I shoot him a confused gaze; but as soon as I look at the room, I understand the reasoning behind the command. I wouldn’t say his room was spotless, because that word doesn’t exist during the zombie apocalypse; but I could agree that it is probably the cleanest living space I have seen since the world erupted into chaos.

As I remove my shoes, I grimace, because damn, the bastard got me good. “My foot really hurts now, thank you very fucking much.”

Levi sighs as his sits at the end of his bed, “I would apologize, but you were breaking and entering.”

“You wouldn’t apologize anyway.”

“Good boy, you’re learning quickly.” I quirk my eyebrow up at him, unsure whether or not I should be offended. I opt that I probably should not bite the hand that feeds me. Well, hypothetically speaking. Here Levi is, allowing me into his room, offering to hear me out. For some reason, I feel like I won’t get this chance again.

I pull out the chair by his writing desk, similar to how Erwin did my room. “So, how are you?”

He has brought his elbows up to rest on his knees, hands clasped together, “I thought we talked about this.” The night Levi and I shared dinner flashes in my mind, and I remember that he doesn’t necessarily appreciate concern.

“Yeah, well, I think this qualifies as something other than married couple bullshit.”

“Oh?” I am trying my hardest to not get angry, because I am one hundred percent sure that is not what Levi wants. But, shit, it’s almost like he forgot yesterday even happened. Maybe he is just trying not to remember. Didn’t I learn my lesson about prodding into Levi’s life? Well, one way to find out.

“You know what I mean. Why have you been cooping yourself up here?” He does not look surprised that I brought up the topic so quickly. If anything, he looks prepared, like he already has an answer ready for me.

“Since when did you become my fucking keeper?”

I fire back quickly, “Since you let Zackly smack you around like you were a whore out of line.”

_Damn, Eren, tell him how you really feel._

I’m expecting Levi to demand my departure, maybe for him to kick my ass for good measure; because I just started sowing wild oats with that comment. But he doesn’t. He stays quiet, silently
staring at the brown carpet layering the floor. As I study him, I notice how messy he looks. The untidiness seems foreign on Levi’s body. His hair is disheveled and oily, his white button up is fastened unevenly, one sleeve is rolled up while the other lies against his wrist. It doesn’t look like Levi. I probably shouldn’t but before I really think about what I’m doing, I have already made it over to his bed. I take a seat beside him, waiting for him to speak.

“You should listen to Zackly, you know?” He doesn’t say it with malice, if anything his voice is lined with regret. “I’m not a good person, I’ve never been, and…” He squeezes his eyes shut like the idea is paining him, “and I don’t think that is going to change.” He opens his lids and is looking at me now, silver eyes capturing my emerald ones. I want to ask him what he means, but I don’t want to spoil his mood. It’s not like he would tell me anyway.

“I’m sorry.” I don’t exactly know why I am apologizing, but it’s already left my lips before I can take it back.

“What for?”

I somehow knew he wouldn’t let me out of the apology that easy.

I hesitate, what can I say? That I am sorry Zackly’s an asshole? That his life has apparently sucked just as much as mine?

“For calling you a hooker,” I blurt out.

Levi laughs. Not a smirk. Not a chuckle. Not even one of those sarcastic dry laughs that he does when he’s trying to be a prick. He laughs. And… I can’t help but think it sounds sort of wonderful.

“I’ve been called worse.” He knocks his knee against mine and smirks.

I raise my lips in a closed lipped smile, and it hits me.

I think Levi might be my friend.

Holy shit.

---

“We are going on another supply run soon, and Zackly wants you to go.” I really wish Erwin would have at least let me finish my bite of stew before dropping the metaphorical bomb on me. I choke on my stew before it manages to make it down my throat. Dammit, I fucking knew that evil, old bat would somehow do me in. I bring my hand up to prevent the chunks from spewing across the table.

“Please remind me why they allow animals in the dining room.” Levi has been reappearing at meal times ever since I joined him in his room. I can’t say it’s lasted long, because it’s only been a couple of days since I visited him. Nonetheless, we always share the same booth. During some meals, Erwin and Hanji join us, much to Levi’s displeasure. He said something about it being ‘too crowded for a small booth’, but he doesn’t say it with enough venom for me to think he really minds. Levi’s disinterested tone causes me to narrow my eyes at the said man sitting across from me. I attempt to kick him under the table, but he strikes first, nailing me in the shin.

“Fuck!” My leg instinctually lifts, and my knee bangs against the underside of the table, causing it to rattle. Hanji and Erwin are looking at me curiously as I nurse my swelling shin.

“Are you okay, Eren?” Hanji asks, still looking highly bewildered.
“Ah, yeah. *Shit.* I’m good, I’m good.”

“She brat was trying to play fucking footsie.”

*What the fuck?*

We may be friends, now; but Levi is still a dick.

**Frienemy.**

“No I wasn’t, you fucking asshole!” We have now drawn a small audience as people from other tables turn to watch the show. And if that was footsie, I have been lied to by every single middle schooler, dammit. I attempt to kick him again, but that only lands me another strike to the same shin.

“Oh *my god,* fuck you.” I moan as quietly as possible as I lay my forehead on the table. Erwin and Hanji are chuckling over our antics, but I honestly don’t find it that funny.

“Levi, play nice.” Erwin’s tone does nothing but bait the bastard to continue.

“The little shit started it.” Whatever, you fucking gnome.

“Anyway,” Erwin starts, “Zackly wanted me to gather a team, but he specifically requested you be a part of it.” The game of extreme ‘footsie’ had distracted me from Erwin’s original comment. I am brought back to earth when Zackly’s name fills my ears. I hadn’t spotted the man since the Levi incident, and I can’t help but feel anxious when I think of seeing him. Levi’s face has developed an ugly bruise across his cheek from the force of Zackly’s slap. My eyebrow twitches. Yeah, I really don’t want to see the old bastard anytime soon.

I raise my head from the table. “Why?”

“He didn’t say, only told me that you were going. If I were to guess, he is probably testing your loyalty.” My loyalty? How will a supply run measure that?

Erwin notices me trying to decipher his words. “I wouldn’t think too much into it, Eren. His definition of loyalty comes down to you being capable of following orders, protecting yourself, etc.”

Hanji perks up, trying to defuse the sudden tension. “You know, kicking ass and taking names.”

“Don’t listen to shitty glasses.”

“Remind me to add your name to my list, Levi.” He rolls his eyes at her, blowing off her threat. How they became friends, I will never know.

I want to ask Erwin who he is planning on recruiting for the trip, but somehow I feel like I already know the answer. And it scares the shit out of me. I don’t want to end up alone again. I *can’t* end up alone.

Against my better judgment, I ask him. “So, who all is going?” A dark aura seems to press down on the table. It’s like Hanji and Levi already know, too.

“Well, you already know about yourself. I’m leading the expedition, so obviously, I have to go. Then, there are a few members from Stohess going that you probably haven’t met yet. And of course, Mike, Hanji, and,” I flinch before Erwin says the last name, “Levi.” I wish I didn’t care if anything happened to these people. I wish that I could shut myself off like Levi or Mikasa. But I can’t.
“Hey, Eren, don’t worry. Erwin told me the mission should be a piece of cake. The only reason so many of us are going is because there is a shit ton of stuff up for grabs.” I appreciate Hanji’s attempt to lift my spirits, but nothing she says can rub off the dread that has suddenly found itself enveloping my mind.

I feel Levi’s foot kick mine under the table, except this time the contact is gentle. I allow my eyes to meet his, and he gives me a small nod. It’s like he is trying to reassure me of Hanji’s words. For some reason, his confirmation settles the storm erupting in my gut.

But why?

Why does it take Levi’s approval for me to accept that maybe we won’t all die? It’s odd, this feeling. And I can’t quite place it. Maybe it’s a sensation of overdue vengeance pumping through my veins. *He did try to kill me.* I keep reminding myself that he has more than made up for the deed, but that makes me sound insane. What kind of person so easily forgives their ‘almost murderer’? Well, me apparently. I’m obviously some sort of masochist.

My mind echoes the same question: *Why?*

I look at Levi quietly sipping on his tea, racking my mind for an answer. He catches me staring; but instead of averting my eyes, I hold onto the contact. And I find my answer.

It’s the emotion in his eyes that made his actions so easy to forgive, isn’t it? That trembling grey sea of fury, regret, and indifference all rolled into one. It seems like an absolutely ridiculous reason, but I accept it. Because it’s true. And call me crazy, but something in my gut tells me that my bite isn’t the only reason he refrained from killing me. The thought had been stewing in my mind ever since I left his room two days ago. Something has made me wonder if he really saved me because of my immunity. At the time, I thought the look his eyes carried as he tried to kill me was anger, vehemence. But it wasn’t. *It was something totally different.* Remorse. Shame. Sorrow. But maybe he is insane; and it’s just going to take another attempted homicide for me to realize it; but I have forgiven him, haven’t I?

Forgiveness, the word sounds foreign.

But it also feels right.

---

Zackly has requested my presence in his makeshift office. The building I am led to looks like it once was home to a real estate agency, but the sign is too worn for me to be sure. As I walk through the doors, a bell toils alerting Zackly of my presence. He is standing in the middle of the small room I have been ushered into. A single desk decorates the office, complete with chairs on either side. It’s dark and dusky, the only light coming from the glass door behind me.

I’m nervous. This is the first time I have seen the man since the sadistic pinata game was played. I hold an untouched anger towards the man, and I know the reason behind it. I should be mad about the display he put on with the zombie, but what angers me the most is how he abused Levi.

“Take a seat, Eren.” His outstretched hand steers my gaze to the chair, and I walk over uneasily to sit down. Zackly walks around the desk and positions himself in the seat across from me behind the desk. His elbows are resting casually on the table, fingers meeting to form a triangle in front of his mouth.

“I assume that Erwin has discussed the details of the next supply run with you?” I knew that this was
the reason I had been escorted the Zackly’s headquarters, but in the back of my mind I can’t help but feel like there are other things the man should be elaborating on. Like maybe why they think zombie maiming is a recreational activity. I realize in my daze that Zackly is still waiting on my answer.

“I… yes.” In truth, Erwin only let me in on the bare minimum. I knew that we were going to be traveling outside the walls, but that was about it. No, I knew who was going.

“Then, I suppose he expressed my desire for your attendance.” I gulp, trying to swallow my anxiety.

“Yes.” I have reverted back to short answers. I don’t necessarily trust myself not to demand explanation for his actions at the fucking horror show I witnessed days prior.

Zackly sighs, obviously irritated at my short replies, “Eren, I can tell you are angry with me. But what I did was necessary. We have to keep order, or at least a semblance of the word. If I would have let Levi walk away unpunished, what do you think the others would have thought of me?” I feel like this is one of those questions that aren’t meant to be answered. That I am supposed to just let Zackly continue in his rant. “Inept. That is what they would have thought. The idea that I couldn’t control a little rebellion would, no doubt, have spread like wildfire. You understand?”

Yes, Zackly. I understand exactly what you mean.

The words are out before I can think twice, “So, this is some kind of dictatorship? Is that it?” My hands are clenching the underside of the chair like a vice. The nerve of Zackly is appalling. He fucking slapped Levi across the face, and here he is sitting across from me trying to justify it. Hell, he is attempting to validate why the survivors feel the need to beat the shit out of a helpless walker. Wow, never thought I would use the words ‘helpless’ and ‘walker’ in the same sentence.

“I think you need to calm down, Eren.” I didn’t notice I was visibly shaking until Zackly brings it to my attention.

No, I don’t need to fucking calm down. “I’d hoped to discuss the plans for the supply run, but if you continue acting so aggressively then I’m afraid I will have to send you to your room for the night. Do you understand, Eren?” Is this the same man that told me just a few nights ago that he wasn’t my father? That I could make my own choices?

Well, I choose to be fucking pissed.

“Whatever the hell is going on here… you can keep me out of it.” I word it as nicely as possible, because further annoying Zackly did not seem like a sensible plan.

“I see.” His gaze darkens to something cold, something evil. “Eren, why do you think we have survived as long as we have?” I don’t answer, still clutching the sides of my chair. “We survive, because we have order. Stability, if you will. I have offered you a practical slice of heaven with the chance to prove yourself and join the community. Now, you can choose to eat this piece of proverbial pie, or I can shove it down your fucking throat.” My eyes widen, and I have to remind myself of Hannes’ speech. “Either way, Eren, you are staying here. Whether you will enjoy your stay or not is entirely up to you.” If he wants to keep me here, then why is he allowing me outside the walls? Does he not think I will attempt to escape? Zackly is not an unintelligent man, and somehow I think he already has the answers to these silent questions. Nonetheless, I realize that my anger is not going to help guide the current situation in my favor; so I attempt to calm down. I can practically hear Armin in my ear directing me to breathe.

“I understand.” My answer surprises Zackly. Obviously, he was expecting me to continue the fight. A relieved look spreads across his face.

“Good boy. Now, where were we?”
I can’t sleep. I try everything. Hell, I even try counting goddamn sheep. But sleep is a sneaky mistress, and she is not going to be quelled by a simple boy.

Fuck you, Shadis. I am poetic as shit.

I stretch my arms above my head, yawning loudly. I wish I could see what the time is, but Erwin had let me know that candles were prohibited in the small rooms. The only thing that I can do in my tiny space is think. And I have learned firsthand that you never know how fucked you are until you are trapped in a room with your own thoughts. It’s terrifying. These feelings consume you as you try to push them back to no avail; because the more you try to hide them, the stronger they become. Clawing at you, reminding you of every mistake, making you question your decisions. If I acted faster he would still be alive; if I didn’t push everyone away she would not have left.

Fuck.

I pull harshly at my hair until the roots are straining against my scalp. Physical pain, I can deal with that. Mental? Whole other ballgame. I pull harder. I need this. I need to feel something besides regret. But that’s not going to happen, is it? Even when I was sure I had gone insane (c’mon, talking to peanut butter could definitely be considered ‘mentally unhinged’), the thoughts still loomed over me like a deadly curse. I let out a deep breath as I resign myself to self-pity. Rising from my bed, I go to retrieve my backpack which is lying haphazardly against the wall. I unzip the compartment and reach my hand inside, knowing exactly what I am looking for.

The wallet feels battered in my hands, but it has been through hell. The fact that it is still in one piece is a miracle in itself. My fingers dig through the folds until they’ve landed on their prize. As I pull it out of the pleats, my hands start to shake involuntarily. This happens every time I withdraw the picture.

It’s a photo of all of us; us being my mother, father, Mikasa, and me. I don’t need any light to be able to see that. I’ve pulled this picture out multiple times, hundreds of times even. It’s been committed to my memory for a while, now; just in case anything should happen to it. We were happy in this picture. No, we were on cloud nine. This was before anything bad happened. Before dad left. Before the walkers appeared. Before mom died.

I run my thumb over where I know her face is. It stands out the most in the picture. Her smile, her bright eyes full of love and life. Everyone had always told me I took after her, and I had to agree. I shared her looks, but I also shared her will to have a better life. I feel the tears forming before they fall, and I decide that I have reminisced enough for one night. I don’t have Mikasa or Armin to console me, now. I only have myself, and I don’t want to go to bed crying. Carefully placing the picture back into its place, I drop the wallet back into the backpack.

As I deposit the bag against the wall, I remember how I was prepared to kill Levi for viewing my pictures. At the time, it seemed so vulgar that he would carelessly rummage through my memories. I would have killed him, too, if it wasn’t for Hanji making an impromptu appearance. Well, when I think about it, that knife probably would have done little damage. But I would have tried.

I’m messed up, aren’t I? Trying to kill someone over pictures.

Suddenly, my room feels suffocating, and I need some air.

I push through the doors of the hotel, cold air smacking me in the face. A walk seemed like a good idea upstairs hidden beneath the warmth of my blankets, but now in the chilled wind, I am thinking I
might just have to suck it up back in my room.

F*ck it, I am already outside and I am taking a damn walk. As I begin to step forward, a hand grasps my shoulder. I did not expect to see Mike until our departure, but his presence is not unwanted. Truth be told, I was a little unsure if I should be sneaking out of bed this late. Somehow, Mike knows my intentions for this midnight escapade, and he is already walking ahead of me. I pick up my feet and quickly shuffle to match his pace. This is not going to be much of a walk considering there is only one road, but I feel like I need this. Mike is still remaining silent, not to my surprise.

So, I begin, not really expecting an answer, “The supply run is coming up soon.” He grunts in recognition of my statement. “You don’t talk much do you?” He pauses, and for a moment I feel like I might have offended him.

“Talking gets you killed.” The man has a point. One I should probably consider.

We fall into a type of taciturnity that, for the first time in forever, feels comfortable. Before I know it, we have looped around the street and are standing back in front of the Super 8. Mike is rubbing his hands together vigorously in an attempt to produce some sort of combat to the chill. A question brings itself to the forefront of my mind, erasing thoughts of the cold.

“Mike,” He directs his gaze to me, “this place isn’t normal is it?” He considers my question for a moment, expression never changing.

Finally, he answers, “Nothing is normal anymore.”

Well, damn. If I wanted some cryptic answer, I would have asked Levi.

I shrug, “Yeah.” If he was going to be ambiguous, then dammit, so was I. Mike decides that my short reply means that it is time to head back inside the hotel. Or maybe it was the wind chill forming white frost on his otherwise blonde mustache. Okay, I might be over exaggerating a little, but it is fucking cold.

He holds the door for me as we reenter the Super 8. I make for the stairwell, but Mike’s grip on my shoulder stops me. I spin to face him, and I am startled with what I see. His face looks content as usual, but his eyes… his eyes look terrified. Of what? What is he so afraid of?

“Eren,” He starts, his voice sounding like an omen, “you need to leave this place.”

What?

Before I can even question him, Mike has already released my arm and started his trek up the staircase.

I need to leave. I knew this place was fucking fishy, but shit. Why was Mike trying to warn me? No, what was Mike trying to warn me of? Either way, I am certain that I will not be going to sleep anytime soon.

Thanks, asshole.

Chapter End Notes

This is the longest chapter yet (+5000 words), and it gave me so much trouble. I don't
want anything to sound too rushed, so I ended up deleting most of it and rewriting it. Whew. Hopefully, this chapter wasn't too confusing; but please, if you have any questions, I will be more than happy to clear anything up (keeping it spoiler free, of course :p). And sorry for that lack of zombie action this chapter. It's coming, I promise! (: 

And I am tracking the tag, fic: what's eating you, on Tumblr. So there's that, too.

Tumblr: 
fuzzyporcupine.tumblr.com

Thanks again for the kudos/comments! It makes me sooooo happy to see that you guys are enjoying the story. And thank you for reading!

FANMIX
ALL FANART
When I wake up, I can’t breathe.

His hands are closed tightly around my neck, fingernails digging into my nape. His thumbs are pressing into my windpipe with a strength that only he could possess. My arms are flailing in the air, desperately searching for purchase on something, anything, that could possibly get me out of this situation. They finally find his arms, the links to the weapons now stopping the air from entering my lungs. I grab onto the limbs that are taunt with muscle, muscle that is flexing as it works to end my life. I attempt to shake the arms, but they are sturdy as an oak tree, rooted into the idea of my death. I search frantically for my next target. His eyes. My shaking hands slither up to his face, my thumbs caressing his cheeks.

He’s crying.

Tears are silently running down his porcelain face, pale and unmarred, hold the streaks of liquid that are racing to meet at his chin.

I can feel the wetness under the pads of my trembling fingers. My appendages stretch further up his face until they are hovering over his eyes. I can’t bring myself to push down. Those eyes that are so full of emotion, those eyes that are so full of pain. It would probably benefit him if I took his sight away. He wouldn’t have to witness the life seep away from my eyes. My bright, emerald eyes once so full of life that are dulling as the seconds pass. One last thank you. I can’t. My hands fall from his face, defeat eminent.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” He has been repeating the same two words ever since he wrapped his fingers around my throat. Two words that I never thought would leave his lips. The world around me is fading out, the color slowly washing away until the only thing I can see are those eyes. Those eyes that are pleading with me to understand, to forgive.

But I’ve already forgiven you, Levi.

I take my last breath, “Le… vi.”

I awake gasping for air, clutching my throat. My body bolts up, shaking with each intake of air. My breathing is rapid, and if I don’t calm down I know I will start to hyperventilate. Sweat is coating my figure, creating an unwelcome blanket over my already heated form. I rip the covers off of me, pulling my knees to my chest. Rocking myself into a state of tranquility, I just focus on the movement of my body.

Back and forth.

My heartbeat finally starts to slow down, and my breaths begin to come more evenly. I’m still shaking, though, my hands trembling with an artificial fear.
It was just a dream, Eren. It was just a fucking dream.

How many nightmares have I had since the end of the world began? How many times have I woken up screaming my mother’s name? This one was so real, though. So vivid. I trace where his fingers had been laced around my throat. The bruises he had left the first time had long since yellowed, preparing their departure from my skin. But, this wasn’t the second time. That wasn’t real. A dream. It was a dream.

I already have enough to think about with Zackly’s threats, Mike’s omens… I really don’t need to add hallucinations of Levi killing me to the mix. Fuck, this is probably just some sort of post-traumatic stress that is flaring up because I have been hanging around the bastard.

I want to cry, to scream; but what good will that do? The noises of my suffering will only enhance the pain. I push the heels of my hands into my eyes, begging the tears to stay locked away. It’s no use, and soon the warmth of my sadness has spread across my cheeks. I turn on my side, immediately blemishing the pillow with dark patches. It’s pathetic, these tears. There are so many things I have witnessed that left me unaffected. Death, separation, departure. But one dream, one fucking dream has me weeping. Fuck this life, I don’t need anyone. I have myself. I have…Nothing.

---

There wasn’t much to do in Stohess besides eat, sleep, and… well, you know. The children were often playing games in the street like tag and hide and seek (when they weren’t busy defacing zombies). I honestly did not think that they would appreciate me attempting to join in on the fun, considering almost all of the children looked to be under ten years old. Ah, the struggles of adulthood.

I glance at the walls surrounding the city. When I first arrived here, they looked like safety. After Zackly’s outburst, the structure looks a lot like subjugation. There are a couple of guards walking atop the formation, constantly scanning the land ahead for signs of trouble. Is this what freedom is? I escape one hell, just to be confined to another. A large cage for a smaller one.

As I sit on one of the benches located outside the diner, I wonder if anyone else has had a more productive morning than me. Is Erwin still going over the plans for the supply run? Is Hanji still-

“Eren!” Speak of the devil and he, well she, will appear. Hanji is waving her arms manically in my face, trying to pick me out of my stupor. “Eren, are you awake?”

“Hanji, I’ve been awake since I sat down. What are you-“

“Great! Good! I, umm, I need your assistance with a little project.” The sunlight reflects off her glasses, giving her an even more frenzied appearance.

“Umm, I-“

Before I know it, Hanji has grabbed my arm and is pulling me in the direction of the Super 8. “I knew you would say yes! I knew it!”

“Hanji, what are you doing?!?” I try to pull my arm away, but the woman has the appendage in a herculean grip. Fuck, this woman can’t be reasoned with. The children scatter out of our way as Hanji drags me down the street. I meet their gaze with pleading eyes, but the little bastards just laugh and continue with their games. This is why I fucking hate kids, the little shits.
Hanji slings the doors of the hotel open, their hinges screaming in agony. I figure the woman is going to let me at least walk up the damn stairs unassisted, but she continues with her kidnapping as we encounter the stairwell. I am tripping on every other stair, floundering helplessly behind her. When we reach her room, I am unceremoniously tossed inside. I have never claimed to be graceful, so when Hanji launches me into room like a fucking shuttle to Mars, I fall flat on my ass.

Okay, I’m a little mad, now.

“What the actual fuck, Hanji?” I ask as I push myself off the floor.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Eren. I’m just so excited.” I understand excitement. Believe me, I know the word.

This is not excitement. This is fucking besotted.

I am about to say to hell with Hanji and her weird ass personality when I hear it. The growl.

“Ah, Eren, listen! They are just excited as I am!”

Wait, what? They?

She prances to the side of her bed and pulls out a big, black duffle bag. Oh my god, no. As she unzips the sack, the moaning grows louder. Shit, I knew Hanji was insane, but there is no way…

Oh, there is a fucking way. I repeat: there is a fucking way.

In her hands rests the head of a decapitated zombie. I wish I was fucking making this up.

I am speechless, gaping like a baby bird waiting for dinner. My mouth keeps opening and closing, words not forming. Hanji looks ecstatic. Hell, she is fucking petting the thing, hands roaming through the walker’s dark hair.

“I have been waiting to let you meet them. This is Bean. Say hello, Bean.” The zombie moans. It fucking moans. Shit, wait. Why am I convincing myself Hanji can communicate with the walkers? I am just as crazy as her.

“And this,” she starts as reaches into the bag again, oh dear lord, “is Sonny.” She pulls out another head, this one covered in blonde tresses. My speech is still having stage fright, because for the life of me, I cannot get a single word out. All that’s leaving my lips are horrified gasps. What is she thinking?

“You’re being rude, Eren. It’s hurting their feelings.”

WHAT?

Excuse me.

WHAT?

Their feelings? These things know one thing; they have one objective. And that is to kill. To consume. They don’t have feelings. If they had emotions, then they wouldn’t devour their own kind. Well, ‘partial’ kind.

“Hanji, what the fuck? Are you insane?” She actually laughs. For your information, Hanji, anyone who laughs after being called crazy is indeed fucking crazy.

“That’s exactly what Levi said. I think you two are spending too much time together.” I have once
again lost the ability to speak. I can’t wrap my mind around the fact that she doesn’t find something wrong with this.

Her expression has fallen. The overzealous look has now been replaced with a picture of dismay. “Oh, c’mon, they are harmless like this.” No, Hanji, they still have fucking teeth, which are chomping at the bit right now for a taste of you. I bring my fingers to pinch the bridge of my nose. I should just leave. Just turn around and act like Hanji isn’t hoarding the fucking undead in her room.

“What was the experiment?”

Just like that, the frenzied look shoots back onto her face. “I wanted to test your… umm skin to the walker’s tastes if that makes sense.” No, that doesn’t make sense at all. My skin? Walker’s tastes? Shit, I’m not a fucking buffet allowing zombies to choose which piece of me they like best.

“I’m not letting them bite me.”

Her eyes are already widened in excitement, but somehow they manage to open further, “No! No! No, that’s not what I meant. I want to see if they will bite you.” I already know the answer to this.

“Hanji, the walkers aren’t any less attracted to me. Believe me, I know.” Her face falls again. Somehow, I know that’s not the only experiment she wanted to run. I turn to leave; because the longer I am in a room with those things, the more unnerved I’m becoming. “Uh, sorry I couldn’t help.” As I reach for the door knob, Hanji’s voice stops me.

“Thanks anyway, Eren… and, umm, could you not tell anyone about this?” I don’t think anyone would believe me even if I did.

“Sure, uh bye, Hanji.” As I exit the room, I can’t help but feel like that was one of the weirdest things I have ever witnessed. How does she sleep knowing that walkers are right under her pillow? But, it is Hanji; I shouldn’t question logic when it comes to her.

Fucking hell.

As I finish pulling the door shut, the last thing I see is Hanji ruffling the hair of one of the zombies.

“She introduce you to her pets?” My nerves are already walking on thin ice, and having Levi scare the shit out of me isn’t necessarily helping.

“Shit!” I whip around to face him, grasping my chest. “Don’t do that.” I haven’t seen Levi since he made a surprise appearance in my dream. I intentionally skipped breakfast and lunch, so I didn’t have to face him. Somehow, I got in my head that if I avoided him then, maybe the dream wouldn’t happen again. It was a stupid idea, but at the time, the last thing I wanted to see was the face of my virtual murderer. I didn't even notice that Hanji's room was on the same floor as his, but I guess that's due to the fact that I was being fucking kidnapped.

“And yes. How did that even happen?” Hanji told me Levi felt the same way as I did about the things. I am praying he didn’t help her bring them in.

“She snuck them in a couple runs ago. And, no, I didn’t help.” Shit, I am easy to read. “You didn’t show up to any of the meals.”

Wait, what?

I am taken aback, “I didn’t think you cared.” Silver eyes stare at me, contemplating what I said. I can tell that he is thinking about what to say next. Maybe he does care. Maybe keeping our friendship
means more to him than I thought.

“I don’t, but do I like routines.” Something in his eyes tells me that’s not entirely true. Either way, I have managed to become part of Levi’s schedule. I am routine. And, somehow, that only makes me doubt the first part of his sentence even more.

“Anyway, Erwin wanted me to tell your lazy ass to be prepared to leave in the morning.” Shit, I had forgotten that we were heading out tomorrow. Honestly, I have been trying not to think about it. The idea that one of us might not come back scares me more than it should. That is one thing about the apocalypse: you don’t get attached. Unless it is family, you stay away. The only thing that could possibly come from affection is heartbreak and sorrow. And those things will break you. Fast.

That reminds me…

“Can I at least have my gun back? I mean, you can keep the knife. It was shit. But, I need my gun.”

Levi stiffens, obviously not expecting that question. “I don’t have it.” What? Why is he lying? I saw the weapon in his hands when he killed the biter.

“You shot the walker with it.” I can tell he is trying to control himself. Maybe it was a mistake to bring this up. Surely, I will be equipped with a weapon, regardless.

“They took it from me.” They took it from him? That doesn’t make any sense. I’ve seen civilians walking around Stohess armed. Do they not trust Levi with a weapon?

He answers the question before I can ask it. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I’m not exactly being voted ‘citizen of the week’.” When I don’t reply, he continues, “I spoiled their shitty game, they aren’t going to trust me for a while.”

I lower my head, looking at the ground. “I don’t know why they wouldn’t trust you, though.” It comes out as a mumble, almost like I didn’t want him to hear it.

“Do you trust me?” My head shoots up at the question, and soon I am looking at Levi through wide, uneasy eyes. I have shut myself off from the demon known as ‘trust’. That sly sonofabitch gets you killed in this world. Trust no one. That’s the motto, right? I remember how easily Erwin had granted me his faith, allowing me into their group without a second glance. But, I also recall how effortlessly Hannes gave his trust away. Worked out great for him, too. One bullet in the head, and nothing left to his name but that damned metal flask of whisky. So, do I trust Levi? My palms start to sweat at the thought of putting my faith in someone else. Mikasa and Armin are the only ones who have my unconditional dependence. But they aren’t here anymore, are they? Do I really need to find their replacements already? All those years, wasted. I realize Levi is still standing in front of me, waiting on an answer. Do you trust me?

“I-“

“You don’t have to tell me, I can see it all over your face.” His reply is short, lacking any emotion. I think he was expecting something different from me. Something that reassured him that at least one person believed in him. I’ve let him down.

“It’s not that I-“

He’s looking away from me now, directing his gaze to the stairwell. “It’s almost time for dinner. Are you actually going to attend, or am I going to have to drag your sorry ass down there?” His urgency to change to topic is obvious. Like he didn’t want to hear my rejection. But was I going to say no?
“Yeah, I’m coming.” He walks ahead of me, fingers curling into the pockets of his russet hunting jacket. For as long as I’ve known Levi, he has never been one to give off body language as it makes him too easy to read. But, now, the signs are obvious. He’s hurt.

And it’s my fault.

---

“So, that’s the plan. As long as we stick to this, we should all make it back alive.” Erwin sounds confident as he discusses the details of the supply run. He is a man bred for leadership, and I honestly don’t know why he isn’t running Stohess. He made it pretty clear to me that he did not support the savage games the civilians played. Maybe he is just sitting in the shadows, patiently waiting for the opportunity to turn this town around. “Any questions?”

A man, Dieter, speaks up, “What are we supposed to do if shit goes down?” I had been around the guy for less than an hour, and I already hated him. Okay, hate is a very strong word; but his haircut pushed strong dislike over into the territory of abhorrence. What can I say? I’ve had a thing against douche bag haircuts since I met Jean.

“If we follow the plan, everything should go accordingly.” Erwin answers with certainty.

“But, what if-”

“Keep to the fucking plan and you won’t die. Now, shut the fuck up so we can leave. These debriefings are boring as shit.” Levi is eloquent as ever. He hasn’t spoken to me since the incident concerning my trust in him. Even so, he still sat through dinner with me as I tried to pry some form of conversation out of him. Hell, I even asked him what his favorite color was. I couldn’t help but feel he was acting like a child. Even if I had hurt his feelings, it was unintentional. I felt like I was back in high school when everything you said was twisted into something else entirely. I want to apologize, but I have been doing a lot of that lately. I don’t want to turn into one of those people who compulsively ask for forgiveness.

“We are going to be leaving tomorrow morning. The destination is about twenty miles north, so we will be taking a couple of vehicles with us. Eren, Levi, Hanji, and I will be passengers in one; Mike, Dieter, Jurgen, and Ivan will be in the other.” Jesus, I can hardly look at Hanji anymore without the image of her petting those fucking zombies flashing into my head. How I am going to deal being stuck in a car with her… I’m not sure yet.

“I will see you all in the morning. Dismissed.” I make to leave, but Erwin’s voice halts me. “Eren, I need to speak to you, privately.” Shit. Did Levi seriously tell on me? Because I swear to god if he is that childish I will personally kick his midget ass… Well, I will attempt to kick his midget ass. I try to see if Levi is looking at me as he leaves, but Hanji is busy bouncing around him. As they exit the room, I see him grab her ponytail, dragging her in the direction of the hotel.

Once the room is empty, Erwin begins. “Zackly told me to keep an eye on you during the expedition.” I knew that man was one step ahead. But, wait. Why was Erwin telling me this? “He informed me that I should avoid deadly force; but if the situation arises, then I am to put you down.” I cringe at his choice of words, or rather Zackly’s. He is speaking about me like I am a wild animal, rabid and feral.

“I’m telling you this, because I am planning a coup, an uprising if you will.”

What?
That’s the last thing I expected Erwin to say. This is the man that embodies perfection. Humble, self-sacrificing, loyal. Well, I guess not so much that last one anymore. Nonetheless, rebel doesn’t really fit into Erwin’s resume. I look at him incredulously, because I have no clue why he is telling me this. Does Levi know of this plan? What about Hanji? Mike?

“I am sure you are curious as to where you fit in to all this.” I nod, still in too much shock to form proper sentences. “Well, Eren, I want you to think of Stohess as a game of chess. Are you familiar with the game?” Again, I shake my head.

“Which piece is the most important?” Shit, if Erwin expected me to answer this correctly, he had another thing coming. I may have heard of the game, but I sure as shit didn’t play it. My patience could hardly handle fucking checkers. I would have had a hemorrhage attempting to play chess.

Erwin answers his own question, “The King. He is the most valuable piece on the board. That piece is you, Eren.” Wait, what? Nothing Erwin is saying makes sense. How could I dethrone Zackly? He has an entire town behind him. Does Erwin not realize this?

“I need you to trust my judgment, Eren. Do not try to run away when we leave these walls. Please.” Erwin had seen through my plan all along hadn’t he? He had known that as soon as those walls opened that I would be as good as gone. Why does he want me to stay? Mike specifically told me to leave. Am I meant to decide which one I distrust the least? And wait. Does this mean he hasn’t told anyone? Mike would not have demanded my departure if Erwin had allowed him in on the plan.

“Does anyone else know?”

He answers immediately, “No.” Erwin is putting too much faith in me. I rack my brain trying to think of how I could overthrow Zackly, and I just draw blanks. I don’t understand. I don’t understand.

“Trust my judgment,” he repeats. “Can you do that, Eren?”

His calculating eyes are staring into mine, looking for an answer. Is this the connection I have been looking for? The ability to trust again seems so far out of reach; yet, Erwin is dangling the power on a string, right in front of me. All I have to do is grasp out and take it. My hand extends forward, ready to grab it. I’m so close. Just a little further.

Almost there.

“Yes.”

Got it.

---

The morning chill nips at my fingers as I try to slip on my gloves. I am silently thanking Mr. Higher Power that Erwin’s outfit found me. If not, I would most likely be a zombiesicle by now. Gross.

Apparently, my struggling with the gloves is enough to make Levi break his silent treatment.

“I swear to god, you are fucking useless.” He grabs one of my hands and begins to carefully slide the gloves over my fingers, clutching the fabric at the bottom and yanking down. His brows are pinched together in either concentration or annoyance, I’m not sure which.
“So, are we back on speaking terms or is this just temporary?” His hands pause on the material, taking in my question.

“It’s whatever you want it to be,” he says as he continues fixing my gloves. *Whatever I want it to be.* Why is everyone so goddamn ambiguous? What is it going to take for me to get one straightforward answer? Levi has finished pulling on my gloves, but his fingers are still grasping at the bottom of the fabric. “I’m not apologizing *if that’s* what you want.”

I expect Levi to start apologizing when the walkers start breaking out into song and dance. I decide to level with him. “I’ll take that as your admittance that you were wrong.”

He narrows his eyes, but they lack any form of malice. Instead, a hint of amusement resides in the slits of silver. “Shitty brat.”

Levi’s gaze softens and he releases my glove, but not before he allows his index and middle finger to softly caress the underside of my wrist. The touch sends goose bumps traveling down my arms. I feel a blush staining my face, because for some reason that trace felt almost… *intimate.* He turns away without another word and heads to the SUV, opening the door to slide inside.

Erwin’s hand on my shoulder snaps me out of my daze. “Ready to go, Eren?” A smile plays at the corners of his mouth. It feels awkward and out of place, almost forced. I am probably only thinking that because I know Erwin’s master plan. Or at least I know I am somehow apart of it. *I am still confused about that, by the way.* He told me to trust him, and I agreed. I feel like I have everything to lose with this, but Erwin is a good man. *Erwin is a good man.* I have to keep reminding myself, because my mind is pleading with me to abandon him. I am not used to handing over my trust to anyone, especially not someone I have known for such a short amount of time. *But, he is a good man.* *He is a good man.*

Zackly, as well as the rest of the community, is there to send us off. He walks over to Erwin and me, turning his gaze in my direction. His eyes are synthetic in the way they produce emotion. Right now, his gaze holds a look of compassion, concern; like he honestly cares for me. But, I know the truth. Under that façade, lies the true beast. Awaiting me with a venomous glare; daring me to step into its clutches so, it can swallow me whole.

He grasps Erwin’s shoulder as he speaks, “Erwin, take care of Eren for me. Make sure he behaves like the good boy I know he is.” He is smiling like what he just said was comical. But, I can see straight through you, old man. I clench my hands into fists, willing them to stay at my side. Of course, Zackly takes notice in how his words are affecting me. Smile not fading he continues, “Eren, make sure to listen to Erwin. You know what happens to bad boys.” *Well, I have an idea.* “Do you understand?” He is a fucking sadist, making me confirm his words.

I say the words as calmly as possible, “Yes, sir.”

“Good boy. Go get in the car, Eren. The adults need to have a talk.” I’m fucking eighteen for god’s sake. I’m not a child anymore. I leave him with a scathing gaze, and it takes all I have not to waylay the bastard right there. I open the car door and sling myself inside, not caring if I look childish or not.

“Acting like a little shit only proves that he’s won.” In my anger, I failed to notice that Levi was sitting in the seat next to me. I seem to forget that we only made up mere minutes ago as I speak to him, “And what would you know?”
He answers before I time to catch my breath. “A lot more than you. I know that acting like a child only proves you are one. So, stop acting like you haven’t hit puberty and suck it the fuck up.” I want to grow angrier. Tell the bastard that he was the child in giving me the silent treatment. But somehow, Levi’s words defuse my anger.

I sigh as I unclench my fists, silently agreeing with Levi’s advice.

The driver side door opens, and Erwin slips inside, Hanji following soon after. He starts the engine and the car roars to life. It’s been a long time since I’ve heard the sound, and it startles me.

“Easy, Erwin, I think the brat’s about to shit himself.”

Fucking asshole.

I go to open my mouth, but then I remember what Levi told me. Breathe, Eren. “I’m okay, it’s just been a while since I have been in a car.” The silence that passes over the car is practically tangible. Does everyone expect me to lash out at every jab? Obviously.

The SUV pulls forward as the gates screech open, and, to my left, I hear an almost soundless murmur.

“Not bad.”

Chapter End Notes

So, I listened to "Life and Death" by Michael Giacchino while I was writing that first section and holy shit. I made a mistake. It infinitely intensified the sadness. I hope this chapter was enjoyable. I wanted to figure out some way to get Sonny and Bean in the story, so I hope that doesn’t seem to er... placed (?). I don't know the word I'm looking for... Anyway, thanks for the kudos/comments! They literally make me so happy every time I get the notifications. (: 

Also, I am tracking the tag, fic: what's eating you, on Tumblr. Woot, woot.

Tumblr:
fuzzyporcupine.tumblr.com

Thanks for reading; and if there are any grammar errors, let me know!

EDIT:
HOLY SHIT THIS FIC HAS FANART!
Please check out the amazing work zipra posted on Tumblr. It makes me too fucking happy.

FANMIX
ALL FANART
The trees blur into a green smear as we head towards our destination. I am leaning my forehead against the window, trying to take in the scenery. And what a sight it is. Corpses sporadically line the street, many already up and craving flesh. We were lucky that this area was not heavily populated. I cringe thinking about what some of the bigger cities look like.

“Ugh, how much longer, Erwin?” Hanji is slumped over in the front seat, head between her knees and arms dangling at her sides.

Erwin chuckles, “Hanji we just left a few minutes ago. We will be there soon enough.” His reply earns a long, drawn out groan from the woman. Suddenly, she shoots up and whips her head around to face Levi and me in the back seat. There’s a crazed look in her eye, and that’s all the warning I need.

I close my eyes, feigning sleep. Hell, I even add I fake snore.

“It’s no use, brat. She knows you’re awake.” I crack one eye open and notice Hanji’s entire body is leaning out of her seat, merely inches from my face.

Well, that is one way to wake up from an artificial sleep.

I jump back in my seat, trying to put some distance between me and the human lap dog.

Hanji starts, “Levi-“

“No.”

“Levi, let’s play I Spy.”

Said man groans loudly, pinching the bridge of his nose. “No.” I am content to stay out of the conversation. If Hanji wants to drive Levi’s sanity off a bridge, okay. As long as I am-

“Eren, you’re first!” I am now adopting the same pose as Levi, moaning as I sink further into my seat. Erwin is trying to keep his chuckling silent, but the bastard is doing a terrible job. Why can’t we have a silent drive to our possible deaths?

What even is there to spy? I glance around the car looking for a possible target.

Bingo.

“I spy with my little eye something angry.” Hanji starts cackling, knowing exactly why I am ‘spying’.

Levi’s narrowed glare turns to me. “Very fucking funny, you little shit.” I can’t help but to join Hanji in laughter.

Levi directs a pointed finger in my direction. “Fuck you.” He turns his finger to Hanji. “And fuck you, too. Maybe I’m so angry because I have to deal with you idiots.”

Hanji attempts to pull puppy eyes, but it just makes her already manic expression a little more terrifying. She starts, “But you love it.” Levi flicks a choice finger at her to express his desire for our
company.

Erwin’s voice pulls us out of our game, “We’re here.”

---

I walk around to the trunk to join the others as Erwin begins assigning weapons. He had informed us that we each would carry a firearm and a melee weapon (some of us a blade) just in case we ran out of bullets. Erwin’s plan seemed solid back at the base; but now that we are out in the open, I am starting to have doubts. A foreboding feeling pours over me as I spot Dieter out of the corner of my eye. If anyone is going to fuck this up, it will be that asshole.

In the past two minutes, I have already heard him express about fifty different ways this expedition was going to go wrong. Why did Erwin bring him again? Oh, right. He’s supposed to be good with a pistol.

We’ll see.

The building we have pulled up to looks like it was once a large factory, white siding encasing the structure. Lord knows what’s in there. Who’s in there.

As we walk up to the entrance, there is no sign of any walkers. I would say maybe we got lucky, and we will get to grab the shit and go. But it never works out that way. Once you think that you’re in clear, you will turn around to find an entire hoard at your back. Believe me, it’s happened.

Erwin motions to open the door, “Okay, everyone remember the formation, and if anything happens do not panic.” I can’t help the shiver that runs down my spine as Erwin’s hand reaches for the handle. Suddenly, there is a pull on my collar, and my head is being dragged down to level with a certain bastard’s impassive stare.

My green eyes collide with silver. “Don’t die, asshole.” Well, thanks. That was reassuring. As soon as Levi releases my lapel, Erwin hand has twisted the door knob.

The factory’s darkness is ripped by the stream of light that pours in from the door. From a glance, I cannot see any biters, but that’s another thing. You can’t trust your sight to help you in the zombie apocalypse. The shadows are powerful creatures, concealing the real beasts. Eyes can be deceived by the darkness, convincing you that it is safe. That’s why you have to rely on your other senses. Listen for the moans, smell for the decay. Allow your senses to combine as one. Make the walkers’ senses become their downfall. Erwin obviously knows this; because he is banging on the wall with the butt of his gun, trying to lure any zombies out of hiding with the echoed pounding.

Still nothing.

We wait patiently at the door, anticipating the moment a walker decides to make an approach on us. It’s beginning to look like Erwin’s plan isn’t going to be needed after all; because even after the symphony Erwin’s gun produced, there is still no sign of any biters. But… this doesn’t feel right. There is no way that there is not at least one walker in this building.

That sense of dread is back, clawing for the purchase of my mind. I try to push it out; but it lurks in the recesses of my head, waiting for one slip so it can make its attack.

Stay down, you fucking bastard.

Erwin turns on his flashlight and begins to illuminate the shadows of the factory. The building is too large for his flashlight to efficiently corrode every ounce of shade, but it allows us to confirm that
there are no biters in the immediate area. Slowly, Erwin steps into the structure. We follow behind him, shifting into formation. We look like a huge circle, but this is the most effective way to prevent hidden attacks. All of our backs face the center as we move forward. No one can be taken by surprise; we have eyes on all sides.

“Any idea where this shit is?” Levi asks softly. He sounds worried, and I am glad that I am not the only one feeling that this is too easy. There’s no such thing as too easy anymore.

Erwin answers him, confidence still prevalent in his voice, “Not right off. There should be some product in packaging boxes if we can find them.” A loud creak suddenly has us stiffening. I don’t like this.

“I don’t like this at all. It would be completely different if I knew what I was getting into. But this… I feel like I am blindfolded, blindly following the instructions of someone… someone who I trust. You trust him, Eren. He wouldn’t lead you to your death.

One of the men, Jurgen, speaks up, “I don’t feel so good.” Yeah, you and me both, buddy. My heart is pounding in my chest, every beat pulsating throughout my body. It’s loud in my ears, and I wouldn’t be surprised if Levi could hear it as he stands beside me.

Ba bum.

Ba bum.

Ba bum.

A gun fires.

“Shit! Fucking rats.” Dieter exclaims. The fucker must have forgotten that silence was one of the keys to survival in situations like this.

Levi remembers.

“Do you want to fucking die, you ingrate piece of shit?” Dieter is staring at the man, eyes wide with surprise. “Shut the fuck up before I personally put a bullet in the back of your thick skull.” Well, I will give it to Levi, he sure is convincing. Dieter has resumed his position, shoulders slightly shaking.

“I think this floor is clear, but we still need to stay together.” Erwin remarks, lowering his gun. We’ve made it to the opposite side of the factory, and still there are no walkers to be found. Shit, maybe we are lucky. Maybe these kinds of miracles do happen; you just have to let yourself get fucked over several times before you’re deemed worthy. “Let’s look around, and if you spot anything let me know.”

I stick close to Levi as our group slowly disbands. For some reason, I feel the safest around him. Wait, what? Anyone here could easily protect me, well, besides the three shit-for-brains Erwin brought along. So, why do I want to be near Levi? I want to protect him. But out of everyone here, Levi could probably protect himself the best. He doesn't need me. If anything, I am probably a hindrance to him. But that’s the truth, isn’t it? I want to make sure he’s safe, so I stay with him. Life would go on without him, though. Wouldn’t it?

“This isn’t right.”

What?

Levi should know better than to direct questions at me when I am in the middle of questioning my priorities. When I don’t reply, he sighs irritably and starts again, “This… place. It’s giving me the fucking creeps. Something should have happened by now.” So, he feels it, too. And he’s right. The
tension is killing me with a fucking butter knife. I open my mouth to respond, but Ivan’s voice drowns me out.

“Hey, I think I found something worthwhile. It says ‘Storage’.”

It happens too fast for any of us to react. Ivan turns the handle, and out they come. Frozen. I can’t move. I hear his screams as the zombies tear into his flesh. Their teeth sink into his neck, his arms, anywhere they can reach. Ripping and pulling. Their hands are shredding him, innards on the floor. Retribution for the piñata Stohess created. He’s still alive, his screaming signifies that. Frozen.

“IVAN!” Dieter’s bloodcurdling scream fills the factory. There is a yank on my arm, and I am being pulled away. Where am I going? Who is taking me away? He is speaking to me, but I can’t hear his words. The only thing filling my ears is Ivan’s death cry. These are screams that haunt you, the ones that echo in your mind at every waking moment. I even have a face to place with them. The mangled visage will lurk in the back of my mind, ready to appear when the screams consume my thoughts.

“Eren!” Levi’s voice somehow elevates above the screaming. No, wait. The screaming is gone. Then, that means so is Ivan.

Panic.

I am gasping for air, the situation finally dawning on me. The sound of gunfire is all around me, mixing in with the theme song of the zombies. Their ever present moans and growls are closing in on me, and the realization hits me. Holy shit, we are going to die, aren’t we? We are going to be ripped apart until we are nothing but tattered remains. I’m scared, and I shouldn’t be. I’ve been on the precipice on death multiple times. Hell, Death is practically my next door neighbor. Why is this different? What’s changed?

Levi.

I was going to protect him. I was going to make sure he was safe. And I’ve failed. I’ve failed at the worst time possible. He’s going to die, and his screams will be what permeate my mind next. His will no doubt be the worst.

I’m sorry.

I’m sorry, Levi.

He throws open a door, and I realize the entire group is here. Well, minus Ivan. I’m thrown inside; and everyone shuffles in, barricading the door after it’s closed.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.” Dieter’s repeating the words like a mantra. Tears stain his cheeks, no doubt surfacing from seeing Ivan’s gruesome death. He stops his muttering as he tries to calm himself. No one is speaking, but the silence is deafening. No one wants to say what’s on everyone’s mind. That we are going to die. I don’t even know where we are in the factory. I was too busy losing the only sanity I had left while Levi towed me along.

The growl breaks the silence.

Jurgen screams and I whip my head in the direction of the panicked cry. I expect to see Jurgen being devoured, next. But that’s not what I see at all.

Not even close.

Jurgen has pushed Erwin into the walker. The blonde man doesn’t even have a chance. The zombie
sinks its teeth into Erwin’s forearm, eliciting a mangled scream from the man. I hear the gunshots. *Bang,* one. *Bang,* two. And the zombie falls. *But wait.* Two gunshots? I turn my head to the direction the noise came from.

Levi’s arm is stretched out, holding the gun. He is shaking, finger still on the trigger. His mouth is open slightly, lips trembling. His normal impassive façade has been replaced with something else entirely. *Fear.* Hannes told me it wasn’t real, and I believed him. But the look Levi’s carrying is enough to reverse my train of thought.

“Jurgen, no! Please, no!” My head whips toward the sound.

What, no.

No, Levi.

What have you done?

Jurgen’s dead, his head carrying a hole that matches the zombie resting on the floor beside him. Blood is spurting from the bullet wound, creating a violent picture on the ground. Dieter is cradling Jurgen’s unresponsive body, sobbing uncontrollably. Levi killed him. *Levi killed him.* I feel like I am going to be sick. This is too much. I turn back to the man holding the gun. *Shit.* Ivan’s face was terrifying, but the visage that is going to stain my mind is undoubtedly Levi’s.

I try to start, “Levi…”

I hear a groan, but this time it is human. I turn to the noise and I realize that I have forgotten the fact the Erwin has *just been bitten, oh my god, no.* My adrenaline kicks in, pushing thoughts of Levi out of my head until only one notion is flowing through my brain. I *have to get to Erwin.* I rush over to him, sidestepping grieving Dieter and the dead walker. Erwin is clasping his bitten arm, a look of panic on his otherwise content face. Erwin, the one who always has a plan, the one who never slips, looks completely horrified, lost. Pupils blown, he is scanning up and down his injured arm. Even in this state, he is still trying to figure out a plan. I don’t know what to do. What’s plan B? *Shit, there was no plan B.* My hands are trembling as I watch Erwin. This is the man who appeared to be able to look death in the face and laugh. And now, here he is, standing on the abyss of undead eternity.

Erwin lifts his head to meet my eyes, his face full of resolve when he speaks. “Cut it off.”

What?

I couldn’t have heard him right. Did he just ask me to amputate his fucking arm? Erwin knows what the plan is now, and just like that, his normal façade is back. “Mike, get your knife. Hanji, prepare a tourniquet. Levi-” He pauses as he takes in the man. My eyes travel back to Levi. He is still standing with his arm outstretched, eyes wide, looking straight ahead.

“Eren, I need you to hold me down.” My gaze spins back to Erwin, and I think I have legitimately gone insane. There is no way I am hearing him correctly. *But I am.* The look of resolve etched on his face tells me that he is actually going to do this. He is willing to chop his own arm off if it means he could survive. And if we don’t do it then I have no doubts that Erwin will wield the knife himself. He wasn’t joking. His will to live supersedes any desire to die. And I respect that.

I grab onto his shoulders without a word, because I know for a goddamn fact coherent sentences are not going to be coming off my lips. My hands are still shaking as they lock onto him. I can't be scared, not now. I have to be strong for Erwin. I grip onto his shirt in an attempt to stop the shaking, but it just makes the quivering more apparent to the man. Erwin looks up at me and nods, silently
telling me that everything will be okay.

How? How is any of this going to be okay, Erwin? But shit. I trust him. If he says everything is going to work out, than there is no reason to doubt him.

Hanji appears with a ripped strip of cloth. She quickly secures the fabric underneath Erwin’s elbow. All of the manic behavior she usually displays has been replaced with a seriousness I never thought I would see in Hanji. She knows this is life or death. Mike emerges brandishing a metallic butcher knife. Holy shit, this is actually happening. He reaches down to squeeze Erwin’s hand one final time before he places the blade against the skin. Erwin’s eyes meet Mike’s and he gives a sharp nod.

The knife starts to move.

Erwin throws his head back as he releases a howl that cannot be considered human. The back of his skull connects with my chin; and for a moment, my grip on his shoulders falters. Hanji is busy holding down his arm while Mike cuts through the skin tissue. I am left alone to stabilize this man who is bucking against every cut. Mike has made it through the first layer of skin; and if I thought I was going to be sick a few minutes ago, I am definitely going to be sick now. I lift one of my hands off Erwin to cover my mouth.

“I swear to god, kid. If you puke on me I will shove my fist down your fucking throat.” Levi is standing beside me, holding onto the shoulder that I abandoned. His usual abrasiveness is back, but his eyes are still exuding terror. Why is he over here? No, how is he over here? Seconds ago, he couldn’t even stand without trembling. But that’s just Levi isn’t it? He will put aside his own suffering if it means he can help save his comrades. He will play the role of the villain if it protects his friends. That’s why he shot that walker at the ritual. That’s why he saved me. It makes so much sense now... but why did he kill Jurgen? Is it because he pushed Erwin into the walker? Wait. That’s exactly it, isn’t it? Jurgen was a coward, and now Erwin is paying for it. He endangered a member of the group. So, Levi killed him without a second thought.

And he hates himself for it.

Part of me wants to write him off completely. He killed Jurgen. I want to yell at him, and tell him that he is no better than the fuckers banging outside the door. But the majority of me sympathizes. The majority of me would have done the same thing. For the first time in forever, I understand. As crazy as it sounds in my head, I know he did the right thing. He made the tough choice, but he did so to spare us the opportunity.

Levi’s staring at me as we hold down a struggling Erwin. Those stormy eyes conveying every ounce of dread his face is trying to conceal. And it hits me. He’s not scared of the zombies, he’s scared of himself. He thinks he is a monster, and he wants me to tell him otherwise. This reminds me of the test I failed with him not even 48 hours ago. I won’t let him down this time.

I try to force the words through my gaze. Please, just let him see that he isn’t like the creatures plaguing the streets.

You are wrong, Levi.

Erwin has stopped struggling, the shock setting in knocking him unconscious. His arm is almost completely detached, only hanging on by a few nerves and strands of muscle. Dieter is vomiting in the corner of the room, from the loss of Jurgen or Erwin’s amputation, I’m unsure. Mike drops the knife as he finishes the job, severing the last bits of tissue. Erwin’s arm is bleeding profusely; and if he doesn’t die from the infection, he will surely die from blood loss. Hanji’s frantically looking for something to wrap the hemorrhaging nub. Her eyes roll over Jurgen’s body, but they quickly look
away. It would seem like sacrilege to use his clothing to stop the wound.

Her hands have worked their way up into her hair as she mutters, “Shit, shit, shit.” I hear rustling beside me, and I turn to see Levi pulling off his winter jacket. He throws the material on the ground like it’s offended him, and he begins to slide off the white button up he is wearing underneath. As he pulls the material off his body, I turn my head trying to give him as much privacy as possible; because shit, for some reason keeping a person’s decency is still important to me during the apocalypse. As Levi slides back into his hunting jacket, Hanji grabs the material, and starts working on tying up Erwin's wound.

The shirt actually makes a decent bandage with its sleeves pulled tight to stop the bleeding; and I am starting to feel a little hopeful that Erwin may survive. Then, I hear it.

The growls. The banging. The fucking zombies.

Oh fuck.

How could I forget? We are stuck in a room with countless, hungry walkers outside our door. Shit, what do we do? There are no windows in the room we’re in, no exit besides the one currently being assaulted by the walking dead.

Out of everyone, Mike was the last person I thought would speak up.

“We stick to Erwin’s plan. We just alter it a little.” No one seems to disagree, but then again, I don’t think anyone else has a better idea. Mike is a lot like Erwin in a sense. He keeps his shit together. Even when we are facing certain death, the man’s head never falls off his shoulders. Hell, he cut through Erwin’s fucking arm like it was something he did on the regular.

The man walks up to the door and prepares to move the barricade. He turns his head and gives us a gentle nod, alerting us that yes, this is totally fucking happening. The sound of gun hammers being pulled back fills my ears; and I soon follow suit, raising my own weapon in front of my face. Shit, why am I shaking? Fear is not real. Fear is not real.

The door opens.

The walkers are eager for our flesh, scrambling against each other to enter the room first. I pull the trigger of my pistol, over and over until the sound of the gun firing is the only thing I hear. Blood and chucks from the garbled zombie corpses are flying through the air, creating a grotesque fireworks show. I don’t stop shooting until my clip runs out, and even then I am still pulling the trigger, firing invisible bullets.

Over and over.

The others are still firing, as there are still a few stragglers trying to make their way into our safe room. It’s almost beautiful how the walkers fall. They take shot after shot until someone finally hits the jackpot with a slug between the eyes. It’s like a dance, the way they move. Their lumbering movements forming a ballet of death. Everything is in slow motion, now. The blood, the walkers, the bullets. My finger has finally moved off the trigger, and I am content to just watch the show being played out in front of me. A splash of blood here, a sprinkle of flesh there, a zombie masterpiece.

Silence suffocates me as the bullets finally stop their onslaught. The walls surrounding the doorway are painted a brilliant red, highlighting the pile of corpses in the entrance. However, no one else is taking the time to appreciate the undead work of art.

Mike already has his arms wrapped around Erwin’s unconscious frame as he makes his way to the
We are getting out of here. We are going to survive.

A hand grabs my wrist as I make to follow Mike. Levi is staring at me with those fucking eyes, and I suddenly feel sick again. Does he really want to do this right now? I am praying my mouth is in working order as I open it to speak.

“You told me not to die, remember? C’mon we are getting out of here.” That’s not the answer he wanted, I know; but it’s the one he needs. The fire in his eyes reignites, burning through any trace of fear he was holding onto, ready to take on the world. This is the Levi I know.

He releases his grip on my wrist, and it’s almost like he didn’t just have an identity crisis. We quickly shift into the formation, Mike and Erwin taking up residence in the center. It seems like our little performance in the safe room brought most of the walkers out of hiding, because there are little to none left in the factory. Those that we spot are quickly dispatched, and soon, the sweet light of the sun is embracing us with open arms.

We made it.

Holy shit, we made it.

Erwin is loaded into the passenger side of the SUV, Levi’s makeshift bandage already a different color entirely. Shit, he’s lost a lot of blood. I am silently praying that the clinic Zackly was bragging about is just as good as he claimed. Mike and Dieter have already floored it, car sending up dust in its wake. No doubt, they are leaving to alert the town of Erwin’s injury. I glance at the wound again. Shit, the clinic better be fucking first-class, Zackly.

Hanji slides into the driver’s seat, starting the engine. Levi and I take our places in the back, a deathly silence filtering down on us. I think I have said enough, and that this thing is just something Levi is going to have to deal with alone. This battle of morality. My mouth has a horrible tendency of making things worse; and as much as I want to comfort him and tell him that he wasn’t wrong, I don’t think it will be that easy. What else could I say? That I’m sorry you had to kill Jurgen? Chose to kill Jurgen. No, fuck, I am an asshole.

Wait.

“Levi?” His overcast eyes turn to meet my gaze, a familiar look of indifference residing in them once again.

“I trust you.”

His eyes widen in shock, and then filter into an emotion I had never seen portrayed on his face.

Happiness.

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Stohess is already prepared for our arrival, several citizens waiting anxiously to tend to Erwin’s wound. Please, let him live. If anyone deserves another day, it’s Erwin. They pull him out of the SUV and begin to carry him hastily to the clinic. Their path is marked by the blood slowly dripping from Erwin’s makeshift bandage, which has long since soaked through.

This is a fucking nightmare.
What makes it even worse is the fact that we came back empty handed. *I swear that was not an intentional pun.* I expected looks of sympathy from the citizens, but what I get is faces smeared with anger. Why are they angry? What could we have possibly done differently?

I hear one of the civilians from the crowd, “There goes another waste of our resources. Sooner or later, President Zackly will realize how useless Erwin’s plans are.” My hands clench into fists, nails forming angry crescent marks in my palm. How dare they? We risked our fucking lives to help make theirs better. Hell, we lost two men and Erwin lost an arm. And they are mad? I go to retort to their biased judgments, but a hand on my shoulder silences the words before they leave my mouth. Hanji is glaring at me, silently pleading for me to let it go. I want to be angry, furious; but the look the woman is sending me drains all my rage until the only thing I am left feeling is empty and hollow.

“Levi, we need to have a talk.” Zackly’s voice breaks my concentration on Hanji’s face. I should have figured he would show up eventually. He is probably only here to chastise our failed mission, or maybe he’s here to find out if I behaved like ‘the good boy I am’. I feel disgusted thinking about the man’s words. As I take in Zackly’s frame, I notice a familiar figure standing beside him. Dieter? Since when did that asshole hold favor in Zackly’s eyes? The look he is shooting our way is the textbook definition of murderous. But his glare carries another trait beneath the obvious venom: smugness. But why? I notice that his gaze is not pointed in my direction; but rather it is being directed at the stone faced man behind me.

I hear the rustle of bodies, and I turn around to take in the commotion.

Two men have appeared on either side of Levi, grabbing him by his upper arms.

“I’m going, so kindly back the fuck off.” His threat is said in a deadpan; but underneath the impassiveness is a trace of a tumultuous storm, ready to unleash hell and beyond. The men release him, and begin to escort Levi in the direction of the clinic. *Wait, what’s going on?* I make to run after him; but Zackly grabs my shirt collar, yanking me backwards.

His eyes look positively malevolent; and I decide that if evil has a form it has taken it in Zackly. He says nothing to me as he turns to follow the men escorting Levi.

Hannes was a bold faced liar, because now, I am certain.

*Dread.*

*Fear.*

*Terror.*

These emotions do exist.

Chapter End Notes

*casually adds Mild Gore to the tags*

I want to start off saying that HOLY SHIT THIS FIC HAS FANART! The scene depicted is from the beginning of chapter 8. So, if you have a Tumblr, go like it, reblog it, worship it, idk whatever you people do:
http://zipra.tumblr.com/post/84870534860/hes-crying-tears-are-silently-running-down-
his

Second, HOLY SHIT THIS CHAPTER WAS A PAIN IN THE EVER LOVING ASS. I swear I rewrote it about five times before I decided that it was fit enough to publish. Mother fucking Erwin Smith and his mother fucking arm. Hey, I had to add that to this story. Anyway, I hope this chapter is sufficient considering it made me want to chunk my laptop out the window.

And I will probably NOT update for at least a couple of days because FINALS ARE A SNEAKY BITCH.

Thanks again for the kudos/comments. They make my day!

Tumblr:
fuzzyporcupine.tumblr.com

If you spot any grammar mistakes, let me know!
Thanks for reading!

FANMIX
ALL FANART
Black and blue.

Those are the first words I think of when I see Levi the next morning.

His face is littered in bruises, ranging in size and color. He looks like a human Dalmatian with the markings. What the fuck did Zackly do to him? *Wait, no.* It’s pretty damn obvious what happened. He beat the shit out of Levi. And the beaten man is just sitting in this fucking booth like nothing happened. It pisses me off. Why is he so accepting of being Zackly’s punching bag? Doesn’t he have any self-preservation? My eyes never leave his face as he sips his tea in silence, memorizing every bruise, every cut. His cheeks are, by far, the worst of the group, the purpled skin lying in stark contrast of his pale complexion.

My fork has been still in my hand ever since I laid eyes on Levi’s injuries. I am too shocked, no, too enraged to even think about eating.

Levi deadpans, “Stop staring at me. It’s fucking creepy.” My grip on the fork tightens until the utensil is softly clattering against my plate. I grit my teeth, forcing the words to stay down. The last thing Levi needs is me chastising him for not being angry about his beating. *But no. He needs* to be pissed.

He gets up to leave, and I decide that this is my only chance to make him see. *Make him realize he was not wrong. That he did not deserve this.*

“What’s wrong with you?” My question comes out a lot snarkier than I’d hoped. Levi whips around to meet my gaze, raising a thin eyebrow.

*Why are you playing dumb?*

“Excuse me?” I hear it. A hint of untouched rage is lurking in the recesses of his statement. God, he’s trying so hard. He doesn’t want his anger to show, but this isn’t healthy. He can’t keep something like this contained without it slowly eating him up from the inside out.

“You heard me. Why are you so content with being treated like this?” In the busy dining room, the shatter of the broken glass is all I hear. I don’t see shards fly out, though. My eyes are trained on Levi’s discolored face. His brow is furrowed, and his eye has developed a violent twitch, the only sign of his ire.

“Fuck you.” The way he says it does not offer any semblance of sarcasm or amusement. He’s pissed. *Finally.* I am happy that he is finally showing some sense of anger; but it’s like I can’t win, because it’s being directed at me. I should have just let him be. Maybe I am the only one who turns into a human banshee when I’m mad. Acting unaffected was probably how he dealt with this kind of rage. *Shit.* My words were the cherry on top of this fucked up sundae. I don’t even have time to apologize; because Levi has stormed off, leaving me and his shattered coffee cup in his wake.

I get up to go after him when I notice Zackly, the fucking bastard in the flesh, is leaning idly by the entrance of the diner. I have nothing to say to him, the only thing I want is to allow my fist the same pleasantries he exchanged with Levi. I attempt to walk past him, knowing that resorting to violence will only work out against me. Zackly stops me with the echo of my name. “Eren,” I pause, fists clenched. Let him see how infuriated I am, I don’t care. “did you get a goodnight’s sleep?” I didn’t
think it was humanly possible, but my fists tighten further. I know what he is playing at, and I refuse. I will not turn around and give this bastard the satisfaction of me responding to his meaningless question. “I hope you didn’t worry too much. Levi was in good hands, I can assure you.”

*Okay, fuck this guy.*

He’s just trying to get a rise out of me, and I won’t let it happen. I whip around to face him. “If anything, I was worried about Erwin. You know just considering he lost a fucking arm yesterday.” I was concerned about Erwin last night, but I’m lying when I say that it was at the forefront of my anxiety. Zackly’s hit the nail on the head when he assumed I was worried about Levi.

I have never been a good liar, and obviously the skill hasn’t improved since Armageddon’s been introduced; because Zackly is looking at me with a gaze that sees straight through my bullshit. “Ah, I see. Well, you’d be happy to know that he was stabilized yesterday. He’s going to make it.”

I don’t know why he’s continuing playing this little game. He knows I’m lying. Shit, he probably knows that I realize the lie didn’t fool him and he just wants to watch me squirm under his scrutiny. Yeah, that seems likely. Well, fuck you, old man. I don’t have time for your psychoanalytical bullshit.

“Good.” I turn back around and open the diner doors, preparing to make my escape.

“Tell Levi I said hello.” His words make me freeze in place. It’s sort of terrifying that he can read me so easily. Mikasa told me time and time again that I needed to work on keeping my emotions in check, but it’s never been any use. I’ll always wear them on my sleeve, and unfortunately, that just makes it easier for creeps like Zackly to capitalize on their manipulations. Yeah, fuck this guy.

I step outside the diner, letting the doors slam behind me in some act of defiance to Zackly’s questioning. Right now, I don’t care if the man knows I’m going to see Levi. Let him know. The only thing running through my mind is the fact that I probably just lost one of the only friends I have here.

*Shit.*

---

I knock on his door, not really expecting an answer. The way he stomped off signaled that he didn’t want company. *So why am I up here, then?* God, I’m an asshole. *I was an asshole.* I prepare to turn and leave when I hear the door creak open.

Levi’s pointed glare is the only thing visible in the crack of the door. It reminds me of the last time I visited him here.

“What do you want?” *Yeah, this seems vaguely familiar.* I resolve to not put my shoe in the door this time, because damn, my foot is still sore.

“I… Can I come in?” When he doesn’t answer, I sigh, “You know I’m not going to leave.” He rolls his eyes as he walks away from the door, leaving it open. I get one foot inside when he starts.

“So, what do you want to know? Huh? Want to know why I’m not pissed? Want to know what they did to me?” His voice is vicious, like he has been bottling this anger in ever since he sat down at breakfast this morning. He’s been waiting for someone to unleash it on, and I just happen to be the one stupid enough to disturb his brooding. “You want to know what they told me as they were beating me senseless? ‘It’s for the good of the community, Levi. You’ll learn soon enough.’ I mean they don’t fuck around, if that’s what you are wondering.”
Zackly, you sick sonofabitch. It’s taking every ounce of control I have not to leave this room to go find the twisted fuck. I need to stay here, though. Levi needs me. Let me be the punching bag for all his pent up rage, I don’t care. Give me his pain, his anger. I’ll bear it all for him. Just make him okay.

At least he’s angry, because that is a reaction. Not like that impassive bullshit he was trying to pull earlier. Zackly should have known that people like Levi can’t be broken that easily. That’s why Zackly punishes him, isn’t it? Because he knows Levi’s close to untamable. But there’s always that one thing. That one thing that can break a person. Call it a modern kryptonite, in a sense that’s what it is. Maybe it’s a memory, a friend, a lover. Once that thing is rubbed raw, you’re done. Maybe Levi is the exception. He might not have anything left to lose. Somehow, I highly doubt it.

He is shaking, arms flailing about wildly. I go against everything my mind is telling me and step closer. “Every punch, every fucking punch they would tell me the same thing, ‘This is for your own good.’ Every fucking punch.” The previous anger he held has transformed into pure despondency.

I reach my hand out towards him, almost touching his shoulder. “Levi, I-“

His rage reignites in acknowledgment of my concern, and he jumps back from my hand like its touch is deadly. “I don’t need your fucking sympathy. I know why you’re up here, Eren. You and your goddamn self-righteous agenda. You try to act so fucking holy and sanctimonious. It’s sickening. You don’t give two shits about me, so stop trying to act like I mean something to you.”

I’m not sure which one drops faster, my hand or my heart. I stand there, dumbfounded, not believing the harsh words emitting from Levi’s mouth. Is this what he really thinks of me? That I’m nothing more than an act?

“What? Do you have nothing to say? Did I finally find the magic words? You’re a piece of work, you know? Are you mad? Are you disappointed that I killed him? Huh?” His voice is breaking, all his misdirected anger rapidly turning into regret. “And you know what? I would do it again.” My courage rejuvenates and before I know what I’m doing, I am standing directly in front of him. He looks up at me, eyes swollen with sorrow. “I would do it all again.” I want him to be quiet; his words aren’t hurting me anymore. They are just rebounding right off me, hitting him with the counter strike. So, I do the one thing I know will shut him up.

My arms wrap tightly around his shoulders, pulling him into my body. He immediately stiffens, my hug taking him by surprise. I relax my grip a little, realizing this might have not been my best idea. Suddenly, a pair of arms begins to hesitantly encircle my waist, attempting to reestablish the tightness in which the hug started. Levi leans into my body, and begins to slowly descend his head towards me until his cheek is pressed firmly against my shoulder. My fingers begin to move on their own volition, rubbing small circles in his back. I really don’t think I am in control of my body, because out of nowhere, I start humming.

It’s a tune my mother would sing to me when I was a child. After every schoolyard fight, she was there with a stern look and a sympathetic tone. I would always run away to my room after she chastised me, hiding from the guilt of disappointing her. It wouldn’t be long before she came to knock gently at my door, even though she knew I always left it unlocked for her. She would come in and wrap me up in a warm embrace and start singing. The melody never really left my head, and sometimes it was the only thing that calmed me down. I realize this is probably really weird for Levi; being latched onto someone who decides to randomly start humming, so I cease my droning.

“Don’t stop.” Levi’s voice comes in a whisper, his heated breath flowing across the hollow of my neck.

Mom always told me that this song had been proven over generations to calm down aching hearts. I
always called bullshit, but I guess she was right. I continue where I left off, humming softly in Levi’s ear.

As I finish the song, I slowly begin to lessen my grip on Levi. When my arms fall from his shoulders, he is still clinging on to me, fingers clutching my shirt like a vice. It is like time has stopped, and he doesn’t realize that my arms are now hanging limply at my sides. Should I say something? I don’t want to ruin whatever this is. He is finally letting down that cold wall of impassiveness and insensitivity. He is finally letting someone in. And that someone is me.

“You smell like shit.” I realize that in my daze, Levi has lifted his head off my shoulder. He’s staring at me, silver eyes causing my heart to pick up to an erratic pace. His hands have since left my waist, finding purchase at the front of my shirt instead. How long has it been since someone comforted Levi? How long has it been since someone comforted Levi? How long has it been for me? It’s the human condition. We feel like we have to bear every burden on our own. We encase ourselves in these shells of emotion; until one day, someone comes along and brings a hammer down upon the casing. And it shatters. And we’re scared, because we’re vulnerable. But that someone tells you that it’s okay. That it’s okay to feel again. Is that what I need to tell him?

“I haven’t had a shower since we left.” I was too upset yesterday to do anything besides go to my room and think about what was happening to Levi, if Erwin was dead… shit. Things were so fucked.

His upper lip curls into a disgusted sneer. “Tch. You’re revolting.” His words carry no malice as he pushes off my chest. I take no offense, because I am revolting. All the sweat, grime, and blood is still encasing my face and shirt. I probably need to change my sheets. Gross.

Levi takes a seat on the end of his bed, resting his elbows on his knees. He glances in my direction and jerks his head in a silent invitation. I take a seat next to him, not really knowing how to start the conversation. Did he want to talk about what happened? Probably not. I want to get his mind off of Zackly, but what could I say to make that happen?

“What did you do before this?” He tenses, and I immediately regret trying to bring up his past. Didn’t someone once say the past is called that for a reason? Well, shit, where is that person to give me advice now, because Levi looks like I just told him Santa Claus doesn’t exist.

“You really want to know?”

Wait, what?

I nod my head rapidly, amazed that he is even giving my question a second thought.

He sighs heavily as he runs a hand through his ebony hair. “I had a group before shit went down. Isabel and Farlan.” His eyebrow twitches slightly as he voices their names. “We were practically stitched together at the fucking hip. And, shit, we took care of each other. Things didn’t change for us just because people decided they liked brains. We were fucked already, so this apocalypse shit didn’t mean a goddamn thing to us. It had always been us against the world.” He pauses, fingers tightening in the bed sheets. Maybe I should stop him. He obviously doesn’t want to revisit these memories, so I should just leave it alone and be happy that Levi is not pissed at me for my outburst this morning.

“One night, we were ambushed by some bandits. None of us expected it. Bastards came out of nowhere. They lined us up execution style, pressed a gun to the back of our heads. Fuck, I knew right then it was over. Then, this asshole asks me if I wanted to live. I told him to go fuck himself, because he looked like one of those shady shits who liked to make people beg. He laughed and
asked me if I wanted to join them, and by now I’m calling bullshit. But the asshole was serious. Next thing I know, I am leading a bunch of dumbasses on raids. Stealing people’s shit and all that jazz.” I don’t really have a hard time picturing Levi as the thug type, considering his personality and demeanor.

“Shit happened, and I ended up in this fucking sanctuary. Matter of fact, I got here not long before you.”

“What happened to them?”

The words are out before I have time to rein them back. Fucking word vomit. This is the most I have ever (and probably will) gotten out of Levi. Now, I’ve fucked it up, because my mouth likes to have a mind of its own.

He considers my question for a moment, eyes boring holes into the shag carpet below. My uneasiness is practically palpable, the feeling being propelled by the thought that any second all of this is going to end.

“Isabel and Farlan?” I nod my head, shocked that he is not angrier at me for prying. “What happens to everyone nowadays. Walkers.” This is hard for him; his clenched fists and furrowed brow tell me so.

No wonder Levi is so closed off and dispassionate. The man has had the only two people he’d cared about ripped from him. And here I am, trying to wedge myself into his life like a permanent fixture. I’m selfish. So selfish. I was greedy when I pushed for a friendship that he obviously didn’t want to return. I didn’t understand then, but now it makes sense. He doesn’t want to lose anyone else. I’m something to lose now. Misplaced aggravation is filling my veins, wishing he would have told me about his past before. But would it have really mattered? I’ve always been stubborn, so I don’t think that his story would have necessarily pushed me off this self-seeking path.

“I’m sorry.” It feels like a shit apology, but it’s the only thing I can offer him right now.

“Why? It wasn’t your fault.” He doesn’t understand, doesn’t know why I am seeking his forgiveness.

“No, I’m sorry I made you become friends with me.” This sounds like a line in a shitty romantic movie. You know the phrase that the love interest says right before she storms off to find herself again? But the ending’s always the same, so I didn’t expect Levi’s reaction would be any different.

His silver eyes scan my face, that famous eyebrow arched in incredulity, “I’d like to think that you know me well enough to figure that I wouldn’t of accepted your friendship if I didn’t want it.” The words are in my head, but I am unsure if I should let them out. I’m already testing the boundaries by asking him to recite his past.

I say them anyway.

“You didn’t want it. You pushed me away.” The words I wanted to say are out, but they are not stopping. I am feeling more agitated with every sentence that leaves my lips. “And… and I am an asshole. God, I’m such an asshole… I should have listened! Now… now, I’m some liability! I should-“ Levi’s hand over my mouth silences any further disagreements that I could have spoken.

We sit like this for a while, his hand covering my mouth. It’s starting to get a little awkward; and I have a strong urge to stick my tongue out and lick his hand to get it off me, but somehow I know that move will definitely be my last. Finally, the offending appendage is lifted off, but not before it slides
down to cup my chin. I wince, because it’s still a little tender from Erwin’s skull colliding into it. He is meeting my eyes, staring at me with an unvoiced intent. What does he want?

“It’s easy for me to hate people, especially in this world. But for some reason… “ He pauses, considering if he really want to say what’s on his mind, “I don’t hate you. To be honest, I’m actually quite fond of your dumbass.” When I don’t say anything, he sighs, “I wanted to be your friend, Bright Eyes. Don’t doubt that.” Levi’s hand falls from my face, leaving a warm sensation in its wake. I can feel my blush before it appears. Wait, why am I blushing? The red tint heats up my cheeks, and I turn my head so Levi can’t see. Shit, I will never hear the end of this.

“I’m angry.” What? I tense up, turning my head towards him, because fuck the consequences. I thought that this signification of friendship dissolved all that shit I said to him before. I should have realized that you can’t just hug some things out. He continues, “You asked me why I was content on being treated this way. I’m not.”

Oh, that.

“I don’t have to be happy with the way things are. And I’m not. But I do have to respect the order of things.” I’m staring at him wide-eyed, because that was one of the last things I expected to leave his split lips. He reaches up to ruffle my hair. “Don’t look so shocked, you little shit.” Shocked isn’t necessarily the word I would use to describe my expression. Disappointed. Yeah, that fits a lot better.

Hell, what did I expect? Levi to go all gung ho on Stohess? Well, yeah a little bit. But he’s not an idiot. He knows that in order to live in Zackly’s world, he has to obey. That’s what this life has come down to. Living like a caged animal under the watchful eye of a sadist, or death.

“He mentioned you.”

What?

“What?” I repeat the words, aloud. Why would Zackly bring me up? I didn’t have anything to do with Levi killing Jurgen. Or did I? No, no. This is stupid. I had nothing to do with Jurgen’s death. I really need to stop questioning myself. There’s no way it’s doing my sanity a lick of good.

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure he said it when my face was becoming really familiar with the toe of his boot.” The image of Levi being beaten makes me sick. How long did Zackly torment him? Every punch, every fucking punch they would tell me the same thing… shit. I look at the bruises on Levi’s face and I imagine Zackly putting them there. I picture his fists, his boots, anything that could cause pain, attacking Levi. That rage I felt when Zackly stopped me in the diner is back. It’s calling out to me, telling me to tempt fate and find Zackly. If they hadn’t taken my weapons back, I would. No. I wouldn’t use weapons. I’d use my fists, my feet just like he did to Levi. Make him pay for what he did.

No, Eren, calm down. Deep breaths.

It’s not my place to fight Levi’s battles. And, anyway, he just told me that he was letting it go. Well, basically. Levi wouldn’t want me to start anymore trouble with Zackly. Lord knows the fucking dictator would probably just blame Levi for my actions. So, I have to resign myself to being the ‘good little boy’ that Zackly wants. Fuck.

“He said you’d be next.” My heart stops. I know I’ve been a little shit and anything but cooperative. But does that warrant the ruthless beating Levi received? “If I act out of line again, he’s going after you.” Levi better have a defibrillator handy, because there’s no way my heart is going to restart now.
“Why?” My voice is shaky and scared, sounding foreign to my ears. Levi’s face stays impassive, but his eyes twist into a swirl of regret and guilt. He has no grounds to be upset with himself. I forced this on him, on myself.

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but you seem to be one of the small few who want anything to do with me.” But wait. Yes, I involve myself with him; but Erwin, Hanji, and Mike are also his friends, right? Why would Zackly target me?

Shit.

It all comes back to me. Zackly’s eerie counseling unearths itself from the alcoves of my mind. ‘I don’t think I have the authority to tell you who you can or cannot play cards with.’ That was a fucking warning. The bastard was practically lying out on a silver platter what would happen if I got close to Levi. He knew, he fucking knew that this would happen. I was just too naïve to realize it.

Zackly’s targeting me, because he knows I consider Levi a friend as well. This is why there is no room in this world for affection. Men like Zackly take that choice and tear it into a million tiny pieces, letting them blow in the wind with a big ‘fuck you’. It’s a dog eat dog world, and I have been living in this fantasy that maybe I could change that. That maybe I could be friends with Levi. The only thing I’ve done is put a target on both of our backs. Zackly fears us, and he is going to do one of two things. Run from this fear, or eradicate it. Something tells me that Zackly isn’t one to avoid his problems. We are a danger to Stohess, no to his power; and he is going to break us. That’s why he made an appearance at the diner. He wanted to see my reaction. He wanted to confirm what he already knew. Fucking asshole.

As I meet Levi’s charcoal stare, I realize something detrimental.

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A knock at my door wakes me out of my light sleep. My arms extend over my head as I release a yawn. I had tried to visit Erwin in the clinic after I left Levi’s room, but the civilians had told me that he was still in shock and could not take any visitors. Figures. I didn’t expect him to be in tip top shape anytime soon. I mean, he lost a fucking arm. I doubt he will ever be the same. At least he’ll be alive.

Another knock echoes throughout my room, and I notice I have neglected to answer the door. I hop up from the bed, running my fingers through my hair in an attempt to tame my bedhead. It’s no use as the gods have cursed me with permanently untamable hair. At least it does look clean. I had taken Levi’s advice and had a shower after leaving the clinic. Needless to say, I was a little sickened by the amount of filth that had accumulated on my body. How Levi was able to stand in such close proximity to me, I’ll never know. Sighing, I pull the door open.

It’s a man, and I recognize him as one of the guards who patrol the wall. He’s holding onto a semiautomatic like it’s his newborn child, and a sudden bout of anxiety hits me in the gut. What if he’s here to take me away? I gulp as I grasp the outer edge of the door in a sturdy grip. If this bastard wants me, I’m not going easily.

He starts, voice gruff and raspy, “There’s a mandatory meeting tonight at The Hole. All citizens are required to attend.” The Hole? What the fuck is this man on about?

“I don’t-” My question hasn’t even left my throat before the man turns to leave. Asshole. I glance at my watch and- shit. Dinner started twenty minutes ago. I can already see the look of aggravation
Levi is probably wearing. I run down the stairwell, completely forgetting that I am about as graceful as a bull in a china shop. The last step grabs onto the toe of my shoe. Time slows as I start my descent to the hotel floor below. I close my eyes, preparing for the pain that is sure to accompany falling face first into the ground. But the pain never comes.

“Where have you been, asshole?” Levi is holding me by the shoulders; and instead of getting a face full of cheap linoleum, I’m being smothered by Levi’s linen button up.

Oh shit.

I scramble away from him, and damn if I can’t think of a time when I had been more miserably awkward. “I, uh, overslept.” I say as I rub the back of my neck. Levi is looking at me like I have grown two heads. I’m overreacting. Of course, I’m overacting. It’s just that I don’t know exactly what this feeling in my gut is, and I am having a little bit of trouble trying to understanding it.

“Sure…” I can tell Levi feels about as awkward as I look, and oh my god I have turned something that was totally nothing into something weird. He turns around and begins to walk back to the diner. “You coming?” Fucking hell. I make to follow him when I see a large group of people heading in the direction of the clinic. Actually, it looks like most of Stohess.

Levi pauses in the hotel doorway, taking in the crowd. I look at my watch, and I notice it’s thirty minutes past when dinner started. By now, all the food would be gone, or, if you are lucky, there would be a few scraps left. The Hole. They must have closed dinner early in preparation for the meeting. Well, shit, I know this thing is mandatory; and I honestly do not want any more trouble from Zackly. I am willing to bet my right arm… shit, sorry Erwin… that is where these people are headed.

I grab Levi’s shoulder, “That meeting… did they tell you about it?” He nods his head, understanding where I am getting at. “Do you know where The Hole is?”

“I told you, I haven’t been here much longer than you. And that’s a no if your nut you call a brain was wondering.”

Ass.

We begin to file in with the crowd, because fuck if we know where ‘The Hole’ is. We are led through an alleyway located between the clinic and one of the abandoned buildings. And shit. Stohess is a lot bigger than I thought. The Hole is a pretty literal name for what we are standing around. It’s, well, a hole at least twenty feet deep with a pole extending from the center. It reminds me of a small scale version of a gladiator’s arena. The only thing missing is the coliseum seats. I mean, shit, it looks wide enough to house a fight to the death. There are even tunnels built into the sides of the pit, some lined with bars. There’s an entire underground system in Stohess that I knew absolutely nothing about. I spare a glance at Levi, and he looks just as confused as I do.

Zackly’s voice commands attention as he begins to address to crowd. “Good evening, citizens of Stohess. As some of you have heard, we’ve been dealing with a little problem as of late.” Oh shit. The hole is beginning to look more and more menacing the longer I think about Zackly’s words. I am praying to whatever deity will listen that this meeting has nothing to do with Levi or me. Said man is just as nervous as me. I look at him out of the corner of my eye, and I notice he has taken to gripping the fabric of his jeans in anticipation.

“Bring her out.”

What?
I hear a muffled scream from inside the hole, and I look do- *holy shit*. There’s a woman emerging from one of the doorways built into the side of the pit. She is struggling violently against her captors, cloth covering her mouth, subduing her shouts for help. They begin to secure her hands to the pole as Zackly continues his speech.

“Our dear, Ilse, here has a lot to explain for, don’t you think?” I see many of the citizens shaking their head in agreement, some even murmuring ‘yes’. “She stole my weapons, your weapons. She would leave us defenseless against the walkers.” Every sentence out of that snake’s mouth ignites a fire under the crowd. “So, what would you have me do?” The crowd goes wild, chanting demands at Zackly. Many including the woman’s death.

I focus of the woman’s face; her eyes look petrified, blown to gigantic proportions. She knows what’s coming. And, fuck, it’s not good.

“So be it.” The men in the pit remove her gag, and she immediately begins to profess her innocence.

“I swear it wasn’t me! It wasn’t what it looked like! Please, no!” The men have exited the pit, locking the gate behind them. The sudden sound of metal being lifted draws my attention away from the woman’s face and towards the noise.

*Oh my god.*

Walkers have appeared from the gated doorways, lumbering steadily towards their meal. *No.* Fuck this. Fuck Zackly. Fuck Stohess. I can accept the fact that maybe these people think that torturing zombies is okay. This, though. *No.* I don't put my foot down, I slam it through the fucking floor.

“Stop!” I scream out as loud as my voice will allow. The citizens turn and look at me with disgust, like I am the one in the wrong. Like they look at Levi. These people are fucking insane if they think executing their citizens via zombies is moral. “Let her go!” The biters are inching closer and closer towards the woman. She’s sobbing now, accepting that she is going to die a terrible death. I’m inching towards the hole, hoping that some miracle will occur and the citizens will regain their senses. A walker finally makes it to her, sinking its teeth into her neck.

*No.*

Her shrieks penetrate into my skull, rattling my bones. I'm frozen, hypnotized by the sight. By now, the other biters have also made it to their feast, hands carelessly ripping apart the woman’s flesh. She’s convulsing now, blood soaking her petite frame. No one deserves this. These people... no, these *monsters* are worse than the walkers. How many of us are dying everyday at the hands of the biters? Hundreds? Thousands? And here they are, *feeding* the fucking things like they are pets. This place... it isn't paradise. It's anything but.

Suddenly, a pair of hands is on me, dragging me out of the crowd and away from the carnage. I struggle vehemently against my captor, anxious to get back to the woman, fruitlessly hoping that she’s still alive.

“Eren, stop!” Levi’s voice sounds desperate as he pulls me out of the alleyway. Why didn’t he stop them? Why didn’t he do something? “Do you want to fucking die? Is that what you want?” He’s shaking me now, every word being enunciated by a joggle. His eyes are wild, frantically searching my face for an answer.

I don’t want to die, but I don’t want to live in a world where *this* is acceptable. *I won’t live in this world.* I yank myself out of his grasp and start running in the direction of the Super 8. He calls my name as I sprint away, but he doesn’t follow. He is not like me in the sense that he knows when
people need time to themselves. I’m the one who’s banging on their doors five minutes after I just yelled at them.

I reach the hotel and yank the doors open. My feet move on their own accord over the steps, and for the first time Mr. Higher Power decides to give me some grace. I enter my room and slam the door shut. Fuck Stohess. Fuck Stohess.

_Fuck Stohess._

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I can’t sleep. It’s understandable considering I just witnessed a woman being eaten alive as a punishment. Mike was right. _This_ is what he knew when he warned me. He knew this place was so much more fucked than a few swings at a zombie piñata. My hands fist into the sheets that suddenly feel way too hot over my body. I feel like I am about to explode. All these emotions I am holding in are threatening to breach the surface, and I need someone to tell me it’s okay.

_I need someone._

I walk out of my room, making my way upstairs. I somehow knew I would end up in front of this door. This room.

26.

It takes one knock before the door is thrown open and he’s there. He doesn’t say anything as I enter; he just waits for me to speak.

My back is to him as I begin, “I couldn’t sleep.” My voice is weak and cracked, trying _so hard_ not to break. _I won’t break._ I repeat the sentence over and over in my head, promising myself. He puts one hand on my shoulder and turns me around. His eyes, his fucking eyes goddammit. Those stains of charcoal penetrate every single barrier I had put around myself tonight.

“Eren,” Levi wraps his arms around my neck, his hands pulling my head into his shoulder. “It’s okay.”

My promise is broken.

For the first time in forever, I let everything go as I twist my arms around Levi. The tears flood over my cheeks, no end in sight. He doesn’t say anything as I cry, as his shirt is slowly tarnished by my tears. He just keeps his hands on my head, allowing me to let everything go. I try to speak through my sobs, but everything I attempt to say is lost in translation.

“I-I’m sorry Levi.”

He shushes me as he tightens his grip on me, rubbing circles into the nape of my neck. "It's okay, it's okay." This world is cruel. _So fucking cruel._ There’s no spot for happiness in this place anymore. It’s just agony. Agony and death. We are just patiently waiting to die. I grip the fabric resting on Levi’s upper back tighter as I bury my face further into his shoulder. I tried so hard to be strong, but I’m not am I?

_I’m broken._

Chapter End Notes
OVER 50K MARK WOOHOO!

So, I made this chapter super long because I felt a little guilty about not updating while leaving the story on a cliffhanger. But damn this chapter is heavy. I was contemplating ending the chapter after Levi's back story was revealed, but I felt like it needed equal parts action/drama/angst. So, sorry if the ending seems weird. If you have any questions, just let me know and I will answer it to the best of my abilities.

AND THANK YOU GUYS FOR THE COMMENTS/KUDOS.

I love writing this story, but the support you guys give me really is the cherry on top. <3

Tumblr:
fuzzyporcurpine.tumblr.com

I am tracking 'fic: what's eating you'.

If you spot any grammar mistakes let me know.

AND I PASSED MY FINALS I AM FREE TO LIVE ANOTHER DAY WOOHOO

FANMIX
ALL FANART
“Eren, honey, it’s time to wake up.” I internally curse my mother’s ability to have such a happy disposition this early. I groan loudly, trying to silently tell her that there is no way in hell my body is going to move itself off this bed. The sound of her footsteps grows louder as they close in on my sleeping frame. “Eren, you have school. You have to wake up.” My garbled morning voice mumbles something that sounds like ‘no’. I clench my eyes tighter as I hear her take a deep breath. “Oi, you little shit, wake the fuck up.”

What?

My shoulders are being roughly jostled when my eyes fly open. Levi’s visage is the first thing I see, still purpled and right in my face. It’s a good thing Levi has quick reflexes, because my body bolts up like a fucking bat out of hell. I bring the covers up to my chin, because… Wait, why? I’m not naked, am I? Oh god, I’m not naked am I? I discreetly check under the sheets to confirm that, yes, I am fully clothed. Why did I… never mind. I’m blaming this lapse in my mentality on the fact that I just woke up. Yeah, I feel better already. I’m shooting Levi a narrowed glare, silently asking him to back off the bed.

He complies, but not before directing a sarcastic remark my way. “Fucking finally. Thank you for gracing us with your presence, Sleeping Beauty. We missed breakfast, you twat.” We missed breakfast? Damn, what time is it? No, shit, I need to be asking myself the more important questions. For instance, why is Levi in my room?

“Why my room?” I manage to mumble as I rub the sleep out of my eyes.

“You’re in my room, asshole. My bed to be exact.” Well, that wakes me up. My body goes into overdrive, throwing my sheets…no, Levi’s sheets off me in a panic. Strong hands grab ahold of my collar, throwing me backwards on the bed. “Calm down, you fucking spazz.” He sighs as he runs a hand through his dark hair. “Christ, it’s too early for this shit.” Well, I agree with him there. But that doesn’t make me any less confused as to why I am currently in Levi’s room.

“Why?” I gesture wildly with my arms around the room, hoping he’ll put two and two together.

“You were a mess last night. And… everything was so fucked.” He sits down on the chair across from the bed, bringing his face into his hands. What is he talking about? Levi lifts his head as he begins, “It’s… I told you that you could stay here. I wasn’t going to sleep anyway after seeing that shit. That fucking girl…”

Wait, fuck.

The woman. The execution. The walkers. All of it, every gruesome detail hits me over the head like an epiphany from Mr. Higher Power himself. Before I know it, I am struggling to breathe. Every intake of air is coming in short bursts, and my heart feels like it is going to leap out of my chest at any moment.

What is going on?

Holy shit, am I dying?
I feel the bed shift, and suddenly, Levi’s hands are wrapping around my shoulders. “Calm down. Deep breaths. Calm down.” His voice sounds foreign in my ears. Is this Levi? Where did all of the underlining sarcasm go? Who is this man, and why is he holding onto my shoulders? For all the good my internal questioning does, Levi’s voice somehow helps my breathing compose itself.

“I… I’m o-okay. I’m okay.” My voice sounds shaky and anything but okay, but Levi takes me at my word and releases his hold on my shoulders. He’s staring at me. Eyes full of uneasiness and guilt. Those fucking eyes. I have to look away, because I can’t accept the fact that he feels this way because of me. Because I can’t keep my emotions under control. I shouldn’t apologize, should I? Fuck whoever decided to cease my social development at grade seven. Fuck you very much. I clench my fists into the sheets, silently wishing that I knew the right things to say. There are words hanging on my lips, struggling to decide if they want to emerge or descend back to where they belong. “Erwin…” Obviously, the name alone is not enough to give Levi any kind of idea to where I am going with this. His head drifts slightly to the side as a look of confusion attaches itself to his face. “Erwin has a plan to overthrow Zackly.”

That look of confusion quickly shifts to something else entirely. Shock. Disbelief. Anger? Out of all things, why is he angry? Is it because Erwin didn’t let him in on the plan? And shit, I don’t even know if I was meant to tell anyone. The man behind the scheme had only made me aware of his coup. So, why did I tell Levi? Well, no, I know why I told him. He’s my friend, right? And this plan, this thing, it scares me. I thought I was brave, that I was strong. But last night showed me that my courage was nothing more than a fucking illusion. That beneath these emerald eyes lies nothing more than a scared, little boy. A fucking child.

I trust Levi that’s why I told him.

“He’s using you.” What? The words coming out of Levi’s mouth don’t quite resonate with me. Why would Erwin be using me? Better yet, how could I be used? I must look highly confused, because an aggravated sigh leaves Levi’s lips as he meets my gaze. “Zackly won’t kill you, you’re too valuable. Erwin has something up his sleeve, and you are going to be at the front and center of it.” Shit, I know I am the main piece in this mysterious plan. Erwin told me that himself, but the way Levi is acting makes me question if I really want to go through with it.

“I won’t let him risk your life for a fucking pipe dream.” His words make me choke on my breath. It’s like Levi is already ten steps ahead of me in figuring out this plan. Erwin wouldn’t sacrifice me… would he? Shit. I think it’s official: I hate the little voice in my mind. Nothing can ever be simple, can it? It refuses to be black and white, instead opting to become a fucking rainbow of problems and questions.

What happened to my first instinct? When did my thought process become a game of twenty questions? I push every doubt I have aside, and decide to just focus on Levi’s reaction. That’s a big fucking mistake, because, if anything, his face seems certain that this scheme is going to end in nothing but my death.

Fuck.

“I think it’s time we go see Erwin.”

---

The citizens don’t seem surprised to see me back at the clinic so early. However, my extra companion does seem to earn me a few disgruntled looks. Well, fuck all of you. These were the people who looked on carelessly as a woman was eaten alive. They listened to her screams like the
wails were a fucking symphony. They watched as Levi pulled me away. They knew what I was trying to do, and they just watched me struggle. Fuck these people. *Monsters.*

I march up to the front desk with Levi in tow. I’m not sure who should do the talking. Either way, it’s a guarantee that the words are not going to be very eloquent. My hands grasp onto the white counter as I begin, “We’re here to see Erwin.” The woman behind the desk begins to open her mouth when Levi interrupts her.

“And we don’t give two shits if he’s not taking visitors. We are going to see him, conscious or not.” I give Levi a look of incredulity, because I am almost certain he could have worded that better.

The woman sighs heavily, obviously not wanting to deal with our imperativeness. “First hall on the left, Room 37.” We take off as soon as we hear the numbers emit from her mouth. The walls are a blur of white as we rush to Erwin’s room. A sudden bout of anxiety hits me in the gut as we close in on the door. What if what Levi said was true? What if I am nothing more to Erwin than a piece in his chess game? I want to doubt these apprehensions, but something is prodding at me. Telling me they are true.

We don’t bother knocking as Levi throws the door open. *Elegance at its finest.* Erwin is sitting straight up in his hospital bed, looking messy and unclean. His face is covered in unshaven stubble, and his usually pristine hair looks disheveled and chaotic. My eyes drift from his visage to the white bandage wrapped tightly around his nub. *Shit.* The invisible appendage fits his shambolic appearance, accentuating the scrappy look. I suddenly regret coming here. I know I need answers, but looking at Erwin in this state seems… *wrong.* Almost unholy. Would it have ever seemed right, though? Whether I waited for his release or not, that missing limb would have not just randomly reappeared. So much for taking this thing in strides.

“Erwin,” Levi’s voice sounds tense. Pair that with the look in his eye, and I would guess that he isn’t far from trying to strangle the injured man. “I am going to give you thirty seconds to tell me why risking the brat’s life is a good idea.” Erwin doesn’t look surprised at Levi’s statement. If anything, he looks like he knew this was coming. That I would spill information over to Levi. A pang of anger erupts in my chest, and I’m confused. Why am I mad? Oh, *right.* Erwin knew I would break my silence about the plan. I’m a traitor in Erwin’s eyes. But shit, I never promised to keep this whole thing a secret. I feel a pair of ceruleans staring me down. I meet his gaze, and shit, there is not an inkling of betrayal lacing his glare. He doesn’t think I deceived him; he knew I would tell Levi. This was part of his plan, the calculating bastard.

*But why?*

Why does Erwin want him in on this coup? *Shit.* Levi’s the ace in the hole, isn’t he? The lone ranger. The impassive introvert. The wild stallion. If Erwin needs anyone on his side, it’s Levi. I’m starting to think that Erwin really would not have had to go through all this in order to convince the man when I remember.

*Shit.*

*The order of things.* We are on the straight and narrow, right, Levi? *Straight and narrow. No fuckups.* I’m next. ‘If I act out of line again, he’s going after you.’ Fucking hell, Erwin knows that Levi will not risk me. That’s why he meant for me to tell him. Because Levi won’t let me get hurt. He will break that promise of obedience if it means we live another day.

Erwin chuckles as he starts, “You act like I’m signing the execution order.” The word ‘execution’ sends a shiver up my spine. “Think about it, Levi.”
It takes a moment, but the pieces finally seem to fit together for the stone faced man. He releases an enlightened gasp before narrowing his eyes into deadly slits at Erwin. “No. Fuck you, Erwin. No.” Do they not realize I am in the room? This reminds me of the times when I had to sit in the principal’s office with my mother. The topic would always be centered on me, but I was never offered a chance to speak my peace. The more I think about it, the angrier it makes me. I can make my own decisions, dammit.

“Levi, you may think these people blindly follow Zackly. But how do you think they will feel when the man starts to risk humanity’s one chance at freedom from this hell?” I’m so confused, and the fact that I am being blatantly ignored is not helping.

Finally, something inside of me ticks and the words I have been suppressing come to the surface. “I am right here, dammit! What the fuck are you talking about?” Levi flinches at my outburst, hands balling up into fists at his sides. A thick blanket woven full of tension has draped itself over the room. It’s like no one wants to be the one to explain the situation to me. What are they so scared of? I hate this. This uneasy apprehension. The feeling that everyone around you doesn’t trust your reactions. Tell me, Erwin. Tell me, Levi. Help me understand why I am so important.

Erwin clears his throat, ripping a hole in the uncomfortable silence. “We need Zackly to show the people the monster he is. If… if he hurts you, then it will prove that he is willing to sacrifice humanity’s last hope in order to keep his power.” Hurts me? Fuck, this is why Levi vehemently denied Erwin the rights to go forward with the plan. He’s protecting me. But I don’t need his protection right now. I trust Erwin. I trust Erwin. I trust Erwin. If my pain results in Zackly’s downfall then so be it.

“All right.”

“No!” Levi looks frantic; like that word was the last thing he expected me to say. “I’m not letting him do this to you.” He gestures to his face, the bruises still marring the once perfect complexion.

His overprotectiveness makes me unsure of my decision. Wait. No, no more second guessing. I know what I have to do, and my fucked up subconscious is not going to talk me out of it. The voice that pours from my lips sounds angry as it echoes in the small room. “This isn’t your choice to make! It’s mine! And I said I’m doing it!” He looks… hurt. Like he did when he was telling me the story about Isabel and Farlan. He thinks he is going to lose me. I want to promise him that I will be okay, but can I really give him that assurance? No, I can’t. Nothing is written in stone anymore; I am pretty sure nothing ever was.

“Zackly told me that it’s happening today.” My breath freezes in my lungs as I glance over to Erwin. “Your punishment for speaking out yesterday. He wants to make an example of you. He asked me if it should be public, and I couldn’t help but jump on the opportunity for the citizens to see the monster Zackly is trying to hide.”

It’s funny how people can act like they are so prepared for anything the world throws at them. Like they can take it all on with their hands behind their backs. But then the time comes to put up or shut up, and suddenly everyone is silent. I thought I could face whatever Stohess could throw at me, but as I take in Levi’s face a familiar feeling of doubt spreads throughout my body. Those bruises are going to be marking me next, aren’t they? Soon, I am going to be the one sporting this look, via Zackly’s rage.

“And what happens if your plan doesn’t work, Erwin? We just wash our hands of the brat? Let him die?” Levi’s becoming more and more agitated with every word that slips through his lips. If I change my mind, he would be at peace. But how long would that tranquility last? How long until Zackly’s hands are around my neck, Levi’s neck? I have to do this, even if he doesn’t understand.
“If the plan fails, then we get Eren out. Mike knows how to work the gates. I will be leaving the clinic within the hour, so Hanji and Mike will know about the plan before Eren is taken away.”

Taken away? My hands start to tremble as I think of being dragged away to certain pain and punishment. I’m okay, I’m okay. Control. I need control. Breathe. I need to breathe. I… A cold hand slowly steadies my own. My eyes trace up the arm attached to the hand holding mine only to meet Levi’s hooded gaze. He offers a small squeeze to my limp hand as I look at him curiously. I can tell there are so many things he wants to say to try and convince me to throw away this plight, but he knows I am stubborn. That I will not relent.

“And, Levi?” Both of our heads turn to face Erwin. “Whatever happens, listen to Zackly.” He nods in acknowledgement. Erwin’s demand makes sense. If Levi were to come to my aid prematurely, it could blow this entire scheme out of the water.

The cold hand is still holding onto mine with a superhuman grip. I curl my fingers around his hand, trying to assure him that I’ll be okay. I’ll be okay. Slowly, five little appendages begin to maneuver their way in between my fingers. They prod for entrance first, like they are scared I will reject them. But they should know that there is no other place I would want them. They fit. They feel right. A strange sensation that feels a bit like nausea worms its way into my gut. It isn’t the apprehension of Zackly’s punishment that’s making me feel this way, is it? I look at our intertwined fingers, and the feeling plows harder into my chest. Yeah, it’s definitely not Zackly.

Erwin’s voice breaks me out of my daze. “You’ll be fine, Eren. I promise.”

Fine.

---

I’m sitting in my room when they come. Hell, I’m not surprised. I’m expecting it. But, you know, they could have been a little more courteous considering they just busted the lock to my door. Fucking assholes. I wasn’t even going to struggle, but now I’m thinking of showing them a fun time.

There are three of them, all laced with the same semiautomatic. “You could have just knocked.” I feel like being a smartass, and these shitheads weren’t going to stop me. I am facing certain agony, and I am not going to go without a few parting words. Apparently my humor is lost on everyone besides Hanji, because they swiftly march across my room, yanking me up by the upper arms. “Boys, boys, I can walk myself. I promise I’ve been potty trained and everything.” One kick to the back of the knee later, and I am beginning to wonder if ‘smartass’ was really the way to go with these clowns. “Fucking let me go!” I try the Levi approach, but I am obviously as intimidating as a declawed cat.

I swing my legs wildly as they try to escort me through the door way. My foot manages to catch, but it is immediately ripped back. Soon, they have me held at all angles: my feet, my arms; hell, even my fucking torso. I smile internally at the struggle I am managing to put up before I remember why these assholes are manhandling me.

I feel the sun’s rays beat down mercilessly onto my face as I am led outside the Super 8. Where are they taking me? Shit, I know Erwin said this was going to be public, but where could I possibly be punished besides The Hole? I hear the murmur of the crowd, before I am forced through the mob. Several of the citizens sound concerned, not understanding what’s going on.

“Why are they bringing him out here?”
“Is the President mad? He’s our only hope.”

Well, so far, so good. It seems Erwin’s plan is already working its magic, and I haven’t even had to take one swing. Suddenly, I am thrown against something rough. It feels like… wood? What? My hands are being pulled tight around the oak tree as I take in my surroundings. I am face first into the fucking tree that plays house to games like Zombie Piñata. What’s going on? My breathing starts to increase as I feel my arms being stretched even tighter around the large tree. Each of my wrists has been bound in firm rope knots, allowing for the binding to act as impromptu handcuffs. Finally, the men cease their pulling, leaving my hands connected limply at either side of the tree. I can’t break free. I try, but my struggle is useless.

“Citizens of Stohess,” That voice. That fucking voice signifies to me that it’s about to begin. Pain. I can take it. I can take it. “Yesterday was unfortunate. No, it was devastating. How terrible it is when we have been betrayed by one of our own.” I push my forehead into the bark, trying to cancel out Zackly’s deceitful droning. He’s a liar. A fucking liar. “And how shocked do you think I was- no, how shocked were you, to see our dear, Eren, fighting for that traitor’s life?” I am expecting the whispers of correspondence. Of agreement. Instead, I hear murmurs of confusion. It’s working. Erwin, you fucking genius, it’s working.

“Now, my great people, my noble flock, what would you have me do with such a boy?” No one says anything. If I could see their faces, I’m sure the look of confusion would be gracing them all. I close my eyes, ready for this to be over. Ready for us to win. My fingers twist harshly into the rope encircling my wrists. Ready to kill Zackly.

His voice does not even sound panicked as he continues. Does he not realize he’s losing? That soon, the only thing left of ‘President Zackly’ will be a discarded corpse? “Such a boy who associates with murderers.” My eyes fly open. He’s throwing all his cards on the table in the hopes that the citizens will remember their hatred for Levi. Remember that he is not one of them.

They don’t disappoint.

The screams fill my ears, begging for my punishment, begging for me to be taught a lesson. I feel my shirt being lifted, and the cool touch of a knife being driven through the fabric, leaving my back completely exposed to the chill of the autumn air. Fuck, fuck, fuck. I need to calm down. I was prepared for this. I am prepared for this. They’ll see; they will realize what a monster Zackly is as soon as he lays the first punch.

“I see, I see.” His voice is growing louder and louder. I can only assume that he is walking closer to me; and when I feel a wrinkled hand upon my bare shoulder blades, it confirms my assumptions. “My good little boy. He’s not been very good, has he?” I feel sick as he brings the pads of his fingers across my skin. They are rough, calloused; and I can’t help but feel violated and exposed in front of the citizens of Stohess. Any minute now. Any minute, Eren. They’ll realize.

Suddenly, his fingers are lifted from my body and are replaced with something coarser. Leather. A whip. He brings the weapon across my back in a revolting caress, tempting me with what is about to come. “Now, I think dear Eren needs to be punished. Don’t you?” They go wild, cheering, no demanding for my suffering. “But, unfortunately, I don’t think that little Eren is going to learn his lesson.” What? The whip is lifted off of my skin, and Zackly disappears from my side. The anticipation is killing me. I just… I just want this to be over. I start to lean back into the tree when a familiar voice draws my attention back to the side.

No.

“I think that if I was the one who delivered the punishment, it would go to waste. Now, if our dear,
Levi, hands out the sentence; I think Eren will do more than just learn from this. He will realize who
his real family is, and that people like Levi are not a part of it.” *No, no, no.* I am struggling openly
against my bonds now. Please, please stop this. The whip is being pushed into Levi’s trembling
hands, a look of pure horror plastered on his face. *Whatever happens, listen to Zackly.* Erwin knew
this was going to happen. Erwin fucking knew.

I turn my head back into the tree trunk. I can’t look at his face. That fucking face full of regret. He
has to do it. He has to. *Levi, make them see. Make them realize.* I am bracing myself for the first hit,
but it still hasn’t come. Can he do it, can he? I want to be mad at him for disobeying Erwin, but
could I do it if I was in his shoes? Could I bring that whip of injustice down upon his back?

No.

The sound of a gun hammer being pulled back permeates my day dreaming; and suddenly, the cold
metal of a gun barrel is being pressed into the back of my skull. “If you don’t lift that fucking whip
and punish him right now, I will blow his fucking brains out.” *Fuck, Levi, please.* I am begging him
not to be a coward, even though ‘coward’ isn’t quite the word I’m looking for. *Brave,* that’s it. To be
brave. Be brave for me, Levi.

“Three.”

*Please, Levi.*

“Two.”

*Be strong.*

“One.”

And for the first time, Levi apologizes.

“I’m sorry.”

The first crack of the whip against my back stings like a pain I can’t describe. Numbness and then
burning. *Fire.* I don’t cry out, not wanting to give Zackly the satisfaction of hearing my screams.
This angers him. “If you don’t whip him correctly, I will do it my goddamn self. I’ll kill him.
Understood?”

I can tell Levi is contemplating if he really wants to do this. *If he really wants to cause me this
pain.* But he doesn’t have a choice, does he? This prospect of power has been thrust down upon him
from the sick bastard, and now he must use it. Use this power against me. *Hurt me.*

If the first lash was fire, the next is an inferno. I can’t control the wail that leaps from my mouth as
the whip mutilates my skin. All his anger, all his pain is channeling into these swings. I can’t blame
him. I forced this on him, this companionship. It’s my fault.

I feel the sweat dripping off my back as the weapon is brought down another time. Or is that blood?
The rusty smell fills my nostrils, and I am positive that the color red is running down my spine. My
back must look filleted with all the markings. Like a fucking fish at market. I fist my hands into the
ropes, looking for some kind of distraction from this pain. I think about riding the trolley downtown
with Mikasa and Armin, of the times my mom would bake me cookies to wake me up, of Levi’s
laugh, of how his hand felt in mine.

It’s no use. No memory I conjure up is enough to draw my mind away from the fact that the whip is
digging yet another bloody scratch across my back.
I’m crying now, pride be damned. Begging him to cease fire. Pleading with him. "Please, no more." I need to control myself, because I know he can’t stop. He has to listen to Zackly. The plan. Erwin. But I cannot help myself. The words just continue to spew out, praying for some sort of mercy. Every word I say makes him hesitate until the familiar sting once again ignites my skin. I’m killing him with my screams, with my requests. This is hurting him just as much, if not more, as it is me.

I hear the whip whirl through the air as it brings itself down yet again.

"Fu...ck!" I choke out through the tears as I twist my back, trying to somehow further myself from the whip.

“This is what you wanted, Eren.” I hear Zackly’s voice radiate through my skull. His words a piercing solvent to the wounds swelling up on my skin. Just one more hit, Eren. One more and they’ll see. One more.

One more.

Searing pain.

One more.

My legs give out from underneath me.

One more.

A gunshot sounds in the distance, and I hear Zackly cry out in pain. Chaos. Everyone’s screaming, but I could care less. All that matters to me is that the pain has stopped. I feel someone pulling at my confines, and I open my eyes to see Levi hastily cutting through the ropes. He looks mortified, like he did when he shot Jurgen. It’s not your fault. Finally, the ropes fall, and an arm is pulling me off the ground. I see his mouth moving, but the words do not reach my ears. The growls are the only thing audible to me.

Just as Erwin said, the gates have been opened. But that means it failed. The plan failed. These people would have seen me beaten within an inch of my life just because Zackly gave the order. Monsters. There are not many walkers entering Stohess, but enough to cause panic within the walls. Some are already feasting on the civilians unlucky enough to get in their way. Good. Let them feel pain. Let them feel something besides this sickening accession. We are almost at the gates. I can see Hanji, Mike, and Erwin waving us on from outside the barrier.

Freedom.

Suddenly, I am pulled from Levi’s grasp. There are dozens of hands on me, dragging me further away from the door. Levi turns around, trying to piece together why I am not at his side when he sees me. I stretch out a hand, reaching for him. A last hope.

Don’t leave me.

I start to experience one of those moments where everything slows down, but even with the change of pace you are never fast enough to fix anything. It’s like a sick joke. You get to watch your life slowly slip from your hands as you realize there is nothing you can do. Nothing but allow it to happen. He makes to run back for me, even though my rescue is close to impossible. Erwin and Mike grab ahold of him and pull him back just as the gates begin to close.

Don’t leave me.
His hand is outstretched towards me in some vain attempt to liberate me from my captors. Hoping that maybe we will be able to reach each other. Recreate the feeling we shared in the clinic. *It felt right.* The last thing I see before the gates shut is his face, full of fear. Full of knowing. I hear my name leave his lips one last time.

*Don’t leave me, Levi.*

Suddenly, darkness.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the wait! I literally had little to none inspiration to finish this chapter :/ So, I got stuck for about a day or so. But I finished! Also, I will probably not be able to update as frequently (daily), because of summer jobs and such. Anyway, I hope you all enjoyed the chapter! I love angst, and I'm sorry if this story is filled with too much of it.

As always, thank you guys for the comments/kudos! You all make my day when I read them (:

Tumblr:
fuzzyporcupine.tumblr.com

I'm tracking the tag 'fic: what's eating you'. Holla.

If you spot any grammar mistakes, let me know!

FANMIX
ALL FANART
My wrists and ankles feel raw from the tug of the bindings that have been securing me to the cold, metal table. I don’t know how long I’ve been awake, given that Erwin’s watch is nowhere to be found. Hell, I could not see the damn thing even if it was still on my person. All that fills my vision is black. *Darkness.* The dark has never scared me, but being completely surrounded in it for unknown amounts of time has definitely unearthed a new fear. The blackness in the room is so consuming that my eyesight refuses to adjust, leaving me to only guess what awaits me in the shadows.

*Is this what true fear feels like?*

*Is this what Hannes told me didn’t exist?*

That fucking liar. I am not sure if he was trying to protect me or his ego, probably the latter. He always acted like he was invincible, immune to anything that would dirty up his pride. God, Hannes was an idiot. Sometimes, I miss him; but then I remember that he left Mikasa, Armin, and me in a closet while he got shot up in some trade deal for whiskey gone wrong. *Fucking bandits.*

The darkness has begun to slowly suffocate me, making me feel like this room is steadily shrinking. *Is it shrinking? Have I finally lost it?* I need to remind myself to tell Hanji that her club just added a new member. *Hanji. Mike. Erwin. Levi.* I wonder where they are. Hopefully, somewhere very far from here. Somewhere safe.

I try to tug on the ropes one last time in some last ditch effort that maybe the bindings will have somehow loosened in the past five minutes. The only thing this succeeds in doing is rubbing my already raw appendages into a deeper burning. *Fuck.* You really did it this time, Jaeger.

I wonder if Erwin’s outfit is worried about me. *Well, that is a stupid question; of course they are worried.* I think about the others, but it really only comes down to him, doesn’t it? *Levi.* A part of me wants him to rush in and save me, dragging me off into the sunset on a white steed. But the other half wants him to forget me. Forget I existed. That would be for the best, wouldn’t it? For him to erase any memory I might hold in his mind. It would be greedy of me to want it any other way. I’ve been selfish enough, haven’t I?

*Forget me, Levi.*

I should take my own advice. Try to expunge any image of the stone faced man from my thoughts. But I can’t. In the darkness, the only thing I see is his face. Those grey eyes, so full of emotion and need. Those battered cheeks, marked with oppression and persecution. Those thin lips, ready to unleash spite and scorn. My friend, Levi. My friend. *Friend.*

I’m going to die here, that much I am sure. It’s been made obvious to me that Zackly cares little about my life. My poor, pathetic excuse for an existence. What good has Eren Jaeger done? I chuckle internally, even though the answer is hardly funny. *Nothing.* I’ve done nothing positive. Mikasa always had to save me on supply runs. Armin had to talk me out of my stupid ideas. Levi… Levi… He suffered the most from my actions, didn’t he? *He lost me.* I’m so stupid, so fucking stupid. I silently promise to Mr. Higher Power that if I somehow make it out of this, I will be less stubborn. I know he is probably up in the clouds laughing at me, calling my bluff.
I feel the warmth on my cheeks, and... wait. I thought I was done crying. I thought the last of my tears flew away along with that whip. Is this my acceptance?

Acceptance.

The blackness begins to blur as the tears cascade down my face. I’m back at stage one, huh? I guess that whole acceptance shit with Mr. Peanut Butter was a fraud. *I knew I couldn’t trust that sonofabitch.* This. *This is the real acceptance.* Because I am going to die.

Alone.

Scared.

In the dark.

*Scratch that.*

*In the light.*

*I will die under the warmth of a fluorescent bulb.*

It burns my eyes as its rays filter into the room, its fierce roar scaring off the shadows. My vision is still blurred from the tears that I cannot wipe from my sight. I expect a voice, a sign that someone is in here with me. Obviously, I haven’t earned this right. Whoever is keeping me company is content on staying as silent as the grave. I feel uncomfortable, exposed. This must be some new form of torture, driving your victims insane with earsplitting silence.

Finally, the sound of footsteps penetrates my eardrums. Closer. Closer. They stop. I turn my head towards the suppressed noise when a pair of hands grabs ahold of my head and forces me to look upwards. I’m panicking. *When were there two people in here? Has one of them been watching me this entire time?* My chest is beginning to feel similar to when Levi reminded me of the woman’s execution. Except he’s not here to calm me down this time.

A hand grabs onto my arm, and I swear I am going to die. I can’t breathe. My heart. My fucking heart is running the Steeplechase. I try to picture Levi’s hands on my shoulders, his voice in my ears instead of my own panicked breathing. *‘Calm down. Deep breaths. Calm-’* A sharp prick in my arm shatters the image I have conjured. *A needle?* I try to jerk my arm away, but that only manages to force the object deep into my muscle.

God, it hurts. Not like the agony of the lashes, but it’s still pain nonetheless. “Stop! Fucking let me go!”

Suddenly, the hands are lifted from my head; and I hear what sounds like fabric being shifted. Before I can put together what is happening, a piece of cloth is being forced against my lips. *No, fuck you.* I refuse to let these assholes gag me. If anything, they should have to be haunted by my screams. *My useless cries for help.* A pair of large fingers reaches up and begins to pinch my nostrils closed, depriving me of oxygen. I swing my head back and forth like a fucking pendulum, frantically trying to throw the offending fingers off my face. White spots begin to speckle my vision, and I decide that passing out will probably not bode well for me.

So, it opens.

I take in a huge gasp of air, trying to hurriedly fill my lungs before the gag is shoved in. The asshole releases my nose and grabs either side of my chin, forcing my mouth open. The fabric tastes moldy against my taste buds, like it has been stored in a musty cellar with the fine wines. It’s sickening, and
I immediately go to spit it back out; but a calloused hand quickly covers my mouth. The sound of tape being ripped fills my ears, and it re-induces my panic at an alarming rate. My legs buck, trying desperately to free themselves. To somehow escape these oppressing bonds.

*Please, someone.*

The skin on my cheeks pulls tightly as the tape is administered, forcing the cloth gag further down my throat. The hands are back on my head, forcing me to study the light swinging violently above me. Back and forth. Back and forth. It would almost be calming if it wasn’t for the brute stabbing the needle aimlessly into my appendage, trying to rediscover the lost vein within my arm. Back and forth. Back and forth. It lulls me into a rhythm, and I find myself counting the times the light sways over my head. Ten. Seventeen. Forty-two.

Finally, the hands are removed from my head and arm. All my former curiosity about my captors has vanished into the sway of the fixture above me. I stare at it, motionless, as the footsteps begin to distance themselves from my ears. *Broken.*

*You scared little boy. Eren, I thought you were better than this. Stronger than this.*

I was.

As the door opens and closes; the light goes out, and I am once again surrounded in darkness.

*But not anymore.*

---

Why am I still alive? How long have I been here? How am I going to die? These questions haunt me in the darkness. No one has returned since the two assholes impaled me with a needle. The gag has turned sour in my mouth, making me wretch every the time it passes across my tongue. I gave up hoping for a rescue a long time ago. I honestly don’t think I deserve one. *Don’t want one.* All of this is my fault. I was so weak, and now, I am being punished for it. I should have taken heed to Mike’s warning. I should have told Levi that I was scared for his life. I should… shit. My life is just a bunch of should have could haves, isn’t it? A joke. A fucking joke.

A sharp creak of the door pulls me out of my self-loathing. The light is flicked on once again, illuminating the dark room.

“Eren,” That voice. *No. He can’t… I heard his cries. “you’ve been a very, very bad boy.”* I lift my head, eyes still adjusting to the light. *He’s there.* Zackly is standing at the end of the table, arm draped in a cloth sling. I subconsciously attempt to shimmy my body further away from him; but this is useless, and it only reminds me of the deep lacerations plaguing my back. “You disappointed me, Eren.” If the gag was not currently halfway down my throat, I would tell him to take his unjustified disappointment and shove it straight up his archaic ass. “I had such high hopes for you. It really is a pity things have come down to this.” *Fuck you. Fuck you, Zackly.* If there is a hell, I am positive this man is going to rot in it. Right along with telemarketers and those douche bags that wear fedoras.

The man walks over to me, smirking as he saunters near. He glances at the tape covering my mouth, and begins to run his fingers soothingly over the material. What a sight I must be, nothing but bright sea fire eyes lighting up my appearance. *That’s right.* Levi’s nickname for me plays in my head, *Bright Eyes.* I can’t give up. I… I refuse. And just like that a wildfire full of vigor and spunk radiates through my body. God, I need to stop with the fucking mental whiplash. I need to realize that failure is not an option. *Never again.*
Zackly unceremoniously rips the tape from my mouth, causing a sharp sting to pulse across my face. *Yeah, fuck you.* With all the strength I have left, I spit the rancid ball of fabric into Zackly’s face. It makes a sickening sound as it collides with his cheek, leaving a damp spot of saliva in its wake. He is enraged; and even in the dim light, I can see his eyes burning with fury.

His voice sounds shaky when it hits my ears, trying so hard not to explode. “I was going to do this the easy way. I just needed a few answers, which I am sure you would have been happy to provide me.” His left hand suddenly extends outwards and clamps around my throat. *Fuck, I’m going to die, aren’t I?* His grip continues to tighten until I am sure that his thumb is going to snap my trachea in two. When he goes to speak again, his words are no longer concealed with a false sense of security. The full unabashed anger of Zackly surges from the lines. “But you want to play, Eren? We will fucking play.” He turns to the open doorway as he releases my throat, “Bring me my knife.”

Shit, shit, shit.

I start to pull against the bonds, because fuck reality. It’s obvious that these ropes aren’t going to snap under my pressure, so there is really no use, right? *No. Fight. I have to fight.* I keep struggling, ignoring the searing pain of my raw appendages. *Fight, Eren.* If I was just a little stronger. *Fight, goddammit!* The sharp pain of the knife slicing across my arm brings my resistance to a sudden standstill. I hiss in discomfort as the metallic gleam, laced with a strip of red, is waved in front of my face.

“See, this is what happens when you are a bad boy, Eren. Bad boys get punished.” He draws another line, this time across my bare chest. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.* “Now, you are going to answer a few questions for me.” *I hate him. I hate every single thing about this man.* I am silently praying for some kind of godsend, a miracle. But it’s not coming, is it? I’ve used all of my nine lives, and I am going to have to get out of this all on my own.

“Fuck you.” My face is jarred to the side by an abrasive slap. *Well, you are off to an utterly fantastic start, Eren.*

Zackly chuckles darkly as he begins, “You’ve been hanging around that fucking killer for too long. He’s rubbed off on you.” Something about his insult against Levi sets off something deep within me. Something that hasn’t been ignited since my days spent on the run with Mikasa and Armin.

“Levi has nothing to do with this, you sick fuck!” I am animalistic in the way I want to tear into Zackly. *How dare he?* How dare he tarnish something that does not even exist anymore? Our friendship is gone. Shut down along with the goddamn gates to this hellhole. It’s like he is spitting on our grave. A final reminder of who has won.

“I think we will start with Erwin. He’ll no doubt refuse to give us a good show. But Levi…” My eyes widen at the mention of his name. “Levi… we’ll save him for last. Make it slow. Make you look into his eyes as he dies.”

My breath hitches as I think of Levi’s life seeping from that brilliant, charcoal stare. His hand reaches out to me like it did at the gates; except this time, he is the one begging me to save him. To end this torment. *But I can’t.* I’m being forced to watch him call out for me, my name a dying cry on his lips. *Eren, save me! Eren, help me!* I can’t even reach out a hand to him, as mine are still bound to this
goddamn table. It’s a dream. It’s a fucking dream. This bastard has gotten in my head. He doesn’t need the knife to deal the wounds; my mind is doing a decent enough job on its own of making me suffer.

I open my mouth, anger pouring out like smoke from an exhaust pipe. “I don’t know where they are.” It’s the truth, and I am silently praying Zackly sees that.

_I really didn’t ask for much, Mr. Higher Power._

The pain doesn’t hit me at first; it’s almost like I am too shocked that Zackly actually did it. _I shouldn’t be, though. This man feeds people to zombies._ I look at the knife currently driving through the palm of my left hand as the pain finally shoots through me.

“Fuck! Motherfucker!” Tears aren’t even producing themselves, it’s like my body is ceasing all functions in order to focus on my impaled hand. Zackly grabs the handle, and shakes it. _Oh, I am going to fucking enjoy killing you when I get out of this._ “Ah! Fu…ck! Shit! Stop! Fucking… I don’t know!” What does he want from me? I’m being honest; I can’t just pull their location out of my ass. And, shit, even if I could would I really give over the information? _No._

_So, stay strong, Eren._

_Stay strong for them._

He grabs my chin, tilting my head up to meet his malicious glare. “I’m going to ask one more time, Eren. I know this was planned, so there is no sense in hiding the information from me. If you’re good I might just be tempted to let Levi meet his end by my bullet, instead.” _Zackly, you manipulative sonofabitch._ I know he is lying. He thinks he is so sneaky, holding Levi’s fate over my head like some I’m some dog waiting on a treat. Well, I am not biting, asshole. Even if I told him, even if I knew, it is a guarantee that he will go back on his word. He wouldn’t let that opportunity go to waste. _To teach me a lesson. To turn me into the perfect civilian._ Fuck you, Zackly.

I shake my chin out of his grip. “I don’t know! That’s the truth!” I didn’t know it was possible for Zackly’s gaze to darken any further. _He doesn’t believe me. He doesn’t believe me._ I want to say something else, profess my innocence. But will that honestly work on him? That woman fucking begged and pleaded until the very end, yet everyone turned a blind eye. There is nothing I can do to convince him; I’ve made my bed with this monster. Now, he is going to make me sleep in it.

Zackly abruptly pulls the knife out of my hand, causing me to curse in surprise. Then, he leaves my side, heading straight out the door. _What?_ I don’t want to sound ungrateful, but where is the bastard going? The door is still standing wide open, so I can only imagine he will be back soon.

_Fuck._

Minutes pass in this anxious silence, and I’m starting to think that _maybe_ he really did leave. But shit, that is a far cry and I probably shouldn’t get my hopes up. The silence sets the scene for my unwanted thoughts to come purging forth. Thoughts that I assumed where long gone, the notions violating my mind with their grisly images. I see their bodies all scattered and dismembered. And, fuck, I would give anything to know that my friends are safe, Mikasa and Armin included. Just one notification that they were okay. _Something._ I want to apologize to them for leaving, but there is no one in here to hear me. No one to relay my message. This weight of smothering guilt crushes me with its accusations of abandonment. _But I didn’t abandon them._ I… didn’t abandon them, did I? _No, stop._ Get the fuck out of my head. These thoughts. Leave me alone. These allegations. _I just want

A growl.

What, no.

No, please not like this.

Not strapped to a fucking table defenseless as the day I was born.

The emerald eyes plastered on my face expand as I take in the sight. A walker is standing in the doorway, arms long gone, but teeth still proudly brandishing themselves. It’s being led by a stiff metal pole encircling its neck. Being led to me. No, no, no. Again, I try but fail to release myself from the bindings. Shouldn’t my adrenaline have kicked in by now? Why am I not green, angry, and ten feet tall? *Great, you are cracking jokes before certain death. Way to go, Eren.* Fucking subconscious.

At the end of the pole is Zackly, a fitting master to such a mangled slave. The biter is meeting my horrified gaze, a look of pure hunger swimming in its dull eyes. “Eren, I would like to introduce you to Big Brother. He’s quite a character, though still not suitable for parties.” *What the fuck? Is this part of The Family? The fucking zombies?* Stohess has given me reason after reason to believe that it is fucked beyond belief, but this. This is the icing on the deranged cake this fucking chasm of misery has been trying to force feed me.

The walker is clacking its teeth together over and over, a sickening symphony of death. Zackly chuckles, “I think someone is hungry.” I can’t even scream, can’t even yell. I’m so shocked, so scared. My end is going to be under the hands of a limbless zombie controlled by its demented puppet master. *No, no it can’t end this way. Erwin… Erwin, he said Zackly wouldn’t kill me. Zackly won’t kill me. He won’t kill me.*

“Let’s test out that immunity of yours, eh?”

*Pain.*

*Scalding fucking pain.*

Suddenly, every sound seems magnified in my ears, every image detailed and pristine. *There’s that adrenaline I’ve been searching for.* It rolls through my body heightening all of my senses. The pain is numbed; the only thing I feel is anger, rage. I am an animal with the way my eyes are now oozing a feral alertness. *I want to rip his fucking throat out. I want to kill him.*

*Kill.*

My bindings suddenly feel breakable, like they were made of paper this entire time. I yank upwards with my wrist, ignoring the burning. It’s not a factor anymore. *Pain.* That word no longer exists. The only thing I know is anger. Rage. The rope pulls free from the table, allowing me full access of my right hand. I see Zackly standing next to me, jaw dropping and eyes widened.

*This is for Levi, you sonofabitch.*

I curl up my hand into a fist, rearing back to give the bastard the hardest punch I have ever dealt in my life; when a sudden prick at my neck has me feeling woozy. *What?* I look around the room, and see ‘Big Brother’ has long since been escorted out. However, Zackly is still standing beside me with a dumbfound look plastered across his face. My eyelids are threatening to shut. *What’s happening to me?* My fist is still in the air, and fuck if I am going to let it down without connecting it to that old
man’s thick skull. I make to attack, when suddenly, my arm is being pulled back. I’m being pulled back. I want to struggle, but I’m too tired. Like I haven’t slept in ages. Sleep sounds nice. Then, I kill Zackly.

Sounds like a plan.

“Jean, for the last time: I don’t give two shits about you losing your virginity on a fucking Ferris wheel.” I groan in aggravation. Why Armin thought it was a good idea to pair Jean and me up on this supply run is anyone’s guess. The little bastard is probably just trying to encourage our ‘friendship’ as he likes to call it. Hate to break it to you, Armin, but I think you might have it a little twisted.

“You’re just pissed because you’re still a fucking virgin.” Oh, Mr. Higher Power, please give me strength. I am trying to resist the urge to punch Jean in his equine face, but every word spewing from his mouth is pushing me closer to the line of violence. “Shit, Jaeger, you’d think you would have gotten laid by now. I mean, you have Mikasa for Christ’s sake.” Oh my god. I really don’t think Jean understood the concept of ‘covert’ when Armin ran down the objectives for the run.

“She’s my fucking sister, you dickwad.” I always thought the asshole had a thing for Mikasa. That was until I walked in on him and Marco getting hot and heavy in my fucking bedroom. Needless to say, I never threw another party again. “Anyway, her and Armin are pretty much a thing.” It was true, they went everywhere together… which was to say they went everywhere I did. But that’s irrelevant. Point is, they were practically together whether they knew it or not.

Jean chuckles, “Coconuthead is getting more action than you?” Mr. Higher Power, you are doing a shitty job. Christ, it was like Two-Tone wanted me to lose it. I clench my fists as I make to walk ahead of Jean. If I listen to his prodding any longer, I can guarantee it won’t be the zombies that kill him. I hear him laughing behind me, proud that he got a rise out of me. You are so lucky I promised Mikasa I would not maim you, Horseface. He quickly catches up, grabbing my shoulder to give me pause.

“You know I was kidding, right?” What? Jean apologizing? Well, shit, it may have taken a fucking apocalypse; but I am glad I lived to hear those words leave his mouth.

I offer him a small smile, acknowledging that he earned a gold star on my board today. “Yeah, I know. It’s okay.”

He starts laughing, and I already begin to regret my words. “Good, because if you get eaten I didn’t want that on my conscious.” Fuck your gold star, asshole. I am burning it to the ground along with any semblance of a friendship we share. I elbow past him, ready for this run to be over. Ready to fucking murder Jean. “I wonder how everyone else is doing.”

“Oh, I didn’t know animals could talk. Fascinating.” I don’t even care if I am being that lame asshole who never had any good comebacks. I am pissed, and Jean’s face is an easy target.

“Fuck off, Jaeger, I’m being serious.” Serious and Jean didn’t necessarily fit into the same sentence, but I got his point. I was worried, too. So far we had done pretty well as a group, only losing Thomas to the biters. And shit. That hit us hard. It showed us that we couldn’t fuck around when it came to survival. We learned that big groups are a danger. That there is power is small numbers. Hence the reasoning behind why Sasha and Connie were staying back at camp while Mikasa, Armin, Jean, Marco and I went on the run.
“I’m sure they are doing better than us. We haven’t found a fucking thing.” We were exploring an abandoned supermarket, and fuck, you would think it would be easy finding supplies here. But so far Jean and I had only discovered a couple of packs of diapers and a box of condoms. Of course, Jean took the condoms, saying that he would need them. Eugh. I sincerely hoped he was joking, but no, he put the fucking things in his pack.

“We got a pack of rubbers. I’d say that is productive.” Like I said, shitty job, Mr. Higher Power. I pinch the bridge of my nose, trying hard to concentrate on something that isn’t Jean.

Gunshots.

What the fuck?

I exchange a worried look with Jean as we begin to move back towards the rendezvous point. Why would there be gunfire? All the walkers were currently corralled at the entrance, and we cleared the store two hours ago.

As we make it to the front, I see it. No, I hear it. The growls.

They are pouring inside, countless numbers of zombies. The door must have busted open by the sheer force of the walkers. Fuck, fuck, fuck. I begin to panic, forgetting the emergency plan. Shit, do I start firing? Obviously, someone else in the group has. Shit. I begin to unleash bullets, efficiently mowing down a row of biters. But it’s no use. Somehow, the group that was gathered outside when we started this little escapade has doubled, no tripled. “Jean, we have to go. Now.” For once, he doesn’t put up one argument as we begin to backtrack through the store.

The others must be close; they were in a group together, so hopefully no one got separated. Please, please let them be okay. I can’t go through another ‘Thomas’. None of us can.

“Eren! Jean!” Armin’s voice is a fucking godsend. I see his arms waving frantically in the air, trying to desperately draw our attention. Jean and I sprint towards him like he is a fucking beacon of hope. Okay, Armin, we obviously see you. Stop waving your arms. He seems more out of breath then we are as he starts, “Oh… oh my god. I thought… I thought you guys were dead.” I hear the moans drawing closer. Armin, you sonofabitch, I am a hundred percent sure that your yelling just granted the zombies a fucking neon sign indicating our location.

“Well, your premonition is about to come true if we don’t get the fuck out of here.” I grab him by the arm, and begin to drag him in any direction that doesn’t sound like it's home to hoards of zombies ready to feast on our flesh. Shit, I hope Jean gets the idea, because I am not rescuing his dumbass. “Where’s Mikasa and Marco?” When Armin doesn’t answer right away, I know something is wrong. “Armin, where are they?” I can’t stop to question him. I have to keep moving. Keep moving.

“I… we got separated.” I freeze. Mikasa. Marco. I said we couldn’t stop, but here I am, frozen in place. I… what do I do? “We are supposed to meet at the entrance if we get separated.” What the fuck, Armin? Where’s the boy genius I know and love? “It will be clear. The walkers are following us now, remember?” Shit, there he is. Armin, you fucking mastermind. I sprint towards the front, dragging Armin behind me. Please be there. Please. The front end comes into view, and… shit.

The bullets are flying through the air as Mikasa and Marco attempt to fend off a small hoard. They are surrounded, and the walkers are quickly closing in. I pull out my pistol and start firing, not needing to think twice. I have to save them. I have to save them. There are more zombies pouring in from the broken front door, the sound of the chaos luring them inside. I don’t know where to aim. At
the biters surrounding my friends, or at the ones coming towards me?

Fuck, I’ve lived a good life.

I start unloading on the zombies surrounding Mikasa and Marco. They fall one after the other; but for each one that goes down, another two appear. The circle of walkers finally gives way to an opening, and I see a familiar mess of black hair jet out. Red scarf swinging, Mikasa darts to me.

“Eren, what are you doing?” Is she serious right now?

“I’m saving you and Marco, now fucking help me!” The cry. It pierces my ears louder than any walker growl. *Marco, no.* In the midst of my argument, I failed to notice that he ran out of bullets. *I fucking left him defenseless.* “Marco!” I begin to run after him, darting past all the outstretching arms trying to lure me into rows full of teeth. “Marco!” He hasn’t responded, and I am beginning to panic. I hear Mikasa calling my name in a desperate attempt to rein me back to her. *No, I have to save him. I have to fucking save him.*

I’m too late.

They are piled on top of him, soaking their hands in his freshly strewn innards. *Marco.* I feel numb as I raise my gun. I hear nothing but the echo of my own thoughts. *You let him die. You fucking coward. You can’t save anyone but yourself.* I pull the trigger over and over until only a few biters are left munching on Marco’s corpse. I feel… pain?

What?

No.

No, no, no, no!

I rip myself away from the cause of my discomfort. Looking to my right, I see an indentation of teeth marring my right forearm along with the fucking walker that put it there. *Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck.* I wasn’t paying attention when I hurled myself into the gauntlet, and now I am paying the price. Pulling back on my trigger, I put a bullet in the zombie’s head before it can do any more harm. The moans fill my ears, and I notice that I am surrounded. *I’m going to die aren’t I?*

“EREN!” I hear Mikasa’s voice ring out across the supermarket. They are dragging her away. They saw me get bit. They think I’m dead. *Fuck.* The walkers are backing me slowly into Marco’s mangled body, and suddenly, an idea comes over me. A *disgusting idea, but shit, it’s worth a try.* I grab one of Marco’s dismembered limbs and toss it away from the entrance, hoping the dumbasses will take the bait. The limb hits the ground with a sickening smack, and the sound automatically draws the zombies’ attention. Soon, almost all of them are chowing down on the piece of Marco.

*Oh my fuck, it actually worked.*

I start running towards the entrance, turning around briefly to see if the gang is still here. *Gone. They left me.* They seized the opportunity to escape amongst chaos. Smart. Armin’s plan probably.

There are more walkers outside the supermarket, maybe more than the number that plowed inside the building. Hundreds. Shit, I have no idea where they came from; but they are blocking the way back to camp. *Fuck.* I have no choice, do I?

I run in the opposite direction, towards the woods and away from the walkers. Away from my friends. My family. With each step I take, I am further condoning myself to the suffering of dying alone. I mean, I know it’s going to happen. I got bit.
Fuck, I got bit.

I got bit.

Tears begin to burn the backs of my eyes as I run towards the forest. I can’t cry; I have to be strong. But, shit, what for? I’m going to die, and I am going to come back as one of those things. There’s nothing to be strong for anymore. Should I have just confined myself to death in the supermarket? At least then I would not have to wait. But I have my gun. I can put a bullet in my head and end this whole charade.

When I find shelter, I’ll do it. Give myself a decent burial ground. I’ll kill myself. I feel the rain begin to hit my forehead, and I can’t help but find it fitting. I lift my middle finger to the sky. Fuck you, Mr. Higher Power.

You fucking killed me.

The feeling of someone shaking me brings me out of my dream. Shit. My body is throbbing, and the fucking ropes I feel circling my appendages aren’t helping. Wait. I thought I broke free. I… I was going to kill Zackly, wasn’t I? Why didn’t I? Wh-

“Good, you’re up.” My eyes fly open to be greeted with Zackly’s smug visage. Fuck. “You are quite the fighter, aren’t you, Eren? Broke right through the rope.” His voice is laced with some sickeningly sweet overtone. I don’t know why he is playing this game with me. He knows that his farce doesn’t fool me. “We had to give you a sedative; so if you feel a bit drowsy, it should wear off soon.” That’s why I didn’t kill him. Because they fucking put me to sleep.

“Now, I think you were just about to-“ A large boom interrupts Zackly’s inquiry. The room shakes from the after blast, pieces of dirt falling off the ceiling onto the floor below. What the hell? What could have caused that tremor? Whatever it is, it's big that's for sure. Zackly looks just as confused as I do, though his face is quickly morphing into anger.

Suddenly, he is grabbing my chin, the former façade dropped. “What did you do? What the fuck did you do?” Zackly is screaming, voice full of… fear? What? What could possibly have this man so scared? I know it can’t be me; I am fucking bound like a pig on a spit.

A man abruptly sticks his head into the room, face covered in terror. “President Zackly, we’ve been attacked.”

“What?” The bastard seems shocked, like the words are playing a cruel trick on his mind.

“It's Erwin, sir. He has a tank. They have a fucking tank.”

Erwin Smith, you fucking genius.

Chapter End Notes

First:
MORE FUCKING FANART!!! JESUS YOU PEOPLE ARE AWESOME! I'm posting the link below to go smother it with your love :3
Second:
Holla for the reveal of Eren's bite. Yeah, sorry if there wasn't a lot of dialogue. I tried not to overkill the angst in this chapter, because that last one... goddamn. But, anyways, I hope this sort of brings some of the past plot points together. And if you have any questions, I will be more than happy to answer them. Some of you guys have been shooting me comments on Tumblr, and if you would rather ask on there it's totally fine, too. I hope you guys enjoyed, and like I said I may not be able to update as quickly in the future (just for further reference).

Thanks again for all the kudos/comments. Seriously. Day = Made when I read what you guys think of the story.

Tumblr:
fuzzyporcupine.tumblr.com

Also, I am tracking 'fic: what's eating you' BUT that tag doesn't like to show me the updated posts on my mobile. so if you want to also tag my username (thespazzbot or fuzzyporporcupine) that would really help me find your posts (:  

As always, if there are any grammar mistakes let me know! There are probably several, because I didn't have time to give this chapter a full once-over this morning.

FANMIX
ALL FANART
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I should have never doubted Erwin’s ability to plan a rescue. Why did I ever question their determination to set me free? Hell, none of them have ever struck me as the type who gives up easily. But a tank? I can’t think of any scenario in which Erwin would acquire such a powerful weapon.

But wait.

The conversation Zackly had with me as we toured the armory revives itself from my mind. ‘They had a tank, too, nasty sonofabitch that was; but it was lost with the rest of their squad.’ But it was never really ‘lost’ was it? Erwin knew exactly where the tank was the entire time. He was keeping it hidden until his hand was forced. And, shit, Zackly has demanded the entire deck. I should have realized that Erwin would be aware of the weaponry those bumbling idiots lost. He’s always three steps ahead, isn’t he? A practical Armin Arlert in the flesh.

If there is one thing I could wish for, besides rescue of course, it would have to be a camera. Because Zackly’s face is the picture of fucking priceless. Got you, asshole. The terror looks out of place on his usually kept together visage. Always so proper, so charming. It’s like everything is crumbling down around him all at once, and there is absolutely nothing he can do to stop it. Maybe the old bastard will have a heart attack and put himself out of this misery. But no. I am going to kill him. His death is practically my birthright.

I forget that I am still being detained lord knows where, underneath the crumbling gaze of a psychopath. I try to free myself, thinking that maybe my adrenaline has left me a little teaser. But it appears that all my superhuman strength has been drained from my body as I lie writhing on the metal table.

Well, shit.

The sounds of my struggle bring Zackly back down to earth, the terror on his face slowly transforming into something completely juxtaposed. There’s a manic gleam in his eye almost identical to the one Hanji sports, if not for its reason of existence. He leans down, white beard grazing against my bruised cheek. His lips brush the shell of my ear as he speaks, “I’m going to kill your friends. I’m going to enjoy watching their limbs detach from their bodies as The Family eats them alive.” A shiver radiates along my spine as he pulls himself back up, eyes roving along my restrained form as he goes. “You be a good boy for me, Eren. I’ll be back soon.” And just like that, he’s gone.

At least the bastard had the decency to leave the light on. Hell, he even allows the door to stay open. If only I was stronger, than I could make a run for it. Now, I am resigned to do nothing but wait for either rescue or despair. And fuck, if that doesn’t sound ominous. I suppose I could go back to the ever popular game of counting the amount of times the light swings above my head. Ah, yes. Enthralling.

One… two… three… fo-

My room is rocked again by a loud blast. Shit, is Erwin intent on leveling Stohess? Are they really coming to rescue me, or is their return solely based on the goal of destroying this town? I clench my
hands into fists at the thought, completely forgetting that oh, hey, you were stabbed through the fucking hand.

“Shit.” I mumble as I try to ignore the blossoming pain sprouting from my palm. I clench my eyes shut; because even after spending all that time in the dark, its black embrace is somehow the only thing I want. I can focus this way. Focus on the fact that pain is just weakness leaving the body. Focus on why I have to be so fucking philosophical about every goddamn thing. It’s no use. My plan just backfires, and forces me to do nothing but think about how badly my hand is throbbing. I open my eyes and turn my head to the side to examine my bayonetted palm when I see it. Another bite. Somehow, I had completely forgotten the fact that Zackly let a walker use my appendage as chow time. Shit. Hey, at least I can say both my arms are matching now. Yeah, thinking of these wounds as fucked up tattoos isn’t really helping.

Fuck.

Damn everything about this stupid apocalypse.

Why couldn’t we have been cursed with a Great Flood or some shit? Hell, I would have even taken Armageddon via superhuman monkeys. But no. We get stuck with the fucking walking dead. It’s like we pissed in Mr. Higher Power’s cereal and he decided that ending the world was fair punishment. Asshole… and I fucking mean it this time, you dick.

Besides being eternally pissed at a deity, I am wondering why the only sounds I have heard of the chaos is the rumble of my room. Shouldn’t there be gunshots? Hell, if Erwin really did break down the infamous wall, shouldn’t there be screams? I mean, I can only assume that walkers have infiltrated Stohess. This isn’t right. Something is seriously off about this whole scenario, or maybe I just haven’t been enlightened about the process of a modern day coup.

My thoughts are interrupted by a hungry growl. What? The haggard walker has caught my scent and is slowly lumbering towards me. Oh fuck, fuck, fuck. He didn’t shut the door. He didn’t shut the goddamn door. I uselessly jerk and yank against my repressing bonds. Closer. Closer. I practically smell the hunger reeking from the zombie, its desire painted on its mangled corpse.

This is it, isn’t it?

They aren’t going to save me.

I’m going to die, and there is nothing I can do about it. Nothing but bask in the agony that is sure to pass over me any second now.

Its teeth sing to me, the lyrics a composition of a dead man. I can only hope that it goes for my jugular, the quick kill. Anything else will leave me suffering on this table that is slowly transforming into my coffin.

Close your eyes, Eren.

I comply, because fuck reality right now.

Out of all things, I picture what he would have looked like if he smiled. Not that little smirk, but an actual smile. Would his eyes light up as the corners of his lips rose to wrinkle his unblemished complexion? Would his nose crinkle, a sign that, contrary to popular belief, annoyed is not his only expression? How would he look as his lips slowly spread to reveal the gleaming set of teeth behind them? It’s like a fairytale, the way I am playing it out in my mind. The elusive smile. Only the most valiant earning the privilege to set eyes upon it. I can’t imagine it, no matter how hard my
imagination presses me. As I feel the walker close in on me, this becomes the one thing I regret. That I never saw him smile. *That I never saw Levi truly happy.*

A gunshot fires.

“Eren?”

My eyes fly open, and I raise my head, not really believing my ears. My voice comes out choked and strangled, still unsure if this is just some sick trick. “Le…vi?” He’s standing in the doorway, hand slowly lowering a gun. Shaking. He’s shaking. *No, wait, it’s not him.*

It’s me.

Something snaps him out of his daze, maybe it’s my purpled cheek, my marked chest. I could care less what it is. All that matters is that he is walking, no, running to me. *Saving me.* I hear the air whip as he hastily pulls out a hunting knife from his waistband. He starts cutting at the ropes like a madman, frantically moving his hand back and forth. I know he can see the damage Zackly has done to me. The cuts, the punctures, the bite. I have been left open and on display like some mannequin in a store front. *Exposed.*

I wonder what he thinks of me, all beaten and battered. Is he disappointed that I didn’t fight harder? That I allowed myself to be abused? Maybe he’s angry that I have seemingly accepted the punishment. Was it not me who called Levi out on his own impassiveness to Zackly’s cruelties? *I’m a hypocrite.*

The ropes begin to fall from my left wrist; and before I know it, the harsh texture is removed, replaced with the stinging autumn chill. I don’t move, simply letting Levi remove and other bands encircling me. He doesn’t say anything as he works. *Silence.* I am almost scared at what he’s holding back. I know he blames himself, the look in his eyes screaming guilt. I want to assure him that he was not at fault, but I know that feeling all too well to believe that my words will make a difference.

Finally, the remaining bindings fall to the ground, and at last I am free. Levi is still not speaking, opting to focus instead on the injuries lacing my body. Slinging my feet over the table, I look up to take in my savior. He stands there, knife in hand and eyes radiating a sense of regret. *Ashamed.* I don’t really feel like taking things slow, considering any moment Zackly could return. So, I do what Eren Jaeger does best.

I react.

My arms wrap around his neck as I throw my body into him. This may or may not have been a terrible idea, because I have greatly underestimated the weakness of my ankles after being strapped to a table for who knows how long. I’m stumbling before I can even complete the hug; but he catches me, arms enclosing around my waist. I don’t say anything at first, just allowing myself to fully embrace Levi. *He’s here.* This whole thing still doesn’t seem quite real, and in the back of my mind I am waiting for this dream to slowly dissolve. I turn my face into his neck, my lips lightly caressing the skin. There are a million things I want to say right now; but only one sentence escapes my lips, containing the singular notion resting at the forefront of my mind.

“I thought I was never going to see you again.” I whisper the words into his neck like they are a secret sin, not meant for anyone’s ears but his. I expect him to tense up, to push me away and say that obviously I was wrong. But he doesn’t. To my surprise, he does the exact opposite. His fingers grip into my sides, mindful of the lacerations plaguing my back.

“Me too, Bright Eyes. Me too.” That name causes me to shiver. *That name was the reason I fought.*
And, hell, I might have not been strong enough; but that isn’t the point. *That name reminded me of who I am.* The boy with the big, green eyes, full of determination and vigor. Not the child swimming in self-pity and loathing. Tears begin to well up in my eyes, threatening to break through my dam of built up emotion.

“I’m glad it was you.” I’m not even thinking about what is coming out of my mouth, still entranced by the mere notion that I’m free. *That Levi saved me.* My eyes widen as I realize what I just said, *as I realize everything I’ve said.* I feel the burn painting my cheeks as I try to make my way out of the embrace. *God, I’m an idiot.* I should have just stuck with a simple ‘thanks for saving my ass, now let’s get the fuck out of here’. The fact that Levi still hasn’t released me despite my struggle is making me feel a hundred times more awkward. If anything, he has tightened his hold on me.

*He doesn’t want to let me go, does he?*

That weird pang erupts inside my chest as I cease my struggles. I… what… *what is this?* No, what are we? The tears that had been threatening to spill finally begin to silently cascade down my face. His hands drop from my waist as he brings them up to cup my cheeks, forcing deep emeralds to meet overcast greys. Fingers have begun to nestle their way into my chestnut locks, carefully weaving deeper and deeper into my mane. His thumbs are gently tracing over my cheek bones, wiping away the wetness that has accumulated under my eyes.

“I’m… I just…” Levi’s speech seems to have adopted my awkwardness like a second skin. This stuttering, this uncertainty. It sounds unfamiliar on his voice. That voice that always sounds so sure, so certain. I wonder if the same sharp feeling is shooting through him, too. Maybe that is what’s making him act so tentative. It’s almost like his body is out of synch, his actions working ahead of his speech.

I’m still standing there, teary eyed and lips slightly parted, when the sound of the walkers breaks apart our isolation. I tense up, realizing that I am still inadvertently trapped in this hellhole. I spent too much time getting swept up in the idea of rescue to notice that I was still standing in my room of torment.

*Shit.*

Levi realizes it, too, if his face is anything to go by. “We have to get you out of here.” He pulls my arm around his shoulder in order to steady me. I am anything but graceful as I attempt to walk forward. Even with his help, I hardly make it to the doorway before my ankles begin to buckle. “Wait.” He releases me as he leans down to pick up a backpack from its position against the doorframe. *My backpack.* He reaches inside, and tosses me a plain black t-shirt which I hastily slip on. I raise an eyebrow as he resumes his abandoned position. “I checked your room first, and when you weren’t there… I knew he brought you down here. It’s where he took me.” A feeling of repulsion passes over me as I glance at the yellowing bruises on his face.

He begins again as we continue our voyage out of this snake pit. “I figured that I would grab your stuff while I was there.” He pulls my arm around his shoulder in order to steady me. I am anything but graceful as I attempt to walk forward. Even with his help, I hardly make it to the doorway before my ankles begin to buckle. “Wait.” He releases me as he leans down to pick up a backpack from its position against the doorframe. *My backpack.* He reaches inside, and tosses me a plain black t-shirt which I hastily slip on. I raise an eyebrow as he resumes his abandoned position. “I checked your room first, and when you weren’t there… I knew he brought you down here. It’s where he took me.” A feeling of repulsion passes over me as I glance at the yellowing bruises on his face.

As if reading my mind, Levi starts, “When I got down here, someone had pulled the release hatch on the cages holding the fucking walkers. Most of them are in that goddamn hole, but I’ve still ran into a
few roaming the tunnels.”

Speaking of the bastards, three of them are currently headed in our direction. Fuck, I don’t have a weapon; and even if I did, I’m pretty sure I would still be as useless as a pair of jeans with fake pockets. Levi whips out a pistol and opens fire on the walkers, taking them down with three precise shots. Wait. Since when did Levi own a gun? I thought all of his weapons were taken away from him after the incident with the zombie piñata.

“How did you get a gun?” I manage to ask as we turn yet another corner.

Levi’s breath hitches like he wasn’t expecting me to ask. “That girl.” What? “The one they fucking fed to the walkers. She was stealing weapons for fucking Captain America.” Shit. I feel guilty all of the sudden, and I’m not sure why. I wasn’t the one responsible for her death. If anyone deserves to hold qualms about the woman’s execution, it is Erwin. But shit. He really thought of everything, didn’t he? I wonder how many people he has on the inside. Obviously not very many, considering he wasn’t able to sway the citizens with my beating. Thinking about the whip filleting my skin causes a wave of disgust to filter through my body. Thinking about who caused the wounds, however, sends a jolt through my heart.

As we whip around the next corner, a set of stairs begins to appear in the distance. We are going to make it. We are going to live. I ignore the pain rattling through my body as I try to increase my pace. Almost there. We’re going to make it, Levi.

“Slow down, dumbass. The stairs aren’t going anywhere.” I could swear that was a joke he just made, but my mind is only focusing on one thing. Freedom. When we finally reach the stairs, Levi pauses. What is he doing?

I can feel his stare, so I turn my head to meet his knowing gaze. “You can’t climb these.” It isn’t a question, said with such certainty that you would have a better time convincing me that grass is blue.

“I… uh… can try?” I shrug my shoulders as I answer him. What does he expect? For us to rot down in this underground tomb while freedom is literally right in front of us? Fuck that.

Levi sighs loudly, clearly annoyed with my pigheadedness. His hand drops from my shoulder, and for a moment I really think that he is going to try to chastise me. But oh no. That’s not what he does at all. Before I know it, I am being carried bridal style up the stairs. I’m too embarrassed to remark on the action, and can only assume that Levi is thankful that I don’t comment any further given the faint blush residing on his cheeks. I opt to nestle into his chest, content that my ankles are finally being given some relief.

“What are you, a fucking cat?” I go stiff in his arms, fearing that I have somehow offended him. The awkwardness I thought I had lost back in my room returns with a fucking vengeance, red face and all.

“N-no, I…”

“Don’t get too comfortable, Garfield. When we get to the top, your ass is limping back to the tank.” His tone is anything but threatening. If anything, it’s tempting. Almost asking me to reengage my previous antics.

“Whatever, Grouch.” I mumble as I push my head back into his chest. Levi releases a ‘tch’ under his breath, but does nothing to stop my impromptu cuddling. Wait. Is this cuddling? Why am I cuddling? Wha- Eren, shut up. A content sigh falls from my lips as I decide to listen to my asshole of a conscience.
This is nice.

Well, I mean besides the fact that we are currently running from zombies whilst trying to avoid a psychopath. I’d say it’s pretty nice. The way his chest feels against my knuckles as I clench into the fabric of his shirt. How he tightens his grip on me as I turn my body further into him.

It’s nice.

And also over way too quickly.

The sunlight blinds me as Levi steps through the threshold. It feels like it’s been forever since the light of the sun has touched my skin. How long has it been? It’s not like I had any sense of time in my prison. For all I know, I could have been down there for days. But I’m safe now. Safe. The word sounds foreign in my mind.

I feel Levi begin to loosen his grip on me, and I take that as a sign to ‘get the fuck off’. But, suddenly, he grunts in pain, and I am falling. He is still holding me as the ground begins to close in. The world slows down, and the only thing I can see are those charcoal eyes. I feel the wind blowing through my hair as we make our descent; all the while those brilliant eyes keep my stare. I know this time warp shit is supposed to be traumatizing, given it warns you that your life is about to fall to pieces. But I am not thinking about the omen or the possible reasons for this sudden plunge. And that is stupid, because the one thing I should be focused on is: Why are we falling? But I’m not. I just see him, and in that moment… I am content.

The impact is painful; because shit, Levi weighs a lot more than I thought. I try to push him off me, but it’s like my body decided that all of my strength was going to feed that useless adrenaline burst. My eyes widen as I see the dark line of blood start to race down his neck. Something must have struck him. But what? Levi is shaky as he tries to steady himself over me. He must have been hit harder than I thought. I meet his gaze, a million questions swimming in my eyes. A silver gaze enlarges as he remembers that he was just attacked. His gun is laying adjacent to him, dropped when we impacted the ground. It’s gleaming like a beacon of hope, the autumn sun highlighting the weapon against the dirt. He stretches out for it, desperate to protect himself. Protect me. As soon as Levi’s fingers connect with the pistol a boot stomps down upon his hand, holding the appendage in place. He grunts in pain, fingers of his opposite hand clenching into the dirt.

My eyes follow the outline of the body that is assaulting Levi, and oh shit.

Zackly is standing over us; foot twisting harshly over Levi’s impaired fingers, looking like the fucking devil in the flesh. I should have known. I should have known he’d be here. Zackly’s a smart man, and there is no doubt in my mind that he knew Levi would come for me. And he knew exactly where to wait, huh? This is some sick kind of revenge, isn’t it? Payback for every seed I’ve sown against him. Hell, his fucking town is in shambles around him, and he is more worried about ruining the life of one eighteen year old kid.

The booted foot kicks Levi’s gun into some sort of dreadful oblivion, making it disappear along with any hope I had to escape. No, he can’t take this from us. This freedom. We’ve earned it, goddammit. I feel powerless as Zackly pulls back the hammer of his gun. The look on his face is blurred with an obsession. Obsession for what? Power? Vengeance? I don’t think I will ever find out.

Suddenly, Levi is thrown off of me, his face meeting the tail end of Zackly’s boot.

No.

Not again.
Levi tries to get up, tries to fight; but his arms give out as Zackly deals another kick to his ribs. Over and over. Kick after kick. It’s like a never ending torture, and I’m not sure who is suffering more: Levi or me. Is this how he felt when he was forced to beat me? Helpless. No, I’m sure his torment was much worse; because no matter how hard Zackly wails into him, he does not cry out. He’s strong, so strong. And here I am, observing this cruelty like some frightened spectator. I try to stand, but my limbs fail me. Is this what Mr. Higher Power has been saving for me? A front row seat to watch the beating of an already broken man?

“Stop! Don’t hurt him! Please!” I scream at the top of my lungs, praying that if there is an inkling of kindness in Zackly’s heart it will make an appearance. The man pauses in his pounding of Levi to give me a look of incredulity.

The smile that spreads across his face is full of malevolence. “This is what you asked for, Eren. This is- FUCK!” Levi’s hunting knife is protruding gruesomely out of the bastard’s thigh. Zackly should have known better than to underestimate the shorter man. The victory is short lived, though; because Zackly retaliates immediately. “You little bitch.” With one more swift kick to the face, Levi is left sprawled out against the dirt, defenseless and broken. I feel wrong seeing Levi this way. It feels… immoral to see such a strong creature fall to the hands of such a monster. I want to reach out to him, call to him; but my voice is stuck in my throat, and my limbs are frozen in place. It’s like I know this is the end for us. That there’s no getting out of this. It’s a fight to death, and we are left defenseless while that cold bastard has an entire armory at his disposal.

Zackly reaches The Hole, dropping Levi beside him at the edge of the pit. And I know I’m too late. Levi’s going to die, because I was weak. I hear the awakened moans, and I know the zombies are now fully aware of their upcoming feast. No, I can’t let him die. I’m expecting any second for this to be over. Well, not over for me so to speak, but over for Levi. Over for us. I’m waiting on his cries, his screams; but I notice that instead of throwing him over the side, Zackly has straddled the smaller man. What is he… no, shit, I know what he’s about to do. I know, because it’s happened to me. Zackly’s hands grip Levi’s throat, shaking him as he chokes the life out of the man. No, no, no. Please, no. I pray for the ability to move faster, to reach him in time; but I know that this wish isn’t going to be answered.

Suddenly, my fingers make contact with what I am convinced is a gift from the heavens. The hunting knife. Still covered in Zackly’s blood, the weapon feels powerful in my hands, like it wants to finish the job Levi started. Determination floods my veins, as I crawl towards the bastard. I won’t let him kill you, Levi. I won’t let you die. I’m so close that I can practically smell the sweat dripping off the battling bodies. So close. Levi’s legs are kicking frantically, trying to buck the older man off of him. They begin to slow their struggle, and I know I am running out of time. So close.

Zackly doesn’t even notice my presence behind him, too entranced in his attempt to drain the life from Levi’s eyes. You’re not taking him, you bastard. I attempt to push myself up to my knees; and for a moment, I am scared that my body is going to refuse. Not when I am this close. Not when I can still save him. I lift the knife above my head, arms slightly shaking. No, Eren, be strong. For once in
your life, be strong.

I do it.

The knife makes a sickeningly slick sound as it enters Zackly’s back. The man pauses in his attempted homicide, the shock of his fatal wound passing through his body. But he’s not dead. He’s not fucking dead. With all the strength I have left, I push Zackly over into the pit. I don’t watch as he is ripped apart, but I hear. Somehow, his screams give me pleasure. His begs for help grant me satisfaction. Does that make me a sadist? That I enjoy listening to him die? After everything the bastard put me through, I hope not.

Levi is gasping for air on the ground beneath me, hands running over his purpled throat. He looks a mess, black hair disheveled, busted lip trailing blood down his chin. Even so, I can’t help but find myself lost in his features. He doesn’t say anything as he meets my stare. Those eyes say enough. ‘I’m sorry.’ For what? ‘Thank you.’ You would have done the same. He says nothing; simply tugging me on top of him, pulling me into the most desperate hug I’ve ever experienced. His arms are wrapped tightly around my upper torso, his need for comfort radiating through the touch. Any movement that I make only prompts him to tighten his grip. You didn’t lose me, Levi. I’m right here.

He turns his head into my neck as he murmurs, “You little shit.” Somehow, the name brings a warm smile across my face, making me forget that he is currently embracing me over a pile of zombies engorging themselves on Zackly’s flesh. Okay, that came out weird. I go to pull away from him, and before he tries to stop me I meet his gaze. I’m not leaving you. I promise. I’m beginning to think Levi might have some sort of telekinetic abilities, because he releases me without a word.

I doubt that my ankles have magically developed the ability to hold my weight, but I attempt to stand anyway. Yeah, I was right. I am soon tumbling forward, but as expected, Levi stops me before I can connect to the ground.

“I swear to god you are a fucking mess.” I wish he could see himself, the asshole.

I roll my eyes as I quip back, “Look in the mirror, you prick.” He allows the silence to settle down on us as he wraps an arm around my shoulder, leading me out into the street. I really don’t know what to expect. Well, no, that is a lie. I expect carnage. And hopefully a fucking tank, because Levi and I are sitting ducks out here with no weapons. We enter the street and…

Chaos.

Pure, unadulterated chaos.

There are bodies everywhere, some not even in solid form. Red fills the once dark streets, a sign that a revolution has begun. Many of the buildings are nothing more than decapitated piles of rubble, further marking the display of the uprising. I wish I could feel some sort of sympathy for these people, but the only emotion I have towards these assholes is resentment. No one deserves a fate such as this, but then again, they handed out this doom to who knows how many unfortunate souls. What’s the phrase? Karma’s a bitch? Yeah, that’s it.

Karma’s a bitch, you fucking thundercunts.

I want to know how Erwin accomplished this. How he just walked in and successfully destroyed an entire human militant base. I mean, there were at least a good seventy people residing in Stohess. Did none of them know how to defend themselves? As an answer to my question, I see a woman darting down the street. It’s obvious the way she is fumbling with her gun that she has little to no experience in firing one. Levi’s squeezes my shoulder, silently telling me to keep moving.
I turn towards the entrance, and *holy fuck*. The tank. It’s the textbook definition of badass. Besides the fact that there is steam billowing out the top. Pretty sure weapons of mass destruction are not supposed to be leaking fumes out of their caps. Levi’s grip on me falters as he sees the state of the tank.

As calm and collected as ever, he speaks, “When I find that dumb bastard remind me to shove my foot up his ass. Fucker said I could drive out of here.” *Priorities. Levi obviously has them.*

As if things couldn’t get any worse (And believe me, when you think they can’t, they will. It is some ancient prophecy or some shit.), a group of walkers has us in their radar. *Shit.* I’m half lame, and Levi’s been beat to shit. I don’t think we are really in an opportune position to be fighting the undead. And apparently neither does Levi; because he is attempting to hightail it in the opposite direction. I’m unsure if he forgot that I can’t carry myself, or if he just thinks my wings are going to suddenly appear; but I can’t keep up with the pace he is trying to set.

“Levi, I can’t. I’m going to fall.” It sounds pathetic coming out of my mouth, and I am positive the man dragging me along probably thinks I am overreacting. I never find out which it is; because before I can object, he sweeps me up into his arms. I would protest, since I know he is fighting off what is probably a set of bruised ribs; but I know that he can be just as stubborn as me. Especially when the bastard knows he’s right. So, I am content to just nestle myself back into his chest. I feel safe here, even though we are currently begin chased by walkers. *Safe.* No matter how many times I try to say it in my head it’s always going to sound out of place, isn’t it?

My senses begin to fail me as I step closer to a state of unconsciousness. I grip onto Levi’s shirt, a silent conformation that he’s still there. *He’s here, Eren.* Sounds turn to echoes as the weight of the day’s trials begins to smother me into a comatose. I think I hear the muffled sound of Erwin’s name being voiced by Levi, but I’m so far gone right now that I can’t really be sure of anything. The only thing I’m positive of is the fact that I’m passing out and that Levi’s here.

*He’s here.*

I stretch up on my tippy toes in an attempt to turn the turn the knob of the door. Whoever decided I couldn’t be seven foot tall is a big, fat meanie. Mommy had told me I would eventually get taller, but in order to do that I had to eat my vegetables. It really didn’t seem like a fair trade.

Finally, my chubby fingers manage to wrap around the metal knob. Ha, I don’t need your vegetables, Mommy. I open the door with a practiced stealth I learned from all those break outs from the prison Daddy liked to call a ‘crib’.

“Grisha, you can’t just leave.” I hear Mommy’s voice echoing in the tiny room. She sounds upset, and I try to think of why she could be mad. She didn’t find my stash of crickets in her shoebox, did she? I hope not; I had already named all of them, and I was sort of attached. I see Daddy pacing back in forth in the bedroom. He doesn’t look very happy, either. *Maybe they did find my crickets. My large, green eyes widen at the thought. “Are you even thinking about Eren?”*

“Of course I’ve thought about him! He’s our fucking son! Do you think me so heartless? That I would just eradicate any bond between him just because we couldn’t work?” I’m starting to get a little scared. Daddy never swears unless he is very angry, and he always makes sure to tell me afterwards that it’s a really bad habit. He says that for every time you use a swear word, a monster grows in your closet. Of course, Mommy always gets on to him for trying to scare me, but I believe him. I’ll never swear, I promise.

“Don’t raise your voice at me. You have no right. Absolutely no right.” Daddy is running his fingers
through his hair. He always does that when he’s feeling bad about hurting someone’s feelings, but I
don’t understand. Whose feelings did he hurt?

“I… I’m sorry, Carla. But… I have to leave. You are miserable and so am I.”

“So, that’s it then? You’re just going to walk out of his life like you never existed?”

“I’m done arguing about this, Carla. My flight leaves in two hours and you know how airports are.”

Daddy reaches down to grab a suitcase. Are we going on vacation? A smile appears on my face as I
think about where we are going. I really want to go see the ocean, but that means that Armin has to
come, too. I scare Daddy as he opens the door.

“Shit! Eren, what are you doing out of bed? Did I forget to lock up your crib?”

I grab onto his leg as I start, “You must have lots of monsters in your closet, Daddy. Is that why you
and Mommy were yelling? I can kill them for you if you want. I’m not scared of no monsters!”

Daddy laughs as he drops his suitcase and scoops me up into his arms. “Airplane, Daddy! Let’s play
Airplane!”

“I can’t play tonight, Little Man; but when I get back, I promise we will play Airplane as many times
as you want.” Daddy looks sad as I grab onto his shirt collar. Why is Daddy sad?

“Where are we going? I hope it’s the ocean! But then we have to get Armin; because he’ll be mad if
I go without him.” Mommy starts to cry, and I don’t understand why she is so upset. Is she not
getting to go?

“I don’t think you can go on this trip with me, Little Man.” What? Why can’t I go?

Tears start to burn my eyes as I ask, “Why can’t I go with you? That’s not fair!” Daddy puts me
down and picks up his suitcase. He starts to walk past me, and I grab onto his leg. “Daddy, you can’t
leave me! It’s not fair!” I wish I was strong like those superheroes on TV, because Daddy easily
pushes me off his leg.

“I’m sorry, Little Man. I’ll be back soon, I promise.”

Tears are streaming down my cheeks as I scream, “Daddy! No!” Mommy picks me up, and I try
squirm out of her arms; but by the time I get free, Daddy has already left. I run to the door, banging
my little fists helplessly against it.

“Don’t leave me!”

My eyes flutter open and for a few seconds I am convinced I must be in Heaven. There is no way I
made it out of Stohess alive. I mean, this can’t be Hell. There’s no way fucking Hades would allow
this much sunlight into the underworld. It is called that for a reason.

Mike’s deadpan snaps me out of my daze. “Erwin, I think he’s awake.” Shit, did eyebrows die, too?
My eyes finally begin to adjust to the light and- holy shit. Fucking Hanji is not even five inches from
my face. I jump back, and realize my bed feels rather… humanlike. I turn my head up and see Levi
staring back down at me, black tresses framing his face. I currently have my head resting in his lap,
but I am still too confused to be embarrassed.

So, either we are all dead or we somehow made it out alive. I’m not sure which one sounds more
likely.
“Eren,” Erwin is leaning over me now, pushing Hanji out of the way. “I’m glad you’re up. We have a lot to discuss.” You’re telling me. I’m having a fucking existential crisis over here. I push myself out of Levi’s lap, trying to at least appear to be fully awake. “As you know Zackly had several tests run on you.” So, that’s what that torture was. Tests. For some reason, I don’t think that being impaled with a knife counts as ‘tests’; but maybe that’s just how the medical field operates.

“He was trying to use your blood to develop an antivirus. So, he had it injected into some of the captured walkers.” So, that’s why I was punctured with a fucking needle. “We found some of the lab results, and well, they were extraordinary to say the least. Once your blood was introduced into the walker’s bloodstream, it began to steadily lose its aggressive tendencies.” My eyes widen as I take in what Erwin said. “It didn’t reverse the effects given that the brains of the walkers tested were already deteriorated, but this does give us hope for a cure.”

Erwin must be insane, because there is no possible way to run tests in the middle of Bum Fuck Egypt. He destroyed the last hope for a vaccine when he steamrolled an entire town. Unless all these trees can magically transform into some secret laboratory, I think we are royally fucked.

“He didn’t kill your fucking puppy, brat.” I swear Levi is just a practical Prince Charming. He tries to soften the blow by reaching up to ruffle my hair. “Don’t look so damn upset.” He’s right. I mean, they did pull me out of the fire and flames as it was. I should be singing their praises instead of acting so skeptical.

“I just don’t understand how we are going to create a vaccine in the woods.”

Erwin flashes a knowing smile at me, “Easy. We don’t.” I raise an eyebrow, because I am now positive that the blonde man may be a little off his rocker.

Before I know it, Hanji has pushed Erwin out of the way, commanding my full attention. I expect her to ramble, but only two words slip from her lips.

“Trost Medical.”

Chapter End Notes


LONGEST FUCKING CHAPTER YET DEAR LORD. Shit, sorry if this seems like wayyyyy too much in one chapter (BECAUSE I KNOW IT IS), but I did not want to cut it awkwardly. And before anyone asks: Grisha was NOT abusive mentally/verbally/physically. I think he gets a lot of slack in fics, but I don’t really have an opinion on him. Soooo, I made him neutral? Holla. And I tried to change the writing style during the flashback scene to something... simpler? Is that the word? But Eren was a toddler in the scene, and for some reason I felt like I needed to write for the part, so woohoo. Also, I am posting this at like seven in the morning; because I am going to be gone all day with a friend, so probably no update tomorrow. It may not even be until this weekend, because I’m trying to develop a few extra plot bunnies. If you have any questions, feel free to ask me on here or on Tumblr. I will respond faster on Tumblr, but if you would rather ask in the comments below go for it :3
Thanks, as always, for the kudos/comments. They are the light of my life, I swear.

Tumblr:
fuzzyporcupine.tumblr.com

If you spot any grammar errors, let me know!

FANMIX
ALL FANART
Chapter 14

Don’t get attached.

That’s rule number one of zombie survival, right? So, should it bother me that every time I look at him this overwhelming sense of dependence flows through my bones? That I can feel the same strain of reliance flowing right back at me from him?

When did he become so dependent on me? When did I become that way towards him? There was a time when I asked myself if I could live in a world without Levi, and… I don’t think that I can. It may have taken several near death experiences, but I finally realize that I need him just as much as he needs me. And that scares me. I’m fucking terrified that any moment he’ll be gone, and I will be left alone. I want to tell him, to somehow explain this feeling raging in my gut; but the uncertainty of the situation is hanging over my head like a glass straddling a table edge.

“Don’t hurt yourself.” Levi is looking at me out of the corner of his eye, hands swiftly pushing apart the brush in front of us. We have been walking through the forest for a while. I’m not sure exactly how long, because once again, I have no sense of time, mark the sun and the moon.

His statement causes me to stumble over my words. There’s no way I am that transparent. “W-what?” Smooth, Jaeger.

“You look like your brain finally decided that you were a lost cause.” I narrow my eyes at him, because I know nothing that I say will have any true bite to it. I want to hate the fact that even after all we’ve been through, Levi is still a dick; but I guess that’s just part of his charm. Wait, what? I’m starting to agree with the asshole, because there is no way a normal person would say Levi is… charming. God, no. “I would ask what you are shitting yourself over, but I don’t really think I want to know.”

No. No, you don’t.

“It’s nothing.” And shit, if that isn’t the biggest cop out phrase of all time. But Levi doesn’t press the matter, simply raising an eyebrow at my obvious avoidance. I envy his ability to drop the subject so easily. If the shoe was on the opposite foot, I would have probably pestered him until he either answered or his boot was up my ass.

A type of comfortable silence settles over us, the only sounds being the crunch of the leaves under our boots. It’s nice. This ability to feel so at ease in the midst of the end of the world. Maybe I should be worried. Maybe I shouldn’t so easily settle into something that is so vague and unpredictable. This feeling of content could effortlessly lead me off the path of safety and security; but at the moment, I don’t really give a shit.

A yank on my shoulder makes me realize that I probably should have given one.

“Aren’t you excited?” Hanji’s bat-eyed with a grin that’s taking up residence on half of her face. I want to question why she is not more beaten up about losing her home, but I guess that’s just Hanji. She doesn’t seem like the type to mourn over trivial things. Even though losing your place of existence isn’t exactly trivial… I didn’t expect anything else, nonetheless. It’s almost like her brain has been wired to forget that we are currently living through World War Z. The only thing I have
heard her complain about since my awakening is having to leave those goddamn zombie heads behind. *That really should not have surprised me, though.*

“I guess. I mean all this could be over then, right?” The woman practically drinks in my words, eyes twitching with a contained excitement. Erwin warned her after she drew in a small hoard of zombies with her screaming that she would have to keep it down.

“Yes! I—“

“And that is my cue to leave. Have fun, kid.” Levi leaves me to the wolves as he slows down to walk beside Mike. Looking at the two, I can tell they have probably never shared more than a couple of words together. It’s almost funny how content they look with each other’s silence. I can see why Levi has never made any complaints about the man, and I am not sure why the he doesn’t hang around him more often. It would obviously be better than hanging around an ‘annoying little shit’ like me.

Hanji picks up as if she was never interrupted, “I think that there’s a good chance that this could help save the human race. The files we pulled showed that the walkers literally lost all desire to feed. So, could you imagine the effects on someone who hasn’t fully turned?” The woman is talking so fast that I don’t even have time to answer her question before she picks up again. “My theory is that your blood acts as a type of advanced white cell. Once injected, it identifies the virus within the blood and eliminates it. That is probably why you didn’t turn to begin with. So thank your white blood cells, Eren!”

“Uh… thank you?” Hanji reminds me that I was a comedian in a past life, tears forming in the corners of her eyes as she laughs.

“You… I…” She finally catches her breath, “I wish I would have known you before this.” A sudden cloud forms over us, grey and filled with sorrow. I doubt that Hanji meant to cast it; but it’s here now, hanging over our heads like a deathly reminder of the past. It is bizarre to think of my life before this. It’s almost like I was reborn when the apocalypse struck. Sure, I’m the same stubborn little shit that was constantly being sent to spend my afternoons in detention under the watchful eye of Keith Shadis; but I’ve changed a lot, too. As cliché as it sounds, I don’t take things for granted anymore. *I can’t take things for granted.* If I’ve learned anything during zombie boot camp, it’s that you can and will lose things that you love. Be it possessions, memories, people. Eventually, something is ripped out of your grasp, never to return again.

Hanji misinterprets my silence for anger, and she is soon apologizing. “I’m sorry, Eren. I didn’t mean to bring up the past. It’s just… I’m serious. I just know we would have been the best of friends.” She offers me a small smile, trying to soothe over the tension with her apology.

“It’s okay, Hanji. I’m not upset… It’s just hard thinking about everything I’ve lost.” Her smile falters, trying to conceal the guilt forming in her eyes. She breaks her stare, opting to focus on the leaves being mutilated underneath her boots. I can tell that there is something else she wants to tell me, but uncertainty is coating her movements.

Finally, she sighs, still not meeting my gaze. “I lost someone, too.” My eyes widen, hands tightening around my backpack straps. “We never got married, but he was the closest thing I had to a husband.” I don’t say anything, merely allowing my silence to speak for itself. “We met in college. We shared the same science course, and were assigned to be lab partners. I love improvising, so of course, I never wanted to stick to the lab guidelines. He would always try to talk me out of my ‘crazy ass experiments’.” She laughs as she recalls the story. However, it doesn’t sound hollow or empty, but instead full of life.
“One day, I was feeling particularly adventurous, so I decided to mix in some extra chemicals and BOOM! I thought I killed him. He had to be rushed to the hospital for chemical burns, and in that moment I regretted every time I had ignored his pleas to stick to the directions. I get to the hospital to find out that he only suffered minor burns, and the only causality was his eyebrows. I walked into the room and I started fucking bawling my eyes out, begging for him to forgive me. And you know what he does? He laughs, and tells me that I can pay him back by joining him for dinner.” Silent tears have started to flow over her cheeks, but they aren’t filled with regret. Happiness. They contain joy, love. Words that almost seem obsolete now.

“He died about a week after the infection appeared. Threw himself in front of a walker to save me. I never got to say thank you or goodbye, but I don’t think I really needed to. Moblit knew I loved him, and that’s all that mattered.” I don’t know what to say. Do I even say anything? This seems too personal, too real for me to comment on. So, I don’t speak. I simply bask in the essence that is Hanji. This brave, insane woman who has been through so much, but still wears a smile on her face like everything is okay. And it’s not. It’s anything but the word. But she won’t let herself think that; and somehow, I am jealous. Jealous of her ability to cope, to love? I’m not sure. Either way, I realize I have underestimated her.

“Sorry if that was too much, I just wanted to let you know that you are not the only one who has lost someone they care about… Hell, I think all of us have lost someone down the line. But that is why humans are incredible creatures, Eren. Because we push through.” She meets my gaze and smiles, big and bright. The tears have long since dried on her cheeks, leaving trails down her face. I feel my lips begin to upturn in a similar manner; and for once, the weight of my losses does not feel so heavy.

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The fire feels warm against my skin, a sufficient combat to the ever growing autumn chill. I don’t think I have ever been more thankful for Levi’s thoughtfulness until now. If it wasn’t for him, I would be sitting in front of the flames half naked and probably dying of hypothermia. I wrap my arms tighter around my brown hunting jacket, reveling in its added warmth.

I’m on first watch, even though in reality, everyone seems to be sharing the shift with me. Given, they are all asleep and only a few feet away from me lying in the dirt. We no longer are in possession of the tents; so we have to make do with the ground, which is ‘fucking disgusting’ according to Levi. I don’t mind, though. I’m still content with just being free of Stohess. In the silence, my mind wonders, questioning how things could have possibly ended. If I didn’t save Levi would Zackly have killed me? I want to say yes; but knowing the twisted bastard, he would have probably kept me around as a pet to torture and prod at. I shiver thinking about being at the mercy of that madman again.

I hear shuffling; and before I know it, Levi has taken a seat right next to me on the log. I can barely see him, his profile being dimly highlighted by the dying fire. Speaking of which, I should probably add some wood to unless we want to wake up as abominable snowmen. He doesn’t say anything at first, merely soaking in the content silence we seemed to have formed.

“I couldn’t sleep.” Obviously. I sigh, because I have never been good at this kind of small talk. The silence begins to take an ugly turn, twisting into something awkward and out of place.

Shit.

“Uh… that sucks.” Goddammit. Why is talking so difficult? Since when did my body decide to revert back to its seventh grade ways? Fucking hell. With anyone else, I would be perfectly okay. It’s just a certain dark headed asshole that seems to get me more tongue tied than a dyslexic auctioneer.
Levi clears his throat, obviously suffocating in the awkwardness I am exuding. “How’s your back?” My breath hitches in my throat, because I honestly wanted to act like that whole thing never happened. The mental wounds are more painful than the physical ones. Now that he has brought it up, the only image playing in my mind is the picture of Levi swinging the whip over his head. Over and over. It sickens me. Infuriates me. I want to wake up Erwin and demand to know why he didn’t warn us of Zackly’s plan to use Levi against me; but what good will that do? Knowing the man, he will already have an answer waiting for me. One that will make me feel stupid for questioning him in the first place.

“Ah, it’s okay. I mean, Hanji bandaged it; and apparently, those assholes at Stohess had put some kind of cream on it.” Levi lets out a breath I didn’t know he’d been holding. It sounds… relieved. I know he blames himself, and I realize that there’s nothing I can say to take away that guilt. He is staring intently at the fire, thoughts lost in the flames. It will kill him, this contrition. And shit, I’ve already almost lost him once, and I’ll be damned if this is what takes him out.

I knock knees with him, trying to pull him out of this blame-ridden stupor. He glances up at me, hooded eyes tired and weary. I smile at him in the hopes that maybe it will coax out an emotion from him that doesn’t reek of shame. My plan works as he lifts the corners of his mouth in a half smirk. “I was glad, too.” My smile falters as my expression fades to one of confusion. “That I was the one to find you.”

Ah, that.

I have to break eye contact as my cheeks begin to rise in temperature. It’s not that I wanted him to forget the things I said, because I didn’t. That’s the last thing I wanted. I just hoped that they could maybe act like an instruction manual. You know the ones that you realize are there, but never read? I should have known that Levi wouldn’t let me sweep something so… powerful under the rug. I mean, shit, I don’t know how he took the words; but they obviously hold some kind of sinew in my heart.

I try to start, but my thoughts are muddling up my speech, “I… it’s just…” I go against what my mind is telling me, and I reach Levi’s gaze. Instead of the satisfied smirk I expect to see gracing his face, I am instead greeted with a look of concern, of anxiety. He thinks I didn’t mean it. And now, he believes he has backed me into a hypothetical corner with no way out. And… and that’s not it at all. How do I even approach this? Tell him the truth? Tell him that I don’t know what this fucking pain in my chest is, but it shows up every time your eyes meet mine. No… shit, that sounds fucking awful. I really should have realized that romantic comedies were not going to help me in real life.

Taking a deep breath, I begin, “I… I meant it.” His breath catches in his throat as he keeps my gaze. I wish he would interrupt me, because I can tell this is going to be one of those occasions where my mouth has no filter. “Every word. I meant it all. You’ve been an asshole. But… but there was so much I still wanted to tell you, so much I wanted you to tell me. And shit. I just felt like I had wasted all that precious time being a dick when I could have been a friend. So, yeah…”

Well, considering there are about one million other things I want to tell him… I think that came out pretty well. I chance a glance back up at him to find that the notorious smirk has made its way back onto his face, erasing any past doubt he may have had.

“You’re right.” A smile stretches across my face at his words. “You are an asshole.”

And it’s gone.
I huff as I bring my face into my hands. *This* is why I don’t open up emotionally. A weird chuckle emerges from the bastard beside me as he takes in my reaction. *Whatever, see whose laughing next time you decide to pour your heart out.*

*Prick.*

Silence begins to fall over us as the last of Levi’s amusement melts away. I hope he’s not expecting me to break it, either; because, I am not a glutton for punishment. I will happily stay in this uneasy stillness if it means my emotions aren’t skewered again. *Okay, maybe I am overreacting.* I mean, I am not mad so to speak. But Levi doesn’t have to know that.

“Stop acting like a little shit.” I narrow my eyes at him as I meet his gaze. The words ‘I’m sorry’ really do not exist in his vocabulary, do they? *No, they do.* My back tenses as I reimagine the last time those words left his lips.

I open my mouth to quip back, “Consider it punishment for being such a prick.” *It’s his charm, though. Remember, Eren?* Yeah… charm. I try to hold my angered glare, but staring into those charcoal eyes soon dissipates any falsified aggravation I had contained. I sigh as I divert my attention to the fire. “I was being serious, you know.”

He doesn’t say anything, and for a moment I wonder if he thinks that this whole *thing* has probably just crossed too many forbidden lines. A hand on my knee dispels every doubt that had manifested in my mind. It squeezes, commanding my attention. I comply, lifting my head to meet those silver eyes. Even with his mission completed, Levi still leaves the hand in contact with my knee, acting as an impromptu relic of my concentration.

“I was, too.” I am ninety-nine percent sure that he is referring to his first statement and not the whole asshole bit, but I can never tell with Levi. He’s like some mythical creature that no one believes exists anymore, rarely stepping into the light. But when he does it is beautiful, majestic. And when you see it, you tell yourself that you would do anything to see this creature again. But you realize that nothing you do will prompt his return. That he alone is in charge of the appearance. And it’s maddening. This anticipation. But it is also worth it. Every second you spend in expectation soon becomes obsolete when he finally reappears. You forget all the waiting, all the tears; because he is here now. *And shit, if that wasn’t the weirdest metaphor I’ve ever made.* But it’s true, isn’t it? As weird as it sounds, Levi’s personality is a fucking mystery.

“I never got to thank you for getting my stuff.”

His hand clenches my knee as he starts. “You don’t have to. I know some of that shit has to be important to you.” *My pictures.* I’m almost frantic in the way I sling my backpack off my shoulder to check if they are still there. A sigh of relief escapes my lips as my fingers connect with the wallet. Levi has since removed his hand, opting to instead stare at me with amazement. *Yeah, I probably could have gone about that in a smoother way.* “It’s the pictures you’re worried about, isn’t it?” I shouldn’t be surprised at Levi’s deductibility, or maybe it’s just my lack of discreetness that gives me away.

“I almost killed you over them, you know.” For some reason unbeknownst to me, I feel the need to explain the depth of my protectiveness for these items. Even if it does make me look a little insane. In the dim light of the fire, I can see him raise an eyebrow, clearly not expecting my admittance of attempted homicide. “It was when you first found me, and you were going through my stuff.” Levi visibly stiffens. For what reason, I’m unsure. Maybe the image of the life draining from my eyes is burned into his mind. Maybe that is what is setting him on edge.

I continue like I didn’t see his act of apprehension, “I was so mad that you were going through my
things that I was going to kill you… well, try to kill you.” Levi attempts to mask his anxiety with a well-placed smirk. I see straight through it, though. His eyes betray him; because no matter how impassive his face attempts to be, those eyes will always paint out his emotions like they are a fucking gallery exhibit. I dig through my backpack and pull out the wallet, because for some reason, I think that allowing Levi to see the pictures will set his mind at ease.

Most of them are school photos of Mikasa and me. Some are of all three of us, The Golden Trio as we liked to call ourselves. It was lame, and Jean always got upset that we didn’t include him in the namesake. My fingers land on the one picture I’ve been searching for. My hand trembles as I pull it out, the photo still carrying the same sense of dread. I feel exposed at the thought of what I am about to do. I’ve never shared this picture with anyone. Not Mikasa. Not Armin. No one. And here I am, about to hand over the one object of my resentment to someone who I hardly know.

But wait.

I know Levi. Maybe not as much as I’d like to, but I know him. Probably better than anyone else in our group. I sigh loudly in some attempt to rid myself of the uneasiness that has invaded my body. With shaking hands, I push the picture into his lap.

He stares at the item with a sense of awe, eyes wide in disbelief. It takes a moment before he finally picks up the photo, still unsure if this action of allotment is something I really want to go through with. I do. I’m ready. His fingers run over the picture like it’s something sacred, something precious. They stop on my face, carefully taking in every detail.

Finally, he speaks, “You look just like her.” My mother. I’d have to agree with him on this one. I want to roll my eyes as I anticipate his next words. It will be the eyes. It’s always the eyes. “It’s the smile.” What? “You both have this kind of happiness flowing out of your smiles… Shit, when did I become so fucking sappy?” I laugh as I lean on his shoulder to get a better look at the picture. He’s right. It’s something I had never really cared to pay attention to until now. I always just took people at their word when they compared my likeness to my mother. And, to be honest, I got tired of hearing how beautiful my fucking eyes were and that I should thank my mother for the emerald wonders.

God, now I sound like an arrogant asshole.

I laugh as I nudge him with my elbow, “I think you’ve always been sappy, it’s just taken being around me to notice it.” Am I flirting? Holy shit, is this flirting? Eren Jaeger is fucking flirting… and is probably about to be punched square in the jaw, because this isn't even good flirting.

His glances up at me, lips turned into that infamous smirk. “You’re probably right, Bright Eyes.” And oh my fuck, is he flirting back? Or am I just totally off base with this? I’ve never been good at reading people’s intentions, and shit, if I know what this conversation is supposed to mean.

He glances back down to the photo as he pauses, contemplating his next words. “I’m guessing this is your dad?” The lightheartedness of the moment is quickly dissolved into something toxic and menacing. I don’t want to talk about this. Dad. The name sounds poisonous in my mind. Like it’s being misused and another attempt at the pronunciation will cause my tongue to fall out. Grisha.

That’s a better title for him. It is his name after all. He never earned the title of father in my eyes. Grisha. Yeah, that’s the name he deserves; but only because he was born with it. Asshole would probably be my pick, but of course, that would look tacky on a birth certificate.

I’ve tensed up, and Levi has obviously taken notice. “You don’t have to talk about it.” Well, I know I don’t have to talk about it. And I don’t want to. But I realize that besides the fact that he knows I resemble my mother, Levi knows nothing about me. Besides that I am a little shit, that is. Fuck, if he
can talk about his two dead friends, I can talk about my daddy issues.

“No… it’s just that I didn’t really know him.” I wait for Levi to add some commentary; but when I realize he is leaving me the floor, I continue. “He left when I was like four. It’s… it’s not like he left us homeless or some shit. Mom never had to file a child support order or anything like that. It’s just… fuck.” Thinking about this is hard. Not like deciding whether or not you want burritos or tacos for dinner, but like deciding whether or not you want to open up wounds you’ve kept covered for so fucking long now. “It’s… the asshole shows back up after ten fucking years. Just waltzes in like he never fucking left and… and that’s when the picture was taken. We were happy. We were so fucking happy that he was back. By then, we had adopted Mikasa, and she grew to love the man just much as I did. Then, one morning I wake up, and he is fucking gone again. Except… except this time, I’m old enough to realize what’s happened. And… and I d-don’t know what I d-did to make him leave. Like, was I n-not the fu-fucking son that he wa-wanted?” I hear myself stuttering, and I know the tears can’t be far behind if they are not running down my face already. “And I still l-love the bastard even though I sh-should hate him. I worry a-all the t-t-time if he’s d-d-dead. I…” Levi stops me by pulling my head into his neck.

I feel pathetic, getting this worked up over something so trivial. Crying over this man. It’s the fucking apocalypse. I should be crying over the deaths of my friends, over the abuses handed out at Stohess; but, no. I’m crying over some long-lost father I never really knew. Maybe it’s because I have kept this under wraps for so long. Mikasa always knew better than to bring up the man, knowing that the consequence for such a question usually resulted in me telling her to ‘mind her own fucking business’ followed by me storming off to my room. Shit, I should have talked to someone about it, though. Even Mikasa. I mean, she had to watch a man she loved walk away from her, too. I act like I am the only one affected by his departure, but in truth, the others just had a better way of concealing their pain.

Levi breaks the uneasy silence, “You know, I never had a dad, either. I was raised by some lunatic on the streets until I met Isabel and Farlan. Even then, the asshole would ring me up from time to time, demanding I owed him something for all the hardships he endured parenting a little shit like me. So… you’re not alone.” His words alleviate the tension that had swarmed its way through my veins. I nestle deeper into him, allowing his arm to wrap around my body. Sleep begins to steadily pull me into its grasp as he begins to rub circles into my shoulder. Soon, everything becomes a blur as I allow Levi’s words to lull me into slumber.

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“It shouldn’t be more than two more days if we follow this road.” Erwin has been trying to reassure me since morning broke that we would be at Trost Medical sooner rather than later. I can’t help the uneasiness that pours over me as I think of entering another facility. I mean, what if it is like Stohess? Obviously, Erwin and gang are not the best judges of character.

“How do you know they’ll be any different than the people at Stohess?” The question has been on my mind since Hanji spoke the two words about our destination. I don’t want to sound like I doubt the man’s plan, but my curiosity has gotten the best of me.

“I don’t.” Well, fuck if that’s not reassuring. “But I do know that this is supposed to be one of the places sanctioned off by the military to run virus recon. In other words, it’s designed to find the cure. But that is all a rumor. So, I guess we will just have to pray that the tides are turning our way for once, hmm?” I don’t answer him as I turn back to face the road ahead. It’s annoying that he has such an optimistic outlook on this ‘Trost Medical’. It’s almost like everything that happened at Stohess has
been lost on him. Maybe that’s what makes Erwin such an amazing human being. That he will never lose his faith in humanity, no matter what happens. I’m envious of his disposition, and I wish that I, too, could share in his faith. But, unfortunately, fate has fucked me over too many times for me to give my trust away so easily.

“I would tell you not to worry, Eren, but I know the words will be lost on you. Just trust me, okay?” Ah, there’s the word that seems to be the bane of my existence. Trust. I’ve already granted it to this man, and I don’t intend on revoking this privilege. I mean, sure Erwin’s plans have a tendency to be sketchy as fuck; but I’m alive, aren’t I?

_Barely._

But fucking alive nonetheless.

Suddenly, an idea pops into my head, a request if you will. “Erwin, if this whole Trost thing doesn’t work out, do you think that we can try to find my friends?” Truth be told, I’m surprised Mikasa hasn’t mowed down every zombie in her way of finding me. It wouldn’t be like her to give up on me so easily. I’m secretly hoping that Armin talked some sense into her, and convinced Mikasa not to get herself killed looking for me. Hell, they saw me get bit. That should be proof enough that I’m not going to be found. Being the sneaky bastard that Armin is, I guarantee he at least had some luck in getting her to stay put.

“If that’s what you want, then I don’t see a problem with it.” I can feel my smile spread across my face, because Erwin is genuine. I know that he will keep his word and see to it that my wish is fulfilled.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot a walker lumbering up to us. We have been fairly lucky avoiding the monsters, sticking to the brush of the forest; but now that we are traveling along the road, the more frequent the biters appear. It’s a slow one, and Levi easily dispatches it with the swing of an axe. Our bullets are running low, so we have been attempting to conserve ammunition by meleeing the shit out of the zombies.

“ Fucking disgusting.” Of course, Levi is not too keen on the idea of close combat given the blood splatter. He looks one hundred percent done, and the fact that there is no warm shower to return to is probably fueling his aggravation.

“I’ll get the next one, if you’re so worried about the filth.” Hanji laughs from beside Mike. She doesn’t earn a reply, but instead a flick of a choice finger which only fuels her cackling. I would join her, but my lungs are starting to burn from climbing the incline of the road. Suddenly, another walker appears out of the woodwork. Erwin wastes no time in sending the biter back to the other side as his knife glides into the decomposing skull. *Fucking one-handed.* Erwin is truly a marvel.

“Shut the fuck up before you draw more of them, shitty glasses.” I have to agree with Levi, because out of nowhere another walker appears. And another. _And another._ Soon, there are at least ten zombies attempting to surround us. We start to run, because we don’t have enough ammo to take all the biters out; nor are we stupid enough to try to take on the small hoard in hand-to-hand combat. The further we get from the walkers, the louder the moaning becomes. It’s strange, bizzare; and I don’t under-

_Oh shit._

We’ve made it over the hill when I see them.

_Thousands._
And fuck if they are not all looking at us.

Chapter End Notes

I called upon the glorious plot bunnies and they replied, "Fuck you."

Seriously, sorry if this is shit. But I wouldn't have posted it if I wasn't happy with it... however, there is still something eternally irking me about it. Err, maybe because the plot isn't moved as much? Eh, idk. BUT HANJI'S BACKGROUND WOOHHOO. I hope I did it justice, because I was not even planning on adding a background for the queen until I had a revelation the last chapter thh. AND DADDY ISSUES WAT. CAN I REPEAT THAT GRISHA WAS NOT MENTALLY/PHYSICALLY ABUSIVE. Again, sorry if this whole chapter just seemed like a whole background story, but what can I say? I live for the angsty back stories. I always want to keep equal parts action/angst/etc. but this chapter sort of just caught with the fucking wind and I couldn't get it back. sorrynotsorry

And I apologize if the science behind Hanji's white blood cell spill is wrong... well, as wrong as zombie science can be. But, give me a break, I made a B in Biology this semester so...

AND I AM GOING ON VACATION MONDAY-THURSDAY (5/19/14 - 5/22/14). Soooo, no updates :( I'm sorry in advance, but the next update will probably be next Saturday if not later. I really want to spend time with my family, and I will not be writing on my trip. So, there's a heads up. And I know I am an asshole for leaving it at a cliffhanger. I'm sorryyyyyyyyy... If you have any questions/comments, feel free to leave them below or ask me on my Tumblr. You will get a faster reply via my Tumblr because I stalk that site like a fucking cat on a mouse.

AND HOLY SHIT THANK YOU FOR THE 5000+ VIEWS AND 350+ KUDOS LIFE = MADE

Thank you for all the comments/kudos, as always. They are the cherry on top of writing this story, I tell you.

Tumblr:
http://fuzzyporcupine.tumblr.com

I am tracking the tag 'fic: what's eating you' BUT IF YOU ARE POSTING FANART OR ANYTHING ELSE PLEASE TAG MY AO3/TUMBLR USERNAME. My mobile does not like the what's eating you tag... so in order to see the posts I have to get on my laptop.

If you see any grammar mistakes, let me know.

And sorry for the long ass note.

FANMIX
ALL FANART
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

I see red.

The anger, the rage to tear into all these creatures until they are nothing more than decapitated corpses littering the ground.

I feel white.

The surrender, the knowledge that there is no easy way out of this. That I don’t have what it takes to protect him.

I smell black.

The gore, the putrid stench of thousands of walkers clambering towards us in a scramble for first servings.

I hear green.

The shouting, the screaming of my comrades. Erwin’s voice is an echo, trying to somehow collaborate a successful plan even though he knows just as well as us that it is hopeless.

I taste… I taste nothing.

The emptiness, the hollowness is the only thing filling my throat as I try to scream for help. Only further enticing the biters with the sounds of my pleas.

Levi’s hands are grasping at my arms, begging me to move. My mind is shouting directions at me, telling me to find Erwin, to follow Levi, to survive. It’s too much at once, as all the thoughts begin to run into each other. The train wreck in my brain leaves me frozen in place, not sure where to go.

Having long since grown tired of my indecision, Levi yanks hard on my arm, dragging me back into the woods. The moans are surrounding me like a deadly vice, aching to satisfy their owners’ hunger. I see Mike out of the corner of my eye running beside me. He looks content as ever, as though we didn’t just stumble into a swarm of the living dead. But wait. Where’s Hanji? Erwin?

“Where are the others?” Levi doesn’t stop to answer me; opting to instead continue with his frantic pace of finding a way out of the hoard. I turn my gaze to Mike, but his expression doesn’t offer anything to the possible whereabouts of our lost comrades. He’s leaving them. No, wait. We’re leaving them. “Wait! We can’t leave them!” Levi is either ignoring my pleas, or is too engrossed in his attempt to find safety; because his escape is not the least bit hindered by my words. “Stop! We can’t leave them, Levi!”

Hearing his name fly through the air gets his attention, but does not cease his movements. “And we can’t just fucking stop either!” The last time he yelled at me like this was whenever I attempted to free the woman at Stohess. He’s scared. And, fuck, I am too; but that doesn’t mean that I am going to leave my friends behind.

Not again.
“Fucking let me go!” I take him by surprise with my struggling, and I am able to rip free from his grasp. I don’t care how much Levi cares about my safety. It’s no excuse to just… abandon the others.

My absence in Levi’s hand causes him to whip around, silver eyes wide with panic. “You fucking shitty brat! Do you want to die? Do you want to get us all killed?” His hands have found their way back onto my shoulders, trying to shake some sense into me. Jean’s old nickname for me rings in my ears. Suicidal Bastard. I always argued with him that he was just a coward who was too scared to take risks for the group. But he was right, wasn’t he? My green eyes widen as I realize how stupid my plan to rescue Hanji and Erwin is. How dangerous. Do I really care that little for the lives of Levi and Mike that I am willing to risk their humanity for a shot in the dark that we will find our lost comrades? I thought I made a promise to myself to protect him. To protect Levi. And my bullheadedness is just shredding that pledge to ribbons right in front of my face. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

A scream pulls my attention away from Levi’s face, and over to-

No.

No, no, no, no.

They are pulling at him, teeth already deep within his neck. Mike tries to push the monsters away, but that only gives them more feeding ground. His arms and hands are soon ripped apart like his appendages are nothing more than flimsy sheets of paper. He’s still screaming, blood gushing out of his mouth. His shrieks are like nothing I have ever heard before. This man, so calm and collected is finally breaking out of that mysterious shell he has hidden behind for so long. It’s grand opening a violent and painful display of blood and guts flying through the autumn air. It’s terrifying. And the only thing I can do is stand and watch this gruesome maiming.

“N-no…” It’s a whisper on my lips, not truly accepting the fact that I have just lost another friend. There is nothing left for me to do. Nothing. I can’t even call out for him; my mouth only moving in up and down motions, attempting to speak the words stuck deep inside my throat.

No, wait.

I can fight.

I can save Levi from the same fate.

I turn away from the horror show to see-

No.

I don’t think. I just move, pushing Levi away from the walker intent on burying its teeth in his neck. He hadn’t seen it, too focused on the gruesome scene playing out before him. The relief of his safety overcomes the pain of the biter currently sinking down onto my arm. I try to push it away; but the more I struggle, the deeper its teeth embed themselves in my flesh. I squeeze my eyes shut in an attempt to focus all of my strength into throwing the walker off of me, fuck the consequences. Suddenly, the pressure on my arm diminishes; and I open my eyes to see the walker that was previously attached to me has been effectively put down by a swing of the axe. Levi’s staring at me wide-eyed, thousands of questions swimming in those silver gaze.

I promised to protect you.

He seems to have lost his voice, but he still retains his will to live. He pulls me off the ground, hand
wrapped in a vicelike grip around my wrist. One that I don’t think I could escape even if I tried. In the chaos of protecting Levi, I have forgotten about Mike’s unfortunate demise. I turn my head to see the zombies feasting on his mutilated corpse, innards painting the forest floor an ugly red. *It’s my fault he’s dead.* If I would had only listened to Levi and continued moving, the walkers would have never caught up with us. I’m so stupid. I promised Mr. Higher Power that if he got me out of Stohess that I would relinquish some of my stubbornness. But that was a lie, wasn’t it? I’m a fucking liar as well as a hypocrite.

Levi hasn’t paused his movements, eyes constantly searching for danger. How will he be able to look at me after this? I know he thinks it’s my fault, too. That I am to blame. If… if I… shit. I’m unsure if he is angry at me or not, but I decide to ease the tensions while I still can.

“I’m sorry.” It comes out as barely a whisper, but I know Levi hears it. He squeezes my wrist, trying to assure me that he doesn’t blame me. *But he’s wrong.*

*It’s my fault.*

---

Neither of us has spoken since we lost the herd. It’s an uneasy silence, filled with the crackling of a midnight fire and the mutilated screams of a dying Mike. Every time I close my eyes, his face is there. Content and calm. Except there is something different about his usual cool expression. *The blood.* It covers his face, painting his visage in my bloodied guilt. *My guilt. My fault.* I want to forget this blame, to banish it into the cold recesses of my mind. Only allowing it to appear on those cold nights when I need to be reminded of why I fight to survive. But that would be disrespecting Mike’s honor. I need this fault. *This pain.* I need to be recapped of what my senselessness will cost me. *Cost others.*

Levi’s gazing into the fire, face full of things unsaid. I assume that he is contemplating killing me now or later, considering I just added to his list of deceased friends. *I’m stupid. So fucking stupid.* I… I just want things to be okay. With me? With Levi? Preferably both. I mean, we still have Hanji and Erwin to worry about; but I know better than to bring up that demon right now. Maybe he wants me to leave. To leave before I get him killed as well. I… I should go far, far away from him. Give him a way out of this friendship. Hell, he would probably do better without me. *Liability, remember?*

“I’m going to sleep. Just… keep watch while I rest.” It takes me a second to realize that Levi has broken the silence. Then, it hits me what he has shattered it with. *Those words.* Seemingly innocent, but lacking so much of that stupid word. *Trust.* But shit. Why would he trust me after that stint? I… I got Mike fucking killed.

He shuffles onto his side, leaving me in the suffocating stillness. *I’ve lost him, haven’t I?* But I deserve it. This pang of bitter agony. That used to be a different feeling when I looked at him, didn’t it? I never had the words to describe it, and I don’t think I will ever get another chance.

I pull my knees up to my chest, trying to comfort myself into a content stupor. My gloved hands are running up and down the fabric of my jeans in some pathetic attempt at self-control. It’s not working, and soon, this pain I have been trying to keep out of my chest wraps its tendrils around my heart and squeezes.

*“It wasn’t your fault.”* My eyes widen at Levi’s words, not really sure that his acknowledgement isn’t some side effect of my self-induced lethargy. I wait for him to say something else, to try and further reassure me that I didn’t cause Mike’s death. But he doesn’t. He stays with his back turned to me in a silent act of passive aggression. It’s like he has forgiven me with a slap in the face. And… *I understand.* I brought this all on myself when I decided to put all of our lives in danger. He’s
probably fighting himself right now, wondering why I should be forgiven. To be honest, even I can’t think of a single goddamn reason.

Though Levi’s assurance has bandaged the mental wounds wrapping my brain, they are still there. Taunting me. Reminding me. The voices in my head are fighting for dominance, one being worse than the last. They are drowning out any sort of support Levi had given me, crushing the beams with their blows of accusation. Your fault. Your fault. My hands weasel their way into my hair, tangling themselves within the chocolate locks. He’s dead. He’s dead. Fingers begin to dig into my scalp, hoping that pain will be a valid distraction from the noise. Your fault. Your fault.

Dead.

Dead.

Dead.

I can’t… I can’t do this. I need them to stop. Just stop the fucking voices. My pleas are ignored as they grow louder and louder and louder until the only thing echoing inside my head are Mike’s dying screams. I try to keep my suffering silent, as I don’t want to further Levi’s aggravation with me. But there is not a doubt in my mind that he will spring to my aid as soon as he hears my whines. To rescue me from myself. But I need this. This pain. Call me self-destructive, but right now this seems to be the only right decision I’ve made all day.

I close my eyes, still listening for the sounds of zombies hitting the Can Line. Mike’s face is still there, but beside it is another visage. Actually, no, there are two more objects beside him. The closer the shadows get, the clearer they become. Mikasa. Armin. My eyes fly open, because there is no way my sanity can deal with seeing my two friends covered like Mike. In that thick mop of blood. Dead. They can’t be dead. They… they’re strong. Stronger than I’ve ever been. And with me out of the picture, I know their strength could have only increased. I wonder if Levi will keep Erwin’s promise. I tell myself no, because I’m not even sure if the man will want me around come morning. But, deep down, I know that Levi is just as attached to me as I am him and that if keeping me around means finding my friends then, so be it. Don’t get attached, right, Eren? Maybe I’m wrong. Maybe I’ll wake up and realize that this misplaced dependency only flows through my veins, and that Levi chucked any ounce of reliance he felt towards me as soon as I pulled my arm from his grasp. I doubt it. But, hey, I’ve always been shit at reading people.

Nonetheless, I’m freezing and the back facing me isn’t exactly helping heat up my body temperature. Bear Grylls, don’t fail me now. I pull myself further into my body, trying to generate some sort of internal body heat. And fuck if every survival show I ever watched was just a crock of shit; because this isn’t helping. Or maybe I’m just an idiot. Meh. The jury is still deliberating on that one.

In my cold induced daze, I’ve failed to notice the slight shaking of Levi’s shoulders. A twinge of pain snaps against my chest as I watch him in this state. I was supposed to protect you, huh? Lifting myself up from the dirt, I walk over to his shivering body. Dressed in a thick russet jacket and blue jeans, Levi is in the fetal position on the ground, breath fogging in the cold. As I slip off my jacket, I think that I’ll probably regret this when I come down with a severe case of frostbite; but I really can’t find it in myself to care. I pull my jacket over his sleeping form, hoping that the added warmth will cease his shivering. As I study his frame, I can’t help but think that Levi seems so peaceful like this. That permanent furrow in his brow has been erased, replaced with a look that radiates tranquility. Thin lips are slightly open, puffs of hot air periodically emitting from the cavern. Eyebrow twitching occasionally at what I hope is a pleasant dream and not a nightmare. I’m glad that, with all his shitty decisions aside, Mr. Higher Power has at least decided that this man deserves peace in slumber.

I take a seat in front of him as I raise my hand above his face, slightly trembling with an unknown
anxiety. My fingers trace his uncovered cheek, outlining the bones faintly protruding from the alabaster skin. His bruises have all but disappeared, revealing that faint complexion to the outside world. That pale, unmarred flesh currently acting as a stage for my dancing fingertips. My heartbeat begins to pick up as my fingers traverse down to his mouth, begging to trace along those slender lips. The pounding fills my ears as I allow my thumb to outline his bottom lip. I know I’m crossing whatever invisible line Levi and I have silently established, but I’m transfixed. He’s… beautiful.

Heat begins to rise to my cheeks as I go over my last thoughts. Beautiful. The word sounds foreign in my mind. Nothing is beautiful anymore. The beauty of this world has been sucked away, only to be replaced with something horrible, something repulsive. But that’s not completely true, is it? Right in front of me is the walking contradiction. Beautiful.

I test the word on my lips, thinking that maybe hearing it out loud will make me believe it more. “Beautiful.” And you know what?

I believe it.

Suddenly, a pair of silver eyes opens to meet my flash of emerald. My blood freezes in my veins as I think about what I’m doing, what I said. I’m waiting for his anger, his annoyance; but after a few seconds, it still hasn’t come. If things couldn’t get any worse, I realize my thumb is still pressing on his bottom lip; and if that one word wasn’t incriminating enough this sure is. I go to hastily retract my arm, but a firm grip on my wrist has me pinned in place. Levi must suffer from the same sleep condition as me; because any minute his brain is going to catch up, and he is going to realize what I’ve been doing. God, his boot is going to be up my ass faster than I can say ‘I’m sorry’. I don’t know what I can possibly do to get myself out of this mess. Those overcast eyes are peeling away any excuse I might have had, my actions writing out the truth with every move.

“Um… I…” The words aren’t forming; and even if they were, I am ninety-nine percent sure that nothing I say could satisfy the man anyway. It’s not like he doesn’t have a million reasons to be pissed at me right now. I got Mike killed. I’m caressing his fucking face while he sleeps. Jesus, that last one makes me sound like a creep. I close my eyes, patiently waiting for the ass kicking I know is going to appear any moment. It never comes. Instead, there is a pressure on my thumb; and as my eyes flicker open, I am introduced to a sight that quite literally takes my breath away.

Levi’s lips are pressing against my thumb in a chaste kiss, his fingers gingerly stroking the inside of my wrist. Shivers travel up and down my spine at the sight. At the intimacy. My breath has still not made its return as Levi allows my hand to drop from his mouth. As he sits up, he notices my jacket lying on top of him. He looks at me with a raised eyebrow, motioning to remove the article of clothing. My hands act on their own accord, pressing the material into his body; silently demanding that he keeps it.

Finally, he opens his mouth to speak, “You’re going to get cold.” When I fail to say anything, he rolls his eyes. Levi scoots next to me, laying his cheek on my thigh. “You know when I said keep watch, I didn’t mean watch me, dumbass.” The words hardly contain the malice they try to emit. There’s a fluttering in my stomach that is refusing to allow my brain the ability to produce any type of reply, cutting off my thoughts with its incessant chattering. Levi seems to be over the conversation anyway, as he nestles his cheek further into my thigh; his hands pulling my jacket tighter around his body. That feeling is back, the one that has been a constant thorn in my side ever since Levi nudged my foot under the table at that diner in Stohess. It feels the same, the weird pang in my chest; except I know what it is now, what it means.

And that scares me more than any zombie out there.

My hands are shaking slightly as they levitate awkwardly in the air. I have no idea where to place the
appendages as Levi has taken up space on my leg, leaving my arms feeling entirely out of place. I reside to be content with allowing them to support my weight from behind.

Unless…

Still quivering, my right hand slowly descends upon Levi’s head, fingers pausing atop the raven hair. I wait for a reply, a signal that this is okay. The corners of my mouth upturn into a small smirk as I hear him faintly murmur, “Mhmm.” I burrow my fingers deeper into his hair, basking in whatever this is. I know what I want it to be, as surprising as it sounds. But I also know what it can’t be. And… and as much as I am yearning for the opportunity to have someone like Levi in my life… I know that all good things come to an end. And, shit, it’s like I never knew I wanted something like this until now. Until Levi. But the only thing that could possibly come from this is heartbreak and pain. So, I have to stop it, right? My fingers brush the rough texture of Levi’s undercut, fingertips tracing words in the coarseness. I can’t stop it, can I? Not now. It took me too long to realize these feelings, and now we are both going to eventually suffer for it. Unless I protect him. I hear Levi’s breathing even out, a telltale sign that The Sandman has sprinkled his magic dust onto the sleeping man. I look down at his face, pleased to find it back to its state of tranquility. I would even go as far to say that he looks more peaceful resting atop me.

He’s beautiful.

Fuck, I… I like Levi. My grin spreads to a full blown smile as I digest my thoughts. I like Levi.

And I’m pretty sure he likes me, too.

---

“So, what’s the plan?” We had just finished packing up camp when I realized that Levi and I had not discussed what was going to happen next. I mean, shit, we spent all last night running on hormones varying from anger to like… shit is like a hormone? Nonetheless, our plans for the next adventure weren’t ever brought up. I am hoping that we will be able to go back for Hanji and Erwin, even though Levi will probably be vehemently against the idea. If not, I want to go find Mikasa and Armin. I miss my friends. As nice as it’s been to meet and get close to new people, there are times when the two parts of my old trio really can’t be replaced.

“We head to Trost Medical.” What? My eyebrow arches at Levi’s statement. That place is a fucking shot in the dark. And without Erwin here to lead us, the chances of discovering the place are about as likely as finding a needle in a haystack. Not fucking likely. “That’s where they’ll be if they are alive. They’ll head there looking for us.” Erwin and Hanji. I feel guilty for doubting Levi’s plan, realizing that his idea is probably exactly what the missing blonde man would do. Erwin has faith in me to reach Trost Medical with or without him. So, I need to have faith in him, too.

Levi throws his backpack over his shoulders, preparing to head out. A pang of anxiety strikes my gut as I think about what happened last night. Should I bring it up? No, fuck, Eren. What part of play it cool do you not understand? Yeah, shit, play it cool. I’m positive that Levi wouldn’t find an overreacting eighteen year old attractive at all. Speaking of ages, I’m pretty sure the man has never told me his. Shit, that seems like something you should know before you start acting all… romantic with each other. Was last night even romantic? Oh fuck, I am completely overreacting, aren’t I?

An uneasy silence has filtered down on us, propelled by the war going on inside my mind. I decide to break it with the question now at the forefront of my thoughts. “How old are you?” The question takes Levi by surprise, causing him to pause in his trek.

He sounds matter of fact when he replies, “How old are you?”
“Eighteen.” I answer quickly, probably too quickly. And it causes Levi’s eyebrow to rise as he mumbles in acknowledgement. He continues walking, as though he was never interrupted. And wait. The asshole still hasn’t answered my question. “How old are you?” I’m thinking that maybe if I emphasize the word maybe he will get the hint that I really want to know.

Levi sighs as he continues his pace through the woods. “Why do you want to know?” I don’t know why he’s being so defensive. Maybe he is really sixty-five and just looks really young. My eyes widen at the thought. Fuck, please don’t be sixty-five.

“Uh, I don’t know. Just curious, I guess.” Which is the partial truth. And unless Levi can read me by the way my voice sounds, he won’t be any the wiser. After a moment of silence, I realize that the man has taken my answer as a scape goat out of the question. Tch, and I’m the little shit. “Are you going to answer me or not?” I probably shouldn’t have given that question a multiple choice answer. Knowing Levi, he will no doubt exploit that hole in my plan.

“Are you going to keep asking stupid questions?”

I run my fingers across my face as I sigh in annoyance. “Stop doing that.”

“Doing what?”

“That! Stop answering my questions with questions and just answer my question!” Well, shit if that wasn’t a mouthful. I swear if I could see Levi’s face, I know one of those infamous smirks would be plastered across it. The asshole sure knows how to push my buttons, and for the life of me I don’t know why I put up with it. Because you like him, dumbass. I pinch the bridge of my nose, because sometimes I really wish my sub-conscience was a real person so I could punch it in the fucking face.

“Twenty-eight.” I wasn’t really expecting an answer, but now that I have one I don’t really know what to do about it. I know people are usually sensitive about their ages, so I can’t fathom what I good response to this would be. Maybe he thinks twenty-eight is old. Maybe that’s why he was so defensive.

He has slowed down, allowing us to walk side by side. I turn to glance at him, “You don’t look twenty-eight.” If I’m going to say anything, at least it’s the truth. In all honesty, the man doesn’t look a day over twenty. He must have done some major ass kissing in his younger years to look so youthful… but somehow, I doubt it; because Levi just doesn’t really look like the ass kissing type.

He pulls the branch ahead of him back; and before I can pass under it, the prick unleashes it on me. Before I know it, I have a face full of leaves and a red whelp across my cheeks. I’m spitting out foliage as I begin, “What the fuck was that for?”

I don’t get any answer besides the shrug of Levi’s shoulders, which I am forced to be happy with. Before I can release another complaint, the sight of a familiar road begins to appear from between the trees. I gasp as I begin to run towards the street. There’s no way, no fucking way. I become more frantic as my legs start to move faster towards the road. I hear Levi calling out my name, but it’s a distant echo in my mind. Right now the only thing I’m concerned about is this street. This fucking street. I repetitiously remind myself that there is no chance that this is the same place. It can’t be. Finally, my hands reach the last of the brush surrounding the road. Pushing it out of the way, I step out onto the black concrete. And… shit. I’m here. I’m really here.

My body is frozen, unable to grasp to concept that I’ve finally made it back. After all this time. I reach out a hand in front of me, fingers slightly curled inwards. If I close my eyes, I can feel it. The rough wood of the stairwell railing. The cold metal of the doorknob. It’s all coming back to me.
“Eren, what the fuck are you doing? You could have-” I must look like quite the scene. If I opened my eyes, I would probably see Levi’s confused face questioning my sanity. But I don’t want to open my eyes. Then, I will have to see what they’ve done. What they’ve destroyed. A hand on my shoulder snaps me out of my trance, and my green eyes snap open. Levi looks concerned, which he is well in his rights to be. Hell, he just walked in on me losing my marbles in the middle of the street. My eyes drift away from his face, and back to the scene of destruction in front of me.

Tears threatening to spill over, I begin, “Levi… I’m home.”

Chapter End Notes

Long time no update, eh? AND FUCK IF THIS CHAPTER DID SKEWER MY SOUL BECAUSE MIKEYYYY. I wish I could have recorded my reaction to his canon death because fuckkkk man. I was a wreck for a good three days I tell you. But yeah. So, I don’t even know if Eren and Levi are a thing now. I mean, I knowwww, but idk? FUCK I DONT KNOW HOW TO WORD THIS. But holy shit, this is totally off topic; but on vacation I wrote an AU about Eren and Levi being stuck on a roller coaster on my way back from my trip AND FUCK IF I DIDNT POST IT. What can I say? I live for sarcastic Eren, and nothing will ever change that because he is a little shit and you all know that.

Thank you again for the kudos/comments. BECAUSE HOLY SHIT I COME ON HERE TO SEE I AM OVER 400+ KUDOS AND 6500+ HITS. FUCKKK

Seriously, without you guys I suck.

AND I HAVE A TUMBLR. So, if you have questions I can answer questions on there (or in the comments if you want, but I am a billion times faster at replying to Tumblr asks tbh).

Tumblr:
http://fuzzyporcupine.tumblr.com

I am tracking the tag 'fic: what's eating you' BUT IF YOU ARE POSTING FANART OR ANYTHING ELSE PLEASE TAG MY AO3/TUMBLR USERNAME. My mobile does not like the what's eating you tag… so in order to see the posts I have to get on my laptop.

If you see any grammar mistakes, let me know.

FANMIX
ALL FANART
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The world is funny in the way that it never changes. Sure, there are flesh eating monsters ruling the streets; but the world doesn’t give two shits about that. If anything, its callousness is sort of an insult to the human race. But maybe this is just a form of silent retribution for all the shit we put the earth through. Don’t get me wrong, I never went to any of those ‘green peace’ rallies Armin was always so fanatical about. But it still seems a little condescending that this piece of shit planet just carries on like nothing has happened. The tree leaves are dying. The sun rises and sets. The seasons come and go. All the while acting completely oblivious to the massive shitfest plaguing its soils. Maybe I should be grateful for the predictability. That at least one thing in my life is guaranteed. But as the auburn leaves are gracefully blown across what remains of Sina Lane; I can’t help but hate this unwelcome expectation.

My eyes follow the copper foliage, watching the vegetation land atop a maimed corpse. See, in reality the earth is just in denial. I don’t think it has anything to do with the fact that humans screwed up its ozone or polluted its waters. The world just doesn’t want to accept that we fucked it up so bad. So, it continues in its little charade, believing that everything is okay. When in reality, there are hundreds, if not thousands, of people being consumed by the living dead every day.

I find myself moving, feet accelerating on their own accord. It’s a slow pace I’m setting, and Levi has no trouble keeping up beside me. He doesn’t say anything as our footsteps echo off the black asphalt, allowing me this sense of solitude without the fulfillment of the word. I’m surprised that there aren’t more walkers carousing about the street. Last time I was here… fuck. I don’t want to evoke these tender thoughts that I’ve tried to convince myself don’t exist; but the memories are slamming into the front of my mind, filling my vision with her face. My ears with her screams. You could have saved her.

No, I couldn’t. There were too many… I couldn’t.

Your own mother.

My feet grant me pause as my fingers lift to rub at my temples, trying to ebb away the accusations of doubt running through my veins. A hand on my shoulder causes me to stiffen, too lost in my own world to remember that Levi is still here with me. Levi. Anxiety is plastered across his face, eyebrows pinched together in a concerned furrow. I attempt to smile, to convince him I’m okay. But I’m not. And he knows. The hand tightens on my shoulder, silently giving me the opportunity to leave this place. To forget it ever existed. To act like she didn’t die here.

But I can’t.

I have to face this. I want to say something cheesy, like it’s fate that I was led here; but I know that’s not the truth. If it wasn’t today, it would have been tomorrow. Eventually, my feet would have brought me back to this place. Back home. Can I even call it that anymore? This place that holds the key to these chains weighing down my heart. Is that really what a home is?

I glance around the remnants of my old neighborhood. It’s as disastrous as one could expect. Corpses line the streets, some trying to take a chance at that whole ‘second life’ shit. The houses look decrepit, wooden planks boarded to many of the windows. Lawns are overgrown; weeds making
many front yards resemble a Midwest prairie. I try to imagine what this looked like before. Before everything went to shit. Before… wait. I see it, mocking me in the middle of the street. Just where we left it.

My legs start to move mindlessly towards the object, shaking me of Levi’s concerned grip. It’s the only thing I see in the sordid street, its alabaster color acting as a beacon for my interest. I can hear a faint echo of Levi’s voice, but for some reason the only thing my mind is willing to focus on is this thing. This… this piece of shit that could have saved us. My nails begin to form angry crescents into the palms of hands I didn’t even realize were clenched. I want to kill it, punish it for abandoning us; but it was never alive in the first place. As I close in, a notice a walker is sitting nonchalantly against the side of the damn thing, further reminding me of the rage I feel towards the machine.

Towards this fucking car.

Both of the walker’s legs and one of its arms are missing, no doubt gnawed off by its brethren. My footsteps alert it of my presence, not that I am trying to be the least bit inconspicuous. Its head slowly lifts to turn in my direction, matted black hair framing its mutilated face. I take in the biter with a sneer of disgust. It’s literally been ripped to shreds; half of its face is missing, a jaw bone and muscle tissue protruding out from the visage. And if the rot is anything to go by, it’s been here a while. If I didn’t know any better, I wouldn’t even say I could distinguish it as a walker. I’ve seen hundreds of these creatures; but for some reason, this one sends a pang of vehemence through my spine. And I want to kill it. Its growl is a broken plead, begging me to come closer and sate its hunger. Arm outstretched, it fruitlessly grasps at the air, fingers curling into a deadly embrace. Its desire to feed fuels my rage, angry tears burning beneath my eyes. Something animalistic comes over me, and I snap.

Grabbing the zombie by its mutilated shoulders, I push it onto the asphalt below. I’m not even thinking about the consequences anymore. Hell, I’ve been bitten how many times now? One more isn’t going to make a single goddamn difference. It’s mewling on the ground, desperately trying to turn itself around. To eat me. But I encourage it. I help it. I need to see its face when I end its second life. As I yank at its arm to flip it around, I hear a gratifying pop as its shoulder dislocates. But that doesn’t hinder it. Oh no, the pain doesn’t even cross its mind. As I gaze into its dull, faded eyes only one thing bleeds through. Hunger. My lip curls into a disgusted sneer as I lift my boot above its face. Those jaws are snapping down, over and over. Hunger. And, suddenly, I want to make this… this thing feel every ounce of regret and sorrow that has ran through my blood. My fingers itch to plunge themselves deep into those wide, lifeless eyes, depriving it of it fake sense of humanity. I want to make it suffer, but I know that it can’t. My boot falls with a sickening crunch.

Retribution.

Is that what this? I’ve seen the word played out numerous times, but I’ve never felt it. Sure, something of the like poured into my veins when I slid that knife into Zackly’s back. Retribution. But that’s not the word for what I felt upon murdering the madman. Satisfaction. My boot stomps down again and again, reducing the twitching biter beneath me to nothing more than a dilapidated pile of mush; and I realize that I’m probably insane. Fingers are grasping my chin, and soon silver eyes are piercing through my homicidal daze. No, I’m like him. I’m like Levi. I remember the man doing this exact thing, this show of overkill, when we first met. So, are we both crazy?

No.

We’re desperate. And I’m not sure if that’s any better. We need a way to release this agony. This anger. There’s just so much pain in this world, and.. and you feel hopeless, because no matter what you do the world’s not going to change. It’s constant, remember? And maybe that’s why I hate it.
Because I know that these are the cards I’ve been dealt, and this shitty planet isn’t going to give me another hand. So, is it crazy to want to deal with this rage? To force it on something else? As his thumb begins to stroke the bottom of my chin, I realize that I’m overthinking this. Always fucking overthinking. I did want I had to do for us to survive. To protect him. I enjoyed killing Zackly because the man was a coldhearted sonofabitch who deserved so much more than the fate I granted him. And these… creatures. They have taken almost everything away from me. So, no. I’m not crazy.

I’m justified.

Levi’s hand finally drops from my face. “Are you okay?” That’s the million dollar question, isn’t it? Am I okay? I’m not… but for once, I’m accepting of that. That I can’t change this world, but I can do my damndest to survive in it. That these feelings coursing through my bones aren’t some sign of a mental breakdown. They tell me that I’m alive. That I’m still fighting.

I offer him another small smile, as I turn towards the destroyed vehicle. “Yeah.” Closing my eyes, fingers timidly graze the hood, the metal cool underneath my touch. They continue their quest across the cover until they encounter the windshield wipers, effectively ceasing their journey. My eyes flutter open, finally taking in the decrepit Lexus. There’s a crater in the side of the car, no doubt where the oncoming vehicle struck us in our attempt to flee. I wonder if the vehicle’s been stripped, but then my eyes notice it is missing a tire; and my question is answered. I silently chuckle; because this car was a piece of shit, and I highly doubt any of these parts took the thieves very far.

I know we should probably get a move on if we want to have any chance of meeting up with Erwin and Hanji; but for some reason, I feel like this is the last time I will be here.

I take a deep breath as I turn back to Levi, “I want to go home.” It’s an ambiguous statement, but the man doesn’t appear to be ready to offer any qualms. He probably realizes that this is therapeutic to me in some fucked up sense of the word. I take his lack of argument as a sign of agreement, and I begin to walk towards the house that I once called home.

Still call home.

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All the plants that used to surround our house are dead, wilting in the preliminary winter chill. I want to say that it looks the same as every other destroyed lawn in the neighborhood, but it doesn’t. She planted these. As I walk up the porch steps I wonder if I really came here to forget, or if I just wanted to further torture myself with her memory. It’s probably a little bit of both, because I apparently have some very serious self-harm tendencies that took a mother’s death to bring out of me.

The wooden planks creak under my weight as I traverse to the front door. It’s cracked open, and through the slit I can see the overturned bookshelf Mikasa had used as a barricade that fateful day. The house has probably been raided, because the space in between the fixture looks man made. My blood begins to boil as I think of someone rifling through our property, touching what doesn’t belong to them. It’s different now that I know the objects aren’t replaceable. Like my pictures. I almost killed Levi due to that simple fact that he touched them. I feel my jaw start to tighten thinking about what thieves have probably done with the articles we left behind.

The doorknob feels colder then I remember, the metal unforgiving and harsh against my palm. I pause as I twist the knob, contemplating if I really want to go through with this. Yes. I push my shoulder into the door, coaxing it the rest of the way open. It feels weird being back here after so long. Like I’m not welcome anymore. It really isn’t my home, is it? There’s an uneasiness that smacks me directly in the face as soon as I step through the threshold into the stuffy house. This isn’t
the same place I grew up in. The same home that sheltered me through eighteen years of life. This is something different. *Something foreign.*

My fingers drag along the walls of the entryway, trying to force some sort of familiarity into my fingertips. I hear the sound of heels clicking behind me, and soon the light emitted from the doorway is swallowed up by the shadows of the house. I assume that Levi has taken the precaution of shutting the front door, given that I am unintentionally throwing caution to the wind.

He still hasn’t said anything, and I’m unsure if he’s playing mute because he thinks I’ve lost it or if he is truly trying to give me space. I’m hoping for the latter, but I don’t care to ask. My breath hitches as my eyes encounter the face of my melancholy. It’s laying face-up on the floor, just waiting for me to pick it up. *No, this isn’t about her. She’s gone, Eren.* I wretch my gaze away from the image, but the scene I’m introduced to instead doesn’t fare any better on my mind. The living room is in total disarray. Tables are turned on their sides. Lamps lie shattered against the hardwood floor. Pictures have been ripped unceremoniously from their fixtures. Blood splatter stains the walls and floorboards with its ugly red. *Wait, blood?* My head whips around to Levi, because suddenly I’m thinking this was a terrible idea. We hardly have any means of protection; and here I am, walking blindfolded into a corner potentially surrounding myself with the enemy. *Stupid.*

“I… this was dumb. We can go.” My voice sounds cracked, regret and disappointment woven into the words. I don’t meet his eyes, because I know that nothing swimming in that charcoal gaze will assist this prodding feeling of unease in my gut. I see his shadow edge closer to me until he is standing directly across from my frame. I expect him to stop, to lay that ever assuring hand on my shoulder. But he doesn’t. He keeps walking. And suddenly, I’m mad; because this isn’t his house. I whirl around to face him, ready to unleash all the misplaced anger that has recently begun to boil in my veins. His back is to me; but it’s like I can see through him, see what object is in his hands.

I was mad, but now I’m irate.

Feet carrying me at an alarming pace, I reach out for him, gripping his shoulder with a cold hand. He is delicately cradling the brass frame, fingers tracing around the edges. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing? I said we are leaving.” I’m being irrational, I know. But right now I don’t want to resonate with any feeling besides this rage coursing through me. It feels right, this anger. Like it’s what I was born to emit. Levi raises a thin eyebrow up at me, and fuck if his act of skepticism doesn’t piss me off further. My eyes narrow into dangerous slits, that for once I’m sure radiate the feeling of vexation I am dying to release.

“Is English not your first language or something?” My voice is shaking, all that unrequited anger just a farce for the vulnerable boy shaking behind these words. Trying so hard to keep up this act of aggression. Levi doesn’t speak as he pushes the frame into my hands, simply accepting the pathetic excuse I have for spewing this venom at him. “… I don’t want this! I just w-want to leave. Can’t you just fucking listen to me? J-just listen to me…” I drop my head as I start to trail off into whispers, silently fighting the demons in mind that are telling me to shatter the frame against Levi’s skull. I try to tell myself that this picture isn’t that big of deal. That if Levi wants to fucking burn it and send its ashes across the sea, then so be it. But it’s of her. *Of my mother.* So, I guess it’s important. *Shit, it’s obviously important if it’s enough for me to bitch out Levi over.* She would be so disappointed in me, wouldn’t she? This isn’t the son she raised. If she saw how much my anger has consumed me, what would she say?

The rough pads of familiar fingers begin to rub across my cheeks, wiping away the remnants of tears I didn’t even know had fallen. Greens clash with greys as I raise my head to meet Levi’s sympathetic stare. It’s so stupid. This anger I keep locked inside. Every time I convince myself it’s gone it reappears like one of those goddamn whack-a-moles that mock you with every emergence. I want to
abolish it from my mind, exterminate this feeling that always leaves me feeling so fucking empty. But no matter what I do the bastard is always going to be lurking at the back of my head, waiting for an opportunity to consume my thoughts with its rage. And now I’ve dragged Levi into the crossfire; and… and he’s still here. Staring at me with those fucking eyes, silently telling me that he accepts my anger no matter how misdirected it is.

And I don’t deserve that.

He should be mad, fuming at my irrational behavior. Instead he’s content to receive this outburst, saddling it atop his back like some sort of emotional pack mule. I guess this is some sort of thanks for all those times I was his support, all those times I pulled him into my shoulder. It’s like a fucked up give and take with us, huh? And I don’t want this. I don’t want Levi to feel obligated to comfort me just because I’ve offered him a semblance of the word in the past. ‘I wanted to be your friend, Bright Eyes. Don’t doubt that.’ But that’s right, isn’t it? He wouldn’t be standing in front of me if this was just some guilt ridden attempt at comfort. Levi cares for me, and I need to stop forgetting that.

A distinctive sound of a truck engine shakes me out of my daze. *Fuck.* Trucks mean people, and people mean trouble. My eyes go frantic searching Levi’s face for answers. *What do we do?* Silver eyes have disconnected from my stare, opting to glance around the room for a possible solution to our steadily growing predicament. Suddenly, his gaze snaps back to me; and if the look in those overcast eyes is anything to go by, I’d say he’s found our answer.

“Closet?” My head nods rapidly up and down, mind running at a million miles an hour trying to remember where a goddam closet is. I don’t have to think long; because before I know it Levi has taken ahold of my hand, pulling me in the direction of (what I think is?) a closet. The frame slips from my grasp before I even have time to think about what is happening. Everything around me goes silent as I hear the glass shatter against the hardwood floor, sending crystal shards in every direction. An eternity seems to pass as I look upon the fallen object, the frame still bouncing against the floorboards, taunting me with every recoil.

I’m sorry.

I’m yanked out of my angst induced stupor when my back connects with the miscellaneous objects lining the shelves of the small closet Levi is attempting to shut us inside of. As his body begins to press against mine, I start to think that a closet may have not been the best choice for shelter. The light filters out as the door clicks shut, leaving us in complete darkness, save for the small sliver of white sliding in underneath the doorframe. I try to remember which closet this is, attempting to identify our location based on the objects surrounding us. My hand falls upon something… fluffy? Ah, the towel closet. Well, if worse comes to worse, I guess we can smother our assailants to death with the overpriced, embroidered handtowels my mother insisted on purchasing.

I realize that reminiscing on my mother’s compulsive purchases has made me forget that Levi’s entire body is pressing into me. I’m frozen, too scared that any movements I make will be heard by the intruders outside. *That and I may or may not be a little overwhelmed with Levi’s entire form laying on me.* The man notices the tenseness of my frame, and lets out an annoyed huff as he begins, “Fucking hell, brat, stop acting like I’ve wedged a stick up your ass. I’m not-” He is cut off by the loud squeaking of the front door being pulled open. Leaning up into my ear, he whispers, breath hot against my skin, “Don’t say a fucking word, Bright Eyes.” His lips brush against my lobe as I shake my head up and down, acknowledging his command.

“I can’t believe this is the only fuckin’ house that isn’t boarded up.” My fingers grip into Levi’s shirt as the gravelly voice echoes throughout the room. “And look, it’s fuckin’ trashed. Great.” Footsteps begin to draw closer to our location, and I feel myself begin to slightly tremble in Levi’s grip. A cold
grasp wraps around my own quivering hand, trying to soothe the anxiety plaguing my bones. I try to calm down, try to remember that as long as I listen to Levi that I will be okay.

I trust him.

Another voice pipes up, and I am beginning to wonder if it would be better to just surrender now or get caught later. “Shut the fuck up, and just look around already. Boss won’t like it if we come back empty handed again. You remember what happened to Tom, right?”

The footsteps stop, and I hear an aggravated scoff. “Tom was a fuckin’ idiot. That was a mercy killin’ if nothing else.”

“Whatever, just know I’m not covering for your sorry ass when Boss asks why you didn’t bring shit back.”

“Asshole.” The click of heels against the wooden floor picks back up, growing louder and louder. I tighten my hold on Levi, because I need a reminder of why I’m not going to leap out of this closet and bash these motherfuckers’ heads in. Deep breaths, Eren. Deep breaths. It used to be Armin’s voice in my ear when I imagined these words. Now, it’s Levi’s. Strong and profound, promising everything will be okay. I try to drown out the sounds of the thieves pilfering through my belongings, focusing on the rise and fall of Levi’s chest against mine instead. How he can be so calm right now, I’m not sure; but his composure is one of the only things keeping me in check. Should I be jealous of this simulated sense of tranquility? Jealous that I can’t will my body to do the same? I’d be lying if I said a hint of green didn’t pulsate through my skull. It’s like some venomous snake, this dependency. Tricking you into a life of full reliance until you can’t defend yourself anymore. I want to be the one to protect him, to tell him everything will be okay. But it’s always the opposite, isn’t it? I’m always the damsel in distress, freezing when push comes to shove. I feel sick as I twist my fingers further into the fabric of Levi’s shirt, trying to reassure myself that I’m not just some liability.

I hear a voice yell from another room. “Have you found anything, yet? This place is starting creep me out.”

The raspy voice from before is closer than ever, seemingly right in front of the closet door. “Not fuckin’ shit. Unless you want to count this picture as something.” My eyes widen as I think about what he’s probably holding in his hands. “Think I could get off to this? She’s pretty fuckin’ hot.” Levi’s grip on me tightens, begging me to stay calm. My arms are trembling under his grasp, and one of my hands has found purchase on the flimsy knife located under my waistband.

“She’s probably pretty fucking dead, asshole.” My fingers dig into the handle of the knife. I’m going to kill them. I’m going to fucking kill them all. I hear a loud sigh, “Shit, we are so fucked up aren’t we? Let me see the goddamn picture.” Footsteps reverberate throughout the room, signaling their departure from the front of the closet.

Levi’s breath is hot on my neck when he whispers, “Unless you want to get us killed, you need to calm down. I…” He takes in a deep breath, laying his forehead on my shoulder. “I know these people, recognize their voice; and they aren’t going to fuck around with your scrawny ass. You might think there’s only two of them, but I fucking guarantee you there’s more sitting pretty in that truck outside. You… you said you trusted me, right?” I nod my head up and down, still too infuriated to produce coherent sentences. His hand reaches up to cup my chin. “Then, prove it, Bright Eyes. Show that you trust me.” My grip falters on the knife handle, his words piercing through the rage filled haze that has tightened around me.

“See, I told you. Last time I saw eyes like that… Shit, could you imagine those things looking up at
“Shut the fuck up, Hugo. We need to finish securing this dump. You know how Boss’s patience is. Let’s run upstairs; hell, check under the beds and maybe your perverted ass will find something.”

The man chuckles, “I already found what I need.” I grit my teeth, pleading with my mind to ignore it. This depravity on her image. These people are monsters, fucking degenerate beasts. I would be doing the world a favor by ending their miserable existence. I want nothing more than to rip their throats out, letting their blood paint a picture of revenge across the floor. But I can’t. I have to stay calm; if not for my own well-being, then for Levi’s.

The sound of boots clicking against the stairs echoes throughout the room. Soon, Levi is pulling off of me in order to grab at the door handle. Before the man turns it however, he looks to me; overcast eyes burning. “Back door?”

“Y-yeah. Straight through the kitchen.” A strip of light sears the darkness of the closet as Levi cracks open the door. I grab onto the back of his jacket like a lost child who is being taken back to his parents. He pokes his head outside, charcoal eyes searching for danger in the human form. I assume the coast is clear when he tugs on my hand, and begins to pull me through the entryway. Levi looks frantic in the way he is trying to find the exit, that mask of calmness long gone. I take the lead, squeezing on his hand as I make my way to the back of the house. I’m passing the stairwell when I hear it.

The footsteps.

“Well, this was a waste of fucking time. Shit’s already been looted.” Shit, shit, shit. My eyes meet the piercing greys as I search Levi’s face for direction. Wait. This is my house. Breathe, Eren. I know what I’m doing. This is my house. This is my house. I yank on Levi’s hand, dragging him into the kitchen. I’m protecting you. I push him down behind the countertops, praying that those assholes didn’t see our retreat. “Boss is going to be so pissed.” I glance up at the ceiling, silently thanking Mr. Higher Power for not being a total dick. My hand is pressed against Levi’s chest, taut muscle ripping beneath my touch. I totally shouldn’t be fantasizing about how unremarkable Levi would be wit- No, Eren, you should be focusing on getting your ass out of here.

Ah, thank you conscience.

The motherfucker with my mother’s picture, Hugo, speaks up, “You checked the kitchen?” My breath hitches in my throat, blood running cold. Looking back up to the ceiling, I pray. Please. Just one thing. Just let this one thing go right.

“Yes, I checked the fucking kitchen. That’s the first place I looked, dumbass.” Thank you. My hand falls from Levi’s chest as my body relaxes into the floor… right into one of those fucking barstools that mom never wanted to get rid of. As it begins to tumble to the ground, I can’t help but think that I knew there was an underlying reason why I wanted these eyesores gone. It unleashes a fatal clank as metal collides with wood. There is a deathly silence rapidly filling the air. I know the men are still inside the house. I know it. The front door hasn’t opened. It hasn’t fucking opened. But wait. Did it even close? Thinking about it, I’m almost positive these assholes never shut the entrance. So, maybe they are gone. Yeah, maybe they-

Hugo clears his throat, “You sure you checked the kitchen?” Fuck, fuck, fuck. Levi yanks me into his chest, pulling out a gun he knows only has one bullet. The kitchen doesn’t have any walls, being partially surrounded by countertops. He aims the gun at the open space, waiting for one of the men to pass by. I should take out my gun, too; but it’s literally empty, my last bullet being used on a walker back by the wrecked Stohess. Maybe I should get it out anyways. Maybe it will intimidate them,
make them think twice about fucking with us. The quiver in Levi’s outstretched arm tells me otherwise.

The footsteps are coming closer and closer until- It breaks apart the repetitive sound ringing from the boots hitting the floor. And fuck if I’ve never been happier to hear it. The growl resonates from the front of the house, effectively halting the trek of the oncoming footsteps.

“Shit! What the fuck are they doing out there?” I’m pulled off the ground by Levi’s strong grip; because if there was ever a sign Mr. Higher Power was giving us a second chance to live, it’s this. We slip into a crouch, slowly moving behind the counters. I glance ahead and see the back door, white and shining like an unofficial beacon of hope.

The growling of the walker is muted by the slick sound of metal against flesh, and I can only assume that the men have incapacitated the creature. Suddenly, laughter fills the air; and a voice I’ve never heard begins to speak, “Fuck, that was good. Oh shit, you should have seen your faces!” Levi has almost reached the end of the countertop refugde when I hear the fighting begin.

“You could have gotten us killed, you fuck! Shit, you know what? Fuck you. Fuck you, asshole.” Hugo’s infuriated voice carries throughout the room, causing me to glance up above the countertops. There’s three of them now, all (from what I can tell) heavily armed. Fuck. “I’m done with this shit. You find your own fuckin’ supplies.” I see Hugo brush shoulders with the laughing man as he exits the house.

I sink back down behind the safety of the kitchen barricade, when I realize we’ve reached the end of the countertop. Levi turns a glance in my direction, questioning look in his eyes. I trust you.

I nod, hoping my words got through to him.

The man speaks up again, “He can’t take a fucking joke, I swear. C’mon, let’s get out of here.” Levi takes that as his signal, and begins to hobble over to the door. I follow close behind, not wanting to make the escape take any longer than necessary. His hand is on the silver handle, ready to free us from this hypothetical cage. His eyes, however, are fixated on the men, now in plain view, waiting for them to push open the front door. Levi is a lot smarter than I give him credit for. With all the shit that went down at Stohess, I guess his intelligence got swept under the mat so to speak. But, shit, I would have already busted through the door, anxious to leave. Levi is smart enough to realize the back door probably squeaks just as loudly as the front, and I silently applaud him for that.

Both doors open simultaneously, as we both prepare our leave. Levi silently jumps to his feet, ushering me to do the same. I clamber up, legs a little shaky from my crouch. I drift through the doorframe, Levi right behind me. As I go through I chance one final glance back, and-

No.

My blood freezes in my veins as the absolute worst scenario begins to roll over me. And I’m not sure whose eyes are wider: mine or the asshole currently staring at me from the doorway.

Chapter End Notes

First, I'm sorry for the delay. I really don't have an excuse besides the fact that I just didn't feel like writing. I knew exactly what was going to happen, but I could not get it into words. And I still feel like this isn't worded (?) right, but whatever. And sorry if this seems like a weird divergence from the plot, but I swear it's not. IT'S NOT I PROMISE.
Also, I wanted to have a lot of shit be inside Eren's house for him to rediscover, but then I thought of this... Anddd I thought this flowed better with his whole err.. angry at the world phase... That is not how I wanted to word it just fyi. He's pissed, but for a good fucking reason. There, that's more what I mean. Anyway, next chapter may/may not be up by Fri? I don't want to give a guarantee, because I have a lot of boring, adult shit to do this week. Tbh, I split this chapter up because I thought that it was throwing too much in one session. Anyway, sorry if this chapter's a bust; because I know I've read some stuff where Eren is overly angsty (if that is even a thing) to the point where it gets annoying. So, I'm really hoping it doesn't come off like that. He's an emotional little bastard in canon, and I didn't want to change that. Anyway, I've rambled enough. If you have any questions, ask away. I reply faster via Tumblr, but I don't mind answering them here.

Thanks for the kudos/comments! They are the light of my life, I swear :3

Tumblr:
fuzzyporcupine.tumblr.com

I'm still tracking the tag 'fic: what's eating you'. Hollaaaaa

If you spot any grammar mistakes, let me know!

FANMIX
ALL FANART
This link will probably be handy to have open in another tab tbh.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

I’ll admit that most of the time my assumptions are wrong. Like for instance, one time I thought that if I used Mikasa’s concealer to cover up my bruised cheek, mom wouldn’t notice that I’d gotten in my third fight of the school year. One chastising and ear pull later, I realized that my mother was a lot smarter than she looked. Or maybe I was just dumber. Either way, I think it was careless to assume that Levi and I were going to make it out of this unscathed. Staring into the unforgiving eyes of my potential killer, I’m pretty sure we’re going to die; and that Mr. Higher Power’s assistance in the kitchen was just some sick joke leading up to the real show. I should have seen this coming, considering the sneaky motherfucker Mr. Higher Power is. I probably shouldn’t condemn myself with this sacrilege just yet, considering the asshole standing in the front doorway hasn’t shot me dead. I’m pleading, begging that the man will act like I was never there. Like he never saw me. That is a longshot, and I know it. But fuck. If there was ever a time for my good luck to be restored, it’s now.

I see the man raise his gun, and I know it’s all over.

Any synonym for fear could probably describe what’s filling my eyes. Terror. Dread. All of these words are streaming into my emerald eyes, pulling at my dilating pupils. I wish I could be ashamed of this feeling coursing through my bones, but the only emotion I can identify with is this unabashed horror plaguing my body. I don’t want to believe it. That I am going to die. I’m still trying to convince myself that I’m going to live another day. And that’s stupid isn’t it? My mind says no, but I really would like to see it tell that to the pistol currently staring me down from across the house.

Is it bizarre that I haven’t accepted death yet? I mean, I might attempt to feed myself that bullshit. That false tolerance of loss. But, deep down, I know that it’s all just some well-conceived lie I pull to soften the blow. I never accepted it when my mother was dragged from my arms. When Thomas was ripped apart like a present on Christmas morning. When Mike reached out for help, but was rewarded with a crude display of his entrails instead. Fuck, I can’t accept it. I won’t accept it. This world is cruel, but it’s the world I’m living in. I’m not ready to die, and I’m unsure if it’s my own death or Levi’s that scares me more. A flash of black hair pulls my vision away from the front entrance and onto the man, whose hand has slithered around my wrist in an attempt to drag me away from the place I used to call home.

Suddenly, the man in the doorway falters as his body jerks with what I can only assume is surprise. He slowly drops his hand, lowering the gun. What? I’m not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, but why? Seconds prior this man looked ready to put a bullet in between my eyes, and now he is having second thoughts? Maybe this is Mr. Higher Power’s way of saying I’m sorry for being a dick. Yeah, and secretly this is all just one fucked up dream, and when I wake up I’ll have one hell of a story to tell my mom.

I doubt it.

As the back door shuts, I can see him through the glass. Still standing in the doorway, the man is
staring at me wide-eyed, gun hanging limply at his side. The bastard’s making no moves to come after us, evidently lost in the surprise we bestowed upon him. And, honestly, he can stay missing forever if it means Levi and I can make a safe escape. I try to forget about the thief as Levi tugs harder on my wrist and begins to pull me through the backyard. This is all too good to be true. Soon, I’m going to hear the shot, feel the pain; and all of this will come crashing down on top of me in a bold show of blood and tears.

We make it out of my old backyard, and I am starting to think that this guy better be a good fucking shot if he plans on downing us. There’s an anxiety streaming through my blood unlike anything I’ve felt before. It’s not the premise of death that causing this sickness within me. It’s the unknowing. The uncertainty if the next step is going to be my last. As the leaves crunch under the heels of my boots, I realize that it doesn’t matter. That I shouldn’t be filling my head with these venomous thoughts. I should be focusing on living. *On surviving.* Didn’t I say I was going to fight? This isn’t like me, this spinelessness. A new sense of valiance passes through me like a drug. *Protect him.* My eyes rove across the dark undercut ahead of me, and something sharp strikes me in the chest.

*Protect him.*

Suddenly, my fight or flight kicks in, and I am pushing with every ounce of strength to further myself from the building. That’s it. *This* is who I am. That dumbass that never gives up even if defeat is imminent. My legs are carrying me faster than I ever thought possible as we start to sprint through the decrepit subdivision, houses becoming faded blobs in the corners of my eyes. I ignore the burning in my thighs as another home blurs past me. The only thing running through my mind is the need to survive. *To live.*

*Live, Eren.*

I slide my hand down to interlock with Levi’s as we dart past a small group of walkers. I hear the echoing moans as we distance ourselves from the monsters, and I’m tempted to turn around and see if the biters are following us… no, if the humans are following us. But I’m too engrossed in this desire to live to try and make space for the anxiety. *Live, Eren.* That’s the only thing that matters, right? That I can see another day. *That we can see another day.* My hand squeezes Levi’s. *Right.*

I’m not sure how far we’ve ran, but it’s enough to make my lungs start to itch with discomfort. *I can’t stop. Live, Eren. Live.* I focus on the man in front of me, attempting to will away all the doubt my mind is trying to surge through my body. That isn’t me, remember? But, suddenly, we are stopping, and all of the recent exertions I’ve placed on my body come back to bite me in the ass. I’m heaving, breath coming in short, painful gasps. Levi releases my hand as I bend over to grasp at my knees. I would say that I am out of shape, but then I glance up to see that we’ve just ran across my entire neighborhood. *Shit.*

I chance a glance at Levi, hoping that during the course of our run he came up with some sort of plan. One look at him gives me my answer. He’s running his hands frantically through his hair, fingers twisting into the raven locks. I can’t see his eyes, as he has them squeezed shut; but I imagine that gazing into Levi’s distressed stare would only confirm my suspicions. I want to question why he is acting so irrational, but then again we did almost meet our maker in the form of a lead bullet.

Strings of obscenities are falling from his thin lips, making his state seem that much more agitated. Finally, his eyes open. Silvers search me out as they finally come to rest on my form. The wild hysteria that was cursing his actions seems to almost dissipate as soon as I lock into his stare. This is why we need each other, isn’t it? Because whether we want to acknowledge it or not, we keep each other from straying off the path of sanity. And I don’t know if that’s a good thing or not. I’ve had this conversation with myself a million times already, and I realize that no answer will ever be good
enough. But staring into those fucking silver eyes makes every doubt I had about this misplaced dependency fly right out the window. And I don’t care. I probably should, because things like this only come back to bite you in the ass. But I don’t. Let me see fire; let me see death. But, Christ, just let me see those overcast eyes and it will all be okay. And fuck if that’s not the weirdest thing my mind’s ever conjured.

I just… I just need him. Because when I look at Levi I don’t think of pain, of agony. Everything is washed away by the fact that he is still here. He’s still here with me. And in a world where being alone is more terrifying than the flesh eating monsters walking the streets, that companionship is all that matters. ‘You’re not alone.’ Levi’s words jump around in my mind, leaving a fire of simmering emotions in their wake. My lips upturn into a smile, because even with the world crashing down around us, those words make it all seem like everything is going to be alright. And maybe this is all just some disillusioned idea that has taken up residence in my brain, but I don’t give a shit. I’ll live in this fucking up fantasy. I’ll bear the weight this disease ridden planet forces upon me. As long as I’m not alone.

When I die, the one thing I want answered is why Mr. Higher Power felt the need to grant me with the social abilities of a moose. Because, as I hold Levi’s stare, I don’t know what to do. I know what I want to do, but acting on my first thought doesn’t usually work out for me. He is probably mad at me, anyways for dragging him on this bizarre journey of acceptance. Hell, I don’t blame him. If anything, I mirror his feelings; because to be honest, I’m a little disappointed in myself, too. I really don’t know what I was expecting coming back to that house. Closure? Probably. And even though I want to stand strong with my opinion that this detour was a total waste, I can’t. Because, for the first time in weeks, my mother’s face is not lying in wait at the back of my mind.

“You okay?” Levi’s words pull me out of my self-loathing daze and into a sea of grey. That ocean of uncertainty and regret is washing over me in a hideous wave; and suddenly, every ounce of repentance that Levi’s holding inside his gaze is being swallowed up by my beacons of green. And I don’t understand. Why is he feeling guilty? None of this was his fault. It was only due to my own selfish desire that we ended up in the scramble for survival. But maybe that’s just Levi. Maybe he is going to constantly attempt to saddle all of the blame; because at the end of the day, that’s what he feels is right. The right thing. And that’s bullshit. Because since when do right and wrong even exist anymore? It’s live or die. Nothing else.

“Y-yeah.” I run my fingers through my mop of tangled brown hair, trying to ignore this pang in my chest that’s telling me this is all wrong. And I’m honestly not sure what it’s referring to; but I don’t think I really want to know. Is it cowardly to want to feel ignorant of some things? I’d like to think that it isn’t, but fuck if I know anything about this world anymore.

Taking me for my word, Levi begins to walk away towards the road. With every step he takes that pang hits me harder. That feeling that something isn’t right here. And I should say something. Tell him to stop and help me understand what is going on. But I don’t. And it’s not that I don’t want some answers; but… but it’s that I’m too scared to hear them. Too scared that they will somehow fuck up my world further, if that’s even possible. So, am I just going to be content with this unsettling sense of dread that has taken residence in my heart?

Yes.

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“We’re going to fucking starve if we don’t find something to eat soon.” Levi’s tone is chipped and annoyed, the hunger obviously taking its toll. I want to stay optimistic and argue that it’s not been that long since our last meal, but my growling stomach says otherwise. We used up the last of our
rations hours ago, and even then, the food only consisted of a couple of stale jerky strips. Fuck, who would have thought there would be a day when I would be lamenting the loss of tasteless jerky? Meh, I guess the same person who thought the walking dead would eventually rule the world.

I bump shoulders with him, “We’ll find something, eventually, Grouch.” A smile spreads across my face as Levi raises a curious eyebrow.

“Tch, you’re such a brat.” There’s a smirk playing at the corners of his lips, dissolving any malice in the words. Gazing at the man makes me wonder where we stand. And shit, I know that should probably be the least of my concerns right now; but for some reason, when my eyes roam over that pale complexion, it’s the only thing I can think of. But fuck if I know how to bring the whole thing up. Asking would probably be a good start, Eren. My hand rubs anxiously against the back of my neck, silently willing my conscience to shut the fuck up. If I know anything about… uh, relationships, it’s that you can’t just pop these questions on each other. But, then again, I don’t know jackshit about relationships, so that assumption is probably all wrong.

“You lived here. Don’t you know where we could make a run?” Levi’s question pulls me back into the reality that is the zombie apocalypse. He’s staring at me intently, thin eyebrow still raised. And shit, I’m glad at least one of us still has our priorities in check.

“Uh… there were a couple of shops near town, but nothing special.”

“Was there a super market, gas station?”

“I think so, but—”

“Then it’s fucking special.” I sigh as I drop my gaze, hands stuffing themselves into the pockets of my hunting jacket. To be honest, I don’t want to go on any more runs. It’s too dangerous; and now, with Levi becoming such an important role in my life, I have too much to lose. I know I’m being selfish, but all it takes is one mistake and your house of cards will come tumbling down in a huge chaotic mess. And, truthfully, I don’t think my mentality could take it if something happened to Levi. That’s why this bond of reliance is so fucking deadly, because if one of us falls, the other follows. “We’ll be okay, Bright Eyes.” I turn to meet Levi’s sympathetic stare, those silver eyes still emitting an unknown guilt. Honestly, I’ve given up trying to hide my emotions, but did I ever really start in the first place? It’s like I’m made of glass, and Levi can stare straight through me. Heart on your sleeve, remember? Right.

I don’t answer him with words; but instead with another smile, trying to convince him I’m alright. I know Levi doesn’t buy it, the twitch in his brow speaking volumes. But he doesn’t say anything, opting to let me stay in my stupor. A silence ferries down upon us as our boots smack against the asphalt below, and I am unsure if it is comfortable or not. Part of me wants to argue with the man, plead with him to just test our luck in the woods. But the other half of me, the more sensible part, understands that we won’t have a fighting chance in the forest until we find some decent weaponry. I drop my head as I begin kicking rocks across the road. It’s juvenile, I know; but right now, I just want something to distract me from the feeling of impending doom looming over my head. And, shit, I think that I’m being just a little too overdramatic.

“Oi, brat, I think we’ve got something.” I look up from the asphalt, and sure enough, there are a few scattered buildings slowly appearing in the horizon. Without the distraction of the rocks, my mind is free to delve back into the venomous fear of dying, of losing Levi. I hear said man breathe out a heavy sigh, and I can only assume that my trepidation has become palpable. “I never thanked you.”

What?
My head whips around to face Levi, brow furrowed in confusion. The man picks up on my bewilderment, and starts again, “You saved my life, you little shit.”

Oh.

Green eyes drift down to the ripped sleeve of my jacket, teeth marks marring the skin below. My fingers instinctually wrap around the bite in some act of insecurity. I frankly don’t want to be having this conversation, as it only proves to remind me that I almost let him die. That I got Mike killed. My eyes clamp shut as the memory of the terror that seemed so foreign on his complacent face haunts my mind. I’m sorry. I know that I could apologize a million times over, and nothing will have changed; but deep down I feel that somewhere in that void of death, Mike has to hear my confessions. Or, maybe I’m just hopelessly rattling off these apologies to an asshole of a deity I call Mr. Higher Power. Probably.

I mutter under my breath, silently wanting this conversation to end, “You don’t have to thank me.” My gaze redirects to the ground, watching my boots trudge forward in their repetitive motions. I hope that Levi will take my short answer as I hint that I don’t want to talk about this. Be reminded of this. I hear him scoff, and I realize that wish was too much to hope for.

“You’re being serious, aren’t you?” There is a mocking tone in his voice, full of question and incredulity. These wounds have already been ripped open by his reminder of my mistake. Now, he’s just pouring salt into the wound; and I’m not sure if he is purposefully doing this or not. I don’t understand Levi’s way of dealing with things like this, and I probably never will. “Do I need to remind you again that you saved my fucking life, or do you like acting so goddamn complacent?” I stop in my tracks and whip my gaze around to meet those silver eyes, and suddenly, I’m seeing red; because I am anything but complacent about this situation.

“Fuck you, Levi.” My uninjured hand curls into a fist, begging for a chance to connect with the shorter man’s jaw. “You… you don’t know a goddamn thing about me!” Levi’s looking at me through a narrowed glare, lip slightly twitching. I can’t decipher the emotions smearing across his face, but I hope that anger is one of them. Fuck the short bastard if he thinks that I am trying to be arrogant about saving his life. It was my fucking fault he almost died. Let him be mad, because bless, I don’t want this undeserved gratitude. I want someone to tell me I screwed up, to tell me it was my fault. And fuck, if I can think of one beneficial reason for this desire. Because you’re fucked up, Eren. For once, I don’t disagree with my conscience.

“I know you.” Levi’s voice sounds controlled, and uneasily so. Like he is trying so hard to not explode, and that’s not what I want. I want his rage, his anger. I need to feel something besides this overwhelming sense of regret. “I know that this isn’t you.” He gestures to me with his hands like I’m some showcase up for auction. “You’re a stubborn little shit, but this fucked up denial isn’t you. That isn’t the bright-eyed little bastard that I know.” His speech pierces me; and before I know it, my breathing has regulated into a normal pace. I wish I could be mad, but his words have deflated my anger like a balloon. It’s probably because I know he’s right. Know that I shouldn’t be harboring these feelings of guilt. My fist slowly unclenches, palm lying limp against my side.

Dropping my gaze, I start, “… I have to protect you.” The sound of Levi’s breath hitching in his throat causes my stare to pull back to the man; and as soon as I meet his eyes, I feel it. Not the guilt. Not the anger. But the need to be at his side. It rushes through by bones like a sea of emotion, filling my senses with its uncontrollable stream of sentiment. His fingertips connect with my wrist; and before I can pull back, he has pulled up my sleeve, exposing the bite. I try to disconnect from his grip, but my attempt is so weak that it’s almost like I want to stay in his grasp. But that’s just it, isn’t it? As I feel his thumb begin to stroke the vein of my wrist, I realize that this is so much deeper than just some schoolboy crush. And I don’t want to voice it, because I’m scared; and I think that maybe
if I just keep these feelings locked up, they will cease and desist. He’s studying the white bandaging surrounding the bite, and I can’t help but feel awkward and exposed under his watchful gaze.

“I’m supposed to protect you, dumbass.” His charcoal eyes have flicked up to meet mine, and fuck if that feeling has never been more prevalent. There is a silence that’s fallen upon us, and I am pretty sure that Levi is waiting for me to break it. But what can I say? I could try and describe to him the streaks of emotional lightening storming in my chest, but I know that half of what I’m feeling will get lost in translation. There are no words for this sensation. For this phenomenon. “Thank you.” It takes me a moment to digest his words; but when I do, the aftermath is something sensational. And I probably sound completely out of touch getting so overworked from two words. But I feel like many people haven’t had the opportunity to hear that appreciation fall from his lips.

That feeling blossoms into something totally different when Levi lifts my arm to place a chaste kiss beside the bandage. And, suddenly, there is a fluttering in my heart that I am not sure I ever want to leave. I’m left speechless, even though I know nothing coherent would be escaping my lips anyway. I never realized what people meant by ‘it’s the simple things in life that matter’. But I want to say that I get it now. That just a simple peck against my skin makes me feel better than a truck load of peanut butter, and that is a pretty big damn deal. I feel the stain of red plaster itself across my cheeks as Levi pulls away from my arm. There’s a smug smirk on his face, like the bastard just stuck his hand in the hypothetical cookie jar. I wish I wasn’t flustered so easily, but blame that on the fact that I caught Jean and Marco buck ass naked in my bed. I shudder thinking about how many times I had to wash those sheets.

I push at his shoulder in a mock show of anger. How a few words managed to completely defuse my rage and guilt, I’m not sure. Maybe it’s because it’s him. Because it’s Levi. The man makes to continue towards the town, boots clicking on the street. The clearing of my throat stops him, as he slowly turns back around to face me.

“You’re welcome, asshole.”

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It is a shock to see that the town isn’t as beat to shit as I expected. Besides the occasional corpse and the boarded up windows, you wouldn’t think that the zombie apocalypse was in effect. There are only three buildings in the vicinity, and I can only distinguish one of them. A gas station. And fuck, if nothing ever looked holier. My stomach starts to growl at the promise of the food that is hopefully still inside. Honestly, I couldn’t give two shits if the snacks have been expired for months. I’m starving, and right now, I would even settle for that stale jerky. And that’s saying a lot.

“Once we’re inside, we stick together. Got it?” I nod my head, acknowledging Levi’s order. Stay together. Stay safe. I try to push out all this fear of once again ending up alone, but I can’t. And, somehow, I think that’s probably a good thing. It sounds crazy, but don’t I need to feel at least an inkling of unease? I mean, that makes me human. It means I am still alive. And, as cheesy as that sounds, I’ll accept it.

We reach the entrance of the gas station, my hand shaking slightly around the handle of the knife. The windows are boarded up, but there are still small cracks in between the pieces of wood. Levi takes the liberty of looking between these spaces, checking for any walkers inside the store. Apparently satisfied that he does not see any biters, he begins to tap against the window with the handle of his axe, creating a reverberating symphony of bangs within the station. Seconds pass, and there is still no movement from within the store. Taking a deep breath, he grabs onto the metal handle of the glass door. So far, so go-

Suddenly, a bloodied walker slams itself against the door, broken nails clawing at the glass. The
desperation in its eyes sickens me as it drags its mangled arms across the entrance, blood smearing on
the glass. I turn my gaze to Levi, searching his face for an answer to this deadly problem in front of
us.

“Get back, Bright Eyes.” No. No, I’m not letting him handle this alone and risk getting bit. If anyone
should take this thing out it’s me. I’m fucking immune, goddammit. My hesitation doesn’t sit well
with Levi, and his eyes narrow into dangerous slits. “Back the fuck up. You said you trust me, so do
it.” I’m calling bullshit on that, because having my trust doesn’t mean I agree with every decision. It
angers me that he’s trying to use that extension of myself to manipulate me. And, if anything, it
makes me more reluctant to move.

“I can’t turn. You can. Let me help.” Levi’s angry glare falters, realizing I’m not going to relent.

Letting out a deep sigh, he pulls out his axe. “Fucking brat… If you want to help, then you distract
the fucking thing and I’ll kill it. Is that peachy enough for you?” Asshole. I roll my eyes as I step
back from the door. Nodding my head, I motion for Levi to unleash the walker.

The door creaks open with an eerie squeak. Levi immediately pulls the door over his body, shielding
himself from the walker. And that’s my cue. “Hey, you ugly piece of shit! Come over here! My
thighs are really juicy!” The biter becomes enraptured by my voice, slowly sucking itself into our
trap. It’s movements are clumsy, feet moving forward in awkward motions. “Yeah, that’s right you
fucking abomination. Come to daddy.” Its arms are swinging wildly in the air, fruitlessly trying to
connect with my flesh. Suddenly, the walker goes frigid as its skull begins to split into two different
directions. As the walker drops, Levi’s form appears behind it, an amused look plastered across his
face.

“Daddy, huh?”

What?

I give him a confused look, but it only takes seconds for it to click. My eyes widen as I realize what
he is referring to. “It’s not like… I mean-”

“Hey, I’m not judging you. Whatever makes your rocket soar is none of my business… daddy.”
Thin lips have risen into a self-satisfied smirk, and I can only imagine what kind of horrific red is
covering my face.

The embarrassment helps me find my voice, “You’re… you’re… I don’t do that! I’m not into
whatever that is… fucking pervert.” I shoulder past him, ready to just get what we came for. I stick
my head into the entranceway, cautiously glancing around the store. Suddenly, a familiar voice is in
my ear.

“I was just joking, Bright Eyes. I wouldn’t have even said it if I’d known you’d get so worked up.
But I have to admit… your face was priceless.” Whatever, asshole. I’m not angry, but the
embarrassment still coloring my cheeks is making me reconsider the emotion. “Plan’s still the same.”
And just like that, Levi is back into survival mode, all previous shenanigans lost to the wind. I nod in
silent agreement, because that’s the only passive aggressive thing I can do right now without
compromising the mission.

The gas station is small, no bigger than my old living room. The aisles look like they have been
mostly untouched, give or take a few dozen candy bars on the ground. Wait, what? My mouth
waters at the thought of eating anything so sweet. It’s been months since I’ve had anything that
didn’t taste stale or flavorless, and the idea of chocolate melting in my mouth has me shaking in
anticipation. I reach down to grab a couple and shove them in my pack. Levi notices and releases an
almost silent chuckle from his lips. What can I say? I’m still technically a teenager; and if he knew any better, than he would realize that we used to live off this stuff. That and energy drinks, but I highly doubt I will find any consumable ones in here.

We shuffle to the back of the small station, glancing carefully throughout the aisles. Finally, it’s clear and I am free to partake in the world treasure that is chocolate. I hastily rip open the packages of one of the bars, the succulent smell of expired sweetness filling the air. I shove the entire thing in my mouth, because I honestly don’t give a shit about savoring it. And- *holy shit.*

I spit the chocolate on the floor, scrapping my tongue against the rough material of my hunting jacket. “You’re fucking disgusting.” Levi’s staring at me, lip upturned in a repulsed sneer.

“ Fucking coconut. Out of all the candy bars I grab, it’s the one with fucking coconut in it.” That sneer turns to one of amusement as that infamous smirk creeps back onto his face. “Don’t laugh, asshole.” My words are not enough to conquer the mischievous grin that is slowly pulling at his lips. I narrow my eyes at him in an attempt to quell his amusement, but obviously my glare is as intimidating as a toothless walker. *I’ll remember this, you short bastard.*

“It’s getting dark; and as fun as it is to watch your dumbass, we need to find some shelter for the night. I don’t know about you, but those buildings looked pretty fucking inviting.” I scoff as I gather more food to stuff in my pack, this time eyeing the ingredients carefully. *Fucking coconut. I knew there was a reason I fucking hated you.*

“Impressive. I didn’t think you could find anything edible in this shit.” I narrow my eyes at him in an attempt to quell his amusement, but obviously my glare is as intimidating as a toothless walker. *I’ll remember this, you short bastard.*

Soon, my pack is full of junk food and water bottles, the perfect apocalyptic meal. I have yet to attempt consummation of another candy bar, and I would be lying if I said that fucking coconut disaster didn’t scare me off the path of chocolate deliciousness. *Whatever.* I sigh as I opt to save my candy for the morning, because what’s a better wakeup call than chocolate? *Exactly.*

“You ready?” Levi’s looking at me over one of the aisles, and I’m almost tempted to make a crack at asking if he’s on his tiptoes, but I decide that I value my life a little more than that. Nodding in acknowledgement, we make for the front entrance and prepare to step out into the cold. It’s bizarre how fast the winter is coming on us, and I’m honestly a little nervous as to how we plan to survive. Winters in Shiganshina have never been unusually harsh, but I am not necessarily putting all my eggs in one basket that Mr. Higher Power will choose to not fuck us over this year. Either way, it’s going to get colder, and I wish that Levi and I had a definite plan of action on how we are going to combat the chill. *Shit, I sound like Armin.*

As we step back out of the gas station, I notice that Levi was right. The sun is beginning to drift towards the horizon, summoning the beginnings of nightfall. My vision roves over the remaining two buildings, trying to decide which one looks less life threatening. I’m not given a choice as Levi begins to walk across the street to a large, boarded up building. As we reach the complex, I see blood sprayed across the side of the structure. Yeah, this already looks promising. The door is shut, and Levi reaches to jimmy the handle only to find it unlocked. We shuffle inside, the pre-winter chill biting at our heels.

I don’t know what I expected when I walked in here, but it sure as hell wasn’t a dance studio. In contrast to its exterior, the inside of the building is practically spotless. No blood. No walkers. I guess this goes to show you can’t judge a book by its cover… or that I really need to stop with the cheesy inspirational quotes. There are three rectangular windows allowing the orange glow from the setting sun to reflect in the ceiling high mirrors of the studio. It’s nice. This little piece of tranquility. I set my backpack down; and walk over the mirrors, running my fingertips along the wooden balance bar connected to the wall. A sense of longing washes over me as I try to remember when life was simple. When things like dance studios weren’t obsolete. When survival wasn’t the number one concern. My
fingers tighten around the bar as I realize that I can’t. That even if I think of the time before the walkers, that memory is associated with something disastrous, deadly. Glancing in the mirror, I take in the boy named Eren Jaeger.

My hair’s grown without Mikasa here to keep it trimmed and tidy. My fingers play with the ends of the brown locks, wrapping them around the ends of my fingertips. I need to cut it. I’m going to cut it. A heavy sigh releases from my lips as my hands find purchase on my cheeks, wiping at the dirt that’s accumulated there. I’m filthy, and I almost wish that I’d never had a goddamn shower at Stohess. Because now the only thing wrapping around my mind is how that hot water would feel against my skin. God, I’m a mess, and not just in my appearance. My fingers drop from my face to reconnect with the wooden bar. Dropping my head, I stare at the floor as the weight of the world tries to press down upon my shoulders. Suddenly, fingers are softly tracing over the nape of my neck. I’m startled as I look up to find Levi standing beside me, his hand still clutching at me. Seconds pass as we hold each other’s stare, and I am beginning to feel a little awkward, those silver eyes unforgiving in their gaze. Then, he leans in, breath hot against my ear.

“Dance with me.”

What?

My hands falter on the bar; and before I know it, I have stumbled forward, my fingers gripping at Levi’s shirt. I quickly drop my grasp and attempt to back away from the man. But Levi’s hands reach out and find residence on my waist, pulling me back into him. My cheeks are flushed a bright red, and I am positive that the color is not going to fade anytime soon. “W-what?” I attempt to sound eloquent and together, but if my face didn’t show my embarrassment, my speech certainly does.

“Dance with me.” The man repeats it so matter-of-factly; like he’s asking if I had a good night’s sleep, or if I need any extra ammunition. Not if I want to fucking dance with him. I glance down at Levi and I am shocked to see the light dusting of pink painting his pale cheeks. Well, if anything, at least I’m not the only one embarrassed by this. I squirm in his grip again, but not hard enough to actually escape. It’s like I am playing some game with myself. Trying to tell my mind that I don’t want this… when in reality, it is one of the only things I do want. Do I not deserve this? This chance at happiness? The guilt trying to worm its way back into my mind says no, but a greater power inside me is slaying that beast. Pushing it back down into the toxic depths from which it arose. In its place is a sense of forgiveness, of acceptance. And I know what I want.

And… and it’s him.

I relax in his arms, allowing him to loosen his hold around my waist. “We don’t have any music.” There’s a playful glint in his eye as he takes in my statement. I raise an eyebrow, tempting him to challenge me with a response.

“I’ll take care of that, Bright Eyes.” Suddenly, his touch is leaving me; and I am immediately missing the feeling of the fire underneath his palms. He pulls off his jacket, carefully folding it before laying it against the wall. He moves behind me before I can move to do the same, his hands pulling the fabric off my shoulders. Once the offending material is off, he gives my jacket the same treatment, sitting it adjacent to his own. Suddenly, his hand finds mine and begins to pull me towards the center of the dance floor. The dying sunlight has conjured the perfect spotlight for us, the orange glow highlighting the center of the stage. Levi looks up at me, silver eyes burning. “Do you know how to dance?”

“No.” I answer quickly and honestly, because I can think of nothing worse than being called out on some false bravado. Well, I can maybe think of a few things.
“Me either.” He offers me a small smirk as he wraps his hands around mine. “I guess just follow my lead.” He gives me a slight shrug before throwing his arms around my neck, causing our chests to collide. It’s anything but graceful, the way Levi is maneuvering my body to fit his needs. But eventually we get there with my hands clutching at his waist and his arms pulling around my neck. He leans his head against my shoulder as he begins to rock back and forth, slowly creating our own rhythm in the middle of the dance floor. Then, he starts to sing.

“I wanna be your vacuum cleaner. Breathing in your dust.” My steps falter, because that’s probably one of the most ridiculous lines I’ve ever heard. Levi notices my misstep, breath hitching against my neck. His head furrows deeper into my shoulder as he continues, “If you like your coffee hot, let me be your coffee pot.” I don’t care how unreasonable the lyrics are, for some reason I am becoming entranced by them, by his voice. I’m honestly not sure which it really is. Either way, this is so… intimate. This moment. And I don’t want it to ever end. I could spend a lifetime wrapped in these strong arms, forever swaying to this outlandish song. As long as it’s Levi singing it to me.

“You call the shots, babe. I just wanna be yours.” This time, it’s my breath that gets stuck in my throat. And, suddenly, the room is feeling too large and too small all at once. I don’t know if these are just some eccentric lyrics or some sort of confession. I’ve never been good with this, and that’s obviously not going to change as I continue to dance in the ebbing sunlight with Levi. “Secrets I have held in my heart are harder to hide than I thought.” My chest tightens, that feeling ready to rip out of my body and take on its own form. “Maybe I just wanna be yours.” My eyes widen, and it clicks. Everything, all of this, it fits together in my mind like one of those puzzles that took way too fucking long to solve. That’s Levi, isn’t it? That man full of mystery and questions, so impassive and unrevealing… except, that is not him at all. Yeah, his personality is a goddamn puzzle, but underneath the mask is a man so full of compassion and affection. It just gets lost in translation, using that shield of aloofness to cast away anyone who dares to get too close. And yet here I am. Pressed against his chest, muscles rippling with every turn. “I wanna be yours.”

I feel his head slowly lift off of my shoulder, and I am given all the time in the world to stop this, to not meet his gaze. But I don’t. Levi’s eyes pierce into me, conveying every ounce of admiration flowing through his body. I’m not positive if the look in his eye is lust or something else entirely, but the way he is pinning me down with that stare is making me forget to even care. “I wanna be yours.” The words are a whisper on his lips, barely audible if not for the close proximity we are sharing. I want to say something, but fuck if anything intelligent will be exiting from my vocal cords. We’ve stopped swaying, opting to instead get lost in this intimate connection of greys and greens. Levi is the first one to break the stare, charcoal gaze flicking back and forth between my eyes and my lips. Before I know it, I find myself doing the same thing. And, suddenly, I realize that I’ve never noticed how unbelievably enticing Levi’s mouth is… and fuck, that sounded really awkward. The man notices my staring, and proceeds to pull his bottom lip in between his teeth, white squares massaging the skin below. His hands begin to roam through the fine hairs at my nape, adding a slight pressure to my neck. My eyes flicker up to meet his, and fuck if those overcast eyes have ever looked more beautiful, shining in the orange glow of our impromptu spotlight. I feel the hands behind my neck begin to add a little more weight in an effort to pull me closer. And, wait, when did we become so close? His head starts to tilt as his eyes once again begin to alternate in their gaze between my eyes and lips. “Wanna be...” It’s like my body has a mind of its own, because I’m suddenly slanting my own head to coordinate with Levi’s steady approach. And I wish I could just finish the deed and close the distance, but I’ve appropriately forgotten how to breathe. He chances one more glance at me before he finishes the line, breath hot against my lips. “… yours.” I close my eyes. And I know what’s coming, but nothing could have prepared me for it.

It’s like tasting the forbidden fruit, the way his lips feel against mine. And unlike everything else in our lives, this is not frantic. It’s paced and perfect, allowing us to savor in this desire. I want to open
my eyes, see if he’ll be doing the same; but somehow I know he is just as lost in this as I am. His nose brushes against my cheek as he deepens the kiss, fingers weaving further into my hair. And, suddenly, I realize I’m just standing there like some idiot who’s never been touched. Hands shaking, I trace the outline of Levi’s back, memorizing every contour, every curve. I roughly pull him into me, causing our teeth to clank together. And I want to be mortified, but everything is swept away by the fact that we are still connected. Levi gently bites down on my bottom lip, the act making my heart race faster than I thought humanly possible. He’s breathing heavily, and I can feel the air entering my lungs like a second soul. This is all too unreal. Too unbelievable. Any minute now, I am going to wake up on the auburn forest leaves with a stomach full of disappointment. Suddenly, the pressure is gone from my lips. Yeah, any minute now.

“Eren,” My eyes slowly open, scared to face the cruel reality that is only seconds from hitting me in the face. But what I awake to isn’t the tree leaves. Not the dying fire. But Levi. And, for the first time, he’s smiling. Big, wide, and full of teeth. It almost seems awkward on that usually impassive face, but I can’t help but think that it makes him so much more beautiful. And, just like that, I’m wearing a matching grin, my cheeks hurting from the stretch. He’s red faced and his chest is heaving; and if I was paying attention to my own body, I’d probably realize mine is, too. I don’t know what to say, the only thing filling my thoughts being the feeling of his lips against mine; and how I’m craving to rediscover that sensation. “you’re drooling.”

And, in that moment, I realize that yes, Mr. Higher Power has definitely taken offense to every name I’ve ever called him.

Dick.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I'm really sorry that I have updated in almost a week. But I swear nothing I wrote was wanting to make sense. And then my plot bunnies decided to bite me in the ass. So, there's my shit apology. BUT I GIVE YOU A 7000+ WORD CHAPTER. And for the love of f**k I'm sorry there is so much in this. But like chapter 13 (I think?), I didn't want to awkwardly split the chapter. BUT YIISSS AFTER 84000 WORDS THEY FINALLY FUCKING KISS. I'm proud of that kiss scene tbh. But I'm not even going to give a definite next update day, because I sort of fucked you guys over with the last one. So, I guess it's just up in the air right now. Also, before anyone asks, the link to the song Levi sings is in the first note. I LIKE THE ARCTIC MONKEYS OKAY.

ALSO IF YOU ARE GOING TO DO FANART FOR THIS FIC I DEMAND IT BE OF THAT DANCE SCENE BECAUSE UNF MY SHIPPER HEART WILL DIE

Thanks, as always, for the wonderful comments/kudos. You guys rock, and I couldn't do this without your support :) 

If you have any questions, you can leave them below, or shoot them over to my Tumblr.

Tumblr:
fuzzyporcupine.tumblr.com

I'm tracking the tag 'fic: what's eating you'.

If you spot any grammar mistakes, let me know!
FANMIX
ALL FANART
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Are you sure you know how to do this?” I’m sitting cross-legged in front of those damn mirrors that are plastered against the dance studio wall. And as much as I demanded to witness this, I’m beginning to regret my decision. But, hey, that would totally not be a first, would it? The image reflected on the glass is quite a sight to behold. Levi’s standing behind me, safety scissors in one hand, a chunk of my hair in the other. Now, I probably shouldn’t be picky about whatever Mr. Paul Mitchell decides to make of my brunet locks. I mean, it’s the fucking apocalypse, not Fashion Week. But, for some reason, the mental image of donning a Connie Springer doesn’t sit well in my gut.

“No, but if you don’t stop fucking squirming, I guarantee I’m going to cut your goddamn ear off.” I go frigid, earning a slight chuckle from the madman behind me. My eyes narrow in artificial anger, bouncing off the mirror to reflect into Levi’s amused stare. “Relax, Bright Eyes.” I take a deep breath, allowing shoulders I didn’t even realize were tense to slightly slump. I’ve never trusted barbers, hairdressers, whatever the fuck you want to call them. Ever since one buzzed a line straight through the middle of my hair, I pretty much wrote off ever going back to a salon. A shudder travels down my spine as I think of my unattractive buzz cut. Hey, second grade was a tough year for me, alright?

Strands of brown begin to fall in front of my face, the telltale sound of snapping scissors in my ear. “How short do you want it?” My fingers knead into my legs as I contemplate Levi’s question. “Uh, I don’t know? Not too short.” He releases another chuckle, and not for the first time this morning, I’m a little terrified. “Please.” I figure that maybe if I add that extra cherry on top that he won’t fuck up my hair worse than it already is. A breathy sigh emits from his lips, and I assume that he realizes I’m being serious. And I am being serious. I honestly don’t think I can take another trip down Buzz Cut Lane, Armageddon or not. Hell, the last thing I need is the walkers laughing at me before they rip out my throat.

The man pauses in his trim to run his fingers through my hair. “Hmm, I like your hair long.” Cheeks reddening, I drop my gaze to the twiddling thumbs in my lap. Suddenly, his hand stops rummaging through the locks, and I know I’ve unintentionally done something wrong. “What? We can suck face, but I can’t give you a compliment?” Charming as ever. I glance up to see him staring at me through the mirror. That infamous smirk is playing at the corners of his lips, mocking me with its reflection. Asshole. He tries to ease my aggravation with one more finger sweep through my hair. And it works, the accusing glare on my face quickly morphing into a type of clueless admiration. My cheeks are still red, stained from Levi’s past jib, but now an enamored grin has taken up residence on my visage.

“You’re terrible.” He blows off the accusation with a click of his tongue, silver eyes catching mine one last time before they direct their attention back to the brown mop sitting atop my head. I cringe as he jerks and pulls at the locks, and I honestly didn’t expect Levi to be gentle whilst going about this. I would bet my last chocolate bar that he doesn’t even realize how hard he’s yanking at my hair, given that he’s probably never done this before. And just so we are clear, that doesn’t make me feel any better about this haircut turning out decent, either. One particular tug causes me to hiss out in pain, and I know my scalp definitely hates me right now. Or, more accurately, hates Levi. “It’s hair, you asshole, not a set of reins.”

Levi pauses mid-clip, a devious smile creeping onto his face; and I know right there that I’ve said
something stupid. Ah, but what’s new? Leaning in by my ear, breath hot against my neck, he starts, “Would you rather ride me?” My breath catches in my throat, because one: that was a terrible pick up line, two: I am one thousand percent sure he is not talking about horses, and three: what the fuck? I whip around to face him in all my red-faced glory, trying my best to not appear completely flustered… which obviously fails if Levi’s amused smirk is anything to go by.

I murmur under my breath, turning back to the mirror and placing my chin in my palm, “You’re such a pervert.” I hear him scoff as he continues to whack away at my overgrown mane. Shit, why did he have to bring this up? I have been perfectly content in living the past eighteen years as a practical Virgin Mary… well, okay, not perfectly. Leave it to this asshole to make me want to change that. Wait, what? My body jerks out of its own internal realization, and Levi suddenly pauses, eyes darting to meet mine.

“Did I nick you?” I bring a hand to rub nervously behind my neck, because I’m honestly not sure how to start this. I want to say that he was only joking around, but some part of me doubts that conclusion. Shit, this doesn’t even matter, though. It’s the fucking apocalypse, not some goddamn soap opera.

But still…

“Did you mean it?” For once, I am able to take Levi by surprise, his hands faltering in their cutting. And, Christ, I guarantee that question just cost me a chunk of hair. He’s looking at me with an inquisitive stare, one that I can’t really make heads or tails of. The only emotion I can decipher is confusion, but besides that, I’m drawing blanks.

Finally, he releases a long sigh, and it hits me that I should have probably listened to my gut for once. Levi doesn’t say anything, just offers me a subtle shrug along with an image of his pink cheeks. Fuck. What was I thinking? Isn’t that supposed to be something sacred, something holy? You can’t even say the fucking word, Eren. Sex. Intercourse. Whoopee. There, fuck you, conscience. Sex. Christ, I’m just ready to wash my hands of this and act like Levi never brought it up in the first place.

“Well, I didn’t perform any accidental amputations, so I think this was a success.” The man apparently has the same mindset as me, his changing of topics being indication enough. He ruffles my hair as I take a look in the mirror, and it’s… not bad. There are a few crooked strands, but shit, it turned out a hell of a lot better than I expected. Not that I really expected much, but still. Besides the dirt smeared across my face, I feel like I am beginning to look like my old self again. And that makes me really fucking happy.

I turn an amused grin up to Levi, who is still weaving his fingers throughout my hair. “Thanks. It looks good.” He raises an eyebrow, obviously mistaking my sincerity for sarcasm. “I’m serious… now, your turn.” I honestly didn’t think it was humanly possible for an eyebrow to shoot up further, but fuck if he didn’t just prove me wrong. “What? You need a trim, too.” My voice has taken on a childlike whine that I am almost positive is the least attractive thing in this universe. I’m pretty sure this isn’t going to work on Levi considering he doesn’t seem the type to be swayed by childish demeanors.

Suddenly, the safety scissors are being pushed into my hand and a loud huff is permeating my eardrums. The man plops down beside me, legs crossed and face resting in his palms. It takes a second for the act to register in my brain that he’s actually letting me do this. But, by that time, Levi has already begun to shoot an annoyed glare in my direction.

“Are you going to do it, or do you expect it to magically cut itself?” My face flushes as I scramble to my feet, waving the safety scissors erratically in the air. “Christ! I know those things are blunt, but they could still take my fucking eye out, you shit!” Oh. Well, so much for starting this off on a good
note. My hand drops to my side as I glance down at the dark mess of hair below me. And I realize
that I have no fucking clue what I’m doing. I hesitantly scratch at my cheek, trying not to look as
oblivious as I obviously am. Placing the scissors’ handle in my mouth, much to Levi’s distaste if his
grimace is anything to go by, I begin to run my fingers through the black locks. It’s strange how silky
the strands feel between my questing appendages. Almost like the feeling is unreal. Which, I have
half a mind to believe, because no one’s hair feels this soft anymore. Not when the lurkers are your
biggest worry. His throat clears, and I realize that any semblance of me knowing how to do this has
probably flown out the window. “I need a haircut, not a head massage.” His voice comes out
distorted due to the fact that his palms are pushing against his cheeks. I stifle a laugh, because he
looks pretty ridiculous with his face mushed together like an impatient child. But I’m sure that Levi
wouldn’t appreciate my observation being vocalized, so I keep it hidden deep down in my throat.

Pulling the scissors from my mouth, I start, “Uh, you should turn away from the mirror. Let it be a
surprise.” I think that maybe if I don’t feel that impassive stare on me whilst I work, I will feel better
about this. The look on his face tells me that’s not happening.

“It best not be a goddamned surprise. I need a trim, not a new hairstyle, brat.” Okay, whatever. This
is okay. I’m okay. I’m not going to lop off half of his hair. No, not you, Eren Jaeger.

Hands slightly trembling, I lift a strand of black and slice into it. I honestly didn’t think that hair
carried that much weight, but the sound it makes as it hits the ground is almost audible. But, then
again, that’s probably due to the fact that I’ve yet to breathe. My eyes shift to meet Levi’s, anxious to
hear his verdict. No words leave his mouth as he raises an eyebrow in a silent ‘hurry the fuck up’.
Right. I can do that. Bringing the scissors back through the raven strands, I attempt to make the cut as
even as possible. Even with the silky texture, Levi’s hair is still tangled. I try not to cause too much
pain, because unlike the asshole below me, I’m considerate towards his scalp’s feelings. But, even
with all of my care, I can still notice twinges of pain lacing his face whenever I pull on a particularly
delicate spot. I guess payback really is a hypothetical bitch.

Finally, it’s done, black hair strewn around our bodies. To be honest, I’m quite impressed with
myself. It’s obviously no five star haircut, but it looks decent. I might be giving myself too much
credit, but I am working with safety scissors here. Those things can barely cut through paper, let
alone bundles of hair. Dropping the blunt blades on the floor and bringing my fingers back into his
mane, I mock Levi with my own hair ruffle.

My hands fall to his shoulders as I lean over him. “You like it?” He brings his own fingers through
the dark locks, face impassive and unreadable. They stop as the appendages reach his undercut. My
hands drift up to meet his wandering touch, and I trace the coarseness with my fingertips. A shiver
erupts through him, causing his eyes to close and his shoulders to rise. It’s cute. Wait, what? Since
when has anything about Levi been cute? Acting as a silent answer, his eyes begin to flutter back
open, lashes laving at the pale skin below. “W-what about this?” I’m tempted to bring my touch back
down the undercut, but I fear Levi would catch on to whatever plan this is.

“Razor’s in my backpack. Bring that, water, and the travel size shaving cream.” Greens flicker down
to greys in question. “Gas station. It had a travel section.” Hmm, made sense. Maybe if I wasn’t so
focused on chocolate bars, I would have noticed. But if you think for a moment I regret it, you’re
wrong; because that chocolate was fucking delicious this morning. I reach the pack, unzipping the
first compartment. I have to hold back a chuckle as I spot several chocolate bars stuffed inside. And
the asshole made fun of me this morning for eating the candy. Chocolate aside, I quickly spot what
I’m looking for, pulling the needed items out of the backpack.

He pulls out his handkerchief and tosses it to me. “Use this to wipe up the shit after you’re done.”
Pouring some of the water into my hands, I drip the substance along the undercut, silently relishing in the shiver Levi is producing. I have almost forgotten how sticky shaving cream was, but hell, if I’m not bluntly reminded when the stuff dumps into my palm. It makes me cherish the fact that I never grew into stubble. Jean might have called me out for ‘deficient puberty glands’, but which one of us got stuck with a permanent five o’clock shadow? Bingo. I smear the paste against the back of Levi’s head, not really knowing where I’m going with this.

As I pull out the razor, I ask, “Uh, so against the grain… or?”

He lets out an annoyed sigh, “Yes, Bright Eyes. Against the fucking grain.” I’m almost tempted to leave him high and dry with the shaving cream plastered against his neck, but I feel like his retribution would be a lot worse. He bends his head down, paste slowly beginning to drip down his neck. “Anytime now would be fucking fantastic.” Sarcasm laces his voice as he faces the floor. Asshole. I want to call him out on his broodiness, but I know that whatever I say will be retaliated with a quip that will make me regret prodding him in the first place.

I bring the razor to his nape, slightly pressing against the skin. Slowly, I begin to pull up on the blade, effectively cutting down the stubs of hair. It’s too quiet in the small dance studio, and I’m suddenly feeling suffocated by this uneasy silence. But just when did it become uneasy? This is why I hate silence, because the asshole just creeps up on you like some sneaky motherfucker; and before you know it, you’re stuck in situations like this. Okay, give or take the razors and the short, snarky bastard.

“So…” And, if I’ve learned anything, it should have been that the word ‘so’ is code for conversation suicide. Clearing my throat, I try again, “Uh, how did you know those guys back there?” Levi stiffens, and I am honestly surprised that I don’t mark his pale skin with the blade. Seconds pass, and I realize I’ve unintentionally hit a nerve. A wave of guilt travels through me, because I know how it feels to be controlled by a figment of the mind, to be vulnerable in the memory’s grasp. And I’m perfectly okay with returning to the silence as long as I can escape this unvoiced dread that is currently plaguing the air around me.

I’m about to apologize, when he begins, “They were part of the group I ran with. Before Stohess.” Oh. Well, that would explain why he recognized their voice. But if he ran with them, then could they really be as bad as Levi made them out to be? Given, the man beneath me is obviously not a saint, but I can hardly picture him carousing around with a bunch of assholes like that. The kind of assholes that get off on a dead woman’s picture. Now, that strikes a nerve. Closing my eyes and taking a deep breath, I calm myself. It’s not like it will do any good to get angry now… especially when I have a razor blade to the back of Levi’s neck. Yeah, not a great idea. The man doesn’t notice my internal rage, and takes my silence as a nod to continue, “I was never with the ones back there. Remember, I had my own smaller group. But I still know the fuckers.” His voice has taken a sharp turn from its usual deadpan, now filled with angry emotion. “They would have fucking killed you up so bad, Bright Eyes. So fucking bad.” His last words come out as a whisper, regret framing his speech. And, again, I’m confused as to where this misplaced disappointment is drawing from.

I’m trying to focus on keeping his undercut straight, but my eyes are drawn to the fists that are now sitting in Levi’s lap. “I would have fucking killed them.” I pause, his words cutting straight through any attempt I was making at not letting this bother me. “I would have put a bullet in each other their heads before I let them lay one goddamn hand on you.” It should frighten me, this protectiveness… but, wait. Should it? I would do the same for him. Hell, I have done the same. If I remember correctly, I stabbed Zackly in the fucking back for Levi. So, no. It shouldn’t scare me. It should empower me, make me realize that I am something to lose to the man. And, shit, I thought we already established this at Stohess; but for some reason this retake on the realization feels different. Maybe it’s because we’ve kissed. Maybe all of this was intensified tenfold with that exchange.
“Levi?” My voice sounds nervous and unsure, foreign in my ears. I see his shoulders twitch in acknowledgement, head slowly lifting. My hands take residence back on his shoulders, gently massaging the muscles below. “Are you okay?” The phrase seems awkward rolling off my lips considering I never use it. It’s never me who asks if the man slightly shaking beneath me is alright. I’ve grown used to giving these silent comforts, a hug, a squeeze on the shoulder, a smile. But I never really ask, do I? And maybe that’s what he has needed this entire time. Maybe he has developed complacency and fully accepted the knowledge that he was never going to receive the reassuring phrase from me. A sinking feeling plummets into my gut, and I suddenly feel guilty for not providing the support that he really needed.

Before I can further my blame, Levi is upturning his head until his face is directly beneath mine. He swiftly reaches up to cup my cheeks, and suddenly, pulls my face down to meet his lips in a bruising, upside down kiss. I’m taken by surprise, green eyes still wide open. As he weaves wondering fingers into my freshly trimmed locks, I begin to relax into the touch, emeralds gradually fluttering closed. It’s nothing like the first time, instead being fast and debauched. Unlike the previous kiss, this one does nothing but remind me of the situation in which we currently reside. Of the fucking apocalypse kicking at our heels. It feels so goddamn desperate, the way he’s smothering my lips with the touch. And I realize that maybe this is what he has needed all along. Not my bullshit concerns. But this. This full understanding of what we are, if we’re anything at all. I mean, this has to be something, right? And shit. When did I get so goddamn cryptic?

My eyes squeeze as Levi pushes harder against me. An abrupt pang in my chest causes my lips to quiver against his as the man pulls me further into the embrace. So many emotions are flowing between us as we lock together. Anger. Anxiety. Admiration. Full of all of these requited feelings we’ve stored for lord knows how long. My hands lift from his shoulders as I delicately run my fingertips along his neck, causing the hairs on his arms to stand. It’s electric, and I never want it to end. Even under these circumstances, I will take it. Finally, my fingers reach his jaw; and I tilt him even further backward, pulling him closer and still not entirely sure how to do this. His lips push against mine once more, before he is drawing back.

I’m panting heavily; and if the heated breath against my face is any indication, then Levi is, too. I’m not sure if I should say anything, because I am honestly content to stay in this dream state where Levi and I are the only two people in the world. I hear him sigh, and my eyes flutter open. I guess it was too much to hope for that I would see that smile when I opened my eyes. Instead, I’m greeted with a set of red, trembling lips combined with a pair of rosy cheeks. And it sucks every ounce of happiness I willed from this moment away.

Fear.

That’s what’s reflecting in those overcast eyes. It’s no longer a mixture of emotions. It’s just that singular feeling. Fear. And I know exactly what he’s scared of, because I’ve been fighting the fucking demon ever since I decided that I wanted to be a constant in Levi’s life. He swipes his fingers over my cheeks, hands slightly shaking.

“I… I can’t lose you, Bright Eyes.” I almost can’t recognize the man beneath me, completely different from the stone-faced bastard I’ve grown so fond of. It’s like this fear has corrupted him, changed him into something vulnerable and weak. No, not weak. Vulnerable, maybe. But never weak. That word will never have a place near Levi. This man who’s lost so fucking much. And I’m all he has left. He’s all I have left. And I feel a sense of betrayal claw at my gut, because I just...
practically dismissed the idea of ever seeing Mikasa or Armin again. But hasn’t that been at the forefront of my thoughts ever since that asshole took a piece out of my arm?

I press down for one last, chaste kiss, trying to silently convey that I’m not going anywhere. He doesn’t respond, lips unmoving against the quick peck, and I’m left wondering if that was really the way to convince him. Sighing, I start, “You’re not going to-”

“HELP ME!” A woman’s scream permeates through the studio, causing Levi and me to jerk upright. I hear a truck engine, and- wait. Truck engine? Oh, shit, truck engine.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.

I should have known the bastards would follow us, should have known that escaping was way too fucking easy. But why is a woman out there? I can only assume they found her along the way, and honestly, I don’t think my assumption’s very far off. I don’t know what to do, given there is absolutely nowhere to hide in the room. I look to Levi, praying that he’ll have a solution. And fuck. That look of terror in his eyes has just been increased in magnitudes, pupils dilating in trepidation of the unknown. His hands have made their way into his hair, pulling and tugging at the roots. I hear the woman scream again, this time sounding more desperate and frantic. The truck passes by the studio windows, casting dark shadows into the room. Yanking on Levi’s sleeve, I drag him over to the glass panels, eyes barely peeping over the sills. And shit.

She’s crawling on the ground, fingers clawing at the asphalt below. And I want to do something. Christ, I want to do something. But how can I help without alerting the assholes of our position? Easy. I can’t. This is where morality comes into play, isn’t it? Risk my life- no, risk Levi’s life to save someone who I’ve never met. The choice is simple, and it sickens me that I can make it that easily. But this is what the end of the world has gifted us with, right? It practically wants us to be unjust, unrighteous. And it’s getting exactly want it desires, all of humanity’s morals being tossed out to sea when the first walker attacked. We’re nothing but rabid dogs waiting to be put down by either the biters or each other. And that’s probably exactly how Mr. Higher Power envisioned it. Because were we really any different before all this shit went down?

No.

We had laws, regulations. But there was always those who lurked in the shadows of society, waiting for anarchy to arise. And did it fucking ever. Complete with zombies and all. Right when the walkers attacked, those people knew they were gods incarnate. People like Zackly, Hugo. People who had no morals to begin with. Or even worse, ones who did have a set of principles, but their laws of ethics are so fucked up that it makes them worse than the humans without a code. It makes them powerful. Because as messed up as it is, they have something to believe in. Zackly. That asshole convinced an entire group of people that hoarding lurkers wasn’t fucking insane.

Suddenly, the truck doors are slamming shut, and I hadn’t even noticed until then that the men have exited the vehicle, too lost in my own internal monologue. My eyes widen as I take in the sight of one of the assholes kicking the downed woman in the ribs, eliciting yet another cry. The only thing I can hear from the attackers is muffled yelling and… laughing. Shit, this is like Stohess all over again. Except worse. These people aren’t fucking with an undead… they are torturing a living, breathing human. One of their own. My hands clench into tight fists, because now, there is no doubt in my mind that I am going to somehow kill these assholes. People like… like that don’t deserve this planet, even if it has gone to shit. People like that deserve to die. Painfully.

My hand attaches to the handle of my knife as I pull it out to ready my attack. I’m not thinking rationally, because if I was, I would have remembered that mere seconds ago I resigned myself to stay out of sight for Levi’s sake. But sensibility isn’t necessarily the word running through my mind.
Kill. Destroy. Eradicate. These are the words that I can associate with. Not this cowardly susceptibility. Not now. Before I can even take one step towards the door, Levi grabs ahold of my wrist, yanking me down onto the floor. I attempt to ask him what the fuck he thinks he is doing, but a hand over my mouth muffles any protests I make.

Levi’s straddling me, one palm pressing against my lips, the other pinning down the hand carrying my knife. That fear is still plaguing those charcoal eyes, but now a sense of urgency has bolstered its way into the seas of grey. “You’re going to get us fucking killed.” He speaks in a harsh whisper through gritted teeth, palm pushing down harder on my face. “So, shut the fuck up and stay down.” The look in his eyes speaks volumes, obviously not willing to argue on the subject. A hand suddenly rips the knife out of my grasp, and I see Levi shove the weapon down into his waistband. Brows knitting together in confusion, I grumble words of protest against his palm. He can’t honestly expect to leave me defenseless… can he? “No. Not fucking happening. Shut the fuck up, brat. You might be immune, but I’m pretty goddamn sure a bullet can still kill you.” Obviously he can.

Another scream pierces into the dance studio, causing silver eyes to dart towards the window. I want to use this distraction to my advantage, buck him off and grab my knife. But Levi’s intervention has bestowed on me a realization that everything Jean said was right: I am a fucking suicidal idiot. If it wasn’t for the man above me, I’d probably be sitting pretty against the side of the studio with dozens of bullet holes littering my corpse.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. I hate my ability to act before I think. Absolutely abhor it. It’s never done me any good, in this life or the one before it. As hard as I try to control the insanity, it never fails that the bastard digs itself out of the hypothetical grave. It seems as though my brain is working to drive me mad, because it’s not like I don’t feel remorse after every single, stupid mistake. Believe me, I do. I’m fucking drowning in a mental sea of my own faults. Shit, I only recently forgave myself for my mother’s death, and it’s been how many months now? Eight? Nine? Maybe that’s just the chink in my armor, my Achilles heel. Yeah, pair that with my dependency to the man currently straddling me, and I’m a fucking poster child for the royally screwed.

I hear it before I see it. The sound of the shattering glass permeates into my self-loathing daydream. The crystal shards are flying in a multitude of directions, transforming into tiny, impromptu weapons soaring in the air. And, suddenly, the world turns dark as Levi’s body crumples on top of mine, shielding me from the fragments. His hand is still tightly squeezing on my jaw, chest pulsating against my own.

“You fucking bitch!” I recognize the voice as one of the assholes who politely ransacked what was left of my home. My fist clenches around an invisible knife, and I am silently thanking Levi for removing the weapon from my grasp; because there is no doubt in my mind that I would have already started an assault on the bastards outside. “We just wanted to have some fun. Didn’t we, Hugo?” A throaty laugh penetrates the air with a menacing swipe. My chest tightens with rage, begging to be released onto the assholes. Breathe, Eren. Breathe. I begin to quiver underneath Levi, anger becoming palpable. His gaze turns to me, charcoal eyes emitting unvoiced pleas for my silence. He begins to shake his head side to side, further imploring that I just stay quiet. The fifth cry from the woman threatens to disobey that request.

His hand tightens as if he knows the how far over the edge the screams are currently pushing me. “And you had to be a little bitch.” Another cry. He squeezes tighter. “And now we don’t get to have our fun, do we Hugo?” The laugh spewing from the man has been cataloged into my brain, patiently awaiting the day I will be able to replace the audio with his screams for mercy. But there will be no sympathy for him or any of his comrades; because he deserves to face a grisly end by the end of my blade. You’re insane, Eren. Is that what this is? Insanity? No.

It’s a reckoning.
The woman tries to speak, her voice thick with tears, “Please! Please! I’m sorry! I’ll do whatever you want! I’m sorry!” Her words are lost in translation as the sound of a gunshot hits the final nail in this coffin of inhumanity. The air is still and silent as the echo of the fatality presses down upon us like a crushing blow. I’ve stopped shaking, the knowledge of the woman’s death ceasing all of my movements. Levi is still above me, silver eyes trained on the window. Those eyes are still pleading, still begging; but this time, the action is not directed at me, but at the bastards outside. And I don’t know why he is even trying. Mr. Higher Power hasn’t necessarily been on our side ever since the walkers appeared, and I doubt that our lives really mean that much to him. And what can we honestly do if they decide to enter the dance studio? Fuck, maybe Levi knows how to curve a bullet and can somehow down all of them with the one shot we have left. I wouldn’t bet on it, but I’m honestly not putting anything past the stone-faced man.

“What a stupid bitch.” I hear the man scoff, tone mocking and insincere. “You know I would’ve kept her alive if the cunt hadn’t tried for my gun. Stupid bitch.” A thud reverberates throughout the studio, and I can only assume that the man is kicking at the corpse. Animal. Scum. Again, my fist clenches, begging me to gather whatever strength I have left and throw Levi off of me. I tell my conviction to shut the fuck up and realize that the man above me is just trying to save my dumbass; but of course, the bastard doesn’t listen, still prodding me to make good on my promise to rid the world of the vermin outside.

That fucking laugh spills out again, an audible poison in the air. “You sure ‘bout that? Pretty sure she would of been wishing she was fuckin’ dead after we were done with her.” The rage is almost uncontrollable now, pounding against my chest in an attempt to force my hand. These murderers deserve what my fury is begging to give them, but I can’t do this to Levi. I can’t make him witness my probable downfall. And, shit, I am glad I am finally thinking rationally.

“Whatever, this one was a lost cause. Come on, we got to report back to Boss.” The truck door squeaks as it’s pried open, and my heart starts to pick up the pace. Maybe Mr. Higher Power is cordial with Levi or some shit; because I know that if I had been the one praying, those assholes would have already been banging down our door. I hear the engine rev, the sound of tires squealing on the pavement a memento of their departure. Levi’s hand slips away from my mouth as he heaves a sigh of relief, relaxing into my body. His cheek nestles against my shoulder, anxious breaths fanning over my chin.

“You’re not a fucking hero.” His words surprise me, destroying my expectations of this silence lasting any longer. And shit. I know I’m not a hero. If I was, then none of my goddamn friends would have met their gruesome fates. Fuck, I know this. But that doesn’t mean I can just sit idly by and allow unspeakable evils to take place. I can’t act ignorant of this world. Levi has it all wrong, because I’m not some savior. I’m just a fucking kid trying to hold on to what little humanity I have left. My silence speaks volumes, and soon Levi is unleashing another sigh, this one full of unease.

“You’re not a fucking hero, Bright Eyes. But that doesn’t mean you’re not human.” His words are simple, but they hold so much meaning. He understands why I want to fight all of these hopeless battles. He knows why I try. And I’m unsure if his speech was meant to defuse the fire inside of me; but if anything, it adds fuel to the flames, causing the inferno to burn through my veins with a reinstated passion.

He turns his head and presses a chaste kiss to my collarbone, trying to soothe this fervor with his touch. “You think they’ll come back?” The question has been pressing against my mind ever since we escaped the confines of my old neighborhood. It causes Levi to tense, lips faltering against my skin.

“I don’t know. Either way, we’re leaving. This is probably their new hunting ground or some shit.” Wait, what? My breath catches in my throat at his words. Hunting ground? What the fuck is that
supposed to mean? My alarm has not gone unnoticed by Levi, who has opted to pull himself off of me. “Don’t worry about it.” The words are harsh and heavy, protecting something that the man obviously has no plans in venturing back into. I want to accept the answer, acknowledge that this is a pile of shit that Levi has probably long since disposed of. But I can’t. He’s hiding something, those four words proof enough that the wound of his old gang is still fresh. As I look into those silver eyes, I try to decipher what could possibly be painful enough for him to keep from me. I mean, the man told me about his two closest friends dying, goddammit.

I open my mouth, ready to argue for an appropriate answer and not just some bullshit scapegoat. But only one word comes out.

“Okay.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh my fuck, if this doesn't read like a filler chapter, I don't know what does. AND IT'S NOT I PROMISE. I swear, I write down three things that I want to accomplish before the end of each chapter, and fuck if I didn't get but ONE of them in this. AND THIS IS OVER 6000 WORDS. I don't want to say that I dislike this chapter, but ughhh... I wouldn't have posted it if I wasn't at least a *little* happy with it, so I should stop bitching. Anyway, just wanted to also mention that I have complied a fanmix for this fic, and it should be up by the time I post the next chapter. YISSS SONGSSS.

AND HOLY FUCKING FANART YOU GUYS ARE AWESOME... because a couple of you drew the dance scene AND I FUCKING LOVEEEE ITTT. The link to all of the fanart is at the end of this, so yeah.

And, holy shit. Thank you guys for the kudos/comments. I AM NOT WORTHY. AND HOLY SHIT 10,000+ HITS IM JUST SITTING OVER HERE LIKE WTF I LOVE YOU GUYS

If you have any questions, leave them below, or shoot them over to my Tumblr.

Tumblr:
fuzzyporcupine.tumblr.com

I'm tracking the tag 'fic: what's eating you' and also my tumblr username 'fuzzyporcupine'.

And, as always, if you spot any grammar mistakes, let me know!

FANMIX
ALL FANART
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Thank you, shukiai, for playing beta to a couple of these scenes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Humanity is dead. Well, at least in the moral sense. It’s all about survival nowadays, and fuck the rest. Because no one gives two shits if you have three starving kids waiting for you back in the piece of shit you call a home. Should’ve put the bullet in their heads early, you selfish fuck. No one cares if that was your only source of protection. Should’ve kept a watchful eye on it, you dumbass. It’s about the singulars now. The me, myself, and I. At least that’s what the world tries to force feed you. In reality, that’s only an optional agenda. Sure, you can live your life like that. Not giving a single fuck about the outside world. But it’s hard to disassociate yourself from the human beings begging for your help at every corner. No, scratch that. I’m positive that some people had no fucking problem ridding themselves of the false morality they had been wearing in the days of old. They’re like wolves in sheep’s clothing… well, not anymore. Now, they are free to bear those yellowed jaws, ripping off the heads of the weak and feeble in one fell swoop.

As my boots click against the asphalt, I have an overwhelming feeling to go back and kill those motherfuckers who murdered the woman. It’s a stupid idea, I know. But it makes me feel a lot better that chivalry isn’t dead. Wait, no. Its corpse turned cold whenever I stayed tucked away in that goddamn studio like a spineless coward. My pride still wants to argue that I could have slayed all of those assholes, but I’m not Superman. ‘You’re no fucking hero.’ He was right, but it’s not like I necessarily disagreed with him in the first place. Even so, I still feel slimy in my own skin. Of course, Levi doesn’t share the same urge to go back and send the pigs to slaughter. Unlike me, he understands this war and knows that some battles are just a lost cause. He’s not spurred by some unrelenting anger, but instead a sense of survival that’s taken months of living in an apocalyptic tour de force to harden. It’s kill or be killed, and obviously, the man beside me made the right decision in retraining my raging form. I’d be long dead and probably reanimated if not for him. So, I suppose I should be thankful. Thankful that he saved my life. That he helped me see the light. But instead, I am met with these feelings of intense unease. And I am pretty sure I know the source.

Glancing over to the man next to me, I feel a pang register through my chest. I understand part of it, that half forming from something I’d like to think is admiration. Maybe I’m just being too romantic, but it is nice to think about. The other half is a mystery to me, carefully treading in the shadows of my soul, pointed teeth reflecting in the darkened abyss. It’s something dark and cruel that much I know for sure. And it frightens me that this kind of aura could emit from a man I’d like to say that I know well. Obviously that’s not true, and it’s just something I feed myself to settle this queasiness that been erupting in my gut ever since I laid eyes on Levi’s old outfit. Maybe it’s best that I don’t know, that I never find out. Ignorance is bliss, right? Somehow, I find myself disagreeing with the phrase.

My contemplation has drawn Levi’s attention, the man always more attentive than I give him credit for. “We should be close. Probably only one more day.” And I am almost positive Levi knows what’s waning on my conscience, and it should be no surprise to me that the man wants to take my mind off of it. Whether it be the woman or his old gang, either one requires a bit of explaining from the man. Explaining that I am pretty sure he doesn’t want to do right now. Or possibly ever. But I
trust him. My chest clenches. *I trust him.* So, if he doesn’t want to tell me… then okay.

“You think Erwin and Hanji will be there?” There is an optimism that has developed in my veins at my voicing of the question. A spark of hope, if you will. And, damn, Erwin would be proud. I miss them. More than I ever thought I would. And it’s weird, because I’ve been living on this fucked up philosophy that it was a bad idea to let people in. When that’s actually just the most bullshit excuse I’ve made during the apocalypse. Where would I be without Erwin? Without Hanji, Mike? Without Levi? Dead. That’s where I’d be. Well, actually, no. I’d probably be roaming the remains of Shiganshina, aching for my old human counterparts. So, is it really wrong to let strangers in? To feel something besides that overwhelming self-pity? It makes me human, right? It makes me so much more than just a bag of bones, sitting around waiting for my clock to strike twelve.

“They’re alive, Bright Eyes. Erwin’s a stubborn sonofabitch. You couldn’t kill that bastard with a fucking bullet to the head.” A smile pulls at my lips, because Levi’s right. If anyone could survive a hoard of walkers, it’s Erwin. Hell, I might be the immune one, but there’s no doubt in my mind that he could last longer in this shitstorm than me. And Hanji. She’s crazy enough to make it out, as well. Give or take a few zombie souvenirs. If she thinks I’m ever going to let that whole ‘walker head’ escapade go, she will be painfully mistaken.

“What are we going to do after this? After Trost?” I am giving the man the biggest expectant look I can manage, because I don’t want him dodging this question. If he can give me answers to anything, it needs to be this. The twitch in his brow says he’s not going to be very keen on it. But I need this one thing. *This one sense of knowing.* Just one confirmation. I’m so fucking tired of being kept in the dark. For once, I want, no **I need** to know what’s coming next. He takes a deep breath, and if he thinks the silence is going to swallow up the question, then he is wrong. This is one thing I’m not going to let go. Let him have his secrecy about his past, but let me have the answers about his future. The silence finally strangles the words out of him, sounding forced and unwilling, “I don’t know.”

And that’s really not the answer I am looking for. I was expecting something… I don’t know, something more reassuring? I open my mouth to argue, but his voice shrivels mine. “You want to know the truth?” The truth? I feel like this question is never the start of anything good. Like it only opts to force out concealed lies that should have been voiced ages ago. And I’m starting to regret even asking, because that feeling in my gut hasn’t gone away. One half is beginning to swallow the other, and it’s not necessarily the best side. Levi takes my silence for what it is, unsure and hesitant. And it’s like he can tell how tentative his question has made me; because before I know it, he is pulling on my sleeve, stopping me in the middle of the street.

“You want to know the truth?” He repeats the words like their supposed to sound better a second time, and I hate to disappoint; but if anything, the repetition is only a reminder of my uncertainty. Sighing, he starts, ignoring if I truly want to hear the answer, “I don’t want you to go to Trost.” **What?** He doesn’t want me to go? I don’t understand why. I’m the supposed answer to this disease, this plague wiping out humanity. And he doesn’t want me to go? “It’s selfish, I know. But what happens if we get there and…” He pauses, charcoal eyes looking anywhere but at me. “And they want to keep you?” My breath hitches in my throat, because I hadn’t even considered the possibility. I guess I’d just been living in this fantasy that they would draw a little blood, and we would save the world. Maybe start a movie marathon and eat some pizza while we’re at it. It never crossed my mind that they would use my body for experimentation. But now that the thought is in my head, it’s spreading like a fungus, consuming every idea that told me this would all end up okay. I shouldn’t have asked. I shouldn’t have wondered what would happen; because now that I am facing an undeterminable end, I’m fucking terrified.

Levi continues as if I’m not having a psychological breakdown right before his eyes, “And I don’t think I could let them do that.” His words grant me pause from my mental collapse, greens locking
with those unforgiving greys. *And he means it, doesn’t he?* He wouldn’t let them take me away, even if it did mean the end of this madness. I know better than to question that look in his eye. I know he is telling the truth. “I told you I’m selfish. But I meant what I said this morning.” *He can’t lose you, remember, Eren?* Yeah, I remember. And I want to stop this devastation that is wiping our planet dry, but at what cost? My life? I tell myself that I’ve been prepared for this, but that’s a boldfaced lie; because *no one* is prepared to die. No matter how many assurances we feed ourselves, we will never be ready for Father Death’s painful embrace.

But maybe this is all just some misplaced apprehension. And, anyways, would Erwin knowingly send me to meet my Maker? The man may have incentive, but he wouldn’t throw me to the dogs. Would he? It does nothing for this uneasiness running through me when I can’t come up with a definite answer. But I’m going to be optimistic. I’m going to march into Trost Medical with a clear head and an unafraid mentality. Because Erwin’s my friend. Practically my family in this shitty new world.

Levi has already cast off the uncomfortable question, and has started walking back down the highway. I figure that we are lucky Trost Medical is such a one-way shot. I know I’m shit with directions, and I’m not sure that Levi fares any better. I guess it’s a good thing we don’t have to find out. That’s probably also why we have been sticking to the asphalt, instead of testing our luck in the woods. But, then again, Levi might also be thinking of the massive horde that was rummaging through those trees the last time we ventured through there. Nonetheless, I can’t help but feel exposed and open in the middle of the road. Zombie Survival 101 tells you to stay out of sight, and our current plan of action seems to be anything but. I really shouldn’t be questioning Levi’s strategy considering we aren’t dead, yet.

Up ahead, I can see Levi casually munching on one of the candy bars we gathered from the gas station. The asshole actually likes coconut, but I think he just stuffed his pack with those spawns of the devil so I wouldn’t touch them. The man’s smarter than I give him credit for, that’s for sure. He looks so fucking content, half a chocolate bar resting in his palm. And I can’t help but feel a little tinge of regret that I don’t get to constantly witness this. Usually, those eyes are alert and calculating. Sometimes, even desperate and grieving. But they’re hardly *content*.

I wonder if we would have met each other in our past lives. My mother used to read to me this story involving a red string of fate. I always called bullshit, because at that time I was way more concerned with crime fighting superheroes, not destiny. I’ve lost pieces of the story along the way, the tale turning into more of a short synopsis. But the basic gist was that no matter where you were, no matter which lifetime you lived; you would always meet your soul mate again. And that sounds just as corny as it did all those years ago when my mother first told me of the story; but I can’t help but place a little faith in the message. But maybe it is all bullshit, and it was just some fictionalized way for my mother to pass the time. She *did* try to convince me that frogs would turn into princes when kissed. You would have thought I would have stopped believing in her wives tales after I spent thirty minutes gargling a bottle of mouthwash. I reach down for Levi’s hand. When my fingers pass over the pale flesh, he turns his head to look at me with inquisitive eyes. And as a small smile begins to weave onto my face, I can’t help but believe that stupid story.

“You’re smiling like an-” My eyes widen as a pair of hands grab onto Levi’s shoulders, yanking him down to the cold, hard blacktop below. The air billows out of his lungs as he’s thrown onto the ground. The man lurking above him isn’t a walker, but he can’t be human either. His hair looks like it’s been a residential suite for every form of parasite known to man. Ragged clothes hang haphazardly off broad shoulders, tanned flesh peeking through the rips of the material. I don’t recognize him as anyone from Levi’s old group, but I *know* him. He straddles Levi, turning his head to give me a smile full of rotten, yellowed teeth. And it hits me. *Cannibals.* He’s from that fucked up family we ran into months prior. That family that would have killed us had Mikasa not promised to
supply the bastards with enough meat to get through the winter. And, shit, she delivered; practically making deer an endangered species. So, why is the bastard out here? They have plenty of food to keep their cannibalistic gullets well-fed. They vowed to never bother us again, to never threaten our lives. We made good on our fucking promise, goddammit. But that oath didn’t include Levi, did it? I’m not given long to deduce as the man pulls out a knife and begins to drive it down towards Levi’s throat.

My breath hitches, and the world stands still.

I’m going to lose him.

And I’m standing there like some awe-struck idiot, silently watching Levi’s hands fly up to protect himself. Because, obviously, I’m doing a stand up job. I have to save him, though. Why can’t I save him?

“Eren!” My name comes out strangled on his lips, the words fighting just as hard as the man releasing them. His hands have found purchase on the hilt of the knife that is inching closer and closer to his jugular. And I am still just fucking watching. Why am I just watching? I can’t say that I understand my body’s reasons for freezing up. Maybe it thinks that Levi is just going to miraculously overpower the behemoth of a man lying on top of him. Maybe it just refuses to kill again.

You’re really going to let him die?

My fingers shake as they grab for the knife handle underneath my waistband. I edge closer to the chaos, and it’s like Zackly all over again. The uncertainty, the hesitation. The feeling that I’m going to lose him. And, fuck, it’s like Mr. Higher Power really just doesn’t want to cut my sanity a break. But I’m not going to lose him. And, suddenly, I am entering a state that I’ve never been to before. Euphoric. I’m not sure how to describe it as I make holes in the back of the man growing increasingly limp under my hands. It’s definitely some sort of mania, because the man was dead ten blows ago. But I just keep going. And going. Keep going until the sleeves of my jacket are dyed a crimson red that looks nothing like the color that spews from a lurker’s split head. No, this is completely different. This is something evil. It’s painted on my face in some fucked up war paint, signifying that walkers aren’t my only prey. And I’m a goddamn monster, aren’t I? But isn’t it kill or be killed? Yes, but that doesn’t justify… this. The bloodied, decrepit body cast beneath me in a grisly display of internal rage.

I’ve fallen to my knees, but I’m still going. Arm mimicking that downhill motion over and over until it starts to cramp from the constant violent swings. The holes are shallow now, my strength only allowing me tiny victories. And I don’t know why I haven’t stopped, because this is anything but therapeutic. Because I have to make sure. He has to be dead. Dead. Dead. Dead. A hand on my shoulder pulls me out of my homicidal daze, yanking me into a sturdy chest. Strong arms are wrapping around me, a pale hand gently dropping a cool touch over my machine of killing. And just like that, it all comes crumbling down.

The world is quiet for once. The birds halting their songs, the leaves pausing in their travels. The only noise permeating my eardrums is the sound of my breathing, deep and haggard. It doesn’t sound anything like me, too heavy, too foreign. But it is me. It’s what I’ve become. This… this fucking monster. And, suddenly, it’s hard to breath, my air constricted by the lump pulsating in my throat. I drop the knife and bring my shaky, bloodied hands to my face, studying the sin I just stained upon my soul. Because murder is a sin. Murder is still a sin, right? Or maybe I’ve just been living on some self-righteous sense of morality. There isn’t a place in this world for ethics anymore, and it’s just taken a step into the shadows for me to finally accept that.

So, I let it go. I scream at the top of my lungs, walkers be damned. The screams are mixed with a
sense of hysteria flowing across my face in the form of choked sobs, pathetic and weak. I’m such a child, such a boy. I don’t know who I’ve been trying to fool with this masquerade. Erwin? Levi? Myself? What a class act job I’ve done. The arms squeeze me tighter as the tears begin to blur my eyesight. It’s not fair. *It's not fucking fair.* What did I do to deserve this? *What did we do?* Why are the evil people of this world rewarded when those who try to do the right thing are gifted with nothing but crushed, empty souls? But that’s how this world has always worked, isn’t it? I’ve just been too fucking blind to open my eyes and see. I let out one last scream before I relax into the arms, a sniveling mess.

It’s probably quite the morbid picture: me crying into Levi’s chest beside a mutilated body. But I can’t help but think that it would make the perfect postcard for the apocalypse. He’s stroking my hair with one hand and rubbing small circles into my back with the other. The silence is only interrupted by my whimpering, pitiful and wretched. He hasn’t said anything; and I’m not sure if it’s because he is at a loss for words, or if he thinks the silence benefits me more than a couple of reassuring phrases. But I would take the sound of his voice over everything. For him to just tell me that’s *it's alright.* Maybe then I’ll believe it.

“*I-I’m s-s-sorry, Levi.*” And I don’t know why I’m apologizing, but something in my gut tells me that I owe the man that much. Still, he doesn’t speak. Opting to instead, place a chaste kiss atop my head, a silent reassurance.

And that’s really all I needed.

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It’s ironic that we’ve decided to find shelter inside a church. After all, I’d say the man upstairs has been good for nothing these past few months. It’s quaint inside, and obviously not built for large congregations. We cleared it in a matter of minutes, pushing the pews against the entrance doors to secure the location for the night. We’re lucky that only one walker was residing in the building, anymore and we might have had to settle with risking another night outside. And, Christ, I really don’t think my jacket was built for this weather. But it probably wasn’t built for the apocalypse either, yet here we are.

The statue in the center of the church catches my eye. Painted with bright, lavish colors sits the center of my vexation. The eternal bastard who has done nothing but fuck us over. Levi pauses beside me, charcoal eyes taking in the statue with a sneer. It’s not hard to tell that he shares the same opinion of the deity as me. This is probably really bad juju, because not only are we renouncing the deity; but we are doing it in his home court. But, honestly, what is the worst thing that could happen? Mr. Higher Power deciding to add another seven plagues to the apocalypse?

*Please.*

“Do you believe in god?” The question is out before I even notice the words forming. I’m not sure what has spurred this curiosity, but Levi doesn’t seem to mind it.

“No.” That’s not the answer I was expecting whatsoever. But who am I to assume that Levi’s been putting some misplaced faith in a power that couldn’t give two shits about us. My silence speaks volumes, and soon, he is continuing, “Why would I believe in something that has not done shit for us?” He’s turned to me now, eyes burning with an underlying passion. And I can’t help but agree with the shorter man. “And even if there is someone up there… well, they’re doing a shitty job.” A smile pulls at my lips at Levi’s bluntness, and I can’t help but wonder how he is above me on Mr. Higher Power’s good list. Sighing, he starts to walk towards one of the side rooms. “I’m going to search for supplies. Try to make yourself useful.”
He disappears, leaving me in the empty sanctuary. It’s an eerie sort of quiet that is filling up the room, only to be interrupted by the sounds of Levi’s soft shuffling behind the closed door in front of me. I meander to the opposite side of the church, peeking into the small closet we cleared earlier. There’s really nothing of value in here besides a couple of mops and brooms. Shit, maybe we can sharpen the handles and turn into a zombie slaying Tarzan and Jane. Now that would be something worth mentioning to Levi.

“Shit!” The man’s muffled voice echoes in the room, and suddenly my heart drops. I’m sprinting to the door, feet clumsily tripping over each other in a desperate attempt to just go faster. And maybe we really should have thought about where we were before spiting on Mr. Higher Power’s name. My hand reaches the doorknob, turning the object like I’m the definition of desperation. I barely have the door open before a heavy weight is slamming it back in my face. “Wait! Fuck, I’m okay… just… just, shit… stay out there.” Levi’s reassurance really does nothing to soothe the unease in my gut, but I really don’t think I could force my way in there even if I wanted to.

Sighing, I resolve to ‘make myself useful’ by pouting on one of the pews. Hell, there’s nothing else in this damn church besides that fucking closet, and I’m pretty sure that it doesn’t lead to Narnia. Minutes pass and I’m beginning to fall into that mental trap of overcompensation. And, soon, I’ve convinced myself that I can bust down that door, and I’ll just have to apologize to Levi later. I reach the door, and decide that I should at least give him a warning before I come barreling in.

Knuckles rapping gently at the wood, I wait for an answer. The only thing I am rewarded with is more shuffling, this time loud and apparent. Growing anxious, I knock again. “Levi?” Grumbled replies of ‘shitty brat’ and ‘impatient little bastard’ are barely audible through the thick wood. And, suddenly, the door is flying open, and—holy shit.

Levi’s standing in the doorway, hair pushed back and white sleeves rolled up to his elbows. My breath catches in my throat as I take him in, and I’m suddenly feeling very underdressed. His throat clears as he runs his fingers through a mop of slicked back hair. And I really don’t know what to say, because I’m positive that my singing of his praises would just leave a bitter taste in his mouth. He grabs ahold of my sleeve and pulls me inside without another word, door closing quietly behind us. I wasn’t sure what I was being dragged into; but now that I’m here, I don’t quite believe it.

Candles are flickering with the breeze, swaying back and forth against a backdrop of shadows. Set atop a rickety, wooden table that’s most definitely seen better days, are unwrapped candy bars, set out like some impromptu dinner. I feel hands against my shoulders, and soon the warmth of my jacket is leaving my body, only to be replaced by the tight embrace of the man behind me.

He murmurs against my shoulder, “Do you like it?” A genial sensation flutters through my chest, because he did this for me. Because even in the midst of Armageddon, the man behind me has taken the time to give me a sense of our past lives. To try and remind me that the walkers aren’t the only thing in this world anymore. And I don’t think I could express in words how unfathomably grateful I am.

I grumble in silent satisfaction, “I feel a little underdressed.”

Levi’s breath waterfalls against my neck as he chuckles, “You look perfect, Bright Eyes.”

I lean my head back until my face is nuzzling against his neck. “I knew there was a reason you had so many chocolate bars in your backpack.” He lets out an affirmative grunt, obviously not aware until that moment that I had discovered his hoard. He drifts away from me, heading for the table. I follow like a puppy chasing his owner, right on his heels as he pulls out a chair for me. “What a
gentleman.” I’m expecting a blunt reply, but all I get is an annoyed scoff. “Are these what caused that bang?” I motion at the chair he is currently sliding into.

“No, I was moving those bookcases out of the way, and fuck if something didn’t fall on top of me.” I can practically hear the limp in his pride.

“You should have let me help.”

“Then it wouldn’t have been a surprise.” He’s popped the lid of a water bottle, which I am assuming is our wine for the evening. This is all so fucking surreal, and I’m not sure which part of it I believe the least. The dinner or the man currently sitting before me? Either one seems pretty implausible, given that never in a million years would I think that I would be eating a meal consisting of chocolate bars. But, then again, I would have never dreamed of a world where I meant so much to Levi, either. “We would have music, but the only records this place has all involve the savior or the gospel truth. And I didn’t think that sounded very romantic.” Romantic. A smile begins to stretch over my face as I twirl the word around in my head. A smile that probably doesn’t look very attractive if Levi’s raised eyebrow is anything to go by.

“Thank you.” His look of confusion is slowly morphed into something different. Content. And what I would do to just see that look under different conditions. For that look to be the only face he wears. Not that apprehension, not the fear, but just the content. And I would be so happy. So fucking happy if my world could just revolve around that.

“Are you going to eat?” And that reminds me, where did he get these candles?

I voice the question, “Where did this stuff come from?”

He’s quick to answer, not missing a beat, "I spotted the shit when we were clearing the rooms. Thought it'd be nice. First date, I guess." I swear, I will never understand this man. This man who can be such an asshole, such a recluse. He just has to go and surprise me with antics like this, like the dance. And it's anything but unwelcome. On the contrary, it's wanted. These little acts of kindness. They remind me that the world we used to thrive in still exists, and it's not just this jumble of walkers and fucked up morality. A foot sliding against my ankle pulls me out of my daze, introducing me to an image of Levi carefully breaking apart a chocolate bar. I offer him no reply besides the intertwining of our ankles and a small smile. For once the stillness in the room feels comfortable and relaxed, the only sounds being the popping of caps and the rustling of wrappers. It feels right. And in the middle of an apocalypse, those are words I never really thought I would say. I’m not sure how many minutes have passed when Levi awkwardly clears his throat, and suddenly, the silence feels scratchy and tight. I lift my gaze to try and meet his silver eyes, eyes that are currently staring a hole into the already decrepit table. “I meant it.” I cast him a confused look, because I have no clue what he’s on about. “I meant it back at the studio.” A tinge of pink has begun to paint his cheeks, and his thumbs have started to twiddle on the tabletop. And maybe I’m just the most oblivious person alive, but I am still very fucking confused. And Levi notices. “Christ, Bright Eyes, I want to…” My head tilts to the side, eyes narrowed in misunderstanding.

Suddenly, his chair is scratching against the stone floor, violent and agitated. And, before I know it, his palms have tilted my face towards his to meet in a bruising kiss. A kiss that tells me exactly what words he was struggling with. And everything just hits me at once, and I should be scared, nervous; but none of those emotions are running through me. The only feeling I am resonating with is this built up desire that is presently pulsating between our connection.

And I want him.

It feels awkward and embarrassing to think about; lord help me if I try to say it aloud. But this is
what I want, what I need. And I don’t give two shits if this sounds cheesy or cliché, but maybe my mother was right. Maybe there is some red string of fate that’s continually pulling Levi and me together. Because there is no one else in this universe who could make me feel this way. This unwavering need to feel something more, to feel alive. And, goddammit, if I’m not an atom ready to explode in these hands. His tongue is tracing against my bottom lip, begging for a pass that I’ve never relinquished. But I give it to him with absolutely no hesitation. Because I don’t even have to think twice when it comes to this man.

His breath is hot and haggard against my lips when he finally releases me, “I want to make you fall apart in my arms.” My breath hitches, and Levi tenses, mistaking my quirk for apprehension. So, I say the one thing that I know will ease his mind.

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Suddenly, I’m being hoisted up into the air, legs instinctually wrapping around his narrow waist. That pale, beautiful curve of skin is mocking me beneath his collar, and I decide that it’s my turn to make him feel these butterflies. I press my lips into the hollow at the bottom of his neck, kiss sloppy and uncontrolled. I probably look like some kind of untrained lap dog, the way I am currently suckling at his flesh as though it’s giving me life. I feel the shudder run down his spine as my lips preform one last sweep. And, fuck, what I would do to feel this man come undone.

Before I can reattach, I am being lowered down onto the floor, our jackets providing an impromptu bed. I land with thump that casually reminds me that Levi has never really been gentle with anything like this. But it doesn’t seem to perturb him as he brings one of my legs over his shoulders. Swift fingers begin to untie my boots, and as soon as the laces are released he’s tossing the items away like they’ve fucking offended him. His jeans are the next causalities, except these are treated with care, being thoughtfully folded and placed to the side. And whatever pace we had previously set is being steamrolled with the way Levi’s shaking fingers are adeptly unbuckling my pants. But this is my first time, possibly Levi’s, too; and, I want to fucking cherish it, goddammit.

“L-Levi,” The ringing of his name in the air grants him pause in his assault on my blue jeans. “I’m not going anywhere, okay?” His fingers run underneath my chin, sparks emitting from the touch. “Okay.” And then it’s slow. So fucking slow. But it’s everything I ever thought it would be. Give or take the zombie apocalypse. My jeans lay beside me in a messy pile that has Levi’s brow twitching, but he quickly casts it aside as innocent kisses begin to peck down my naked leg. It feels strange to be pampered like this, to be taken care of. I can’t help but feel like some porcelain doll in his grasp, the way his lips are skimming over my flesh as though I’m something so fucking precious. And maybe I am. Maybe he thinks I am the most wonderful thing in this world. The fingers crooking under the hem of my last article of clothing drag me out of my assumptions, grey eyes scanning my face for a sign that this shouldn’t happen. One nod signals to the man that rejection is the last thing on my mind.

He pulls them down; and, suddenly, I’m exposed and vulnerable, not an inkling of fabric remaining on my body. But underneath this man, I feel safe. This man currently whispering sweet nothings into my ear as though I’m his virgin bride on her wedding night. His hands are tracing every inch of me, lighting a fire behind their touch. And, soon, my entire body is burning, aching for Levi to douse the flames. My hips arch upwards in a desperate attempt to flag the man’s attention. And it works. Even in the dim candlelight, I can still see that thin eyebrow rise in question.

He ignores my request, opting to ravage my neck with long, drawn out kisses that are sure to be visible in the morning. A wanton moan silences any protests I had as he licks a stripe across my collarbone, causing the skin to ignite in a blaze of infinite passion. And he’s inching lower and lower, lavishing every piece of skin with those lips that seem to be made for this. And, once again, I am having a difficult time believing he hasn’t done this before. I’m putty in his hands as his breath cascades against the place that wants his touch the most. I can feel his eyes searching my face, looking for a trace of protest. But they find nothing but encouragement as strong thumbs begin to rub small circles into my inner thighs. And, suddenly, heat. Warm, scorching heat that sends my body into a type of unimaginable sensory overload. You would think I was a gymnast in a past life the way my back is arching off the floor as I bring a hand to my mouth to muffle my moans. The warmth is abruptly sucked away from my body, leaving me cold and empty. Green eyes meet desire stricken greys in silent question.

“I want to hear you, Eren.” And I’m too wrecked by this lust filled libido to even argue with the man, merely giving a shaky nod. And, suddenly, the wet heat is back with such intensity that it is all I can do to not tangle my fingers in those raven locks. Incoherent phrases are spilling from my lips, and I’m repeating his name like it’s the only word I know. Levi, Levi, Levi. The heat rushes from my
skin, gathering together to create one, large blaze of eternal pleasure. My hands are desperately clawing at the air, wanting so badly to find purchase on his scalp. Fingers clenching and unclenching over and over and over and over until finally, I hit the wall. And my flame erupts, sending my body into a set of uncontrollable spasms.

Seconds pass, and I feel his weight slowly begin to lift off me as he leans back in between my quivering thighs. My vision is hazy, fire still dwindling, but I can vaguely make out the grin playing at the corners of those lips. And it doesn’t look arrogant, but instead, satisfied. Like my pleasure has brought him happiness. Levi notices my staring, and it’s not long before he is draping his body back across mine.

“S-shit…” I somehow manage as he brings that slick match back up my stomach. I feel his grin as he begins to pepper chaste kisses up and down my jawline, stopping when he reaches the corner of my mouth. And, just like that, the fire has been reignited. Except this time, I am determined to grant him the experience of the same sense of pure, unadulterated pleasure. My hands reach up to his chest as I try to take control, earning an inquisitive look from the man above me. “Trust me.” I speak in a hushed tone, trying to ooze a sultriness that I know I do not possess. But it works; and soon, the man has pulled me into his naked lap, bottoms having been shucked sometime during my eruption of bliss.

My hands trail down his chest, following every curve, every dip; committing to memory every detail of this beautiful man before me. I connect with his longing stare as the texture underneath my fingertips begins to change from the smoothness of his stomach to something rough and coarse. Bottom lip pulled between trembling teeth, Levi looks like he is going to fall apart any second now. Leaning closer, my lips caress his shoulders as my fingers finally answer his silent call. My breath hitches in my throat, because I have no idea what I’m doing, simply playing off what Levi enacted on me. But if the moan echoing in my ear is anything to go by, I’d say I’m doing something right. The man tenses against my touch, a brazen groan spilling from his mouth. And this is so uncharacteristically Levi that it is almost maddening. This man in front of me who is letting every emotion play out carelessly across his face. And, suddenly, I feel like he has been cheating me by hiding behind such an impassive face for so long now.

And it’s like I am determined to taste every inch of his skin, the way my lips are moving against his tensed muscles. I can feel every quiver, every shake with his body pressed so tightly against mine. The muscles are rippling under my suckling, tightening until I’m positive he is going to break. My tempo increases, as do his wanton groans. But before I can watch the gratification fill those silver eyes, he stops me. And, suddenly, my back is becoming very familiar with the floorboards. Levi’s leaning over me, eyes radiating pure lust; and I can’t help but feel like prey under his gaze.

Breath labored, he starts, “You really want to do this?” I’m surprised he can speak, let alone construct coherent sentences. Or maybe it’s just me who is losing control of all useful body functions. I nod my head, because my mind still doesn’t want to form any word besides his name. Suddenly, the warmth of his body is gone, and I’m questioning if I did something wrong. A sense of insecurity washes over me as I attempt to cover myself, because now, I am feeling so fucking stupid. I should have realized that Levi wouldn’t want to share something so intimate with me. I shouldn’t- “What are you doing?”

He’s kneeling beside me, bewilderment plastered across his face. “I… I just… you don’t have-” His lips silence any other protest I was going to make. If he knows what I on about, he doesn’t let it show. And I want to feel embarrassed, but the hand coaxing my thighs open is forcing something entirely different into my veins. I have no idea how this is supposed to work, and there is an uneasy feeling looming in my gut that is telling me I am going to do something wrong. But, suddenly, that fire is back, shooting flames up and down my body as Levi’s fingers spread the blaze like some sort
of arsonist. I’m a pyromaniac, the way I am begging for this heat to never fade away. The way I am just basking in its warmth like it’s some inadvertent life source.

I’m still foggy when the sound of a cap being popped open permeates my eardrums, and the only thing I can hear is Levi mumbling ‘travel section’. But what I feel. God, what I feel. My eyes shoot open as the fire begins to burn from the inside out. And this blaze is different; it’s painful. Streaking hot coals up my spine in a furious rampage to force this inferno out, to douse the flames and accept that Eren Jaeger isn’t meant to burn on a pyre of pleasured glory. But I don’t say anything, don’t tell him to stop; merely allowing my eyes to squeeze shut in an attempt to sate the demon clawing at my insides. But Levi’s not naïve. He sees the way my eyes are pulling shut, the way my hips are unconsciously edging away from his prodding. And I tell him not to stop; because I can feel in his movements that he’s about to pull the fire away. I demand that he adds the fuel.

And he does.

There are tears prickling at the corners of my eyes, threatening to add composition to this agonizing burning. But Levi wipes them away before they can spill, indulging me with affectionate adjectives. I’m just about to apologize, to tell him I can’t take it, when that fire crooks inside of me, and holy shit. The moan that spills from my mouth is not human, pure yearning pouring through my lips matched with a crude display of jerking hips. And all of this, all of the pain will be worth it if he can just strike that match again. My hands fist into the white button up that is hanging haphazardly around his elbows, clawing at the fabric like it somehow has control of the blaze. And, finally, the pain has vanished, completely subsided into a type of unadulterated euphoria that only Levi can provide me.

Suddenly, his touch is gone, and a needy whine immediately follows the absence. A chuckle tells me he’s still there, but it’s the feeling of his palms grazing up and down my thighs that confirms it. He asks me if I’m ready, and shit, I’ve been ready ever since the asshole kissed me back at that dance studio. A pale hand finds mine, intertwining our fingers in some sort of intimate connection that only linked appendages can provide. Taking a deep breath, he aligns our bodies, bringing my legs back around his waist. As our eyes lock, he offers me one last chance, one last opportunity to back out. Giving him a silent answer, my heels drive into the middle of his back, urging him forward like an impatient child. He keeps my stare as the fire begins to light me up once more, mouth hanging open like he has so much to say, but the words just won’t come. And, fuck, does it hurt; but I’m pushing the pain to the back of my mind. Eyes only focusing on the man above me. My face morphs into another grimace as the fire spikes against my spine, but soon that discomfort is turned into something entirely different. The fire has spread into a type of insatiable inferno in my gut, overpowering any sensation of pain with overwhelming spikes of pleasure. And I’ve never felt this way before. So out of control. That control only loosens as Levi presses that fire further into my body, spreading the blaze like I’m some sort of forest, a chain reaction of burning limbs spiraling me into a sea of rapture. I almost bring my free hand to my mouth, but I remember his demand. So, I don’t hold back, letting every crude phrase permeate into the air around us. I’ve reverted back to the Book of Levi, his name flowing off my lips like some sort of mantra. I tell him not to stop, to never stop. Because I want this burn to last forever, to never fizzle out.

My entire body is under his command, hips being lifted into the air by strong hand that is gripping me so hard, I wouldn’t be surprised if the bruises tattoo themselves into my flesh. And it’s like I could fucking combust from the way this burning is threatening to rip me in two. Incomprehensible phrases are flying out of my mouth, words lost to the rhythm of our bodies. I drag one of my hands across his sweat-slicked chest, the other still being held captive by his fingers.

“F-fuck, you’re doing so good, Eren.” His words sound so fucking broken, lips quivering as the
final syllables of my name leave the pink flesh. He releases a breathy moan that makes my stomach clench in anticipation. I don’t- fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. And I’ve decided. There’s no fucking way he hasn’t done this before. I doubt that I’ll be able to last in this heat any longer, my thighs trembling against his waist. And even in the midst of the inferno, he is still telling me it’s okay, still rubbing those circles into my quaking thighs. He hasn’t taken his eyes off of me, and I would think that this would be awkward, but I revel in the intimacy. Those silver eyes only adding fuel to the flames overloading inside my body.

And, suddenly, I’m arching off the floor, mouth open in a silent scream. My voice chokes out ‘again, again, again’. And, shit, this sense of upcoming explosion is so much different than the last. My nails are forming lust-filled crescents on the back of his hand, trembling as it clenches around mine. That fire is painting me red, everything around me fading in a haze of desire until the only thing I can see is his face. And he’s hitting me again and again, and fuck. It’s like anything pleasurable I’ve ever experienced is being put to shame by this constant drive of euphoria shooting through my body. I’m writhing beneath him, begging for this blaze inside of me to be released. And it’s so wanton, so crude the way I’m screaming his name like a fucking prayer on my lips. His breaths are coming faster and faster, and I’m sure he’s just as close as I am. He’s telling me just a little more, and I am not sure if I can handle it. This is past sensory overload, past every checkpoint I told myself I would hit. His eyelashes begin to flurry against that pale skin, and suddenly my name is the only word leaving his lips.

And, suddenly, I combust.

My back bows up into the air, the most animalistic moan releasing from my lips. Free hand slinging around his back in some wild attempt to find purchase as an anchor to this euphoric frenzy. It’s like everything hits me at once, every muscle in my body freezing in pure indulgence. The moment of bliss pulls me into somewhere unworldly, and I’m enraptured, caught up in this abrupt pang of ecstasy. Suddenly, I’m shuddering, eyes unable to focus on anything besides the dark undersides of my lids. Levi sounds absolutely wrecked above me, his breath coming in short, gasping bursts. And, soon, the fire inside me sputters to a halt, and I know that he is feeling the same gratification.

He collapses on top of me, chest heaving with uneven breaths. Seconds pass in silence, mark the sound of the air stuttering from our lungs, both of us still lost in the lust-filled haze. He’s still clenching onto my hand, fingers intertwined in a hard grip. I don’t even try to pull away, simply residing myself to the human blanket lying on top of me. Levi begins to come to his senses, propping himself up on shaky elbows. And I honestly thought that the waves of pleasure I just experienced moments prior would be the best feeling to ever pass through me, but I was wrong. So wrong. Because, right now, looking at that breathtaking smile shine down upon me, puts every past explosion to shame. I lift my free hand up to trace a thumb over his cheek, fingers weaving into those raven locks. I don’t know where I went right to end up with a place in this man’s heart. And he would kill me if I told him so, but I can’t help but think that he is the most beautiful thing in this entire universe.

He lets out one last breathy gasp as he retreats from my body, warmth spilling over onto my inner thighs. And I wouldn't mind sleeping in the mess, but Levi obviously has qualms about letting me play host to his release any longer. Turning to his side, he reaches for his folded pair of blue jeans. Hands finding their prize, Levi delves into one of the pockets, pulling out his handkerchief. It’s almost embarrassing the way he tends to my care, caressing my thighs with the soft fabric. But, I know that he is secretly just as stubborn as me, and any amount of arguing would just result in a chastising from the man. I try to contain the wince that pulls at my face as Levi drifts further down, the area still tender and sore. But I obviously do a terrible job, the man pausing in his treatment to knead reassuring circles into my thighs. And it works. My mind drifting away from the pain until he’s finished and pulling me into his arms.
“This world is shit.” And this is starting to sound like really awkward pillow talk, but I’m just blaming all of this on the fact that Levi is probably still trapped in a daze. He rolls us over so my head is lying against his chest, his hand roving through my mess of hair. “But I’ve learned that there are some things worth fighting for.” My breath catches in my throat as I nuzzle deeper into that hard chest. “Some things worth hoping for.” My eyelids start to flutter as a wave of exhaustion begins to flow through me. Before I drift into comatose, I hear four words. Four words that send sparks radiating through my chest.

“You're my hope, Eren.”

Chapter End Notes

I'll just be in this corner over here if anyone needs me.

Let's play how many ways I can get around saying penis. And, this chapter is WAY TOO FUCKING LONG but half of it is smut so. AND SHAME OMG THIS ISNT EVEN WELL WRITTEN SMUT ftUUUckKKKK

I didn't want it to be graphic, because I felt like that would be doing a disservice to the plot. Call me pretentious, but I like smut that can make you picture exactly what's going on without having to be blunt.

Oh my god, don't look at me. I'm trash, I know.

** Also, this is important: From here on out this fic WILL NOT be following along with manga character deaths. If feel like I should mention this so if any character was to die next manga chapter (we all know who I am talking about) then you wouldn't necessarily know that they were done for in this fic. So, there is a little assurance.

Thanks as always for the kudos/comments!

Tumblr:
fuzzyporcupine.tumblr.com

Reminder that I'm tracking the tag 'fic: what's eating you'.

If you see any grammar mistakes let me know! This fucker was over 9000 words, so there is bound to be stuff I missed.

FANMIX
ALL FANART
“Okay, Little Man. Cast her off.” I roll my eyes as Grisha passes me the fishing pole. I shouldn’t even be here at this stupid park with this stupid man casting off this stupid fishing pole. I promised myself the last time he left that I was done, that the man didn’t exist. Figures that my mom would be the one to force these get-togethers on me. But, hey, at least this time I am given a warning as to when he is going to slip in and out of my life.

“I’m sixteen. I stopped being your ‘Little Man’ twelve years ago. And, anyway, you should probably stop saying that considering you’re drawing a crowd. They probably think you’re some pedophile with that caterpillar growing on your upper lip.” I hear him scoff, but that only fuels my silent victory. I might be a little shit, but truth be told, that mustache does make him look pretty creepy.

“You’re still on about that?” And I am praying he is not being serious right now. The question alone makes my knuckles turn white against the pole that I’m forcing myself not to break over his head. “It’s been twelve years, Eren.” The sentence acts as the metaphorical straw on the camel’s back. But instead of a broken vertebra, I’m chunking the fishing pole so far across the water that I half expect the Lady of the Lake to reach up and grasp it.

“Of course I’m still on about that! I don’t give a shit if it’s been twelve years, twenty years, a hundred fucking years!” The passerby are being to take notice, slowing their pace in attempts to catch an earful of the argument. But I don’t care. I have been so cordial in acting like his departure from my life didn’t matter. Like I have been perfectly fine with this hole in my chest. And it’s not as if I have done a good job at concealing my anger. It’s brought up in every trip to the principal’s office, every after school discussion. ‘It’s because he has no father figure in his life.’ Well, I would like to give a personal ‘fuck you’ to everyone who uttered those words, because his presence is obviously not taming any amount of rage. If anything, it’s spurred it on.

“You’re not going to talk to me like that.” His voice comes out through gritted teeth, whispered and angry. But fuck him if he thinks he has any say in my actions. He’s the one who decided to become an optional player in my life.

“I’ll say whatever the fuck I want! You’re the one who left. Twice.” He’s obviously had enough, hand wrapping around my wrist in a vice. “Get your fucking hands off me!” It’s like talking to a wall as he drags me back to the parking lot. And I had no idea that the man was this strong, or maybe I’m a lot weaker than I thought; because I am thrashing around like a child throwing a tantrum, trying to wrestle out of his grip. But it’s solid, and I’m not released until I am tossed unceremoniously into the passenger seat of his beat up Civic. You’d think for a doctor, he would splurge for a nicer vehicle, but the man’s never been one for the ‘bling bling’ as he liked to call it. And wait. Why do I care what kind of piece of shit he drives? I’m being unofficially kidnapped, you’d think I’d be more worried about that.

Before I can even attempt to open my door, the bastard turns on the locks. And it would be different if the plastic pole didn’t fucking disappear into an oblivious hole whenever he pushed the button, but it does. And now I’m trapped in a car with someone who I would like to be eons away from. Fan-fucking-tastic.

“Eren.” And if he thinks I’m going to have this conversation with him, then I don’t see how he got a medical degree. But, hey, maybe he just printed one off from some shady website and has been
secretly performing botched surgeries all this time. Those glasses do make him look like the mad scientist type now that I think about it. A deep sigh reverberates through the tiny space of the car that smells like cigarettes and stale fast food. “Eren, I’m sorry.” My fingers twitch against my jeans, his apology hitting something deep within me. “I know I haven’t been there for you. But I’m trying.” What does he want? Me to kiss his feet, praise his good name for being sorry that he hasn’t been in my life? Fuck that. No, actually, fuck him. “It would help if you could try, too.” Fists begin to clench against my knees, and I am silently praying that those breathing exercises Mikasa told me about are worth something.

“Just take me home.” It comes out rough, audibly displaying every ounce of rage that is currently bubbling under my collar. I don’t want to be near him any longer, and if it wasn’t for those pieces of plastic shit pulling a disappearing act, I would be long gone. But maybe I shouldn’t go home. I’m not really looking forward to the chastising I am guaranteed to receive when I step through those doors early. But what does my mom honestly expect? That I will just forget all of those days I sat by the front door like some fucking puppy waiting for him to walk through? Or that I will overlook all of the Christmases spent staring at the card that contained some written apology of why he couldn’t be there?

“Eren-”

“Just take me home!” He doesn’t argue any further, shifting the car into gear. And thank the lord that the drive was only ten minutes; because I doubt I could sit in this hypothetical prison much longer. I really should just let it go, this anger. But I can’t. I need this feeling of resentment, because throughout the years, this has become routine. It’s become something that I’m familiar with. And I’m not ready to jump off this emotion pier into some black vat of unfounded happiness. Because that would all be a lie. It would be a sham, a farce in order to try and show the world I’m more than a pair of balled up fists and a furrowed brow. But, to be honest, I stop caring what everyone else thought twelve years ago.

We’re about two minutes from the house when he tries to start again, “I’m sorry. Whether you believe it or not, I’m sorry, Eren.” I don’t answer him, deciding that the blurring buildings outside the window are more deserving of my time. He lets out a defeated sigh, knowing that I am not going to forgive him. And I’m glad the man has finally accepted that these random day trips don’t make up for twelve years of emptiness. The locks pop open as we pull in front of my house, and I can already see my mother’s head peeping through the curtains.

Great.

I throw open the door; ready to just face the lesser of two evils, when a hand tugs down on my sleeve, preventing me from going any further. My head whips around, eyes narrowed in aggravation. That saying ‘if looks could kill’ is obviously bullshit, because the man in front of me is still alive and breathing. His grip falters; and I am able to slip out, turning my back on the asshole in a show of obvious anger. The man lets me walk away, and I hope that this hurts him just as much as it hurt me each time he decided to leave.

“I’ll always love you, Eren. Don’t forget that.”

I wake up to a cloud of smoke hanging precariously over my head. Eyes blinking away all the weariness that comes with the morning light, I release a drowsy yawn. I really don’t want to get up, satisfied to just sleep away the rest of my life if it means I can stay in this feeling of content. Rolling my shoulders, I notice that my bed feels rather life-like. It is rather life-like. The events of the night prior ram themselves into my memory like a fucking runaway freight train. And holy shit. Holy shit. My cheeks begin to burn as I think of the wanton moans that emitted from my lips last night. Of the
way my body shuddered under his touch. *Of how excruciatingly vulnerable we both were.*

Levi’s fingers begin to wander through my hair, fingers twisting the locks like they are some sort of string his wants to wrap around his knuckles for a safe reminder. The man must know that I am awake, my yawning signal enough. Another waft of smoke appears above me, quickly dissipating in the morning light. My head begins to drift backwards, skull pushing into Levi’s thigh. A distant look is plastered across his face as he brings the cigarette up to his lips for another drag. I’m not sure what he is staring at, but I’m pretty sure it’s nothing. He looks too unfocused, too lost in his own thoughts to be concentrating on anything but the strain of his own mind. His disassociation is scaring me, making me feel absolutely helpless as I watch his face struggle to come to terms with a problem that I’m not aware of. But maybe I’m wrong, and he always looks detached in the mornings.

“Levi?” His fingers pause in my hair, obviously not aware that I’ve been awake for the past few moments. Which is odd, because there is no way that my yawning was quiet. The cigarette teeters dangerously between pale fingers, smoke creating some sort of oppressive barrier above me. I remember Levi telling me back at Stohess that he only breaks into a pack of cancer sticks whenever he feels stressed, but I don’t understand. What happened, what did I do to cause these feelings of anxiety to resurface?

He’s looking down at me now, charcoal eyes full of an apprehension that I do not comprehend. It’s like his unease is contagious, because now, I am positive that a pair of emeralds are mirroring the man before them. Maybe last night was a mistake. Maybe I should have said no. But I’m selfish. *I’m so fucking selfish.* Because I know that even if I had the chance to go back and refuse him… I wouldn’t. The opportunity could be placed before me time and time again, but I would never change anything. I would never deny him that need to take this just a little bit further. I’m probably an idiot, probably still caught in some hormonal afterglow. But is it so wrong to be selfish? To want to feel happy? To feel loved? My breath catches in my throat at my internal questioning.

*Love.*

For such a small word, the fucker sure sounds heavy in my mind. *Love.* Is that what this is? No. No, I don’t… I don’t love him. And, as hard as that is to swallow, it feels almost refreshing to let that simple truth spread throughout me. This feeling in my chest isn’t love, is it? It’s want. It’s selfish. *So fucking selfish.* Because Eren Jaeger can’t let anyone in. Not fully. Eren Jaeger can’t take that final step, because he’s too fucking afraid. Eren Jaeger doesn’t want to feel that agony when this man will ultimately ripped away from him. Eren Jaeger won’t allow himself to feel anything besides this unreasonable desire to let it go. Eren Jaeger is a goddamn coward. *I’m a goddamn coward.*

“Good morning.” His fingers are pushing the fringe off my forehead, allowing the tips of his appendages to trace gently over the tanned flesh. Levi looks exhausted, the dark circles under his eyes sticking out like a sore thumb. He’s obviously been on watch all night, not bothering to wake me. Which isn’t how this whole apocalypse thing works. We are supposed to share responsibly, not decide to throw it all atop our backs lack some sort of human caravan. It’s reckless, stupid. And I’m holding back these feelings of anger; because I know that he didn’t mean any harm in allowing me the extra rest. But a couple hours of sleep can decide between a head shot and a wasted bullet.

The apprehension in Levi’s eyes deepens as he takes me in. And I should probably be doing a better job of hiding my emotions; but I know he would see straight through the façade, anyway. “What’s wrong?” I have several possible answers that I could use against his prodding. *You’re risking your life for something stupid… I woke up to someone who I didn’t recognize… I think I might be in- no. I stop myself while I’m ahead, because I thought that I’d already came to the conclusion of these feelings mere seconds ago. Silver eyes are still piercing into me as I try to drift away from the uncertainty. But my conscience is a sneaky little bastard, and I don’t know why I hadn’t realized this*
 sooner.

“Nothing.” And that’s a lie. A lie that is practical glass under Levi’s gaze. Brow gathering in suspicion, his fingers pause atop my head. The man usually is content to let me have my secrets, to let me keep up with my own problems. He never prods me for information that I’m not willing to give, but the look in his eyes tells me that this time is different. That this time, he isn’t going to just let it go. “It’s nothing.” Another lie causes an overcast glare to narrow further down at me. I feel cornered, and it is making me squirm against his thigh. My eyes are attempting to look anywhere but at his unforgiving gaze, but those silvers pull me in like a fucking trance. I take a deep breath; but the look he is giving me halts the oxygen, instead forming a huge lump in my throat. So, I lay there like an idiot, gaping above me at the man who is shooting me narrowed glares. The only thing that is coming out of my mouth is buffering words that are trying desperately to form at least one coherent sentence. My verbal deficiency doesn’t amuse Levi, who rolls his eyes as he pushes my head off him.

I sit up before the back of my skull becomes familiar with the cold stone below, fingers tightening around the jacket lying on top of my body. My still naked body. And, suddenly, all of the shorter man’s apprehensions are forgotten as I begin to manically search for my clothes in an attempt to replace Levi’s previous body heat. Because fuck it’s cold. A pair of dark, blue jeans smacks me in the face, followed by a shirt, and fuck! “Did you really have to throw the boots, you dick?” All I am offered with is a subtle shrug as the rest of my clothing is tossed in my vicinity. He’s pissed. Or, highly annoyed. Either one really doesn’t bode well for me. Ah, the luxuries of traveling in pairs. I want to tell him to snap out of it and stop acting like a child in time out as he stomps out the glowing cigarette butt. But I know my chastising will only further aggravate the man. I don’t understand why my unwillingness to admit what’s on my mind is such a big deal, anyway. He’s never had a problem with it before, so I don’t see why the action would bother him, now. Nonetheless, it is way too cold for this shit. I slip on my pants and shirt, welcoming the warmth that the fabric is providing my chilled body.

Levi’s still shirtless, the harsh winter chill obviously not a factor to him. He’s in the process of pulling up his jeans when I see them: the scars. They litter his back, the marks white and slender. My eyes travel down his body, pausing when they land on the purple bruises plaguing his sides. I’m left drowning in a sea of confusion for a moment, but then I remember that this man was recently introduced to the tip of Zackly’s boots. Obviously, those wounds are going to take time to heal, and they aren’t going to magically disappear just because I forgot about them. An intake of air alerts Levi of my staring, the man’s face still hardened with doubt. But I’m not looking at his face, his eyes. It’s the scars and the bruising that are commanding my attention. And he knows it. Levi pulls on his button up at breakneck speed, and I am left in awe at how he manages to fasten the shirt correctly.

“Levi~”

I’m not even given a chance to finish before he is snapping on me. “Is this what is wrong with you?” He gestures to himself, hands shaking as he completes the motion. And we are falling apart before we’ve even started. This deck of cards is tumbling down as I watch Levi’s trembling hands clench into fists, awaiting my answer. But what can I say? Because he has it all wrong. Because I’m not scared of the scars. Because he shouldn’t be ashamed. He scoffs, “What am I saying? You’re a just a fucking kid. I wouldn’t expect for you to understand.” I don’t even process what I am doing until his face is inches from mine. And I realize that I’m pissed. I’m so fucking pissed.

“You’re such a fucking asshole.” I emphasize the name with a push to his shoulder. “What did I fucking do to you?” I’m getting more and more worked up with every word that leaves my lips, the anger practically oozing off my voice. Levi hasn’t said anything, merely acting as a channel for all of
my pent up aggression. And that makes me angrier. I want him to argue, to fight. Not just accept this verbal abuse. "You fucking asshole, I didn't do anything to you. And I'm not a kid, dammit!" My hands push at him for a second time, trying to ignite something in that silver light. His eyes flicker up to me, something dangerous lurking inside them. It's like he is daring me to touch him again, jaw already tightening with contained anger. I lean forward to nudge him once more, when a pair of hands wrap around my wrists in a vicelike grip. And there it is. There's that spark. He's on the precipice, barely hanging on the line of control. And I know exactly what will push him over the edge. "And you *fucked* this kid if you don't remember." The phrase sounds disgusting running off my tongue, and I honestly can't believe I let it pass through my lips. Because, as carnal as last night was, it seemed so much deeper than just a quick tumble. It appeared to be greater than just a joining of bodies in order to feel something else besides this overbearing depression. It was something different. It was something real. And I just soiled it with those words. The evidence is plastered across Levi's face, shocked and… hurt.

"Stop." The word sounds so deadly as it spills out, so controlled. And I know that he probably wants nothing more than to sock me in the face for being such an insufferable shit, but he wouldn't hurt me again, would he?

So, I push it.

I tug at his hold on me, causing him to shake my imprisoned appendages. “I said stop, you fucking brat!”

But I don’t.

And, soon, my back is colliding with the stone floor. Levi wretches my wrists above my head as he straddles me, and this would be very alluring if it wasn’t for the gravity of the situation currently pressing down on me. “Stop.” The word does not emit the same fatal essence as before, but instead it’s pleading, begging. Broken.

And I listen.

Chest heaving from the effort of trying to free myself from my human captor, I lay against the cold ground, defeated. I’m not even sure why I fought to begin with. Because Levi insulted me? No, that’s not it. That was just the cherry on top, wasn’t it? It’s because I want him to understand, to realize that I am not a child. That I’ve aged so much in these past few months. That I’m not a liability. *I’m not a liability.* And, shit, even I don’t believe that last one. The lump in my throat is trying to force itself out, but I know that it will only bring tears. Tears that I really don’t want to shed. And I am not positive if it’s pride or anger that is holding them back, but I think it is a little bit of both.

“Stop.” It’s a whisper, flying away with the wind. And it breaks me. I go completely limp in his grasp, the only movement being my trembling bottom lip. It’s amazing how quickly things can go to shit. Just last night, I was praying that I would never be pulled from his arms. Now, it’s all I want to get away from them. It’s just too much being trapped under him. I’ve long since lost my anger, it being replaced with a sadness that I suppose comes with remorse. Because I shouldn’t have attacked him. I didn’t think. I never think. I just- The fingers gripping my chin yank me out of my daze, throwing me into a pair of guilt-ridden, grey eyes. His lips have been pulled into a thin line, no longer calculating, but remorseful. I probably should apologize, but my voice doesn’t want to form the words. I doubt that an admittance of fault is what Levi is looking for, anyway. He pulls himself off me, sparing me one more passing glance before he walks to the door. It doesn’t slam as he pulls it behind him, but it might as well with the pretense of his departure.

I wish I knew the right thing to do. Wish I knew the answers. Because part of me wants to chase
after him, make him understand that I still need him. But the other half wants to let him be, let him sit alone with his thoughts. I know which side Levi would take, but I also know which one I would typically choose. It’s time for a change. It’s time to start acting like I give a shit about someone besides myself. So, I’m going to sit here. I’m going to wait, because this is what Levi would do. He wouldn’t pester me when I needed space. He would understand that I wouldn’t need his sympathy, but his understanding.

I spend several minutes rooted in one spot before I decide that this self-pity is useless. Crossing over to the rickety, old table, I try to gather the excess candy bars and water bottles. If anything, I’m going to at least make myself productive. Memories of last night flood my mind as I pick up the contained liquid. Wine to water, huh? A small smirk drags at the corner of my lip as I think of Levi’s impromptu date night. The grin falters as I remember that I royally fucked up the whole evening with my outburst. Or, rather my retaliation. I should have just played the role of punching bag for once. Lord knows Levi has done it countless times for me. Because maybe all he needed was someone to release all of his built up anger on. And I fucked up.

I don’t even realize that the man has reentered the room until I feel a hand on my shoulder.

“Shit!” I jump halfway out of my skin, fingers pulling the hunting knife off the table. I relax once the realization dawns on me, but the bastard must really have a death wish. “I could have killed you, asshole.” The only response I am given is a squeeze on the shoulder. It doesn’t seem like much, but pair that with the look in his eyes and it’s almost like he has forgiven me in twenty different languages. And I don’t deserve it. He should still be outside contemplating whether or not he should just abandon my dumbass in this eerie church. But he doesn’t. He makes forgiveness seem so fucking easy. Like it is something rudimentary that takes no effort whatsoever. As he threads his fingers back into the front of my shirt, I can’t help but feel the green monster prick at my pride. Because forgiveness shouldn’t be so simple. It’s complex, a labyrinth. Having thousands of corridors and hundreds of struggles, until finally the little bastard is found. But Levi makes it seem as though the path to clemency is a straight line.

But I don’t voice my jealousy, I don’t voice anything. I simply allow him the comfort my shoulder is currently providing him as his forehead presses into my body.

We’re not broken.

Not yet.

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“Fourteen hours. I swear to god.”

“You’re a fucking liar. That’s the biggest pile of bullshit I’ve ever been fed, brat.” There’s a smile pulling at Levi’s lips as he attempts to erode my claim that I was trapped in the classroom closet after hours. Which is the complete truth, even if Levi doesn’t believe it. It’s too bad that Connie isn’t here, considering the asshole was trapped in the fucking thing with me.

“I couldn’t make that up, and you know it.” I offer him a show of teeth as he rolls his eyes. He lets out a scoff that tells me nothing will convince him that I am telling the truth. I guess I’ll just have to be content on waiting to sway him when we find my friends. Something hits me in the gut at the thought of my old group. Part of me wants this whole ordeal with Trost Medical to be a sham so I have a decent excuse to seeking out my comrades. The other half is too scared to search for them. Too scared that the only things I will find are dejection and their dilapidated bodies. But I know that they are strong. I know they are alive. They have to be. They have to be.
“You’re a fucking liar.” The smirk on his lips dissipates any animosity in his words. I think deep down he realizes that I am telling the truth, but his pride just won’t accept defeat. Probably. Suddenly, those silver eyes go wide, and I am turning my head to see what has caught his eye. My breath catches in my throat as I take it in.

The building’s not as large as a commercial hospital, but it is still a decent size. The blocky lettering has long since faded, leaving behind the broken words, ‘TR ST EDICAL’. It’s not exactly what I pictured when I heard the words ‘Trost Medical’, but I’ve learned to expect the unexpected when dealing with the end of the world. But something’s not right. Something’s missing. That something being a tall blond man and a crazed woman. It’s like Levi is reading my mind, grey eyes scanning my face until they are met with a pair of anxious greens.

“They’re probably inside, Bright Eyes. Erwin isn’t a fucking idiot. It would be suicide to wait outside for us to show up.” His words settle the unnerving feeling ripping through my gut, but the nausea is back as quickly as it left when I see the front door of the hospital.

Written in red, bold letters, in what I can only assume is blood, are two words that send a deadly shiver down my spine.

NO HOPE

Chapter End Notes

EDIT: Here is the link for the What's Eating You? fanmix.

I had such different plans for this chapter what the fuck happened? Can I reiterate that Grisha's not mentally/physically abusive? And yes, I will state this in every chapter in which he appears. Also, I wanted Eren's reactions to his father to be 'real' sooo I hope it came off that way :3 And more Levi backstory foreshadowing holy shit... I LITERALLY FUCKING FORESHADOW EVERYTHING IN THIS FUCKING FIC OMFG.

But thank you for the kudos/comments HOLY SHIT OVER ITS 800 KUDOS YISSSSS

Tumblr:
fuzzyporcupine.tumblr.com

I'm tracking 'what's eating you' as alwaysssss.

If you spot any grammar errors, let me know pls and thnk u.

FANMIX
ALL FANART
There is just something about diving head first into a creepy ass hospital that sends shivers down my spine. I’m convinced that Levi is made of some impenetrable steel, the way the calmness has settled upon his features. Hell, one look at him and you would never know that we have ventured into a possibly fatal situation. But beneath the calm those quicksilver eyes are brimming with an alertness that only an apocalypse could bring out. Scanning the darkened corridor in front of us like a hunter searching for its prey. The only source of light for the narrowed hallway is coming from a couple of broken windows and the opened door, leaning against my foot like a crutch. I should be wondering how the fuck we are going to see with the windows only providing a dim light… but I’m not. Instead, my mind is revolving around the fact the Erwin and Hanji aren’t here. That if they were going to be anywhere in this goddamn building it would have to be the front entrance. And they aren’t here.

I want to grab Levi, tell him that he’s a fucking liar, because he said they would be here. But anger isn’t what’s pulsating through my core right now. No, that emotion decided to burrow itself deep into my system when Levi straddled me with those pleading eyes back in that church. Fear. And there we go. Self-realization be damned, because the fucker is doing nothing but tormenting me with these inner comprehensions. The feeling turns into an itch that I can’t scratch, because absolutely no amount of self-reassurance is dwindling the feeling of terror. It’s in the back of my head, mocking me with an unseen face in the dark recesses of my mind. Prompting me with images of a mangled Hanji and Erwin, the sick bastard is slowly driving me insane with this internal prodding. I just can’t lose my friends, not again. This will be my limit. There is not one doubt in my mind that this paper castle I’ve created will be ripped to shreds if anything has happened to them.

The sound of a zipper being yanked down causes me to direct my attention to Levi’s hands, which are currently shuffling through the contents of his pack. The man is a wonder, always so together even though I know the same thoughts are running through his head. But that’s where he has me beat, because his survival instincts top his need for emotional comforts. It’s things like this that make me wonder if it was really true when he said that he couldn't lose me. I’m not questioning if the man meant it. Fuck, I know he meant it. But would he really break if I was taken out of the picture? I see his hands shifting inside the backpack with a focused need, and I decide.

No, he wouldn’t.

The flashlight that he pulls out is miserable at best, the object looking like it has been to Hell and back. But it works, the beam of artificial light providing us the option of continuing into this possible haven. Haven. That sure is a fucking terrible word to describe the blood stained walls we’re currently passing; but shit, this is the apocalypse, so my standards have dropped significantly.

“What are we looking for?” I speak to him in a whisper, considering the fact that we haven’t checked the floor for any undead. Which was probably not the smartest way to go about this impromptu siege on Trost Medical, but here we are.

He raises his eyebrow as he regards me, “A blond tank and a rabid animal.” Of course, he’s looking for them. He’s not seeking out some rumored military operation; he’s searching for his friends. My friends. Because Erwin’s plan was a fucking shot in the dark, wasn’t it? Even, the man himself was just pulling at straws, hoping that the facility was still in working order. It was a good plan, a hopeful plan. But this world has taken hope and wrung its neck like it was a fucking chicken, promptly
serving the word up to us on a steaming platter of ‘fuck you’. “And maybe the Men in Black.” Okay, so we aren’t completely abandoning hope. Erwin would be proud.

A low moan pauses our venture, provoking us to stop dead in our tracks against the dingy wall. It’s coming from the darkness ahead of us, covered by a sheen of black. The brightness from the windows has long faded, the halls providing us with nothing but closet doors and white paint. It growls again, the drawl pitching an audible hunger into the air. Levi turns the light towards the ground, because while the walkers’ eyesight falters in the afterlife, it’s still there. His hand slips into mine, leading me in an apprehensive dance. I don’t know what’s more terrifying, the fact that I can’t see the walker or the knowledge that it’s there. As my sweaty palm slides against Levi’s hand, I figure that both details are equally horrifying.

Fingers curl around mine, trying to offer me a silent comfort that we will be okay. But I would like for the owner of those appendages to remember that we are currently floundering around in the dark with a monster at our heels. Plus, we are about as defenseless as a newborn baby, our only real weapon being the small axe Levi has wedged underneath his waistband.

My heart is jumping in my chest like a flea on a dog, pounding in my ears until it’s the only thing I can hear. That and Levi’s steady breathing. How he can be so fucking controlled in a time like this is beneath me… well, no actually above me, given that if I was alone in these halls I would’ve probably opted to just say fuck it and run out of here. But here he is, blindly leading me through the hallway with only a wavering circle of light. A putrid stench begins to wave through my nostrils. I had thought that my sense of smell had grown used to such scents, but the absolutely rancid odor permeating into my nose has me second guessing that hypothesis. It smells like death, as cliché as that sounds. But that’s the only word that I can find suitable for the putrid scent lingering in the air.

I hold back the gag that threatens to ascend from my throat as my boot connects with something that I’m certain shouldn’t be squishy. I’ll never get used to this, and I suppose that it is a good thing my mind refuses to become desensitized to the world we live in now. Or, maybe it’s a hindrance. Because I’m almost certain that things would have turned out differently if I had accepted this fucking apocalypse months ago. Like the fact that my arms wouldn’t be riddled with bite marks. That would definitely be a plus. Hell, right now, I would probably be sitting around a warm fire in an argument with Jean about sharing the last piece of squirrel. But, shit, I would take all of those stupid arguments, all of the smacks to the back of the head if I could just see my old group again.

I hear the growl sound off again, and the hand squeezes mine tighter. And it hits me that if things would have worked out differently, if I’d never been bitten, than I would never have met him. I would have never met Levi. A sharp pang strikes at my chest, causing my thoughts to falter. Because I believed that I had it all worked out. That there was no doubt that I would rather be with my old friends. But that’s not true is it? Because I don’t think there is anyone else in this world who I rather being suffering with. And, fuck, that sounded fairly masochistic. But it’s the god honest truth. I just suppose that realization just comes with a bit of internal flagellation.

Suddenly, I’m colliding with something. Something metal. A metal whose sound reverberates through the narrowed halls like the bells of Hell. I hear a sharp intake of air come from the man beside me, because he knows just as well as I that we are royally fucked. The walkers are bred for this, to see without sight. It was quickly discovered that even though the brain is dead, the senses have never been more alive. I tend to compare it to those people who have those bizarre fetishes with sensory deprivation. Jean had told me that it when a sense is taken away, the others are heightened. However, that was after he let me know exactly how he knew that information. Fucking Horseface. But the information did prove useful; because I was able to understand why the walkers could seek us out beneath the light of the moon.
So, it really shouldn’t surprise me that the growls have gotten increasingly louder as the lurker approaches.

That calm façade is gone as Levi allows the flashlight to dance across the room like some sort of spectacle. He has me pressed against the wall, his body providing a human shield against the incoming walker, which is ridiculous; because I’m the immune one here. One more bite won’t kill me, but it will certainly destroy him. I put a hand on his shoulder, a hand that is immediately thrown off as he slams his shoulders into my upper body. He knows exactly what I’m trying to do, the bastard being three steps ahead of me. My back’s connection with the wall forces the air out of my lungs, leaving me to lean forward onto the man who thinks body slams during the apocalypse are appropriate.

My aggravation doesn’t last long, though, as a carnivorous roar breaks the through the tension. Levi’s flashlight is still moving frantically through the shadows, trying desperately to get a hold on the walker. The anticipation is killing me, the only thing I’m able to see being flashes of blood splattered walls. Suddenly, the light finds it, and holy shit. Big, angry, and hungry the biter looks like it’s devoured villages. It’s huge, taller than Erwin and matched with a build that could rival Zeus. And it’s coming straight for us. Holy shit. I feel Levi’s hand shift, and I know that he is going for his axe. But we both know that the flimsy piece of wood will barely hinder the monster trampling towards us. We have to run, fuck the consequences. We have to get out of here.

But that’s obviously not what Levi has planned, hand firmly gripping the handle of the axe. The beast is coming closer and closer, until I can practically smell the rotting flesh strapping across its body. And Levi is still standing there like this is some ultimate showdown between man and machine. But he’s about seven feet out of his league with this one.

“Levi! We have to go!” Because fuck being quiet, fuck his unfounded male bravado, but most importantly fuck death. I grapple with his shoulders, but the man is solid, throwing me back again as if I weighed nothing at all. “Levi!” The monster is just a few feet from us, thick arms flying about with little to no control. “Levi…” He’s going to die; I’m fucking positive. And there’s absolutely nothing I can do but stand here, restrained by the man I have repeatedly promised to save.

The walker strikes first, jaws open like a vacuum into the dark depths of his gullet. But Levi’s faster, the man wedging the blunt end of the axe into the forehead of the creature. And, for a second, I’m left speechless, left ashamed for even doubting this man. However, the feeling doesn’t last as the biter continues in his transgressions. This takes the man by surprise, obviously under the same assumption as me that the walker was dead or dying. The beast may be brainless, but instinct still drives it. And soon its claws have wrapped around Levi’s arm like a vice. Time stops, or slows whatever the fuck you want to call it. I’m sick of these time warps, the bastards only bringing along with them death and despair. But this one’s different. This one is giving me chance to save him.

Save Levi.

The walker’s teeth are inching closer and closer to that pale unmarred flesh, the veins pulsating underneath the monster’s grip. But I can still save him, can’t I? He isn’t resigned to share a fate of flesh eating vices, but instead a life alongside a cool oceanic breeze. A better life. Levi’s struggling, body dragging itself to the floor in a hopeless attempt at freedom from the cruel enclosure. But the walker doesn’t relent, the hunger in its eyes practically palpable. The flashlight drops from Levi’s grasp, providing an improvised stage light to the horrors about to take place. It’s rolling on the floor, both wrestling bodies being highlighted in the span of seconds. And I’m wasting time. For whatever reason, Mr. Higher Power had a change of heart, and is granting me this slowed time to save him.

Save Levi.
The words flow so easily through my mind, but they falter when my hands are grasping the hilt of the hunting knife. The chance of success is such a flip of the coin, the weapon in my grip not even half as durable as the axe currently lodged in the walker’s skull. But I have to hit brain. I have to drive it further. The teeth are so close, chomping up and down as they close into their prey. Levi’s still fighting, still clawing at the walker’s hulking frame as he is pushed into the hospital’s tiled floor. But, soon, that struggle will mean nothing. And I have to save him.

Save Levi.

I pray that the man doesn’t get caught in the crossfire as I bring the weapon down with a force I haven’t been graced with since Stohess. The sickening crunch of bone tells me that I’ve done my job, I’ve slain the monster. But it doesn’t alert me if I was fast enough.

“Shit.” But that voice does. I pull the dilapidated body off him, grabbing the rolling flashlight while I’m down there. “Shit.” He repeats as he meets my eyes, ocean fire and blazing with what I’m hoping is aggravation, because this asshole almost got himself killed. He brings a pale hand to his forehead, sweeping away the dark fringe. “You’re pissed.” We have a winner, ladies and gentlemen. I’m all for heroics, but fucking hell, keep that shit one thousand feet from me when it puts someone’s life at risk. Out of everyone on this godforsaken planet, I should know what heroism gets you.

“You think?” I reach down a hand to lift him off the floor, because even with the frustration brewing inside of me, I was still more worried than anything. “We could have ran.” I state the obvious, wanting to force feed into his brain that attacking a seven foot man-eater probably won’t make it on his list of ‘smartest moments’. I’m gifted with a look that combines both incredulity and sincerity, something I’m sure only Levi can pull off.

“I thought I could kill it.” It’s an honest answer, his pride silently dying with its emission. “Didn’t want to run into the fucker again.” I understand his reasoning, but that’s because it’s something I would do. Something reckless. “But you saved me, you little shit.” I know what I’m expecting when I shine the light on his face, and I’m not disappointed. That smirk is pulling at his lips like he’s the cat that ate the canary, and I’m guessing that’s as close to a thank you as I’m going to get.

Any amount of frustration I was feeling evaporates into the air with that smirk, acting like a protection against grumpy moods. I bump shoulders with him in a silent scolding that only rewards me with a ‘tch’ from the shorter man. The grin that stretches across my face seems out of place, given that I almost witnessed a Levi buffet, but some part of me is saying that it’s okay to smile in the face of darkness. Which is quite literal right now, considering that’s all we are surrounded in. But, for some reason, it doesn’t feel quite as suffocating.

I hear the slick sound of the axe being withdrawn from the downed zombie, and soon, the feeling of his palm is back against my own. He tugs me along, and even though I am the one who is in control of the flashlight, he still leads the way. The smell of the dead never wavers, nor does the constant squish against my boots. Finally, the hall ends, presenting us with an office door and two separate corridors.

Levi jiggles the handle, the door pulling open with his shaking. I shine the light inside, and holy fucking shit. I take back literally every cruel word I ever spoke against Mr. Higher Power, because I have been blessed. The shelves of the small office are loaded with weaponry. Well, loaded is sort of pushing it, but when you see something shiny, black, and beautiful, word choice isn’t necessarily the first thing on your mind. Levi drops my hand, meandering over to the shelves to inspect our find.

He picks up a pistol, the weapon dangerous in his palm. “Not bad.” That’s the understatement of the year, I’m positive. I swing the light over the counters, trying to gauge how big a pick this is going be. Given, the initial shock of finding weapons made them appear to be a lot more numerous. But, shit,
“I’ll fucking take it.

My hand grabs for the first weapon I come to, a black handgun. My fingers trace over the metal head of the pistol like it’s some fragile object in my hands. Shit, it feels good to have this weight back in my palm. For the first time in forever, I feel deadly again, like I can actually defend myself need be. I want to toss the decrepit hunting knife into oblivion, but I tell that voice in my head that there may come a time when I regret pitching the piece of shit. “C’mon, Eastwood, we did come here for a reason.” Levi’s already at the door, a black pistol highlighting his waistband. I wish he would give me a few more moments to savor in this silent victory, but the man is right. And the sooner we can leave this hospital, the better. I turn back to the shelves, stuffing my pack with every bit of ammunition available. Does it fit my gun? Fuck if I know, but it’s a bullet so I’m taking it.

There’s a sense of glee that is emitting from me as I walk to where Levi’s standing. And he notices. “Fuck, kid, if I knew that a gun would make you this happy, I would’ve looked a little harder.” I grace him with a smile, because I am on cloud nine right now. You never really notice how quintessential certain things are until you are stripped of them. A decent weapon is one of them. Take that away, and you’re exposed, helpless. You feel naked in a crowd of thousands, and the feeling fucking sucks. I got a brand new wardrobe when that metal touched my palm, and shit, I’m ready to strut it.

“You’re happy, too, Grouch.” He rolls his eyes, trying to feign the sense of joy that even a man as impassive as Levi can’t hide.

“You better hope this ‘grouch’ doesn’t pop a cap in your dumbass.” A hand flies to my mouth as I try to unsuccessfully contain the laugh pitching from the back of my throat. Suddenly, there’s a prodding at my backside. “I was being fucking serious, brat.” Well, that shuts me up. My laugh fades into an embarrassed squeal, quickly moving away from the man trying to violate me with a pistol. Asshole. A quiet chuckle rumbles out of his throat as he grabs for my hand once more, only to drag me down one of the darkened corridors.

“How long should we keep this up?” I can tell the question surprises him by the hitch in his breath. I also know that he understands exactly what I mean by the inquisition. I want to find Erwin and Hanji just as badly as the man next to me, but I’m not willing to risk his life again for some wild goose chase. They might not even be here, and for all we know this whole military thing was just some sham a survivor crafted in order to feel better living in this shitty world.

A deep sigh passes through his lips as he starts, “I don’t know, Bright Eyes.” He sounds defeated, conquered by this unrealistic dream of reuniting with the pair. “What would Erwin do?” It takes me a moment to swallow what he has asked. And I don’t understand why this question would be voiced. What does it matter what Erwin would do? I’m not sure if Levi wants an answer to this question, or if he’s simply voicing it for his own purposes. “What would Erwin do, Bright Eyes?” His silver gaze is on me, and I don’t need the flashlight to see that.

“He’d… he’d do what’s best for humanity.” That’s the most articulate answer I can think of, and it obviously suits Levi, who grunts in acknowledgement. I decide to continue, because if anyone needs to hear this, I think it’s the man beside me. “He’d… he’d tell us not to risk our lives for him. He’d want us to find the military.” In the back of my mind, I can hear the blond man saying it, those words spilling from those lips with a side of deep, blue eyes. I’m unsure if Levi is satisfied with my continuation, given he hasn’t said anything. The darkness only acts as a conductor for my unease, smothering me into a scratchy uncertainty.

“You’re right.” My hand falters against his, those pale fingertips trying to settle my surprise with a tiny squeeze. “But we still have to try.” There’s a sadness in those words. A sadness that I am all too
familiar with. It’s a type of pain that comes with incomplete knowingness. In the back of his mind, he probably realizes that they are gone, whether that be to the other side of life or Shiganshina. Either way, there’s a voice telling him that *they aren’t here*. And I feel like I am betraying them by giving up so easily, but I believe it, too. I can’t imagine that Erwin would allow himself to be holed up this deep inside the hospital, especially with no military in sight. The blond man I know would have set up camp in the front atrium, under the watchful eye of the sunlight, not in the unwavering darkness.

“Wait.” Levi’s hand has shifted to my wrist, locking around it with intent to stop me. His fingers slowly drift away from me, and soon, he has stepped in front of the yellowed light, his shadow casting menacingly against the wall.

He’s heading to a door that I’ve failed to notice. A door labeled ‘Operation’. I feel like nothing good can come from opening a door that is entitled ‘Operation’, every horror movie preparing me for this scenario. But I don’t say anything as Levi twists the handle open and steps into the room.

If I thought the stench before was wretched, then I was sadly mistaken; *because this*. This scent can’t be of this world. The smell making me gag with a convulsing throat, trying desperately to block out the putrid odor. It doesn’t take long for me to realize the cause of my hacking as the light breaks into the darkness of the room. The moans should have alerted me of what thrived inside this small hellhole. But my body was too intently focused on the horrid smells entering my nasal cavity. I feel like I have walked into a horror show, and if the look plastered across Levi’s face is any indication, then he does as well.

They’re strapped to hospital beds, several of them. All thrashing and twisting like rabid dogs, trying to free themselves from their unforgiving bonds. Some of them are split apart, the skin of their abdomen’s flayed open not unlike the frog dissections we did in fourth grade. What the fuck was happening here? Is this what my fate would have been under these medical professionals? I want to leave, this room sending an infinite amount of shivers down my spine. I turn to voice this need to Levi, but the man is no longer at my side.

Suddenly, the moans grow louder, and my heart sinks. Flashlight swerving in the direction of the noise, I see him. The look on his face reminds me of the expression he was wearing when we first met, closed off and cold. He’s inspecting each undead, earning their disapproval in the form of strained groans and lifted heads. The grunts do not bother the man as he scans walker after walker, what he is searching for, I’m unsure. To be honest, I’m a little disturbed with his intent to investigate every writhing lurker. He looks so calm and unaffected with this display, and if anything he just seems annoyed. It sends my mind into confusion, wishing that he would just give up whatever morbid plight he’s set himself on.

As if my thoughts were audible, he lifts his gaze to me. “They’re not here.” *Erwin. Hanji*. He wants to be sure, doesn’t he? He doesn’t want to leave this place thinking that we abandoned their undead bodies in some place of nightmares. And, all of a sudden, his act of inspection doesn’t seem as much disturbing as it does depressing. Because they were his only friends, weren’t they? Besides the pair he grew up with, Erwin and Hanji were all he had until I showed up. And I suddenly feel like an asshole for wanting to abandon any other search and seizure. *I am an asshole.*

What if this was Mikasa we were searching for? Armin? Would I want to give up so easily?

*No.*

No, I would fight tooth and nail to search every fucking crevice of this goddamn hospital. I walk over to the man, hand pressing atop his shoulder.

“We don’t have to leave. If you want, we can search the other rooms.” The promise seems sort of empty considering that ‘the other rooms’ were just supply closets that I am positive Erwin’s hunk of
six foot couldn’t fit inside. But it’s the thought that counts, right?

There’s a shimmer in those grey eyes that sets my heart to mach speed. And I probably shouldn’t be getting romantic in the middle of a living horror movie, but I think the end of the world is just wanting me to get creative.

“You’re such a little shit.” He nudges me with fake annoyance, pushing past me to a connecting door. “We’ll check this hall, then we’re done, okay?” I nod my head, glad that the man seems to at least have given up impersonating the grim reaper. Something like dread hits me in the gut as soon as the pale hand turns the handle of the door. Call it a premonition, but something warns me that the concealed beings behind the metal frame are going to pull a repeat of my first supply run with Erwin. Except, this time Levi will be playing the role of Ivan.

“Wait!” I yank on his shoulders, pulling him back before the door fully opens. And fuck me. There are dozens of them beginning to pour out of the woodwork. Their moans obviously being blended into the groans of the unfortunate walkers strapped to the hospital beds. I grab his hand as I rush him out of the room, slamming the door behind me. However, it’s no use, the sounds of the biters filling the airways as they continue to rush at us. We have speed on our side, but the assholes have numbers, the lurkers filling up the hallway in seconds. I almost forget that I have a gun, but honestly, there are too many to bother wasting the bullets on. Levi realizes this, too, eyes sharp as he searches for an exit.

Suddenly, I see it. A practical safe room from the terrors travelling behind us. I rip open the double doors, pulling Levi’s axe out from his waistband and shoving it in between the handles. The walkers are furiously banging against the door, but I know from experience that the impromptu lock I crafted won’t fail. A wave of relief pours over me as I take in the room. The adrenaline leaves my body in a heavy rush, causing me to slide against the door down to the floor.

Levi looks at me with curiosity, “How did you know this would be a cafeteria?”

My lips upturn into a small smirk that I know he can see, due to the fact that this lunchroom has a multitude of windows lining its walls. “My sperm donor was a doctor. He brought me to the hospital when I was little. I always played in the cafeteria, begging the lunch lady for cookies. I saw the sign hanging above the door, and I knew it would be the safest bet we had.” For the first time, I’m blessing the name Grisha Jaeger. I’ll remember to tell the man that his expert parenting saved my life if I ever see him again.

“Sperm donor, huh?” I nod my head, wearily; because my daddy issues are the last thing I want to talk about. And, anyways, he already knows why I don’t associate myself with the man, that conversation still fresh in my mind. Before I can answer verbally, Levi’s eyes are narrowing in the corner of the cafeteria. Drawing his gun, he moves over to what looks like a slumped blob. He pulls back the hammer, and the blob moves, a head of blond hair abruptly lifting up into the air. A head of blond hair that looks really fucking familiar.

Holy shit. My breath catches in my throat and my heart stops beating. The head turns, azure eyes wide with unvoiced fear, eyes that used to be so bright, now a dull, lucent blue.

I choke on the words as they leave my lips, “A-Armin?” His eyes widen, causing a smile to break out across my face. A smile that rapidly fades as I see him back further into the corner, knife in hand. This isn’t the bright-eyed boy that I left behind all those weeks ago. This is something completely different.

This is fear.
Christ, I don't know what the fuck I'm doing anymore. And I pitched this out early what is life? AND 100,000 WORDS IN AND YOU FINALLY GET ARMIN HOLY FUCK.

HERE IS THE LINK TO THE FANMIX I PROMISED YOU GUYS WEEKS AGO HOLY SHIT

Thank you guys for all the kudos and comments ayyyy

Tumblr:
fuzzyporcupine.tumblr.com

I'm tracking the tag 'fic: what's eating you' as always.

If you spot any grammar mistakes, let me know.

And recently some new fanart for this fic was posted, so be sure to give it your tumblr love.

FANMIX
ALL FANART
“Armin, that’s fucking stupid.” The words ‘stupid’ and ‘Armin’ don’t usually combine together, but this case is definitely an exception. “We can’t just leave. No car, remember?” That hopeful gleam hasn’t left Armin’s eyes, still just as bright and bold as they were when he first told me of the plan.

Those eyes roll as if I’m supposed to understand the workings of his mind. Unfortunately, my IQ is a few dozen points shy of ever comprehending the boy beside me. “I know we don’t have a car. Have you even been listening?” To be honest, he lost me at the words ‘run away’, because one: my mom would kill me. And two: my mom would kill me. It really shouldn’t surprise me, though, that Armin is suggesting some great escape from this small town. Neither of us has ever ventured very far past the Shiganshina border. My mother not being one for vacations, the health of Armin’s grandfather preventing the blond next to me. “I’ll take the drool dripping from your bottom lip as a no.”

It’s a little known fact that Armin Arlert is actually a snarky, little bastard.

The back of my hand darts to my mouth, frantically wiping away invisible saliva. A small giggle emits from Armin as I continue to wipe at an unreal enemy. Dropping my hand and narrowing my eyes, I attempt to shoot the blond the biggest ‘fuck you’ look I can muster. It has the complete opposite effect. I was aiming for desperate groveling, not the increased volume of laughter coming from the boy. Goddammit.

“Sorry, Eren. I didn’t think you would believe me.” A wide grin is causing his eyes to crease, and I wish that I could harbor a grudge longer; but any amount of annoyance I had retained is lost in that smile. I punch him in the shoulder, because the smartass deserves at least that much. I relish in the small grimace that graces his features, silently thanking my lady, Karma. “Anyway, we could take a bus. It shouldn’t be that expensive.” And if the words ‘run away’ didn’t lose me, the word ‘money’ certainly did. I’m not sure if Armin just expects me to magically shit out this currency, because the last time I had a job was not once and never.

“I’m broke, Armin. Fuck, I thought you were supposed to be my smart friend.”

He tsks under his breath, playfully nudging my shoulder. “I’m you’re only friend, Eren.” I open my mouth to counter, but he interrupts me. “And Mikasa doesn’t count. She’s your sister.” Fucking blond mushroom. I can’t really argue with him, though. We’ve been attached at the hip ever since I saved him from those playground bullies. And by saved him, I mean that I let the shit get kicked out of me while he ran screaming. It was a friendship crafted by the gods. Me being a spitfire, full of excess bravado; Armin being a recluse who practically gave meekness its name. We protected each other… well, I protected him. But I’ve never resented the fact. He’s my best friend, and that is just a requirement that comes with the position. Shit, I know if the roles were reversed, then Armin wouldn’t think twice about saving my ass.

He hates it, too. Feeling so useless. And, fuck, every time we drink a little too much of my mom’s red wine, he tells me. It never gets easier to take in; because part of me wants to let him know how completely inadequate I feel, too. I’m the one who allows for those thugs to follow him back home. I’m the one who lets the high school quarterback shoulder him into a locker. I’m the one who isn’t there until he is already sporting a shiny, black eye. If anyone is good for nothing, it’s definitely me. Not the poor, innocent boy with the mind that shines too bright. Listen to me getting all sentimental. Goddamn, I’d never live this down.
“You’re a little asshole, you know that?” The smirk appearing on his face tells me that the blond knows exactly what I mean. I’m tempted to send another punch his way, but I remember that Armin bruises easily. And he honestly doesn’t need to add my marks to his current collection.

“But what would you do without me?” A choice finger flicked in his direction expresses my thoughts on the matter. He chuckles, “I’m being serious, though. We can do this. Get out of Shiganshina. See the ocean. God, Eren, can you imagine?” I have a pretty good picture, the majority of our childhood being spent nose deep in an encyclopedia, absorbing pictures of the deep, blue sea. “I wonder if the air smells as salty as they say. I bet it does. God, I bet it’s beautiful.” A smile pulls at my lips as he continues voicing his assumptions.

I’d never tell him, but I’m so fucking jealous of Armin. The kid’s had one of the worst dealt hands life could possibly throw at a person. Parents both killed in a freak car accident, grandpa getting weaker every day, and top all that off with the fact that half of the school thinks Armin doubles as a human punching bag. But, he is so goddam optimistic. Almost sickeningly so. Because, I know that there is no way this constant turmoil doesn’t fuck him up. That behind those hopeful, blue eyes is a boy who just wants things to be alright for once in his life. And I’m so fucking jealous. He can keep up this good-natured façade while I’ve decided to fuck the world just because someone walked out of my life. I’m weak. As much as I try to put off this persona of courage and bravery, I’m so goddamn weak.

“I’ll ask your mom for permission if you don’t want to sneak out. I just thought that you would appreciate my attempt at delinquency.” Armin’s words drag my attention to his face, still confident that this plan will work out. And wait…. this snarky, little ass.

“Yeah, Armin, because this would make us a practical Bonnie and Clyde.” He stifles a laugh under a well-placed palm. “And I’m not a delinquent, you asshole.” The chuckle he was badly attempting to cover finally spills out.

“Yet.” I can’t help myself as my hand shoves at his small shoulders. Shit, since when did Armin become such a little smartass? Well, no… he’s always been like this, and I’ve just been in denial that Armin feeds the homeless and never swears. But, wait, Armin does feed the homeless, so who am I actually kidding here?

A huff passes through my lips, “Fine.” The word comes out harsh, and tries to be far more aggravated than it actually is. My feet skid to a stop on the sidewalk as a pair of arms wrap around me.

“Yes! Thank you! Yes, yes, yes!” A smile appears on my face as I return the hug. “I swear it will be worth it, Eren. I promise. It will be better than any of those pictures. I swear.” The hopefulness has passed over into his voice, sounding so fucking content that I regret not saying yes sooner. This isn’t any of that false happiness. This is something true, something pure. Something real.

“Okay, fuck, Armin. You’re suffocating me, asshole.” The arms twisted around me begin to gradually slacken until I am completely freed from Armin’s ecstatic bond. “One condition, though.” Blue eyes perk up, filling with an unfounded apprehension. But, I’ve already promised, and Eren Jaeger doesn’t go back on his word… usually. “We don’t tell my mom. I can’t remember the last time she said the word ‘yes’.” She’ll be pissed if she finds out. Fuck, she’ll be pissed. But I got to keep the dream alive, right? “And we have to wait until next week. Tomorrow, Mikasa and I have some shit to do with Grisha.”

Armin nods his head rapidly, too excited to even feel disappointed about having to wait an extra week. I see a familiar stop sign, and realize that this is where the blond cuts out. “That sounds good, Eren. God, I’m so excited. Thank you, again. You’re the best friend I’ve ever had. Like, you don’t
I have any idea how much this means to me.” I think I might have a clue. He begins to walk down the sidewalk to his house, waving a hand to me in departure. “And don’t forget to study for that test tomorrow!” Shit, Armin needs to have more faith in my procrastination abilities. I wouldn’t be passing without them. The head of blond hair begins to morph into the distance, growing smaller with each step he takes.

Finally, it fades completely, and I take that as my sign to continue towards my own home. Hands diving into my pants’ pocket, I try to picture Mikasa’s face when I tell her the news. It will probably be a mixture of disbelief and caution. But, I know she’ll agree to go. The ocean has been just as big of a dream for her as it has for Armin and me.

The ocean, huh?

I smile thinking about the crashing waves against the shore, of the seagulls crying out for food from the beach goers, of the sun high and hot in the air.

Yeah, the ocean.

He’s shaking in the corner, knife pointed at me like I’m one of the monsters banging on the cafeteria doors. This isn’t the Armin that’s always three steps ahead. This isn’t the Armin who had to experience an apocalypse to learn that he wasn’t useless. This Armin has reverted back into submission, add the terror of the walking dead. Levi’s still pointing the gun at him, hand unwavering as he looks down the barrel. And he’ll fucking kill him, won’t he? If the blond doesn’t snap out of this disillusioned fear than Levi will pull that trigger. And he would feel guilty, inhuman. But he would do it if it meant saving me. Armin wouldn’t try to hurt me, though. The blond had never killed another human in the time that I spent with him. But maybe that’s changed now. Maybe my departure has missed out on Armin’s turn to homicide. Maybe that would explain the incessant shivering hands, the blown out azure eyes.

“He’s shaking in the corner, knife pointed at me like I’m one of the monsters banging on the cafeteria doors. This isn’t the Armin that’s always three steps ahead. This isn’t the Armin who had to experience an apocalypse to learn that he wasn’t useless. This Armin has reverted back into submission, add the terror of the walking dead. Levi’s still pointing the gun at him, hand unwavering as he looks down the barrel. And he’ll fucking kill him, won’t he? If the blond doesn’t snap out of this disillusioned fear than Levi will pull that trigger. And he would feel guilty, inhuman. But he would do it if it meant saving me. Armin wouldn’t try to hurt me, though. The blond had never killed another human in the time that I spent with him. But maybe that’s changed now. Maybe my departure has missed out on Armin’s turn to homicide. Maybe that would explain the incessant shivering hands, the blown out azure eyes.

“Levi,” the man looks at me out of the corner of his eye, weapon still raised, “drop the gun.” The demand causes him to turn his head in my direction. A look of complete confusion splayed across his face, he searches my visage for an answer as to why our defenses should be lowered. I say nothing, opting to give him a slight nod of the head. Whatever confirmation he was looking for is found in the motion, and he begins to slowly lower the pistol. This doesn’t sate any of Armin’s apprehensions, however, knife still stiff against his chest. I want to walk over to the blond and physically express how much I’ve missed him, but I fear that the weapon pointed in my direction won’t allow for such a reunion. “Armin…” The sound of his name has the boy visibly stiffening, blue eyes wide with fear. His bottom lip is quivering, fingers around the hilt of the knife mimicking the action, as well. “Armin…” I try again, silently praying that I will be gifted with an expression that doesn’t radiate terror.

It was too much to hope for; because instead of an answer, he starts to shake his head left and right like a man possessed. His lips begin to mouth words, mouth moving up and down in silent conversation. And it’s terrifying. I need to know what happened to him. What happened to the others. Mikasa, Jean, Connie, Sasha. Where the fuck are they? They obviously can’t be here. Mikasa would never let Armin deteriorate into such a state. But how were they separated? As I examine the boy quivering in the corner, I somehow doubt that I will be receiving any answers.

“Who is this?” It’s Levi’s voice filling the air, taking my eyes momentarily off Armin and to that impassive face. He looks like he wants nothing more than to aim his gun back at the blond, fingers tapping hesitantly against the black metal. But, he trusts me. He trusts me.
Armin isn’t a threat, then he will believe it. And Armin is not a threat. Is he?

“My best friend.” The words come out as a whisper, not quite believable; because this isn’t the person who would spend hours trying to convince me that an orca whale could eat a shark. And I want to grab him by the shoulders, shake him until he remembers who he once was. But I can’t. The only thing his knife is allowing me is the opportunity to observe his slow mental decline. “My best friend.” I repeat the words with the hopes that they will somehow convince me that Armin is alright. That Armin is still the same bright-eyed boy I left behind. But, it’s useless, the words only further solidifying the obvious.

Levi’s arm has gone completely limp, no longer clenching the gun like a vice. He knows. He knows that something is entirely wrong here. But, how do I tell him? How do I relay that this quivering boy in front of me used to be so different?

“D-dead.” Armin’s voice pulls my attention off Levi and back to the blond trembling in the corner. “D-dead.” Dead? It only takes my mind a second to comprehend the meaning behind the word. Dead. He saw me get bit. Hypothetically speaking, he saw me die. No one survives a bite. No one but me. And Armin doesn’t know this, does he? Fuck, and I’m just standing here like the goddamn ghost of Christmas past. I’ve already fucked this whole reunion up, though. There’s not going to be any redemption. Because I came in here, guns blazing. Aimed the pistols at Armin, too. Well, Levi did. So, he’s not going to believe a word I say. Chances are he probably thinks I’m some fucked up hallucination, lord knows those things aren’t uncommon.

“D-dead.” It’s the same word, and maybe Armin is just trying to reassure himself of what he saw weeks ago. But he’s wrong because I’m right here. I reach out a shaking hand, outstretching my fingers in an attempt to pull myself closer. But, my legs are frozen to the cheap linoleum of the cafeteria floor, still too shocked to try and close the distance between us. He feels miles away, even though he is maybe twenty feet from me at most. And, somehow, I felt closer to him when I ran into that forest, away from the walkers who had just attempted to convert me to one of their own.

“A-Armin.” Wait, why am I stuttering? Why am I shaking? Why is there a warmness on my cheeks? And I know the answer; but I’m in complete denial, pushing the solution into the deepest pits of my mind. Because, I don’t want it. I don’t want to accept what’s right in front of me. Fuck acceptance, that bastard has done nothing positive for me.

“N-no. D-dead. Not r-r-real.” He’s pulled himself in closer to his chest, knees tight against him in a defensive ball. “D-dead.” I’m not sure how to describe the pang bouncing around inside my gut. Pain? Anger? Hopelessness? I draw a short breath in inner realization. Hopelessness. I spent a lifetime living in it. Now, it seems that I am fated to carry the feeling once more. It ricochets inside of me, spreading like a poison in my body. And there is no antidote. I’m destined to watch this scene of human insanity play out right before my eyes.

The image will be burned into my retinas until the deity above finally decides that I’m not worth the trouble anymore. The blood-matted blond hair, the sunk-in cheeks, the dirt-speckled skin. All of it will forever remain in the back of my mind. No amount of internal bleach could possibly purge it out. But I guess this is just another curse that Mr. Higher Power has rewarded my previous bravery with. Figures.

“Armin, it’s me.” My feet have finally found themselves, opting to let me take a couple of steps in his direction. “It’s Eren.” The blond’s breath hitches in his throat, fingers still steadily shaking the blunt knife. And maybe I was wrong. Maybe I can break through to him. My heart starts to pound relentlessly in my chest, the rhythm practically audible in the tense air. I’m stepping closer and closer until I can practically see the specks of white dancing around his blue irises.
“Eren,” I stop, turning to the man calling my name, “are you sure about this?” What kind of question is that? Of course I’m sure. What, does he just expect me to leave Armin behind? Let him suffer inside this center of nightmares? If that’s the case, then Levi doesn’t know me as well as I thought. I don’t answer him, the question stirring up all kinds of unwanted anger inside my chest. Instead, I continue forward, steadily closing in on Armin.

“It’s me, Armin.” I feel a tight lipped smile beginning to form on my face, cheeks rising with the motion. And all of that regret, all of the sadness is lifted off my shoulders; because I found him. Goddammit, I found him. The smile grows wider, teeth beginning to poke through my pink lips. And, fuck, I can finally have my family back again, can’t I? It will be just like before… well, add one short asshole. But, shit, I’ve missed them. So fucking much. And it’s taken getting to see one of my lost comrades to make me realize how deep that longing was.

My hand reaches out again, fingers inches from the cowering boy. I’m so close. I just- “Get away from me!” My eyes widen, hand instinctively jerking backwards. Armin rises to his feet, knees slightly wobbling. “Y-you’re not E-Eren! S-stay back!” No words are presenting themselves, leaving me standing there looking like some guy who got stood up at prom. Dejected. And I don’t know what to do, because I feel like I shouldn’t take Armin’s threats at his word, the boy too weak to effectively injure me. But then what? What happens after I disarm him, after I force away his defenses? I would still be just another monster in his eyes. I’d never be Eren. The Eren he knew died back in that supermarket.

But I can’t leave him. I can’t leave him. Because there is no doubt in my mind that my departure will mean his death. And fuck if I am going to let another friend parish due to my decisions. Not again. Not Armin. So, I reach forward again, praying that the blond will have some sort of epiphany and realize that I am not the enemy here. Blues connect with greens, and for a second I see it. That glimmer of hope. That glimmer that tells me Armin is still in there. That he knows it’s really me.

But he doesn’t.

“N-no! G-get away from m-me!” He swings the knife in my direction, causing me to jump backwards, falling to the floor. I hear the sound of a hammer being pulled back, and my heart drops. Levi’s going to kill him, isn’t he? Fuck, Levi’s going to kill him. And Armin realizes this. The boy drops the knife, eyes wide with fear. It rattles on the ground, the metal bouncing harshly off the floor. But, I’m not paying attention to the weapon. I’m not paying attention to the man still holding the gun. Both of my eyes are on Armin. The boy who could never look more afraid. The boy who was once my friend. The boy who is running out of the cafeteria. The boy who is running out of the cafeteria.

“Armin, wait!” I scramble upwards, mind running into overtime as I think of how to stop him.

The sound of metal pans clattering to the floor pulls my attention to a swinging door. Goddammit, I am going to fucking kill Armin when I get my hands on him. Wait, no. That was a terrible choice of words. First, I’m going to hug him. Then, I’ll kill him. I use the silver counters as leverage as I propel
myself towards the swinging door ahead. If there is one comfort I am taking from this, it’s that there is no way Armin can keep this up much longer. He looked like complete shit, and that’s an understatement. So, I can’t believe that his body will allow for this exertion to go on much longer.

A scream echoes through the air as if Mr. Higher Power wanted to audibly answer my question.

And my heart stops.

No. No. No.

It wasn’t him. It wasn’t Armin. I want to laugh, because Mr. Higher Power couldn’t be that cruel. I mean, fuck, I literally just reunited with him. There’s no way. No way. Things can’t end like this. Not for us. It wasn’t him. It wasn’t Armin.

The metal of the door feels too cold under my palm, but fuck these warnings. I know that he’s okay. Armin’s a sneaky little shit, and I highly doubt that he would run right into a biter, delirious or not. He probably tripped on some pots and pans, the fucking klutz that he is. And hey, that would explain the loud clattering. See, I have it all figured out. It wasn’t him. It wasn’t Armin.

He’s going to be okay. Armin’s going to be okay.

I open the door.

I wish I could take it all back. The heroism, the bravado. I wish I could have just left Marco. We all knew he was dead. We all knew. And I would be with my friends again. We would grieve, but it would make us stronger. It wouldn’t happen again. No one else would die. And maybe I would meet Levi anyway. This time, he would probably have Isabel and Farlan in tow. And we would hate each other at first just like before, but eventually, something would give. And everyone would be happy.

We would be happy.

The walker is attached to Armin’s neck, effectively gnawing on the cords of muscle. We would be so fucking happy. I’ve never been a crack shot, but I bullseye that fucker directly between the eyes. We wouldn’t have to worry about a goddamn thing. Armin immediately collapses, rivets of blood pooling from the wound. Heh, besides the occasional zombie. But, fuck those guys. I drop my pistol, running to seek out Armin. Because, we would be happy. My palm presses down on the bite, frantically trying to stop the bleeding. We would be so fucking happy.

I don’t recognize the frenzied voice that comes out of my mouth, “It’s alright. You’re going to be alright, okay? You’re alright.” Those dulling, blue eyes never leave my face. Not when his pulse starts to fade. Not when blood starts to bubble up between those thin, pale lips. And, for some reason, I start to laugh. It’s hysterical, the way my chest is heaving trying to give me air whilst the laughter quickly is sucking it all away. “I’m immune, Armin. Isn’t that fucking crazy? I’ll save you. I’ll fucking save you. I just need a needle then you’ll be okay, alright? Alright, you’re okay.” I didn’t even notice that my hands were shaking until I feel the warmth of red begin to run between my fingertips. “God, we’ll laugh about this later, won’t we, Armin? I can just picture their faces when we tell them.”

He’s choking, blood spewing out with each hack. Broken syllables are making their way past the fluids upchucking from his lips. He’s trying to tell me something, but that’s stupid. If anything, he should be saving his strength. God knows he’ll need it after this is over.

I try to stop him with my words, try to reassure him to be strong. “W-we’re going to see the ocean, remember?” And why am I stuttering? I know he’s going to be okay. I’m a practical antidote, Erwin told me himself. So, why am I stuttering?
“N-n-not…” His eyelashes are flickering faster than a candle in the wind, black lines laving on his paling cheeks below. “… r-r-real.”

And, suddenly, the world stops.

Everything crashes down on me all at once with the draw of his last breath. Everything. And I lose it. My face contorts into something grim; and the dam breaks, tears spilling over my cheeks like a rushing tide. I can’t take my eyes off the corpse beneath me, still warm and practically breathing. The sobs are choking me, throat closing with an overwhelming grief.

“A-Armin…” The blood is still steadily pooling between my fingers, a reminder of my mistake. My mistake. I didn’t listen. I didn’t fucking listen. “A-A-Armin…” It’s like I’m expecting him to answer, for him to offer me some witty quip that I would have no chance at countering. But all I am rewarded with is a cold, dead stare. Damp spots begin to form on his cheeks; and I realize that the source of the wetness is me, my tears falling freely onto his porcelain face. “We have…” I can’t finish the sentence, mind not wanting to fully accept his departure from humanity. “I’m s-sorry… I’m s-so sorry, A-Armin.” I drop my head to his chest, allowing my body to fully wreck itself with sorrow.

This isn’t like Marco or Mike. This pain is something completely different. It stems from my mind and quickly travels down to my heart, squeezing the organ like a python and its prey. This is Armin. We spent eighteen years scrounging around in Shiganshina, shooting for the sea but landing in the dirt. And now he’s gone. He’s gone. Holy shit, what have I done? You killed him, Eren. My breaths are coming in short, choked gasps, the realization of my crime smothering me like a vengeful wife with a thick pillow.

The sound of a gun hammer being drawn back shatters my mourning.

I raise my head, and I see it. Shiny, black, and pointing straight at Armin’s head. I realize what this means. That Armin may be dead in this life, but soon he will be reincarnated for another. And am I going to stop that? The image of the blond with a bullet in his skull is almost as sickening as the sight before me. Suddenly, I go into mother bear mode, defending the corpse like it was my child.

“Don’t you fucking touch him!” And I am not thinking clearly, too eroded by this grief. Levi notices, shooting me a confused glance. But I don’t care how crazy I sound, how completely insane I am for not allowing Armin to enter the sky above as a human. No, not insane. Selfish. Because, I don’t want to accept it, do I? I don’t want to realize that I fuck up everyone I touch. That it will be Levi looking at me with those glassy, soulless eyes next. But I’m so sorry. I’m so fucking sorry. I know that it doesn’t do him any justice now, but he still deserves to hear it. If that’s the only closure I can provide Armin, the so be it. But, wait. That isn’t the only closure I can give him. I can end this before it starts. Secure him a place of eternal peace away from this hellhole.

I connect with Levi’s stare once more, trying to ease the look of pure venom oozing from my gaze. I know that he’s confused, that he doesn’t understand why I am prolonging the inevitable. And, to be honest, even I don’t know the answer to that. I break his stare to find my weapon. A wave of sickness washes over me as my fingers connect with the metal. The gun feels heavy in my palm as I lift it up into the air. I should be the one to do this. I got him killed. This is my punishment.

But I’m too late.

Because instead of the dull, blue eyes I am expecting, I get a pair of grey, hazy orbs, full of hunger. His jaw begins to move slowly up and down, teeth clacking like a dead man’s orchestra. A dry groan emits from his pale lips, eyes zeroing in on me. But he’s new to this whole ‘undead’ thing, so his movements are slow and clunky. Hands reach out for me, fingers digging into my arms as the
appendages find purchase. He looks so starved, so hungry. I’m almost tempted to let him feast upon
me, because I really don’t deserve anything less. But this isn’t what he would want.

So, I lift the gun.

My hands are shaking as I press the barrel to his skull, and I can’t control the sobs that have decided
to make a reappearance. They wrack my body, sending me into a series of emotional spasms. I try to
pull the trigger, but my finger keeps slipping. It’s probably from the quivering, but then again, maybe
it’s just my mind telling me how weak I am. That I can’t even save Armin in the afterlife. I’m that
pathetic. Fuck. My palm slides over his eyes, because I can’t continue to look into those lifeless orbs.
Ones that used to be so full of fucking life. Now, resigned to play house on a dead man’s face.
Seconds pass, and Armin begins to grow stronger, finally becoming familiar with his new vessel.
And I have to do it. I can’t let him stay like this.

Fingers, once again, find the trigger. I’m your only friend, Eren. I begin to add pressure. What would
you do without me? Just a little more. God, I bet it’s beautiful. I hear the bang, and he goes limp in
my arms. I look down at him, eyes still filled to the brim with watery tears. Jaw hanging open, orbs
still wide, he looks like the signature walker. And he deserves so much more than that. He deserved
the world, no the universe. And I destroyed that dream. I ruined it. A pair of strong hands is gripping
at my cheeks, pulling my face up to meet Levi’s steely gaze. I’m expecting pity, maybe a little anger;
but what I get is something else entirely.

Understanding.

Because he knows how I am feeling. Because his two best friends were killed before his eyes.
Because this is what I need.

I lean into him as he wraps his arms around my body, pulling me into his shoulders. I spare one last
glance at Armin before I duck into Levi’s neck like the coward I am.

You’re the best friend I’ve ever had.

END PART ONE

Chapter End Notes

Not sure if I should apologize, or.....

Thank you guys for all the kudos/comments!

Tumblr:
fuzzyporcupine.tumblr.com

I’m tracking ‘fic: what’s eating you’ as always.

If you spot any grammar mistakes, let me know.
FANMIX
ALL FANART
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

NOTE: It has been brought to my attention that this chapter contains some triggering scenes. If you are concerned with what triggers may be located inside this chapter, please click on the 'more notes' link underneath this message.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Numb.

That’s probably the correct word to describe what I’m feeling as I gaze down at Armin’s corpse. I can’t even cry anymore, my eyes exerting the last of their tears hours prior. I’m just sitting here, numb. The word sounds so accurate, but then again, I don’t really trust myself to decide what’s right and wrong anymore. I wish that I was still wrapped in Levi’s arms. At least that gave me a tiny distraction from this mess that I have made. That I killed him. I thought that it would be the discovery of Erwin and Hanji’s bodies that would toss me over the edge, down into a deep, crushing depression. But I was wrong. Fuck, was I wrong. Because, it was him. It was Armin that forced me to the other side.

There was a time when I questioned the cruelty of the world, but I think I am finally accepting it. Finally learning to stop giving a shit and just let the bastard swallow me whole. Because struggling in this world is useless. The only thing it amounts to is death and depression, the two words combining together to create a force strong enough to destroy even the strongest heart. But who am I kidding? I’ve never been strong, have I? Wait, no. I’ve been strong. I’ve just been carrying my own brand of strength. A brand of strength that is absolute shit. Yeah, that sounds better. Stupid, I’ve been that. I am that. The body rigid with rigor mortis to my side is proof enough of that.

My fingers pass through the matted blond locks, coagulated blood forming stiff bunches in the dirty tresses. I try to tell myself that killing Armin was the right thing to do. That allowing him to forever walk these sin-stained halls would be the equivalent of spitting on whatever grave we’ve dug here. But the bullet hole painted on top of his forehead wants to convince me otherwise.

I’ve never been artisic, and I definitely wouldn’t describe myself as deep or philosophical. So, I can’t help but think that the hole looks ugly against his features. It doesn’t represent anything metaphorical, anything profound. I can’t bring myself to think of it as anything other than a hole. A large, unsightly hole in the middle of Armin Arlert’s forehead. I guess that could have a ring to it if you really thought about it.

But I don’t want to think about it. What I want is to disappear from this grungy hospital and wake up in my bedroom covered in fresh, linen sheets. Shit, maybe add the obnoxious echo of my alarm, telling me that I am already twenty minutes late. Yeah, that’s what I want. Not this. Not this grievous desertion into an apocalyptic nightmare. Not the blood of my friends staining my palms a violent red. No, not this.

Maybe, I’m just some tragic hero that will eventually get his happy ending. Although, I’m pretty sure the definition of tragic hero implies that the protagonist dies at the end. But, fuck, here’s to hoping that I’m not destined to a life of the undead. Yeah, maybe I will end this tale a champion among men, my friends at my side. We’ll live happily ever after in a city by the sea, the only threat to us being the
amount of UV rays our skin should be allowed to soak in. That would be the life, huh? Too bad it’s not going to happen. The best thing that could be guaranteed to me right now is an assurance of a quick and painless death. And that’s pretty fucking depressing.

I should probably stop being so pessimistic. I used to be so spirited. And I told myself back in Stohess that the bright-eyed boy still existed, he’d just lost his way. But that was just another lie to add to my growing list of internal deception. Because he’s gone. He left as soon as that walker sunk its teeth into my mother’s neck.

I pull into myself, knees pressing against my chest. I want to cry, want to force out these overbearing emotions with a liquid release. But the only thing my body is allowing itself to do is quiver next to the dilapidated corpse. My forehead finds purchase against the tops of my knees, and shit, I must look mess. Broken doesn’t even begin to describe my current position. Numb. There’s that word again. But it fucking fits, doesn’t it? Numb. The word echoes in my mind, further spreading the feeling of complete detachment.

And, fuck, I wish Levi would leave me here. Because, somehow, that seems like the most unselfish thing my mind has produced in the last twenty-four hours. I’m a liability. And I’ll eventually convince myself that it’s not true; but goddammit, I don’t think my mind has ever made a truer statement. I will kill him, get him killed, pick your poison. Either way, I will inadvertently be the cause of his eventual destruction.

I have tried to get him to take the hint by sitting here like a fucking statue, mute and unwilling to move. But it hasn’t worked. He’s still here, quietly watching me from his place against the kitchen wall. The man gave up trying to comfort me back when I could still form tears, but I don’t blame him. He’s never seemed to be one for emotional vices. And it hasn’t come as a surprise to me that Levi doesn’t know how to deal with my uncontrollable anguish. All of his cards were played when he wrapped me into his arms, softly whispering that everything was going to be okay. But that didn’t sate the beast inside me this time. No, he continued until I was positive the words ‘it’s okay’ had been murmured in my ear at least a dozen times.

So, he eventually let me go. Let me implode on myself into an emotional heap of self-pity. He didn’t say anything as my throat rubbed itself raw. He just stared at me, silver eyes full of sympathy and uncomfortable indecision. I can’t say that I am glad he decided to leave me to my grief, because, the only thing I want right now is his reassurance. But I remember that I’m selfish. So fucking selfish. And that I should be forced to deal with this alone.

A throat clears, and I pull my forehead off my knees to meet the unsure gaze of the man in front of me. “We need to leave soon.” The words sound forced and hesitant, so unlike Levi. This isn’t the man who couldn’t give two shits if I agreed with his decisions or not. This is someone who is tiptoeing on a very fine line, a line that I’ve drawn. He doesn’t want to upset me further, does he? I feel like that is an impossible feat, but I appreciate the effort. Nodding my head in silent acknowledgement, I watch Levi push himself from the wall only to squat next to me. His gaze lingers on my visage, seemingly waiting for me to start the conversation. I hate to break it to him, but my mind isn’t feeling cooperative enough to form intelligent sentences. Taking a deep sigh, he decides that it’s no use waiting on an answer that’s not coming. “It wasn’t your fault, Bright Eyes.” And fuck, I wish he would stop telling me that. I want his reassurance, but I don’t need his lies. Because looking into that unforgiving stare, I can tell even he doesn’t believe his own words. “There was nothing you could do. You can’t…” He takes a deep breath, and it’s almost like the words threatening to spill are too painful to be revisited. “You… you can’t regret the choices you’ve made, Eren. Not in this world.”

My breath hitches as I swallow his words. No regrets, huh? That’s definitely easier said than done as
I stare into the empty void of Armin’s dull, lifeless orbs. And who is he to try and convince me to forget this mistake? Fuck, Levi is a goddamn poster child for contained guilt. Even now, I can tell that he is shouldering some of the blame for my friend’s demise. His words make him a hypocrite, and I want to tell him this. But pushing Levi away is one of the last things I should be doing. If anyone needs to feel the punishment for Armin’s death, it’s myself, not the man beside me.

“There was nothing you could do.” He repeats the words like the reiteration of the phrase will convince me of its actuality. But there were so many things I could have done. Could have not done. Like chase Armin away. Yeah, that’s probably at the top of the list.

I drop my head back towards my knees as an awkward silence trickles down on us. And I’m not going to break it if it’s only going to led to more false comforts. I’m not sure if Levi realizes it or not, but those words do nothing but further plunge me into this doubt. Because I know they are wrong. And that knowledge just attaches itself to the already massive heap of distress currently raging in my mind. A hand clasps on my knee, pulling my gaze back to the man crouching beside me. And, for once, I feel like Levi might be feeling more out of place than me. Lips pulled into a thin line, brows gathered in a deep furrow, it looks like he has so much that he wants to say, but the weight of the situation is pressing those words deep down into his throat.

And I don’t try to assure him that I am okay. Because I’m not. And, for the first time, I don’t care if Levi knows. There are no faint smiles, no convincing words leaving my lips. Nothing. Let him know that I’m broken. Fuck, let the entire goddamn world know. Because, hiding this pain is useless. The only thing it rewards me with is a bunch of clogged up emotions that eventually spill over like a practical typhoon.

Obviously aware that any attempt at conversation will falter, Levi pushes himself off the ground and begins to head towards the lunchroom. He pauses at the door, before turning to give me a final glance, shooting waves of empathy in my direction. “Do what you need to, Bright Eyes. I’ll wait outside.”

My stare drifts to the corpse next to me as I hear Levi’s boots echo out into the cafeteria. And I know what he’s doing. He’s giving me one last opportunity. One last chance to say goodbye. And I’m not sure if I want to take it. If I should just pick myself up from this disembodied stupor and attempt to find Levi outside. But deep down, I know that I’ll regret just leaving without a word. And, fuck, my column of remorse is already full enough as it is.

So, I start.

“It’s been awhile.” My voice sounds foreign to my ears, too scratchy, too raw. It’s no doubt due to the incessant sobbing, but I ignore the alien sound. “I missed you.” I pause, almost like I am waiting for the corpse to sit up and continue my conversation. But he’s dead. Tears that I thought were long gone begin to burn the backs of my eyes, threatening to fall with every passing second. My voice breaks as I continue, “I missed you so much.” Emerald eyes clench shut, allowing the wetness to silently cascade down my cheeks. It angers me that these tears have made an appearance, and I’m unsure as to why. I don’t have to be strong anymore. The only other person in this tiny kitchen is Armin, and he never had a problem with being my shoulder to cry on. But he’s dead. That word doesn’t seem like it belongs here, and in an apocalypse that is a pretty stupid thing to say. Numb. That word still sounds right. Dead? Maybe, delusional would work better.

“I… I wanted to ask you something.” My thumb wipes at the dirt encasing his cheek. “I… I just needed to know if… I just…” The words won’t come out, getting caught on the lump swelling in my throat. It’s becoming harder to breathe, harder to focus on what I wanted to say. Eyes locking into his hollow stare, I try to force the question out. “I…” My bottom lip is trembling, quivering in the
acknowledgement that he’s really gone. *He’s dead.* Fists gripping at shaky knees, I decide that I can’t do it. That I’m too weak. “I’m so… I’m so fucking sorry.” My hands drop, palms sliding against the smooth surface below. Suddenly, they connect with something bulky. Something black. Something deadly.

I wave of nausea rolls over me as I think of what this weapon did. Who this pistol killed. My eyes scan Armin’s empty face, fingers twitching against the gun. If there is one positive thing I can take from this, it’s that he looks peaceful. It’s the same expression that filled his visage when I agreed to travel to the ocean with him. Like he doesn’t have a worry in the world. *Content.* Like death isn’t so bad.

*Like death isn’t so bad.*

The pistol suddenly feels a lot heavier in my hand. A lot deadlier. My fingers run up and down the object as if it is something fragile. And am I really considering this? This coward’s way out. My chest squeezes with a bout of sorrow. I just want to feel okay again. I just… I just want to do something right. But is this really the correct option? It sounds so selfish. Killing myself. Pulling this trigger and ending it all. Well, ending my mortal suffering. *Because I am suffering.* But what about Levi? *Levi.* It always comes back to him, doesn’t it? And as much as I try to convince myself that he’s not at the epicenter of it all, I’m wrong. Because he is. He resides right in the middle of everything. This stoic asshole. This sheep in wolf’s clothing. *This absolutely amazing man.* Am I really content to just leave him in this cruel, unforgiving world? To leave him alone? I’m all he has left. *But wait.* I’m a liability, remember? Sooner or later, it’s going to be his eyes that are adapting that insatiable need to feed. And it will be because of me.

*I will kill him.*

So, this isn’t selfish. It’s anything but. And the man will grieve. There is no doubt in my mind that my departure will momentarily break him. But maybe I am thinking too much of this deadly dependence. Shit, he could walk back into this cold, abandoned kitchen only to see my brains splattered across the floor, and instead of drowning in depression, maybe he’ll only offer my dilapidated body an eye roll. That seems textbook Levi. Somehow, though, I think my death will leave a bigger emotion scar than a mere twisting of the eyes. But, regardless, he will survive. Levi is strong. Stronger than anyone I’ve ever met. And he will get over me. He will survive.

My hand is shaking as it lifts the weapon, still so unsure if this is the right decision. And as if my mind is trying to push me over the edge of this indecision, images of Mike relay in my mind. Of my mother. *Of Armin.* All of these images of people who I have gotten killed cycle through my head like some fucked up cinema show. And it gives me that final shove.

I close my eyes, because I don’t want to see anything but the blackness of my lids. They can’t convince me that this is wrong. The cold press of the barrel against my skull causes my breath to hitch. So, this is it, huh? This is what the great Eren Jaeger accomplished. Several dead friends and a hole in his head. *Shit, you did so well, Eren.* Fuck my conscience; but more importantly, fuck my self-pity, because that asshole stopped being comforting several months ago.

My fingers quiver as they locate the trigger. Palm sweat-slicked and fumbling, the barrel is trembling against my forehead as if it’s the terrified one. But I shouldn’t be scared, should I? I should be happy, jubilant. Because I’m getting out. Fuck, I’m going to be free from this shithole dubbed ‘Planet Earth’. A lunatic’s smile pulls at my lips as my finger finally finds the deadly switch.

And I pull the trigger.

To be honest, I’m expecting nothingness. *But not this kind.* Not the sound of a blank cartridge
echoing throughout the kitchen. Dark lids fly open as my eyes frantically scan the room. Maybe this is Hell. Maybe I’m being forced to relive Armin’s death. I’ve had similar assumptions before, right? But that lifeless corpse is still where I left it. And I’m still alive. I try again, bringing the barrel to its rightful place against my forehead.

And I pull the trigger.

Nothing.

And I pull the trigger.

Nothing.

And I pull the goddamn trigger.

Nothing.

My breath is coming out in loud, uneven gasps as green eyes examine the pistol in my palm. “Why?” I feel stupid asking an inanimate object a question that I will never receive an answer to, but I continue, regardless. “Why?” The question sounds harsher this time, louder and more demanding. And, fuck, I thought I stopped this craziness back when Erwin and company rescued me from that hut. But I quickly decline back into that state of insanity, slamming the gun against the ground, relishing as the fucker spits out metal in multiple directions. “You piece of shit! Why?” I pick up what remains of the barrel and sling it into the brick wall, watching as black ricochets into the air.

“When I don’t deserve it?” I hear a satisfying crunch under my boot as the remnants of the weapon are smashed into the floor. “Was I not good enough?” Every word is highlighted with a stomp, over and over, up and down. “You…” Pieces of black are scattered across the floor, silver springs assisting in painting the violent picture. And, suddenly, the gravity of it all hits me. My ankles give out as I crumple to the floor, looking so fucking broken.

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Because I meant what I said.” Levi’s voice shatters my shell of anguish, prompting me to turn a tear-streaked face towards his direction. He’s leaning against the wall, arms crossed against a strong chest. I can offer him nothing more than a whimper of uncertainty, my voice retreating back into the dark recesses of my throat. He pushes himself off the wall and begins to walks towards me, face still filled with that unending need to take away my pain. And, if anything, its severity has doubled against his furrowed brow, obviously due to the fact that I wasn’t necessarily quiet with my destruction of the useless weapon.

Soon, he’s adapted the same position he left in, crouching quietly beside me. I expect him to offer me more false comforts, to try and convince me that I’m wrong in wanting to leave this earth. But he doesn’t. Instead, he raises a clenched palm in front of my face. I don’t listen. My eyes don’t quite believe what they are seeing, but the resonating clink of the silver bullets hitting the floor in front of me confirms my vision. One by one, they drop from his palm, scattering onto the ground, not unlike their ruined companion piece. And I want to be angry. I want to be so angry. Because he efficiently stole the choice to die away from me. A choice that was not his. A choice that I wouldn’t have regretted. And he ruined it.

I tell myself to be calm, that getting irrationally angry will not benefit either of us in this situation. But I don’t listen. I never fucking listen. My hands push at his shoulders, throwing him off balance and down onto the cheap linoleum beneath us. And, suddenly, all I can see is red, the rage inside of me burning way past it’s boiling point. I’m consumed by this need, by this irrevocable want to prove to him that I am not some puppet to be controlled. That I am a human being. That I’m not one of them.
“Why are you such an asshole?” I’m blinded by this anger, the only thing appearing in my line of sight being the objective to make him see. Make him understand. “Why did you do it, huh?” I’m mocking him now, prodding him for a response that I can successfully throw back into his face. But none comes. “Are you not going to answer me? Am I not good enough for that?” The only response I receive is a choking sound that- wait, a choking sound? The noise doubles as a form of holy water, effectively purging me of this hazy fury. And it’s only when my vision clears that I realize I’m straddling him. That my hands are wrapped around his throat. That I’m killing him. And he’s not stopping me. My hands release his flesh like the skin is on fire, eliciting a loud intake of air from the man beneath me. I remove myself from his body even faster, my form tumbling backwards like a child who has yet to discover their feet.

And I need to get away. I need to run. Because I said I was going to eventually kill him, but I didn’t think the phrase was going to be literal. I pull my shaking form to my feet, preparing myself to delve headfirst into whatever zombie bullshit lies within the remainder of the hospital. But I’m stopped, a pair of strong hands wrapping around my legs and pulling me back to the ground. I collide painfully with the floor below, my hands barely saving my skull from impacting with the linoleum. I don’t even have time to attempt an escape before I'm flipped onto my back as the man mimics my previous position, straddling me with sturdy thighs. But I’m still trashing, still trying to evade having to face the man I just tried to kill. And I don’t know which one of us is more fucked up. The one who tries to commit homicide, or the one who willing drags their attempted murderer back into forgiving arms.

He grabs at my hands, bringing the squirming appendages above my head; and fuck, does this position seem eerily familiar. I accept defeat as my body goes limp under his grip, knowing that there is no exodus from Levi once he decides to put you in his cage. Greens meet greys in what I swear could be entitled the most sympathetic stare in the history of mankind. And that’s probably really exaggerated, but as the gaze breaks down every defensive barrier I attempt to put up, I realize I don’t give two shits.

“You... you needed it.” And I am sincerely hoping that the man is not talking about his recent strangulation, because if so, then I don’t think that contest of insanity will even be a close call. “You’ve needed it ever since I put my hands on you back at that piece of shit you called home.” The air stills in my throat, the muscle tightening slowly but surely as his words sink in. Because they are insane. I’ve needed to murder him? Fuck, who does he think I am? Because I sure as shit haven’t needed to quench some fucked up sense of homicide, thank you very much. I can see the look I’m shooting him reflected in those silver eyes, and I look confused, aggravated… hurt. So fucking hurt. And I know where that pain is resonating from, and it has nothing but everything to do with the man restraining me. Because I tried to kill him. I’m a monster. I’m a monster. And, nothing Levi says will convince me otherwise.

“Say something, Eren. Tell me I’m wrong.” There’s a yearning in his eyes, a desire to be reassured that his assumptions are correct. That I’m not a monster. But he’s so mistaken.

“You’re wrong.” My words come out as a whisper, gracefully dancing across my lips as if their containment wasn’t detrimental to my life. His grip on me falters, and the look in those silver pools changes to something morbidly disbelieving. “I... I was mad. So, I tried to kill you.” My confidence builds as more words begin to flow through my mouth. “Because you wouldn’t let me die. I was so mad. So fucking mad. And… and I’ll do it again, L-Levi. I won’t even realize it. B-because I’m a f-fucking monster. Don’t you s-see?” The weight around my wrists loosens until it’s completely gone; and suddenly, that pressure is being applied to my cheeks, his fingers gently caressing the tear-streaked skin beneath his touch. But I don’t deserve this tenderness, this seeming acceptance. He should be mad... he should be scared. He should be anything but accepting of this.

“I see something,” His words grant me pause from the voracious creature clawing at my conscience,
“but it isn’t a monster.” I guess I should have expected this answer, but it still manages to leave me breathless, nonetheless. I stare at him, wide-eyed and full of unadulterated astonishment. My expression pulls at his lips, causing the corners to rise in a faint smirk. And god, this is so fucked. We’re so fucked. Because no one normal would just forgive their attempted murderer. And, suddenly, it hits me like a bag of bricks. No one but me.

Because Levi tried to kill me, too. And I forgave him, begrudgingly, but it was an acceptance to an unsaid apology either way. So, is that why he hasn’t lodged a bullet deep into my skull? Because my aggression acted as an ‘I owed you’?

I open my mouth to question him, but something else entirely slips out, “What do you see then?”

He answers so fast, I almost think that he is expecting my question, “My hope.” I’m not gifted with another smile, not another caress of the cheeks. The only thing he gives me is his answer along with a certain twinkle in those charcoal eyes. A twinkle that lets me know he means it. Everything. And he still trusts me.

“Why?” The question is simple, but I know he understands it. And it breaks every wall he was trying to build around the true issue.

His hands fall from my face, dropping beside my head. Those silver eyes are quietly suffering as he tries to find the words to explain why he is so goddamn content around me. Finally, thin lips part and the words begin to flow, “I knew you wouldn’t finish it. I… I knew you wouldn’t kill me.” What? What is that supposed to mean? The only reason I stopped in my brutalizing is because I heard the sounds I was forcing from Levi. If those noises hadn’t penetrated my rage, the man would probably be sporting a pair of comatose orbs right now. “You weren’t even hurting me.” And I call absolute bullshit on that. There’s no way that the feeling of my fingers wrapping around that pale neck didn’t cause at least a semblance of pain. “Look.” To prove his point, he pulls down on the collar of his button up, and what the fuck? Unlike the ugly, purpled bruises that I am expecting, I am granted with a set of faint, pink lines. And that makes no sense. I was squeezing. I was trying to kill him. Wasn’t I?

It takes a few seconds looking at the thin whelps to realize Levi is waiting for my response. “I’m sorry.” The apology is mumbled under my breath, barely audible in the empty kitchen. And, it’s certainly a shit way of making amends for an attempted murder, but right now, it is all I can offer him. Letting out a sigh, he pulls on my upper body and shifts our bodies so that I am situated in his lap. We sit in silence for a moment, merely basking in my act of contrition. Pale fingers begin to rub at the small of my back, coaxing me deeper into his chest. And I give in, finally accepting that this man isn’t going to let me go, so I should probably stop trying to force him away. In the back of my mind, a voice is still telling me that I don’t deserve this. That I should use this opportunity while his guard is down to make a run for it and save Levi the future agony that I am sure to bring him. But I tell the asshole to shut the fuck up as I nuzzle my face into his neck, lips pressing a

“You’re worth so much more than you give yourself credit for, Bright Eyes.” Levi’s deep voice breaks the comforting silence, causing me to tense up against his chest. His words hit me hard; because even after all this shit, after the attempted suicide, murder, he still believes in me. And I want to tell him that it’s a stupid notion. That hope is only reserved for people like Erwin Smith. But I don’t say anything, merely allowing his words to settle over me like an impromptu blanket woven of comfort and forgiveness. “And I’ve… I’ve never been good at this sappy bullshit, but you are something special… and I’m not saying that just because you have some freaky inability to turn.” Well, shit thanks, Charming.

I turn my gaze up towards him, and he looks so goddamn accepting that it’s almost saddening. Because I still feel like his forgiveness was too easily gained, but it’s hard to argue with my conscience when I am bundled up in these strong arms. I duck my face into his neck, lips pressing a
kiss against the skin. I should probably pull away, because our current locale doesn’t seem very promising for what the burning beginning to form in my gut is willing me to do. But I don’t stop moving against the soft skin of his neck until my nose is bumping into his jawline. I just want to forget. Just for a moment. And Levi knows this, pulling my face away from his skin before I push us over into a void of no turning back.

He waits until my eyes have found his to start, “We need to leave.” And I suddenly feel foolish for thinking this was a good idea. Well, no, I never thought it was a good idea; I just didn’t give a fuck. And maybe that is even worse. Not wanting to leave me completely without, he brings my cradled cheeks towards his face. And as our lips meet in a chaste kiss, I realize that the throes of passion are not the only place where your memories can fade. That something this simple shouldn’t make me feel as though I’m on cloud nine, but it does. And I was an idiot for thinking otherwise.

“My last name’s Jaeger.” And I don’t know why I’m telling him this as the man lifts me off the floor, but it feels right. It feels… needed. Like with that piece of information, I offered up my soul for his taking. Because the admittance meant so much more than just an extra bit of knowledge. It means that I fully trust him. No strings attached. Just full, unadulterated trust. And it’s terrifying. Because I had refused so long ago to give him my last name as some internal means of unbroken pride. Like keeping this a secret was the only thing preventing the spear from searing my ego. To be honest, I’m not expecting Levi to comprehend the gravity of the admission, but one look at those stormy seas tells me that he understands perfectly. That maybe he shares the same qualifications, given that I don’t know heads or tails of his last name.

“Ackerman.” The familiarity of the word causes my breath to hitch. Mikasa. I guess out of all the possibilities, I should have predicted his answer would be the last name of my lost sister. She used to joke around with me saying, ‘Everyone’s an Ackerman.’ But that joke lost its humor when Mikasa realized that she shared World History with four of her cognomen brethren. It was always a gift and a curse for her. On one hand it was a sturdy name, a strong name. But on the other, it was the most popular surname this side of Shiganshina. So, it really shouldn’t surprise me that Levi shares the title with her.

“What?” Eyebrow quirked and upper lip raised, He’s giving me an inquisitive look as he releases me from his hold. And I have the sudden urge to tell him everything about Mikasa. To tell him all about our misadventures. To tell him that the only reason she was so protective of me was because I was the only family she had left. To tell him that I failed her. And, holy shit, I thought this self-pity had been extinguished. But it strikes me in the gut as my gaze passes over Armin’s corpse. Armin.

“Mikasa.” The words come out so matter-of-factly that Levi doesn’t even act to question why her surname was different from mine. He just accepts it, merely handing me a pistol in replacement of the one that I mutilated. His heads nods in the direction of the kitchen’s back exit, obviously ready to make our leave of this heinous place. And I share his feelings, but there is one last thing I have to do.

One last goodbye.

I crouch next to Armin, his eyes still wide with an emptiness that sends pangs of sorrow straight through my chest. But the blond boy wouldn’t want me to suffer with grief, would he? He’d want me to move on, to grow stronger from his loss. To learn from it. My hands slide over those lifeless orbs, pushing the lids closed. And I will learn from this, Armin. Running my fingers across his cheeks one final time, I whisper, “I hope there’s an ocean in heaven, Armin.” Because if anyone deserves an afterlife of eternal happiness, it’s him. It’s Armin.
My hands leave him as I rise to my feet, and it feels as though some monstrous weight has been lifted off my shoulders. Like those words have hypothetically released the bonds of anguish I was tying around my heart. And I’m okay. Well, not exactly the textbook definition, but I’m getting there.

Levi takes my hand as our footsteps begin to echo throughout the kitchen, further and further away until we’ve reached the backdoor. I’m staring directly ahead at the hard, red metal in front of me, but I can feel those silver eyes on me. He wants to make sure I’m okay. He doesn’t want a repeat suicide attempt except unlike the previous time, the next may provide me with a loaded gun. But I won’t do it. Not again. It was selfish, stupid. Totally Eren Jaeger. But not again. Because I have to live for someone other than myself. I have to live for him.

For Levi.

Chapter End Notes

TRIGGER WARNING: ATTEMPTED SUICIDE
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So, what was originally only thought to be a section of a chapter TURNED INTO THE ENTIRE FUCKING CHAPTER... I swear I overwrite so much, and I promise, it is not intentional. But, damn, the reaction for that last chapter fucking blew me away. Like, bless, every other message I got on Tumblr had something to do with Armin. And, it was awesome, because I love hearing from you guys :3

AND WE’VE HIT OVER 1000 KUDOS WHAT THE FUCK
I wish I knew how to thank you guys, but I'm shit with giving thanks... BUT HOLY FUCK THANK YOU...

Tumblr:
fuzzyporcupine.tumblr.com

As always, I am tracking 'fic: what's eating you'.

If you see any grammar errors, let me know!

FANMIX
ALL FANART
Thank you, shukiai, for beta reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Hope is a terrifying word in any context. To the man with the iron fist, it is a symbol of mutiny and rebellion. To the revolutionary, it is a word riddled with promise. Whether that be potentially fatal is to be decided. And to me?

An illusion.

A dream that disappeared the moment that hoard of walkers separated us from Erwin and Hanji. A sickening pang reverberates through my gut as I think of how implausibly fucked the pair probably is. Or, maybe they are better off than us… which probably isn’t pulling at that many straws considering that Levi and I are currently trespassing in the dark halls of some hospital from Hell.

The hope of a possibly lightened hallway flew out the windows located back in the cafeteria, gifting us with nothing but a corridor of blackness. Levi’s prepared, though, flashlight already illuminating the shadows of the hall. I try, again, to remember what Jean told me about sensory deprivation, because that bastard had a point. A point that has been proven by several unannounced lurker attacks. So, I throw all of my cards onto the table, praying that Jean’s kinky sexual fetishes will work just as well for me as it has for the biters.

I block out the nauseating smells wafting through the air.

I remove the objects morphing in the distance until the hall is nothing more than a black screen.

I drop it all until the only sense I am utilizing is my hearing, acute and piercing in the darkness.

But I must have done something wrong. Because, I hear nothing. Nothing but the shallow breathing alternating between Levi and me. And I am starting to regret taking Jean’s suggestion to heart. A sense of dread falls over me as my ears pull and tear at the inaudibility of the black hall. And, suddenly, my breathing is not the only sound filling the airways. My heart. It’s beating like the organ has just completed a marathon and is currently struggling for oxygen. Pounding in my ears, it soon becomes the only noise available to me, the beat playing out a horrifying rhythm of shaking hands and sweaty palms.

But then I hear it.

The growl, the moan, the signature echo of the undead’s finest. And it’s close. I pull on Levi’s hand, prompting him to drop the flashlight down, because I really don’t want a repeat of his last walker experience. He immediately follows my silent instruction, the beam of artificial light shooting to the floor below. My breath catches in my throat at his instantaneous agreement, and it’s probably due to the fact that I still am a little shell-shocked that he hasn’t revoked his trust from my list of privileges. But, then again, I suppose that Levi’s reluctance to let me go isn’t necessarily the most bizarre thing that’s happened to me over the past few months. A tell-tale sound abruptly pulls me out of my internal questioning, the noise changing violently into the clacking of teeth, up and down, up and
down, constantly singing to its prey. The symphony guides me away, causing our direction to shift to the opposite side of the narrow hallway.

I’m terrified, and there’s no use denying it. Even with this singular sensory trick, I’m still just a bag of bones that could be easily ripped open beneath the claws of the monsters stalking these halls. But I’m more aware this time around, and it has nothing to do with the fact that my senses are more adept. I know what is lurking in these hallways, walkers and all. Including those goddamn metal carts. My free hand extends outwards, acting as an cane for a blind man. The steps I’m taking are careful, but steady, nothing like the shaking movements I was making the last time we traversed through the darkness. And slowly, my fear begins to evaporate, because, I am in control.

The hand wrapped around my own squeezes to give me a reassurance that I do not need. But I allow him this small form of comfort, because even if it is unnecessary, I will always accept support from the man. Maybe it is due to his harshness, and the act of kindness just seems magnified. Maybe I’m just a selfish asshole who needs this constant coddling. My gut is prompting me that it is a mixture of the two, but since when did I listen to that bastard?

But I’m still in this dark hallway. Still fighting for my life. Still wrapped in his hand. I tug on the connected appendage, testing his apparently unwavering trust. The trust that, in spite of everything, seems so fucking out of place. And it is probably hypocritical of me to think of his faith in such a negative connotation, because there is not a doubt in my mind that at one point Levi was probably questioning my overzealous trust of him. That hand constricts tighter as I attempt to shuffle us out of the darkness. And I am not even sure where I am going, merely praying that I don’t indirectly lead us into another concealed hoard. But this fact doesn’t seem to bother the man behind me, who is giving no qualms about being tugged into an indefinite unknown.

And, to be honest, I feel like Levi should probably give me the flashlight given that it’s occupying his only free hand. Or, he could just let go of me, but somehow that option seems a little more terrifying than surviving in the darkness. But out of the two of us, he is the better shot; and if worse should happen, then he should be the one pulling the trigger. It’s unfortunate that I can’t make these desires audible, considering that the noise of eternal damnation sounds like it is in breathing distance from us.

The groan of the creature freezes the blood running through my veins as I attempt to shuffle us further away from the monster. It’s having the same effect on Levi if the slight tremble of his palm is anything to go by. And I know that in the back of his mind he is replaying over our previous escapade in these halls. That he remembers the feeling of being so close to a deathless demise. But I won’t let that happen.

Never again.

You’re fighting for him, remember? The thought sends a renewed sense of vigor through my veins, melting all of the icy anxiety that had previously attached itself to my morale. I tug against him once more, still not knowing where I am headed, but frankly not giving a shit. Wherever we end up will be better than sharing the air with our good friend Brainless. The moans begin to steadily decrease in volume as I pull further into the darkness, until they are nothing more than a quiet echo at the end of the hall. A reminder of the humanity this place has wrought. My brain is still telling me to keep moving when Levi pulls out of my grasp. For a moment, I continue progressing towards the unknown until I finally realize that my hand is missing a certain cold touch.

“What are we doing?” Levi’s deep tone breaks the anxious tension surrounding us. I hope he isn’t expecting a confident answer, because that is certainly not what I can provide. “Do you even know where we are?” He’s obviously aware of my ineptness, the question sounding way more mocking
than inquisitive. And I want to ask him why he’s so concerned when he could have taken the lead at any time. Instead, he thrust the initiative onto an eighteen year old kid who doesn’t know heads or tails of this goddamn hospital.

I open my mouth to retort, an unnecessary anger beginning to bubble up inside my chest. “I’m sorry if we are a little lost, but I was trying to save our asses.” The bite comes out as passive aggressive as ever, making me sound like I am seconds away from materializing my growing annoyance. Levi sighs, any amount of anger he contained dissipating with the breath of hot air.

“I really don’t want to end up as walker shit today, Bright Eyes.” My annoyance subsides against the crack, slowly sinking back down into the dark recesses of my emotions. I’m about to quip back when his flashlight wanders onto what I am guaranteeing is a gift from Mr. Higher Power. “Shit.” The curse flies off Levi’s lips in a whisper as he brings the yellow shine across the wall. I take a step closer, my shadow displaying itself vividly against the wall as I cross into the path of light.

It’s a practical endowment from above, but I suppose the technical term for it would be ‘map’. My fingers gently pass over the directory, fingertips collecting dust as they glide across the glass. And shit, these butterflies appearing in my stomach are supposed to be saved for things like love and first kisses, but here they are, practically flying in my gut at the sight of this plot plan. My eyes follow the trail of cleared dust, slowly leading to a dull, red dot that states, ‘You Are Here’.

“Stairwell A.” The path of the flashlight follows my words, and sure enough, directly to our right marks the entrance for the flight of stairs.

“As helpful as that information is, I think we are looking for the one that says ‘Exit’.” Slowly turning my head, I try to muster the biggest ‘shut the fuck up’ glance I can give with a set of big, bright eyes. It’s obviously ineffective given that I can see remnants of that signature smirk pulling at Levi’s lips. My middle finger decides to tell him just how funny I think his jibe is, earning me the sound of muffled laughter.

Rolling my eyes, I turn back towards the board. And even though I won’t admit it audibly, Levi’s right. Spread fingers make quick work of the remaining dust, revealing the musty glass beneath. My vision is hopping from one side of the map to the other, frantically searching out for that magic word. And my eyes find it… well, not exactly, but ‘Front Entrance’ sounds just as good rolling off my tongue.

“Found it.” A sharp intake of air sounds off behind me as Levi digests my words. “We’re close, too. Just a few turns and we should be golden.” I memorize the hall pattern in front of me. Left, left, right. Left, left, right. I commit the directions to memory, because for some reason, I don’t think Mr. Higher Power is going to grant us a second glance at this directory. In the back of my mind, I am wondering how we have been graced with this momentary freedom away from the creatures that seemed to be around every corner. And I should probably stop posing such internal questions considering that a convenient moan has decided to act as my silent answer. “Let’s go, I got it.” Levi doesn’t try to argue as the sound of the groan encloses on us, growing increasingly more desperate and menacing.

I rip the flashlight out of Levi’s hand before he even has time to comprehend the movement. But I am not taking a chance on leaving the man more defenseless than he already is, with his unproven susceptibility to the walker bites. This, however, does grant me retaliation, and I guess this is where the boundaries of his trust are drawn.

“What are you doing?” His whisper is harsh and unyielding, all previous slack and mocking lost in the stiffness of his words. And I know he wants to grab me by the shoulders and shake the answer out of me, but the increased volumes of moans is forcing Levi to follow in my steps. A sudden jerk to my forearm causes me to turn my head towards the shorter man, still trying to keep up with my
rushed pace. His brow is furrowed in frustration, a look of uncertainty plastered across his face.

I want to tell him that now isn’t necessarily the best time to be playing twenty questions, and that maybe he could come back later when we weren’t being followed by an undetermined number of undead. But my voice decides to revolt against me, spewing the beginnings of an explanation for my flashlight thievery.

“You need your gun in case-

“I don’t give a shit if you are immune. Those fuckers can still tear your goddamn throat out, and I’m pretty sure even you can’t survive a ripped jugular. Unless there is something you’re not telling me.”

And as useful as that ability would be, I am certain that a wall painted with my guts will leave me a little more than just under the weather. Levi takes my silence as an answer to his unvoiced question. “Exactly. So, stop trying to play hero. If anyone needs protecting, it’s your dumbass.” And I’m sure that Levi meant for the speech to rouse my pride, but the man has never been good with words and this time is proving no different. Because, instead of inspiring me, the vernacular has just reminded me of my previous heroics. And shit, I thought the weight of this agony had been lifted free from my shoulders. I thought that the reckoning I faced with Armin had helped clear my guilt. But it has.

And I remember that I’ve forgiven myself. That I’m not living for this unyielding depression any longer. That I’m living for him. “Shit, I didn’t mean it that way, Bright Eyes.”

Levi’s unspoken apology draws me out of my thoughts and back into the bleak hallways. He’s staring at me, those silver eyes shooting invisible bullets of regret in my direction. And I would stop to tell him that his worries are unfounded, that I’ve shaken the demon of internal despair. But the clank of teeth is directly behind us, the smell of rotting flesh permeating the air with a pungent odor.

“It doesn’t matter. We just need-” The world slows to a halt as a pair of battered hands wrap around my shoulders. The hiss of the labored breath is right in my ear, the creature behind the sound preparing to sink its jaws into my neck. The anticipation of the pain has my muscles tensing beneath my skin, the function of the tendons coming to a complete stop as I’m further entrapped behind the cold grip. I guess I should blame Mr. Higher Power for the irony of my situation, given that Levi literally just explained my body’s inability to take an attack to the neck. But instead of the sensation of agony, I’m treated to the feeling of wetness splattering across my face.

Levi’s gun is pointed directly at me, the barrel practically smoking from its recent activity. I should probably be thanking my lucky stars that the man was quick enough to dispatch the lurker behind me. Should be running because there’s no way the sound of the gun firing did not alert the other walkers. But I’m not. I’m frozen. With fear or surprise, I’m not sure. Either way, the only part of me stirring is a pair of trembling hands, effectively waving the flashlight like a beacon for the biters.

I’m not sure exactly how I start moving, but I feel like it has something to do with the strong grip yanking harshly on my wrist. The walls are a blur of black as I’m tugged unceremoniously through the darkness, all the while as a symphony of the undead plays the soundtrack of our escape. I try to remember that the walkers are slow moving as my mind begins to resonate with the situation in which we are currently residing. But this does nothing to deter the lurkers that are already ahead of us, Levi having to play acrobat for two as he flawlessly maneuvers our bodies in between the dozens of extending arms, hungry to sink into our flesh.

Suddenly, we reach the end of the hall, the bloodstained walls in front of us halting any more forward movements. Levi pauses, breath coming in frantic huffs as he begins, “Which way?” Which way? Fuck, which way? “Which way, Eren?” He’s yelling now, completely disregarding the incoming hoard lumbering towards us, gaining distance with every passing second. And they are so close, shit, they are so close. And there is so many. I can tell just from the countless moans that they
outnumber our bullets by a landslide, and that there is no way that we will be making it out of here alive once cornered. “Eren!”

*Left, left, right... remember, dumbass?*

“Left, left, right.” The words are spoken like an epiphany, quiet against the sounds of the approaching hoard. *Left, left, right.* “Left, go left!” I yank on his arm, tugging him in the direction that should assure us freedom. The sound of a gun hammer being pulled back echoes in the black hallway, the man next to me already preparing his rounds in case the worst should happen. But the bullets are not needed, as this corridor is almost completely clear, mark the couple of legless walkers mewling against the wall. But, then again, there *is* a massive hoard of biters still probably following us, so I suppose that keeping a weapon at the ready is not necessarily a terrible idea. I’m murmuring the directions over and over aloud like a mantra. *Left, left, right.* And I’m pretty sure the man beside me can hear the repetition, but he is not putting up any arguments as to why my babbling should cease. *Left, left, right.* The end of the hallway is lit up by the now steadied flashlight, and I’m giving the direction before we even make it to the central point. “Left.” We’ve all but lost the friendly group of biters following behind us, the fuckers still stumbling at the back of the hallway. But those assholes could be on a whole other planet, and I would still be sprinting like their heated breath was against my neck. Apparently, the same cannot be said for Levi.

I’m jerked to a halt as the man suddenly stops in the middle of the hallway. And I am about to ask the asshole what the fuck he thinks he’s doing when I notice what’s captured his attention. *Operation.* He looks enraptured, silver eyes tracing the lettering of the name plate. And I want to tell him to move, to shove his ass out the door if he refuses. But he wants answers, doesn’t he? He wants to know why there are a dozen walkers tied and splayed open like some fucked up science project. And who am I to deny him the peace of mind that the solution may bring?

So, I say nothing. Nothing as he releases my hand. Nothing as he walks towards the door. And nothing as he finally presses through the entryway.

The man disappears behind the threshold, beckoning me with sounds of the struggling undead. As I step closer into this purgatory, I wonder if the answers are really worth it. To understand what *humanity* has done to these creatures. I would think that Stohess would have brought down enough examples of complete sadism, but obviously I was wrong. The smell is still just as putrid as I remember, the rotting flesh allowing no room for anything but complete disgust. The walkers have been reawakened with our return, shredded arms thrashing against their bonds in a vain attempt at sedation from their everlasting hunger.

Others pound tirelessly against a closed door located inside the room, their ragged limbs a shadow on the fogged glass. Who knows how many rest behind the door. Dozens? Hundreds? Regardless, it sounds like a lot, and it has me itching to get out. But I ignore the creatures, only focusing my attention on one singular figure.

Levi’s standing with his back facing me, head down and moving in slight left to right motions. As I close in on the man, I realize that he’s reading. That he has found his answers. And they are as satisfying as I expected as I finally get a glimpse of his face. Mouth slightly open, brow furrowed in confusion, he looks horrified. *Disgusted.* Pushing the folder into my hands, Levi marches outside the room without a word. Shit, I didn’t think it would be that bad.

I probably shouldn’t look, given that my knowledge of human morality is already at an all-time low. But, curiosity killed the cat, right? And I’ve practically grown ears and a tail with the way my eyes dart down to emerge myself in the pages.

And *fuck.*
Patient Number – 78

Age - 13

Symptoms – 78 did not show any prior symptoms before laceration was introduced into right forearm.

Hour 4 – Cognitive behaviors dwindling, able to answer simple questions.

Hour 7 – Forearm slowly disintegrating, cognitive behaviors completely lost.

Hour 10 – Death.

Patient Number – 113

Age – 10

Symptoms – 113 did not show any prior symptoms before laceration was introduced into left shoulder.

Hour 1 – Blood loss steady, death imminent.

Hour 2 – Death.

My eyes stare at the ages listed on the record sheets. Ten? Thirteen? Fuck… shit, this is worse than Stohess. These were kids. They were killing fucking kids. Fingers that I hadn’t realized were shaking drop the folder on the ground, effectively scattering the reports across the floor. Kids. It makes so much sense now. The look on Levi’s face, why he left. It makes so much sense. Because, it’s like an unspoken rule that children are untouchable. Of course, the walkers don’t follow these laws, but humans? Humans should have this engraved in their memory. And these people just fucked it over, didn’t they? They took whatever hope the deity above had that we weren’t a bunch of sociopaths and tossed it down into the deepest fucking abyss.

My hands are still trembling as I attempt to make my way out of the room, hip colliding into several hospital beds. Fuck, hospital beds that probably have undead children attached to them. And I feel sick. I legitimately feel that any moment those goddamn candy bars are going to be revisiting me in the most unpleasant way possible. Clutching my stomach, I try to purge my mind of these recent memories. Kids. Holy shit, kids. My legs quiver as I start towards the door, attempting to think of anything besides the torment these people probably went through. Eventually, I reach the entrance, my fingers quickly curling around the entryway. Pulling myself through the threshold, I slide against the nearest wall I can find, head leaning up to admire a dark sky.

“We’re monsters, aren’t we?” He is sitting beside me on the floor, eyes watching the same unmoving ceiling tiles. And I want to disagree, because we’re not monsters… well, at least he isn’t. But, for some reason, I think Levi is talking about the bigger picture, about humanity as a whole.

“Yeah.” I offer him a simple answer, one that is short and to the point. I figure he accepts it if the acknowledging hum is anything to go by.
“It’s always been like this, hasn’t it? People just needed a shitstorm to get away with it.” And I could guarantee that if the man wasn’t currently sitting inside a walker-infested hospital, he’d probably be lighting up one of his cancer sticks. “And it’s acceptable. Part of the agenda for a cure. I bet that’s what those sick fucks told themselves every time…” He takes a deep breath and closes his eyes, head dropping between his shoulders. “I’m so tired, Bright Eyes.” The defeated tone in his voice sounds completely foreign against his deep tenor, like it doesn’t belong and it’s trespassing into illicit territory. *Broken.* And that word is usually only reserved for me, but I can’t help but think it suits the man slumped over against the wall right now.

My hand reaches out to him, gently stroking the fine, dark hairs that are falling in front of his face. And I can’t do much, my words never really mattering for shit, but it doesn’t stop me from trying. Because, Eren Jaeger can’t give up. *Not again.*

“I’m sorry, Levi.” And, for the millionth time, I’m confused as to why I am apologizing. It wasn’t me who strapped down the children. It wasn’t me who fed them to the walkers. But the apology feels right coming off my lips. And it obviously sits well with Levi given that the man is now leaning in towards my touch. “I’m so sorry.”

I’ve never seen him cry, and I doubt that I will ever witness the occurrence; but nonetheless, I feel like this is the closest I will come to seeing the display as he trembles in my arms. And it breaks me. Because, this man is so strong, so fucking brave. And I can’t help the burning appearing at the back of my eyes as he quivers against my chest. Soon, there’s a wetness spilling over onto my cheeks, silently cascading down the tanned skin to collide at my chin. I know that I’ve claimed our anguish filled embraces to be ‘apocalypse scrapbook’ worthy before, but this scene really nails it. *This is definitely the perfect picture of the apocalypse. Two people silently suffering on a hospital floor, one being too forlorn to spill those tears, the other quietly lamenting with a pair of wet cheeks. Perfection.*

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The early winter chill is more than welcome against my skin, the cold reminding me that I am no longer trapped in a hospital of horrors. Levi hasn’t spoken since we left the hellhole, the journey out being rather quick and straightforward once we gathered our wits. He hasn’t even *looked* at me, merely keeping his eyes on the road ahead. I want to ask him where we are going, considering we have been walking aimlessly down the highway for the past hour. But my words are not welcome right now, the man seemingly content with the uncomfortable silence.

My hand instinctively rubs at the back of my neck with nervous habit, when I feel the remnants of my walker friend still plastered against the side of my face.

“Shit.” The curse pulls Levi’s eyes away from the road and onto me. And, for the first time in days, I’m feeling like we are back at square one. Because, that gaze doesn’t carry the same spark behind it… not anymore. It’s empty. *Hollow.* And, at one point, I would have categorized this as textbook Levi, but not anymore. Not when I’ve seen the emotion this man has locked behind his collar.

And I feel sick all over again.

“We’ll make a detour at the creek. I hear one running off to the side.” He doesn’t give me time to argue as he steps off the road and into the brown leaves covering the wooded area. And I realize that it’s not just his face, but it’s his words as well. *Empty.* The man has never been one to show much emotion, but this. This is all wrong. This isn’t Levi.

*This isn’t Levi.*
I chase after him, the man already disappearing behind the trees. The leaves crunch under my boots as I follow the sound of the steady current; and soon, I am introduced to a familiar, scarred back. He’s sitting shirtless by the water edge, cross-legged and transfixed. And what can I do? I’m not good at reading people, even worse at reading Levi, and I don’t know how to help him. Armin would know. Armin would—

*Armin’s dead.*

To be honest, I think I liked my subconscious a lot better when it was just a smartass instead of it being a constant reminder of my faults. Pushing the asshole out of my mind, I walk over to Levi, trying to maintain a courage that I’m not sure I have. He bristles as I take a seat next to him, pulling off my jacket while I’m at it, because if he is going to suffer in the cold, then I guess I will, too. How that makes sense, don’t ask me. I’m blaming the fueling tensions for fucking up my thought process.

A few minutes pass in silence, neither of us willing to rip a tear in the stillness. I offer up a loud huff, hoping that it will prompt Levi to speak, because I’m shit at comforting people; and I feel if the man gives me something to work with then maybe this won’t all go downhill. But, of course, I am granted with nothing but a stiff disregard as he continues to gaze into the crystalline waters.

“I don’t know how to talk to you.” The sentence is out of my mouth before I can stop it, the word vomit deciding that it’s been far too long since it’s made an appearance. I’m almost regretting it, but then the man turns his head, giving me a stare that somehow seems less blank. “I…” And this was never easy when Levi wasn’t giving me an expectant glare, but now it seems practically impossible. “You confuse me, and I don’t know how to make you feel better.” And, shit, this is starting to sound really pathetic really fast. I’m almost willing to say ‘fuck it’ and silently pray to Mr. Higher Power that he can help Levi see the light, because I am obviously doing a wonderful job at it. But, goddammit, I made myself one promise. One fucking promise. And if I don’t have something to live for, then honestly, what’s the point? “I just…” He’s looking at me curiously, one eyebrow raised and lips barely parted. “You always know how to help me, even if you say that you are shit with emotions… and… and, I’m not like that. My inventory runs out after apologies and hugs. So, to be honest, I am a little out of my league here.”

And, suddenly, something sparks in those silver eyes, something that has seemed so long gone for the past few hours. The sight emboldens me, prompts me to continue. “I just… I just want you to be happy, Levi. And I know that’s a really selfish thing of me to ask considering the Grade A piece of shit we are living in… but… but, you once told me that I wasn’t alone. And you’re not, either. I’m here. And…” Pausing, I take in the man sitting beside me. His lips still parted, he has lost the look of confusion, something completely different forming across his visage. Amazement. And the feeling pushes me to say finish this off, to say the magic words. “I… I care about you, Levi. So fucking much.” The last words come out as a whisper, almost like they aren’t intended to be said. But I meant it. Every single goddamn word. I lov-.

Wait, no. I pull myself back from the precipice, as I attempt to swallow down anymore unintentional confessions of adoration. Because, I don’t… *I don’t love him.* I… I don’t… A cold hand is abruptly pulling me out of my internal struggle, collapsing on top of my own with a gentle caress.

I don’t turn to him, his eyes still seeking out something in the running water. I just sit there in silence, letting my words trickle down on the two of us. And if the cold wasn’t currently nipping my ass then I would say that this stillness is rather relaxing, but unfortunately, I’m treading into frostbite territory the longer I sit here, motionless. Obviously, the chill is harsh enough to even ward off Levi, who removes his hand from mine as he begins to dip his handkerchief into the creek.

It’s almost enchanting the way his fingers move through the water, pale appendages delicately cleaning the piece of cloth. And maybe I’m just being way to pretentious with my thoughts, but I
can’t help but find the simple act beautiful. He wrings the fabric with a bony hand, causing the excess water to cast itself back into the current. Levi turns to me with a softened face, a face that no longer looks empty and hollow. And it makes me glad. That even if he can’t audibly express it, I’ve helped him. I’ve made him happier.

The man drapes the handkerchief against my neck with no warning, reminding me that Levi isn’t necessarily the gentlest man in existence. A shiver runs down my spine from the chill of the water, and I impulsively attempt to back away from the frigid piece of fabric, only to be pulled right back in.

“This would probably work better if you took your shirt off.” I raise an eyebrow. “So, it doesn’t get wet, you perverted little shit.” Rolling my eyes, I pull the black t-shirt over my head, trying to hide my smile behind the fabric. Because, this is Levi. This sarcastic asshole that has somehow wedged a place in my heart. And I know that this can’t be healthy, his mental whirlpool of a stagnant depression into his old impassive self. But was his journey back into reality such a strange one? Fuck, I tried to… I tried to kill myself, and here I am accusing Levi’s two hour brooding session of being unhealthy. And, anyways, I snapped out of it just as easily. It just took him. It just took Levi, and I was okay. So, is his apparent rejuvenation really all that hard to believe?

No.

“You scared the shit out of me back there.” Levi’s voice echoes through my mind as he continues to scrub at the blood caked on the side of my neck. And I’m not sure if I should answer him, given the man has probably heard enough of my voice. But, as the silence begins to dwindle down back on us, it becomes obvious that he is looking for an answer.

“You scared the shit out of me, too.” The hand on my neck pauses, and for a moment I am thinking that I should have probably just dealt with the peace of the quiet. And I’m positive that I shouldn’t have brought up a wound that he literally just received. But, shit, there is classic Jaeger for you. Eventually, the hand resumes its movements, albeit a tad rougher.

“It was kids. What did you expect me to do? Forget and move on?” The bite in his voice threatens any reply I might make, because I have inadvertently become an object of emotional release. He emits a deep breath, and I know that he is trying not to make me the center of his rising anger. But, to be honest, I will bare that burden if it means he will not descend back into that solitude. “I knew the world was fucked… but, I didn’t know it was that fucked.” His eyes are studying the blood crusted on my skin, narrowed in concentration and, a hint of, anger. My hand grabs at his wrist, because I’m sure he has went over the same spot about ten times, and it’s actually starting to burn.

His eyes dart to mine at the touch, fabric coming to a dead halt against my skin. My fingers begin to trace the inside of his wrist, writing invisible letters on the sensitive flesh. The narrowed glare he was sporting seconds prior transforms into a content stare, face slowly becoming more relaxed with each graze of my fingertips.

“You’re shit at distractions.” A small smirk begins to pull at the corners of his lips as he pulls his wrist from my grasp. And I can’t help the grin that begins to form on my own face, the tranquility of this moment helping to eradicate every angst ridden memory that’s etched itself in my brain over the past twenty-four hours.

“I beg to differ.” I quickly wrap my free hand around the back of his head, pulling him down for a swift peck on the lips. And, fuck, there is no way this is the same man that was slowly deteriorating right beside me mere minutes ago, is it? Maybe, Levi has some evil twin that he didn’t tell me about. Because, shit, I would totally believe a doppelganger excuse over reality. It’s that look in his eyes that makes me wonder. And even though I had previously assured myself of his clarity, this just seems too sudden. Because, that look. God, those eyes are staring at me like I’m the only thing in this
world. Like I am the only thing he sees. And it’s wonderful, it’s bliss; and if I had the option to spend an eternity in this moment then there would be no contest.

“Little shit.” The insult is broken apart by the playful smirk resting upon his face, making the name sound a lot more endearing than he probably intended. “Turn around.” I follow his command without argument, adjusting my body so my back is facing the man. A sharp intake of air sounds from behind me, opting for my head to turn in order to meet Levi’s apprehension. I’m offered answers in the form of fingers delicately tracing over my back, over the scars. There’s a hitch in his breathing as his fingertips cascade over the raised flesh, pink and violent against my tanned skin. “I’m sorry.” The apology sounds almost as desperate when I first heard it back at Stohess before he brought the whip down against my back. But it’s completely unfounded, because I’ve long since forgiven the man for these transgressions, the act only directing my anger at Zackly.

I’m about to reply when he brings the cloth down across my back, effectively scrubbing away the dirt and blood caked there. It seems silly for me to try and convince Levi again that the flogging was not his fault, because the man is just as stubborn as I am. So, I decide to push the thought from my mind, to just bask in this silent comfort the man is giving me as the fabric drifts across my shoulders. It’s nice, a word that I should probably use more considering it would indefinitely brighten my mood. But the sensation of being pampered in this world is so far and in between that I’ve almost forgotten how it feels. And as Levi finishes washing my back, I decide I want to do the same for him.

He’s gone back to dipping the handkerchief in the creek, muscles tightening as he leans forward. “What about you?” It’s a sentence that I didn’t expect would give him pause, but it does. He stops washing out the fabric in order to shoot me a questioning glare.

“I said… I’m okay, Bright Eyes.” His tone is bordering something desperate, something angry. And it’s almost like he’s audibly trying to push me off this path. But I am a stubborn asshole, and if he thinks that a couple harsh words are going to throw me off, then he is wrong.

“This is about your scars, isn’t it?” I probably shouldn’t have brought up something that the man is obviously self-conscious about, but in the back of my mind, I’ve decided that he’s left me no choice but to play dirty. And I’m expecting a big show of pride, perhaps even a silent treatment. But, instead, I’m treated with a wet handkerchief to the face and a muttered agreement. As the fabric falls from my visage, I see that Levi has already assumed the position, facing away from me as to give me better access to the canvas of pale skin.

I’m tentative at first, because unlike the asshole in front of me, I don’t want to shock him with the chill of the cloth. Despite my best efforts, the contact still prompts a slight shiver from the man along with a whispered string of curses. Holding back a chuckle, I start at his shoulder blades, massaging the tense muscles underneath the material. He hums in satisfaction, and that sound soon becomes my main target. I map out his back with the cloth, spending a considerate amount of time on each scar… which doesn’t go unnoticed by Levi.

“I don’t know if you’ve realized, but I’m not proud of those marks. So, stop worshiping the fucking things.” His bluntness causes my hand to pause atop his back, the words of chastisement sending a hollow pang through my chest. Sighing, he tries to soften his next words, “I’ve made a lot of mistakes, Bright Eyes. And most of them gave me one of those bastards that you’ve been fawning over. I’m not proud of them, and they don’t deserve to be cherished.” And, suddenly, I feel like an asshole for reminding him of his previous faults, because it now makes sense as to why the scars were such a sensitive topic with the man.
A muttered apology almost spills from my lips before I remember that I’ve already apologized to this man today, and that too many words out of my mouth have been verging on pathetic. So, I keep quiet as I finish washing him, and it’s probably coming off as passive aggressive; but to be honest, I don’t trust myself to not utter those two words if I break the silence. Pulling back on my shirt and jacket, I reside to forget I even attempted to break further through Levi’s seemingly impenetrable barrier, telling myself that when he wants me to know the details of his past, he will let me know.

“So,” My name sounding in the air causes me to turn back towards the man in question, his body already clothed with his winter attire. “I don’t-” His statement is interrupted by something terrifying. Something I thought we had heard the last of miles ago. And, suddenly, the hospital doesn’t seem that scary. Because this noise is the founder of true fear, of the exertion of complete depravity.

A truck engine.

And it’s right next to us.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry I haven't updated in forever. I have been really busy with other things, and to be honest, I just didn’t want to write. But I got over it and somehow pushed this bastard out. This chapter is probably a load of shit, but I just really like angsty Levi, okay?

Thank you for the comments/kudos!
You guys are amazing!!

Tumblr:
fuzzyporcupine.tumblr.com

I am tracking the tag ‘fic: what's eating you’ as always. And if you have any questions, feel free to message me on there.

FANMIX
ALL FANART
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There are certain moments when I realize that I’ve obviously fucked up any chance I have of salvation with the man upstairs. This can definitely be classified as one of them as a limitless supply of wiry branches continuously smacks me across the face. I don’t know how they found us, but fuck if I am staying to find out. Obviously, Levi had the same idea as me, the man hurriedly rushing through the brush beside me as if he’d been born and raised in the growth. But with nothing but his thick winter jacket as protection, he is as exposed to the branches’ fury as I am.

I’m not sure where we are going, only certain that Levi has no earthly idea either. We are just running. Running from a danger that could possibly be right on our tails. I wouldn’t know considering I haven’t looked back once.

I don’t even know if we’ve passed any walkers. I’m sure we have— we are sprinting through a practical breeding ground for the bastards. But the only thing I have been focusing on is the sting of the limbs slashing my cheeks and the sound of the footsteps beside me. Given, I should probably be more attentive as to not become a walker’s next meal, but when the real monsters start to enter the equation, your priorities tend to shift.

Because it’s them who we are really afraid of.

Humans.

Because biters kill to feed, to satisfy some twisted desire that consumes their lack of a soul. But humans, they are different. We’re different. Killing for the pleasure, claiming some misplaced self-righteousness. When the truth is merely shrouded in the blood staining our hands. My hands.

Because I –

A strong grip is tugging on my shoulder, not only pulling me out of my thoughts but off the impromptu path we’ve created. His eyes don’t meet mine as we crouch in the wiry section of foliage, silvers trained on the trail we just exited. It doesn’t take me long to realize that Levi is scanning for the men, his hand still firm around my shoulder. And I hate to break it to him, but this dense shrubbery doesn’t seem like the best line of defense against his possibly scorned ex-group of friends. Well, probably scorned considering there’s no way these men would still be tracking Levi if they didn’t have some sort of beef with the asshole.

It is a cruel game, waiting for a potential death in these bushes. If anything, at least this demise will be poetic. Surrounded by a bunch of twigs that are currently trying to shove themselves halfway up my ass. It’s good to know that maybe my sanity has left, but the unrelenting sarcasm is still here.

Seconds turn into possible minutes, but I really would not know given I have been without a notion of time ever since Erwin’s watch was stolen from me. Nonetheless, it is long enough for Levi to throw a hypothetical ‘fuck you’ to this anxious waiting game.

He rustles in the bushes, gun pulled to his chin with a readiness should he have to fire. Something that I am praying he doesn’t have to do considering that we are practically as good as dead if we attempt a siege against the unknown amount of assailants. Hopefully, I am not the only one who realizes this. That two against an ambiguous number with guns is never a winning combination.

Maybe it has worked in those high dollar action films, but something tells me that it isn’t going to be
red dye and corn syrup painting the ground if one of us gets shot.

My fingers dig into his tense shoulder, causing the man to flick a pair of overcast eyes in my direction. There is a feral presence in those pools of silvers. Something that seems out of place and foreign in that usually impassive glare. Something that fits me, but is a couple of sizes too big for the man slightly twitching in my grasp.

I see his fingers tighten around the gun still floating below his chin, practically white knuckled by the way they are clenching the weapon. My mouth opens, nothing but silent pleads spewing out in an anxious intake of air. But he is already shaking out of my grasp, already maneuvering back onto the abandoned path.

Stumbling through the bush, I rush to grab him, ready to pull him back into our shitty excuse of a hideaway. But he is already out in the open, already revealing himself to any enemy who wants to take aim. So fucking stupid. I shouldn’t go down with his hypothetical ship. I should kick my ass into gear and either dive back into the now crushed bunch of limbs or get the fuck out of here. There are two options. Two possibilities. But somehow I find myself unearthing a hidden choice. An ignorant choice. One that I should definitely toss out. Should mark off this map of ensured insanity, because I would have to be crazy to choose it. Or maybe I just have nothing left to lose. My heart clenches. Nothing but Levi.

And it’s almost like I wasn’t just questioning leaving this man to his own devices.

My body pushes forward, feet slightly slipping on the thick blanket of dead leaves layering the forest floor. I see him standing in the middle of whatever path we had created, arms gently resting at his side and finger steadily twitching against a trigger that is practically begging to be pulled. He hears me approach, but it’s not like I am necessarily trying to be quiet about my arrival. For a split second, something akin to fear passes across his face, but the blankness easily swallows up the emotion before I can be any the wiser.

“What are you doing?”

But that quiver in his voice paints a different picture.

What did he expect? For me to simply stand by while he is possibly murdered by a bunch of vengeful assholes? Well, possibly vengeful assholes. I scoff, because it seems like the only correct answer to his question, my arms rising in confusion at his inquiry.

“I can handle this, Bright Eyes.” And I want to doubt him, to tell his dumb ass to either get back in the fucking bush or start our inaugural Walker Run. Wait; scratch that, Unconfirmed Angry Assholes Run. But the look in his eyes is making me swallow every quip, making me bite my tongue even though I want nothing more than to tell him that I can’t lose him. Not after Armin. Not Levi. “They won’t kill me.” I’m reminded that I’ve always worn my heart on my sleeve and that Levi can read me like a damn book. “But you… just trust me.” He says it like it’s easy for me to just walk away. Like it’s easy for me to possibly lose the one positive I have in my life. Because what will I do if I lose him? Try to find Erwin, Hanji? Mikasa? Hope that they aren’t as batshit insane as Armin was? Hope that I don’t get them killed as well?

“You can’t just expect me to walk away.” The words break in my throat, sounding much more like a goodbye than an ultimatum. Levi’s features soften as a pair of silver eyes rove over my pleading expression. But soon that expression is replaced by something else entirely. Something that is fueled by the fact that I am still standing beside him on this path. Those eyes darken, a clouded light filling the silver pools. That once forgotten white knuckled grip returns, forcing Levi’s fists to steadily shake in midair. His jaw tightens, I can practically hear the grind of his teeth. It’s almost terrifying,
but as I focus on the hints of grey located beneath that furrowed brow I notice the distinct terror. The fear that he is going to lose me, too.

“Tch.” Levi’s gaze disconnects from me, head snapping down as a series of muttered expletives blow against his lips. He starts to pace back and forth, like an animal cornered in its cage. Hand worming its way into a mess of dark hair, he tangles his fingers so deep into the strands that it looks physically painful. The words are whispered, almost as if I am not meant to hear them. “Why can’t you just fucking trust me?” The question causes my breath to hitch, the air almost freezing in my lungs. Because I do. I trust him so much more than he knows, more than I trust myself. He turns to me, face filled with a torment that has my stomach dropping as soon as the stare reaches my visage.

“I… I do… but I just…” The words don’t come out right at all, jumbled and unsure. What was meant to be a reassurance turns into the exact opposite, the quick inhale of breath coming from the man speaking volumes. I’m expecting anger when I glance into those eyes, but what I receive is something worse. Hurt. Like I have kicked his hypothetical puppy. And my mind doesn’t know how to fix this. It’s running a hundred miles an hour, part of it wondering when the assholes are going to show, because they have to be close. Shit, they have to be close. Opening my mouth, I guess that an apology is probably the only thing I can offer Levi, as out of place as it feels. “I can’t lose you, too.” And you would think my brain could comprehend the wording of an apology considering how many I have made to this man.

The pain previously mixing with silver disappears as his eyes widen. It was a low thing to say, something that I know deep down he won’t be able to argue with. But I suppose that I am willing to subconsciously play dirty if it means he will step off that path. And even though it is said under such unsavory conditions, I mean it. God, I fucking mean it. That sympathy now swirling around inside those eyes tells me he realizes it, too. That he knows I can’t lose him. That he is going to stop being —

“Trust me.”

My feet move on their own volition, slowly backpedaling until the wiry branches are brushing at my ankles. He’s no longer glancing at me, eyes focused on the swaying of the trees. A predator that could soon turn prey. I want to fight, want to pull him back. But, instead, I nestle back inside the weak protection of a dozen feeble limbs. It’s because I trust him, right? The reason that I am allowing myself to anxiously watch him stand in the middle of an unmarked path. Maybe this is stupid. Shit, this is stupid. But… trust. It’s a weird thing, isn’t it? Makes me want to ask myself whatever happened to reason. To logic? Because a logical person wouldn’t let someone they cared about do this. But trust. It’s just some massive trump card, shitting on everything we have ever been taught. Changing the rules as the game progresses.

What an asshole.

But trust.

Yeah, Levi has mine. Had it when I told him my last name back in that hellhole of a hospital. And he still has it. I take a deep breath as I try to picture all the ways this could go right. Nothing is coming to mind, but I trust him. But there are so many ways this could go wrong. But I trust him.

My eyes clench shut, because if it should happen, I don’t want to witness it. I don’t want to see him fall to the hands of some assholes who really shouldn’t have his gut’s guarantee. Just because I trust Levi, doesn’t mean I trust his friends. And, to be honest, after witnessing all the instances of lost morality these pricks have shown, I doubt I will ever trust them. So, it really shouldn’t surprise me that I am silently waiting for the sound of a bullet being unleashed. To hear Levi crumple to the ground, dead or dying.
But it never comes.

Nothing comes.

I spend an undetermined amount of time surrounded in the darkness of my lids and the prickle of the
bushes. Long enough, though, that if they were coming after us they would have already made it
here.

“They didn’t see us.” Levi’s voice causes me to shift my eyes open, grants me the image of the man
giving me a slight once over. He looks relaxed standing in the middle of the forged trail, well, as
relaxed as someone could possibly look after facing an almost possible death. It’s like a weight has
been lifted off his shoulders, the way his frame gradually casts away the stress of being chased by a
bunch of crazies.

“But the truck—”

“Obviously didn’t stop.” He finishes my sentence, taking a couple of steps towards me as he speaks.
A hand is extended, the pale skin contrasting harshly against the dark colors winter has wrought
down upon the forest. “C’mon, we need to leave before they change their minds.” He tangles bony
fingers into the rough fabric of my jacket before I can offer any argument, although I have been
ready to leave this unsafe haven for what seems like an eternity.

Yanking me up, he pulls me to my feet until I am slightly looking down upon him, our small height
difference allowing me that much. “They shouldn’t even be here.” I’m not sure if he is talking to me
or if the statement is meant to be answered by some angry voice in his head. Probably the latter if the
vacant look in his eye is any indication. “This isn’t right. They shouldn’t fucking be here.” The grip
Levi’s taken on my jacket tightens as he pulls me forward. Where we are going is anyone’s guess,
but the highway is obviously not safe with the chance of running into Levi’s Merry Band of Misfits.

“They’re probably coming after you.” It’s like time has stopped with my words, Levi’s hold
immediately going slack around my jacket. Brows furrowed and lips slightly parted, he is giving me
a look that seems like it doesn’t want to understand the meaning behind my statement. “They saw us
— they saw you. Back at my house.” It’s like I am trying to explain why I snuck a cookie in before
dinner with the way the words are rapidly firing off my lips. Like this was some secret I didn’t even
know I had been keeping. My stomach knots as Levi begins to pace away from me, fingers lacing
behind his neck in obvious anxiety.

“When we were leaving… this guy… he was going to shoot me.” I should probably just stop talking
considering I can practically see the hairs standing on the back of Levi’s nape. “But he saw you
and… and he dropped it… he dropped his gun.” Suddenly, the man pauses and I am given some
semblance of hope that my explanation has settled whatever is brewing in his gut. As he turns to face
me, I realize that I have done anything but. “I… I didn’t think it was important. I—”

“You didn’t think that I should know that someone almost shot you? Almost killed you? Is there
something I’m not getting here or do you agree that is legitimately one of the stupidest things you
could have possibly done?” His eyes are narrowed now, the sharp quips granting him the anger that
he has probably been wanting to unleash ever since he was scarred with the faces of undead
children.

“I didn’t think it was important.” The prior tentativeness of my voice has been replaced with
something that is no doubt a product of Levi’s irritation. “What did you want me to do? Tell you
before or after we stopped running for our lives? Oh wait, we are still fucking running. I’m sorry that
I thought survival was more important than reminding you of your fucked up friends.” I feel the heat
emitting off my cheeks, and if I looked in a mirror I’d probably find a clenched jaw as well. Anger
doesn’t help anything, but I’ve never been a doormat and the apocalypse doesn’t necessarily seem like a great place to start.

Levi still hasn’t released me from that unyielding glare, a scoff playing on his lips, “I forgot you were a fucking child.” My hands curl into fists, politely reminding me that one of my palms was recently impaled. “You don’t want to tell me about the next time someone puts a gun to your head? Fine—”

“Don’t.” Maybe it’s the word. Maybe it’s the fact that Levi is being an asshole. It’s more than likely a bizarre mix of the two. Either way, I refuse to stand in the middle of Bum Fuck Egypt arguing with the man when we could be finding Erwin and Hanji. “Just…” I take a deep breath, relinquishing my fists with the exhale. “Just drop it.” He looks like he wants to do anything but drop it, silvers still tapered in my immediate direction. Unfortunately for Levi, finding Erwin and Hanji seems a lot more enjoyable than continuing with this confrontation.

I hear him sigh as I brush past him, can practically feel the burn his stare is pushing against the back of my neck. “I can’t lose you, either.” There is a sinking feeling that washes over me as my body freezes in its place. Something that graciously reminds me of how Levi’s face twisted the last time he spoke those words. How it will probably look just as wretched if I could conjure the courage to turn around and face him. But, obviously, the man isn’t going to give me the time to find my nerve, the telltale sound of golden leaves crunching under his boots as he approaches.

There is an awkward silence that falls down on us as his footsteps come to a stop behind me. I am not sure which one of us is planning to break it considering I still haven’t turned around to judge his expression, even though it is not like I would be able to read the no doubt blank stare he is probably directing at me. Suddenly, I feel a warmth bind me, strong but tender. It pulls me out of my thoughts, out of this awkward silence. I tense up, expecting several things, but not this. Not his arms wrapping tightly around my waist as he presses his forehead in between my shoulder blades. Not the slight quiver that is shooting through his body as he attempts to pull me closer. “I can’t.” But those words, whispered into the thick, russet jacket protecting me from the pre-winter chill.

I expect that.

It’s almost as if his touch has prompted my body’s restored movement, trembling hands slowly drifting on top of the ones clenching fiercely at my front. He relaxes with my touch, the previous death grip loosening into something soft and carefree. “Promise me.” His frame might have eased, but Levi’s voice is still carrying a chipped undertone of anxiety. Like he is too unsure to let it go. And I don’t blame him. Because as I find myself leaning back into his hold, I understand his anger. That inexplicable need to just keep hold on one thing. To keep hold on your kryptonite. To keep hold on me. On each other. “Promise me I won’t lose you.”

He is asking so much from me. Asking me something so impossible. But I think he realizes this. The way his fingers begin to twist back into the fabric of my jacket. I think he knows that I have no say over Mr. Higher Power. The way I feel his face press deeper into my back. Knows that any moment could be our last, my last. But it’s not the divine security he is looking for, is it? It’s my word. My assurance that I won’t do anything stupid. And I think that I can give him that.

“I promise.”

As a man, hearing a story about the guy who got his dick bitten off is not something I take lightly. That is why when Levi so eloquently announced that he needed to piss, I followed quickly behind. He allows for the companion act until it becomes apparent that I am not leaving, still right on his heels as he meanders further into the brush. Levi clears his throat as if I don’t already know how
awkward this is.

“What are you doing?” I’m guessing he thinks I didn’t catch the uncomfortable feelings consuming that weird noise that came out of his throat.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” His eyes leave the confused look plastered on my face only to drift down—Okay, wait. Does he seriously think that I followed him out here to… to get him off? If that cocked eyebrow is any indication then, yes, that is exactly what he is thinking. I scoff, close enough that I can punch him playfully in the shoulder but decide against it. “Stop being a fucking pervert.” Levi lets out one of those chuckles that sounds about as condescending as my second grade teacher. It makes me want to explain myself, because I have always been the one who insists on digging their hole deeper. “I’m serious. This is a just a precaution.”

“A precaution that lets you stare at my dick?” I feel the heat filtering into my cheeks, silently willing my eyes to keep in contact with that impassive stare. A smirk appears at the corner of Levi’s mouth as he turns away from me. Asshole. I hear the sound of his zipper being dragged down the teeth of his pants as I turn my focus towards the sky. It reminds me of when I first met him, of when he threw me into the ground after I landed that elbow to his skull. When we hated each other… well, tolerated each other. Because I don’t think I have ever truly hated the man. Wanted to smash my fist into his face? Probably half a dozen times. Wanted him dead? Not once. “You act like you haven’t seen it before.”

His allegation causes me to drop my gaze from the branch littered sky to a familiar undercut. “I…” There is no doubt in my mind that the smirk is probably still pulling at the asshole’s lips, my ineptness enough to answer his unspoken question. “I just don’t want you to lose it.”

Levi scoffs as if what I’ve said couldn’t happen. Well, I would like for him to tell that to the guy who is now dickless and craving guts. “I’ve got a hand on things, Bright Eyes.” I’m really hoping that was not his attempt at humor, even though I know the tone of his voice is telling me it was just that.

“Did you just—”

“Maybe.” His head is turned sideways, allowing me to reach his half-turned gaze. I see a glint of teeth that is obviously a product of his standup comedy, and I’m almost tempted to smile myself; but the man really doesn’t need any more goading into telling the terrible jokes. Although this does suit him. Which sounds like crazy talk when I know who I am referring to. But it does. That slight smile showing off a set of teeth that should really be put on display more often. The crinkle that appears in the corners of eyes that could light up the sky. “You look like someone took a shit in your Cheerios.” I would argue with the man that he has the saying all wrong, but the quip has no doubt just been seasoned with a little spice of Levi. “Christ, I’m glad you are concerned about my dick.” And if the phrase in itself isn’t enough to confirm the innuendo, the wink that follows certainly is.

I offer him an eye roll and a shake of the head, because obviously my constant accusations of him being Shiganshina’s number one pervert are in one ear and out the other. Clutching at my backpack straps, I turn to head back out onto our path-not-really-a-path. Dick be damned, let Levi see how well he functions without his favorite appendage.

Obviously, Levi’s mind is on the same track as mine, because, soon, I hear his zipper being yanked up and boots pulverizing the leaves below.

“I’m being—” A distinctive moan cuts Levi off short, causing him to whip out his gun in anticipation. Everything seems to slow as I watch the walker push its way towards us, eyes wide and yellowed from hunger. I turn to Levi, the man who I am supposed to protect. The man who tries so hard to protect me. In this world where survival is practically meaningless, he still fights for me.
From Stohess, from the walkers… from myself. He keeps me alive. And as I watch him lower his gun, I know it’s the right decision.

But as three more lurkers appear out of thin air, I think that maybe I was wrong.

He unleashes on the ones nearest to us, his aim true as the walkers fall to the ground. Suddenly, he is grabbing my arm, pulling me back towards our trail. And that’s when I hear them. A hoard. I don’t know how they snuck up on us, well actually, no, I do. Because this has happened so many times before. Because you don’t realize that you’re fucked until it’s too late. Until you are surrounded by walkers at every angle. I’m sure Mike would happily attest to that if he was still alive.

I should probably be going for my gun. Should probably be assisting Levi in eliminating the biters quickly approaching us. But it’s like my mind already knows that our guns are useless. That the walkers outnumber our bullets ten to one. I hear Levi cursing, every other word out of his mouth being ‘no’. No, shit. Fuck. No, no. Fuck, fuck, shit. He is not even trying to hide the terror lacing the edge of his voice. Not even trying to convince me that we aren’t standing in our graves.

But I still have to protect him, right?

He meets my gaze as I turn towards him, completely ignoring the walker symphony quickly approaching from my side. I’m almost scared that he has given up. That he has accepted this is where we die. But as I gaze into though silver pools I see something that destroys every one of my assumptions. He wants me to fight. He wants me to save us.

And I will.

I tug on his arm, guiding him in the direction that looks the least populated with biters. Which is a sort of difficult choice considering they seem to be spawning everywhere, but North has always seemed like a good direction. Gun in one hand, Levi’s arm in other, I pull us through the walker-infested forest; dodging the grabbing limbs, assassinating the potential threats. It’s almost like I know what I am doing. And, obviously, Levi believes it, too, staying silent as he allows himself to be dragged behind me. For a moment, I actually think that we are going to make it out of this unscathed. But thoughts are a funny place. Well, actually, to be quite honest, they are just assholes. But that is merely a personal opinion.

But I am not unfounded in my vengeance against the inner workings of the mind. I mean, they fill your head with such false hope. With such ideals that you convince yourself that you are immortal. Unbreakable. That not even god could crush you. And then the harsh reality stomps down upon you, crushing you with its heavy boot. And where are your thoughts then, huh? Scampering away like some false friends who don’t want to be your shoulder to lean on. Allowing you to submerge yourself in the overwhelming truth that this world is cruel. That no man is above it. No man will escape it. And as Levi falls I realize this.

“Fuck!” I can’t even catch him as he tumbles to the ground, face first into a blanket of leaves that are finally getting their revenge for all their crushed brothers and sisters. He immediately tries to force himself up, only to fall back onto the traitorous foliage.

“Levi!” My mind finally recognizes that the man trying to stand might need some help. I wrap my arms around him, my grip nearly Herculean with the way my fingers are digging into his coat. “C’mon, we have to go!” I hear the biters approaching, can practically smell the rotting decay of their flesh. He hisses as I pull him upright, visibly leaning as he tries to stand. It’s almost like watching a nightmare reenacting itself as his ankle gives out. Like watching the tragic hero meet his gruesome end. But this isn’t our finale. This isn’t our ending. Not in some godforsaken forest surrounded by cannibalistic monsters.
“I’m not going to make it.” Those words cause my blood to freeze, making all the fears running through my brain audible. “You… fuck.” His ankle gives out a second time as I prompt him to move forward. “You have—”

“No.” I hear the way the words shake in the air, the way my eyes are starting to blur. “Not without you.” My arms pull him forward once more, the same pained hiss leaving his lips.

“It’s okay, Bright Eyes.” He sounds so defeated, like he knows that this struggle is useless. But it’s not. It’s not. It’s not. “Don’t get yourself killed because of me.” The groans have gotten louder, more desperate. I don’t know how long we have until they reach us, but I’ll be damned if I leave him here to die.

“We can make it, Levi.” The tears have made themselves visible, stinging the corners of my eyes and dragging down my cheeks. “We can m-make it.” I see a few of them emerging from the woodwork out of the corner of my eye. “Not without you.” They are downed quickly by my gun, my aim slightly off by the weight currently wrapped around my shoulders. But I know there is more. Know that the sound of gunfire is a guaranteed way to lure the bastards.

“Eren,” I don’t stop as he speaks my name, don’t even look at him for fear of the pain that is no doubt etched into his face, “let me go.” My breath evaporates from my lungs. My heart ceases in my chest. The world stops. And I know I have one decision. One choice to make. But I’ve had my pick chosen ever since I first heard that laugh. Ever since I first felt the way his hand felt in mine. The way his lips pressed against me. The way he made me feel alive.

“No.” Slinging my backpack to my chest, I crouch down, hoping he will understand what I am getting at. And he does, the scoff practically writing me a novel over how he feels about this. “Wrap your legs around me.” He does as he’s told, arms also encircling my neck as I carry him.

He’s not light, and I can only believe that pure adrenaline is allowing me to lug him through the woods. But, honestly, I couldn’t give two shits about what is granting me this strength. Hell, let it be a gift from Mr. Higher Power, just as long as it lets me save us, I don’t care.

They are still close, but not anything like before, my pace slowly furthering the distance between us and certain death. And, for not the first time, I am counting my lucky stars that the walkers are slow as shit. Levi is breathing steadily against my nape, arms still wrapped tight around my neck. The hold isn’t suffocating, but comforting. A reminder that he is still here. That he’s alive. That we’re alive.

My body is willing me to cease, but it’s that breathing that is keeping me going. That’s reminding me of what I’m fighting for.

“That wasn’t the same hoard,” Levi sounds raspy as tries to speak, like he could use a good twenty-four hour nap. Shit, I know I could. “It was too small.” To be honest, I wasn’t really concerned if it was the same hoard as before. The only thing I was worried about is the fact that there were walkers surrounding us. Not if we had been introduced before. And I think Levi knows this. Realizes that I don’t have a care which hoard tries to make us lunch. That as long as we pull through I’m content. But he needs this. Whatever this is. He needs it.

“Thank you.” It’s whispered into my neck, and I immediately know that it’s something that doesn’t need a verbal reply. So, I simply squeeze his good ankle that is still wrapped around my waist, give him a silent reassurance that I’m thankful, as well. Because I couldn’t lose him. I can’t lose him.

Not Levi, too.
Wow, it has been like a month since I updated. Bless, I am sorry, but I've been really preoccupied with family/friends/school. I haven't really been inspired to write, either. And I didn't want to publish a shitty chapter... which I probably did regardless but alas. Well, I am not guaranteeing a quick update considering I started college back. But, anyway, I hope you all enjoyed this chapter even if it is a little lackluster.

Thanks to Stephanie (shukiai) for beta reading this!

Thanks for all the kudos/comments, they really make my day (: 

Tumblr: 
fuzzyporcupine.tumblr.com 

If you have any questions, feel free to message me on there. And I am tracking the tag, 'fic: what's eating you' as always.

FANMIX
ALL FANART
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The fire feels nice against my skin, palms opened up trying to beckon in the orange warmth. It’s freezing... and that is definitely an understatement, the winter barreling into the remnants of fall with a fucking vengeance. We should have probably tried to find shelter that had four walls, the harsh winds constantly reminding me of this misstep. But, to be honest, I don’t think my back could have really endured Levi’s weight much longer, the man is a lot heavier than his short stature gives him credit for. A lump begins to form in my throat as I think of him clinging onto me for dear life as we tried to evade the hoard behind us. Of him asking me to leave him behind.

I pick up a twig and toss it into the fire, the flames greedily lapping up the tiny branch. It’s the most I can do to vent my frustrations right now, my mind finally getting a chance to slow down and take everything in. I’m really not sure if his attempted sacrifice makes me more angry or sad, the tumultuous feeling drifting in my gut not really giving a good starting point. Anger would be the easiest choice. It’s something I’ve always been able to identify with. Something that has never seemed out of place on my expression. Something that felt right. Not this wishy-washy uncertainty currently storming inside of me.

But it’s not like anger would do me any good right now— well, it’s not like it’s ever done me any good. However, it’s always been constant, reliable. Always ready to be unleashed. And maybe I should be proud of myself that I’ve kept docile for so long. Even though ‘so long’ only roughly translates into the few minutes it took me to set up this rickety camp. So, I guess I shouldn’t be giving myself any gold stars yet.

A breathy sigh falls from my lips as I watch the fire crackle in the moonlight, the embers briefly illuminating the darkness around me before they fizzle out into the shadows. If it wasn’t for the looming threat of danger, then this would almost be nice. Well, add a tent and maybe remove the arctic chill. Actually, no fuck the outdoors. I swear to god, when all this is over, that I am going to spend a good year doing nothing but watching cheesy movies and reality TV. Yeah, doing nothing but laying back with my hand in a bag of cheese puffs. That sounds nice. The man stirring below me takes me out of my junk food infested daydream, his head nuzzling deeper into my thigh.

He lets out a shaky breath, the air around his mouth frosting over in the cold. And I would offer him my jacket like before if I didn’t think that I would legitimately get frostbite this time around. Pulling closer into himself, Levi looks like his body heat is running off fumes. Brushing the dark fringe off his forehead, I run the pad of my thumb across his furrowed brow, smoothing out the irritation. Because lord knows the man deserves at least a few minutes away from his troubles. And it absolutely kills me that I can’t take away some of them. That, more often than not, I add to his burdens.

Levi begins to relax as I allow my fingers to tangle in his hair, still so soft and silky even after all the shit we’ve been through. It’s magic, and I refuse to believe otherwise. The man hums in appeasement as I begin to massage the base of his skull, fingers occasionally dropping lower to graze the fine hairs of his undercut. And he’s so goddamn beautiful. The fire glow highlighting the sharpness of his jaw, the thin lips slightly quivering in the cold. My chest tightens as he brings a hand to clench at the fabric of my jeans.

And I wish... I wish so badly that I could let myself feel it. I wish that I wasn’t scared of letting everything go. But I am. I’m so fucking scared. Because I almost lost him. And not even just once.
Shit, the events hours prior were child’s play compared to what I witnessed almost become of Levi at the hands of Zackly. But maybe when this is all over I will be able to finally admit it. Maybe he will, too. Because as egotistical as it sounds, I can’t help but sense that he feels it as well.

But would he even want to be around me when this is over? A sense of doubt washes over me, replacing that feeling in my gut with a nervousness I am already wanting to be rid of. I’ve never asked him, never thought it seemed necessarily important. But, then again, Levi seems to have a different definition of the word if I remember correctly. Shit, will I even want to be around him? I mean, sure, he means something to me. Something that if I had to put into words I would fail every single time, because he’s just so… Levi. So blunt and honest. And caring. And… My fingers tighten their grip in his hair as I think of a life without him. A life after him. Because what will we see when we look at each other after this? Will we just forget all of the atrocities that we’ve witnessed together? Will we be able to glance into each other’s eyes and not see the irrevocable desire to just forget all of this destruction happened? Or will we be constant reminders to each other of the dead? Of our friends who we couldn’t save, of the promises we’ve broken, of the lives we’ve taken?

“First watch usually means you actually do that weird thing called watching.” I’ve failed to notice Levi’s nap has ended, too lost in my own thoughts. When I don’t reply, he turns onto his back, staring directly up at me. ”You look like shit.” This causes me to quirk a brow at the man who still appears to be half asleep, stretching his arms above his head as he continues. “Or need to shit.” I’m almost tempted to push him off my thigh as he yawns. Almost.

“Classy.” He lazily shrugs at my comment, obviously either still too tired to reply or just not giving a shit. Probably the latter. “What are you doing after this?” But that does grant him pause, brows furrowing as he looks up at me with confusion.

“I’d think it’d be pretty obvious.” Another yawn stretches across his face. I would argue that the man should try to get some more rest, but I figure Levi to be the type that refuses to go back to sleep once he’s up. “Find the assholes we, for some ungodly reason, put up with.” Any confidence I had in obtaining an answer flies out the window with his reply. Of course he is thinking of finding Erwin and Hanji. Of his next move. Because why plan ahead for a future that might never come? I can tell by the way Levi’s staring at me that my demeanor has obviously shifted. And it won’t be long now before— “What’s wrong?” Fucking clockwork.

I avoid his gaze, which is always a great sign to show that I am not upset. Really, ten out of ten, Jaeger. “It doesn’t matter.” His eyes narrow at that, probably still a little scorned from our previous fight. Sighing, I admit defeat in the form of silver eyes. “You’ll probably just laugh.”

He snorts as he brings his fingers to his temples, trying to seemingly force the weariness away. “Try me.”

Taking a deep breath, I will my body to adapt Levi’s current calmness. I can tell it doesn’t work by the crack in my voice as I try to start, “What are you doing after this? After the world… I don’t know, puts itself back together?” Levi doesn’t seem surprised by my question, and if he is then he’s doing a great job of hiding it. I’m almost expecting a quick answer, something that will leave no room for prying words like mine. Instead, he turns his head, cheek pressing into my denim jeans. What seems like an eternity passes before I decide he isn’t going to answer. Which doesn’t necessarily calm the storm brewing inside my chest. My eyes clench shut as I prepare to just tell him to forget it. That it doesn’t matter to me. That I was just curious. Even though none of those things are true.

“That’s still pretty fucking obvious, Bright Eyes.” And all my self-doubt, all my insecurities vanish with his words. I almost want him to repeat them, just so I can have some small confirmation. But as
I open my eyes and look down at him, I realize that I have all the confirmation I will ever need. I have him. And if that smirk on his face is any indication, I think I will get to keep him. Hell, now I’m making Levi sound like some bonafide lap dog… which I guess isn’t that far off base considering he is still laying across my thigh. “You think I’d ditch you just because we couldn’t smash some walker skulls together?” He reaches up to cup my chin in between his thumb and pointer finger. “Contrary to popular belief, I like you a little more than that.” I smile as he casually strokes my skin, relaxing into his touch as if it’s the only thing I need in this world.

“Can we get a dog?” My question causes Levi’s touch to stutter on my chin. Makes him drop his hand back to lie atop his chest as he gives me a look of bewilderment. “I mean after this is over. Mom never—” I stop myself; the wound may be closed, but it is still tender. Levi notices my pause, and he brings his fingers to fiddle with the bottom hem of my shirt. I can’t exactly make out the face he’s giving me, but I am almost certain it is one that is prompting me to continue. With a deep breath, I start again, “I never had a dog, and I’ve always wanted one.” It’s short and to the point; maybe a little rushed, but I praise myself for being able to push through regardless.

“I guess. Just nothing bigger than me.” I grin at that, the image of Levi trying to wrestle with a Saint Bernard as the dog brings a slobbery tongue across his cheek. And he would be calling for my help, but who else would be able to capture the scene on video? Something blossoms in my chest at the thought. At the domesticity. Because that’s what I want. And I want it to be with Levi. “And nothing that sheds. That shit will be impossible to clean up.” He stops twiddling with my hem in order to gauge my reaction. Probably looking for some argument in my eyes that he is being way too picky. But, shit, I’m just glad he’s considering the offer.

“We can name it Bingo.” I can practically hear the eye roll as he scoffs, bringing his fingers up to flick me in the nose. And call it whatever you want, but I can’t help but find the little slice of normality comforting. Maybe something like hope. And, god, Erwin really would be proud, wouldn’t he?

“You’re a fucking dork.” A smile pulls at my lips once again, basking in the way those eyes shine as he meets my gaze. And I’m probably being way too sentimental. Probably thinking way too much into this as we huddle together under the moonlight. But, regardless, it doesn’t stop that fluttering in my chest. If anything, it increases it.

“You’re stuck with this fucking dork, asshole.” I bring my digits back into the strands of black hair, still leaning toward witchcraft as the silky threads glide against my fingertips. Levi gives me a contented sigh as a smirk starts to edge onto his face.

“Unfortunately.”

I snort, not really thinking when I open my mouth next. “I think I like you, Levi.” It was supposed to be some poorly worded retort, maybe even a little bit of an insult just to add some flavor. But, instead, I offer him some ambiguous confession. And it’s not like I said the actual words that are just fucking pounding against my chest with every beat of my heart, but he knows, nonetheless. That look in his eyes singing me symphonies of my slip up. I’m just waiting for the confusion to spread across his face, for the furrow to catch in his brow. Waiting to be told what I already know. What I already feel.

But I’m wrong.

A pale hand has reached up to cup my cheek, the angle awkward due to the fact that Levi is still lying horizontally across my lap. That smirk hasn’t faded, but it’s different all the same. Looks unused on that face. Like it’s just recently been brought out of retirement. And I’m really not sure what I’m expecting him to say, to do. His actions in themselves already enough to make my palms
start to sweat, my heart start to hammer. And someone once said that actions speak louder than words, but I don’t think that person ever met Levi.

“I think I like you, too.”

Because that was practically deafening.

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“Fucking hell, for the last time, I am alright.” Levi rolls his eyes as he pushes my hand off his shoulder, attempting to trudge ahead of me with his gimpy ankle. I sigh as I easily catch up to him, careful not to offer my assistance again. He is acting like a child, huffing over his handicap like the aggravation will magically heal the wound. It’s probably his pride… well, no it’s definitely his pride. Because Levi was perfectly okay when we headed out this morning. Well, as ‘perfectly okay’ as someone can look with a purpled, swollen ankle. He didn’t start this melodrama until I asked if he needed my help, and god forbid someone ask Levi fucking Ackerman if he needs help. He was a lot snippier about his denial the first time I asked, and I can only assume that somewhere in that dark soul is a heart that is feeling a little guilty for snapping at me.

Now, I’m being melodramatic.

Great.

“Well, we can take a break whenever you want, Rocky.” I don’t have to be looking at him to feel the narrowed glare being shot in my direction, my quip coming off just as antagonizing as I had planned. But regardless if his pride refuses to let him ask for assistance, his body knows it needs help. He leans into my touch as I try to slide underneath his arm once more. “Finally.”

“Fuck off,” he mumbles underneath his breath as he grips onto me tighter. Sometimes I have to wonder which of us is really the older one here.

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell Hanji.” Levi doesn’t even put up an argument, probably knowing that there is a lot that I am not going to tell Hanji. Or Erwin for that matter, but the man is so attentive that he will probably figure it out without my confirmation. And, fuck, I miss them. Hanji’s loud laughter. Erwin’s knowing glances. I miss it all. So fucking much. Because I never knew that I could get reattached to anyone else. And then they just show up on practical white steeds, ready to pull me out of that shithole of a setup. They saved me. And, god, I need them just as much as I need Levi. Sure, the feelings I share with him are different, intimate. But I still need them. I still want them back.

“You want to know a secret?” I look down at Levi, who is slightly grimacing with each step. When I don’t immediately answer, he takes it upon himself to continue. “I can always tell when something is bothering you.” My jaw tightens as I direct my gaze back to the dead leaves in front of us, not really looking forward to hearing about how much I wear my heart on my sleeve. But if Levi notices my discomfort, it doesn’t stall him, “You get this look on your face. Like… like you’re not here.” And I can’t help the way my head instinctively turns to meet his stare… except he isn’t looking at me anymore, grey eyes trained on something off in the distance. “Like you hate yourself.” He whispers the last line, the words getting lost to a cool breeze that musses Levi’s hair across his face.

I probably wasn’t supposed to hear it, just like so many other things said between us. But I did. And I don’t know how to respond. The truth seems like the best option considering that lies do nothing but create walls of deception. Walls that, once discovered, can almost never be brought down.

“I don’t hate myself.” The way Levi stops on a dime tells me that I’ve already started laying the bricks. And I feel my anger lurching to the surface, my defense mechanism ready to be unleashed.
But all it takes is those eyes. *Those goddamn eyes.* And it’s gone, sunk back into the deep recesses of my gut. “I don’t… I… I just…” There is no accusation coming from his gaze, no judgment. Like he just wants me to tell him the truth, no matter how disgusting that truth is. “I just want them back.”

And I don’t think I could be more honest if I tried.

Levi doesn’t say anything, merely uses his grip on my shoulder to pull me into one of the tightest hugs I have ever received from the man. It reminds me of the time I ran to his room after that woman was executed in Stohess. When I thought everything was lost. When I thought I was broken. But he showed me that I wasn’t broken, but simply missing a piece. That I was missing him. That maybe he was missing me, too.

And I guess that is where I went wrong about this whole apocalypse bullshit. Because I always said that attachments were deadly. That growing close to someone else is the equivalent to suicide. And I believed myself. I thought that mediocre excuse for solitude was a valid reason to stay away from the intelligent side of humanity. That you had family and no one else. No exceptions. But I was so wrong. Because I’m holding onto mine.

“We’ll find them, Bright Eyes. We’ll—” My heart drops with his halted speech, thinking the worst. Thinking of the herd. “Holy shit.” *Okay, not the herd.* With that, he drops his grip around me and starts to hobble in the direction of—* holy shit.* A cabin. A fucking cabin. A smile pulls at my face, thinking that this is probably our best bet of finding Erwin and Hanji. That if they came in this direction, they would stay here until we caught up with them. Hell, I don’t have half the brain Erwin does, and I know that is a smart plan.

It doesn’t take me long to reach Levi, the man barely a few steps ahead of me. I would ask if he needs help, but I doubt he would even hear my question, his vision locked on the fast approaching cabin. The trees have blocked most of the view, only slits of wooden siding being able to peek through the foliage. I don’t remember the last time I felt so sure about something. Felt like I was right, no questions asked. Because Erwin and Hanji have to be here. They have to be.

*Please, let them be here.*

We push through the bushes, ignoring the sting of the branches that still seem insistent on riddling our faces in scratches. But I don’t think either of us really care, both too honed in on a possible reunion with Erwin and Hanji. God, just thinking about it causes me to jump onto Cloud Nine. Makes me feel like maybe this apocalypse isn’t that bad. That maybe—

And, suddenly, my heart is stopping, my breath quickening. Because as the building begins to reveal itself, I realize exactly whose cabin this is.

“Levi, no.” He either doesn’t hear me, or is blatantly ignoring my command. It’s not hard to grab ahold of his upper arm, but it does prove to be difficult when he rips himself out of my grasp, giving me a look of pure exasperation. And I know that my explanation better be good if I plan on preventing the man from entering that cabin. “Stop, we have to go back. This isn’t safe.” That gaze tapers and I know I’ve failed.

“They could be in there, and you want to go back?” I can tell he’s trying not to be angry with me, trying to hold off on broad allegations before I give him a reason to leave me here. “What am I not getting?”

“You don’t understand. I know what’s in there.” I reach outwards to grasp him, but he takes a step backwards to avoid my hold. I just need him to listen to me, to trust me. “Please.” I’m begging, praying that he will see reason. See how irrevocably stupid this is. But if I was in his position, if I
thought Mikasa was locked in that cabin… would I simply walk away on the gut feeling of someone else?

No.

No, I would fight my way in there tooth and nail if need be. I would make sure that I checked every inch of that place before I left without her. And that’s what Levi’s going to do for Erwin, for Hanji.

And there is nothing I can do to stop him.

“What’s in there, Eren?” I shake my head, not wanting to think about it, not wanting to remember. The smells, the tastes, the sounds. Everything. It’s like some fucked up horror movie that you joke about with your friends, because you know that could never happen. You know people aren’t that sick, that twisted. But they are. And I know. I’ve lived it. And fuck if he’s going to witness it, too. “Tell me.” He grabs me by the shoulders, a manic look in his eye that knows whatever I say isn’t going to be good. “Tell me what’s in there.”

“People.” For a moment he looks confused, not quite comprehending what my vague hint is supposed to mean. I don’t want to tell him, don’t want to let him know. To see those beautiful eyes widen with fear. But what choice do I have? He’s going to enter the god forsaken place whether I want him to or not, so I might as well let him know what he’s up against. Who he is up against.

“Cannibals.” Just as I predicted, his pupils begin to dilate, the hands holding my shoulders start to shake. And I know he gets it. Understands why I am so adamant about our departure. “You can’t. You—”

“I have to, Bright Eyes.” I could probably make myself cry, shout that I hate him; hell, even punch him in the face for being such a fucking idiot. But he would still go. I know that look in his eyes. I know that determination. That desire that in this shitty world, you could make a difference. Even if it is small. And I understand him, because I would be doing the same. So, against everything my mind and my body are telling me, I go to his side.

He doesn’t smile when he realizes that I’m going to let him do this. That I’m going to help. Shit, he’s probably thinking of a way right now that would convince me to stay outside. But if he goes, I go, and I don’t plan to argue on this. He simply gives me a gentle nod, an affirmation that we are actually doing this. And then he starts.

I’m silently praying that maybe my mind is just playing tricks on me. Maybe this isn’t the same cabin. That this isn’t the same shop of horrors. And it’s probably my subconscious trying to ease my anxiety, because I actually start to believe myself. Start to think that Erwin and Hanji are going to be perfectly fine when we open those daunting doors. That they’ll be pouring some tea, and shit Levi will be happy to see that.

Happy.

We will be so fucking happy, right?

I clench my eyes shut as we lean against the side of the cabin, wood rotting from multiple places and looking just as decrepit as I remember. Because this is it. And once I notice the blood caked on the railings, I realize that there is no getting around that. No more misbelieving that this place doesn’t exist. Because it’s right here. And we’re leaning against its fucking walls. Perfect.

I’m pretty sure neither of us knows how to go about entering this hell house, the front door seeming like way too easy of an option to be considered. But obviously Levi is shooting for simplicity. I see him skirt around the edge of the cabin, pistol in hand. I reach out, but he’s already gone. Already
heading up a set of stairs that I remember having a sickening creak. I’m just waiting for the sound as I creep closer to the turning point. The noise that plays in my mind is like the devil’s soundtrack. Everything associated with it. Everything they’ve done.

It is probably too much to hope for that the sound scares Levi off. And when I hear the noise choke out once more, I remember that the man isn’t going to leave here without them. Or at least without answers; a confirmation that they aren’t here. I pull my body around the edge, looking up to see Levi close to the top of the short set of stairs. He’s crouched over, and at least he is trying to be inconspicuous, noisy steps aside. There’s broken glass littering the porch, the windows patched up with sheets of plywood that give the cabin that classic apocalypse feel. Blood still stains the building, just like I remember. And it isn’t the liquid that is sending shivers down my spine, but the knowledge that most of it came from a human being. And not the undead kind.

I want to close my eyes, pull my mind out of this living nightmare. No, I want to run. Want to grab Levi’s hand and summon enough strength to drag his stubborn ass off this goddamn porch and out of harm’s way. But I want to save them, too. Erwin. Hanji. Because didn’t I say that I needed them just as much as the man ahead of me? But it’s this fear that’s holding me back. Fear of the unknown.

Fear that we will walk into this place and only be met with the barrel of a gun. Fear that Erwin and Hanji are one hundred miles in the opposite direction and we just risked our lives for nothing. And it’s a powerful thing, this unadulterated terror that likes to creep up on you from behind when you least expect it. Wrangles your insides until everything quivers.

I can feel its effects as I climb the stairs, my knees already feeling wobbly and unsteady. And I hate it. Hate that my body is trying to turn against me when I need it most. Hate that it’s trying to warn me. Because ignorance is bliss, and I would probably be doing a million times better if I stopped imagining what I think is behind these doors.

Levi reaches the handle before me, the man a few paces ahead even with his limp. I wonder how it feels as he takes it in his palm. Can he sense the evil, the horrors that are sure to be behind this entrance? The slight hesitation in his movements tells me all I need to know.

“Levi,” I whisper his name, trying to stay quiet as I tug on his jacket. Because this is stupid. And, goddammit, he knows it. Because the more I think about it, the more I refuse to believe that Erwin Smith would allow himself to be caught by cannibals. And maybe my mind is just still trying to give me any excuse to leave this place, but I don’t give a shit. He isn’t here, can’t be here. “Please.”

Levi twists his head to partially meet my gaze, eyes filled with something like guilt, regret. And I know his next move. Know that he made up his mind as soon as he approached those steps.

He turns the handle.

The smell is the first thing that hits me, overpowering and gut churning. Makes my stomach start to lurch with disgust as the scent wafts over us. It’s almost like rot, decay. The way its odor puts such a complex image in my mind, disfigured and grotesque as it swarms my thoughts with its depravity.

The floorboards creak as we pass through the threshold of the entrance, no doubt under the same distress as the stairs we climbed. Except the noise sounds a million times louder in here, where the monsters could be lurking around any corner. But it’s not like we would be able to see them, considering its pitch black in here, the last of the light draining with the closure of the battered wooden door. I shuffle through my pack, frantically trying to produce the flashlight that has been a practical god send these past couple of weeks. My fingertips brush against the familiar plastic as I frantically rip the object out from its confines. Statistics probably show that alerting your presence to a group of homicidal maniacs doesn’t output a high survival rate, but if I know these assholes— and I know these assholes— then odds are if they are here, they would have already killed us and made
dinner with our spleens. But, somehow, that fact still doesn’t disrupt the ebbing in my gut that is warning me to leave.

*Run, Eren, run.*

The light begins to illuminate sections of the room, quickly shifting from one object to the next in my haze. It’s filthy, dried blood caking the floors, furniture overturned and broken. It causes my heart to pick up erratically, the sound of its pumping practically audible. Every turn I am expecting to see them. To come face to face with the monsters. My movements are fast and quick, not staying in one place for very long due to the unstoppable anxiety seeping into my mind. That and the sooner we get out of here the better.

I can’t see the cringe in Levi’s face, but I am assuming it’s there as he steps over a broken chair. And I’m silently praying that his curiosity has been sated and that we can leave. But as I watch him walk further into the cabin, I realize it’s far from quenched.

*Run, Eren, run.*

That voice in my head has become insistent, slamming its fists into the side of my skull in a vain attempt at catching my attention. I drown it out with each step I take, slowly suffocating my attempted savior underneath the weight of my foolishness. And I want to listen… *god, I want to fucking listen.* But I can’t leave him here. Not when I know what will be waiting for him.

Not without Levi.

The light starts to flicker, and I am left to wonder if this is an omen from above to get the fuck out of here. Or maybe Mr. Higher Power just wants to make things more difficult for us. *Probably.* The faltering luminescence continues to stutter against the random nest of objects skittered across the floor. The torn books, the broken glass, shit there is probably a half-eaten corpse that we have yet to find. It sends my already overzealous anxiety to sky high levels of apprehension. Reminds me of those cliché scenes in horror movies where that dumb blonde is just about to get it. The one that’s stupid enough to walk off on her own while there is a serial killer on the loose. I am just waiting, twiddling my thumbs in the face of an unavoidable tragedy. One that I could avoid, at least on my part, but I *can’t.* I can’t leave him alone.

And if this was a movie then I think we would have just hit the climax.

Levi’s paused, gaze scanning over a blood stained door. And this is it. The moment of truth. Because if Erwin and Hanji are here then they are going to be behind this door. In that basement. Dread begins to rain down over me as I remember the last time I spent the night in that hellhole, thinking that any moment those crazy fucks were going to march down those stairs with the intent of stealing my organs. I can see the slight quiver of Levi’s hand as he reaches out to grab ahold of the crimson coated handle, probably feeling the uncertainty that’s asking him if this is what he really wants. A sickening confirmation or a troubling ambiguity. Neither option sounds promising, but to be honest, I would vote for anything that saved me the trip down memory lane.

The door releases a pained squeak as it opens, lending us nothing but darkness.

*Run, Eren, run.*

I try to steady the flashlight in my hand as Levi begins to descend the stairs, the stammering glow being shit at illuminating the steps. I’m almost wondering how the hell I haven’t fallen and broken my neck as I follow quickly behind, but something else entirely is taking up the forefront of my mind. It’s invading my nostrils with a vengeance worthy of a wife scorned, nauseating me to the
point that I have to throw my free hand across my mouth in order to muffle the sound of my retching. It’s all too familiar, the smell being something that stains itself in the core of your mind. Something that never truly goes away. Reminding you of all the atrocities associated with it. And, fuck, do I remember.

Even the light seems affected by the odor, flickering at a frantic pace, and I’m counting down the seconds until we are shrouded in complete darkness. I turn to Levi in an attempt to gauge his expression, to see if he has already reached his breaking point.

His eyes are following the sway of the light, scanning over the bloodied tables, taking in the chunks of rotted, human flesh. Eyes wide and mouth dropped open, he stands frozen, unmoving. I take a step forward, removing the hand from my mouth to grip at his shoulder. Levi flinches, mind too far into this grotesque nightmare. The horror movies had it all wrong, because this is the real thing. This is far worse than those creatures who go bump in the night, than that killer who swings the final blow down upon that stupid, stupid girl. This, this knowledge that the human race is so capable, so adept at finding ways to destroy each other. That is the true fear. That is what’s etched across Levi’s face as his lips begin to wobble. What’s on mine as my knees begin to go weak.

And I’m pretty sure that point has been shattered.

Snapping himself out of his daze, Levi pivots around and brushes past me, not even sparing a glance at anything mark the set of stairs in front of him. But it doesn’t matter. I’ve already seen the look in his eyes, the disgust, the abhorrence… the fear. And I want to wrap my arms around him, tell the man that we will be okay. That this isn’t our world, but just a part of it. But I know that he is ready to leave, and I am not going to hinder that.

Turning around, I lift my foot to move forward onto the stairs, Levi only a couple of steps ahead of me due to his ankle. I don’t say anything as I twist to follow him, knowing that this is one of those situations where my words will be meaningless. That Levi is going to have to figure part of this out alone. The light moves with me as I turn, quickly illuminating the horrors behind us with its flickering gaze. And I’m almost surprised that I see it with the way my one track mind is focusing so hard on escape.

Well, see him.

*Run, Eren, run.*

The flashlight drops from my hands, appropriately turning to the figure stuffed in the corner. The noise of the object hitting the floor causes Levi to turn his stare back towards me, causes his breath to hitch because I know he is seeing the same thing as me.

I wouldn’t call myself frozen, because my feet are definitely moving. Maybe frozen in the mind. Not knowing if this is real, and unable to ask. My motions are almost robotic, the way I shuffle to the corner. Completely opposite of Levi who, with his limp, has already bypassed me in reaching the figure first. His hands grasp eagerly onto those strong, broad shoulders that I honestly never thought I would see again. But they look so different now, slumped and drooping. So different from that hopeful stance the man always seemed to wear.

“Erwin.” Levi’s voice cracks as he speaks the man’s name, the thought of never seeing the blonde again probably causing the break. Erwin’s eyes flutter open, now a dull memory of the once brilliant blues. He looks terrible, and I can only imagine this sinking in my gut is what Levi felt when he discovered me underground at Stohess. “Erwin,” the man is given a shoulder shake when he doesn’t respond, “Erwin, talk to me, goddammit.”
Those eyes come to focus on a frantic Levi, who is still digging his fingers into Erwin’s shoulders. “Levi?” Even his voice sounds hopeless, and it makes me want to scream. To yell out and cry against all this inhumanity. Because if Erwin Smith has lost hope, then god save us all.

Levi lets out a breathy sigh as his forehead collapses against Erwin’s shoulder. “Yeah, it’s me.” His fingers drift over the rope coiled tightly around the man, the bindings digging harshly into his chest as they tether Erwin to the pole right behind him. Levi pulls a knife out from his waistband and begins to go to work on the ties, almost as manic as he was when he found me. This just seems too familiar, too easy. And I can’t help but feel like we won’t be able to just walk out of here. “Where’s Hanji?” The man’s eyes have closed again, his chin falling back against his chest. “Shit.” Levi turns to me, still hacking at the ropes as he speaks, “Eren,” That guilty look in his eye his back, that desperation to just make things right, “help me.”

I rush over, cupping Erwin’s cheeks between slightly trembling hands. My eyes widen as I fully take him in, stubble flush against his cheeks, face scarred and bruised. He’s been through hell. We all have. But this is the kind of torture you never speak of again, the kind you only allow to haunt your own thoughts for the fear of tainting someone else’s with your demons.

“Erwin, where’s Hanji?” My thumbs glide against the prickly skin, trying to tell him that it will be okay. That I know who these people are. What he’s went through. But all of my comforts are for nothing as he realizes who is caressing his face.

“Eren.” He stamps my name in the air, pulling away from my grasp as he speaks. Looks at me as if I’ve done something terribly wrong, eyes enlarged and head shaking side to side. “No, Levi, stop.” Erwin directs his gaze to the man trying to cut through the thick rope; and even with Levi’s strength, he has barely made it through the first line, the knife just too blunt to make a difference without a sufficient amount of time. Time we obviously do not have if Erwin’s struggling is any indication. Levi spares a quick glance at Erwin before he gets back to work, uselessly trying to free the man before the monsters are any the wiser. “Levi, you have to listen to me. Take Eren and leave. He’s not —”

“Shut the fuck up.” Levi cuts the man off before he can go any further, fingers tightening around the bonds that just won’t break. “We aren’t leaving you here.”

“And I’m not letting you get yourselves killed,” he snaps back at Levi with a determination that I’ve only seen when he asked us to chop his arm off. “Leave me.” My hands are faltering in midair, unsure if I should pull back on Levi and drag him up the stairs, or let him continue in his fool’s task. “I won’t let you do this.”

“I’m not asking your permission, Erwin.” He says it with such a fatality that I know nothing is going to sway his decision, and I think Erwin realizes this, too. So, he turns to me.

“Eren,” I see those eyes, once dead and lifeless, now shining with a tiny flicker of hope. A hope that he can get us out alive. “Do you want Levi to die?” My heart suddenly drops, and I feel like I know exactly what I am supposed to do with these hands.

“Shut the fuck up, Erwin.”

“He’s going to die if you don’t make him leave. You want to protect him, right?” Yes, I want to protect him so badly. More than anything. I need to protect him.

Run, Eren, run.

Levi snarls as he grinds his teeth together, the frustration in his veins practically tangible. “Shut up,
you stubborn piece of shit! We aren’t leaving without you so—”

There’s a pain radiating from the back of my skull as I feel myself slowly start to sway, and I swear that Levi is still talking. I can see his mouth moving, up and down in angry motions. But I can’t make out anything besides the muffled sounds of his arguing. And my eyesight is fading, why is my eyesight fading? I almost feel numb to everything, feel like the descent that I’m currently making to the floor isn’t going to hurt on impact. And it doesn’t. It’s just disorienting. Well, this whole situation is disorienting. I guess my fall was just what Erwin needed to convince Levi to stop his attempted rescue, because I see the man drop the knife and begin to crouch at my side. But he never makes it.

And there’s not a damned thing I can do about it.

Not when I’m half delirious and losing consciousness fast. I can only watch as a set of beefy arms wrap around Levi’s neck. Can only watch as he’s lifted off the ground by the giant. Can only watch as Levi desperately claws at the forearm pressing against his throat. Can only watch as he begins to steadily grow limp in the monster’s arm. And, finally, I can’t watch anymore. Because it’s black. All black. And the only thing I can think of as my vision finally fades is that there’s no getting out of this. At least not the both of us.

Not this time.

Chapter End Notes

I would apologize for the amount of cliffhangers I leave on almost every chapter, but I hate getting into the middle of scenes and breaking them off. And anyway that I looked at this chapter, there wasn't a way to leave it without there being a cliffhanger. Also, school is royally kicking my ass. So, I have been trying to write but those times are near and far between. What I'm trying to say is that college is terrible and to become a hobo.

If you have any questions, always feel free to shoot me a message on Tumblr. I haven't been on there as much, because I have been trying to pull myself back into the real world if that makes sense ahahah. But I will still answer your questions a lot faster on there then on here.

Tumblr:
fuzzyporcupine.tumblr.com

I am tracking the tag, 'fic: what's eating you'. So, if you post any fanart or anything involving WEY, tag it so I know!

Thanks, Stephanie, for beta-ing this!

FANMIX
ALL FANART
I’ve never really understood why Levi always insisted on sleeping on the side of the bed furthest from the window. But as the sun starts to beam in between the cracks of the blinds, I get a pretty good idea. The light has a million places that it could choose to illuminate, but my eyes have obviously done something to personally offend the luminescence. Groaning, I pull an arm over my face in an effort to hinder the sun in its attempt to blind me. I should probably just accept defeat, because I know that there is no way my body is going to let me fall back asleep anyways… what an asshole.

Shit, the least I could do is start breakfast. I know Levi has to get up for work in a few minutes, and I also know that the stubborn bastard equates a cup of coffee to his morning meal. It’s a habit that he only breaks whenever I find it in myself to wake up before him to fix something that’s actually considered food. Which is something that’s been happening a lot more ever since Levi tasted my scrambled eggs. And I can never decide if I should be flattered or angered that the asshole hasn’t made an effort to make his own damn breakfast. Probably should be angry considering he’s playing me like a fucking fiddle, but after all we’ve been through together, I don’t think that emotion could ever be directed at the man. The man who has wrapped himself around my body, legs tangled in the sheets and fingers twisted into the fabric of my nightshirt.

And Levi says he isn’t a cuddler.

Bullshit.

I attempt to pull away from the man, only earning a constriction of limbs around me. Definitely a cuddler. And I know that he won’t tell me that he is disappointed when he leaves with nothing more than a lukewarm cup of coffee, but it’s become sort of routine. And I’d be lying if I said that I didn’t look forward to seeing that slight smirk catch the corner of his lips when he walks into the kitchen to find me laboring over the stove.

“Levi,” I whisper his name into the head burrowing into my chest, and if he hears me then he’s doing a stand up job at playing mute. He probably hears me. “Levi, c’mon.” I shake his shoulders this time, even give a ruffle to his hair, adding to the current state of disarray the raven locks are in. And if there is one thing that I have learned to appreciate about the mornings, it is waking up next to Levi and his adorable bedhead. Of course, I would never tell him that. Levi isn’t adorable, no way. Levi is manly, eats nails for breakfast. My entire spill about the eggs was just a well-conceived lie because I’m totally ashamed of my lack of masculinity. Right.

I halfheartedly nudge at his head with my hands, but the man just clenches me tighter. “You were a koala in a past life, I swear to god.” I almost expect him to counter that, to give me some classic Levi charm. But, apparently, sleep has taken priority over his wit today.

I turn my head to glance at the bright, neon numbers on the alarm clock: 6:45. Shit, the bastard is
going to be lucky if I have enough time to brew his coffee, never the less make some eggs. Sighing, I sink back into the plush pillows lining the headboard. Hell, it’s not me who is going to get slack for being late… but it is me who is going to have to put up with said grumpy asshole. Goddammit. “Levi, you are going to be late.” I tug at his arms, harsher than before because it is now ten minutes till and he is probably, most definitely, going to be late. He mumbles something in my chest that sounds oddly familiar to ‘I don’t give a shit’ and ‘Recon can suck my dick’. He may or may not have added on a ‘so can you’ to the end of that last one, but I am choosing to ignore his vulgar quips for the sake of my sanity.

“Still so classy.” Levi gives me a familiar shrug as he tries to tunnel deeper into my chest. And two can play that game. Turning to the night stand, I set the alarm; because if force can’t get him up, this definitely will. I count down in my head the seconds until the shrill ringing fills the air, preparing myself with hands over my ears. Three, two, one. The noise seems louder than usual, and to its credit, it does manage to make my heart jump in my chest. And it makes Levi… well…

“Turn that shit off.” He’s detangled himself from me, opting to instead bring the blanket over his head and scoot to the opposite edge of the bed. I smile as I push myself off the mattress, intentionally leaving the alarm on because for one: Levi needs to wake up; and two: I’m still that little shit he rescued from that shack all those months ago. I hear a telltale groan as I walk through the threshold of the bedroom door, signaling that Levi is, in fact, going to get out of bed.

I waste no time once I enter the kitchen, knowing that I probably have about ten minutes on Levi given his extensive morning shower routine. Which totally isn’t weird at all, but I guess I can’t blame him considering how many months we spent without hot water. It’s a luxury that I’m glad is back in our lives, along with many other things. Including an stove. Smiling, I pull a carton of eggs from the refrigerator, setting aside three eggs for breakfast; two for Levi and one for me. Regardless to what he says, I still think he could grow a couple of inches.

The eggs sizzle once they hit the hot pan, crackling as I bring a spatula down on top of them. The yolks begin to bleed out from the side, but instead of the normal yellow color, the liquid is red. A deep crimson that is turning darker and darker with each passing second. It seems all wrong, because I know that the yolks are never this color, are never so vibrantly inflamed against the black pan. The spatula drops from my hand as the kitchen starts to shrink, my lungs feeling way too small for the amount of air currently entering my body. And I can’t breathe, I can’t—

“Eren.” There is something wrapping around me, confining my flailing arms to my sides as I try to free myself from the bonds. “Eren, it’s okay.” But it’s not. It’s not okay. I’m going insane. I’m going crazy. “Calm down, deep breaths.” That voice sounds so familiar, and I can’t help but to relax as it passes over me. “There you go. I got you.” And it’s him, it’s Levi. Always coming to save me. He’s coming to save me. Save me, save me, save him. “You scared the shit out of me back there.”

“I’m sorry.” Always apologizing. And for the millionth time I’m confused as to why I am apologizing. It wasn’t me who strapped down the children.

Levi’s lips pull back to reveal the biggest smile I’ve ever seen him wear, teeth glowing in the fluorescent kitchen lights. “It’s fine, Bright Eyes.”

Fine.

Fine.

Fine.

“I… I can’t lose you, Bright Eyes.” But he isn’t. I’m right here. I’m— “You’re burning the eggs,
dumbass.” Shit. Leave it to me to screw up the one thing I do to help Levi. Help Levi. I mean, it’s not like he earns all of our income or anything. It’s not like I am allowed to just sit at home with my hand in a bag of cheese puffs, watching cheesy movies and reality TV. It’s not like that at all. I turn around to pull the eggs off the eye of the stove, lest they become inedible, but Levi is already there when I twist around. Already sliding a spatula underneath the food and beginning to plate it. “I’ll bring it over when it’s done.”

I nod, almost instantaneously as my feet move towards the dining room table. I wouldn’t call myself frozen, because my feet are definitely moving. Maybe frozen in the mind. “You should really go talk to Erwin about these panic attacks.” The voice sounds like it’s right in my ear, but when I turn around Levi still has his back to me as he finishes with the eggs. But when I rotate back to the table, he’s there. Right in front of me. Except it’s not him. Not him. It’s Erwin. It’s not him. It’s Smith. Erwin Smith. But as I walk forward, he disappears. Vanishes into thin air like some apparition. Maybe that’s what it was. Maybe I’m crazy. I’m insane. Going crazy.

“Erwin’s a school counselor, not a psychologist.” The words sound monotone coming out of my mouth, sound so lifeless and dead. Maybe I am dead, not crazy. Not crazy. Just dead. And insane.

“It was just a thought. Figured you needed someone besides me to talk to. I’m really not good with words.” He’s not good with words, though. It’s Levi. Levi’s never been good with words. Levi’s never been good with anything. He’s killing you. He’s killing himself. Not very good with things because he doesn’t understand you, Bright Eyes.

I wanted to be your friend, Bright Eyes.

You’re worth so much more than you give yourself credit for, Bright Eyes.

They’re alive, Bright Eyes.

I’ve made a lot of mistakes, Bright Eyes.

I’ve made a lot of mistakes, Bright Eyes.

I’ve made a lot of mistakes, Bright Eyes.

Bright Eyes.

Bright Eyes.

Bright Eyes.

“Are you going to eat, or did I just waste my time?” Levi’s sitting across from me, fork digging into a plate of eggs that appear to be of a normal color. I’m just seeing things, that’s it. Not dead. Just crazy. He’s giving me a deadpan stare, not unalike to the glances we shared during our first meeting. I would apologize, always apologizing. Not sure what I did wrong, but I should apologize. But I’m hungry, so hungry. “Eat.” He points his fork at my plate, and I decide that I should take his advice.

I glance down to gauge how badly I’ve burnt the eggs, but they aren’t eggs at all. Not dead. Not crazy. Not insane. Very insane. Those goddamn eyes. The plate is covered in red, the crimson that I thought had disappeared. But it is here, very real, and swamping my plate. And swirling in the middle of the liquid is a set of eyes. Those goddamn eyes. Staring at me, burning holes into my vision until I can’t bear the sight anymore.

So, I look up.
“Are you not hungry?” That smile is back on his face, every tooth in his mouth gleaming. But his eyes. His eyes. Those goddamn eyes. They’re gone, nothing but red, scabbed holes marking where they should be on his face. “Do I not taste good?” That smile turns manic as he reaches into his empty eye sockets and begins to pull red mush out of the holes, throwing it all onto my plate as I sit there completely motionless.

And, abruptly, it all stops. Everything. Not insane. I’m not crazy. Maybe dead. I’m not dead. It all stops. It’s black, pitch black. Nothing but the sound of my breathing to keep me company. But, suddenly, there is a light, a spotlight. Levi is the only thing I can see in the darkness, the only thing that is being illuminated from the shadows. And he looks frightened, scared. Of me? No, of them.

Them.

Oh god.

He is strapped to the arms and legs of the chair, escape impossible. He raises a shaky head, looking at me with eyes that have magically reappeared in his skull, but hardly visible due to the obvious weariness in his movements. They are slit, and I can barely make out the hints of smoke peeking in from between his narrowed gaze. His mouth opens, and in the dead silence, I hear him perfectly,

“Are you not going to protect me?”

It’s like I’ve been holding my breath for an eternity when I wake up, sweating and gasping for air. I’m expecting Levi’s reassuring hands to appear on my shoulders any second now, for his deep voice to ask me that million dollar question. Because it’s always the same; the pain, the worry, the false assurances. It’s a vicious cycle that I know one day will have to come to an end, but as of yet, I’m satisfied with refraining from becoming just another burden for Levi to worry about. But maybe the cycle has been stopped without my knowledge. Maybe it’s finally come to a head.

Because that hand never comes, those words never sound off.

It all comes back to me as my eyes fly open. All comes back as I scan over the man in front of me. And I would say something, would call out to him. But I just feel so dizzy, so fucking dizzy. My ears are ringing with voices that I haven’t heard in a long time. Voices of the dead. Of the departed. Voices that tell me I will soon be joining them. I try to push them all away as my vision clears, but they are insistent, clawing at my mind with their pointed claws. Tearing at me from the inside out. Forcing me to recognize how fucked I truly am.

I’m sure that I already know who the man in front of me is, pretty sure that I don’t need my eyesight to steady in order to realize this. But I don’t want to remember. Don’t want to come to terms that he’s just as fucked as I am. That there is no reasonable way out of this.

But I’d be a fool to think that there is any mercy left in this world.

Mercy.

It’s such a fickle term now. I can remember when it meant something. When the word was something more than a myth swept under the mat. My hands claw at wooden armrests as my vision clears. It was like a code, something that people strived to attain. Because I don’t want to see it, see him. Not like this. Who wanted to be labeled as the executioner? Who would willingly say that they’ve tossed away their morality? Because this image is never going to leave my head, and I’ll be damned if this is how I remember him. No one. I try to close my eyes, try to tune it all out and think about those times when he smiled. Actually smiled, not that condescending smirk that more often
than not reminded me of how big of an idiot I am. Because we were happy.

_We were so fucking happy._

But I’m wide awake.

_Alive._

He looks at me like he knows. Looks at me like he’s so goddamn sorry. There’s a dingy piece of cloth pulling between his teeth and around his head, but I’m sure if it was gone that he would be verbally apologizing. My eyes drift lower, follow the line of blood caked onto his shirt, get to his arms and quickly realize why that reassuring hand was never placed on my shoulder. It’s barbed wire or something equally sinister that wrapped tightly around his arms, the pale skin marked with dozens of incisions where the wire is biting the flesh. Where he’s probably been struggling to escape, because it doesn’t sound like Levi to just lie down without a fight. He pulls at his bindings once more as I watch a fresh line of blood drip down onto the floor below. It causes my heart to clench as I see the crimson drop from his skin. Makes me want to get up and save him. To take him away from all this, even though I know that’s near impossible.

I was supposed to protect him.

A shaky breath passes over my lips as my head drops to my chest. _I was supposed to protect him._ Should have dragged him out of here, kicking and screaming if need be. But I didn’t. I let this happen. I… I _knew_ what these monsters were capable of, what they would do if they caught us. And they have. And I’m prepared for the worst.

My eyes wonder over my own arms, ready to inspect the wounds that will no doubt rival Levi’s. Except my bondage is nothing as dramatic as the man across from me. Ropes. That’s it. Carving angry, red lines into wrists that have been rubbed raw if the stinging sensation gliding over my skin is any indication. I jerk at my bonds, trying and failing to free myself from this certain fate. My mind is telling me that I’m so close, that just one more tug will magically dissolve these oppressing ropes. One more tug and I’ll be free.

That word sounds almost as foreign as mercy.

I hear a sound, a moan, and I’m almost glad that I can’t place it as Levi’s. Although knowing who owns it doesn’t make me feel any better.

His eyes are wide, that previous hope that I thought had been potentially restored all but demolished in that desolate gaze. I open my mouth to ask him questions that I know will not be answered, a similar colored fabric straining in between his lips as well. The words freeze on my lips, and for some ungodly reason, I just want to cry. Maybe it’s the human condition that’s burning the backs of my eyes. Maybe it’s something else entirely. That irrevocable need that I have to just be assured that everything is going to be okay. To sink my face into those strong shoulders and feel his arms wrap around me like they are never letting go.

_I need that._

_Need him._

_Levi._

“Good mornin’, Sunshine.” So, that was the reason behind Erwin’s distraction. He knew they were right behind me and wanted to spare me, us, the possible punishments endured by an escape attempt. _Escape attempt._ I would say this is sarcasm, but I feel like that’s a goddamn given. Tch,
fuck this bowing down. This frightened submission. What happened to fighting for your life? To living? We have to live. Have to fight. I sneer as a hand grabs harshly at my shoulder, don’t cower. I’m not afraid, but I’m so afraid. Not for myself, no I think that my self-perseverance flew out the window all those weeks ago when I befriended the man who tried to kill me. I’m afraid for him, for Levi. And Erwin, too. “We’ve been waitin’ for ya to wake up.” The monster’s grip on my shoulder tightens as I am presented with a face I’d been hoping to never see again. Its grin is ugly, teeth playing a visual hide-and-seek as it smiles at me like I’m some long lost friend. I want to immediately drive my thumbs into its eye sockets, want to purge that stupid, stupid grin from its face. But it waves a gun in my face, silently telling me who is in charge here. “That’s not a pretty face, Sunshine. We just wanna play.”

Sunshine.
Bright Eyes.

Two ends of the same spectrum. One spoken with such tease and taunt. The other with care, with... goddammit.

“Fuck you.” My lip curls as I regard the thing in front of me. Pulls back into a hiss as fingers are wedged into my hair and my head is jerked backwards. I don’t want to show this pain, but it’s abrupt and all over my face if the satisfied look splayed across the monster’s visage is any clue.

“I remember you, Sunshine.” It lowers its head, presses its nose into my hair. And sniffs. Like a fucking animal. I’m not surprised. “Always wanted a taste.” Those fingers loosen in my hair as a shiver travels down my spine, making me wish that I’d just made him turn around. Just made him see. I should be sorry. I am sorry. Greens meet greys as my gaze tapers back down, and I try to tell him that. Try to... tell him something, anything. Let him know that we are going to be okay. Even if I really don’t believe it. The touch leaves me completely, and as soon as I realize where it’s heading, I want it back.

A silver blade is dragging a thin line across his cheek before I can stop it, a narrow trail of blood slowly rising over that pale skin. I try to reach out to him, but I am reminded that my arms are currently strapped to a rickety, old chair. There’s a glint in the monster’s eye as it watches my reaction, watches the way my face twists with anger. Watches the hundred and one ways in which I am destroying it in my mind. Because I will fucking kill it. Kill them all. Nails dig into the wood as it runs a pink tongue across Levi’s cheek. As the blood stains the corner of its mouth when it looks at me and smiles.

“He’ll have to be dessert, hmm?” It’s something that’s going to haunt me for months, the way that smirk pulls over the remnants of teeth. The blood stained lips. Something that’s going to remind me of what happens when you’re stupid. But, then again, the odds are that we probably aren’t going to be alive much longer to be scorned by them. Maybe that’s a good thing.

“I’ll fucking kill you.” But I still want to live. More than anything. Want to fight. To kill all of these inhuman atrocities. To purge this already cruel, corrupt world. Just to make it a little brighter.

“You haven’t changed, Sunshine.” That smile’s withstanding as it makes its way back over to me. “Well, company’s changed.” It jabs me softly in the chest with the handle of its knife. “You haven’t.”

“Hoss!” Its eyes are pulled from me as it scans the figure looming in the doorway. “What’d I say ‘bout playin’ with your food?” I’m still not surprised. The other one, the larger one, marches through the frame with two bowls in hand. I’m hoping one’s not for me, but ask Erwin Smith about hope. “Sunshine.” A familiar smile pulls over its face like this is just some goddamn family reunion that I
never asked to be a part of. I feel like I should say something, tell them that my name is Eren and that
the only one allowed to venture from that title is currently being muted. But I sit there silent, because
for all my talk, I am very afraid.

“Didn’t think we’d see ya again.” Small talk isn’t my strong point. Small talk while being bound to a
chair while my friends and I face certain death is definitely not something I’d say I was good at. It
sets the bowls down at the end of the table, far enough where I can’t see the contents, dare I be brave
enough to look. I probably wouldn’t be, so I’m not even thankful for the location of the bowl. “Glad
we did though.” There is something that tries to feel like reassurance patting my shoulder, but the
only thing it lets off is cold, abrasive death. Something I have become all too familiar with these past
few months. It’s still the same, still posting that carefree smile on its face like it doesn’t eat the human
race for breakfast, lunch and dinner. And maybe a little morning snack. Disgusting. “Sorry ‘bout my
boy. You remember him, right?” My jaw twitches as I slowly turn my head to meet its gaze. I want
to kill it. More than I even wanted to kill the smaller one. There are splinters diving under my nails
from the way I’m digging into the wood beneath my grasp, but I don’t feel the pain. I’m too focused
on all the ways that I’m going to tear this thing apart once I’m given the opportunity. “C’mon, now,
show a little hospitality to your host, Sunshine.”

The wad of spit that’s now fresh against its face probably wasn’t hospitable at all.

It’s slow to wipe off the saliva, probably used to the sense of filth. But the look it sends me says that
it’s not, however, used to the meaning behind the action. To the disobedience. Fingers fist angrily
into my hair as my cheek is slammed into the table. I hear Levi’s muffled screams from across the
table, probably full of violent, empty threats that he realizes are useless against these monsters. His
chair is shaking, and I know he’s hopelessly trying to free himself. To be my hero.

I was supposed to protect him.

Erwin is staring at me as I’m being pinned to the table. So empty, so hollow. I don’t know what he is
telling me with the gaze. I’ve never been able to read lips, and I definitely can’t read eyes. The
calmness in his stare is unnerving, sends a chill down my spine as I think of how long he must have
been subjected to this place in order to look so empty. There are so many things I never got to ask the
man. Did he have a wife, children? Did he lose them? How? Why doesn’t he want to talk about it?
Ah, that’s why. So many things I never got to say. Thank you.

“You fuckin’ piece of shit!” I’m slammed onto the table again. Levi cries out. Erwin just stares. It’s a
weird kind of harmony. “I shoulda’ killed you before.” I feel the cold press of the gun against the
side of my head as my cheek squishes into the table.

When I thought of my ending, I never thought of this.

Levi screams as the hammer is pulled back, even the cloth shoved in his mouth is not enough to
muffle it.

I always thought that I would go out in some final countdown deal. Jean and I had it all figured out.

The sound of Levi’s chair scrapping across the ground screeches into the air. He’s desperate to save
me, isn’t he?

We would be surrounded by walkers, fucking fifty to one.

He cries out again, and I can only assume it’s put a finger on the trigger.

So, there we’d be, right? Standing in a center of the undead like two dipshits, and to be honest, that
part probably wouldn’t be that far off. We’d have some pretty sick machine guns, though.

I don’t know if I want his face to be the last thing I see, so cold and lifeless.

And we would blast those motherfuckers back to hell. It’d be all blood and guts flying everywhere.
And when we knew that there was no escape, we would take ourselves out.

But, for some reason, I’m not mad that it’s Erwin.

Bullet to the head. Seemed poetic enough, even though Mikasa would always tell us to stop fucking around with thoughts like that.

“Goddammit.” I hear the monster take a heavy sigh as he lifts me back up by the nape of my neck, “I would fuckin’ kill you.” Its grip tightens on me, the bruises no doubt purpling my tanned skin.

“You’re lucky that I’mma man of my word.” My eyes widen at that, and it hits me. Well, the memory… not the monster still grasping the back of my neck. The bond, the treaty, whatever the fuck you want to call it. The no-touch policy between the savages and my old group. I should have remembered, should have used it to my advantage when I had the chance. But is it really too late?

The majority of my mind’s telling me yes as I glance over at Levi whose arms look so fucking tattered. But there is this little voice in my head that is saying that it’s never too late. That you have to fight. *Fight, Eren.* And I listen to that side.

It releases its hold on me, opting to walk over to the bowls that I really would like to stay one hundred feet from. Something in my gut tells me that I know what is in them. And that something is nothing good. Before I can object, one of the bowls is pushed in front of me, along with a piece of cloth and a fork.

“I’m givin’ you a second chance, Sunshine.” I don’t think I want it anymore. “Now, you are gonna enjoy this meal we’ve so humbly prepared for you.” It’s working on my binds, running a knife through the ropes and letting them fall carelessly to the floor. “We worked hard on this.” The fork is pushed into my shaking hand. “So, eat.”

My eyes venture down into the bowl, and before I can stop myself, I am gagging over the side of my chair. I don’t know what it is… well, no, it is definitely meat. I just don’t know what kind. But I’m putting two and two together and just assuming the worst. That seems like a safe bet considering I’m in a room with fucking cannibals.

“You not gonna eat? You gonna disrespect us again?” My eyes flick to the monster sitting at the end of the table, hungrily digging into his bowl, lips slick with grease. *Revolting.* Its hand finds the gun as it dares me to deny another minute of savoring the meal set before me. But it is not going to kill me, right? I meet its stare with defiance, holding strong even as it raises the gun.

And points it at Levi.

*Wait, no.*

Finger on the trigger.

“Stop! I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” *I’m so fucking sorry.* I pick up the fork, eyes watching intently as it keeps the gun pointed steadily at Levi. Don’t even look as I stick the meat in the bowl. Don’t even think as I bring it past my lips. It lowers the gun. And I chew.

I don’t know how to describe the taste. Connie always told me that everything tastes like chicken if you try hard enough. So, that’s what I do. Think that deep down this is just some overcooked chicken and not a… *human being.* And I can’t do it. Before I know it, vomit is forcing its way out
my mouth and onto the floor, covering the ground in the heinous liquid. It’s a steady drip that falls from my lips, that being the only sound that breaks the silence of the room. Everyone is probably staring at me— no staring at it. Waiting with baited breath to see how offended it will be as it takes in my disrespect for the meal. But I can’t get past the idea, won’t get past it. Because the end of the world has made men, has made me, do terrible things, but this can’t be one of them.

“Papa,” My head turns to the voice, one that I remember belonging to a little girl that I couldn’t find in my heart to classify as a monster just yet, too young, too innocent. She staggers in, barefooted and filthy as her hands cradle— no. No, no, no. “I can’t see outta these.” And out of everything in this goddamn room, those glasses seem the most familiar.

I don’t think as the fork burns into my hand, letting my mind run on pure rage. They were stupid to unbind me, and now I am going to make them pay. I am going to kill every last fucking one of them. Monsters. Goddamn monsters. It’s all a blur, and I just sort of let my body guide its own way through the motions. Eyes seeking out its prey, I push away from the table, fork almost bending in my grip. But they killed her. They deserve this. I will kill them all. Every last fucking one.

It’s a madhouse in my mind, filling with unwanted images of everyone who I have lost. Just fuels my rage, makes me whole. This anger. This is what they should have served me. This is what I hunger for. I’m not even sure where I am anymore, not even sure if I have finished them off with my metal fork. Shit, that will be a fucking story to tell. No one will believe it, though. That’s why I need to make sure Levi’s okay so that he will be able to back me up. And Erwin. God, I wonder what’s bleeding in those eyes now. It makes me smile in the chaos. Makes me happy that I am going to get us out of here. That I’m—

It’s the gunshot that makes me come back to earth.

It’s the lack of pain that tells me I’ve done something terribly wrong.

It’s Levi’s scream that confirms it.

Mikasa once explained to me that bad things happened to good people. I always chalked it up to her bullshit mothering, but she was right. If anything, it is the good people who suffer the most. Those who are so selfless. So brave. I don’t know why Mr. Higher Power decided that the world should work that way, but then again, why are we living through a fucking apocalypse? She said touché, and I counted that a point in my score column.

However, I have always wondered: am I a good person? Obviously, you want to say that you are. I mean, who wakes up and looks in the mirror happy that they are a bad person? Well, I’m sure there are some sick fucks out there who do, but beside the point. I like to think that I am a good person, decent at least. I’ve had my share of traumas, watching my mother get ripped apart before my eyes. Damn, now if that doesn’t classify my status in at least ‘okay he’s sort of alright’ then I don’t know what does. But even though I know I’m not the best person in the world, I like to think that I’ve made a difference. That my actions have helped better this shitty world. Maybe they have. Maybe they haven’t. I guess I will only know when I meet my own end and find out if the ring of fire is legit or not (Thank you, Ms. Springer).

But I do feel bad for the good people out there. Because, as much as I might bitch and moan about my life, they really do have it rough. Keeping that morality and living in this world isn’t easy. And Mikasa and I agreed that the reason that there aren’t many good people left in the world is because their struggles tend to get them killed. Ergo, they are all dead. God, that sounds fucking depressing. But we figured that it was the truth. That at least the majority of them have passed over to the other side. And we were actually jealous of them. That they got to go out being such kind spirits, as cheesy as that sounds. But maybe we were just pissed that they were freed from this world and onto
something greater.

Probably.

I’m shaking as I take in the scene across the table, not quite believing what has just played out before me. *Erwin would be proud.* “No…” It’s a whisper on my lips something that gets lost within the strangled sob threatening to leap from my throat. Something that has already accepted what my mind refuses to confirm. I can’t believe it, I won’t believe it. This couldn’t happen to him. Anyone else, not him. He’s so fucking strong, so fucking brave. *Erwin is truly a marvel.* “No…” The fork drops from my hand as I begin a phantom walk over to him, mind too lost in this haze to even register everything that’s going on. It’s only when I take in his posture does it hit me in full force. *Hope is only reserved for people like Erwin Smith.* “No!” My knees buckle before I can steady myself, sending me to the ground as I frantically try to claw my way up the lifeless form lying face first on the table. *You couldn’t kill that bastard with a fucking bullet to the head.* “Erwin, please. No, no, no.” My fingers dig into his shoulders as I lift him up, shaking him like some kid angry at a vending machine. “Erwin!” My rattling grows more desperate, the ultimatum settling on me quick. “Erwin, wake up! Just wake up, goddammit!” I’m probably bruising him, and I can just picturing that condescending look that he would give me as he studied the marks. Would probably ruffle my hair as well with his good hand, because that just seems so fucking Erwin-esque.

“You c-can’t…” I don’t even realize how hard I am crying until my vision starts to blur. Until my shoulders start to shake. “P-please, Erwin. Please, don’t go.” Begging has never suited me, but right now I don’t give a shit. My face is pressed into his neck as I pull myself into him, not even minding the scratch of the barbed wire against my clothes. “Please.” I murmur it into his ear, thinking that maybe I’m wrong. That maybe there isn’t a hole in the center of his forehead and that those eyes are now fully living up to their previous title of dead and empty. And for some reason, I think of Armin and how scared and afraid he was before he died.

I wonder if Erwin was scared as I hold his body in my arms.

“Don’t leave.” He’s starting to get colder, the warmth steadily exiting his body. And I guess that’s just one more ‘fuck you’ from the guy upstairs. It doesn’t stop my sobbing, though, hot tears running dirty tracks down my face as I press into Erwin’s cooling frame. I haven’t looked at Levi once, haven’t wanted to. I know what I will find there, and to be honest, I would rather avoid it as long as I can. Which is complete bullshit, but I can’t be strong all the time. I can’t—I just want to do the right thing. For once, I want to make the right decision. *I want to be happy.* But that is asking so much. It’s asking too much. As I’m pulled away from Erwin, I realize this. As I’m dragged down back into the basement, I understand this. And as I finally catch a glimpse at those silver eyes, I loathe this.

I just want to be happy.

*I just want him to be happy.*

Chapter End Notes

Please do not kill me _._. So, I think I know how I am ending this. Because as much as I love WYE, I don’t want it to go on to an extremely lengthy amount of words (it’s already a ton). But I have (mostly) everything planned out, I just need to finalize the ending. I’m not putting a set amount of chapters on here, because to be honest, I have no idea how many chapters it will take to finish up WYE... I just know where I’m going
now ahaahah. For sure there is one more major 'arc' after this that will probably consume a few chapters. After that, though, it will be looking towards the end. So, I guess I will try to aim that WEY will be finished by the end of this year? Maybe heading a little into 2015? Idk but yeah... soooo how about them cannibals, eh? Ahahahah, if it makes anyone feel better, this is one of the things I have planned since day one. So, I didn't add it just for needless angst.

Thanks to all the kudos/comments! You guys are the lifeforce behind this fic!

Thank you, Stephanie, for beta-ing this!

If you have any questions, feel free to ask me on Tumblr (although I am not on there as much as usual anymore). I am also tracking the tag 'fic: what's eating you' on there, so if you make any fanart (hnmmmmmmmmggggggggggggggg) or anything related to WEY, tag it so I can give you my first born.

Tumblr:
fuzzyporcupine.tumblr.com

FANMIX
ALL FANART
I’m scared. It’s a quiet kind of fear that has drifted over me. Something that increases with every passing second, every minute. Hours. I wish I knew what to do. Wish I knew the answers to how to escape this unfathomable nightmare; but my mind has decided its sole purpose, and obviously helping me get out of this situation isn’t it.

My eyes flutter shut as I bring my head back to lean against the pole I’m comfortably connected to. Comfortably, heh, glad you’re still with me conscience. Stuttered breaths pass over my lips as I try to bring feeling back to my numbed fingers, squeezing and clenching in some silent guarantee to myself that I will have another chance at freedom. That I shouldn’t allow my body to become too friendly with this captivity lest I find a way to get us out of here. I’m sure that this mangled hope inside of me is nothing to bet on, sure that it’s just my relentless determination that is forcing my mind to believe that such a hope still exists.

That it didn’t die right along with Erwin Smith.

My jaw clenches. Stupid. So fucking stupid. I’m positive that if I had anymore tears left to shed then they would be marking my filthy cheeks right now. So fucking stupid. It’s all I can do to believe that I did the right thing in trying to fight. Unlike every time before, Levi hasn’t said anything to reassure me that I made the right decision. And I know he’s here, the man being brought down and secured to the pole beside me shortly after my own binding. I haven’t tried to speak to him, figuring that if he has anything to say to me then it will be his voice that breaks this damning silence, not mine. I’ve done enough today.

I swallow hard, wincing at the dry scrape of my throat as it constricts around my gulp. They haven’t returned since we were abandoned down here, leaving us with only the putrid smells of the tortured dead and our own breaths to keep us company. Like I said, it’s a quiet kind of fear.

Any moment, I am expecting that basement door to fly open. For them to choose one of us to set to the fire. God, I hope it’s me. Because even though my faith in surviving this is diminishing by the second, there is still a voice in the back of my mind that is telling me that Levi can, will, make it out of this alive. That I was never destined to meet my end by the slack jaws of an undead, but of the slickened lips of a different breed of monster. It’s kind of poetic if you really think about it.

Levi’s voice sounds rough, coarse when he finally opens his mouth to speak. So fucking broken. Sounds like he was a past convict that swore himself to silence during his life sentence. That this is the first time in twenty years that he’s spoken a word. Sounds like he would rather bask in this silence, but realizes that I’m going fucking crazy swimming in it. “Why?” Why what? Why didn’t I stop him from walking into this trap? Why couldn’t I control my temper? Why did I get Erwin killed? They are all great candidates for what Levi’s thinking, but then again, the man is an enigma.

“Why did you save me?” My breath hitches in my throat as I turn to him. He is a faint outline against the shades of black, but I know he is looking at me, too. Expectant. That’s the tone of his voice. And it makes me wish that my suffering in this stillness wasn’t so obvious.

I am surprised. It isn’t a question I had been expecting, not that I was expecting much to begin with.
Honestly, I figured that Levi preferred to fester in his stillness. So, I’m sort of at a loss. “I…” My own voice sounds just as raw, the sobbing that only recently fizzled out draining what was left of my vocal cords. And how do I answer this? It’s difficult, almost impossible to put into words, and I feel like I would be able to explain myself so much better with action. If only I wasn’t tethered to a post then that would be easy. But, unfortunately, ‘easy’ and ‘the apocalypse’ have never seemed to go together. “I couldn’t just leave you behind.” There’s a crude honesty adhered to my reply. It’s something that leaves no room for regret or remorse. Something that says I would do it again in a heartbeat. I hear him shuffle next to me, see his head lean up against the pole in a position I recently abandoned.

“You should have left me.” There’s an acidic edge to his voice that sweeps away any sympathy in his tone and replaces it with an unabashed anger that I am all too familiar with. “You’re so stupid. You’re so fucking stupid.” I feel my fists begin to tighten behind me, can feel my jaw clench, my eyes narrow. He turns to me, and even in the darkness I can see the flick of silver illuminate in the shade. See the way his eyes have tapered dangerously in my direction, the way his lip is curled. And maybe the shadows aren’t so dark after all. Maybe I wish they were. “I should have died out there. I should be craving goddamn guts right now. But you just had to be a fucking hero, didn’t you?” He sneers, turning away from me in apparent disgust as I swallow his words.

My nails are chewing the inside of my palm, carving angry crescents into the soft skin as I try to rationalize with him. As I try to tell myself that the reason he’s saying these things is because he is afraid and doesn’t really wish that I let the walkers eat him alive out there. I refuse to believe that.

“So I guess that makes you a liar then, huh?” I can practically feel his eyebrows rise at this. “You told me back in that goddamn hospital to not have any regrets, and if you think for one fucking minute that I regret saving your ungrateful ass then you’re wrong. You…” My anger filters into a sober guilt as I consider that fate may decide this to be our last conversation, and to be honest, I really don’t want to spend it raging about an unchangeable decision. “You are a good—”

“Don’t say it,” Levi cuts me off before I can finish my sentence, voice tight and tense. He’s not going to budge on this. And what can I do? Argue with him until one of us is ultimately placed on the same chopping block as Erwin? Let him continue to believe that he was unworthy of saving? Is still unworthy? “I’m not a good person, Eren. There aren’t any good people in this world. You’re either living or dead. That’s it. There is no in between.” It’s so black and white now, isn’t it? In this world, this life. You are one or the other. At least according to Levi. But who could argue with him? Maybe he is right. I think about Erwin’s lifeless body laying across that scarred dining room table.

Maybe he is right.

Levi’s heavy sigh twists my vision back around to watch him bring his head back up to rest against the pole. “You should have left me.” My fists unclench at the melancholy lacing his voice, hang limply behind my back as I take in how broken this man has truly become. How hopeless. “You wouldn’t be here.” It hits me like a bag full of bricks, and as I meet his weary gaze I understand exactly how he feels. And it fucking kills me.

“I’m sorry.” Because it’s the only thing I can ever say. The only thing that ever feels within my rights to give. An apology. A repentance. A wish that I could make this world better. That I could make him happy. I just want him to be happy. Just want to see that smile pull over those lips. To kiss it all away. To run my fingers through his hair as I laugh against his mouth.

I want that.

“Stop… just…” He sighs again, sounding so tired. Like I am an unruly child who he is chastising for the umpteenth time about getting into fights on the playground. “Stop fucking apologizing.” I stare at
him through the darkness, casting my eyes across his abused frame. The want to make this better is so strong in my gut, but along with the desire to fix this comes the guilt that I shouldn’t have allowed any of this to happen. The apologies apparently unwanted, but still sticking to the ends of my lips. I dart my tongue over them in an attempt to wipe them away, also to smooth the cracking skin because I guess not everything revolves around my unsaid regrets. Not everything is so cryptic.

“Stop acting like you don’t give a shit about your own life.” I say it before my mind can nestle the thought back down into the less sensible part of my brain. The hefty silence that follows tells me that Levi doesn’t know what to say. So, I speak for him. “Someone once told me that this world was shit. That there wasn’t anything left to hope for in this place. But then he told me that I was worth fighting for. I didn’t believe him. Not at first. To be honest, I didn’t know what to think. But then I realized that he was right. That I am worth something in this shitty world. That I have someone to fight for, too.” I turn to him, finding his gaze exactly where I figured it would be. “You.”

And in all the chaos, all the bullshit, I manage a smile, because he looks like he needs to see it.

The past is a weird thing. It’s like that one crazy uncle that no one ever truly understands. He will come and show up at your house at family reunions even though your mom is pretty sure she never sent him an invitation. She doesn’t have the heart to tell him to leave, though, considering the worst he does is drink all the beer and tell the kids nonsensical stories about how he once evaded an entire brigade of police officers down in Tijuana. And no matter how much your mother tries to reason with him, he’ll never change. He’ll be back next year with the same old stories and the same endless thirst for Budweiser and hot dogs.

The past is the same as that deadbeat uncle. It’s never going to change, and eventually you just have to accept that. Either you spend your time regretting it, or you can decide that maybe that is just the way your uncle is. I chose to accept it back in Trost Medical. I decided that there is more to this life than the past. More than just a dead set of eyes and a blank face. There is hope. For a better tomorrow, a better ending. A better life. It’s something that Levi taught me, that Erwin proved to me. That the past may be written in stone, but the future is an open book, blank and untouched. That hope… hope can be found even in the darkest of places, in the hardest of hearts. That we all have something to fight for even if it kills us. Even if that something draws our last breath. That it was worth it, and it’s a valiant death we had. I can’t lose that, and as I stare at Levi I hope that he will not, either. That he realizes how much he is worth. Especially in my eyes.

That he is my hope.

“Whoever told you that is full of shit, Bright Eyes.” There’s a slight smirk catching the corner of his lips, and I know that maybe he hasn’t lost it after all.

“Probably.”

A heavy sigh passes over his lips, the man so worn. He just needs a break, we both do. Just one day of respite from the horrors this new world has wrought down upon us. Just one day to be unafraid. To be able to bask in the warmth of each other’s arms instead of the fear of the unseen terrors. It’s really not that much to ask, but then again, it is. Then again, this isn’t a world for favors and kindness. “I envy you.” A look of surprise that I’m sure he can’t make out worms its way onto my face. “The light at the end of your tunnel is always so bright.” A hollow laugh echoes into the air as he tilts his head back. “Even though you know we are fucked, you still think we can get out of this.” My eyes drop to the floor as his words wrap around me. It sounds so frivolous hearing it from someone else. Thinking about an escape, a rescue. And maybe it is. Maybe all of my hope and my faith will be for nothing. Maybe I should have spent time placing it on things like god and a cure.

“We will.” I’ve never been strong like Mikasa, never been smart like… like Armin. But I’m
determined. And determination may not stand a chance against a bullet or a set of teeth, but fuck if I will go down without a fight. If I will just lie down and die like some livestock ready for the slaughter. Levi looks at me with no ridicule, no prejudice. It’s a grey despondency taking over his features as his eyes burrow into mine. “You can’t give up on me now.” I whisper the plead in some desperate attempt to make him see, to pull him out of this resignation. To bring him back to me. “You can’t.”

His gaze releases me as he drops back into the darkness, body contouring against the pole behind him. My stomach drops as I watch him turn from me, from the hope that we can survive. The words are murmured against the backdrop of shadows, barely audible if not for the eerie silence of the basement, “Tell me a story.” His voice cracks as the request moves against his lips. And I don’t want to open my mouth, because I am sure that nothing I say will be sufficient. That no ‘story’ will be able to conquer the quelling fear that I know is brewing inside his chest, the same one storming in mine. If he could just believe in me, just have faith that, if anything, I will make sure he makes it out of here alive. I think that some part of him believes it, but then again, I think that the majority of him is living in this state of unseen fear. Something that is lurking around the corner and just waiting to strike him down. That part is the most realistic, most logical, and he would be a fool to not take refuge up with it. “Please.” So desperate, so defeated.

God, what have I done?

My breath is shaky as I start, trying so hard to keep a semblance of my courage together, “O-one summer, Armin and I decided that we were going to make our own ocean.” His shoulders shift as I begin, slightly relaxing under the rhythm of my voice, “We were only seven or eight, so we didn’t have the money to buy anything. But Armin…” My heart suddenly feels very heavy in my chest as I think of the shenanigans I got into with Armin as a child. Of our dirty faces and hands that always left my mother shaking her head and sending us to the bathroom with a lengthy chastisement. Goddamnit. “Armin… he was smart. He was so damn brilliant, Levi.” My eyes clench shut, because this is difficult. I thought it would be easier, I thought… I thought I had forgiven myself.

“Erwin and him would have gotten along well.” I see his shoulders twitch, and I decide that mentioning the man’s name will probably not settle any wavering feelings of doubt Levi has about surviving this.

Clearing my throat, I try to start again, “We… w-we had a sandbox, and mom used to store the extra bags of sand beside the house. Armin thought we could use those to create the shore.” A small smile pulls at my lips as I picture the scene, our chubby fingers grabbing excitedly at the bags with the picture of long awaited shores at our disposal. “We brought one bag into the kitchen and dumped it.” This gets Levi to look back at me, a thin eyebrow raised in curiosity. “Then we took water from the sink and poured around it. Mom was so fucking mad when she got home.” His lips twist upwards as he listens to me talk, and I can’t help but wonder why he is giving up so easy. Why when happiness can be so simple to find? “She donated our sandbox to the local daycare, and I remember crying for days.” I release a quiet laugh, the sound much louder against the silence of the room.

“I think I would have liked your mom.” He’s looking directly at me now, no longer hesitating with that defeated stare. And it makes me feel better. That’s a curious thing to feel whilst tied to a shoddy pole, wrists skinned with rope burn. That I feel better. But as he looks at me with a certain sparkle in his eye, I can’t help the fluttering in my stomach. The motions that tell me that maybe, just maybe, we will both be okay. I have to believe it. Because if I don’t, then who will?

“I think she would have liked you, too.” A softness overtakes his features as my statement falls over him. It’s something rare to see, something that I’m positive Levi doesn’t allow to appear often. It makes him seem too vulnerable, too exposed. But, god, what I would do to wake up to that every morning. To see him pressed against my chest as the morning sun filters in between the blinds.
Domesticity. It’s still in my top ten things I want to accomplish before I leave this world.

“Eren,” My name catches my attention as I refocus my attention on the man before me, “I believe you.” Something warm blossoms in my chest, and I find this action even stranger than the improvability of my mood. Something like…

_Fear._

Because that basement door is wide open.

The footsteps are thunderous as they trounce down the stairs, dark and foreboding. I feel myself stiffen against the pole, because even though I will gladly spread myself across the pyre in order to ensure Levi’s safety, I am not ready to die. I don’t think anyone really is. It’s something no one likes to think about. Death. Something that everyone likes to assume will never pull them under. But Death is sneaky, has a hold on you since day one. And it’s slowly pulling you down, slowly submerging you in waters that you will never rise from. How are you supposed to accept this? That one day you will be nothing more than a figment in someone else’s mind. Or even worse, you will cease to exist at all. That everyone you knew, anyone who could pass along your legacy is gone as well. Or maybe that you had no one. That you died alone. Helpless. Scared. Is this my fate? To die underneath the toothy grin of a satanic evil? To be consumed by these twisted creatures?

I am not ready to die, but I’m not afraid.

_I’m very afraid._

I’m temporarily blinded as a bright light is waved in front of my face, signaling that the monster has made it to the bottom of the staircase. “Hello, Sunshine.” I try to regulate my heart beat to a normal pace. I really don’t want to go out with a heart attack, although that does seem more preferable than to be eaten by these maniacs. A toothy grin is flashed in my direction as a meaty set of fingers wrenches my chin upwards. “You ain’t been very good company, Sunshine.” The fingers dig into my skin, dirty nails leaving red indentations against the flesh. “I think we got a remedy for that, though.” That filthy grin beams at me once more. “But you ain’t gonna like it.” Something akin to dread settles in my gut as I watch the monster’s eyes travel over to Levi. Watch it scan him like its next meal.

_Its next meal._

_Fuck._

“Hoss, get your ass up here and help me!” The bigger one’s voice echoes like nails on a chalkboard down the stairs. _Grinding._ It turns its gaze back to me before releasing my chin to give my cheek a playful smack. I sneer, because that’s the only thing I can do. God, if only my hands weren’t tied, I’d sink my thumbs so far deep— “Hoss!”

“Comin’.” Its footsteps are heavy as it turns away from me, marching back up the stairs. In my gut, I know what’s going to happen. Wish I didn’t. Wish I could live in a state of ignorant bliss instead of sitting here restrained with the knowledge of their plan. That they are going to kill Levi right in front of me. And there’s really nothing I can do to stop it, is there? I’m bound to a pole, hands tied like a pig set to roast. I have nothing left to my disposal, nothing but my big mouth, which has never really proved to be very— wait. My big, fat mouth. And, suddenly, I know how I’m going to get us out of here. How I am going to save Levi.

The steps creak painfully underneath the weight of the monsters climbing down. They sound labored if their arduous breathing is any indication. For a moment, I am left wondering why, the beasts
finding their way down into this nightmarish cesspit easily beforehand. But then I see it, and I am reminded exactly what it is that’s holding us captive.

“He’s fuckin’ heavy.” It’s the first time I’ve seen him since that bullet entered his skull, and I’m not really thankful for the reunion. All the color has been drained from his skin, blond hair stained crimson with a hole in the back of his skull to match. It isn’t the Erwin Smith I am used to, and it’s definitely not how I last wanted to picture him, cold and empty. Maybe his death was a saving grace as I am sure he was already past the point of demise, regardless. Maybe he was thankful. But, then again, maybe behind that glossy glare was a piece of hope that he would make it out of here alive. I can’t believe that Erwin would ever lose all hope. So, maybe I did kill him after all.

Maybe I’m the monster.

But what else could I be? There’s no place left in this world for the person I used to be. It’s a new age, bred for the merciless and unforgiving. Those are the true victors in this devil’s playground, those who can easily cast humanity aside in favor of their own selfish gains. Good people die. Erwin Smith is dead. Haunting knowledge that’s no doubt going to plague my mind like the lecherous leech I know it is. Hands clean? Filthy. A final exclamation of this world’s true intentions. Of what it has allowed itself to fall into. This unending bloodshed of limbs and minds. Insanity. Is that who I should become? Some boy, man, who is unaffected by the darkness surrounding him? A creature of its own benediction in the night? Something to be feared? The unadulterated fear previously plaguing my bones transforms into some needy lust for vengeance as I watch Erwin’s lifeless body being tossed heedlessly on to a bloodied table. Some desire to rip each of these monsters limb from limb and cherish in their screams.

It’s time to stop running.

Time to face this.

Become the monster.

“Take care of it.” I only catch the tail end of the conversation, the larger one already making its way back up the flight of stairs. The other turns to me, that knowing grin reattaching itself onto its face. But I’m no longer afraid, no longer that same scared little boy. Monster.

How fast Eren Jaeger has changed.

I would match its smile if my face wasn’t so concentrated on controlling the deathly glare.

“Sunshine, I told you that’s not a pretty face.” This is who I am supposed to be, right? This is who I’m supposed to be, right? Right? I’m so much stronger than it knows, and I am going to tear it apart. Become the monster, Eren. “You’ll learn soon enough.” The irony of that statement is almost incredible. Fucking pigs. Because I’m not the one going to the slaughter. Not today.

I’m focused on the wall ahead of me, mind staring blankly into the darkness like some sort of crazed maniac. But I see where it's heading. I see who it has its filthy, fucking hands on.

“Don’t touch him.” The voice echoing throughout the room cannot be my own, sounding too calm, so dangerous. But this is what I’ve become, isn’t it? Monster. And it doesn’t impress, the creature merely shooting me a snide look as it fists its fingers deep into Levi’s hair. You’ll learn soon enough, right? “Don’t touch him.” This state of false control is unnerving, like I’m watching myself from the outside looking in. Like something is consuming me. I can’t come back from this. Monster. “I will kill you.”

This gets its attention.
“Really, Sunshine? And how do you reckon that you’re gonna do that?” Its breath is passing crudely over my face, smells a lot like death and probably a little bit of human remains. “Cause the way I see it, you’re tied up and I’m free range. Unless you think that pretty little face is gonna send me over.” It laughs, and I’ve never wanted to smother myself in red so badly. “Then I got some bad news for you, Sunshine.” My gaze rises slowly, and I’m not afraid.

I’m just fucking angry.

“Same way I killed the other one.” Its eyes widen, because it knows exactly which one I’m talking about. The shift in the air is so sudden, so rapid. And even though I am the one restrained to a pole, I still feel like I have the upper hand. It looks like it’s trying to control what’s bubbling on the surface, but I know sooner or later that anger will spill over, the emotion being the only reminder that this used to be something I could consider human. It’s pulling and tugging at the monster’s face, yearning to unleash itself upon me. And I’m just waiting for that dam to break.

I’m counting on it.

It doesn’t know how to deal with its rage, the only probable outlet being its fetish of murdering human beings. And knowing that it can’t kill me is probably doing wonders for its already fucked up mentality. But that’s what I want. For it to push past those barriers and break this trust. “I killed him.” The smirk I’ve been holding back ever since I opened my mouth is finally allowed to break apart my lips. “And I’m going to kill you, too.”

The monster has nothing to say. Nothing but action, because I’ve literally left it speechless. It whips out its knife, but I’m still not afraid. I can’t be anymore. Have to be strong. Have to save him.

“No! You want me, you fucking want me!” They probably should have gagged him again, because it doesn’t necessarily make what I’m trying to do any easier. “Take me, not him!” I glance over to Levi, his face so torn, so broken. But I have to save him. “Take me.” It’s a cracked whisper, desperate and pleading. But the monster isn’t listening, focused solely on its rage and desire to have me dead. It’s behind me now, working on the ropes binding my chaffed wrists. I can’t tell exactly when I start drowning out Levi’s pleas, or maybe the man just stops asking all together. Maybe he realizes that trying to convince this monster is a hopeless task. Either way, the only thing I can focus on is the strong grip around my arm and the shimmer of the blade in the monster’s hand.

I hear the clang of the knife connecting with the tabletop before my body collides harshly with the metal table, nothing besides the cold plate of silver left to cushion my fall. A sense of confusion is pulling over my senses, no doubt echoing from the crash my head just made with the butchering slab. But I only have one shot at this. One chance. And if I fail then we both die. And I have to save him.

Save Levi.

Fingers desperately grasp around the edge of the table, clenching and unclenching in the suffocating darkness like an anchor cast into the middle of the sea. Almost hopeless but still glimmering with a single shred of faith. The monster is stomping towards me, steps loud and angry as it encloses on my squirming form. I know it’s here. I saw it. Saw the flash of silver in the corner of my eye. And, suddenly, light. All too familiar. Stohess. The florescent bulb swings precariously above my head, back and forth, back and forth. The rhythm exactly the same, though the situation a little different. Except not really. They were still trying to use me, just in a different, less sinister way. Or maybe they were just as bad, just as evil. Those who fed the flock of sheep to the undead instead of consuming the flesh themselves. They are both monsters in their own rights, I suppose. One just leaves a worse taste in the mouth.

A hand wraps around my throat as my thoughts of morality are brought to an abrupt halt, a face
written with fury encompassing my vision.

“You little bitch.” Taking me out like this seems so volatile, so unhuman. A pleasant reminder of what is currently squeezing the air out of my lungs. “You fuckin’ bitch.” Another hand seizes my throat, gripping tighter and tighter until my vision starts to speckle with white spots. ‘Imma’ let you turn. Then Imma’ kill your little friend. Gonna enjoy it. Make it slow.” But I can’t fail. I have to save him.

Save Levi.

My hand reaches out blindly, fingers scrabbling incessantly across the smooth plane of metal. I know it’s here. I saw it. Glimmering hope. Probably only have a few more seconds before I pass out and the monster above me rattles my corpse into a state of the undead.

Save Levi.

My vision flicks to the side, something in the back of my mind telling me that I will be able to see it again. But I don’t. I see him. Cold, lifeless. Dead. Erwin Smith. Staring at me blankly from the other table. He’s probably so disappointed in me right now, probably could have thought of something better than getting myself and Levi killed. Erwin Smith. Glimmering hope. I wish I could look away. I know the seconds until I enter my early grave are passing way too quickly. But I can’t. It’s like he is still trying to save me, long dead and a hole straight through his brain. Still trying to convince me that his plan will ensure our safety. That in this world there is still faith. That we will make it another day. And, suddenly, my fingers reach something that feels a lot like hope.

I don’t think. I just react, using all the strength I have left in my body to plunge the knife towards its body.

A crimson circle grows outwards on its chest as its hands loosen their hold around my neck, allowing me to take in the breath of air that had been eluding me for what seems like hours. It’s sweet in my lungs, a warm hello back from the precipice of death that I was previously straddling. Am still straddling until I can get myself and Levi out of this hellhole. Suddenly, those calloused hands leave me completely, opting to grasp softly at their owner’s chest in some bizarre fashion. Like they are discovering their body for the first time. The last time. That pool of red steadily soaks through the thin, cotton shirt its wearing as the blood starts to drip softly onto my own chest. Its gaze is resolute on my face, eyes wide with a kind of surprise I haven’t seen since I saw Armin cowering in that godforsaken hospital. Stubby fingers begin to hastily grasp at the shirt, the red soon covering the tips in a bittersweet beauty that has me praising the fool’s ignorance in underestimating me.

“Eren…” And I remember who I’m sacrificing my sanity for. I turn to him, feeling every bit as frantic as when the monster tossed me onto the table. My hands push at its shoulders, the body above me heavy with its wide frame and large gullet. It falls back easier than expected, its eyes now directed towards the blood still pooling from its wound. Still alive. And for all my talk of humanity and morality, I am a monster. I spot a rusted blade beside Erwin’s body, stained red with god knows how many victims’ remains. Is this what they used to prepare their meals? To carve the last bit of humanity out of themselves as they feasted upon the flesh of the innocent? Maybe this is poetic justice then. Not immorality. No, I’m wrong. Immorality would be to let these monsters suffer, to show them the same kindness that they have shown however many poor souls. It would be fair, wouldn’t it? To let them taste retribution? But I am already walking such a fine line. Monster or human? Villain or hero? Neither? I wrap my fingers around the blade, and I know what path to choose.

It’s still gazing down at the knife protruding from its chest when I pause in front of it. “I should let you turn.” It meets my venomous glare then, eyes hazing and already losing their luster. It won’t be
soon now. “It’s what you deserve.” My lip curls as the words roll off my tongue, every syllable bringing me closer and closer to that line I don’t want to cross. *But would love to cross.* Love to beat it within an inch of its life and then beat it again. Bathe myself in its blood, its sin. Become that monster.

Its voice is raspy when it opens its mouth, the last words hanging on its lips like a dark prayer. “We… we did what we had to survive.” Its reasoning sickens me, makes me want to… want to… My grip on the knife tightens. “We’re the same, Sunshine.” A twisted smile etches itself onto its face. “We’re the same, and you know it.” And in that moment, with those words, I am effectively reminded of what kind of monster it is. Of what kind of monster I could become. That I don’t need to bring down upon my own form of righteousness, own torture. That just ending the creature is enough. Because if there is a Hell, it will be burning in it. And that’s satisfaction enough.

“No, we’re not.”

And I end it.

Once, twice, three times. Up and down until it becomes robotic, my arm moving on its own volition as it brings itself down over and over. Covered in a sheen of red, I slowly rise from the ground where I had followed the monster as I brought its end. I’m shaky, hand twitching as it cradles the bloodied blade. Shaky and a little unnerved, feeling like I just crossed over a line that I was never supposed to be beside. Feeling like I might have unearthed something deadly, something monstrous. It’s like the walls in my mind are closing around me. Like everything is happening way too fast and way too slow at the same time. I look down at the blade and, in turn, at the unrecognizable monster beneath me.

I did this.

But I would do anything, *anything* to save his life.

*Save Levi.*

“Eren…” My head whips around at the sound of his voice, cracked and uneasy. He’s looking at me through tired eyes, face stained with dirt and blood as he peers through black fringe. I pocket the blade, bending down to pull the more convenient weapon from the monster’s chest. It exits with a slick shuck that has my skin crawling, deadly and wretched as the deceased creature beneath me. And I decide that it’s a decent retribution. Decide that as long as he’s safe that I don’t care how horrifying the consequences are. That I just need to keep him safe at all costs. That I need to save him.

*Levi.*

My legs go weak as I make my way over to him, knees shaking as I try to keep myself upright. My hand feels numb around the knife, almost as if my mind is trying to will away its existence. To make me believe that none of these atrocities happened. It’s utter bullshit, and I wish that I could convince myself otherwise, but I can’t. Because it’s stained on my hands, my soul. Good people. Bad people. Levi was right.

The living and the dead.

That’s what is left of this world now.

“It’s okay,” I say as I reach him, my own voice breaking against the words. And it’s so hard. So hard to smile under these conditions. To tell him that everything is going to be alright. Because things
can’t ever be alright anymore, can they? Or maybe I’ve just been getting the shit end of the stick throughout this whole apocalypse. Maybe there will be an eventual upside, and we just have to find it. I bring the knife through his bindings, the cuts a lot smoother than when Levi tried to rescue Erwin considering this blade has been kept pristine. My hand wraps around his wrist as the last of the ropes falls to the ground, and pulls him into my chest as my knees finally give out beneath me. “It’s okay.” Whispered into his hair like I’m trying to convince myself, too. Trying to tell myself it’s alright. “It’s okay.” That we can come back from this. That I can come back from this.

“I know.” The words float in the air as his breath falls across my neck, his hands gripping tightly at my shirt as if he lets go he’ll lose me forever. But I’m not going anywhere. Lifting his head off my chest, Levi stares at me with eyes like fire, lit up with a new sense of vigor, of a new tomorrow.

Of hope.

“Now let’s get the fuck out of here.”

Chapter End Notes

See? Not everything in this fic is terrible. Ahahahahh, no but really I feel like 90% of this fic is gut wrenching sadness. So, I guess it’s nice to have a chapter where things are looking up for a change. If you have any questions, feel free to leave a comment or ask me over on Tumblr. It may take me awhile, but I will answer you eventually.

Thanks for reading! You guys are amazing!

Tumblr:
http://fuzzyporcupine.tumblr.com

Thank you, Stephanie, for beta-ing this!

FANMIX
ALL FANART
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Life has a weird way of making you realize how shitty it can truly be. Like failing that math test you studied all night for (looking at you, Shadis). Letting you run out of toilet paper in a public stall. Oh, and zombie apocalypses. I couldn’t possibly forget that one. But I have obviously done something terrible in the eyes of Mr. Higher Power for him to add ‘stuck in a house full of cannibals during a zombie apocalypse’ to that list. Shit, that sounds like a B-Grade horror movie at best, not my life. But, alas, the pungent smells surrounding me are an all too familiar reminder of where I am. And who I’m with.

He clings to me like a lost lifeline, his ankle still swollen and probably a little worse for wear after his encounter with these humanoid monsters. Both our arms are coated in crimson; mine from my last kill and his from the vicious claw of barbed wire. It’s a sick world that I’ve allowed him to walk into. Something that he should have never bared witness, something I should have protected him from. But it is too late for regrets now. It’s time to, as Levi said it best, ‘get the fuck out of here’.

I tighten my grip around his waist as he hobbles forward, a slight grimace lacing his features with every step. We deserve just one break. Just one day where our world isn’t going to shit. I know it’s a lot to request during an apocalypse, but I figure things really can’t get much worse, so what is the harm in asking? My gaze briefly falls to the side, catching Erwin’s body on that cold, metal slab, muscled arm lying lifeless off the side. I quickly divert my vision straight ahead, not to Levi and his tattered, bloodied frame because that’s equally as horrifying.

Just straight ahead.

Just keep going.

Keep moving.

Keep him safe.

It runs through my mind like a mantra, repeating itself over, and over, and over until it becomes the one constant. The one thing that I have to accomplish. Maybe it’s stupid, deadly, to care this much about someone else. I told myself before that dependency was dangerous. That it only led to things like broken hearts and bloodied hands. Maybe I was right. Maybe this is going to kill me in the end. But, for some reason, I don’t care. Call it stupidity, ignorance. I don’t care. I just want— need him safe.

That light is still flickering, still illuminating what could have been. Erwin’s body hasn’t moved, that’s obvious. But it looks different now. Doesn’t look so foreboding as it does hopeful. Something that I’d almost completely forgotten. And I could probably spend another eternity killing myself over his death, in some ways I know I will; but what I’m taking from the man isn’t an everlasting sorrow but a hope to survive, to live. It’s embedded in my veins, has always been there, granting me strength in the loneliest of places. Just took Erwin’s divine intervention to make me see how strong it truly is. That will to live.

I glance back to Levi when I feel his grip tighten. He’s not going to say anything, not going to tell me that he’s in pain, both physically and mentally. Because it’s not like Erwin only meant something to me. No, that’s the furthest thing from the truth, and it was sketched on Levi’s face the moment that
bullet cut Erwin’s life short. I know how deep these wounds run. I’ve experienced it, can still feel Armin’s blood trailing down my fingers. He probably needs, needed, time to get over this, because that look is still playing on his stoic features. Still pulling at that deep furrow in his brow. But that’s a luxury that we don’t have.

He hisses, and I just hold him tighter. “I got you.” The words come easy, like I wasn’t meant to say anything else to the man. And he just accepts it, leaning into me with more weight. We tremble together in the darkness, only broken by the fluorescent flicker of those menacing lights hanging over the metal tables. The silence of shadows has always felt suffocating, but somehow, the atmosphere has changed. And maybe that’s a stupid thing to think while still in the midst of a nightmare, but I’m no longer scared of the dark or what resides inside of it.

The stairs that once terrified me seem liberating, something like freedom. It sends a burst of excitement through my chest at the thought of escaping this place, what seemed like a pipe dream mere hours before. I don’t look back to either corpse as I take the first step, maybe I can think of it as liberating.

Something like freedom.

“I don’t deserve this.” I feel his gaze on me as I tug us up the stairs. “You.” And for a moment everything just stops. Because I know he means it. There is nothing but honesty in that stare. And, fuck, it scares the shit out of me. My fingers dig into him, trying to silently counter whatever war is raging up inside his head. He smiles, but it’s sad. Fucking lonely. For reasons I don’t understand considering we are on our way out of this hellhole. But then I see it, the way his eyes flicker to the scene behind my head. The way a certain agony fills those silver pools. I’m all he has left, aren’t I? Have been for a long time. And maybe he’s all I got, too. Kryptonite, remember? Fucking kryptonite.

“Are you the one who’s supposed to be telling me not to say stupid shit?” I smile, because that’s all I feel like I can do. Try to encourage him to accept that we all make mistakes, especially in this world. Even though I am sort of a hypocrite given that I tried to off myself less than a week ago. Is this what change feels like? Some holy reckoning in which you hold the power for once, to feel like you make a difference? Feels like we’re on a precipice, standing over the edge. And Levi is about to fall, just waiting for the wind to take him down. Arms wide, accepting it. Acceptance. And there I stand, changed. For all the better, worse, willing to make some kind of difference even if it kills me. Do I pull him back while I still have a chance, or let myself tumble alongside him?

Levi doesn’t answer me, strengthening some incessant pull in my gut that I’m just now realizing exists. So, I look ahead, because words will not heal these broken bones now, not yet anyway. Isn’t time supposed to do that? Or do we not have any left? A million thoughts race through my mind as we ease up the stairs, Levi being at the center of them all. Dependence, the heartless bitch.

I want to scream that I don’t need him, not to push him away. God, no don’t let him leave me. But to just give myself a sense of validation. To prove that I am worth something alone, as Eren Jaeger. Maybe that’s the pit in my stomach, the mindless control that Levi and I share between each other. Two souls intertwined. Now, that sounds like some bullshit.

We’re getting higher, that door closer. Freedom so close, but I guess I shouldn’t put all my eggs in one basket. Eggs break easily, spilling over with yolks once penetrated. They are fragile. Like hope. Something that burns bright in my chest, pulses with the strength of a million armies. Something that’s alight in Levi’s eyes, as well; even if he is dwelling on past mistakes. It’s the least we owe Erwin. To carry his torch, keep it burning strong.

It’s still lit as I reach out with my free hand to grab the doorknob, passes through the metal like a
flame. Scorches beneath my palm as I turn the handle. Freedom.

He’d be so proud of us.

When I open the door, I see nothing but dark figures in the shadows. It’s an eerie reminder of what we walked into, what we need to walk away from. I don’t know where the other monster is, but I am praying, begging, that it doesn’t find us. That maybe just this once, Mr. Higher Power will be on our side.

His footsteps are heavier than mine, loaded with the weight of his bum ankle and Erwin’s death. I try to help him as best as I can, but Levi is a lot heavier than he looks. If we weren’t trapped in this damn cabin, I’d probably tease him about it. He presses into me, a man just wanting to go home wherever home may be. So tired, so fucking tired. We just need this one break. Just this one opportunity to free ourselves from the rotted tendrils of this world, this fate. Shit, I’m too cryptic for an eighteen year old boy—man.

My free hand blindly reaches out into the dark, fingers clenching desperately around the open air. Like a prayer, hoping for some security in the form of broken furniture. I’ve placed my faith in lesser things.

It finds me, or rather I find it, in the form of a knocked knee as I collide with something wooden. Wooden is good. Wooden isn’t human. It wobbles nosily against the floorboards, and I’m holding my breath. I can tell Levi is, too, by the way he has gone ramrod stiff beside me. And we just wait in the shadows, because there is nothing else we can do. Like frightened mice hiding from the house cat. Going to fetch the cheese in order to avoid a desperate starvation only to earn dismemberment in the paws of the feline god. We’re the mice. The rodents. Dirty and filthy, scrambling alongside the floorboards. Sneaky. But we survive. Survival. Survival. Written deep in my bones, my blood. My soul. Something that’s long since been damned with what I’ve done. A damned rat. Fitting for the apocalypse, I guess.

Nothing comes.

Nothing but the creaks of an old shack and the shaky breaths of the prey. Or the hunters. Maybe we aren’t the mice after all.

I start to edge forward; because if they heard us, they would have already made an appearance. These things are smart, but they don’t plan ahead. They aren’t Erwin Smiths, Armin Arlerts. They react.

I react.

My hand moves along the edge of the wood, pulling us both towards the exit. To freedom. He’s shuffling close beside me, body pressed to mine like a second skin. And I’ve never seen him more vulnerable. More dependent on someone other than himself. It’s like he has finally accepted that there are no heroes in this world. Something he told me back when I tried to save the helpless woman from his old gang. That he can’t save them all. Like we’ve had to learn the same lesson. Mine with Armin and his with Erwin. I think of what I can say when the time’s right. Not just when we leave this place, but when there is finally a moment when he needs the comfort of my voice. What I can tell him to make the demons not seem so big.

I’ve never seen him cry.

There is an outline of light, so bright and beautiful. It beckons me from my place against the furniture, sparking something in my chest only comparable to pure, unadulterated joy. Like seeing a
parent return home from war. Unwrapping that toy you’ve always wanted on Christmas morning. And I’m probably being so selfish with my speed considering Levi’s handicap, but he doesn’t offer one groan of pain, letting me drag him along as we close in on the door.

And we’re so close.

I hate happiness, or at least the overbearing sense of it. The one that strangles you from the inside out with the feeling that everything is never going to be terrible or awful or disastrous in any way. That your life is fucking perfect, and sooner or later the angels are going to descend from the heavens to sing you a personal hallelujah. The kind that fills you with such an indescribable sense of security and safety. You’ll never be hurt. You’ll never feel pain. I hate it. Because when you crash down, your whole world comes with you. Everything breaks. Nothing is indestructible. And your world just shatters. Just fucking turns into a million goddamn pieces that you are left to put together, because fuck you and your dreams and your desires to just be happy.

I just want to be happy.

She still has them on, even though she said they didn’t fit her right. Of course they don’t, you stupid, stupid girl. And I want to rip them off her dirty face, take the chance I didn’t have before when I was being held at gunpoint at that table. But all I can do now is stand there with my eyes wide and mouth open as she gapes back at me.

It’s like a silent standoff, neither of us making a move in fear of something deadly. For me, it’s her voice. I know that I could end the girl, but not before she let out one last battle cry. But am I that monster? It’s one thing to kill an innocent, another entirely to kill a child. I know that she’s scared. It’s an emotion all too easy to see reflected in those eyes. That even in the darkness, I can see her tremble. Am I that monster? The kind that I witnessed back at that godforsaken hospital?

I think that maybe, just maybe I can reason with her, but I remember who she belongs to. That those things have no doubt raised her on a kill first, ask questions later motto.

I’ve learned so many things since this whole shitfest started. Learned the value of life. It used to be of a dollar, but I have seen what happens when people try to reason with that useless piece of paper. Thinking that it means a damn in this unforgiving world. I was in those camps; I saw how much they begged and pleaded for just a little more. That they could pay, but they were the weakest of us all. Those who couldn’t fathom a world where Mr. Franklin couldn’t clean up their mess. And god what a mess we got ourselves into.

Sometimes I wonder exactly what caused this turn of the century. It surely couldn’t have been the great divine just zapping the dead back to life. No, that’s too unrealistic, even for what I’ve seen. We had our theories, Armin and I. Thought that maybe it was some human genome experiment gone wrong. That someone got injected with too much crazy juice and decided to rip the throat out of their companion. It didn’t sound impossible. We’d usually follow along those thoughts with giggles and testaments that we were just kids. Just kids in some fucked up world that we didn’t belong in.

Just a child.

But I’ve changed.

I’m not the same stupid boy that was found half dead in a piece of shit shack all those weeks ago. I’ve changed. We’ve all changed. Done things we aren’t proud of. In the name of justice, pride, freedom. So many terrible things. My jaw starts to tremble as my fingers wrap around the handle of the knife lodged beneath my waistband. Terrible things. Her eyes are wide and full of fear, scared to death behind those rims.
Am I that monster?
My hand’s shaking.

Am I that monster?
The glint of the blade reflects off the small sliver of light peering in through the doorway.

Am I that monster?
And I see her mouth open, watch the breath draw into her lungs.

No.

“Papa!” It’s loud and violent, breaking through the air with a shrill squeal. I’m frozen, a type of primal fear soaking into my veins. Chilling me to the bone. It’s slow, everything is so slow. The way she runs out of sight, his voice in my ear. Just dragging. And the door is right there. Freedom. His face screams desperation, terror that looks foreign on that visage. The raw, stripped version of this man. Someone so broken, but he’s still fighting. Teeth gritting as he tries to pull me forwards.

A savior.

Hero.

Things I could not be.

My hand is gripping his, fingers tangled in each other’s embrace. Like lovers. Almost romantic. He’s no longer looking at me, but at the door. Priorities have shifted. It’s not that he’s given up on me (I hope), it’s that someone has to save us. Someone has to be the hero. And it’s him.

It’s Levi.

I’m stumbling; unsteady on my feet as Levi yanks, hard and final, pulling me towards the door without choice. Even with his obvious limp, he is still outpacing me, already within arm’s reach of our exit. Of freedom. But then there is the sound of heavy footsteps echoing throughout the house, and my heart tries to jump out of my chest. This isn’t a large cabin, and there’s no doubt in my mind that the monster is close. And Levi must know it, too, palm sweaty and shaking beneath my own. His hand finally closes around the doorknob, twists, and – nothing.

“No, no, no,” Levi mutters under his breath as he shakes the knob once more. Again. Drops my hand. Again. The footsteps are getting louder. He whips around, eyes scanning for something, anything, that could possibly save us. And, suddenly, my hand is grabbed again, and I’m being tugged forward once more. It feels almost bittersweet, running away from our last hope. Because the only other door I know of in this cabin leads straight to Hell.

Or maybe not.

It’s a bedroom, or at least fashioned to look like one. A dresser with missing drawers, a bed with a simple spring mattress against the wall, and – a window. Holy shit. A window. A beacon of light in this place of eternal darkness. A savior. Levi’s hand around mine squeezes gently, like a silent reassurance that we will be getting out of here alive, that against all odds we will survive. And like a piece of glass, our dream shatters along with the piece of furniture thrown against the wall in the opposite room.

Unlike me, Levi doesn’t need thirty second epiphanies involving frozen bodies and inner
monologues. He moves on instinct, pulling me to the floor as we slide under the bed. There is no
thing covering us from being seen, and the situation is eerily familiar of a first encounter I had with a
certain charming asshole. One that is pressing my body against the wall as he guards me with his
own, my chest molding into his back as he continues to move further beneath the bed.

I can hear the monster raging in the room beside us, broken furniture being further tarnished as it
-crashes its way through the space. Assumptions can only lead me to think that it still believes us to be
inside the cabin, the entrance still locked. Probably thinks we are hidden somewhere beneath the
rubble of broken chair legs. At least that’s what I’m hoping it will continue to believe. Maybe look
for us down below, and then we will be able to make our escape. It’s entirely too risky to attempt
-exiting through the window now with the monster just right outside. There are just too many
possibilities that would end with a bullet in the back of each of our heads. What if it’s locked,
-jammed? All the better to wait until the beast furthers itself from us.

However, even though we are temporarily out of its direct line of sight doesn’t mean that I’m not still
petrified. I didn’t even realize I was shaking until I let my body come to a complete stop. And now
it’s obvious as the fingers on one of my hands dig into the back of Levi’s shirt, trembling in anxious
 anticipation. The other is still cradling the knife, pressed against my chest like an unspoken oath. I
should give it to him considering if we are discovered, he’ll be the one who needs it the most. But I
already know that there is no way he will take it. Learned that the last time I tried to hand over my
weapon. So, I just cling to it like some tangible hope that will get us through this. To show us the
way.

And, suddenly, silence.

So thick that I can hear how heavy I am breathing against the nape of Levi’s neck as I continue to
-hang to him like a last salvation, fingers twisting into the dirtied, ripped fabric. I try to control it, but
that’s the thing about terror. It’s the kind of thing that pulses through your bones until it fills your
entire being. Until it’s you. Angry and deadly. Like a rabid animal consuming your soul, confusing
you with its insane anesthetic.

There is a point where it becomes suffocating, the silence acting as an echo to the monster’s
-madness. He is still beside me, a man of many talents and self-control obviously one of them. I blame
his elusiveness, but in fact, it’s my own fault that I don’t know the reason behind his sense of calm.
Surely, Levi would have told me if I asked. Given it would’ve probably been as easy as pulling
teeth, but an answer would have eventually fallen to me. Maybe it was his past life that hardened him
and not this apocalyptic nightmare. Maybe Z-Day wasn’t necessarily a reckoning as much as it was
just another day in the life. The thought makes me sick. It also makes me feel hollow. Thinking of all
the things I don’t know about him and how we might not have another chance to reminisce.

I grip him tighter.

“Sunshine,” And my heart stills. The voice plays off in the distance, far enough for me to know it
hasn’t entered this room but not enough to release myself from the tendrils of this unabashed terror
gripping at my body. I hear its footsteps edge closer, the climatic echoes of some B-grade horror
movie. The anxiety’s crushing, pressing down on me from all angles. Smothering and overwhelming
in this small confine.

“Sunshine,” Again it calls. Closer this time, sending jolts of anxious unease through my system like a
volt of electricity. And the footsteps, just adding another layer of fear. I faintly wonder if it knows
that I’ve taken yet another of its kin.

Levi is unwavering beside me, cobalt eyes glaring straight ahead as if he was the predator and not the
prey. It would be inspiring if we weren’t both huddled underneath a decrepit bedframe. If we weren’t
Currently standing on a shaky precipice of life and death.

A stench suddenly fills the air, carrying along with it an aura of death and agony. And I know it’s here.

“Tell ya what.” Right there, right in that goddamn doorway. I can barely see its feet over Levi’s body as it hovers in the threshold. “Ya come out now, and I’ll let ya go. Hmm? That sounds good. Don’t it, Sunshine?” But not him is all I hear. Because there was never an easy way out of this. Not for Levi. As soon as we stepped foot into this place of horrors, I knew that something was wrong. And goddammit, I should have done something. Even now, I clench my fists in silent anger.

My mother used to tell me that I lit up all the wrong neighborhoods. A clever way of telling me my anger was typically misplaced. Back then, I would roll my eyes like the stubborn little shit that I was, would tell her that all those assholes deserved it. But I get it now. I understand why she would always sigh dramatically, ruffle my hair, and tell me that I would learn one way or another. If she only knew that my epiphany came beneath a decomposing mattress.

“I know you’re here, ya little bitch.” The footsteps are heavier, angrier. And I know that promise it made before is probably void. That if it catches either of us, it won’t hesitate to put a bullet in the back of our skulls. I don’t know what to do, and that is probably the most infuriating thing. I don’t know how to save him. So, I’m just left to wait like a scared animal, driven into a corner. But this is survival, isn’t it? Sacrificing your pride in order to stay alive. Maybe this isn’t surviving. “I’m done–” Something smashes against the wall, “– playin’ games.”

And am I scared? Is this what this bubbling in my chest is?

Fear?

I feel the wall pressed against my back, Levi to my chest. A false security. And he’s unconsciously pushing me further, burrowing deeper into me even though I’ve hit the barrier. I don’t think he knows. Don’t think that his mind is running on anything besides survival. To get us out of here alive. I’ve always underestimated him, and it wouldn’t really surprise me if out of the blue he discovered a way to escape this hell with both of us alive.

Or maybe he is just trying to protect me.

Maybe he’s just trying to make sure that I survive.

It’s screaming, gibberish flying from its mouth in loud, hasty echoes. Rampage, pure unadulterated rampage flooding into the room. I start to wonder if I should have revealed myself, should have given Levi a chance to escape, caused a distraction. Done something. Because this just feels like waiting on an undetermined end.

And suddenly, it all stops, just like before. Silence. Unnerving silence that chills me to the bone.

Is this fear?

I’ve come to realize one thing about this apocalypse. And it’s not don’t get bitten, because that one seems pretty damn obvious. It’s that no matter what you do, you can’t hide from others. Whether they be your friend or foe, they will find you. Stick with you. Kill you. Either way, you can’t be alone. Not out here. I guess dependence isn’t a bad thing. Or maybe it’s lethal. I’ll probably never come to a conclusion. It’s an undeterminable answer, different for every scenario. And right now, I need him. Will always need him. I can’t be alone. Not anymore. So, when he’s ripped from underneath the bed, I don’t think twice about lunging out after him.
It has a steel grip and about hundred pounds on Levi, even with his strength he’s not a match for the monster. Especially when it has its hands wrapped around his throat. I move from out from the bed, blunt fingernails scrabbling at the floorboards as I try to get to Levi as quickly as possible. I know all too well how precious time is, and with the power that monster has behind its grip, Levi doesn’t have much. It comes almost natural to me, and that should probably be frightening; but I don’t give it a second thought as I bury the knife in the forearm of the monster. A scream echoes loudly inside the room as it drops Levi to the ground, focus solely on the stab wound. This is our chance, I realize. The moment we’ve needed to leave this hellhole for good. The both of us.

Something sparks inside of me as I watch it reach for the gun nestled inside of its waistband. Something that is probably borderline heroic and stupid as fuck. I throw myself into it, hands grappling with the gun that is now in open air. For some reason, I feel like this point is pretty pivotal. That if the monster ends up with the weapon, it will no doubt end both mine and Levi’s lives. But on the other side, there is freedom. Glorious freedom in the form of dozens of trees and hordes of walkers.

I’ll fucking take it.

Adrenaline shoots through my veins as I wrestle with the monster, the weapon waving through the air like a white flag. But I’m not surrendering. Not even close.

For a second I feel like my left eardrum has popped, and then I realize that the beast has pulled the trigger of the gun. There’s a nice hole decorating the ceiling, and in a matter of seconds, there’s a twin mark from a second shot. In the back of my mind, I know that determination is only going to get me so far. That I will only be able to hold out so long against this monster. My hands are losing hold on the gun. Becoming weaker and weaker. I’m going to lose. And it’s not fair. I’ve come – we’ve come – so far, so fucking far. But time doesn’t stop for anyone, especially not some shitty kid from Shiganshina.

My fingers slowly begin to slip from the weapon as it twists in the air. Another gunshot. Its teeth are bared, yellowed and broken. Face scarred and filthy. A monster. And suddenly, I’m falling backwards.

Time doesn’t stop, but it sure as hell seems to slow down a lot.

Things are a blur, and for a moment, I only realize that I’m falling because of the distance gaining between the beast and I. Then I see my arms, fingers clenching onto a weapon that is no longer there, limbs flinging upwards. Next, is the gun. It’s pointing at me now, and I realize that it’s going to shoot me. All bets are off, and that obviously stands for previous pacts of good will. Deep down, I reward myself for being able to sort the pieces out. Even though, my deductive skills will do me no good with a bullet through the brain.

I faintly wonder where I will end up once I’m gone. Is there a heaven? Or did Mrs. Springer lie about that, too? Maybe I will be cursed to float in limbo for all of eternity. Hell, I’ve already been there once. Figuratively. Maybe I will see Armin again. See my mother. But something about that leaves a bad taste in my mouth. I wished for death before, right? So, why does it seem so terrifying now? So ugly?

Because of him. I don’t even have to question myself. Levi. And it’s not even because he needs me (does he really?). Maybe I just don’t want a life, afterlife, without him. But I don’t think I will have much of a choice as I see the monster’s finger pull back against the trigger.

Pain.
It is the first thing I think of as my back collides with the wall. Searing down my side like a hot iron against my bare skin. The second is, how the fuck am I still alive? I couldn’t have been more than a foot from it, and shit, it fucking headshot Erwin from across a table. But then I see him. That stupid, stupid, glorious man.

His arms are wrapped around its thick neck, muscles bulging as he wrestles with the monster. I’m paralyzed for a moment, watching Levi swing around its shoulders like a child riding piggy back. And I’m thankful, because he saved me. But then I’m terrified, because now that gun is lifting towards his skull. Levi’s not even looking. Not even worrying about his own life. And that should probably piss me off, but I feel like there are more important things to spend my emotions on besides Levi’s recklessness. Because he’s about to die. That’s the simple cut and paste version of it. There’s going to be a bullet in his head in a matter of seconds, and there is absolutely nothing I can do to stop it; because I’m across the fucking room and the gun is already nuzzling his skull.

It pulls the trigger, and I decide that when I meet Levi in the afterlife I am going to kick his ass.

Out of all the noises I’ve heard in the past couple of days, I think the click of the empty cartridge is probably my favorite.

But then he’s screaming, and I know that there’s no time to waste on daydreams.

“The fucking window!” I don’t think, I just do. Just listen to what Levi is telling me as I sprint towards the opposite side of the room. And that’s when I see it. The clothes, shoes, all bloodied in what I know has to be human remains. There are dozens of them, tossed into the corner of the room with absolutely no care. Just another lost memory of a person who once was. But something of mine is there, too.

The backpack.

Out of all the things I could have come across, it would be this.

Still moving, I grab it, tossing it over my shoulder as I run to the window. It’s only then do I realize how much my side actually hurts. Almost like a walker bite, and shit, I know what that feels like. But I don’t look down, I just keep moving. Because right now, our time is ticking. Levi can’t keep the monster at bay forever.

My feet almost betray me as I trip forwards onto the splintered window sill. Fingers trembling, I try to lift it open, but it’s not budging.


The window shatters with a shrill crack, my backpack slinging over the side of the sill. Fingers trembling, I try to lift it open, but it’s not budging.


The window shatters with a shrill crack, my backpack slinging over the side of the sill. It’s probably not what Levi had in mind for me to do, but improvisation just happens to be my middle name. And suddenly, Levi is pushing me forwards, sending me out the window with a dull thud as I hit the ground. I don’t tell him how much of a gentleman he is for throwing me out of a broken window, but I do wonder how he got away from the six feet of big and angry. My question is answered pretty quickly.

I look back to see it pulling itself up off the floor where I am assuming Levi somehow forced it. “Go, just go!” Levi is hobbling as fast as he can, but I know it’s not going to be quick enough to outrun the colossal beast coming for us. I can’t even appreciate the sunlight peaking in from between the leaves, can’t cherish in the fact that we are out of that place. Because we aren’t safe yet. Not until it is dead. And in the back of my mind, I understand that. Understand that it is always going to come
down to survival of the fittest, especially in this world. That there is no peace treaties, no deals. It’s the winners who take all, stepping over the corpses of second place as they claim their trophy.

“Don’t look back,” he whispers, gruff and husky. “Keep going.” Like he knows what we have to do. I hear the monster scream in rage, but I don’t turn around. I listen to what Levi says, eyes forward. But then I hear the growls. “Don’t,” he says before I can even bother to ask him. So, we just keep going, running as fast as Levi’s injury will allow us. Just looking forward. Another scream. Just moving. Another growl. Closer. Eyes ahead.

“I’ll fuckin’ kill ya!” I don’t think I’m shaking, but my body has betrayed me so many times before that in reality I am probably quivering like a small child. “Fuckin’ little bitch! I’ll rip ya apart!” We just keep moving, feet shuffling in the leaves. But the moans are growing louder, and out of the corner of my eye, I start to see the mass form. A horde. Smaller than any that we’ve encountered so far, but larger enough to easily overpower us. And suddenly, I realize what Levi means. I knew Erwin wasn’t the only genius.

“Get the fuck away from me!” The gunshots probably drew them in, and the screaming was just the cherry on top. Somehow, they don’t see us, being drawn to the angered cries from the monster several paces behind. They come from the sides, and I realize that is probably why we aren’t being targeted. And while the plan was a good one, this is just sheer luck.

I hear it scream protests out again, trying to fight the walkers with its words. But like most mindless objects, they don’t pay attention to heedless chatter. Different screams are sounding out now. Those that usually associate with bones snapping and skin tearing. I can’t find it in myself to feel sorry for the beast. If anything, it’s justified.

I look up, watch the sun filter through the branches. For some reason, this light feels different. Warmer. It feels warmer. The sounds of carnage are becoming more and more silent, and I silently wonder how long it took for the monster to die. That’s strange, isn’t it? A million things are running through my mind, and the one that comes to the forefront of my brain is how long did that piece of shit suffer. That’s definitely strange.

I think about the little girl back in that cabin. I think about how long it will take for her to become one of the undead if she isn’t already. I think about how Erwin’s body will never be laid to rest. I think about where Hanji’s could be. I think about Mikasa. Hell, I even think about Jean, that horse faced bastard.

I think about how bad my fucking side hurts.

And then I pass out.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry I went through major writer's block when trying to word this chapter. Plus, college has just been dandy. So, yeah. I'm not sure when the next chapter will be, but I am taking commissions over on Tumblr to help pay for school. And I hope everyone enjoyed the long awaited chapter lulz. As always, thanks to everyone who continues to read this, comment, and give me support. You guys are the best \( * v * \) / And if you have any questions, feel free to leave a comment or shoot me an ask on Tumblr.

Tumblr:
http://fuzzyporcupine.tumblr.com

Thank you, Stephanie, for beta-ing this!

FANMIX
ALL FANART
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Somehow, I feel safe here, deep in the darkness.

Guiding me away like an unseen beacon. A never ending path of eternal infinity. Things seem peaceful in this quiet solitude. Surrounded by nothing but the black and my beating heart. It’s a type of tranquility that I did not have out in that cruel, cruel world. Something that seemed so far from me until now. However, I still don’t know why I’m actually here.

Maybe I am finally dead. Or maybe he left me behind. In the back of my mind, I remember the forest. I remember the walkers and the bloodcurdling screams of the true monster. Of the adrenaline pumping in my veins as we raced through the branches. But that adrenaline could only help so much with the injury I had obtained. And then… nothing. I can remember nothing else except the feeling of darkness. Just the whispers of the shadows as I fade into nothingness. Maybe I am dead.

A part of me hopes that he left me behind. He deserves so much better than this boy playing hero. Deserves someone better than me. It’s a harsh reality, one that I wouldn’t face in the light. But here in the endless wall of darkness, I can easily accept my faults. It’s funny how that whole pride thing works. If I had to take a guess, I think that I’d be smiling right now.

My mind wonders if this is just my soul, floating in an unseen reality. If my body has long since deprived itself of the living in order to take on a much more grisly characteristic. Just left with nothing but an empty vessel feeding on flesh and blood. It is a disturbing thought.

To be honest, I’m a little disappointed. When I envisioned becoming a restless spirit, I was hoping it would entail haunting the living (mainly Jean, because why not). Not cursed (blessed?) to a ceaseless oblivion.

I feel safe here, but I feel lonely, too.

Is it wrong to want him with me? To miss the touch of his fingers laced within my own? To be able to look into that misunderstood gaze and see a man that is every bit worth hoping for? To need him with me?

I was never fully his, though. We weren’t some modern Romeo and Juliet. We were just two unfortunate bastards trapped in a world full of the undead. A world that was never meant for us. That is the unabridged reality of it all; no matter how much I don’t want to accept it. And in reality people die, hearts break, and lives move on. It just… hurts. And that’s a weird thing to feel considering that I thought I was already dead.

But we carry on.

We have to.

He has to.

Levi.

And suddenly I no longer feel safe, but suffocated. Condemned. Strangled by the forces of an unknown shadow, wrapping its blackened tendrils around my throat… and… squeezing,
squeezing… dead. I’m dead, but I’m dying. The breath burning in my lungs, fighting to sustain this weak, feeble body for just a few seconds more.

I scream, but there is no sound. Not here in the epitome of the end. Reaching out for that touch. Just one more time, please don’t let me go. Screaming, screaming, screaming.

And suddenly, everything shatters, light flooding my vision with abrupt clash.

He’s the first thing I see, haggard and dirty above me. Breath passing over my face in panicked huffs, eyes wide and shaking, angry. Hands are balled in the fabric of my shirt, and it is only then that I realize Levi has lifted the front of my body off the floor. The expression painting his face rapidly changes, and it’s like he has seen a ghost with the way he is gawking, mouth dropped open as if he has a million things to say but can only continue to stare at me speechless. The grip on my front begins to reside until I’m being slowly lowered to the ground, Levi still hovering over me in a state of disbelief.

“Levi,” I try to start, voice weak and breaking on the singular word. My mind is getting ahead of itself, not knowing what I want, need to say. Stumbling on questions inside my head as if he will have all of the answers. But nothing comes out. Nothing but an unsure silence as I gaze back into those strung out eyes, into a vision that has seen so much more pain than good. My heart clenches in my chest as I feel his hand reach up to cup my cheek, thumb tracing the lines beneath his touch. “Levi,” He mutes me with a kiss. Chaste and so, so sweet. Dragging his hand behind my head to pull me in deeper and deeper – “Shit!”

The pain shoots up my side, racing through my veins like a hot wire. And I remember that I may or may not have been shot. Great. There’s a makeshift bandage wrapped around my waist, and I figure that must be Levi’s doing.

“You’re lucky.” I glance up to see him watching me prod at the dressing, eyes distant as they run over my covered wound. “Just grazed you.” Ah, the bullet. A heavy sigh runs across chapped lips as my shoulders slump in relief. But wait. The cannibals. The walkers. Erwin. Hanji. And as if he senses the apprehension seeping into my bones, Levi’s gently grabbing my chin, forcing me to meet his gaze. “We’re safe.” Safe. But we’re never safe, and I almost want to scoff. There is no safe. Not anymore. Not in this shithole of a world we live in. Levi should know that, should understand that safety is in the day that you can stay alive. In the hours you are away from the treacherous grasp of the outside world. It isn’t something that lasts.

He should know that.

And he takes my hand, thumb dragging over the knuckles, smoothing circles into dust worn skin. “We’re safe, Bright Eyes.” Maybe he knows I don’t believe him. Maybe he doesn’t even believe himself. But then Levi’s smiling at me, and my stomach flips with all of these feelings of insecurity. Because I wish, god I wish that I could believe for just one goddamn minute that wherever we are will get us through this. That Levi and I will be able to live out the rest of our lives safe and sound from all the monsters that go creep in the night. The hand grips mine harder.

I take a deep breath.

Maybe I can.

And release.

“The house is clear, but we need to take care of this pain in the ass.” Levi’s gaze is now directed at the wound on my side, which still hurts like a bitch. I hiss as his free hand runs its fingers over the
stained fabric, digits immediately pulling back at the sound of my pain. He sighs, heavy and tired, squeezing my hand once more before he drops it to stand above me. “I’ll get the shit. You just… just don’t get yourself killed.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.” Levi narrows his eyes at me. Oh, he’s being serious. “I’ll try my best, sir.” A flush of red fills his cheeks as he quickly shuffles out of the room. I would laugh, but it hurts to even breathe. So, instead, I glance around the room, silently wondering how the hell Levi managed to find this place. Especially with me on his back and a bum ankle. The fucking hero he is.

It’s actually, against everything I want to believe, pretty cozy, tinted floors and paint chipped walls attributed with several homey attributes, all of which are decorated with a layer of dust. I see that I’m sitting in what is the remainder of a dining room, chairs pushed askew from the hands of Levi, no doubt. It’s not large by any means, but it is enough to remind me of home and of my past life. Before everything was completely gone to shit. My fingers reach out to play with the peeling linoleum floor tiles, nails scratching at the corners in some attempt to erode the boredom settling over me.

“Oi, Wreck-It-Ralph, hands to yourself.” He’s standing in the doorway with a handful of medical supplies, cocked smile pulling at his cheeks as he steps towards me. I roll my eyes, leaning back into a kitchen cabinet. Most of the items in his arms are easily recognizable, bandages, toilet paper, hydrogen pero—

“Wait.”

“How the fuck did you get hydrogen peroxide?” I’m giving him a befuddled stare, brows pinched together in confusion; because that shit is not easy to come by, most of it long expired or exposed too long to Mother Nature.

“Sold a kidney to a walker on the black market. Said that was the tastiest part.” I playfully push at his shoulder as he takes a seat next to me, the fucking asshole.

“I’m being serious, you dick.”

“So am I. You should see my scar.” Huffing, I grab the bottle from his hands, ignoring the quiet chuckle that’s turning my stomach in knots. “Bathroom. Under the counter. It’s a goddamn goldmine.” I hum, believing that answer a lot more than his dealings in the zombie black market.

“That’s strange, don’t you think? I figured this place would have been sacked by now.”

Levi hums, watching me turn the bottle in my hands, “Not really. We’re in the middle of BFE after all. Probably just abandoned by some poor shits who didn’t think to take the crap with them.” He’s probably right, considering our trio did the same thing as we ran out of the house. It’s not like the world was necessarily prepared for an apocalypse. The most I had was my backpack, but that’s because it was already in my possession.

But suddenly, there’s a chill that runs down my spine. I stop flipping the bottle, looking up at Levi as I begin, “How far away are we?”

Levi swallows thickly, all the memories of what happened flooding back to him as well. “Ten miles give or take. Far enough.” A deep breath of relief floods over my lips as I relax back into the cabinet. The farther away we are from that hell house, the better. Even if the monsters inside of it are long gone.

With the silence stretching over us, he wordlessly reaches over me to start pulling off my shirt, the thing more like a rag than an article of clothing. His hands toss the ruined shirt aside, quickly moving onto the crimson bandage wrapped around me. The dressing sticks to my skin, eliciting a pained cringe from me once Levi gets to the last layer. He whispers reassurances under his breath to me as
he pulls the wrapping away, telling me how good I’m doing, but god, we aren’t even to the worst part yet. I stare at the bottle of peroxide. Nope, not even close.

Levi reveals a needle and thread, sitting them aside as he reaches for the bottle. “Contrary to what you might believe, I actually have experience in this.”

“Sewing or treating bullet wounds?” I’m trying to keep the atmosphere light, considering in a matter of seconds I’m probably going to be wishing for an early death.

“If the world hadn’t gone to shit, you would have made a fan-fucking-tastic comedian, Bright Eyes.” He uncaps the bottle, and I can already smell the pungent odor of the peroxide. “Tell me if it gets too much, okay?” I nod my head, eyes warily watching the bottle edge closer and closer to my skin.

“Did you have any pets?”

My gaze immediately travels back upwards, “What– fuck!” I grit my teeth as Levi rubs assuredly on my thigh, opposite hand continuing to pour the liquid over my bubbling wound.

“Shh, I know. Worst part. Okay, Bright Eyes?” My head nods again, eyes now closed as the peroxide works its magic. Its painful, torturous fucking magic. Suddenly, there’s a hand rubbing at my cheek, and I realize that Levi has stopped pouring the peroxide. “You did good, okay? You did good.” I swallow, nuzzling deeper into his palm. And I almost still can’t believe this is the same man I met at the filthy shack all those weeks ago. So amazing and affectionate. It’s sort of like some bizarre fairy tale, just add walkers.

Levi wipes off the wound with the toilet paper, immediately dipping the needle in the peroxide once he is finished. It’s actually pretty attractive. You know, for zombie apocalypse standards.

“You doing okay up there?” Levi is now trying to thread the needle, but I can see the telltale smirk at the corner of his mouth, the cocky bastard. I don’t answer him, just sigh as I tip my head back into the cabinet. Eren Jaeger, there will come a time when you aren’t completely transparent, but obviously the apocalypse isn’t it. “Okay, second worst part,” Levi says as he holds up a threaded needle.

Let the fun begin.

“So,” I try to muster up a grin, “what’s the damage, doctor?”

“Oh, that’s your kink now?” Levi asks as he presses the needle into my skin, “I thought it was daddy?”

“Fuck – ah – you.” I hear that distinctive chuckle sound off again, my heart beating at what has to be an abnormal rate, because goddamn this guy. I don’t even really know what I did to deserve him if I’m being honest, this man that just barreled into my life with a gun and a bad attitude. Who would have thought the infamous Eren Jaeger could’ve ever fallen for someone like this? The butterflies in my stomach pick up at the thought of falling, of taking that trust fall into an unknown oblivion. Just hoping he’d take it with me. It’s scary, almost as scary as the biters roaming what’s left of the world. Giving someone your heart is a lot harder than giving them your trust, and I’m constantly debating with myself whether or not Levi deserves mine. If I deserve his.

“You know I thought I’d lost you back there.” His voice pulls me out of my mind, greens focusing on the top of his head as he continues to stitch the wound. “I mean you were breathing, but you were being a little shit about waking up.” A part of me remembers losing consciousness, but I guess that’s the thing about being out of it, I don’t recall how long I was gone. It could have been minutes, hours, days. God, I am almost scared to think about being unconscious for that amount of time, especially
out in the open. “I think it was a sign when I found this place. You know, that divine bullshit.” I smile down at him, the eloquent bastard he is.

“Mmm, thought you didn’t believe in god?”

“I don’t,” Levi doesn’t stop working when he answers my question, focused on the needle pulling in and out of my skin. “I believe in you, though.” My throat closes up tightly, heart feeling like it’s about to leap out of my chest. How am I even supposed to reply to that? I know he has said it before, but I don’t think that I’ll ever get used to it. “Okay,” he starts as he ties off the string, “you’re right as rain, Bright Eyes. I’d recommend bed rest and not being a little shit, doctor’s orders.” A quiet laugh spills from my lips as he glances up at me, silver eyes gleaming. He pulls out the set of new bandages and wraps it carefully around my waist, helping me stand once he has the dressing secure. Levi takes my hand, directing me to a living room, pointing at the couch. “I was being serious about the bedrest.” I would argue, but to be honest, a nap sounds really good right now (even though I did just wake up from unconsciousness).

The cushions are soft and squishy beneath my weight, reminding me of what it feels like to rest on something besides the ground. I hear Levi shuffling in the kitchen, cabinets opening and closing. This almost feels, dare I say it, domestic. Like if the world wasn’t currently ending, Levi and I would be bundled up together on the couch watching cheesy romantic comedies. Holding hands beneath the blankets and falling asleep in each other’s arms. It’s enough to have my chest clenching in disappointment, struggling with the what-ifs and the could have beens. A breathy sigh blows over the couch cushions as I turn my body towards them, trying to shut out the negative thoughts racing through my mind. To just be happy that we are finally safe.

Safe, right?

“Oi, lift your feet.” I look over my shoulder to see Levi holding two bowls of who knows what. He hands one to me as I turn, and it ends up being something recognizable in the container. “I hope you like beans,” Levi tells me as he takes a seat at the end of the couch, letting my feet rest in his lap, “because that’s the only thing edible in that fucking cabinet.” Well, it beats that shit jerky, that’s for sure.

However, there is one thing that nags at the front of my mind, only fully recognized as I had watched Levi limp to his seat. “How’s your ankle?”

He looks over to me, brow cocked as he pulls up the fabric of his jeans to reveal a bandage wrapped around the swollen ankle. “Hurts like a bitch, but I think it’s just a sprain. Not much I can do about it either way beside wrap it and hope that it isn’t something worse.” I hum at his answer, watching him pull down his pants leg and settle into the couch.

There’s a comfortable silence that settles over us as we eat, only interrupted by the scraping of our spoons against the bowls. Soon, I’m staring at an empty dish, my hunger a lot stronger than I gave it credit for. My feet twitch anxiously in Levi’s lap as I look up to see him mimicking my motions, gazing into a bare bowl. I swallow thickly, not knowing what he’s thinking, looking so lost in thought. There’s obviously something on his mind, that much is apparent from the furrow in his brow. And I want to ask him, to let him know that I can bear whatever he needs to lay on me. I’ve surely done it enough to him. But I’m not even given a chance to end the quiet, Levi clearing his throat as he finally looks back to me.

“There was nothing you could do.” I am confused for a moment, quirking my brows in wonder. “About Erwin.” Oh. Well, fuck. I knew there would be a time when he wanted to talk about this, I just didn’t think it would be this soon. Levi is like a ball of walled up emotion, never letting anything out until things come to a boiling point, allowing everything to spill over all at once. I learned this back at Stohess. But for him to bring this up so quickly, I’m taken off guard. “They would’ve blown
his fucking brains out anyway.” He takes a moment, and then Levi’s looking right at me, eyes an ocean of emotion. He’s hurting, and I don’t know how to help him. “Just... just don’t blame yourself. Not like you did with that kid.” My breath hitches, chest suddenly going numb.

Armin.

“I don’t, I mean... I know that I couldn’t have done anything.” The whisper flows over my lips, finding Levi and giving him a sigh of relief. To think that he was that worried about my possible mental breakdown is almost endearing, but more concerning. Does he really think that I have no control over my emotions? That he’s nothing more than a babysitter to my suicidal tendencies? The thought is enough to make me angry, and if I wasn’t trying to prove a point with controlling my emotions, then I would tell him as much. “You don’t have to worry about me, Levi.”

“Of course I have to worry about you.” My hands tighten around the bowl, and I open my mouth to—

“You’re all I have left, Eren.” The words disappear from my throat, leaving me with nothing more than a bitter taste in my mouth. And suddenly, I’m no longer angry, but sad. Just so goddamn sad. “I just...” He runs a hand through his hair, struggling to find the right words. “I know how it feels to be completely alone. I know how it feels to lose everybody you care about. And... and I don’t think I could go through that again.”

I ignore the pain in my side, stretching up to sit next to him, pulling his head into my shoulder. “You’ll never lose me. I promise.” We stay like that for several moments, Levi pressed against me in silence. Just savoring the other’s presence.

For a second, I think that he has fallen asleep, but then he breaks the silence, “I never told you how he took me in, hmm?” Looking down at him, I answer a quiet ‘no’, trying not to give too much input into the conversation. I know it’s not really for me, but for him, a way to get this off his chest. And if I can be his silent crutch, then so be it. “He was a goddamn asshole, a cocky fucker. But he found me at my worst. I’d just lost Isabel and Farlan, was trying to track down this shithead who decided to abandon us during a mission. I found the prick, but the walkers found us, too. They tore Isabel and Farlan apart, and all I could do is watch.”

I reach down and grab his hand, gently squeezing it as he takes a shaky breath. “So, I went ballistic, don’t even know how I got out of there alive, but I did. I don’t know how many of those fuckers I took down, but I walked out covered in walker shit. Erwin found me a day later, wandering the highway like a goddamn idiot. Why he didn’t just shoot me down, hell if I know. But he tells me that he has this camp, real nice place, and that judging by the look of me, I could help them out. Shit, I told him to fuck off. Even put a gun to his head. But that asshole didn’t even flinch.” Levi chuckles, and I can’t help the smile that pulls at my cheeks.

“He took me in, gave me food, shelter, a fucking bath. Even convinced that grey old twat to let me join the scouting group. He was a good guy, and he didn’t deserve what happened to him.” Levi lets out a deep breath, gaze falling to our interlocked fingers. “But shit, what do I know? Maybe there is a god, and he's chilling up there with the big guy right now.” He pauses, looking up at me only to reach behind my head in order to pull my face down to a chaste kiss. “Thank you,” Levi whispers against my lips, leaving me with one final peck before he’s pulling away to gather our bowls.

“You’d make a great housewife,” I tease as he grabs my dish from me. I’m given a set of narrowed silvers in return, still not enough to wipe the grin from my face.

“Fucking hilarious. I hope you mean the kind who murders their husbands in the dead of night.” My eyes go wide. “Kidding, I’m fucking kidding.” Levi smirks as he walks back into the kitchen, hips swaying back and forth. I fall back against the couch, sighing as my body slowly begins to drift off into the peaceful sleep I’ve been searching for. It’s nice, and maybe Levi was right. Maybe safe does
happen, and it starts right here. Maybe this is our happy ending. My eyes flutter shut, and the last thing I hear before my mind falls into unconsciousness is Levi kissing my forehead as he tells me goodnight.

Chapter End Notes

See, not every chapter is heartbreaking :D

Tumblr:
fuzzyporcupine.tumblr.com

Thank you, Stephanie, for beta-ing this!

FANMIX
ALL FANART
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Opening my eyes this time feels different, feels warmer. There’s a hint of sunlight streaming into the house from in between the window blinds, cascading into my vision like a blind awakening. A tattered blanket has been thrown over top of my body. Whoever made the thing was a sad excuse of a craftsman, but I can’t really complain considering it is keeping the winter chill off my skin.

Something inside my head is pounding, like an incessant child clinging to her mother’s leg. The ache is really the least of my worries, though. Especially when I am still recovering from a bullet wound. Wincing as I sit up, my fingers instinctually trace over the bandaging that’s wrapping the sure to be scar. It’s still unbelievable to me that Levi somehow got us here. Wherever ‘here’ is. All I know is that Levi thinks it’s safe. And… and that should be good enough for me, right? I mean, I’m still alive, still breathing – or else this is one hell of a dream.

“Morning, Sleeping Beauty.” My vision flickers over at the sound of his voice, rusty and dry, probably hasn’t gotten a fucking wink of sleep since we found this place. And an unappealing lump settles square in the middle of my throat, making it hard to swallow as I look him up and down, all rags and stains. He’s filthy. But there’s no way I’m looking any better. “C’mon, you smell fucking disgusting.” He cracks a smile, charming as ever, and it doesn’t take long for him to hobble over to me. Teeth grit tightly as Levi helps lift me up, my side pulling uncomfortably. I can see the distress wane over his expression, those thin brows furrowing sharply, jaw going taunt.

“I’m okay,” I murmur, more for him than myself, considering I really don’t like to be reminded that I was shot in the fucking side. A good lot my acknowledgement does, though, Levi’s gaze becoming even harder as he walks me towards the bathroom. But I can only say so much, stand so tall, before he sees straight through me. And I know that with every step we are taking that I am becoming thinner and thinner, that the pain is etching itself on my face like it’s making a permanent claim. And he probably hates himself for it. I know I would, if Levi were the one shot, that is. Would wonder every time I looked at him why it wasn’t me, what I could do to take away his pain. So, I guess that I get it. Get why that smirk faded away as soon as he saw me wince.

Regret.

I can only say so much.

The bathroom door creaks open like a bad omen, moans echoing through the house as we step inside. The heat wraps around me like a mother’s embrace, warmth flooding into my bones as I’m smothered in the fog lifting from the tub. It’s enough to have me immediately at ease, to wipe away the tension from my side, my head. And suddenly, Levi’s hands are at the buttons of my pants, undressing me with this unbroken concentration. No words slip past my lips, just letting him do as he sees fit. It’s almost robotic, how he so seamlessly moves from one part of my body to the next. Almost unhinging. And a jolting fear drives through my chest that my injury has taken a lot more of a toll on him than I first thought.

“Levi.” My scarred hands are now halting his from moving any further. It’s only then that I notice he’s shaking, trembling beneath my grip. Words have never been my forte. Actions… well, they’ve never really worked for me, either. But it always seems to yield a better effect than when my mouth decides to blurt out a few unwise phrases. So, I don’t say anything. Merely pull Levi up off the floor and wrap my arms around him. He’s tense at first, but soon, Levi relaxes into my embrace, his own
arms trailing around my waist. I don’t know why this seems so… so intimate… but it does, and I can’t help the clenching in my gut as Levi presses his cheek against my chest. This is more than just two people stranded alone in an unknown place, broken and bruised. We are more than just two people. And I don’t know how to describe it, this aching feeling that’s settled somewhere deep in my heart, but I never want to let him go.


“Hmm?”

“You’re squeezing me.” A stupid smirk tugs across my cheeks as I lean down to peck a kiss on top of his head, the romantic Levi is. And it’s like the resentment just disappears into the fog filling the room, Levi looking significantly less dour as he pulls away from my touch. Rolling his eyes, he continues undressing me. Except now, the staleness has vanished. Red cheeks are quickly replacing the stiffness, eyes wanting to look anywhere but down at Levi. If I was a betting man, I would put everything I owned – which let’s face it, is not that much – on the fact that Levi is probably smirking right now, the bastard. Too bad I will never find out, though, since I currently am staring holes through a ceramic sink. “Okay, in you go.”

I look down – and I was right, goddammit – to find Levi extending a hand towards me. It’s quickly wrapped in my own, and soon, I am being lowered into a warm, heavenly abyss. God, you really don’t know how much you miss hot water until it’s gone. Especially in a zombie apocalypse. I’m about to ask Levi how he actually managed to get a tub full of heated water, but I’m distracted by the fact that he’s currently stripping down to his birthday suit. Of course, Levi notices my staring. “What?”

Like he doesn’t know.

As an attempt to keep what is left of my pride, I simply look away, sinking down until the water is just below my nose. It seems to be an effective tactic in avoiding answering Levi, but unfortunately, it doesn’t work for when he is actually entering the tub.

Our feet slide together, Levi’s back resting on the opposite edge of the bath. He’s staring at me like he wants to say something, but hell if I’ve ever been good at decoding the brick wall of a man. Even now, with all the things we’ve been through together. The death, the hope, he still manages to boggle my mind. And maybe it’s because I’m not someone who focuses on the gritty details, just running on pure instinct. But for some reason, I have a hard time picturing anyone who could ever figure out this man.

“Where did the water come from?” That’s not exactly what I want to know, but Levi seems to pick up on the intent of the question all the same.


Huffing, I splash the bastard with as much force as I can while still containing the water in the tub. It’s not that effective. He’s chuckling – that villainous tone, too. One that makes me realize I’m at the butt of some joke I haven’t even heard. And against the contrary, it makes my chest warm, makes my heart fill with those goddamn butterflies like I’m a teenage girl fawning over her latest celebrity crush. There’s probably something wrong with me, but I’m blaming it on the whole apocalypse scenario. I was bitten by a walker after all.

“There’s a creek out back.” He nods in the direction of the backyard, subtle grin still present on his face. And god, he’s so fucking beautiful. Black fringe plastered against his forehead, cheeks flushed red, and looking at me like I’m the only one in this shitty world. Call me crazy, but I think I managed pretty well on who I ended up with in regards to surviving the end of the world. Hell, I could have been stuck with Jean. Or even worse – Jean. But somehow, I got him. I got Levi. And I guess, that’s
really not so bad. “And I’m talking to a fucking brick wall over here.”

“Oh, what?” I watch him shake his head as he shoots me a crooked grin. “Sorry, I spaced out for a second.”

“No kidding.” His foot nudges mine under the water, and I can practically feel the heat rolling off my body. Bubbling beneath my skin, sending fire down my veins. It’s maddening. Especially as I sit across from someone like him. Someone like Levi. Someone who has the ability to take me apart so easily. Maddening, absolutely maddening. And I shouldn’t crave the feeling, but I do. Yearn for it. Drives me crazy. He must know, realize how hot my skin is running; because in an instant, Levi has maneuvered over into my lap, back resting against my chest as his body sits in front of me.

“You’re terrible,” I whisper, fingers tracing down his arms. The thudding of my heart is almost audible, and I’m positive that Levi can feel it pounding as he presses languidly against me. He sighs, sounding for the first time since we escaped Stohess, content. It’s a weird word to use during the so called end of the world. Scared, afraid. Dead. Those are the things you are supposed to associate this world with. Not content, happy. And I suppose that in a sense, we aren’t. Happy that is. We’ve both lost so many people that we cared about. Both suffered through so many tragedies. But content? That’s a nice way to describe the feeling rolling through my chest. The one I hope is signified in Levi’s minute breaths.

“You know, back when we found you,” Levi starts, “Erwin told me: keep an eye on that shitty brat.” I scoff, the sound rolling into a chuckle as Levi reaches up to entwine his fingers with the ones I have dancing along his skin. “He said that you were something special. I didn’t believe him.” Suddenly, that lump in my throat is back. That feeling of dread, even though realistically, what’s the worst Levi could tell me? That he hated my guts when we first met? I thought that was already pretty obvious. “All this talk about the freedom I would make if I joined up with his group was a bunch of bullshit. Making me play babysitter to some shitty, little twerp who didn’t know when to shut his mouth. Making me remember–” Levi cuts himself off with a sharp inhale, body going tense in my arms. I don’t know where he is going with this, don’t know why it’s relevant to bring up all of these past demons if they are going to do no more than cause him harm. Cause me harm.

But he continues, regardless, “He was right. Erwin was always right.” Something like a sigh echoes off his lips, hand clenching my own with a needy grip. “You’re special. More than I ever realized.” A thumb has taken to rubbing the backs of my knuckles, and for some reason, this whole thing sounds like a bizarre attempt at an apology. Not a simple ‘I’m sorry’, but something deeper, more painful than that. And whatever he is sorry for, whatever is making him run down this unwanted memory lane, I forgive him for it. I’ve already forgiven him. For everything, and I thought he knew that.

“Levi,” I whisper, soft and timid, almost like I’m scared to pull him out of this apologetic state. “No regrets, remember?” He turns then, looking up at me with this face full of… something, and never in my time spent with Levi have I ever wanted to decode his expressions more than I do now. I would pray to the invisible Mr. Higher Power, beg him to help me understand. But if there is one thing I have realized about the apocalypse, it’s that praying doesn’t do you much good around here. Not until that man upstairs decides to grow a heart and cure this epidemic. No, we are on our own down here. Have been for a long time, I figure. It doesn’t hurt to think we’re not alone, though. That someone is listening. Even if they are deaf and blind. It’s the thought that counts, right?

“Okay,” Levi mumbles, and I realize that he has gone back to resting against my chest. One of my arms is pulled across his chest, his fingers walking along my hand as we sit in the muddied water. It
feels like a tentative peace, like something hasn’t been said. But right now, I don’t really care about what happened in the past. I care that we are alive, breathing. That we are able to sit mindlessly in a dirtied bath tub. That we don’t have to wonder if the next moment will be our last for five goddamn minutes.

I’m content.

“Don’t say a fucking word.” My hands are already lifting in surrender as I try to contain the laugh bubbling in the back of my throat. Levi’s sending me a pointed look, but it sort of falls short – pun totally intended – of anything near intimidating paired with his current attire. The sleeves are dangling near his thighs, hands swallowed up by the overwhelming amount of fabric. Cute, is the first word I think of, but quickly decide that Levi probably won’t take to being called something people associate with puppies and babies. Well, he probably won’t take to anything right now considering the glare he’s giving me, but it’s not my fault he chose to seek shelter in the mountain man’s house.

“Hey, I think it suits you,” I say, chuckling when Levi’s chest puffs out like the big, bad wolf. Thankful, the clothes were at least somewhere in my size range, a plain, black shirt with an equally simple pair of jeans.

“If my name was Paul Bunyan maybe,” he angrily mumbles, glancing down at the red checkered shirt hanging off his body. And all I can think is that Levi makes one sexy Paul Bunyan. Mark those down for words I never thought would run through my head. Regardless, a sly grin starts to form on my face, steps echoing through the tiny bedroom as I move closer to him. There’s a slow burn tension that boils in my veins with every inch nearer I get, eyes trailing along those pale, bared thighs. Yeah, he’s beautiful.

“Levi.” And he looks up at me, gunmetal gaze piercing me in two. Hands seem to instinctually wrap around his waist, wandering back around to trace the knobs of his spine, memorizing every detail of this man standing before me. Maybe this is Eren Jaeger trying to be romantic. Sweeping him up into my arms, feet dangling off the ground. Maybe this is Eren Jaeger trying to hold onto the one thing that’s keeping me whole. Slotting our lips together in a kiss that seemed to go a lot more smoothly in my head, noses bumping and teeth clacking. Or maybe… maybe this is just Eren Jaeger hopelessly in love.

Maybe it’s that.

The backs of my knees somehow find the foot of the bed, Levi now hungrily capturing my lips, like a cornered animal striking out to fight. Except I’m not putting up any kind of resistance, breathless as he pushes me backwards on to the bed.

His hands are everywhere, running up my chest, my arms, as if Levi can’t decide exactly where he wants to light his touch. And I’m brought back to that old, decrepit church. Remembering how I burst into flames. How desperate we were. How desperate we are now. The way he is so
unbelievably frantic with every move, and I finally stop him, because somehow, this doesn’t feel the same. Beneath the desperation. Beneath the lust. Feels like a band aid that’s being used to cover up something greater. Hands wrapped around his wrists, I watch as his face tightens, conflicted and so, so desperate.

“Levi,” I whisper, thumbs circling over the soft skin beneath my fingertips. Is it too much to just want everything to be okay? In this world, is it asking the impossible? To look into his eyes, and not see the pain latched so tightly there. To watch him smile, and not find the traces of a doubt in between the lines etched along his mouth. To just let him be okay. I want that.

Shaking gently beneath my grip, Levi looks at me like I’ve poured salt into the wound, eyes wide, mouth agape, quivering as he straddles me. And I realize that he’s just as broken as I am. That beneath all the personas of strength and passive aggression, Levi is the same as me: hiding in that shell of a body, waiting for someone to let him out. Waiting to be able to break down those walls closing tighter and tighter around him. I get it. For the first time, I understand what’s lurking behind that silver gaze.

“You’re strong,” I tell him, voice still not above a quiet mumble, “Stronger than anyone I’ve ever known. Stronger than me.” Something inside of Levi seems to pause at that, an expression I’ve never seen forming onto his face as I continue, “And nothing about any of this is fair, but we’ve made it this far, haven’t we?” The beginnings of tears start to prick at the corners of my eyes, “We’re alive, aren’t we?” Part of me wishes that he would stop looking so thoroughly shocked and conflicted, but the other half is begging for more, wanting him to just leave all of this pain on the table. To move on with our lives the best we can. “Erwin’s dead, and there’s not a fucking thing you could have done. Armin– I couldn’t have done anything, either.” Wet trails streak down my face, but there’s no shame in crying – at least not over this.

“Don’t do this to yourself. Don’t let this be the thing that gets you killed. Because that’s exactly what’s going to happen if you can’t move on.” A sort of unsteady silence settles over us, Levi still looking down at me through these eyes that are fucking begging to let all of the pain, all of the anger go. Wrist no longer shaking in my grip, but limp beneath the touch. But it’s almost like a resolution. Almost like I’ve somehow gotten through to him. Behind the glaze in those eyes is that fire that I know never truly burned out. And even though the thoughts may still be lingering there in the forefront of his mind, I know that Levi is one step closer to being whole again.

Acceptance, right?

I’ve learned a lot of things over the past few months, with the loss of friends and family, the destruction of everything I grew up knowing. Learned and lived, became the man I am today. Am I happy death decided to descend upon us in swarms of flesh eating undead? Hell no. But it’s shaped me into the person I am today, taught me that at the end of the world, the biggest monster is yourself. And as my hands rise up to cup his cheeks, thumbs brushing over the unshed tears, I know he gets it. Understands that we don’t move on because we want to. We move on because we have to.

“How long have you been practicing that?” That subtle smirk has curved the edge of his lips, and despite all the drama and pain, I can’t help but mirror him with my own.

“Did it work?” He answers me with a quiet hum, slowly dropping his head to rest on my shoulder. I take that as a yes, moving slightly to place a soft kiss beneath his ear. That silence falls back down upon us, but this time, it’s much less dramatic. Instead, marked by tender presses of lips on skin, fingers lightly dancing along exposed thighs, smiles forming into muffled giggles. Almost like the ghost of our previous selves. And instead of content, I’m happy. A word I never thought I’d use to
describe myself during the apocalypse.

Happy.

Maybe not the textbook definition of it; but laying here, fingers trailing through a head of dark hair, feet tangled in between a mixture of sheets and Levi’s legs. I decide that it is probably as close as I’ll be able to get to the word. At least right now. There’s always hope for a brighter tomorrow, right? A future that has me sharing memories with not only Levi, but Mikasa and the rest of the gang. Hope for a life outside of the one we’re living. Moving on, but staying strong. Hmm, that sounds like a good slogan for a team at the end of the world.

Now, we just need t-shirts.

Our hands are coated in a thin sheet of brown, faces sheened with the shine of sweat. All the signs of a good day’s work, if you ask me.

“They would have liked this place,” Levi says, and I can’t help but agree with him as I look at the four posts in front of us. Decorated in wildflowers and placed a decent distance from the creek, carved with four names, four fallen friends. It’s kind of a final closure, one that Levi had suggested early this morning when we were gathering water from the creek. A hypothetical nail in the coffin, so to speak.

It made me think that my words really did get to him last night, made me realize that I was more than within my rights to help him understand how the guilt will eventually drive him mad.

So, when he brought the idea up, it took me by surprise. But it only took a moment before I realized exactly why Levi wanted to erect a graveyard. To bury the dead along with the guilt. A final farewell to what we lost.

It was a good plan.

We had gathered the posts, shaped them down until they were relatively smooth and presentable – the best we could do with a couple of butter knives. Picked the flowers, particularly blue for Armin (his favorite color), decorated the posts with an industrial Sharpie, and drove them into the ground. I allowed Levi to handle Erwin, Hanji, and Mike’s, as he left me with Armin’s. I’d bet that we spent hours on the memorials, know for sure if I still had Erwin’s watch.

For some reason, I felt like adding some waves to the post decorated with Armin’s name. A sun, some really badly drawn seagulls, the works. Never being the artist, it probably looked like some sad attempt at van Gough, but I didn’t think that Armin would really mind just how shitty my artistry was. It’s always been the thought that counted. So, I had flourished the post with traits of the ocean, added three stick figures on a beach just for good measure. And when I finished and looked over the post filled with reminders of a sight never seen, I knew that Armin would have loved it.
“We should say something,” Levi tells me, looking out towards the four memorials. They look beautiful against the scenery winter has brought, standing stark against the browns and oranges of the leaves. Four individual pieces to our puzzle.

“Yeah,” I murmur, voice tight in my throat, “we should.”

Then the breeze is blowing, throwing the leaves around us up into the harsh chill. Like a sign from above. And if Levi thinks the same, then he doesn’t say it, merely taking a deep breath before starting, “Mike, you didn’t say much, but shit, I didn’t either. You were a good friend, a good man, and I’m sorry that we couldn’t save you.” I swallow thickly, thinking about Mike’s death. But unlike before, that guilt that would typically come with remembering the way he was devoured doesn’t make an appearance. Instead of the unforgiving darkness, I am brandished with a new type of understanding. And for the first time, I smile.

"Shitty glasses… Hanji… I… I don't know what happened to you, but I'm sorry. Sorry that we weren't able to find you, save you. You were fucking insane, but you were my friend, no matter how much I denied it. And I hope that you're back with that guy you were so crazy about, because if any of us deserved a happy ending it was you." He takes another deep breath, eyes clenching shut for a brief moment.

“Erwin, if you’re listening then I hope you know you’re an asshole for getting yourself killed.” He pauses for a moment, “I also hope you know that you’re one of the best men I’ve ever met. You saved my life, and… and I never thanked you for that. So… thank you. Wherever you are, I hope you get your arm back so wiping your ass won’t be such a… well, pain in the ass.”

It’s a typical Levi-esque way of putting things, but it is the best send-off Erwin, Hanji, and Mike could have asked for; and if we had some alcohol, I’m sure that we would drink to it. However, there is still one more person waiting.

And suddenly, this seems way too hard, too– Levi’s hand wrapping around my own pulls me back down, grounds me. Finally ready to start again.

“Armin,” I whisper, words quickly lost to the heavy breeze. “Armin,” I say once more, louder this time, “I miss you.” His hand squeezes mine. “I miss you so much sometimes. And I try to think of how I could have possibly saved you. Every time I close my goddamn eyes, I see your face, and I think of what I did wrong.” A beat passes. “But I couldn’t save you, Armin. And… and I know you would be so disappointed in me if you knew how long I tried to convince myself that I could.” A chill down my spine. “But I couldn’t. I couldn’t.” A tighter squeeze. “That’s not my fault, though. And you would say the same. You’d tell me to snap out of it and pull it together, because you were my best friend, Armin. You were my best friend.” My words trickle off into a whisper, caught again in the wind.

“Hell, you’re probably looking down at me right now, thinking about how big of a moron I’ve been.” A broken laugh falls off my lips, “And I bet you’re up there soaking up the sun while I’m down here freezing my ass off.” I pause for a second, letting a smile form on my face as I think about Armin, no doubt relaxing next to an ethereal ocean. “I love you, Armin, but I know you’re in a better place. I know you’re happy.”

As Levi’s hand squeezes mine one last time, I let that grin widen, allowing the relief of forgiveness to spread throughout my body. He’s smirking, too, watching me from the corner of his eye. And everything feels okay. Looking at the memorials of four dead friends, it all somehow feels okay.

Chapter End Notes
I could write a huge note about why this chapter is so late, but life has just been life. The first part of WEY is also available for purchase in softcover (follow the link below). And thank you all so much for the 2600 kudos .________. It is amazing to think that you have all enjoyed my work, and I hope that you all love this chapter as well :’D

MY TUMBLR
PURCHASE WHAT'S EATING YOU? PART ONE
FANMIX
ALL FANART
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The snow finally comes two weeks after we’ve made shelter at the little house in the woods. It’s a small sprinkle at first, something I notice from the spaces between the blinds. But by the second day, it is coming in droves from the sky, like walkers weren’t enough of a ‘fuck you’ from above.

I guess it was only a matter of time before the cold actually culminated into something besides just the frostbite to the ass.

Pulling the bundle of blankets tighter around myself, I listen as Levi hums some low tone over in the kitchen. He’s making something special tonight, and by special, I mean beans. Never thought I’d end up hating something as much as that goddamn beef jerky, but I have to say that the thought of consuming something besides the runny substance has me actually excited to make the supply run. We will have to head out tomorrow given he’s making our last can - well, unless we’d like to starve before freezing to death. Of course, Levi doesn’t share the same thrill as I do to step out into the frost, but I think he just likes to act as if he isn’t excited to stop eating slop. But it is better than nothing, so I should probably stop acting like such a brat.

But I really hate these goddamn beans.

“Oi,” Levi calls from the kitchen, not bothering to take his eyes off the wood stove, “Make yourself useful and grab us some bowls.” To be honest, I’m perfectly fine with eating out of the can – living in a post-apocalyptic world tends to lessen your need for etiquette. Levi, on the other hand, has taken every opportunity that he can into making this house seem like a home. And I guess that I can’t really blame him for it. We have been living in a massive pile of shit for who knows how long. So, I never question why he wants to dirty up the dishware in order to make all of... this seem normal.

If Armin was here, he’d probably explain to me how it was some sort of coping tactic – a way to deal with the shit of the undead world without actually dealing with it. I’d seen some stories on the news when life wasn’t totally fucked about soldiers coming home from war, about how they dealt with the stress of being off the battlefield. Although, I don’t think any of them insisted on certain dining habits.

“We’re going to have to make that run tomorrow,” he says, voice sounding a little tight at the apparent thought of travelling back out there. Placing the bowls on the counter beside him, I gently wrap my arms around that lithe waist, drop my chin atop a steady shoulder. He smells like vanilla – has ever since that bath filled up with the heated creek water. It’s something I’ve gotten used to, being so utterly domestic while the rest of the world continues to fall apart. And in the back of my mind, I have to wonder if anyone else out there is living a similar life. One that doesn’t come worry free, but feels safer. Feels warmer.

Turning my nose into the soft skin of his neck, I breathe in deeply. Vanilla. It suits him, a nice softness to round out his edges.

Levi leans back into me, head lolling to the side as he lets my body surround his completely – arms now pulling him stark against my frame. There’s just something about seeing him like this, so fragile and open, that has my thoughts going wild inside my head. Thinking if anyone’s ever had the chance, the privilege of seeing him like this before. Thinking if he feels just as much for me as I do for him. And that’s terrifying – absolutely horrifying to imagine that he wouldn’t. That after all this,
everything we’ve been through I would be left alone. It only makes me grip him tighter.

Suddenly, there is a hand falling upon the one I have wrapping around him. “You’re going to make me burn the beans,” he mumbles, trying to sound a lot more frustrated with me than he actually is. It’s not hard for me to tell that Levi really doesn’t want me to let him go. Would probably be content to let us waste the rest of the day away standing silent in this kitchen, falling into each other’s embrace. It’s sort of romantic if you really think about it.

“Fuck the beans.”

This time he actually pulls away. “I’m sure you’ll be saying that when your ass is stuck eating grass and earthworms.”

“Good point,” I mumble, nose scrunched in disgust. He simply hums to answer me, turning back to the beans in question. And I can’t help the subtle smile that begins to appear on my face. It’s fucking insane – that even with all the bullshit, I am smiling. Is that crazy? Probably. “So, what’s the plan for tomorrow? Or are we just winging it?”

He stiffens again, hand stalling around the wooden spoon. And after a few tense seconds, Levi finally answers, “We are not winging it. Unless you want to add one of those to your ass cheek.” His gaze directs to the bite mark scarred onto my forearm. Swallowing thickly, I divert my eyes away from his burning stare. And surprisingly, it’s not the thought of me being bitten again that causes my gut to churn, but the picture of Levi being eaten alive. It’s enough to have me pinching my eyes shut, taking a deep, concentrated breath, and– “Don’t worry, Bright Eyes. I love your ass too much to let those bastards fuck it up.”

Oh, this asshole.

Eyes flying open, I see him sporting that signature smirk – the one that never ceases to steal the breath from my lungs. Red faced and tongue-tied, I send him the only comeback I really can manage, a quick glare with slanted eyes. Obviously the effect is lost on the man, who merely goes back to stirring his precious beans, smirk still playing on the edges of his mouth.

Soon, the meal is ready, and Levi is pouring the contents into our separate bowls. Silence encloses us as we eat, the only sound being the clang of metal against the ceramics. It’s a peaceful quiet, though. Something that isn’t as unsettling as it probably appears. However, even underneath the blanket of calm, I can still tell that Levi is slightly on edge. With good reason, obviously, but on edge, nonetheless.

“You said we’d be alright, hmm?” I mumble around a mouthful of beans, which earns me a raised brow and curled lip. But it eases him, the reassurance. And I know that he would never ask for, never want me to be the one to constantly tell him everything is going to be okay. But I don’t mind. Especially not when he has done the same for me countless times. Maybe it’s because he thinks he has to be strong. Not show that weakness that constantly gets people killed around here. Stay strong for me.

My chest clenches.

After the last of our bean rations have been devoured, the bowls are taken to the river, cleaned thoroughly and brought back inside the house. There’s a certain routine about it that we have fallen into. Wake up, build up defenses, gather wood, eat, sleep. This is what life has become, huh? I feel like a piece of shit, thinking that I could be in anyway ungrateful for this. Because I’m not, god I’m not. Would enjoy keeping this routine until my hair turned gray if it meant safety.
So, why do I feel ready for tomorrow when it means anything but safety? If anything, could mean death. Levi’s death. Sighing, I try not to feel like the psychopath that I’m certainly beginning to sound like.

We had fallen beneath the sheets not long after cleaning the bowls, the dusk starting to settle into the unforgiving night. He’s curled up next to me, bare chest pressed against my side as his even breaths fall over my skin. Sleeping, it’s what I should be doing instead of contemplating my mental state. That never does me any good, you’d think I would learn. Especially now, after everything that has happened. After everything I’ve done.

God, maybe I am insane.

Stretching my left arm up to the ceiling, I flex out my fingers, reaching out for something, anything to tell me that I’ve not delved into some crazed nutcase.

Hell, who am I kidding? I’ve stabbed more than one man to death, been soaked up to my arms in the blood of another. I’m pretty fucked up by most people’s standards.

But then there are fingers tracing up my lifted arm, soon intertwining with my own digits in midair, a pale hand contrasting harshly against the tone of my tanned limb. I stare at our linked fingers for several seconds, look until my arm begins to protest being held upwards for so long. And he doesn’t have to speak, doesn’t have to say a single word as our hands slowly fall back down onto the center of my chest. I know without fancy phrases what he is trying to say. What he wants me to know. That he’ll be strong for me. And with a squeeze of his hand, I try to tell him the same.

That I’ll be strong for him.

We stay like this, curled up in each other’s arms. Sometimes, I’ll wonder if he has fallen back asleep, but then I will feel that gentle squeeze and know that he is still awake and waiting. But even then, Levi never speaks a word. Just keeps those fingers wrapped in between my own, assuring and warm.

Finally, when the moon is high in the midnight sky, my eyes begin to waver – flashing lights and faces flickering between my lashes. The room is fading, falling into a blurred dreamland where I’ll be free from this desolate wasteland. Or maybe pulled into a nightmare worse than the one we’re already living. Either way, I don’t resist the pull of sleep on my conscious. It’s going to be a big day tomorrow, and my senses need to be sharp if I expect my ass to return unscathed.

The woods are almost beautiful in the midst of the snowfall – that is if we weren’t having to trudge through the mess. Levi had been more skilled with the needle and thread than he previously let on, probably out of the sake of his pride to be taunted with my jeers. He does make a great housewife, though. Within the past two weeks, Levi had found the time to repurpose the oversized clothing into something a little more practical for his smaller frame. He’d given me a pair of gloves, too. Made from some left over scraps of cloth and currently keeping my hands from falling to frostbite.

At least the wind has died down, though. Now we’re just left with the biting cold, and well, biters. Neither of us have spotted any beside the occasional corpse rotting in the snow.

Back at camp, I had asked Levi if he had thought about the prospect of hunting any of the game that was left in the woods, but he’d simply shaken his head, said there was enough death in the world right now for us to be taking any more lives. But I think he’ll probably change his views if we don’t find any supplies on this trip. However, it’s not like we have any real weapons to hunt with, anyway.
Well, besides the shitty-ass knife lodged in my waistband. I guess it is better than nothing – no, it is better than nothing, but the flimsy blade still won’t be able to save us against a horde if we happen to come across one.

I would wish that this supply run could end in a truck full of peanut butter and maybe a few dozen guns, but I’m not as stupid to think to push my luck that far. Being alive is good enough for now.

“You think we’re getting close to anything?” I ask, keeping my eyes peeled for a sign of something looming in the distance.

“Hard to tell,” Levi says, fist clenched around a sizeable branch. I’d laugh if anyone else were to attempt to wield the limb as a weapon, but for some reason, Levi looks pretty threatening with it in his palm. Probably the permanent glare resting on his face that helps.

I watch as he pulls a Sharpie out of his pocket, drawing a small ‘x’ on the trunk of the tree next to him. Considering neither of us know where we are going, it was the only surefire way that we would be able to find our way back to camp, the snowfall constantly recovering our footprints.

Turning back to me, Levi looks sullen as he tucks the marker back into his pocket – probably due to the fact that we’ve been tracking an unknown target for what seems like a countless number of hours. But then his eyes are going wide, and before I am able to ask him what’s up, Levi is throwing a hand over my mouth and tugging us behind the trunk of the tree.

The rapid beating of his heart is hammering softly against my back as Levi pulls me tighter to him. And I have no idea what’s going on, what he saw, but it’s obviously something dangerous. A hoard? Those men from before? My answer is found pretty quickly when I hear the droning sounds only associated with the walking dead. However, it doesn’t seem loud enough to be emerging from a herd – maybe three or four at most, aimlessly wandering through the trees.

I’d question Levi’s caution, but then again, we are about as armed as a newborn baby. Better safe than sorry, I guess.

We stay in silence until the last sounds of crunching leaves and endless moans are long gone. Then, a long, heavy sigh cascades over my shoulder, the body beneath mine relaxing into the ground.

“Get up,” he mumbles into my jacket, “I’m going to have an ass—sicle in a few seconds.” Pushing myself off his lap, I immediately extend a hand to lift him from the snow. “Thanks,” Levi mutters, hands wiping the excess snow from his body.

And I simply smile, because there’s really nothing else for me to do. Nothing but to squeeze his hand as I tug us forwards – a bizarre Hansel and Gretel, except you know, with zombies. But he follows, regardless, doesn’t mumble a retort as I pull his hand into my coat pocket to keep it warm. There may even be a little bit of color that lights up his cheeks. But if I see it, then I don’t say a word, not wanting to ruin whatever kind of moment this has turned into.

The snow continues to fall as we trek on towards the great unknown, falling heavy and catching onto my eyelashes as I try to bat my way through the sheets of white. It isn’t until my legs are aching and my toes feel numb that I spot a building in the distance.

“Levi, look.” He turns his head accordingly, eyes slightly widening when they spot the building.

“Good job, Bright Eyes.” Levi says, gifting me a smile as he pulls us towards the dark shadow. It only takes us a few moments to reach the much more forgiving terrain of the black pavement. Of course, it, too is covered in a sheet of snow, but it is much easier to walk through instead of the
endless paths of leaves.

There are a few shopping carts scattered among the lot, signaling that we’ve found our best bet at food: a supermarket. It’s very small, obviously a local chain, but a supermarket, nonetheless. And god, I can already hear my stomach growling.

Moving on instinct, both of us approach the building with a tailored caution, hands gripping our weapons as we reach the entryway. Unlike the gas station, this store’s front door has long been torn down, not boarded up in time to prevent the apocalypse from wrecking its havoc.

Stepping through the entryway, the first thing I notice is the empty shelves.

No.

“Shit,” I whisper, eyes almost unbelieving that we could have possibly traveled all this way for nothing. But as I step closer, I notice how empty this store actually is. A few perishables have fallen to the ground, obviously something that was dropped by whoever came before us. But besides that, nothing but inedible household supplies seem to be left.

I search the store, trying to find that inevitable gold mine that always seems to be waiting for us. But the only thing I recover this time is two opened Doritos bags, already being consumed by ants. This can’t be it, though. There’s just no way, no possible way that someone could have emptied this entire store of its supplies. But then I think about places like Stohess. Places that weren’t just bringing two people along to savage for food. Communities that have the manpower to wipe a store like this clean to the very last box of Tic-Tacs. And it just fucking sucks.

It wouldn’t typically be that unusual for Levi to be so silent, but now under the weight of all this wasted time, it’s almost enough to cut through glass.

And the moment I look at him, the moment I see how empty his eyes appear, I know he’s not that strong any more. Not when his hopes are being pulled from him left and right. I wish there was, anything I could do to make this situation better. Tell him that maybe we can find a way to live off a bottle of fabric softener. But I can’t. Can’t make any of this better.

It just fucking sucks.

But you know what sucks even worse? Walkers. And obviously one was looming somewhere in the store, because before I know it, the bastard has hold of my left arm.

“Eren!” Levi yells, racing towards me as I try to reach for my knife. Hell, I know even if it does bite me, I won’t turn, but what kind of masochist would just allow themselves to be bitten? Not Eren Jaeger, I can guarantee that.

Before Levi can even reach me, I’ve already dispatched of the biter, a clean stab between the eyes. My knife is sliding out of its skull by the time Levi is in front of me, hands shaking as he slides dirty fingers through his hair. He’s rattled, that much is for sure, and I am starting to think that maybe it was just a good idea to chance it with the earthworm stew.

I open my mouth to say something, not to tell him it’s okay, because god none of this is okay. But to reassure him in the way he has done for me. A little payback, I suppose. However, before I can even get the words off my lips, a gut wrenching noise is breaking through the air.

A scream.

A scream for help.
A scream for help.

Everything is going so fast. First, we’re fucked over by some hope-seeking grocery store. Then seconds later, someone is calling out to us. It’s going too fast.

I’m running, sprinting towards the noise. And Levi, in all his crippled glory, is doing the same. Fingers dig into the side of the wall before I allow my momentum to slam me into it, heart pounding, cold air electric in my lungs. Peeking out to view the scene happening in the parking lot, and – oh god.

There are six of them, surrounding him and closing in as they seek out their prey. But there is still time. We can do something, we can save him. We can –

Levi holds my arm back, fingers digging into the fabric of my jacket as I attempt to move forwards. There is a dead look on his face, one that sees straight through me as I try to yank out of his grip.

“Let me go,” I whisper harshly, gritting my teeth as the pressure on my captured arm just tightens.

“We can’t help him,” he says, so calmly and monotone that I could almost mistake him as one of the walkers. And he can’t be suggesting that we just sit here and watch while this man is eaten alive. Can he? “We can’t help him, Eren.”

All of my life, even before the world ended, I’ve always stuck up for what I thought was the right thing to do. Brainless or not, I followed the direction my heart believed in, fuck the consequences. It’s how I ended up with a set of teeth marks as a souvenir of World War Z. How I ended up here with Levi, standing at the entrance of a looted supermarket, watching as some guy screams for help.

So, why am I not moving to save him? It’s what my heart is telling me is the right thing to do. To save this man from a horrible fate. Why am I silent, motionless as the walkers close in tighter and tighter? Have I lost that morality, too, among all the other things taken from me?

And suddenly, I’m back to all those months ago. Back to when I watched as my mother was torn from limb to limb, saving me in the process. Telling me to run, to stay safe as she choked on her own blood.

It’s just that easy, though, isn’t it? I’ll run away from all of this, go back to that house. We both will. Pretend none of this fucked up shit actually exists. That all life ever was is a can of beans. Doing that, it's easy.

Making the right choice.

That’s the hard part.

Levi’s watching me. I can feel those gunmetal eyes digging into the side of my head as if they were a set of jaws instead. Knows that I’m thinking about doing something stupid. So, he grips me harder – a silent way of telling me to stay the fuck here.

I take a deep breath.

And I hear that scream.

Red litters the snow, sprinkles it with deep spots of crimson. My eyes stay glued to the scene, watching as the roamers sink their teeth into any part of the man they can reach. Still screaming, although no longer for help, the man finally falls to the ground, taking the walkers with him. It’s not long before guts and flesh are being torn from the innards of another hopeless victim. Just another
I’m still staring even as his screams silence completely. Still wondering why any of this had to happen. I’ll never stop questioning it, even if all of this ends. Won’t stop thinking about what humanity could have possibly done to deserve a fate like this. Will my life end this way? With someone watching as I’m consumed by the undead? Will Levi’s?

Ended with your insides being shared like a feast at the dinner table.

I’m pulled from my thoughts when Levi’s hand reaches up to cup my cheek, to pull my vision away from the grotesque carnage and back to him. Back to Levi. It’s like he wants to tell me that he is sorry, like he wishes that he, too, could have gone out there and stopped the group from consuming the man. But life just isn’t that easy anymore.

Making the right choice.

We wait until the undead have finished feasting on the body and have moved away from the area to leave the market. The only thing in sight being the dilapidated body of a man I never knew. A leg is gone, lost to the walkers, along with most of his face and torso. He reaches up to us, not unlike how I did the night before, calling us to come closer, to help him one last time. Except now, the man is asking for something we cannot give.

Those teeth clack loudly as Levi raises his stick and brings it down once, twice over the turned man’s head. Now, nothing but the wind echoes through the air. It’s almost poetic. If we weren’t standing over a corpse and all.

But just as Levi is pulling his stick out of the caved-in skull, I notice something around the man’s shoulders.

A backpack.

Without thinking, I turn the body over and wretch the pack from its owner. Levi doesn’t stop me, though, apparently also curious as to what’s inside. It’s a huge bag, having multiple compartments, perfect for the end of the world. But I’m not really concerned with how much it can hold as to what is actually inside of it. So, I open it.

And holy shit.

Holy shit.

Food. Well, baby food, miscellaneous cans, the works to be specific. But still, food. And a lot of it, all stuffed deep inside the backpack for safe keeping. And I start to think that maybe it’s okay for me to be a coward, to not be the hero. That is what Levi told me all those weeks ago, right? To not be a hero. At least not in this world.

When I look up to him, still somber but still hopeful, handing him the backpack to sling around his shoulders, I understand. I understand more in this simple gaze than I have in the past twenty-four hours I’ve spent with the man. That Levi is strong, but he can be weak, as well.

And when he interlocks our fingers together, I tell myself that being weak can be the right choice, too.

Chapter End Notes
MY TUMBLR
PURCHASE WHAT'S EATING YOU? PART ONE
FANMIX
ALL FANART
“Steady,” he whispers over my shoulder, hands balancing me from either side. Eyes focused on the target ahead, I release a slow breath before my finger falls from the string of the handmade bow. There is a certain kind of beauty, watching the arrow fly through the air. A power that comes with pulling it free from the bow.

I never argued with him when Levi decided to start crafting the weapon. It seemed to be an escape for him, witling the wood in between his hands for hours on end. To be completely honest, I really didn’t think it would turn into anything remotely useable, but I guess that just went to prove how smart it was to doubt the man. Next thing I know, Levi’s pretty much adapted the name Robin Hood.

“You’re getting better,” Levi says as the arrow lands into the bark of the marked tree, his roughened hands giving me a satisfied squeeze from either side. And something inside my chest clenches at the thought of how proud he sounds.

“Oh, really?” Leaning back into his touch, I can feel a smile start to form against my neck.

“Yeah, really.” Those hands grip me tighter, and suddenly I’m being spun around to face him. Levi’s looking up at me with these expectant eyes, full of that anticipation and hope. That desire for something more. And I give it to him, reach down and tilt his chin so our lips can meet. Press into him until he’s the one pulling away. Because I’d keep giving in to him – and he knows that, knows that I don’t feel like any of this will ever really be enough. So, that’s why I let him decide, let him tell me that it’s good enough. “We should head inside,” he says, whispered into the air like a promise of something more.

So, I follow. Like I always seem to do.

When I wake up in the middle of the night, he’s wrapped around me. Naked bodies pressed together like some kind of shield from the outside world. I’m sweating, chest heaving in a silent desperation. Thinking of the images floating inside my head. The dead, undead, living. All of it, coming to a violent surge in my dreams – nightmares, as they were. Seeing the ones I loved picked apart piece by piece, screaming, crying for a help that would never come. And here I am, witness to it all as I lay here soundless.

Levi pulls me closer, like he knows without even waking that I’m struggling. He never talks about his dreams, his nightmares – as if it’s just another burden he would rather not saddle me with. Just fades the night away when the dawn arrives as if nothing traumatic could have happened to him. And there is this part of me, this jealous, insatiable part that craves that dependency. That begs for him to seek comfort in me instead of the bow and arrow.
I know it’s selfish, to ask so much from someone that has already given me more than enough. But I can’t help the egging at the forefront of my mind that nags me every time he wakes me unintentionally in the middle of the night with his quick drawls of breath.

It’s sick, isn’t it? To want that kind of assurance? To know that you’re needed?

He’s sleeping soundly, head on my chest, breath falling across my skin in even lengths. Beautiful. Fingers steadily reach to push the straying hairs from his face, gentle as I can be in the middle of the night. His lips are still kiss-swollen, a blotch of red marking beneath his jaw. There is a faint shift in his breathing, and I take good care to keep him from waking. It’s a rare thing when Levi can actually rest a full night.

He has told me that it really has nothing to do with the whole world ending bullshit. Said that he’s been like this ever since he can remember. That even back when he was keeping tabs on Isabel and Farlan, he’d hardly slept a wink. I hadn’t missed the small cringe his mouth made when their names had fallen off his tongue.

I try not to move too much, being a survivor of the apocalypse has made us all light sleepers. Instead, I just try to fall back into the dark, allow the promise of another world surround my thoughts as I let the black start to fade my edges.

Ignoring the sound when Levi’s sleep-soaked voice starts whimpering out against a new nightmare. Just gripping him tighter. Telling him that I’m here if he wants me. That I’m always going to be here.

I’ve never taken the time to actually think if the walkers could feel anything. To me, they have always seemed like these moving targets – a punching bag for humanity. Or maybe it is the other way around. I’m pretty sure the undead actually outnumber the living now.

Regardless, I’ve never really considered that the walkers we think of as so far from human might still have a little bit of humanity left inside of them.

“Do you think they remember anything at all?” We’re sitting on the steps of the porch, staring at a couple of impaled walkers struggling to free themselves in order to sink their teeth into our flesh. It is kind of morbid that we consider this normal, watching the undead strain to unhinge themselves from our traps. “Like maybe they are just really drunk off the virus or something?”

“Pretty sure a few shots never made me rip anyone’s throat out, Eren.”

“Okay, bad comparison,” I mutter. Levi scoffs, rolling his eyes. “I’m serious, though.” Looking back out towards the walkers, the thought strikes something deep down inside my gut. “What if they’re still there?” It’s hard to think that could be a possibility, with the biters currently gnashing their teeth at us. One in particular has almost reached the ground with how far it has pulled itself down the pole, fingers scrabbling in front of it as it growls.

But then there is a rustling, and I notice that Levi has jumped up, a kitchen knife in hand. And before I can even tell him to stop, he has shoved the knife deep into the skull of the first walker. I push myself up, moving forward as he withdraws the knife only to force it into the second walker’s eye. A sickening crunch follows as he pulls the weapon free, quickly turning to trot back inside of the house.

“Levi–” I try, but I am cut off by him shoudering past me. “Levi,” the words come out sterner this time, along with my hand wrapping around his wrist to wrench him back around. He doesn’t look at
me immediately, but when he does – there is a fire in those eyes. Something smoldering behind the scathing glare. “What are you doing?” It’s not necessarily the question I want an answer to, not the thought that was on my mind when Levi ended the two walkers behind us.

Then, that gaze softens, lessens itself into something apologetic, something tender. My grip around his wrist drops, and in that, I give him the chance to leave, to not explain himself. Because really who am I to demand answers out of him? He’ll tell me when he’s ready, right? Levi’s never been one to be forced into anything.

“You can’t tell me that,” he finally whispers. Levi looks away, bloodied hand dropped lifelessly to his side. “Don’t make me think that. Not after all this.” There is a soft drop of red hitting the ground as he stands there, seemingly waiting to be judged. “I can’t…” his words begin to trail off, clean hand coming up to push through his hair.

“Levi… it was stupid, I’m stu–”

“Don’t… don’t say that either.” He reaches to grab ahold of my hand, squeezing it gently. “I just don’t want to think about it. Not after all this.” A part of me understands, realizes that Levi’s already faced enough demons. Realizes we all have. And even if the thought has provoked me, I understand that it is something that should stay buried. Something that isn’t worth the grief when we’re still trying to save our own lives out here.

So, I don’t protest when he leads us back inside the small house, dropping my hand once we pass the entryway. Life seems to sort of fall in line after he releases his hold, Levi walking to the backpack to grab one of the multiple cans of baby food. And then there’s me, the one who wishes he could do something other than just stand there. I watch as he pours half the glass into one of the empty baby food containers. Make my way to the living room to sit down when I realize he really isn’t going to need any of my help. There is a filler of awkward silence that permeates into the room as he hands me my portion, sitting beside me on the couch. It’s broken by the sounds of us slurping at our food, Levi abandoning his attempt at civilized behavior as soon as he noticed that spoons just really don’t work as well as fingers when it comes to being able to savor all the baby food in the jar.

“I wanted to ask you something,” I say between gulps. And he side-eyes me cautiously, quickly going back to his dinner. “I’ve been thinking after the snow clears of going to look for my sister.” As soon as the words leave my lips, I can feel his hardened stare back on me. Knowing it’s a lot to ask, I figured that I should get it out in the open before the snow actually started to melt. And it seemed easiest to just subtly slide the conversation into the air during dinner – well, actually none of it really ever seemed easy at all. Especially asking Levi something like this. But he had to know that it would be brought up eventually, know that I wouldn’t just completely abandon Mikasa out there – wherever she may be.

There’s a long pause, then, “Think it will get you killed?” That isn’t the first question I thought he would ask. Hell, I’m not sure if I was even expecting a question. More like a stern kick in the ass for threatening to abandon what we’ve made here. But I guess I don’t know Levi as well as I’d like to believe.

“I’d die trying.” I see his lip twitch at this, knowing that he’s trying to hold back what he probably really wants to say. Then, he’s really looking at me, all doubt fleeting from his face as he takes me in.

“Okay, Bright Eyes. Okay.”
We don’t expect to come across an old, forgotten town, but somehow we manage it. Levi and I had decided that it’d be best to scavenge for supplies before we almost starve to death like the last time. There is still several jars of baby food left back at camp, but they are all pea flavored. I’ve realized that Levi can stomach a lot of things, but that green baby food is not one of them. I offered to pinch his nose shut last time, but all he’d responded with was that this was probably why we ended up with a fucking walker shit show – because we fed this shit to babies. Can’t say he’s entirely wrong.

The town looks abandoned, looks like you’d expect, I guess. Littered with trash, looted buildings. It’s about as typical as one could assume.

He’s brought the bow and arrow, shabby thing that it is – can still take out a biter, though. Still has a knife on him just in case, but I think he’s proud of it deep down. Not like he’d ever ask for the praise, however. I just give him a look, and he always seems to know.

“I want to check that office building,” Levi tells me, head nodding towards the long forgotten complex. Shooting him a questioning look, he immediately responds with a heavy sigh, one that makes me feel like I should know what he’s thinking. “Vending machines,” Said like it was obvious and makes me bristle beside him. But that quick tempered frustration is easily lost as Levi starts to walk ahead of me towards the building.

He’s Not Here is painted along the side of the wall in big, red letters. A kind of haunting omen for any who might stumble across this town. It makes me grip my knife just a little bit tighter, briefly glancing up into a cloudless sky. But then Levi’s there, his body moving swiftly ahead of me, prepared for anything this godless world could throw at him. And I pull myself back, focusing only on the figure in my front – not the death whispers written on the walls.

The windows have been busted. Glass shines bright in the daylight as it reflects our hastened images. Still, I follow him as he persists inside, edging himself over the open window. The shattered shards crunch beneath my feet as I land on the ground, eyes peeled, knife drawn. I don’t want to have a good feeling about this place, don’t want to let that guard down in the hopes that maybe this once a run won’t end with some kind of traumatic event. It’s too much to ask of the world. So, I keep that arm raised, ready to pick the brains of whatever wants to come near me.

I don’t have to wait long.

It’s staggering over, hand nothing but brittle bone and tattered skin as it reaches out. Eyes blank, dead, communicating nothing but its unending hunger. Then I notice it, the band circled around one of the decaying fingers grabbing out towards me. Should it make me sick that this walker was once a spouse, once a lover? It’s all the same, though, right? The wretched guilt that pits inside my gut when I remember these things were once people. Not the mindless walking dead they’ve become.

Levi doesn’t let me rest on the thought, sending an arrow straight through the skull of the biter. There’s a slick shuck that sounds out as he walks over and pulls the arrow free from the walker. Then a thud, the lifeless body falling back to the floor. It’s a weird kind of irony that walkers can die just as humans do.

Levi doesn’t look back once.

I feel like it is kind of morbid how mute we have all become to the death. Makes me wonder how fucked up we’re actually going to be if any of this ever straightens out. How we’ll be able to live again. Normally, that is.

Somehow, thinking of a world free of walkers sounds scarier.
"I think there’s one back here." He’s peering around the corner, not leaving me far behind. Disappearing swiftly over the edge, I follow him into a ransacked room, chairs thrown across the floor, table pressed against a closed door. But Levi was right – it’s here, the vending machine, pressed neatly against a pale, white wall. It’s almost like Mr. Higher Power doesn’t fucking hate us for once.

I see Levi throw his bow and arrow to rest against his back as he leans in close to inspect the machine, and I quirk a brow when he presses his cheek to the glass.

“Some of these got alarms,” he says. “Just making sure we’re clear to bust it.” A part of me feels like Levi definitely has experience doing this – probably way before the apocalypse even began. But then he’s turning around, shooing me further away with his hand. I take a couple of steps backwards, an anxious itch beginning to travel down my spine. He doesn’t waste time, grabbing ahold of the nearest chair and busting the glass protecting the insides of the vending machine. There’s no alarm, but the sound of the shattered cover seems loud enough to draw in a few dozen walkers.

“Are you fucking insane?” I ask, marching over to help him gut the machine.

“Calm your tits. We’ll be gone before those assholes can even think of munching our bones.” It still doesn’t do my nerves any good, nonetheless still moving to shove the multitude of snacks into my backpack. “Oi, found your favorite.” Looking to the side, I spot him handing me an Almond Joy – and I almost want to wrap my hands around his neck.

Fucking coconut.

“Ha ha, very funny, asshole.” Anyway, jokes on him, because I’m totally not going to share my bag of Doritos now. “How long do you think this will last us?”

“If we’re smart, probably a month.”

“I thought we were always smart.” At that he gives me a pointed look, and I can’t help the smirk that rises onto my face. It seems to be so easy to rile him up now, but I think that is just a benefit of surviving together. Kind of weird how far we’ve come, huh? To think that this is the same guy who almost killed me should really blow my mind. But, hey, it’s not like I was too fond of him, either.

But now… now what I am?

I’ve put off thinking about it, trying to shove the words into the back corner of my mind. Terrified of what they could do to us if spoken aloud. But there are too many things to be afraid of in this world right now. And being in love with someone really shouldn’t be one of them.

“Levi,” I say, quiet – trying so fucking hard not to be afraid. And he turns towards me, eyes seeming to pierce straight into my soul as if he’s trying to pull the words out himself. “I just…” Fumbling, I can’t find it in myself to look away. There’s something dragging at my gut, pushing me to say it, to just get it over with. But it’s hard. So much harder than killing walkers and living off baby food. Should it be like this? Is it supposed to be easy to say those three words? I grab his hand. “I want to tell you that… fuck, I want…”

“Eren?” He gives me a gentle squeeze, a prompt to continue.

“L-”

And in the silence, nothing sounds as loud as the hammer being pulled back on a gun.

“Hey, don’t let me stop ya. I was enjoying the show.” The man is greasy, skinny and slick with a
toothy smile. Pointing the gun right in my direction. And I’m scared, still gripping Levi’s hand as the man takes a step forward. “You’ve gotten careless, huh?” There’s a wave of confusion that washes over me as I take in the man’s words, realizing he’s speaking to Levi and not me. “I could’ve shot ya right in the back of the head if I wanted to, huh?” Levi stiffens beside me, and I try not to let my fear bleed through my expression. “We thought you were dead.”

Wait, what?

“I might end up that way if you don’t get that fucking gun out of my face.” There’s a snarl that curls on the edge of his lips, and nothing is seeming to make any kind of sense. How this man knows Levi, how Levi knows him. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’ve never once thought that Levi was only surviving with me out here. Knew that he’d been at it with Farlan and Isabel, with that group. That group. Like a hard awakening, it hits me. That this could be a man from that gang he used to run with. The one we almost ran into back at what was left of my house. The one he wanted to protect me from. But nothing stays innocent out here for long. Especially if you’re trying to keep it that way.

“You ain’t changed, have ya? Still a fuckin’ asshole, just got someone to suck your cock now.” The man’s head jerks my direction, and I can physically feel Levi stiffen as he continues to grasp my hand. But the gun falls down, barrel pointing towards the white office tiles instead of my forehead. “I just can’t believe the boss was actually right about finding ya here.”

“He’s here?”

“Of course he’s here, dumbass. Boss is the whole reason we’re here in the first place. Couldn’t imagine leaving ya out here all poor and defenseless once we caught eyes on ya back in Shiganshina.” The man smiles, all crooked and cold. And I feel like running, like taking on this asshole and just shoving my knife right in between his eyes. Running all the way back to our little house in the woods and pretending like all of this is okay. “It’s all okay, it’s all okay, it’s all okay.

“Well, you can go tell him I said to fuck off.” Then there’s a laugh, sharp and chilling, sounding off into the air as the man throws his head backwards. Levi takes the opportunity to step in front of me, to shield me from whatever this man could have in store.

“You ain’t changed,” the man says as he starts to wipe at his eyes. “No, you ain’t changed.” I need to run. We need to run. Now, plunge that knife into this monster’s thick skull. “But I think ya misunderstood me.” That gun is lifted back up into the air, a hollow barrel into the next world looking right back at us. “You’re comin’ back with me. You choose if it’s with both ya kneecaps workin’.” I try to reach back for the knife lodged between my jeans and jacket as quietly as possible, but the crack of the glass beneath my feet gives me away. “Boss didn’t say anything about bringin’ back no pets.” I see his finger move to the trigger as the gun moves slightly to aim directly at me. “Tell me how good you can suck a cock, boy, and I might change my mind.”

“Fuck you,” I ground out between my teeth, pushing forwards against the barrier Levi’s provided.

“I see why you’ve kept him around,” the man chuckles, “Your little slut’s got spunk, huh? Ain’t too bad on the eyes either.” But then the man pauses, narrows his gaze as he stares deeper into me. “Wait,” he takes a small step closer, “I’ve seen ya before.”

“I’ll go,” Levi interrupts, letting go of me as he steps forward. “Leave him, and I’ll go.”

But the man isn’t swayed, “Those eyes, I wouldn’t forget ‘em.” And I’m terrified, not because of the man creeping closer, not because of the gun. But Levi, dropping my hand and leaving me behind. Leaving me her— “Bright Eyes!” What? “You’re that kid from the grocery store, huh? One that went to hell in a handbasket?” And I can’t breathe. “That plan really went to shit, huh, Levi?”
“Shut up,” he says. I’ve never heard his voice sound like this before.

“What, ya never told him? Thought ya could just mosey on along with some happily ever after?”

The man scoffs. "Maybe ya have changed."

"I said shut up."

But the man doesn’t listen. He’s the one holding the gun, after all.

"See, the boys were lookin’ for some fun. We found your group – well, we found you, Bright Eyes. Don’t remember who came up with the name, but it suited ya. Thought you’d be a good time if we could get our hands on ya. Led the walkers to that grocery store thinking we’d be able to cut ya off at the exit, but fuck us, right?" There are words forming on my tongue, trying to deny that any of this happened. That Levi, that Levi, the man I’ve fallen in love with could have had anything to do with this. That he killed Marco. “The little shits scattered when we tried to cut ‘em off. You weren’t even there. Hell, we figured ya got eaten by some undead bitch, didn’t we, Levi?” He doesn’t answer until the gun is pointed at his head.

“I’ll fucking kill you.”

The man who helped kill Marco.

Wait.

Scattered.

Scattered.

Scattered.

And it hits me like a ton of bricks: that’s how Armin was separated. That’s how Armin went insane.

That’s the reason Armin died.

Levi killed him.

Levi killed him.

Levi killed him.

“We got one of ‘em, though. He didn’t last long. Wasn’t as pretty, either.” I wish that he would have never found me. I wish I would have died back there in that fucking shack. “I think I’ll keep ya, huh? I’m sure your dear ol’ Levi won’t mind. Finders keepers and all tha—” There’s an echo of a gunshot. Blood. A scream. The slick sound of a knife tearing through flesh. I stand there unperturbed, numb to it all. What else can surprise me after this? To know I’ve been sleeping with the wolf in sheep’s clothing? It comes back to me as soon as he stands, as he turns, flannel soaked with an angry red, knife still in his hand.

“Eren,” he tries to start, hand reaching out to grab me.

I step back, eyes finally meeting his own. “Don’t touch me,” I whisper. Everything inside of me is shaking, and I just want to run – always want to run, away, away, away from him, from all of this. “You’re a monster.” The words are painful coming off my lips, sound like an audible poison in the air.

And he feels it, I can tell he does as soon as I say the phrase. Trying to take a step closer to me, only
to be met by me backing away further from him. The hand still in the air begins to slowly drop, a defeated thud as it falls against his thigh.

“Please,” he says, quiet, afraid. “Please.”

I take another step backwards.

“I should kill you.” And he looks up, tears beginning to trace the rims of his eyes. “I should run you through with this fucking knife and let you bleed out. I should let you turn. It’s what you deserve.” The drops of liquid begin to trace down his cheeks, running lines through the stain of dirt and dust. Good, let him feel something other than that goddamned apathy.

I’ve never seen him cry.

“Eren,” he says through the tears, “Don’t do this, please. Just let me explain back at the cabin.”

A dry laugh is all I can manage. “You think that I will ever go back there with you? You… you think that I even want you anymore?” He tries to step towards me again, and I point my knife in his direction.

“Please,” he whispers.

“I wish you were fucking dead.”

Then I run.

I can hear him scream my name as the wind whips past my face, as the sound of groans begins to draw closer. And it’s only then that the sickness hits me. That I have to pause as the ground begins to close in on me. That the tears I thought would only mask Levi’s face begin to stream down mine. That the wails leave my lips, crying and moaning as if the only world I’ve known for the past few months has just crumbled in my hands. But it has, right? Ended as soon as I left him all alone back in that office building.

And then I’m sick, vomiting into the bushes beside me as I curl into myself. Breath coming in rapid succession, heartbeat pounding. It’s over, isn’t it? The moaning grows louder, and the first thing I think of is Levi being torn apart. Screaming, begging for my help as I stand there watching the blood rain. It makes me want to run back to him, that dependence. To make it back to the cabin then hate him later.

I should, right?

Hate his guts and wish he was dead.

But I don’t have time to think about the answer. Not because of the incoming walkers, but because of the man in a bowler hat that’s currently hovering above me with a gun pointed in my face.

“Hello, Bright Eyes.”

Chapter End Notes

D-d-d-drop the bomb.
If you have any questions, please feel free to ask - I might be slow answering them on here, and you'll probably get a quicker response through my Tumblr, though. This chapter might be a little confusing if you haven't read over some earlier chapters in awhile.

MY TUMBLR
FANMIX
ALL FANART
Preparing to die isn’t easy. Makes me realize how much simpler it is to just be ended by a shot to the back of the head. But knowing… truly understanding that there is no way out of this for you, that you’re going to be killed in some brutal, inhuman way.

It’s hard.

The only thing harder is knowing that the person you loved is probably going to end up the same as you. *Loved.* The word still burns the back of my throat even thinking about it – about him. I was so fucking stupid.

We’ve been driving for what feels like hours, the world passing beside me in a grey blur. I never thought I would end up in the truck that seemed to symbolize the loss of humanity in this world, but I now find myself slotted in between two heartless bastards in the back seat. They’d tied my wrists to prevent me from trying to escape – not that I hadn’t tried, but a gun really does hold all the power around here.

The ropes are so tight that my skin has long since rubbed raw, partially due to my attempt at breaking free. Somehow, a part of me wonders if Levi has thought about escaping. If he would take me with him.

He’s in the front seat directly ahead of me, wrists bound same as mine. Except he hasn’t tried to escape, not even once. However, Levi’s never been stupid, so maybe he just knows when it’s time to give up the fight.

He had arrived black and blue, head busted, lip bleeding. Was tossed into the front seat like a sack of garbage, without a care. It was then I started to realize why Levi had been avoiding these people. It was more than the fact that he knew they would probably kill me, rape me, and cut me up into a million pieces. It was that they would kill him, too.

“You doing okay back there, Bright Eyes?” The name wraps itself around my throat and tightens every time I hear it echoed. Each syllable choking me from the inside out. I don’t even think they even realize the gravity behind it, something that used to empower me, guide me. Now nothing more than a vulgar mark on what could have been.

When I feel the gun barrel press against the underside of my jaw, I decide it is probably best to not keep the man waiting. “Fuck you.” Those words are the only thing holding my dignity together, the rest of it lost when I was roped off and thrown into the back seat of this damned truck.

“Heh, you’re a feisty little fucker, ain’t ya?” I can see him smiling at me in the rear view mirror, gold tooth gleaming in the sunlight. And you know, even though I’ve long since accepted that I’m more than likely going to die at the hands of these men, I’m still scared. No matter how many times that little voice in my head tries to reassure me that I’ve gotten myself out of worse situations, the
foreboding anxiety still finds a way to arch up my spine. “I’ll be damned, this kid’s a keeper. Ain’t he, shorty?” The man chuckles, jostling Levi’s shoulder as if he wasn’t currently holding both of us captive. “It’s good to have ya back, boy.” I watch an arm wrap itself around Levi as his head is pulled close against the man’s chest. And I don’t know what disturbs me more: the camaraderie these two obviously share or the fact that Levi doesn’t even try to pull away from the embrace. Both feel equally revolting.

So, I close my eyes. Block it all out until the sounds are nothing more than a fuzzy backdrop of noise. Thinking that none of this is actually happening. That maybe I still love him. We’re in a house, far away in the woods were no one or nothing could ever hurt us. Smiling, laughing as he holds me in his arms. Warm and strong. Tells me I’m beautiful as he kisses me softly. Wipes away the tears falling from my eyes and pulls me closer. Even when I say that I hate him. That he is a monster.

But then we are stopping, and my sight is beginning to return to me. The picture of a chained fence being opened before us as the man meets my eye in the mirror once more.

“Welcome home, Bright Eyes.”

“You can’t just fucking leave me down here!” I scream. Tied to a metal pole, my bargaining chips are pretty much null – which explains why the asshole just clicks his tongue and shakes his head as he walks back up the stairs. It’s a heavy omen when the basement door finally slams shut. The whole scene is all too reminiscent of the cannibals and their tactics of keeping prey fresh. Of seeing Erwin’s lifeless body resting on the carving board. Except this time Levi isn’t down here with me. That goddamn bastard.

I faintly wonder what they’re doing to him upstairs – even though I shouldn’t care. It’d be best to just purge myself of him altogether. Forget how much I used to feel for someone who essentially killed my best friend. Who killed Armin. My jaw tenses, fists tightening behind my back as I think about it. I should have just fucking killed him. Got it over with and ran the knife straight across his throat. Watched him bleed out in front of me and wonder if that’s what they did when they were finished playing with Jean – if that asshole was even telling the truth about capturing one of us. Because that is who it had to be, right? Marco was dead, Armin separated from the group… and Jean – the shiththead he was – would get himself captured by a bunch of sadists, huh? But hell, I lived with one of them, slept with one of them. So, I guess that makes me the biggest shiththead of us all.

The ropes tied around my wrists have no give, doesn’t matter how many times I pull. Luckily, the burns have faded into a dull kind of numb that’s only barely present in the back of my mind. It will probably hurt a lot like a bitch afterwards – if I can somehow manage a way out of this. Even though that is very fucking unlikely given the current circumstances. Maybe I should just start thinking of the best way to beg for my life. Pray they end it quickly.

There’s a small window down here that illuminates some of the darkness. It’s like a cruel tease of freedom, taunting me with what I can’t have. Or maybe a push to be strong, to fight to be alive once again. I pull at the bindings one more time to no avail, only rewarded with harsher burns to my wrists. It’s not fair, I think. To come so far, only to fall before the end. Like some tragic hero, except I doubt anyone will remember my story. Is that the worst part about it? That I will fade into some apocalyptic past with not even a memory of my name left in this world? Sighing, I let my head fall back against the pole. Who even gives a fuck about memories anymore? Almost all the people in mine are dead, anyway.

I can hear the voices faintly muffled behind the basement door. None of them I can make out to be
Levi’s, but he was never a big talker.

In a way, I hope he is the one to do it, to kill me. That he has to look into my eyes as he presses that barrel against my forehead. It would be a nice retribution for me at the end of it all. To know that the monster who made me fall for him would be responsible for ending my pain. Just to make him see how much he betrayed me before I go. Hell, I don’t even care if he isn’t the one cutting that cord, as long as he is there. As long as he watches me fall. Deep down, I realize that someone like him probably doesn’t give a shit, anyway. I’m just another mark on his list of victims. But a small part of myself wants to think that he still has some form of empathy left in that chest, and that I’m the one who will be able to steal it away from him.

There’s a creak and another beam of light that shines from the top of the stairs. Then, footsteps sound off, heavy and aching as they climb down the stairs. I don’t look up to see who has come to visit me, torment me. The prelude doesn’t really matter. Only the climax. The way I’ll leave this world and who will take me out of it.

“Given up already? Oi, I put more effort into shitting than you do tryin’ to stay alive, eh?” His shoe nudges my outstretched leg, impatient for an answer. And I don’t give him one, tired of trying to prove myself with bold words. But he obviously wants a show, twisting his fingers harshly into my hair as he yanks my head up to look at him. The strands tug painfully in his hold as I grit my teeth, refusing to give him the satisfaction of an answer. “The game’s no fun if ya don’t play fair, kiddo.”

An unflinching, mechanic smile has spread across his face, the skin around his eyes creased with age and glee. He has a dastardly appearance: thick, unruly beard covering the lower part of his face with greasy black hair curling around his shoulders from beneath the bowler hat. In a past life, he probably looked charming, but in this one, he’s crazed.

“Let me go,” I manage through clenched teeth, my bark obviously coming off much fiercer than my bite.

“HAH!” The laugh that booms out of the man is loud enough to have me flinching in his grip, spittle landing on my face as he carries on like a madman. A few more seconds pass before he starts to wipe the tears away from weary eyes with his free hand, all the while keeping that tightened hold on my hair. “So, you’re a joker, eh? Like to be funny? How’s about this for a joke?” Leaning in until he’s merely a breath away from my face, he speaks, “You’re gonna die here.” That grin grows just a little wider. “The boys are gonna have their fun with you then when we’re done and we got what we need, we’re gonna slice open this pretty little throat of yours, eh?” To emphasize his point, the man runs a dirtied thumb across the ridges of my throat, pressing in slightly just to make me squirm.

“I’ll fucking kill you.” The whisper breaks over my lips as his thumb applies more pressure. “I’ll kill you all.”

“There ya go! I like the spunk! Now, call me something evil – really put some thought into it!” But I can’t manage any words, any breaths, his thumb halting my ability to breathe. “Come on, you were doin’ so good!” Black starts to fade the edges of my vision, light slowly drifting out of view. And I realize that out of all the ways I had accepted death, in the hands of some crazed lunatic was never one of them.

Then, suddenly the oxygen returns to my lungs in a gasp of tainted air, a series of desperate coughs exiting my body as I return from the edge of the fade.

“I’m gettin’ carried away, eh? We still need that big mouth of yours for something after all.” Then my head is being dropped, gravity carrying it down till my chin rests firmly against a heaving chest. The man is saying something, loud and obnoxious, but all I can focus on is the cool touch of the blade against my wrists. Of those ropes being cut free as he slices through the fibers. And I think of
the window, of escape.

My vision filters up watching him from the side as he continues to work of the bindings. If I’m quick enough, I can make it. He’s crouched down, off balance. If I’m quick enough, I’ll survive.

As soon as those ropes pull away from my wrists, I’m moving, slinging my arms towards the man in an effort to push him over. It happens all at once, the spray of obscenities, the scramble of limbs. All I know is that I have an edge on him as I lift myself from the floor. It’s an awkward run towards the closed window, my legs not wanting to move as fast as my mind. Telling me to go faster, faster, faster.

_Do you want to live, Eren?

You have to run.

_Faster._

I reach out, for what, I’m not sure. The window is still several feet away from me, but it’s as if my body is grasping for the freedom. Pushing itself closer and closer to the end of this fear. Reaching, reaching, reaching.

_Faster._

_Go faster._

And then I’m falling, hand still outreached towards the window. There’s a grip around my ankle, hard and strong as it tightens. I try to kick away, nails digging into the concrete as I attempt to pull myself closer to the window, to freedom.

_I just want to be free._

But I’m too weak, being dragged backwards towards the man.

“No,” I whimper, “no, no, no.” And try as I might, there’s not enough strength in my body to face the man, fruitlessly straining against the pull. Fingers drag along the ground, gritty and gruesome as the very last beat of me fights to the end. Pleas flying out of my mouth as tears begin to edge along my eyesight. Then, I’m back to where I started, flipped onto my back as the man straddles me.

“I was rootin’ for ya, Bright Eyes. I really was.” A fist follows the words, aimed perfectly at my cheek at my head slings to the side from the force of the blow. “But ya know, this ain’t a world for heroes.” Blood wells up behind my teeth as another strike slams my skull into the concrete. “And if ya think you’re a hero, well you’re gonna lose.” I want to tell him I haven’t felt like a hero in a long fucking time. The vision in my left eye vanishes as the man pounds another punch into my face, all the while keeping that smile splayed across his face. “Shit, you okay, kid? Don’t think Levi’s gonna be happy I fucked his toy up.”

I’m expecting another strike, maybe a couple of teeth to fall out along the way. But instead, I yanked up by my hair, the thick strands weaved around his fingers as he pulls me to my feet. I stumble as the steps are forced out of me, blood dripping from my face as I wobble on the ground.

“See this ain’t so hard, eh?” I’m thrown onto the stairs, chin colliding with the edge of a step. His laugh echoes throughout the room, bouncing off the walls as I hear those footsteps inch closer to me. And even though I know that it’s pointless to try and still escape, that upstairs only houses more of the monsters, I attempt to crawl up the stairs away from the man. But my weary body can only carry me so far, and it's not long before the asshole has his boot pressing down against the middle of my
back. There’s a pressure, and for a split second, I wonder if the man actually has the intention of fracturing my spine. But then it’s gone, replaced by that familiar hand in my hair.

Feet trip and catch on the multitude of steps as I’m dragged along. There’s a throbbing in the center of my gut that tells me it’s going to be over once I pass through the basement door – that I won’t have much longer to live. I should feel more scared than this.

The door creaks open, revealing a dining table with several taken chairs. It seems as if almost every member of the gang has gathered to watch me break. I quickly spot Levi, who finally looks at me for the first time since I abandoned him back in that office. He seems surprised by my appearance, eyes widened and jaw clenched. Shouldn’t he have expected something like this from his old group? He’s always known what they were capable of, and I don’t understand why he thought they wouldn’t leash it out onto me. He’s told me himself that I wouldn’t survive their handling.

My right eye narrows, face still trying to emit that aura of hatred even though I look defeated. But I’m not, because this is what I wanted, right? To have him witness my end? To look into those eyes one last time, voicelessly ask him why?

“Your mutt’s got some bite, runt,” the man says as he pushes me into the seat across from Levi. I notice he doesn’t seem to have any fresh wounds. Unlike me, he’s apparently followed orders. But he still is carrying his restraints, wrists strapped to the chair as he watches me from the other side of the table. “Now, that everyone’s here,” the man starts, gripping my shoulder, “let’s get some answers, eh, Levi?”

“He has nothing to do with this.” The words are chipped and forced, almost making me believe that Levi still gives a shit about me. Like he’s trying to protect me. But I don’t know why he’d risk his own life in order to save someone who’s fucked regardless.

“Oh no, boy, he’s got a lot to do with it. Don’t cha, Bright Eyes?” A hand reaches up to ruffle my hair, teeth automatically gritting on instinct. Then, that hand slides down, rolling up the sleeve of my flannel, exposing the bite. And then it starts to slowly slide into place, the realization that I’m not going to die today. No, I’ll be here for a while, but fuck if I won’t wish I were dead by the end of it. “I had a little birdie tell me you got yourself a gig down in Stohess. That you were someone else’s bitch, hah! But then they say you’ve been hanging around some immune little freak.” A thumb begins to trace around the bite, caressing it in a way I didn’t think this man capable.

“He’s not—”

“Oh, you want to tell me this is from you? While you were fucking him ya bit down too hard?” The man thrusts his hips vulgarly into the air, and all the men laugh around me. “Don’t try to fuck with me, we all know he’s been bit; and he ain’t turned.”

I meet Levi’s gaze, his eyes have softened into something that looks like an apology, something pleading. It’s enough to break the angry glare I’d been sending him, forcing my vision to fall down into my lap. Enough to almost make me feel sorry. For what, though? I didn’t betray him, kill his friends, pretend to be something I’m not.

“What do you want, Kenny?” Levi finally asks, voice broken and defeated. The taste of rust fills my mouth as I swallow hard, blood still trailing down my chin like unshed tears.

“Heh, now you want to bargain, eh? Make a little bet? I’ll tell you what, shorty, you tell me what I want to know, and I won’t let the boys bend your little fucktoy over this table.” I don’t even have a reaction as the words fall from the man, from Kenny’s lips. It’s the kind of thing I expected from this group, given I witnessed them talk firsthand about their treatment of fellow human beings outside the
dance hall. I probably should be struggling, disgusted; but somehow, I have accepted this fate. Maybe it’s my swollen eye speaking, but trying to escape now would only result in defeat and more pain.

But then there is a scrape of wood against the floor, so similar to when Levi was fighting to free himself from the chair back in the cannibals’ cabin. That strong will to protect me all consumed in one single movement.

“You fucking touch him, and–”

“And what, boy? You’ll kill us? Gonna break through that rope and snap my neck?” The hand holding my wrist has released its hold to stroke its fingers through my hair, almost lovingly. The thought has me feeling sick at my stomach. “No, you’re gonna tell me what I want to know. Then, I might be a little more charitable to your boyfriend.” It’s almost like ice water down my spine when he starts dragging his nails over my scalp, causing me to twist in the chair. “Now, where are the others?”

My breath is heavy and labored as it echoes into the silence of the room, head pounding as Kenny continues to weave his fingers though my hair.

“There aren’t others. It’s us, that’s it.” There is an edge of panic to his voice that I’ve never heard before, something that’s preparing for the inevitable. But before I have too long to think about it, my head is being slammed down into the table. “Eren!” I hear him call my name over the rattle of the table, over the wheezing of my breath as my cheek is pushed into the surface.

“I thought I told you not to fuck with me,” Kenny grits out, palm sending more pressure into my skull with every syllable. “I’ll ask again, where the fuck is Erwin and Hanji?” A whimper manages to escape my lips as Kenny slams my head down for a second time, my hands reaching up to try and wrench his fingers out of my hair.

“What?” Levi’s voice sounds about as raw as the nerve Kenny hits inside of me with the mention of their names. Like a pinch of salt in a wound that’s never going to fully heal.

“Who else do you think I’m talkin’ about, idiot? What, ya think any of my boys would be able to do jackshit with the cure flowin’ in Bright Eyes’ veins? I know that scientist had something up her sleeve. They’re the last piece to this puzzle, shorty.”

“They’re dead, fuck they’re dead. Just… just let him go. Let him go.” And suddenly, I’m freed, palms falling down atop the table as I try to catch my breath. There’s a deathly calm that fills the room, a foreboding that has my heart pounding inside my chest.

“You know, I did give ya a chance, eh?” There’s a snap of the fingers, and like clockwork, a dozen hands start to pull at me. Restraining my arms against the table, forcing me down by the nape of my neck as the chair is pulled out from underneath me. And all I can do is cry out, yelling for them to stop as the multiple hands begin to roam over my body.

“They’re dead! They’re fucking dead, I swear!” I can barely hear Levi shout above the pounding in my ears, the feeling of these lecherous hands clawing at my body sending me into a type of shock. “Please, they’re dead!”

“They’re dead, they’re dead,” Kenny mocks, “Oi, lift his head up, boys.” Then, there is a hand in my hair, lifting me to face Levi. This is what I wanted, isn’t it? For him to see me break? Because that’s definitely what I’m doing as the tears start to streak across the red staining my face, as deft fingers reach around to unbuckle my pants.
“Trost Medical!”

Another snap of the fingers, and everything stops.

The hands all leave me at once as I slump down to the ground, vision going blurry around the edges.

“They’re at Trost Medical,” Levi breathes, desperate and begging. And if I wasn’t currently hunkered down on the floor, I’d shoot him a look of question. Something to ask why the hell he would risk lying to these bastards. Because they’re dead, shot in the head and… fuck. But maybe Levi is just smarter than me, because Kenny seems to buy it, a deep chuckle emitting from his mouth as I hear him walk closer to me. The footsteps cease, and I’m suddenly being yanked up from underneath my arm and deposited back to the seat I was previously perched.

“Trost Medical, eh? You sure ‘bout that?”

“They didn’t want anyone else to know. Didn’t want it to turn into Stohess. They… they have a camp set up inside the building. We were going to head there after the snow passed. I swear, that is where they are.”

A beat of silence passes before Kenny shouts, “I knew you had it in ya, boy! Couldn’t pull the wool over ol’ Uncle Kenny’s eyes, eh?” I watch him stroll up to Levi and ruffle his hair, manic smile still plastered across his face. I’m still in a state of shock, though, body numb as I sit in the chair. It’s only when Levi finally looks at me again that I seem to slightly snap out of it, the picture of fear and loathing in his eyes. All being directed towards me as Kenny continues to stroke his hair. It’s then I fully understand that this was what he had always been warning me of, the insanity surrounding his previous gang, the faux family that never was. Something trying to drag him back into the thick of it. And for a moment, I actually feel a little sorry for him.

But then I’m reminded of why I’m here, of how I came to sit in this fucking wooden chair surrounded by a bunch of nutcases and rapists. Especially when Kenny marches back over to me only to reach out and grab my chin. He stares me dead in the eye for a couple of seconds before finally opening his mouth to speak. I’m expecting several phrases, but I don’t receive any of them. The only words he relays to me being something entirely worse. Something that can’t help but send chills down my spine.

“You ready for a road trip, Bright Eyes?”

Chapter End Notes

I’ve finally finished my internship with Disney, so I was able to release a chapter :’D Hopefully, I won’t take another decade before the next is out. Sorry, I haven’t been replying to comments, but I do appreciate every bit of love you guys give me :’DDD

UPDATE 05/27/17: I am NOT dropping this. I've just been going through a ton of problems and stress in my personal life. Please don't be too frustrated with me! Updates will come as soon as I'm able.
This shouldn’t be familiar, being held hostage in some dank, dark basement. That suffocating feeling of confinement as the ropes burn my skin. It is probably one of the first signs that my life is fucked. However, mine probably less so than the fucking idiot who decided heading back to Trost Medical would be a good idea. Of course, Levi probably has some complex plan of escape, but what do I really know about him anymore?

I don’t know what’s worse, thinking that I knew him or finding out how much I didn’t.

_Fucking asshole_, I think, kicking a stray rock across the concrete. It’s easy to blame him though, isn’t it? Hate him with every fiber of my being. Fists clench and teeth grit – like a rush of adrenaline to the heart. Except instead of helping me escape, it’s just pissing me off. Reminding me of how much I trusted him, how much I royally fucked myself.

Red wounds still flame along my wrists as they rub the coarse rope. Even though I’ve stopped trying to escape, it’s a constant reminder. Kenny had told me after he brought me down here for the second time that if I attempted to flee again he would ‘chop off that bit of Levi’s I like so much’. Funny how the man still thinks I give a shit. That I could actually care about someone like Levi ever again. However, underneath all the bravado, there is still an egging at my gut to not hate him completely. Telling me to look at the world I live in and understand the definition of survival, what it has made people do, made me do.

“He killed your best friend,” I whisper. And it’s almost as if the words themselves are doubting me. But why? I have every right, every fucking right to hate him. Don’t I? Levi had known this entire time what he’d done, knew exactly how badly it would break me to find out. To think it only took another coward for me to discover the truth.

Swallowing hard, I try not to imagine how life would be if I’d never known. Simpler. But also wrong. Like living in the center of a web of lies, not realizing how tangled in the string I’d become until Levi had drained the last bit of life from me. Until I was little more than nothing.

So, why do I still feel conflicted? Like I’d hate myself by welcoming him back – but lose myself without him. Which one is truly worse? Thinking about it makes my stomach turn, winds up my insides and scrambles the thoughts jumbled in my mind. My right eye flutters shut in an attempt to find some kind of peace within, the left still swollen shut from Kenny’s abuse. It doesn’t work – only leaves me in my own crafted darkness in which to lose myself. Too much noise, too many thoughts. Feeling like everything is closing, closing, and then –


_No._

Maybe it is a dream. I’ll open my eye and find that the world is still just as cruel as I left it. That I’m still balancing on a tightrope between life and a very painful death. It would make much more sense than the sight of the person slowly coming into view. “You look surprised.” He walks towards me from the bottom of the stairs, almost ghoulishly as he limps closer. “Don’t be.”
“You’re dead.” It’s the only thing I can think to say. Or maybe I’m dead. Then this whole thing would all make a lot more sense. There is only so many times a human being should be able to reasonably find themselves held captive in one lifetime. Regardless, he smiles, and my chest clenches. “I’m sorry,” whispered so low that it is probably not clear if the words are for his or my own ears. It’s hard to understand exactly why I’m apologizing to a person who is likely not even there. Guilt? Mania? A combination of the two?

“Don’t cry,” he breathes, heavy and restless. Then, suddenly, his balance is lost, a sharp thud resonating from the floor as he hits the ground. There is a loud, hollow groan that emits from him, causing me to flinch as the noise manages to curl beneath my skin. Then, he’s twitching at almost impossible angles, the sound of joints cracking echoing throughout the room. Fingers, ungainly and thin, claw at the concrete, pulling his body closer to me. “I’m here. You didn’t kill me.” None of this seems right, watching him edge his way closer and closer. “You… you didn’t kill me.” He’s not – can’t be real.

“Armin,” I murmur, and his head snaps up at an inhuman speed, eyes shallow, grin crooked. Makes my entire body want to turn into itself, meeting that blank gaze, crazed smile. Something inside is telling me to run, instinct probably. Get out, get away. Run, run, RUN! But I’m still tied to this pole, and no amount of struggling is going to free me from it. “Stop,” whispered as I pull my legs close. He doesn’t halt, though, grin becoming even sharper as he drags his body forward, a streak of red following the path. "Please."

His body deteriorates more with each inch he closes in on me. Nails splitting against the ground, skin peeling back to reveal crimson gore. Broken fingers reach out to me as he extends a hand in my direction. Hunger. It’s all I can see in those eyes now. His jaw hanging on by fragile slivers of flesh as he speaks, “Save me, Eren.” Throat tight and pulse pounding, I try a last-ditch struggle against the bonds that hold me. Wanting so badly, so fucking badly, for this nightmare to end – to let me go back to wondering when the mass murderers upstairs are going to kill me. Just not this. Not Armin.

Grotesque digits scrape against the fabric of my jeans, nailbeds long crusted over with the dried remains of blood and dirt. Fear seeps into my veins, coiling around my spine and poisoning my senses. I should scream, fight, do something – anything. But I’m frozen, staring into eyes that have glazed over into a dull, lifeless grey.

Faintly, the thud of footsteps sounds off around me. Like white noise in the background of a bad dream. And voices – several different voices all speaking in the same sense of urgency. They are muffled, but I can make out the desperation. The fear. But I don’t see anything. Nothing but the ripped flesh and hungry eyes.

Then, blood.

It’s warm and wet as it splatters against my face, nose scrunching up and head attempting to turn away. There is a loud thump, and as I look down out of the corner of my vision, the body becomes visible. It’s a walker, that much was already obvious. But it’s not Armin. Just some fucking biter who probably was once a decent human being. But it’s not Armin. My body sags against the pole, relieved but also defeated. Realizing that the best thing about this day so far has been the knowledge that my dead best friend actually wasn’t talking to me from beyond the grave.

It makes me remember the time Jean tried to raise my spirits after the only loot we could pull from an abandoned grocery was wet dog food. “A win is a win, Jaeger, so shut the fuck up and eat your Kibbles N’ Bits.” I don’t know if this actually counts as a win – only partially losing a little bit more of my sanity – because I’m still tied to this goddamn pole. But Armin’s dead, Jean probably, too. So, I guess it really doesn’t matter.
Red starts to flow freely from the gaping wound as I try to recover, leaving the creature crumpled and deformed at my feet. The stain continues to grow larger, pooling around my body and soaking into my jeans. Almost as if I’m the one lying there, cold and broken on the ground.

“No, please! We didn’t mean nothing by it, boss!” The voice comes from the distance, followed to a man who has raised his hands in apparent surrender. It’s hard to focus, but once the images stop blurring, I realize that Kenny has drawn a knife.

So, is he actually going to kill me after all? Fuck everything he said before? It would make sense. I still don’t know what this kind of man would ever plan on doing with the cure anyway – even if he could somehow find a person smart enough to pull it from me. The bastard’s a thug. A murdering, thieving thug who would have no clue on how to monopolize a goddamn cure to the zombie apocalypse. Come to think of it, maybe that’s why he wanted Erwin in the first place.

Contemplations are cut off by the swift slickness of flesh being torn open, the gurgle of life draining. The knife is now lost in the pleading man’s throat, Kenny’s grin manic as he cradles the dying man’s head. There is a sick sort of satisfaction in the horrific scene – seeing the man I knew was capable of such split-second atrocities actually commit one in front of my eyes. A kind of confirmation that I’m positive shouldn’t feel so fulfilling.

“Don’t ya worry, I’ll bash your brains in nice and good. I don’t need another brainless shiteater tryin’ to eat me alive around here.” With that, Kenny lets the man fall to the ground. There is a fruitless escape attempt, a hand wrapped quickly around the slit throat to try and stop the excessive bleeding. But it’s no use, and without much thought, Kenny lifts his boot up into the air and promptly slams it back down onto the man’s face. Fingers twitch against the basement floor as the same action is repeated again and again until there is nothing left of the man’s skull besides smeared gore and small pieces of fractured bone. “Ahaha! Fuckin’ idiot, he was, huh?” It’s not a question that seems meant to be answered, so I stay silent as I watch Kenny rear back his head and spit on the mangled corpse. “Fuckin’ idiot.”

A strange atmosphere fills the room – one that is only filled with the ragged sound of Kenny’s heavy breathing and the steady dripping of blood from the two bodies. Makes my fingers clench behind my back as the wave of unease washes over me. Questions of why the fuck a walker managed its way down here want to leave my lips, but confronting a man who just brutally smashed another’s face into a pile of mush doesn’t necessarily seem like the best way to go about it.

“Your fuckin’ lucky I give two shits about keepin’ alive a twink like you.” He twirls the bloodied knife in between ruddy fingers, smile stretching ear to ear as he moves in my direction. “No use to me dead. Yet, ha!” Kenny crouches down to my level once he reaches me, blade still taunting me with its red sheen. “Or maybe I’ll keep ya around as my little pet, eh?” Teeth gritting, I turn away from him, trying to avoid becoming further acquainted with the anger of the madman. But the motion just eggs him on, calloused fingers roughly grabbing my chin and forcing my head back around to meet his crazed gaze. “You’d like that, I can tell.”

“Fuck you, asshole.” I’d thought it impossible for that grin to get any larger. However, my words must spur on some kind of sadistic glee inside of Kenny, mouth stretching almost inhumanly wide. Then, before I can make a move to escape he’s on me. Hand securing my chin, he tilts my head to the side, allowing a wet tongue to swipe slowly up the side of my neck. I’m unprepared for the gesture and instinctively try to squirm away. “Get off of me!” Feet thrashing outwards, I manage to land one solid kick to his ribs before that bloodied knife is pressed dangerously close to my throat.

Kenny laughs as I freeze up, pulling his face away from me as he pushes the blade in deeper. “Oh, c’mon, baby. I saved you, right? Ya know, that asshole,” he gestures back to the unrecognizable face
of the dead man, “and his little buddy was going to get you killed. Thought it be funny to see ya shit your pants, I guess. Want to know how I killed his friend?” Kenny leans back in, eyes glittering with something like insanity. “Slit his fuckin’ throat and cut off his balls, ha!” I can feel my skin starting to break beneath the knife, slowly severing as Kenny continues to add pressure. More and more and more. Until I know he’s going to end up killing me, whether the man knows it or not.

Then, suddenly, the pressure is gone, leaving a tender stripe of skin in its wake.

Thumb pushing into my bottom lip, Kenny starts, “When we get back from our little adventure we’ll see if I should let ya keep your tongue, eh?” He chuckles as I try to swallow down the thick ball of fear that has risen up into the top of my throat. Dropping my chin, his hand reaches up to ruffle the top of my head. “Good boy.”

Biting my tongue, I watch as he walks off and up the stairs, thoughts of what will happen to me once we return from the hospital running rampant through my head. This world has treated me like shit, but it’s not went that low.

Not yet, I guess.

-

The road is bumpy as we travel down the path to Trost Medical. Hands tied, I can’t do much but wonder how Kenny is going to react once he finds out we’ve – that Levi’s – played him for the fool. Though, I’m starting to think the only fool here is Levi considering how impossible it is to imagine that we will be able to escape once arriving at the hospital.

Beside me he sits, thighs pressed together, elbows knocking each other. And even though I know he betrayed me, there is still a comfort there in his touch. A kind of hope that maybe not all is lost after all.

*What are you planning, Levi?*

Kenny’s brought his entire team out, the ones that couldn’t fit into the interior of the truck riding cozy in the bed. Has to be at least a dozen of them, all smashed together like a can of sardines. It seems unreasonable to think that this amount of manpower couldn’t dig up another vehicle. But then I remember how many we used to have and that no amount of digging could ever find us a car in working order.

“So, where we headed once we get to this hospital, runt?” I feel Levi’s thigh tic against my own as he’s addressed, and I try not to let my anxiety show. To not give away the fact that the only thing waiting for us at that hospital is a horde of undead.

“First floor, operation room.”

*Wait, what?*

The operation room where all the children were turned into the living dead? The one that had Levi and myself questioning whether humanity was even worth saving? The same damn room with the horde of undead behind a sealed door?

Wait.

*No.*

*No. No. No.*
He can’t be fucking serious. As if I am asking the question aloud, I find myself staring at him unbelieving. Just hoping that he’s not going to be as big of a fucking idiot as I think he’s planning. Like an answer to my unspoken question, Levi turns to me, looks down then back up, focusing on my gaze.

It’s fucking suicide.

And for what? The off chance that I might be able to escape these assholes in the chaos? I want to scream, tell him how much of a goddamn idiot he is. Of course, I keep quiet, trying to tell myself that he’s not going to unleash the horde that’s locked behind the door in the operation room. But he is. That his whole master plan, huh? Lead them to their deaths while sacrificing himself in the process.

“Levi,” I whisper, defeated and soft. The word widens his stare, mouth twitching as if there is so much he wants to tell me. So much he’d wished he had said before… before all of this. Is it wrong that I want to hear it, want the chance to forgive what I said I never would? To think that I could hate him while still loving him so goddamn much?

I don’t know what’s wrong with me.

“Eh? Operation room?” There is obvious distrust in the man’s tone, and Levi is quick to steady the lie.

“I’m sure you can figure it out.” Kenny’s grip tightens on the steering wheel, and for a moment, I’m sure his quick temper will overwhelm him. However, he quickly regains his composure, probably realizing that it wouldn’t be in his best interest to beat the shit out of the person designated to lead him to his destination.

“Don’t test me, boy.” The words are spoken at an uneasy level, emphasizing just how unhinged Kenny truly is. Tension breaks into my spine like a metal rod, and it’s obvious that I am not the only one affected. The other members of Kenny’s gang are also uncomfortably quiet. As if they know how little of a push this man needs to fall over the edge. I’d tell Levi not to do anything stupid, but I assume he already knows as much, shoulders falling back against the car seat in resignation.

The anxiety puts a strain on the rest of the trip, no one daring to speak a word to break the silence. I try to focus on the what I can remember from the lay of the land, eyes shut attempting to resurface anything that could help should I be able to escape. There is not much that comes to mind besides the cabin, but that is miles away by now. I’m sure I could hole up in some abandoned gas station for a few days, maybe double back towards what remains of Stohess. Unless Levi has some other plan. Considering he is even planning on bringing me with him, that is.

We haven’t really spoken since the fallout, and all I can think of is how I wished him dead – how I wished I was the one to do it. Seems like you can’t really come back from that. Petty fights are one thing, but death threats? A whole other ball game.

I don’t know what I’d even say to him. That I forgive him – because I don’t. At least not entirely. Some part of me has been able to shift past the blind hatred that was plaguing my judgement when I swore I’d never see him again. But there is still a vein of betrayal that was coursing through our relationship whether either of us want to realize it or not.

Part of me argues that he should have told me, but would I have been any more sympathetic? Probably not. Still would have lashed out with all that rage and despair. We wouldn’t have ended up in the hands of serial killers, though… well, maybe.

How can I face this alone, though? Without him. Should I go back and find an empty shack to spend
the rest of my time here on the earth? Pretend I never met him? That’s just the thing.

I can’t.

“Alright, assholes, gear up. Hugo, keep an eye on the brat.” A man seated in the passenger seat grunts an affirmative as we slow to a stop, my body lurching forward as the brakes are hastily applied. Gravity pulls me backwards, causing my shoulder to cushion into Levi’s arm. Looking up, I quickly try to think of something to tell him, last words as they might be. But nothing comes to mind, and I am left just staring blankly up into remorseful steel grey until he is roughly yanked out from beneath me.

“Wait–” I start, not really knowing how to finish the train of thought. Though, I am not given much of a chance as Kenny appears before me, same crafty smile playing on his lips.

“Give him trouble, and I silt your throat and bleed ya dry. Clear?” My answer comes in a defeated gaze downwards as I break eye contact. “Atta boy.”

The truck door rattles as it’s slammed shut, the sound of locks being activated chiming in quickly after. Through grime-coated windows, I watch them force Levi along towards the entrance of the hospital. He’s defenseless, hands tied behind his back, same as mine. *Defenseless and unleashing an army of fucking undead,* I think. Got to admit, the plan still sounds pretty damn stupid.

Eyes follow Levi until they are out of sight, the group making it into the hospital. And it almost feels like it is me walking those halls instead of him. Heart pounding, palms sweating. Like I can feel his reactions as a second skin. My bottom lip soon finds itself being worried between my teeth, anxiety beginning to overtake my own need of finding an escape route.

“Well, unless he is going for deranged psychopath. Then, by all means, bravo.”

Eyes follow Levi until they are out of sight, the group making it into the hospital. And it almost feels like it is me walking those halls instead of him. Heart pounding, palms sweating. Like I can feel his reactions as a second skin. My bottom lip soon finds itself being worried between my teeth, anxiety beginning to overtake my own need of finding an escape route.

“I ain’t on the juicy end of a human sandwich is because of that fuckin’ traitor.” That’s not true, though. I have saved myself, saved Levi. I’m not helpless. Even though being in the position that I am seems like a hard time to claim that. “Hell, you look like you already got one foot in the grave with all those goddamn bites. How many times should you have died already, huh?”

Three, I think to myself, subconsciously recalling the feel of the teeth sinking into my flesh. It’s clear that the man, Hugo, thinks he has made his point, succeeded in belittling what is left of my confidence. But if he thinks that a few taunts at my courage and character are going to phase me… well, he has another thing coming.
As if Mr. Higher Power himself has gotten tired of Hugo’s lewd attempts to goad me, an undead appears a little ways away from the side of the truck. It visibly startles the man, causing him to let out a low curse under his breath. I watch his fingers trace the edge of his gun, as if ready to shoot on a moment’s notice. It’s obvious that Hugo hasn’t had that much experience with the walkers, probably the benefit of traveling with a larger group. Reminds me of myself when the whole outbreak first began, trigger happy and ready to kill anything that so much as moved in my direction. That’s your first mistake, though, going all gung-ho into zombie territory. Just wears you out and draws more of the bastards to your location. Hugo is probably used to staying in the back, letting the others fight and die.

A coward.

Something interests the walker into heading in our direction, limping over as it grunts and growls. I hear Hugo release a stuttering breath, watch his fingers twitch against the gun.

This is it, I think. This is my way out.

Scanning the inside of the truck, I find nothing of real value. An empty beer can, a crumpled-up wrapper – nothing that is going to help free me from my restraints.

“Shit,” I hear Hugo mutter, only then looking up to see the biter has made it to the side of the truck. As if he knows I’m planning something, Hugo turns back to me, “Don’t make a fucking sound, or I’ll shoot your goddamn brains out.” I am pretty sure he is bluffing, considering I am something of a valuable asset to Kenny, at least for now. So, I do something that is probably incredibly stupid.

Raising my foot, I slam it against the side of the door, causing a loud enough bang for the walker to take an interest. “What the fuck are you doing,” he tries to whisper, but it comes out as more of a half-scream, his eyes widening as the undead finally spots us. “You fuckin’ idiot. You fuckin’ idiot!”

The gun is whipped out and pointed in my direction, held by a shaky hand. I meet the man’s frightened gaze, showing no fear as he pulls back the hammer.

“You don’t have to try and prove yourself to me,” I mock as sweat begins to trail down his face. The quip falls on deaf ears though, as he shakes the gun at me.

“Shut the fuck up! Kenny will kill you! Kenny will fuckin’ kill you!”

By now the walker has started to claw at the driver’s side window, leaving grimy streaks of dirt and gore behind on the glass. It twists its neck and moans, growling over the denial of its meal.

Hugo’s eyes constantly switch between the biter and myself, seemingly not knowing which one is the bigger target. I’m about to make a move, probably try to kick the gun out of his hands somehow and move on from there, when a gunshot sounds off.

And everything seems to pause for a moment, the noise rattling through the trees.

Then another.

And another.

All coming from the hospital.

“What the fuck,” Hugo whispers, dropping the aim of the gun for a split second. A couple more walkers begin to slowly emerge from the woods, drawn in by the sound of gunfire. But instead of heading towards the hospital, they are distracted by us, by the undead still trying to claw its way inside of the truck.
Well, shit.

I edge to the side of the truck, back facing the window as I try to open my door. Maybe they have been stupid, maybe they have left me an easy method of escape. Unfortunately, it can’t be that simple, the handle not giving even as I try to pull it open.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Hearing the two other walkers begin the knock at the door makes me realize I probably should have thought this through more. Shouldn’t have just assumed that Hugo would turn into a sniveling baby and drop into the fetal position at the sight of the monster. Well, I mean, he is kind of close, though.

“You fuckin’ asshole!” He no longer looking at me, instead hesitantly pointing his gun at one of the three undead pressed against the side of the truck. I take this distraction with a grain of salt, glancing up at the driver’s side door to check if the locks are automatic. Like a shiny ‘time to get the hell out of here’ button, I see it. Thinking quickly, I slide across the seat, toeing off my left shoe once I get there. Hugo is too distracted by the fourth walker that has appeared to notice my leg sneaking in between the door and the front driver’s seat.

It’s a bit of a stretch, but I’m able to press the button down with my big toe. Quickly slipping my shoe back on, I push my way over to the other side. Back facing the window again, my fingers blindly scramble for the door handle. It’s then Hugo seems to finally notice me, eyes going wide as my fingers finally connect with the handle.

“Fuck! No!” My body weight throws the door open, and I land on my back with an oomph. The realization of freedom takes a couple of seconds to soak into my brain, the world still upside down and a few of my fingers now hurting like a motherfucker. It hits when I feel Hugo’s hand wrap around my ankle, trying to drag me back into the truck. “You little shit!”

Adrenaline kicks in all at once, and I throw my leg forwards trying to release his grip from me. The rocks dig into my shoulders as I try to twist away, but for all my effort, I cannot seem to free myself.

Then, the moans of the undead return.

I can see their feet shuffling underneath the truck, heading around in my direction. They will kill me, I realize, knowing that there is no way I will be able to fend for myself belly up with my hands tied behind my back. Using my free ankle, I make a last-ditch effort to escape, placing my right foot on the edge of the truck. With the remainder of my strength, I bend my knee and push off as hard as I possibly can.

For a split-second, I’m unsure if it actually worked, if I didn’t just sign my death warrant. But I no longer can feel the abrasive grip of Hugo’s hands around my ankle. Just the cold ground beneath my back. Sharp pain in my fingers, pounding thumps against my skull. But nothing around my ankle.

Rolling over, I push myself up to my knees, thinking about whether I should just make a run for it or try to find Levi in the hospital. It doesn’t seem like much of a decision, because I’m already looking towards the dark entrance of the building. However, I’m not allowed to think on it long due to the cold metal pressed against the back of my head.

“You… you fuckin’ piece of– gah!” The warmth of the blood hits the back of my neck, and I barely spare a glance backwards as I hastily push myself up from the ground. There’s no time. Something is wrong. The thought is punctuated by another couple of gunshots ringing out.

Have to reach him.
Have to save him.

Reaching the hospital entrance is easy, the undead not yet breaking free of the confines of the building. It’s stupid to go charging in the way I am, no weapon, no free hands to even defend myself. Hell, I think the last time I did something this blatantly ignorant was when I decided to take Jean up on the cinnamon challenge. Regardless, I’m here now, and I know that I’m either going to be leaving here with Levi or not at all.

There is a symbol spray painted on the wall of the lobby that I don’t remember being there before. Wings. It’s a stark contrast to all the messages of death and hopelessness that seem to be left behind as a reminder of the ways of the world. Another gunshot is fired off, this time sounding a lot closer than the ones before. And I’m not sure if I should follow the sound or not. Given, I know it will lead me to the chaos, but who is to say that is where Levi will be? I know none of these gunshots are coming from Levi. Kenny wasn’t stupid enough to grant him a gun, was he?

I decide to just follow my gut, head towards where I think – hope Levi will be.

The further I venture inside, the more bodies I seem to find; mostly those of undead, but a couple of them I can distinctly recognize as Kenny’s men. However, while they look like they were the obvious victims of a walker horde, they each have bullet holes decorating their foreheads. As if someone put them down after they were attacked. But who? Kenny? He doesn’t seem the type to really give a fuck about preserving his men’s prospects on afterlife.

“I don’t know, but we have to get them out.” The voice is one I’ve never heard before, hushed behind a closed door. “Run recon and make sure the information is secured. This shit is still considered classified.”

There is a shuffle of bodies inside the room, and I hurriedly make my way around the corner to avoid view. The strangers emerge, dressed in all black, faces covered with masks that only spare the eyes. All of it feel way too ‘government’ to me, the attire, the secured information. Fucking Area 51 kind of shit. I try to push the suspicion out of my mind, return my focus back to the reason I decided to step back into this godforsaken place.

It seems like everywhere I go turns into a dead end, that or it is just filled with rotting undead. I’m trying so hard not to give up hope, to not think of the worst-case scenario. It’s just hard when the last memories I have of this place involve putting down my best friend. Sighing, I continue forward, shoulders and elbows starting to ache from being pulled backwards.

Somehow, I manage to find the same map as before, quickly scanning over it before deciding where I think Levi is most likely holed up. That is if he has decided to stay in one place, after all. It doesn’t take me long now that I know where I am going, repeating the route over and over again in my head just as before.

The door seems less ominous this time, knowing what lies beyond it. Except instead of the moans of restrained biters, I hear… nothing. Nogrowls, no groans. Just silence. It’s uneasy at best, terrifying at worst. Stepping inside, I find the door that had held the horde of walkers has been opened, no doubt thanks to Levi. The undead are still strapped down, except now they are decorated with holes in each of their foreheads – a merciful end.

Papers have been thrown about, scattered around the floor as if some kind of decoration. Probably knocked over in the scuffle of the horde being released. As I step further inside, something else catches my attention. A bowler hat.

Rushing over, I see it hasn’t been separated from its owner, still resting snuggly on top of Kenny’s
head. Of course, the hat is overwhelmed by another accessory – the knife sticking out of the man’s forehead. Part of me wishes he hadn’t been granted rest. Should have been cursed as the hundreds of thousands out there, walking the streets, moaning and hungry. Should have suffered.

Even in death, that sadistic gleam can still be seen in those eyes. The want to hurt, to kill. A fucking maniac practically bred for something like the apocalypse.

I just wish I could have seen it happen.

“Eren,” a voice, sounding so small, whispers out to me. I turn immediately, eyes widening when I take in his appearance. How I didn’t notice him there, I don’t know, but he looks horrible. Covered with dirt and blood, seemingly exhausted to the core as he leans against the cabinet.

“Levi,” I utter, word almost breaking on my tongue.

“Grab that knife.” He motions to Kenny’s corpse. I turn my body, fingers searching out as they finally grip the blade’s hilt. It slides out with a slick shuck, causing Kenny to follow the path of gravity onto the ground. Good riddance. “Come here,” Levi says, tone different, almost unfeeling. I walk over and hand him the knife. He makes quick work of my bindings, causing my shoulders to slump as soon as my hands are freed. The rope burns can still be felt on my skin, the flesh chafed and broken. It’s almost like I was never released. “I knew you’d get out.” Levi breaks my concentration, silvers focusing on me in a way I have never seen before, almost solemn, hollow. “But why’d you come back for me?”

“Don’t ask stupid questions,” I mutter, reaching out to brush his bangs out of his face. And that’s when I see it.

Red.

It is something that I cannot initially process, eyes going back and forth. Words don’t want to form, feet can’t move. It’s as if my entire body is shutting down, closing itself off to the hurt of what this understanding is going to grant me. Nothing but fucking sorrow and pain. Being alone. Again. Crying, I know I’m crying even as he tries to whisper something in my ear about everything being alright. Like I am the one who needs the comfort. It’s not me who… it’s not…

I’ll call him an idiot tomorrow. I’ll go back to that stupid cabin. I’ll pretend none of this ever happened. I love him. I love him. I love him.

And he’s going to die.

“Fucking bastard took a good chuck out, huh?”

And he’s going to die.

“Oi, look at me.”

And he’s going to die.

“Eren, look at me.” I look up, tears streaming down my face, trying not to gaze at the teeth marks embedded in his shoulder. I’m unblinking as he pulls me into his chest, simply letting my body be willed wherever he wants to take it. “It will be okay,” he takes a deep breath, letting in out against my hair, “You will be okay.”

You - not me is all I hear.
“I can fix this,” I whisper, “I can fix this, just… I can fix it, please.” He lets out a heavy sigh, hand coming up to wrap around my shoulder and tug me in closer. Like he knows it’s over, like I probably should. But I can never let anything go, especially not this. Not him. Please, not Levi. “I’m the antidote. You know it.”

“Eren—”

“I won’t just let you sit here and fucking die!” It comes out all at once, words not half as powerful behind the veil of my tears. “I can’t.” Pulling my head off his chest, I meet his gaze, ignoring the shallowness that is already starting to form behind his eyes. “I love you,” whispered softly across my lips, the words falling out before I can even think to stop them. But I would not have, regardless. He needs to know how I feel, how I’ve felt.

I watch his mouth twitch, like it doesn’t know what he should say. Stares deep down into me with those eyes so full of regret. Silent tears begin to fall down his cheeks, trailing through the dirt and dropping off his chin. My thumb reaches up to brush at his cheek, smearing away the grime and the tears. He leans into the connection, like a touch-starved child feeling warmth for the first time in his life.

“I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry.” Don’t know if he is referring to the betrayal or the bite. If I had to make a guess it would probably be the former.

"I know,” I whisper. They are the only words I can say. I don't want to fight anymore, don't want to ask why he chose to live a life with those monsters. Because beyond all of my doubts, all of my anger, I can't let him go.

Then, he is looking at me, truly looking at me - like he did back in that cabin, back in the old, decrepit church. Wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me even closer into him.

"I love you, too,” muttered soft and sweet. "You know if it still matters.” He lets out this sad, choked laugh, and I break just a little bit more inside.

Though, even in this heartbreak, this knowledge that he is down to days, I can't help but smile. It would be impossible not to, not when he is looking at me the way he is, not when he is holding me even tighter. Leaning down, I press our lips together, chaste and simple.

The thing is, it's hard to think of a world without him anymore. Hard to imagine not waking up to see his face every morning. To feel his lips on my skin. This familiarity, this attachment. It's the one good thing that I have, so how am I supposed to give it up?

“I will figure something out,” I say against his skin. “I won’t let you die.”

Levi opens his mouth, probably to protest, but is cut off by the sound of a hammer being pulled back. It just figures that this kind of thing would happen, being caught by yet another group of assholes. But this time, I will be damned if they take us again. Never again.

“Don’t fucking move,” the voice says. And it is like something inside of me ignites, like a wave of realization washes over me with the sound. It’s something I would never forget, someone I always told myself I would go back to.

I turn around, half expecting for her to not hesitate in putting a bullet between my eyes. I’m almost correct as I see her finger on the trigger. But then it seems to suddenly click, to fall into place. Her hand falls down against her side with a thud, eyes wide with something much greater than surprise. I’m not shocked at her reaction. I know that I’m supposed to be dead.
“Eren?” Her voice sounds so unsure, probably wondering if this is just some sort of fever dream. I nod, and she immediately drops to her knees.

“Hey, Mikasa.”

Chapter End Notes

// casually updates fic after a year // hiyaaaaaa

Buy Me a Coffee
MY TUMBLR
FANMIX
ALL FANART

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