A streak of bad luck leaves Eren desperate for cash, and desperate enough that making porn doesn’t seem like such a terrible idea. He’s young, he’s cute, he’s horny, and his favourite studio is currently hiring. It seems like fate up until he learns that his two most admired actors, whom he spent the majority of his teenage years appreciating, have recently retired.

Still, he is nothing if not determined, and he sets out to see if he can persuade them to make one last movie. And then he gets to know them as people, and things start getting complicated.

Disclaimer: The mainstream porn industry is highly problematic and exploitative, and I don’t seek to excuse or glamourise it. Hange’s studio is an idealised version of what a consent and queer friendly porn business might look like.
In this story fairly random combinations of characters have platonic professional sex with each other. These pairings are not listed in the pairings tags, but anything other than a brief offhand mention I'll make note of in the specific chapter notes.

There is fanart for this fic already. The amazing pickletea drew Levi and you can view it here: http://pickletea.tumblr.com/post/96353546926/i-might-have-drawn-fanart-for-mongoose-bites

There is now MORE fanart, this time from mizozoh. I am not worthy.
http://mizore.co.vu/post/97369348415/mongoose-bite-fuck-my-life-ch-1-a-streak-of
Chapter 1

Eren knew things were bad when he found himself relying on Jean for emotional support.

“Argh!” Jean yelped supportively, and promptly dropped his keys. “Jesus Christ, Eren.” He stooped to pick them up again before finally taking note of the oppressive atmosphere as well as Eren’s gloomy expression and posture as he sat slumped on the couch, where he had been for quite some time as the apartment they shared had gone dark. “Eren, why were you sitting in the dark?”

“I wasn’t sitting in the dark,” Eren said, finally looking up from the blank TV screen to his flatmate. “I was sitting here and it got dark and I couldn’t be bothered getting up and turning the lights on. I took Missy to the vet today.”

“Oh,” Jean said, in what was one of the most tactful responses Eren had ever heard from him. “Is she okay?”

Eren hadn’t expected a polite question. He’d been waiting for sarcasm or dismissiveness, and he’d worked out exactly how many steps it would be before he could connect Jean’s face, first to his fist and then to the floor. He was entirely derailed for a few moments and he recalculated the trajectory of the conversation.

Jean and Missy did not get on. Or rather, Jean disliked Missy and Eren had to field a constant stream of complaints re: cat hairs, claw marks and chewed bedspreads (Missy seemed to like how Jean smelled apparently, an aroma Eren completely failed to appreciate, and Missy expressed this by chewing on Jean’s dirty laundry and his blankets whenever he forgot to close his door.)

But Jean also knew Eren loved that fucking cat. Missy had been a present to his mother, one of the last presents she’d ever received, and the little black and white kitten had since grown into a large and friendly cat, now approaching the placid end of middle-age.

Eren scrubbed his hands in his messy brown hair. “She ate a bit of wire or something,” he said. “And it was hurting her; it’s why she wasn’t eating. They gave her an x-ray and they had to cut it out. She’s recovering tonight at the vet. So, I think she’s gonna be okay.” He really, really hoped so. If she wasn’t- she was family, and Eren had precious little of that left.

Jean sighed, and his shoulders dropped slightly. “Sounds like a shit day.”

Eren managed a strangled laugh, “It’s not as bad as the one Missy had.”

Jean clumped into his room to put his bag away and strip off his work shirt for one that smelled a little less like deep fryer. Eren rubbed his eyes and waited for Jean to re-emerge. He wasn’t done yet.

“So, there’s another problem,” he said when Jean returned. “I’m not meaning to dump this on you I just think you need to know. The uh, vet bill is going to be in the four digits.”

“Can you afford that?” Jean asked.

Finally, a stupid question.

“Of course I can’t, what a stupid fucking question,” Eren snapped. “I almost emptied my savings fixing my car last month, and I had to borrow from Mikasa anyway. I’ve looked over the numbers, and I’ve worked out if I stop eating and attending class, and work, like, quadruple shifts at the bookshop, I’m still utterly, utterly screwed.” He slumped forward, hanging his head and staring at the
worn carpet between his feet.

“I could see if they have any extra hours going at my work,” Jean suggested.

“I don’t think minimum wage is gonna cut it,” Eren said listlessly. “I had to pay half the bill up front, and that was next week’s rent.”

“If you don’t pay your share of the rent we could both get thrown out,” Jean said, frowning.

“I know. I know that. But I couldn’t just let her die, Jean.” Eren lifted his head, pleading.

“Yes, yeah, stop looking at me like that. I’ll cover your rent for a week. Somehow.” Jean scowled and tried to pretend he wasn’t being generous. Eren knew he couldn’t afford it much more than Eren himself could. He couldn’t ask Mikasa for help again either; he still owed her for the car.

“I’m really fucking sorry.”

Jean shrugged. There wasn’t much he could say.

“Should I look under ‘L’ for loan or ‘S’ for shark?” Eren asked rhetorically.

“You’re not getting an illegal loan.” Jean frowned and applied the finest mind his mother had raised to the problem. As expected he came up with nothing useful whatsoever. “Hey, if you were a chick, you could strip. Strippers make heaps of cash, right?”

“Dudes can strip,” Eren said.

“There you go then.”

“I’m not- if it’s so lucrative why don’t you do it?”

“I’m saving myself for marriage.” Jean put on such a tortured expression of faux-innocence that Eren felt a smile tugging at his lips.

“Thank you for your contribution, I’ll keep it in mind.” Eren rolled his eyes. He still wasn’t feeling much better, but he knew he’d probably exhausted Jean’s patience by now, and there was no point in going over things again.

He guessed Jean probably would make a fortune if he did decide to take up stripping; he had a face that had been far too long for him as a child that he’d grown into nicely, and Eren assumed the rest of him didn’t look any worse than it had when they were in high school and seeing each other naked regularly.

Eren also knew there was no way he could take up stripping himself. The mere thought of doing a presentation in public with his clothes on was enough to make him sweat a little; the thought of shaking his bare arse on stage made him queasy.

Since they were now officially in the poorhouse they ate instant ramen for dinner, and Jean retreated to his room to study, or whatever it was he did in there.

Eren drifted around the living room and kitchen aimlessly, half-heartedly tidying up a bit. He missed Missy. He kept looking for her in her favourite spots before remembering she wouldn’t be there. He could call Mikasa, but if he explained what was wrong she’d try and help him out again, and he just couldn’t. Besides, he didn’t want to rely on his sister all the time.

He found himself standing outside Jean’s door, faint music coming from within. He raised his hand
to knock. Jean was a good kisser; they’d taught each other, after all. It wasn’t like it had to be anything more than that.

No, Eren. Don’t be fucking stupid. He lowered his hand. Right now it was pure bad luck that had screwed him over, and there was no sense in making obviously terrible decisions on top of that to screw himself over further.

He was just lonely, that’s all. He missed his cat.

He went back to his room and shut the door. He thought he’d done pretty well at being an adult; he got himself into college and into a (crappy) job and into a place to live all by himself for the most part, but now he felt that his apparent competency was merely a facade, and at the first sign of real hardship everything was going to fall down around his ears and he would end up living under a bridge, having dragged Jean and probably Mikasa down with him.

He crossed the room and his reflection in the mirror on his wardrobe caught his eye. He turned and faced himself, scowling. Was he really desperate enough to consider stripping? He was probably hot enough, he decided. Jean had always called him pretty although he might have said that just to piss him off, which it did every time. He was cute if he pouted, he thought, pulling a few faces at himself in the mirror. He sighed and gently head-butted his reflection, which bowed its head to meet his. He just couldn’t do it, and it was ridiculous to pretend that he could.

Maybe I should sell my arse instead, he thought sourly. At least he’d get laid. Which reminded him, it was time to cut back on everything and the most obvious saving he could make was cancelling his subscription to his favourite porn site.

Eren flung himself down in front of his computer and jigged the mouse to wake it up. He had study he could be doing, but after a day like this one he knew there was zero chance of it being productive even if he tried. Civil engineering could wait.

He traced the cursor through a familiar path of favourites folders and clicked on HotFreeRange.com. It wasn’t what you’d call a normal porn site, but he hadn’t come across it in what you’d call a normal fashion, either; it had all been Mikasa’s doing, although by now he had successfully divorced the site of all associations with her.

She’d sent him the link.

He’d been fifteen, or thereabouts, his mother four years in the grave and his father an almost non-existent presence in both their household and their lives. In a way, Mikasa raised them both; where Eren got angry and frustrated, she remained calm and collected. She was the one who called plumbers when things needed fixing and made dentists appointments, and somehow in all of that managed to find the time to get political.

Eren liked to think she’d investigated his browsing history; the alternative was too horrible. She sent him a long, carefully worded email expressing her reservations with an industry that exploited thousands of people, mostly women, and encouraged an unnatural attitude towards what should be a fun and mutually satisfying activity- the email was long-deleted but he could still remember parts of it seared onto his brain for all eternity.

She wasn’t asking him to give it up, she said, and implied such an ambition was a lost cause anyway. She was asking him to consume responsibly and to that end there was a link. Eren never knew how she discovered it, but he suspected it had something to do with all her online friends who as far as he could tell did nothing but write stories about gay men.
It wasn’t a gay porn site, however. Not entirely. There was an ‘about’ section full of words like diversity and inclusiveness, and regular rants from the studio owner that Eren never read beyond the first one about how the industry had to change. This was free range porn, they declared, ethically made and guilt free.

Mikasa had successfully made him feel very guilty about the whole thing and despite the best of intentions the site wasn’t really making him feel any better. If he hadn’t seen the teaser video he might never have been back.

Filled with adolescent stubbornness (and guilt) he clicked over to the free samples, determined to hate everything forever. The galleries were arranged in alphabetical order by actor’s surname, and the first male on the list belonged to an Axel Black.

Who was five foot three, the text profile helpfully told him.

Eren was taller than that already, and he sniggered at the very idea. He clicked, determined to be entertained if not aroused.

The site granted access to two pictures and a short video before credit card details were required, but for Eren that was more than enough. Axel Black was something else. The first picture was a head shot of a severe looking man with short black hair buzzed into an undercut. He looked right out of the screen at the viewer, pinning them with an intense gaze. The corners of his mouth softened slightly in what might have been a ghost of a contemptuous smile. He’s five foot three, Eren reminded himself, which was absolutely not breathtaking.

And yet he was short of breath all of a sudden.

In the second picture he was naked. And upside down. He was doing a handstand, his back to the viewer, and Eren spent a good twenty seconds staring at his arse, and another forty staring at the defined muscles on his back. His mouth was dry. This guy looked like an athlete; why was he on display here?

Eren decided he didn't care, he'd just make the most of his good fortune. He was half-hard already and he checked his door was shut before he unbuckled his belt and unzipped his fly. Right. He scraped his teeth across his lower lip as he clicked the play button on the video.

Axel, possibly in the same room the photos were taken in, wearing nothing but a pair of snug dark boxer shorts.

“Huh, okay.” His voice was deeper than Eren expected, but it suited his solid frame. That smile was definitely slightly mocking. His fingers plucked briefly at the edge of the boxers and then he started rolling the edge down over his hipbones. Eren practically had his nose against the screen as more skin and dark hair was revealed, and then the broad base of what was probably going to be an amazing cock-

And then video ended. Eren actually made a noise of frustration, and immediately played it again.

“Huh, okay.”

He only needed to play it three more times.

Spent, Eren saved the bookmark, deleted Mikasa's email, and cleaned himself up. Over the next week or so he explored the rest of the free content – that which appealed to him anyway – although he kept going back to Axel Black and his stupid mysterious almost-smile and his perfect abs. He was all the way down in the S's before he discovered Armand Savage.
Superficially he was Axel's opposite, tall and blonde where Axel was short and dark. His portrait grinned cheekily, promising all sorts of things if the viewer would care to stay just a bit longer, but something in his eyes was a warning as well. Like Axel, he was letting the viewer know he was holding things back. The other photograph was an action shot, Armand launching himself out of a pool, while sunlight glittered off the water and illuminated the drops running down his cheeks and arms. His head was thrown back and his whole body was arched, like he was leaping from the water as effortlessly as a dolphin might.

Eren was expecting the video to be an utter cock tease and he wasn't wrong. Armand stalked towards the camera, a look of lustful concentration on his handsome face, while the suit he was wearing just seemed to melt off him. The coat slithered off his back, and he ran one hand down the line of buttons on his shirt, stripping them off rather than undoing them as he opened the garment. His belt buckle caught the light for a moment as his right hand undid it and his trousers fell off his hips and Eren hadn't been expecting the fact that he was wearing nothing underneath but this happy surprise was almost instantly followed by the video ending before he could get a really good look.

Eren ended up ripping and saving the videos, and in one night of online one-upmanship with Jean he actually sent the clips to him. Jean responded with incessant demands for 'sauce' and 'moar.' Eren didn't have any more, but he did pass on the link.

But more wasn't that hard to get, in the end. With the teenagers now running the household themselves, their father had given them access to his credit card. Simple as that. Eren panicked the first time a bill arrived, but his father never mentioned the extra charge; he probably didn't even notice. Eren had been a subscriber to the site ever since, although he had long since ceased charging his father's card.

Axel and Armand shaped his late-adolescence. It was something of a private embarrassment to crush on porn actors, but it wasn't like all they did was have sex. As part of HotFreeRange's quality endeavour, they made longer, more complex films and Eren found himself watching some of their long-running series at least partially for the plot, not just for the frequent sex scenes. His favourite was a rather silly series called *Wings of Freedom* in which Armand was an angel and Axel was a demon and they spent their time trying to seduce mortals away from each other. Eren envied those mortals.

Axel and Armand didn't do scenes together, and Eren did sometimes wonder why. The closest they came to one was a strange black and white movie in which they had a shirtless fistfight in a rain storm. Eren thought it was fascinating and hot, but not exactly wank material. He wanted to get to know them better. He wondered what they were really like.

And now he was saying goodbye to them, at least temporarily. He checked their galleries one more time, just to see if anything new had been posted before he unsubscribed. Neither of them had added anything for a couple of months, but that wasn't entirely unusual. Even porn stars took holidays, Eren supposed.

Nothing new. He didn't really feel like jerking off anyway, he was more lonely than horny, and he gazed wistfully at a few photographs instead. Kind of pathetic, he thought.

Eren scrolled down through the gallery and his eye caught an item on the sidebar.

*Now Hiring.*

Wait, what? He'd noticed that particular notice pop up a couple of times before in the past, although the one time that he'd clicked they were looking for a web designer. What were the odds they were looking for a first-year engineering student, he wondered, although he could do a bit of coding if he
had to. Maybe? He was desperate, and he knew it. And if he got to work in an office in which Axel and Armand might be wandering about, well, he was due for some good luck, surely.

They weren't looking for IT staff, they were looking for actors.

Eren felt a strange jolt in his stomach. He was qualified for that, wasn't he? Better qualified for it than for stripping, at least. He tapped his fingers against his lips nervously. He was actually considering-

the studio was in the same city, after all.

*He might get to work with Axel or Armand. Or both. At the same time.*

Okay calm down, he told himself. He stood up and did a nervous circuit of his room before sitting down again and reading through the requirements, butterflies in his stomach because he might actually go through with this. There were clear guidelines and expectations laid out up-front, including a .pdf of the contract he'd have to sign.

You had to be of legal age, obviously, and there was a medical exam, that made sense, and they wanted some photographs. Of course they did.

*They don't have to be unclothed but please show us your best side.*

Eren was pretty sure the only naked photographs he had were of when he was about four anyway. Mikasa had custody of the family photographs, including the more recent ones were but were any of them sexy enough? Could he ask his sister if she had any sexy photos of him? No, he could not.

Eren got up and started going through his wardrobe. Pretty much everything was just tshirts and jeans, aside from one set of formal wear that made him look and feel like he was at a funeral. There was a trick to wearing suits comfortably, and Eren had yet to acquire it.

Maybe just boxers then. Like Axel. Or just jeans.

Eren was worried that the moment he stopped and thought about it he'd lose his nerve and he spent the next few minutes trying on his own underwear in front of the mirror, and wondering what expression to make.

“I can't do this. This is stupid,” he muttered, scowling at himself.

They had to do it once. For all their apparent ease in front of the camera, Axel and Armand were new at one point as well. If Eren wanted them to fuck him- and oh boy he did- then he had to do this first. And he had to stop looking like someone was putting a gun to his head and making him, he realised.

Yeah, he wouldn't really consider this seriously if it weren't for his current financial troubles, but that wasn't enough. The site made it clear than none of the actors were forced to do anything with anyone they didn't want to. If he wanted either of his idols, he had to impress them first.

Eren took a deep breath and lifted his head, staring at the mirror like he was a lost puppy hoping to be adopted. Well, that was better. Maybe a smile. Shy smile. Crazy smile. He went and got his phone and started taking photos. At least they didn't have to be professional quality.

And he found he was starting to have fun. In his head Axel and Armand lounged somewhere on the other side of the mirror, giving him encouragement, telling him to show them more. And he did. He swapped his boxers for his tightest pair of skinny jeans and had trouble getting himself into them- maybe he would jerk off this evening. After he'd finished taking pictures.
He smirked at the mirror and slid his hand under the waistband. He wasn't keeping track of how many pictures he'd taken by this point; he'd sort through them all later for the best ones. He undid the top button, and started to peel the garment open. Caught his lower lip between his teeth and gazed promisingly at the camera. He was in some sort of zone, he realised; it just felt easy, the butterflies gone. He felt hot. He felt like he could walk into a room and turn heads. He felt he had that power, for the first time in his life.

He could feel the cool metal teeth of the fly on his cock as he slid the garment down, just a bit further-

Jean knocked on the door, “Hey Eren!”

“Fuck!” Eren nearly dropped his phone and then he tripped and staggered as he accidentally stood on the hem of his jeans. He stumbled over and put his hand on the door, in case Jean tried to open it, his heart pounding as he tried to wrestle his jeans back on one-handed.

“Are you all right?” Jean asked.

“Yes! I mean, yeah. I'm just-” he sagged against the door. “Applying for jobs. Focused, you know?”

“Yeah, I get you. Good luck. I was just gonna say I was out of caffeine and is there anything you want from the store?”

“No, it's fine. Thank you. I couldn't afford anything anyway.”

“You sound a bit more cheerful. Go get those jobs.”

“Yeah. Thanks.” Eren listened to Jean's footsteps receding towards the living room, and a few moments later he heard the front door close.

“Pfft!” He chuckled. And then he threw his head back and laughed, feeling some of the tension of the day drain away. “Oh, what the hell.” Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

He sat down at his computer, uploaded his best photos and started filling in the online application form. By the time he was done the day had thoroughly exhausted him and he brushed his teeth and crawled into bed.

He woke up the next morning to underwear all over his floor, no money, no cat, and a job interview.
Chapter 2

Eren nearly choked on his coffee when he checked his emails the following morning. They'd got back to him overnight, somehow. The email was timestamped around 2am. Who answers work emails at 2am, he wondered, since he highly doubted they outsourced their HR to Australia. And they wanted him to go in for an interview and audition; he was to call up and organise a time.

Audition.

Had he really volunteered to have sex with people on camera for money last night? Apparently he had. He took a deep breath and entered the number. He pushed his bowl of cereal away as he did so; suddenly he didn't feel very hungry this morning.

“Hange speaking.” The voice on the other end sounded cheerful but not entirely professional, like they were answering a personal phone.

“Um, good morning, my name is Eren Jaeger and I applied for-” Of course Jean took this moment to emerge, sleepily making his way to the coffee machine, still in the rumpled pyjama bottoms he'd slept in. He saw Eren was on the phone and didn't say anything, merely nodding blearily at him. “A position,” Eren continued. “Um. At your company.”

“Oh yes, right. Thank you for your application, Eren. I'm looking forward to meeting you in the flesh.”

“What?” Eren's voice came out higher and squeakier than he'd intended. “I mean. Ha ha.”

The person on the other end, and he still couldn't place their gender, was laughing. “Sorry, sorry. When's the soonest you can come in? Our schedule is flexible.”

“Well, I was hoping for a time this morning, actually-”

Hange seemed impressed by his enthusiasm, and suggested nine-thirty. Eren looked at the kitchen clock. He could make it if he hurried. He thanked them again and hung up.

“Can I use the shower first? I have a job interview.” He was already getting out of his chair.

Jean waved him away, “Go on. Dude, you work fast. Isn't there supposed to be a recession?”

“I'm a little surprised myself,” Eren called back. Christ. What should he wear?

Twenty minutes later Jean forced his way into the bathroom. “I have to go to class,” he said. “Why the fuck are you taking so long?” He trailed off as he eyed Eren's outfit.

Eren had scrubbed everywhere so long he'd gone pink, and he was trying to get his hair perfect. He'd slithered back into the jeans he'd worn last night and eventually picked out a shirt, mainly for its tendency to wrinkle up over his hips.

“Is this an interview or a date?” Jean asked, raising an eyebrow as he reached for his toothbrush.

“Shut up, horseface.” Eren frowned, ruffling his hair artfully.
“You didn't seriously apply to be a stripper, did you?”

That was uncomfortably close to the mark. “No. I did not,” Eren snapped, and then fled before Jean could ask any more insightful questions. Eren grabbed his keys and bag and Missy's carrier, and headed out.

Eren owned a Suzuki Swift in rather fetching shade of green. Jean had informed him the day after he bought it that it was a girly car, and Eren had informed him that if he found a car that was equally as cheap and reliable and made his dick bigger he was welcome to it as he clearly needed it more than Eren himself did. Jean shut up about it. Up until last month the Swift had given him no trouble and after spending most of his money repairing the transmission it was now running cheerfully again.

Eren was not so cheerful.

Now among the morning traffic, he had time to think about where he was going and what he was going to do. Or try and do. What if he met Axel or Armand at the studio? He couldn’t really claim to be a fan without admitting he was also a huge wanker as well. What was the polite thing to say? Eren had the horrible feeling he probably wouldn’t have to say anything, and that all his thoughts would be read easily off his face. He just had to hope it was endearing and not creepy.

He didn’t have any clear expectations, so he wasn’t surprised when the address he arrived at proved to be a rather nondescript office building on the edge of what could be termed the central city. A sign above the parking spaces out the front proclaimed them Reserved for HFR Media Staff and Visitors. All others were threatened with towing. There were only two other cars in the lot, and Eren parked in a visitor’s space. He glanced at himself in the rear vision mirror, flashed what he hoped was a cheerful smile at his reflection, and got out.

He wished he hadn't worn this shirt now, tugging it down over his hips as he approached the building.

There was no clue on the outside as to what HFR Media did, and the front door opened at Eren’s touch to reveal a very bland waiting room. The door on the other side had Staff Only stencilled on it, and there was a bell to push for deliveries. With no other options, Eren pushed it. Delivery: one very nervous nineteen-year-old and two huge crushes, he thought.

He was glad the place didn’t look too ...weird.

The interior door opened about thirty seconds later. The individual on the other side had reddish-brown hair pulled into a ponytail and glasses, and they were wearing trousers and suspenders and a collared shirt.

“Hi! Eren, right?”

“That’s me.” He started to feel his jeans might not be appropriate after all, but nevertheless he held out his hand and it was duly shaken.

“I’m Hange. I run this madhouse. I’m not male and I’m not female, so please don’t insult me by trying to pick one for me.”

“Okay.”

They regarded him kindly for a few moments. “Nervous?”

“A little.”
“You did mention you hadn’t worked in the industry before.”

“I kind of thought that might disqualify me,” Eren said. “But if I wasn’t honest you’d figure out out right away anyway.”

“I like your thinking. Come through to my office, and let’s get this started.”

Beyond the Staff Only door was a corridor cluttered with footlights and bits of sets. Eren had worked backstage at a musical in high school and recognised the same sort of theatrical junk. Hange led him past doors with numbers stencilled on them, through a large, pleasant tea room, and upstairs to an equally cluttered office. There didn’t seem to be anyone else about, and Eren wasn’t sure if he was relieved or disappointed.

It might have been any other office, except for the pictures on the walls. Eren was by now so familiar with the contents of HotFreeRange.com that he recognised most of the actors by sight; the pictures were all tasteful, but nevertheless not quite appropriate for an ordinary work setting.

Axel scowled down from his perch astride a motorcycle and Eren smiled faintly. Wish me luck, he thought. He didn’t spot Armand until he glanced behind him and saw a picture of him in full angel garb, wings outstretched, above the door as if blessing all who entered.

“How familiar are you with our studio?” Hange asked.

“I’m very familiar with the product,” Eren said, and winced, but Hange didn’t react. “And I know how you guys take all the ethical stuff seriously.”

“Good, good. That makes things simpler. Honestly, in some ways we prefer actors who haven’t already been exposed to the industry, especially when it comes to men,” they said bluntly. “They learn bad habits. I’m going to go over the rules anyway.”

“Okay.”

“We operate under a policy of complete and informed consent. We are drug-free, and that includes substances like Viagra, although they are common in other studios. You will be tested. You will also have to take an STI test and have a full medical examination. You can use your own GP if you want or you can see our doctor, who is familiar with the industry and specialises in this sort of work.”

“Okay,” Eren said. He’d read all this on the website already, but he guessed not every applicant was as thorough.

“Competition for places here is pretty high,” Hange said. “We pay well and we treat our people well, and word’s gotten around. If you get caught violating the rules you’re out; the performers here trust each other with their bodies, you have to be worthy of that trust.”

“I understand.”
“You’ve got this far for a couple of reasons; one, you’re what we’re looking for currently, because we’re short on men and two; you looked like you were having fun. Attitude’s important. Now, experience.”

Eren had been starting to relax, and then his stomach clenched.

“Yes,” he heard himself say faintly.

“You said you did a bit of theatre work in high school.”

“Oh! Um, yeah.” Eren talked a bit about that for a while, but he’d spent most of his time backstage; his actual role was just one of a crowd of unnamed onlookers. Mikasa had played the lead, and it was mainly for her sake that he even participated in the first place.

“I did enjoy it,” Eren said. “It was a great atmosphere, and even though I had to be talked into it I’m glad I was. But I can’t sing.”

“That’s all right.” Hange smiled. They smiled a lot. Eren got the impression they were playing a role too; being professional. He wondered what they’d turn out to be really like.

“Why do you want to do this job? Why are you here?” Hange asked.

“I thought it might be fun, and,” Eren sighed. “I really need the money.”

“No shame in that.”

“To be honest, it was a bit spur of the moment. I didn’t really expect to get this far.”

“You can back out any time, Eren. That’s what consent means. Now, I’m sorry I couldn’t give you more warning, but you’ll have to audition before we sign you up.”

Eren felt his eyes widen. With Hange? By himself?

Hange was going through a desk drawer. “Here we go! Let’s see...okay. Here.” They handed over a sheaf of papers. “This is a script. Take ten minutes or so, to read over from uh, there.” They leaned over and made a mark on the paper with a pen. “Just that bit until the end of scene. Don’t worry, you don’t have to memorise it, I just want to see how you act.”

Act? Right, of course. They took the story a bit more seriously here.

“Go to the tea room and have some coffee if you like.”

“Okay, thanks.” He took the script and headed out.

The tea room was warm and sunny, and there were a number of clearly individualised mugs sitting near the sink. There was a large fridge in the little kitchen area, but he didn't pry to see what was inside. The furniture was all old and comfortable looking, and none of it matched.

Eren didn’t really feel like coffee right then. He looked at the machine for a few moments and turned away. There was a big whiteboard on one side of the room, to which was stuck a laminated sign. Today Nanaba’s Pronouns Are: next to this on the whiteboard someone had scrawled she/her. The rest of the space was taken up by a schedule of some kind. Eren didn’t recognise any of the names, but of course they wouldn’t use their real names on the website.

Right, script. Even though Eren’s part had been small, he’d had to help Mikasa prepare for her role in the musical, and thus he wasn’t entirely unfamiliar with the process. He knew how to read a script
like he was speaking, not reading, although it had seemed a fairly pointless skill to pick up at the
time.

Hange had indicated Eren was to play the part of a young man struggling with his father’s
expectations of him. It couldn’t have been much further from Eren’s actual relationship with his
father if they’d tried. He mumbled through the words, the other character (of indeterminate gender) a
friend trying to offer support. Eren tried to mentally cast the other character; Axel wouldn’t fit, he’d
be much blunter, so Eren mentally replaced ‘friend’ with ‘older colleague’ and cast Armand. He
pretended he could hear his voice, concerned and encouraging, whenever the friend spoke.

It helped. Flicking ahead through the script informed Eren that his character and his friend would not
remain merely friends for much longer, and thus he tried to put a bit more feeling into it, imagining
Armand’s cool blue eyes and big hand on his shoulder, and wanting without realising it to lean in, to
accept more than verbal support.

He could do this. Once his ten minutes were up, he headed back to Hange’s office.

“Ready?” Hange asked, their computer screen reflecting off their glasses.

“As I can be without taking it home for a week to learn it properly,” Eren said, with more confidence
than he felt.

“Good enough! Let me get my copy.”

It wasn’t easy to mentally replace Hange’s slight, androgynous frame with Armand’s, and Eren kept
forgetting he didn’t actually know the lines and had to look down at the pages, but he did his best.
He tried to express how much he wanted to meet Armand, pour it into the undercurrent of his
character’s discontent with the status quo. When the scene ended he was staring a bit sadly and
longingly at Hange, as the character they were playing was meant to exit the scene.

Silence fell.

A slow smile spread across Hange’s face, and grew wider. Their eyes glittered behind their glasses
and Eren was unnerved by the sudden enthusiasm.

“Eren, you gorgeous person, if you can get it up on camera, you’re hired.”

The statement gave Eren intensely mixed feelings. He settled for, “Thank you,” as a response.

“Let me just mark some things for editing-” They bent over the script and started scribbling in the
margins.

“Do you write all the scripts?” Eren asked curiously.

“Well, most of them. With input from the actors of course. But if you have any ideas yourself you’re
most welcome to share. Sometimes we have brainstorming lunches but they never seem all that
productive.” Hange looked puzzled by this. Eren could see that they'd made their mind up about him
and was starting to relax.

“Come on, let’s give it a whirl, eh?” They nudged him on the arm.

“Give what a whirl?” Eren asked.

“Getting it up on camera, of course. The sooner you know if you can the better, really.”
"What, now? But I haven’t taken the tests yet."

"Not with anyone else. Everyone gets an introductory solo shoot first. I wonder where Nanaba is. She’s our photographer and she’s amazing, as you already know of course.” The printer across the room spluttered to life. “Well, if you're not ready today there’s no rush. This is your paperwork. Including some homework for you.” Hange handed him a printed list. “This is all the things you might be asked to do. Just put a yes, no, or maybe next to them – this can be renegotiated at any time, of course, but it's to give me an idea of where to start, and what stories might suit you. There's empty space for anything we might not have thought of and things that are personal to you, for example if you don't like your feet being touched, etcetera. Take it home and think about it for a couple of days.” Hange smiled proudly at him.

“Okay.” Eren accepted it, along with his contract.

“You need to sign that before you do anything. Read it over, take your time, I'm going to track down Nanaba. You should meet her at least.” Hange left to find the photographer, leaving Eren alone in the office.

Eren had already skimmed the contract on the website, but he dutifully skimmed this copy as well. His name had been entered up the top.

_I, Eren Jaeger..._

I need this money, he thought. Even if he only managed a couple of films, that would be enough to pay off the vet bill and repay Jean for the rent. He could go back to paying off Mikasa in instalments if he had to; he knew she wouldn't mind. But this, this could save him.

Eren picked up a pen and signed.

Nanaba was a woman of indeterminate age, with short fine hair such a light shade of blonde it was almost white. Hange introduced them, and Eren shook her hand.

"Let me know if you'd be more comfortable if I was man,” she said cheerfully.

“What?”

"It's my superpower to be both. I may as well use it for good, right?”

“Oh. It's fine, I think. I don't really know. I've never done anything like this before.”

“Really? Hange showed me the photographs you submitted. They were terrible, no doubt, but the model had potential.” She looked him up and down, like a carpenter evaluating a log of wood. “How much time do you have, Eren?”

“Um, I have class in the afternoon and I have to pick up my cat—Missy. In all this he'd almost forgotten her. She was still at the vets, full of stitches and alone, he realised.

“What's wrong?” Hange asked with concern, as Eren sagged under a wave of unhappiness.

Eren explained. He told them what had happened, and how much it was going to cost, and why he was even there in the first place.

“Go and get your cat, Eren,” Hange said kindly. “We can schedule a photoshoot later.”

It would be the easy option, Eren knew. He glanced at the clock on the wall and took a deep breath.
“I've got nearly two hours before class. Let's do it now. That way, I can pick Missy up, and tell her everything is going to be okay.” And tell himself that as well.

Hange looked at him for a few moments, and then glanced at Nanaba, “Well, if you're sure.”

“Let's go to Studio Two,” she said to Eren. “The bar's still set up. I think that will suit you.”

The bar was in fact a set, and Eren looked around the studio with interest – he'd never been in a space like this before. Nanaba turned some of the lights on and shifted cameras out of the way.

Eren stood in the set, feeling lost.

“What should I do?” he asked.

“Whatever you like,” Nanaba said. “Why don't you put on some music and dance? Dance like no one's watching. Turn the music up loud enough and you won't hear the camera. Don't worry, the studios are all soundproofed.”

“Should I take my clothes off?” Eren asked, noticing that the glasses behind the bar were all plastic, and blinking as Nanaba shone a light in his eyes briefly as she moved it about.

“Whoa, slow down,” Nanaba laughed. “Give yourself some time to get used to it. Forget I'm here if you can. Trust me, I'll make you look good.” She picked up a camera like the ones Eren had seen shoved in the faces of celebrities on TV and adjusted some of the settings.

Eren danced. It was a weird thing to be doing on a Tuesday morning, but with the lights and the bar he could almost believe it was Friday night. Nanaba seemed to disappear; he was aware of her moving sometimes, setting up another shot, but it was like her presence receded, and he was sure she was doing it deliberately. He was grateful.

Eren never thought himself particularly good or bad at dancing, but he'd spent an adolescence competing for the world's attention with Jean and dancing was something he was relatively comfortable with. He danced until sweat started to slick back his hair when he ran his fingers through it, he danced until his shirt got too warm and he threw it aside.

He danced until he was exhausted, stumbling like he was drunk and grinning, high on endorphins and the beat. He fell to his knees, legs spread, chest heaving.

In the gap between this song and the next one, Nanaba spoke.

“More.”

Yeah, he wasn't just here to dance, and he didn't think he had it in him to keep dancing just then anyway. He stayed where he was, and started unbuckling his belt. Nanaba lay on the floor in front of him, camera to her eye like it was a sniper rifle, the device tilted up slightly to catch Eren's feral smile.

He tried not to see her, put Axel on the floor in front of him instead, slinking forward on his hands and knees, his tongue flicking between his lips, hungry. Eren hadn't got around to jerking off the night before and as he cupped himself through his jeans he felt the familiar spike of heat. He wanted to close his eyes, lose himself easier in fantasy, but he forced them to stay open, staring into the black eye of Nanaba's camera.

If I give a good enough show, he told himself, Axel is going to kick the door in and demand his next movie is with me. Motivated, Eren found himself unzipping his fly for the camera for the second time
in twenty-four hours. This time Jean didn't knock on the door.

And Axel didn't kick it down, either.

Some time later, Nanaba told him he'd done a good job and politely withdrew and let him clean himself up in private. There was a supply of personal cleaning products on a table near the cameras, and when Eren was done he found his shirt and slumped into a chair, wondering what he'd done, what he'd started.

He heard the door open and close.

“Eren?” It was Hange.

He waved at them, not sure he felt like speaking just then, and they approached.

“If you would prefer,” they said, dragging over a canvas chair for themselves. “The pictures will be destroyed and no word of this will be spoken.”

“Why?” Eren asked. “Were they that bad?”

“No, no of course not,” they moved to reassure him. “But this is one of those things where some people don't realise they can't do something until they actually do it. I had a quick look through the set, and they were brilliant. Nanaba said you were a natural, and I agree.”

“Oh.” Eren felt his face heat up, pride and embarrassment burning in his cheeks in equal measure. “Thank you.”

“How do you feel?”

“Oh. I mean, Nanaba must have seen a lot worse, right?”

Hange chuckled. “Don't worry about her. You're the one who's new to this work.”

“It took a bit of getting used to. The music helped. Oh fuck!” Eren had taken out his phone, just for want of something to do with his hands, and he saw the time. “I have to get Missy.”

“All right, Eren. Go, we understand.” They smiled. “You mentioned classes, so email me your schedule. We'll see you soon, I hope.”

“You will!” Eren said. He had a new job.

He wondered how he was going to break the news to Jean.

Chapter End Notes

Once again, there is fanart from Mizore. Go look at it and enjoy :)
“Well, you always were stupid, but now you look stupid as well,” Jean said loudly.

“Don't be so hard on Missy,” Eren said, not fooled in the slightest. “She doesn't have a choice, whereas I'm pretty sure your haircut is voluntary.”

Jean frowned and ran his hand over his hair before getting to his feet. Eren knew he'd been kneeling by Missy's basket to check on her, and was just covering for himself when Eren had walked in.

“And how is my gorgeous little girl?” Eren asked, shrugging off his bag and making his way over. Missy had come back from the vet with a large shaved patch on her side, a neat row of stitches, and a cone around her neck to stop her worrying at both. She wasn't very impressed with any of this, but otherwise she seemed as well as could be expected. Eren had hugged her close and only just managed not to cry right there in the surgery, partly with relief and partly something more complicated.

The trajectory of his life had changed. By how much, he didn't know, and he didn't regret it, at least not yet, but what was done couldn't be undone, and he had to bid farewell to the version of himself that would have baulked at fucking himself in front of a stranger with a camera. Maybe this was what was meant by growing up, not just paying rent and washing your own socks, but realising what you were and weren't prepared to do. And Eren had surprised himself, and it was like he had to get to know the new him. Learn to live with him. Learn to like him.

Now he knelt by Missy's basket and stroked her forehead with a finger.

“Oh, she's fine,” Jean said. “Cats have nine lives, don't they?”

“Well, I think she used up one.” Missy purred and tried to scrape off her cone on his hand, regarding him with puzzled, pleading eyes. “I'm sorry, it's just until your stitches come out. Put up with it, all right? It's good for you.”

Missy didn't look convinced. Eren petted her for a while longer, but he didn’t want to wake her up too much, since she looked like she was resting comfortably.

“How'd the interview go?” Jean asked, a shade too casually, as he opened the fridge.

“Good,” Eren said. “I'm hired.”

“Congratulations. So, what exactly are you doing? You said minimum wage wasn't gonna cut it.”

Eren took a deep breath and wandered over to the kitchen bench, resting his elbows on it like it was a bar. There was no point in lying about it.

“I signed up with a porn studio as an actor,” Eren said.

Jean barked with laughter and straightened up, having retrieved a can of red bull from the fridge. “Seriously though.”

“I am serious.”
Jean paused and looked at him suspiciously, waiting for him to admit the joke. “Really? You?”

“Don’t tell Mikasa,” Eren said.

Jean gaped at him for a few moments as he realised he wasn’t joking. “You don’t have to worry about that,” he said eventually. “That’s one can of worms I will not open. Damn. You’re making porn.”

“Why is that so weird? I’m fucking hot and it’s not like I’m some sort of virgin, as you well know.”

“Yeah, exactly,” Jean said, opening the can. “It’s like, you’re using all the skills I taught you—”

“You didn’t teach me shit! You didn’t even know what a prostate was.”

“I did too!” Jean shrugged, “I just didn’t know what it did. To be honest, I’m still not clear.”

“It makes the parts of jizz that aren’t sperm,” Eren said.

“I wonder which part you get the flavour from.”

Eren shrugged, “Find a guy who’s had his tubes tied and offer to blow him?”

Jean rubbed the back of his neck. “I can’t believe we’re having this conversation. I can’t believe you’re making porn.”

“I can’t believe you’re making a big deal about it. Are you jealous or something?”

“No! I mean, I don’t know. It’s weird. What’s it like?”

“I haven’t actually done much yet. I gotta take a drug test and stuff first.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. Fuck. Wow. Okay, well, good luck.” Jean seemed to want to get away from him and Eren wasn’t really sorry to see him go. Jean went back to his room, clutching his drink.

Eren sighed and slumped over the bench. Well, he couldn’t have expected anything better, really. Jean wasn’t the most nuanced guy in the world, after all. It would be nice to have someone to talk to though, he thought. A mentor.

Or two.

One blonde, and one dark. One tall, one short. Nanaba had said he was a natural; maybe that was enough. Next time he went into the studio if Axel and Armand weren’t there he was going to ask after them, he decided.

Eren didn’t make it back to the studio for the rest of the week. He filled out Hange’s kink list, as he thought of it; a lot of yes’s and maybes followed by a large number of no’s and a handful of ‘I don’t even know what that is.’ He couldn’t think of anything to write in the blank spaces.

Missy clattered around the apartment for a day or two until she got used to the cone, although perhaps ‘got used to’ was overstating it. She clearly hated the thing, and she’d regard Eren with her huge green eyes, begging him to take it off. He gave her all the love and attention he could, but he couldn’t afford to treat her, even though he wanted to, and Jean’s generous offer on rent would definitely not extend to fancy cat food. Jean himself seemed to find Missy’s new outfit pretty funny; he could leave his door open a crack now for air, and she couldn’t fit herself through. Eren asked him not to taunt her but it didn’t put either Jean or Missy off, and Eren would be studying when he’d hear the clunk-scrape of Missy trying to wedge her cone through Jean’s door, and Jean’s braying
laugh in response.

Eren went to the doctor Hange had recommended as he didn’t get sick often and didn’t actually know if he had a GP; Mikasa would know, but if he asked she’d also want to know what was wrong with him. The doctor was a bald man with a greying moustache and a mischievous look in his eyes. He treated Eren to an utterly serious and extremely thorough sex-ed lesson, explaining the various risks inherent in different sex acts with complete calm. He told Eren he was lucky to work for Hange’s company, and he said he wished the wider industry had their standards.

“It’s gotten much worse over the years. Back in the seventies—”

“You’ve been doing this since the seventies?” How old was he, Eren wondered.

“Please don’t interrupt, Eren.” He frowned.

“Sorry, doc.”

Despite leaving the surgery feeling like he was better off never so much as looking at another naked human again, he was relieved Pixis gave him a clean bill of health, even though it totally unsurprising given his only sexual partner was just as inexperienced as he’d been.

Eren started going for a run most mornings, or evenings if he had early classes. He wasn’t exactly out of shape, but he’d been spending more time snacking and studying than exercising since he left high school and the thought of Axel’s rippling muscles motivated him to put a bit of effort in.

He thought about Axel and Armand a lot. It was inevitable now that he was going to meet them, and idle fantasies now had a serious chance of coming true. He was nervous and excited and determined to do the best he could not to be starstruck.

He didn’t even jerk off over the weekend; he was a professional now, and it just seemed like a good idea not to be running on empty when he went back to the studio on Monday afternoon after his class.

The parking lot outside of the studio was much more full today. Eren counted four cars, and he pulled into the last free staff space. He really hoped this would start getting easier, he thought as he rubbed his sweaty palms on his jeans.

He went straight through the Staff Only door and along to the tea room, from which he could hear voices. There were three people in there, none of whom he’d met before. A tall, scruffy looking man in dad-jeans, a slender, dark-skinned woman in conversation with him, and a young blonde guy who appeared to be studying at one of the desks. Eren hovered in the doorway, wishing Nanaba or Hange would appear and introduce him.

“Of course he’s keen,” the woman was saying. “But I’m a bit concerned, so I want to do a test-run with the harness myself. I don’t want to put him through something if I don’t have an idea of what it’s like.”

“It’s not gonna fit you, though. I’ll have to think of something.”

“Um, hello?” Eren said. Three pairs of eyes looked back at him.

“You’re Eren, right?” the tall guy strode over, hand extended. “I’m Mike. I build the sets, I shoot the movies, and drive all our piles of shit around when we shoot on location. Nanaba told me about you.”
“Oh. Yeah, that's me.” He flicked his gaze to the whiteboard and noted that Nanaba was still a woman. Mike noticed him doing so and smiled approvingly.

“Meet some of your colleagues, Eren. This is Ymir, and that’s Armin.”

Armin smiled. “Hey.”

“Hey.”

Awkward. And Eren was sure he looked familiar.

Ymir looked him up and down and threw her head back and laughed, “Not into chicks, huh Eren?”

“What?” He felt himself flush.

“You didn’t recognise me, and you looked me in the eye. Don't worry; no need to be shy. Welcome aboard.”

“Thanks.” Her handshake was like a vice.

She turned back to Mike, “Let’s give it a go now, while we’ve got time. It’s set up in Three, yeah?”

“Yeah. Nanaba was taking photos of it. See you soon, Eren. If anyone asks, we’re in Three.”

“Okay.”

Somewhat at a loss, Eren drifted over to the coffee machine. “Do you want one?” he asked Armin.

“Mm, yeah thanks. I could use a break.” He arched his back and stretched.

“What are you studying?”

“Archaeology.”

“Ah. I’m first year civil engineering. It’s a lot of maths.”

“Rather you than me, then. So you’re our newbie.”

“Yep. I saw Dr Pixis on Thursday,” he said proudly. And then realised he’d just boasted about seeing an STI doctor to a complete stranger. He sighed. “I’m still not used to this,” he muttered.

Armin chuckled, and told him how he liked his coffee and which mug was his. Eren selected a plain one for himself; he’d have to make a note to bring one in.

He brought their drinks over and sat opposite Armin, eyeing off the pile of books on the table. “You come here to study?”

“I live in a dorm,” Armin said. “And the library gets full. It’s actually pretty peaceful here and I can get a lot done. Hange doesn’t mind if I leave a few textbooks around, and there's free coffee.”

“How long have you been working here?” Eren asked.

“A bit over a year. When I started college I crunched the numbers and realised I was going to be sunk to my eyeballs in debt and living on instant ramen unless I got a job that paid well. But I didn’t want anything that cut into my studies too much. I did my research and decided if I could get a place here the working conditions would be satisfactory. And here I am.”
“Wow,” Eren said. Armin couldn’t have been more than a year or two older than him, and Eren felt that he was far more impressive and organised than Eren himself would ever be. “My car broke down, and then my cat got sick. The whole thing just sort of happened.” He still wasn't quite sure how.

“Ah. I hope your cat is feeling better.” Armin smiled.

“She is, thank you. Um, this might seem rude but you really look familiar.”

Armin raised an eyebrow, “Maybe you’ve seen some of my work?”

“Oh. Yes, fuck, of course. You were in Wings of Freedom and that librarian one with Armand.”

Armin looked puzzled for a moment and then his face cleared, “Yeah, that one was fun. The library was just a set though; all those books were actually painted styrofoam. You can’t do that sort of thing in a real restricted section; it might damage the books.”

“Um. Right.” Eren barely remembered the books. He set his cup down and leaned forward, “So what’s Armand like?”

Armin looked amused. “He was very professional. As you’d expect for a veteran.”

“Yeah, of course, but what is he like?”

“If you want the dirty details, watch the film.” He was clearly trying not to laugh.

“I’ve seen it, God Armin.” Eren grinned. He liked this guy; he was easy to get along with, and unlike Jean he didn’t rub it in when Eren embarrassed himself. “I guess I’ll just have to wait and see for myself then.”

“Not much chance of that, I’m afraid.”

“Why not?”

“He retired like, a few months ago now. Axel went too. That’s why Hange has been scouting for more guys recently.”

Eren remembered Hange saying something along the lines of being short of men, but he hadn’t paid it any attention at the time. He slumped back in his chair, as his dreams of having amazing paid sex with his idols evaporated in front of his eyes. It just wasn't fair.

“But-”

“Armin! What have you done to him? Poor Eren looks pole-axed.” Hange came downstairs from their office.

“Hello, Hange,” Eren said distantly.

“I just told him that Axel and Armand were no longer on the roster,” Armin said.

“Ohh, were you a fan, Eren?”

“Kinda. Why’d they go?”

“Why wouldn’t they?” Hange asked. “Ten years is a long time in this industry and they’ve both been here longer than that. I certainly didn’t tell them they were too old, if that’s what you’re thinking.”
They patted him on the shoulder, “Cheer up Eren, maybe they’ll come to the Christmas party.”

“It’s August,” Eren said. He frowned, “What about Wings of Freedom? You can’t just stop it there.”

“We shot a special episode that wraps up the storyline. We’ll publish it at the end of the year to finish the season.” Hange laughed, “And it’s nice to know at least one fan watches it for the plot.”

They’d thought of everything. Eren sighed deeply.

“Come on Eren, we’ve got work to do. Where’s Mike?”

“In Three,” Eren said.

“Oh good. I’ll just go and get him. You’ll be doing a debut video today, and I’ll send you home with a script to look over. I hope you two get along!” Hange winked and hurried out in search of Mike.

“What does that mean?” Eren asked.

“We’ll be working together,” Armin said calmly.

“I. Oh. I guess that makes sense.” Eren tried not to eye him off like he was picturing him naked. He stared at a spot on the wall behind Armin’s head instead, his entire life up until this point leaving him completely unprepared for this particular social situation.

“It gets less weird,” Armin said. “Don’t worry.” He tapped his pen against his notebook for a few moments. “Sorry I’m not Armand.”

“No, it’s fine. I’m just- I guess I built it up in my head that it was gonna happen and I was really looking forward just to meeting them, you know?” Eren met Armin’s calm, inquisitive gaze. “I don’t even know their real names, do I?”

“Nope.”

“Do you know why they left, were they unhappy?”

“I don’t think so, I think they just moved on. We had a party to farewell them and everything. It wasn’t like they stormed out. My guess is they got bored, or wanted to settle down or something. This isn’t an industry a lot of people can build their lives around indefinitely.”

“Wait. Settle down? Are they, you know, together?”

Armin laughed, “Pfft! No. At least, I don’t think so. It was more like they were a team. It just seemed to make sense that they’d leave at the same time. I dunno, I’ve only been here a year; I didn’t know them that well. Erw- um, Armand practically founded the company with Hange and Mike. They were the original three, I think.”

“Well, fuck.” There didn’t seem to be anything he could do about it now.

“Hey, if you do a good enough job, maybe you could entice them back,” Armin joked.

“I don’t think that would work. I mean, why would they even want to watch porn? That would be weird. It already feels weird to watch porn and I’ve hardly started.”

Armin merely shrugged.

Hange returned, Mike in tow. “Let’s go upstairs and brainstorm, Eren.”
“Okay.”

Without being asked Mike picked up a chair and carried it up to Hange’s office; Eren realised there were only two up there normally. Hange sat down behind their desk and started shuffling files again.

“Honestly, I need someone to get rid of these. Surely there’s enough in the budget for an assistant. I tried to make Moblit do it,” they said brightly. “But he threatened to quit.”

“He’s our IT guy,” Mike explained. “You probably won’t see him around much unless something’s gone horribly wrong.”

“He’s shy around the actors,” Hange said. “It’s adorable. Sometimes I wonder if he made our website with his eyes shut.”

“I’m pretty sure he accused you of writing the specs with your eyes shut,” Mike said, grinning at Eren.

“Um, before we start,” Eren said.

“Yes?” Hange gave him their full attention.

“Are Axel and Armand really gone? Might they not come back?”

“Well, they’re always welcome back, if they decided they wanted to. But I’m pretty sure they had other jobs lined up.”

It wasn’t very encouraging.

“Could you at least tell me their real names?”

“Sorry, Eren. I’m sure they’d tell you themselves if you met them, but I can’t disclose. Tell you what, if they come back for lunch or something, I’ll send you a text.” Hange grinned. “I’m sure they’ll want to meet their number one fan.”

“Thank you,” Eren muttered, both embarrassed and grateful.

“Now, look at these.” Hange passed over a folder, and inside was a stack of large, glossy photographs. Mike looked over his shoulder as Eren examined them.

They were of him, but Eren had to take a few moments to convince himself of that fact. Mostly action shots of him dancing, he jumped and spun, sometimes just a blur, sometimes in full-focus, sweat gathering on his temples, arms and hair flying. He looked, well, like someone in a magazine, and almost supernaturally attractive.

“Wow,” he said.

“Wow indeed. Keep looking.”

He knew what was in the second half of the stack, and he didn’t want to, but went through them anyway. The pictures showed him on his knees, lips parted, his hands undoing his pants. The next few had his cock in full focus- he’d never seen the underside before. It was pretty impressive from this angle, he had had to admit. He forced himself to go through the whole set. The second last one had managed to catch him mid-orgasm, spunk flying, and the last was the immediate result gleaming on his chest and fingers, his face slightly out of focus.

“Her timing is perfect,” Mike said proudly. “As always.”
Eren finally shoved them back into the folder again and buried his face in his hands, convinced steam was coming out his ears. Mike patted him on the shoulder.

“It's all right, Eren. No one's laughing. You did good.”

“I want to publish those,” Hange said. “For a first shoot they’re brilliant. You really let yourself go and it showed. What we need to talk about is what to do next, that is, your debut film. Which is why Mike is here.”

Eren raised his head and smiled weakly. “Okay.”

“It's for the teaser film. You tell the audience a bit about yourself, and show off a little.”

Eren nodded. He'd watched Axel and Armand's a few times. He knew how they went.

“What do you think?” Hange asked.

“Um. Sure.”

“Any thoughts, Mike?”

“Maybe something outside. He's got a vitality that will look good in the sun. Bit feral, too, you could see it when he was dancing. The safety fence on the roof might work. Shoot him through the bars. Have him pace up and down like he's caged for a bit.”

“And then have him break free!” Hange said standing up so suddenly that a pile of papers slid off their desk. Eren bent to pick them up, and caught a glimpse of a familiar face before he put them back in the folder. It was Axel, but not as Eren had ever seen him. He was young and pouting and it clearly wasn't a professional shot. The shock of a photo Eren hadn't seen before made him tingle. This was Axel's file. He slid it back onto Hange's desk.

They were looking at him.

“What do you think?” Hange asked.

“Um. Sure.”

“He needs a name,” Mike said.

“Oh yes. Any thoughts, Eren?”

“Not really.” He was fixing in his mind exactly where in all the clutter Axel's file was. He'd bet Armand's was right next to his; they'd both retired at the same time, and their files would have been put there together. He hoped, anyway.

“Well, your name makes me think of Hunter, and hm, well, you’ve got vitality, life, spark. Hunter Sparks?”

“Hunter Sparks,” Eren repeated. “Okay, sure.”

“Really? Most people try and argue with me when I give them names. You’re so easy to work with, Eren.”

“Don’t say that until he’s in front of a camera,” Mike suggested.

“Then let's get him in front of a camera.”

This time there was no music, and he had to do the opposite of lose himself. Look this way, look that way, arm up, tilt your hips. Mike's voice was deep and soothing, but it didn't leave much room for argument, either. It was breezy on the roof, and Hange manipulated an overhead microphone that
they had to remind Eren constantly not to look at. It was distracting, but they wanted him to share his voice.

Tell a joke.

What kind of guys do you like?

Do you work out?

Do you like to show yourself off?

Eren gave the answers he thought they wanted to hear, and if he messed up they were patient with him and reshoot the question. If he wasn't sure what to say they'd cut and Hange would discuss possible answers with him, but mostly they told him to be himself.

“You're very cute, Eren, you don't need to fake it. Smile, and brush the hair out of your eyes.”

He draped himself against the bars of the safety fence, from the unsafe side of it, and peered through them at the camera like a wild animal. Taking his shirt off wasn't any hardship, but eventually he had to take everything else off as well.

He just hoped his bare arse wasn't visible from the parking lot.

“This is for the tease,” Hange said. “So we want that bar placed, just a third of an inch to your left, Eren- no, too far, back a bit.” Hange and Mike took turns looking through the camera while Eren tried not to shiver. The sun was starting to set, and Hange had waxed poetic about the things the orange light was doing to Eren's skin.

Eren was feeling proud of himself. He'd known in a vague sort of way he was relatively attractive, but it was starting to dawn on him that he could do better than that. He pouted and smiled and undulated against the cold steel bars. And it was fun. He'd always liked attention, but he'd never tried to get it like this before.

When they finally said they were done, Eren threw his clothes back on and they went back to the tea room. Mike went to put away the equipment and Hange started making Eren coffee to warm him up again. It wasn't that cold, but he'd felt every stray breeze that had gone past.

“Armin, do you have a while to talk about our next project? they asked.

“Yeah, I think I've done enough study.” He stood up and stretched. “How'd it go?” he asked Eren.

“It was a bit weird taking my clothes off outside.” He felt like he'd been running; slightly out of breath and exhilarated. Bulletproof too.

“We won't be able to do too many more outdoor shoots before the weather starts to change,” Hange said. “Which is why I want you guys to look over the new script as soon as possible.”

“Sure,” Armin said easily, starting to pack up his books.

“Remember the script I had you audition with, Eren?” Hange said.

“Yeah.” It was at that moment Eren had a brainwave. “Do you want me to run up and get it?” he asked.

“If you can find the copies in the mess,” Hange joked.
Eren was moving. He knew exactly where to find what he was looking for. He forced himself to walk casually upstairs and as soon as he was in Hange's office he raced for Axel's file. Sure enough, the one underneath it belonged to Armand. There was a notebook on the table under a coffee mug and Eren grabbed it and tore out a blank page, and started scribbling.

_Erwin Smith. Work address: 106..._

“Found them!” he said triumphantly a few minutes later, brandishing the printed scripts as he came downstairs. His heart was hammering in his chest, and a carefully folded piece of notepaper was burning a hole in his back pocket; he was probably technically breaking a few rules, but he didn't really feel like he'd done anything wrong. It wasn't like he was going to start stalking them or anything.

He had names. He had addresses. He was just going to apologise for bothering them and politely ask if they'd come back, just one more time. That's all. And if they said no, that would be okay too.

Simple as that.

Chapter End Notes

There is more art once again! Mizore is amazing. And I've just learned how to add links to chapter notes.
Chapter 4

Heads up guys, for those who might have missed it, Mizo has been drawing fanart of every chapter so far; there are links in the author's notes. They're all awesome so go and check them out if you haven't already.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Erwin left the cap off the toothpaste. He knew he probably took slightly more satisfaction in the act that was strictly normal, but he'd shared an apartment with Levi for nearly six fucking years and he was relieved to know that the clean freak hadn't broken him in entirely.

He could no longer leave dishes in the sink overnight, and he now noticed when dust gathered on his books (even if he wasn't all that motivated to do much about it,) but he could still leave the damn cap off the damn toothpaste without breaking out in hives.

It was good to live alone again.

It was good to have money, too.

He slung his toothbrush back into the holder and turned off the shower. His apartment was expensive and spacious, and sometimes Erwin felt it was a bit too spacious for one guy living on his own, even though it was smaller than the place he’d had when he’d been a student. He just wasn't used to it yet. He didn't miss banging his elbow on the wall every time he towelled off, however. His last bathroom had been little bigger than a closet, and while that might have been adequate for Levi, it certainly wasn't for him.

He put on a suit, standing in front of the floor-length mirror in his bedroom and adjusting his cuffs. He wore the uniform of his new profession, but he didn't really fit in. He'd spent most of his adult life relying on his body to keep a roof over his head, and thus he'd looked after it carefully. A well-made suit was designed to make the wearer look their best, and as he approached forty his peers uses theirs to hide paunches and slouches, ties knotted below double chins, belts loosened. Erwin's were equally well designed, but his suits put him on display, his coat fitted like a glove around his broad shoulders, the lines revealing rather than concealing. He could have let himself go, now he'd changed professions, and it was true he wasn't quite as religious as hitting the gym as he had been, but Levi was maintaining a body like granite and even if he couldn't compete with someone who exercised professionally and was five years younger, he refused to just concede the friendly contest.

He didn't go around flaunting himself like he was more than capable of doing, and most of the time he acted perfectly professionally, but when someone pissed him off enough he could turn his sexual magnetism up to eleven pretty much at will. It threw hardened veterans of the courtroom utterly off-balance, and if it wasn't so terrible for his reputation he would have been tempted to do it more often just to watch them splutter and look away.

And that was the real problem, not just what he looked like but who he now was. He just wasn't respectable, no matter how much he pretended to be. He wasn't one of them.

His long-running feud with his grandfather, which had ended only four months ago when the Smith
patriarch had finally died, was common knowledge. Everyone in the legal business in the city knew he’d been outcast because he was gay. Fine; he wasn't the only gay high-flyer. And if he'd restricted himself to bringing softly-spoken and inoffensive 'partners' to work functions they probably wouldn't have minded too much.

But he couldn't hide how different he was, how his life path had diverged, and he brought with him a reminder of worlds that they could never know, were scared of even. His family had kept how he'd paid the bills during his years in exile a closely-guarded secret, and Erwin certainly didn't go around telling people, but the lack of information was information itself. He'd say this for the legal profession; it didn't reward the stupid.

So the family firm kept him out of sight. It was under the pretence, currently, of easing him back into the business, and indeed there was a lot to catch up on, but Erwin knew there was no sign they were going to do anything but bury him under mountains of paperwork for the foreseeable future.

He didn't know how he felt about that. He was glad to be back in a way, as he'd enjoyed law school and he was still interested in the field. His family hadn't had to extend the olive branch as far as a job, he knew, and he was grateful up to a point. The money wasn't anything to complain about either but right now he wasn't engaged in his work. Maybe that was okay. He had the rest of his life to settle in, he thought.

He just wasn't entirely convinced he wanted to.

He made sure that there wasn’t a hair out of place and left for work. He had his own parking space, and he'd bought a silver Aston Martin DB9 to fill it with. It was a ridiculous purchase, and the bank still owned most of it, but he'd wanted that car. He had no idea what else to do with his money, and when his apartment felt too big and empty he could escape the city and go for a drive. It was a symbol of the reclamation of his birthright, and perhaps an act of defiance as well; he hadn't promised to behave himself.

It would be nice if he had someone to sit in the seat beside him, he thought. When he'd shown Levi the Aston he’d made snide remarks about mid-life crises, and Erwin knew it was weird to suddenly have so much more money than his friend, but he wasn't about to drive a hatchback just to make Levi feel better and it wouldn't work anyway.

What would be really nice would be to escape for a while. To just be himself without being the Smiths' wayward heir, or a porn actor. He just wasn't sure who that person was any more.

There was no escaping today. He and the Aston were hemmed in on all sides by the morning rush to the city, and he left her cooling under the office tower where he worked. As usual, he’d budgeted enough time to get a coffee from the cafe on the ground floor. He stood in line with the other suits, his mind nowhere in particular.

The back of his neck prickled. He felt like he was being watched. He turned to survey the cafe, and as his did so he saw the young man by the window abruptly drop his gaze to the drink in front of him. The line moved and Erwin shuffled half a step forward.

The young man looked up again and Erwin's suspicions were confirmed when he looked directly at him and their eyes met. Erwin smiled, friendly but mostly neutral. You want to look, kid, go right ahead. The young man himself wasn't bad either; he was wearing jeans and rather dirty sneakers, and he had a bag on the ground at his feet. He definitely wasn't on his way to work; not any work that was around here at least. He looked like any other college student to Erwin's eyes, albeit a pretty cute one.
The stranger started, realising he'd been caught staring but at Erwin's smile he smiled back. It was a sweet smile, a kind of aww-shucks-you-caught-me, and some embarrassment. The line moved again, and Erwin realised he was next and he approached the counter to order, looking away from his observer. A simple, wordless exchange of appraising glances with a stranger was enough to put Erwin in a better mood. Maybe the day would be a good one.

When he collected his drink the young man was still sitting at his table. He glanced over his shoulder at him, and then looked away, frowning. Erwin stirred his drink and tasted it before turning to go.

Erwin watched him put his hands flat on the table, and take a deep breath before standing up and striding to intercept him. Erwin could see he'd nerved himself up to do so, and he raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“Hi,” the young man said. Close up he was still pretty damn attractive. He couldn't have been much more than twenty; there was still some roundness in his cheeks although his jawline was strong. Erwin couldn't place his ancestry; his skin was a deep tan, but summer hadn't quite ended yet, and Erwin could see a handful of freckles, barely noticeable, on his nose. His eyes were green. It was a startling colour, and Erwin wanted to brush the strands of brown hair falling over them aside so he could see them better.

“Hello,” he said instead.

“I'm Eren,” he held his hand out, and Erwin transferred his cup to his left hand so he could shake it. Firm grip, mostly smooth fingers, very warm, like he'd been in the sun. Felt like he had to remember to let Erwin's hand go.

“I'm Erwin. Nice to meet you, Eren.”

“Yeah. Likewise. Uh, hi. Wait, I said that.” He frowned.

Shit. That sort of adorably awkward had to be against the law. Erwin felt his lips curve into a smile again, unbidden. He was surprised Eren had even approached him in the first place. The obvious difference in age and status would have kept a lesser admirer away, and Erwin was pretty sure this wasn't a professional approach. For a start, no one would cruise at nine in the morning at a law firm, and even if they did they wouldn't make such a mess of it.

“It's fine.”

“Anyway,” he took a deep breath. “Would you like coffee? With me.”

“Yes,” Erwin said honestly. “But I am expected in the office.” It wasn't like anyone would chip him if he was late, but he was for now determined to act seriously in his job, no matter how unenthusiastic everyone else was to have him there. He hadn't been late once yet, although this morning he was awfully tempted.

“Oh, yeah, right, of course. Shitty timing.” Eren looked him up and down. “You're obviously doing something important.”

“You'd be surprised,” Erwin said wryly. Eren seemed at a loss, and Erwin didn't see any reason not to pick up the slack. It wasn't like pretty young strangers approached him every day, and Eren deserved something back for his courage. “What about another time?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Eren said eagerly.

What the hell. He had money now, he could afford to do this right. He didn't think there was any
ambiguity about this.

“How about dinner instead?” he suggested. Eren blinked at him in shock. “Since I had to refuse your invitation it's my turn. I'll pay, of course.” Please don't say no. He wasn't sure how to react if he said no; he honestly hadn't done anything like this for a while.

“Oh, okay.” He nodded for emphasis.

“Free tonight?”

“Am now.” His grin was cheeky and he looked more sure of himself, but his eyes were still wide, like he couldn't quite believe the conversation was happening. Erwin had some idea how he felt.

“Okay, I'll call you when I have a reservation, right?” He had no idea where to take him, but it would be somewhere good, he decided. No more fast food dates.

Eren took out his phone and they exchanged numbers.

“I have to go to work now, Eren.”

“Yeah, of course. It was good meeting you. Erwin.” He said his name like he was testing it out.

Erwin took the elevator up to his office, and he rested his temple against the glass, looking down at the entrance of the cafe. His effort was rewarded when he saw Eren leave, his bag on his back. He couldn't much more than the top of his head, but he did see him pause and cover his face with his hands briefly before joining the crowds outside.

Erwin was grinning when the elevator doors opened, his heart light. One of the interns was standing on the other side of the doors and she froze like a deer in the headlights when their eyes met and nearly dropped the tablet she was holding.

“Good morning,” Erwin said, trying to school his expression into something a little less distracting. She turned to watch him go and nearly missed the elevator.

Well, whatever. He had a date.

When Erwin returned to his apartment, late that night, he stood in the doorway for a few moments and sighed. He flicked the lights on as he went, dropping his keys, wallet and phone on the bedside table before sitting on the bed and taking off his shoes.

“Argh!” He pressed his palms against his eyes and rubbed them in frustration. “Stupid...” he muttered. He took his phone with him when he went back into the kitchen and grabbed a beer from the fridge before sitting on the couch and calling Levi. Who else was he gonna call?

He put his feet up on the coffee table and took a swig of his beer as he heard it ring.

“Come on, I know you're not asleep you half-sized little-”

“What?”

“Hey Levi.”

Levi sounded pissed off, but he sounded like that most of the time and Erwin paid it no mind.

“Why are you calling me at this hour?”
“I know you weren't doing anything important. Levi, I need help.” He let his head fall back against the couch. “I've forgotten how to date.”

Dull silence for a few moments, then. “What?”

“I've forgotten how to date. Fuck, Levi. I went on a date and screwed it up.”

He could hear the springs on Levi's old couch (the same they'd had when they'd shared an apartment) squeak as he sat down on it. “How'd you screw it up?”

“I don't know, but it was really horribly awkward. I mean, the food was good and all of that, but we hardly said anything and when we left he honestly looked relieved to be out of there. I offered him a lift home and he said he'd catch a bus.”

“Ha! He didn't like your car.”

“Actually he thought it was really cool when he saw it, I'll have you know.”

“What is he, six?”

“No.”

“That was an awfully defensive answer. How old is he?”

“I don't know exactly, I didn't ask.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Erwin.”

“He's not that young! He's in college. Legal, okay?”

“Legal is a pretty low bar to set but whatever. Where'd you go for dinner?” Levi asked.

“Pilot Light. That seafood place on the river.”

“Well no wonder you fucked up,” Levi said. “You date a college kid and you show up in a two hundred thousand dollar car and take him to a fancy restaurant. The poor bastard probably thought you were buying his arse. At the very least you probably frightened the crap out of him. I'm amazed he stayed until dessert.”

“Well, what else was I supposed to do? Invite him here?”

“Well that might have gotten you laid at least.”

“I don't want to get laid. I mean, yeah I do, but.” Erwin sighed. “I didn't take him out to dinner just because I want to get laid. If I want sex I can go to a club and get it, no strings attached.”

He hadn't actually had sex with anyone since he'd quit working at HotFreeRange, although he wasn't going to tell Levi that. It was complicated, and he hadn't sorted it all out in his head yet.

“I'm sick of fucking someone and then deciding maybe to try for a relationship afterwards,” he said. “I want to do all that romantic stuff that you don't give a fuck about. But I just realised that I don't know how.”

“I think you're overthinking it,” Levi said. “Overdoing it at least. Don't just pick people up and smother them in money.”
“I didn't pick him up, he approached me. Bold as brass.” Erwin smiled just thinking about it. “Eyes met in a coffee shop and he asked me out for coffee.”

“He did what? Erwin, you chucklefuck, that would have been fine. That would have made sense. Next time, ask someone out for coffee, for fuck's sake, and don't make a big deal about it. And stop moping, there's plenty of other college students out there.”

“I'm going to see him again,” Erwin said. He hadn't really decided that he would until that moment, but now he'd made up his mind.

“I thought it was a horrible date.”

“Yeah, it was, but it was all my fault. It was like he kept nerving himself up to say something, and then he'd give up. I'll ask him, anyway. And I'll apologise for overdoing it. I can try, right?”

“Why are you doing this to yourself?”

“Because,” Erwin sighed. “I can't date anyone I meet through my current work, because everyone assumes the worst of me, and there's enough of my old work on the internet that if I go to a club ninety percent of the guys I meet there are going to be able to pick my dick out of a line-up better than I could.”

Levi snorted, but didn't disagree.

“Take up a pottery class or something.”

“It's not just that,” Erwin admitted. “Levi, I was in a suit and tie and looked like every other overprivileged knobhead in the building and I'm twice his age, but he still found the guts to walk up and ask me out. That's not something you just give up on. Not when it's your fault.”

“Hn.”

“Besides, he's gorgeous, just quietly.”

“Well, you're a grown man, even if he isn't—I'm joking, keep your hair on—just don't take it too seriously, okay? You said yourself; he's half your age. Have fun, and don't heap too many expectations on the poor fucker.”

“Yes, Levi. Thank you for your invaluable advice. I suppose I should let you get back to ironing your underwear or whatever it was I so rudely interrupted.”

“That was one time and it was to dry them and you know it. Fuck off.” He hung up.

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That had been weird. Really, deeply weird. It wasn't that Eren hadn't known what to expect from Erwin, it was more than Erwin himself had seemed at a bit of a loss more than once. Eren had set out to ask him one simple question and then it became dinner and when he showed up in that amazing car-

Eren hadn't known what to say. He wasn't even sure what the evening had been. It sort of felt like a date, but Erwin hadn't tried to kiss him or hold his hand or anything like that, and if he was waiting for Eren to do something he'd be waiting a long time because the restaurant had been terrifying. He'd ordered dinner mostly at random, and he'd felt really underdressed for the place. He was sure the waiter hated him. Erwin was wearing the same suit he had been to work, but he fit in perfectly.
Afterwards, Eren was so unsettled and uncertain he declined a lift home, even though he'd been hoping to get a ride in that car and had at first congratulated himself for leaving his own at home. Erwin had explained what it was, but Eren had been goggling at it so intensely he hadn't been paying a lot of attention. It was all just so fucking awkward, and Eren didn't know if it was his fault or not; he felt hopelessly inexperienced. His experimentations with Jean had taught him a reasonable amount about fucking, but pretty much nothing about how to behave on dates, or even what a date was like. He'd been on a couple with other people since but they were all his age and it was just hanging out with the expectation of making out more than anything else.

Maybe he'd disappointed Erwin. He didn't know. Erwin hadn't really said anything either, and he'd certainly looked somewhat disappointed at the end. It would have been worse riding back in that car though.

That car. That suit. Eren was going to make much better money from porn than he had selling overpriced textbooks at the campus bookstore but he was pretty sure that sort of money was out of the question; whatever Erwin did now, and he didn't seem keen to talk about it, had to be much, much better paid than his previous job.

Eren wondered if his cause was hopeless. He'd moved on from making films and why would he want to come back?

There was only one way to find out, of course, and that was to ask him directly which had been his plan from the start, but sitting in the restaurant there was no way, under those circumstance, the sentence 'please make porn with me' was ever going to make it past his lips. Eren had accepted defeat as gracefully as he could. Maybe he'd try again, if he ever found the courage.

Because after meeting Erwin he didn't want him any less. It wasn't tricky camerawork that made him gorgeous; he was genuinely stunning. He seemed to know it too, but hadn't come across as arrogant the way a lot of very attractive people did. They'd talked so little Eren wasn't sure what he was actually like, but all it did was make Eren want to know more. Erwin wasn't what he'd expected.

Jean was still at work when Eren came home and he was glad of it. He flopped back on his bed, and a short while later Missy came out from wherever she was hiding and joined him, standing on his stomach for a while and digging her claws in until he'd been tenderised enough to sit down on. Eren stroked her undamaged side and wondered if Erwin liked cats.

That left Levi. If he owned a Ferrari and wore fancy suits Eren was going to give up, he decided, but the address he had for him wasn't a towering skyscraper in the city but what Google told him was some sort of community hall.

This time he was not going to be distracted. He wouldn't suggest coffee, he'd just come right out and say it. He hoped. Part of the reason he'd gone to Erwin first was that Levi looked scarier, and Erwin was intimidating enough.

"What the hell am I doing?" he asked Missy. Chasing after guys way too old and hot and experienced for him, that's what he was doing. But he owed it to his teenage self to try, and so far he couldn't say it had gone badly, exactly. He still had Erwin's number, after all. And Erwin had his.

Maybe Erwin would call, Eren thought. Their first conversation in the cafe, as short as it was, had given him butterflies. His smile faded. If he asked him out to dinner again, Eren honestly wasn't sure he'd say yes, as much as he liked him. He didn't care to repeat that particular experience. He'd just have to tell him that he didn't really like fancy places, and hope he wouldn't think that meant by extension that Eren didn't like him.
There would be no weird almost-dates with Levi, Eren thought decisively. Find him, ask him, and that's it. It couldn't be that difficult, surely.

Chapter End Notes

And Mizo has illustrated this chapter as well! Check it out here.
Levi always arrived early for his classes. The Rose Memorial Community Hall was used for a startling variety of purposes, and from week to week Levi never knew if the room he regularly booked had just hosted a dance class or a finger-painting enthusiasts club, and he wanted it clean before his students arrived.

He put his gear on the table, moved any furniture that had migrated into the room out of the way, and then ran a broom over the polished wooden floor.

He still had a few minutes until his first students could be expected to arrive, and he started unpacking his gear and mentally preparing for his lesson. He was aware the moment the footsteps in the hallway halted outside the open door to his room, but he didn't look around until they hadn't continued on for a good thirty seconds. He pulled his sweatshirt off over his head and glanced over his shoulder at whoever was staring at him.

The kid standing in the doorway didn't notice. His gaze was firmly directed at Levi's arse, and Levi slowly folded the sweatshirt, waiting for him to notice he'd been spotted. Eventually his gaze made its way up Levi's back and when he realised the object of his intense stare had been looking at him over his shoulder his face turned bright red.

Levi half-expected him to turn and run. He knew he generally looked unimpressed with life, and a lot of people took that to mean he was unfriendly. The kid didn't move, although he did avoid Levi's gaze. Levi placed his folded sweatshirt on the table next to his gym bag and turned to face him.

He wasn't bad himself, really. There was room for improvement, in Levi's professional opinion; he didn't look like he did any weight training, and now he got a better look at him he realised he was a bit older than he'd first thought, although still young enough to be coasting along on the free ride that adolescence gifted some people with physically. But he was lean and tanned and still apparently struck mute by embarrassment, and Levi was feeling playful.

Perhaps playful wasn't the right word.

He didn't share Erwin's enthusiasm for romantic walks on the beach and holding hands in the rain or whatever other bizarre fetishes he'd apparently been hiding all these years, but the phone call they'd had two days ago had stuck with Levi for other reasons. If Erwin wanted a boyfriend that was fine, and Levi would be happy for him if he actually managed to find someone who wasn't scared off by his money and awkwardness. But it left Levi feeling a bit left behind.

He didn't quite know what to do about it. Erwin had often attempted to have relationships alongside his work in porn, with varying degrees of success, but Levi had never bothered. He got all the sex he wanted through work, and everything else seemed like too much effort and drama. He told himself he just wasn't a relationship person and didn't give it another thought.

Now he wasn't working any more, and he was remembering what it was like to actually find strangers attractive. So he wasn't about to hit on the guy, because he wasn't Erwin and he wasn't that reckless, but he wasn't going to send him packing either.

“The first lesson's free, kid,” he said. Technically this was no longer true; when he'd first been building a clientele he'd offered free lessons, but now most of his classes were about the right size, and he had enough of them to make a reasonable living. He'd gotten his qualifications over a year ago, and had started his own business while still working for HotFreeRange.
But the kid didn't need to know that.

He took a cautious step into the room.

“What do you teach?” he asked.

Levi looked at the gloves he'd unpacked and then back at the stranger, wondering if he'd been dropped on his head at some point.

“Flower arranging,” he said, entirely straight-faced.

The kid stared at him for a moment, and then he grinned, and oh fuck that was a nice smile. It lit his whole face up, and it was an effort not to smile back and Levi wasn't even sure why he was trying so hard not to. Maybe it was because he sensed that if he did, he'd have trouble stopping.

“Mixed martial arts,” Levi said. “I teach self-defence classes at night, too.”

“Oh. Cool.” He spent a moment considering his options. “Sure. I have time for a class.”

Levi wondered what on earth he was doing here if he didn't have a class to go to already, but decided it wasn't really his business.

“Take your shoes off then.”

“What?”

“This is my class,” Levi said flatly. “No one wears shoes in my class.”

“Yes, sir.” He crouched down obediently and started unlacing his sneakers. Not bad; Levi was a little bit pleased despite himself.

“I'm Levi.”

“I'm Eren.” He glanced up and smiled again, but Levi didn't smile back.

Okay, pretty-boy had a name now. The first of the other students were starting to arrive, and Levi nodded when they greeted him. He had a large proportion of women in his classes; they'd take the self-defence course, and then decide to stick around for MMA. Or they stuck around for the view, but Levi didn't mind either way; he'd spent the last decade putting his dick on display, after all, and their money was just as good whether they were there to stare or work out. Levi didn't treat them like second-class athletes the way some of the more competitive instructors did either.

“You need gloves. There's some communal gear in the storage room at the back,” Levi told Eren. “It's disgusting but judging by the state of your socks I don't think you're going to be bothered too much.”

He watched in amusement as Eren tore off his socks and stuffed them into his sneakers to hide them, looking guilty.

His students knew what to do, dragging the mats and the bags out of the storage room at the back, and catching up with each other. Eren hovered at the outskirts, having obtained a pair of gloves that you couldn't have paid Levi to put his hands into. He wasn't really dressed for the class, but Levi wasn't planning on making him work too hard—he hadn't even come here with the desire to train, after all.

“Good afternoon everyone,” Levi said, and the conversation faded away. “This is Eren, he's just
trying it out for today.”

Eren waved shyly and the other students smiled at him and murmured greetings.

Levi took them through the warm-up, and got down to teaching. He told Eren how to stand and had him practice some simple moves. For someone who hadn't even intended to take the class, Eren applied himself with such determination it was almost comical. His forehead furrowed he listened intently to everything Levi said and Levi had to tell him not to put so much effort in at first or he was going to strain himself.

“Gently, slowly. You can build power later, but you need to focus on getting the movements right first. It needs to be second nature because bad habits learned now will be really difficult to unlearn later.”

“Gently and slowly,” Eren said. Their eyes met. “Right?”

“Yeah.” Levi stepped away to tend to another student. He had to step away. He was not going to flirt with him, no matter how much Eren clearly wanted him to. He was a fucking professional, he was teaching this class, and he wasn't so desperate he'd start drooling over a teenage student he'd only just met. He'd leave that sort of pathetic behaviour to Erwin.

Break time and the group relaxed, fetching water bottles and wiping off the sweat. Eren made a beeline for the drinking fountain and Levi did not watch him bend over the tap.

After the break Levi set up some sparring for those advanced enough while everyone else practised with the bags.

“Hey boss,” Annie called. “I challenge you.”

Annie was an unusual student. She hadn't come via the self-defence classes, she'd just showed up one day and watched from the doorway, her grey hoodie hiding most of her face. The next day she paid for a class. She attended two or three classes a week, even though she didn't exactly need Levi's training, at least, not with regards to fighting technique. She was his best student, without a doubt. She intimidated most of the others, and Levi could feel the relief of those who knew they wouldn't be paired with her.

He didn't spar with her every time she asked, because he knew it was distracting for the other students, but today the audience was a little different. He didn't have anything to prove, but this was an opportunity to give Eren something to really stare at. And he would stare; Levi was damn sure of that.

“Yeah, okay Annie. Rest of you, back to work.”

Levi put on his gloves and warmed up as he didn't actually get a lot of exercise while he was supervising, and he couldn't just leap into it. He'd installed Eren at a punching bag, but he could feel those green eyes boring into the back of his head as he stretched.

Eren wasn't the only one. Despite the fact he'd told them to keep working, when he squared off with Annie the other fights slowed and halted as everyone watched. Every match with Annie was a demonstration match.

Annie smiled at him, her teeth indistinct behind her mouth-guard. He inclined his head in acknowledgement and the fight began. Most of the time Levi couldn't tell who was going to win; Annie was just that good. She was barely twenty, but she'd been training almost as long as Levi himself had. Today Levi felt he was at a disadvantage; he was needlessly distracted by the audience.
Annie seemed to sense something was up, and she landed a few solid hits quickly. She was fast and strong, although he was stronger, but she didn't think quite as quickly, and she relied a bit too heavily on a few tricks that she'd practised to perfection. He'd been caught out more than once before, but by now Levi knew them all.

He rolled with the punches for now, using the pain and adrenaline to focus on Annie and ignore everything else.

They punched and kicked and circled around each other, and Levi honestly enjoyed these fights. Annie was a worthy opponent and an enjoyable one to fight, or rather she had grown into one. Those first few bouts had been gruelling for both of them; she'd pushed and pushed, and Levi had sensed if he'd given way and told her to stop she would have moved on, seeking another teacher. Somehow he managed to be what she was looking for, and he was proud that she fought more honestly, that she now smiled when she won and smiled when she lost. He hadn't asked her why she was there, and in a sense it didn't really matter. Levi knew that shit happened, and the details weren't relevant. Somehow this helped her deal with her shit, and it wasn't so different from his own youth.

He understood.

She used her feet as well as her fists, and there was little difference in height to account for. By now they'd been at it for long enough that he'd finally forgotten the audience and concentrated on the fight fully. She was having more trouble connecting solid attacks, and in response had reverted to a more defensive style. A mistake; she could have worn him down, but backing off allowed him a bit of time to get a second wind.

He saw her foot go out and her hand up as she attempted to put him on the floor and Levi took the hit, twisting with it, and taking advantage of her unstable stance to sweep her other foot out from under her.

She landed on the mat with a soft sound. She tapped the mat with her hand, conceding, and Levi extended his own and helped her to her feet. Once she would never have conceded until he'd given her no other choice, and she still had plenty of fight in her, but she knew not to take the fight too long and disrupt the lesson any further.

“Nice, boss. I thought I had you there.”

“You could have won.”

“You say that every time,” she said, tilting her head to one side. He did say it every time, because it was true every time.

Most of the other students had gone back to their assigned work, now the fight was over, but Eren was still staring. Levi flicked a glance at him, and Eren stepped forward.

“I challenge you too.”

Levi's jaw literally dropped. For once had had so many cutting retorts on the tip of his tongue that he couldn't actually pick one. He didn't know if he was more angry or amused or baffled. Annie stepped into the breach.

“Let me, boss.”

She looked up at him.

“Annie-”
She hadn't seen the way Eren had been staring at him earlier, and she didn't get the subtext to Eren's request, as poorly thought out as it was. All she'd seen was someone disrespecting her teacher, and Levi was actually somewhat touched that she was so immediate in her defence of him. She was asking him to trust her with Eren. They both knew she could break him in half, and she was promising him that she wouldn't.

She'd been so angry when she'd first joined Levi's class.

It wasn't about Eren. To her he was just some guy. It was about her, and how far she'd come, and how much Levi was prepared to credit her.

Levi exhaled slowly. “Okay. Remember he doesn't have any gear.”

She nodded. She didn't smile, but she didn't have to.

“Me first, newbie.” She beckoned Eren over. “You don't get to challenge the boss like it doesn't mean anything,” she said flatly. “This isn't just a game.”

Levi would say this for Eren; he'd clearly started to acquire a clue of some sort, because his gaze flicked between the two of them, and he licked his lip nervously.

“I understand,” he said. Levi doubted that, and Annie didn't look very convinced either, but they made room for him on the mat.

Levi thought, just looking at him, that Eren had clearly hit people before. There was a way you approached someone if you really meant to throw a punch that was hard to fake. And he'd been paying enough attention to the fight not to assume Annie couldn't take what he could dish out. When Levi indicated they were to fight he didn't hesitate, and he put his back into the attack. He was credibly quick, too. But even so, Annie didn't even need to bother to raise her guard. Eren stepped forward, fist flying, and she casually ducked to the side, grabbed his wrist, and planted him, fairly gently, on the mat.

She stepped back, looking satisfied, and glanced at Levi for his reaction. He nodded.

Eren looked a bit startled as he lay there, but he didn't do anything stupid like demand a rematch. It wasn't technically even a win, but it didn't need to be. “You're really good,” he told Annie.

She gave him a look that indicated he'd stated the fucking obvious and simply walked away. He was going to have to work hard if he wanted her to respect him as an opponent.

Eren propped himself up on his elbows and Levi extended his hand. Eren accepted it and Levi hauled him to his feet. He didn't even notice that he'd finally touched him. Now he had more important things to discuss.

“Back to work, everyone. Eren, come with me.” He led him out to the corridor, and Eren looked appropriately contrite. “What the fuck was that about?” Levi asked.

“Me making a fool of myself?” Eren suggested, rubbing the back of his neck.

“It's more than that. You do realise what an insult that was, don't you?”

“I do now. But I wasn't really thinking about it at the time.”
“Clearly.”

“I just really wanted to, uh,” he trailed off, staring into Levi’s eyes. “Spar,” he said eventually. “With you.”

As subtle as a brick to the face, Levi thought. He didn’t really feel like dealing with this right now, and he had a class to run.

“Train hard and you might, eventually, but where you are now it would be dangerous of you to even try,” he said. “Now get back in there, and if you do something stupid like that again you won’t be welcome back. I don’t have time for brats.”

“Yes, Levi.”

Chastised, Eren went back to his practice.

The rest of the class went smoothly and afterwards everyone packed up and paid for the lesson; Levi accepted cash from the casual attendees, although some people paid for a whole season of lessons in advance. He talked with them too; he’d known some of the regulars for quite a while, and he considered this socialising part of his job, even if it didn’t come naturally to him most of the time. Eren hung back, waiting for the others to leave, and Levi watched him out of the corner of his eye. Well, this was going to be interesting.

Levi packed up his gear. There was a tai chi class in here next, and he nodded at the instructor as she came in.

“Thank you for the lesson,” Eren said.

“I just hope you learnt it,” Levi said pointedly and Eren winced.

“Yeah, I did.”

“Think you’ll be back next week?” Levi asked casually. “I don't really have any other classes with any openings for new students right now.” After that little stunt with the sparring, he’d cooled on Eren somewhat, but he’d noticed he’d gone up and apologised to Annie afterwards so Eren wasn’t entirely stupid. And if he wanted to show up again, well, Levi was prepared to forgive his mistake if he proved he had learned from it.

“I don't know,” Eren said. “I've got a few cash flow problems right now. I mean, I think they’ll be sorted pretty soon. So maybe not next week, but the week after.”

“Hm.” He put his sweatshirt back on and slung his bag over his shoulder. “The question is, do you really want to do this class, Eren?” he asked. “You didn't come here with the intention to take it, after all.”

“Well, I enjoyed it,” he said. “And I'm thinking I should probably do something to keep fit. I've been running recently but it's kind of boring and it's not gonna do much for my arms.” Even though Levi had his sweatshirt on, Eren's gaze drifted to his shoulders.

Levi shrugged and started strolling out. “Well, that's good enough. I don't demand my students have absolute dedication to the sport, after all. I just don't want you wasting your money.”

“So, how did I do?” he asked, trotting out after him. “Aside from the sparring thing.”

“I can't say you've got any natural talent or anything,” Levi said bluntly. Eren's face fell. “But look,
you didn't slack off and you paid attention.” He looked him up and down critically. “A bit more muscle mass and you'd probably make reasonable fighter.”

“Good as you?” Eren asked.

“Maybe.”

“Good as Annie then?”

“No.”

“What? How does that work; you beat her.”

“This time. And it wasn't certain. Look, don't compare yourself to other people. You are the enemy you have to beat. Annie fights at a professional level. She's been trained since she was a kid to fight at professional level. I beat her because I'm older and I know how many hits I can take and I can take more than her. And I know her style. You can't catch up to someone who's had that sort of background. If we were the same age, and she'd kept training, she'd probably beat me more often than not.”

“I see.”

“Besides, I don't run a gym for fighters. I run a class for people who are interested in the sport and who want to kick bags around a few hours a week. Annie is an exception. I'm not gonna yell at you and give you a diet plan and if you want to do that sort of shit I can refer you to a proper coach.”

“No, I don't.” He halted. He'd been following at Levi's heels and perhaps he realised that following Levi into the gents was going a bit further than politeness would strictly encourage. He licked his lips nervously. “I just want to impress you,” he confessed.

Levi looked at him for one long moment. Eren didn't look away, although he clearly wanted to. Eren had more guts than he thought, and Levi appreciated the lack of bullshit.

“Well. You just did.” He allowed himself a faint smile.

Levi could actually see his words sink in, and Eren seemed to grow an inch taller as he straightened up as a result. He didn't seem to know where to direct his grin, looking first at his feet and then at the wall and briefly at Levi's mouth.

Okay, calm down, kid. Levi could see those words giving Eren more encouragement than he needed.

“Now unless you want me to demonstrate taking a shit, I'll see you around, Eren.”

“Oh.” That took the wind out of his sails all right. “Um, okay. Yeah, I'll see you, Levi.”

He hurried off, and Levi wondered again what he was doing here in the first place. The toilets were empty and Levi let the door swing closed behind him.

“What the fuck was that all about?” he asked himself.

Well, either he'd see Eren again or he wouldn't, he supposed. He hoped, just a little bit, that it was the former. He was interesting, and Levi was enjoying the novelty of being interested. But he wouldn't cry about it if Eren didn't come back, either. He could take or leave other people, and he certainly wasn't going to mention Eren to Erwin. Not until there was something worth mentioning anyway.
Eren's phone rang at a quarter to seven on Saturday morning. Surfacing from some strange and immediately-forgotten dream, Eren fought his way out of his blankets and nearly knocked the device off his desk in his haste to silence it.

“Hange?” he said.

“Goooood morning Eren! Ready for our big day?”

“No.” He wasn’t remotely ready. “Am I late?” A stab of panic woke him up a bit more and he blinked sleep out of his eyes, as he tried to remember what time he was supposed to get up.

“No, not yet, but I need you to do me a favour. You've got a car, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Could you pick up Armin and Historia from campus and drive them to the shoot? We're trying to do several things at once today and we're short on room in Mike's van.”

“Oh. Okay, sure. Wait, who’s Historia?”

“You're a star. Don’t worry, I've told Armin and Historia to wait for you out the front; you won’t miss them. Meet us at the studio at eight and we’ll go on location from there.”

“Sure.”

Hange hung up.

Eren sighed. It was truly an awful thing to be awake this early on a Saturday morning. But he'd have been getting up in half an hour anyway, and now he had to leave earlier to pick up the others, so he may as well get up.

He still had his phone in his hand, and he noticed Erwin had sent him a text.

The time-stamp indicated he'd sent it at around one in the morning.

Would you like to go for a drive today?

Oh. Oh yeah. Eren smiled to himself, relieved and happy that Erwin still wanted to see him, was thinking about him at one in the morning even. Going for a drive sounded like a lovely idea, as long as they didn’t end up somewhere fancy afterwards, but it wasn’t going to happen today. Regretfully, he thumbed in a response. Yes, but I'm working. I'm sorry. Some other time?

He really hoped that didn’t look too much like a rejection. He would have made a counter-suggestion but his head was just too fuzzy right then. Given he’d been awake that late, Eren doubted Erwin would see the response for some hours at least, so he had time to come up with an alternative plan.
He got up to have a shower and make some coffee. Jean's door was firmly and unsurprisingly still shut, although Missy was already awake, sitting in the first patch of slanted sunlight coming through the living room window, her cone like a satellite dish collecting the warmth. She ignored his 'good morning' until he rattled the tin of cat food.

Eren showered and shaved and collected the by now rather dog-eared script he'd been poring over every spare minute the past few days. He read over the parts of it they'd be shooting today while he ate his toast.

“There is a huge untapped market for porn out there,” Hange had told him. “Can you guess what it is, Eren?”

At the time Eren had still been somewhat distracted by his acquisition of Erwin and Levi's information, but he did his best to focus. The expression on Armin's face had suggested he'd heard all this before. “Women?”

“You're close. Everyone but men. The focus is so narrow it's not surprising that other genders are, in general, alienated. Most porn treats neither the viewer nor the actor with respect. It’s considered exceptional that a porn actor can act, and it’s considered irrelevant if the viewer cares. My business it built on the fact that both those assumptions are wrong. Don’t think for a moment that you’re not making a creative work. You’ll take it seriously; talk the script over with Armin and myself and then learn it.”

So they had. And afterwards Eren had exchanged Skype names with Armin and the discussion continued. The way Armin approached it kind of made Eren feel like they were working on some extremely strange group assignment. In fact, when Jean had asked him who the hell he was talking to so late at night, he told him it was for a project. It was close enough to true and he didn't feel like doing this with Jean metaphorically looking over his shoulder.

But it wasn’t bad. Eren felt he was making a friend, as they exchanged views on music and college as well as the movie. Armin was thoughtful and considerate with a black, rather deadpan style of humour that Eren found quite entertaining. He was glad he’d been assigned his first film with him. Eren was feeling reasonably confident when he left his apartment.

He was feeling downright cheerful when he arrived at the studio. Between him and Armin, wedged awkwardly between their seats, was a large bronzed spear, and in the back seat, smiling along to the music blasting from Eren’s phone via the Swift’s speakers was its owner; the diminutive, the almost-too-cute-to-be-real Historia.

She’d been dressed like she was coming back from a Greek-themed frat party, a crown of leaves on her head and a white toga wrapped around her. She had a shield to match her spear, and was apparently unbothered by the odd glances the early morning exercisers were giving her and Armin.

“I’m an Athenian priestess,” Historia explained. “Ymir’s an Amazon, and she’s going to invade Athens and carry me off,” she giggled. “I get the better of her in the end though.”

“It's not very historically accurate,” Armin said.

“I thought it was based on a myth,” Historia said.

“Pretty sure the myth didn’t end in lesbian sex,” Armin said dryly while Eren spluttered a laugh in the driver’s seat.

“There it’s an improvement,” Historia said with the dignity befitting a priestess of Athena. Armin
didn’t argue.

Eren enjoyed himself. The three of them rocked up to the studio to discover a scene of controlled chaos, as Hange and Mike packed the large van Eren had seen parked out the front the other day. As it was, his poor Swift was loaded down with extra gear, and he felt the car scrape on the speed bump at the end of the driveway when they finally got under way.

It was a pleasant drive, but Eren felt rather outclassed and somewhat ganged up on by his pretty blonde passengers.

“Armin likes some girls, you know. We even did a film together once. Do you like girls, Eren?” she asked innocently.

“Um. Not much,” he said, wondering why he felt he should apologise.

“I like girls,” she said dreamily. “I like penises too, of course. They’re so cute! Aren’t they amazing?”

Eren glanced at Armin for backup but he was gazing out the window with a suspiciously peaceful expression, as if he hadn’t even heard.

“They sure are,” Eren said eventually, feeling like his cheeks were on fire.

“Girls with penises are the best. I dated one for a little while but she didn’t like it that I was making porn. Ymir doesn’t have one but she makes up for it, you know?”

Eren cringed over the wheel, wishing he wasn’t driving so he could escape. “Can we please talk about something else?”

Historia burst out laughing and Armin sighed. “I thought you’d be made of sterner stuff, Eren,” he said, taking out his wallet. He handed Historia ten dollars and she tucked it somewhere in her flowing dress, looking smug.

Eren watched this exchange with growing suspicion. “What was that all about?”

“Nothing you need to concern yourself with, Eren,” Historia said, her eyes flashing mischievously. “I thought you did very well, for a newbie.”

“Everyone gets fooled by her pretty face at first,” Armin said. “She nearly turned Reiner straight, or so I hear.”

Historia cackled gleefully. “Reiner’s a sweetie. You should see the movie he made with Ymir. They’re making another one soon; I can’t wait to see it.”

Armin caught his eye and shook his head. “Their work is an acquired taste.”

Eren decided to change the subject slightly. “How long have you been making porn?” he asked Historia cautiously.

Her smile faded, “Since I was twelve.”

Eren nearly drove the car off the road. “What?”

She sighed, “I was a model. It’s basically the same thing; creepy guys telling me how far to spread my legs, and not to smile. Not to eat, either.” She looked away. “It was really hard.”
That sounded like an understatement to Eren. “Sorry I brought it up,” he said.

“You didn’t know. And it’s all over now. I’ve been working for Hange for nearly two years, and I like it here. I like the people.” She took a deep breath. “Happier times now. Why’d you join? Armin says you’ve not worked in the industry before.”

Eren explained the saga of Missy again, and Historia made appropriately sympathetic noises.

“That’s not his only reason,” Armin said slyly. “He wanted a chance to bang Armand and Axel as well. He’s quite a fan.”

“Ooh. Missed them by that much. I never did any scenes with them; they’re not really my type, and I wasn’t theirs, but I’ve heard good things. Aww, poor Eren. That must have been really disappointing.”

“It’s fine,” Eren said, somehow managing not to spill the news that he’d met them both and had even been to dinner with Erwin, as mildly traumatic as the experience had been.

And Levi had said he was impressed. That had immediately gone in the treasured memories pile and Eren couldn’t help but smile every time he thought about it. Fired up, he'd practised what he’d learned in class every day since at the park where he went to run. He wanted to impress Levi again; hopefully he’d be more likely to say yes if he did. He hadn't managed to get around to asking him yet, but he would, definitely.

Mike indicated a turn off the road, and soon the Swift was bumping down a gravel track in the van's wake. Armin explained that Hange had a long-standing agreement with a farmer who owned this particular slice of America, and that they did most of their outdoor filming here.

“It doesn’t really look like Greece,” he concluded.

Eren saw Historia roll her eyes in the rear-view mirror.

There was a semicircle of cars at the bottom of a grassy hill, and in the next field over Eren could see a bit of forest. As soon as the van had halted, Hange leaped out, full of apologies for being behind schedule, and started ordering people about. There were a lot of extras already there, and they were given leather skirts and spears and other weapons while Mike set up the cameras. Ymir was bare-chested, strolling about in the sun with a sword at her hip, every inch the Amazon she was supposed to be. She nodded at the three of them and Historia ran over to her and they were soon deep in cheerful conversation.

“Do we have to do anything?” Eren asked Armin.

“Not really. Hange will want to get the battle scenes shot as fast as possible so the extras can be sent home. They pay union rates and overtime will kill the profits if we’re not careful. Sit back and enjoy the show.”

Eren and Armin commandeered a couple of canvas chairs and settled down, drinking bottled water and watching the spectacle. Every fifteen minutes or so Ymir would run down the hill, Historia over her shoulder, a large group of leather-skirted actors shouting at the top of their lungs in hot pursuit. Then Hange and Mike would move some cameras around and everyone would climb the hill and do it all again.

Eren found the whole thing highly entertaining. He’d really quite enjoyed the day so far, and it almost made up for being woken up so early.
It was only after Hange and the armies of Athens had disappeared into the forest for a while that Eren realised something; he was next.

He took out his script and read over it as a few butterflies started to stretch their wings in his stomach. He gnawed on a thumbnail as he read over his lines, but it wasn't the lines that were worrying him.

"You know, I froze up," Armin said, breaking the silence between them. In the distance Eren could hear the cries of battle and the sound of fake weapons clashing. Occasionally Hange would holler 'Cut!'

"Really?"

"Yeah." He tucked his hair behind his ear. "Like. I could barely breathe. I kind of freaked out the guy I was doing the scene with. He was called Marco; he was with us for about six months then he got a job offer in LA. Doing okay last I heard, anyway. Hange stopped everything, and made me some tea and said it was okay, whatever I wanted to do. I didn't want to give up; I don't like failing, and the money I could make doing this was a big deal."

Armin idly scuffed one shoe against the grass. "And Marco he just hugged me, like the cameras weren't there, and said it was okay. And he asked if there was anything he could do and you know, no one had been that kind to me when we were having sex before. It was like, fuck, what have I been putting up with? Guys who didn't know what side of the closet door they were on, people who figure I'm a pushover cause of the way I look- And this guy, who was being paid to fuck me, was so nice and non-judgemental. It kind of opened my eyes."

"Anyway, long story short, I fucked him and did the scene and it got easier after that. Now it doesn’t bother me at all; it’s fun or it’s boring, basically. So if there’s anything I can do to make it easier for you, you just need to ask. The first time is difficult for everyone."

"Thank you." Eren glanced sidelong at his companion. "So, this Marco guy was nice."

Armin groaned and rubbed his eyes. "He was nice. Oh God, he was nice. I know what you're getting at, but I like arseholes. I like hot fucking arseholes, and if they’re not straight I get what I want and then I remember that they’re arseholes and why that’s not generally considered a good thing."

Eren chuckled, "You should meet my flatmate then. He’s a huge dick. I don’t mean he has a huge dick; like, it’s average, but-"

"How do you know? Is he your ex?"

"No! I mean. Not really. There is nothing between us now anyway."

Armin raised an eyebrow. "That story wasn’t an invitation to set me up with a jerk,” he said.

"He's not a- yeah, okay, forget I said anything."

"I'm supposed to be cheering you up and filling you with confidence;” Armin prompted.

"I'm filled! I’m filled. Thank you."

He remained at least partially filled, or at least capable of pretending, until the point where Armin was stretched out on the grass beneath him, his legs either side of Eren's hips and Hange said, “Cut! Eren, more cock please.”
“What?”

They’d practised their lines so much that the preceding scenes had hardly needed more than one take, and he’d spent enough time having angry just friends kissing contests with Jean as a teenager that making out with Armin was actually sort of pleasant. Everything that had happened since he’d just tried not to think about, as they’d stripped off their shirts and Armin had shimmied shyly out of everything else. Eren hadn’t really even started yet, still unbuttoning his pants.

“Reveal more as you go. It's an important moment. Do them up again and try- yes, thank you. Mike can you close up? Armin, more breath; you're in the foreground.”

Armin obediently started breathing more harshly, his pale chest rising and falling. He gave Eren an encouraging smile. He was pretty, Eren could see that, and displayed before him, lying against the grass like it was the most comfortable place in the world, patches of sunlight dancing on his skin as the breeze stirred the leaves above them.

This image should have been for someone else, Eren thought. It was for someone else; Mike edged forward with the camera. Eren nodded obediently and buttoned and unbuttoned his pants again, rolling his hips forward as he did so, and this time Hange was satisfied with the shot.

Eren didn't think he was going to freeze up, but there was definitely a block of ice in his stomach. Armin helped him, touching him, and his acting was probably more convincing than Eren's was. He suspected his face was out of shot more often than not. But he could do it; Armin was cute enough, and even if he didn't necessarily want him specifically, he was a warm, welcoming, willing body and his own responded.

They were rather cautiously starting to fuck when Eren's phone chimed.

Eren sagged and buried his face in his hands, “Jesus fucking Christ,” he muttered. He was an utter mess of tension and for the first time he was actually grateful for his indefatigable cock and forgave it an adolescence of inappropriate timing and extra laundry. A lesser dick would have given up and gone home, he was sure of it.

“Cut,” Hange murmured while Armin chuckled.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry,” Eren muttered, embarrassed as all fuck. “I'll turn it off. I was so nervous I forgot.”

“It's fine, Eren,” Armin said, still entirely calm.

As he silenced his phone, Eren glanced at the text. It was from Erwin.

Don't work too hard. Are you free Sunday?

Don't work too hard, huh? Eren put his phone away. If he could somehow manage to get through this scene he was going to have a film to show them by the time he got around to asking. Why hadn't he thought about it like that before? This was an audition; he had to impress, and right now he couldn't imagine either of them being impressed by his woeful performance so far.

He looked at Armin, sweet, patient Armin, flopped back in the grass, tolerating Eren's nervous fumblings when he'd experienced riding Erwin's cock until he looked like he was about to pass out. That wasn't right at all.

He'd been going about this all wrong, Eren realised.
He flopped forward, bracing his hands either side of Armin's head and looking into his eyes. He smelled like sunscreen; he'd absolutely slathered himself with the stuff before starting the scene, explaining he'd look like a lobster tomorrow if he didn't even though they were in the shade underneath a tree.

“I'm sorry,” Eren murmured. “I've been crap. I'll make it up to you. What can I do for you? What do you like?”

Armin looked at him with surprise, but he looked pleased too and Eren could feel him tighten with anticipation. “Stroke my sides, grab my hips. You can do it harder, you know, I don't break that easily.”

“Yeah,” Eren nodded, determined. He remembered that he'd seen what Armin could do. He glanced up at Hange and the camera for the first time since the scene had started, and nodded.

“Roll 'em,” Hange said.

The story was fake, the characters were fake, but the sex was real, and Eren realised he was a jerk just to assume that as long as he managed to get hard and perform that would be good enough. Hange had higher standards, but more importantly he decided he wanted higher standards as well, as an actor and a sex partner.

He still had to rely on Armin, but Armin was reliable. He breathed instructions in Eren's ear, and they only had to cut once or twice more when the action got obscured. Hange didn't say a word to them, although they occasionally nudged Mike for a different angle.

Eren focused on Armin, rather than himself, and it worked like magic. He did whatever Armin suggested, and his confidence increased. Everything became so much easier. Armin lifted his hips and wrapped his legs around Eren's waist, and Eren changed angle slightly and Armin arched up off the ground and yelped, somehow managing to remember Eren's character's name in a display of professionalism that Eren couldn't hope to match.

Armin looked at Hange, his mouth hanging open as he panted, and Hange nodded.

“Get me off,” Armin muttered, digging his hands into the grass and holding on.

Eren did as he was told, and Armin's performance was enough for him to finish his own.

Hange was very pleased.

“Cut. Perfect. Catch your breath. Can you remember the rest of your lines?”

They nodded. Eren cupped Armin's face in his hands and told his character that he'd be waiting for him when he came back from Toronto, and that there would always be next summer for them. Armin looked appropriately entranced until Hange said cut for the last time.

They separated, and Eren was so relieved it was over he didn't know what to say. Armin got to his feet and Hange cheerfully helped him brush off all the bits of grass that had stuck to his sunscreen-coated skin. Eren curled away to hide himself as he cleaned up, not wanting to look at any of them.

“Ants were biting my shoulders.” He heard Armin talking to Hange, and Hange asking if he needed anything put on them.

“There's a first aid kit in the van if you want to put cream on them.”
“They're not so bad. It was just annoying.”

Eren's knees were grass-stained and knobbled with the imprint of the ground he'd been kneeling on. He was sweaty and sticky with second-hand sunscreen and lube, but he didn't want to spend any more time than he had to without pants and he struggled back into his clothes almost as soon as he'd shucked the condom. He felt rumpled and dirty, and yet a bit pleased. He'd managed to make his first scene a success, but when he looked at Armin his stomach twisted nervously too; he felt like he'd cheated him somehow.

Hange had drinks for them in the van, a choice of soda or juice or iced tea, and they fussed over Eren and told him what a great shoot it had been.

“The first one's the most difficult,” they said. “But you did great. Thank you for looking after him, Armin.”

“No problem. It turned out well.” Armin seemed completely at ease, scratching his bites and sinking bonelessly into the canvas chair.

Hange spent a few more minutes making sure Eren really was okay, and then went to help Mike pack up, assuring them that they didn't need to lift a finger.

“You guys are done for the day. Head home whenever you like. Ymir took some of the props back when she and Historia left earlier so we won't need your car.”

Eren nodded and to his relief Hange left them alone.

Armin held his bottle of iced tea against his cheek for a few moments. “I hope I don't get sunburnt. To be honest, I hate outdoor shoots. Next time we do one, you're gonna lie in the dirt,” he joked.

“Okay.” Eren smiled weakly.

Armin looked at him thoughtfully for a few moments. “You know, I'm really curious as to what was in that text.”

Eren started. He hadn't realised Armin had been watching him that closely.

“It wasn't anything important,” he said.

“Yeah, but it was something. A good something, yeah?”

Eren smiled. “Yeah.”
Chapter 7

Eren had put his studying on hold while he'd been learning his lines, and he knew he had to get stuck back into it or he was going to start seriously falling behind. But he didn't want to turn down Erwin for a second time either, so he compromised.

When Eren left the university library it was late afternoon. Since it was a Sunday he hadn't had to look too hard to find a space to work, and here at least he wouldn't be tempted to join Jean on the Xbox in the living room.

Nor would Jean know he was meeting someone.

Today he was going to come clean to Erwin and ask him properly. Hange had at least half a film with him in it now, so he had something to show as proof of his work. And he'd organised pizza with Mikasa for afterwards so he wouldn't end up either going to another awful dinner or moping alone because Erwin had turned him down.

He'd gone to bed the night before feeling uncertain and guilty, but he'd woken up the next morning and the world hadn't ended and everything was pretty much as it had been before he'd starred in a porn movie. He could look himself in the eye when he shaved in the morning and by the time he was packed and ready for his day at the library, he'd been cocky enough to ask Jean, “Guess who made a movie yesterday?”

“Dude it's too early for this,” Jean said, mumbling through a mouthful of cereal.

“Okay.” Eren shrugged. “I'm gonna do work at the library today. Don't forget pizza tonight.”

“Wait, Eren.” Jean stirred his cereal in a way that irritated Eren immensely; he was gonna make it all soggy. “You actually like, did it with someone? While other people watched and filmed you?”

“Yes Jean, that's how porn is made. It doesn’t grow on porn trees to be harvested by the porn fairy.”

Jean rolled his eyes. “What was it like?”

“I was nervous and he was patient with me.”

“Was he hot?”

“I dunno. Yeah. Kinda. Hotter than you, but that wouldn't be too difficult.”

Jean clearly didn't know whether or not to be jealous, and Eren left him to it. In the game of one-upmanship that was their life, he was currently winning.

Now after a day that Eren considered reasonably productive, he was sitting on one of the concrete seats outside the library and waiting for Erwin. He'd suggested they just hang out for a while and Erwin had said he'd be there.

Eren was waiting for the growl of Erwin's car and so he was caught by surprise when the man himself said hello, having approached on foot.

“Oh. Hello.” Eren started and then smiled. “I was expecting the car.”

“Yeah, that.” He was dressed in faded, rather ratty jeans, an old tshirt with a torn sleeve and battered sneakers and if it weren't for his age he would have fit right in with the other students enjoying the
late summer afternoon. He looked too scruffy for even the most casual lecturer. He still managed to
look like he could have been in a magazine, even though Eren guessed he'd combed his hair with his
fingers rather than a brush that morning. “I'm not very familiar with the campus I didn't know what
sort of parking was available.”

Eren nodded, admiring his forearms and the way his jeans clung to his hips. He wasn't wearing a
belt. Eren was amused by the contrast; the first time they'd met he was in a flawless suit and now he
looked like he was dressed to paint someone's house.

“If you're not familiar with campus, I can show you around,” Eren said. Urgh what a dumb thing to
say; he's not a fresher and he doesn't need a tour. Just ask him and get it over with!

“If you're not familiar with campus, I can show you around,” Eren said. Urgh what a dumb thing to
say; he's not a fresher and he doesn't need a tour. Just ask him and get it over with!

“Actually, no.” Erwin shrugged, awkwardly deciding to come clean. “I took the bus because, well,
the Aston was a bit much, wasn't it?”

Eren smiled, “I liked the car. The restaurant was a bit much.” He realised now that it was no accident
that Erwin had dressed down. He was sort of touched that he'd given it that much thought.

Erwin nodded, looking relieved. “Yeah. I'm sorry about that.”

They admired the ground in front of each other's feet for a few moments. Eren didn't know why
Erwin was so uncertain; he wasn't nerving himself up to ask if he wanted to make a porn film. Or
was he? No, no, get a grip, Eren.

“If you're not familiar with campus, I can show you around,” Eren said. Urgh what a dumb thing to
say; he's not a fresher and he doesn't need a tour. Just ask him and get it over with!

“Yeah, I'd like that.” Erwin smiled, and Eren revised his opinion of his suggestion. “I grew up here
but I was pretty determined to go away for college; I needed some space from my family to work
things out, you know?”

They started walking, nowhere in particular. The campus wasn’t too crowded on a Sunday
afternoon, but the late summer weather had brought out the frizbee-chuckers and the outdoor
studiers, and there were enough people that it didn’t feel too lonely wandering past the empty lecture
halls.

“It was the opposite for me. I wanted to go to the same college as my sister, but she's really smart so I
really had to work at it. And Jean—he's my housemate—we were really competitive and he was
determined not to do worse than me and we all ended up here.”

“Sounds nice. What do you study?”

“Engineering. It's not like a passion or anything, but you can make good money at it. And I got the
marks to get in, which was an important consideration.”

“You look like you're working hard.”

“Well, I didn't get anything done yesterday, so.”

“Oh yeah, you were working. Where do you work?”

Say it say it say it.

“Campus bookshop,” Eren said with a smile.

Fuck, you idiot. You had the perfect opening. It was just too difficult. But it did lead into a question
Eren had been waiting to ask.
“What do you do?”

“I’m a lawyer,” Erwin said. “Not the exciting kind either; mostly corporation stuff. We try to settle things before they get to court.”

Eren frowned, trying to make the pieces fit. So Erwin went away to study law. How did he end up making porn, then? Unless he went away to study something else and had been doing a law degree at night or something, but Eren didn't think lawyers got immediate access to cars that fancy within a few months of starting work.

“I don't really want to talk about work though,” Erwin said. “This is a nice campus.”

“It's okay. Where did you study?”

“Harvard.”

“Wow.” He was so out of Eren's league it was getting ridiculous.

Erwin shrugged, “It’s overrated in a way; when all’s said and done the people who go there are still just people. I spent most of my time agonising over coming out though, so I didn't have as much fun as I could have.” He glanced at Eren. “Are you out?”

Eren laughed, “Yeah, I'm very out. It's such a stupid story—do you want to hear it?”

“I would love to hear it, honestly. The look on your face tells me it'll be good.”

“Okay so, Jean, whom I mentioned earlier, we were friends kinda but troublemakers too. We were always fighting and doing stupid dares; everyone in school knew us. We were personalities, you know? It was just kid stuff; we didn't do anything really dangerous. Although I'm sure plenty of people thought we were arseholes and I guess the teachers got sick of us. Anyway, we were having an argument in the cafeteria one day and I said something like, 'What are you, gay?' and he gets this look in his eye like he has the best comeback ever and he was just, 'Yeah, I'm fucking gay. What now, idiot?' and I couldn't believe he'd outed himself like that. In front of everyone, and he had this stupid smug grin on his face; I couldn't let him get away with it. So I was just, 'Yeah, well, so am I.' I didn't really think it through.”

“I think I can see where this is going,” Erwin said, amused.

“Well he said 'Prove it!' and long story short we ended up making out in front of half the school until a couple of teachers separated us.”

Erwin's jaw dropped for a few moments, “Okay, I did not see where that was going. What happened then?”

“It just gave us another excuse to piss people off,” Eren grinned. “We'd like, check out guys and make everyone uncomfortable and if we got in trouble we said it was discrimination. Looking back, if there were any other gay kids there we probably scared them right to the back of the closet. We were so obnoxious and it was probably because we were a bit scared and wanted to put up a front, but it was good front.”

“So Jean was your boyfriend?”

“No, it wasn't like that. We did a lot of playing around but it was 'just friends' playing around.”

“You were lucky to have him.”
“Yeah, I was.”

“What did your parents think?”

“Well, Mom died when I was ten.” He could see the look in Erwin's eyes and he hurried on because he didn't want to go over that right now. “And Dad never really mentioned it. He must have known, but I guess he decided I'd figured it out without his help and kept out of it.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad. My family didn't take it so well,” Erwin said. Eren could see the shadow cross his face.

“I'm sorry,” Eren said.

“So am I. But it could have been worse, and I didn't behave perfectly either. They said I was just trying to hurt them and being rebellious, and that was true; I was trying to do those things. Didn't make me less gay, though.”

“Are things better now?” Erwin seemed to well put together, with his car and suit and respectable job, but Eren supposed he'd had plenty of years to sort things out.

“Better, but I wouldn't call them good. Eren, I'm glad you never had to go through what I did. Makes me feel like the world might in some ways be becoming a better place. Thank you for sharing that story.”

Eren didn't know what to say to that. He'd all but forgotten his original purpose in talking to Erwin, and simply enjoyed being in his company. They'd done a slow circuit of the green spaces on campus, and were approaching the library again from the other side.

“It can't have been that long ago,” Eren said. “You make it sound like you were growing up in the fifties. You not that old, right?”

“Well, not quite.” Erwin slid his hands into his pockets and hunched his shoulders slightly as they walked on. “I'm thirty-eight,” he said eventually.

“Seriously?” Eren looked him up and down. “Wow. I would not have guessed that.”

“Too much?” He looked wary, braced for a bad reaction.

“No.” Eren smiled and shook his head. He felt a little sorry for him, and was secretly pleased he had some insecurities to make him human too. “I think it's kind of hot, actually.”

He hadn't quite meant to say that. Erwin seemed a bit at a loss for words as well.

“Okay. Good.”

“Good.”

They'd stopped walking and were now just looking at each other. It was dawning on Eren that maybe he could do better than making a film with Erwin. He wasn't motivated by a desire for professional development, after all; he just wanted to go to bed with this man. If he could do so without Hange watching-

He didn't know what to do with this line of thought and he took refuge in looking at his phone. He'd have to think about this.

“Ok.”
“What?”

“It’s later than I thought,” Eren said. “I have a pizza thing with Jean and my sister this evening.” He was starting to regret organising it.

“I’d better let you get to that then.”

“Do you want a lift home?” Eren asked, aware of how the roles had reversed since their last meeting.

Erwin grinned, clearly thinking something similar, “Yes. Thank you, Eren.”

“Any time.”

Eren was not surprised when Erwin directed him to a fancy apartment building relatively close to the river. He pulled up outside and Erwin thanked him again for the ride.

“This was um,” Eren began.

“Better than dinner?”

“I don't think we should ever mention that dinner again,” Eren said.

“Agreed. I think we should try again though.”

“Yeah. Somewhere normal.”

Erwin laughed, “Somewhere normal, I guarantee. I'll text you or call you.”

“Yeah, both of those. Are fine, I mean.”

Erwin stood on the curb and watched him go, and Eren didn't know what to do with himself after that. He flicked through a dozen songs on his phone, and then decided he didn't want music and caught himself singing anyway and when he arrived back at his own apartment he had to collect himself for a few moments, arranging his face into something approaching normal.

Erwin Smith — the real Armand Savage — liked him.

Eren liked him back, but he still couldn't quite believe it was going to go anywhere. He wouldn't get his hopes up, he told himself, aware that it was probably a bit late for that.

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“Eren!” Jean sounded rather annoyed.

Eren couldn't really bring himself to care. His pizza night had been the last free time he'd had for days. Between studying, attending class, working at the bookstore, and Hange's shooting schedule he was exhausted. And he had Levi's class tomorrow and he was not missing out on that.

He had barely closed the front door when he heard Jean's door open and the man himself stormed out, holding a ragged piece of cloth in his hands.

“That fucking cat! If I see her I'll wring her neck. Look what she did to my shirt! I need this shirt for work and now I have to pay for a new one. What the fuck, Eren? Why didn't you tell me they were taking her cone off?”

“I told you the stitches were coming out a week ago. I can't help it if you can't count to seven.
Besides, you were the one taunting her all the time. You deserve it.”

Jean drew breath to argue further.

“I'll pay for your stupid shirt,” Eren said. Normally he would have enjoyed a nice spat with Jean about Missy but he was just too tired for it today. Even Jean's empty threat against her life didn't wring a reaction out of him.

“What?”

“I'll pay for it. I transferred the money I owed you for rent, by the way. Thank you for the loan.”

“What, already?”

“I've done a photo-shoot, an introductory movie, and I've nearly finished my first film. Hange paid me the other day; I have lots of money. Well, at least until I pay the other half of the vet bill.” More than he was used to having, that was for sure. When Hange had texted him to tell him to check his bank balance it was if a huge weight had lifted off his shoulders, one he didn't even know he'd been carrying. He had money again. Everything really was going to be okay.

“Oh.” Jean shrugged. “Look, you don't have to pay, it's just a shirt.”

“My cat, so I'll pay. Just this once, though. I'm not buying you a new wardrobe just cause you smell like chicken.”

“Well, thanks.” Jean frowned. “Are you all right?”

“I'm just tired. I have an MMA class tomorrow.”

“You're doing MMA? Why?”

“I have to keep in shape,” Eren said.

“Dude, maybe you should cut back. The circles under your eyes have circles of their own.”

“I'll pay back Mikasa for the car and then I'll decide which job I want to quit. I know I can't keep this up, don't worry.”

“It's your funeral.”

The next day Eren nearly didn't go to Levi's class. He dragged himself out of bed and forced himself not to crawl right back into it. Coffee perked him up a bit, and Levi himself perked him up further. This time he was more appropriately dressed for working out, although he'd still have to use the communal gloves. He'd intended to arrive a bit early but in the end had been just on time, the other students already setting up when he arrived.

Levi nodded at him when he came in, but Eren didn't get a chance to talk.

“You've been practicing,” Levi said later. They'd warmed up and got right into it, and Levi strolled among them, giving advice. To Eren it felt like he'd been watching him for hours, although it was probably no more than a minute or so. He felt Levi's gaze like a caress. He grinned at Levi's words, pleased that his work had paid off, and that he'd noticed.

Levi made suggestions and demonstrated how he might improve. This time, he didn't avoid touching him, moving his arms, nudging his feet into a better position with his own. Eren nodded, and redoubled his efforts.
By the half time break, Eren's head was swimming. He'd put everything he had into the lesson, and he staggered over to his bag to get a drink. The chatter of the other students seemed to recede in his head, and Eren leant one shoulder against the wall, catching his breath.

“Oi, Eren.” Levi was suddenly beside him, looking at his face with concern. “What's wrong? How do you feel?”

Eren took a deep breath. “I'm fine, I'm just really tired. Feel a bit sick.”

“Drink slowly, all right? Small sips.” To Eren's surprise Levi put his hand on his forehead briefly, which did nothing to cool him down all that much. “You look like you've overdone it a bit.”

“I started a new job,” Eren said. He didn't want Levi to think he was weak.

“Sit down and rest. You don't want to do yourself an injury.”

Eren nodded and did as he was told, sitting with his back to the cool concrete wall and watching the other students mill about on their break. He knew he'd been overdoing it; hell, even Jean had noticed he'd been overdoing it, but he really wanted to attend this class. Willpower alone could only take someone so far, however. He let the noise wash over him and tried to relax.

He ended up watching Levi. Technically he'd been watching him for a very long time and although the setting was very different Eren could still see he kept himself back. He was polite, but rarely smiled. Eren wondered what he was like when he wasn't being paid for his time.

Occasionally he'd glance at Eren, just checking on him, and Eren was too tired to try and pretend he hadn't been watching him. It felt good to be looked after by someone; he'd always fought when Mikasa had tried to parent him, partly because he was ashamed that she felt she had to and partly because he didn't want to be a burden to her. So he'd looked after himself, or tried to.

There had been no one else, and he told himself that Levi was just doing his duty as an instructor, but nevertheless he let himself enjoy it. His forehead burned where Levi's cool fingers had touched it. He let his eyes close for a while.

“All right, sleepyhead, rise and shine.” However many of Eren’s fantasies involved waking up to Levi’s voice, this wasn’t like any of them. He was sitting against the wall, Levi kneeling in front of him and gently nudging him awake.

“What?” He looked about. The room was empty; the mats had been put away and the other students and their gear had gone. Only Levi was left; he'd put his sweatshirt back on and his bag was packed.

“Did I miss class?”

“Only the second half. You looked so peaceful I didn’t have the heart to wake you up. I think you needed a rest, anyway.”

Eren rubbed the back of his neck. It was stiff. All of him was stiff.

“Don’t worry, I won’t charge you for the class,” Levi said. “Although given you’re absorbing an important life lesson every week, I’m starting to think I should charge you extra.”

Eren smiled sheepishly and Levi’s expression softened. “‘Don’t try and do too much at once,’” Eren said.

“Exactly. I won’t be offended if you don’t make every class. You’re not getting a grade for this, you
know.”

“But you won’t be very impressed, either,” Eren pointed out. “Although I guess this isn’t much better.”

Levi didn’t answer directly, but he did sort of smile. “Come on, up you get.” Levi unbent himself, as lithe as a cat, and he helped Eren get to his feet. “How do you feel?”

“Sleepy. Bit stupid.” Eren reached for his water bottle. “Thank you for looking after me.”

Levi shrugged. “No big deal. Don’t work out tomorrow, okay? Give yourself a proper rest if you can.”

“Yes, sir.” Eren swung his arms and stamped his feet a bit to restore circulation. He insisted on paying for the half of the lesson he’d been awake for and Levi didn’t object.

There wasn’t a class on after this one, and they were undisturbed while Levi waited for him to collect his things and they walked outside together. Eren breathed deep of the fresh air, or at least, what passed for fresh air around here; outdoor air anyway, and he felt himself wake up a bit.

“Do you want a lift anywhere?” Eren asked. Please say yes.

“No. I have another class here in a couple of hours. There’s a gym two blocks down so I usually work out during my downtime or swim a few laps. Thanks though.”

“Cool, cool.” Well that explained why Levi looked the way he did. Eren fiddled with one of the straps on his bag for a few moments. “Um, Levi, there was something else I’ve been meaning to ask you,” he said.

Deep breath. He could do this.

He felt Levi’s hand on his arm and he snapped his gaze up to Levi’s face. His expression was one Eren had seen before, but only on a screen and it was enough to tangle both his tongue and his stomach instantly. It promised things.

“I think.” There was hesitancy; that was new. Concern, too. That only made his inability to speak worse. Levi often had played mean characters, but it was the streak of kindness in them—the same streak that he exhibited in real life—that really got to Eren. “I think you should probably wait a week, and see if you make it through a lesson first.”

Eren nodded; it was too difficult to try and work out what he wanted to say. Levi released him and started walking away.

“Take care, Eren. I’ll see you next week.”

Eren watched him walk away, and he didn’t cease watching him even after Levi threw a knowing smirk over his shoulder.

Next week seemed like a very long way away.
“They should do it,” Levi said. “And jack up taxes on people like you to pay for it.”

He snagged the last of the spring rolls before Erwin could, and tried to collect as much of the remaining sauce as possible before he ate it. This was a ritual that stretched back years; once a fortnight, if not once a week, he and Erwin would meet up for Thai food at the same restaurant. They’d been coming here for so long that most of the staff knew their preferred orders by now, and they had a regular table. They’d spend a leisurely couple of hours solving the world’s problems and catching up, and their recent change of professions hadn’t altered that. If anything, the recent changes in their lives had wedded them more firmly to this tradition.

Sometimes they’d order a second pot of tea and stay until closing.

“We both know that's not going to happen.” Erwin had come here from work, and he still looked out of place and strange to Levi’s eyes in his suit. He didn't wear it quite the same way he wore the ones he donned for Hange's camera.

Levi's last class had finished several hours ago and he'd had time to go home and shower and wear something more respectable than his sweats, although he was quite sure the staff were used to them turning up in strange and mismatched clothing; they started coming here because it was fairly close to the studio, after all.

“Yeah.” Levi was tired of politics and the main course hadn't even arrived yet. He wasn't even sure he wanted to be here tonight. It wouldn't have occurred to him to cancel, but he couldn't relax. He hadn't been able to relax since yesterday afternoon, and he knew why and he was avoiding thinking about it.

Erwin could see the subject was exhausted also, and changed it. “I met my young friend again the other day.”

“Oh yeah.” Levi kept his tone neutral, he was both curious and quite sure he didn’t want to know. The subject still irritated him. Or maybe it was the look on Erwin’s face; he was clearly enjoying this a bit too much and hadn’t, in Levi’s opinion, thought it through nearly enough.

“We met at the college and just walked around for an afternoon. It was really quite pleasant and everything went much better this time.”

“That’s it? You walked around and then went home?”

“Levi, don’t you ever want to savour the anticipation of courting someone new?”

“I don’t court people,” Levi said flatly. “That sort of thing is all bullshit and pretending to be someone you’re not. I don’t see the point.”

“I’m sorry, I forgot you just pounce on them and drag them back to your lair. I’m enjoying this, making myself wait. The colours are brighter, the flavours are richer; it's like spring.”

“How do you know there’s anything worth waiting for?” Levi asked. “He might be crap.”

“The only way someone like him could be bad in bed is through sheer inexperience, and I can compensate for that.”
“Overcompensate.”

They paused while the curries arrived. Levi started serving himself rice. He was hungry after a day of classes and working out and even if he hadn't been enthused about going out, he'd been looking forward to the food. He cooked for himself most of the time now, and while he wasn't bad at it his food tended to be unexciting, if nourishing. If he missed anything about living with Erwin, and he honestly didn’t miss much, it would be his cooking.

“He’s adorable, all right? He told the most hilarious story about coming out. I won’t spoil it; you can hear it when you meet him.”

“Does he know you’re planning a wedding?” Levi broke in before Erwin could continue, and slid the rice in his direction.

“I’m not planning a wedding, although I did briefly enjoy imagining my mother’s face should I announce I’m doing so.”

The last thing Levi wanted to do was meet Erwin’s toyboy. All his talk of sweetness and good humour led Levi to tell himself that Erwin’s new friend was probably little more than a gold-digging twink with a nice arse and he wished Erwin would snap out of it. He didn’t know if he’d be capable of being polite to such a person. If he wasn’t Erwin would smooth it over, of course. That’s what he always did in social situations, and that irritated Levi plenty as well. Most of the time he was rude to people because he didn’t want the conversation to go smoothly.

Levi just hated insincere people. He thought of Eren and as ill-advised as some of his actions were, they practically radiated sincerity. Levi knew from the start what he was nerving himself up to ask, and he’d only put him off propositioning him because Eren hadn’t been in a good physical state at the time.

And because he hadn't convinced himself that it would be the right thing to do to say yes.

“You need to get laid,” Levi said, digging into his curry. “This can’t be healthy.”

“And you’re an expert now?” Erwin raised an eyebrow, unperturbed.

Levi shook his head. There was nothing for him in that line of enquiry. Silence fell for a while as they ate.

“We’re going to go out to dinner again. Somewhere normal, he said.”

“Not here.” Not this place; it was theirs.

Erwin shook his head. “No. We’ll go to Chinatown. There are lots of good, cheap places to eat there. Can’t go wrong, really. He’s got a busy schedule though, between work and study I won’t see him until the fifth.”

“Oh wonderful. I get to hear about you marinating in anticipation for another week and a half. Erwin, do me a favour; when you meet this kid again, please fuck him. Just do it. Get it out of your system.”

“Why do you care so much?”

“It’s pissing me off.”

It was pissing him off, but he wasn’t entirely sure why. He knew Erwin could take care of himself,
one way or another and it wasn’t really him he was bothered about. And he didn’t care if his new pet got his heart or his arse bruised either.

Maybe he should follow his own advice. Going cold turkey with sex after so many years of doing it for a living was probably doing weird things to his hormone levels or something. Although everything had been fine until his new student had arrived.

“Heaven forbid I piss you off,” Erwin said dryly. He didn’t flinch at Levi’s stony glare. “Change of subject then. How are the classes going?”

“Just the usual. Actually- I had someone fall asleep in one yesterday.”

Erwin burst out laughing. He was loud enough that a couple of the other diners turned their heads for a moment and then went back to eating.

“Amazing. How did that happen?”

Levi found himself smiling in mirrored amusement as he recalled. “The only reason I got told was that he’d started a new job recently. He wasn’t looking so good during the break and I told him to sit and have a rest. Next thing I knew, he was out like a light.”

“Not a reflection on your teaching skills of course,” Erwin said, his eyes lit with amusement.

“No,” Levi said, and the word came out far softer than he’d intended. He hadn’t been entirely surprised when Eren had fallen asleep; he’d been very tired, after all. What had surprised him was his own impulse to drape the young man in his sweatshirt and watch over him. It had been a wave of misguided protectiveness and he’d ignored it, but he couldn’t stop himself from glancing over occasionally.

It had been difficult to wake him up, not because he was sleeping that deeply, but because Levi had no desire to disturb him. He’d spent a minute or two admiring the curve of his lower lip and the length of his eyelashes before rousing him.

And when his big green eyes had blinked open, Levi had been the first thing he’d seen and even dazed and disoriented he’d smiled.

Well, Levi wouldn’t necessarily object to waking up beside him either.

Erwin was looking thoughtful, “I wonder if I should attend your class sometime.”

Levi’s good humour evaporated. “No.”

“I’m still in good shape, you know.”

“I don’t doubt it. No.”

“Why not?”

Levi did not think Erwin’s question was sincere, but he answered it anyway. “You’d undermine my authority.”

“It’s a fitness class, not West Point, Levi.”

“You’re more than welcome to my self-defence class.”

“Pass. I’d rather talk my way out of trouble.” He returned to his food.
“Suit yourself.”

When they left the restaurant Erwin offered Levi a lift home, and Levi was tired enough to accept. He’d say this for Erwin’s stupid car; it was clean. It even still smelled new. Erwin told him he hadn’t actually given his friend a ride in it yet.

“He gave me a lift in his car though. It was pretty filthy, I’m sure you would have hated it.”

“No doubt.” Levi rested his elbow on the door and looked out at the city lights gliding past. He was so sick of hearing about this guy. It made him feel impatient, and it made him think of bright green eyes and a cheeky smile. It made him feel a bit lonely.

“Levi, you don’t know the guy. What is your problem?” You couldn’t hide things from Erwin. Not for long, anyway, and Levi didn’t look away from the window until he was certain of his logic and had his arguments ready. Erwin could be misdirected, at least for a little while, and right now he had a great sore spot that Levi was not too scrupulous to press to obscure his own dilemmas.

“That he doesn’t know you?”

“Well, we’ve only just met. I told him how old I was. He said it was hot.”

“Yeah, because ‘rich older men’ is such a rare fetish.”

Erwin shifted his jaw and Levi wondered if he was actually considering throwing him out of the car.

“I’ve talked to him, Levi. I’m a good judge of people and he’s not like that. You remember what a disaster our first date was; he’s scared of money if anything.”

“Okay, I’ll believe you. How good a judge of character is he then?”

“What do you mean?”

“How well does he know you? Does he know about your family or what you used to do?” Erwin pressed his lips together. “Were you planning on telling him at some point? I know you’re having fun being incognito or whatever, but if you actually like this guy and want to I don’t know, what the fuck, relationship him or something you’re gonna have to tell him sooner or later.”

“I know.”

“It’ll come crashing down otherwise.”

“I know. It’s not like he asks me. He asked me what I did for work, and that’s about it. I wouldn’t lie to him.”

“Except by omission.”

“What, do you just hand out your resume on dates?”

“I don’t date.”

“I know. You never did.” Erwin sounded resigned.

The Aston purred to a stop outside Levi’s address. He’d barely noticed that they’d covered the distance. He wouldn’t say so to Erwin’s face, but it was an amazing car. They wished each other goodnight and Levi went inside. He thought about Eren Jaeger.
He had almost an entire week to think about Eren Jaeger.

He had better things to do with his time, and he did them dutifully, but thoughts of Eren snuck up on him in spare moments. It wasn’t the first time one of his students had managed to get up the courage to ask him out, but Eren’s case was a bit different. For a start, he’d only become his student in the first place because he liked what he saw. Levi was okay with that up to a point, and it helped that Eren took the class seriously now he was there.

If he fucked him he might drop the class.

On the other hand, if he fucked him he might not drop the class.

It wasn’t a school or even an official sports club, so there weren’t any rules against playing around with his students, but it might be awkward. Levi kept his personal life away from his students; a holdover from when he was still making porn at the same time as teaching. He didn't really think Eren would stay, however; it was clear he joined only because he liked Levi and as endearingly diligent as he was Levi couldn't see him sticking with the class once he’d got what he wanted.

On the other other hand, if he didn't fuck him-

Levi chuckled. He was elbows-deep in the washing up when he realised the truth, and his faint reflection in the window above the sink silently shared his realisation.

There was no way he wasn’t going to end up in bed with Eren Jaeger. That was the simple truth of it; they were clearly attracted and there was no real reason for them not to. None of this lying and bullshit and going on dates. Once you’ve established what you both want, the only thing left is to work out the most enjoyable way of getting it.

It would be nice, Levi thought, resuming scrubbing melted cheese off a baking dish, to fuck someone without Hange making suggestions in the background. He was looking forward to it.

That's the way it should be done; no expectations other than to have a good time. If Eren wanted to stick around and make it a habit, that was fine by Levi and if he didn't, well that would be okay too. Unlike Erwin he wasn't going to get over-invested in someone ten years younger. People Eren’s age were striking out, looking for the own fun and Levi intended to be a good experience he could regard fondly.

That was his plan, anyway.

By the time the next week rolled around, Levi had decided he didn't want to hear Eren stumble through whatever half-arsed confession he was going to make. He'd show him how it was done instead.

Eren showed up on time, wearing shorts and a tank top and clean socks under his sneakers. Levi caught his eye and gave him a look he'd practised years before and it nailed Eren to the doorway for a good thirty seconds until one of the other students politely edged past and broke the spell.

Yeah, he still had it. Not that Levi ever considered he'd lost it. He hadn't had a burning ambition to make porn, but he did have a burning ambition to be good at what he did, whatever that might be. Anything less than his wholehearted attention was a waste of time. He didn't enjoy it necessarily, but he derived a certain satisfaction from it.

Making Eren forget what he was doing, however, was very satisfying and it set the tone for the rest of the lesson.
They warmed up and Levi said they were going to practice some grappling techniques today. He thought Eren might have made a small noise, but he wasn't sure over the general background sounds of the classroom. Since Eren was the newbie, he set the others up practising in pairs and then beckoned Eren over to show him properly.

He explained how it worked, and showed him a few holds, first by demonstrating on Eren and then letting Eren try it out on him. At first Eren looked like a deer in the headlights, touching Levi only exactly where directed, and hardly game to put any strength into it. Levi had been going easy on him until he got the general idea, but this was closer to dancing than wrestling. Something had to be done.

The next time they lined up, Levi waited for Eren to half-arse it again, and then he put his own considerable strength into it and put Eren on the mat. Wrestling was one of Levi's strengths; he hadn't the reach of a lot of taller fighters but he had a low centre of gravity and a lot of muscle to back it up. Eren didn't stand a chance.

Levi got him in a hold, his arm under Eren's chin and he felt Eren flex underneath him, finally putting some effort into throwing him off, but it was too late for that. Eren tapped on the mat and Levi released him.

“Let me try again,” Eren said, and Levi was pleased to see that determined look was back on his face. This time Eren managed to get over his shyness, reaching around Levi for a better grip, digging his toes into the mat, baring his teeth with effort.

Levi let him strain himself for a while, and then put him on the mat again. Eren made a frustrated noise and didn't give up, trying to wriggle free like an eel. It was delightful and rather distracting. Levi could feel Eren's muscles bunching as he strained against him and he pressed Eren further into the mat until he wheezed. He didn't concede for a little while, however.

When Eren gave up, Levi released him but he stayed face down on the mat for a while, panting. It gave Levi an opportunity to go and observe the other students and make his rounds; he was rather chagrined to realise he'd almost forgotten he was meant to be holding a class.

He put on a professional face, and approached the other students. He glanced back over his shoulder at Eren. He was still lying on the floor, apparently catching his breath.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes, fine.” He nodded, looking defensive. He caught Levi's eye and flushed but didn't move from his position on the floor.

Oh. Levi knew what his problem was, now. He left him to get himself under control and observed the rest of the class. Then he called for a break. By then Eren was capable of sitting up without embarrassing himself and he shot Levi a smouldering look before going and getting a drink.

Not bad for brat, Levi thought, that expression had been almost professionally hot. It was clear Eren had understood the message, too. Levi eased up in the second half of the lesson; the other students deserved to get their money's worth and with the way Eren was looking at him he wasn't sure he'd be able to remain professional if they ended up on the mats again. Eren pouted slightly when Levi announced they would be practising something else.

Have some patience, Levi thought.

Eren didn't. He approached the second half of the lesson like a bull at a gate, but at least there was no
chance he'd fall asleep again.

He even had the nerve to ask for help a couple of times, and Levi supplied it while Eren smiled wickedly, his eyes on Levi's face. Levi pretended to be professional, ignoring the way Eren put himself on display to be touched, giving him mostly verbal instructions and watching him simmer with frustration.

He allowed himself a smirk when he moved on. This was fun. Fuck going for walks in the park.

The lesson really did seem to drag a bit. By the time everyone started packing up it felt to Levi like it had been going for hours. He collected his money and chatted like he usually did but he couldn't stop his gaze sliding over towards where Eren leaned against the wall with his bag at his feet, waiting.

He didn't move when the last of the other students left. He'd looked fierce and flirty earlier but now he was biting his lip and couldn't seem to decide what to look at.

Levi sauntered over.

“Hi,” Eren said.

“Hey.”

“Um, thanks for the lesson.”

“Don't fuck around, Eren,” Levi said gently. “Your straightforward nature is to your credit.”

“I. Oh.” He looked startled.

“You had a question, didn't you? And I told you to wait a week.” He sidled closer, nudging Eren's bag out of the way with his foot. “Changed your mind?” he asked.

“Nope.” He still looked pretty nervous.

“Good.” He smiled faintly. “Relax, I think you're cute.” That didn't seem to relax Eren much, but he did smile a bit breathlessly. “Correct me if I'm wrong.” Levi rested his hand on Eren's cheek.

Eren didn't correct anything. Levi leaned in and Eren turned his head and parted his lips to meet Levi's.

They were gentle for a couple of seconds, and then Eren made a needy noise in the back of his throat and grabbed him and Levi surged forward to pin him against the wall and Eren's hands were everywhere, kneading at him, tugging at his arms and hips and hair, like he wanted to pull Levi inside himself. Their teeth clicked together as Levi slid his tongue into Eren's mouth. He smelled like new sweat, the clean sort of dirty, and he tasted like Gatorade which under other circumstances Levi would had found disgusting. Eren made soft hitching sounds in the back of his throat.

Levi pulled his head away from Eren's neck.

Shit.

He was practically rutting him into the wall and anyone could have walked in in the meantime. It was sheer luck the tai chi class wasn't on again. Eren didn't seem to care and he bent his head,
chasing Levi's lips.

“Eren!” Levi glared at him. “We can't do this here.”

“Okay,” Eren panted. His eyes darted around the room. “Storage room?” he suggested.

“Ugh!” Levi actually stepped back, his ardour cooling as he thought about the piles of sweaty equipment gathering dust. “That's disgusting.”

“Sorry.” Eren swallowed his own spit, his chest heaving and his shorts tented. “God.” He licked his lips.

“Not quite,” Levi said dryly. He ran his hands in his hair. “This is all very promising but I can't do this now. I have another class this evening.” Pounce on him and drag him back to his lair: Erwin actually knew him pretty well, he had to admit.

“How far away?” Eren asked hopefully.

Levi shook his head, “Not far enough.” He didn't want to fuck with half an eye on the clock. It would make it feel too much like work. He hadn't been caught up in someone so completely for a long time, and he wanted the opportunity to savour it.

“Next week,” Levi said.

“Yeah?”

“I'll clear my schedule after class, so you better clear yours.”

Eren nodded. “I will, I promise.”

Simple, Levi thought. No confusion and no expectations, save to have a good time. Still, his mood had improved to the point where, as he watched Eren collect his bag and leave, still tousled and smiling, he silently wished Erwin luck as well, secure in the knowledge that it couldn't possibly match his own.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After the end of Levi’s lesson, Eren had found himself short of breath at odd moments in the days afterward. He didn’t have to ask either of them to perform in front of the camera; Levi wanted to fuck him and Erwin wanted to date him and all he had to do was show up and be himself. Eren had never felt so fantastic. He finally believed Hange and Nanaba when they told him he was beautiful. He had proof now. He lived up to his stage name. He sparkled.

Levi had been overwhelming; everything Eren had ever imagined, forceful and contained, and his stomach twisted in anticipation and delight whenever he thought about next week’s lesson. That’s how it happens he thought, for real, not just with a friend or on camera. He had trouble getting to sleep that night, and the subsequent nights. He’d curl up in bed and close his eyes and he’d replay his favourite moments and he’d writhe around getting tangled in the blankets in an agony of lustful impatience.

It did wonders for his work in front of the camera, too. He felt energised and full of confidence and he acted his heart out as the first half of the story was put together in the studio and the street behind the production office.

He and Armin had another scene together as well, and Eren actually enjoyed it this time. Instead of pretending the camera wasn’t there he played up to it, secure in his own attractiveness. He only had to think of Levi to feel a surge of desire and Armin was surprised but not displeased by the result. Afterwards, he innocently asked if Eren had been doing a lot of texting lately.

Eren didn’t have to say anything; he was pretty sure everything Armin wanted to know was written all over his face.

Hange was delighted, and told him that he had real potential.

Infatuated with someone else, he felt more at ease around Armin as well. Since most of the scenes they shot required both of them, more than once Eren offered Armin a lift back to campus once they were done for the day, since they were going the same way. He was getting the knack of forgetting that he’d seen him naked once the cameras stopped rolling.

When he wasn’t at class or the studio Armin haunted the library, and Eren got in the habit of working beside him even though they had no classes in common. Armin’s diligence made it easier to concentrate, unlike Jean, who only made it more difficult as he was as restless as Eren himself. Armin had a lot of assignments and tended to disappear behind piles of books while Eren tapped away at his calculator.

Eren didn’t tell anyone about Erwin and Levi. He was too excited, too delighted; if he told someone it might vanish like a beautiful daydream. And part of him knew that this sort of unrestrained joy couldn’t be maintained forever and he didn’t want his bubble popped any earlier than was absolutely necessary.

Jean just glared at him suspiciously when he caught him shuffling strange little dance steps while putting away the clean dishes or staring dreamily off into space with a stupid smile on his face. He didn’t want to know and Eren was happy not to tell him.
One afternoon Eren was in the library with Armin later than usual. He’d agreed to give Jean a lift home after his classes had finished. Eren’s gaze was resting idly on the top of Armin’s head as he hunched over his laptop, fingers flying, but he wasn’t really looking at him. If Erwin asked him to be his boyfriend he’d have to turn Levi down two days later, he thought. And wasn’t that a delightful dilemma to have?

He was jerked back to reality when Jean tapped him hard on the left shoulder and then sat in the chair to his right. Eren hadn’t been fooled by that trick since grade school but it hadn’t stopped Jean trying it on every time.

“Hey,” Jean said. He ignored Armin, presumably assuming he was a stranger who just happened to be sitting nearby. The library was emptying for the evening, but it had been packed earlier. “We should do some shopping on the way home. I went to have lunch today and the only thing in the cupboard was cat food.”

“That explains why your breath is so horrible,” Eren said, packing up his stuff. “And why Missy’s such a fan.”

“Real fucking funny. I bet I could put that shit in a casserole and you wouldn’t notice the difference. I’ve seen you eat vegetarian sausages.”

“I knew they weren’t real though,” Eren pointed out.

Armin had glanced up by this point, his amused gaze flicking between the two of them and a faint smile on his lips. Jean, as was his wont, assumed he was being laughed at by a stranger and glared at him.

“What?” he said aggressively.

Eren intervened before Jean could make things worse. “Jean this is Armin. Armin, meet Jean.”

“Hi.” Armin smirked as Jean’s face fell.

“You know him?” he asked Eren.

“I just introduced you, dipshit. Of course I do.”

“Hi,” Jean said, smiling anxiously. “What’s he said about me?”

“Oh,” Armin tilted his head as if remembering fond memories. “Eren told me so much.”

“What?” Jean’s voice went up an octave.

“He’s fucking with you, Jean,” Eren said.

“Spoilsport,” Armin said without rancour. He leaned back in his chair and stretched and Jean stared at him as he arched his back like a cat.

Oh boy, Eren thought. Here we go.

“Well, we should get going then,” Eren said, before Jean started drooling. “Before you start drooling,” he added, just to watch Jean flush.

“What the fuck,” he muttered. “Yeah, let’s go.” He stood up and started to stomp away, changed his mind and came back. “Nice meeting you,” he told Armin.
“It’s been fun,” Armin said.

Jean made his escape while Eren shoved his books into his bag.

“I told you he was a dick,” he said.

“You also implied he was hot,” Armin replied. “Can’t fault you on either count, really,” he mused.

“Don’t tell him that. His head will swell so much I won’t be able to fit him in the car,” Eren grinned. “I’ll see you later.”

Armin wished him a good evening and Eren rejoined Jean outside the library.

“Where do you know him from?” Jean asked without preamble.

“I give him a lift into campus sometimes,” Eren said. “From the studio.”

“Oh.”

Jean was very quiet when they got into the car.

“I wonder if I should make porn,” Jean said about ten minutes later.

“You don’t want to make porn,” Eren said.

“It can’t be that difficult if you do it.”

“I didn’t say you couldn’t do it, I said you didn’t want to. You want to do Armin instead.”

“He’s all right. I guess.” Jean stared intently out the window.

“The easiest and most sensible thing to do is just ask him out,” Eren said. “I know sensible isn’t really your thing, but I’m pretty sure he’s not seeing anyone right now.” Normally he wouldn’t bother giving Jean advice, but he was feeling happy and generous.

“How am I going to do that?”

“I dunno. I’ll invite him to our next games night or something.”

“Really?” Jean looked at him sharply. “Why? Why are you so helpful all of a sudden?”

“Can’t I want my best friend to be happy?” Eren asked.

“You’ve never wanted that before.”

Eren sighed, “I think he’s lonely, but he’s not really my type. And hey, worst to worst all you’ll do is make him appreciate the single life again.”

“Huh. Okay, well, thanks.”

Eren could see Jean didn’t really believe he was going to do it, but that was okay.

The next day Hange invited him to the studio to view the finished film. They’d apparently stayed up all night editing it and had achieved a state of caffeine-fuelled mania.

“With this Hunter Sparks is ready to debut on the website. You’ll have your own page and everything; you’ve done enough work to get yourself a proper spot on our roster. You’re not just a
guest star.”

“I see.”

“You’ll get your pay check for the movie next week too. Don’t get your hopes up about royalties though; they only apply to direct sales of films, not our subscription fees, and it’s really only a token amount.”

Eren had figured as much. There were a few people gathered in the meeting room to watch the film, not just him and Armin. It seemed he’d made something of an impression. Historia couldn’t make it but Ymir was there, eating popcorn. Mike had fallen asleep in his chair; he’d been helping Hange the night before. Occasionally he snored.

It was really weird watching porn with other people. It was even weirder watching himself in the porn, and Eren found himself squeezing his eyes shut a few times and wondering if anyone would notice if he blocked his ears. Still, he saw enough to know that Hange had made a solid film, easily on par with the others at HotFreeRange and Eren was pretty happy with it. He didn’t look stupid, or sound stupid. If it weren’t for the graphic sex scenes it could have been any other sweet indie romance film. He was actually a bit disappointed he couldn’t show it off to his friends for that reason.

“Dude!” The audience had grown during the film. “Sign me up for your next movie.”

“Um.” Eren blinked at the big blonde guy who’d snuck in late.

“This is Reiner,” Ymir drawled. “He thinks you’re cute.”

“Whaddya say?” Reiner nudged him. “Could be fun, right?”

“Yeah, sure.” Eren wasn’t really sure how to react to the proposition.

“Sweet! Although, once Ymir’s finished with me I gotta take a few days off to recover.”

Eren opened his eyes very wide.

“I’ll do you too, if you want,” Ymir said with a smirk. “How tough do you think you are?”

“Not that tough at all,” Eren said, leaning away from her.

Hange clapped their hands to get everyone’s attention. “Well, that’s a very positive response, thank you Reiner. Further comments? No? I’m looking forward to seeing the statistics on Eren’s new page once it goes live. More importantly though.” They clasped their hands together. “That film had heart. It had heartbeat. It had meaning. And some lovely sex, too. Well done, Armin and Eren.”

There was a polite round of applause and Mike jerked awake and joined in.

“It’s all in Moblit’s hands now. Eren, you’ll get an email when your page goes live; everyone’s automatically subscribed to the mailing list. Check it out and let me know if there’s anything you’re not happy with, but I think you’ll be pleased. Now sit back and enjoy a well-earned break. I’ll send you some scripts in the next week or so.”

Eren nodded.

“All right everyone. Thanks for watching.” Hange yawned hugely. “I think I’m going to go home and have a nap. I get so excited when I’m editing I forget to sleep. It’s where the real magic of movie-making happens, after all. Goodnight!”
It was mid afternoon.

Ymir and Reiner went off to rehearse something and Mike just curled himself up on one of the couches in the tea room for a nap. His feet stuck out over the end.

In the end, Eren never even read the email. He saw it later in his inbox and deleted it without looking at it.

Hange called him first. He didn’t have class that day, and wasn’t expected at the studio either so he was still in bed when his phone rang. He snatched it up, hoping that it might be Erwin.

“Good morning, Eren.”

“Oh, hello Hange.” Eren stifled a yawn. “Did the page launch okay?” he asked, wondering why they were calling him. “I haven’t had a chance to look yet.”

“It went fine.” They sounded oddly tense, and for the first time there was no trace of their usual cheerfulness. Even half-asleep, Eren felt a prickle of foreboding. “Look, are you free sometime today?”

“Yeah. I’m not doing anything. Are we shooting another film already?”

“No, this is for a meeting. I’d like to have it as soon as possible.”

“Oh. Okay, um, I can be in there by ten.”

“That will be fine. I’ll see you then, Eren.” Hange hung up.

Eren frowned at his phone, but it didn’t tell him anything useful. He’d just have to go in and see what Hange wanted, but it sounded like they weren’t happy about something.

He got some idea what the something might be when he arrived at the studio just under an hour later and saw a silver Aston Martin parked next to Mike’s van. He parked across from it and realised that he’d broken out into a cold sweat.

“Oh shit,” he muttered. It couldn’t be that bad, surely, he told himself. He wasn’t very convincing.

It wasn't too late to turn and run, he supposed, but he found his feet carrying him into the studio anyway. He felt sick.

Nanaba was writing his pronouns on the whiteboard when Eren entered the tea room. He looked a lot younger with his hair slicked back.

“Hey Eren. I didn't know you were coming in today.”

“I'm here to see Hange, that's all.” His own voice sounded distant in his ears and he climbed the stairs to Hange's office like he was walking to his own execution. Nanaba said something further but he didn't really hear it. He knocked quietly, half-hoping Hange wouldn't hear him.

No such luck.

“Come in.”

As he'd expected, Erwin was sitting in the chair in front of Hange's desk. He looked like he'd come over from work and was wearing one of his suits. Eren realised when he wasn't smiling (and he'd smiled so much in his presence until this point) he looked really intimidating.
Levi was even more so. Eren hadn't been expecting Levi to even be in attendance but there he was, leaning against the wall with his arms folded and his face an expressionless mask.

“Hello, Hunter,” he said.

“Shut the door, Eren,” Hange said.

Eren did as he was told and stepped forward, feeling three sets of eyes watching him.

Eren clasped his hands in front of him, feeling like he was once again at the principal's office, only this time Jean wasn't standing beside him. In fact, he felt very, very alone.

Hange sighed when it was clear Eren wasn't going to say anything. “Okay. Why don't you tell us what you did, Eren? Also kindly explain just how much I knew about it.”

“I looked at some files on your desk,” Eren muttered. “Just two. I didn't read all of them I just wanted-”

“Names and addresses.”

“I told you this mess needs to be cleaned up,” Erwin said to Hange.

“It's not a mess, I know exactly where everything is.”

“Yeah, so does he. I'm sorry I snapped at you earlier, Hange. I should have known this wasn't anything to do with you, I just couldn't see how else it could have happened.”

“Don't blame Hange,” Eren said quickly. “This is all my fault.”

Hange took off their glasses and pinched the bridge of their nose. Levi just watched. Eren wasn't game to look at him directly.

“Yes, it is all your fault. You do realise what a breach of trust this is, Eren,” Hange said. “It's not in the fucking rules because I didn't think it needed to be. Respect for people's privacy-” They shook their head. “I have no idea what you thought you were doing.”

“I didn't really know either,” Eren mumbled. “I didn't have time to think about it. I just saw it and acted.” He wished the floor would open up and swallow him whole. “I'm really fucking sorry.”

“Yeah, you look sorry,” Hange said. “That's not really enough though, is it?”

“No.” He suspected he was going to get fired, but that really was the least of his worries right at that moment. Erwin looked so disappointed in him it made Eren want to cry. Levi didn't look like anything which was somehow even worse.

“Well, now we know the start of it. I don't really know what's gone on between you three since, and it's not really my business. We're not using one today so go and talk this out. If either of you,” they addressed Erwin and Levi. “Are not entirely comfortable with Eren continuing to work here, he's out. The only reason I'm giving him half a chance in the first place is that I trust you two to get to the bottom of things.”

“Throw him out and have done with it,” Levi said.

“You're not even curious?” Erwin asked. “I want to hear what Eren has to say.”

Levi shrugged. “Fine.”
Eren did want a chance to explain himself to them, even if he didn't expect they'd forgive him. He didn't want them to think that this whole mess was deliberate, or a joke. He trailed along obediently behind them as they left Hange's office. Luckily, Nanaba had gone; Eren really didn't feel like faking a smile for anyone right then.

Eren had been in studio one before. The set was a bedroom, the pieces designed to be shuffled and redecorated quickly. He'd done a couple of scenes with Armin in here, but right now he was too miserable to even be self-conscious about it. Erwin and Levi ignored the set, Erwin sitting in Hange's director's chair while Levi preferred to stand.

Erwin waved Eren into a chair and Eren sat.

“Did you really think we wouldn't be on the mailing list?” Erwin asked.

Eren could only shrug helplessly; Erwin was assuming so much forethought on Eren's part that he didn't know where to even start. Then his phone rang. He nearly dropped it getting it out of his pocket. What now?

“Mikasa?” she rarely called him. Usually she texted. He hoped nothing was wrong; if she needed an emergency lift it would at least get him out of this room.

She didn't need an emergency lift.

“Eren. What have you done?” He recognised that tone of voice.

“Wh-what?” For one confused moment he thought she was mad about Erwin and Levi before realising that wasn't possible.

“You're naked on the internet! I can't believe my eyes-”


“Eren this is serious.”

Eren glanced up. Erwin was watching him with a detached, mildly curious air and Levi just looked bored. Right, he had more immediate problems than his sister.

“Uh. Yeah I'm in the middle of something. I'll call you back later, okay. I'm fine. It's fine. Just don't look at it.”

“Eren-”

He hung up and then turned off his phone.

“Sorry,” he said. “That was, uh, my sister.”

Something that might have been the vaguest hint of a smile crossed Erwin's face. “You're not having a very good day, are you?”

“No really, no.”

He sighed, “Just tell us what you thought you were doing. I can't really believe you were trying to make such a mess.”

“No! I just. Okay, starting from the beginning. I really liked you guys for a long time.” Oh God this was embarrassing. “And when Missy got sick and I saw Hange was hiring it was the thought of
meeting your guys that got me through it. I really hoped I'd um.” He stared at his hands as he fidgeted. “That I'd impress you. And when I found out you'd gone I was really disappointed but it would have ended there only.” He glanced up at Levi, “Your file fell off Hange's desk. It wouldn't have occurred to me otherwise but it was right there and I didn't think.”

“What did you intend to do with this information?” Levi asked, exasperated.

“I was just gonna ask if you wanted to work with me! Like, 'hi, would you like to make one last movie?' I didn't really expect you'd say yes but I had to try.”

“So why didn't you?” Erwin asked.

Eren stared at him. “Cause you were really nice. And,” he glanced at Levi. “I never got around to it. Stuff just happened and then, and then I couldn't ask. I didn't want to. I understood that you'd moved on and it didn't seem right to ask you to go back and you know, I thought instead maybe we could be friends.” He ended on a mumble.

“Huh.” Levi was scowling and staring at the ground, but Erwin just sighed.

“I'm really sorry.” Eren added. “I didn't mean to invade your privacy or anything like that, and I'm sorry for lying by omission, too.”

“What do you think?” Erwin looked at Levi.

“I think it's plausible. If there's one thing Eren's good at it's making impulsive decisions, most of which are terrible.”

Eren couldn't argue with that.

“I did some questionable things when I was his age,” Erwin said.

“You do some questionable things now,” Levi said pointedly and to Eren's surprise Erwin actually looked away for a moment.

He'd never seen them interact before, and he now realised what Armin meant by them being a team. They weren't exactly nice to each other, but he could see the way they listened and reacted to what the other said.

“You want to let him off,” Levi said.

“You don't?”

“What the fuck do I care? He's not exactly dangerous. He showed up and employed me to teach him MMA; I feel so used.”

That wasn't just it though, and Eren knew it. Erwin and Levi stared at each other for one long moment and Eren wondered if they were actually telepathic. Just what had they said about him to each other, and more importantly what were they keeping back? Because he was pretty sure what had happened last lesson wasn't just MMA.

“Okay,” Erwin said eventually. “Well, now we know.”

“I'm sorry,” Eren added.

“You already said that,” Levi said. “If he wants to stay, let him stay, I guess. If he puts a foot wrong Hange won't forgive him again.”
“Yeah. You're off the hook, Eren. Don't screw up again.” Erwin looked tired.

“I won't,” Eren said quietly.

And that was it. They simply walked out without any further discussion, now that the decision had been made. Eren buried his face in his hands. He was an idiot, he knew, and he deserved everything that had happened, but his heart still ached at the unfairness of it all. So close, and yet so far. He waited for a while, but no one came to look for him, and he figured he wasn't fired so he just snuck out without talking to anyone.

When he left the building he noticed the Aston was gone. He wondered if he'd ever see it again.

Chapter End Notes

More fantastic fanart from Mizo! This time for the last five chapters in one post. Go check them out.
Chapter 10

“Leave his door alone, please?” Eren lay on his side, watching Missy sniff hopefully under Jean's door. Jean wasn't home and Eren had flung himself back into bed, curling up under this quilt even though it was really too hot for it. He just wanted to hide away.

He felt sick and sad and stupid and the fact that he'd kept his job wasn't much comfort. He should have known better. He had known better but he'd pretended he didn't to himself because he was having such a good time. He'd told himself it would work out one way or another which was stupid and childish.

He hadn't turned his phone back on. He'd have to deal with Mikasa at some point but he had no idea how and didn't want to think about it.

“Missy! Missyyyy,” he called softly, stretching one hand out towards the cat and clicking his fingers. Sometimes she came when called and sometimes she didn't. He really wanted her to listen to him this time.

She looked at him for a few moments and then slid in through the slightly open door and crossed his room. Eren crooned at her and reached down and scooped her up carefully, even though her stitches had come out the week before. He took no chances.

He sat up against the wall and plopped her into his lap and she put up with him holding her, as she always had done. Sometimes it seemed she'd been more of a comfort to him than to his mother in the end.

She didn't judge, and she didn't seem to mind when he sniffled into her fur and shed a few tears for the relationships he hadn't really even gotten started with. He moped and wallowed in self-pity for a while and Missy went to sleep in his arms and eventually boredom and hunger drove Eren out of his room and into the kitchen, still feeling like an invalid. He cooked some mac and cheese and curled up on the couch to eat it. He'd left Missy sleeping on his bed.

He felt better after food. Or at least, less sick, and he decided it was time to face Mikasa. If he didn't she'd eventually lose patience and come and visit him, and while he thought he could sound all right over the phone, she'd take one look at him and assume the worst if they actually met in person.

She picked up almost immediately, even though Eren could hear her lecturer talking in the background.

“I'm sorry about hanging up on you earlier,” he said quickly, before she could launch whatever was on the tip of her tongue. “I was in a meeting. My phone shouldn't even have been on.”

“Eren I don't care about that.” She was speaking in a hushed, yet angry voice. “You let someone take pictures of you and you were in a movie-”

“I told you not to look! That's fucking creepy!”

“Why did you do it, Eren?” She sounded so heartbroken. “Why couldn't you have come to me if you needed the money?”

“Because I already got your help when my car broke. I couldn't do it again. And Missy's bill was so huge.”
"I like Missy too, you know?"

"I know. I don't want to rely on you forever."

"Eren you shouldn't have to-"

"I didn't have to. I decided to. You recommended HotFreeRange yourself."

"To watch, not to participate!"

"It's okay, Mikasa. I ...I kinda like it. I'm good at it, and I don't feel bad and the money is great. I'll pay you back for the car and I can quit my job at the book store. I'll have more time for study, then," he added hopefully.

"Eren, but-"

"It's already done, anyway."

"You should have said something."

"Like what? You would have gotten mad and I would have lost my nerve. I'm fine. It's fine. Don't worry about it. And stop watching it!"

"I wasn't watching it. God, Eren, how fucked up would that be? I just clicked on the page and it was enough to see your face. I just don't want you to be hurt."

Eren sighed, and felt the ache in his chest bloom anew. "Yeah, well, everyone gets hurt sometimes. At least if I screw up it's my own fault, no one else's. And I know you'll always be there if I need you and I really appreciate it, Mikasa."

"I-" He heard her sigh.

"I should let you get back to class."

She didn't object. Eren knew he hadn't been terribly grateful to her over the years for all she'd done; he'd been too busy resenting it somewhat, but it meant his gratitude now was so rare it tended to rend her speechless. He looked down at his phone and took a deep breath. That was done, at least. Maybe he hadn't heard the last of it, but he'd made his case fairly well, he thought. It didn't hurt that Mikasa's attention had been divided.

Eren went back to his room. If nothing else, he could always do some homework. He never thought he'd be studying to take his mind off things.

He distracted himself almost successfully for the rest of the day, and Jean didn't seem to notice anything strange. Then again, Eren told him Mikasa had found out, which would have explained any low spirits well enough.

"She's gonna kill you," he said.

Eren shrugged. "She can try." He felt weirdly invulnerable; the worst had already happened, and everything else was just an annoyance. He'd never broken up with anyone before, let alone two anyones.


He managed to remain numb enough until the following afternoon, when his phone reminded him
that he had a date that evening with Erwin.

Eren sighed shakily and moved to dismiss the reminder. He remembered when he'd made it he'd figured he didn't need it, that there was no way he was going to forget.

He couldn't stand looking at his room, or his work, any more and he grabbed his keys and left. He'd intended just to go for a walk, but not to the park where he usually practised his MMA. How had they gotten into so many parts of his life so effortlessly, he wondered.

So he walked. And he found himself sitting at the bus stop to the city, and when a bus arrived he got on it. He just wanted to get away. At least, that's what he thought he was doing.

But nearly an hour later he found himself sitting on a public bench in Chinatown, wishing he'd brought a jacket as the sky went dark and the streets lit up, and the smell of food drifted over the heads of the tourists ebbing and flowing around the restaurants and discount shops and Chinese medicine stores.

Eren felt hungry and cold but he stayed where he was, watching the people and trying to pretend he was in a city far away and not waiting for someone who would never show up. It was the perfect place to mope, really.

“What are you doing here?”

Eren snapped his head up when he heard the familiar voice and worked his mouth a bit but nothing much came out.

Erwin was wearing a sports-coat over a tshirt and jeans, and an expression of genuine surprise. His hands were in his pockets.

Eren shrugged. “I don't know,” he said eventually. “What are you doing here?”

Erwin ran his hand through his hair. “Well, nothing that's easy to explain. I didn't expect to see you.”

He frowned, “But I am glad you're here.”

“What?”

“Really?”

He smiled a bit ruefully, “You look so surprised. I don't hate you, Eren. And there are things I want to clear up myself that I didn't get a chance to when we talked last.”

He sat on the bench next to Eren and Eren stared at him, half expecting he was some sort of hallucination brought on by lack of food.

“I owe you an apology as well when all’s said and done,” Erwin said. “I was lying by omission too. I assumed you weren't familiar with my work and I was happy to keep it that way. I told myself, and Levi, I'd let you know the truth eventually but I was putting it off and I know I would have continued to do so as long as I could and fuck, well, maybe this is for the best. That everything comes out now.”

“You're ashamed of your work?” Eren asked.

“No. Quite the opposite, really. Part of me riles against the fact that I have to hide it from everyone I meet, but I'm tired of being my work too. People make a lot of assumptions about us; who we are, and what we're like in bed, and what we want from relationships.”

“I'm sorry, that was probably me too,” Eren said.
“I don't think so,” Erwin said. “I didn't twig that you knew, after all. And it's not just my old career, it's my new one too. I don't just work for a law firm; I was once the heir.”

Eren stared at him curiously.

“On my mother's side. It is an ugly saga.”

“You mentioned your family didn't approve of your sexuality.”

“I've recently been allowed back and I'm still finding my feet, as it were. I wanted to get away from all of that for a while. Just not deal with it; not be that person and have a bit of fun. At your expense.” He gave Eren a wry look, “I'm old enough to know better. You have the excuse of age and inexperience. I do not.”

“I see.”

“Neither of us were very honest. I don't know exactly what you and Levi were doing; he didn't even mention you directly until the morning I called him after seeing your debut. It's not my business anyway. But between you and I; we haven't been honest.”

“We're honest now, right?”

“I certainly hope so.”

They sat in silence for a while and Eren thought about what Erwin was saying. He supposed if he hadn't known who Erwin was it would have been a shock to learn. He hadn't really thought about it as deceptive at the time, but he hadn't thought about much, really, caught up in Erwin's smile.

“So, um,” Eren began. It would be easier to say nothing, but his lack of courage when it came to asking for what he wanted was what got him into this mess in the first place. He was going to try not to make the same mistakes twice in his life.

“Hm?”

“Can we start again?” he asked. “As friends. I know it sounds weird but you really did give me confidence to work and I don't care about your family stuff. Mine's a bit messed up too and I just screwed up so badly and I want to make it right.”

“If I tell you I forgive you will you stop looking so miserable?” Erwin asked. “It wasn't a good thing to do, but keeping you in the dark about myself wasn't a good thing to do either, so we can call it even.”

“Yeah,” Eren smiled, maybe for the first time in two days. He held out his hand. “Hi, I'm Eren Jaeger. I'm a big fan of your work.”

Erwin let out a surprised chuckle and shook his hand. “I'm Erwin Smith. I think I'm going to be a bit of a fan myself.”

Eren slumped back on the bench, legs sprawled. “I'm so glad,” he said. “I didn't want to be a jerk for the rest of my life.”

“I know the feeling.” Erwin sighed. He glanced at him. “Are you hungry?”

“I'm fucking starving. I've been forcing myself to eat for the past two days.”

“Did it really twist you up that much?” Erwin asked, frowning.
Eren sat up and scrubbed at his hair. “Yeah. Like I said, you guys were my heroes, if that's not too weird a word to use about porn stars. And you know, I’ve never done anything like this before. I just sort of assumed I’d be a good guy who’d never screw over his friends.”

“It's part of growing up, learning how much of a jerk you can be.” Eren looked at him. “I've been a real jerk in my time,” Erwin said.

“That does make me feel better. You turned out okay.”

“Hm.” Erwin didn’t look convinced on that last point. “So, want to get some dumplings or something?”

“Oh hell yes.” Eren sprang to his feet, suddenly keen to get moving. He realised it was quite cool out here. The days were still warm, but the nights were starting to get an edge on them. He was glad to get moving again. “Where should we go?”

“Anywhere. Pick a place.”

It might have been more fun to ramble around and explore, but Eren was hungry and cold and in the end they chose a tiny barbecue meat store that had a row of roasted ducks hanging from hooks in the window and sold meat by weight as well as cramming people around tiny formica-topped tables and serving huge mounds of noodles or rice with the barbecue for a paltry sum.

Erwin barely fit at the table. It was almost comic. He ordered wonton soup and Eren requested barbecue pork with noodles after seeing a nearby customer getting served the same. They didn’t bother with appetisers. It wasn’t the sort of place one could sit and talk; they were crammed in beside workers on their way home or heading out, and student couples eating one-handed while they examined their phones.

Eren didn’t mind, and Erwin didn’t seem to be bothered either. Eren warmed up fast in the crowded room.

Their food arrived quickly and Erwin put some of the sambal olek in his soup and within five minutes his eyes were watering.

“You’re so white,” Eren said, confidently smearing some on his noodles. He regretted this a short while later and he gained infinite respect for the girl at the next table practically dipping her vegetables in the stuff as he blew his nose.

Watering eyes and running nose or not, Eren enjoyed the meal, not least because it was as big as it looked. By the time he’d eaten two thirds of it he was starting to slow down. Erwin was regarding the remains of his soup with some respect as well.

“This place is excellent,” Eren declared.

“You certainly get your money’s worth,” Erwin said. The table next to them vacated and it got a bit easier to talk.

“Why’d you decide to work for Hange anyway?” Erwin asked.

Eren told him about Missy and remained vague as to the details of his application and interview. He had no idea if Erwin had looked at his work or not and he was too shy to ask.

“Are you going to stick with it?”
“I think so, if I haven’t messed up too much. It’s fun; I like going on shoots and learning lines and the money’s pretty good. Armin says it gets easier and that’s been my experience so far.”

“It does,” Erwin said.

“Do you have any advice?” Eren asked.

Erwin thought for a few moments. “I do, actually. Are you done? I don’t think I can eat much more of this.”

Eren made one last valiant attack on his noodles and vanquished the last of the meat before giving up. He took out his wallet to pay for his share of the meal and Erwin didn’t so much as raise an eyebrow.

“We can look for dessert,” Eren said brightly.

“I really hope that’s a joke,” Erwin replied.

With a stomach full of noodles Eren felt fortified against the night and Erwin suggested they walk some of their meal off.

“I suppose it’s not really advice I’m offering so much as a warning,” Erwin said as they wound their way slowly down the narrow streets, pausing sometimes to peer into strange shops. “You get to have a lot of sex. That’s a given. All you could want, really. But there’s no intimacy; there’s the camera, there’s the performance, and there’s the audience. Any pillow talk is just lines you’ve memorised.

Erwin sighed, “It’s unprofessional, in a way, to try and be intimate with your colleagues. I’m speaking from experience; it doesn’t go well but when you’re first starting out especially it can be pretty confusing. You can see stuff that’s not there or you can find yourself acting a part even when the cameras have stopped.”

They paused on a raised walkway, looking over the railing at people taking photos of each other in front of the fountain. Eren wondered if there were any carp in there but they were too far away to see clearly. Erwin rested his forearms on the railing and stared blankly.

“You can end up weirdly touch-starved, craving affection rather than sex.” He shifted his jaw, “Not something that’s easy to find at your average gay club, either.”

Eren looked at him, his perfect profile, his broad shoulders, and wondered how hard it was for him to admit these things and to talk about them so freely. Eren looked at his hands, dangling limply over the railing, and wondered if he was still touch starved, if he was still looking for what he’d missed out on.

Eren licked his lips and knew he’d never ask.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Hm?”

“For warning me.”

“Well, it might not be such a problem for you. I was doing it a long, long time. I expect you’ll find your engineering degree may well earn you more and more respectable money in a year or two. And you have a family; your sister, and your cat. Keep them close, Eren.”
Eren nodded, “I will.”

“Then I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

Eren cast about for a less difficult topic.

“Armin said you started HotFreeRange,” he said.

“Well, sort of. When I was at college I spent a lot of time hanging around the film and theatre people, mainly looking for other young men who shared my predilection for sucking cock. I met a few, too, but I also met Hange. Hange was doing film and they had grand ideas, lovely ideas, and no money.”

Erwin shrugged, “We were friends. I met Mike through Hange.”

“You dated Mike?”

“For a little while. Anyway, it started out as a joke, but I said I’d be happy to get naked in front of a camera to raise money for films. And Hange said that would be a film, and then Hange got some more ideas and I was very keen on the whole thing. My grandfather was making blustery sounds about not letting me join the firm and being a disgrace and all of that and as a career making porn seemed tailor-made to give him a coronary. It didn’t, of course, he died in his sleep at the age of ninety-two four months ago, but we can’t have everything we want in life.

“The three of us recruited some more actors, and formed a company and I am technically still a major shareholder although in practice I don’t have much to say about the day-to-day running of things since I left.”

“That’s pretty cool,” Eren said.

“I agree,” Erwin said. “Like I said earlier, I’m not ashamed, nor do I regret a minute of it. Hange makes good films.”

“They do,” Eren said. “What about Levi?”

Erwin paused and gave him a look. “What about him?”

Eren realised he’d made a tactical error. “I was just curious. You’re friends, right?”

“Yeah. And if you want to know things about him, you should ask him yourself.” Erwin didn’t speak unkindly, but he was very firm.

“Do you think I should attend his class this week?” Eren asked. “He seemed really angry at me when we had that meeting.”

Erwin sighed. “Well, he’s not dangerous. No, let me rephrase, the worst he’s going to do is yell at you and turn you away. Why do you want to talk to him?”

“Because I like him too and talking with you has gone well,” Eren said honestly.

Erwin gave him a faint smile. “I’m not Levi. Look, if you want to do it, do it. Just don’t expect him to cut you any slack. He makes people earn his respect.”

“I’ve noticed,” Eren said. He took a deep breath. “I’ll see how I feel on the day, I guess.”

Eren felt a wave of tiredness. He’d been wound up and miserable for two days and now he felt a bit of hope. Full of food and starting to get cold again, he realised he was in danger of just nodding off.
He yawned.

“It’s not really late, but I think I should head home,” he said.

“Do you want a lift?” Erwin asked.

Eren smiled. “You brought your car? Yes, I like a lift. Thank you.” It wasn’t just the thought of avoiding public transport that made him grin.

“Come on then.”

Erwin led the way, and Eren followed.

They walked. And walked.

Eventually Eren had to say something. His ears and fingers and nose were starting to go numb. “Um, is it much further?”

“Not far. Sorry. I don’t have any choice but to keep it in secure parking, but there wasn’t much close to Chinatown.”

“Oh.” Eren drooped, and plodded on alongside Erwin.

“Are you cold?” Erwin asked a few minutes later.

“A little. It’s okay. Walking keeps me warm, and awake.”

He started when he felt something warm and heavy drape around his shoulders. Erwin’s coat. It smelled like cologne and Erwin himself. Eren’s heartbeat kicked up a gear.

“Oh. Thank you. You don’t have to.”

“I know.”

Eren threaded his arms into the sleeves. It was too big for him by a size or two and he drew it around himself, sure he looked ridiculous and not really caring. He was glad this wasn’t a date, he decided, because if it was he’d be completely lovestruck, he was sure of it.

When they finally arrived at Erwin’s car, Eren handed the coat back with slight reluctance.

The Aston was beautiful on the inside as on the outside. Eren gave his address and the satnav understood, and Eren settled into the seat while trying not to touch anything too much. It was comfortable though and the Aston glided forward, purring softly under Erwin’s direction.

Eren sighed and looked out the window, and his eyes closed.

He was woken up a short time later by Erwin’s voice.

“Hey, you’re home.”

Eren opened his eyes, his head fuzzy.

“This car is wasted on you,” Erwin said, amused.

“No, no it was really lovely. Thank you.” Eren rubbed his eyes. He opened the door and the night air woke him up a bit. “Are we going to do this again?” he asked, a bit anxiously.
“Yeah, of course. Good night, Eren.”

“Goodnight.”

Eren stood and watched the Aston’s tail-lights disappear down the end of his street before heading inside.
Chapter 11

Eren attended Levi’s class. In the end, the decision was no decision at all; if he didn’t go he’d regret it, regardless of the outcome, and he’d simply have to go through the whole process of making a decision again next week. He had to try and set things right at least once.

It still wasn’t an easy thing to do. As the appointed hour approached his stomach started to feel queasy and he was pretty sure his last tutorial of the day went in one ear and out the other. Nevertheless, he went. He arrived a bit early as well; if Levi was going to forbid him from the class, he rather he did so before the other students arrived.

Eren was early, but not early enough; Annie was sitting on the front steps of Rose Hall, her legs stretched out in front of her as she waited patiently for class to start. By the time Eren spotted her she’d spotted him and it was too late to turn and run.

“Hey, Annie,” Eren said awkwardly. Since he’d apologised to her at the end of the first lesson, they hadn’t spoken at all. She’d ignored him entirely.

“You here to train?” Annie asked.

“Yeah. Why else would I be here?”

Annie shrugged. “You don’t seem the type to care.”

“Well maybe you’re wrong,” Eren said defensively. “I’ve been training between classes as well. Just cause I fell asleep in the last one.”

At that something like a smile crossed Annie’s face, but it was a poor shadow of the one she’d directed at Levi when he’d fought her.

“You’re an idiot,” she said flatly, like it was a simple statement of fact rather than an insult. Eren wondered if she was trying to goad him into another fight. She didn’t look tense or worried at all, and her seat on the steps was hardly a good position to fight from, although Eren had the suspicion she’d beat him even if she was standing on her head.

Eren took a deep breath. He wasn’t there to argue with her, and he knew if he did he’d lose any chance that Levi would even listen to him. He didn’t know what Annie’s problem was, and it didn’t matter; he had problems of his own.

He managed a shrug and a polite smile, even if it wasn’t very sincere, “Well even idiots are allowed to attend training.”

“Unfortunately,” Levi said.

Eren made a very unmanly noise and nearly dropped his bag. It seemed both Levi and Erwin had perfected the art of appearing suddenly and without warning.

“Hey boss,” Annie said. She was facing the other way and must have seen Levi coming, but absolutely nothing in her expression had given him away.


“Hello,” Eren said, staring at his shoes. Wracked with guilt and regret and a dozen other unpleasant
emotions over the past three days, Eren had almost forgotten what it was like to be in Levi’s physical presence. The things it did to him.

Because the last time they were here, Levi had nearly eaten him alive and those memories came back as vivid and wonderful as always, leaving him short of breath and his pulse humming. Ill-advised as it was, he still wanted him and he was right there and Eren stared so hard at his shoes it was a wonder they didn't burst into flame.

“You’re here early,” Levi said, and he didn’t appear to be talking to Annie.

“I came straight from a tutorial,” Eren said. He couldn’t possibly say anything beyond surface pleasantries while Annie was listening, and he kept his head down, still braced for something horrible to happen.

“I see. Well, you’ve still got ten minutes.” With that Levi just stepped past them both.

“Yes, boss,” Annie said.

“Right,” Eren replied weakly. It looked like he wasn’t barred from attending class after all. Levi climbed the steps and entered the hall without looking back. Eren couldn’t sense any anger, but he knew Levi was good at keeping himself in check by now. Except when he didn't. Except when he looked right through him and pushed him up against the wall and-stop thinking about it.

Eren felt Annie’s eyes on him and when he turned to look at her she tilted her head back and narrowed her eyes.

“You really want to impress him, don’t you?”

“Don’t you?” Eren countered, surprised she even cared enough to mention it.

“Not really. I don’t need to impress anyone. Answer my question.”

Eren sighed, giving in. “Well, yeah. Of course I do.”

“Practice with me,” Annie said. Eren’s jaw dropped. “When we do the drills.”

“What?”

“Are you scared? It’s just training; I’m not gonna hurt you.”

“I’m not scared,” Eren lied slightly apprehensively. “But why?”

Annie’s lips thinned. “Do it or not, suit yourself.” She tucked her hair behind her ear and got to her feet. Without another word she followed Levi inside.

The first of the other students started to arrive. They’d begun to learn Eren’s name by this point, and he got a few friendly remarks about not nodding off this time. Most of the women there were older than he was, fitting in the class around kids or work, and Eren sort of liked the atmosphere. Everyone seemed to think he was likeable at least. Well, everyone except Annie.

She didn’t look at him when they set the room up for the class, and Eren wondered what she was up to. She didn’t seem the type to set him up; he didn’t think the offer was anything other than genuine, but he didn’t really understand it either. Annie’s face was no help.

She did, at least, take his mind off Levi for a few minutes, but once class began it was right back on him again.
Levi was in teaching mode, calm and professional, and Eren strove to be just the same, but he was sweating before they’d even finished the warm-up. This was an especially subtle form of torture; being taught a physical activity by someone you both liked very much and had recently ticked off a great deal. Someone who’d had his tongue between your molars and who’d suggested you be fired in such a way that ‘out of a cannon’ had hung implicitly in the air.

It was very hard to concentrate. At least Levi didn’t pay him any special attention. When he was doing his rounds, he just nodded and said ‘good’ without stopping to give advice.

By the half time break Eren was wondering why he was putting himself through this. Levi was like a stone wall without cracks or handholds; his expression gave nothing away. Eren almost wished he’d yell at him just to break the spell.

When training resumed, Eren had made his mind up, and he walked over and stood in front of Annie when Levi asked them to pair up. Annie looked neither pleased nor surprised.

He wondered if she was going to go easy on him.

She didn’t.

When they’d squared off the first time, Eren had been impressed by her strength. This time he was impressed by her ability to be wherever he didn’t want her to be. They were practising throws and holds and Eren couldn’t keep his feet under him. Even when he was supposed to be practising on her, she’d slide out of his grip, twist, and put him on the mat again. And again. And again.

The smell of dusty rubber filled Eren’s nose. It didn't hurt much, but it wasn't pleasant either.

“Dammit,” he gritted out. He glared up at her and she tucked her hair behind her ear and regarded him expectantly. Eren hauled himself to his feet for what felt like the hundredth time, and tried again.

It honestly didn’t feel like he was making progress at all.

Eventually Levi’s rounds took him to their mat and Eren redoubled his efforts, and Annie seemed to halve hers, looking bored, and the result was exactly the same.

Levi was about to move on without comment when Annie spoke. “He’s not learning, boss.”


“Stop trying to forget your defeats,” Levi said. “When you feel yourself start to fall, pay attention to how you got in that state. Then you might have a chance of avoiding it next time. Learn from your mistakes.”


By the end of the lesson Eren was exhausted and he wasn’t sure which way was up any more. He had no idea if he’d learned anything or not, other than that Annie was truly something else. He helped drag the mats back into the storeroom and for the third time in as many weeks watched Levi talk to the other students after class.

Annie didn’t hang around. She paid her money and thanked Levi for the lesson and strode out, glowing from the exercise in contrast to Eren, who felt like he was melting. He doubted Levi was impressed, really.

Eren was last to pay his money. Levi accepted the cash without counting it and put it with the rest in neat little pile he tucked away in his bag. Eren thought it was probably pretty safe.
“Okay,” Levi said. “Why are you here?”

“I wanted to talk to you,” Eren said, although now he was doing so he wasn’t certain what to say. “Erwin said I should give it a try-”

“Erwin did?” Levi looked startled. “When?”

“We ran into each other in town the other day. And we talked about stuff and decided to be friends.”

Levi stared at him for a few moments, and then he picked up his bag. “That’s so stupid I think I believe every word. Friends?” He said the word the way a priest might say ‘sexting.’

“We’ll we’re gonna try. He told me some things, you know, advice.” Eren trotted after him as he strode out. For a short guy he took long steps.

“Well, good luck to the pair of you. So now I suppose you want to be my friend as well?”

“No! I mean, yes, of course, but I don’t know if that’s likely, I just. I just wanted to apologise properly and uh, I dunno, let you shout at me or something?”

“I don’t think there’s any point in shouting at you,” Levi muttered, frowning. “You’re so fucking persistent.” He halted at the top of the steps. Eren didn’t know what to say so he just waited in silence. “What sort of advice?” Levi asked curiously.

“That you can get lonely even when you’re having lots of sex cause it's on camera and doesn't really count.”

“That sounds like him. Are you really planning on sticking with it? Not just gonna make a movie or two and quit?”

“I don’t plan to quit. I like it.” Eren offered him a cautious smile.

Levi took a deep breath and thought for a few moments. “Okay. I think you need some better quality advice. Are you thirsty?”

It was such a non-sequitur it took Eren a few moments to answer. “Um, yes?”

Levi started to walk off and Eren offered to drive them somewhere if he wanted. To his surprise, Levi said yes, and he scrutinised the interior of Eren’s car thoughtfully when he got in.

“He was right,” he muttered. “It is filthy.” He leant forward. “Is that cat hair in the air vents?”

“Um. Probably,” Eren said, wondering why he cared so much and how he’d even noticed in the first place. He started to explain about Missy and Levi didn’t interrupt. It was hard to know if he was actually listening or simply scowling at the dirt in Eren’s car. To Eren’s surprise, Levi directed them to a tea shop.

“You’re taking me out for tea?” Eren asked, as he found a space to park around the side.

“I sure as fuck ain’t taking you home,” Levi said. “I like tea. And you’re buying your own.”

“Oh.”

There was a dazzling variety of drinks to choose from and Eren ended up with something half full of crushed ice and sugar jelly with whipped cream on top. Levi didn’t look remotely surprised. Levi’s tea came in a teapot. They were playing some sort of pop music in a language Eren didn’t understand.
inside the shop and Levi insisted on a table outside where they could talk in peace.

“Do you come here often?” Eren asked.

“No.”

“Oh.”

“This franchise makes tea properly at least.” He glanced at Eren’s drink. “When one orders proper tea, anyway.”

Eren just grinned. Levi wasn’t so scary now.

“So we’re here so you can give me advice?” Eren prompted, since Levi was looking at him like he wondered what the hell he was doing here.

“Yeah.”

Levi sipped his tea and Eren waited while he gathered his thoughts.

“Unless you are Erwin,” he began. “And I doubt you are and hope you are not, you are going to have long dark nights of the soul in which you will regret what you’ve done. You’ll wonder if you’ve cheapened yourself, or ruined something about you. You will feel like you have; that circumstances pushed you, and you yielded. You’ll wonder if there had been a better way. You will feel judged. And some people will judge you, I suppose, although they aren’t worth your time.”

He spoke slowly and deliberately, choosing his words carefully as he tilted his cup to watch the tea swirl. Eren swallowed hard, and didn’t say anything.

“It’ll pass, of course. But still, if you start to feel like that, I want you to call Hange.” He put his cup down and rummaged around in his bag. “Or me.” He handed Eren a business card. On it was an email address and a phone number.

“Thank you, Levi.”

Levi shrugged. “Maybe you won’t need it.”

Eren looked at Levi, watching him hold the rim of the cup rather than the handle, and wondering if he did everything his own way.

“You’re a very kind person, aren’t you?”

The words slipped out before he could consider them. Levi looked up from his drink, startled.

“What?”

“You’re very kind to offer to help and offer advice like this. I think,” Eren took a deep breath. “I think you’re a kind person. A good person. I guess I’ve always hoped you’d be like that but, you are. I didn’t imagine it. You were so angry with me the other day, and yet you still—”

“Oh, Eren. Stop.” He held up a hand. “I’m getting really tired of seeing your eyes watering.”

“What?”

“You were staring at me all through class like you expected me to pick you up by the scruff of the neck and throw you out.”
“Oh.” He’d noticed, huh?

“I don’t care any more, okay? It pissed me off but watching you cringe about it is pissing me off even more. You did something stupid and shitty and you regret it; welcome to the human race. You claim to be a big fan of us, whatever the fuck that means in this context, and you’re hardly the first fan to make use of an opportunity they shouldn’t. As long as you don’t start calling me up twenty times a day and breathing heavy, I officially no longer give a fuck.”

“No phone sex. Got it,” Eren said quickly. Had he said that? Yes he had. He bit his lips, wondering if he’d made a huge mistake, but the opportunity had been too good to miss.

Levi put his cup down again and looked at him. Something twitched in his neck; probably one of those muscles Eren admired so much. He didn’t smile.

“Is this going to be a thing?” Levi asked.

Please laugh, Eren thought. Just a twitch, just a hint. Anything. He wasn’t game to answer, still chewing on his lips.

“Fucking hell, Eren,” Levi muttered. “I got nothing.” And then he smiled. It was a strange little expression but it melted away everything that was wrong with the world and Eren let out a deep sigh of relief.

“I thought I was gonna die,” he said weakly.

“It’s what you deserve.”

Eren chuckled, suddenly delighted. He felt like he’d just got away with robbing a bank or something. He sipped his tea, cheeks hollowing as he sucked the jelly up through the straw.

“What is that?” Levi asked, watching him with a faint look of horrified fascination.

“Sugar jelly. Um. I dunno what flavour it is. I just got it cause it was purple. Do you want to try some?” Eren offered him the drink.

“No. Please never ask me again.”

“Okay.”

They drank in companionable silence and Eren examined the card Levi had given him.

“What did you mean, my not being like Erwin?” Eren asked.

“You said you had a big vet bill, right?”

“Yeah. I’d just got my car fixed so I had no savings. I couldn’t even cover my rent. Jean had to do it.”

“Oh. I understand you’re a regular patron of our website,” Levi said.

“Somewhat,” Eren mumbled.

“If Missy hadn’t gotten sick.” Eren was startled and rather impressed Levi had remembered her name. “Would you have still applied to be an actor when you saw the opening?”

“No,” Eren shook his head. “It wouldn’t have occurred to me.”
“Right. That's what sets us apart from Erwin. Erwin is one of those people who always have choices. He was born with them and he'll die with them, and people like him, no matter how well-intentioned, take them for granted to a certain extent. Okay so, he didn’t want to stuff himself back into the closet for his homophobic grandfather; I respect that, and I think that was the correct response. But he was a fucking Harvard graduate. Maybe his grandfather could have locked him out of every firm in the city, but in the state? In the country? He could have gone overseas or he could have picked another profession; just cause you’ve got a law degree doesn’t mean you can’t do something else with it. If at any point he’d stopped having fun making films he could have quit. He could have done anything he wanted. He chose to make porn his vocation every single day.”

“I see.”

“I’m not saying I was forced into it, but my other options, like yours, weren’t very good. Overall the experience hasn’t been a bad one, but I had to work hard and build this second career as a trainer. I couldn’t have just stepped into it any time I wanted. Erwin tries to understand, but he doesn’t. Not really. It doesn’t make him a bad person either, although it’s caused some friction over the years.”

“You guys seem, uh,” Eren searched for words.

“We’re two eccentrics who tolerate each other’s eccentricities when no one else will. Couple that with the lack of sex and we’re practically fucking married,” Levi said dryly. “We are cursed with each other's company.” He sighed and sipped his tea.

“It can’t be that bad,” Eren ventured.

“Oh, don’t look so worried,” Levi relented. “The idiot needs me more than I need him, anyway.”

Eren smiled. “It’s funny. He wouldn’t talk about you, but you talk about him without worrying about it.”

“That's because I know he wouldn’t mind.” Levi sighed, “Although I do weary of him as a topic.”

“Right. How about you as a topic then?” Eren asked, aware he was riding the ragged edge of disaster by flirting with him and unable to stop. Everything was just going too well.

Levi narrowed his eyes warily, “What do you want to know?” Eren was surprised by how seriously he took the question.

Eren shrugged. “Everything?”

“You’re going to have to buy me a hell of a lot more than tea for that,” Levi said.

Eren grinned and leaned forward over the table, “What do I start with then, dinner?”

“Oh, fuck no,” Levi said. He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “Let’s just leave it here for today.”

Eren didn’t really want to leave it there, but he didn’t argue. He felt like he’d pushed his luck far enough, and it had paid off in spades.

“Thank you for giving me another chance, Levi.”

Levi shrugged. “You never know how things turn out, but I trust you won’t let me regret it. Were you really just going to ask me to make porn with you?”
“It sounds really stupid when you say it out loud like that,” Eren said. “But yeah. I was all fired up and I figured it couldn't hurt but um, well, other things happened instead.” He risked looking at Levi, but Levi wasn't looking at him, instead staring into the dregs of his tea.

“I see. You are unique, Eren. Well, I should be going.” Levi put down his cup and got to his feet.

“Wait, um. So I can keep attending class?”

“Do you want to?”

There was no other way he could be guaranteed to see Levi again, and now that they'd had this conversation Eren was sure he wanted to see him again. Maybe he'd never say the word friend the way Erwin did, but that was okay. Levi wasn't that sort of person and that was fine. Just as long as Eren could see him more, that would be okay. Prove to him that he hadn't made a mistake giving him another chance.

“Yeah.”

“You did well today,” Levi said. “Annie is a relentless sparring partner, but you kept your cool and didn't give up. Not bad.”

Something warm bloomed in Eren's chest and it might have been gratitude. He owed Annie, he decided. He doubted it was a debt easily repaid, but he was going to thank her next time he saw her from the bottom of his heart. She'd been right after all.

“Thanks.”

“Then I'll see you next week.” He collected his bag.

“Do you need a lift anywhere?” Eren asked.

“No thanks. I'll walk.” He nodded at him and strode off and Eren wondered how far away he lived that he could walk everywhere. Maybe he lived miles away and just didn't mind the hike; it wouldn't have surprised him if that was the case.

Eren went back to his car. Erwin and Levi were both treating him like an adult who could be trusted to be sensible from now on and he was going to do his best to live up to those expectations. And then maybe they would all be friends some day.

He slid into the driver's seat and stared at the air vents. How had Levi noticed the cat hairs? It wasn't like they were choked with them or anything. Either way, Eren made a mental note to clean them out, and soon. Just in case Levi wanted another lift anywhere.
Chapter Notes

It was nearly five, and Erwin knew Levi was finishing a class soon. He'd never sat down and worked out Levi's schedule, but had sort of picked it up by osmosis in bits and pieces over the years. He was paying attention to the clock today because he wanted to talk with Levi, even though they didn't have a dinner scheduled this week.

For the last two days Erwin had found himself wondering, on and off, if Eren had worked up the nerve to attend Levi's class. He rather hoped he had; Eren was good company and he'd rather not have Levi hanging metaphorically in the air like a malevolent shade whenever they talked. If they could make up and at least be civil with each other, it would be for the best. Erwin preferred it when people got along, and one of his strengths was brokering peace among his friends.

He wasn't sure any problems between Eren and Levi were within his ability to fix, however.

The whole thing had blind-sided him, if he was honest, and he wasn't blind-sided often. He'd been taken completely by surprise to learn that Levi had known Eren. Maybe his own relationship style could be described as erratic but he was usually right on the money when it came to other people's. Not that Levi had much time for relationships; occasionally he'd ask someone if they wanted to fuck in private, but even that rarely caught Erwin by surprise.

So when Erwin had received the email from HotFreeRange and saw Eren's face on the familiar website he'd called Levi first, partly because he simply didn't understand what was going on and he hoped Levi's objective perspective would have made some sense of it.

But Levi hadn't been objective at all. Erwin had explained his new friend had shown up on the website, and Levi had gone and looked. And then he'd gone very, very quiet and Erwin had wondered if the call had dropped out.

"The kid's in my class," he'd said gruffly, when Erwin had asked him what was wrong and Erwin couldn't get any more details out of him. He'd definitely been furious when they'd held the meeting with Hange however, in his quiet, contained way. Erwin had wondered just exactly what had happened between them, but he hadn't asked and he wouldn't ask, because it wasn't his business.

He did want to know if Eren had fronted up since, however.

When the clock hit five Erwin locked his computer and left his office. He still wasn't comfortable there; it was a nice office with a window, even if the view was only of the building opposite, but it didn't feel like his. He hadn't done much about it either; he'd changed his desktop wallpaper and that was about it. There were enough pictures of his family in the foyer as was and he was at a loss as to how else he might personalise his space; there still wasn't enough of him that was acceptable here.

He headed down the hallway, past the library, to one of the ambiguous waiting spaces that weren't quite break areas and weren't quite waiting rooms, in which people who weren't too important could be safely shunted until they were required. It was where Erwin always made personal phone calls, and where he escaped to when he needed a break. He stationed himself at the window next to some sort of dwarf palm, a vantage point from which he had a view of the entire street. At this hour it was ablaze with slow-moving tail lights as the evening rush commenced.
He called Levi. Levi picked up.

“What?”

Same as always.

“You done for the day?”

“Yeah.”

“I feel like cooking. Is there anything good in your fridge?”

There was dull silence for a few moments.

“No, but there will be.”

Erwin chuckled. Levi had his weaknesses and one of them was Erwin's cooking. “Tell you what, I'll pick up some seafood in the city since I'm here and I'll meet you back at your place. Risotto sound good?”

“Yeah.”

Levi hung up. Erwin sometimes wondered if he was so abrupt with his clients. He turned away from the window and nearly walked into someone going the other way.

She inhaled sharply and stepped back. That intern again; the fresh-faced one with the red hair.

“Excuse me, Mister Smith.”

“Ah, sorry. Ms Ral was it?” He remembered her name just in time.

She forced a smile. Erwin wasn't fooled; he couldn't tell if she was angry or upset, but her professional mask wasn't practised enough to hide the fact that she wasn't very happy.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” she lied.

“I see. Don't stay too late then. Good evening.” It wasn't his business; this wasn't HotFreeRange and it wasn't appropriate to treat everyone like family, even if that was Erwin's impulse. She stepped out of his way and wished him a good evening and he went back to his office, free once more until tomorrow.

Erwin drove to his old address, a journey that never failed to make him nostalgic. There was nothing special about the place; it was just one of a row of brick town-houses, somewhat dilapidated, in an unfashionable suburb. The grass on the lawn outside looked half-dead, and there was room for one car under each of the units. Levi didn't drive and he kept the garage space free of junk, so Erwin could park the Aston under cover and he did so, Levi having opened the garage doors in anticipation of his arrival.

He and Levi had shared this place for six years, and when he'd moved out Levi had stayed on. It had really been too small for the both of them, but it wasn't an unhappy place for Erwin. It had been a home, for all its flaws.

Levi had obviously heard the car arrive because the door was open before Erwin was halfway up the front steps.
“Evening,” Erwin said, handing Levi the ingredients he’d brought. He’d been back here since he’d moved out and he already knew Levi had turned his room into some sort of home office and gym, and that he’d tossed out all of the rugs had Erwin insisted made the house warmer and that Levi had insisted housed billions of dust mites. Any dust mites left now would be having a hard time of it; the floors, like everywhere else, were spotless.

“Work all right?” Levi asked.

“Mm.”

Erwin tossed his coat over the back of a chair, and his tie soon joined it before he rolled up his sleeves and got to work in the kitchen. He knew where everything was, and Levi kept out of his way as he set the table. The silence wasn't as companionable as it would have been, however. They both knew this dinner wasn't just a random impulse on Erwin's part.

Which in itself answered Erwin's most burning question, really.

“So he found the nerve to show up after all,” he said as he put the stock on to simmer. There was no question as to who he was referring to.

“Yeah.”

“And?” Erwin didn't look up from his cooking.

“We had a talk. I gave him some advice that he might actually find fucking useful, since he asked politely for some. He reckons he's going to stick with the class but I don't know how long that will last.”

“Good,” Erwin said.

“Good?”

“Isn't it better to solve problems and talk rather than staying angry at each other?”

“You would say that. Some people aren't worth the effort of talking to.”

“Eren is though,” Erwin said firmly. He believed that. He liked Eren, and he'd watched enough bridges go up in flames over the course of his life that he was okay with helping him rebuild a few.

“Mm.”

The silence had now taken on a distinctly uncomfortable cast, and although Erwin didn't look away from the stove he could feel Levi’s gaze on the back of his head. He didn't say anything; Levi would get to it eventually and rushing him just made him irritable.

Eventually Levi stood next to him, leaning a hip against the sink and folding his arms.

“Friends?” he asked, eyebrows raised.

“What?” Erwin glanced at him and then looked away again. “There's nothing wrong with being friends. He's a nice kid.”

“Yes,” Levi said slowly. “But I seem to recall you describing him as gorgeous, and how going out with him was like spring, and other nauseating shit I've managed to suppress for my own sanity. All that just went away, did it?”
Erwin sighed and closed his eyes for a few moments. “Yeah, okay,” he said softly. “Look, you were right. Congratulations. All of that stuff was in my head; he wasn't dating me, he was working up the nerve to ask for an autograph, metaphorically speaking. Whatever relationship I'd imagined it was based on assumptions that turned out to be wrong. And that was a good thing; I would have fucked it up. I was in the process of doing so anyway. I'm honestly glad all this happened, and I'm not going to try and make him into something he’s not.”

Levi looked at him. Levi heaped shit on him all the time, with one exception. When he bared his heart like this Levi always listened, and then he'd just say, 'okay' and it would be. The first time, Erwin had assumed Levi didn't care, or didn't understand, and it had irritated him beyond measure, but he knew him better now. Levi accepted. He'd seen Erwin's worst and decided it was okay.

This time absolution didn't come. Levi just stared at him with slightly narrowed eyes, as if he was trying to read something off the inside of his head, his arms still folded.

“What?” Erwin asked.

“I don't really believe you're going to leave it there.”

Erwin shrugged. It wasn't like he hadn't thought about it; Eren liked him well enough, clearly, but he wasn't going to rush into anything and even if he was why would Levi be bothered?

Oh.

Erwin glanced at him, suddenly quite sure of himself and Levi was instantly defensive. Erwin allowed himself a smile.

“I'll back off if you want,” he said.

“Don't be fucking stupid,” Levi muttered. “I have better taste than that.”

No you don't, Erwin thought, amused. He'd been so caught up in his own problems, and Levi had been so reticent about his own opinions, he'd completely missed it. Again. Either he was losing his touch or Eren Jaeger clouded his mind somehow.

He didn't mind if Levi liked Eren. Levi was his best friend and as cute as Eren was, Levi was more important to him. He'd meant what he'd said.

Levi threw his hands up and stalked away, probably to clean something, and Erwin got on with cooking. The conversation had taken an unexpected turn and they separated to think it over. Erwin went to the fridge and then remembered that Levi didn’t keep any wine, even for cooking. It was a shame; the risotto wouldn’t be quite as good without it, but Erwin did his best with what he had.

When he was done Levi emerged from the other room and they ate at the scarred kitchen table. Erwin said it was nostalgic and Levi said that his cooking skills hadn't entirely gone to shit since he'd started living by himself.

“What made you think they would?”

“You can afford someone else to cook for you,” Levi said. “I'd have thought you'd have got out of practice.”

“I can afford someone to clean for me and I don't do that either,” Erwin said.

“You're cleaning up after yourself?” Levi asked, looking mildly horrified.
“I learned from the best,” Erwin said with a sweet smile.

“Bullshit you did. But I guess you need to count your pennies to pay off that car.”

“It just seems weird to pay someone to pick up after me,” Erwin muttered. “It reminds me too much of the house.” The house was where he’d grown up; he never referred to it as home. “I don’t have anything to hide any more, and I certainly don’t have to worry about anyone I might hire running off to tell my mother, but still.”

“Okay,” Levi said, and the conversation moved to other things.

It didn’t return to the topic of Eren until the dishes were cleared away and Levi made tea for himself and unearthed the coffee that Erwin had left behind when he’d moved out to make him a mug of the same. Levi didn’t drink coffee; he got his energy from whole grains and boiled eggs and fruit smoothies and Erwin could recall a thousand mornings in which he sat at this same table with his hands over his ears to block out the noise of the blender, staring blearily into his coffee while Levi made his breakfast. Living with Levi had sometimes felt like watching an endless yoghurt commercial.

“Thank you,” Erwin said, when Levi put the drink down in front of him.

“Thank you for cooking.”

They sat across from each other and marshalled their thoughts.

“Eren clearly thinks we're hot,” Levi said.

“We are hot,” Erwin corrected him.

Levi ignored this. “But we don't actually know what he's thinking. On the odd occasions he actually bothers to think.”

“This is true.” Erwin could see Levi was going somewhere with this, and he didn't interrupt his train of thought.

Something derailed it anyway.

“He's so fucking transparent,” Levi said. “But it fools you; I didn't guess the little shit was working for Hange. It didn't even occur to me. Even though he turned up out of nowhere, with no reason to be at the hall. He didn't even know what I was doing there. I thought it was odd but, whatever.”

“He deceived us by deceiving himself, first and foremost,” Erwin said. “He told himself he'd have the guts to front up and ask for what he wanted once he actually saw us for one thing.”

Levi chuckled. “He was getting around to it. Christmas maybe.”

Erwin watched Levi thoughtfully. He knew him so well but there was some unfamiliar expression on his face. He might actually like him, he thought. He didn't say anything; he didn't want Levi to get defensive again, and honestly he could do a lot worse. If Eren managed to get under Levi's skin, well, it was about time someone did.

“What do you think should we do?” Levi asked, smile fading.

“Nothing,” Erwin said. “Up until this point everything's been a bit of a mess, mainly thanks to Eren but I did my share. The point is, it's Eren's decision, whatever happens. Let's face it, at his age he
could get over us both next week without a backward glance.”

“Get over you maybe,” Levi said.

Erwin grinned despite himself. Levi didn't normally do the self-aggrandising thing so when he did it never failed to amuse him. Eren had clearly gotten to him and Erwin was enjoying watching Levi be gotten to.

“Let's not get ahead of ourselves,” Erwin said. “That's my point. I mean, it's Eren; once he's made his mind up there's not going to be any ambiguity.”

“That's sort of what I was leaning towards as well,” Levi said. “We're too fucking old for him, and if he's going to be in our social circle—and he will be regardless if he stays on at HotFreeRange—it's not right to just fuck him and fuck off, even if that's what he asks for.”

“That's what you were planning on doing?”

“That's what I always do,” Levi said. “You know that. You were the one taking him courting and getting drippy.” A feral smile curled Levi's lips, and Erwin could see him come to some sort of decision. “All I did was push him up against a wall and stick my tongue down his neck.”

Erwin inhaled sharply. There it was. That was why Levi was so pissed off then. Fuck, of course he would; Levi moved fast when he wanted to. He asked outright for what he wanted once he'd decided he wanted it.

Erwin wasn't surprised, now he thought about it.

But he did feel a stab of envy. Who wouldn't? Eren’s lips were inviting; almost always parted in a smile, and Erwin himself had imagined more than once running his tongue along them.

“That’s all you did?” Erwin asked. The tables had turned so suddenly he wasn’t sure he wanted to know this, but it was too late to block his ears now.

“Yeah.” Levi shrugged and sipped his tea. “I had another class.”

“You know, I feel like we dodged an awful lot of bullets just now,” Erwin said. “This could have been ugly.”

“Oh relax,” Levi said. “Unlike you I didn’t have unrealistic expectations. I figured he’d get what he wanted and move on. If he wanted to shack up with you I would have questioned his taste but I wouldn’t have said a word against it.”


“How many people have we both fucked?” Levi asked.

Erwin thought back over the years. “About forty? Give or take.”

“Exactly.”

“It’s a little different outside the studio though,” Erwin pointed out.

“Is it?” Levi didn’t seem to be joking.

“It is for me,” Erwin said. “Still,” he looked into Levi’s eyes. “I don’t think something like this is
going to come between us.”

“No,” Levi said easily. “Whatever happens, I think I’m stuck with you. I told Eren we were cursed with each other.”

“That’s a good way of putting it.”

“He looked worried when I said it.”

“He’s sweet. So determined to make everything right.” Erwin smiled, thinking about it and then he focused again. “I’m not going to chase him. It would end up some sort of fucked up contest otherwise.”

“Yeah. He’s not a prize to fight over. If he works out what he wants he can ask for it, otherwise.” Levi shrugged.

“Say it,” Erwin grinned.


“One big happy family.” A thought occurred to him. “Have you looked at his work?”

“No. Have you?”

“No. I’m not going to, either.”

“Yeah.”

The agreement struck, they drank in companionable silence, everything once again set right.

Erwin almost forgot that he didn’t live there any more, and that his towel wasn’t in the bathroom and there was nowhere other than the clean yet decaying couch for him to sleep. He wished Levi pleasant dreams and Levi told him not to fall over the piles of trash doubtlessly accumulating in his apartment when he got home. Erwin told him he didn’t deserve to taste his cooking and drove home in a thoughtful state of mind.

He might have been projecting, where Levi was concerned. He still liked Eren, just differently to the way he had before; a great deal had been swept away. For one thing, a lot of the awkwardness had gone. When they’d talked in Chinatown there had been nothing difficult about the conversation, even though he’d talked about quite personal things. Eren was a good listener and now Erwin didn’t have to pretend he was someone he was not he could relax and just talk.

He’d looked so adorable bundled up in his coat. Erwin had considered driving back to his own place rather than Eren’s, but it had been an idle fantasy, nothing more. He’d been confident that if there was any genuine attraction between them things would develop naturally.

He was less certain now Levi was in the picture. But that was fine; if Eren decided he liked Levi better he would probably envy Levi but he wouldn’t be jealous of him. Levi was a lonely person, and he went his own way. Erwin liked people and needed people. It was his very own lack of indifference that made it easy for his family to hurt him but it meant he had friends, too.

Levi was not easily hurt. He let things roll off his back; it was one of the reasons Erwin could be so open to him, and how he managed to refrain from judgement. Sometimes Erwin envied him in his splendid isolation, but other times he found it sad and wished he didn’t wall himself off quite so much.
If a pretty young man with bright eyes could get through to him when so many others couldn’t, Erwin would be genuinely pleased for him.

When he got home Erwin sighed and turned on the lights in his apartment. His view included a narrow slice of the river between two other apartment buildings, but only rarely did it look anything other than inky black at night. He wondered why people paid so much for that sort of thing and closed the curtains. He found himself going over to his stereo system and swiping a finger along the top of one of the speakers.

Maybe he could stand to give the place a bit of a dusting. It could be a project for the weekend; there was no way he was going to do anything about it now. He flopped down on the couch and took out his phone and found himself looking at HotFreeRange’s front page.

No.

He had an agreement, and so he wouldn’t. He checked his email instead, and then regretted it when he saw that all of the unread ones were work related and he put his phone away without opening any of them.

He hadn’t really been tempted to look at Eren’s page before now; he’d been too irritated by the whole thing and the site was just a reminder of his own folly, along with Eren’s dishonesty. Even once he’d sorted that out he hadn’t been tempted and perhaps it was sheer confidence in his own ability to seduce; if he wanted to see Eren naked he could get the real thing, he’d been sure of it.

He wondered what Levi had seen when he’d pulled away from his mouth, what sort of face Eren had made. Had he been holding his breath or was he panting, did he look at his eyes or his mouth, did he cling to him or step back, was he shy or certain?

Erwin exhaled slowly and shut his eyes, thinking about these sorts of things, chasing the idea further, taunting himself by imagining what was already on display online.

Maybe Levi was doing the same thing. Erwin opened his eyes at the thought, his desire to jerk off melting away like ice in the sun.

“Oh, fuck off!” he snapped at the ceiling. Still grumbling, he got to his feet and went to get a beer. There were some things that were just beyond the pale.

Chapter End Notes

Mizo has done some more great illustrations for the last three chapters. Right here.
“What are you doing?” Jean asked, carelessly leaning against the door frame and running his hand over his hair, making sure nothing had happened to it since he left the bathroom twenty minutes earlier.

Eren didn't look up. “I'm cleaning the car, what does it look like I'm doing?”

“When you said you were going to clean the car I kind of assumed you meant the outside,” Jean said. “You've been at it all morning; it can't be that dirty.”

“The inside is where you sit,” Eren said stubbornly. “Wouldn't it make more sense to clean it more that the outside then?”

“No. The outside is the bit people see.” Jean strolled over and arranged himself casually against the open passenger side door, looking in over Eren's shoulder. “Since when have you cared about how clean the car is? I don't care.”

“Will you stop posing like that?” Eren asked. “He's not going to be here for another hour and a half and you look ridiculous anyway.”

“I don't know what you're talking about,” Jean said, straightening up self-consciously. Eren rolled his eyes and kept scrubbing.

Eren knew he had to spend some quality time with Mikasa, and decided to kill two birds with one stone and invite Armin as well. Hopefully the addition of a stranger would keep Mikasa from getting too personal, and he had promised Jean that he would introduce them properly. And if anyone was going to reassure Mikasa about the kind of people who worked at HotFreeRange, Armin was it.

For a moment he even considered inviting Erwin as well, but quickly squashed that idea. He suspected Mikasa would recognise him from the website if he showed up, and there was enough awkwardness in the air as it was without him having to explain exactly how he'd acquired his handsome older friend.

He wasn't entirely sure himself.

He hadn't seen Erwin since the evening in Chinatown, but he had received a text congratulating him on smoothing Levi's feathers a couple of days later. Eren had taken that as an invitation to start a conversation, and after assuring Erwin that Levi had been perfectly reasonable after all, they'd batted a couple of texts a day back and forth about nothing too consequential.

So, they were friends. Eren was pretty proud of himself for rescuing the relationship from complete disaster and his mood always lightened when he saw Erwin's name on his phone.

“What are you doing that's taking so long anyway?” Jean asked. “We need to lay in some snacks.”

“I'm just cleaning the air vents,” Eren said. He was kneeling on the seat and scrubbing at them with an old toothbrush.

“Why?”

“There were cat hairs in them.”
“Are you fucking with me?”

Eren glanced up. “No. Why?” He could tell from Jean's voice that a tirade was incoming.

“Cat hairs? Eren, we live in cat hairs. There are cat hairs in the washing machine, there are cat hairs on the couch, there are cat hairs in the soap, I found a cat hair in my soup two minutes after cooking it last night. Seventy percent of everything you feed that creature goes into the production of more hair! It's not like she does anything else with her time but shed everywhere. We breathe cat hairs and you suddenly care about the air vents in your car? What is wrong with you?”

“If it bothers you so much vacuum the apartment more often,” Eren said.

“That's not the point, Eren.” Jean put his hands in his hair and then realised he was messing it up and went back inside to find a mirror and fix it.

Eren ignored Jean's distress and sat back and regarded his handiwork. He knew he didn't really have to do this, but Levi had been so nice to him so it was a gesture, he decided. A gesture of, of good faith or showing willing or something like that. There wasn't any point in thinking about it too much; he did what seemed right and Levi would probably never get to see it but that was okay. He felt better about it.

Jean was right though; he had other things he should be doing.

Mikasa brought an external hard drive with her movie collection on it and some snacks chosen at random from the Taiwanese grocery store near her apartment. Armin brought home-made peanut butter cookies that Jean seemed to think demonstrated an incredible generosity of spirit not seen before among mortal humans. He also nearly dropped the box when Armin handed it to him.

Eren introduced Armin and Mikasa, and Armin and Missy. Missy had sensed there were new people in the house and came out to greet them, her tail held high like a banner. Mikasa stooped to pet her, murmuring soothing sympathetic words; it was the first time she'd seen her since the operation.

“The famous cat that started it all,” Armin said.

Mikasa looked up at Eren at those words. Eren sighed.

“Yeah, okay, let's talk. You guys can pick a movie.”

“Uh, right,” Jean said, torn between staring at Armin and not staring at Armin and managing only to look shifty eyed in the process.

Eren led Mikasa to his room and sat on the bed.

“I'm okay, Mikasa,” Eren said with a shrug. “See? Everything's fine.”

“Just because you feel okay now doesn't mean anything. What if this hurts your future prospects?” she asked. “I mean, employers Google you and-”

“That's why I have a stage name. Look, maybe there's a tiny chance someone will recognise me but it's not like I'm gonna make a career out of this. I'll be for a couple of years at most and then I'll disappear again. I'm not going to be famous. Do you think I'm somehow devaluing myself making porn?” he asked aggressively.

“What?” Mikasa looked at him, startled.
“Is that what you think?” Eren pressed her. “You think less of me?”

“No of course not! But other people might.”

“So? People might think less of me cause I'm gay, too.”

“You can't help that.”

“Would it make any difference if I could? Do I have a responsibility to make people not think badly of me due to their own prejudices?”

“No.” Mikasa frowned and sat down next to him. “I'm just. I didn't know this part of you, Eren. I feel like you might turn into someone I don't know without me noticing and then what? The Eren I knew would never do something like this.”

“Never?” Eren asked. “Don't you remember when I made out with Jean in front of the whole school?”

A faint smile played across Mikasa's lips. “I was at practice at the time and I came back to all these messages on my phone. Pretty much everyone who had my number sent me pictures, like I wanted to see my brother making out with his best friend.”

“See, see?” Eren nudged her.

“Is this really the same thing?” she asked.

“Well, sorta? Maybe not quite the same but there's not that much difference. And it's not like I'm bothered by an audience, right? And I'm not ashamed of myself.”

“Hm.” Mikasa didn't look totally convinced but she seemed to have relaxed somewhat. Eren could hear Jean and Armin talking in the living room, and the TV in the background.

“I'm sorry if I made your favourite porn site weird now though,” Eren said.

“Shut up!” Mikasa blushed.

Eren laughed.

They fell silent for a while.

“You know,” Mikasa began, looking around his room. “When we moved here, it was kind of a relief not to be looking out for you all the time.”

“What?” Eren had never heard a word of complaint from her before. “I didn't ask you to look out for me.”

“I know. But I had to anyway and it pissed me off sometimes. It was like, you could get away with not taking things seriously, but I was scared if I did the same thing something awful would happen. Enough awful things happened as it was.”

“It's Dad's fault,” Eren said, frowning. That was always his answer to this sort of thing.

Mikasa shook her head. “I don't know. I mean, of course I still think of you and worry about you but not living in the same house meant I could relax a bit. Leave you in Jean's hands although why I thought that was a good idea-”
“I'm not a kid,” Eren said sharply. “But you always acted like I was. I hated it.”

“Did you really hate it that much?” She looked at him with wide, hurt eyes.

“Not all the time,” Eren allowed.

“We were kids,” she said softly. “I didn't want you to have to grow up as fast as you did. And I felt so frustrated because I knew if you decided to do something you would, and there was nothing I could do about it, no matter how stupid it was. I didn't have the right to forbid you anything.”

“It felt like you did,” Eren grumbled. “You stopped me doing a lot of stuff.”

“Good.” Mikasa grabbed his ear and twisted it. “It's probably the only reason you're still in one piece.”

“Ow! Stop that.” Eren laughed.

She released him.

“Sorry,” she said.

“Me too.” Eren wasn't entirely sure what they were apologising for, but it seemed the right thing to say. “So are things going to be okay now?”

“Are you going to keep making porn?”

“Yeah, I think so. Hange sent me some scripts—you can read them if you want.”

Mikasa looked curious for a moment. “Maybe that's not a good idea.” She took a deep breath. “I guess I can't stop you. Just, you know, I'm here, okay? And if anyone hurts you.” She narrowed her eyes. “I'll murder them.”

“Uh. Thanks. And don't worry, no chance of me growing up just yet.” Eren grinned.

“I know. We should probably get back before they start the movie without us,” Mikasa said.

“Oh, speaking of which, what do you think of Armin?”

“He seems nice. He's the guy you made the movie with, isn't he?”

“Yeah. I don't like him in that way though. But he's pretty cool. And Jean trips over his own lips every time he's in the room. It's hilarious. You'll see what I mean.”

“You're trying to set them up?” Mikasa asked.

“Not really. I just think it's funny. But hey, if it happens, it happens.”

“Hmm. Let's go and see what they're up to.”

They weren't up to much. They'd selected one of the films on Mikasa's drive and were sitting at opposite ends of the couch, Armin patting Missy's head as she sat at his feet and purred. Jean was attempting to look casual.

“There you are,” Jean said when they emerged. “Took you long enough.” He didn't have a lot of venom in his tone, however.
“I'm sorry, were you bored?” Eren asked.

“No,” he said defensively.

“Mikasa and I had stuff to talk about.”

“Ah.”

Everyone in the room knew what the stuff in question was.

Armin smiled encouragingly. “And it went okay?”

“Yeah,” Mikasa said. She looked at Jean, “I guess I shouldn't be surprised you didn't say anything.”

“He asked me not to,” Jean said. “And I have to live with him.”

“Yeah, I get it. I'm not blaming you.”

“Oh.” Jean looked like he'd just dodged a bullet.

“Everyone's happy,” Eren said firmly.

Mikasa raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything.

“Shove over, horseface.” Eren wedged himself in between Jean and the armrest, forcing him to shift over.

“Hey! What are you doing, you idiot?”

Armin caught Eren's eye and shook his head, but he was smiling. Mikasa looked at them thoughtfully for a few moments.

“I'm sitting next to Eren,” she declared and sat herself in between him and Jean, and Jean was obliged to shift out from underneath her and practically ended up in Armin's lap as the siblings mercilessly shuffled him along the couch, grinning all the while.

“Ah, sorry, sorry,” he apologised to Armin who was blinking up at him with wide, innocent blue eyes. Eren tried not to laugh.

It was a fine afternoon, and even if Jean didn't exactly ever relax he seemed a bit reluctant to move from his seat when the movie ended. They ordered pizza for dinner and watched a couple more films and Eren drove Mikasa and Armin back to their respective homes.

He hugged Mikasa goodnight on the steps of her apartment block and she ruffled his hair and told him not to be a stranger. When he got home Jean was pretending to tidy up, even though all the empty pizza boxes had already been put away.

“Thanks,” he muttered.

“Did you get his number or anything?” Eren asked, without much hope. Jean just frowned. Eren shrugged, “Well, you can't say I didn't try.”

“Like you'd do any better,” Jean said.

“Ha! Jean, trust me, I have way more guts when it comes to talking to guys I fancy than you do.”
Jean raised an eyebrow, “Since when?”

“Since-” Eren cut himself off. “Anyway, you suck. And you'll probably die alone. Maybe Missy can sense that about you.”

“Since when?” Jean repeated in a slightly louder voice as Eren beat a retreat to his room. Eren just laughed.

Of course, it didn't count if you only made friends with the people you fancied, now he thought about it.

But he was definitely doing better than Jean.

The next day, Eren had a meeting with Hange. It was the first time he'd been back to HotFreeRange since the morning his work had gone up on the site. Despite what Erwin and Levi had agreed he'd half expected not to hear from Hange again, but a few days later they'd sent an email with several scripts attached.

He'd felt very relieved.

They met in Hange's office, and Eren noted that it wasn't any tidier than the other times he'd been in there. He tried not to look at the mess and he really wished Hange would clean it up. He supposed they had some sort of system, but he felt guilty even being in the room.

Hange pushed their glasses up on their nose and regarded Eren silently for a few moments.

“Well, it's good to have you back.”

“What?” Eren was startled.

“Would you like to see your streaming stats? It was an excellent debut. I think you're going to be quite popular.”

“Oh, I see.” That was what they meant. “That's good.” Eren wasn't sure he wanted to know the details; it didn't make any difference to his pay, after all, and he preferred not to think about all the anonymous viewers out there staring at his junk.

“Mm. I also got a call from Erwin, telling me not to be too hard on you.”

Eren wasn't sure what to say.

“He needn't have worried,” Hange went on. “We agreed to overlook it and that's what we'll do.”

Eren could tell it wasn't going to be that easy to regain Hange's trust in him, but he'd expected nothing different. His sentence had been a light one. He told them that he'd do his best in the future and they moved on to the scripts he'd been given.

He liked the one about the hacker the best. He remembered reading his mother's collection of sci-fi and cyberpunk novels as a teenager during the long, boring summers when Jean went away to camp, and he liked the idea of starring in one.

Hange launched into an explanation of the themes behind the work, and how they wanted to explore what sex might look like from a transhumanist perspective, and how technology might change the way people found pleasure. Eren felt his eyes glazing over; if he was honest he just wanted to play with cool gadgets and do a couple of action scenes.
“So can I be the cyborg cop?” he asked.

“Uh.” Hange halted mid-diatribe. “I'd put you down as the hacker, actually.”

“But he doesn't get to do any shooting,” Eren said. “And when he tries to beat up a guy, he loses. Did Reiner have dibs on the cop?”

“Not exactly.” Hange said. They sighed. “Eren, when you're put next to Reiner, you not convincing as technologically enhanced for combat.”

“Oh.” Eren couldn't really argue against that. Reiner was built like a brick. Still, he felt a bit depressed about it.

“Cheer up, Eren,” Hange grinned, noticing his downcast expression. “Reiner is looking forward to working with you. We just have to wait for the bruising to go down.”

“What did Ymir do to him?” Eren asked.

“Nothing he didn't ask for,” Hange said. “Don't worry, this script doesn't call for any bondage elements, although I notice it was a 'maybe' on your list.”

“Yeah,” Eren shrugged. “I never really thought about it. I guess if it doesn't hurt too much.”

“You don't have to be on the receiving end,” Hange said idly. They obviously didn't mean anything by it but Eren found himself picturing Erwin with his hands bound above his head, and Levi snarling around a gag. Christ, where had that come from? He'd certainly never seen either of them do anything like that on the site.

“I never thought of that,” Eren said. Maybe he'd have some words with Reiner about all of this. It couldn't hurt to get an experienced perspective on the whole thing.

“Well, like I said, it's not required for this project. We are going to need costumes though, so I'll get Nanaba to take your measurements, since you're here. We'll go over the script with Reiner in more detail but there are just a few points I'd like your opinion on.”

The meeting went on for about an hour and then Hange said they had to be on set and they went and found Nanaba and explained what needed to be done.

By this point, Eren was comfortable enough to strip down to his underwear in the break room and let Nanaba drape measuring tape all over him.

“I'll measure everything,” Nanaba said. “For our records, even though it's probably overkill for this project.”

“Where do you get the costumes?” Eren asked.

“A local company makes them to order for us. They do cosplay stuff as well, so pretty much everything we ask for they can handle. Their first job was Erwin and Levi's wings, and you'll have seen those,” he explained. “It's actually pretty cool; if you get the chance to visit their workshop it's definitely worth going to.”

“Are they nearby?” Eren raised his arms and Nanaba ran the tape along them.

“Not really close, but if you're around when Mike and I go to pick up an order I'll let you know.”

Nanaba paused and entered some figures into the tablet he was holding. Eren lowered his arms.
“Hey, can I ask you something?” Eren asked.

“Sure, anything you like.”

“How did you get this job? Did you know Hange at college?”

“No, I got in the way you did,” Nanaba said. “I answered an advertisement. Not on the site though. I was a freelance photographer.” He returned to measuring. “But it's so hard to make a living like that, you know? People just don't want to fucking pay us.” He frowned, looking angry for the first time Eren had seen. “I spent more time chasing down money than taking pictures and I love taking pictures. The ad Hange put out stressed creative freedom and quality and I sent in my portfolio not expecting much.” He smiled, “I didn't normally take pictures of naked people for a start, but Hange hired me anyway. And I feel really comfortable here; I can't imagine quitting now.”

“Do you still take other photos?”

“Of course I do. But now I have a day job I can actually try more experimental things. I'm hoping to get my work into a gallery again sometime next year.”

“I think your photographs are amazing,” Eren said. “I couldn't believe them when I saw them. Were they photoshopped?”

Nanaba smiled. “Thank you. You're a good model. I'm looking forward to photographing you again. And Hange has a policy against photoshopping bodies; I only use it to tweak lighting if it's really necessary.”

“I see.”

“That was all you, baby.” Nanaba looked up from his measuring and winked. Eren smiled despite himself.

Feeling more at ease with Nanaba he found himself speaking again.

“I nearly got myself fired, you know.” The words were out before he could think about them. He just wanted to tell someone.


Eren told him, hoping he wasn't making a mistake but desperate to unburden himself.

Nanaba was silent for a few moments afterwards, idly coiling the measuring tape around his fingers.

“That's actually kind of funny. A lot of people found Erwin and Levi really intimidating, and you just bounced after them like a puppy.”

“Well, they're not so bad once you know them,” Eren said.

“Look at it this way,” Nanaba said. “In this business, we have a constantly changing roster of young, pretty people paid to fuck each other. Compared to our usual disasters, this isn't really a blip on the radar. Hange has fired people before on the spot, mainly for not respecting their co-stars on set.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. It wasn't like you went after someone with the intention of victimising them. You picked some of our oldest veterans, and you had honest intentions at least,” he said.
“I guess that's what I wanted to hear,” Eren said.

“You'll look back on all of this someday and laugh,” Nanaba said.

“I hope so.”

“How did Erwin and Levi take it?” he asked curiously.

“They were mad, at first. I apologised and I guess things are okay now. I'm not sure how that happened, to be honest.”

“It's your natural charm, Eren,” Nanaba said with a smile. “Okay, you're done.”

“So I can put my clothes on?”

“Only if you want to,” Nanaba grinned.

“Hey, if I'm allowed to ask,” Eren said, pulling on his jeans. “What kind of models were Erwin and Levi?”

“Hm.” Nanaba thought for a few moments. “Erwin was pretty easy to work with; he didn't really do spontaneous shoots very well, so I'd give him an idea of what I hoped to do the day before. Levi was, uh.” Nanaba sighed. “It didn't matter what I wanted. He didn't take direction really well, you know? He was a hard worker and professional, but if I forced him into a pose you could see it in every line of his body. He had his own opinions as to how he wanted a shoot to go.”

“Is that why he looks so cranky in a lot of photos?” Eren asked.

Nanaba laughed, “I think that was just his persona. Sometimes I wondered if he had smiling down as a hard limit. I even asked him that once.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing. He didn't smile, which is what I'd hoped he'd do. But when we were working to the same script he was perfect; he was never lazy in front of the camera, never left the work to me.”

He smiles sometimes, Eren thought. With Nanaba's measuring done he was free to go, and now assured of his continuing employment at the studio he drove in to campus to hand in his notice at the book shop.
“Ffffuhh...” Eren gritted out between clenched teeth. His arms ached, and he could feel sweat trickling down his forehead and his ribs. It was hard to breathe. His head was pressed back against the bench beneath him.

“Come on, Eren,” Levi said, looking down at him. “You can do it, you know you can. Just bit further.”

Eren wanted to believe him but he felt that he was at his limit. He tried to keep his lips together, holding back the embarrassing noises he was making. It wasn't like anyone but Levi was listening but that was bad enough. He wanted to impress him, after all, and he redoubled his efforts.

With one final effort he straightened his arms.

“Good.”

Levi reached over and added his strength to Eren's and helped him put the weight back on the brackets above his head.

Eren let himself relax, breathing hard. He wondered why he'd thought this was a good idea in the first place.

He'd worked one of his final shifts at the bookstore, but hadn't really been paying a great deal of attention. He was still mulling over what Hange had said about his physique. They'd told him not to feel bad about it, but it kept nagging at him. He never thought of himself as unfit or anything, but maybe he should be lifting his game, given his appearance was now going to be his bread and butter. Not to mention, he wanted the roles that gave him the most action scenes; who could blame him for wanting to look cool?

He needed a second opinion and Levi was the obvious person to ask for it, but it had still taken a fair amount of courage to enter his number into his phone and send a text.

_Sorry to bother. This is Eren. Can I get your professional opinion on something?_

Ten minutes later Levi had called him.

“I don't like texts. If you want to talk, then talk,” he said when Eren had picked up.

“Um. Sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologise; it’s for future reference. So, what did you want to ask?”

“Well, uh. It's kind of embarrassing.” He hadn’t actually prepared himself to ask verbally, and it was more difficult than typing. “Hange said that- No um, look, should I be working out more, in your opinion?”

“Why are you asking me?”

“Well obviously I'll never look like Reiner but,” he trailed off.

“In my opinion almost everyone could stand to work out more,” Levi said unhelpfully. “You've got room for improvement,” he added. “It's up to you what you want to prioritise. But one MMA class a week isn't going to make much difference by itself.”
“Well, I’ve been practising between classes. I guess I’m just not sure I know what I’m doing.”

He heard Levi sigh, “Look, if you’re free this afternoon come to the gym with me and see how you like it. I'll text you the address. You shouldn't just leap into weightlifting without someone watching you anyway.”

“Really? It’s okay to come over?”

“Don't ask stupid questions.” Levi hung up.

Eren found himself blinking at the phone, wondering if he’d pissed Levi off. Nevertheless, Levi sent him the address and Eren went home to get his gear and that was how he found himself a couple of hours later, feeling rubbery and exhausted as he wiped down the bench.

“How did I do?” he asked.

“You did the best you could, which is what matters,” Levi said. “Take a break; it's my turn.”

Eren watched as Levi loaded more weights onto the machine, torn between feeling dispirited at how far behind he was and grateful he had the chance to watch.

He didn’t think this was an offer normally extended to student, or to anyone, and Eren felt honoured and pleased that Levi didn’t mind spending this time with him.

When he’d arrived Levi had told him that if he complained he wouldn't work out with him.

“Erwin works out too and he hates it,” he explained. “It's miserable listening to him, so I don't do it. I like working out; no one’s making me, but I do it anyway. If you want someone to commiserate with while you exercise, I'd suggest you call him instead next time.”

“Would he want to work out with me?” Eren asked curiously.

Levi had given him a funny look. “I can't imagine he'd object.”

Eren was already used to Levi’s teaching style, and everything went smoothly. The gym wasn't too crowded at this time of day as the after-work rush hadn't yet started. Eren still felt a bit self-conscious; without the background of the classroom it seemed more personal when Levi watched him.

Eren sat on an unused machine and watched Levi bench-press. He didn't think he'd ever get tired of those arms and even if he felt like he'd been run over by a bulldozer it was probably worth it to watch Levi’s muscles flex under his pale skin. Levi didn't seem to mind being watched; he wore an expression of calm concentration, and towards the end of his set Eren could see the strain on his face as short puffs of air escaped his lips.

If he dropped that weight Eren was pretty sure he wouldn’t have the strength to lift it off him.

As Levi worked through his sets without mishap, Eren’s mind drifted from worst case scenarios to best ones. Ones in which he'd flung a leg over Levi's hip and sat on his lap, ground down against him, felt those amazing abs flex underneath him. The position Levi was in was perhaps too inviting. Eren actually felt a bit guilty about the fact that half of this lesson was going in his spank bank for later. On the other hand, he told himself, he'd spent the last few years wanking over Levi as it was, and Levi clearly wasn't particularly bothered by the fact.

It was a little different without a computer screen between them. Eren hadn't found any particular
desire to go back to HotFreeRange for anything other than professional reasons since he'd appeared on the site himself. It was just too strange.

He'd memorised all the best bits anyway.

The sound of the bar clanking back into place brought Eren back to reality with a start.

“Rested?” Levi asked. He had a sheen of sweat on his face and arms. “Let's try something else.”

Levi didn't want to push him too hard, and Eren found himself doing about half as much as Levi himself did. But Eren wasn't bored. Not in the slightest.

Finally, Levi suggested they swim a couple of laps before they went home.

“Nothing too strenuous, but it cools me off.”

At least, that's what Levi intended. Eren agreed that he could use some cooling off although he wasn't sure getting in the water with Levi was a good way of achieving it. He changed in record time, keeping his eyes averted because he'd been flirting with disaster all afternoon as it was. If he saw Levi naked no amount of cold water was going to help, and he'd probably be obliged to jerk off in the toilets and Levi would know.

If he didn't already.

Eren wished he knew what Levi was thinking. Neither of them had mentioned what had happened that afternoon after class, and now more than a week and a half had passed and it seemed too late to raise the topic. But he still thought about it; he thought about it a lot.

They lazily swam a couple of laps, and Eren could feel how tired his muscles were. He guessed he was going to be quite sore tomorrow. Nevertheless, when they paused at the end he grinned at Levi as an idea came to him.

“Wanna race?” he asked.

Levi shrugged, looking amused. “Okay.”

“Loser has to buy the winner a drink,” Eren said.

“Where's all this confidence coming from? All right.”

“Hey, either way I get a drink.” Eren took a deep breath. He had one chance to be better than Levi at something and this was it.

They lined up, eyes on the clock beside the pool, and when it showed zero they both pushed off. Eren was exhausted but he was motivated, and he pushed himself past the pain in his protesting body, focusing on the dark line at the bottom of the pool. He couldn't have taken it more seriously if there was a gold medal at the end of it.

His fingertips hit the opposite wall and he lifted his head, yanking off his goggles in time to see Levi finish, several seconds behind him.

Eren laughed as Levi took off his goggles and looked at him, genuinely surprised.

“Yes! Victory! You owe me a drink.” He felt absolutely delighted with himself.

“Something you want to share, Eren?” Levi asked, raising an eyebrow.
Eren decided to come clean. “I was in the swimming squad all through high school,” he explained. “I'm a bit out of practice but I did do some swimming over the summer.”

“Huh. Yeah, you’ve got the build for it. I see. Don’t be too proud though, you have a natural advantage.”

“I do?” Eren was puzzled.

“Yeah. You only had to swim two thirds of the distance I did.”

Eren thought about this while Levi caught his breath, floating with his head tilted back and an odd smile on his face.

“That was a short joke,” Eren said.

“Yeah? I have noticed I'm short,” Levi said. “Presumably you have as well.” He moved his arms lazily in the water.

“I just figured it would be a sore spot,” Eren said.

Levi shrugged. “Why would it be? Do I have any reason to be insecure?”

He knew he was being obvious again but Eren found himself looking along Levi’s body as he floated in the water.

“No,” Eren mumbled, brushing waterlogged hair out of his eyes and looking away again.

Levi smirked. “Exactly. I mean, if someone made a big deal out of it I'd get pissed off but otherwise why should I care? Anyway, I suppose I should buy you a smoothie or something, since you won fair and square.”

“You don't want a rematch?” Eren asked.

“Why, are you challenging me to one?”

Eren shook his head. All the adrenaline had worn off by this point and he wasn't sure he'd make it to the other end of the pool, let alone win another race. He wanted to just crawl into bed and sleep.

As promised Levi bought him something from the juice bar attached to the gym once they'd dried off and changed back into their clothes. They sat at one of the tables, Eren's hair still slightly sticky with chlorine; he'd decided to wait until he got home to have a shower.

“You don't mind doing this, do you?” Eren asked, stirring his smoothie with his straw. Levi had ordered something similar for himself.

“What?”

“Helping me out. I mean, I guess I figured I wasn't your favourite person after what happened.”

“I told you I don't care about that any more. If something bothered me you'd know.”

“So we can do this again?” Eren asked, getting to the point of his questions.

“If you want,” Levi said. “Look, Eren, you're free to work out with me as long as it doesn't interfere with my program, whatever, but I can tell you now that if you prefer swimming, that's what you should do. Unless you resort to chemical help, and if you do I will not train with you, you're never
going to look like Reiner. You don't have his body.”

“Or yours,” Eren said.

Levi inclined his head. “Yeah.” His gaze flicked down to Eren's chest and back up again so fast Eren would have missed it if Levi hadn't been a constant magnet for his attention any time they were in the same room. “I don't think it's something you should worry about.”

Eren raised his eyebrows. “So we should work out a schedule then,” he said, taking out his phone.

“Sure,” Levi said. He sounded tired and uninterested but when Eren looked up from the screen he realised Levi's eyes were still on him. He smiled and Levi shrugged.

Eren figured a gym membership was a small price to pay to spend more time with Levi. The next day he wondered if the pain might not be too high a price to pay to spend more time with Levi. Everything ached. He eased himself through the day like a zombie, but he wasn’t going to complain.

After dinner he sent Erwin a text before he sat down to study.

_Worked out with Levi yesterday._

He wasn’t interrupted until a few minutes before midnight, at which point the buzzing of his phone was a welcome distraction from the fluid mechanics problems in front of him.

_My condolences. I assume there will be a memorial service for the late Eren Jaeger?_

Eren grinned, happy to be distracted.

_It was p brutal. He said u worked out w/him sometimes_  

He’d half expected Erwin had sent him one final text before bed, but to his surprise the response was almost instant.

_Don’t remind me. We got rather competitive._  

Eren chewed his lip. _He said u complained a lot. He said if i complained i was banned_  

_Did you?_  

_Of course not._  

_You are a glutton for punishment._  

Eren rolled his shoulders and winced and decided that he must be. _What r u doing up so late? Don’t u have work 2morro?_  

_Don’t you have class? I’m working._  

_That sux. Oh, what the hell. It was worth a try. Can I call u?_  

Erwin’s response was to call him.

“I tell you I’m working and your first instinct is to try and distract me further?” he asked without preamble.

“I thought you were doing a pretty good job of distracting yourself with all the texting,” Eren replied,
leaning back in his chair.

“Hm. Maybe.”

“Are you really still at the office?” Eren asked.

“No, I’m at home. I just took back some amendments to read. What are you doing?”

“Fluid mechanics problems. Liquid around obstructions, liquid through pipes, stuff like that. It’s not my best subject.”

“I know how you feel.” Erwin sounded tired.

“Did Levi really ban you from working out with him for complaining?” Eren asked.

“Oh is that how he put it? No. I quit working out with him because I got sick of his smug face and how much he was clearly enjoying himself. Levi’s a freak; a health freak and a clean freak. Don’t pick up his bad habits.”

Eren thought about the air vents in his car and laughed nervously, “I’ll try not to.”

“You going to keep working out with him?” Erwin asked.

“I think so. I guess. Unless I get sick of him too, or he gets sick of me.”

“Why the sudden health kick anyway?”

Eren explained what Hange had said.

“You know Hange doesn’t mind, right? You were hired because they liked you the way you are. They don’t demand their actors change themselves; they want a wide variety of people in their films.”

“Yeah, but I want more action roles, so I gotta look like a man of action.”

Erwin laughed. “If you want more of that just tell Hange; they love a writing challenge. Anyway, if you can stand it Levi will certainly put you through your paces.” A pause. “And you know, I’m glad you guys could be friends.”

“Um. Oh, yeah.” Eren smiled. “Well, I dunno if he’d call us that.”

“Don’t hold your breath waiting either. He doesn’t call me a friend. That's just the way he is.”

Friends, huh. Erwin seemed so keen on the concept now, Eren was a little hurt. He’d liked him once, but it looked like he’d blown that chance. He sighed, uncertain what to say.

Erwin stepped into the gap. “How’s your cat, anyway? All recovered?”

Eren went with the change of subject and they discussed Missy and Eren told Erwin about Armin and Jean and how hopeless the latter was. Erwin was easy to talk to; he made Eren feel like whatever he had to say was worth listening to, that he was interested.

Eventually he sighed, “It’s a weeknight, Eren. You should sleep.”

“So should you.”
“Okay, how about I will if you will,” he suggested.

“It’s a deal. I don’t think I’ll get any more work done now anyway.” He felt happy and relaxed and fluid mechanics would just ruin all of that. “Um, Erwin can I ask you something?” He’d been flopped back in his chair one foot up on the table next to his mouse, but now he straightened up a bit.

“Of course.”

“Could we, um, hang out again sometime? Like, nothing in particular just, you know.” He wasn’t really asking him out. Not like that but he wanted to spend time with him again. “Yeah, that sounds good. Whenever your schedule opens up.”

“Actually, I um, quit my job,” Eren said. “At the bookstore.” He half-expected to be chastised; dropping a reliable job for an unreliable one. “I only have a few more shifts.”

“Good for you,” Erwin said, without hesitation. “Students shouldn’t spend all their spare time working. You gotta have fun while you’re young.”

“Why, what happens if you don’t?” Eren asked.

“You turn into Levi.”

“You’re such arseholes to each other,” Eren said, laughing. “I guess I’ll know I’m your friend when you treat me the same way, right?” He said it as a joke, but Erwin didn’t respond right away. “Hello?”

“I’d never treat you like that,” Erwin said quietly.

“I-I. Um. Okay.” Eren didn’t feel offended, rather he felt that there were other reasons that Erwin might not consider him the way he considered Levi. Good, complicated reasons that made him squirm in his chair. Maybe he’d been wrong to think he’d blown his chances earlier, but he wasn’t certain and he wished he could see Erwin’s face.

“Let’s face it,” Erwin continued in a lighter tone. “You’d really have to work at it to be half the arsehole Levi is.”

Eren dutifully chuckled at the joke, but he felt all unsettled and the conversation ended soon after. There was no reason why Erwin wouldn’t still like him, after all. He found himself wondering what Levi might think.

And then he decided he was too tired to think straight and that he was probably reading more into things than was actually there, and he went to bed.

Eren fled down the alleyway and rebounded off the iron railings at the end, breathing hard. A dead end. He braced himself and ran at the fence, trying to climb up and over. It looked like he might make it when a gloved hand clamped around his ankle and yanked him backwards. He kicked free, and rolled and tried to scramble back the way he came.

“You’re under arrest.” His assailant swung a nightstick at him and he ducked, deflecting the blow. He had another device in his hand-

A blow to his arm sent it skidding away across the cobblestones.

“That trick won’t work on me twice.” Heavy hands descended on his shoulders and clamped down
around his arms. He was lifted off his feet, kicking and struggling and swearing.

“Let me go! Let me go, you arsehole cop!” His words had about as much effect as his attempts to kick the cops legs did; that is, none whatsoever.

He was slammed up against a wall and he flung his head back.

Crack!

“Ah, shit.” Eren was free in moments as Reiner staggered back, his hand going to his face.

“Cut!” Hange called. “Medic!”

“Crap, I am so sorry,” Eren turned around, looking at Reiner in concern.

“I'm fine, I'm fine,” Reiner said, cupping his hand around the blood pouring from his nose. “I've had worse.”

Mike abandoned his camera and took Reiner by the arm, steering him off set and into better light.

“Let me have a look,” he said.

“Just wait till it stops bleeding and clean me up and we can continue,” Reiner said, letting Mike turn his head this way and that as he mopped up the gore.

Hange sighed, “No, Reiner, you're meant to be a cyborg. A bruised nose is not really plausible.”

Eren was hovering nervously, wondering if there was anything he could do and Hange looked at him.

“I'm pretty sure that head-butt wasn't in the script, Eren.”

“It wasn't a head-butt, I was struggling. I didn't know his head was going to be there.”

“I think it's awesome!” Reiner said nasally. “We should write that into the script I reckon, only have him bounce off my cyborg nose.”

Hange pinched the bridge of their nose. “Let's not change the script at this late point. Mike, is his nose broken?”

“Hard to say. It's starting to swell up, but I don't think so. I'll put some ice on it.”

“Well, I don't think we can shoot this scene today, either way. Where's our extra? Eren you can shoot the gangster scene. I'm sure you've learned your lines.”

“Yes I have,” Eren said anxiously. Reiner seemed more amused than anything else, but Eren was worried about Hange; they didn't look all that happy and he didn't think he'd be allowed too many more screw-ups.

“Okay. Good. We can stay on schedule at least.”

“Just a moment.” The extra, who was apparently regularly on-call for bit parts that didn't require nudity, approached Hange. “I'm not entirely happy about a fight scene with him. He doesn't stick to script. I have an audition tomorrow; I can't risk a bloody nose today.”

“I won't do it again,” Eren said. “It was an accident.”
“Exactly, kid. You don’t know what you’re doing; you haven’t had much practice and you’re way too enthusiastic and it shows.” He shrugged. “I hate turning down paid work, Hange, and maybe if I didn’t have this thing on—”

“It’s fine,” Hange held up their hand. “This won’t effect your employment prospects next time.”

“Thank you.”

Hange scowled, rolling the copy of the script up in their hands and looking like they wanted to beat someone with it. Eren felt like he was definitely probably going to be absolutely fired.

“Okay, take ten. Reiner, get out of those clothes before you stain them. This is gonna play merry hell with our schedule.”

Eren felt further apologies would just draw Hange’s ire at this point and he slunk off set. Maybe he could fix this somehow before the ten minutes were up. He took out his phone and chewed his lip for a few moments. Well, it might be worth a try.
“Hange!” Eren had taken himself out to the corridor to make a phone call and he returned to the studio a few minutes later, grinning widely. “I've solved our problem.”

“How?” Hange was reviewing the footage that had already been shot, and they looked up from the camera screen. Reiner had taken himself off to the break room, a cold pack pressed to his face. He'd patted Eren on the shoulder as he'd walked past, still assuring him that it was totally fine.

Eren recalled what Ymir had said and wondered if he liked that sort of thing.

“I've found a replacement to play the gangster,” Eren said proudly.

“I, no, you can't just hire people.” Hange pinched the bridge of their nose, exasperated. “That's my job. There's a process...” they trailed off, perhaps realising that their words weren't making a dint in Eren's smile.

“He's worked here before,” Eren said, unable to keep from sounding just a bit smug. “I'm sure it will be fine. But we can only shoot for an hour, over his lunch break.”

“And when will that be?” Hange asked. Mike was listening in but didn't say anything.

“He's on his way,” Eren said.

Hange looked at him for a long moment. “Well, that's fine then.”

Hange didn't look entirely surprised when Erwin showed up. Eren had called him as a last resort; he'd been sure he was going to be fired, he was still feeling bad about Reiner, and he'd wanted advice more than anything else.

He'd asked enough of Levi recently—and he was starting to feel like he was asking for too much attention of the pair of them, really—so he'd called Erwin, half expecting he wouldn't pick up during work hours. He had picked up, and he told Eren to speak freely.

Eren explained what had happened, and asked Erwin what he thought he should do. There had been silence for a few moments and then Erwin had simply said he'd do it, and that he'd be there in half an hour or so.

Eren couldn't thank him enough. Erwin had chuckled and told him it was fine, but Eren still felt incredibly grateful. What he could possibly offer in return for his generosity and consideration he had no idea.

The ten minutes had been extended to twenty when Erwin poked his head around the studio door.

“Ah, here you are.”

“Hello Erwin, welcome back,” Hange said.

Eren had been sitting down but upon Erwin's entrance he scrambled to his feet and practically saluted. Erwin looked like he had done the first time they'd met; flawless and friendly. He bestowed a smile on everyone in the room. Mike waved.

Hange folded their arms. “I must say this is a surprise. I had no idea you and Eren were on such good terms.” They looked from Erwin to Eren and back again and Eren could feel his cheeks heating
Erwin smiled, “I couldn't just leave all my old friends in the lurch. It would be terribly irresponsible of me as a stakeholder in the company also.”

Hange's bemused look melted into one of their mad grins, “Ah Erwin, you're my rock. Welcome back, anyway. You’ll need a script; here you go.” They handed over their copy. “How long have you got?”

Erwin checked his watch. “Forty-five minutes.”

“Then we've no time to waste. Mike, cameras.” Hange and Mike swung into action to change the scenery and set up the shots while Erwin approached Eren.

“Nice hair,” Erwin said.

Eren grinned self-consciously. They'd dressed him up in a jacket with painted bits of tinfoil stuck to it and some jewellery with LEDs blinking away at his wrist and ear. According to Hange, all the hackers in the future would wear this sort of thing. They'd also woven some neon green streaks though Eren's hair and he touched them carefully to make sure they were in place.

“I look a bit silly, don't I?”

“Well, I've worn worse,” Erwin said, looking him up and down with amusement.

Eren had to agree with that. Erwin grinned and told him he looked fine.

Erwin skimmed the scene and then they rehearsed the lines quickly. There wasn't much actual dialogue, mostly just fighting, but even so Eren was impressed; Erwin seemed to have memorised the lot after just one read through.

Reiner appeared, his nose bright red and a rather peculiar shape, saying he'd heard Erwin was here and wanted to see him work.

Erwin went over to the mirror and Eren watched as he got ready. The tie and cuff-links came off, and he shifted his suit around a little, roughing up the perfect lines, rumpling it slightly. The last thing he did was hunt through the various cosmetics and other bits and pieces for something that would hold his hair in place and he slicked it back.

Erwin sneered at himself in the mirror for a few moments, rolling his shoulders and moving his feet and when he turned back the transformation was complete. He'd barely changed anything; he was wearing the same clothes, but the respectable lawyer had become the thug. Even the suit looked cheaper somehow.

It didn't make Erwin any less attractive. He looked dangerous, the kind of man that Eren would avoid if he saw him in a club or on the street, but that he'd surreptitiously stare at until he was out of view.

“How did you do that?” Eren asked, trying to cover for his staring.

Erwin shrugged, “Practice. Just getting into character.”

Eren realised that in a way his dream was about to come true; he would finally get to do a scene with Erwin, even if the clothes were staying on.
When Hange declared everything was ready, Eren took one last pointless look at the script and stepped into the set. He knew they were on a strict time limit; even if Erwin wouldn't be penalised for a long lunch, making him late to return to work wasn't the way to thank him for his time, and so he was determined to be as professional as possible.

They ran through the script again, this time rehearsing the fight. With Reiner it had been a bit ad hoc; they'd both just sort of thrown themselves into it, trusting that they could improvise the tussle. Erwin was different.

“Put your hand here,” he said, indicating his chest. “And then you push in,” he put his hands on Eren’s shoulders, guiding him. “And then I’ll catch you under the chin like this.” He made the movements slowly, like they were rehearsing underwater. “Snap your head back. Then I’ll grab your jacket.”

He went through the entire fight movement by movement. Hange and Mike watched without comment, and both seemed entirely at ease. Even Hange, who normally hovered around frowning even when things were going well, appeared to be paying only casual attention.

Eren understood why. In Erwin's hands, nothing felt left to chance. The fight, the entire scene was safe. His exact, calculated movements were incredibly reassuring.

Which wasn't to say Eren was feeling calm about the whole thing. He had Erwin's hands on his shoulders, his knuckles at his collarbone and his fingers gliding past his face. They'd shaken hands twice, but this was the first time Erwin had touched him beyond that, and it made his heart thump.

Eren tried to concentrate. This was important. He could be starstruck later.

“Put your hands up like this,” Erwin demonstrated. “When I put you on the floor. Take the weight on your arms, not your face.”

This was the end of the scene, in which Eren's character is finally defeated.

With rehearsal over, Hange focused again.

“Quiet on set.”

Eren hunched down, pretending to work at a computer screen that Hange had explained would be added in later via some technical wizardry of Moblit's. He looked up at the sound of Erwin's footstep.

He was to gasp in surprise and fear and attempt to take off running, and he had no trouble doing so. Erwin loomed. He managed to look about a thousand feet tall, and his expression was cold and cruel. Gleeful too, at the prospect of beating him to a pulp.

Erwin's hand landed on the back of Eren's neck as planned and Erwin yanked him back, not hard. It was up to Eren to stumble back, and make it look like it had real force behind it.

Eren squeaked and raised his guard, and Erwin came at him, fists swinging. Eren's heart pounded as his instincts responded to the apparent threat. He had to remind himself that Erwin was only acting, and didn't actually want to rip his head off his shoulders. They swung and punched and Hange didn't call a halt, so it had to be going well.

Eren bounced off the wall, having hurled himself back into it with Erwin's fist just lightly touching his chest, and took a device off his belt and hurled it at Erwin.
He paused, only momentarily as it fell to the ground, inert.

“’You think I’m a machine?’” Erwin snarled, incredulous.

“Now I know you’re not.” The next bit was the difficult part, and Eren attempted to aim his knee at Erwin’s crotch.

Erwin staggered back, gasping.

“Cut!”

They stopped, Eren terrified that he’d actually hurt him. Erwin straightened up and looked at Hange.

“Eren, you didn’t actually connect, you don’t have to look so horrified,” they said. “You didn’t even come close; the camera isn’t going to be fooled.”

“Do we need to redo?” Erwin asked.

“Yeah.”

“He’s really convincing,” Eren mumbled. He really didn’t want to hurt him.

Erwin looked at him for a few moments, while Eren tried to nerve himself up. “We could change the camera angle so he doesn’t have to get so close,” he said.

“It won’t be quite as convincing,” Hange said. “Eren?”

“Can we do that, please?” He smiled gratefully at Erwin for coming up with an alternative and Erwin winked.

“Action!”

They paused a couple of times for Eren’s nose to be artificially bloodied, but Hange didn’t yell cut again until towards the end of the scene, when Eren was on the floor, Erwin’s shoe on the back of his head and his arm wrenched backwards in the older man’s grasp. It wasn’t actually painful, but it could have been; he could feel Erwin’s strength and weight hanging over him, holding off, and just the thought that he couldn’t do anything if Erwin did decide to cause some pain made him short of breath. He wasn’t sure why, and he squirmed against the ground, breath hitching.

“Eren, less sexy, more painful, please,” Hange said.

“What?” Eren gasped. Erwin wasn’t pulling on his arm hard, but he relaxed his grip further.

“Grimace more when you groan,” Hange said. “Otherwise you’re setting the viewers up for something that’s not in the script.”

“Sorry,” Eren mumbled, and wished he could see Erwin’s face. Or maybe he was better not seeing it.

Eren did as he was told, drawing his lips back from his teeth in a snarl, and then rolling his eyes up as his character lost consciousness, Mike’s camera on the floor next to him focused on his face.

Erwin took his foot off Eren’s head and Eren rolled over, fake blood smeared across his cheek. He looked up into Erwin’s eyes and Erwin gave him a tight, neutral smile before extending his hand and helping him up.

Eren averted his eyes and took a deep breath to try and calm down.
“Phew,” Hanges said. “That looks good. Thirty minutes, Eren. Have some lunch, and we can shoot your escape scenes.” They walked over to Erwin and slapped him on the back. “You saved my schedule, Erwin. I owe you one.”

“Well, be sure you remember that when you come to assigning Christmas bonuses.”

“We get Christmas bonuses?” Eren asked.

Hange and Erwin both laughed.

“Look at him,” Hange said, grinning. “Eyes on the money. Sorry Eren, it's a joke.”

“I don't even get a shareholder bonus,” Erwin said.

“Do you want one?” Hange asked.

“Not really. You have better things to spend your money on. Like cleaning up your office.”

Hange sighed and avoided the topic. “Hadn't you better get back to work?”

“I suppose I must.”

Eren watched as Erwin reversed the transformation process, straightening out his suit and sliding back into respectability as if he'd never left. He tried to rearrange his hair for a few moments before giving up with a shrug.

“Oh, let 'em wonder,” he said.

Erwin had to go; his lunch break was pretty much over. Eren followed him out.

“I really appreciate your help,” he said. “Thank you.”

“It's fine.” Erwin smiled, “I miss this place. I had a lot of fun here, and I still enjoy making films. And the idea of sneaking off to make them during my lunch break entertains me quite a bit.”

“You're amazing,” Eren said. “Just the way you changed everything about you; how you stand, how you talk. I'm really glad I got to see you acting at least once.”

“Well, I'm flattered. I hope it was useful.”

“Very useful.”

“Good luck with the rest of it; I'm sure you'll do fine.”

“Thanks, um before you go.” Erwin paused. “I really owe you, you know? Like, if there's anything I can do for you, you just need to ask.” He looked up at Erwin, trying to impress on him that this was important to him; he didn't want to be in his debt all the time. If they were going to be friends, or whatever, it had to be give and take and Eren was determined to make it so.

Erwin smiled, “I'll keep it in mind, but don't worry about it too much.”

With that he left, leaving Eren uncertain as to how clearly he'd got his message across. Truth was, Erwin looked like he had everything he could ever want, except that maybe he was touch starved and Eren wasn't game to bring up that topic again.

But he thought about it quite often.
Eren bolted down his lunch and went back to work.

“I see you got your wish granted,” Levi said, when Eren went up to pay for his next class.

Eren had spotted Annie beforehand and made a point of going up and thanking her and telling her he owed her one. She’d merely shrugged. Eren still didn’t know exactly why she’d helped in the first place; she didn’t seem particularly fond of him or anything. Maybe that was just her personality, and Eren vowed to try and make allowances for it in the future.

Luckily, today there was no practising in pairs and he’d managed to avoid being thrown on his face. As usual, Annie had left immediately after class.

“Huh?” Eren handed over the money.

“You finally got to make a movie with Erwin,” Levi explained.

Eren scowled and looked away. He’d really rather hoped that particular wish would never be referred to ever again.

Levi pulled on his sweatshirt and picked up his bag, “So how did it go?”

“He was really good,” Eren said. “He just stepped into character like it was nothing. He made his suit look different even.”

“Yeah, he’s good at that.” Levi seemed happy to talk and Eren kept pace as they left the classroom. One or two of Levi’s students were still standing around talking and Levi waved at them briefly as they went past.

“I’m sure you’d be good too,” Eren prompted.

“Don’t flatter me. I have my strengths, but that sort of character work isn’t one of them. And no, I’m not likely to go back and show you no matter how big you try and make your eyes.”

“I wasn’t trying to make my eyes big,” Eren muttered hotly. He just stared sometimes and he couldn’t help it. “Anyway, I’m really grateful to Erwin. It was such short notice and all of that. I wish I could repay him somehow.”

Levi raised an eyebrow.

“You as well,” Eren said. If Erwin didn’t get it maybe Levi would. “You know, you’re helping me out in the gym and all of that. It’s not like I’m paying you so if there’s anything you want me to do, all you have to do is ask.”

Levi paused at the top of the steps.

“Well, good luck getting Erwin to see it your way. He likes helping people. A bit too much in my opinion; sometimes it’s best to just leave things alone.”

“Helping people?” Eren asked.

“Yeah, it’s a thing with him. He wants to fix everything for people he likes. You can’t make him happier than when you ask for his help and if you abuse that information,” Levi added coldly. “I’ll make you regret it.”

“I don’t want to abuse it. I feel bad enough as it is.”
Levi sighed, “Yes, I know. That was a bit unfair of me; you’re not that sort of person. He's met people who've taken advantage of him in the past, but don’t feel bad about Erwin, regardless.” He looked Eren up and down thoughtfully. “Do you really want to help me out?” he asked.

“Of course.”

“Okay. Are you free Saturday?”

“Yeah, I quit my other job.”

“Then I’ll text you my address.” Levi took out his phone. “Be there at nine and wear old clothes.”

“Am I going to regret making this offer?” Eren asked, only half joking.

“Probably, but it’s too late now. I’ll see you then, Eren.” Eren’s phone chimed as Levi sent his text and strolled off.

Eren was torn between feeling apprehensive and excited; he’d get to see Levi’s house.

Saturday dawned sunny and crisp and Eren parked on the street outside the row of town-houses Levi had directed him to. He was dressed appropriately in old jeans and a shirt he didn’t really care about. He wondered if Levi was going to make him paint something.

The place looked a bit depressing to Eren; the exterior hadn’t seen a lot of love for many years, and no one had bothered to sweep the leaves off the driveway yet. Only the cars parked in the garages and the occasional pot plant near the steps indicated it was inhabited at all.

Eren climbed Levi’s steps and knocked on his door. It was opened moments later by the man himself.

“Hi,” Eren said. The apartment behind him looked clean and sparsely furnished, but not bare; the lack of clutter felt like a choice rather than a necessity.

“Good morning. We’re cleaning the gutters today.”

“For the entire building?” Eren asked.

“Well its a bit pointless to only do a bit of it,” Levi pointed out. “Technically I shouldn’t have to do it at all, but I’ve lived here long enough to know that trying to get the landlord to do it is more trouble than its worth.” He looked at Eren, “Still keen?”

Like hell he was going to back out now. “You bet.”

Levi smiled faintly. “You know you should be more concerned that I’d take advantage of you rather than the other way around. Anyway, the ladder’s under the house. Go and get it out, and I’ll get some gloves. The garage isn’t locked.”

“Aren’t you worried about stuff getting stolen?” Eren asked, when he’d carried the ladder outside.

“If they’re that desperate for an old ladder they’re welcome to it,” Levi said. “Besides, putting a lock on the door is basically advertising and the door’s so warped you could probably prise it open around a lock anyway.”

“I see.”

“You know how to walk on a tiled roof?” Levi asked, pulling on a pair of gardening gloves.
“No.”

“No. Distribute your weight and try and keep your weight on tiles that are supported by beams. If you crack a tile, my roof leaks. So fucking tell me if you do, so I can get it fixed before storm season.”

“Right.”

Eren was starting to think that this had been a bad idea, but things improved once they’d scaled the ladder and got to work. It was refreshing to be up there in the breeze, with a view of the surrounding suburb that was rarely seen by anyone. The work itself wasn’t exactly enjoyable, but it wasn’t too unpleasant either, and Eren got a sense of satisfaction as they cleared the gutters of leaves.

Some of Levi’s neighbours eventually came out, calling up their thanks. It clearly wasn’t the first time Levi had done this and a couple of hours after they’d started they were obliged to return to ground level to accept sandwiches from the lady in the apartment next to Levi’s.

Eren was glad of the break and he accepted the food gratefully.

“Are you moving in?” she asked him.

Eren nearly choked. Did he look like he was moving in?

“I used to share with Erwin,” Levi explained. “But I’m not looking for another room-mate.” He was then obliged to inform the neighbour that Erwin was doing well, and yes he’d pass on their congratulations as to his new job. Eren was amused; as reserved as Levi was, he was clearly liked for his yard work if nothing else.

And he’d lived with Erwin. Eren was desperately curious but wouldn’t ask while there were other people listening.

“How long have you lived here?” he asked, when they scaled the ladder again.

“About six years.”

“Wow.”

Levi didn’t talk much, but he wasn’t bad company, and occasionally they’d stop work and straighten their backs and turn their faces to the breeze, letting the sweat at their temples cool. Eren glanced at him, admiring the peaceful look on his face. Maybe enjoy wasn’t the right word, but he sensed Levi got satisfaction out of doing this, regardless of his grumbling about the landlord.

Levi called a halt for lunch and he seemed content with their progress. Such was the size of the building it would take most of the day to clear all the gutters by hand.

“Did Erwin used to help you?” Eren asked, as he sat at Levi’s kitchen table.

“What, with the roof? No, I didn’t let him. I figured if I did he’d fall off and break his neck.”

“Seriously?”

“He always wanted to pay to get it done professionally and then try and get the money back out of the landlord later. That’s a lawyer for you. But I don’t mind doing it myself. With your help it’s only going to take me half the weekend this time. So thanks.” He put a bowl of salad down on the table.

“No problem.”
They ate cold chicken and wholegrain bread rolls and after a morning of physical labour Eren was starving, and he devoured his share in record time. To his surprise, Levi insisted on washing up the dishes afterwards and Eren obligingly dried up.

By the time they returned to the roof, the weather had changed. The wind still blew, but it was now gusty and cold, and dark clouds were scudding across the sky. The sun still shone, for now, but Eren felt a sense of urgency.

Levi must have felt it too, because their breaks were fewer and further between, and when the same kindly neighbour called up asking them if they wanted anything to drink, Levi declined, saying he'd prefer to push on and get it done.

The wind now tugged and shoved at them, not strong enough to be in any danger of blowing them off the roof but giving the impression that it would greatly like to see them fall. Suddenly the ground was looking a long way away.

Eren stretched out, scooping up the last of the leaves as spots of cold rain began to fall and thunder rolled across the sky.

“We have to go,” Levi said. “It got here faster than I thought.”

“I’m almost done,” Eren said.

“Eren, now!” Levi ordered in a voice few could argue with.

Eren certainly couldn’t. He scrambled to his feet, abandoning the last scattering of leaves and starting to make his way back to the ladder. He could see why Levi had ordered him to move. As soon as they got wet the tiles became treacherously slick, and he practically slithered onto the ladder.

When Eren reached solid ground again, he held the ladder steady while Levi descended, flinching as big, cold raindrops hit him like bullets. He glanced up at the sky for a few moments and when he looked back Levi had practically climbed down into his arms.

Eren realised he could let go of the ladder now. He just couldn't quite seem to bring himself to.

He could feel Levi's body heat in contrast to the cold air.

Levi looked over his shoulder, and Eren realised in this light his eyes were almost exactly the same pale grey as the clouds above. Somewhere above the storm clouds, the sun was still shining; the sky glowed.

“Eren?”

“Yeah?”

“You should get your car under cover. I'll open the garage.”
I don’t normally write a lot of author’s notes but I just wanted to say the response to this story has really blown me away, and I appreciate it so much. I did not expect this at all when I started writing it. Thank you.

The rain started to come down in earnest and Eren sprinted for his car while Levi put the ladder back. Even this much had water trickling down the back of Eren's neck and his clothes sticking to him. Levi had it worse, however; he was obliged to stand in the rain and hold the garage door open, such was the strength of the wind buffeting the old wooden door as Eren nosed the Swift into the garage.

Eren exited and hurried out to join Levi, helping him close the doors as the rain pelted down. There was no real point in trying to stay dry now as they were both soaked and Eren struggled manfully to stop his teeth chattering. Levi just looked pissed off, and somewhat bedraggled.

“At least we got the gutters done in time!” Eren called over the sound of the storm.

“Always looking on the bright side.” Levi hadn’t raised his voice and Eren had to lean in a bit to hear him. Levi hurried up the steps, Eren practically stepping on his heels, and dug out his keys, letting them back into the apartment and finally out of the weather.

He closed the door on the storm, and they stood in the entranceway, Eren slightly out of breath and both of them dripping.

Eren felt drawn to Levi; he was a warm body, and he looked like he was cold too, his face pale and slightly pinched looking. He didn’t quite realise he was acting on this impulse until Levi broke the spell by speaking and he hastily stepped back out of Levi's personal space, hoping he hadn't noticed.

“Go and shower,” Levi said. “I'll get you some dry clothes.”

“What about you?” Eren asked.

Levi looked at him curiously. “I’ll get me some dry clothes as well, don’t worry. Or are you suggesting we shower together?” he asked with a half-smile.

“Nope!” That was enough for Eren. He toed off his shoes and fled, trying not to get Levi's nice clean floors too wet in the process.

Levi’s bathroom was unsurprisingly very tidy, and also very small. Feeling weird and nervous and self-conscious, Eren stripped off as quickly as he could, and was stepping out of his boxers when Levi knocked on the door.

Eren practically shrieked.

“Um, yes?” he asked shakily, his heart pounding. Surely, surely surely he wasn’t-

“I brought you a towel,” Levi said. “And clothes. Give me yours and I’ll put them in the dryer.”
“Right. Yes.” Of course. There was no point in having a shower if he was just going to put his wet
clothes back on again afterwards and of course Levi wouldn’t want him to use his towel.

“You didn’t really think I was going to join you, did you?” Levi asked as the exchange was made
through the partially opened door. He sounded amused.

“No,” Eren lied indignantly.

“There's no room in there anyway,” Levi said.

Like that was the problem here, Eren thought irritably. Levi was having far too much fun teasing him
and truthfully Eren didn’t mind being teased too much, he just wish he knew if there was anything
more serious behind it. With Levi it was impossible to tell. He thanked him and shut the door again.
Levi had given him a pair of old sweatpants and a tshirt, both of which smelled faintly of soap and
sunshine.

Eren told himself to get a grip and stop smelling Levi’s clothes, and put them aside before stepping
into the shower. He didn’t indulge in a long soak as this was the most nerve-wracking shower he’d
ever had and he wasn’t sure why. Levi wasn’t going to care if he took his time, but he was aware of
how naked he was in a way that had never bothered him when he'd showered before. He was naked
in Levi’s house, no less. With Levi himself doing who knows what somewhere in another room.

It was the dumbest thing Eren had worried about since he’d thought Santa might not realise they’d
moved house when he was six.

But he warmed up, at least, and feeling returned to his fingers. He could still hear thunder rumbling
outside, and occasionally a gust of wind would drive the rain hard enough against the frosted glass
window that Eren could hear it over the sound of the shower. He was very glad he wasn’t trying to
drive home in this, and he was glad his car was safely undercover as well.

When Eren emerged from the bathroom, wearing clothes that were simultaneously too big and a bit
short on him, he found Levi standing in the living room. The house was gloomy and dark, but Levi
had pulled the blind on the largest window up and was watching the rain and lightning. A few cars
were feeling their way along the drenched street, headlights on despite the early hour and the trees in
the corners of the yard bent and swayed crazily, the wind stripping leaves off them by the handful.
Eren thought about all the leaves that were probably piling up in the gutters already and padded over
to stand next to Levi to share the spectacle.

Levi glanced at him briefly, but then turned his attention outside without saying anything. He’d
changed his clothes too, and had dried his hair somewhat. Eren wondered if he was still cold. Levi
had his arms folded and Eren could almost feel his elbow brushing the hairs on his arm. Or maybe he
was only hoping he could.

Eren licked his lips, wondering if Levi could sense the atmosphere as well. They’d sorted things out,
hadn’t they? They were friends again and what had gone before hadn't been an act; at one point Levi
had wanted him. Pushed him up against a wall, even.

The thought of that now made Eren’s shoulder-blades ache for whitewash, and the rest of him just
sort of ache.

He was barely seeing the storm now, even though he still faced the window. All his attention was
focused on the corner of his eye, at Levi.

He’d made up his mind to speak when Levi stepped away.
“Tea’s probably ready by now.” He dropped the blind as he went and Eren followed him into the kitchen.

Levi turned on the lights, and the apartment immediately felt warmer and more welcoming, and no less quiet and intimate than it had in the dark. Eren seated himself back at the kitchen table.

“There’s coffee if you prefer it,” Levi said. “But you didn’t object to tea last time, although I’m afraid if you want jello in it you’re out of luck. I’ve got some strawberry jelly if you want to try it with that.”

“I like tea and coffee,” Eren said. “And just milk is fine,” Eren smiled. “You really like tea, huh?”

“I do.” Levi set two mugs down on the table. “There’s a ritual to it. It’s calming. When I make tea well, everything is all right for a few minutes at least.”

Thinking about it now, and watching Levi pick up his mug without using the handle, Eren realised just how quietly strange Levi was, in his own way. It wasn’t bad, but Eren knew so little about him none of it made a lot of sense. He preferred to clean the gutters for his entire building than fight with the landlord, even though it wasn’t his responsibility to clean them and Eren was quite sure he was capable of winning the argument or calling on Erwin if he truly didn't want to be bothered doing so.

They drank their tea and listened to the thunder. It wasn't awkward.

“You’re thinking pretty hard,” Levi observed eventually.

“I wish I knew more about you, but I don’t know where to start,” Eren said, earnestly and a bit more truthfully than he’d intended.

Levi sighed, “You already know quite a lot. You’ve seen where I live, you’ve seen where I work.” A faint smile, “You’ve seen me naked.”

“So have you!” Eren retorted.

“No I haven’t,” Levi said.

“You didn’t look at my work?” Eren asked. He wasn’t sure if he was relieved or disappointed. Levi didn’t want to look at his work? Maybe he’d disappointed him so badly he didn’t like him at all any more.

Levi sighed irritably. “Stop thinking. I can see you galloping off in all the wrong directions. I don’t watch porn any more. I never did, really. I started making it and that killed any desire I had to look at it. All I see are technical performances; it’s work, and most of it isn’t up to my standards anyway.”

“I guess I kind of feel the same way, now. Well, not the standards stuff, but I haven’t been back recently either.” Eren shifted uncomfortably in his seat and frowned into his tea. “Still,” he mumbled.

“What?” Levi asked. “Speak up.”

“I thought you might be a little bit curious at least.” He knew he was sounding like a brat, but Levi had called him cute once.

Levi just looked at him, eyebrow raised, and Eren wondered if he could see what he was thinking.

“Um, anyway,” Eren hurried on. He didn’t think this line of enquiry was going to be very productive. “How long do you think the storm’s going to last?”
Levi shrugged. “It doesn't matter. You can stay until it passes and I can’t imagine it’s going to last all night. I can make us something that’ll suffice for dinner later.”

“Thank you,” Eren said, pleased at least that he had some idea of how far this invitation extended. “Do you like cooking?”

“Not really.”

“Oh.”

“Erwin does.”

Eren didn’t really want to think about Erwin right then. He supposed he was curious about what it had been like when they lived together but at the same time it was an uncomfortable subject. He liked Erwin and maybe Erwin liked him but he liked Levi too and Levi was the one sitting across from him and pouring himself more tea and making it hard to think straight.

Thinking about Erwin under these circumstances made him feel strangely guilty, even though he’d examined the situation from all angles and couldn't see anything to feel guilty about.

“I’ll help!” Eren said, pushing such thoughts aside. “With dinner, I mean.”


“Well, no, not really. Like, nothing fancy. I guess I can make food, like anyone can.”

“Some people never learn.”

“Well, I kind of had to learn,” Eren said. “After Mom-” No, he didn’t want to talk about that. “Well, my parents weren’t around much and Mikasa’s an awful cook so I ended up doing most of it. I wasn’t very adventurous though; just as long as it was edible that was good enough for me. I can’t cook anything fancy.”

Eren half-expected Levi would question him about his family further, but instead he sort of leaned back in his chair and regarded Eren with slightly narrowed eyes for a few moments.

“Well, it’s hardly dinner time now. Do you want to watch something?”

“Sure.” Eren was grateful for the change of subject, and he didn't think it was an accident on Levi’s part.

Levi led him back into the living area and waved his hand at the DVD rack while settling down on the couch, putting his mug on the coffee table.

“Go on, pick something.”

Levi’s collection seemed to be entirely made up of horror films; chiefly vintage monster films and more recent and varied offerings from various east Asian countries.

“You like horror films?”

“More or less,” Levi said. “Erwin got the action ones; it made more sense to divide them up by genre. That way we can generally tell who has which film without actually going through our collections to check.”

Eren thought the idea of them sitting on the couch watching films together was quite adorable, but he
didn’t say anything, instead smiling to himself as he picked out DVDs at random and scanned the blurbs on the back. He ended up going for vintage cheese rather than anything that might be genuinely scary. He didn’t want to risk actually getting scared and making Levi think less of him, and the real point of scary films was to edge closer and closer to the person you were watching them with, and he didn’t think Levi would appreciate that sort of thing.

Or at least, he was a bit worried that he wouldn’t.

They settled down to watch Tokyo get menaced, Eren curling his bare feet up underneath himself and making himself comfortable.

“That didn’t make any sense,” Eren said later, as the ending credits rolled.

“It took you an hour and a half to work that out?” Levi asked. He glanced at the clock on the microwave. “Come on, let’s go and make something to eat.”

Eren chopped onions and tomatoes and continued to dissect the film while Levi put pasta on to cook and made garlic bread out of the bread rolls they hadn't eaten for lunch.

“Look, if it was immune to bullets, how was it possible for the scientist to inject it with the serum in the first place?”

“Maybe it wasn’t immune back then.”

“But it was, remember? When that security guard tried to stop it back in the beginning. What’s the practical difference between a bullet and a needle anyway?”

Levi could only shake his head and shrug.

“Do you think it would make more sense if we knew Japanese?” Eren asked.

“I doubt it.”

Eren wondered if he was annoying Levi with his analysis, but when he looked over he appeared anything but annoyed and in fact seemed rather amused, the corners of his mouth turned up endearingly.

By now the storm had moved on, leaving only rain in its wake. The thunder had died to the occasional distant rumble and even the wind had dropped. Eren kept out of Levi’s way as they cooked, and they sat down to generous portions of a meal that wasn’t particularly complicated or interesting, but somehow the circumstances of its creation and the fact that they’d worked on it together, made Eren appreciate every bite.

“Is it weird to say that I’m kind of glad that storm came over?” Eren asked, as Levi collected the empty plates. “This has been really nice.”

“Not that weird,” Levi said. He looked like he was going to say something else for a moment and then thought better of it. “You should head back, however. I’ve wasted enough of your weekend.”

“It wasn't a waste.”

He didn’t want to go back. Not at all, really. This place was fine, despite first appearances to the contrary; it was clean and worn in, like the clothes he realised he was still wearing. Levi seemed to remember at about the same time he did, for he left to empty the dryer and soon returned with Eren’s clothes.
“They still need to be washed properly though,” he said.

“Yeah.”

Eren was totally not going to bother washing them properly. The look Levi gave him suggested that Levi had some idea what he was thinking.

“Thank you for your hard work today, Eren. I appreciate it.”

“That's okay,” Eren ducked his head and took his clothes back and went to the bathroom to change back into them. His shoes were still wet so he decided to carry them and shoved his socks into his pocket.

Levi had opened the front door and was peering out at the dark, leaning against the door frame with his hands in his pockets. Raindrops glittered briefly where the light caught them, and a cold, earthy smell drifted inside.

“Do you want an umbrella?” he asked, as Eren joined him.

“It's okay. I'll run.”

Levi sighed. “I'll walk you. I need to close the garage after you leave anyway. Don't want it getting blown about in case the wind gets up again.”

Levi took a large black umbrella from the stand next to the door, and unfurled it, leaving the door open as he and Eren descended the steps together, shoulder to shoulder to keep out of the rain. Eren's feet started to freeze almost immediately and he regretted not wearing his shoes.

Levi opened the garage door, and Eren stood next to him, and wondered if there was anything he could say that would allow him to stay a bit longer. Home seemed a long way away in the dark and cold and wet. The indirect light shining out the front door was enough for him to just make out Levi's face.

“Levi,” Eren said softly.

Levi must have heard him despite the sound of the rain on the umbrella and he looked at him. Eren could feel his gaze, feel his breath. His toes were going numb and he didn't care.

Eren took a deep breath, his heart thumping, but he held Levi's gaze. Not backing down. I want to stay a bit longer, he thought, a bit longer. Eren leaned in. Christ, what had he got to lose? Levi already knew how he felt and he was so close, huddled under this umbrella in the dark where no one else could see, as if no one else ever existed.

“Eren.” Levi turned his head away.

“Sorry,” Eren mumbled, drawing back.

“I'm not rejecting you,” Levi took a deep breath. “But you need to start thinking these things through, okay? You act on impulse and you've regretted it before.”

Eren knew what he was talking about. They weren't alone in the world any more.

Erwin.

And once Eren had started he couldn't help thinking about the other man, his hands, his smile, his foot on the back of his head, the awkward way he ran out of words sometimes, the way he laughed.
He felt a great wave of loneliness that seemed to coexist perfectly well with the pleasure he took in Levi's company. It didn't make any sense. How could he be miserable and content at the same time?

“Yeah,” Eren said. Levi was right; they'd given him a second chance and he had to do the right thing by both of them, whatever that might be.

“So,” Levi said quietly, looking back at Eren again. “If you've thought about it and you decide you want to stay here tonight, you can, Eren.”

“I can?”

“I don't dislike your company,” Levi said, feeling his way through the words as if they were unfamiliar. “That probably doesn't sound like much of a compliment to you but—”

“No, I get it,” Eren smiled, understanding. “You do things your way, and I guess that goes for people too. Either you like someone, or you don't. And you don't like many people.”

“Yes. Exactly.” Levi sounded neither proud nor ashamed, but relieved that Eren got it without him having to explain.

Eren didn't know much about Levi, but he felt he did understand him a little bit. Even so, he still could hardly believe Levi was offering to let him stay. Not just stay; he knew all the other things that offer encompassed and he could see himself coming back here, week after month, to sprawl comfortably in this clean apartment, to take up some of the empty space. To wash the dishes, to clean the gutters. To be accepted and to learn how to coax Levi into smiling rather than just accidentally stumbling into it. To be pushed against a wall again, to see those cool grey eyes alight.

He could believe that would happen.

He wanted to stay. So, so badly.

But.

Levi was right. He'd courted disaster by acting without thinking before.

“I shouldn't,” he said. “I need to um, you know, think about stuff.” It felt like the most difficult thing he'd ever done.

“Good,” Levi said.

“Really?”

“Yeah. I'm not offended by you being sensible for once. I'm not going anywhere and if I was, well, that's the chance you take.”

“I'm not, that is, I mean I haven't done much of this sort of thing.” Eren rubbed the back of his neck.

“You're not the only one,” Levi said. “I'll tell you this much though, I'm not normally this gallant.”

“Why are you being gallant this time?” Eren asked.

Levi sighed. “I think you've managed to get quite enough out of me today. Go home, think it over. Whatever. Either way, I'll see you at the gym.”

“Yeah. Thanks again.”
“Go. You'll get frostbite otherwise.”

Eren couldn't feel his feet at all by this point. He felt his way into the Swift and turned on the heater. Levi waited while he backed out, and gave him a brief wave before closing the garage doors.

Eren drove home carefully and when he got back Missy was at the door to greet him, wailing to be fed. Naturally, Jean hadn't bothered which was probably for the best because if he had Missy would have greeted him just the same and received two dinners for her troubles. She was slightly overweight as it was.

He crouched down and watched her eat, stroking her back occasionally but not wanting to interrupt her.

“What should I do?” he asked her.

Missy didn't have any answers for him. Man up, make a decision, work out which of these incredibly hot guys you want to bang, Eren thought, and found himself smiling at the sheer ludicrousness of the situation. He was pretty sure if he tried to talk to anyone else about it they wouldn't believe him.

He left Missy to her dinner and went back to his room. He supposed he should do some study or something, but instead he flopped back on his bed and stared at the ceiling for a while.

Fuck.

Levi had invited him to stay over and he'd turned him down. He was probably the stupidest person in the entire world. He missed Levi already. He should have turned around. Should have made his decision.

Stupid stupid.

There was one cure for Levi.

Eren took out his phone and sent Erwin a text.
Chapter 17

Once again they exchanged a few texts before Erwin ended up calling him. Eren could hear music in the background, and Erwin said he was just relaxing on the couch.

“Not very exciting for a Saturday night, but the weather’s too miserable to go out.” As his voice reverberated in Eren's ear, Eren started to feel better about declining Levi’s offer. It wasn't a simple decision to make after all.

“Yeah, it started raining while we were still on the roof.”

“I can’t believe he made you help clean the gutters. He's got a nerve,” Erwin muttered.

“I offered help if he ever needed it,” Eren said. He didn't want Erwin to think badly of Levi, even though logically after all these years his opinion was probably pretty set. “I mean, if I really didn't want to he wouldn't have made me or anything and it was kind of interesting.”

“If you say so. He doesn't need to clean the gutters himself, you know.”

“Yeah, he explained. But I think he kinda likes doing it.”

“He likes a lot of strange things. Just be careful or he'll have you scrubbing his bathroom floor or something.”

“I'm not too worried,” Eren said, smiling. “And you know, the offer stands for you as well.”

He heard Erwin sigh, “So you've said. I honestly can't think-” He broke off. “Hm. Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“Do the seats in the back of your car fold down?”

Whatever question Eren might have been imagining, this was not it. “Uh. Yeah.”

“Can you keep your mouth shut?”

“Oh my god, you've killed someone and you need help moving the body. Erwin, I'm honoured. I'll line my car with garbage bags first thing tomorrow morning.”

Erwin was silent for a few moments and Eren wondered if the call had dropped out. Then he laughed. Really laughed. It was a rich, warm sound that Eren smiling into his hand, proud and pleased.

“I think that is the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me,” Erwin said.

Just great, now he was blushing as well. Wasn’t he aching for Levi just a few hours ago? What the hell was wrong with him?

Whatever was wrong with him, it didn’t feel wrong.

“Seriously though,” Erwin said, the laughter still in his voice. “Can you keep your mouth shut?”

“Erwin I’m so curious I’d do almost anything,” Eren said. “Yes. Not a word to anyone.”
“I was going to ask Mike, but of course he’d tell Nanaba and somehow I doubt it would stop there.”

“Erwin, tell me,” Eren commanded sternly.

“I need to transport some things to my office,” Erwin said. He sighed, coming to the crux of the problem, “And they won’t fit in my car. Well, not safely anyway.”

“They won’t fit in your car, but they’ll fit in mine?” Eren asked, disbelieving. The Swift was half as long as the Aston was.

“Eren you don’t buy a supercar because it’s spacious and has a family-sized boot.”

Now it was Eren’s turn to laugh and he chuckled into the phone. “How much did it cost, again?”

“I’m not saying. Look, are you going to help or not?”

“I’ll help, I’ll help. That sounds much easier than cleaning gutters.”

“Thank you.”

The next morning was grey and dreary; the rain had moved on only reluctantly and left behind small showers just frequent enough to make it ill-advised to venture out without an umbrella. Jean wanted to know if Eren was making another movie, as he seemed incredibly busy this weekend.

“I’m just helping some friends with stuff,” Eren said, zipping up his hoodie and putting on his shoes.

“What friends? What stuff?”

“No one you’d know.”

“It’s not Armin, is it?” He looked both worried and annoyed.

Eren narrowed his eyes, irritated that Jean would even think to be jealous. “No it is not Armin, so you’ve got no reason to pout. Especially since you’re the guy who had a whole evening to ask for his number and flubbed it. If we were dating the first thing I’d do would be to tell you about it if only to rub it in your face. Okay?”

“Okay, fine. Forget about it.”

“Are you sure?”

Jean scowled and folded his arms. “You will see him at some point, won’t you?”

“Yeah, he goes to the studio to study quite a lot.”

“Well, could you?”

“Yes?” Eren said.

“Give him my number,” Jean said.

“Yes. And this is the last time I’m helping you,” Eren said. “If you still manage to screw things up from here then Armin deserves better. Anyway, I gotta go.”

“When will you be back?”

“I have no idea. Have dinner without me if I’m not home.” He didn’t have any idea how much stuff
Erwin needed to take over to his office and so he’d allowed most of the afternoon, just in case, and he didn’t want to have to cut their meeting short again.

As much as Eren was looking forward to spending time with Erwin, in the back of his mind he knew he had important decisions waiting for him in the near future.

Eren already knew Erwin’s address, and Erwin had told him which button to press when he got there. Eren parked out the front, and when Eren pressed the intercom button Erwin unlocked the front door almost immediately.

It was very quiet and very clean in Erwin’s apartment building. Eren could see his own reflection, slightly distorted, in the tiles under his feet and the elevator was swift and silent. The place smelled like an upscale motel; someone obviously came through here and cleaned professionally quite often.

There were only two apartments on each floor, and Eren knocked a bit nervously on Erwin’s door. He didn’t really feel like he belonged in a place like this.

Erwin answered the door and Eren told him he was half expecting a butler to do it.

“Ergh, no. I don’t like being waited on. Come in. I’ve got the pictures ready to go.”

Erwin’s apartment was just as large and expensive as the exterior of the building suggested, but it wasn’t anywhere near as intimidating. The furniture looked like it had come with the apartment, all designer leather and chrome, but Erwin had put his own stamp on the generically expensive decor.

Woven rugs that didn’t match anything in the room lay on the floor, thick and inviting enough to lie down on. The other half of the DVD collection he’d seen at Levi’s was in a cheap rack next to an entertainment system that was a mixture of old and expensive and new and cheap and that Eren guessed had been put together over a series of years.

Levi’s home had been clutter-free, but Erwin had lined his nest with law books, exercise gear, coffee mugs, and souvenirs. There was a hoodie thrown over the back of the computer chair, and a pair of shoes tangled under the desk. There were framed photographs on the shelves and on top of the computer, and Eren would have been happy to poke among them and explore the place further, but he remembered he had a job to do and it was probably rude to stare.

But it was a nice apartment, Eren thought, and not because it was expensive.

Near the door in the kind of little hallway that led towards the living room, Erwin had assembled several large pictures in frames.

“These are what we’re taking?” Eren asked.

“Yeah. I need to do something about my office; it still feels like it belongs to someone else.”

Curious, Eren tilted the picture on top away from the wall. It was a picture of a dirt road, leading off into nowhere, and a faded, hand-painted sign advertising fresh fruit standing next to it. In the distance, sunlit storm clouds gathered.

It wasn’t what Eren had expected, either from Erwin or from a law office, but he didn’t dislike it. It made him feel oddly nostalgic. There was something about the crisp colours that promised that the viewer could step inside the picture if they wanted, and something about the composition that asked ‘are you sure?’

Erwin didn’t interrupt, he just let Eren look.
Eren suddenly had a realisation, “Is this photograph Nanaba’s?”

Erwin smiled. “Good guess. Yeah, after he finished college he went on some sort of hitch-hiking holiday and the pictures he took made his first exhibition. Years later he was moving house and said he was considering putting these into storage because they weren’t going to sell and I bought the lot.” Erwin smiled, “I got a discount.”

“They’re really cool. Nanaba’s so talented.”

The pictures weren’t particularly heavy, but they didn’t want to risk dropping them and shattering the glass, so they carried them out of the apartment one at a time and took them down in the elevator. Eren had dropped the back seats of his car and the pictures lay flat safely enough.

Erwin told him that he could use his parking space at the office and they drove into the city.

“This car seems cleaner than I remember,” Erwin mused.


“I just use whatever I was using last until I get information to the contrary. Turn into here.”

Erwin handed Eren a card that let him into the parking area underneath the office where Erwin worked.

“Should be nice and quiet here today. One thing lawyers rarely do is work on weekends.” Erwin smiled, “We're too expensive.”

Erwin was right. The office was eerily quiet. They went up in an elevator, and carried the pictures out into a large foyer.

Above the receptionist's desk was a large framed oil painting of an old man, and underneath was a shiny new bronze plaque that read: Walter Smith 1922-2014. He looked unremarkable to Eren’s eyes, just a nondescript gentleman in a suit and tie.

“Every morning,” Erwin said heavily. “I arrive at work and I see my grandfather.”

“That has to really suck,” Eren said.

“I don't know. I'm definitely here against his wishes so I defy him every morning as well. At least that’s what I tell myself.”

“Why did he care so much to hold a grudge for so long? You’re his heir, right? You'd think he'd learn to put up with you for the sake of the family.”

“The fact that I was his heir was why he cared.” Erwin heaved a sigh.

“Smith,” Eren said slowly. “Didn't you say the firm was on your mother's side?”

“Yes. When she married my father she kept her name, and when she had me she had a fight with the doctor over making sure I had the family name as well. A very unusual decision back then; it's not even common now, but my father didn't oppose it. You see, she had no siblings and this was the only way the family name might be preserved.” Erwin shrugged, “I didn't see why it mattered myself; Smith is not a rare name that needs preserving, but that's the sort of family they are. They don’t consider themselves just any old Smiths.”
Eren sighed and looked around at the various other Smaths, all old and male, that graced the walls of the foyer. Maybe this place was nicer when it was actually open for business, but on a rainy Sunday afternoon it felt vaguely haunted.

“Let's get out of here,” Eren said, picking up one of Nanaba's pictures again.

Erwin's office was, as Erwin himself had implied, kind of bland and generic, if large and expensive. There weren't even any pictures on the large desk, only papers and books and the computer. It was quite a stark contrast from Erwin's apartment.

Eren peered out the window, but there wasn't much to see.

“How long have you been working here?” Eren asked.

“Only a few months. I'm still catching up with everything.” Erwin walked around the room, looking thoughtfully at the bare walls. “I am a source of curiosity. Any personal pictures I put up are going to be incorporated into the gossip mill, so I've been wary about decorating.”

“And your car's too small,” Eren said slyly.

Erwin looked at him and raised an eyebrow and Eren grinned.

“That's why there are no pictures of Levi or Hange?”

“Yeah. I'd have to tell so many lies by omission it's just not worth the effort. Anyway, come and help me hang this one.”

Whoever had used the office last had also hung things on the walls, so all they needed to do was find the right hooks to hang the pictures from. They shuffled around the office, hanging and rehanging while Erwin worked out exactly what he wanted.

If Eren was honest it kind of made the room look more like a travel agency than a lawyer's office, with the bright landscapes of far-off places, but the atmosphere was much lighter too and definitely an improvement to work in. He sat in Erwin's huge leather chair and waited until he was needed again while Erwin decided what he wanted.

“I think that's fine,” he said eventually. He gave Eren a smile, “Thank you.”

“That wasn't so hard, was it?” Eren said.

“What?”

“You were so determined not to ask me for help,” Eren said, getting out of the chair.

Erwin sighed, “I don't like asking for help. I've had so much given to me already, it seems selfish to request more.”

Eren shrugged awkwardly, “You have money, but that's not quite the same. And if I feel like I'm in your debt all the time—I hate that.”

“You are never in my debt, Eren. Your presence is more than enough compensation for any favours I do for you.”

“So? Yours is too.” Eren looked up into Erwin's eyes. He was so exasperating sometimes, and usually because he was trying to be nice. Eren didn't necessarily want Erwin to be nice to him, he wanted Erwin to be himself with him, and even if that didn't mean the kinds of casual insults he
exchanged with Levi, it definitely didn't mean one sided favours either. “I like you.”

“Yeah.”

Erwin was looking at him and the air between them felt thicker than treacle. That hadn't entirely been what Eren had meant but it hadn't not been what he'd meant either. Eren bit his lip and wondered what to say.

“Um.”

“I-”

“No, you go first,” Erwin said. Eren was saved from having to admit he didn’t have any clear idea what he was going to say by a soft thump from somewhere nearby.

Erwin frowned.

“Is someone here?” Eren asked.

“I'll go and see,” Erwin said, and left without giving any indication that Eren should follow and Eren was grateful for the chance to think without Erwin’s pale blue eyes on him.

He was nowhere near coming to a decision. He had to take a step back and leave things for a while longer. Putting off making a decision wasn’t much of a decision but it was better than nothing.

Eren waited a little while longer and soon he could hear Erwin’s voice. He didn’t want to eavesdrop exactly, but there wasn’t much else to do other than listen.

“We’re not paying you enough for the hours you work, let alone for extra. Go home.”

The response was indistinct.

“Tell him if he has a problem with it he has a problem with me. He knows which room I’m in.”

Please Erwin, Eren thought, don’t get into fistfights with your colleagues.

Erwin came back, and Eren heard the elevator ping.

“Sorry about that.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Just the standard exploitation of the young and inexperienced that’s endemic in American corporate culture,” Erwin said sourly. “It’s not just the porn industry.”

Eren blinked at him.

Erwin sighed, “I’ve spent more than enough time here this weekend as it is. Let’s go home.”

When they arrived back at Erwin’s apartment, Erwin insisted on Eren coming up again, and Eren wasn’t too adverse to the idea.

“I think we could both stand to do something a bit more enjoyable,” he said.

“Like what?” Eren said, examining the statement for traces of innuendo and finding none.

Erwin grinned. “I’m going to show off, and you’re going to have an afternoon snack.”
A slow smile spread across Eren’s face, “Levi did say you could cook.”

“When I moved into the house, that is, the family home, the person I got along with the best was Monsieur Gerard. He was the family chef, trained in the French style although never actually lived in France. He was gorgeous too, I eventually noticed, as was his wife; I wanted so badly to impress him. And a few years later I learned to appreciate how knowing how to cook impressed others.”

“What are you going to cook?”

“Something sweet to go with coffee. I haven’t decided yet. I may or may not have made a bit of pastry last night in anticipation of your visit.”

Erwin ushered Eren back into his apartment and told him to make himself at home. “Just put your coat anywhere and relax.”

Eren followed Erwin into the kitchen. Unlike the rest of the apartment, the kitchen looked like it was being used exactly as the designer imagined it; there was a row of potted herbs near the sink, and expensive knives stuck to the magnetic strip on the wall. The spice racks were full of spices bought in bulk and decanted into jars, and the fruit bowl was overflowing. The coffee machine looked like it could double as a controller for a space station. There was no clutter; everything was clean and in the exact right place.

Erwin opened the fridge and took out a ball of dough wrapped in cling-film. He set it on the marble counter top and frowned.

“Now what should I do with this?” He looked at the fruit bowl. “Do you like apples?”

“Yes. Do you want me to help with anything?”

“Yes. I’d rather you didn’t.” He already sounded distanced and distracted. He turned away to start peeling and slicing the apples and after a few minutes of watching Erwin’s utter absorption in the task Eren slipped away to leave him to it.

He made a pretence of going over to the DVD rack to have a look at the collection, but he was far more interested in the pictures. There were quite a few familiar faces. Hange featured prominently and often; wearing a pith helmet on a hike in the forest, grinning at the camera at a birthday party, fast asleep or passed out on someone’s couch, beer cans and other objects piled on top of them. Shirtless Mike, years younger with his hair long at the back, standing on a beach and holding a fishing rod. Hange and Mike standing in front of Mike’s van, which looked like new.

Erwin was in a lot of them as well, and Eren was delighted to see him as a young man at college, leaner and lighter-featured. He looked more intense too, staring into the camera like he was daring the viewer to make a comment. These were the years he was fighting with his family, Eren thought.

Levi didn’t show up until Erwin had started to grow into himself, and most of the shots of him he was ducking away, or in the corner. The staff of HFR Media around a huge dinner table celebrating a successful year, and Levi was paying more attention to his plate than the camera or the other people around him.

There were no pictures of anyone who Eren thought might be Erwin’s family.

Something started to smell really good, and Eren drifted back to the kitchen. Erwin had a frying pan on the stove, in which the slices of apple bubbled in what smelled like a mixture of brown sugar and butter. Eren pulled up a stool and sat.
“It’s a ways off yet,” Erwin said, carefully turning the slices over with a spatula.

“Smells great though.”

Erwin just smiled. Eren noticed he’d rolled out the pastry as well.

“I was looking at your pictures,” Eren said.

“Oh yes. Whenever we have a get together I always take a few. That’s only a small selection.”

“You looked so young in some of them. Hange looks the same though.”

“I know! It’s aggravating. Sometimes I wonder if they traded their gender for eternal youth.”

Erwin eventually took the pan of the heat and carefully detached the handle before laying the pastry over the top and putting the whole thing in the oven.

“Now we wait. Coffee?”

“Thank you.”

Erwin was at the coffee machine when he asked Eren, casually, over his shoulder, “Can I take your picture? I mean, you’re my friend and I like having pictures of my friends.”

Eren couldn’t think of any reason to refuse, and upon receiving permission Erwin retrieved his phone and took a picture of Eren just as he was, sitting at the kitchen counter. He looked pretty happy with the result, although Eren didn’t think the picture was anything special when Erwin showed it to him.

Erwin looked at it for a few moments and then looked at him and Eren looked away. Let this be enough for now.

Erwin seemed to get the message and he went to check on his pie. Which turned out to be not a pie at all, in the end. He took out a large plate, and while Eren watched he tipped the whole pan upside down, and the crust became the base for an apple tart.

“It’s called **tarte Tatin**,” Erwin explained. “Upside down apple tart.”

Eren was duly impressed, and he remained impressed when he was served a slice with cream and finally got to taste Erwin’s creation.

“I think people would pay good money for this,” Eren said. “You never wanted to be a chef?”

Erwin shook his head. “It stops being a gift if you charge people for it. And besides, I don’t feel like doing this every day. If I did I’d be pretty fat, let’s be honest.”

Eren laughed.

And came to a realisation. He was having a wonderful time with both Erwin and Levi and only an idiot would do anything to mess that up. Thinking with his dick was just going to ruin things.

“I feel really lucky,” Eren said. “To have friends like you and Levi.”

“Hey, Eren,” Erwin said softly. He looked up. “HotFreeRange is my family. You’re part of that too now, and don’t forget it.”

Eren thought he was so happy it hurt.
Some time later Eren decided that two slices of tatin were enough, and Erwin wished him a good evening at the door.

Sure of his decision, and perhaps wanting to make sure he didn't have a chance to change his mind later, Eren called Levi when he got back to his car.

“Yes?”

“Hey,” Eren said. “Um. I think, I think we should be friends. All of us.”

“I understand. I'll see you next week, Eren.”
“I just wanted someone to love me!” Historia howled. She was dressed in frills and lace and thick, LED-festooned cables sprouted from her neck and shoulder-blades. Her hair fell in front of her maddened eyes.

Eren summoned tears from somewhere inside him and they trickled coldly down his cheeks as he manipulated the interface.

“That's not good enough,” he muttered. “You can't program someone to love you. It's not real.” He gazed up at her snarling face as she thrashed impotently in her wiring. Her face went slack for a moment and then refocused again.

“What have you done? Error. Cannot retrieve system data.” She smiled at him, “You're so beautiful. What is your name?”

Eren just shook his head. “After all you've done, you don't deserve this, but I'll save your core files. It is all I can do for you.”

Historia sagged back against the wiring, her head flopping to the side.

“Thank...you,” she intoned. “Stranger.”

Eren held her gaze while the camera lingered on his face.

“Cut!”

Eren sagged and exhaled and wiped his eyes.

“Did I do okay?” Historia asked, as Mike moved up to help her get out of the cables.

“You were terrifying,” Eren said weakly. He remained kneeling on the set for a few moments more, breathing deep and trying to return to the real world. When he'd signed up for porn, he hadn't realised how much actual acting was involved. He still felt like an amateur compared to Historia, but he supposed he still was.

“You were brilliant,” Hange declared. “A wonderful performance that has definitely earned you a sequel. Which I have yet to write but don't worry; you're an inspiration. I can feel the ideas.” Hange stretched their hands out as if physically feeling, well, something.

Freed from her costume, Historia stepped over to Eren as he got to his feet.

“Nice job!” she said, smiling sweetly. She was still wearing her make-up and the effect wasn’t quite as sweet as she probably intended.

“Thanks. That was a tough scene.”
“You did good, Eren,” Hange said. “Historia, you're done for today. Thanks for your hard work and I'll see you-”

“Thursday!” Historia chirped.

“Yep! So you've talked the script over with Rico?”

“Yeah. She's cute as fuck. I'm looking forward to it.”

“That's the spirit. Eren, Reiner's not gonna be here for another half an hour so take a good break.”

“Sure.”

The atmosphere lightened as everyone went their separate ways. Eren went back to the break room for some coffee. Armin was once again installed at the table, studying. He looked up when Eren entered.

“Hey, are you okay?” Armin asked.

“Huh? Oh, yeah.” Eren swiped at his eyes again. “I was just acting. Coffee?”

“I'm good, thanks.”

“Jean wants you to have this, by the way.” Eren handed Armin a piece of paper. He'd scrawled Jean's number on it and had been planning on leaving it on Armin's pile of books if he hadn't been in that day.

“Huh. You know I'd pretty much given up hope on that one.” Armin smiled. To Eren's surprise, he actually seemed happy to have Jean's number.

Well, there was no accounting for taste, and he got the feeling that unlike Jean Armin wouldn't be too shy about using this new information. Eren had finished making his coffee when Reiner arrived, his bag over his shoulder. He bicycled everywhere, apparently, and he was slightly out of breath.

“Eren! I'm glad I caught you. Hi Armin.”

“Hi.”

“Can we talk for a sec?” Reiner asked. Eren nodded and Reiner led them out to the hallway. “I got here a bit early cause I wanted to see you first,” Reiner said.

“Okay.”

They had a scene today. Eren was getting used to the cameras but he'd still woken up with a queasy feeling that reminded him of how he felt before a big exam. He could do this; he'd done it before, after all, and Reiner was a nice guy. Blunt, kinda, but laid back as well. He gave the impression that he was having a good time no matter what he was doing, even if he was getting head butted in the face.

So it was a bit odd to see his heavy brows knitted even heavier in a frown.

“What's up?” Eren asked.

“So uh, kinda before we get started,” Reiner rubbed the back of his neck. “Just so you know, I don't top very often.”
“Oh.”

“Like, just tell me if I'm messing something up, okay? I won't be offended or nothin'. Just order me around. I just figured I'd give you fair warning and all.”

“I'll be the toppiest bottom you've ever banged,” Eren declared, with a lot more confidence than he actually felt. Fake it 'til you make it, he told himself. He was going to be awesome this time, texts from Erwin or not, and he remembered how reassuring Armin had been with him; if he could do the same for Reiner he would.

Reiner blinked at him and then gave him a broad grin. “You're a really cool guy, Eren. I'm glad we're working together.”

“Oh, well.” Eren shrugged, not sure what to say. A thought occurred to him. “Since we're having such an awkward conversation, um, can I ask you something?”

“Sure. Anything at all, I'm an open book.” He spread his hands.

“Well, uh.” Reiner's eagerness actually made it more difficult to speak. “You know the kind of bondage stuff you do with Ymir, like, it hurts, doesn't it?”

“Yes?” Reiner grinned, a little sly. “Why, are you curious?”

“Kinda. A little. I don't know.” Eren shrugged. “I just wondered what the deal was. Ah, forget it-”

“Nah, it's cool, man. I ain't gonna make a big deal about it. You're not the first person to ask me about it, neither.” Reiner sighed and leant against the wall. “Okay, it's complicated. I'm a total sub so, that's my perspective. When I'm tied up or whatever, it's like I'm free; I can just feel and do as I please and the top will take care of me, I'm protected. And at the same time I feel strong too, that my body can take the punishment I'm given. It's such a rush to be struck and to roar and just let everything go.” His hand clenched into a fist. “I endure, like a rock. And sometimes I feel dangerous too, like I have to be bound or tied down, because I'm a beast, and when I'm doing a scene I'm free to act beastly and nothing more is expected of me.”

His entire face had lit up and Eren stared at him, a little more impressed with him than he had been until now.

“Wow.”

“It's not true of course; it's an act,” Reiner said seriously. “I have a responsibility to know my own limits and be prepared to speak up for them, although a good top will notice and stop if things get out of hand. It's all a game; it's agreed on beforehand what will happen, although of course there's room for spontaneity as well.”

“As for tops,” Reiner mused. “Well, the simplest answer would be it's a power trip, but it's probably just as complicated for them as subbing is for me, you know? And of course I'm just one guy. Other people probably think differently about it.”

“There's more to it than I thought,” Eren said.

“Hey, if you're ever curious about anything, you can just ask. Even if you don't get into it yourself, there's lotsa misinformation floating about. I figured you weren't after actual techniques though.”

“No,” Eren assured him. “I guess I'm just trying to understand how it works.”
“I don't think anyone knows that entirely. Anyway, I gotta have a quick shower and get into costume and such. I'll see you on set, yeah?”

“Yeah.” Eren patted his own head to make sure his streaks were still in place while Reiner strode off. I'm going to have sex with that guy, he told himself. It was kind of hard to believe.

They had a few other scenes to get through first, and Eren tried to use that time to get himself in the mood. Reiner had a nice body; a little bulky, but Levi was bulky too and-

And he was not thinking about Levi. He had to get over that. He had to get over both of them before he did something stupid and wrecked the friendships he was building.

So, Reiner. Nothing like Levi. Tall, blonde, built, and much, much younger than Erwin and that was definitely a good thing because he wasn't thinking about Erwin either and what sort of mess would he be in if he compared every partner he had from here on out to two people he'd never actually had sex with. Talk about setting impossible standards.

So Eren acted. His character thought Reiner was a gorgeous hunk of titanium and meat, and that would have to be enough.

And he gave pretty good head, Eren would give him that.

Things went a bit downhill after that. Reiner wasn't kidding about being an inexperienced top, and Eren hadn't bottomed all that often for Jean, either (and the whole thing had been a source of endless mood-killing arguments and after satisfying themselves that it was possible they tended to do other things that were less contentious.) So Reiner fumbled around and grabbed his dick too tightly at first and Eren came to the realisation that he'd been lucky enough not to have bad sex before.

Not this bad anyway. Not even when Jean had procured a six-pack from his older cousin and they'd drunk all of it far too fast and had ended up with neither pants nor dignity in Eren's bathroom and Jean had tried to put the condom on inside out for what seemed like hours and they'd agreed never to speak of that evening ever again.

In a sense it helped with the plot; most of Reiner's character was meant to be discovering if it was still possible to use his body in this fashion, even though he'd been modified beyond human. And his rasping voice in Eren's ear, “How does that feel? I've forgotten...” was actually fairly effective.

But for the most part Eren just wanted it to be over. Reiner would stop the moment Eren indicated he should, but Eren realised they'd be here for hours if he was going to insist on training Reiner to be a good top—something he wasn't sure how to do anyway. At some point, Eren decided he'd be better of enduring the discomfort and Reiner's complete inability to find his prostate and just get it done convincingly for the cameras.

He wasn't entirely convincing. Hange stopped them a couple of times to ask if Eren was okay, but Eren said they could continue each time. He was a professional, dammit. He was having no trouble remembering his lines at least; it gave him something to do besides moaning for the camera.

He stayed hard. Well, he did have a guy on top of him feeling him up and he didn't exactly mind the way Reiner's abs flexed against his back. But his mind was somewhere else; he was irritated and bored, and he concentrated on pretending he wasn't. He got himself off for the camera, and it was such a fucking relief to come unstuck from Reiner that his grateful smile was actually genuine, as they went through the post-coital dialogue.

Hange wanted some parts of it reshot from different angles and Eren put his body where Hange
indicated and they faked it for a bit more.

Eventually Hange had enough footage and their privacy was restored. Eren felt wrung out. Reiner stood up and told him that he was welcome to the first shower. He wasn't looking at him so he didn't know what sort of expression he had, but he sounded subdued.

“Thanks,” Eren said tiredly. A few minutes later he stood under the water and took inventory of himself; he felt slightly sore and stretched, and his arms were tired from holding both his own weight and some of Reiner's; Hange had wanted it to be obvious that Reiner was heavier than an ordinary human and had asked Reiner to put more of his weight on Eren's arms. There weren't any bruises or bites or scratches or anything like that but he felt abraded anyway. Like he had to restore himself. Eren stayed in the shower a long time, until he remembered that Reiner was waiting for his turn and he stumbled out, hastily drying himself off and getting back into his own clothes.

Armin had gone home when Eren made his way back to the break room, and Eren was kind of glad. He stretched out on one of the couches and looked at the ceiling for a while. Mike came by and asked if he was okay.

“I'm fine,” Eren said. He was, probably, but he realised if he didn't go home people were going to keep asking him that question.

He was walking towards his car when he heard the front door close behind him.

“Hey.” Reiner jogged over, back in street clothes again.

Eren sighed. He didn't really want to talk to him right now. “Hey.”

“I'm sorry,” Reiner said. He took a deep breath. “That was pretty ordinary, wasn't it?”

Eren didn't feel he needed to disagree. “Well, you did warn me.”

“Yeah. Even so. I wanted to make a movie with you and I told Hange whichever script you picked would be fine, but I probably shoul'da thought that through a bit more.”

“It's part of the job though,” Eren said, and he realised it was true. He shouldn't have been so surprised. “And hey, I'd rather have disappointing sex with someone who isn't a jerk about it afterwards.”

“That's something.” Reiner shook his head, “Here I am, all set to try and set things right and you're trying to make me feel better.” He looked at Eren for a long moment. “Anyway, I've learned my lesson. You were good, by the way. None of this was your fault at all.”

Eren wasn't totally sure about that, but he wasn't going to be too hard on himself for what was only his second film.

“Next time, you'd better top,” Reiner said.

“Sure,” Eren said, although right now he didn't want to consider next time. He still had some processing to do over last time.

“I'm sure the finished work will look great though. I guess I should let you get going. I'll see you around, Eren.”

“Yeah. Later, Reiner.”
He turned back towards the studio and Eren sighed with relief. He drove home and decided to have another shower, although at this point it was pure indulgence. He flopped back on his bed afterwards, his skin slightly reddened from the heat, and realised he'd probably be sleeping on his side tonight.

He called Levi.

“Yes?”

“I had a bad day at work,” he blurted out fast.

“Ah. How bad?”

“Not that bad, I guess. Like, I'm not really hurt or anything and I agreed to everything.”

“Mm. Do you want to come over?”

Yes. “No, I'm kind of tired. Just gonna sit and play with Missy for a while.” If he went and visited Levi now he knew he'd end up falling into his arms. There were some temptations it was better not to even expose yourself to when you were feeling a bit hurt and lonely.

“It's fine, Eren. I don't mind at all.” Levi didn't ask for details, and his usual impatient telephone manner had softened. Eren listened to him breathe for a while, and felt a bit better.

“I've never had a bad day at work before,” he said eventually. “I guess I should have seen it coming.”

“The perils of being an optimist,” Levi said. “I went into the job expecting every day to be a bad one.”

“The guy was nice, he just didn't really know what he was doing and I didn't really know what I was doing.” Eren sighed. “I feel silly now. Hell, I'm kind of proud of how I handled it really; like, I got it done and it must have looked okay on camera.”

“Mixed feelings are pretty natural,” Levi said. “And sometimes you can step over your own boundaries and not notice until afterwards. Don't feel bad about calling me.”

“Okay,” Eren said. “I didn't interrupt anything, did I?”

“I was just about to go for a run, actually,” Levi said.

“Ah, I'm sorry.”

“It's not important. The road will still be there later. We can talk as long as you like.”

“It's getting dark though. It's getting dark pretty early, nowadays.”

“I like running in the dark,” Levi said. “Even if it's slightly more dangerous. Maybe I like it like that,” he mused

“I could believe that,” Eren said, smiling. He was feeling better. “I should make something to eat and let you get on with your run. Thanks for letting me vent.”

“All right, Eren. Take care of yourself.”

Eren did. The next day things felt much better and the day after he wondered if he'd been
overreacting. It helped when Hange sent him the rough cut for the film, probably to reassure him, and he got to see his character hack into things and generally do all the awesome stuff he'd chosen that script for in the first place.

He even went and showed Jean some of the clips, just the ones in which he kept his clothes on. Jean told him his hair looked stupid, but he didn't have anything bad to say about the rest of it.

Eren watched his scene with Erwin with the door shut. He just wanted to see what it looked like, that's all. Erwin wasn't playing a major character, and the camera spent most of the action focused on Eren; Erwin was hands and feet and shadowy bulk. When he put his foot on the back of Eren's head, Eren paused the playback and stared at his own bloody face beneath Erwin's heel, feeling slightly sick with guilty delight.

He thought he understood a bit better what Reiner was talking about, looking into his own startled and subtly aroused face. It hadn't been comfortable in that position, but it was a completely different feeling from the discomfort of the last day's shooting.

It didn't matter. He didn't think he'd be exploring that particular aspect of his sexuality any time soon. He closed the video and sent an email to Hange.

Eren was at college when he got the text from Erwin.

Want to see a film on Friday night?

Eren had texted the affirmative when Levi called about twenty minutes later.

“Hey. Are you doing anything on Friday?”

Eren didn't answer for a few moments. Just what was this?

“Is this some sort of test?” he asked, feeling weirdly hurt.

“What?”

“Erwin asked me the exact same question like half an hour ago. Am I supposed to choose between you or something?”

Levi sighed. “That fuckwit. No, Eren, we don't do that sort of bullshit. You got invited twice to the same movie. We're going to see a film together and Erwin suggested we invite you along. He didn't say he had invited you so I thought he'd forgotten in his old age and I decided I'd do it.”

“Oh.” Eren relaxed. “I feel silly now.”

“So, are you free?”

“Yeah, I'd love to go.”

“Good, you're driving.” Levi said firmly. “If Erwin takes his car he'll need to find somewhere safe to park it, and if we get really unlucky some nerd will recognise it and spend half an hour talking to him about European engineering and power to weight ratios.”

Eren laughed. “Okay.”

Which was how he ended up with Levi in the passenger seat admiring the air vents with a pleased expression while Erwin crammed into the back. He'd picked Levi up first and Levi had shown no signs he intended to give up his seat when they picked Erwin up from his apartment.
They directed him to an independent cinema, and told him they were going to watch the latest by one of their favourite Korean directors. Eren didn't care; he would have been happy watching two hours of paint drying if it meant he got to hang out with his friends.

They bickered in their usual fashion and Erwin insisted on paying for Eren's ticket since he'd driven them. Eren didn't protest too much.

Erwin bought himself a beer and Levi bought popcorn and handed it to Eren since he ended up between them and they talked about the previous films they'd seen while they waited for the lights to go down.

Eren felt warm and happy and relaxed, even if he didn't have much to contribute to the conversation. He didn't feel like he was missing out on one by spending time with the other; they were both here, a warm solid presence on either side of him that made him want to sink back into the chair and just bask in it. The conversation continued while the advertisements showed, the three of them putting their heads together to talk in an undertone.

The movie managed to be both sad and darkly funny, and the screen was red with blood more than once. The tragic ending felt inevitable.

Afterwards Erwin suggested coffee, 'or tea for those who feel coffee is too much flavour' to which Levi responded with both a filthy look and an answer to the affirmative. That meant finding somewhere that served tea to Levi's standards, and they strolled, Eren still somehow in the middle and everyone satisfied with that configuration.

“What did you think about the bit after the credits?” Eren asked.

“It meant he was just a kid all along,” Erwin said. “For all his cool and killing ability he never grew up.”

“It did not,” Levi said. “He was a pure fighter, at least until he met the girl. And he was happy like that.”

“Are you sure? He drank a lot.”

“Only after he met her.”

Eren smiled and let them talk, and his gaze dropped to their hands. All he had to do would be to reach out, just a few inches, to hold both of them. His fingers actually twitched with the effort of not doing so and he shoved his hands into his pockets.

This was fine. This was more than enough. This was brilliant; the three of them together, and he smiled and smiled and wished the evening would never end.
Chapter 19

Life went on, and Eren was determined not to mess it up. The weather grew colder, and Eren’s group projects grew more intense. He paid off his debt to Mikasa. He tended to see Erwin and Levi together, when he wasn’t attending Levi’s class or going to the gym. It wasn’t like he didn’t trust himself to be alone with them, he just liked the reminder of what he had to lose if he screwed up. Plus, he enjoyed the way they interacted without ever making him feel like he was excluded from the conversation.

Life went on like this for a week, give or take.

He came home one evening to find Jean and Armin playing on the Xbox in the living room.

They told him he was welcome to join them, but he said he had heaps of work to do, and that he’d be better off hitting the books instead. For a moment Armin looked guilt-stricken, although Eren had no idea why; he studied more than Eren and Jean put together, and he wasn’t even doing a difficult major—or at least, that was what Eren instinctively felt about arts subjects.

They told him they’d let him know when they were getting dinner and soon Eren could hear Armin’s soft laughter and Jean’s irritating voice and Eren collected Missy from her post outside Jean’s room and took her into his, shutting the door on the cheerful noise.

He wasn’t lonely or anything, he just needed to concentrate on his work. He ended up putting on his headphones. Missy purred and sank her claws lovingly into his lap, reassured that he wouldn’t be going anywhere for some time.

If he was being honest, he thought, paging through his textbook. If he was really being honest, he should probably see about getting a boyfriend. Because if Armin enjoyed his games night then there would probably be others to follow and Eren didn’t think he could feasibly pretend to study through all of them, but there was no way he’d stand to be a third wheel on Jean’s dates.

It was something to consider, anyway.

Eren had looked at his expenses and worked out with Hange how often he’d need work. It was only a part-time job, after all and Hange was quite firm on the fact that he should put his studies first. He felt his school and working life had never been more organised. Mikasa would be proud, he thought.

The next time Eren had an on-location shoot, he was told to meet up at a gym; not the one Eren attended with Levi. Once again Eren was drafted to give Armin and Historia a lift over from campus.

It was a photoshoot, nothing more, and so they hadn’t had to learn any lines.

“Seems busy,” Armin observed, as they had to hunt for a free space in the car park.

“Sorry, we’re closed for today,” the receptionist said when they walked in.

“We’re here for the photoshoot,” Armin said.

“Oh, right.” The guy did a double-take, looking the three of them up and down. “Head over to the pool; they’re still setting up.”

“It’s not all about art, commerce is important too,” Hange was saying, as they put together one of the cameras from its case without even looking at it, like a hardened soldier stripping and reassembling
their rifle. “Basically, what I’m saying is, the softcore gay market is going completely nuts over swimming right now, although I don’t know why.”

Historia opened her mouth to say something, and then apparently thought better of it. “So why am I here?” she said instead.

“Because it’s not every day I get an entire pool to play with and I’m going to get as much done as I possibly can.”

“You mean I am,” Nanaba said. She was pacing up and down the side of the pool, head craned back as she looked at the lights with a faint frown.

“Everyone’s to participate. Eren, Armin, Historia, there’s a rack of swimming costumes over there. Pick out something cute and hit the changing rooms and do whatever it is you gotta do to look stunning.”

Reiner was doing pushups when Eren and Armin went into the men’s. There were several other guys there as well, although Eren didn’t know them. One or two seemed to recognise Armin. Hange hadn’t been kidding about trying to fit as much in as possible.

“I wonder how Hange got permission to film here,” Eren said, as he started taking off his clothes.

“They can be very persuasive,” Armin said. “But I wouldn’t bet money on the parent company having any idea what’s going on.”

“Hey Eren,” Reiner said. They hadn’t really seen much of each other since they’d made the film together.

“Hey.”

“Today is going to be fun, I think,” Reiner declared. “Just kick back in the pool and get paid for it.”

Armin sighed and told them that he was never very good at swimming. “I can hold my breath a long time, though.”

“We should have a contest,” Reiner said.

“And a race,” Eren added, getting into the spirit of it. Or at least, getting into the spirit of something. When they returned to the pool fired up for the competition, Hange had to scowl at them and dress them down.

“This isn’t actually a swim meet, guys. Although, that’s not a bad narrative. Reiner, Eren, do a bit of facing off; I like photoshoots with dramatic tension.”

“Wait for me,” Nanaba said plaintively from where she’d been photographing several of the female actors lounging by the side of the pool. “I can’t do two sets at once.”

“Oh, right. I’ll do these, don’t worry.”

In the end they did get to do some action shots in the water, and Eren easily beat everyone else who raced him; even Ymir, who came closest on his heels. His work with Levi was starting to pay off.

Mostly, they posed. Hange told them not to be shy if they got hard, even though this was a softcore shoot. Eren didn’t feel the circumstances were entirely conducive to such a phenomenon. Eren wrestled with Reiner and splashed around with Armin and Historia and rather cautiously worshipped
Ymir, who seemed to find his nervousness at touching her deeply amusing. Hange paired them up randomly, looking for aesthetically pleasing combinations, and Eren had no problems posing with the people he didn't know.

They each got a personal session with Nanaba when they took off what little they were wearing, and Eren artfully draped himself across the concrete as if it were a feather bed. This was exactly what he needed after last time, he thought. A bit of a confidence boost, now he was completely at ease in front of the camera. The number of other people in the room didn't even bother him that much; the other models paying no attention as he worked.

Afterwards he sat wrapped in a towel so he wouldn’t get too cold, waiting for his next set, politely not paying attention to Armin as he took his turn.

“Hey, I found the vending machine,” Reiner said, walking up, a towel wrapped around his waist. “You want anything?”

More out of boredom than any real desire for protein bars or energy drinks, Eren accompanied Reiner to the machine.

“So you're studying?” Reiner asked.

Eren told him about his major and Reiner said he'd dropped out of college before he'd managed to rack up any actual debt.

“I'm just too fucking dumb,” he said cheerfully.

“What do your folks think?” Eren asked.

“Ah, it's just my ma and my lil sisters,” Reiner said. “She's just glad I'm doing somethin' legal and making a reasonable amount of dough. I can help her cover the rent when things get tough.” Reiner scratched the back of his head. “I kinda gave her a rough few years when I was in high school, you know?”

Eren could believe it.

Reiner bought a couple of energy bars and some water and Eren bought Gatorade and they were about to head back when Reiner caught Eren's arm.

“Hey uh, Eren.”

“It's fine,” Eren said. “We are cool. You're a cool guy and we can work together again some time, and you don't have to worry about it. It just happens.”

“Well, yeah, thanks, man. I was actually gonna—that is, aside from all that.” Reiner took a deep breath. “You're a pretty cool guy too, Eren. You're sweet, and funny, and well, you're, you're fucking gorgeous as far as I'm concerned. I don't really want to keep going on about that stupid fucking scene but you know, you were amazing.” Reiner looked him in the eye.

Eren's heartbeat had picked up at the start of Reiner's speech, pretty much as soon as Reiner started singing his praises. No one had ever come out and complimented him like that before, not with those intentions at least, which were pretty clear.

“So,” Reiner continued. Eren seemed to have lost his voice. “If I haven't made too much of a mess of this, I was wondering if you wanted to go out with me sometime. This weekend maybe? See a movie or go to a club or,” Reiner shrugged. “Visit a shelter and look at the puppies. Whatever you like.”
He was being so serious about this. And now he was waiting for an answer.

Eren knew, with a kind of ruefulness, that he'd been half-heartedly hoping for a boyfriend only the night before, and here was a volunteer; maybe not the most sexually compatible but even Eren knew the difference between a public performance and what might happen in private. He wasn't bad looking, and Eren was sure if he wanted to play around with kinkier things Reiner would be helpful and wouldn't pressure him.

“That's uh,” Eren ran his fingers through his damp hair. “Wow. No one's ever quite confessed to me like that before.”

Eren also knew that there was no way he was going to say yes. Under other circumstances, maybe he'd have given it a try, but he already knew what would happen if he did now.

He licked his lips nervously. “I'm sorry, but there's kind of someone else right now.” Someone else. “Which is a bit complicated.” In his head if nowhere else. “It really wouldn't be fair to you to take you up on your offer.”

Reiner shrugged, “Well, I had to ask. Thanks, Eren.” He looked disappointed but not all that surprised.

Eren nodded.

“And hey,” Reiner added. “Good luck with your guy, alright? That sonovabitch has to be the luckiest guy in the country and I hope he knows it.”

“Thanks.”

They walked back to the pool and Eren was glad Hange called him over. When he got back in the water he ducked his head under the surface for a few moments to try and cool his face down. He felt like he'd just run a marathon or something.

By the time they were allowed to put their clothes back on, Eren's fingers and toes were wrinkled and his eyes were starting to sting from the chlorine. Hange had spoken at length about how much they'd love to make some films about mermaids next summer, especially since they had such talented swimmers on the books.

Historia said she'd get a lift back with Ymir, and Armin said he'd accompany Eren back to his place.

“Jean said there was this Korean movie you were talking about that sounded really good so we're gonna go and see it.”

Jean had picked a movie he knew Eren had already seen. Eren was actually rather impressed by his level of strategy, even if it was entirely pointless. Still, if Jean was going to take six months to admit he was taking Armin on an actual date, it wasn't his business.

“Well, I won't spoil it for you then.”

“Are you okay?” Armin asked.

“Fine, thanks.” Just feeling mixed up and terrible. He knew rejecting Reiner had been the right thing to do, but he still felt bad about it.

Jean and Armin left for their just-friends date and Eren flopped down in front of the Xbox to play a game he couldn't remember the plot of but he was meant to be shooting all these guys and really, the
plot wasn't relevant. He turned the sound up to drown out the thoughts in his own head, even though it kept Missy away.

He felt like shit and he didn't know why. He hadn't done anything wrong and in fact had been bending over backwards to do everything right. If there'd been ice cream in the freezer he'd have been tempted to have it for dinner, but he decided to get pizza instead.

He took out his phone. He'd received a text.

*If you're free tomorrow, I can show you what the Aston's good for.*

Eren looked at Erwin's text and realised there was nothing more he wanted to do tomorrow than find out what the Aston was good for.

*I'd love to.*

Jean hadn't come home by the time Eren went to bed, and his door was shut the next morning. Eren didn't care. He bolted his breakfast, desperate to just get away from everything for a while, and he was waiting by the curb when the Aston glided up.

“Good morning,” Erwin smiled at him as Eren got in.

“Hi.” This felt like a good day already; the sky was a promising shade of blue, and Eren felt alive with anticipation. “Where are we going?”

“To look at the autumn leaves,” Erwin said. “It’s the perfect time of year for a drive.”

“Cool.”

“And maybe find some nice empty winding roads once we get out of the city,” Erwin added.

“Now *that* I’m looking forward to,” Eren said. He may or may not have googled the Aston last night out of idle curiosity. It was terrifyingly expensive, even more so than he’d imagined, and he couldn’t wait to see what sort of experience that money had bought.

He was obliged to wait, however, as they made their way out of the city. Erwin didn’t fight the traffic, letting the Aston patiently endure it until they turned off the motorway out towards the lake. It was an obvious weekend destination, and there were plenty of other cars and camper-vans on their way out for the weekend.

“Hey, Eren,” Erwin said. He had a pleased little smile on his face. “Watch this.”

And then he didn’t seem to do anything at all. The car didn’t seem to do anything at all. But the pit of Eren’s stomach told him that they’d suddenly started going much faster. They surged past the car in front of them, effortlessly.

Erwin turned up the music; clearly a driving mix of some kind, orchestral and techno selected to raise the heart rate, and bass drops that Erwin seemed to try and time gear changes to. They were behind a car, and then they’d just go around it, like it wasn’t moving.

Eren found himself short of breath, as he recognised the sheer power that Erwin was conducting with apparently no exertion at all. Fallen leaves danced and fluttered in their wake as they climbed higher, leaving farmland behind for trees ablaze with leaves of a thousand shades of red and orange.

Erwin was taking the long route nowhere in particular; he avoided arterial roads as much as possible,
preferring winding country drives. Eren was glad he was a safe pair of hands as he wasn't sure he'd have trusted anyone else with this machine. He remembered how careful and precise Erwin was, and his stomach fluttered in excitement without a queasy edge of fear.

It felt like they were flying. The Aston purred and sang and Eren realised this is what it had been made for; not necessarily blistering around a racetrack (although it could do that too) but eating up beautiful stretches of road. He found himself anticipating every swooping curve; he didn't know turning a corner was such a pleasurable act.

Erwin glanced at him to gauge his reaction and Eren beamed. It didn't feel real.

“I get it now,” Eren said, over the music. “I thought these cars were just to show off.”

“Some of them are,” Erwin said. “But not this one. Not her.” He looked so genuinely happy, and it was infectious; or maybe Eren was the infectious one, he wasn't sure. It didn't matter. He nodded his head to the music and watched the scenery and felt the car do her thing.

They stopped for gas and sandwiches at a little store catering for tourists. Eren watched the reaction the Aston got; indifference from those who only saw a silver car, envy from the middle-aged guys, delight from the kids and teenagers who recognised it. A guy on a motorbike came up to ask Erwin some questions about it, but he only seemed to be listening with half an ear, more wanting an excuse to stand near it and look.

“Okay,” Erwin admitted, once he'd gone. “It's for showing off as well.”

Eren laughed. As far as he was concerned, both car and owner were worth showing off; even though they'd stopped moving for now his stomach still felt fluttery. He felt aware of Erwin even when he wasn't looking at him and it was so nice. He could let himself enjoy this much, surely.

Erwin consulted his satnav for a while, but he'd kept the device silenced throughout the drive so far; they weren't going anywhere specific after all, so there was no need for directions.

“Not too bored?” he asked.

“Never,” Eren said, and they escaped again. That's what it was, an escape; it didn't feel like they were bound by the laws of physics in quite the same way as the other motorists. If they wanted to be over there they would be, in almost no time at all. Erwin took them up into the mountains. He stayed on the sealed roads, but otherwise he didn't baby his car. He'd bought her to drive her, not wrap her in cotton wool and if she got a bit of dust on her it would wash off, he said.

Only the motorbikes could keep up, and they were in the mountains for a similar reason to Eren and Erwin. Eren felt like he was a guest at a secret club dedicated to beautiful speed. They dropped down the other side of the mountains quickly, to a small town near the lake.

They stopped at a lookout by the water's edge and stretched their legs.

“I needed this,” Eren said. “I've been so busy and there's just been so much, I dunno, stuff going on.”

“Oh?”

Eren shook his head, “It's not like it's life-changing or important or anything. Or even bad, really. Just stuff.”

“It's good to get away,” Erwin said. “I know what you mean.” They wandered around for a while, looking at the souvenir shops and Eren bought ice cream even though it was too cold for it, and
eventually Erwin looked at the sun and said they should be heading back.

“It's not as much fun after dark. Not in the woods, anyway. City driving is nice at night, if you go really late when the streets start to clear.”

“I feel like I'm in a James Bond movie,” Eren said, as they started to walk back to the car.

“He did have an Aston in a lot of the early films,” Erwin said. “So, and are you Bond or the girl?” he asked with a sly expression.

“Well, it's your car,” Eren mumbled, feeling shy.

Erwin smiled at him and Eren looked away.

They drove back but it still felt like they were ploughing forward as the sun dropped in the western skies. They recrossed the mountains and suddenly Erwin slowed and stopped, pulling off onto the gravel beside a random stretch of road.

“Look at that,” he said. “You can see the shadow the mountains cast.” He got out for a better look, taking a camera out of the glove compartment as he did so. Eren followed, pulling his hoodie a bit closer in the evening air as Erwin took photos of the shadowed and sunlit scene. The sun seemed to pick out a patch of trees so red they looked like a forest fire.

Eren thought it was pretty neat, even if he wouldn’t have bothered stopping and taking a photo of it.

“Hey,” Erwin swung around and pointed the camera at Eren. He gave him a few moments to object before taking his picture.

“Don't you already have one?” Eren asked, smiling.

“Mm. It never hurts to have a spare.”

Eren laughed, “What does that even mean?”

“It's worth commemorating the moment. Come on, let's take one together.”

Eren didn't object and Erwin wrapped an arm around his shoulders and Eren found himself pressed against Erwin's side and he could smell the same cologne that was on Erwin's coat and his heart decided to keep double-time as he smiled into the camera Erwin held away from them.

He wanted him to take the picture so he could step away and he also hoped that this moment would stretch on indefinitely. Erwin took the picture and took his arm from around Eren's shoulders to examine the result, but he didn't step away. Eren maintained the pretence that he was looking over his shoulder at the camera as a reason not to move either.

They were caught in the last of the sunlight, and Eren would remember it later as if the moment had been preserved in amber.

Erwin showed Eren the picture on the digital display.

“It looks good,” Eren said.

“I don't think it's possible to take a bad picture of you,” Erwin said. “I'd be happy to try, of course-” He broke off and Eren glanced up at him and was caught by his gaze. Erwin's lips twitched, as if he might say something further, but whatever he was going to say he'd apparently forgotten.
Erwin sighed like he was giving up and then he leaned down and pressed his lips against Eren's and the only thing Eren could think was *finally*.

There was a tiny sound that Eren realised came from somewhere in the back of his throat and he moved his lips against Erwin's. Erwin wrapped his arm around his shoulders again and Eren stretched up towards him and wound his arms around his neck and when he did so he felt Erwin relax, his shoulders drop, and he plucked at Eren's lower lip with his own. Eren drew a shaky breath when he felt the tip of Erwin's tongue just trace along the edge of his lip. He hummed against Eren's mouth and Eren felt drawn in, sweetly overwhelmed without a single demand. His eyes were slitted against the sun and all he could see was endless gold, Erwin's hair and sunlit skin and the pale sky behind him.

He pressed up against him, magnetised, seeking heat and Erwin wrapped his other arm around him, the camera held loosely against Eren's back.

Erwin pulled back, just far enough that they could breathe, still wrapped around each other.

“Feels like we've been waiting a long time for that,” Erwin said in a voice little louder than a whisper.

“Mm.”

Eren felt like the ground beneath his feet was in danger of crumbling away and he clung to Erwin and hid, pressing his forehead to his collarbone, feeling the warmth and curve of his chest through the shirt under his open coat. He was just gonna hide in here. Just for a little while.

He felt Erwin reach up and stroke his hair and Eren bared his teeth where Erwin couldn't see and wondered what he'd done.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The sound of a vehicle approaching separated them. Eren had been frozen in horrified delight, his heart thumping against his ribcage like a bird trying to get free. He’d been waiting so long to find out what it was like in Erwin’s arms and it was more than he’d hoped. He felt secure, he felt like all he had to do was ask and Erwin would hold him forever, his chin on Eren’s head, his hands gently pressing on Eren’s back, urging him to lean in, to rely on him. It wasn’t a passive request either, the way Erwin pressed Eren to his chest told him how much he wanted him to stay there. Eren felt, weirdly enough, that Erwin had missed him, even though they’d never been together in the first place to be separated.

The moment didn’t last forever. No moment ever did. The sunlight gradually moved off them, and when Eren heard the sound of the approaching car he stumbled back, feeling strange on his own two feet again, and cold in the evening air as Erwin let him go.

Erwin must have seen something wasn’t quite right. He glanced at the car as it passed and then looked at Eren for a long moment, during which Eren was unable to meet his eyes. After the car passed them Erwin touched Eren’s shoulder and walked around the Aston to the driver’s side door.

“Well, think about it,” he said in a voice that was almost too soft to reach Eren’s ears.

Eren nodded, and silently got back into the car.

Erwin put the camera away, and returned the Aston to the road. Eren looked out the window, not wanting to see what sort of expression was on Erwin’s face.

This could be okay, still. He’d told Levi he wanted to be friends, so he wasn’t bound to him; he never had been. He could trade Levi’s quiet, sparse apartment for Erwin’s welcoming clutter, add his own, be cooked for and lavished attention on, probably never have to worry about money, and feel Erwin’s arms around him as long as he wanted them to be.

Who could blame him? Levi wouldn’t. He’d understand, Eren was sure. In fact, Eren realised he’d probably already done this calculation in his head, probably knew what Erwin felt for him (Eren knew it too, now; the sigh of surrender before he’d kissed him told him everything about how long he’d been waiting to do so, and Eren could feel how treasured he was and it was heartbreaking.)

Eren would be happy for them, and probably tease them about it and Eren started to feel like he was the worst person who had ever lived.

Because he didn’t like Erwin better than Levi, not in any quantifiable measure. They were too different, they were like stars and Saturdays; how could you pick one? It didn’t seem fair to choose one over the other.

“Eren.”

“Yeah?”

“Well, never mind.” Erwin shook his head. He’d run out of words again. Eren wanted to reassure him somehow, because he knew he was being weird and making the end of their day weird and if he’d been in Erwin’s shoes he’d be feeling pretty insecure right now. But it felt wrong to pretend
everything was fine.

He missed Levi. Missed his voice, his grounded way of looking at things. Levi would tell him he was over thinking things. If you want to fuck him, just fuck him, if you want to date him, date him and don’t worry about what I think. That's what Levi would say, and Eren knew that wouldn’t be any use either.

It was far, far too late to take the easy way out.

Erwin didn’t suggest dinner. He drove Eren home and they smiled awkwardly at each other and Eren told him earnestly that he’d had one of the best days of his entire life.

“Well, I’m glad,” Erwin said. “We can do this again, you know, regardless of other things.” He looked at his hands and frowned as if he’d decided they were the wrong size as he tried to work out what he wanted to say. “If I made things too complicated, or you know, something like that, you don’t need to justify yourself whatever you decide to do.” Sad smile. “Or not do.”

“I need to think, that’s all,” Eren said.

“Then take all the time you need.”

They wished each other goodnight and Eren went inside. He didn’t need that much time to think; he knew he had to do what he should have done a while ago, and he was lucky he hadn’t dug himself a bigger hole before he’d decided to do it.

Just like ripping off a band-aid, he told himself. Get it over with.

Jean wasn’t home. There was a fifty percent chance he was working and a fifty percent chance he was making out with Armin, Eren thought as Missy appeared at the door to greet him, wailing for her dinner and rubbing her head against his leg.

“Yes, yes. Wait til I’ve got my coat off.”

He fed Missy but didn’t feel very hungry himself and he didn’t think he would feel hungry until he’d done what he had to do, so he braced himself and called Levi.

“Yes?”

“We should talk,” Eren said, and winced. It was such a cliche thing to say.

“Sure.”

“No, I mean, the three of us. Erwin as well. Face to face somewhere private.”


“Is tomorrow okay?” The sooner the better; he didn’t want to give himself enough time for his nerve to crack.

“Yeah, I’m not doing anything. What time?”

“Um. I’ll text Erwin and find out and let you know,” Eren said. “I’ll text you.”

“Okay.” Levi sounded concerned but he didn’t ask Eren any questions, something Eren was grateful for.
Eren texted Erwin and he replied a few minutes later and they agreed to meet at around eleven.

Eren took a deep breath. I can do this. I have to do this.

He was repeating those same words to himself when he arrived at Levi’s house the next day. He wished they’d arranged for an earlier time because waiting for eleven o’clock to roll around had been torture. Eren had filled in the time by half-heartedly doing various household chores. Jean had only just woken up when he left the house and hadn’t been very coherent, although he had seemed weirdly smug.

The garage under Levi’s apartment was open, and Eren could see the back end of the Aston inside it. His heart thumped uncomfortably just to see the car. He forced himself to leave his own and walked up Levi’s stairs like a man mounting the gallows for his own execution. That is, reluctantly and so slowly Levi had heard him and opened the door before he’d even had a chance to knock.

“Morning.” Levi sounded cautious, like he wasn’t sure what to expect.

“Hi,” Eren said, staring at his shoes.

Levi sighed, “Just great, I should have expected you’d both be fucking weird today.” He stepped aside and let Eren in. “You know if you guys are banging, that’s fine with me,” he said more loudly, presumably so Erwin could hear.

Eren cringed. “I knew you’d say that,” he muttered.

Erwin was sitting at the kitchen table, a mug of coffee in front of him and a teapot and cup at the place opposite. He was resting his chin on his hand and worrying at his lower lip with his knuckle, looking concerned and bleak. Levi looked braced for something, anything. It wasn’t a very pleasant atmosphere.


Eren shook his head. He hadn’t managed to eat anything yet today, and he wasn’t sure if that was contributing to the sick feeling in his stomach.

Levi sat down at the table, while Eren remained on his feet. He just wanted a bit of space. They looked at him expectantly, and he took a deep breath.

“I think we should break up.”

“I didn’t think we were together in the first place,” Levi said curiously.

Erwin frowned, his forehead wrinkling and his expression grim. “Look, Eren, we can be friends-”

“No, we can’t! I tried that. I tried really, really hard. I mean we should break up as friends, too.” He swallowed with difficulty, determined not to start crying and look like more of a mess than he already did. “I like you so much. I like you more than anyone else I’ve ever met in my entire life. Both of you. You’re so amazing; I don’t know why you waste your time with me.”


Eren took a deep breath and kept going. He had to get it all out and over with. “It doesn’t matter. If we keep going like this, I’m just gonna do something stupider than I already have and I’m gonna screw everything up and you know if you guys started hating each other I’d never forgive myself.”
“That’s not going to happen,” Erwin said. “Whoever you pick, we’re okay with it. We’ve even talked about it; you don’t owe us anything. Just follow your heart, and I promise it will be fine.”

Eren shook his head. He didn’t seem to be getting through. “I can’t choose, that’s the problem. I tried. I tried really fucking hard—”

“Okay, Eren, just listen to me for a sec,” Levi said, holding up his hands. He pointed at Erwin. “He has been smitten from the moment he met you.”

“Levi—” Erwin began.

“You shut up as well,” Levi said, glaring at him. “You'll get your turn later. I don't really want to go into this because it's fucking embarrassing watching a middle-aged man—I said shut up,” he directed the aside at Erwin who’d opened his mouth to protest. He shut it again and frowned. “A middle-aged man acting like a teenager, but Eren, he's nuts about you. And you know, you'd be good together. He wouldn't take advantage of you for a moment and I know you wouldn't do the same to him. Trust me, I know Erwin; I've seen this before. Go and have your grand romance, just spare me the soggy details.”

Eren sagged. He hadn't expected Levi to make this argument and he wasn't sure what to say.

“Is it my turn?” Erwin asked.

“Go on,” Levi said.

Eren rather wished he hadn’t given permission. He didn’t want them to argue back, it only made things a hundred times more difficult, but he supposed it was only fair to hear them out, even if every word Levi had said had sunk him further into guilt.

“Okay right.” Eren could see Erwin marshalling his argument like he was in a courtroom. “Levi says he’s seen this before. That's because it's happened before. Even if I did,” an awkward pause. “Fall for Eren, it isn't the first time. It won't be the last. I'll be okay, I'm not going to wither away and die, I'll meet someone else sooner or later. I've been in love before, and I'll be in love again. Levi, on the other hand.” He turned away from Levi and looked at Eren. “He's lonely as hell and he won't admit it in a million years. When he talks about you, he wears an expression I’ve never seen on his face before. Somehow you’ve managed to crack that impenetrable shell and I knew he had a heart under there somewhere. I will be okay. I mean he will too I'm sure, but you're something special, Eren. Listen to us. Whoever you pick, the other will be okay; he’ll understand, I promise you, and he’ll still be your friend. You don’t have to give us up like this.”

Eren wished he'd never been born, but what had started as mortified guilt (and being honest, quite a lot of gratification as well because wow there was a lot to process there and it was all very flattering) was starting to turn into annoyance.

He slapped his hands down on the table. “You're not listening to me!” he objected loudly, and Erwin fell silent as they both looked at him. “If there was any way I could have avoided this do you think I wouldn't have? I'm gonna miss you so much. But I need to get some space and get over you guys, I really do, otherwise I'm just gonna be even more miserable than I am now.” Shit. Don't cry. Don't cry. He took a shaky breath and looked away because they both looked so sad and sympathetic. “This has to be the right thing to do. For everyone.”

Levi sighed, “Oh Eren, I’m sorry.”

Erwin frowned.
“Eren,” Erwin said. “I don't want you to be miserable. I certainly don't want to be the one who makes you miserable; what would make you happy? Just tell me.”

Eren shrugged, blinking furiously. What a strange question; you couldn't just decide to do what made you happy. “I don't know. I guess.” He looked away, “Date you both?” It sounded stupid and selfish; why not ask for a mansion why he was at it?

Levi gave a helpless shrug and leaned back in his chair, picking up his cup. “He’s already said he’s thought it through, Erwin. Even you can’t fix this.”

Erwin was silent, looking at the tabletop in front of him and drumming his fingertips on it lightly. Eren waited for whatever he was going to say.

“That's fine with me,” he said eventually.

“What is?” Levi asked.

“If you want to date Levi as well as me I don't mind.”

Eren glanced at Levi. He seemed just as nonplussed by Erwin's pronouncements as Eren was.

“Do I get a say in this?” Levi asked.

“Of course you do. I'm just putting it out there as a possible solution to all of this. It’s not like I’ve suggested we cut him in half, so stop staring at me like that. I like him, and he likes me. You like him, and he likes you. He gets us both and everyone's happy.”

“And you think that will work?” Levi raised an eyebrow.

“I have no idea if it will work or not. But it seems a shame just to give up and drift apart. Look at it this way; Eren's working for Hange so he's going to be having sex with other people anyway, and if we had talked him into picking one of us he'd be emotionally attached to the other as he admitted earlier. This isn’t such a big leap, really.”

“So we'd share him,” Levi said.

“Essentially. Or to look at it another way, Eren would keep both of us.”

“And what does Eren think about all of his?” Levi shifted his gaze from Erwin. He carefully wasn't wearing any particular expression and Eren couldn't read what he was thinking, but he had to be seriously considering it to even be talking about it, surely.

Part of Eren wanted to leap on Erwin for solving everything and being brilliant and he felt like he'd just had a life sentence reversed and part of him was terrified; rather than one heart he'd be risking hurting two, and he'd been so busy being feeling guilty and uncertain he hadn't even seriously thought about how he might actually go about having a relationship, let alone two. Let alone these two.

He pulled out a chair and sat down, trying to collect his thoughts.

“IT sounds like it could be complicated,” he said. “I don't want to screw up. But.” He looked from one to the other, “It might be really good too. I don't really have a lot of relationship experience though. I don’t know.”

“Well,” Levi said quietly. “You're not the only one.”
“I wouldn’t even consider this if it was anyone but you, Levi,” Erwin said. “But I trust you with my life, and I’d trust you with my boyfriend. I know you’d just roll your eyes and tell me I’m being sentimental or whatever but I want you to be happy.” Erwin gave him a funny little smile, “And by that speech earlier I think you feel the same way about me.”

“Fuck me,” Levi muttered, running his hand through his hair. “I mean, no, don’t. Because I am not -”

“No. We are friends,” Erwin agreed. “This doesn’t change that.”

“It’s going to be a lot of work,” Eren said. He’d only been listening to them with half an ear, caught up in his own thoughts. “Like, scheduling and stuff.” He couldn’t let anyone feel left out or taken for granted.

“Eren, you don’t have to do this,” Levi said. “You can take a break and meet some other guy and get over us and we can be friends later. We’re not going anywhere.”

“No.” Eren looked up, his heart beating fast. “I don’t want to meet anyone else. I want to try it. If I even have the slightest chance with you—I’m gonna do my best. Can we at least try it?” he asked Levi.

Levi looked somewhat taken aback, but he didn’t drop his gaze. “Well. Yeah, okay. If you want to date him as well it’s not my business. You know what you’re getting into.”

“Okay,” Eren said.

“Okay,” Erwin echoed.

Awkward silence descended. It was the kind of silence Eren imagined would fall in the deepest depths of the ocean. Even Erwin’s cup scraping slightly on the table as he lifted it to take a sip of coffee didn’t really disturb it. Nor did the sounds of traffic outside. The three of them stared at the wooden tabletop as if they were expecting it to sprout new leaves.

Eren jumped slightly when Levi snorted, “Well, we’re off to a brilliant start.”

“Hey-” Erwin objected, ever the peacemaker.

And Eren laughed. He threw his head back and just let it go, all the tension and stress and self-consciousness and the sight of them sitting around the table like that was somehow the best joke he’d ever heard. That they trusted each other so much and they trusted him so much and he wasn’t sure if he was laughing or crying but this was either going to be the salutary cautionary tale of his youth or the best thing in the world, and maybe both.

“I can’t believe this happened,” he said eventually, pressing his hands to his face and looking at them through his fingers. They were looking at him with concern but also amusement too; he could see the way the corner of Erwin’s mouth was curling, and Eren now recognised the twitching in Levi’s neck whenever he was fighting the urge to laugh and that set Eren off again. “Ah, my stomach hurts,” he said when he finally came back down to earth.

Levi patted him on the back, and Erwin ruffled his hair.

“So do you want a drink now?” Levi asked. “Tea or coffee?”

“Well.” He looked from one to the other.

“It’s not a test,” Levi said with an exasperated frown. “I just want to know what you’d like to drink.”
“I like tea and coffee,” Eren said, looking from one to the other. “This time I’ll have tea, thank you. I’ll have coffee when I visit Erwin; he’s got the coffee machine, after all.”

“Smartarse,” Levi growled, getting up to fetch him a cup.

Erwin laughed, “You know, I think he’s gonna be all right.”

“Milk, right?” Levi asked.

“Yeah- oh!” Eren jumped as he felt something brush his ear. Erwin’s lips; he’d leaned in and kissed him. Levi looked at them both and Eren met his eyes guiltily, Erwin’s breath on his neck.

“I don’t mind, you know,” Levi said. “I draw the line at hand-jobs under the table though. Not in my kitchen; that shit’s unhygienic.”

Erwin smiled and sat back in his chair and Eren didn’t know what to say.

Levi poured Eren some tea and put the cup down in front of him and then he bent down and pressed slightly parted lips to Eren’s mouth before sitting down again, looking unconcerned.

Eren took a deep breath and looked at his tea. “I think I’m in trouble,” he muttered, smiling. This had the potential to get really, really good. His heart was pounding and his sipped his drink and tried to pretend it wasn’t.

“You speak up if something bothers you, right?” Erwin said. “I don’t want you to feel toyed with.”

“Yeah, but that goes for you too,” Eren said. “If this has any chance of working we all have to say what we mean, cause you know, I’ll probably mess up.”

“Everyone does sometimes,” Erwin said.

“By the same token,” Levi sipped his tea. “I really don’t need to hear any of the details. What goes on between you two is your business.”

“That’s fair,” Erwin said. “Given your idea of a hot date is cleaning the gutters, I don’t want to hear about it either.”

“That wasn’t a date,” Eren and Levi chorused and Eren met Levi’s eyes and smiled. Looking back, maybe it had been a date after all.

Eren felt the whole situation was a bit unreal. But this didn’t seem to be a dream. Maybe they’d call come to their senses later, but he was going to enjoy this while it lasted, this fluttery, empty kind of sick feeling-

Eren groaned. “I’m so hungry.”

Erwin suggested they get some lunch.

“You’re welcome to raid my fridge,” Levi said. “But I haven’t done the weekend shopping yet.”

Erwin got up and looked in it and confessed that he wasn’t sure even he could make anything really edible out of two peppers and half a bottle of fish sauce.

“It’s not that bad,” Levi said. “There are some eggs.”

“It’s not that good either.” Erwin closed the fridge. “Maybe we should eat out.”
“That’s fine, I’ll get my shoes,” Levi said.

“I think.” Eren noticed Erwin was speaking meaningfully and Levi paused. “What do you think about Thai?"

Erwin and Levi were doing that telepathic thing again.

“Thai is fine,” Eren ventured, although he didn’t feel Erwin was exactly talking to him.

Levi nodded. “Yeah, of course. Thai is fine.”

Eren understood a bit better after they’d all piled into the Aston and Erwin had driven them halfway across the city back towards the studio to a Thai restaurant. Erwin and Levi were greeted like old friends and taken to a table that Eren suspected was their usual by the way they anticipated where the server was going to direct them.

He didn’t get a chance to order for himself. They sat on either side of him and recommended things from the menu and in the end he let them order for him. When the three of them finally left, a couple of hours later, Eren was sure he’d never want to eat again he’d eaten so much.

They’d talked like they always had, as if nothing had changed between them at all, and that was weird in and of itself. It was as if they had an unspoken agreement to pretend it hadn't happened but when Erwin drove them back to Levi’s place so Eren could pick up his car it got strange and awkward again. They looked at each other, trying to work out what was appropriate.

Eventually Levi said he couldn’t stand it and he was going inside and they could do what they liked. Eren said he should probably get going as well Erwin had wished them both a good afternoon. Sitting in his car a few minutes later Eren felt it had been a bit anticlimactic.

But it was for the best. This new reality might take some adjusting to, and that was probably an understatement.

Chapter End Notes

Syn has done some gorgeous artwork for this chapter. Go check it out.
There were many different kinds of cowardice, Levi knew, and one of those kinds could be found on 
the floor under your opponent’s body, their forearm wrapped around your windpipe and your back 
bent until you can feel it creaking in protest. Sometimes it was easier to listen to your own breath 
being forced out your nose due to the pressure on your ribcage than your own thoughts. Blood and 
defeat were a sweeter taste than guilt.

Still. He needed to breathe at some point, and all his strength did him no good if he couldn't get any 
leverage.

He slapped his palm on the mat, indicating defeat.

Annie released him and stood up, breathing heavily. She extended her hand and helped him up.

They were back at Rose Hall. Late Sunday afternoons it was almost always entirely deserted and 
they could beat the snot out of each other without distraction or interruption. Annie hadn't questioned 
it, hadn't even seemed surprised when Levi had called her and asked if she'd wanted a fight.

He was glad she hadn't made anything of it. It was something they had in common; a respect for the 
others' silence.

“Yeah, boss. I’ll be there.” And that was that.

She wiped the sweat off her forehead with her arm while Levi rolled his shoulders and made sure 
everything was back where it was supposed to be. He was fighting like shit today, but he wasn't 
entirely surprised and he didn't really care. Annie had won three of their four bouts so far.

She was looking at him now, eyebrows raised, hip cocked, silently asking him if he wanted another 
go and the strange thought occurred to him that if he'd 
liked girls-

And wasn't that an indication of what kind of mess his head was in right then?

“Yeah,” he said, his words indistinct around his mouth-guard, and held up his hand. Five minutes.

Annie nodded and went to squeeze water out of her bottle into her mouth. Levi prowled around the 
mats, trying to empty his head for the next fight, feeling everything that stung and ached and 
relishing it.

Cowardice, clearly.

Fuck Erwin Smith. He flexed his fingers inside his gloves as Annie stepped back onto the mats.

They raised their guards, letting the other know they were ready.


It was easier thought that done.

Fuck. Erwin. Smith. Levi jabbed at Annie, forcing her back on the defensive, and he could see she 
was surprised that he still had the energy to feint. He aimed a kick at her side and she grunted as his
foot connected, but she didn’t lose her balance.

He was angry at Erwin for doing what he always did and trying to fix everything and make everyone happy. Trying to fix him. Levi had got caught up in things and hadn't been given any time to really think about what he was doing. Erwin was difficult to argue against once he really got going; Levi had seen plenty of other people relent under Erwin's well-intentioned relationship renovation projects. And they worked, more often than not. But Erwin was his own biggest blind spot and he should have known better than to play with them like this, if he cared as much as he claimed.

Annie surged back and Levi raised his guard, taking more of the force than he really needed to, but not wanting to retreat. He was getting tired. Annie was too, but she hadn't taken the beating he had.

If he was honest he couldn't blame Erwin, not really. He was sincere in this, Levi was sure, and road to hell or not he couldn't complain about Erwin having good intentions. It was better than the alternative and in the end it wasn't one of the things Levi would change about him if he could. He'd not proposed anything he wasn't fully prepared to try for himself, after all.

Fuck Eren Jaeger.

They stepped in close, beating each other about the head, but neither gave the other enough room or opportunity to get a decent swing in. Levi blinked sweat out of his eyes. He had an advantage here; he had brute strength on Annie, but his ears were ringing.

No, he couldn't blame Eren. Not in the slightest. He'd been so determined to do the right thing by both of them, determined to be a sensible adult even though he wasn't really either of those things, and determined to be honest no matter how painful it was. Levi knew Eren must have beaten himself up over the whole thing; he'd looked so miserable when he'd told them he wanted to break up, and he couldn't blame him for leaping on Erwin's suggestion. And even then he'd hesitated, still trying to do what was right.

Really that left Levi with only one person to blame: himself.

Annie's fist got under his guard and she planted it in his stomach and he gasped. She stepped back and he raised his forearm automatically as she bounced up and kicked at his head. It was supposed to be a finisher, and it nearly succeeded in putting him down. He staggered under the force of the kick and Annie followed up before he found his feet with hard, fast attacks at his crumbling defences. Her padded knuckles cracked into his face and he felt his lip split.

He yielded before he hit the floor. There was no coming back from that and they both knew it.

“'That'll do, boss,” Annie said.

Levi nodded. It would indeed. This would be the last bout of the day.

Levi took off his gloves and went to the toilets to clean up and examine the damage. His students were probably going to ask him about it next week, although it wouldn't be the first time he'd turned up to class a bit battered and they accepted that he kept his hand in and didn't just teach.

He set his mouth-guard on the sink and rinsed the blood out of his teeth before curling his lip and examining it in the mirror.

He'd expended all his energy and he could look at himself clearly now, too tired to run away. He'd fucked up. He'd held himself aloof for so long, telling himself that relationships and their attendant drama were for other, weaker people who hadn't sorted their shit out the way he had. He'd kept his mouth shut and let things happen and he had no real excuse for it.
There was no running away from this unless he left the country and even then Erwin would probably hop on a plane and chase him down and Eren would tell him he was going too and Erwin wouldn't refuse and Levi forced that particular train of thought to come to a stop because he was starting to feel uncomfortably trapped by all of this.

“Cowardice,” he muttered, looking himself in the eyes. Eren deserved better. It would have been a relief, in a way, if he'd picked Erwin; it would have meant a continuation of the status quo, that things were normal.

But he didn't and he hadn't, and he'd told him as clearly as he could why and Levi still felt good, somehow, when he remembered what Eren had said to him.

*If I even have the slightest chance with you-*

Every time Levi remembered Eren's words it did him in and brought him to a halt. He loved it and hated it because he was so weak to it. If anyone else had said those words to him he'd have run a mile, but in Eren's mouth they'd rooted him to the spot.

Erwin hadn't been enough; somehow his money and good nature and physical presence weren't enough. They'd never directly competed for anyone; Levi avoided people looking for a relationship and Erwin was the exact opposite, after all, but should it happen Levi had always assumed he'd lose, if nothing else because he offered so little besides sex.

Only.

Eren had been a special case. Levi hadn't *wanted* to lose to Erwin, even if he'd been braced for it.

Annie was waiting for him when he returned. She'd cleaned herself up and packed her gear, her bag at her feet as she leant against the wall, arms folded.

Levi tossed his gear into his bag.

“Thanks, Annie.”

“That's alright, boss.”

“Annie.” He didn’t know where to start with this, and he paused and looked at her. “Why’d you train with Eren that time? I doubt he came up with that on his own.”

Annie regarded him with pale eyes that gave nothing away. “No, he didn’t. I offered.”

Levi shouldered his bag and Annie picked hers up as well, waiting while he locked the room and they walked out together, making sure the main doors locked behind them.

They’d spent quite a bit of time in there and night was starting to fall. Annie pulled up her hood.

“Taking the bus?” Levi asked.

“Yeah.”

“Want me to walk you?” He wasn’t asking because he thought Annie was in any danger and she knew it.

“Yeah.”

It was permission to speak, although neither did for a few minutes while they crossed the empty
parking lot.

“You must have seen something in him cause you didn’t toss him out after that first lesson,” Annie said. “Your lessons are mostly full; you had no reason to give him a space. Especially since we both know he ain’t a fighter. He doesn’t have the drive.”

“You’re wrong,” Levi said softly. “He’s got the drive. He just doesn’t need to use it to fight because he doesn’t have a reason to.”

Annie glanced at him with a faintly triumphant look. “You know him better than me, clearly.”

Levi frowned, “Just what were you up to?”

“I was giving the poor fucker a chance, because he looked like he expected you to rip his head off.”

“And how did you know he didn’t do something deserving of having his head ripped off?”

“Because you didn’t, in the end.” Annie sighed. “Boss, you know when we first met?”

“Yeah.”

“I appreciate it, you know. What you did. You didn’t say anything about it, but I understood what you were doing.” Annie tilted her head up to look at the first few stars. “And I wanted to do something for you. Eren’s not like us; he didn’t come to your class because he needed something, but you still looked at him. Properly. I never saw you do that before to anyone.”

Levi frowned. She was right, as much as he was loath to admit it.

“And he really cares about what you think. If you’re gonna,” Annie groped for the words. “Look at someone, it should be someone who looks back at you. I dunno. I’m shit at this shit. I just wanted to do something nice for someone for once. Someone who deserved it.” She glanced at him quickly. “I figured it was worth a try, anyway. Did I screw up, boss?”

“No, I screwed up,” Levi said. “Or maybe I didn’t, I don’t know. Not yet.”

They were approaching the bus stop and Levi halted.

“Thanks,” Levi said. “For the fight as well.”

“When you sort this all out,” Annie said. “We should have a rematch. It didn’t really feel fair today.”

“Thank you for not going easy on me then. And it’s a deal.”

Levi’s house was in the other direction, and they separated. Levi walked home, battered and beaten but a lot calmer than he was. He hated this shit, he really did, but he thought he probably liked Eren more.

It didn’t mean there weren’t things to sort out because whatever happened he was not going to follow Erwin’s lead, and by the time he saw Eren next he wanted to have worked out exactly what he wanted to say.

When he saw Eren next, he still had no idea what he wanted to say.

Levi was setting things up as usual and trying not to look at the door every time someone walked through it but somehow he knew when Eren entered the room anyway and he found himself staring.
When Eren had called him up and told him that he wanted them to be friends, Levi had felt more disappointment than he was happy admitting to. But he'd respected Eren's decision, acknowledging that it was the sensible choice, and he'd done his best to suppress the attraction he felt for the younger man. In some ways it hadn't been difficult; part of the job of making porn was to control your sexuality and direct it where required for the camera. In fact, Levi hadn't given it a lot of thought since; if you ignore things like that long enough they go away.

Until now. Until Eren strolled into the room and Levi realised in purely physical way what he'd known intellectually but hadn't thought about; Eren was no longer off limits. It was like he'd forced himself to forget just how hot Eren was and now he'd been forcibly reminded. Levi was slightly taken aback by the intensity of his own interest now there was nothing holding them back. He could kiss him if he wanted, bite the smooth skin of his neck, find out if his arse felt as good as it looked, take him home and match his own stamina against Eren's youthful energy and fuck him until he couldn't see straight.

Eren wasn't even doing anything particularly seductive, but it didn't seem to matter. Levi just wanted to brand 'mine' across his forehead, or mark it into his shoulders with his teeth. Well, not his exclusively, but that didn't make a dent in his enthusiasm.

Levi took a deep breath. He had a class to see to first, and other things they should discuss, but maybe, maybe Erwin was onto something.

Eren was staring at him too, but his expression was one of slightly horrified concern.

“Levi.” He crossed the room swiftly, not bothering to take off his shoes. “What happened? Are you okay?”

Huh?

“Oh. This.” Levi gestured towards the bruise on his cheek. “I wouldn't be much of a teacher if I didn't practice what I teach, would I? I get some fights in on weekends sometimes.”

Eren frowned. He'd seen Levi at lunchtime on Sunday, and Levi could see him working things out.

“Oh,” he said softly.

“Eren, I'm fine. Now take your damn shoes off.”

“Right, yes.” Eren trotted back to join the other students at the side of the room as they got ready, and Levi watched him shed his shoes and hoodie and start warming up. Levi felt someone's attention on him and when he looked up Annie caught his eye before going back to her own routine.

After the lesson Eren waited for him.

“I've got another class later,” Levi said. Eren looked a bit startled by his declaration but it was more to remind himself than Eren. He'd have to remain off-limits for a while longer.

“Do you want to get tea?” Eren asked. “At that place we went to.”

“Miss the jello, do you? Okay.” That was a good idea; much less temptation there than if he'd taken him home.

They kept glancing at each other on the way there, and looking away again. It was awkward, as Levi had feared, but by the same token not that bad either.
Eren ordered something disgusting again, although it was a different colour this time, and they sat at the same table away from the music. Most of the other customers appeared to be high school girls and they stood out.

“Things kind of happened fast on Sunday, didn't they?” Eren ventured cautiously.

Levi shrugged.

“I mean,” Eren plunged on. “Erwin did most of the thinking and talking. We didn't really get to say much. I was thinking about it, going over it.”

“Changed your mind?” Levi asked, carefully neutral, partly because he wasn't sure what he'd feel if Eren had decided to back out of it.

Eren shook his head, “Not exactly. But I want to know what you think.”

“That's the problem, isn't it? I don't know. I don't do relationship stuff, as Erwin well knows. And this is like, I don't know.”

“Advanced difficulty?” Eren suggested.

“Yeah. Something like that. I just figured we'd have some fun and that would be it. No big deal.”

Eren got quiet for a while, using his stupidly oversized straw to stir his drink around, staring at it with a faint frown.

“I'm sorry, Eren. That's just the way I am.”

Eren took a deep breath and raised his eyes to Levi, “Is that what you were offering then, the night of the storm? When you said I should think things through? When you said you didn't mind my company? Is that all you meant?” He sounded hurt.

Levi opened his mouth and shut it again. Fuck. Eren was many things and stupid wasn't one of them.

“Well, no,” he admitted. “I thought. I imagined it would be okay if you decided to stay around. If you liked it well enough, I would just see how it went at a sensible pace. Not splashing in with both feet without thinking about it. You are a special case; you deserve to know that. I was willing to see where it went, if it became something more than just some fun.”

“Well, can't we do that then?” Eren asked.

“What?”

“All Erwin said was he was okay with you and me. That it was none of his business what we did. So, we could do what you said; just see how it goes. If, if you're okay with me and Erwin, that is. Because I know it's weird but when I'm with you sometimes I think of him and I feel really lonely.”

“I know. I can see it on your face when you miss him.”

“It's the same with you though. I miss you when you're not there. I feel so greedy and selfish.” He hung his head. “Like I don't deserve either of you and now suddenly I might get both.”

“I'm okay with it,” Levi said, and Eren looked up. “That's the truth. You and him make a good pair; we went over this on Sunday. You'll be working at HotFreeRange; you're gonna be fucking plenty of other guys.” Levi allowed himself a smile, a wicked one that he normally reserved for the cameras. “I don't feel threatened by the competition.”
Eren's eyes went wide and he nearly choked one of the tadpoles in his drink. Levi offered him a napkin and he shook his head.

"I'm okay. Wow. Do you know what you're doing when you do that?"

Levi sipped his tea. "Well, yeah. Pretty much."

Eren smiled, "So, do you want to get out of here? When's this next class of yours?"

"Ah, no. Let's be somewhat sensible about this. Besides, I haven't finished my tea."

Eren laughed, and Levi felt the clouds begin to lift. "You and your tea."

"I'm really quite annoying," Levi said. "I'm just warning you now."

"I know," Eren said. "I mean, I can see why people might find you annoying. I don't, really. Although I do kind of wonder how you and Erwin lived together without killing each other."

"So do I."

"What rules?"

"We had a lot of rules and we followed them. And we respected each other's space. His room was disgusting, but it wasn't my business."

"Hm. Do you really think this is gonna work out between the three of us?" Eren looked worried.

"Who knows? Maybe."

The response seemed to satisfy Eren, although Levi had far graver doubts than he'd let on. It just seemed so unwieldy. On the other hand, if he turned out to be as clumsy as he expected, Erwin would be there for Eren to pick up any pieces. It was reassuring, in a way.

"No pressure," Eren said. "We'll just see how it goes. That's a bit of a relief. It's like when Erwin talks he assumes that everything's already worked out for the best."

"He's an optimist," Levi said. "And a romantic. The poor bastard can't help it."

Eren laughed. "Tried to talk him out of it, have you?"

"I lead by example."

They sat in silence, and that was something else Levi liked about Eren. He wasn't one of those people who felt the need to fill every gap in the conversation with meaningless noise. Erwin understood that too, to his credit.

"I feel better," Eren said. "Now that we've talked. I kept thinking about you and worrying because you seemed so reluctant. Like, I didn't want to convince you but at the same time if I'd hesitated I was afraid you'd say no for my benefit." He glanced at Levi. "Did you, well, that fight you had. Was it because of what happened?"

"Yes, but not in a bad way. When I fight, it clears my head. Or it's supposed to; it didn't work so well on Sunday so I got my arse handed to me a few times." He gestured to his face, "Don't be bothered by this. I just needed to calm down."

"Is that why you took up MMA in the first place?" Eren asked.

"No. When I was your age I thought I was above that sort of thing. Rules and such. I'd learned to fight the hard way, blah blah. I was young and dumb. And I could fight, no doubt about that. But it was bad for my career. When you fight without rules, the first thing you lose is your nose. Then your teeth. By the time they're thirty most street fighters look alike." Levi shrugged, "If I wanted to keep my job, I needed to keep my face. Had to fight smarter, so I gave MMA a try as it was closest to
what I already did and then I learned to appreciate the rules.”

“And now you teach,” Eren said, smiling.

“I like seeing people grow in confidence. Learning to trust their own strength, and feeling self-assured enough to fight.” He smiled, “And I like taking the ones who are too eager to hit people down a peg or two.”

“I bet you do,” Eren smiled. “People like me, huh?”

Levi shook his head, “No, I don't think a fight was really what you wanted from me.”

Eren flushed. “Maybe not.” He put down his cup, empty save for some bits of ice in the bottom. “So, um, after we go to the gym this week, do you want to come to my place? Like, for dinner or something? It's not going to be really fancy. Or we could get pizza- do you like pizza?”

“In moderation,” Levi said.

“I have a room mate, I'm just warning you although he works a few nights every week. And you could meet Missy.”

“I'll go, Eren.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. That sounds fine.”

Chapter End Notes

Once again, Syn did some fantastic art. Go bask in Levi's smile.
Eren cleaned.

He’d realised something when he’d talked with Levi; Levi thought of himself as the weak link. He hadn’t said a word about Eren being too young or too inexperienced or too clumsy, even though Eren had wondered about those things himself in the days following the extraordinary conversation Erwin had initiated. Levi trusted him, which was slightly scary.

Levi hadn’t said anything against Erwin either; he’d played so many mean, possessive characters Eren was surprised by his sheer lack of jealousy. Eren realised later that Levi probably thought Erwin was a better match for him than Levi himself was.

He’s probably humouring me, Eren thought as he ran a mop over the bathroom tiles. There wasn’t much Eren could do about that other than to try and demonstrate to Levi that he was just as important to him as Erwin.

Erwin had gone back to texts, and hadn’t really said much other than they should all take a few days to think about things. Somehow, Eren doubted Erwin was having second thoughts; he was politely waiting for the other two to catch up with him. Which was for the best, because things with Levi were not settled.

He’d almost told Erwin all about it when he got home; if anyone would have any useful advice regarding Levi it would be him, but Eren had stopped himself halfway and deleted the text, and after thinking about it for a bit longer he decided against telling Erwin anything. It didn’t seem fair to use one to unlock the other, and they’d both agreed that they didn’t want to know the details of the others’ relationship. Eren was determined to do this right, and that meant not doing anything stupid, and sticking with what they’d agreed or talking it over. He then went online and googled a few polyamoury resources. It was a relief to know that their situation, strange as it was, wasn’t totally unique, although Eren didn’t find anything that reassured him entirely.

He went over and over the details of their conversation and was actually tempted to write bits of it down.

He’s lonely as hell but he'll never admit it in a million years.

Erwin chose his words, and his arguments, well because that phrase had stuck with Eren painfully. Levi’s expression hadn’t changed much when Erwin had said it, but Eren nevertheless felt it was true. He knew he was a special case; he’d known it ever since Levi had forgiven him for lying about HotFreeRange, and he’d outright stated it since.

They just needed to go forward and see where it lead them. Preferably into bed. Eren didn’t think Levi flirted often but when he turned on that wicked charm it made him weak in the knees. Something about his voice and his eyes promised so many things, and to see them in real life and not just on a screen was something that made Eren feel very privileged. And horny. And impatient.

Eren realised he was leaning dreamily on the mop and staring into space and he went back to work. He knew the place was never going to get to Levi’s standards in the few hours before he’d have to leave for class, but he wanted to do what he could. He’d nagged Jean the night before about doing the washing up, but he’d said something about doing it later and Eren himself had done it after Jean had left for college that morning.
Missy had sensed cleaning products in the air and had disappeared as soon as Eren had taken out the vacuum cleaner. He stacked up all the games near the xbox and tidied up the printed notes scattered around the couch where Jean liked to study sometimes.

Before he left Eren collected his bag and drifted around the apartment, giving it one last look over and feeling weirdly nervous. This was just Levi.

Yeah right, just Levi. It could never be ‘just’ where Levi was concerned. Eren told Missy to be good, wherever she was hiding, and went out.

Levi was oddly professional when they met up at the gym that afternoon. He didn’t flirt, but when Eren asked him if they were still on for dinner he said they were and that would just have to do. Eren had decided not to focus on weightlifting so much as he found it incredibly boring, even though he’d made reasonable progress. Levi had warned him he was going to hit a plateau sooner or later and Eren didn’t really enjoy it. Instead Eren spent most of his time in the pool, and Levi joined him at the end, although they didn’t hold any more races.

Eren showered at the gym and he was glad Levi did too because he was pretty sure his bathroom was not going to be up to standard, his slapdash efforts to clean it up a bit that morning notwithstanding. It was dark when they drove back, neither saying much. Eren had relaxed a bit while working out and now he was feeling nervous again. Levi didn’t look bothered.

Eren parked the swift in its usual spot.

“Here we are,” he said, wondering why he felt the need to apologise. He knew if their lives didn’t fit together, Levi would go his own way. He wanted this to work. “Jean usually works nights. I dunno when he’ll be back.”

Levi nodded and followed Eren up the driveway. He could hear Missy wailing to welcome him back (or demand dinner) as he unlocked the door.

Crap. Levi didn’t approve of cat hairs. Maybe this has been a bad idea Missy seemed to love everyone regardless of what they thought of cats, and would come up and greet visitors and rub against their legs and would probably leave cat hairs on Levi’s clothes.

“Um, don’t feel you have to pay attention to her,” Eren said, trying to nudge Missy away with his foot. “If she gets too annoying I can just shut her up in my room. Anyway, this is Missy.”

“Hello, cat,” Levi said, looking down at her.

Eren hurried to his room to dump his bag and coat.

“Can she be picked up?” Levi asked quietly.

“Um, yeah. She doesn’t mind,” Eren called over his shoulder.

Eren’s heart was pounding. He realised he’d never brought a boyfriend home before. Well, Levi was a sort of almost definitely hopefully going to be boyfriend soon and that was close enough. He heard Levi saying something and he trotted back into the living room, hoping Missy hadn’t bothered him too much.

He was going to apologise but the words died on his lips when he saw them.

Levi had Missy cradled carefully in his arms, holding her as gently as one would hold a baby. Her
forepaws were over his arm and his other hand curled around to stroke her head. Missy looked slightly startled but quite pleased by the attention.

Levi was murmuring to her, something about her being a very fine cat, and the expression on his face made Eren’s heart ache. His gaze was soft and kind, and there was a faint smile on his lips. He looked so pleased that Missy was enjoying his attention.

Eren felt he was interrupting, but he couldn’t just stand in the hallway and stare at them forever.

“Um, you can sit down, if you like.”

“Mm.” Levi walked slowly over to the couch, careful not to jostle Missy, which given the kind of casual teenage affection she’d put up with most of her life was probably unnecessary but it made Eren feel weirdly emotional. Missy was important to him and Levi liked her. If it wasn’t such an unlikely thing, Eren almost would have said he loved her. He looked like he did.

“She likes you,” Eren said, deciding to keep it to himself that she liked everyone.

“I had a cat once,” Levi said. His forehead wrinkled as he frowned, and he held Missy against his chest before sitting down and settling her in his lap. It was on the tip of Eren’s tongue to ask about Levi’s cat, but something about the way he looked at Missy told him it wasn’t a happy story.

“Would you like some tea?” he asked instead. “I think it’s the kind you have at home. At least, I tried to get that sort.”

“Thank you.” Levi tore his gaze away from Missy and smiled. “No milk or sugar.”

“Right.”

By the time Eren had made the tea and carried it over, Levi had slouched down on the couch to give Missy more of his stomach to sprawl on, and Missy had apparently forgotten all about dinner for now. Eren sat down next to them and set the mugs on the coffee table.

“You like cats.” Eren smiled, pleased.

“I like animals,” Levi said. “They’re not like people.” He ran his hands down Missy’s sides. “Ah, is this where she had the operation?” His fingers brushed the shorter patch of fur.

“Yeah. The fur’s almost grown back. You can still feel the scar though.”

“Brave cat,” Levi said.

“She’s really become one of the family. I’d do anything for her,” Eren said, reaching over and rubbing her behind the ear. “Even if she does shed everywhere.”

“They do that. How old is she?”

Levi seemed quite happy to hear Missy’s life story and since Eren had never had the opportunity to ramble about his cat at such length, time passed pleasantly enough, although Eren wondered if he even needed to be there; he got the impression Levi would have been just as happy to play with Missy on his own.

Eventually Missy started getting restive and Eren said she was probably hungry.

“Are you hungry?” he asked Levi.
“Yeah. What’s for dinner?”

“Well, I couldn’t decide whether to get pizza or make something so I compromised and I have some pizza bases and you just tell me what you want on ‘em.”

Levi seemed on board with that plan. Eren went to the kitchen and the moment Missy sensed she was about to be fed she abandoned Levi’s lap and wailed at Eren’s feet until he filled her bowl. No longer confined to the couch, Levi wandered over and asked if Eren wanted help.

“Well, you’re kind of the guest, but if you want to you can.” Eren appreciated that Levi hadn’t commented on the state of the kitchen. Or the less than healthy food it was stocked with. Levi said he would help and went and washed his hands and they sliced salami and onions and overloaded their pizzas with whatever was in the fridge.

“I suppose Erwin makes them from scratch,” Eren said, half joking.

“Yeah. He went through a phase of trying to make the perfect pizza dough.”

“Did he succeed?”

“Some of them were pretty good. Some of them were fucking weird though.”

“Maybe I should ask him to teach me to cook,” Eren said, sprinkling cheese over the top.

Levi quirked a smile, “Well I wouldn’t object if you did.”

“You never thought to ask him?”

“Cooking was his thing and I let him have it. I know enough to get by.”

The pizzas were definitely overloaded and in the end they gave up and ate them with a knife and fork, as the bases refused to keep their integrity under the weight of the toppings. Eren went to wash the plates up afterwards and Levi spoke.

“You don’t have to, you know. This is your house; you do things your way.”

“But you care about that stuff, right?”

Levi sighed. “Well, yeah. But I get that it’s a me thing. I don’t want you to feel you have to do everything my way or I’m just going to leave.” Eren looked at him sharply. Levi shrugged, looking awkward. “Relax a bit. Please?”

“I just want to impress you, I guess.”

“Yeah and the last time you tried that Annie beat your arse.”

Eren couldn’t help smiling at that.

“Yeah, I remember.”

“Your awkward is making me awkward,” Levi said. “Stupid as it sounds.”

“No, it makes sense.” Eren took a deep breath. “Okay, forget the washing up.”

“Good. Only, you should do the washing up now. Once that cheese solidifies, it’ll be really hard to get it off.”
Eren gaped for a few moments and then realised he was being teased.

“I suppose you think that's funny.”

Levi shrugged.

Eren excused himself to take a leak and when he came back he wasn't entirely surprised to see Levi had installed himself on the couch with Missy on his lap again.

“I'm starting to feel a little jealous,” he said, walking over and sitting down next to Levi. “My cat is getting more attention than I am.” He said it lightly, not being terribly serious. He was really rather charmed and delighted that Levi had such an adorable weakness.

“Well maybe if you were a bit more like a cat I'd pay attention to you as well,” Levi said, not looking up.

“What, you want me to shit in a box?”

Levi didn't appear to hear him at first, and then he blinked, pressing his lips together.

“Pft!” Levi covered his mouth with the back of his hand and for a moment Eren wondered if he was choking. His eyes were slightly watery and his shoulders shook and Eren realised he was laughing. He was almost silent, as if the mirth was contained within him. He laughed like someone who'd not laughed for a very long time, and it had all been saved up, like he was trying to control the uncontrollable. He patted Missy with his free hand, trying to keep her from moving away even though she was being slightly jolted by the way Levi's stomach was flexing.

Eren grinned so widely he thought he might strain his face as he watched Levi lose it. He felt he was watching a rare phenomenon and he didn't want to miss a second of it. Levi really did have the weirdest fucking sense of humour; Eren didn't think he'd been that funny but laughter is contagious, especially if the laughing person is trying desperately to keep it to himself, and soon Eren was chuckling helplessly alongside him while Missy looked on in bemusement.

When Levi looked like he was about to recover, Eren grinned slyly and repeated, “Shit in a box?”

Levi glared at him with teary eyes. “Shut up.”

To Eren's delight it set him off again, and Eren felt like he'd charmed a bird down from the trees.

“It's okay,” Eren said when he could breathe again and Levi's shoulders had stopped shaking. “You can come over and play with Missy any time you like. She likes being spoiled.”

Levi took a deep breath, apparently recovered, but Eren could see traces of mirth lingering around the corners of his mouth.

“Thank you. She's a nice cat.”

Eren relaxed back against the couch, and watched Levi and Missy for a while. He was very glad he'd managed to uncover this side of Levi. It was like he hid his gentle side away, but somehow Eren wasn't really surprised that it existed. He'd always thought Levi was kind.

He watched Levi run his fingers along Missy's back, and rub behind her ears with his thumb and he realised he probably was a little jealous. He glanced up at Levi's face, but he didn't seem to notice Eren's scrutiny.
“More like a cat, huh?” he mumbled under his breath.

Well if Levi was relaxed enough to laugh in front of him, he could probably get away with being more of an idiot. He tucked his legs up on the couch, getting on fours. Levi looked up.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Being a bit more like a cat,” Eren said. He was prepared to back off if Levi looked like he didn't want him to do it but he merely raised his eyebrows.

“I see.”

Eren crawled forward towards him, wondering what the fuck he was doing but feeling a bit light-headed and dangerously brave, still buzzed from laughing so much.

“Um.” Eren scraped his teeth across his lower lip.

Levi shifted his arm, putting it along the back of the couch and Eren took this as an invitation to edge in closer, but now he was here he realised he hadn't thought this through. He butted his head against Levi's shoulder, feeling foolish but determined to finish what he'd started.

He pursed his lips and tried to make a purring sound, rolling his tongue.

“Purr purr purr.”

“That doesn't sound anything like a cat,” Levi said.

Eren looked up and made to move away again, embarrassed, when he felt Levi's arm drape around his shoulders.

“It's not that bad,” Levi said.

Eren stared into Levi's eyes. Levi had kissed him twice now, but he'd never been the one to kiss Levi. He leaned forward a couple of inches and changed that.

Levi's lips were warm and dry and they parted for him easily. Eren took his time, breathing through his nose, tasting Levi cautiously. Levi took his cue from Eren, kissing him back slow and sweetly, keeping in check the hunger Eren had felt when he'd pushed him up against the wall.

There wasn't any hurry, and Levi's arm around his shoulders felt relaxed, his fingertips brushing Eren's arm lightly, stroking him like he really was a cat. Eren's eyes had fluttered shut when he'd leaned in but he opened them slightly now, taking in Levi's expression. His brow was slightly furrowed but his eyes were closed and Eren could feel rather than see the faint smile at the corners of his mouth.

Eren pressed his tongue briefly against Levi's and drew back slightly. They looked at each other, and Eren took a deep breath and licked his lips.

“Well,” Levi said. “I think I prefer you as a human.” Levi's other hand was still resting on Missy's flank; it looked like she'd gone to sleep, her head resting on Levi's arm and the rest of her stretched out, basking in the warmth of his lap.

Levi wasn't paying any attention to her now.

It didn't look like he was planning on disturbing her either, and Eren was fine with that. They could stay here. He was getting a bit tired of propping himself up on his hands, however, and he turned
around, settling down against Levi's side with one of his legs bent under him and the other hanging over the edge of the couch. Levi wrapped his free arm tighter around him and hauled him up slightly until he was close enough to kiss and did so.

He probably intended it to be brief, but when he went to pull away Eren let his head loll back and cupped the back of Levi's head, pulling him back down to his mouth. Levi didn't resist, and they stayed like that, Eren rubbing his fingers across the bristles at the back of Levi's neck while they exchanged lazy kisses.

“I always wanted to do that,” Eren said, running his hand up the back of Levi's head. “Feels nice.”

“Good.”

It was an understatement, but Levi was understated. He looked like he understood, and Eren resisted the urge to babble on, tell him how much he'd thought about this moment, or something like it. Instead he let his hands wander down Levi's neck, his finger tracing a tendon. Eren had admired his body for years, and now he was allowed to touch it. And he did, tracing the lines of Levi's muscles through his shirt until he grew too self-conscious and hid himself in Levi's shoulder, and Levi bent his head and kissed his cheek until he stopped hiding.

Eren sighed against Levi's mouth. He wanted more of him; his cock was pressed against the fabric of his pants, but he'd arranged his legs so that Levi probably couldn't see. He didn't want him to see; it would change the atmosphere between them, charge it. This felt rare and wonderful and Eren wanted it to last as long as possible. Levi wasn't a passive person, but Missy had him pinned in place, and Eren felt like he was stroking a tiger, that he was outside of what was normally permitted. He wanted Levi to touch him back, but here would be other times now, he was sure of it. He'd make sure of it.

Still, he wondered why Levi thought he was bad at this.

Eren rolled over so he could wind both arms around Levi's neck and Levi was holding him to his chest with one hand when Jean came home. They hadn't had anything much to talk about and Eren had alternated between kissing Levi and admiring him, and Levi for his part had worn a peaceful and slightly relieved expression. He must have been worried that this might not go well, and Eren was reminded again how much Levi cared about him, even if he didn't seem to know how to express it most of the time.

They were given only a few seconds' warning; the brief jingle of keys preceded Jean flinging the front door open with a relieved sigh. He was dressed for his job in a yellow shirt with a picture of a chicken on the front, he looked tired and greasy and Eren could smell the oil from where he was lying on the couch. Lying on the couch and lying on Levi.

Levi didn't move, merely lifting his head from Eren's while Eren scrambled to roll over and sit upright. Missy felt the movement and flicked her ear before lifting her head, her nose twitching at her favourite aroma; overworked Jean.

Jean didn't notice them at first, making sure the door had closed behind him and kicking off his shoes. And then he glanced around the room and froze.

“Welcome home?” Eren ventured, trying to look casual.

“Yes,” Jean said slowly. He glanced at the silent television. “You know, you're meant to at least put something on and pretend you were watching.” He still looked like he expected someone to leap out of a cupboard and tell him this was all a prank.
“We were playing with Missy,” Eren said, which was both true and the most unconvincing excuse ever. “Anyway,” he plunged on because it was too late now. “This is Levi. Levi, this is Jean.”

“Hello,” Levi said calmly.

“Hey,” Jean frowned. He couldn't seem take his eyes away from Levi's face. He went to the fridge to put whatever was in the bag he was carrying inside it, but he kept glancing over his shoulder at their guest.

“I'm gonna get changed,” he said absently, and wandered down the hall to his room. Missy heard his door open and, without a backwards glance at her admirer, hopped down off Levi's lap and trotted away.

“She likes eating Jean's work clothes,” Eren explained.

“Oh.”

“Holy fucking shit, Eren!” Jean's voice, somewhat muffled by the door floated into the living room about thirty seconds later.

“Ah.” Eren said. “I think he's just worked out where he recognised you from.”

“He subscribes to HotFreeRange?”

“I don't think so, but I may have sent him some of your videos when we were teenagers.”

“Tch. That's piracy, Eren.” Levi didn't seem all that bothered. “I suppose I should be going home.”

“Yeah, I guess.” There was no way they could recreate that mood now, and when Eren looked at the time it was getting pretty late. “Do you want a lift home?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Thank you,” Eren said. “For coming over.”

“I had fun.”

Eren grinned at him and went to get his keys. Erwin had told Eren that Levi was unlikely to use the word friend, and so it was safe to say he probably wouldn't use the word boyfriend either, but whatever they were it was pretty fucking awesome.
Erwin Smith was not having a good week, a fact made all the worse by the knowledge that it was entirely his own fault and there was nothing he could do about it.

He told himself his idea wasn't so far-fetched; in his years of working at HotFreeRange he'd seen all manner of relationships, and nothing much would surprise him at this point. He'd watched Mike fall for a guy who was sometimes a girl; he'd seen a love-pentagon get resolved by a group scene (that he may or may not have suggested to Hange as a solution to the tension-filled atmosphere that had been hanging over the studio at the time.) He didn't judge; he delighted in seeing people he cared about find people that made them happy, whatever form that happiness took.

But he'd never considered anything like that for himself. He flung himself into his relationships with an eternal optimism that this time it would be as perfect as one could expect from reality and they'd grow old together, paired off like swans, and never cast their eyes astray. He wanted peace and stability and the love he'd sensed existed between his parents but that'd he'd never actually seen. He wanted proof.

He wanted Eren. Logically he wasn't a particularly good first choice for happily ever after, but Erwin was happy to follow his heart, despite how young Eren was. He believed in following his heart.

When Eren said he was prepared to just up and leave from their lives, Erwin had been equally prepared to do almost anything to convince him to stay. But Eren was stubborn and thoughtful and had made up his mind, and wouldn't be made to choose, and Erwin was proud of him for that too. He was a kind person; putting them and their friendship before himself.

And so Erwin had turned his intellect towards coming up with a logical solution and he'd found one and he'd convinced them to give it a go.

Convinced being the operative word, and the source of a great deal of his distress. Whatever happened, good or bad, a great deal of it was his responsibility. And he couldn't talk to them about it. He and Levi rarely contacted each other without a specific reason, and Erwin felt like he had to leave them to it to work it out without interference.

Which meant he had nothing but his own over-active imagination to keep him company for the next few days. He felt some measure of relief when Eren continued to text him, but he kept them to light and inconsequential topics.

Since the only time he could really escape from chasing his thoughts round in circles was when he was working, he threw himself into work. He bared his teeth a bit, pushing for something that would actually challenge him, some real work for once, and he took what he could get.

He got up early to work out, and stayed late to work.

On the day Eren would normally attend Levi's class Erwin had to put his phone in a drawer in his desk to stop himself looking at it every two minutes, and even so there was no news either way. Just Eren's pleasant, non-committal texts.

The week was drawing to a close when Levi called. It was late, and Erwin was throwing together a stir-fry and mentally rewriting all the things he'd said on Sunday, his lips moving silently as he frowned and shook his head.

When he saw who was calling he turned off the gas and picked up his phone.
“Levi.” He was proud that he sounded like he always did, but he was braced for the worst.

“I think,” Levi said slowly, while Erwin paced around his kitchen. “Maybe, maybe this idea of yours wasn't so stupid after all.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Levi sighed. “I assume you're a nervous wreck?”

“Ha,” Erwin said weakly. He paused in front of his fridge and let his forehead thunk against the brushed steel. “You could say that.”

“Well, you probably deserved it, pushing us around like that.”

“Yeah. Can't argue with you.”

Eren aside, Erwin thought there were things he probably shouldn't have said to Levi. Levi liked to keep his boundaries nice and sharp and Erwin didn't step over them and Levi trusted him not to step over them; or at least, he had done. He had to try and apologise, at the very least.

“Look, Levi, about some of the things I said on Sunday. I probably shouldn't have got so personal; I know you don't like being discussed like that. I should have known the difference between using the strongest argument and the best argument. I'm sorry.”

It wasn't going to be enough, exactly. One thing Sunday had revealed to Erwin was Levi's depth of feeling for him. It wasn't exactly a surprise, but to have confirmation was strange. Erwin knew Levi cared about him; he knew Levi cared about a lot of people, but he rarely expressed it in words. It had meant a lot to him and he also knew it was something they were unlikely to ever talk about directly, but now more than ever he wanted to do the right thing by his best friend.

Levi had deserved a bit better than to be told he was hopelessly lonely in front of the guy he liked, and Erwin was sorry for doing so. It hadn't been necessary, he decided later. It was hard to know if Levi was ever offended; he didn't react immediately to that sort of thing so much as slide away from people who pissed him off, and Erwin did not want him to do that. Not ever. He'd been thinking about this too much, he knew, but he just wanted-

“Okay,” Levi said, just like he always had done. That was that then. Erwin heaved a sigh of relief and removed his forehead from the fridge so he could open it and take out a beer. He felt like he needed one. Thank you, Levi. Thank you for putting up with so much of my bullshit, despite it being against your nature to do so. It was something else he wasn't going to say out loud.

“So, how are things?” he asked, cradling the phone against his ear with his shoulder as he opened the bottle.

“Everything's fine,” Levi said.

“And that means?”

Levi sighed. “I talked to Eren. We'll do as you suggested and see where this goes. You know him; he's an optimist. Like you.”

“Good.” He felt so relieved. Levi clearly wasn't such an optimist, but that's okay; they could probably use someone to keep them somewhat grounded.

“This better not get fucking weird,” Levi said.
“It’s probably going to be a bit weird until we get used to it,” Erwin said. He leant against the counter-top and sipped his beer. “It gets easier with practice, Levi. I guarantee you.”

“Right. You’d know.” He hung up and Erwin found himself smiling slightly. Well, not everything had changed that much.

He looked at his phone for a few minutes and eventually sent Eren a text. He didn’t know if he was still awake at this hour.

_I miss you._

He sent it before he could change his mind; it was both more and less than what he wanted to say and he regretted sending it almost immediately.

Eren must have been asleep because Erwin didn’t get a response until the next morning, his phone buzzing halfway though his second set of sit-ups.

“Hey, Eren,” he said, slightly out of breath.

“Hey.”

They were silent for a few moments and Erwin heard Eren make a sleepy sound partway between a yawn and a sigh.

“You work out early.”

“I hate working out this time of day but since I started to work at the firm I don’t really have any other time. I’m turning into Levi. How have you been?”

“I’m okay.” A pause. “I missed you too.”

Erwin found himself smiling. “Mhm. We should do something. Any ideas?”

“Well, um, can I ask you something? Have you ever heard of Sina?”

Erwin raised an eyebrow at the unexpected question. “Yeah, it’s a gay club in the city.”

“Right. Yeah. Armin took Jean there last weekend and he won’t shut up about it. I’m sure it wasn’t as great as he makes out that it was, right? Have you been there?”

“I have.” Erwin could guess where this was going. “Do you want to go?”

“Um. Yeah. If you don’t mind, that is.”

Erwin kind of did mind; he didn’t really like clubs any more, and he’d hoped his first official date with Eren would be something a bit more romantic but he knew that Levi would never agree to go and he definitely didn’t want Eren trying to go by himself. Eren didn’t seem to realise how gorgeous
he was but Erwin was damn sure everyone else there would.

“Sure. It's Friday. We can't drive though; there's no parking.”

Eren's voice lightened with excitement and they agreed to meet in there that evening.

Erwin actually found himself looking forward to it. Maybe with Eren it wouldn't be so bad. That evening, after dinner, he pawed through his wardrobe. He hadn't missed Eren's reaction to his performance as a thug and he felt he should put a bit of effort in for Eren's sake. Who was he kidding; he always put effort in for Eren.

He dusted off the leather pants he'd worn so often for the camera and he wondered if he could still get into them. He could, he discovered a short while later. Well, it wasn't like he had anywhere else to wear them, and now he'd managed to get into them he kind of wanted Eren to see.

He threw on a tshirt and a jacket and slicked his hair back like he had for Eren's film. It wasn't a look he was too old for, at least.

The bus was full of people barely more than half his age heading in to the clubs for a Friday evening of deafening music and drugs, and Eren was waiting for him when he stepped off at the stop they'd agreed on earlier.

Eren hadn't really dressed up much; but he didn't need to. Erwin recognised the jeans from the brief glimpse he'd allowed himself of Eren's original photoshoot, and he'd done something complicated and yet vague with his hair, but it didn't make that much difference. Eren was vital and beautiful without any help.

He also nearly dropped his phone when he saw Erwin. He looked him up and down about five times, his jaw slightly dropped and his eyes wide, and Erwin cocked a hip and hooked his thumbs into his belt and let him stare.

“You want to take a picture?”

“Uh huh.”

He took two. Erwin put on a knowing smirk for the first one, and one of his real smiles for the second, playing up to the camera, even if it was just Eren's cameraphone, second nature to him.

They walked to Sina along sidewalks crowded with cops relaxed because it was early, and revellers teetering on high heels or bouncing on expensive sneakers. Eren was delighted, trying to look everywhere at once.

“Our hometown, like, it had nothing like this,” he said as they walked past a club, bass rumbling somewhere behind the door. Erwin smiled at his puppyish enthusiasm, and kept pace without comment.

Eren grew quiet and self-conscious when they approached Sina, a cluster of guys smoking outside eyeing them off as they approached the front door.

“Relax, you're gorgeous,” Erwin said.

Sina was pretty much as he remembered it; a meat market. Everyone eyeing off everyone else and evaluating them. But he remembered what it had been like to come to one of these places for the first time, and he understood Eren's wide eyes and cautious smile. He was also glued to his side like he was afraid he'd get lost.
“Go explore,” Erwin said into his ear. “That's why you're here. I'll be by the bar. Come and find me.” He nodded in the appropriate direction. He knew Eren wanted to look around but even this distance from the dance floor the music was too loud and all he wanted to do was find somewhere quieter. The bar area would be a slight improvement.

He managed to elbow himself a space and ordered an extremely overpriced gin and tonic and waited. He wasn't left to wait in peace; he may have had at least ten years on a lot of the people here, but you didn't look like he did and get ignored in a place like this. He politely and expressionlessly rebuffed everyone although some guys insisted on hanging around long enough to tell him how much they'd liked watching him fuck on the internet. It happened every time, and Erwin was bored. He wondered how Eren was getting on.

He found out a short while later when Eren himself emerged from the crowd, slightly out of breath and with an irritated expression.

“They won't believe you're my boyfriend,” he said, scowling.

“Who won't?”

“These guys I was dancing with. They seemed to think I'd just picked you out at random as an excuse because you look big and tough. Like I need someone to protect me. I was just trying to explain why I didn't want a blowjob.” He glanced around. “Huh, they've gone.”

Erwin wasn't surprised. He knew both that Eren had fresh meat written all over him, and that he could take care of himself.

“What do you want to do?” Erwin asked.

“I just wanted to dance,” Eren said. “I've never been hit on so much before.” He looked a little shell-shocked.

Erwin finished his drink. “Come on then.” He took Eren's hand.

“Really? You can dance?”

“Not very well, but what does that matter?”

Eren flashed him a brilliant grin and followed him to the dance area.

Erwin did his best not to make too much of an idiot of himself, although the dance floor was so crammed there wasn't really much opportunity for comparing skill levels. Since neither of them were on drugs or looking for someone to go home with the press of guys flailing about and copping the odd feel tired even Eren out fairly quickly, and Erwin felt him wrap his fingers around his wrist and pull him away after a couple of songs. Not a moment too soon either; Erwin's ears were ringing and he could smell other people's deodorant on him.

Eren sighed and leaned up to talk in Erwin's ear.

“Let's go,” he said.

Erwin nodded. “Don't look so downcast,” he said. “You're leaving with the guy they didn't believe was your boyfriend.”

That made Eren grin and he took Erwin's arm and they walked out together. Erwin could see Eren was absolutely proud to be at his side. It was mutual.
It was a relief to be outside in the comparative quiet and fresh air, and they strolled, Erwin lacing his fingers through Eren's. This was more like it.

They got a few strange looks, but Eren didn't seem to notice. Not until a guy spat at their feet, his lips curled in disgust as he told them what he thought of men like them. Eren let go of Erwin's arm and hand and Erwin could see his eyes light up and his lips thin in utter fury and shock.

Erwin wrapped an arm around Eren's shoulders and pulled him against his chest, not breaking stride.

"Just walk on, sweetheart," he said, bending his head down. "If they start a fight we'll finish it, but otherwise just walk on."

Eren looked a bit reluctant but he nodded and wrapped his arm around Erwin's waist, under his jacket, still looking like he wanted to kill someone.

"I guess I see why people go to Sina," he said quietly, when the ugly incident was a block behind them.

"Yeah. Although, places like that might be dying out."

"Why?"

"You got Grindr?"

"Well, I installed it but that's it."

"It's replacing places like that. Streamlines the whole cruising process."

"Hate that thing."

"Why?"

"Lemmie show you." He took out his phone with his free hand and started up the app. He showed Eren the screen. "Lot of dicks, right? Not a so much indication about whether you'd want to hold a conversation with the guys attached to them." He sighed and put his phone away. "I made porn for a living; I don't want to do it in my free time as well. You know the difference between porn and sex?"

Eren nodded, "Yeah."

"Well, Grindr blurs that distinction."

"I can't believe how many guys in Sina came up to me," Eren said. "It was kind of flattering, but at the same time..." he trailed off.

"Not," Erwin finished for him.

Eren nodded and squeezed him a bit tighter. "I'm glad I went with you. Thanks."

"You're welcome." Erwin glanced around. "There's the lesbian bar, if you're curious."

"The Notebook?"

"It had that name long before the sappy film came out. You want to look?"

"Are we allowed?"

"As long as we behave ourselves. I've been there before for work outings. Err, HotFreeRange"
outings, not the family firm. It’s a bit more friendly towards those who fall outside the standard categories than Sina is. And you can hear yourself think.”

Eren agreed and they went in.

They got the weird looks. Erwin steered Eren to the bar and room was made for them, less welcoming, more putting a bit of distance between them and the other patrons. Erwin was expecting it and wasn’t particularly bothered, but he sensed Eren had probably changed his mind already.

“Ilse!”

One of the barmaids, tattoos snaking up her arms, looked over. It took her a moment to recognise him.

“Erwin, right? Yeah. It's been a while.” She smiled and they shook hands. “Hange around? Do you want a table?”

“No, it's just me and Eren tonight. Just showing him the night-life.”

Eren smiled shyly as Ilse nodded at him.

“Eren, this is Ilse. She was with us for a little while.”

“God, those were the days,” she smiled. “It wasn’t really for me though. Can I get you anything?”

They ordered drinks, and the other patrons relaxed around them now that they’d been recognised. Eren relaxed a bit too, sipping his soda and trying not to stare at anyone. Ilse asked after a few people, and Erwin caught her up and told her he’d retired.

“Damn, I never thought you’d leave.”

“I'm not getting any younger, you know.”

“You're still fitting into those pants okay,” she laughed.

“We went to Sina,” Erwin explained.

“And then you came here instead?”

“I'm too old for it and Eren's too young.”

Eren shrugged, “It was a little uh, intense I guess.”

“I can imagine.” Ilse went away to serve someone else briefly and then came back, resting her forearms on the bar. “If you guys are looking for something to do, I can recommend you some bands.”

“Yeah?” Eren perked up.

“Lemme think who's playing tonight.” She gave them some recommendations and they finished their drinks and moved on. They ended up in a hipster bar crammed shoulder to shoulder while a band neither of them had ever heard of tore up the stage. Erwin made a note to look them up later, while Eren bounced around to the music. Erwin preferred to just listen; he probably stood out a bit in his outfit but Eren blended right in with the other kids.

When the concert was over they went outside again. They talked about the band they’d just seen and
music in general until Eren said he was hungry and Erwin agreed; dinner had been hours ago by
now. Neither wanted to pay for overpriced bar food, so they wandered around until they found a
kebab shop and they queued up with several inebriated people. Eren asked for the hottest sauce on
his kebab and they ate them leaning against a wall, their breath steaming in front of them as they
watched the night-life.

It wasn't anything special to Erwin. He'd been to London for a summer when he'd been at college,
and he'd spent the wild nights of his youth trying to forget about this city. The night-life here was
boring and parochial by comparison but Eren had come from an even smaller town, and to him the
lights were so bright. When they reflected off Eren's eyes, Erwin thought they looked brighter too.
Eren hummed bits of the songs they'd just heard, full of youth and life and Erwin felt about a dozen
years younger himself.

It had been an uneven night, all things considered, but they'd managed to find the pace of it, turn it
into something to remember.

Around two am it started to rain; fine and cold, and the lights were doubled, reflected in on the
gleaming asphalt. The smell reminded Erwin a bit of London. Erwin took off his leather jacket and
held it up over them both while Eren laughed and huddled close. Erwin suggested they find a taxi
and call it a night, and Eren agreed.

“Wait, Erwin,” Eren said, a catch in his voice and a gleam in his eyes.

Eren popped up on his toes and a moment later kissed him. He tasted faintly spicy and Erwin closed
his eyes and kissed him back, still holding up the jacket. He could hear the rain falling on it, and
Eren's uneven breathing against his lips.

“Thank you,” he said. Then he kissed him again and again and eventually Erwin had to mumble that
his arms were getting tired.

They hailed a taxi and Erwin told Eren to give the driver his address. Eren looked a bit startled.

“It's late, Eren,” Erwin said. Too late to take him home and too early as well.

Eren looked a bit disappointed but he didn't argue. On the way back Eren practically fell asleep
against Erwin's arm. Erwin couldn't take his eyes off him and occasionally Eren's eyes would open
and he'd glance up and see Erwin watching him and smile.

Eren looked shy in front of the taxi driver and Erwin didn't kiss him goodnight. Erwin watched him
walk up the driveway and gave his own address to the driver. Suddenly he felt exhausted; Eren's
phone call that morning felt like a thousand years ago.

Erwin was kind of glad there were two of them; Eren might possibly kill him otherwise. He yawned
so hard he felt tears gather at the corners of his eyes, but he was happy, too.
“All right, let's establish some things so this sort of clusterfuck doesn't happen again,” Levi said. “If someone says, 'Would you like to go to a movie?' that means just the two of them. When they say 'We should see a movie' it means all three of us. Right? And if you're not sure, fucking ask.”

The three of them were standing outside the cinema after an afternoon of what should have been a simple logistical exercise made more complicated by Erwin disappearing into meetings and turning his phone off and Eren needlessly worrying that he was double-booked. They had, at last, figured it all out in time to actually see the movie and Levi gave them a dressing-down as they went in.

“At least try and be a bit fucking organised,” he muttered.

Eren guessed he was nervous, rather than genuinely pissed off, and Eren was somewhat as well. They hadn't met up, all three of them, since they'd had that awkward talk in Levi's house. It was going to be strange, he'd resigned himself to that, but he hoped it wouldn't be too strange. Not so strange they'd change their minds.

Eren didn't want to change his mind. He'd slept until noon after his night out with Erwin and had felt silly and loved-up all weekend. He got to rub Jean's nose in the fact that not only did he go to Sina he'd also visited the lesbian bar and seen a live band and he was only slightly deflated by Jean asking 'What, with that Levi guy?'

Eren had rolled his eyes and been casually non-committal. He'd have to tell Jean sooner or later but he didn't know how he'd take it and wanted to see if it was actually going to go anywhere before making any big announcements. He kind of had a good feeling though, and the good feeling didn't go away when the three of them met up and none of their expressions seemed forced. If he was going to make things to weird between Erwin and Levi he would have backed away from them for good.

His fears seemed unfounded. So far at least.

They were here to see another action movie, American this time, and once again when they took their seats Levi handed him the popcorn so they could both reach it. Trailers were playing but Eren wasn't paying a lot of attention to them. He was looking at Erwin's hand.

Fuck it. He was allowed.

He reached out and clasped it in his own. Erwin glanced away from the screen and smiled at him. Levi raised his eyebrows when Eren reached out and held his hand as well, but he didn't object. Eren grinned. Perfect.

“Fuck.” He let his head flop forward. “I can't reach the popcorn,” he muttered, as the other two looked at him curiously.

Erwin chuckled.

Levi tightened his grip on his hand, “Your loss,” he said, reaching over with his other hand to grab some for himself.
“Don't worry Eren,” Erwin said. “I'll feed you.” He held a piece of popcorn up to Eren's lips and Eren nibbled it out of his fingers, slightly self-consciously.

Levi sighed and shook his head, “You're just encouraging him.” Eren honestly wasn't sure which of them he was talking to. The movie began and Eren took his hands back from Erwin and Levi, for a while at least, but when the popcorn was gone he sought them out again.

“I honestly have nothing to say about it,” Erwin said when they wandered out two hours later. “I enjoyed it while I watched it but now it's over I feel absolutely nothing. How strange.”

“All style and not a lot of substance,” Levi said. “But it wasn't bad.”

“No,” Eren agreed. “And there was a happy ending. I wasn't expecting that; not after the last movie we watched.”

“This year's crop of Halloween films look like shit though,” Levi said bluntly.

“Do you guys have a movie night on Halloween?” Eren asked.

“Nah, Hange always throws a party,” Erwin said. “Even if Levi half-arses his costume every year.”

Levi shrugged but didn't deny it.

“What now?” Eren asked.

“Hm, I've got work tomorrow,” Erwin said. “And you have classes.”

“I can sleep in class,” Eren said. He glanced hopefully at Levi.

Rather than offering to take him home, Levi had another suggestion. “In the interests of not making this awkward, if the three of us go out together like this, maybe we should agree we all go home alone, as it were.”

“Unless all three of us go home together,” Erwin said quietly.

Eren glanced at him sharply as Erwin laughed.

“Well didn't that make his ears perk up? All right, I agree.”

They didn't go home together. They talked for a while longer and then Erwin offered to drive Levi home and Eren found himself going back alone. He didn't think much about it at the time, but over the course of the next week he started to get a bit frustrated.

He was busy, for a start; the mid-semester exams were coming up and assignments were coming due. When he worked out with Levi he pretty much had to excuse himself directly afterwards and get back to studying. He hardly saw Erwin at all and Erwin himself seemed to be working equally hard, given the lateness of some of his texts. He said he'd asked for extra work and couldn't complain.

But there was something else, too. Whenever Eren said something suggestive his boyfriends got evasive, not exactly discouraging but not very enthusiastic either. He didn't understand it. He knew they wanted him; he could taste it when he kissed them but he could never seem to find quite the right time to do anything about it.

For Eren, overflowing with eagerness and hormones, it was incredibly annoying. When Hange brought him in for a couple of scenes in a minor role, he outperformed the other actors without really trying. Hange busily rewrote the script because they said they were not wasting such a brilliant
scene. Eren fucked like his life depended on it, gasping and baring his teeth and snarling and begging the camera, because he'd been holding off for days, avoiding jerking off because he was constantly waiting for something to happen and he felt like he was going to explode.

It made for exciting viewing.

It didn't make for a great lifestyle.

He knew what he had to do, of course, he just wished he didn't have to do it. They had to talk. He sent them both a text, despite the fact that Levi didn't like them; it seemed fairer to do it that way.

*I DON'T WANT TO BREAK UP but I think we need to talk.*

He tried to make it as un-ominous as possible but there really was no way around it. Erwin got back to him a short while later, presumably after having called Levi because he had a plan all worked out. Erwin was on board the moment the words 'I'll make us some dinner' had left Erwin's mouth, and so that evening he picked Levi up from his house and drove them both to Erwin's.

“*It's not anything bad,*” Eren said.

“I know. It's fine. Relax, Eren.”

Yeah right. Easy for him to say, he wasn't the one working up the nerve to ask them why they hadn't fucked yet.

Something smelled amazing when they arrived at Erwin's apartment and Eren and Levi set the table and waited with poorly concealed impatience for Erwin to serve up lamb and chickpea casserole and various kinds of vegetables.

“It has a kind of Moroccan flavour, I hope,” Erwin said, when he finally sat down with them to eat.

“It's delicious, that's what it is,” Eren said.

Erwin looked pleased.

Levi made disapproving comments about Erwin's housekeeping and they talked about their week. It wasn't entirely relaxing but it wasn't too bad either and Eren wondered if he was making a fuss over nothing; this was perfectly fine in its own way.

Afterwards Erwin stacked the dirty plates next to the sink and Levi didn't even try and suggest that someone wash them. They made coffee and tea and took the conversation to the living area, Erwin sitting in his computer chair while Levi and Eren took the couch.

For the first time that evening, silence fell.

“So, um,” Eren put his mug down on the side table the better to nervously wring his hands, his heart thumping. “*I was just wondering if any of us were going to have sex at some point?*” He glanced up quickly. Both Erwin and Levi seemed to have been startled into silence. He plunged on, “*I've really been kind of looking forward to that part, but you know, it never seems to happen.*”

“So you guy's haven't...” Erwin trailed off.

“You haven't either,” Levi said defensively.

“I was waiting for you!”
“Why?”


“I was waiting for someone to break up,” Levi admitted.

“You want to break up with me?” Eren asked with trepidation, breaking into the conversation now he could get a word in edgeways.

“No,” Levi shook his head. “Of course not. I just figured someone would, sooner or later and it would be best to wait and see.”

Erwin groaned and ran his hands through his hair, messing up his work-perfect style. “Does anyone want to break up? Anyone?”

“Beuller?” Eren asked.

“What?” Levi said.

Eren shook his head. “Nevermind.” He heaved a sigh. “Are we idiots?”

No one leaped in to argue to the contrary. Eren looked from Erwin to Levi but they both looked distracted and rueful and he realised he wasn't going to get anywhere with them waiting around for them to reach some sort of conclusion. They both looked a bit lost.

Okay. It was up to him. He was Hunter fucking Sparks and he'd fucked someone so thoroughly this week that they didn't notice Hange giving them directions. Hange had rewritten the script to accommodate his blistering performance and he was afraid of no one and nothing. He was hot and cute and he fucked like a machine and he knew these two guys wanted him and he was going to get them to act on that desire if it killed him.

Before he could lose his nerve, and before the effects of his mental pep-talk could wear off, Eren got to his feet and stood in the centre of the room.

“Okay.” His voice didn't sound quite as strong as he'd hoped, and that nerve he'd been holding slithered off without a backwards glance, but Eren didn't back down; he could do this. “I don't really care who goes first, but I would really like to go to bed with at least one of my boyfriends sometime soon.”

“What, right now?” Levi sounded amused.

Well that hadn't actually been what he'd planned, but why the hell not? He wasn't going to let Levi get away with laughing at him.

“Yeah, okay.” He he shrugged off his hoodie and tossed it somewhere on the floor. He could feel the other two looking at him and he he took his tshirt off much more slowly, telling himself that he was drawing it out but mostly he wanted to hide his face in the fabric for as long as possible.

When he finally drew it off over his head, his breathing was slightly erratic and he could feel a flush creeping up over his cheeks. Over the past month or two he'd gotten pretty comfortable with being naked in front of a whole lot of people who were staring at him, but taking his shirt off in front of Levi and Erwin made him feel so self-conscious he wanted to hide somewhere.

Erwin didn't help. Eren was facing him, and he grinned and leaned back in his chair. “Go on,” he invited, settling in for the show.
“That's not very nice.” Eren jumped as he felt Levi's breath against his neck, and his hand on his waist. He hadn't even noticed him leave the couch. “Eren's putting himself out there, such courage should be rewarded.” Eren turned to look at him. Levi was smiling that promising smile. He cupped Eren's cheek with his other hand. “Don't mind if I go first.”

Oh god.

Eren closed his eyes and Levi leaned forward and kissed him, slowly but with teeth, scraping them across his lip, making him shiver.

“This is my house,” Erwin said, sounding slightly plaintive.

Levi pulled back but didn't even look at him, his attention focused on Eren as he slid his hands across the bare planes of his torso, his thumb brushing a nipple. “Yeah and it's fucking filthy. Go clean it or something. We're busy.”

Eren heard Erwin heave an irritable sigh, and his chair squeaked slightly. He was still caught by surprise when Erwin slid a hand under Eren's jaw, tilting his head up and back. He got a brief glimpse of Erwin's face before he covered Eren's mouth with his own. He didn't go for polite and sweet this time, sliding his tongue past Eren's teeth with a force that made Eren squeak and his toes curl. His mind was going blank. They were overwhelming him; do whatever you want, he thought. Anything would be fine.

“Tch,” Levi said.

Erwin came up for air.

Eren's knees felt wobbly and he felt Levi hold him up as they threatened to buckle. He looked from one to the other, trying to catch his breath. Erwin and Levi were regarding each other warily, like a pair of rival tomcats.

“Just keep your hands to yourself,” Levi said eventually.

“Likewise.”

“What?” Eren sensed some negotiations were happening on the private Erwin-Levi wavelength.

Erwin smiled at him, “Would you like us to take you to bed, Eren?”

Oh. That's what they were negotiating.

“Oh fuck.” Eren was pretty sure his eyes were wide as saucers. “Yes?”

Erwin took his hand, tugging him out of Levi's arms and Eren followed. Levi stopped to pick up Eren's discarded shirt and followed after them as Erwin led them to a slightly untidy bedroom, no worse than Eren's own.

“At least the bed's made,” Levi said critically.

To Eren's eyes the room was huge. He followed Erwin to the bed and there was a pause while everyone took their shoes off. Erwin just kicked his off and immediately took off his shirt and pants as well and god he was beautiful. His muscles weren't quite as defined as Eren remembered from his films, but they were still sleek, rolling under his skin as he moved.

Eren didn't get a chance to stare for long because Erwin tackled him back onto the bed while Levi
was still folding his shirt and putting it neatly in the corner with his shoes. Eren giggled, more from nerves and excitement than mirth as he wriggled back along the bed, Erwin crawling on top of him, planting breathy, ill-aimed kisses all over his face.

Eren was very sorry he was still wearing his jeans and he grabbed Erwin's arse through his boxer-briefs, grinning as Erwin rolled his hips against him, his cock hard against Eren's leg.

“Condoms?” Levi asked.

“Bedside table,” Erwin muttered, wrapping his arms around Eren and rolling them both so Eren was on top. Eren propped himself up on his arms and let Erwin undo his belt as Levi pawed through the table. Erwin flinched as a tube of lube hit him in the cheek. Levi wasn't looking at them so it could have plausibly been an accident but Erwin didn't look impressed. He didn't say anything, however, instead working Eren's boxers and jeans down over his hips; the former were wet and sticky already. Eren kicked off the last of his clothes, pushing them off the end of the bed and flopping down onto Erwin and kissing him, tangling his fingers in his blonde hair.

“I can't find them,” Levi said. Eren felt the bed dip as he sat on it.

“Did you look in every drawer?” Erwin asked.

“Yes I looked in every fucking drawer.” Eren jumped a little as Levi leaned over and squeezed his arse, his fingers dipping teasingly between his legs.

Erwin sighed and sat up, tipping Eren off to the side as he did so. He wrapped his arms around Eren and awkwardly heaved him in Levi's general direction. “Hold this for me,” he said. “I'll look for them.”

Eren laughed and rolled obligingly into Levi's lap. He was starting to worry that he might be feeling left out, and he straddled him, his cock bobbing between them as he kissed him. Levi was still wearing his jeans, but Eren could see the dark material straining over his crotch and he reached down and squeezed the bulge, watching with delight as Levi's pupils dilated and he sucked in a breath.

Levi seemed more interested in his arse, cupping it with both hands and squeezing and rolling the muscles with his fingers.

Erwin swore and abandoned the bedside table, hurrying out of the room.

“I don't have any,” he said when he returned a few minutes later.

Levi flopped back on the bed and looked at him upside down. “What do you mean you don't have any?”

“I can't find them.” Erwin rubbed the back of his neck. “I always used to steal them from work but I can't remember where I put them when I moved. They're not in the bathroom.”

Levi groaned and looked at Eren, “Are you sure you want to date this idiot?”

“Yeah, I'm sure,” Eren grinned. “We could just blow each other?”

“You should use condoms for that as well,” Erwin said. “Well, we'll improvise.”

He stripped off his boxers and pulled the covers back before climbing into bed again.

“Come on,” he beckoned Eren and Eren glanced at Levi, who shrugged.
Obediently Eren crawled over, and Erwin positioned him between his legs. “That's it, put your legs together.” Eren got what he was aiming for and moved up so Erwin could nudge his big, pretty cock between Eren's thighs. “Good?”

“Yeah.”

“Awkward as fuck,” Levi mumbled, and Eren heard him unzipping his jeans and turned his head so fast to look that Erwin laughed.

“It's nothing you haven't seen before,” Levi said with a smirk, giving his cock a long, slow stroke for Eren's benefit before climbing up onto the bed behind Eren and running his hand along his back.

“Erwin, move your fucking feet.”

Their legs tangled together as Levi cautiously added his weight to the pile. Eren could feel his cock rubbing against his backside, and the warm weight of his balls. He whimpered, suddenly struck by just where he was and what he was doing, wedged between these two amazing guys. His cock leaked precome over Erwin's stomach.

“Still breathing, Erwin?” Levi asked.

“It's fine,” he said. He kept his eyes focused on Eren's face.

Levi shifted around, apparently looking for something. Eren could feel his hands groping about.

“Stop touching my arse,” Erwin said.

“I'm not trying to touch your fucking arse and I wouldn't have if it wasn't so big. I'm trying to find the lube.”

Eren laughed helplessly as they searched around for it. “This is not quite how I imagined this would go,” he said.

“Got it. Oh, you imagined this did you?” Levi said, taking the cap off the tube.

“Well, who wouldn't?” Eren said, flushing.

Erwin laughed and kissed him. Eren jumped as he felt Levi squeeze out some of the cool substance on his thighs and arse.

Hange wouldn't have thought much of it. It was an awkward, uncoordinated tangle of bodies that wouldn't have looked particularly good from any angle. There was lots of ‘stop, no wait you're kneeling on my leg' and ‘my knee's at a weird angle’ and swearing from Levi. Erwin looked somewhat pressured under the weight of both of them, although he claimed he was fine whenever Eren asked. There was no rhythm that suited all three of them.

And Eren didn't mind a bit. In fact, he was pretty sure if he'd had any more stimulation than the back and forth of Erwin's stomach against his cock he would have come far too early, because he could see Erwin underneather him, aroused and delighted, kissing him until he ran out of breath and stopping to gasp and he could hear Levi behind him, grunting and panting and pausing sometimes to drop kisses along his spine or prop himself on one arm to play with one of Eren's nipples.

He could feel Levi's cock sliding between his buttocks and he was desperate for more, to be fucked, and he knew that he wasn't going to be tonight and that was a strange delight of its own as he tried to buck his hips up to meet his thrusts. His thighs ached from keeping them clamped around Erwin's
cock. Erwin himself could barely move much, and by the expression on his face that was sweet torture as well; he barely made any noise, no spare breath for it.

“You're so beautiful,” Levi rasped, and Eren shuddered.

He was desperate for more and also completely overwhelmed and Eren trembled and whined and felt himself slowly edge closer to orgasm. If he only had more pressure on his cock he could probably just-

He was coming anyway, wide eyed and surprised and whining from the back of his throat, shuddering between them.


His words made Eren twitch and shudder again and add another spurt of his come to the mess on Erwin's stomach and an unmeasurable amount of time later he could feel Levi grind down almost painfully against his tail-bone and a wash of wet heat on his skin as Levi gasped and came.

Levi sat back, taking his weight off them and Erwin regained some lung capacity with a relieved wheeze and he grabbed Eren's hips and pulled him closer, rutting up between his legs until he added to the mess on Eren's skin.

The room smelled like sweat and semen and hormones and Levi lay down beside them as they recovered. Eren made to roll off Erwin but Levi swatted his arse and told him to wait.

“You're gonna get jizz all over the sheets, just hang on. Where's the linen closet?”

Erwin hadn't opened his eyes since he'd come and he pointed unhelpfully at the doorway. Levi sighed and staggered out. Erwin smiled and kissed Eren's nose and cheeks until Levi came back not much later with a towel.

“I really don't think a washcloth is gonna cut it. You're a mess,” he said, wiping down Eren's back and legs efficiently and not all that gently.

“Mhm,” Eren smiled sleepily. He felt happy and sated and when Levi let him finally roll over he sat up and wrapped his arms around him and pulled Levi back down again; sitting up was too much effort.

“You're not gonna shower?” Levi asked.

“Sleepy,” he said against Levi's mouth.

“Tch.” He kissed him and pushed Eren's slightly sweaty hair away from his face. “Did you have fun?”

“Yeah.” He cuddled up to Levi who was still trying to wipe down his stomach. When he was done he passed the towel over to Erwin who sighed deeply and contentedly and said something about the bathroom before getting up and wandering out, taking the dirty towel with him.

Levi started to disentangle himself as well.

“Hey, Levi,” Eren said.

“Hm?”

“Don't go.” He looked at him. This was Erwin's bed and Erwin's house, and he was well within his
rights to want to leave; he wasn't Erwin's boyfriend after all. All Eren could do was ask.

Levi sighed, and looked at him with a soft smile, “Okay, okay. I'm not leaving. I'm just gonna put some pants on. I'm not sleeping naked here.”

“You normally sleep naked?” Eren asked, realising his head was neatly falling between the two pillows when he lay back and so he stole Erwin's.

Levi raised an eyebrow, “You'll just have to find out.”

Eren stretched out on the bed, waiting for them to come back, feeling the sweat dry on his skin. Erwin returned first, smelling of mint, and he climbed in on Eren's right, pulling up the covers and straightening them over Eren's body before wrapping an arm over him, loosely curled against his back. Levi returned a short while later, having turned out all the lights. He slid into bed on Eren's left with a cautious air and mumbled goodnight against his lips. Eren was barely awake enough to hear him.

Chapter End Notes

Mizo has done an amazing illustration for this chapter. Go and look at it and shower her in likes.
Chapter 25

Levi woke up first. He heard the regular breathing of someone beside him and opened his eyes to an unfamiliar ceiling. He blinked himself awake as he tried to work out where he was, for a few moments utterly confused by the situation he'd found himself in.

This was Erwin's bed.

It was not somewhere he'd ever thought he'd be. He felt a queasy sort of relief as he recalled the events of last night cautiously, like he was probing a loose tooth. He had no idea if all this had been a good idea or a bad one; no one had given it a lot of thought beforehand. Erwin had met his eyes with a silent question and Levi hadn't been prepared to relinquish Eren, in a strange reversal of the original discussion in which they'd both tried to step aside for the other. So they'd share him, even when it came to sex. At least, they did this time. Levi wasn't sure he wanted to repeat the experience.

The others were still asleep. When he raised his head he could see Erwin slumbering peacefully on his back, one arm flung up over his head. Huh. Levi had always assumed he'd snore.

Eren was still asleep too. Stuck between them like that he must have gotten too warm because he'd pushed the blankets down and firmly nudged them both towards the edges of the bed. Levi could feel his knee gently but insistently pressing into his side, forcing him to keep his distance. He rolled over to face him, making a bit more space. The movement didn't wake Eren up, and Levi looked at his sleeping face in the diffuse morning light creeping around the edges of Erwin's heavy drapes. Oh, let me not regret this, Levi thought, propping his head up on his hand to better observe him. He was so beautiful, his hair awry and his jaw rough with stubble. Levi let his eyes wander across his lips, down his jawline, over his shoulders. He could admire him for days, he thought.

And he'd actually called him beautiful out loud. In front of Erwin, no less. Levi frowned and hoped Erwin hadn't been paying attention at time.

He didn't know who he was concerned about more; Eren or Erwin.

It wasn't written down on Levi's hard limits list when he'd worked for Hange, and he doubted it was on Erwin's either, but Not With Him was an unspoken rule that Hange had never questioned. Most other studios would have offered inducements for two of their most popular actors to perform together, and honestly if the money had been offered, and if it had been enough, they probably would have done it. Levi had seen some lean years in his time.

And they would have been professional, and it would have been fine.

Except that it wouldn't have been. They couldn't have lived together after that. It would have been strange and awkward; the delicate balance between them shifted beyond repair. They sold sex as a performance for years; they'd been in the room when the other was fucking plenty of times, and they watched the footage. But they remained apart, and that had eventually become a gesture of closeness in itself. Levi didn't understand it in a way that he could easily put into words. He knew Erwin was attractive in a technical sense but they were already too close to look at each other properly like that. If they got closer physically they'd have to separate for good or get enmeshed in a way that made his skin crawl. They worked because they had achieved balance; he was like no one else in Levi's life, and there was so much they could lose by fucking with the equilibrium.

He was pretty sure last night counted as coming pretty fucking close to fucking with the equilibrium. So now what?
Levi didn’t know, and he had to wait for the others to wake up before he found out. He thought about leaving the bed, but he didn’t want to look back and see Eren and Erwin together like that without him. He and Erwin were in this together.

Levi sighed, and waited.

He’d almost drifted off again when he saw Erwin lift his head and peer over Eren’s shoulder. Levi raised his eyebrows and tilted his head at the door and Erwin nodded. Careful not to disturb Eren, who looked like he intended to sleep all day, the pair of them crept out of bed, Levi collecting his clothes as he did so.

In the hallway Levi muttered, “Shower.” and Erwin said he was welcome to go first.

“I’ll get breakfast on.”

“Mm.”

It was kind of nostalgic, in a way. On weekends when they’d lived together Levi would sometimes eschew his morning run and Erwin would cook them both breakfast. This morning the atmosphere was similar but far more fragile and they weren’t game to meet each other’s eyes just yet. Well, Erwin had only just woken up and could barely keep his open, but even so they kept out of each other’s way.

Levi found a clean towel and went to have a long overdue shower. Erwin’s bathroom was massive; it almost echoed. It also was about as sloppily cleaned as Levi had expected. Levi had a short, hot shower, and rather reluctantly put yesterday’s clothes back on. He didn’t bother hunting through Erwin’s cupboards for a spare razor; he’d shave when he got home.

He peered at himself in the mirror, looking at the fine lines on his forehead and at the corners of his mouth. I’m too fucking old for this bullshit, he thought.

When Levi emerged he glanced into Erwin’s bedroom but Eren was still curled up in the blankets and hadn’t moved. Good. They had shit to work out between the two of them first, before Eren was returned to the mix. Neither of them were entirely capable of thinking straight when he was around, that much was clear.

Erwin had thrown on a pair of boxers and yesterday’s button-down shirt and was whipping up pancake mixture in the kitchen while the coffee machine went through its launch sequence. He probably thought he made the perfect morning-after picture, Levi thought sourly, and took a deep breath. He should say something.

He walked into the kitchen and said the first thing that came into his head.

“You left the cap off the toothpaste.”

Erwin stopped distressing the batter with a fork for a few moments and turned to stare at him.

“Unbelievable,” he said.

“I know. How old are you going to get before you learn simple civilised habits?” Yesterday’s dishes were still piled next to the sink and Levi walked up and turned the water on.

“No, I mean it’s unbelievable that’s the first thing you said. What happened to a civilised, ‘good morning’? Who’s got bad habits now?”
“You’ve never wished me good morning in your life,” Levi said, retrieving the dish soap from under the sink.

They fell silent while Levi filled the sink and started piling in the dishes. Erwin had a dishwasher he was sure, but Levi didn’t really trust them to get things properly clean so he didn’t even bother looking for it. If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself. And he felt like cleaning something. Erwin didn’t bat an eyelid.

Levi knew Erwin would wait for him to speak; Erwin was aware he used his words too powerfully sometimes and he usually made a point of giving Levi enough space to work out what he wanted to say before launching into his own opinions.

“How’s this okay, do you think?” Levi asked eventually.

Erwin shrugged and turned on the gas. “I don’t know. This is out of my comfort zone too. Last night didn’t feel like a scene though.”

“No.”

“It didn’t quite feel like sex either,” Erwin said slowly. “I mean, yes, but it was more like.” He shrugged, putting a thin slice of butter into the pan and watching it melt.

“You couldn’t have a deep, intimate, soulful connection while I was rubbing myself off on his arse?” Levi suggested.

Erwin sighed, visibly deflating. “Yes, that is both correct and a perfect example of what you did to spoil the atmosphere.”

“You’re the one who didn’t have any condoms,” Levi muttered.

Erwin started pouring the batter onto the pan and it hissed appetisingly. “I thought I did.”

“The great Armand Savage, the Founding Fucker of HotFreeRange, unable to find condoms in his own home.”

Erwin scowled. “You know, I could just not cook you any pancakes.”

They looked at each other and Erwin smiled. “We’re gonna be fine. A little thing like this isn’t gonna bother us. Oh, fuck!” He hurriedly flipped the pancake over as it threatened to burn.

Levi sighed and shrugged. It was too late to regret things now; you just had to keep going. He washed and dried the dishes while Erwin piled up the pancakes.

At least the ice had been well and truly broken now, although Levi still wasn’t entirely at ease. He washed and dried the dishes while Erwin piled up the pancakes.

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“What about Eren?” he asked.

Erwin glanced at him before turning his attention to the pancakes. “What about him?”

“We’ll be okay, you say, but what about him?” Levi frowned. “He is so young,” he said softly. “And we outnumber him. Is this just taking advantage?”

Erwin was about to answer when Levi saw movement from the corner of his eye. Eren was peeping out of the hallway, his hair fluffed up like a dandelion, look of wide-eyed concern on his face, and
wearing nothing but a pair of boxers.

“Speak of the devil,” Levi said. “His Highness has decided to wake up today after all.”

“Hi,” Eren said shyly, looking from one of them to the other. “Um. Are you guys okay?”

Levi sighed. Eren probably couldn't understand his relationship with Erwin entirely, but he clearly understood enough, and it touched him how much he cared about it.

“We're fine,” he said.

“Yeah.” Erwin flipped another pancake on the stack. He was making an awful lot of them.

Reassured, Eren beamed at them and emerged properly, walking up to Levi and giving him a hug with only a fraction of a moment's hesitation. Levi unfolded his arms and hugged him back, despite the fact that he smelled rather questionable. These clothes were dirty anyway.

“You need a shower,” Levi told him.

“I know,” he mumbled, but didn't move to unwind his arms from around Levi's neck.

“You've got time to have one before breakfast,” Erwin added.

“Okay.” He released Levi and walked up to Erwin, wrapping his arms around him from behind, as he was still cooking. He rested his head against Erwin's back for a few moments. Having greeted them to his satisfaction Eren left the room again, long limbed and catlike and Levi watched him walk down the hall, admiring the way he moved.

He heard Erwin sigh and when he glanced at him he was doing the exact same thing with such a ridiculous expression on his face it immediately reminded Levi was his own face probably looked like and he frowned and cleared his throat.

“Well, I take it back,” he said.

“What?”

“I don't think he's the one who needs to worry about being taken advantage of. He's got us right where he wants us.”

Erwin shrugged and gave him a knowing smile and suggested he set the table.

Breakfast was served by the time Eren returned, freshly laundered and wearing actual clothes this time. Erwin had put Eren's plate at the end of the table so he could sit next to them both, and silence fell while they appreciated Erwin's pancakes. Levi made them for himself occasionally, but they were never as light and fluffy and he certainly never drowned them in maple syrup the way the other two did.

Levi suggested Erwin put some pants on but he said it was his house and he was under no obligation to do so and Levi couldn't actually argue with that.

The room smelled of coffee and the butter than Erwin had used for frying. Steam rose from Levi's teacup. Eren got up and opened the curtains to let in some sunlight and he seemed delighted that he could see the river from Erwin's living room. Despite the jumble, Levi had to admit it wasn't a bad apartment. The atmosphere was good, at least. Erwin had made a huge number of pancakes and after they'd made a significant dent in their numbers they started to slow down and talk, unshaven but
Eren did most of the talking, telling them about the scripts that Hange had sent him, and talking about his assignments and plans for the Autumn break, which was little more than a week away.

“I won't have time to go back home, but I don't really mind. Gonna hang out with Mikasa and stuff.” He glanced at them. “And you guys.”

“Sadly we won't have any time off,” Erwin said, chasing a blueberry around his plate.

Levi didn't say much at all, and the other two didn't try to draw him out. Eren glanced over at him every so often and smiled to let him know he wasn't forgotten, but let him eat in peace.

Levi never liked morning-afters. He avoided them if he could; going home before it got light or better yet not staying to sleep in the first place. They tended to be awkward, as first thing in the morning you were slow and vulnerable and it was harder to articulate your expectations with a mind fuzzy from sleep. This time he'd showered and eaten and was drinking tea, and it had been close to an hour since he'd gotten out of bed and longer than that since he'd woken up.

And yet he still felt fuzzy.

He just wasn't motivated to do anything other than sit here and watch Eren talk. He shouldn't have felt so at ease here; this was Erwin's home after all, but here he was sipping tea and contemplating another pancake and he realised he had no idea what time it was and couldn't be bothered turning around to look at the clock to check.

Eren was trying to convince Erwin to try some video games sometime and he was putting far too much effort into it. Levi was pretty sure Erwin would be willing to give almost anything a go at Eren's suggestion anyway.

It felt just like those mornings when Erwin had cooked for the two of them. No, slightly different; neither of them verbally sparred with Eren the way they sparred with each other, and the tone of conversation was softer and easier. Levi wasn't about to suggest the three of them move in together, but this wasn't bad. Better than he'd expected. Maybe they'd get away with it.

Levi watched as Eren mopped up the last of the maple syrup on his plate with a fragment of pancake and paused speaking long enough to eat it. He'd mocked Erwin for it earlier, but he'd had made a good point; whatever last night counted as, it wasn't enough. He wanted to experience Eren alone, without any distractions for either of them. It was the only way he'd really be able to explore him properly and learn what he what he really liked and what he didn't. Eren had been so overstimulated by the mere fact of their presence last night he'd been practically incoherent. They could have done almost anything and he would have come just has hard as he had done.


They'd spent years fucking for a living and neither of them had got to apply their skills to the one person they were both intensely interested in showing them off to. They'd blundered against him like moths against a light-bulb. Levi knew he could do better, a lot better, and he wanted to demonstrate this. He wanted to take him apart deliberately, put him back together.

He wanted to lose himself in a way that he just couldn't with Erwin in the room. He wanted to get a proper look at Eren's body as he still hadn't looked at any of Eren's work.

Erwin got up to get more coffee, Eren shaking his head at his silent offer of another mug.
“When shall we three meet again?” Erwin intoned in a way that told Levi he was quoting something.

“That's a good point,” Eren said eagerly. “We should do this again, like have a movie night or something. Erwin's got a big enough couch.” He paused, “If you guys want to do this again, that is.”

“Yeah, sure,” Erwin said, flicking a glance at Levi. “I just don't want to share you all the time.”

Levi nodded, “Likewise. Is that okay?”

Eren looked slightly surprised they were even asking him. “Of course. I mean I figured that's how it would work, until uh.”

“We all ended up in the same bed,” Erwin said “Yeah, I wasn't expecting that either.”

“I thought it was fun,” Eren said.

“It had its moments,” Erwin said, sitting back down again. “We probably should have talked it out beforehand.”

“Like that was going to happen,” Levi said. “Eren had to sit us down and force us to even think about it.”

“Okay,” Erwin threw his hands up. “We're talking about it now. Any comments or suggestions?”

“Yeah, buy some fucking condoms,” Levi said.

Eren snorted and laughed.

Erwin rolled his eyes. “Any serious comments or suggestions?”

Levi was tempted to double down on the joke but instead shrugged, “You can't just ask a question like that and get a sensible answer off the top of my head. This is okay, this is nice,” Levi waved his hand. “In a domestic sort of way. But I don't want to line up another threesome just yet. That wasn't what any of us signed up for originally, after all.”

“Yeah, I gotta think about it,” Eren said. “I'll text you if I think of something though.” The conversation petered out at that, and silence fell as they contemplated the night before.

“So, does anyone have any plans for the weekend?” Erwin asked, before the silence had stretched on too long.

“I have a class this afternoon,” Levi said, and his nerve finally cracked and he turned and looked at the clock. Still plenty of time.

“Class. Shit,” Eren said, the dreamy look in his eyes fading. “We've got one week 'til the Fall break and everything's coming due at once.” He sighed. “I won't be able to see you guys much at all. Not this week anyway. I'm not even sure I can make it to MMA.” He slumped in his chair.

“Your study is probably more important,” Erwin said. “And it is only a week.”

“I know, I know. It's just, I feel like I don't want to go anywhere or do anything else. Just hang out with you guys.”

Levi understood the feeling.

Eren's pronouncement had let the rest of the world in, however, and time started moving again. They
emptied their mugs and collected the dishes and Erwin gave Eren his one spare toothbrush. Levi made do with mouthwash. There was enough room for all three of them in the bathroom at once. Eren grinned at them around his toothbrush in the mirror. Levi wasn't brushing his teeth so he left first. He wandered back into the living room and stood in front of the window, gazing at the sliver of river.

“Hey.” Eren appeared and joined a couple of minutes later, and stared out the window. “Erwin's having a shower,” he explained.

“Ah.”

“I was bit worried when I woke up and you guys weren't there,” Eren said quietly.

“I'm sorry about that,” Levi said.

“No, I understand, I think. You guys had to talk about stuff, right? I guess you don't really want to wake up next to each other like that.”

“Yeah.”

“And it's okay?”

“Mm. Probably. We're not that fragile, Eren. I mean, yeah, this is all new, but,” Levi turned to look at him properly. “This has to be pretty new for you, as well.”

“I've never had a boyfriend before,” Eren said. “Not a proper one like you guys are. I've never been swept up like that.”

“Did you like it?”

“It was incredible.” He grinned and bit his lip. “I feel so happy right now. God, Jean's gonna know; it's written all over my face, isn't it?”

Levi didn't really need an excuse to stare at Eren's face but he did so anyway. “Yeah, you look pretty satisfied with life.”

His smile faded a bit. “He knows about you, but at some point I'm gonna have to explain about Erwin too, aren't I? And to Mikasa.”

“You sister?” Levi thought Eren was getting a bit ahead of himself. “Look, there's no rush. Give yourself some time to get used to it first.”

“I kind of want to shout it from the rooftops; look how lucky I am.”

“Some people aren't gonna think you're lucky,” Levi said.

“What do you mean?”

“I'm wearing pants, are you happy now?” Erwin asked, interrupting them as he wandered into the room.

“Well it's a start,” Levi said. “I should really being getting home; I have stuff I need to do before my class.”

“I should too,” Eren said with a sigh. “I have to study. Do you want a lift?” he asked Levi.
“Thanks, that would save me some time.”

“Then I'll see you both soon,” Erwin said. “And Eren, I just want to say, regardless of the outcome, you did the right thing by sitting us down to talk the way you did. It probably wasn't easy, and I know it took courage to stand in front of us and take your clothes off, but I appreciate it, all right?”

“Okay.” Eren looked embarrassed and Levi nudged him with his elbow and gave him an encouraging look. He did good. In some ways, he did better than they did; they were too old, too cautious, in Erwin's case too bruised by past mistakes, and in Levi's too pessimistic of making his own.

Eren plunged right in and hoped for the best, and Levi suspected if he didn't they'd never get anywhere.

There was something else Levi was going to mention, but he'd forgotten it. It would come to him eventually he was sure, and he went to put on his shoes.
Jean’s door was shut when Eren made it home and he assumed he was sleeping in, but he was proven wrong half an hour later when Jean came home, slamming the front door with cheerful abandon and humming all the way up the hallway.

“Where have you been?” Eren asked, taking the opportunity to squeeze in a few more precious minutes of procrastination before starting his work in earnest.

“I went out for breakfast,” Jean said.

“Since when do you get up early on weekends to go out for breakfast?” Eren asked.

Jean wandered into his room and leant against the door frame, hands in his pockets and a satisfied smile on his face.

“Since when do you stay out all night? We would have invited you for breakfast too if you’d been there.”

“We?” Given Jean’s expression it didn’t look like a slip of the tongue.

Jean’s smug look dissolved into a broad, pleased grin. “I think I’ve got a boyfriend.”

“Congrats,” Eren said.

“Really?” Jean looked startled. “I expected a joke.”

“No joke. Armin, right?”

“Mm. Thanks to you, I guess.”

Damn. Honest gratitude? Eren spun his chair around to face him. Just over a week ago the thought of Jean acquiring a boyfriend made him depressed and jealous but now all he could feel was pleased for him. He was happy, and Jean deserved to be happy too. Everyone in the world deserved to be happy.

“We’re doing pretty good, you know,” Eren said. “You and me.”

“You mean we're both dating porn stars?” Jean raised an eyebrow.

“Dude, I am a porn star. Besides, Levi’s retired. He doesn’t do that stuff any more.”

“What does he do then?”

“He teaches mixed martial arts.”

“Oh, well that explains why you suddenly took it up.” Jean smiled, “Yeah, okay, this semester’s going really well.”

“Hey,” Eren said. “Are you gonna study in the living room today?”

“Yeah, I guess I should get on that.” Jean sighed.

“Mind if I join you?”
Jean looked at him for a moment, “Pfft. You pay half the rent, the living room is yours too.”

Eren grinned and spun his chair around again to collect his textbooks.

They spent the rest of the weekend like they'd spent quite a few weekends as teenagers; sitting on the floor with the TV showing muted cartoons while they studied. Jean kept looking at his phone every five minutes to see if Armin had texted him until Eren pointed out that Armin was probably studying harder than he was and wasn't likely to procrastinate by texting.

Eren himself sent Armin one text; a short message of amused congratulations.

Eren ended up skipping the gym that week, and when he'd called Levi to tell him Levi had understood and wished him luck with his exams. Eren missed him. He missed them both, especially when Jean invited Armin to join them for a study session and spent most of it staring at his face. Armin actually refused his suggestion they organise another one on the grounds that he actually wanted Jean to pass his exams.

“It's only a few days,” Armin said, looking amused.

“I know,” Jean sighed dramatically.

It was just a week, Eren told himself.

He heard from Erwin much earlier than that. Jean had gone out to work and Eren was staying up studying when his phone rang. It was odd for Erwin to call without texting first and Eren felt a spike of anxiety as he answered. He hoped nothing was wrong.

“Erwin?”

“Hey, I didn't wake you, did I? I figured you'd still be studying.” Erwin sounded sort of depressed, and Eren had never heard him speak in that tone of voice before.

“Yeah, I'm still up. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I'm fine. I just, look, can I come over? You don't have to entertain me; I don't want to interrupt your study or anything. I just want to.” He sighed. “Sit in the room with you.”

“Yes, of course,” Eren said, still not convinced everything really was okay.

“Thanks. I'll see you soon.”

Eren's concentration was truly gone by then so he took the opportunity to take his dirty mugs and empty chip packets back to the kitchen, and put on some more coffee while he waited for Erwin to show up.

When Eren answered the door to Erwin, there was no sign of the Aston and a taxi was pulling away from the driveway. It was cold outside, and Eren ushered Erwin into the warm. Erwin was wearing a suit but he'd taken off his tie. He smelled of alcohol but didn't seem particularly drunk when he shrugged off his coat and hung it up in the hallway.

“Good evening,” he said with an apologetic look. He spread his arms slightly in an awkward shrug and Eren realised he was hoping for a hug and he stepped in to give him one.

“Hey. Are you okay?” He squeezed Erwin for a few moments before stepping back.

“Yeah. You don't have to look so worried. I've been networking.” He ran his hand through his hair.
“An important part of my very important job is spending some of my free time drinking with colleagues and clients and pretending to care about their investment portfolios,” he said with an unhappy twist to his mouth. “Sorry, I won't disturb you. I just didn't feel like going home. I would have taken them with me if I did; heard their voices in my head all night.”

Eren told him he was more than welcome and as usual Missy came over to greet the new visitor. Erwin stooped and patted her head politely, but didn't pay her much more attention after that.

Eren offered him coffee, but Erwin shook his head.

“Just show me to an out of the way corner and I'll let you get back to work.”

In the end Erwin took his shoes off and stretched out on Eren's bed. He was very firm on Eren getting back to his study and since he had an exam the next day Eren didn't argue, as much as he wanted to help Erwin get over his bad day in a more tactile manner than merely being in the same room.

He was also quite pleased that Erwin had come to him, given the amount of convincing he'd needed to even ask Eren to help move a few pictures.

To Eren's mild surprise Erwin wasn't a distraction at all. For the first few minutes he was aware of him in the room but once he focused on his work Eren forgot Erwin was there. He was so quiet, and he hardly moved. Eren assumed he'd fallen asleep after a while, but when he decided to close his books for the night and looked over his shoulder to check on him, Erwin was a quarter of the way through a battered paperback copy of *Neuromancer* he'd taken from Eren's bookshelf. He was lying on his stomach, propped up on his elbows, apparently absorbed in the story.

Eren leaned back in his chair and watched him for a few moments. He looked far more relaxed now, more like himself.

“Do you like it?” Eren asked.

Erwin looked up from the book and smiled, “Yeah. I don't get a chance to read for pleasure much these days.” He glanced at the bookcase, “You like science fiction?”

“Yeah.” Eren got up and moved to the bed, Erwin edging towards the wall so there was space for him to sit. “That's my mother's collection. I inherited it when she died. When I was too young to read them, I'd see her reading them and ask her what they were about.” Eren smiled, “You try explaining wormholes to a six year old; it's almost impossible, but she tried.”

Erwin smiled a bit sadly as he closed the book and put it on the bed next to him. Eren was sure he was going to ask the obvious question, and he was braced for it. He had to tell them sometime, after all.

But instead of asking, Erwin volunteered some information of his own. “My father died when I was six. Or somewhere around then.”

“I kind of wondered why you never mentioned him, but always talked about your grandfather,” Eren said. “Even though I probably should have guessed.”

“There was quite a big age gap between my parents,” he continued. “And he had a heart attack. He in his sixties, my mother in her thirties. I don't really remember much about it, except moving back to my grandfather's house. I don't remember my father much at all, just the way his office smelled.”

It felt weird to be looking down at Erwin while he talked about this, and Eren shifted, laying down
next to him. The bed was only a single, but they lay on their sides and there was space between them so they could talk face to face.

“I'm sorry,” Eren said, knowing first-hand how little use the words were. At least he had a lot of memories of his mother.

Erwin sighed. “Well, like I said. I don't remember much about him. He was an academic, and my mother met him when she was a student. When I asked her about it all she ever said was that he wasn't ever her teacher, so it might have been frowned upon but it wasn't against the rules.” Erwin frowned, “Like I cared about that. I just wanted to know about him. She must have loved him though.”

“I'm sure she did,” Eren said.

“My grandfather didn't approve,” Erwin said. “I know what it's like for my grandfather not to approve of something, and it must have taken a lot of guts to marry my father against my grandfather's wishes. I'm sure my grandfather had a shortlist of suitable partners lined up for my mother.” A wry look, “He certainly did for me.”

“I was the consolation prize. He got an heir at least. But growing up, it was like my father never existed. My mother acted like she'd always been single and just somehow acquired a son, probably to make life with my grandfather a bit easier for the both of us.”

Eren couldn't really understand what that would have been like, but the world Erwin had grown up in was as alien to him as if he'd been raised by wolves. He didn't know what to say, but he appreciated being told, and he reached out and took Erwin's hand.

Eren took a deep breath, “I guess we're both half-orphans then.”

“Mm.” Erwin laced his fingers through his own.

Get it over and done with. He already knows she's gone. “Leukemia,” Eren said. “I was ten.”

“And you don't want to talk about it,” Erwin said.

Eren nodded, and felt a deep sense of relief that Erwin understood. “I was really hung up on trying to do everything right, you know? So, whenever someone asked if I was okay or how I was feeling, I felt obliged to tell them. Or if they didn't know and asked what was wrong I'd have to go over the whole thing. I realise now it was stupid and I didn't have to but I didn't know.”

“And before she died, when she was sick, when I told people, they always, you know, wished her the best or said they'd pray or something and I thought if I could get enough people to do that...” He trailed off.

“Mikasa understood. We just kind of had a silence between us that was calm. But with Dad, I wanted him to talk but he didn't. He's a doctor, so I grew up hearing that my dad made sick people well again. Maybe he felt guilty. I dunno, he just didn't say anything. It was like he disappeared.”

Erwin lifted his arm in a silent offer and Eren accepted it, moving forward and letting Erwin drape his arm around him, tucking his head under his chin, holding him close. Eren lay there for while, listening to Erwin breathe, their other hands still clasped between them. He didn't want to talk about his mother directly, but that was okay.

“It's always at the back of my mind.” Eren said. “Whenever I meet people. Is someone going to ask about my mom? Like, it's not the first thing people think of but it always happens eventually, and
then I have to figure out if I want to say anything and either I'm evasive, or I lie, or everyone feels like shit.” He scowled against Erwin's chest. “Mother's Day is bad for it. Holidays in general, you know?”

“I can imagine.” Erwin's voice reverberated through his chest.

“Sometimes I wish people would just know in advance so I don't have to tell them. So I don't have to go through watching them find out and have to help them figure out what to say to me.”

“Yeah. Does Levi know?” Erwin asked.

“No.” Eren smiled. “I don't think he'd ever ask, either. It's not like he doesn't care he just wouldn't ask, would he?”

“No. He doesn't ask others to do what he doesn't do.” Erwin paused. “Do you want me to tell him?” he asked quietly.

Eren thought about it for a while and Erwin waited.

“Yeah,” he said eventually. “If you don't mind. Is that weird?”

“Maybe. But it doesn't matter. If it makes you feel happier, that's what's important.”

“I feel like it's my responsibility to tell people for some reason.”

“Well, it's just a suggestion, but Levi will understand either way. I guarantee you.”

Eren lifted his head from the warm space against Erwin's chest and looked up at him.

“Yes, he will. Although you're pretty good at understanding stuff too, you know.”

“I try.”

Eren knew he'd probably want to talk about it himself to Levi someday, but Erwin would spare him that first shock of understanding, the moment of having to bridge the gap between knowing and not knowing. It would be easier.

“Thank you,” Eren said. “And for telling me about your dad, too.”

“I want you to know me and my life,” Erwin said. “If there's anything you want to ask, I'll answer it.”

Eren smiled. For a lawyer he was very earnest and straightforward sometimes, and it was almost as endearing as Levi's love of cats.

“Okay, then, can I kiss you?” Eren asked, levering himself up a bit on his elbow.

“You never have to ask that,” Erwin said.

Eren smiled and leaned in. Despite the fact that they were both lying on a bed, Erwin held himself in check. Jean would be home at some point, and he was tired anyway. Erwin was quite happy to plant toothy little kisses all over his nose and cheeks and Eren squirmed and laughed softly.

He let the sad memories fade for now, caught up in making happier ones. He lost himself in examining Erwin's face, tracing his lips and nose and eyebrows with a finger. He couldn't hide his age that close up; Eren could see how the years were starting to engrave themselves on his skin. Eren
thought it was fascinating, and not in the slightest bit off-putting. His jaw was slightly prickly with regrowth and Eren rasped his thumb along it. Erwin let him do as he pleased, watching him with affectionate eyes.

We have to get to know each other, Eren thought. He didn't want to miss any part of him.

Eren heard the front door close.

“Oops. That'll be Jean,” he said, smiling apologetically at Erwin and rolling off the bed. Something fell to the floor with a soft thunk as he did so.

“Oh fuck!” Eren reached down and picked *Neuromancer* up off the floor. As he did so the worn paperback's spine finally relinquished its hold on a dozen pages out of the middle. “Crap crap crap.” Eren shuffled the pages back in together, but it wasn't really surprising it had fallen apart; the glue was dry and brittle. Erwin sat next to him, looking concerned as Eren stared at the book, slightly heartbroken.

His swearing drew Jean, who poked his head around the partially-open door.

“Are you oka-?” He broke off when he saw Erwin. He clearly recognised him too. “Are you fucking serious?” he asked, sounding a mixture of genuinely shocked and amused.

“Piss off, Jean; this is not the time,” Eren snapped. He didn't feel like hearing any jokes about porn stars right then.

“Sor-ry.” Jean rolled his eyes and retreated.

Eren sighed. “Well, they're just paperbacks. They're not going to last forever.”

Erwin patted him gently on the back. “Do you mind if I borrow the book anyway?” he asked. “I kind of want to finish it now. I'll be careful.”

“Yeah, take it,” Eren smiled. “It's falling apart anyway, I don't think you could do much more damage to it.”

“I'm sorry, Eren.”

“It wasn't your fault. I'm the one that knocked it down.” Eren smiled. “It's okay. I have plenty others. I'll just have to be more careful in future.”

“What about your friend? Will he be okay?”

Eren shrugged. “Yeah? He got a new boyfriend recently and he's stupid over him so he's got no reason to be jealous.” Eren paused, and smiled a little. “Well, maybe he should be a bit jealous.”

Erwin held the book carefully in both hands and they looked at each other for a little while.

“I should be getting home,” Erwin said regretfully.

“Do you want a lift?” Eren asked.

“It's fine, I'll take a taxi. I wouldn't make you go out there in the cold. Besides, you have more important things to do this week than chauffeur me around.”

“Okay.” Eren leant against Erwin's shoulder while he tied his shoes. Jean had disappeared into the bathroom to wash off the grease, so they wouldn't be observed or overheard for a little while at least.
Erwin called a taxi, and Eren walked him to the door.

“Thanks, Eren. I think I'm going to sleep well now.”

“That's good.”

“Thank you for the loan of the book, and good luck with your exams. Oh, I nearly forgot.” He patted down his pockets, and produced an envelope. “Terrible timing, but this is for you. Well, for your information. I'll see you later, Eren.” Erwin pressed his lips to Eren's forehead as he shoved the envelope at him and Eren couldn't help but feel he was making an escape.

Eren gave him a brief wave and shut the door. The envelope had Erwin's name on the outside and had already been opened. Eren recognised the piece of paper inside; he'd gotten one almost identical from Pixis when he'd gone to get tested before he started working at HotFreeRange.

These were Erwin's results, dated only yesterday, all negative.

“What?” Eren sighed and went back to his room to get his phone. He called Erwin and repeated his enquiry. “What?”

“What,” Erwin said, presumably from the back of a taxi.

“Why did you give me this? Do you need this piece of paper for something?”

“No? I'm not about to go back to work for Hange and there's no one I'm hoping to have sex with other than you.”

Eren felt his face heat up. “Well, yeah. Good.”

“Eren, I was sex worker. Hange's standards are very high but it's the responsible thing to get tested early in a relationship. I just couldn't figure out how to tell you so in the end I decided it was just easier to show you.”

“Oh. Well, thanks.” Even if your timing leaves something to be desired, Eren thought. “I wouldn't have thought of that.”

“I know, that's another reason I did it. It's a question you wouldn't have asked.” Erwin sighed. “I really hope this driver can't read lips.”

Eren laughed, rather touched, and they wished each other goodnight again.

“I can't believe he actually gave you the paperwork.”

Eren’s exam finished early enough that he could still make it to Levi's class that week, and afterwards Levi had beckoned him over to talk.

Jean hadn't said much about Erwin the night before, only frowning and looking uncomfortable when Eren had tried to explain how he ended up with two boyfriends. He wasn't sure what Jean's problem was, but he knew there was no point in asking him either. He was probably just jealous, and Eren hoped further time with Armin would mellow him out about it. He didn't want it to be awkward when Levi and Erwin visited him, even if they were never going to fit in with his peer group.

“He told you he gave it to me?” Eren asked.

“Yeah.” Erwin must have also told him about Eren's mother, but Levi didn't refer to it, and Eren was glad not to see that pitying look that so many other people wore when they found out.
“He's such a fucking lawyer.” Levi unzipped a pocket on the side of his bag and took out a folded piece of paper. “Here, since we're being so official about it.”

“You really don't have to,” Eren mumbled, as Levi thrust the piece of paper at him.

“I know, but it would be weird if I didn't now. I wasn't gonna say anything, actually. The test was fine so I forgot about it.”

“Well, thanks.” Eren took the piece of paper and didn't bother unfolding it. He did notice the date at the top was from over a month ago, however, dated around the time Levi had pushed him up against the wall.

Eren felt embarrassed by the whole thing but warmed by it too; they cared about him so much.

“Since we're kind of on the subject,” Eren continued as they vacated the room for the next class. “Um.” He'd been thinking about this a little bit after going over what had happened between the three of them. “Can we maybe not use condoms for blowjobs?”

Levi raised an eyebrow, “You like the taste of jizz that much?”

“No,” Eren said, mustering what dignity he had. “I like the taste of cock, thank you very much. And I hate the taste of condoms. It's fine for work, obviously.”

Levi shrugged. “Well, we're all tested and it's low risk anyway. I don't object.”

“Really?” Eren honestly hadn't been expecting such a positive response.

“I don't like the taste either. We have to get Erwin's agreement first though.”

“Mm. I'll text him sometime. Jean found out about him, by the way. I explained it to him but I don't know if it really sunk in.”

“Eren.” Levi's amused expression was replaced by a more serious one. “Not everyone's going to react well to this. They're gonna look at us and assume we're taking advantage of you, or they'll look at you and think you're cheating and we're idiots.”

Eren felt like a bucket of cold water had been dumped on him. “But Jean wouldn't really-”

“Maybe not Jean, who knows? I'm just saying, as gently as I can, you might want to decide which of us you're going to introduce to which people. Everyone at HotFreeRange will be fine, I'm sure, but you know, just give it some thought.”

“Like coming out all over again,” Eren said.

“I don't care, you know, if you want to introduce me as a friend. Erwin will care; he's a sap and he'll want to hold your hand when you walk down the street, but I don't really like public displays of affection anyway.”

“You shouldn't have to sacrifice yourself.”

“I know. But like I said, it doesn't bother me, so I'll volunteer if you need me to, okay?”

Eren nodded.

“Cheer up,” Levi said. “We'll see you on the weekend.”
Finally free of assignments, Eren dropped by the studio to discuss his next project with Hange, and just to say hello to everyone. Eren was starting to understand why Armin studied here so much; the atmosphere was good, and he'd been so busy these last couple of weeks he hadn't had a chance to see Mike and Nanaba and the others and he realised, as he strolled through the Staff Only door, that he'd missed them. It was good to be back.

“So, are you going to Erwin's birthday dinner on Saturday?” Hange asked, sorting through the papers on their desk, which was still a mess. “I need numbers before making the booking.”

Eren looked up from the script he'd been skimming.

“What? It's Erwin's birthday?”

“Well, it's on Sunday, but more people can make it on Saturday. Can you?”

“Yeah, I'll go. Definitely. Crap. I didn't know it was his birthday.” Eren scrubbed his hands in his hair. “I need to get him something.” Saturday was tomorrow. What did you get a man like Erwin anyway? How much should he spend? Why hadn't anyone mentioned it? He looked at Hange hopefully. “You've been friends for ages, right? What are you going to get him?”

Hange grinned, “I always get him a nice bottle of wine.”

That wasn't actually a bad idea, and Eren was sort of surprised Hange had come up with something so sensible. It wasn't useful to him though, as he was too young to purchase alcohol and knew very little about wine anyway.

“Well, thanks. I'll definitely be going to the dinner and I'll get back to you on these scripts, too.”

“There's no rush. You've been working hard with your exams so don't feel bad about taking a couple days off to relax.”

“Yeah, okay.”

Relax. Maybe he could do that after he found a present for Erwin. Eren stuffed the scripts into a folder in his bag and went out to collect some more opinions.

“I just send Mike to the food markets,” Nanaba said. “And he follows his nose. Erwin likes to cook so we get him something exotic to experiment with every year. For the important birthdays I give him a photograph I think he'd like.”

“Oh yeah, he's hung a bunch of your pictures up on the wall of his office,” Eren said.

“Seriously?” Nanaba grinned. “I'll have to ask him to show me sometime. I know he always complained he had nowhere to put them. They're really meant for a gallery wall, not a house.”

Eren thanked Nanaba for his help but realised he'd probably have to ask Mike to pick something for if he wanted to get Erwin the same thing and he didn't want to do that. He wanted to give Erwin something from him. He wandered into the break room, his head still empty of good ideas.

Armin was sitting in one of the easy chairs, reading some scripts. He'd handed in his assignments early, and looked far more well-rested than Eren felt. Eren explained his dilemma and Armin thought
for a while.

“Why not get him a book?”

“He said he doesn’t have much time to read. He did borrow my copy of Neuromancer but I have no idea what books he normally likes. I can’t extrapolate from one data-point either.”

“Wow, you really have been studying,” Armin said. “Look, you probably don’t have to get him anything fancy. Like, you could get chocolates?”

Eren sighed, “That’s the present you get for someone that basically admits you don’t know what to get them.”

“Well you have left it until the last minute.”

“I didn’t even know it was his birthday until Hange mentioned it. Are you coming to the dinner?”

“Yeah.” Armin put away his scripts and stood up. “The regulars always get invites to these sorts of things. It’s a tradition. You know, you don’t have to get Erwin a present. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind. I’m not getting him one.”

“I do,” Eren said stubbornly. Armin sighed and shrugged.

To celebrate the start of the break, and the end of the mid-semester exams, Mikasa had organised a small party at her house to which Armin had received two invitations.

Since his attendance had been doubly requested, Armin promised he’d bake cookies for the occasion, and Eren volunteered their kitchen for the job. Whatever he ended up getting for Erwin, he’d have to find it on Saturday morning.

Armin had the recipe memorised, along with most of his coursework, and so Eren just followed his instructions. Jean had an exam in the very last slot and said he’d be taking a bus directly from campus to Mikasa’s apartment, so it was just the two of them cheerfully spilling flour and somehow using half the clean crockery in the house while they discussed the upcoming break.

While Armin put the trays in the oven, Eren excused himself and ducked off to call Levi for his opinion. Surely Erwin’s best friend would have some good gift ideas.

“A DVD?” Eren said incredulously.

“Yeah. It’s what I get him every year. We watch films together so I know what he’s already seen and the sort of thing he likes.”

“I guess that makes sense.”

“And it’s easy to wrap. I could give you some suggestions if you want.”

Eren sighed. “No, that’s fine. Thanks” He couldn’t fault Levi’s reasoning but it seemed a little underwhelming. A thought occurred to him. “Why didn’t you tell me it was his birthday earlier?”

“To be honest I’d forgotten. I rely on Hange to remind me. Erwin’s birthday isn’t exactly a big deal; he’s had a whole lot of them already, after all.”

“And you made fun of him for every one, I’ll bet. When’s your birthday anyway?” he asked. “I don’t want to be caught out again.”
“Doesn't matter. I don't celebrate it.” Levi spoke so casually and matter-of-factly that Eren found himself unable to think of a reason to object before Levi continued. “Anyway, whatever you get Erwin you know he'll love it.”

“I know. That's kind of the problem.” Eren sighed.

“Look, just tie a ribbon around your dick and tell him you're his present,” Levi said. “He'd eat that sort of stupid shit right up. Probably eat you right up too.”

“Levi!” Eren hissed. There was no way he was going to do that. Although now that Levi had mentioned it, birthday sex was sort of traditional, wasn't it? The thought made Eren's stomach lurch happily. "I'll think of something. You're going to the dinner, right?"

“Yeah, I'll be there,” Levi hung up. Eren wondered what would happen if he ever managed to hang up on him first, and he put his phone away and wandered back into the kitchen.

“Ten minutes 'til they're done,” Armin said. “Let's wash up.”

“Have you already washed the bowl?” Eren asked.

Armin shook his head. “It's all yours.”

“You're so thoughtful. Jean's a lucky guy,” Eren said, setting about cleaning the bowl himself with his finger.

Armin smiled, “He's not so bad himself, you know?”

“Yes he is.”

“He's not.” Armin shook his head. “He talks like a dick but he's a good guy. If you really need his help, he'd be there.”

“I guess.”

Armin looked at him from under his hair, his hands in the sink. “So, Jean said something about you and Levi.”

“Yeah, well, we're dating. There's no point in hiding it if Jean's already told you.” Thanks, Jean.


“He doesn't normally.” Eren put the bowl down and picked up a dishcloth. “This is different.”

Armin frowned. “Uh, Eren, are you sure you're not reading too much into it? Cause the Levi I know-”

“I'm sure, okay? We've done a whole lot of talking. It's, well, it's complicated and we'll see how it goes.”

Armin didn't ask any more questions and they worked in silence. Soon the smell of baked goods filled the kitchen and Armin kept a close eye on the cookies, sliding the trays out of the oven to cool when they were just done. They looked almost professional. Eren focused on drying up, or tried to, given how appetising they smelled.

He'd asked Jean not to say anything about Erwin and it looked like he'd kept his word. Eren didn't like keeping things from people like this, it just wasn't in his nature, but he remembered Levi's
warning and realised he had no idea what to do. He needed someone to talk to; someone not to close to any of them, but not likely to judge them too harshly either.

“Hey, Armin?”

“We can't eat any until they cool down a bit. They're still soft.”

“Yeah, that wasn't actually my question though.”

“What's wrong, Eren?”

“Can I talk to you about something? Maybe I'm worrying over nothing, but I don't know. I don't know who I can talk to about it.”

“I'll do what I can to help,” Armin said, and gave him an encouraging smile.

Eren took a deep breath. “So. I'm dating Erwin as well as Levi. Jean found out. I asked him not to tell anyone.”

Armin blinked, but to his credit he managed to hide any other signs of surprise. “Well that explains why you were so worried about getting Erwin a present. Damn, Eren, you must have made a good impression,” he said with a sly smile.

“Yeah, somehow.”

“So, what's bothering you? Is it Jean?”

“I don't know. He seemed kind of weird about it, but it is kind of weird, right? It was like he didn't want to hear it; it gave me a bad feeling.”

Armin shrugged. “I don't know that it's that strange. HotFreeRange is full of this sort of stuff. You're not gonna stand out. As for Jean, I dunno. You still know him better than I do.”

“Yeah, Levi said you guys would probably be okay with it.” Eren frowned, “He also said that other people might not be. He offered to let Erwin be my official boyfriend and just pretend to be my friend.”

Armin tilted his head to the side and looked thoughtful. “And that's what's really bothering you. You could handle Jean being a dick, but you're worried about what Levi said.”

“Well, he's probably right now I think about it. Gay, porn star, dating two other porn stars—some people aren't gonna like that look. Hell, I mean, six months ago I'd have given myself the side-eye. And maybe a high five.”

Armin smiled at that. “How long have you three been dating?”

“About two weeks. I know it's not long so I'm better off keeping it quiet for now, but it feels good. I like them a lot.”

“I can see that. Well, you don't have to worry about me; I know the three of you are good people and maybe it'll work out and I hope it does.” He paused to collect his thoughts, “Look, Levi's probably right to a certain extent, but perhaps he's also worried for himself. I've only worked at HotFreeRange for a year and a half, but it was kind of a thing that Levi didn't date people. If you worked with him, or you know, talked to him, he made really clear what his expectations were. So regardless of whether or not you're seeing Erwin, the fact that he's changed is something he has to work out how
to tell people about himself. He's probably nervous. He probably wants to think about it a bit more.”

“You think so?” Eren had been wringing the dishcloth as he talked and he straightened it out and folded it over the oven door again. “You might be right. He's not very good at talking sometimes. When we first started all of this he was defensive about it. What should I do?”

“I think his advice was a request,” Armin said, looking at Eren steadily. “He doesn't want you to go public with him just yet and so he's giving you permission to do so with Erwin, if you want. It's only been two weeks; I'd do as he says, and see how it goes for a while.”

Eren nodded slowly. “Yeah, okay.”

“And I won't invite Jean to Erwin's birthday dinner.”

“What?”

“I was considering taking him. Partners are welcome to these things, of course, but to be honest he's not gonna know anyone there, and I wasn't set on the idea if he wasn't gonna have a good time. Now I've made up my mind. It's Erwin's birthday, and you're his boyfriend. If Jean's gonna cramp your style, he can stay home. There'll be other dinners.” Armin turned his attention to the trays of cookies, “Now, I think these are cool enough. Shall we make sure they turned out okay?”

“Oh yeah. Definitely. Thanks, Armin. I really feel a lot better now.” He was really glad they'd become friends. Armin was just so sensible about things, and Eren felt great relief to know he could talk to him.

The cookies had turned out well, and after sampling a couple they shovelled them into a tupperware container and made their way to Mikasa's apartment, which she shared with a friendly girl named Sasha. Sasha had invited people from her work, and Mikasa had invited a couple of classmates and there were enough strangers that the first hour or so was mostly people getting acquainted. Armin's cookies were a big hit and he had to keep some aside for Jean, who arrived a bit later.

When Jean arrived Armin waited until he'd taken off his coat and hugged him and Eren offered Mikasa a high five.

“Our plan worked.”

Mikasa shook her head. “I don't think it was us, Eren. Congratulations!” she called to them, and Jean looked pleased and embarrassed and rested his head on Armin's shoulder to complain about his exam.

Eren didn't get much of a chance to talk to his sister until later in the evening, when games had been broken out and comfortable seats claimed. Eren offered to get more drinks from the fridge and Mikasa had followed him into the kitchen. Eren's apartment was open-plan but Mikasa's wasn't and they had some privacy. They talked about their exams, and as usual Mikasa was quietly confident she'd done well. She was doing pre-med with a view to becoming a doctor, although she still didn't know if she wanted to specialise. It wasn't that she was naturally brilliant, but she had a laser-like focus and apparently boundless motivation once she'd put her mind to something.

Eren did not, but he figured he'd done okay given the sheer number of hours he'd put into studying in the last couple of weeks. Mikasa seemed to think that Armin was a good influence on him.

“How's work?” she asked, finally. She hadn't mentioned it when they'd texted each other, and Eren got the impression it had taken some effort of will on her part not to bug him about it. She was looking at him very intently.
“It's fine. What do you want me to say?”

“Well, I guess you look okay,” Mikasa conceded. “I'd know if you were lying.”

“There you go then. It's just like a normal workplace really. We're all going out tomorrow for someone's birthday even.”

“Your co-stars are treating you well too?”

“Yeah. One of them even asked me out afterwards.”

Mikasa's eyebrows shot right up. “And?”

“I turned him down. He's a nice guy but, you know, I didn't like him like that.” Crap. He shouldn't have said anything. Mikasa was now looking at him even more closely and Eren wondered how to arrange his face.

“Okay,” Mikasa said. “Here, let me carry some of those.” She took some of the cans out of Eren's arms.

That was it? Eren was startled.

Mikasa looked a bit sadly at him, “I'm not, you know, trying to invade your privacy or anything. I just need to know you're doing okay and I can't tell just by texting. I'm not gonna ask, alright? You can tell me whatever you want to tell me whenever you want to.”

“How are you?” Eren asked suddenly. “I mean, besides acing all your exams.”

“I'm good,” Mikasa said. She smiled, and Eren realised she smiled almost as rarely as Levi did and wondered why he hadn't noticed this earlier. “Right now, I'm really good. Now come on, they'll be waiting for their drinks.”

They played Cards Against Humanity and watched Die Hard and Armin seemed to get on well with everyone. Eren fell into conversation with a friend of Sasha's who was into building props for the theatre groups and he had to bite his tongue not to talk about the props they'd used for his cyberpunk film. Not that Connie noticed; he seemed happy to talk for hours.

Eventually people started going home. Eren said he'd stay over, partly because he'd realised how little he'd seen of Mikasa and partly because it was closer to town here. With a bit of luck he'd find something for Erwin within walking distance. He hadn't been game to take suggestions from his friends; they'd probably ask what Erwin was like, and Eren couldn't work out how to describe him without making it obvious that this wasn't just a gift for a colleague (who clearly didn't need anything anyway.)

When Jean and Armin left, Armin winked at him. Yeah, he'd probably done him a favour by staying over here as well. Jean hadn't exactly avoided him, but they hadn't said more than two words to each other all evening. Not that it was surprising; they saw each other every day, and Jean still spent most of his time blinking at Armin like he couldn't quite believe he existed.

Eren helped Mikasa and Sasha tidy up and stretched out on the couch. He thought about texting Erwin and simply asking what he wanted but he was willing to bet Erwin wouldn't have any ideas either; he was the sort of person who went out and got something if he wanted it. The trick was to find something he didn't know he was missing.

Eren sighed, and thought about it a while longer before giving up and going to sleep.
The next morning he was woken up by Sasha making scrambled eggs. She put in so many other ingredients, including cheese and onions and tomatoes and bacon, that the eggs barely held together. It was a slightly strange breakfast, but there was plenty of it, piled up on toast.

Sasha then bounced out to do something with her friends and Mikasa asked Eren what his plans for the day were. When he explained he was still short a present for the guest of honour that evening, Mikasa offered to help him look.

“I think if I can't find anything I'll just get him a book,” Eren said. “One of my old favourites maybe, and hope he hasn't read it before.”

“You said he was wealthy, right?” Mikasa said, winding a scarf around her shoulders as they prepared to leave.

'Well off' was how Eren had described him, but he nodded.

“Well, how about something handmade then?”

“What could I make in day?” Eren asked. “Maybe I should have made extra cookies yesterday.”

“I didn't necessarily mean you have to make something. But there are craft markets every Saturday morning. Why not try there first and get a book as a last resort?”

Eren stared at her and then grinned. “Mikasa, you're a genius!” He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and hugged her. “There's bound to be something there. I mean, uh.” He stepped back. “I just, you know, wanted to get a good present.”

Eren sighed.

But still Mikasa didn't press him on the subject, instead regarding him fondly before beckoning him after her. “Come on then,” Mikasa said. “You can buy me something nice to drink as thanks.”

It wasn't that difficult to find something to drink, and they wandered among the handmade pots and scarves and toys sipping coffee. Eren felt nostalgic; they didn't have anything quite like this in their hometown, but it did remind him a bit of the fair they'd gone to every year as kids, with the brightly-coloured stalls and profusions of expensive junk. All that was missing were the rides. He remembered racing around, full of sugar and excitement, hand in hand with Mikasa while their parents strolled after them.

“Scarf?” Mikasa suggested. “No one can have too many scarves.”

“Maybe.” They were standing in front of a stall of knitted objects and Eren stared at a hat in bright yellow and electric blue with pom poms attached. “You know I can actually picture him wearing this.”

“Seriously?” Mikasa looked at it. “I'm really having trouble getting a handle on what this guy is like.”

“It's hard to explain. Come on.”

They looked at gloves and hats (okay but kind of boring), toys for the office, (Eren could imagine Erwin hoping they'd mystify his colleagues), and things to sit on the dashboard of a car (absolutely not in a million years.)

Eventually even Mikasa started reminding him that he could always get a book, but by now Eren
was convinced there was something better out there. Mikasa was looking at some handmade picture frames when Eren saw it. He'd been paying almost zero attention to the jewellery stalls; Erwin wore a watch and cuff-links to work, but he probably had more than enough of the latter and he didn't seem the type to wear jewellery the rest of the time. It also seemed a bit early to start presenting him with rings and things.

But this.

Eren drifted closer as if hypnotised. It was a bolo tie; big and handsome and slightly too much, just like Erwin himself. It was pretty much perfect. He picked it up and weighed it in his hand, examining the metal clasps and the setting around the turquoise stone. He knew nothing about this sort of thing.

Mikasa noticed he'd found something and came over to join him.

“What do you think?” he asked her, although he'd already made up his mind.

“It's nice,” Mikasa said.

“It's all hand crafted,” the stall holder told them, having noted their interest. “All genuine too. Real leather, real turquoise, silver finish.”

Not real silver then. Eren didn't care.

“How much?”

“Forty dollars.”

Eren paid without a murmur, although he sensed it was probably overpriced, and watched as the stall holder wrapped the tie so carefully in tissue paper that Eren decided he wouldn't have to wrap it again later. He stowed it carefully right at the bottom of his bag so it wouldn't get jolted about, but it seemed fairly sturdy.

“Done,” Eren said. “Did you have anything you wanted to get today?” he asked Mikasa.

“I was going to get some new boots for winter but I figure you won't want to hang around for that.” Mikasa looked amused.

“Well you're wrong,” Eren said, taking her arm. “If getting boots is what you want to do then getting boots is what we'll do.” He walked off with her, Mikasa almost stumbling as she stared wonderingly at his face.

Then she smiled, and fell into step beside him.

“You know, Eren, I really hope I get to meet this guy someday.”

“Yeah, me too.”
Chapter Notes

Seasons Greetings! I managed to get a chapter done before Christmas for you all. Thanks for reading; you're a wonderful audience and I wish you all the best for your holidays, whatever form they may take.

Eren was not going to tie a ribbon around his dick.

However, he did shove a strip of condoms into his back pocket as he got ready for Erwin's dinner, before brushing his hair and working out what shirt to wear. He felt slightly presumptuous doing so, but one, he really wanted to go to bed with Erwin and what better time than his birthday, and two, there was a good chance Erwin himself hadn't yet got around to buying some and he didn't want a repeat of last time.

Well, a repeat of last time wouldn't be bad, but he didn't think it was unreasonable to hope for a bit more.

They were meeting up at an Italian restaurant Hange had booked for them, and Eren once again found himself drafted into giving Armin and Historia a lift to the venue. He'd offered to drive Levi there as well, but he said he usually got Mike to give him a lift.

“It's not going to be too fancy is it?” Eren asked, when Historia showed up in a glittering dress.

“It's all right, Eren,” Historia reassured him. “I just like having an excuse to dress up. Your clothes are fine.”

“We won't need a lift back, by the way, thanks,” Armin said, and when Eren met his eyes in the rear-vision mirror he winked.

The restaurant was quite crowded and when they gave Hange's name they were lead back to a small private function area.

“Given the nature of our work, and the way Hange likes to talk shop loudly when drinking, we usually try and get our own room,” Historia explained. “So we don't have to censor ourselves like we would if we were in public.”

When they arrived the room was already half-full, and Hange welcomed them warmly. Erwin was there as well and they all wished him happy birthday. The present was burning a hole in Eren's pocket, but he didn't know when the appropriate time to give it was. Erwin looked relaxed and happy, and he reserved a smile for Eren that lit his eyes up. Eren didn't get a chance to talk, however, as Mike, Levi and Nanaba showed up almost immediately afterwards and were greeted enthusiastically.

When the group arrived Mike raised his voice and told everyone Nanaba was a guy today. Nanaba was wearing a rather fetching blue dress, but no make-up and his hair was swept back again. He smiled awkwardly while the room acknowledged the information.

Eren had hoped to sit next to one of his boyfriends but he ended up with Nanaba on one side and
Armin on the other. By now he was familiar with almost all the regulars at HotFreeRange, by sight if not by name, and the atmosphere was good as drinks and bread were placed on the table. Eren realised only he and Historia were underage, but Levi indicated they were to take his wine glass away as well and ordered mineral water.

Nanaba was looking at his plate and tearing off little pieces of bread, in contrast to the bright conversation around him.

“Are you okay?” Eren asked.

“Yeah.” Nanaba smiled weakly. “I shouldn't have worn this fucking dress. I really liked it, and I was looking forward to wearing it because I haven't had a chance to wear it anywhere yet.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “I feel so stupid. I shouldn't have forced myself.”

Eren wasn't sure what to say. Armin was talking across the table and wasn't paying any attention to the conversation.

“Well, I think you look cool. It is a nice dress. And, you know, guys should be able to wear dresses without shame. I'd wear a dress!” he declared.

Eren found himself in the centre of a sudden lull in the conversation, his words loud in the crowded room.

“Well, I would,” he added.

“You'd rock it, too,” Ymir declared.

There was general amusement and Nanaba smiled and nudged him. “Thanks,” he said quietly. “I'll be okay. Once the real food arrives I won't give a fuck what I'm wearing.”

Eren felt he was under observation and when he glanced over at Levi he found himself meeting a very intense and thoughtful stare. He glanced at Erwin and realised he was keeping an eye on him too, and he smiled and raised his eyebrows in Eren's direction.

Okay, that was interesting.

Eren didn't have a chance to think it over for very long, however as the server came to take everyone's orders and the thought of food swept more abstract concerns from Eren's mind. Over steaming piles of pasta, Erwin was caught up on what he'd missed since he'd left HotFreeRange, and his camera was passed around the room so people could take photos of the event. Erwin himself got up and stood at the end of the table while everyone except Levi bent to get into shot and shout 'cheese!'

Levi didn't avoid the camera, but he didn't make any effort to get into any shots either, and he didn't smile. No one tried to make him. Second and third glasses of wine were poured, and some of the smaller members of the party gave up on trying to finish their pizzas and extra slices were passed around to those who could fit them in.

“I am serious,” Hange said loudly. “I would love to see porn in schools.”

“Oh come on,” Nanaba said, who'd relaxed over the course of the meal.

“No no, hear me out.” Hange waved their glass around. “I'm not saying show it in front of the class. I'm saying every teenager should get a password or something to short films depicting safe, consensual, real sex. Straight sex, gay sex, all genders can access it because at that age a lot of
people don’t know how they identify yet. And hell, it couldn’t hurt for some guys to see how real
lesbian sex works, right?” Hange appealed to Ymir, who raised her glass in approval.

“Totally private, totally optional. No one will ever know whether any student looked or what they
chose to look at. They’re gonna see so much shitty sex all over the internet, why not set a good
example first? You could tie it in with sex ed and all of that.”

“And the actors involved would be instantly recognisable to an entire generation,” Erwin said with
amusement.

“There are worse things to be famous for,” Hange said.

“And the studio who got the contract would make a fortune,” Mike said with a peaceful smile.

“That’s not the point,” Hange objected. “Think of how much better the world would be if we did
this. Think of how less awkward your first time would have been if you’d already seen it done.”

“Can we not?” Levi asked. “Some of us are still eating.”

“It’s not gonna happen anyway,” Historia said. “Half the schools still teach fucking abstinence.”

Hange sighed, deflating somewhat. “I know, I know. It’s a dream, all right? A dream of a better
world, with better porn. And that has always been the dream of HotFreeRange.”

“Is this a birthday party or a corporate seminar?” Mike asked, as Hange looked poised to leap into
another speech.

“Good point,” Hange said, glancing at Mike with a slightly sheepish air. “Levi, stop stealing food off
people’s plates so I can tell them we’re ready for the cake.”

“Do we have to sing?” Eren asked Armin as the plates were cleared.


The cake was brought in to a round of applause and even Levi dutifully mouthed the words to
Happy Birthday, while Erwin beamed into the camera that Hange was holding as he blew out the
candles. Eren was feeling nervous again. He realised he had to give Erwin his present in public; he’d
asked too many people what he should get him and now they were going to be wondering what he’d
settled on. And once they found out, well, now he was second-guessing himself. He’d been so
enamoured of the tie in the markets he hadn’t actually considered that it was a pretty weird present,
all things considered.

He passed slices of cake down the table, nerving himself up.

Eren watched as Erwin duly received his wine from Hange, his DVD from Levi, and a jar of stuff
from Mike and Nanaba that could have been anything. Eren’s heart was pounding as he held the tie
in his hands under the table.

Deep breath.

“Erwin.” Armin obligingly leaned back so Eren could see him. “Happy Birthday.” He handed the
wrapped object down to him.

“Thank you, Eren,” he smiled.

Levi coughed quietly and when Eren glanced at him he tilted his head and motioned with his eyes in
Erwin's direction.

Go on.

Erwin was still picking at the tissue paper it was wrapped in when Eren stood up, pushing his chair back. Erwin glanced up as Eren stepped to his side. He didn't give himself time to think, he bent down and pressed his lips to Erwin's cheek.

There was laughter and a couple of people applauded.

“Well that explains a lot,” Hange said.

Reiner sighed and finished off his drink, presumably giving up all hope.

And Erwin grabbed Eren's hand and squeezed it and the look in his eyes suggested that any further birthday honours would be superfluous. Eren stayed by his side while he unwrapped his present, and Armin and Hange moved down one place so Eren could sit next to him.

“You should have said something earlier,” Hange said, ruffling Eren's hair.

“Ha. Well.”

Erwin lifted the tie out of the remains of the wrapping paper and admired it for a few moments.

“Thank you, Eren,” he said softly. Then he set it down to button up the top of his shirt and slid it on over his head.

“Please don't wear it to work,” Eren said.

“Why ever not?” Erwin asked, adjusting it and looking pleased. “I like it a lot.” He wrapped an arm around his shoulders and pulled him in to kiss his forehead. “Looks like you've collared me,” he mumbled against his skin.

Eren inhaled sharply, glad no one else could hear what he'd said. That wasn't quite the message he'd meant to send. He thought about the condoms in his back pocket and smiled self-consciously.

The conversation picked up again, now that the presents had been given, and Eren found himself watching Levi. He looked fine, listening while Ymir explained something and scraping up the last of the cream off his plate (Eren had been surprised by the sheer amount he'd eaten; and it made him wonder if Levi had once lived for big meals like this one.) When he excused himself to go the bathroom, Eren saw his chance to talk to him and followed.

“Hey, Levi.”

“Congratulations,” Levi said.

“Yes, well.” Levi was going home alone tonight, and Eren was struck with a wave of guilt. He stepped aside so kindly and he didn't deserve to be ignored and-

“Eren. You're thinking too much again.” They were standing in the hallway leading to the bathroom, crowded against the wall so people could get past.

“Maybe you should come with us,” Eren said. “Like last time. I even brought my own condoms in case Erwin's still forgotten to get any.”

“Oh, Eren.” Even in the dim lighting Eren could see Levi's neck twitch as he swallowed a laugh.
“Okay. No. Thank you, and I'm very glad you're prepared, but no. It's his birthday for fuck's sake, and you know if we're both there we just distract each other. Besides,” he looked into Eren's eyes. “I'm looking forward to getting you on my own too. Soon.”

Eren nodded. “Thank you. Thank you putting up with this.”

“I'm not putting up-”

“Please just know how much I really appreciate you. Both of you.”

Levi patted his shoulder. “I know, okay? So take him home, and wish him a happy birthday. And please don't tell me about it.”

“Got it.”

“Good. Now unless you've got something else to talk about, I'd like to take a leak before my bladder explodes.”

“No, please. Go.”

Eren took a deep breath and went back to the party. It was splitting up into two groups; the people planning to go home, and the people planning to head out somewhere else.

“There you are,” Erwin said when Eren returned.

“Was talking to Levi,” Eren said. He smiled, “It's fine.”

“I don't really feel like going on anywhere else. Could I trouble you for a lift home?”

“You could,” Eren said.

There was no way to go home quietly with the birthday boy. Once they'd paid and left the group stood around outside in the cold, talking, Erwin carrying his presents. Eren stood a bit awkwardly to the side while Erwin was hugged and wished happy birthday. Levi didn't say much, waiting by Mike's van with his arms folded, but he was wearing a faint, affectionate smile.

When they finally got away they were waved off like they were going on honeymoon. Erwin waved back from the passenger seat and then glanced at Eren.

“I wasn't expecting that,” he said.

“What, the reaction?” Eren asked.

“No, that you'd go public.”

“Ah, well, I wasn't really planning on it, but Levi gave me the idea, and it just seemed like the right thing to do.”

Erwin kept smiling at him, and Eren found himself smiling too, even though he had to focus on the road.

“I really like the tie as well. Where did you find it?”

Eren told Erwin the story while he drove him back to his apartment block. There was a free space in the visitor's parking area, and he pulled into it and killed the engine.
“Are you coming up?” Erwin asked.

Eren wondered why he felt he even had to ask. “I'd like to.”

They rode the elevator up in silence. Erwin had his arms full of stuff so Eren couldn't really get close, as awkward as it was to just stand politely next to him. Eren held the bottle of wine while Erwin fished out his keys and let them both in. The apartment may have been tidied up a little since Eren was last there, but he wasn't entirely sure.

He shed his coat and shoes and socks near the door while Erwin went to the kitchen to put the wine away in a special cabinet and Mike's mysterious jar in a cupboard.

“Make yourself at home,” Erwin said. “Do you want anything to drink?”

Eren followed Erwin into the kitchen and when he turned around Eren reached up and grabbed the lapels of his coat. “I don't want a drink,” he said, tugging at them.

Erwin bent. Eren heard him set the DVD on the counter-top before he wrapped his arms around Eren's shoulders and pressed his mouth against Eren's own. Eren knew what he did by now, swept people off their feet in a movie-style embrace and stole their breath and he wasn't having any of it this time. He didn't really need extra height but he pushed himself up on his toes anyway and pressed his tongue into Erwin's mouth, his fingers still bunched in the fabric of his overcoat. He heard Erwin make a noise of surprise and Eren tried not to let him recover, nipping at his lips, sucking gently on his tongue.

“Ha,” Erwin breathed when Eren finally let him go.

“What do you want for Christmas?” Erwin asked.

Eren shook his head. He didn't try to take the lead back.

“It's kind of a shame. I did it for you, you know, well, thinking about you.” He dropped his hands from Erwin's coat. “I've got another present for you then.”

“We're not going to watch your porn, are we?” Erwin asked.

“No, better than that.” Eren led him into the living area, although Erwin detoured to hang up his coat.

If he could do it for the camera, he could do it for Erwin. It's what he'd wanted to do from the beginning after all, make them look at him, want him.

“Can I?” he indicated the stereo system.

“Go for it,” Erwin said, sitting on the couch. Eren hastily assembled a playlist; he really hadn't thought this through, but that was becoming a strategy that worked for him. He managed to get the slightly eccentric stereo system to work, and his toes scrunched into the soft fibres of the rug as he moved to the centre of the room. Erwin helpfully shifted the coffee table a bit further out of the way. “Hang on a sec.” He got up and turned the lights down a bit, and Eren smiled. A bit better. His heart was pounding.

He closed his eyes, listening to the music. He could do this. He did it for the cameras, he did it in club Sina, he'd done it a thousand times as a joke for his friends. He could do it for Erwin.

He danced.
He was awkward at first, and he realised he'd have to open his eyes if he wanted to keep his balance, but when he did so Erwin was staring at him, arms resting on his knees, hands dangling limply, mesmerised. Eren swung his hips and moved closer to him. The music seemed to move in time with his pulse, he absorbed it through his skin rather than his ears.

“Can I touch you?” Eren read the words off Erwin's lips rather than heard them, and he nodded. He was cautious, teasing, ghostly fingertips across Eren's hips and down his back. Eren arched into them, silently asking for more. Erwin didn't oblige, at first, until Eren stepped in between his legs and practically shoved his crotch in his face. Erwin's awestruck expression hardened into something much more devious, and he put his hands on Eren's hips and slid them up his sides as he stood up, pulling his shirt up. Eren fumbled for the top few buttons and let Erwin tug the garment off him.

“Can I dance with you?” Erwin asked into his ear. Again, Eren nodded. He was out of breath, and it wasn't just because he'd been dancing.

Maybe Erwin wasn't very good at dancing. Eren wasn't sure. But he put his hands in the right places, and his breath was warm on his bare shoulders. Eren put his back to Erwin's chest and he could feel the smooth turquoise stone pressed against the skin between his shoulder-blades.

Erwin moved back and started undoing his shirt. Eren turned to help him, lifting the tie. Erwin let him untuck it from under his collar and then shook his head when he started to take it off entirely.

“It stays,” he said, shrugging off his shirt.

Oh. He really did like it. Eren touched it as it rested on his bare chest, and then he grinned and slid up against him, seeking out the beat again. He rolled his head back as Erwin bit gently at his ears, his spit cooling on Eren's skin as he licked his way down one and then up the other, sucking on his earlobes, making him shiver.

They weren't really dancing so much as rocking against each other by this point. Eren ran his hands down Erwin's back and grabbed his arse through his clothes and Erwin angled his leg against the bulge in Eren's jeans and he finally gave up the pretence that they were dancing and kissed him again. He tangled his hands in Erwin's hair, tugging gently on it, messing it up. He stumbled against Erwin's leg and Erwin caught him but instead of righting him he pulled them both down onto the rug.

Eren panted against Erwin's mouth, wrapped his legs around his hips and they rolled around for a while. Erwin's bass was sitting on the floor under the table that held the rest of his speakers and it went right through Eren; he could feel it through the floor, in his bones.

“I've got-” Erwin slid his hand into Eren's back pocket. “Oh, you found them.” He grinned as Erwin pulled out the condoms.

Erwin shook his head and kissed Eren's nose. “You're so sweet. Hang on.”

Eren felt bereft as Erwin released him and got to his feet. He came back about thirty seconds later, having taken his shoes and socks off, a tube in one hand and undoing his belt with the other. His trousers started falling off his hips as he crossed the room, and Eren stared; he wasn't the only one who could perform, after all.

“Fuck,” Eren breathed. He remembered that look, that movement, the single hand undoing the belt from that first video all those years ago. This time the image didn't end with a replay button. Erwin slid his hand down into his open fly and squeezed gently, giving Eren a view of the boxers beneath
and the cloth pressed taut over his cock.

It had been something Eren had been waiting to see for a long, long time, and he realised he was whining, writhing against the rug as Erwin loomed over him. He rolled over, fumbling with his own trousers. He'd beg, if Erwin wanted him to.

Erwin didn't require him to beg.

When he started to kneel down Eren leaned up to kiss him, and Erwin flopped on him, pinning him underneath his body and Eren wriggled, still trying to work the last of his clothes off his legs. Erwin wasn't really helping, distracting him with toothy, sloppy kisses against his mouth, his hand in Eren's hair, and heavy heat of his cock, still clothed, against Eren's leg. His tie brushed against Eren's chest as he moved.

“Wanna roll over for me?” Erwin asked, one hand squeezing Eren's arse. Eren nodded eagerly and did as he was bid.

“I'm gonna make your rug dirty,” Eren said hoarsely, wiping precome off the end of his cock with his fingers before it dripped onto the rug.

“I'll get it cleaned,” Erwin mumbled against his shoulder. “Don't worry about it.”

Okay. It was his rug. Eren took a deep breath and braced himself.

Eren found himself moving to the music again as Erwin worked a couple of slick fingers inside him to the same rhythm. Eren didn't even know what song this was; the bass washed over him as Erwin stretched him. He felt afloat in an ocean of noise.

“That's easy,” Erwin murmured in his ear, his voice deep and his pronunciation lazy. “Were you practising?”

Eren shook his head, “Just want you.”


Eren knew how to do this. He was a professional now, after all, but he'd never taken anyone like Erwin before. Eren knew what to expect as he'd already conducted a thorough study of Erwin's gorgeous cock, and he'd imagined it would be a lot of work, and so worth it. It was both those things. His breath hitched and he gritted his teeth, his fingers flexing and tugging at the fibres of the rug, his toes clenched. He felt tears gather at the corner of his eyes.

Erwin went slow, and even so it was almost too much. Almost. Whenever his breathing grew too fast Erwin would stop and touch Eren's cock lightly like he was handling a live animal. Eren didn't have to say anything, and he wasn't sure he could anyway. He almost missed it when Erwin whispered 'well done' in his ear. He whimpered in response, a spike of heat in his chest at Erwin's words.

They stayed still for a while, Eren getting used to both the physical feeling and the concept of Erwin inside him. He'd waited so long.

Eventually Eren stopped letting the music wash over him, and started moving again, and Erwin took that as his cue to do the same. He covered Eren's body, one arm over Eren's shoulder and his uneven breathing in Eren's ear. Eren could feel the tie resting against his back, swinging slightly with every move. Eren's cheek was pressed against the rug, his nose tickled by the soft fibres and his arse in the air. He wasn't sure where he was any more, floating on a sea of music, the only constants in his
world the pulse of the beat and Erwin's cock filling him in the same rhythm, over and over. He couldn't hear if he was making any noise or not, but he thought maybe he was given the dryness of his throat.

It could have been hours. It felt like hours. It probably wasn't; no one could fuck like that for that long, even Erwin Smith, but when Eren finally came, desperately trying to catch himself in his hands and spare the rug somewhat, he was practically sobbing with relief. He felt boneless, lost, and he could feel Erwin swell and shudder inside him only with a kind of distant, tired triumph.

Eren lay under Erwin's body, his come-filled hands crushed under them both against his stomach as he concentrated on breathing. Erwin moved, easing himself away to turn off the music and it stung when he did so. The silence was deafening; Eren's ears buzzed. He wanted to sleep here, forever maybe.

Gentle hands turned him over and lifted him up, Erwin hugging him to his chest and combing his hair back, pulling Eren into his lap. Erwin's pants were still around his knees; he hadn't waited to take them off, or maybe he'd forgotten.

“Happy Birthday,” Eren said, opening his eyes and licking his dry lips.

Erwin smiled and kissed him. After they'd caught their breaths he helped Eren to his feet and herded him into the shower. Eren had to remind Erwin to take his tie off before he got it wet. The shower was big enough for them both, soaped up and sleepy. Eren leaned against the tiled wall and let Erwin rinse him off, focusing on staying awake. Afterwards they didn't bother putting on any clothes, barely taking the time to towel off and brush their teeth before tumbling into bed.

Erwin pulled Eren against him, holding him close and the last thing Eren remembered was Erwin's hand wrapping around his own before he drifted off.
Chapter 29

It was the second time Eren had woken up in Erwin's bed, but this time he was not alone. When Eren rolled over Erwin was still there. He hadn't even managed to sleep in late, Eren realised, when he sat up slightly to peer at the clock on the bedside table. Erwin had forgotten to draw the drapes and sunlight was coming in through the curtains, lighting the room and warming it, and that was probably why he'd woken up such a virtuous hour. Eren lazily kicked off one of the blankets and settled back down again. It was Sunday, and they had no place to be.

He dozed rather than slept, and he woke up a bit when Erwin stirred and rolled over to cuddle him. He was so big and warm and Eren wished he never had to get out of bed as he rubbed his cheek against Erwin's chest.

The next conscious thought he had was of Levi, sometime later. He wondered what he was doing, and realised he'd yet to see his bedroom. He didn't feel guilty, pressed to Erwin's bare chest, but he did suddenly feel sad. I miss him, Eren realised. There was nothing to be done and instead he directed his fierce affection to Erwin because he was just as important and he threw an arm over his shoulder and hugged him close. That must have woken Erwin up, finally, and Eren found himself staring sleepily into Erwin's eyes, still vague and unfocused. Erwin blinked at him, and Eren could see him wake up, and remember why he was here, and smile.

“Happy Birthday,” Eren said.

“Mm, yeah it is. Thank you,” he said. He pulled Eren closer, rubbing the top of his head with his stubbled jaw affectionately. “How are you?”

“I’m.” Eren thought about this for a few seconds. “Kind of sore, actually.” His neck ached slightly, his back and thighs were sore as well, and his backside was as tender as it was when he'd lost his virginity. Eren stretched and groaned as he took inventory; he hadn't really noticed while he'd been lying there relaxed.

“I'm so sorry,” Erwin mumbled sleepily, kissing his forehead in apology. “We should have gone slow, or let you top.”

“No, no don't you dare apologise.” Eren took Erwin's face in his hands and looked at him. “I've never felt anything like that before. It was incredible. Thank you.” Just thinking about it made his heart rate pick up and he realised they were both still naked. And that Erwin had suggested, casually as anything, that Eren might like to top. He'd assumed Erwin wouldn't particularly like-

Eren cast about for a distraction, as his cock started to respond. Down boy. “What are we doing today anyway? It's your actual birthday now.”

Erwin sighed, “Well, eventually I suppose we're going to get up and have some breakfast. And then I'm going to the house to have a birthday lunch with my mother.”

“Oh.” That didn't sound like all that much fun.

“Mm. Yesterday was the one that counted.”

“What's your Mom like?” Eren asked after a while.

“I don't know, honestly. Like, it was hard to tell what was her and what was Grandfather speaking through her. She did what she had to to appease him. She always accepted the consequences of her
decisions, both when she defied him and when she came back to him after my father's death. But it was hard to know what she really thought.”

“I see.”

Erwin rolled onto his back and Eren flopped on his chest, looking at him. Erwin stroked Eren's head, like he was a cat.

“This will be the first birthday without my grandfather.” Erwin sounded like he'd only just realised it. “Maybe I can start finding out what she really thinks.”

“I hope it goes well then,” Eren said.

“It doesn't matter.” Erwin wrapped his arms around Eren and hauled him up until they were nose to nose. “This birthday's already been wonderful.”

Eren smiled, embarrassed and with nowhere to hide while Erwin regarded him affectionately. Eren wanted him to stop looking and he kissed him, kissing his nose and smiling lips until his eyes fluttered shut. His hands started roaming Eren's back, and Eren realised his earlier attempts to distract himself had only worked temporarily and that he was getting hard again. He'd angled his hips politely away from Erwin but he didn't think he'd fooled him at all.

Oh, what the hell.

Eren sat up abruptly and Erwin opened his eyes as Eren flung the bedclothes away from them both.

And stared.

Erwin was laid out before him like a banquet, acres of smooth, tanned skin, relaxed and pliant. His cock was resting against his hip, half-hard, and Eren automatically reached for it before stopping himself. Instead he laid his palm flat on Erwin's stomach, and slid it up his torso.

Erwin sighed, and moved his head back a little, stretching his throat. It was a nice sound. Eren wondered if he could get him to make more, and he kneeled up so he could reach him more easily, spreading his fingers over Erwin's skin, kneading his shoulders, trailing his fingers through the gold hair on his forearms.

“That's nice,” Erwin said, smiling lazily at him.

The words 'touch starved' skittered across Eren's brain.

Not while I'm around, he thought. Never while I have any say in it at all. He leaned forward and pressed his lips to Erwin's chest, before shifting around to straddle one of his muscular thighs. He picked up one of Erwin's hands and met his eyes as he pressed a kiss to each of his knuckles, and then his palm. He trailed his lips up Erwin's forearm, the hairs tickling his nose. He worked his way up his arm and across his torso, biting gently at his skin as he admired the muscles beneath. Touched him.

Erwin sighed, shifting underneath him. He'd close his eyes for a while and then open them. He hummed, practically purring, arching up to meet Eren's mouth, curling into his touch.

“Yes, yes, yes,” he breathed. It didn't matter whether Eren touched him hard or soft, feather-light to make him shiver, pushing his thumbs into the muscles of his shoulders to make him groan. Eren didn't know if he was serving or being served; giving pleasure or taking it, but it was a heady feeling.
He felt like he was making this body, that had loved and lain with so many others, now his. Conquering territory, learning it in ways that were impossible by sight alone. Things they didn't show on camera; the way he squirmed, digging his shoulder-blades into the bed when Eren scraped his fingernails across his ribs. The fact that touching under his upper arm made him clamp it against his side with a breathless laugh and a 'shit, no!' He's ticklish, Eren thought, and resisted the urge to torment him further.

He's thirty-nine today, Eren realised. There was grey in his stubble; only noticeable when Eren looked close. God, Eren sat back, absently rolling his hips against Erwin's leg, if thirty-nine looks like this growing older has been vastly underrated. His body looked settled into; his muscles grown in like the limbs of a tree, years of work that wouldn't quickly be undone. It was like looking at a well-constructed house; a home.

Erwin was hairier than Eren had expected too; he must have kept himself trimmed for the cameras. Eren didn't mind, carding his hands through the blonde curls at the base of his cock. What Eren was doing was closer to a massage than foreplay; he hadn't been deliberately trying to arouse Erwin, but it hadn't made a lot of difference to either of them. Eventually, Eren gave in and touched his cock as well. He was kind of impressed with himself for his performance last night, now he could see it in daylight, and despite the ache part of him wanted it back inside, making him float again, making him forget how to breathe.

It was gorgeous, he was getting lost in admiring it, squeezing the head and making it glisten when Erwin sat up and held his upper arms, pulling Eren down onto him.

"Come here."

They moved against each other, rolling around and getting their feet caught up in the sheets. Erwin kept muttering Eren's name, tangling his hands in his hair, hugging him, feeling him like he had to absorb as much of his touch as he could. Eren tried to keep up, kissing whatever he could get in reach, listening to Erwin make hungry little sounds around his name, feeling played with and needed and loved and breathless.

"You're wonderful, you're so gorgeous," Erwin murmured.

Eren laughed. "You are." He didn't know what else to say; he didn't think he could just declare things like that the way Erwin did. Like it was nothing. Like it was obvious.

They didn't ask or grant permission with words. Erwin's knuckles brushed Eren's cock and Eren's hand drifted from Erwin's hip and then they were stroking each other, lying on their sides. Eren bit his lip.

"Hey, Eren." Erwin sounded so torn, so good like that. "Open your eyes."

Eren looked at him, taking in his expression as he gazed back into Eren's eyes.

"I didn't get to see last night," Erwin continued, his hand moving up and back, insistent and wonderful. "I didn't get to see you come. I want to see."

"Ngh." Eren still didn't know how he could say that with a straight face and he looked away; it was just too intense staring at him like that. Away ended up being down and he stared mesmerised, watching them play with each other.

"Eren. Pretty close."

That had his head snapping back up to watch, his hand moving a bit faster, as Erwin panted.
Embarrassed or not, Eren couldn't look away now, they gazed at each other, jaws dropped, breathing erratic. Eren couldn't help it, Erwin was too good, too sure, and he squeezed his eyes shut and whimpered but didn't turn his head away as he jolted and twitched and came in Erwin's hand.

“Oh God,” Erwin breathed, and Eren opened his eyes as he felt him swell in his hand, and Eren experience the rush of seeing Erwin come in real life and to focus on nothing else, being the one to make him gasp and groan and lose all co-ordination in his hips.

They sagged and sighed and relaxed back into the bed.

“We should get up,” Erwin said a little while later. They were too messy to hold each other so they lay shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip. “It's getting late.”

“I'm am kind of hungry,” Eren said. “Would you like me to cook you breakfast? It is your birthday, after all.”

“What can you cook?”

“Um. I can fry eggs.”

Erwin chuckled. “I'll cook. I like cooking for people I care about, that's why I do it. Do you want eggs? I could make you a French omelette.”

“Yeah?” Eren sat up, suddenly very keen to experience this breakfast.

Erwin smiled at him. “Then it's decided.”

They rolled out of bed and after some 'after you', 'no, after you' at the bathroom door they ended up in the shower together again.

“I should have brought spare clothes,” Eren said afterwards, as he went to collect yesterday's from the living room.

“You're welcome to leave some here in future,” Erwin said. “I'll make some space.”

Eren smiled to himself. Maybe. That sounded like it might be good.

It was like a switch had been flipped overnight. Up until now Erwin had been mostly polite and reserved, but now he seemed to feel comfortable touching Eren whenever he liked. Which was a lot. When they were stepping out of the shower he wrapped Eren in a towel and hugged him before letting him dry off, and his hand brushed the back of his neck when they separated to get dressed.

Sometime after Eren had pulled on yesterday's clothes in the living room, and opened the curtains to let in the sun, Erwin reappeared fully dressed, neat and conservative in slacks and a shirt, presumably for the benefit of his mother. He was also wearing his birthday present, and Eren smiled to see it and wondered if he was going to wear it everywhere now. He wouldn't mind so much if he did. Collared, he'd said. The word seemed a bit more suitable today.

“If you're going to be my boyfriend,” Erwin said, beckoning Eren over. “You should learn to use the coffee machine.”

“So I can bring you coffee in bed?” Eren asked as he found himself caged by Erwin's arms in front of the machine, Erwin's chin resting on his shoulder.

“Hmm, maybe. Okay, first check there's enough water in the reservoir.”
By the end of the lesson Eren was quite sure he'd need another lesson before he'd grasped it, partly because it was hard to concentrate with Erwin guiding his hands all the time, and his voice in his ear and partly because it was a pretty complicated machine in the first place. Nevertheless, coffee was the end result and Eren offered to set the table while Erwin cooked.

Eren sat at the table nursing his mug and watching Erwin throw things into the frying pan. Every Sunday morning should be like this one, he thought. No, every second Sunday, he amended, as he wondered what Levi looked like when he woke up. What kind of expression he'd make to see him lying beside him. Then he remembered the last time he'd had breakfast here with both of them and changed his fantasy to every third Sunday.

Eren sighed, a bit wistfully.

“December twenty-fifth,” Erwin said suddenly. Eren looked up and realised Erwin was looking at him over his shoulder.

“Christmas?”

“That too, but it's also Levi's birthday.” He went back to cooking.

“Seriously? His birthday is Christmas? No wonder he doesn't celebrate it. That would suck.”

“I'd ask you not to tell him where you got this information, should you choose to use it, but I expect he'll figure it out on his own.”

“Why did you tell me?”

“Because he deserves to have someone like you who knows, and he's too stubborn to tell you himself.” Erwin slid the omelette onto a plate and brought it over. “Even a grumpy idiot like him deserves a birthday like this one,” he said, bending down and pressing his lips to Eren's mouth.

“Honestly,” Eren mumbled, shooing him away. “Let me eat. You need to make yourself something too.”

“I know I know.” Erwin still insisted on watching Eren try his breakfast and get a thumbs up before he went to make some for himself.

Eren wasn't sure what to do about Levi's birthday. The fact that it fell on the holidays didn't help; he was pretty sure he'd be going home for Christmas anyway, and wouldn't be there. At least he had a bit of time to think about it. If finding Erwin a present was difficult, Levi was going to be nearly impossible, he thought.

“I'm probably going to go home for Christmas,” Eren mused.

“Of course you are,” Erwin said. “You're a college student. We're not going to expect any different. I'll be obliged to go back to the house myself.” He smiled. “We'll have Christmas another time. Before you leave or after you get back.”

“We?” Eren asked.

“All three, I hope. It seems inappropriate to exclude someone. It's a little strange; I can't forget that you're his boyfriend as well. I feel a bit guilty, I must admit, having you here like this. I could see you thinking about him earlier.”

“You're really good to me,” was all Eren could say.
Erwin just smiled and brought his breakfast over.

Erwin said his lunch wasn't for a little while, but Eren felt obliged to hurry anyway; it was nearly eleven by the time they stacked the dishes in the dishwasher.

“You have to go,” Eren said. They were standing in the kitchen and Erwin was hugging him again. Eren got the feeling he'd be happy to do that all day, given the chance.

“I know.” He nuzzled Eren's neck and reluctantly released him. Eren realised his phone was still attached to Erwin's sound system and rather self-consciously retrieved it. He wasn't sure what exactly had come over him that he gave Erwin a show like that.

He didn't regret it though.

When he checked his phone he saw several texts from his friends asking what his plans were for the next few days and a congratulations from Hange that he didn't know to reply to. Erwin bid him a long and affectionate farewell at the door, and he headed home, feeling stiff and sore and pretty happy.

When he opened his front door he almost hit Armin in the forehead with it.

“Oops. Sorry. Hey Armin, are you heading out?”

“Hi Eren,” Armin said, scowling as he wrapped his scarf around his neck. It was an expression the likes of which Eren had never seen on Armin's face before. “Bye Eren.” He stepped around him and walked out, closing the door behind him.

“What was that about?”

Jean was sitting on the couch, arms folded, frowning at the television. Eren hesitated. The atmosphere was horrible, and clearly he'd walked into the tail end of a fight, if not a break up. He was tempted to chase Armin down, but he looked like he was going pretty fast and the thought of jogging after him didn't fill Eren with enthusiasm, given his hips were still sore.

Which left him with Jean.

Eren sighed and took off his coat. Missy came over to greet him, demanding to be fed. Eren went into the kitchen and gave her some breakfast, but he knew he couldn't really ignore Jean.

“What have you done now?” Eren asked, only realising when Jean trained a murderous expression on him that he probably could have phrased that a bit more tactfully.

“What fucking business is it of yours?” he asked.

“Well, Armin is my friend and I need to know if I'm going to be seeing you guys separately from now on.” Eren sighed. “Dude, come on, what happened in a single night? I mean, everything was fine at Mikasa's right?”

“I'm surprised you noticed, what with all your fucking around,” Jean said sullenly.

“Fucking around?” Eren asked. “What fucking around?”

“That's all you do, nowadays. I don't know what happened to you. How many guys have fucked you in like, the last month?”

“What's that got to do with fucking around? I'm not fucking around. I have a job, Jean. And I have
two boyfriends. The last thing I'm doing is fucking around. In fact, the closest thing I've ever done to 'fucking around' is fucking you. What the hell is your problem all of a sudden? Why are you mad at me anyway and what's that got to do with Armin?"

“Yeah, okay, you've got your excuses.”

They glared at each other. Eren was resentful for Jean trying to ruin his marvellous mood and for blaming him somehow for the whole thing. He wasn't even going to touch the 'fucking around' business. Eren spread his hands. “What?”

“It is none of your business.” Jean stood up. “You'd just take his side anyway.”

“I don't want to take sides,” Eren said, but Jean wasn't listening. He stalked off and grabbed his coat before leaving, slamming the front door behind him.

Eren made a noise of frustration and scrubbed his hands in his hair. It probably wasn't any of his business, but both Jean and Armin were his friends, and even if they didn't work out as boyfriends, he'd never imagined them starting a feud over it. Well, he could see Jean doing that but Armin didn't seem the type.

Eren lasted half an hour before his nerve cracked and he called Armin, still uncertain if he was doing the right thing. Erwin would probably know what to do, but he wasn't going to disturb Erwin's birthday lunch with his mother, even assuming he hadn't turned off his phone.

“Hey,” Eren said, when Armin picked up.

“Hey.”

“Um. Are you okay? I asked Jean what happened but he just got in a snit and stormed out.” He wasn't going to tell Armin what he'd said; he didn't want him to feel worse on Eren's behalf, even though Eren had been a bit hurt by Jean's words.

“Yes,” Armin said in a clipped manner that suggested this was an effort of will. “I'm fine. You were right, by the way. He is a dick.”

“I'm sorry.”

“It's not your fault. Better we had this discussion now, rather than later.”

“What happened?” Eren asked. “If you want to talk about it, that is.”

“He suggested I stop making porn,” Armin said.

Just great.

“But it's paying for your college.”

“That's not even the point. It doesn't matter what it's paying for.” Armin was speaking faster now, getting worked up. “It is no one's call but my own whether or not I make porn. And he just didn't seem to get that; he seemed to think- I don't even know, Eren. Like it was some sort of slight against him or something.”

“He's probably just insecure.”

“No shit. Anyway, I don't have time for people like that.” He heard a soft thunk like Armin was resting his head against something. “This always happens. Why does this always happen? Is it me?
Am I gonna be like fucking single until I graduate? What if I want to do a postgraduate degree? You know, I've got the marks for it and I was really thinking I might and it would be okay, but I'll need to keep making porn. I may have to anyway. You know how many jobs there are for archaeology majors? Not a lot.”

“I'm sorry.”

“You don't get to talk. You've got two boyfriends.” Armin sighed. “Sorry, I didn't mean to snap at you.”

“It's okay. You're upset.”

“I wish I wasn't. I hate being upset.”

“Maybe Jean will get over himself.”

“Maybe. I don't put up with crap like that.”

“You shouldn't have to. Do you want to do something? We could go and see a movie.”

“No, it's fine. I think I'll do some reading.”

“What, study?”

“No, like a book. They're like old friends, you know?”

“Yeah, I do. Well, we should do something this break. Let me know, okay?”

“Sure, Eren. Thanks for calling. Thanks for caring.”

Eren hung up and slumped in his chair. But he couldn't think about Armin for too long, and as soon as his mind started to wander he found himself smiling. He couldn't help it, as he remembered Erwin's hands and mouth and cock. He felt bad for Jean and Armin, but at his core there was a sense of pure joy and it wouldn't be so easily dislodged.
“At first he was angry, which isn’t really anything new for him so I could just ignore it but now he’s miserable,” Eren said. “He mopes about and plays the sort of music I gave up listening to when I was fourteen. It’s kind of embarrassing. He’s even started petting Missy.”

“Sounds tedious,” Levi said.

They were at the gym again. Eren hadn’t really felt motivated to work out on his break, and he had no intention of doing a particularly strenuous work-out. He’d do a few laps and admire Levi, the real reason he was even here on such a cold and blustery day. He’d been looking forward to seeing him, but at the same time he was glad to have had a couple days to recover from Erwin first. He’d been spending his break so far with Mikasa and Armin for the most part, as he hadn’t seen much of the former while classes were on. Armin hadn’t said much, other than he wanted to be distracted.

It was also an excuse to get away from Jean, who was in full pining mode and determined, apparently, to ruin his own Fall break, which was fine by Eren as long as he wasn’t dragged down with him.

Levi was already there when Eren had arrived, and Eren had changed quickly to join him in warming up.

“I guess Armin hasn’t contacted him, and I know he hasn’t tried to talk to Armin. I wish he would; I mean if he’d just apologise it would probably be okay, right? Jean’s not really good at apologising though.”

“Mm.”

“What should I do?” Eren asked.

Levi sighed, and gave him an exasperated look as he bent his other arm over his head. “Nothing. You do nothing. It’s not your business.”

“But he’s miserable.”

“Yeah, that’s what relationships do to people; they make them miserable.”

Eren stared at him. “Are you miserable?”

“No. I didn’t mean that. This is different, somehow.” He frowned and ruffled his hair and Eren thought it was endearing watching him recalibrate his opinions. “Look, if you want to cheer him up, take him out somewhere and go see a movie or something. Let him whine for an evening then tell him to shut the hell up and get over it.”

“Is that what you did to Erwin?”

“For Erwin, not to Erwin. There’s an important difference. Look, don’t stick your oar in. I think people should sort their own shit out and if they can’t then that’s their problem. Anything you do now would probably just make things worse.”

“I don’t know what I expected, really,” Eren said to himself. Of course Levi wouldn’t interfere. “They both seem really sad though.”
“Just because two people are miserable because they're apart doesn't mean they're going to be any less miserable together.” Levi stepped closer and touched his arm. “This stuff, people either work or they don't. If your friend can’t get over Armin's job then they're not going to work, no matter how cute they look together. And it's sweet of you to worry, just like it's sweet of Erwin to worry about this stupid shit, but you're wasting your time. Look after your own stupid shit, and you know, be around for your friends. That's all anyone could or should do.”

Eren smiled, “You're sweet too.”

Levi looked away. “Well, anyway. We should get to work.”

They hadn't discussed what they were going to do afterwards, but Eren had cleared the rest of his afternoon and evening, and when he walked towards the pool area he could feel Levi's gaze on the back of his thighs and arse. When he glanced over his shoulder he caught Levi looking away from him and he smiled to himself.

Eren was halfway through his usual number of laps when a familiar form surged past him in his own lane, trailing bubbles. There was no mistaking Levi, and Eren got over his momentary surprise and sped up from his relaxed crawl into something a bit more competitive. Levi still touched the end of the pool first, and was waiting for him when he finished his lap.

“Hey,” he said.

“You can't possibly have finished your work out already,” Eren said, glancing at the clock beside the pool.

“Decided to switch it up a bit and swim today. Couldn't seem to stay out of the water, for some reason.” He gave Eren one of those looks and Eren suddenly wished he'd worn board shorts, even if they slowed him down, rather than the swim briefs he usually trained in.

He kept his eyes up and on Levi's face. He watched a bead of water run down his cheek and decided to look at the swimmers in the other lanes instead.

“Want to race?” Levi asked.

“Um, okay?” Levi had never shown a real interest in racing after that first day, although he never backed down when Eren challenged him. Eren was getting the feeling that Levi had some sort of plan for today. “Are we racing for drinks again?”

“How about the winner gets his cock sucked,” Levi suggested. “By the loser.”

Okay, Eren was pretty sure Levi was using lines from his own films at this point, and that was both kind of irritating and sort of adorable and Eren was starting to wonder if he was going to have drag issues when they actually started racing, because his cock really liked the idea of getting sucked by Levi.

“Right,” Eren said. Time to get his own back. “I'm not going to go easy on you just because I'd dearly love to give you a blowjob.”

“Good.” He was smiling. Fuck. He shouldn't be allowed to smile, and when had he gone back to staring at him anyway?

Eren forced himself to look down the lane. He knew he could beat Levi every time under normal circumstances. Levi's body just wasn't built for swimming and if he lost now, Levi would know why.
He took a few deep breaths and kicked his feet, trying to get the blood moving to more useful areas of his body.

“Ready when you are,” Levi said.

Eren nodded. He was as ready as he was going to get.

Their race was like all their others, in that Eren surged ahead early despite a certain lack of coordination which was unusual for him. His heart was racing, and he had to force his breathing back into its usual pattern. He could hear Levi carving through the water behind him, and he had to work to stay ahead. He was not going to lose because he couldn't get his dick under control. Was. Not.

Didn't.

Eren's fingers touched the end of the pool and he slowed into the wall as Levi caught up with him a second or two later. It was the closest race they'd ever run. They panted at each other, Eren feeling somewhat relieved.

“Congratulations,” Levi said.

“Yeah, thanks.” Levi was drifting sort of close and Eren glanced around the pool. No one was paying them any attention; the other swimmers had their heads down as they crawled up and down the pool, and there weren't many people just wandering about. As usual they'd chosen a fairly quiet time to attend the gym. Eren's heart didn't slow down one bit, though; this was way too public.

“I think I owe you a prize,” Levi said.


“Oh,” Eren relaxed.

“I meant the cubicles in the changing rooms.”

“That's, that's kind of-” Eren didn't know where to put his hands or his feet, or his anything.

“I was going to wait until we went home for all of this,” Levi said. “I mean, I was going to work out. I like working out; I just couldn't really concentrate.” The words were coming out one at a time, like they were difficult. “Fuck, I don't even know why I'm like this. I know how to seduce people; fuck me. And I don't have to seduce you, I mean we're, you know, already seduced, as it were. Shit. Fuck.”

He sucked in a breath and ducked under the water and Eren's first thought was to cover his crotch but instead he took a breath and joined him.

His hair floated around his face and his eyes were shut until Eren poked his shoulder. Bubbles escaped from his nose.

Levi the seducer made his heart race and his cock hard. Levi the awkward and inexperienced boyfriend made his whole chest throb with affection. The combination was pretty dangerous, Eren thought.

Hidden beneath the surface from prying eyes, Eren gripped Levi's shoulders and floated forward to
kiss him, and Levi didn't pull away. Eren pressed his tongue against Levi's lips, tasting chlorine, and he felt bubbles brushing against his cheeks as Levi opened his mouth to kiss him back.

Natural buoyancy pulled Eren back upwards and he broke the kiss before his head breached the surface. He'd noticed that Levi didn't float easily; he was almost pure muscle and simply sank without effort when he emptied his lungs.

Levi lifted his head from the water with a gasp a moment later and they looked at each other.

“Let's get out of here,” Levi said.

Eren nodded and watched as Levi levered himself out of the water with an enviable lack of effort. His board shorts clung to his arse and he had to ask Eren if he was coming before he could tear his eyes away and get himself out of the water as well.

Eren made a beeline for his towel and dried himself off as best he could without lifting it higher than his waist, for modesty's sake. His hair would just have to dry by itself. He wrapped his towel around his hips and headed for the changing rooms, Levi at his heels.

There was no one in there and Eren glanced at Levi and wondered if he should just go and have a shower. He could you know, just wait until they went home. That sounded good. It was still way too public and it was probably a joke anyway.

“Get in there,” Levi said, and gave Eren a gentle push for emphasis.

Eren was a bundle of nerves as he edged into a cubicle, Levi stepping in behind him with that intense, confident expression on his face. Maybe he didn't know much about being a boyfriend, but Eren was pretty sure Levi had forgotten more than most people ever learned about giving head. But if someone saw-

Levi closed and locked the door and gently pushed Eren against it before undoing Eren's towel and draping it around his shoulders. “Dunno how clean the floor is,” he said. He leaned up and kissed Eren's mouth. Eren was waiting for him with parted lips but he only kissed him for a moment before stepping back and running his hands down Eren's damp chest.

“Fuck yes,” he murmured. “I'm going to enjoy this. And so are you.”

Eren was already enjoying it. His swimming briefs were straining around his cock and he braced himself against the door as Levi took his time getting down on his knees. Levi met his eyes as he turned his head and pressed his teeth gently into Eren's upper thighs, first one, then the other.

“Eren?”

“Mm?” Eren was keeping one hand over his mouth, at this point just as reminder to keep quiet.

“Can I mark you?” Eren felt his lips move against his skin and the heat of his breath as he spoke.

“What about Hange?” Eren breathed, caught utterly off-guard by the question. He hadn't expected Levi to want that sort of thing but the look in his eyes, and the way he mouthed hungrily at Eren's skin made his knees feel weak.

“They can cover it with make-up,” Levi said. He smiled. “It's okay. Another time maybe.” He pressed a chaste kiss to Eren's leg.

Eren was about to protest and tell him it was fine when Levi hooked his fingers over the top of his
briefs and pulled them down. As soon as his cock was in the open air his hips jerked forward involuntarily and the door rattled slightly against its hinges.

“Oh yeah, good boy.” Levi massaged the hollows above Eren's hipbones with his thumbs as he regarded Eren's body with gleaming eyes, and a hungry smile. Even Erwin didn't look at him quite like that, like he was starving.

Eren wondered if it was possible to come just from someone staring at you and breathing on your dick. He pressed his knuckle to his teeth as he stared at Levi's expression. Pleasepleaseplease he thought, but wasn't game to speak; he wanted to see what Levi would do without prompting.

He didn't have to wait all that long. The heat of Levi's breath washed over him as he sighed and then Levi released one of his hips to pull his cock down to his mouth. He didn't tease. He slid the head of Eren's cock past his lips and leaned forward, drooping his jaw. He put his hand back on Eren's hip as he took his entire cock down the back of his throat, without hesitation. His nose brushed Eren's pubic hair when he finally stopped moving.

“Holy shit,” Eren managed to get out. He bit down on his knuckle hard enough to hurt. Levi stayed like that for a few moments and Eren squirmed against his grip as he felt him swallow around him, his tongue moving against the underside of his cock. Then he pulled back, lifting his head away from Eren again. A strand of precome or saliva—probably both—connected his lip to Eren's foreskin and Levi licked it off, casually, like he wasn't a clean freak, or like Eren wasn't the least bit dirty.

“Are you okay?” Eren whispered.

“Been a while since I did that,” Levi said. He sounded hoarse. “I couldn't resist.” Before Eren could reply he'd opened his mouth again, and Eren could only sigh as he put it to use.

He didn't deep throat him again, instead sucking and licking with no rhythm, teasing and making Eren whimper behind his hand. Had to be quiet. What if someone came in? Maybe someone already had. Eren didn't think he would have noticed if that was the case. He tried to brace himself against the door and not move his hips because it wasn't well-made and rattled when he jerked too hard. Levi didn't help, just drew those lazy circles with his thumbs and let Eren try and keep some self control.

When he held his breath he could hear Levi, the soft wet sound of his lips against his skin. Eren was panting now, bent nearly double over Levi's head, one hand braced on the side wall the other crushed against his mouth as he tried to breathe through his nose. His legs were rubbery. His cock ached; he wanted rhythm, he wanted release.

Levi pulled on his foreskin with his lips and released it with a smacking sound.

“Okay,” he said. And then he took Eren entirely in his mouth again, and Eren tasted blood in his efforts to keep himself quiet because Levi was moving, back and forth, his tongue and lips dragging over Eren's slick skin, his mouth constricting around him as he sucked and swallowed. Eren couldn't do anything, he could only breathe, and try not to fall over, and come.

He came and came, great breaths wrenched from his lungs whistling around his bared teeth. He released himself into Levi's mouth, down the back of his throat, and Levi sucked him dry, swallowing everything. He kept his lips clamped around Eren's cock until Eren patted his head, desperate and overstimulated.

“Ah!” Levi pulled back, his breathing ragged. Eren wanted to sit down, but he kept himself upright, sort of, as he gazed down at Levi. Levi coughed and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, his
eyes slightly watery.

Eren couldn't speak for a little while, and he stroked Levi's head instead, his hair still matted and damp from the pool. Levi caught his hand and squeezed it.

“That's a nice expression,” he said as he gazed up at Eren's face.

The front of his board shorts was tented and Eren nudged the bulge with his bare foot.

“Should I return the favour?” he asked, feeling a bit shy about it. He was pretty sure he wouldn't be able to swallow Levi like that.

Levi shook his head. “Later.” He got to his feet, wincing as he straightened out his knees.

Eren pulled his briefs up and retrieved his towel from around Levi's shoulders. Levi had been so thorough, so assured, but now he was looking away, frowning slightly and probably trying to will down his erection.

“Do you want this?” Eren offered him his towel and Levi shook his head with a funny little smile. He was reaching to unlock the door when Eren leaned over and kissed him, just lightly. Levi recoiled slightly, like he didn't expect it. “Thank you.”

“Right. You're welcome.”

By this point Eren was more than ready to get out of this cubicle before they were caught in here together and didn't stop Levi from opening the door. Levi just strolled out, like there was nothing strange going on but Eren peered around the room before he emerged properly and made a beeline for the shower.

“You can do that at home,” Levi said. “If you want.”

“Oh. Sure.”

He went to get dressed. It was a complicated thing, he thought as he pulled on his hoodie. His body was buzzing with dopamine and other happy chemicals, still riding the high of his orgasm, and at the same time he felt nervous and uncertain as well. It was probably Levi’s doing; Levi himself had these moments of insecurity and whenever Eren saw them he was never sure if he should step in and reassure him or back off and let him find his own path.

He sighed, that was probably what a relationship was all about and in this case he and Levi were almost equally uncertain.

Still, when he rejoined Levi at the entrance, he couldn't help but smile to see him. It was cold enough that he wore a second coat over his sweatshirt now, and he'd covered his damp hair with a beanie. A plain dark beanie shouldn't have looked so adorable on anyone, Eren thought, smiling wider when Levi noticed him approach. I'm going home with this person, he thought, feeling unreasonably lucky.

They were leaving earlier than usual, as their workout had been cut short, and there was still some light in the sky when they left the gym. They walked swiftly to Eren's car, not saying much.

“How's Missy?” Levi asked, when they were settled inside.

“Oh, she's well.” Eren smiled to himself. “I wasn't joking, you know; you're welcome to come and play with her.”
“After your description of your housemate I'd really rather not.” Still, when Eren glanced at him he actually looked a bit tempted.

When Eren drove up Levi's driveway he realised he'd missed the place, despite its bleak first impressions, and he was glad to be back here again. He knew what it was like inside now. Levi got out and opened the garage for him, and had the front door open by the time Eren had walked up the stairs.

He shut the front door and put his bag on the couch, unsurprised to see Levi filling an electric kettle in the kitchen. Levi's apartment was still as spotlessly clean as always, but it struck Eren for the first time that it didn't smell of cleaning products or fake perfumes; it was a different sort of clean. Worn, rather than chemically sterile. He suspected Levi used bicarbonate and sugar soap and elbow grease more than anything else.

“I um, I brought some clothes with me,” Eren said. Levi looked at him sharply. “So if you want me to stay over, I have clothes,” he explained. “I'm not moving in.”

“Oh. Yeah. That's good.” He nodded. “Or you could borrow mine, I don't mind.”

“Yeah. That too. Thanks.” They stood in awkward silence for a while. Eventually Eren couldn't take it and buried his face in his hands and looked at Levi through his fingers. “Why is this so difficult? Why am I so nervous?”

“Well, you know-”

“No! No you're going to say something down about yourself, I can see it.” He crossed the room and stood in front of him, Levi still holding the kettle in his hands. “It's not you. Well, it is you, and me, and it's not bad. I actually think it's kind of cute sometimes the way you get all flustered about stuff. It makes me really happy that I can do this to you.”

Levi raised his eyebrows.

“And your blowjobs are spectacular?” Eren ventured, since Levi didn't look very convinced.

Levi frowned slightly, his forehead wrinkling. “You don't have to try so hard, really. You're fine, everything you do is fine.” He sighed and put the kettle on the counter and plugged it in without turning it on before facing Eren again. “I know my blowjobs are spectacular,” he said. Very deliberately, he cupped Eren's face in both hands and pulled him closer. “But has anyone ever told you.” Eren's eyes were closing as he felt Levi's lips brush his own. “That your cock is magnificent?”

No one had, in fact, shared this information before and Eren barely had time to register this compliment, which was accompanied by a surge of blood across his cheeks when Levi kissed him. A small squeaky sound made it out of his mouth before Levi attacked it, and it was all Eren could do to keep up as his tongue traced his teeth and Eren realised that the roof of his mouth was ticklish, at least when Levi was the one tickling it.

Levi eventually wrenched them apart with deep reluctance. In fact, he looked like he was exercising considerable self control not throwing Eren over his shoulder and carrying him off to bed.

“Okay,” he said. “Feeling better?”

“Uhuh.”

“Good. Go and have a shower. You're sticky and smell like chlorine. And hurry up, because I'm just as bad.”
“And then what are we going to do?” Eren asked, with a cheeky smile.

Levi took a deep breath and ran his hands through his hair. “We're going to have a nice cup of tea.”
Levi turned off the shower and stood in the steam for a few moments, letting the water trickle down his back and drip off his fingers and hair and cock for a while before getting out of the shower. Eren hadn't been so fastidious, and Levi stepped into the faint, damp footprints he'd left on the bathroom mat and noted the drops of water on the floor around it.

He was feeling slightly nervous. He didn't have performance anxiety as such; he had no doubts as to his ability to perform, it was more a question of whether or not Eren would like it, would like him. He hadn't intended to suck him off like that either, but after he'd watched Eren stroll off towards the pool he'd been unable to think of anything else. That the young man was his and why wasn't he doing anything about it. He should have just invited him home from the start, rather than going through the pretence of working out together.

Well, it didn't matter. They hadn't been caught, although in hindsight they'd gotten lucky on that point. He towelled himself off and got dressed although his cock was not very comfortable in his pants. He'd been aroused to a greater or lesser extent all afternoon, and he wondered if there was even any point in putting on clothes.

No, he'd already put the tea on to steep, more out of force of habit than anything else, but now he intended to drink it. He could have some further fun in the meantime making Eren squirm in his chair because he knew Eren liked his voice very much at least.

That had been his intention anyway.

Levi liked tea, but didn't care much for fancy tea sets. His teacups were a plain, elegant white without any decoration, and easy to replace should one be broken. His teapot was a simple design and made of glass so he could ensure it was clean on the inside rather than for any aesthetic reason. Nevertheless, he liked the look of it, and sometimes he just sat and watched the tea colour the water and the tea leaves gently move in the convection currents in the glass infuser.

Which is what Eren was doing when Levi returned from his shower. He was leaning forwards, his chin in his hands and his elbows on the bench, watching the process patiently.

It stopped Levi in his tracks. Eren hadn't heard him come in, and he remained oblivious. Oblivious to the way his shirt hung off him, showing a strip of skin on his back, and providing an inviting warm space to slide a hand up his stomach and chest, but these were secondary considerations; Levi was staring at his arse.

He'd considered it before, held it in his hands in Erwin's bedroom and fucked himself against it a few minutes later. It was perfect, and now Eren was bent over, practically begging for it to be touched. Levi's bare feet made no sound on the tiles in his kitchen.

"Are you doing that deliberately?" Levi asked, palming one of Eren's denim-clad buttocks.

Eren yelped and jumped in surprise at Levi's sudden proximity.

"What?" he looked over his shoulder at him. His look of surprise melted into that utterly disarming grin and he relaxed again. "No, but I wish I'd thought of it now."

"Tch." Levi stepped up against him and Eren stood and turned around to wind his arms around his neck while Levi continued to rest his hands on Eren's backside. "You don't need to do things like that. All you need to do is exist."
Levi hadn't quite meant for his words to sound the way they did. Eren's eyes opened wide and he breathed a soft, happy 'oh' before he tightened his grip on Levi's shoulders and crushed his mouth to his lips. He gave Levi hungry, delighted kisses and he smelled like Levi's own soap now, although it seemed to Levi to have a different scent on Eren's skin. It was just plain old ordinary soap but somehow it was sweeter and cleaner and Levi kissed him back, breathing harshly through his nose.

“What about-” Eren managed to form words around Levi's tongue, somehow, and didn't bite him in the process. “The tea?”

Levi slid his hands down to cup Eren's arse properly and gave him a firm squeeze.

“Fuck the fucking tea,” he growled.

Eren laughed, and Levi felt his body tense, giving him a split second warning to prepare himself as Eren braced himself on his shoulders and leaped into his arms, wrapping his legs around Levi's hips. Levi caught him, still gripping his arse and taking his weight without too much effort.

Eren clung to him and arched his back, grinding his crotch against him. The little brat was hard again already. Levi had been tossing up whether or not to give him more of a break, but clearly it had been too long since he was nineteen himself, and he'd forgotten what kind of recovery time he'd had back then.

Levi took a step back, turned around, and laid Eren back on the kitchen table. Eren went with it, keeping his grip on Levi's hips with his thighs.

“Wha? Ahah. I thought there was a rule against hand-jobs under the table,” Eren said as Levi popped the button on his jeans.

“Notice, Eren, that we are not under the table.” He raised an eyebrow, “And if you think all this is leading to some hand jobs, I've got a surprise for you.”

“Is the surprise in your pants?” Eren asked.

“Eren.” Levi gave up on Eren's jeans since he wouldn't move his legs, and slid his hands up his shirt instead. “Shut the fuck up.”

Eren didn't take it personally, sitting up to let Levi take off his shirt and tugging at Levi's in turn. Levi wondered why he even bothered putting it on in the first place and let Eren peel it off him. He tossed the shirts over the back of one of the kitchen chairs turned his attention back to Eren.

He explored with hands and tongue and teeth while Eren shifted and squirmed against him. His nipples weren't particularly sensitive, Levi learned. Eren didn't seem to mind him playing with them but he didn't sigh the way he did when Levi pressed the hollows above his hips. He trailed his lips along Eren's collarbone and Eren hummed and when Levi bit gently at his neck he gasped and dug his fingers into Levi's back.

“You like that?”

“Mmmyeah.” He sounded delicious, breathy and rough at the same time.

Pleased, Levi continued, taking his time, touching Eren's neck lightly with his fingers. He could feel Eren fidgeting and heard him take a breathe a couple times as if to speak before he finally worked up the nerve to get some words out.

“Ah, Levi?”
“Hm?”

“About what you said earlier.”

Levi pulled back, trying to work out what particular 'earlier' Eren was referring to. He looked a bit uncertain and Levi was bracing himself for a request to back off.

“Yes Eren?”

“I've decided.” He met Levi's eyes. “You can mark me if you want. Please.”

Levi stared at him for a few moments. Eren's words had such an effect it was all he could do not to attack his neck then and there. His cock was painfully hard. “Hang on,” he said, and wrapped his arms around Eren, lifting him up off the table. Eren did as he was told and gripped Levi tightly with his arms and legs.

He was still pretty heavy, but Levi carried him out of the room, striding down the hallway to his bedroom while Eren clung to him without great difficulty.

“Man, you're so strong,” Eren said, with a delighted expression.

Not as strong as you think, Levi thought. He'd simply run out of patience. He practically tossed them both onto the bed, rolling his hips forward against Eren's crotch as he clambered over him. He bent his head to kiss Eren thoroughly, and Eren kissed him back, undulating beneath him, and tugging at his hair. He couldn't hide how much he wanted this.

Levi started on his neck, working his way down, for now leaving nothing but spit, just the threat of teeth, the slightest pain.

And Eren was panting, rubbing himself against the inside of his jeans as he moved his hips slightly, his muscles taut with anticipation.

“You're starting to like this idea,” Levi said roughly.

“Ye-”

Eren never got to finish his sentence. Levi held his hips still and placed his lips just above Eren's hipbone and sucked. Eren gasped and then groaned and Levi lifted his head and smiled at the reddened skin before kissing it gently.

“Looks good on you, Eren. More?”

“Wow, Levi.” Eren had propped himself up on his elbows to look at him. Levi gazed up at his smooth, inviting skin and dropped his head again, leaving sharp little bites across his stomach. He wasn't going to cover him in marks; he didn't want him to look like he'd lost a fight with a wasps' nest, but he was going to be thorough. He worked his way around Eren's side, encouraging him to roll over. One thing he was not going to overlook was his arse. He pulled Eren's pants off him as he turned over, and Eren kneeled up to help him strip him.

“Fuck you've got a nice arse,” Levi said, tossing the clothing on the floor.

“So do you,” Eren mumbled.

Levi thought Eren's was nicer, really, but he was entitled to his opinion. Levi demonstrated his appreciation, kissing and kneading and finally biting, hard, sinking his teeth into the firm flesh,
leaving a nice imprint when he pulled away.

“Oww,” Eren said, but he turned his head to let Levi see his smile.

Levi worked his way up Eren's back, leaving a couple of marks on the spots where Eren squirmed and shuddered the most. When he was lying alongside Eren, Eren bowed his head forward, and Levi brushed his hair away from the back of his neck.

He blew on it, and Eren tensed slightly. He was so sensitive there. Levi kissed him next, hearing him squeak as he did so. He wasn't going to leave any marks where the clothing wouldn't cover, so the neck was off-limits for that but he bit down gently just to see what would happen.

“Ha! Aah-” Eren muffled himself with the pillow.

Christ.

“Think about how hot it would be,” Levi said, letting his breath tickle the back of Eren's neck. “If I fucked you while I sank my teeth into the back of your neck.” For the first time in quite a while, Levi deeply, viscerally resented his lack of height; a position like that wouldn't be physically possible between them unless Eren bent himself backwards quite a lot.

The words seemed to electrify Eren, he twisted in Levi's arms, thrashing around to turn himself over so he could meet his eyes.


“What?”

“I want to mark you too.”

It was a request Levi almost always declined, but this time he smiled faintly, “Go on then.”

Eren wiggled down and started applying himself with inexperienced enthusiasm to Levi's chest. It wasn't unpleasant and Levi let him play.

“There's a trick to it,” he said, when Eren frowned at his lack of progress. “You gotta do it harder-”

Apparently seized by the sudden and ill-considered determination that saw him do a lot of reckless things, Eren straightened up and sank his teeth into Levi's neck. Levi flinched and swore. It really fucking hurt, and Eren sucked like he expected a prize for it and Levi gasped.

“You little shit,” he breathed when Eren finally detached himself, grinning slyly at him. Levi pounced on him, rolled him on his back and attacked his weak spot. Eren mewled as Levi sucked and licked at his neck, still somehow keeping himself from leaving marks.

“Levi, Levi, Levi, shit-” Eren whimpered and Levi did not let up because he entirely deserved everything he was getting and then Eren's entire body suddenly went rigid and he stopped breathing for a few moments. Levi lifted his head and Eren relaxed with a sigh, his chest heaving and his mouth open.

Levi could smell him and when he glanced down he wasn't surprised to see Eren's come on his jeans.

“Damn,” Eren said, squeezing his eyes shut. “I'm sorry.”

“It's okay.” Levi rolled over and took off the rest of his clothes, careful not to let his dirty jeans
spread the mess further. He was hard as a fucking rock, and Eren was a boneless puddle beside him. Maybe he would be getting that hand job after all. He fished some tissues out of the bedside table and let Eren clean himself up; he'd probably be too sensitive to appreciate Levi doing it for him.

Levi lay on his back and Eren sat up and looked down at him.

“Looks painful,” he said, staring at his cock.

“The things you do to me,” Levi said, fingering the side of his neck. Oh, that was gonna bruise.

“You can still fuck me,” Eren said.

That wasn't what Levi had been expecting and his cock twitched at the thought.

“Are you sure?” Levi asked.

Eren licked his lips and nodded. “I've fucked this up, I'm sorry.”

“No, no you haven't.” Levi sat up and hugged him. “You're just young.” He looked at him. “Are you sure you can go another round?” The thought of making Eren come three times in one afternoon was an interesting one. He probably wouldn't be able to get him off by his cock (or neck) alone but that didn't mean he was out of options.

And he wanted him, so fucking much.

Eren shrugged and nodded and that was probably an honest response.

“Okay,” Levi said. “Tell me if it's too much and I'll stop.”

Eren spread himself on the bed, Levi between his knees, relaxed and willing. It was a strange contrast, because Levi thought he was probably wound tighter than he'd ever been, and he was desperate to just fuck him. And Eren would be satisfied just to see him come, he was sure, but he had a challenge now and he was determined to meet it.

He left the mark on Eren's thigh that he'd wanted to at the gym as he prepared him, and Eren was so relaxed he didn't have to do much at all, really. Erwin had a monster cock but Levi's advantage had never come from his size. His dick looked pretty impressive compared to the rest of him although wasn't really much above average taken in isolation, but it had a nice bend that he'd learned to use to his advantage a long time ago.

Unlike Erwin, he also had his own supply of condoms that he actually double checked after that first awkward night. He rolled one onto himself now and asked Eren if he was okay.

Eren smiled at him lazily and nodded. His cock was half hard, and he seemed to be enjoying the show at least. He lifted his hips as Levi kneeled forward, and sighed as Levi pushed his way inside.

“Good boy, easy does it.”

Eren swallowed and breathed deeply, and Levi was biting down on the inside of his lower lip to keep himself focused, keep himself still. Eren was beautiful and his arse was perfect and Levi knew if he let himself go and just mindlessly fucked him he'd be coming almost instantly.

But he didn't.

He rolled his hips, easing his way out and back and Eren inhaled sharply and his cock jumped slightly and Levi allowed himself a grin as he found the right angle. He didn't want him falling
asleep, after all. He started moving more insistently now, finding a rhythm even as he fought off his
desire to come.

Eren looked surprised, his eyes and mouth open, and his hands clenching and unclenching against
the bed.

“Okay?” Levi asked raggedly.

Eren nodded. He was hard again, probably to his own amazement, and Levi allowed himself a
moment of triumph. Yeah, he was good at this. He gritted his teeth and kept going, and Eren
squeezed his thighs around Levi’s waist.

“Touch yourself, if you feel like it,” Levi said. He had his hands on Eren's hips, helping to keep them
lifted at the right angle. Eren only stroked himself lightly at first, chewing on his lip and rocking his
body in time to Levi’s movements.

The sight was getting to be too much and Levi closed his eyes to better focus. His breathing was
loud and harsh in his own ears and soon he could hear Eren's join it, the younger man gasping
unevenly.

When he opened his eyes again, Eren looked completely lost, flopped back against the pillow, his
head lolling back, his mouth open, and only his hand still moving on his cock giving the indication
he had any control over himself at all. He whimpered and shuddered, and Levi guessed he was
probably at his limit.

He hoped he was, because Levi could feel his own was being breached. He bared his teeth and
started moving faster, more urgently and as he snapped his hips forward Eren cried out, his eyes
flying open at the noise and he forced his mouth shut.

“It's okay,” Levi said. “Make some noise.” Like he gave a fuck what the neighbours thought.

Eren didn't though. He curled up slightly, twitching and panting and muttering a string of obscenities
out with every broken breath.

“I can't, I can't.” he was whimpering, and his hand was shaking. Levi relieved him of that duty,
wrapping his fingers around Eren's cock and stroking him.

“You can, I promise you,” Levi panted. “You can do it.”

He closed his eyes again, and gave himself over to the urge to rut, his hand still moving on Eren's
cock.

“Ffuck,” he bit out but it was getting harder to draw breath every time. He was lost now, he'd done
all he could and now he couldn't hold himself back any more. Eren writhed and Levi didn't know if
he was coming or not because his own orgasm took hold of every shaking muscle, his knuckles
white, his breath ripped from his throat as he shuddered and thrust desperately into Eren, every other
thought wiped from his mind.

When Levi opened his eyes, Eren looked like he'd passed out, or something close to it. His chest rose
and fell as he breathed and his fingers twitched. His stomach was splattered with come; not as much
as before, and he was shaky and barely responded when Levi removed himself.

“Eren?” Levi crawled up beside him and Eren smiled, his eyes still shut.

“Mm.”
Levi was relieved that he seemed okay and rolled over to take off the condom.

“Was that a bit much?” he asked when he moved back, propping his head up on one hand and resting the other on Eren's chest. His own heartbeat was still elevated, and he could feel Eren's thumping under his palm.

“Yeah,” Eren said dreamily. “That was pretty incredible.” He moved one arm so he could brush the back of his hand against Levi's stomach. Apparently everything else was too much effort.

Levi glanced at the clock and then moved closer, pressing up against Eren's side and kissing his ear. He could see the red marks on Eren's hip and chest, and he knew there were more on his back and he hugged him gently. He was feeling pretty pleased with himself, but more than that he was impressed by Eren's sheer stamina. He'd taken pretty much everything Levi could give him and he'd loved it. He was wearing a faint, crooked smile on his face, his eyes still closed. He looked utterly, utterly fucked.

So fucked, Levi doubted it would be possible to fuck him further for quite some time.

Eren's breathing started to even out and Levi could feel his own eyes drooping, even though it was a stupid time of day to nap and they'd only have to get up and have dinner once they woke up, but he couldn't bring himself to move. Eren's come was still drying on his stomach and Levi couldn't bring himself to do anything about that just now either.

So he rested his head against Eren's shoulder and dozed. Half an hour later he woke up for a piss and when he turned on the bathroom light he saw the bruise starting for form on his neck. He could hide it with makeup he supposed, and he did have his own supply having refused to use the communal stuff at the studio.

But why bother? It felt daring and strange to him, but also kind of satisfying too, the idea of walking out into the world with Eren's hickey branded onto his neck. Maybe he would, maybe, he thought, looking at it in the mirror and touching it lightly. He supposed that's what a relationship was; you marked them and they marked you. Usually Levi declined the offer, only getting marked when permission wasn't asked first or when he was desperately horny.

He heard a noise and a few moments later Eren shuffled into the light, still blinking sleepily and entirely naked.

He smiled at Levi.

“It looks good on you,” he said.

“Cheeky,” he said. “I didn't leave any above the collar.”

“I'm sorry.” He didn't look very sorry. “I'm gonna shower. I feel, wow, kind of woozy actually. Weird time of day for a nap.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah. I'm not sore. Well, some of these bug bites sting a little. But man, I'm wiped.” He sagged against the door frame. “You're amazing.” He stepped forward and took Levi's hand. “So, can I stay for dinner?”

“Of course you can.” Levi both appreciated and felt a bit hurt that Eren had thought to ask. “You can stay over if you want.”
The look on Eren's face told Levi that was the right thing to offer. “Thanks, I'd really like to.”

“Although, maybe you shouldn't. What about Missy?”

Eren blinked at him and then gave him such a loving smile it made him feel defensive. “I can text Jean and ask him to feed her. Even if he forgets, it doesn't really matter; she can skip dinner occasionally. She forgives me.”

“It's not going to be that exciting, staying here.”

“What do you normally do in the evenings?”

“Go for a run or do the bookkeeping,” Levi said. “Like, I said, boring.”

“So?” Eren sighed and ran his hand over his hair. “It's like you think all you have to offer is sex. I just want to hang out with you, even if it is boring. I've got my phone. There's a TV. You don't have to entertain me. I want.” He cast about, and Levi got the impression he was quoting someone else. “I just want to sit in a room with you.”

“You can do that.”

“Of course I can; I'm your boyfriend,” Eren said fiercely, and stepped past him into the shower. “It's more that you shouldn't apologise for it.” Eren drew the shower curtain and then drew it back again. “Also you're really naked.”

“So?” Levi raised an eyebrow.

Eren laughed, and hid behind the curtain again. “Nothing,” he sang and turned on the water. Levi caught sight of his own smile in the mirror and it startled him.
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

Hey guys, the next few updates may be a bit slower as I'm working on prompts for Eruriren Week (and you should too, if that's your thing) as well as F:ML.

Eren got dressed slowly, looking at the marks forming on his skin as he did so. His shower hadn't really woken him up, and he felt warm and sated and he couldn't stop smiling for some reason.

Levi had made the bed while he was in the shower, and had folded his clothes neatly on the quilt and Eren spent a few seconds just looking at them feeling very happy at the sight. Now he had the chance to look around Levi's bedroom as well, but it didn't tell him much. Unlike Erwin who had his life on display, thrown carelessly over the back of chairs, and hung on the walls and littering his desk, Levi had everything tidied up. Eren suspected he saw pictures and souvenirs as merely something else that would require dusting. But it wasn't Spartan; Eren now knew the bed was as comfortable as it looked, and there was something sort of satisfying about the way the bottles of shampoo and shaving cream were lined up neatly in the bathroom. Eren had been careful to put everything back where he'd found it.

On his way back to the kitchen and living area, Eren stuck his nose in what had presumably once been Erwin's room. There was a bench and a set of weights in the corner, a mat on the floor, and near the window was a desk and computer and filing cabinet, all tidy. This must be where Levi did his bookkeeping.

“Tea?” Levi asked, when Eren finally emerged.

“Mm thanks. Sorry about the last pot.”

“I'm not,” Levi said. “There are things in life better than tea.” He got a second cup down from the hooks on the wall and took the milk out of the fridge, letting Eren decide how much he wanted. “I'm starving,” Levi said, sitting at the table while Eren poured himself tea. “Is steak all right for dinner? I don't have a lot else to be honest.”

“Yeah, that sounds good.” Eren held his cup in both hands, and wondered if Levi ever worried about dropping his the way he held it by the rim. They drank in peaceful silence, and Eren put his cup down and reached across the table for Levi's free hand and Levi didn't deny him, smiling faintly behind his teacup.

Erwin's apartment was insulated from the outside world like an oasis, but at Levi's Eren could hear the trees outside moving in the wind, the cars along the street outside and occasionally one of the neighbours would close a door loudly enough that the sound travelled through the brick. It was colder too, and Eren put his hoodie back on before he lost the warmth of the shower and wondered what it was like in summer. He wanted to find out. He could get used to this place just as easily as Erwin's. He rubbed his fingers over Levi's hand, feeling the callouses left by the weights, the thickened skin over the knuckles. Fighter's hands. Lover's hands as well, he thought, remembering them on his neck. That had been kind of embarrassing; he didn't really know what had come over him, but he knew he'd be asking for more of it sooner or later. Levi hadn't blamed him or made him feel bad for coming too fast but Eren didn't intend to be caught off-guard like that again. He
wondered if Levi had any sensitive spots, and vowed to go looking when he had the chance.

“Hey,” Eren said. “That was pretty incredible earlier. I guess I've got a lot to learn, like from working at HotFreeRange.”

“Yes and no. They're related, but making sex look good for the camera and being good at fucking are two different skills. I learned all of that before I started making porn.”

“How?” Of course there was a time before Levi made porn, but Levi had never mentioned it before.

He didn't look too comfortable about it now, sighing and frowning at his tea. “Yeah. That's why I considered making porn in the first place; I was confident of my skills. And there wasn't much else I was qualified for.” He glanced at Eren and then back at his drink again. “Do you really want to hear about this? I mean, it might bother you.”

“Levi I've seen you fuck many guys already, that's not gonna bother me. It's more, I don't want you to feel like you have to say things that you don't want to say, or talk about stuff you'd rather not.” He held Levi's hand a bit tighter. “I know you, so I don't need to know about you but I would like to, just a little, sometime.”

“It's no big deal,” he said. “When I was your age- no, younger.” He looked wry. “I was not legal when I started cruising. Anyway, I've always wanted to be really good at what I did. When I was a teenager, that meant fighting and fucking. I couldn't really handle school all that well. It just didn't suit me, so I didn't care about it, but I did care about being the meanest scrapper in the suburb and when I decided I liked guys, well that was just another thing I could be good at.”

Eren stayed quiet, just listening. Levi was fidgety, and eventually took his hand back from Eren. He clearly wasn't used to talking about himself like this.

“My first experiences weren't particularly good, but I liked them enough to know I wanted more, and that I wasn't going to get what I wanted just by hoping it would happen. Guys would look at me and see this little twink that they thought they could push around. Even if they knew I was a fighter they'd figure I was just bluster or compensating or something.” Levi sighed. “So, I'd fuck them and in the process prove to them that they could never hope to fuck me half as well. Like, it was a challenge; I wasn't satisfied with getting myself off I had to make them scream and beg and tell me they had experienced no finer cock. Christ.” He ran his hand over his hair. “It sounds so fucking juvenile now; it wasn't a kink, I just wanted my ego fed. Some of them couldn't look me in the eye afterwards and some of them came back for more, but I wasn't in the habit of going back for second helpings. And then I got a bit older and pickier, and then I started working for Hange and I didn't need to pick up strangers to get laid any more.”

Eren took a deep breath, “I see.”

“At HotFreeRange Erwin did the character work and the acting and all of that, but I couldn't do that sort of thing as well as he could. Hange wrote me parts that suited me instead, that played to my strengths.”

“Your speciality was the fucking,” Eren said.

“Yeah.” He didn't look entirely proud of it. His cup was empty and he poured himself more tea.

Eren thought about this for a while. What Levi had done to him was amazing, but he wasn't sure he wanted an endurance test every time he went to bed with him. On the other hand, he knew Levi
would feel bad if he tried to explain that. Levi could be affectionate, Eren knew this; he just needed practice. He's new at this; newer than I am, Eren thought. He wasn't sure how a tale of uncaring youthful promiscuity could make him feel all warm and protective inside.

He had to express it somehow, so he smiled and thanked Levi for telling him that story. Then he stood up and walked around the table and wrapped his arms around Levi's shoulders, burying his face in his neck.

“You were wonderful, and it doesn't matter to me how you learned it.”

“I know,” Levi said. “If I really thought that sort of thing would bother you we probably wouldn't be together like this.”

Eren sighed, and kissed the mark he'd left on Levi's neck.

“Okay, are we gonna have dinner soon? Can I help?”

“Yeah, if you'd like.”

Really Eren wanted to stretch out on the couch and wait for dinner to magically appear, but he drained the last of his tea and Levi put him to work scrubbing the dirt off potatoes in the sink.

“Why don't you buy the pre-washed potatoes?” Eren asked.

“Because I don't know how well they've been washed and I have to wash them anyway,” Levi said. “This way at least I can see the dirt come off,” he said, going through a cupboard and taking out baking trays of various sizes and looking at them.

Levi might have been clean but he wasn't a neat cook. He sliced vegetables in a fairly slapdash fashion, and Eren felt at ease working alongside him. They were basically at exactly the same level of competency. Eren cut the potatoes into chips and Levi prepared other vegetables. He used the timer on the microwave to make sure he cooked the steaks correctly.

By the time they sat down to eat they were both ravenous, and neither of them said much as they ate. Levi only had fruit and yoghurt to offer for dessert, and Eren decided to skip it all together.

While Levi stacked the plates and cutlery next to the sink and began washing up, Eren took the opportunity to check his phone, and he smiled, like he always did, to see a text from Erwin.

“Erwin,” he began and then wondered if it was a faux pas to mention his name at a time like this. Too late now; it would be too weird to stop. “Wants to know if we'd like to get Thai for dinner on Thursday.”

Levi thought for a moment and nodded. “Okay. What with his birthday and everything we haven't been back for a little while. They'll be wondering what's become of us I'm sure.”

Eren smiled and sent back an affirmative response on behalf of both him and Levi.

*It's a date.* Erwin replied almost immediately, and Eren missed him a little bit as he put his phone away and went to help Levi dry up. It would be nice to see them together again.

Eren expected Levi would go and do his bookkeeping, but when he said he might watch a movie, Levi joined him on the couch. Eren looked over the collection and asked Levi to recommend something scary. Levi pointed out a film in Japanese that Eren had never heard of, and Eren cuddled up against him to watch. Levi didn't seem to mind, putting an arm around his shoulders.
Eren deeply regretted asking Levi to recommend something scary. He did his best to put on a brave face, and he hoped Levi hadn't noticed him sinking closer in against his side, but he couldn't help it. When the ghost finally made her appearance Eren yelped and jumped so suddenly that he startled Levi, who convulsed with a “Fuck! What are you doing?”

“Nothing,” Eren said. He was sure Levi was frowning at him, but he couldn't take his eyes off the screen. “No no no, get out of there.”

When the scene finally changed and he dared look away again, Levi was still watching him. Instead of the irritated or dubious expression he'd expected, however, Levi was smiling.

“You're pretty cute,” he muttered.

This was the man who had fucked him until he'd practically passed out, but those three words rendered Eren as self-conscious as a virgin on a high school date.

“O-oh. Thanks.” Eren had a bit of trouble concentrating on the film for a while after that, and even once he'd regained his focus he didn't feel quite as unnerved as he had at the start. He was inoculated against the supernatural terrors on the screen by the sound of Levi's heartbeat and breathing, the arm draped protectively over his shoulder, and mostly by the knowledge that Levi rarely called anyone 'cute' who wasn't a cat.

When the film ended, the evil only temporarily put to sleep, Eren rolled over while the credits were still on and kissed Levi firmly. Levi smiled against his mouth and kissed him back.

“You're more fun than Erwin is to watch films with,” Levi said.

“He doesn't get scared?” Eren asked, glad that Levi was talking about him without it being awkward. Levi looked amused, “Well he claims he doesn't. He has suspicious coughing fits when he gets startled sometimes though.”

“What about you?” Eren asked. “You didn't look worried at all but I guess you've already seen this one.”

“I'm hard to scare,” Levi admitted. “But I liked being scared, so I'm always keeping an eye out for films that might get to me.”

Eren was surprised that someone so stoic would seek out that sort of thing. “You like it?”

“You feel alive when you're hearts pounding, right? Whether it's a scary film or sex or a fight or just exercise, I like that feeling,” he said quietly. “It's a bit strange, I'll admit.”

“I dunno. I don't think you're alone in liking that. Plenty of people like those things.”

“Hmm.”

Levi clearly didn't want to talk about it any further right then and Eren unwound himself and returned the DVD to its case, and they got ready for bed.

“You said you slept naked,” Eren said. Unlike Erwin's bathroom there was no room for two and when he'd come back into the bedroom (he now had a third toothbrush that was designated his) Levi had changed into a loose shirt and boxers.

“No I didn't,” Levi said. “I said you should find out if I did. I sleep naked in summer, if you must
know, but it's too cold in winter.”

“You do keep the heating pretty low,” Eren said.

“Yeah, force of habit,” Levi said. “Keeps the bills down a bit. I can turn it up if you'd prefer.”

“No, it's fine. It's your house.” He knew by now that Levi liked it when things suited his particular preferences and he wouldn't ask him to change unless he was really uncomfortable. It was cool but not freezing, and Levi's bed and Levi himself would be warm.

“Do you want a shirt then?”

Eren said he would and Levi tossed him one. Eren noted there was no offer of any shorts to go with them, and while Levi was off brushing his teeth he good-naturedly stripped everything off and put on the shirt. Levi's shirt was not long on him and didn't cover more than half his arse, let alone his junk, and he sat on the bed, his arms wrapped around his knees and waited for Levi to come back. He really didn't feel up for any more sex right then, but the look Levi gave him when he saw him arranged so carefully still kindled a spark in his stomach.

“Do you want to go another round?” Levi asked.

“Not really,” Eren admitted.

“Then get in, you'll get cold,” Levi said. “Show-off.”

“With no encouragement from you of course,” Eren said, wriggling down under the covers as Levi turned out the lights.

When Levi got into bed Eren reached for him and Levi rolled towards him and they tangled their legs and arms around each other, and Eren started to drift off until Levi nudged him and muttered about his arm going to sleep and by then the bed was warm and they separated slightly, but Levi didn't object when Eren rested against him back to back, their feet still sharing the same space.

Eren was woken from the deep and exhausted sleep of the happy and well-fucked by the realisation that Levi hadn't come back to bed. He'd vaguely been aware of him leaving but assumed he'd gotten up to take a leak and thought nothing more of it.

Eren raised his head from the pillows and forced his eyes open. It didn't help, it was still quite dark. He reached out, making doubly sure Levi wasn't there. He wondered what time it was and realised Levi didn't have a bedside clock.

“Levi?” he muttered thickly.

He heard footsteps in the hallway and he sat up to peer at the dark shape that had caused them. Levi's house was noticeably cold by this time and Eren pulled the blankets around himself, not wanting to lose the warmth.

“Hey, sorry I woke you,” Levi crossed the room and ruffled Eren's hair.

“Mmuch. What time is it?”

“About five-thirty.”

Levi sounded far too awake for five-thirty. It was still dark out.

“What are you doing?” Eren asked.
“I'm going for a run.”

What? Eren had rather hoped for a lazy morning in bed like he'd had with Erwin. Levi sat on the bed and wrapped an arm around his blanket-shrouded form.

“Go back to sleep, Eren.”

“No, I'll come with you,” Eren declared, despite the fact that he could barely stay sitting up let alone go for a run.

“You're not awake,” Levi said. “Go on, get some more rest. I'm sorry, but I didn't get a full workout yesterday and I have to go for a run. I can't sleep any more.” His calloused hand brushed Eren’s cheek. “Thank you for the offer.”

“Mm. Okay.” Eren flopped back onto the pillows and curled up in the blankets. He felt Levi pet his head for a few moments more before he stood up.

“I'll be back in an hour or so, Eren. I'll try not to wake you up.”

“I don't mind,” Eren mumbled. He didn't even hear Levi leave.

He woke up sometime later to see the sky had lightened a lot, but the bed was still empty. He sighed and dozed again.

He woke up when he sensed he was being watched.

The sun wasn't coming in the window but the sky was lit, and Levi was leaning on the wall by the door, arms folded, his hair damp. He smiled at Eren when he lifted his head.

“Hey, I didn't want to wake you again.”

“Come back to bed,” Eren ordered, too sleepy to be diplomatic. “I missed you.”

He heard Levi sigh and then the bed dipped as he lay down on the covers and wrapped an arm over Eren's body.

“I'm sorry,” he muttered into Eren's ear.

“Mm.” Eren worked an arm free of the blankets and wrapped it around his neck. Levi didn't move and Eren dozed off again and woke up and Levi was still there, having made himself comfortable on the blankets. His eyes were shut but he wasn't asleep for he opened them when he felt Eren move.

“Morning,” he said. He looked a bit apprehensive.

“Hey.” Eren smiled. Levi smelled like soap. He pulled him close and nuzzled him rather than subjecting him to morning breath kisses. Levi had showered and shaved and probably brushed his teeth as well already. “Do you do that every morning?” he asked.

“No. I prefer to run at night, but if my routine gets interrupted I get very restless. And grumpy. I didn't want to subject you to that. A run calms me down.”

Eren had woken up properly by this point and he looked at Levi kindly.

“That's okay,” he said. “You came back.” He could tell Levi felt guilty about it, and Eren had felt confused and a bit abandoned at the time, but it wasn't like his eccentricities were entirely unexpected. He'd waited for who knew how long, apparently content for Eren to wake up on his
own, and Eren appreciated his company.

The bare wooden floors were cold under Eren’s feet when he finally decided to get up and he made a beeline for the shower, Levi briefly grabbing a handful of his mostly-bare arse as he went past still wearing Levi’s shirt.

Levi’s idea of breakfast was either soft-boiled eggs and toast or a smoothie and Eren opted for the latter since Levi was making one for himself. He decided it would probably have been more palatable in summer, but he was probably healthier now than he was yesterday, and it wasn’t bad overall. There was tea as well, and although Eren felt like some coffee he decided have some when he got home rather than trouble Levi to make instant.

Levi had classes to run later and despite the massive, obvious bruise on his neck he gave no sign he intended to cover it up with anything. Eren was secretly rather pleased; everyone in Levi’s classes would know he'd allowed himself to get bitten.

Levi reminded Eren that Missy hadn't had any dinner and would be wanting her breakfast and Eren could only sigh fondly and reassure him that Missy wouldn't allow him to forget.

Levi didn't know what to say when he saw Eren off, and he said as much, his hands on Eren's shoulders and an apologetic look on his face.

“See you next time sounds like you've just had a fucking dentist's appointment,” he muttered.

“Just kiss me,” Eren said.

Levi leaned up and did so, sweetly, like he was still learning how. He probably was, Eren thought.

“Perfect,” Eren said.

“Just go,” Levi said, smiling.

When he got home Jean was still moping and spent most of the day eating chips and shouting at the Xbox. Eren decided to try Levi's advice and asked him if he wanted to see a film or something but all he'd said was, “Don't pity me, Eren,” and Eren told him he didn't pity him so much as want to dropkick him out a window.

Jean ignored him.

When Eren attended Levi's class a day later, he considered foregoing a shirt, as his bites were starting to fade but were still visible, before deciding that was perhaps taking things a bit far. As it was when he arrived, Annie marched right up to him and gave him such a cool and intense stare he was pretty sure she'd already put two and two together.

“Well,” she said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear and looking away again. “You've made some improvement on when you started.”

He supposed that was probably the Annie equivalent of a congratulatory box of chocolates. He smiled at her. She had helped him out after all, and he hadn't forgotten.

“Yeah, all right,” she muttered, and she might have even smiled, Eren wasn't sure.

When he met up with his boyfriends on Thursday for Thai, he was overall quite satisfied with his Fall break, although he wasn't looking forward to resuming classes on Monday. Erwin wore his bolo tie and Levi wore his hickey and Eren felt like he owned the whole world. Erwin didn't directly
comment on the latter but once their orders had been taken he leaned forward and smiled at Eren and asked if he was going to score them out of ten.


Eren laughed and hid behind his hands and didn't say a word.
Erwin's phone rang, startling him slightly. He was glad to have an excuse to take a break, however and he picked up his phone. He didn't recognise the number.

He answered it anyway. “Smith.” Sometimes having such a nondescript name was useful.

“Hi Erwin, it's Armin.”

“Oh, hello. Give me a moment.” He liked his office much better with Nanaba's pictures on the walls but he still didn't like holding personal calls there. Unfortunately there were several people having an early lunch at the usual spot so he ducked into the library. It wasn't very large; about the size of an ordinary office, the space filled with rows of legal tomes and a single desk. Erwin drifted among the books.

“Okay, I can talk, what's up?”

“It's nothing too important, I guess, I just wondered if I could get your advice or something.” He heard Armin sigh. “Normally I'm the one giving advice to people; it feels weird to ask for it for once.”

“Of course, I don't mind at all.” Erwin paused abruptly when he realised he wasn't alone in the room. That intern was staring at a shelf as if frozen, her hand on one of the books, but she made no move to take it down. He could see the tension in the way she held herself and frowned. “Listen, how about lunch rather than talking over the phone? I can pick you up if you're on campus.”

“Um. I'll take a bus. I should go and run some errands in town before classes start next week anyway. We could meet in a park?”

Erwin said that would be fine and they finalised the details before he hung up.

Erwin put his phone away and sighed. It probably wasn't his business, but he had a weakness for helping people. He could sense Petra was wishing he'd leave, but he had to try first.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“Are you sure?”

She glanced at him, startled by his insistence, and he was equally startled by the sheer rage in her large brown eyes.

“I don't think so, Mister Smith. Thank you.”

“Erwin,” he said. “And in case you were wondering, I'm not looking upon this as an opportunity to target an intern while she appears to be upset for my own gratification or advantage.”

Her jaw dropped slightly but she mastered herself fast, “Of course I wouldn't imply that, sir.”

“No, but you were thinking it, and probably not unreasonably so.”

Petra pressed her lips together for a moment then spoke, “I'm just knees and dimples. You can't imagine what it's like to be reduced to a collection of body parts.”
“Well, I may have some idea,” Erwin murmured. “My offer for help is serious. We have policies against.”

“Harassment? I'm aware.” She paced up and down along the shelf, her arms wrapped around herself defensively. “This doesn't even count as that. It's not like it's something I could even complain about. It's just.” She shrugged.

“I'm listening, and I won't do anything more than that unless you ask me to.”

“There's a client. It doesn't matter which one, just that he's important. And I've been sitting in on the meetings, taking notes and such. I thought it was because Reiss was mentoring me, you know? I was there to learn and I did all this extra work on my own time. And today as he was leaving, this client made a remark complimenting the senior partner for having me around. Not for my work, just for me. Like I was a decorative vase or a service like the coffee. And the way he responded, all smiles, I realised I wasn't being taken seriously at all. I was just a favour to him, and what's worse they assumed I wouldn't notice, talking like that in front of me. And I am,” she unfolded her arms and bunched her fists at her sides. “So angry. At myself too, for being so naive.”

“You weren't naive assuming you were there for the job you've been paid to do,” Erwin said.

“Next time I'll spit in his god damn coffee,” she muttered. Then she glanced at Erwin apologetically. “I won't. Thank you for listening, Erwin.”

“What are you going to do now?”

She took a deep breath. “I'm gonna have an early lunch. And I'm going to buy something full of chocolate, and then I'm going back to work.”

“Ms Ral-”

“Petra. Definitely Petra after this.” She gave him a smile and he realised she did have very cute dimples. No wonder she wasn't being taken seriously in this old boy's club of a firm.

“Petra, if you need me to listen again, I will. And if you want me to have a word in the senior partner’s ear, I'll do that too.”

“I'll keep it in mind, thank you.” She probably knew Erwin's words would have limited effect, but she'd calmed down a lot, and that was what Erwin had set out to do. He stepped aside politely as she ducked past and he remained for a couple of minutes after she'd gone, just thinking.

He wouldn't do anything unless she asked, but he was a bit sorry she hadn't. Not everywhere was going to be like HotFreeRange and he knew that, but if he'd not been pushed out into the cold for nearly twenty years may he could have changed something about the firm's culture.

Or, as was more likely, it would have changed him, he thought wryly. He'd learned a lot from Hange and although his days of fumbling around with their pronouns had long ended he hadn't forgotten the sort of ignorant he'd once been. There was nothing he could do about it now anyway, and he went to collect his lunch and coat and meet Armin.

It was clearly his day for helping people, and he didn't mind at all. It made a break from brokering agreements between corporations; he didn't even know what they supposedly made half the time.

Halloween decorations were up in the shop windows as he made his way to the park on foot, weaving his way among busy lunchtime traffic. Armin wasn't there yet as he was a bit early and he went and got himself a coffee while he waited for him to show up. He had some idea of what he
might want to ask about; Eren had spoken briefly about his flatmate's romantic problems during dinner the night before, but hadn't asked for any advice so Erwin hadn't given him any.

Armin showed up in a coat and scarf, carrying a bento box from one of the nearby sushi places. Armin gave him an awkward smile and they sat on one of the park benches; it would soon be a bit cold to each lunch outdoors, but Erwin liked to get out in the weather at least once a day, just to remind himself of the changing seasons. Fallen leaves carpeted the ground, and the sunshine provided a bit of warmth.

Erwin had packed his own lunch and Armin looked a little enviously at his sandwiches.

“Shall we split them?” Erwin asked.

“You don't have to,” Armin said, looking a bit embarrassed to be caught staring. But he didn't object when Erwin swapped one of his sandwiches for a couple pieces of sushi. “Thanks. And thanks for talking with me on such short notice.”

“It's good to see you again. I miss all the regulars. Maybe I should start inviting them to lunch instead.”

“We miss you. It's not the same without you and Levi around. It's still good, but you were a big part of the place. There's a gap.”

“So how are things?”

Armin sighed. “I assume Eren told you about Jean.”

“Well, he spared me the details, but I got the gist.”

“It was a stupid and ignorant thing to say, but he is stupid and ignorant and now I wonder if I overreacted blowing up at him like that.”

“You blew up at someone?” Erwin raised his eyebrows. When Armin got angry, which was rare, he tended to become icily calculating, demolishing opponents' arguments through vicious logic rather than shouting.

Armin sagged and stared at his sushi. “Yeah. Jean kind of does that to me, you know? It's like when I'm around him I'm more expressive, I can let go.” He smiled faintly. “And it makes him happy when I do. Ah, shit,” he muttered.

“I think I see what your problem is,” Erwin said.

“Totally not over him. Hell, I don't even know if we've broken up. That's why I want your advice. I guess, it's more I want your opinion. Do I get over him and break up properly or do I try and talk to him? I've been going over it but I can't decide. I mean, we hardly know each other that well, but on the other hand,” he trailed off.

“Yes?” Erwin prompted.

“I really like him. It's like, if he does something mean or dumb it's because he's being impulsive, but when he stops and thinks he's really sweet. I don't know, I miss him. And,” Armin took a breath. “Part of me is wondering if I got so upset because I'm jealous.”

“Of who?”
“Eren.”


“I don't want to be jealous, it's ridiculous. I was overcompensating I guess, talking about how nice you guys were because Jean seemed a little worried about him. Like, he doesn't know you so I was trying to describe, and I was trying to you know, smooth things, reassure him, but I think all I did was give him the impression that I wanted that too. Either a threesome in general or you guys specifically. And if I did, I can't blame him for getting mad, can I?”

“So I'm back to second-guessing myself. And I suppose I could go and explain all this, but then that would sound like I agree with his stupid argument about giving up porn. Like, no way.” Armin ate some sushi, chewing it angrily.

“Is Jean smart?” Erwin asked. “I mean about this sort of thing, would he understand it?”

“He wouldn't have a clue. He's kind of like Eren, really, but a bit less straightforward.”

“So you think you're both a bit to blame, but you're worried if you say that he's going to assume he's blameless?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Do you want me to talk to him?”

Armin hesitated only a moment. “Yes. I think. Although he might not like you much right now.”

“Well, regardless of your relationship with him, it would be nice if we could get along, given he is Eren's housemate. I'll have a word.”

“Thanks, Erwin. I'm sorry for bothering you about this. And I feel I should apologise to Eren too. I shouldn't be jealous I just.” He brushed strands of hair away from his face. “I just wish I knew how he managed to get Levi into a relationship.”

“You liked him.”

“It was a dumb crush on an older guy who was acting a part anyway. But I kind of thought it would be the same for Eren, too. And you know, it kinda stung when Levi turned me down. I can't help but wonder what was different about Eren.”

“To be honest, I don't understand it entirely either. But Eren is very stubborn and doesn't know when to quit, and combine that with an overwhelming desire to treat everyone right.” Erwin shrugged. “It's a combination that's hard not to love.”

Armin nodded, “So I see.”

They ate the rest of their lunch in comparative silence, and Armin thanked him before they went their separate ways. Before he went back to the office, Erwin thumbed in a text message to Eren, asking if he minded a call.

On Saturday morning, Erwin drove the Aston to Eren's house reasonably early. Eren himself opened the door, and welcomed him in. Missy greeted him as well and he gave her a pat on the head. He didn't dislike cats, but he wasn't sure how to play with them; dogs were much easier to understand.

Eren was still wearing the clothes he'd been sleeping in and he told Erwin to make himself at home
while he got changed and had a shower. He banged on his flatmate's door as he went past, as Erwin had suggested the day before.

“Jean? We're going to the markets. Do you want to come with us for breakfast?”

There was silence for a few moments and Erwin saw Jean open his door and stick his head out, bleary eyed.

“Who's we?”

“Erwin and I,” Eren said, indicating him.

A look of disappointment crossed Jean's face. “No, not really.” He closed his door again, but a short while later, while Eren was having his shower, he emerged to make some coffee.

“Good morning,” Erwin said politely.

“Hello,” he said warily. “Coffee?”

“No thank you, I had some earlier.” Nevertheless, Erwin wandered into the kitchen and leant against the bench, close enough for conversation.

Jean didn't say anything for a while, making his coffee and shooting him short, suspicious glances out of the corner of his eye.

Erwin waited. He could out-wait Levi when he had to, so Jean was no challenge. Jean had barely sipped his coffee before he cracked.

“You're one of the guys who's fucked Armin, aren't you?” he blurted out, directing his gaze at his mug.

“I worked with him,” Erwin said. “There was sex.” Jean didn't say anything and Erwin continued, “I am rather curious as to what your problem is.”

“What do you mean? Isn't it obvious? Even Eren's fucked him. And now you and Axel are hanging around all the fucking time. However that works. Do you just like not care what Eren does with him when you're not there?”

“Grow up,” Erwin said in a tone of voice that made Jean flinch. “Eren is not relevant in the slightest and you know it. In what way are you the injured party here? You knew from the start what Armin did for a living; you went in with your eyes wide open, and you have no right complain now.”

“He doesn't have to do it; he could do something else-”

“He doesn't need eliminate all other options before he chooses this work. He doesn't need good reasons; I had terrible reasons for making porn by all objective measures.”

“Yeah, well. It still doesn't seem fair,” Jean muttered.

“What doesn't?”

“That someone so nice and sweet has to do that! I mean, Eren is, like, whatever. It's fucking weird but it sort of suits him, but Armin's just.” It was the closest thing he'd done to smiling yet. “He should be selling fucking fairy cakes or something, or walking dogs, or tutoring nice kids. Not having sex with people he barely knows for other guys to jack off over him on the internet.”
“Do you think less of him for doing that?”

“No! Of course not.”

“You think he's dirtied himself?”

“No.”

“You think it means he doesn't care about you?”

“No.”

“That he's not interested in sex with you?”

“Of course not!”

Erwin could see he wasn't going to get away with another question but he'd wound Jean up pretty nicely anyway, he thought.

“So what do you think he hears when you tell him he shouldn't make porn any more?”

Jean gaped.

“Do you think he's stupid? That he doesn't know what he's doing, or that no one has said these things to him before?”

He shook his head. “No. Shit, I didn't think of it like that.”

“Do you trust him?” Erwin asked, more quietly dropping the aggressive tone he'd been taking.

“Yeah,” Jean muttered. “I can't imagine him ever setting out to hurt me. Shit. Shit, I've fucked everything up.”

“Hm, maybe,” Erwin said calmly.

“What should I do?” he asked.

“Did he actually break up with you?” Erwin asked.

“Well. No, not exactly.”

Erwin spread his hands. “Well then.”

Jean put down his mug and nearly ran into Eren as he darted out of the room.

“How did it go?” Eren asked, watching Jean pelt down the hall and swing himself into his room.

“I gave him a shove. I'm not going to hold his hand; what happens now is up to him and Armin.”

“Hmm.” Eren smiled and walked over to him and wrapped his arms around his neck. “So now you're done playing fairy godmother?”

“Almost.” Erwin kissed him briefly and then raised his voice to Jean. “Do you want a lift?”

“Thank you!” Jean called back before slamming the bathroom door. Jean showered and got dressed and arranged his hair and goggled when he saw the Aston.
“I had no idea porn made this much money,” he said, awestruck, as he settled carefully into the back seat.

“It doesn’t, I assure you,” Erwin said. “I’m a respectable wage slave now.”

“Well, uh Armand- I mean, Erwin, I guess I, uh.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” Erwin said. “Talk things out with Armin first.”

“Mm.”

Jean asked to be dropped off at a coffee shop near campus so he could purchase some peace offerings before he went to see Armin, and they left him to it. Eren wished him luck.

Eren relaxed a bit when Jean had gone.

“I really hope this works,” he said. “It’s been miserable living with him recently. I asked Levi about it and he recommended doing nothing, but you’re pretty good at this stuff.”

“Well, I like helping people. Most of the time you just have to ask them leading questions until they work out what they should do for themselves. But that’s not something I can see Levi doing in a million years. He’s too direct and that would put most people on the defensive. It took me a while to get used to his style myself.”

“Yeah. Um, speaking of Levi. You know the mark on his neck?” Eren shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

“Eren, your body is yours. And I know Levi’s got a biting habit; I’ve seen plenty of people putting on concealer the day after he took them out for drinks. Relax; I’m neither surprised nor bothered.”

“I just thought I’d check. So, what are you gonna get for Mike?”

“I don’t know. He’s not exactly hard to buy for; like, he’s easy to please, just as long as you don’t get him anything that’s got scent on it like cologne or something. He’s very picky about that stuff and buys it for himself.”

“Do I need to get him anything?”

“No, it should be fine. Just wish him happy birthday at the Halloween party.” Erwin could see the ‘road closed’ signs indicating the markets were close, and he started looking for a park. On such a crowded and central space he wasn’t too worried about parking on the street. “Speaking of which, have you thought of a costume yet? The entire props room is at our disposal.”

“Hmm, I don’t know,” Eren smiled to himself a little secretively. “What about you?”

“I have some ideas,” Erwin replied, equally secretively.

Eren laughed and Erwin saw a car vacating a parking spot and Aston surged forward to claim it.

Erwin was happy. Simple as that. Eren was content walking arm-in-arm, and the pair of them strolled among the stalls, trying on ridiculous hats and enjoying the atmosphere. Erwin asked for and received permission to take more pictures of his boyfriend and Eren returned the favour. He knew Eren had classes again next week, and these last few lazy hours were precious.

Erwin eventually settled on a pair of gloves for Mike that looked like they might actually fit his enormous hands. They’d known each other so long that it was almost a superfluous gesture. He paid
for them and declined a bag and tucked them away inside his coat to wrap up later.

“Right then,” he said, draping an arm over Eren’s shoulders. “Our duty is done, and the rest of the day is ours. How do you feel about a mid-morning snack of some kind? Are there any good places around here?”

“Hmm, let me think. I’m sure Mikasa recommended some places—”

Eren stumbled against him as someone in the crowd gave him a shove. Erwin steadied him as Eren found his feet again. The person who’d shoved him was still there, a short, blonde young woman in a white hoodie. She was staring at Eren like he had stepped on a puppy.

“You bastard,” she spat.

Eren opened his mouth to speak, but before he could get a word out she moved like lightning and swung her fist into Eren’s face. Eren had automatically moved to protect himself but she’d been too fast, and he staggered back, hands raised.

Erwin snarled, surging forward to protect Eren from his assailant without a moment’s hesitation. Erwin received a look of utter hatred from the attacker as he stepped in front of Eren, his fists bunched at his sides. Eren had doubled over slightly, his free hand on his face, and Erwin felt him claw at his coat with his other hand, trying to pull him back. Like hell; he might not be the fighter Levi was, but he was sure he could take her, and even if he couldn’t, he’d rather it be him than Eren. No one was going to hurt his boyfriend further; not while he was still conscious.

She was tense, but didn’t even look worried as Erwin loomed over her. Strange, given he was fairly sure he looked fucking terrifying, and this time his rage wasn’t an act for the cameras.

“Don’t!” Eren grabbed his arm and hauled him back, nearly pulling him off his feet. “She’ll break you in half,” he warned. His eyes were teary and his cheek was reddening, and he was staring at the woman in hurt disbelief. “What the hell, Annie?”

“You know her? That’ll make prosecution easier,” Erwin said through his teeth.

She scowled fiercely, her bottom lip trembling but instead of saying anything she shoved her hands into her hoodie and quickly darted off into the crowd. Erwin thought to follow her, but he couldn’t leave Eren. He’d got a good look at her anyway; he had no doubt the charge would stick.

“Christ, Eren are you okay?” He tilted his head up in his hands to get a better look. “We better get you some medical attention. What the fuck was that? Was she on drugs or something?”

“I know her,” Eren said.

“We need to report this to the police as well.”

“No!” Eren grabbed onto the lapels of his coat. “No police. That’s Annie. She’s one of Levi’s students.”

“Eren, she attacked you unprovoked. Look, let’s find you some ice and calm down a bit.”

“Okay. But no police!”

Erwin didn’t want to upset him further by arguing and he nodded, but he wanted to throw the book at this Annie. His heart was pounding and he was furious that he hadn’t been able to do anything. If he’d realised what she’d been about to do after she’d shoved Eren then he could have stopped her.
Probably.

One of Levi's students.

Maybe he was lucky he hadn't tried.

They found a cafe that was willing to give them some ice and Erwin ordered Eren a hot drink as well to help him calm down. He looked rather upset, but in a quiet way, and he kept shooting warning glances at Erwin, absolutely refusing to let him call the authorities.

“Come on, drink this,” Erwin said. Eren took the cup with a nod. Erwin pulled a chair close to him, feeling, for all his skill in helping people, utterly useless. “I'm going to call Levi.”

Eren looked at him. “Yeah, I think that's a good idea.”
“I’ll handle it,” Levi said, and hung up on Erwin.

He was sitting at his desk in the room he still thought of sometimes as Erwin’s, and he took a deep, irritated breath. He’d handle it. He didn’t want to; he hated this sort of thing and had no confidence in his ability to navigate these unfamiliar social waters. It was the sort of thing best left to Erwin.

But Erwin didn’t know Annie, and from the way he spoke he didn’t care to either. He had the luxury of choosing a side, the luxury of being explosively, ruthlessly angry if he wanted to be.

Levi wanted to be angry. When Erwin had said Eren had been assaulted it was like an eel had come to life in his stomach, a roiling, queasy sense of horror that had lasted until Erwin’s next sentence, that he was okay, that he was conscious, that he wasn’t bleeding or broken. But he was still hurt, and Levi wanted to rectify this injustice.

He stared at the phone in his hand for a couple of minutes, just thinking. He could guess how Annie had drawn the wrong conclusions, but he still didn’t understand why she’d reacted so violently. He’d always thought she was like him; reserved and careful, and not prone to using her fighting skills carelessly or for dubious reasons. So he had to swallow his rage, and talk to her, and sort this out, because there had to be a reason.

It what Eren would want him to do, he was sure. He thought Eren and Annie had gotten along fairly well; Eren was clearly in awe of her skills, and Annie seemed to like Eren, in her own way.

“Boss,” she answered almost immediately. Levi didn’t bother trying to decipher her mood over the phone.

“I need to talk to you. Are you free?”

“Yes, boss.” She didn’t sound surprised.

“I’ll text you my address. Get over here as soon as possible.” He hung up.

He had a class that day, and he kept his file open and called up his other students to cancel. It was such a rare occurrence that more than one of them wished him good luck, although he didn’t tell them why the class wouldn’t be running. Maybe they could hear the strain in his voice.

He had nothing to do but wait for Annie to show up. He didn’t think she had a car and he wasn’t sure how long it would take her to arrive. He felt like doing some cleaning but if she was still near the scene of the crime it wouldn’t take too long by bus and instead he calmed and distracted himself by getting down on the mat and doing a few push ups.

Annie knocked on the door about half an hour later. She had her hood up, and when Levi opened the door she just stood there, as tense as a deer about to take flight. Levi was slightly out of breath, but mostly calm. He put his anger at what she’d done to Eren aside, for now, and looked at her.

She didn’t quite look at him. He could see her trying to meet his eyes and failing.

He stepped aside and indicated she was to come in. She reminded him of Eren in the way she looked around the room, uncertain and interested in his space. Their relationship might have been deep but it was narrow; expressed only in physical acts of combat and a kind of wry, comfortable silence, and neither of them had ever expected her to see the inside of his apartment.
At some point, he'd come to trust Annie. He liked her as a fellow fighter, or he had. Now he didn't know what to think.

She wasn't carrying a bag, and she kept her hands inside her pockets as Levi closed the door behind her.

“Are we gonna fight, boss?”

It was the easy way, wasn't it? He was sure—utterly, totally sure, that if he fought her today he would beat her. His purpose would be pure and absolute. He would make no mistakes, whereas he could see how tense and uncertain she was; he'd force her into an error, open her up. But the sheer fact that the outcome was so predictable made any actual fight completely pointless, and besides-

“There's been enough violence for one day.” Levi led her into the kitchen. “Sit.” She sat. “Do you drink tea?”

“Yes, boss.”

He suspected if he'd offered her rat poison she would have said the same. She looked like she was braced for anything and determined to endure it.

Erwin would have had a plan by now. Some clever succession of lawyer's questions to turn her around and trap her and trick out the truth. Levi had nothing like that. He let her sit while he prepared tea in silence, watching the steam rise from the kettle just before it clicked off at a boil.

He set the teapot down in between them while the tea brewed and sat.

He got right to the point. “Okay, Annie, why'd you thump Eren? You of all people should know better than that.”

She took her hands out of her pockets and pushed her hood off her head, taking a deep breath.

“Eren's cheating on you.”

If she was waiting for a dramatic reaction, she was going to be disappointed.

“What makes you think that?”

“I saw him at the markets! All wrapped around this other guy-” She bit herself off. “I'm sorry, but I'm not mistaken. They were, you know, they weren't just friendly.”

“Big blond guy? Eyebrows?”

She nodded.


While Annie thought this through Levi poured them tea. Annie gripped the cup with both hands, her eyes wide as she stared down at it.

“I've screwed up,” she said softly.

“Yes,” Levi said. He didn't drink his tea either. “And Eren's relationships are irrelevant to that fact. Annie.” She snapped her gaze up to meet his, and he held it. “There are rules, Annie. We are not thugs; we are fighters. And that wasn't a fight. That was a cowardly, unprovoked attack and you are reliant only on Eren's good nature to keep you out of handcuffs, and to hold Erwin back; he's a
fucking lawyer for fuck's sake.”

Annie bit her lip.

“Forget the fucking cops,” Levi growled. “Because if you hurt Eren ever again, I will make you regret it.” Finally he let a bit of his rage off the leash and Annie's normally pale skin went even paler and red blotches appeared on her cheeks, but to her credit she didn't look away.

“Understood, boss,” she whispered. She looked down only when Levi forced himself to drop his shoulders.

Levi took a deep breath and sipped his tea.

“Annie, why did you hit Eren?” he asked again, more quietly.

For a while it looked like she wasn't going to answer.

“I thought.” She swallowed and tried again. “I thought you were being tossed aside. Taken for granted and replaced with someone better—” She shook her head. “I couldn't stand the thought of that happening, not to someone like you. You didn't deserve it. I got so angry, I couldn't stand looking at them, not for one more moment when you were somewhere else and didn't know what was going on, and I just—” She looked at her hand and made a fist before uncurling her fingers again. “I'm so sorry.”

Levi sighed, “I'm shit at this sort of shit, so I might be wrong, but this is about your wrist, isn't it?”

Annie looked at him and then down again, and cautiously sipped her tea, her brows knitted in an unhappy frown.

“Forget it,” Levi said. “It's not my concern.” He didn't want to know; he didn't do this sort of bullshit. They could fight it out later if they had to.

“My- my coach,” Annie began, stopped, and started again. “I went horseback riding. It was a reward for winning a junior championship. I always got to pick if I won. I've been skydiving, and bungee jumping and scuba diving, and this time I wanted to ride horses. And I fell, and broke my wrist.” She held out her left hand and rotated it slightly. Levi could see nothing wrong with the range of movement, but he'd picked up quite early that she favoured that joint, and no matter how she focused, she couldn't bring herself to be quite as brave with her left hand. He never exploited that weakness, although he never went easy on her for it either, but a competitor in serious competition would have no such scruples.

“I went through rehab, and training, and I returned to fighting at a professional level. I did everything I could. Everything he asked of me. But I couldn't win.” Her voice had started to waver. “I'd lost whatever it was that made me a champion, and then, and then it was like I'd ceased to exist. Like I'd never existed in the first place. I didn't matter. I only mattered if I could fight and win.”

Shit shit shit. He'd got to the heart of it all right, and it was somewhere he'd never meant to be. Tossed aside and replaced with someone better, she'd said. She'd looked through a pane of glass and seen her own reflection and he'd guessed it was something like that and he should have left well enough alone.

What did you do when your prized student, the girl who barely blinks, who treats physical pain as an old friend, sits in your kitchen and fights off tears you'd never imagined her shedding, he wondered.

Eren would know. He wouldn't even have to think about it. Compassion came effortlessly to him, or
rather, expressing it did. What would Eren do, he thought.

Levi stood up, pushing back his chair and walked around the end of the table. Annie glanced up at him in surprise as he put a hand on her shoulder.

“You didn't deserve that either,” he said, and hoped it was enough.

Annie looked up at him and then down again, and without warning she turned in her chair, wrapped her arms around his waist and buried her face in his stomach. Levi froze in sheer shock for a few moments as he felt rather than heard her stifle a sob in his shirt. He forced himself not to think about the likelihood of her snot getting on his clothes and put his other hand on her head and patted her gently. It was possibly the right thing to do, because she gripped him harder.

She was definitely getting snot on his shirt.

Levi felt deeply, deeply uncomfortable but at the same time relieved. There was something brittle about Annie, something that reminded him of himself; she carried a calcified shield against an indifferent world. He just wished it had been someone other than him who'd managed to dissolve it. What if he said the wrong thing now? So he said nothing, and stroked Annie's head and despite what she'd done to Eren his anger had ebbed away.

Everyone had their own pain, and how they dealt with it wasn't always fair or just or even forgivable, but there was no point in hating them for it.

Annie didn't cry for long. She swallowed the last few sobs and pulled away slightly.

“I wish you were my dad,” she said so quietly in a tearful voice that Levi almost didn't hear her.

What did you say to that?

Levi sighed, buying time while his brain scrambled for a response. “I'm afraid it's just boss to you,” he said finally.

Annie released him and Levi stepped back. Her face was still blotchy, and her eyes were red, but she gave him one of her rare, sad little smiles.

“Boss is good enough for me, boss. That is, if after what I've done you'll still train me.”

“I will,” Levi said. “If you make it right.”

“I'll try,” she said. “Can I just, um, where's the bathroom?”

Levi pointed it out and she hurried away and he heard her turn on the taps and splash her face. Levi took the opportunity to duck into his room and find a clean shirt before he sat down at the table and waited for her to return.

“You're tea's probably cold,” he said. His was, but he drank it anyway and poured himself a warmer cup from the pot.

“I don't drink tea much,” she said, rejoining him at the table.

“I can get you something else,” he said, but she raised the cup to her lips and drank the whole thing before putting it back down on the table.

“May I have another, boss?”
He poured and told her that she could have milk or sugar in it if she wanted and she asked for sugar and when Levi handed her the jar she put two spoonfuls in. Levi winced, but didn't say anything. At least she hadn't asked for jello.

“I'm going to call Eren,” Levi said.

“Understood.”

Annie waited at the table while Levi drifted away to make the call. Eren picked up almost immediately.

“Levi!”

“Hey, are you okay?”

“Yeah. She socked me pretty hard but my head's pretty hard too. Have you talked to her? Is she okay?”

Levi smiled faintly. “Well, she's here. At my place. Do you want to talk to her?”

“Mm. So I should come over?”

“Yeah. I'll see you soon.” He hung up.

“I don't know what I should say,” Annie said.

“Don't look at me for advice, I never know what to say,” Levi said.

They drank tea in silence, Annie lost in her own thoughts. Levi recognised the distinctive sound of the Aston's engine not too much time later, and he got up to let Eren and Erwin in.

The side of Eren's face was red and swollen but he smiled at Levi and rushed to reassure him that he was okay.

“She wasn't wearing gloves so it probably hurt her hand more than it hurt me,” he said, as Levi cupped his chin and looked him over carefully. Annie stood back by the kitchen table, hands clasped in front of her and her head bowed, waiting.

As soon as Erwin saw her he narrowed his eyes, but Levi caught his gaze and shook his head slightly. This wasn't Erwin's problem to sort out. It was up to Eren what happened next.

“Hey, Annie,” Eren said cautiously, when Levi had finally satisfied himself that he wasn't about to keel over and die.

“Hey, Eren.”

“Go and have some tea,” Levi said, giving Eren a gentle push. “We'll be outside.” Annie had bared her heart to him, but it was up to her how much she wanted to share with Eren. Levi grabbed Erwin's arm and tugged him outside. “Come on. Have a little faith.” Erwin still looked like he wanted to hurt Annie.

There was a difference there, Levi supposed. He'd seen how much Eren could take physically; he'd watched him fight a dozen times by now, and he'd seen him take punches and get tossed to the ground, but for Erwin, who hadn't, it had to be a shock.

“He'll be fine,” Levi said.
They stood on the front steps, Levi with his back to the brickwork and Erwin leaning on the metal railing opposite him, idly picking bits of flaking paint off the metal.

“I know. He's not made of glass. But I just, shit.” Erwin ran his hand over his hair. “She shoved him before she punched him. If I'd reacted faster, if I'd realised what she was going to do I could have stepped between them or pulled Eren away or something. If you'd been there you would have stopped her, I'm sure of it.”

“If I'd been there she wouldn't have hit him in the first place,” Levi said. Erwin raised his eyebrows and Levi continued. “She thought she'd caught him cheating on me.”

“Of course she did. That's still no excuse.”

“I know. I trained her better than that.”

Erwin frowned and fretted and Levi realised that he was glad someone else cared about Eren as much as he did. He didn't feel jealous; he felt that Eren deserved nothing less, and he didn't doubt Erwin's sincerity for a moment. Eren was lucky to have him. It was a strange feeling.

“Misunderstandings like this are going to happen though,” Erwin said. “Even if this isn't a common outcome.”

“Yes.”

“And it's going to be worse if you don't tell people,” Erwin said pointedly.

Levi narrowed his eyes. “I do not want relationship advice from you. I know, all right? I just need to-I don't know, what the fuck do I do? Send out a mass email?”

“I thought you didn't want my advice.”

Levi sighed irritably. How did people do this stuff? Maybe Eren would have some ideas. Erwin smiled indulgently at him, but thankfully kept his great fat mouth shut.

They could hear Eren and Annie talking, but the words were indistinct. Still, the tone was soft and even, and both Erwin and Levi relaxed after a while, reassured that things were going as well as could be expected.

“Change of subject,” Erwin said. “Any idea what Eren's costume is going to be for the Halloween party?”

Levi shook his head. “I haven't spoken with him about it. I wasn't even sure he was going; I presume his other friends are doing something for it as well, and he might have preferred to go with them.”

“They're trick or treating, apparently, but he said he was going to Hange's party instead.”

“Trick or treating? Aren't they a bit old for it?”

Erwin shrugged. “Apparently not. Halloween has changed a lot since I was their age.”

“We're so fucking old,” Levi muttered. “Why do you ask, anyway?”

“He was evasive when I asked him and now I'm curious. I assume you're going as a pirate again.”

Levi shrugged. Pretty much every year he put on a white shirt and an eye patch and said he was a pirate and left it at that. He didn't really see the point in playing dress-ups. But this year, if Eren was
making the effort to do something special, maybe he should as well.

Erwin put in a huge effort every year. Weeks in advance he'd raid HotFreeRange's props department for the best bits and pieces and show up as something ridiculous and glittery. One year he'd gone as the Goblin King and the glitter had been all too literal and he'd left sparkles in his wake for a week afterwards. So Levi doubted he could outshine him, but he could probably out-sexy him.

“Maybe I'll do something different this year,” he mused.

Erwin raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“Mm.”

They were interrupted in their summoning of the spirit of friendly competition by Annie's raised voice.

“Please, Eren!”

They glanced at each other and Levi abandoned his spot against the wall and went back inside, Erwin at his heels.

“You don't have to,” Eren was saying. He and Annie were standing in Levi's living room, and he glanced at them as they walked in. “She wants me to hit her.”

“It's only fair,” Annie said. “Just do it. I deserve it.”

Eren looked at them for guidance. Levi shrugged. Eren didn't use fights the way he and Annie did, but even if he had, Levi could understand baulking at taking a free shot at someone.

“Is that really going to help anything?” Erwin asked.

“Yes,” Annie said firmly.

Oddly enough that seemed to make up Eren's mind.

“Okay Annie.”

She braced herself and Eren stepped forward sharply and punched her in the shoulder. It was a nicely-executed jab, and he hadn't put everything he had into it, but the sound it made suggested that it would bruise at least. Annie had clearly been expecting it to the face instead and was caught off-balance before righting herself with her usual speed.

Eren wasn't done yet, however. As soon as she recovered he stepped up to her and wrapped his arms around her shoulders.

“It's okay, Annie. I forgive you.”

She froze, wearing the same expression Levi suspected he'd worn when she'd hugged him earlier. She didn't hug him back, but she didn't pull away either, just standing there and accepting Eren's embrace until he pulled away.

When he did so she looked at him for a long moment and hesitantly offered him a smile.

“Thanks.” Then she looked away and tucked her hair behind her ear and Levi was so proud of having the sweetest boyfriend in the country he had to resist the urge to walk over and hug the air out of him. He didn't realise until that moment how relieved he was that Eren and Annie were able to
work things out.

Erwin looked thoughtful, and somewhat bemused by the strange customs of Levi's students, but Levi knew him well enough to know he wasn't hiding much anger any more. Whatever had happened, it was on the way to being over.

Annie stepped up to Erwin, and looked him in the eye.

“I apologise, sir. I misunderstood.”

“You did,” Erwin said. “But if Eren says it's settled then it is, as far as I'm concerned.”

“Yes, sir.” She looked around at the three of them. “I should be going.”

“I'll see you next week,” Eren said.

She nodded and faced Levi and bowed.

“Boss.”

Shit. He had to follow through, didn't he? It was the right thing to do. Annie deserved better than what she'd got so far.

“You're welcome here,” Levi said. “Just call ahead first.”

She didn't look like she trusted herself to answer, and she nodded and fled. The three of them listened to her footsteps on the front steps and then the dead grass crunching under her feet as she strode away.

Eren sighed. And then he walked over and hugged Levi fiercely.

“Poor Annie,” he said against Levi's neck.

“Soft-hearted...” Levi murmured, wrapping an arm around him.

Eren raised his head and gave him a knowing smile.

“I know, I know,” Levi muttered, ruffling his hair. “We're all fucking soft-hearted.” He glanced at Erwin. “I suppose you want some coffee?”

“If it's not too much trouble.”
Levi's class ran as usual that week but when it ended, rather than being first out the door, Annie hung around for a while, like Eren, waiting for the other students to pay their money and finish talking with Levi before approaching him.

The three of them left together.

Annie didn't say much; she mentioned the colder weather and said she'd been invited to a party for Halloween and that she might actually go this year. She seemed to run out of words after that. Other than that strange conversation in Levi's house, which consisted of her apologising and trying to explain how much she cared about Levi without actually coming out and saying it, it was the greatest number of words he'd ever heard from her at one time.

“Well, I'll leave you to it then,” she nodded at them both and walked off.

Eren smiled.

“I hope she has a nice time,” Eren said.

“Yeah.”

They stood in silence in for a while. Eren was glad he understood, despite Annie's clumsy way with words, how much she cared for Levi. He already knew what a caring person Levi was, and even though his face was still bruised and a bit sore if he prodded it, he felt the whole thing might have turned out for the best in the end. Levi deserved more people who cared about him, and he deserved to know when people cared about him, because Eren wasn't sure he'd notice most of the time.

It was too public for Levi to be comfortable with kisses, but he touched his arm when they said goodbye, and Eren knew what he meant.

Half his face covered in concealer, Eren went back to work as well as back to class. He told Hange he'd done the damage practising MMA and they told him to be a bit more careful in future, and shuffled the schedule so he was only in background and minor parts that week.

After he'd done filming for the day, Eren wandered around the racks of costumes for a while. He needed a costume for the Halloween party. By now he'd heard enough people talking about to know that the dressing up was often taken pretty seriously at HotFreeRange.

He probably needed some help with this, because he'd been thinking pretty hard about what he wanted to wear but now faced with actual clothes he was feeling a bit lost.

Mike was making coffee in the break room and when Eren asked for Nanaba he directed him to one of the studios. Nanaba was hard at work going over the results of a shoot, selecting and editing the shots she wanted to use.

“Hey Eren, what's up?” she asked, looking up when he knocked on the door frame.

“Um, hi. Sorry if I'm interrupting. I was wondering if you could give me some advice. About my Halloween costume.”
“Sure, although Mike handles more of the prop stuff than I do.”

“So I was, um, thinking.” Eren shuffled his feet. “I might wear a dress to the Halloween party.”

There, he’d said it.

Nanaba didn’t look all that surprised. She smiled at him. “Okay, have you thought about how?”

“How?”

“Mm. There are three ways you could go about it. First, you could dress as a woman, that is, you could try and pass. Secondly, you could go in drag, which is slightly different; it’s a performance of femininity, but you’re not necessarily trying to pass. That’s the short explanation, anyway. And the third way is just to be a man in a dress.”

“That’s it!” Eren said quickly. “The third one.”

“Well, that sounds like fun. Let’s see what we’ve got that’ll fit you. Just let me send these to Hange.”

Nanaba turned back to the computer and finished off while Eren waited.

He hadn’t been lying when he’d told Nanaba he’d be okay with wearing a dress; if Hange had suggested it for a film he wouldn’t have thought twice. But this was different; he was doing this for two reasons only, the looks that Levi and Erwin had given him at Erwin’s birthday dinner. Since that night he’d been to bed with both of them, and knew he most definitely wanted to please them the way they pleased him. He wanted them to look at him, admire him the way he was admired when he worked for Hange. He was growing to love the powerful feeling he got in front of the cameras, not so much when he was having sex but when he was showing off, flirting, teasing the lens. That was his favourite part; to be desirable.

Eren and Nanaba went back to the wardrobe department and Eren stood back while Nanaba went swiftly through the racks of clothes. Occasionally she’d hold something up and then shake her head before putting it back. Even more rarely she’d take something out and put it aside.

“Okay, let’s try these on,” she said. There were about four dresses in the pile. “The party's two days away so there's enough time to make a few minor alterations if need be.”

“You don't have to go to so much trouble-” Eren began.

“Eren,” Nanaba handed him the first dress. “This sort of thing is important, I really believe that. I have the luxury of working here and forgetting sometimes what the outside world is like, but just because I'm lucky doesn't mean I shouldn't do what I can. I really think the world would be a better place if more boys wore dresses sometimes, and didn't feel like it was something to hate themselves for. And besides.” She looked him up and down, “You've got real potential. Now try that on.”

Nanaba had taken pictures of him naked from almost every angle, but she still politely looked away while he tried to struggle into the dresses. The only one that really fit was a chocolate brown colour, strapless with a slit up the thigh. It had a kind of silky texture that Eren didn't mind at all. Nanaba had to zip him into it because Eren had no idea how to reach the zip but when she’d done so it actually stayed up.

“Hm. Walk around a bit.”

Eren swished around, expecting the dress to fall off him but it remained in place.

“I'm pretty sure that one's already been altered a bit to fit a more masculine body,” Nanaba said.
“What do you think?”

“It’s okay. It feels kind of weird. Tight around the middle but bare shoulders. And my leg is kind of naked.”

“Are you planning on shaving them?”

“What?” Every time Eren moved it flashed his left leg; there was no possible way to hide it. “Um, do I have to?” He really wasn't sure he wanted to go to that much effort.

“Of course not.”

“They are a bit hairy though. Do I have any other options?”

“If you got some opaque stockings or tights that would probably do it. Let's see if we've got some shoes. I know we have shoes for guys, it's a pretty common kink. What's your size?” Eren was left to stare at himself in the mirror while Nanaba sorted through a large bin of shoes.

“Not high heels please,” Eren said.

Nanaba sighed. “You're making it difficult, Eren.”

The only shoes with a low heel that would fit were a pair of shiny green ones.

“At least they match your eyes,” Nanaba said, rubbing the dust off them with her sleeve.

Eren clumped around in the shoes. He knew the heels were low but they didn't feel low when he was actually walking on them.

“Eren, don't mince,” Nanaba said. “I know they make you want to, but forget that they're heels; imagine they're cowboy boots. As Tim Curry was told on the set of Rocky Horror, 'walk with your cock.' Strut. Yeah, that's better.”

“I feel like I'm gonna stand on the dress,” Eren said, pacing up and down between the racks of clothes.

“You're fine.”

Eren jumped and nearly lost his balance when Mike opened the door.

“There you are,” he said to Nanaba. “I wondered where you'd disappeared to. Did I interrupt?” he looked amused.

“We're working on Eren's Halloween costume,” Nanaba said.

“I see. What's he going as, mint chocolate?”

Eren hadn't actually given any thought to what his costume was meant to represent, other than his own daring and his desire to surprise his boyfriends. Nanaba looked a bit nonplussed as well.

“Well, he does have brown and green theme.”

“Is mint chocolate even a costume?” Eren asked.

“Why not? We could make some mint leaves out of sparkly paper and put them in your hair.”
“Peppermint oil,” Mike said. “It's practically a costume all to itself.”

“Um.”

They were looking at each other now, rather than him, firing back and forth suggestions.

“Maybe green eye-shadow and brown lipstick.”

“I don't want to wear make up.”

“Green accessories.”

“Guys!”

They stopped.

“Sorry Eren,” Mike said. “Got carried away.”

“Well it might not be such a bad idea. I didn't really have any plans to go as anything. But no eye shadow.”

“He's gonna be so cute,” Nanaba said.

“Cuter than me?” Mike asked.

Nanaba rolled her eyes, and reached up to ruffle his hair, which seemed to mollify Mike.

Eren decided he'd leave the costume here and get changed just before the party. He didn't feel like walking past Jean dressed as mint chocolate, even if his roommate was in much better mood now he'd talked things out with Armin, who wouldn't be attending the party this year.

Nanaba told him he should buy his own stockings and gave him some suggestions as to where he might do so. Eren asked Nanaba and Mike to keep the whole thing a secret, which seemed to delight them both.

It had all gone much better than Eren had hoped, and he found himself wondering what Erwin and Levi would wear.

Eren went direct to the studio after his last class for the week, to help set up. Mike and Hange were carrying equipment out of the largest studio to make room for the party. Hange was surprised to see Eren so early but happy to have the extra help.

Mike was already in costume, looking distractingly good in the shredded remains of a shirt and torn jeans. He had ears and a tail as well; a good old fashioned werewolf, he'd told Eren. Nanaba showed up later having gone to buy supplies in the van. He was dressed as a vampire, complete with shirt open to his navel. He was so pale he barely needed make up. The four of them unloaded crates of drinks and plates of Halloween themed food that had Eren wondering just what the budget was for this party. It all looked pretty good, and he was glad he'd blown off his other friends to attend, regardless of Levi and Erwin.

They set up some music and hung fake cobwebs over everything, and at some point early in the evening Hange had gotten both into costume and into character. They'd wound a sheet into a toga around themselves and accessorised with a crown of grape leaves and a bottle of wine.

“Dionysus will lead the festivities this evening!” they declared. “Did you know I made a dildo out of an olive branch once? I'd pledged to be a mortal's lover but he died, so I had to do it myself,” they
told Eren, an arm draped around his shoulders. They seemed drunk already, although they didn't smell of it.

“I see.”

“Join my thiasus, oh beautiful youth!” they said, and skipped away again.

Mike sighed heavily. “Well, we're not going to get any more help from them this evening. Eren could you get the rest of the ice out of the van?”

“Sure.”

They kept Eren working and unable to slip away until the other guests started showing up and Mike started the music. Hange might have half-arsed their costume, but they made up for it by staying resolutely in character, while almost everyone else had gone the extra mile. Eren kept getting asked where his costume was and he decided it was time to get dressed before Levi or Erwin showed up.

Nanaba had to help him into his dress again, and he'd put on his snuggest pair of boxer briefs underneath so they wouldn't mess with the lines of the dress. He didn't have the guts to go commando with that slit so high up his leg. He'd found some black stockings as instructed, and they mostly hid the hairs on his legs, and only little bit of skin was visible just above the top. He thought, well, hoped, it looked rather inviting.

“I made you this,” Nanaba said. “It's just green paper and glitter glued to a hairclip so it's not going to last long.” He'd cut and folded to make it look like a sprig of glittery mint leaves and he carefully clipped it into Eren's hair. “There. Oh. And Mike got you this.” He handed him a tiny bottle. As soon as Eren took the lid off he was assaulted by a wave of peppermint scent.

“This stuff is strong,” he said, holding it away from his face.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t put on too much if you use it.”

He was arranging his hairpiece when Hange burst in.

“Nanaba!” Their eyes were alight with delight. “Hello Eren, you look lovely,” they said distractedly. “But you're not going to believe this!”

“What?” Nanaba asked.

“Levi.” Hange grinned widely. “Has dressed up. Big time.” Hange laughed, apparently from sheer delight, waving their wine bottle around, which Eren noticed was now only half full. “Nanaba, get a camera; that's an order from your god.”

“What makes you think I worship you?” Nanaba asked, but Hange had reeled away again. He sighed. “They do this every year, you know. Dress up as a god and make mayhem.”

Eren was now intensely curious as to what Levi was wearing, and he finished putting on his costume in a hurry, splashing some peppermint oil on his neck and then regretting it as the fumes cleaned out his sinuses.

“Wow,” he wheezed while Nanaba laughed. “So how do I look?”

Nanaba gave him a thumbs up. “Really cute. Erwin's gonna love it.”

“That obvious, huh?”
“Hm, just a little. Anyway, I gotta get my camera before Hange banishes me to the underworld or something. I'll see you in there.”

As soon as the door closed behind Nanaba, Eren realised he was really quite nervous. Maybe he should have asked Hange for some of that wine. He turned back the mirror again, and smoothed down the dress. He could hear music from the party and he knew it was time to go.

Walk with your cock, he thought to himself as he strode down the corridor, his heels clicking. He realised where he’d once pretended the cameras were Erwin and Levi, he was now pretending they were merely cameras and it was just a performance.

The door was open, and he could see the room was quite full of people and he took a deep breath and stepped in. All he could smell was peppermint.

The decorated studio looked much better with people in it. Earlier they’d dragged in most of the furniture from the break room and some people were already sitting down with plates of food, or clustered around the buffet. Those that weren’t occupied with those things were watching the main attraction: Levi and Erwin.

They were the centre of attention. Nanaba was down on one knee in front of them, taking photographs while almost everyone else watched.

Erwin drew the eye first. He’d slicked his hair back to make room on his forehead for a pair of curving ram's horns, or at least, a close plastic facsimile of the same, and he was wearing his leather pants again, this time with a dark red frock coat that clearly came from the props room because it was slightly too small for him. He’d managed to do up only one of the buttons, and bare skin was visible above and below it. He wasn’t wearing a shirt underneath. He was tossing an apple up and down in one hand and smirking; the perfect, handsome demon. Eren’s hands grew sweaty just looking at him and he swallowed a lump in his throat.

Eren didn’t realise what Levi was at first. He was wearing a snug grey suit and a white cravat, and he was wearing obvious make-up, shadowed under his brows to make his eyes big and gleaming and hollowed under his cheeks. It was only when he moved his head that Eren saw the black furry ears on the top of his head.

“Fuck, he's a cat,” Eren breathed, the heavy make-up suddenly making sense. He'd never seen Levi dressed up before; he spent most of his time in jeans or sweats, and the effect was startling. He looked like he belonged in a magazine. It was also the most amazing and adorable thing Eren had ever seen and he gave thanks that he was there to see it.

They were both playing it up for the camera, Levi sort of sinuously posing and Erwin sneering seductively, and somehow they seemed to go together, despite the mismatched costumes. Two wild creatures stepped into the human world on this haunted eve, to cause innocent young mortals' hearts to flutter. At least, that's how Eren saw it, and when he joined them he'd be the beauty to the beasts. He was glad he'd made the effort to be beautiful.

Hange spotted him first.

“Erwin! Your boyfriend's here.”

Eren felt that the entire room had turned to look at him, but he might have just imagined it. He didn't look; he was focusing on Erwin and Levi.

“He smells delicious,” he heard Ymir say as he stepped forward. He felt his dress swishing around
his legs, and he lifted his head and strode towards them, his heart pounding.

He saw Erwin bend his head and say a couple of words in Levi's ear, and Levi responded with a nod, but neither of them took their eyes off him as he approached. He looked from one to the other when he was close enough. Levi was smiling, actually smiling in public, and Eren could see he had cute little fangs to go with his ears. Erwin's jaw was slightly dropped, and both of them looked up from his feet to his face and back again, trying to take him in.

He heard the click of Nanaba's camera but didn't turn to look at him.

“Hey, guys,” he said. He seemed to have struck them both speechless, and his heart soared. “Happy Halloween.”

“Yeah, same to you.” Levi found his voice first.

“You look beautiful,” Erwin said. He inhaled. “You smell pretty appetising too.”

“I'm uh, meant to be chocolate mint,” Eren said, feeling a bit silly.

“My new favourite flavour,” Erwin said, in a low voice.

Eren flushed; he didn't feel silly any more. He knew by now what their expressions meant. He took a deep breath, peppermint flavoured, and managed to keep his cool. “You guys look great too,” Eren said. “Erwin, I thought you said Levi didn't dress up much.”

“I think he had someone to impress this year,” Erwin murmured.

Levi just shrugged gracefully, but he didn't deny it and Eren felt inordinately pleased. The three of them stood in an awkward circle while the party restarted around them. Neither of them seemed quite game to touch him until Levi spoke suddenly.

“Can I dance with you?” he asked.

Erwin looked slightly surprised but he smiled and made a half step backwards, and Eren guessed Levi had asked first to make sure Erwin was okay with it. Right now he was Eren's only official boyfriend, after all.

Levi held his hand out and Eren took it.

“I'm not really used to these shoes,” Eren warned him.

“I'll catch you if you trip,” Levi promised. Close up his eyes looked so blue when ringed with eyeliner. Mike was in charge of the music and seemed determined to keep the playlist firmly in the first half of the twentieth century, and so those souls drunk or confident enough to be dancing already were attempting various different dance steps to old timey tunes that Eren didn't recognise. Historia's fairy wings nearly took Levi's eye out as they made their way onto the patch of free space that was designated the dance floor.

Levi took the lead, and in these shoes Eren wasn't going to argue. Levi wrapped an arm around his waist and pulled him in close. Eren put his hand on his shoulder, slightly startled by the move; Levi rarely was so touchy in public.

“Do you know how to dance?” he asked.

“Mm. A little.”
Levi started him off telling him which way to step, but it wasn’t complicated and he soon got the hang of it.

“You know,” Levi said. “I almost regret promising to share you tonight. I bet I could sneak you off right now without Erwin noticing.”

“That’s what Erwin asked you when I walked in?” Eren asked.

“Yeah,” Levi said softly. “When this comes off.” He ran a finger up the zip. “I want to be there, and if that means he’s there too I can deal with it. What do you think?”

“I think I’d like that.” Eren smiled, a little breathless. He hadn’t really dared hope for another threesome; it had been something the other two weren’t entirely comfortable with and that was fine, but apparently all they’d needed was a bit of incentive. I have so much power, Eren realised.

Levi spun him out and Eren clumsily followed his direction before being pulled back in again. He was surprised Levi was being so open; he was aware of others’ eyes on them as they danced. He wasn’t sure where Erwin had got to. The buffet maybe.

Out and back and in close and Eren could feel Levi’s breath on his face when they stepped in again.

“You reek,” Levi muttered and Eren told him about Mike’s peppermint oil. Levi smiled, “You really went all out.”

“It was for you guys,” Eren said.

“We know. We appreciate it. We’re going to make sure you know just how much we appreciate it,” he promised. His wicked look faded into something softer, but it was hard to see in the dim and shifting lights. “Eren,” he said softly.

“Yeah?”

“Hang on.”

The song was coming to an end, building to a crescendo and when the music swelled instead of spinning Eren Levi dipped him, supporting him with one arm while Eren clung a bit nervously to his neck to find himself suddenly approaching the horizontal in mid air in unfamiliar shoes. He could feel his hair clip threaten to fall off.

“Eren.” Levi’s face was right above his, and he gazed down at him.

Oh.

Oh. Go right ahead, he thought.

Eren smiled and closed his eyes and a moment later he felt Levi’s lips on his own. Maybe people were pointing and shuffling and probably politely tugging on Erwin’s arm with an apologetic expression but Eren didn’t really care. It would get sorted out soon enough and right now Levi was staking at least a partial claim and Eren shivered and kissed him back.

When Levi lifted his head, Eren could feel the arm underneath him starting to quiver from the strain of holding him up and Levi righted them both.

Eren took a deep breath.

“So we’re official?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Levi said, and suddenly he ducked his head as if he just realised what he’d done and wanted
to find the nearest table and hide under it.

“About time.” Erwin's voice cut in over the music, probably deliberately so. The crowd parted and Erwin was grinning at them as he approached. Eren held his hand out to him and Erwin took it and pulled him close and kissed him firmly. Then he looked at Levi while Levi looked anywhere but him.

“Yes well-”

“Good,” Erwin said. “Now you don't need to send an email.”

“Shut the fuck up, Erwin.”

Eren grinned and reached out and took Levi's hand and he heard the click of Nanaba's camera, but it didn't matter he hadn't noticed until then because he was already smiling.

Chapter End Notes

As I'd dared to hope, there's fanart for this chapter.

Syn has drawn a very cute and NSFW Eren. Also SFW Erwin and Levi. Petora-raru has also drawn Eren, this one is SFW.

Tanekore has done an amazing sketch of Levi.
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

There's some awesome fanart for last chapter that's been posted. Syn has drawn a very cute and NSFW Eren. Petora-raru has also drawn Eren, this one is SFW. Hakorin has also drawn Eren here, SFW. I love how inspired everyone got by the dress.

Tanekore has done an amazing sketch of Levi. Go check them out and shower them with likes.

If Eren thought he would spend the rest of the evening being teased discreetly by his two boyfriends, desperate to get him somewhere more private, he was in for a surprise. Erwin waltzed him around the dance floor for five minutes and told him how beautiful he was, but once the song had ended he suggested they head to the buffet before all the good stuff was gone.

Eren must have looked a bit disappointed, and Erwin grinned and leaned in. Eren could see the clear gummy stuff sticking his horns to his head.

“Pace yourself,” he said. “Enjoy the party; it only happens once a year, after all. We can wait.” With that he turned his attention to the food, quite deliberately, but he kept smiling.

Eren soon realised that they'd made a good call. Anticipation added an extra frisson to an already deeply interesting atmosphere, not just between the three of them but in the room in general.

Eren had never actually been to a grown-up party like this one before. He'd been to parties where people had been drinking, usually illegally, and at this one there was wine and alcoholic punch, clearly labelled, freely available alongside the lemonade and orange juice, but unlike at the adolescent house parties he'd attended there was little excitement surrounding it; it was just there. He saw Historia floating by in her sparkly fairy outfit holding a glass of wine, and he supposed no one would much care if he had something to drink.

He decided against it in the end. He was already feeling a bit light-headed and buzzy and the last thing he wanted to do was lose co-ordination in these shoes. Instead he loaded his plate with little pastries and sandwiches cut into Halloween-appropriate shapes and drifted around being congratulated on his outfit and admiring the costumes.

He'd expected good-natured teasing about his romantic conquests but mostly what he got was quiet respect, and he realised that in acquiring Levi he'd been seen to do the almost impossible.

Levi himself seemed to have disappeared and the grey coat he was wearing didn't help Eren find him. He eventually located him leaning against the wall, stuffing his face and looking harassed when anyone came to talk to him, which seemed to be often.

“Is he okay, do you think?” Eren asked Erwin, nudging him with his elbow as his hands were both full.

“If he's not he brought it on himself,” Erwin said. “He's probably having an existential crisis or something. Feel free to try and cheer him up if you want.”
Erwin seemed more interested in catching up and having his photo taken with groups of people and Eren drifted over to Levi.

“Regretting it already?” he asked, smiling hopefully to let Levi know it was a joke.

“Mm. Somewhat.”

“I'm sorry.”

“I didn't mean you should be sorry. I'm relieved that everyone knows now as well. I don't like lying to people, even if it's just by omission. But on the other hand, maybe I should have sent an email instead.”

“I thought it was really romantic,” Eren said.

Levi scowled at him and Eren laughed. Yeah, he'd discovered it now; Levi's secret romantic streak, once buried deep now out for all to see.

“It's that fucking dress,” Levi said. “I can't think straight.”

“I'm glad you like it.” He didn't feel silly in it any more, but he did feel rather undressed. He was very aware of the few inches of skin between the top of his stockings and his boxers, even if there wasn't much of it on display.

“So are you wearing panties underneath?” Levi asked.

“No!” Eren declared loudly, spluttering around a gulp of coke and turning red. Several people turned to look at them and Levi appeared irritated by the attention. Well, served him right.

“Stop teasing him,” Erwin said, appearing out of the crowd. “For now.”

“Tch.” Levi's plate was empty and he looked down at it for a few moments before walking off, presumably to refill it.

“Does he really enjoy these things, or is he just here for the food?” Eren asked.

“You'd have to ask him yourself to be certain, but I think he does. He just prefers to observe people he likes having a good time rather than participate.”

Ymir approached them next, nodding at Erwin and then bowing low in front of Eren. She was dressed as a gangster, or maybe a private detective, in a pinstripe suit and hat.

“Wanna dance, cutie?” she asked with a feral smile that suited her quite a lot.

“Um. Sure. Okay.” She grabbed his hand and hauled him off towards the dance floor and when he glanced back Erwin just waved a skewer at him and Eren put his plate down on a table as he went past.

“Your stockings clash with your dress you know,” Ymir said, confidently taking the lead.

“Oh, do they?”

“Well, it's not bad for first try.”

Ymir danced a lot faster than either Levi or Erwin and Eren wasn't as comfortable in her presence and he stumbled a few times, but he was getting the hang of it by the end.
“Now this cutie,” Ymir took Historia's arm. “Needs to dance with this cutie.” She practically pushed them together and stepped back to admire her handiwork.

Historia laughed. “You look really nice, Eren.”

In fact, he seemed to get a lot of attention from the ladies, more than he expected, and now he'd worked out a few steps he was confident enough on the dance floor. He had to prise himself away to get more food in the end. He was introduced to a lot of people he forgot instantly; mostly partners of actors or ex-actors who stayed in touch.

The evening wore on and people got noisier and kept forgetting where they'd left half-finished glasses and Hange had maintained a disruptive level of drunkenness all evening that Eren had decided was part of their costume, but the atmosphere didn't get meaner or more charged. No one snuck off to make out with anyone else and Eren realised that most of the people in the room had probably already had sex with everyone they'd cared to. It made for a relaxed atmosphere.

Instead the jokes got worse and the dancing got better as people loosened up. Someone managed to prise Mike away from the sound system and the music got a bit better too. Eren ran across Erwin quite regularly, and they'd exchange smiles; Erwin seemed very pleased that Eren was having a good time.

Levi was harder to find, but Eren caught him occasionally, just watching him. He seemed to have calmed down a lot, and Eren was relieved to see him talking to people and he took to sitting on the couches rather than lurking in a corner.

“You've tamed our very own Grumpy Cat,” Hange said, wrapping an arm around Eren's bare shoulders.

“I heard that,” Levi said from a nearby couch.

Hange ignored him. “I don't know who to congratulate more.” Their smile faded into something fonder and the act dropped for the first time that evening. “Good luck, all of you.”

“Thanks, Hange.”

“Hange,” Erwin loomed out of the crowd like the Prince of Darkness he was, at least until he smiled. “Isn't it about time?” he said meaningfully.

“Want to leave early, do you?” Their glasses glittered.

“Time for what?” Eren asked.

Erwin and Hange's smiles were starting to look eerily similar.

“It's a tradition,” Hange said. They released Eren and reeled through the crowd, repeating, “It's time, it's time!”

“You too, pussy cat,” Erwin said, looking over the back of the couch at Levi.

“I know.”

All around the room people were putting glasses aside and gathering in the centre. The room had gone strangely quiet, and then Eren heard the music.

“It's astounding,” Erwin declared theatrically, his voice carrying across the crowd. “Time is fleeting.
Madness takes its toll. But listen closely.”

“Not for very much longer!” Hange recited the other half of the dialogue, standing on a chair.

Eren realised he was grinning. He realised the whole room was grinning and practically vibrating as they waited for the music’s cue. Erwin had told him once that HotFreeRange was his family, and Eren realised he understood now; this was a family, with members that might come and go, but no lesser for that, with its own rituals and traditions.

Eren wasn't totally sure of the words, but when everyone else started to sing along he did his best, and the chorus nearly raised the roof.

“Let's do the time warp again!”

Levi was lost in the crowd for the first couple of verses, and Eren's heart nearly leaped out of his chest when he bounded up onto the couch at the appropriate point and howled, “Like you're under sedation!” He ducked back down again once his line was delivered but Eren hopped up as much as he dared on his shoes to catch a glimpse of him dutifully dancing along with the others. Eren realised they’d done this so often it was practically rehearsed.

When the song ended everyone cheered and whooped and Erwin stepped up behind Eren and wrapped his arms around his waist.

“Now we can go home,” he said into his ear.

Eren wasn't sure he was ready to leave he was having such a nice time and he turned his head to say so, but when he looked into Erwin's eyes he found the words dried up in his mouth. He really had been holding back, and Eren swallowed.

He wasn't surprised when he felt Levi's hand on his arm.

“That was some nice dancing,” Eren told him.

Levi smiled a bit ruefully and Eren realised he'd lost the fangs, probably so he could eat.

“Your place?” Levi asked Erwin.

“Mm. More room.”

“I need to get my bag first,” Eren said. “It's got my clothes in it.”

“Where you're going you won't need clothes,” Erwin joked. “We'll meet you out the front.”

Eren nodded and darted away. He sought out Nanaba and Hange and thanked them for the advice and the party respectively and grabbed his bag from the break room.

Levi and Erwin were waiting for him in the parking lot, their breath steaming in front of their faces. Levi looked warm enough in his suit but Erwin was trying without much success to close his coat over his chest a bit more. Eren shivered as the cold bit into his bare shoulders and arms, and his stockings didn't do much to keep him warm either.

Both Eren and Erwin had brought their cars but Eren was quite happy to get a lift.

“Eren sits in the front,” Erwin said, unlocking the Aston. “No one makes out in this car unless it's with me.”
Levi actually looked a bit disappointed.

Erwin turned the heater on and Eren basked in it as they drove.

“Should have made you sit in the back,” Erwin said. “You're distracting.”

“Good,” Eren said. What the hell, he'd wanted this reaction from them, and it wasn't like him to be self-conscious for too long. He adjusted the seat slightly, leaning it back and crossed his legs.

“Huh.” Levi was sitting in the back behind Erwin's seat, and so he had a good view of Eren's leg. Erwin was obliged to keep his eyes on the road, and when Eren glanced at him he could see a faintly frustrated frown on his face. When he glanced back at Levi, he was wearing a knowing smile.

Well, yeah, he wasn't going to pretend he wasn't doing it deliberately. He shrugged and smiled back.

When they arrived at Erwin's apartment building Eren was practically hustled into the elevator and as soon as the doors had shut his bag was forgotten at his feet as he was sandwiched between them. Levi kissed him, smoothing the dress down his sides and over his hips while Erwin stood behind him and nibbled the back of his neck, his hands resting lightly on his back.

“Ah.” His weak point. Eren squirmed and tried to remember which floor Erwin lived on and valiantly stabbed at the button while the other two did their best to make him forget. Erwin was working his way around Eren's neck and then he stiffened and drew back and coughed.

“Pleh,” he wiped his mouth. “Ugh.”

“What's wrong?” Levi asked, pulling back with some alarm.

“Ah, that'll be the peppermint oil,” Eren said.

The doors opened and he stooped and picked up his bag.

“Eren, wash that shit off first,” Levi suggested, while Erwin pulled faces and tried to work the taste out of his mouth. “I need to get this crap off my face as well.”

“Can you leave the ears on?” Eren asked. “I think they're cute.”

“I suppose, if you keep the stockings on.”

“What do I need to keep on?” Erwin asked, unlocking his door and ushering them in.

“Those pants,” Eren said. He was gaining confidence by the second. Erwin's encounter with his peppermint oil and the fact that he could get away with calling Levi cute and telling him to wear cat ears were making him feel more than self-confident. He was feeling powerful.

“You don't want me to take my pants off?” Erwin asked, and he looked so disappointed Eren nearly laughed and Levi's neck twitched.

“No, I don't,” Eren said. He pressed himself up against Erwin, splaying his hands across his chest and gazing up at him. “I want to do it.”

“You're being quite pushy tonight,” Levi said.

“Do you mind?” Eren asked quickly.

“No,” they chorused, and Eren felt quite warm under the intensity of their gazes.
“I should um, go wash off this mint.”

Erwin had to unearth his make-up remover for Levi and Eren was left to his own devices while his boyfriends stood in front of the bathroom mirror elbowing each other as they cleaned their faces up.

Eren kicked off his heels, took out his hair piece and sat on Erwin's bed to think about what would happen next. He didn't want to take his outfit off just yet, but he was pretty sure it was too tight to fuck in it easily and he didn't really want to get it dirty anyway, since it technically wasn't even his.

He was still thinking about it when Erwin and Levi walked in. Erwin had lost the horns and the coat and Levi had taken off his jacket and cravat and undone a couple of buttons, but as instructed still had the cat ears on his head.

They stood there, watching him.

“Still want to be the boss?” Erwin asked.

Eren nodded. “Just stay there.”

He approached them, just admiring, feeling like he owned them. It was hard to tell under Levi's suit but Erwin's pants definitely looked pretty uncomfortable. He leaned up and kissed him and then he kissed Levi and touched his cat ears and neither of them moved other than to kiss him back.

They were being so good and so obedient. It made Eren's stomach twist with excitement. He wanted to reward them, make them feel good.

“I want to blow you,” he said.

“Which of us?” Levi asked.

“Both of you!” Obviously. “At the same time,” he added with bravado.

Erwin raised an eyebrow. “I don't think they're gonna fit, Eren.”

“Now you've given me a challenge.”

They exchanged a glance and Levi shrugged. “Whatever. Let him try.”

Carefully, so he wouldn't rip the dress, Eren got down on his knees. Yeah, he wasn't gonna get them both in his mouth at once; regardless of size there was too much of a height difference. Nevertheless, he kind of liked it down here, and he could feel his own erection straining at the front of the dress. He kneeled up and started undoing Erwin's pants. They were incredibly snug and Eren could smell the leather and Erwin's own scent beneath that as he popped the buttons one by one, feeling the heat coming through the thick material. Even with the fly open, the end of Erwin's cock was still trapped against his leg and Eren peeled the pants open, loosening them around his hips. He could hear Erwin breathing with effort.

He glanced up and Erwin smiled down at him, lips slightly parted, and petted his head.

Levi had his hands clasped behind his back and was staring out ahead of him and he was being so stoic about it, Eren vowed to give him something nice for his patience soon. It was easier than last time; less awkward. The fear that it was all going to go up in flames had receded, and Eren was glad for the more comfortable atmosphere, even if watching them ignore each other under these circumstances was kind of funny.
Eren pulled Erwin's trousers down off his hips and freed his cock from the underwear beneath. He was already pretty hard and Eren just kissed it lightly before turning his attention to Levi.

“Stand like this,” he said, pulling him so he was at an angle, a bit closer and Levi did as instructed. He was wearing a belt and he'd tucked his shirt into his trousers and Eren fumbled impatiently with the whole thing and Levi ended up helping him. It was just too hard to concentrate. He imagined he could feel the heat of Erwin's cock next to his head.

Levi had barely dragged himself out of his pants when Eren descended upon him, open-mouthed. He closed his eyes and sucked the head of his cock, remembering when Levi had done the same to him. He was glad Levi hadn't taken off his suit; the combination of uncharacteristic formal dress and the shameless arousal it had parted for was intoxicating.

Levi made a hitching sound at the back of his throat and stroked Eren's head and ear and he felt Erwin's hand on the other side of his head, bigger and softer, the thumb stroking his cheek. Yeah. He couldn't forget about Erwin. He released Levi with a sigh, and admired the cock glistening with his spit before turning his head, kneeling up slightly and applying himself to Erwin's.

He held Levi in his left hand and Erwin in his right and he heard Erwin chuckle breathlessly and call him greedy. And he was greedy. He wanted them so much and if it had been possible he would have tried to fit them both in his mouth anyway. As it was he lavished attention on one for about thirty seconds before switching to the other. He fucking loved these cocks so much; Erwin's big enough to make his jaw ache and Levi's prodding at the side of his mouth. He tasted salt and his hands grew slippery and wet as he jerked whoever he wasn't currently sucking on.

Levi shifted his weight and nudged Eren's erection with his foot.

“No no no stop!” He pulled his head back and squirmed, closing his legs. “I'll come if you do that,” he panted.

“Oh,” Levi said softly, and did as Eren asked.

He would, too. He could barely stop his hips moving. They each kept a hand on his head, no matter who he was sucking on, playing with his hair and lightly touching his ears and neck, a loving gesture and Eren knew even though he was on his knees in front of them, they would never think less of him; if anything the opposite.

Last time they'd objected when the other had touched them but when Eren looked up they were leaning on each other; Erwin had his arm on Levi's shoulder and Levi was braced against him. They barely seemed to notice, focusing on him. Eren redoubled his efforts, sucking and stroking and he could feel drool dripping off his chin; he didn't have a hand free to wipe it away. His eyes were blurry with tears and he eventually shut them. His lips were kind of numb. He got mixed up, nearly choking on Erwin's cock when he'd expected Levi's, and his neck and jaw were growing tired from the constant movement but he could feel their fingers flexing in his hair, and hear them gasping and panting above him. He could taste how close they were. The constant stopping and starting had to be driving them both mad but neither complained.

Eren ended up picking Levi to go first. He stilled his hand on Erwin's cock and concentrated on Levi's instead, and Levi got the idea and cupped the back of Eren's head, not hard, and Eren sucked and pressed his tongue against the vein on the underside and Levi said his name in a kind of broken sob and Eren jammed his cock as far back as he could stand it and swallowed as he felt rather than tasted him come.

Eren lifted his head and caught his breath for a few moments while Levi smiled tiredly at him.
The taste of Levi's come was still in the back of his mouth when he turned his attention back to Erwin, who'd been waiting patiently for his turn. Eren was pretty tired by this point, but he knew he wouldn't be doing this for much longer. He couldn't take Erwin as far back as Levi either; he tried and gagged and put both hands on that gorgeous cock and rocked his whole torso in time with Erwin's shallow thrusts because his neck just wasn't up to it any more.

Erwin cradled his face with both hands, Levi having stepped away, and told him he was so good and he was nearly there and Eren tried to brace himself but it really wasn't enough. Erwin came, teeth gritted and Eren's stomach rebelled at the thought of swallowing down another load and he choked and his cheeks filled and he managed to swallow some of it but he felt it trickle out past his lips and he tried to catch it in his hands.

“Oh, you poor thing,” Erwin rasped.

Erwin gently pulled his cock free of Eren's lips and Eren slapped his hand to his mouth, shoulders hunched, his mouth full of come. They always used condoms at work and he'd almost forgotten how weird it tasted.

“Spit,” Levi said. He knelt beside Eren and held out a wad of tissues and Eren coughed into them and wiped his face and hands, as Levi pulled more as he needed them from the box and patted him on the back. “Well done.”

Erwin struggled out of his pants and tossed them in the corner of the room so he could kneel on Eren's other side and he wrapped his arms around his shoulders and nuzzled his ear.

“It was lovely.”

“Uh. Thanks, guys.”

Levi held out the bin and Eren dropped the tissues into it. The three of them caught their breath for a while, sitting on the floor. Eren noticed Levi's suit was folded neatly on a chair, the coat hung over the back so it wouldn't lose its shape. He hadn't even noticed him getting undressed. He was, however, still wearing the ears and Eren couldn't resist reaching up and touching them a bit more.

Eren sagged, putting his back to the side of the bed and finally uncurling his legs. He felt stiff and sore and his cock was rigid, pressed against him by his clothes which clung to him tightly enough that it was impossible to hide. He didn't bother trying. He flexed his feet, trying to work back some circulation.

“You know what happens next, right?” Erwin asked.

“What?”

“It's our turn,” Levi grinned. “You've been very good to us this evening, I think we should return the favour.”
Chapter 37

They didn't leap on him immediately. Levi had recovered already and he went and got Eren a glass of water while Erwin sat next to him with his arm around him. Eren suspected he'd managed to surprise them both this evening; they both seemed somewhat impressed. Not just a pretty face, Eren thought, but a damn fine cocksucker.

Well, probably not as good as Levi, but he was still pretty pleased with himself.

He couldn't calm down. He could catch his breath, somewhat, and he could let his hands and legs relax and let his head loll back against the side of the bed, but his heart still thumped and his cock ached for attention. While Levi went to put the glass back (and knowing him, probably wash it up as well) Erwin started kissing Eren's neck. The breath against his skin made him shiver and the scrape of teeth made him gasp, and when Erwin hummed a generous kiss, just over the pulse in Eren's neck he cried out softly, his legs shifting against each other, his cock pressed too tight against the material to rub, even when he lifted his hips seeking a bit of friction.

“I wouldn't do that,” Levi said, as he returned. “He'll probably come if you keep that up.”

Eren wanted to object; he'd vowed not to do that again after last time but if he was honest, Levi was probably right. He didn't think it would take much at all to get him off now.

Levi stood over them and stretched out his hands.

“Let's get you out of that dress.” He took Eren's left hand and Erwin's right and heaved them both up onto their feet.

They were careful not to touch his neck or his cock, but everything else was fair game. They circled around him, kissing him and playing with his hair and Levi sighed, squeezing his arse through the dress while Erwin pressed kisses all over his upturned face and Eren could barely breathe. He reached out and touched them, whatever was in reach, stroking down their arms and sides as they worked him over. It was delightful and at the same time he was pretty sure they were getting him back for all the teasing he'd put them through earlier. Erwin knelt down and found the patch of bare skin above Eren's stocking peeking through the slit in his dress and pressed his tongue against it, looking up at Eren's face. Levi bit at Eren's shoulder-blades before he started undoing the zip, Erwin helping slide the dress down, unhooking it when folds gathered over Eren's erection.

“Leave his stockings on,” Levi muttered.

“Yes, yes, I know.”

“You like them huh?” Eren managed to ask. He felt Levi smile, his teeth against his spine. He shivered, although he didn't feel cold; quite the opposite. Eren stepped out of the dress, and Erwin tossed it out of the way, still kneeling by his side. Eren could feel them look at him and his legs were shaky.

“Please, guys,” he panted. His boxers weren't as restrictive as the dress was, and when his cock twitched it rubbed just a little. He wanted to come.

“Okay,” Erwin relented and they carefully peeled off his boxers, dragging them down over the stockings.

“Lie back,” Levi said. They practically carried him onto the bed, and ended up kneeling on the
blankets, one on each side of him, and they exchanged a glance over Eren's body. Eren didn't know what they were going to do but he'd be okay with it, he was sure.

“He's not gonna last long,” Levi said.

“Guess we can't take turns then.” Erwin was grinning, and Eren realised they were looking at him with the most ravenous expressions.

“What?” he asked.

Levi took a deep breath and Erwin looked like he was bracing himself as well, and then they both bent over him. Levi cupped Eren's balls, sliding a couple of fingers over the skin a little further back and Erwin fingered one of Eren's nipples but he almost didn't notice because they'd both put their mouths on his cock and Eren could only yell. Levi held the base carefully with his teeth and his tongue pressed firmly against the vein and Erwin slid the head into his mouth, not too far so as to keep out of Levi's way and Eren's toes were curling and his hands clenched in the bedclothes.

He managed not to come instantly, somehow, and he lifted his head to look at them bent over him. He couldn't see Levi's face, his head was obscured by Erwin's but Erwin had his eyes shut, and Eren could see his cock pressed against the inside of Erwin's cheek. He could feel it too. They weren't moving in tandem, Levi's tongue flicked over him faster than Erwin was moving his head but it didn't matter. After about ten seconds of breathless moaning Eren's hips jerked up violently enough that he nearly arched up off the bed and his cock was actually pulled away from Levi's mouth for a moment. Levi didn't let him escape, following his movement, sucking and licking at the base of his cock while Eren came in Erwin's mouth, panting and gasping and too breathless to make any more noise.

He whined, teeth bared as Erwin swallowed and then he collapsed back on the bed and they lifted their heads and looked at him.

Eren wished they wouldn't and he covered his eyes with his arm for a moment. He heard Erwin chuckle and Levi squeezed his thigh gently.

“Come here,” Eren said, his eyes still shut.

“Hm?”

“Come here.” He held his arms out and he felt the bed move as they shifted up beside him and he wrapped an arm around each of their necks and pulled them close. He felt Levi sigh against his shoulder and he settled down under his arm, one hand on Eren's stomach. Erwin shifted up further and rested his head in the crook of Eren's neck. He touched Eren too, his hand a few inches away from Levi's.

It was perfect, Eren thought, listening to them breathe, the heat of them seeping into his tired body and he basked in it. He held them gently, too tired to do much else and he could feel Levi occasionally press his lips to his chest, but otherwise they were mostly still.

“We can't sleep like this,” Erwin mumbled eventually, just as Eren had started to fall asleep like that.

“Mn.” Levi agreed and sat up and Eren missed his warmth and reluctantly opened his eyes, squinting as his eyes adjusted to the light.

“I suppose you want a toothbrush,” Erwin said to Levi.

Levi frowned. “It's not necessary.”
“I bought another one, you can have it if you want.”

“It’s fine.”

“Suit yourself.”

Levi got up and put his boxers back on and Eren wrapped his arms around Erwin and let him lift him up from the bed. He took his stockings off and brushed his teeth with Erwin and reminded Levi he was still wearing his cat ears when they finally got into bed properly.

He got kissed goodnight twice and Levi rolled over near the edge of the bed and Erwin draped his arm across Eren's chest and Eren had no trouble getting to sleep.

Eren woke up alone. This was the second time it had happened, and since both Erwin and Levi had indicated under other circumstances they were happy to watch him wake up it meant this was probably something they didn't like doing together for whatever complicated reason. Eren stretched out happily; as big as Erwin's bed was, it was designed for two rather than three, and he sleepily rolled around taking up a lot of space as he woke up. He didn't stay in bed long, however, he could smell coffee and hot butter and when he made his way into the living area he was delighted to see Erwin stacking up pancakes again.

_That_ was a tradition he was happy to get behind.

It all felt so familiar already, and this time he knew he had nothing to worry about. Levi was sitting at the table with a mug of tea brewing from a teabag, examining Erwin's horns. He was wearing the suit from yesterday and Eren silently admired him for a few moments, enjoying catching them both unawares.

“I don't think I'll bother next year,” Levi was saying.

“He'll be disappointed,” Erwin replied.

Levi frowned and Eren knew a relationship that lasted a year was probably nothing to Erwin and unfathomably long to Levi and he smiled and stepped into the room and wished them good morning.

“Feel free to leave those stockings here,” Erwin said, turning to plant a kiss on Eren's forehead when he hugged him, his hands still full.

“I don't think so,” Levi said.

Eren smiled, “I'll take them home. I'm glad you liked them though.” He was very happy with how much they liked them. Maybe once he had more disposable income he'd consider getting more. As it was he hugged Levi and went to collect his bag from the spot he'd dropped it near the door the night before.

Eren had a shower and was getting dressed when Erwin stuck his head around the bedroom door.

“Hey Eren.”

“Hm?”

“Are you free next weekend? I was thinking the three of us could go for a drive somewhere before it gets too cold to be much fun. We could bring a picnic or go out for lunch.”

“That sounds great,” Eren grinned.
“Good, so could you invite Levi for me?”

“What? Why are you asking me? He’s in the next room.”

“Yeah, but if I ask him if he wants to go for a drive in the Aston he's going to say no. If you ask him if he wants to go on a picnic I'm sure he'll say yes.”

“How cunning of you. All right.” Eren threw on his clothes and stuffed the shoes and dress into his bag, eager to get to Erwin's pancakes before they got cold.

“You look really good all dressed up,” Eren told Levi, as Erwin served coffee.

“You're only saying that because I don't dress up often,” Levi said. “If I wore a suit like Erwin does every day it wouldn't be such a big deal.”

“Just take the compliment,” Erwin said.

This time Levi was comfortable talking more, and they told Eren stories of Halloween parties past, and Erwin promised he'd unearth his photographs and send them to Eren.

“Remind Nanaba to send you the photos he took last night as well,” Erwin said.

“Are you going to ask for copies too?” Eren asked Levi.

“I don't really care.”

“I don't think Levi grasps the concept of photographs.”

“I got enough photos taken when I was working for Hange,” he said.

“You don't like them?” Eren asked.

Levi shrugged, “I just don't see the point.”

By now Eren had plenty of photos of Erwin both by himself and with Eren and he realised he had none of Levi, unless he wanted to download some from HotFreeRange itself. He didn't want to do that; they were professional photographs, and not of Levi has he really was. Even the ones Nanaba had taken the night before wouldn't really count, as much as Eren was looking forward to seeing them.

It wasn't something to discuss among the three of them, however, and Eren changed the subject.

“How about we go for a picnic next weekend? The three of us.”

“I'm free,” Erwin said. “I could cook something to bring, too.”

“I can't, sorry,” Levi said. “I have a class on Saturday.”

“What about Sunday then?” Eren asked.

“I'm visiting my grandmother.”

Eren blinked in surprise and glanced at Erwin but he looked just as startled as Eren felt, eyebrows raised.

Levi frowned at them, “Why are you looking at me like that? Why wouldn't I have a grandmother? I
wasn't hatched from an egg.”

“I always pictured you as rising fully-formed from the ocean,” Erwin murmured, amused.

“Do you like your grandmother?” Eren asked curiously.

“Not particularly.”

“Oh.”

“Feel free to go on a picnic without me,” Levi said. “I'll come along some other time.”

“Right, yeah.” Erwin still looked deeply puzzled.

After breakfast they sat around talking for a while and then Erwin drove them back to HotFreeRange to return the props and bits of costumes that they'd borrowed, and so Eren could retrieve his car. The studio was quiet and deserted when they went in, and their footsteps were loud in the empty corridors.

Studio One was still a mess, decorations and empty glasses and plates littering every surface. At least most of the food was gone, any leftovers taken home. They glanced at the mess and then made their way to the wardrobe department. The only thing Levi had to drop off was the cat ears, and after he'd walked out again Eren turned to Erwin, who was arranging his jacket on a hanger.

“You never knew Levi had a grandmother?”

“I lived with him for six years and he never mentioned a family once. I always,” he paused. “Look he doesn't talk about it, so I assumed he didn't have a family one way or another. Like while I'd go back for Christmas or Thanksgiving but he either stayed home or did stuff with other people from HotFreeRange for the holidays. He never got any cards or presents or anything.”

“Hm. I'm kind of glad he does have one though, even if he doesn't seem really happy about it.”

“I dunno,” Erwin said. “Sometimes I think it's easier to choose your own family without having to deal with the one you inherit.”

“Speaking of which, how did your birthday with your mother go, anyway?” Eren asked. He'd almost forgotten.

“Okay, I suppose. She's concerned about the firm, I guess. I mean, it's a transition period. It's complicated and she knows enough about the business to be doing okay with the paperwork, but she's never really been that interested. She's still deciding what to do.” Erwin looked uncertain as well, and Eren decided not to push the subject.

“I see.”

“I also told her I was seeing someone,” Erwin continued.

“Oh?”

“Mm. She didn't say much, but on the other hand, she never does.” Erwin smiled ruefully. “Her reaction is usually 'oh not this again.' At least I don't think she expects me to suddenly change my mind and bring home a girl, but I think she'd prefer it if I wasn't so open about it. But by now she's resigned.”

Eren guessed he made sure to keep his family informed partly to annoy them. Eren himself still
hadn't told Mikasa anything, and he wasn't sure he wanted to just yet. He'd see how things went at HotFreeRange now that they'd gone public first.

He put away the shoes and they wandered back out into the corridor, turning out the lights behind them.

“I wonder where Levi got to,” Eren said.

“I'll give you three guesses,” Erwin said dryly.

“He wouldn't really be cleaning up, would he?”

When they peered into Studio One Levi had taken off his jacket and vest and rolled his sleeves up and was collecting glasses and plates and stacking them on the buffet table.

“Urgh,” Erwin sagged. “You don't even work here any more,” he pointed out.

“So? I felt like tidying up. You don't have to do any.”

“Good. Bye.” Erwin waved dismissively and turned to go.

“I'll help,” Eren said, almost instinctively.

“Thank you Eren,” Levi said, and he smiled wolfishly at Erwin, who groaned in defeat.

“Et tu Eren?”

“It'll take ages for Levi to do it by himself.”

“Yes but he likes this sort of thing. Okay fine. I'll start stacking the dishwasher.” Erwin shrugged off his coat and Eren did the same, grinning. He honestly didn't care too much what they did, as long as the three of them were together. He hadn't really felt like going home and this was as good an excuse as any to hang out with them for a bit longer.

Erwin carried the glasses and plates that Levi had collected back into the break room to start them washing up and Eren went around the room taking down the decorations and putting them back into cardboard boxes labelled 'Halloween Decorations ooh Spooky' that he'd taken them from the day before.

Erwin set the first load to wash and the three of them started moving the furniture back where it belonged. Eren wasn't sure where everything went but the other two did.

He and Erwin were manhandling a couch back to the break room when Mike and Nanaba arrived.

“Burglars!” Mike shouted dramatically and unexpectedly and Eren nearly dropped his end of the couch.

“Hey guys,” Erwin said.

“I'm a dude today,” Nanaba said. “What are you guys doing here anyway? Not that I'm complaining.”

“It was all Levi's idea,” Erwin grumbled. “Back up a bit, Eren. Put it down about here against the wall.”

“Well, we appreciate the hard work,” Mike said. “Although we figured you three would be
honeymooning this weekend.”

Erwin chuckled and Eren felt his face get hot.

“We came back to return our costumes and Eren left his car here,” Levi said, appearing with a chair in each hand. Mike and Nanaba stood aside and let him edge into the room.

“Well thank you for helping,” Nanaba said.

Levi just nodded.

“And I thought your costume was very stylish,” Nanaba continued.

Levi sighed as he put the chairs down. “Just say what you wanna say.”

“We're happy for you,” Mike rumbled.

“Okay, good.”

“And we'll never mention it again cross our hearts,” Nanaba added.

Levi actually almost smiled, and Eren sensed Nanaba itching for a camera, his fingers twitching to capture such a rare sight.

“Thank you. So are you gonna help us clean up the fucking mess you lot made last night?”

“That's why we're here,” Mike said. “Hange is, well, unlikely to wake up early enough to be useful. Oh, Erwin, thanks for these.” He wiggled his fingers in his new gloves before stripping them off.

“They actually fit.”

“My pleasure,” Erwin said.

“Oh, Happy Birthday,” Eren said, feeling a bit guilty. He'd completely forgotten.

Mike thanked him and Nanba suggested they all get cake and Levi told them to get to work first. With the five of them helping it didn't take all that long after all, although Levi insisted the floor be mopped once the furniture was moved back, because “Fuck knows what kind of disgusting crap got spilled on it last night. People have to fuck in this room, you know. It needs to be clean.”

“Yes, Levi,” they chorused dutifully and he scowled at them.

When it was all done it was well past lunchtime, although everyone had eaten breakfast so late that it wasn't much hardship. Nanaba thanked them profusely for helping and Erwin said at least Mike didn't have to spend his entire birthday cleaning.

“Do you miss it?” Mike asked, as they put away the mops and buckets.

“Yeah, of course I do,” Erwin said. Eren was stacking clean plates in the cupboard in the break room and he worked quieter so he could hear. “It was creative work, and it was satisfying. On the other hand, I like having my body to myself again. I kind of forgot what it was like to have a private side to my physical self. And I can slack off a bit.” He patted his stomach.

“You don't slack off that much,” Eren called and Erwin laughed.

“Well, I have to have to keep up with the young and the beautiful.”
“How about you?” Mike asked, as Levi carried the last of the cleaning tools in. “You miss the work?”

“No,” Levi said flatly. “I missed getting laid for a while, but that's not a problem now.”

Eren took an extra long time to finish putting the plates away, hiding his face in the cupboard.

Erwin remarked that the room was probably cleaner than it had been before the party, and Mike texted Hange so they'd know whenever they woke up that everything was shipshape again and they left the studio in a group.

Mike and Nanaba invited the three of them back to their place for cake, and after some hesitation even Levi accepted. They lived in a small, neatly-kept house full of Nanaba's photographs, and a Staffordshire Bull Terrier greeted everyone at the door and drooled on their shoes, much to Levi’s evident displeasure and Erwin's indulgent delight. Eren was pretty charmed too and he stooped and patted her broad, smiling head.

Nanaba made available copies of the pictures he’d taken at the party for them, and for a while it looked like Levi wasn’t going to copy them over to his phone, but eventually he did. As he did so Eren got a look at the device and realised his wallpaper was still the default. There was beer and reminiscing and Eren was put to work whipping cream while Erwin threw together a ginger sponge, saying no friend of his would have to endure a store-bought cake on his birthday while he was around.

Levi drank tea and started to relax after a while, and Mike told Eren later that he'd never gone over to their house before, even though Erwin was an infrequent visitor, and Levi had been invited more than once.

“I'm glad he met you,” Mike said. “Both of them really. Cassy! Stop annoying Levi. C'mere girl.”

They sat around and talked, although Eren mostly listened, sitting on the floor near the couch and keeping Cassy occupied so she wouldn't disturb Levi any further than she already had. It would be a shame to get dog hair on that nice suit.

As they were leaving Levi mentioned the dog hairs on the couch anyway, but when Nanaba said they should do it again sometime he didn't say no. It was a pleasant end to a pleasant weekend and Eren was sorry it was over. When he got home Missy was absolutely furious with him for being away for so long and sulked even after he’d changed his clothes and attempted to wash the dog smell off his hands.

Jean heard him come back and emerged from his room to ask him if he’d had a good weekend.

Eren said he had and enquired after Jean's weekend and Jean told him it had gone well and they both regarded each other silently for a few moments and then asked each other no more questions about it.

When he got back to his room Eren spent some time staring at the picture Nanaba had taken of the three of them. Erwin with his arm around Eren's shoulders, beaming, Levi looking away from the camera, flushed and slightly startled, and between them Eren himself, resplendent in his dress, wearing a smile of pure joy.
Chapter Notes

This chapter is dedicated to Rho/egomix, who probably won't read it for ages, but nevermind! She'll get there. My prose is not worthy of her sterling analysis, and I am forever grateful. And I entirely agree with her; Eren definitely needed to go for a ride in the Aston.

“Jean said to thank you,” Eren said as he settled into the passenger seat of the Aston. It had been a busy week for them both and Erwin hadn't had the chance to do more than text him. He'd been looking forward to this. He'd remained quite curious about Levi's mysterious grandmother but he knew better than to ask directly; if Levi wanted to tell them he would and so far he hadn't breathed a word.

“Oh, he straightened things out with Armin, did he?”

“Mm.” Eren buckled himself in and unwound the scarf from around his neck. It wasn't a great day for a picnic, Erwin had to admit, but neither of them had wanted to call it off. There was little sun and the wind had teeth. The only thing that could be said for it was that it didn't look like rain. Worst to worst Erwin supposed they could eat in the car. Eren looked adorable all rugged up, however, standing by the side of the road rather than waiting inside for Erwin to pick him up. His cheeks and nose were flushed and red by the time he'd bundled himself into the car, wriggling out of his coat and tossing it on the back seat.

“They talked things out,” Eren continued. “And apparently Armin apologised or something as well and now they're all over each other again. Jean seems a bit calmer about it though. Like, before he kind of treated Armin like he was made of glass or something and now he's a bit more relaxed. Happier.”

“That's good. If you think your partner is perfect and can't see their flaws it probably won't work out. You have to see their flaws and love them anyway, in my opinion.”

“Why'd you help them out anyway?”

“Armin asked me to,” Erwin answered honestly. “I suppose I have a reputation for helping people.”

“Hm, Levi said something similar once. Well, it's nice not to have Jean moping about everywhere, so thank you from me as well.”

Erwin chuckled and they settled down to drive. Once more Erwin took them up to the mountains, in search of quiet, winding roads. The trees were still quite beautiful, and he'd spent a bit of time searching out good picnic spots that might be sheltered from the cold wind, mostly deep in the state forests. Once they'd left the main roads behind, the air became full of swirling leaves and Erwin brought the Aston up a gear and turned on his driving mix.

Eren grinned at him and tilted his seat back a bit, watching the road and the countryside. The Aston had cost Erwin so much money, money he technically didn't have, but it was at these moments that she proved her worth, and he felt his heart soar with the music.
Eren didn't stay relaxed, however. After a little while Erwin noticed he was squirming in his seat, crossing his legs and biting his lip.

“Do you need to take a leak?” Erwin asked.

“What?” Eren glanced at him guiltily. He sounded a bit breathless. “No.”

“Are you all right?” Erwin wondered if he was getting sick or something.

“I'm fine! It's just, um.” He ran his hand over his hair. “The last time I heard this song I was on my hands and knees on your living room rug.”

Oh.

“And this car really doesn't help,” he muttered.

It took all Erwin had not to take his eyes off the road as Eren adjusted himself.

“Fuck,” Erwin muttered.

Eren laughed, embarrassed, “Sorry.”

“Well, there's nothing to be done. Maybe the next song will be better.”

It wasn't better, and by now Erwin was pretty thoroughly reminded of Eren whimpering along to this song as well.

“Maybe we should stand around in the cold for a few minutes,” Eren suggested.

“That's not such a bad idea.” It took a while for Erwin to find a safe place to stop, however, and eventually he turned off the road, following the signs to a rest area among the trees.

Eren practically leaped out of the car as soon as they'd stopped, grabbing his scarf but not his jacket. Erwin ran his hand over his face and got out as well, taking his coat with him and feeling the cold air bite at his exposed face and hands. He could hear the wind but the trees still had enough leaves to shelter them. His shoes crunched on a carpet of fallen leaves as he walked around to join Eren. Eren pulled his hoodie closer and dug his hands into the pockets.

“It's so quiet,” he said. He stepped closer, leaning against Erwin's side. “And cold. This was a good idea. No one could fuck out here in this weather.”

“Stand near the car if you're cold, it'll still be warm.”

Eren went and lingered near the bonnet, pressing the back of his legs against the heated metal.

“Oh yeah, that's much nicer. Beautiful and practical.” He turned away from the trees and looked at the Aston instead, subtly gleaming in the low light, warm like a living thing. Erwin thought he'd never get tired of looking at her, or looking at Eren, and it was almost instinctive of him to lift his phone and take a photo.

At the sound Eren looked over his shoulder and joked, “Probably warm enough to fuck here.”

Erwin had been successfully slowing his pulse until that point, but Eren's words kicked it up a notch instantly and at his expression Eren's eyes widened.

“I mean, I wasn't actually suggesting-” He held up his hands. “Well. It's a very expensive car,” he
dropped his voice to almost a whisper, like the very idea was sacrilegious.

It was sacrilegious, and Erwin realised he liked it a whole lot. The Aston's curves invited stroking, invited admiring, and the purr of the engine and the pull in the pit of his stomach when he swung her round a curve - it wasn't such a leap to eroticise her, even if he hadn't done so particularly up until that point.

Maybe it wasn't the car. Maybe it was Eren, uncertain and bright eyed and slightly scandalised and clearly interested in the idea and so very, very beautiful.

“Yeah,” Erwin said, his feet carrying him over to Eren's side. “But it's my very expensive car.”

Eren grinned and wrapped his arms around Erwin's neck and kissed him, and Erwin decided, Eren's breath warm on his face and his tongue at his lips that yes, this was definitely gonna happen.

“We can't take too long,” he mumbled between kisses. “She's not gonna stay warm forever.”

“Yeah. I don't wanna wait anyway.”

“Then turn around.”

Eren did as he was asked, pushing his arse back against Erwin's crotch while Erwin reached around him and tugged Eren's belt open.

“You wicked little thing,” Erwin breathed in his ear, and, remembering what Levi had said the weekend before, he pulled the back of Eren's hoodie down, exposing the back of his neck and blowing on it, making Eren laugh before he bit gently at it and made him gasp.

“That's haah, not fair,” Eren panted.

“It's what you deserve for making my car all dirty,” Erwin said.

“I haven't done anything!” he protested.

“You will,” Erwin promised him.

Eren stretched himself out on the bonnet, sighing happily at the warmth, placing his hands flat on the smooth metal, as Erwin tugged his jeans and boxers down just far enough to free his erection and reveal the curve of his perfect arse.

“It's cold,” Eren said.

“I know, I'll keep you warm,” Erwin leaned over him, putting his weight on Eren, and forcing his cock to press against the Aston's bonnet. “Not too hot?” He asked.

“N-no, it's good. Feels like I'm gonna get in trouble.”

“Mm.”

They'd have plenty of warning in the silent forest, should another tourist decide to make a pit stop, but Erwin looked around guiltily anyway. Weirdly enough, he knew he'd be completely relaxed if Hange was there with a camera.

Still bent over Eren to keep him warm, the open edges of his coat brushing the car on either side of him, Erwin unbuckled his own belt and unzipped. He didn't have any lube or condoms on him, and they didn't have time for that sort of thing anyway, so he eased his cock between Eren's legs, while
Eren grinned, his head turned to the side so he could keep an eye on Erwin's expression. Erwin smiled back briefly. Eren's jeans trapped Eren's legs pretty closely together and his balls rested against the top side of Erwin's cock by the time his hips were flush against Eren's arse, he could feel the head pressing against the Aston beneath Eren's body.

“Warm?” Erwin asked, squeezing Eren's arse.

“Yeah, pretty hot. Can we just, move a bit?”

“Yeah,” Erwin breathed, and he did so. He held Eren against him with one arm wrapped under his chest, feeling his hips move as he rubbed himself off on the car. Erwin could feel his own precome slicking the end of his cock, making it easy to slide against the warm metal, Eren's legs squeezing the rest of his length. He didn't pull back too far, wanting to keep them together and warm, and he rolled his hips just a bit.

They both did their best to be quiet, the forest soaking up their pants and groans and stifled curses without reaction or comment, the only other sound the wind in the treetops and the rustle of falling leaves.

Erwin had fucked outside before, both professionally and otherwise, but not in fall, not in this strange, solemn atmosphere like they were the last animals on earth, rutting before the winter arrived. Eren had given up lifting his head and let it rest against the Aston, his lips moving against the warm metal, mouthing at it.

Erwin waited for Eren to come first, the entire car moving slightly under his last, desperate thrusts, Erwin's lips pressed to the side of his neck. There wasn't enough stimulation for Erwin to lose control the way he had the last time they'd been together, but at last he groaned into Eren's hair, and felt the warm backwash as he released against the Aston's perfect skin, Eren's thighs clenching around him.

As soon as Erwin let him up, Eren fumbled to re-clothe himself before he got chilled, and they both stared at the slightly milky mess they'd left behind as they tucked themselves away.

“I'm sorry,” Eren said, more to the car than to Erwin.

“I'm gonna wash that off,” Erwin said.

Eren climbed back into the car to bask in the heating while Erwin applied water from a bottle and his handkerchief to the mess.

“You can take it to the carwash when we get back,” Eren offered, when Erwin got back in.

“Yeah, I might do that.”

They looked at each other for a few moments and then leaned in to share smiling, self-conscious kisses, butting cold noses against each other's face.

“I'll put on a classical mix this time,” Erwin said as he started the engine.

They drove on, relaxed and cheerful and ended up having lunch on a rather windswept lookout rather than somewhere more sheltered. They used the Aston as a windbreak, sitting behind it rugged up in their coats, the picnic basket on the ground in front of them and the blanket Erwin had brought to sit on draped around them instead.

Erwin had offered to take them to a restaurant for lunch but Eren said he was happy to camp out like this, and they huddled together, drinking coffee from a thermos and dipping bits of tough sourdough
bread into pumpkin soup, still hot, and admiring the view.

Erwin watched Eren retrieve a piece of bread with his spoon and wondered why such an unimportant action was so fascinating and realised he felt like talking. It was anathema to him to ask for help; he’d prided himself on forging his own path, disdaining those who claimed to know what he wanted better than he did, and who tried to make his decisions for him. He helped other people; he was rich and good-looking and clever and what right did he really have to burden others?

And yet.

Eren must have sensed his scrutiny because he looked up from his soup with a questioning expression.

“Eren.”

“Mm?” Eren licked his spoon.

“You know I mentioned my mother had to decide what to do with the firm?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“Really I’m the one who has to decide. Regardless of my grandfather's wishes, if I choose to fight for it, the firm could be mine. Mother made that clear to me the last time we talked, although she didn’t promise to make it easy. The other partners expect her to hand it on to them, of course, and you know, I’m still trying to catch up with everything. Where I am now, I don’t know that I could run the firm.”

Erwin sighed. “I don't know what I want. I don't know what I want to do. I don't dislike law, but the firm is so hidebound and old fashioned and the way some of our staff are treated by those in charge—” He shook his head. Petra's story wasn't his to tell. “I am a nobody, really. All I have is the name of a family I was practically excommunicated from for nearly twenty years. If things don't change, I don't think I want to stay there for what is potentially the rest of my working life. I look at you and Hange and even Levi and ask myself what the fuck I'm doing that's any good to anyone other than just mindlessly continuing my grandfather's work?”

“Could you do something else?” Eren asked.

“Mm. I could get a job in a number of places. If I get lucky I could even keep the car. Aside from the firm the family has plenty of other assets; property, that sort of thing. Losing the firm wouldn't mean losing the entire inheritance and I wouldn't starve.”

Eren didn't say anything but he smiled sympathetically and rested his head on Erwin's shoulder.

“But if I fought for it and convinced my mother, I could take over. A lot of people would be quite unhappy and it would be a whole lot of thankless work but maybe I could turn it into something I could be proud of. Maybe.” Erwin sighed. “I don't know.”

“When do you have to decide?”

“The sooner the better. Before the other partners get too restive. By the end of the year, maybe. I don't expect a solution from you or anything I just wanted to tell you.”

Eren was silent for a moment and then he carefully put his soup and bread aside and knelt up and wrapped his arms around Erwin, hugging him fiercely. Erwin only had one arm free to hug him back.
“Eren?”

“Thank you.” Eren pulled back and smiled at him. “Whatever you decide to do I'm sure it will be brilliant but mostly thank you for telling me. I don't get the feeling it's something you do much.”

He'd noticed, huh?

“Not really, no.”

“You never want to ask for help.” Eren sighed and hugged him again, talking over Erwin's shoulder. “I really like the things we do together, and I wouldn't want them to stop but I feel like, I don't mind if it's not always like this. You don't have to be perfect all the time. I'm not going to go away if you'd rather order pizza and do homework together or something.”

“But if I can give you good things-”

“You can. But you don't have to all the time.” Eren sighed. “Well, it'll work out.” He settled down again and arranged the blanket over his shoulder and picked up his soup and Erwin looked at the cold, pale sky and felt deeply warm inside. He felt like a weight had been not exactly lifted off his shoulders, but it was lighter now.

Yeah, maybe it would all work out.

Once they'd eaten they got moving again, grateful to be back in the Aston's warm cabin. Even Eren said he didn't think he'd want ice cream this time, but Erwin looped them around the lake anyway, and they stared at the dark, chilly water.

“We have to come back in summer,” Eren said. “Like the three of us, and go swimming.”

“I think you can rent houses here,” Erwin said. “A bunch of us from HotFreeRange did it one year, although it was a working holiday.”

It had been a fun time, but Erwin was already anticipating next summer would be even better.

“Do you think it's safe to put my driving mix back on?” Erwin asked on the way home.

“Better not risk it,” Eren said.

Erwin chuckled. “At least my car's been christened properly now, although the back seat is more traditional.”

“You were thinking about fucking someone in this car?”

“Well, no, not so much. I'd worry about the upholstery.”

Eren laughed, “Now you're sounding like Levi.”

“Well the outside is easy to clean.”

Eren turned in his seat to look at the back.

“What are you thinking?” Erwin asked.

“I was wondering if we could do anything during the car wash.”

“Not in the back seat; no time.” Erwin grinned. “You'd have to sit on my lap.”
“Yeah?” Eren raised his eyebrows.

Erwin glanced him and then back at the road again. He was so fucking nineteen it hurt. If I decide to leave my job, Erwin theorised, I could be forced to give up this car; I may not have this opportunity for much longer. He'd missed doing ill-advised things; Eren made a better demon than he did, a wicked incubus, using his eyes and mouth to full effect, even though Erwin wasn't looking directly at them.

“Whatever Hange pays you, it's probably less than you're worth,” Erwin said.

“Is there anything I could do to get a raise, Mister Shareholder?” Eren asked, not innocently at all, and Erwin inhaled sharply and forced himself to concentrate on the road.

Erwin was silent for a while. “I don't have any condoms,” he admitted finally.

Eren snorted and then burst out laughing. “I knew it! I have some, though,” he added slyly, still grinning. “I thought we might have a roll around in the bracken or something although it turned out to be way too cold.”

Erwin shook his head, “And my thoughts were pure.” Nevertheless he was pretty pleased that Eren's weren't.

“Yeah right.”

“Average automatic car wash isn't going to be long enough for a lot of foreplay,” Erwin warned him. “And this car gets enough attention without going through the wash fifteen times.”

“I can prep myself,” Eren said. “I'm gonna have to.” He twisted around. “I'll sit on the rug so I don't get your seat covered in lube.”

“Fucking hell,” Erwin breathed. He was actually going through with it.

“Just don't get too distracted.”

Erwin laughed, but it sounded thin and unconvincing to his own ears. Right. This was going to be torture, and he was pretty sure Eren knew it. He loved how bold he could be. He loved a lot of things, he thought.

When they entered the city limits Erwin was obliged to turn his music up again, because Eren had taken off his sneakers and jeans and his boxers were around one leg and Erwin wasn't looking at him but he could still hear the soft squelching sounds and Eren's heavy breathing. He drove around randomly until he found an automatic car wash. He didn't want to hurry Eren, as he didn't want him to hurt himself but at the same time-

“Are we doing this?” Eren breathed. “I really hope we're doing this now.”

“Yeah.” Erwin swung the Aston in. It took him twice as long as it should have to program in the kind of wash he wanted because Eren had leaned over and unzipped his pants, and the lovely boy was doing all the work, putting on a condom with firm, confident fingers while Erwin chewed his lip and tried to work out if he wanted a deep buff or not.

He decided he did.

They drove in and waited patiently while the machine started up and as soon as they were hidden from outside view Eren abandoned his chair and crawled over to Erwin. It was an odd fit and they
scrambled and twisted around and Eren's legs didn't really fit anywhere and Erwin just held still and let Eren find what was most comfortable for him, even though he was so close.

Eren kissed him, hunched down so he wouldn't hit his head on the roof.

“Okay, okay,” he breathed.

“Be careful.” Erwin remembered how difficult it had been last time. “Don't force yourself.”

“Yeah.” Eren wrapped one arm around his neck and the other hand around his cock to hold it still. Around them the machinery clanked and shifted and water jetted over the windows, obscuring everything. Not that Erwin really cared if someone saw; fuck, neither of them had anything in particular to be ashamed about.

Eren panted against Erwin's lips as he sank down on his cock. He was probably going as fast as he dared, judging by the way he hissed and shuddered.

Erwin stared up at Eren's face, one hand gently caressing the back of his neck. I love him, he thought. I love him so much. He didn't say anything; it wasn't something he wanted to blurt out in the heat of the moment but he thought it, thought it so strongly he wouldn't have been surprised if Eren heard him anyway.

It wasn't all in when Eren stopped trying, but fuck it was more than enough. Erwin worked his hand between them and stroked Eren's cock, surprised to realise he'd put on a condom as well. That would save a mess to clean up.

They couldn't go slowly, and they didn't. Erwin stroked Eren firmly, finger ing his neck and sucking on his parted lips, trying to work him off as quickly as possible as he shuddered and tensed beneath him. He had no idea how much time they had left. Eren was doing the same, twitching and rocking himself on Erwin's cock, gasping when he managed to make it hit the right spot.

“I'm gonna,” Eren panted. “You should hurry, cause I can'-”

“It's okay, it's okay, I will,” Erwin promised, and muffled him with his mouth as Eren jolted and tensed around his cock and Erwin could feel his whole body curl in towards him as he gripped Erwin's shoulders.

Erwin could have held out for much longer, but he let himself go, urging his body on as Eren ground down just a bit further, his heel tapping against the floor of the car, his teeth gritted. Eren was still riding it out, still gasping out the last few shuddering seconds when Erwin came.

Eren dropped his jaw in surprise when he felt it, his eyes widening.

“Holyfuckyes,” he hissed. “Ah, you're good.”

The scrubbers were still brushing down the car when Eren slumped against him.

“We made it,” he said, with relief. “I couldn't have stopped, even if we ran out of time,” he confessed against Erwin's ear, his head on his shoulder.

Erwin licked his lips and hugged Eren tightly. His heart felt full and he didn't say anything, the words warm and heavy on his tongue but he held them back for now.

Eren groaned and ungracefully wriggled off him and back into his own seat as the car wash started winding down. They fumbled to remove condoms and Eren grimaced as he put his pants back on.
“Lube everywhere,” he muttered. He flashed Erwin a grin, “I had fun though. I didn't think you were gonna finish so fast. I mean, I've had like ten minutes of playing around first.”

“Felt like hours,” Erwin muttered as the Aston was finally freed, gleaming and flawless. “It's not so strange; I was a professional. You make porn for that long and you learn to come on demand.”

“Really?”

“Within reason. You want to milk me dry or something?”

“Not right now, that's for certain.” Eren bent down to pull on his shoes. “So am I getting that raise?”

“How about I cook you dinner instead?”

“An acceptable compromise.”

I would cook you dinner forever, Erwin thought as he turned the Aston for home.
That Monday night Eren was half-heartedly working on his assignments when his phone rang. He pounced on it and flopped back on the bed, happy for an excuse to take a break.

His dawning smile faded when he saw who was actually calling. He heaved a sigh, braced himself, and answered.

“Hey, Dad.”

“Eren, I hope I didn't interrupt anything important.”

“I was just doing some study, it's fine.”

“Good, so you've got some time to talk? How's everything?” He sounded sort of tense, but Eren wasn't sure; they spoke so rarely now he couldn't really gauge his father's mood with any accuracy.

“It's fine. Did you get my email with my mid-semester results?”

“Yes, I did. Quite adequate, Eren.” Eren knew that was a compliment; Grisha was never shy about letting him know if his marks were disappointing—Mikasa's never were. “How's Missy? And Jean?”

“Missy's fine, although I think she misses the warm weather. Jean's well. Got a boyfriend. Nice guy.” Eren knew at that moment he was definitely not prepared to tell his father about Erwin and Levi, or his new career in adult movies. He wasn't really prepared to talk to his father at all, but then again he never was. It was like his stomach was full of setting concrete, making him feel slow and heavy and defensive, although he didn't expect to be scolded for anything. He just felt like there was this yawning chasm between them and the worst of it was Grisha never seemed to even notice. Just thinking about him made Eren feel frustrated and helpless.

“I see. Congratulations to him. I was calling to ask you what your plans were for Thanksgiving. It's snuck up on us a bit this year.”

“Yeah.” Eren frowned. He'd sort of been putting off making a decision. He knew he'd have to go home for Christmas, and was resigned to it, but he wouldn't mind spending at least one of the holidays with his boyfriends, although he'd yet to ask them their plans. “I don't know, Dad. I mean, I'll see you at Christmas for sure, but you know, finals are coming up and the days off are a good chance to catch up on assignments and stuff.”

“That's fine, Eren. Your studies are important.”

Eren knew Grisha wouldn't object if he didn't go home, and he wasn't sure if he was relieved or annoyed by that fact.

“Yeah, I've been going out a lot so I got a bit behind.” Spent too much time this weekend being fucked over an Aston Martin, he thought, and it made him feel a bit better.

Grisha was silent for a while.

“Eren. Ah. Well, I suppose you should know that I've recently, well, not that recently really, met someone. I was hoping you'd get to meet her sometime soon.”

“What?” It felt like his ears were buzzing.
“Her name's Maria, she's a pharmacist at the hospital. She's, well, my opinion is pretty biased, really.” It sounded like he was smiling. Eren's jaw was hanging open slightly. “She's a very lovely woman, nurturing.” He's braced for something, Eren realised, his heart sinking. “It's a bit sooner than we'd planned, but we're having a baby.”

Eren worked his jaw, but nothing came out.

“Eren?”

“Unbelievable,” Eren muttered. He choked back the next words, which would have been what's going to happen if she dies of cancer as well, you miserable arsehole, just making more kids to abandon. He clenched his jaw around them. “I can't make Thanksgiving,” he said flatly. “Sorry.”

“I understand, Eren.”

“I'll talk to you later.” Never.

“Of course, Eren. Good luck with your assignments.”

Eren hung up.

“What the fuck,” he muttered. “What the fuck?” Irresponsible, stupid.

He called Mikasa, and she answered like she always did when he called unexpectedly, with a worried tone that assumed something awful had happened. Well, it had.

“Eren, are you all right?”

“Dad called,” he said.

“Yeah,” Mikasa said softly. “He called me earlier and asked me not to say anything until he'd had a chance to talk to you.”

“This is fucked up,” Eren said hotly. “It's just like, wow, your first family didn't work out so why not start a new one? And just like spring it on us and expect us to what? Just go along with it?”

“Eren.” Mikasa sighed. “I was shocked too, but there's nothing we can do about it. We just have to live with it.”

“I don't have to live with shit. He can just fuck off, I mean, I don't rely on him for anything.”

“Eren,” Mikasa sounded slightly irritated. “Just calm down a bit, okay? We'll get used to the idea. Maria might be really nice; it's not fair to judge her before you've even met her.”

“I.” Eren knew that. “I know that.” He wanted to think the worst of her, but he knew he was being unfair. “It doesn't mean I shouldn't judge him though. What if he abandons her too?”

What if he didn't abandon her? That in its own way could be worse.

“We can't assume the worst.”

“I'm not going home for Thanksgiving,” Eren said firmly.

“Eren. I already said I would; now I'll have to take a bus.” Mikasa sounded irritated.

“Jean will probably go home too; you can sit with him. Mikasa, he gave us a week's notice. I just
don’t think it's a good idea for me to go. I'd probably ruin things,” he admitted. How could he possibly keep his temper under these circumstances?

Mikasa sighed, but she understood. “Maybe you're right. Are you going to be okay by yourself?”

“I got heaps of work to do, and you know Jean always brings back a lot of his mother's leftovers so I won't even miss out on much of the food.”

“True.” Mikasa was silent for a while. “What are we going to do for the anniversary then?”

“I don't know,” Eren said. “Maybe just buy her some flowers.” At least he'd see her grave at Christmas.

“Yeah.”

They'd held Thanksgiving in her hospital room, and she hadn't lasted until Christmas, although Eren was sure she'd tried. Fuck Dad and his awful timing, he thought, feeling the familiar stab of grief, even though it had dulled over the years. Why did he have to spring this on us now? Had he forgotten what this time of year meant to them?

“Are you okay, Eren?” Mikasa asked.

“Not really,” he said. “But I guess I have to deal with it right?”

“I'll let you know what she's like,” Mikasa said.

“Yeah. Thanks.”

There wasn't much left to say, and after some desultory small talk they said goodbye. Eren didn't feel like studying, and he gave up and went to bed, hoping he'd feel better in the morning.

He didn't really feel much better the next morning. He was angry all day and work was an exercise in frustration as Hange ordered take after take because his face refused to do what he asked it to. At least he wasn't fucking anyone today; he really wasn't in the mood for it. Hange asked him what was wrong, but all he said was 'family stuff' and while they understood, they also suggested he learn to leave it at the studio door.

He tried to, and Hange acknowledged that at least. He didn't like being so upset; he felt like he was probably being childish, but he couldn't make himself feel any other way, no matter how much he tried to cultivate some indifference.

He felt angry. He felt hurt, too.

He attended his tutorials, took lots of angry notes in an attempt to distract himself, and showed up for Levi's class determined to let off some steam. Levi noticed, of course, and he installed Eren in front of a punching bag and let him do as he liked.

“You're not going to learn anything new today,” he said. “So just practice what you already know.”

Annie didn't say anything, although she looked a bit concerned, and she waved at Levi and left right after class. Eren was still standing at his bag, drenched in sweat and breathing hard.


“A bit,” Eren said. He took off his gloves. “My dad called with some news. I think I need to talk to you guys. I dunno what to do.”
“I’m sure that can be arranged. Put the gear away; I’ll call Erwin.”

Levi had a self-defence class to run that evening and so the three of them decided to have a late dinner at Erwin's apartment. As soon as things were organised, Eren immediately started feeling a bit better; Erwin would have good advice, he was sure of it, and he knew they'd both be a hundred percent on his side, unlike Mikasa, who naturally had divided loyalties, and was probably dealing with her own response to the news.

By the time the appointed hour had arrived and Eren had given Levi a lift over to Erwin's apartment he was starving. He barely paused inhaling the pasta Erwin had made to tell him how good it was, let alone had time to explain why he'd called a meeting. So they took tea and coffee to the living area after dinner, and Eren told them what was bothering him, all of it, pouring it all out while the other two listened in silence, giving him space to talk.

“I'm just angry,” Eren said, finally running out of grievances. “It's like, I always felt he'd given up on us as a family after Mom died, and I guess I'd gotten used to it, and then he goes and starts a new one and where does that leave me? He never talked to us about anything, and now he wants us all to be happy for him. It's not fair. I got out of Thanksgiving, but I can't avoid it; I'll have to go home for Christmas.”

“No you don't,” Erwin said. “I know you feel obligated. I felt obligated for many years as well, but then I realised it's not a crime to break away from your family for your own peace of mind. You don't owe them anything. Especially if they've elected to ignore your feelings; go ahead and ignore theirs.”

Levi sipped his tea, but didn't say anything.

“I have to go back,” Eren said. “I want to visit Mom's grave.”

“Well, that's different. But the principle is the same. You don't owe your father and his new girlfriend anything other than basic politeness due to any human being. Pick your own family; build it out of people who are worth your time.”

“Yes,” Eren said. “All he does is make me angry. Every time I think about him, I get mad.”

“Cut him out,” Erwin said. “Don't waste your time even brooding about it. Have a great time at Thanksgiving, if you can. You're welcome to spend it with me, if you want.”

“Go to your family dinner?” Eren asked.

“It's not really a family dinner. The family got too small, and Grandfather's taste was for more extravagant events, so it's more of a Thanksgiving ball. Mother enjoys them too so the tradition will continue this year. Friends of the family and important members of the firm and their families are invited. Grandfather always seemed to regard it as some sort of feudal obligation to his serfs. But he won't be there this year and the food will be excellent. And I can invite whoever I want. You'll have to wear a tux, though.” Erwin smiled at him.

Eren was feeling a bit better. “Yeah? I have a suit. I got it for Prom but it still fits. Probably.”

“It's held at the family house,” Erwin said. “You should see it some time anyway.”

“I'll go too,” Levi said unexpectedly.

Erwin looked startled for a moment and then nodded. “The more the merrier. Just leave the cat ears at home.”
Eren laughed. This family right here was much, much better than the one he'd inherited, he decided.

“I'm looking forward to it,” he said. “And I'm feeling better too. Dad can do whatever the fuck he wants and it's not my problem. If he screws up this family, well, I don't care.”

Levi put down his teacup. “If we're done then, Eren, would you give me a lift home?” He didn't phrase it like a question.

“Um. Yeah. Of course.”

The meeting ended a little abruptly, Levi frowning at nothing in particular while Erwin gave Eren reassurances and an affectionate hug.

Levi was silent on the way home but when Eren parked, he invited him to come in. Again, it felt more like an order than an invitation, and Levi's lips were pressed together in a thin line as Eren accompanied him to his front door.

Once they were in Levi glared at the kettle and grumbled because he'd 'just had a fucking cup of tea.'

“Are you okay?” Eren asked.

Levi sighed. “Yes, I suppose. Sit down, I want to tell you some things.” Levi sat down on the couch, frowned at his hands for a while, and then got up to make some tea anyway. Eren was starting to feel nervous; he'd never seen Levi quite this grim before.

“I think,” Levi said, as he put the tea on to brew. “Erwin's advice was a bit, well, clouded by his own experience.”

“What do you mean?” Eren started feeling defensive.

Levi carried over the teapot and a couple of cups, and he set them carefully on the coffee table. He sat next to Eren, his hands on his knees and stared at the tea set for a while.

“My mother was a heroin addict,” he said quietly.

Eren's incipient anger evaporated instantly, and he found himself holding his breath. Levi didn't talk about this stuff, ever, he thought. Except that now he was. Levi ran his hand over his hair and stared blankly in front of him.

“She died of an overdose when I was about two years old, so I have no memories of her,” he continued. “Her mother, my grandmother, couldn't keep me. She couldn't bring herself to, because she blamed me for killing her daughter. My mother had gotten clean, for a while, put it all behind her. For my sake, maybe, who knows? But having a young child is a great stress on anyone, especially someone like her whose peace was so fragile. After she died my grandmother gave me up, and I'm glad she did, such was her rage, and I grew up in various foster homes. No one claimed to be my father; my mother never said, apparently.”

“Levi,” Eren said softly. He could see it, almost, the unwanted child Levi had been, growing up wary and self-reliant and alone. “It wasn't your fault.”

“I know. I don't blame myself for any of it. Just as your mother's death is not your fault, and neither is your father's distance.” Levi looked at him, his gaze unwavering and intense. “I'm telling you this to explain that you can't know someone else's pain. My mother had to know the risks she was running, the things that could happen, but she was driven, ultimately, to destroy herself to get away from her pain. I have no doubt,” he continued, “That your father hurt you in the years after your
mother died. But you can't know his pain. You don't have to make up with him, you don't ever have to speak with him again if you don't want; Erwin was right about that. But please, Eren, don't hate him.”

“What am I supposed to do then?” Eren asked.

“You need to decide that. It's not fair, Eren. You were a child, and he failed you; you don't have to forgive him for that. But you are no longer a child, and you have to decide what you want now. He's not going to wake up one morning and apologise and become the father you lost. You will have to breach the gap if you think it's worth breaching.”

“You went and talked to your grandmother,” Eren said, understanding.

“I looked her up about a year ago, when I decided I was doing well enough with my own business to quit HotFreeRange whenever I wanted. It just seemed like the time to find out some things before I moved on. I didn't know any of what I just told you until she told me, although I think I was aware somehow that my mother was dead. Maybe I had the childish belief she wouldn't have abandoned me if she was alive.”

“Does your grandmother still blame you for your mother's death?” Eren asked.

“Yes.” Levi looked at him. “And she may well be right; without me, my mother might have survived. Who knows?”

“What? Why do you still talk to her then?”

Levi looked sympathetically at Eren's startled frown. “She's got no one else, Eren.”

Eren couldn't keep looking at him, he stared at his hands instead, feeling his eyes burn. It was so unfair, all of it. He couldn't take it any more of Levi's solitary sadness, and he turned back and wrapped his arms around Levi's neck, burying his face in his sweatshirt.

“I'm glad you exist,” he said, even if other people weren't. He was so very, very glad Levi existed; he didn't want to think of a world in which he didn't.

“Yeah, so am I,” Levi said, hugging him back, his arms warm and reassuring around Eren's shoulders. “Aside from all of that, I'm sure leaving his family wasn't as easy as Erwin made it sound. He didn't just decide to leave his family; he was given an ultimatum, and it took him years to come to terms with that. Your family is demanding nothing from you but a bit of your time.” Levi was speaking gently but his words still hurt. Eren wanted to claim that it was all unfair, but he couldn't argue with Levi, who had been treated the most unfairly of all.

“What if he does abandon the kid?” Eren asked.

“You need to decide how much you care. Maybe he will be a shitty father, but what sort of brother do you want to be?”

Eren lifted his head. “I didn't think of it like that. I don't know.”

“Think about it then. You've got time. You can decide to be no brother at all, if you think it would be best.”

Eren flopped back down on Levi's chest, and listened to him breathe.

“Is that why you don't drink?” Eren asked quietly.
“Yeah. Well, I didn't know about my mother, but I've always been predisposed to bad habits. If something makes me feel good, I keep doing it; exercise, fighting or sex. Tea, even. I never gave it a lot of conscious thought but I decided early on to avoid drugs entirely. I was scared I'd really like them and scared of losing control over myself. When you grow up like that, you are the only thing you can control; the world can completely shift around you and there's nothing you can do about it. When I found out about my mother, I guess I wasn't really surprised. The trick is to get addicted to things that don't cause much harm, although Erwin informs me on the rare occasions I get too sick to work out I'm quite unbearable.”

Eren smiled, “I think I can believe that.”

“Don't blame Erwin, by the way. When it comes to this sort of family business, he had to make himself unforgiving. The alternative would have been an emotional running sore. Normally he wants people to be happy but I don't think he can imagine what being happy in your own family would be like. So he assumes the worst.”

“You haven't told him about your family.”

“Nope. The last thing I want is for him to get righteously angry on my behalf. I don't need that. I'm not angry. What's the point of being angry?”

Eren sighed. “It feels good. Better than guilty. Like, we tried so hard, Mikasa and me, and he didn't seem to notice.”

“Maybe he didn't,” Levi said. “If you want to know for certain, you'll have to ask him.”

“Yeah.” Children shouldn't have to sit down their parents to mend things, Eren thought, but Levi had gone to see his grandmother, kept going to see her. Eren tried to imagine it and failed. “Should I meet her sometime?”

“Who?”

“Your grandmother. I mean, not if you don't want to.”

“You can if you like,” Levi said, sounding somewhat puzzled. “I honestly don't think she'll care much.”

“I don't want to meet her for her sake, but for yours. It's up to you.”

“Hm. I'll think about it.” Eren felt Levi lean forward and pour out some tea. When offered some he shook his head. He was quite happy to stay like this, curled down to Levi's chest.

“Can I stay here tonight?” Eren asked. He felt exhausted; the entire day had drained him, and the thought of dragging himself back home was a depressing one.

“Of course,” Levi said, and Eren found himself smiling a little. He knew both that Levi would say yes, and that he was right to ask rather than assume.

Eren thought about his family, and Levi's family and Erwin's family, and realised he didn't feel so angry any more. Maybe he'd get angry again when he next saw his father, but he had something to ground him now. He wasn't adrift without his parents; you couldn't get a much more stable anchor than Levi, he realised.

“Thank you,” he said. “For telling me all of this. You probably didn't have to; if you'd yelled at me I would have listened.”
“I haven't told anyone else,” Levi said. “But I don't think it's especially important. Do you see me differently all of a sudden?” he asked.

Eren thought about this. He wanted to say he thought more highly of Levi now, but he'd always thought highly of him. “It's just more of what I already thought,” Eren said.

“Right. I wanted to tell you though. Well, I figured I would sometime. I'm not ashamed or anything it just doesn't feel like anyone's business. Except yours, I suppose.”

Eren squeezed him a bit tighter. “I won't tell anyone.”

“I know.”

By the time Levi had finished his tea, Eren was practically asleep. He nudged him until he got moving again, and Levi gave him a shirt and some boxers to sleep in. There was no suggestion of sex, and Eren brushed his teeth and crawled into bed, curling up under the covers while Levi was still washing the teapot and turning out the lights.

“Good night,” Levi murmured as he got into bed.

Eren stretched his hand out until he found Levi's. “Hey, I was thinking I might email my dad.”

“Mm?”

“I still don't want to go home for Thanksgiving; I've already told Mikasa I won't be going and I kind of want to go to Erwin's thing with you guys. But I guess I was kind of rude about it. And, I will be seeing him at Christmas, I guess.”

“Yeah.”

“But I want to talk to him first. Properly, just him and me. So I'm going to email and ask if we can do that before Christmas itself and if he doesn't want to-”

“Then you've got your answer,” Levi said. He shifted closer and pressed his lips to Eren's hair. “You are a good person, Eren. You proved that when you forgave Annie. No matter what your father says, you've already done the right thing. But for what it's worth, I think he will want to talk to you.”

Eren smiled in the dark and snuggled closer.
Chapter 40

It took Levi a long time to get to sleep.

It didn't bother him too much any more; he'd always been an uneasy sleeper, quick to wake and restless. When he'd been younger he'd found it incredibly frustrating, especially since he denied himself the soporific effects of alcohol. But he'd learned to cope with his insomnia over the years, just like he'd learned to cope with all his other quirks.

He got up early and he physically tired himself out often, and when he found himself staring at the ceiling he didn't berate himself for being unable to sleep. Sometimes he just got up and did something else. Tonight he didn't feel physically restless, but he'd stirred up so many ghosts he wasn't surprised that he was still awake long after Eren's breathing had evened out.

He lay on his side, staring blindly in the dark in Eren's direction, listening to him breathe, feeling his weight on the mattress and imagining his sleeping face. Levi had never done this with anyone else; if he was still awake and there was someone else in the bed he'd usually leave. Even if it was his own house (and it normally wasn't; he and Erwin had agreed that it was too awkward to bring people home most of the time) he preferred to get up if he couldn't sleep.

It wasn't bad, he decided. He'd assumed he'd be irritated, and he was braced to endure so many things for the sake of Eren's company and Eren's affection, but it wasn't what he'd expected. Eren didn't prod him in his sleep or snore or talk or drool or do any of the dozen things Levi had feared he might, and lying in the dark next to him was strangely soothing.

He also hadn't overreacted to Levi's story. Levi knew Erwin would have overreacted, and that was one of the reasons why he'd never mentioned it to him. Eren was sad for him, certainly, and Levi had expected him to get sentimental, but he'd taken on board the point of Levi's story. Levi trusted he'd do the right thing with it.

Levi had considered Eren's age with some concern back when he'd considered this entire arrangement with some concern. He wasn't bothered by the sex so much as the influence he and Erwin might have on the rest of his life; he was so young and had so much to learn. He and Erwin had answered at least partially some of life's questions in their own ways, and they both had strong opinions on some matters. The last thing he wanted for Eren was to browbeat him into growing up like him, or Erwin if it came to that.

But Eren had two waypoints on his map now. Levi would call out Erwin's bullshit, and he was sure Erwin would do the same for him, and Eren was free to chart his course between them. And Eren himself wasn't some naive pushover; the events of his adolescence had forced him to grow up quite fast in some ways as well.

Levi didn't think much about his mother, who was little more than an abstract concept anyway, and he didn't think much about his grandmother who was, yes, an obligation, although one Levi didn't resent. Instead, he thought about Eren trying not to cry and telling him that he was glad he existed.

He thought about it for a long, long time.

Levi woke up late. Late for him, anyway. He had an internal clock so accurate he didn't keep a real one next to his bed as he found the glow of digital displays and the constant movement of the numbers tended to aggravate his insomnia anyway. So he knew he'd slept in pretty late by his standards at least, even though the room was still fairly dark.
He could feel Eren's presence before he'd opened his eyes, and when Levi blearily opened one eye his gaze was met almost instantly. Eren had propped himself up on his elbows and was staring at him with a fond but oddly guilty expression. He had his phone in his hand.

“Hello,” Levi said, more to test his voice than anything else.

“Hi.” Eren smiled. “I mean, good morning.”

“Morning.”

“Can I take your picture?” Eren asked.

The question was so unexpected it took Levi a few moments to turn it over in his head and process what it meant.

“What? Now?”

“Yeah.”

“I assume I look like shit.”

“You look like you just woke up, that's all. I won't show anyone ever, I promise. I know you don't like having photos taken but all the ones I have of you were taken by Nanaba and I just want to take one myself of you like this. Real.” He'd clearly been awake for a little while if he could be so articulate.

Levi didn't feel like arguing. If it meant that much to him, it wasn't such a hardship.

“Fine, whatever.”

“Actually,” Eren continued. “I took one earlier. While you were asleep. I'm sorry, I just couldn't resist. I can delete it if you want. I feel sort of bad-”

“I don't care, Eren. Just take the fucking thing.”

“Don't move,” Eren said.

Levi squinted into Eren's phone as Eren took the picture. He smiled and turned it so Levi could see. It was an awful picture; dark and kind of fuzzy, and as he'd expected, Levi looked the way he felt; hair awry, unshaven and frowning in a puzzled sort of way, but Eren was so damn happy with it, he couldn't complain.

“Thank you. This is—I want to put you as my wallpaper,” Eren said. “Erwin's my lock screen already but I guess someone might see it if I do that.”

“It's a terrible picture,” Levi muttered.

“I know,” Eren laughed. “It's so real.”

“I dunno why you want me looking like that.”

“You look fine,” Eren said fondly. “All sleepy and cute.”

“Humph.” But he didn't feel as grumpy as he sounded.

Levi gradually realised he wanted Eren's picture too, as he watched Eren smile at both him and his
He didn't really keep pictures of anyone; he had no family to remember and no desire to see anyone else's face much. But Eren's not going to be like this forever; he's going to grow older, Levi realised. Levi had never considered that before, as his idea of relationships existed only in the here and now and he rarely peered into the future.

He stared at Eren, trying to imprint him on his memory; his dishevelled hair and unevenly sprouting stubble, the way Levi's own shirt displayed his collarbones, the way his eyes gleamed in the low light.

“What?” Eren asked. “You're not mad, are you?”

Levi shook his head. “I think I get it.”

And Eren, beautiful boy, somehow knew the right thing to say. “Do you want one of me?”

“Yeah.” Levi smiled ruefully and Eren lifted up his phone and took a picture. It was strange to be photographed as himself, without a constructed image between himself and the lens. He had to fight the urge to act, to pose, and just relax and have no expectations.

“Go on then,” Eren said.

Levi rolled over and picked his phone up from the night stand. He frowned at it, as he'd only ever used the camera on this particular model once before, and that was to take photographs of some storm damage for his landlord.

“Do you want some help?” Eren asked cheekily after a little while.

“Fuck off.” Levi lifted the phone and took a picture of Eren's laughing face.

“Nope.” Eren waited until he'd lowered his phone to check the picture and while he was distracted took another one.

Levi glanced up at him. “How many are you going to take?”

“Right now? As many as you'll let me.”

“And from now on?”

“As many as you'll let me,” Eren repeated. He flopped down onto the pillow, his head next to Levi's and he wriggled closer and pressed his lips against Levi's. Levi broke off the kiss when he heard Eren's phone again.

“Oi, we're not making amateur porn here. For a start, we're not amateurs.”

“Who said anything about porn?” Eren asked. He moved closer, pressing himself up against Levi's side. “Were you thinking things?”

“When it comes to you,” Levi lowered his voice, and gave Eren a look. “I am always thinking things. But the phones go away,” he added more seriously.

“I know.” Eren smiled. “I don't want pictures of that anyway. Well, not when the real thing is right there.” He abandoned his phone on the pillow and climbed up over Levi, wrapping long, tanned limbs around him lovingly while Levi struggled to get his own phone back on the bedside table before it got broken or lost in the bedclothes.

It was only when the device was out of danger that he turned his attention back to Eren who was
sitting on his stomach, curled down to kiss at his neck and ears, the blankets falling away from him. Levi kicked them off to get a better look at him, sliding his hands up his legs and over his hips to reach back and grab his arse.

Eren rolled his hips forward when he did so, and Levi grinned wickedly. Yes, he'd missed playing with Eren. He lifted his head, seeking Eren's neck, knowing what it would do to him when Eren sat up out of reach, his hands splayed across Levi's chest.

“Um.” His brows were knitted into a frown.

“What is it?” Levi asked softly, releasing him.

“How do I put this? Can you let me, um, I want to play with you for a bit. I feel that you're a whole lot better at this than me and I guess I want to do something for you if I can.”

Levi was about to argue, reassure Eren that he did wonderful things for him, but then he thought better of it. He didn't have anything he needed to prove, and Eren had worked up the nerve to ask him directly for what he wanted, even if Levi wasn't totally sure what he meant. It was strange for him not to take an active role in bed; it was just what he did, but for Eren's sake he made himself relax.

“Yeah, go ahead.”

Eren grinned at him and flung himself forward to hug him, and Levi hugged him back. Whatever. Either way, his goal was to make Eren happy. Eren sat up again and stripped off his shirt and when he clambered off Levi to take off his boxers as well, Levi did the same. He didn't think getting undressed counted as taking the lead, and Eren didn't object, watching him hungrily as the rest of his body came into view.

When they were naked Eren sat on him again, and ran his hands over his chest and arms, just taking him in, taking his time. Then he started exploring with his mouth, shuffling back a bit so Levi's erection rested lightly against the cleft of his arse. Levi didn't even think he was doing it all that deliberately; he was concentrating on mouthing at Levi's neck. Trying to find a good spot, Levi supposed. Levi could have told him that he wasn't that sensitive, but he kept his mouth shut. He didn't mind it, after all, and he let his hands skim up and down Eren's back.

Eren worked his way down and Levi hummed when Eren's lips closed around a nipple.

“Finally,” Eren said. “I thought you were going to fall asleep again.”

“I am not likely to fall asleep with you wriggling around on top of me like that,” Levi said. He shifted as Eren gently applied his teeth. That wasn't bad.

Eren glanced up at him. “Am I being too gentle?”

“You do whatever you want.”

Eren sighed and rested his forehead on Levi's chest. “You're missing the point. This is for you, not me. Please give me some direction here?”

“I'm not really good at talking about this sort of crap,” Levi muttered. He wondered if he was just messing everything up like this; maybe he shouldn't have agreed in the first place. He knew where his strengths were and he should have played to them.

“You like biting,” Eren said, in a patient tone.
“Yeah. That's not exactly letting you take the lead though; isn't that what you wanted?”

“What about me biting you?”

“It's okay. I don't want a whole lot of marks though.”

“It's okay?” Eren prompted him.

“I like it.”

“Thank you.” Eren stretched up and kissed his nose. “You don't have to frown. I don't mind. I don't mind anything about you.”

“You should, I'm pretty fucking odd.”

Eren laughed. Then he ducked his head down to Levi's neck and started again, this time much more aggressively. It still wasn't going to make Levi lose it the way Eren lost it when someone played with his neck, but he could concentrate on the sensation; it demanded his attention.

“Harder,” he breathed. He wanted it to hurt a little. He trusted Eren not to mark him and indeed Eren didn't suck and bruise, he scraped and bit. He worked his way around Levi's neck and over his collarbones, and he scraped his nails along Levi's ribs and Levi liked that, he decided; he didn't want to be clawed, but just lightly was okay.

He also wanted to be fucking. He knew he could lose himself then, give Eren what he wanted, which was to see him lose it, he was sure. He slid his hands down Eren's back and cupped his arse.

Eren lifted his head.

“You really like my butt, don't you?”

“It's very nice,” Levi said.

“Yeah, but even so.” Eren sat up and looked at him. He had that wicked, daring look on his face again. Levi rather loved it; he hadn't expected Eren to surprise him as often as he did. Halloween was still a memory he treasured. “I could ride you like this.” He turned around to face the other direction and sat on Levi's cock, his weight flattening it against Levi's stomach. “Then you could stare at it while you fucked me.” He moved his hips to demonstrate.

“Yeah,” Levi breathed. Okay, now he was starting to get to him. The one thing Levi had never, ever mastered was dirty talk, no matter how carefully Hange wrote it. Eren seemed to say things so effortlessly by comparison. He squeezed Eren's arse, and Eren tensed up in response.

Eren leaned back and looked over his shoulder, in the process putting more of his weight on Levi's erection. “But all I'd get to look at is your feet,” he grinned.

“Uh huh.” Levi didn't know what to say.

Eren laughed, and flopped back against Levi's chest. Levi reached around and stroked Eren's cock; he couldn't resist. Eren didn't object. His head was tilted right back off Levi's shoulder and Levi turned his head and kissed his neck.

Eren convulsed and lost his balance and rolled off, luckily onto the bed beside him and not off the other side onto the floor.

“Ff that's not fair,” he gasped. “I want to make you do that too.”
Speak. Speak you motherfucker or forever hold your peace, because Levi could see Eren's confidence was failing, even though he was hard and breathing harshly.

“You can,” he said. “Probably.” Eren looked at him, eager to please and Levi wasn't sure what to do with it but he plunged on anyway. “You're doing fine, Eren. Please keep going.”

“Really?” Eren sat up a bit.

“Eren, look at me. No, not my face.”

“So what you're trying to say is, 'Hey, arsehole, my cock's down here'?” Eren pointed to the cock in question and then his cheeky grin widened into a proper laugh. He didn't stop, and Levi could see the tension leaving him and even though Levi pressed his lips together and tried to frown he knew it was a hopeless cause and for the second time since he'd met Eren Jaeger, Levi laughed too. He put his hand to his mouth and wheezed silently.

When Eren saw him laughing that only encouraged him and he flopped across Levi's chest, giggling helplessly and they stayed like that until they lost their breath and found it again.

“Please fuck me,” Levi said, his forearm resting across his eyes. “Bite me. Talk to me. I don't really know how to say the sort of things you do.”

“What sort of things?”

“I just said I don't-”

“Like, compliments? How hot and sweet and kind you are?” Levi was about to protest that no that was not what he wanted to hear when Eren continued. “How nice your cock is? How nice your voice is? I would do almost anything to hear it break you know. When you're really getting into it you kind of growl sometimes and it does things to me.”

“Eren.”


“I can make you,” Levi managed to get out.

“Not today. God do you know what it's like, having a boyfriend like you? Knowing what you could do to me whenever I wanted you to?” Eren gave in to his own frustration and attacked Levi's skin, kneading and pulling at him with his fingers, leaving sharp little bites all across his chest and shoulders, moving up to his neck in a frenzy of lust, and Levi wanted to return the favour, roll him over and fuck him until he couldn't speak because Christ it was embarrassing to hear those things and wonderful too and Levi held back. Somehow.

For once he wasn't holding back for his partner's pleasure but for his. This sort of torture and teasing, I would only tolerate it from you, Eren, he realised. I trust that you will do the right thing with it, so he restricted himself to touching Eren lightly, and Eren worked himself up, rubbing his cock against Levi's leg.

Eventually Eren said he couldn't take it any more and he searched the drawer in the bedside table and Levi told him not to mess up all the objects in there as they were each in their place so he could find them in the dark. Eren heaved a sigh but was careful to do as requested.

Eren under-did his preparation and consequently when he sank down onto Levi's cock (facing away
from his feet this time) he went agonisingly slowly, and Levi stroked his thighs while Eren, bright red, told him how good he felt.

“You do too,” Levi managed to say when he finally fell silent, seated finally.

“Is that the best you can do?” Eren panted.

Levi nodded. “Sorry.”

Eren smiled at him, “Don't be sorry for anything. You make up for it, you really, really do.” He lifted himself up and sank back down, slow, his brow furrowed with concentration. Eren fucked him slowly and a bit awkwardly, and Levi panted and twitched underneath him, watching, and wanting to say what he felt but being unable to, but Eren kept his gaze locked with Levi's and he seemed to understand. Despite Eren's best efforts his pace gradually grew faster, and his mouth hung open more than it formed actual words. Levi angled his hips up when Eren pressed down onto him and Eren's fingernails scrabbled at Levi's chest.

“Come first,” Eren said, eventually, the words coming out in a pained whisper. “Please,” he added when, Levi opened his mouth to protest. “I'm not gonna think you're less of a partner I just want to see you come.”

It went against every habit Levi had; he gave other people orgasms, wrung them out around his cock, conquered and took and gave as a king might a devoted subject and Eren was asking for him to give all that away.

He did. There were things he couldn't give Eren, but his childish pride in the sort of fucking he was starting to realise wasn't the be all and end all wasn't one of them.

He shuddered and shook and Eren's weight on him kept him pinned down, teeth bared and squirming against the bed. He snapped his hips up and Eren dug his fingernails in and held on, his thighs clamped around Levi's hips. He rode Levi, his stomach muscles flexing, his hair falling into his eyes and his lower lip between his teeth as Levi groaned and came whispering his name.

“You're so beautiful, you're so hot,” Eren said, and Levi didn't need that kind of reassurance but he'd never realised he wanted it before now either. “You're so good,” Eren's voice was shaking. “I want to-”

He called out as Levi wrapped his hand around his cock. Levi knew what he wanted. Eren fell forward and came whimpering, his arms around Levi's neck and Levi's cock still in his arse.

Eren sighed and they breathed.

“That was really embarrassing,” Eren said eventually.

“You think?” Levi said. He still wasn't entirely sure what had happened on some level. It was the strangest sex he'd ever had, and Hange could be quite imaginative.

Eren chuckled.

“I have classes to teach today,” Levi said.

“Oh fuck!” Eren sat up and Levi winced at the sudden movement. “I have classes to go to as well. What time is it? Where is your clock, Levi?”

“In the kitchen.”
Eren rolled off him and checked his phone and sighed with relief and said he wasn't late yet. They showered and bolted down tea and muesli and when Eren got up to wash the breakfast dishes Levi stood also and wrapped his arms around Eren's waist, resting his forehead against Eren's back.

“Hey.”

“Levi?”

“I don't know.” I don't want you to leave. I want you to stay here forever. I don't want to say this in case it comes true and in case it doesn't. I don't even want to think this about someone. “It's too fucking late,” he muttered.

“I can give you a lift to the hall if you want,” Eren said. “I should have time before my first class.”

Levi released him. “Yeah, thanks. I appreciate it.”

“It's nothing. Don't worry about it.”
Chapter 41

“Is Mikasa really okay with this?” Jean asked.

Eren was standing near the door, idly twirling his keys around his fingers while Jean finished packing. It was far too early in the morning, but Jean and Mikasa had a bus to catch, and Eren had offered to drive them to it, mainly as a peace offering to Mikasa.

“She was disappointed.”

“Mom's gonna be disappointed too. She worries about you.”

“Yeah, I know.” The whole school had been aware of Carla's illness and subsequent death, and Eren got the impression Jean's mother would have happily adopted both him and Mikasa, given half a chance. When they'd been teenagers Jean had always been rebellious and ill-tempered and took every opportunity to get some time away from her, but Eren wouldn't have minded spending more time in her kitchen. “I'll see her over Christmas. Tell her I promise.”

“I will.” Jean glared at Missy as he picked up his bags. “And you stay outta my room!” Missy ignored him.

“Are you going to do anything besides study?” Jean asked, as they drove to Mikasa's apartment.

“Erwin's family is holding a big fancy dinner,” Eren said. “So I'll probably go to that.”

“You're meeting his folks?” Jean raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Have you even told Mikasa about him and Levi yet?”

“Well the dinner's big, not just his family. It's more like a work thing I guess? But his mother will be there.” Eren felt a prickle of discontent. “I hadn't actually thought about that much.”

“Clearly,” Jean said. “You look like you just swallowed a spider.”

“It'll be fine. And don't tell Mikasa. I'm gonna tell her soon. But this would be the worst timing. We've got enough to worry about.”

“Your dad, right?”

“Yeah.” Eren had told Jean the news the next time he'd seen him. Jean didn't have any advice, but he did say things like ‘wow’ and ‘fuck, dude’ that made Eren feel a bit better anyway. Jean had heard many of Eren's angry teenage rants against his father, and he knew their background better than most.

It had taken Eren two days to work up the nerve to email his father. Even as he typed it he felt resentful, but he knew Levi was right; it was up to him. So he'd kept it short, confirming he would skip Thanksgiving and be back for Christmas, and ending with a firm request that they talk one on one before the holiday itself.

Grisha's reply had been even briefer and more stilted.

That will be fine. Thank you for letting me know, Eren.

As soon as he'd received it Eren felt angry; it was so bland and hard to read and polite and didn't he feel anything? Wasn't he worried or curious? He regretted the whole thing; their 'talk' would
probably be an hour of them staring at each other. But you can't know other's pain, he reminded
himself. And it was too late to back out anyway. But he was glad he wasn't going home to face his
father just quite yet. It might be cowardly, but the idea of confronting and what, *befriending* his own
father was weird and he needed time to work out what he was going to say, even if his father
remained silent.

Bringing up the topic again successfully silenced Jean for the rest of the trip, and once Mikasa had
joined them the conversation moved to lighter topics. Armin had caught a flight the night before to
head home to see his grandfather, so it was only Eren who saw Jean and Mikasa off. He watched the
bus pull away and sighed. He wasn't going home for Thanksgiving, for the first time in his life.

It felt lonely, like he'd stepped outside a warm house, but it was a relief as well.

Erwin had said he'd pick Eren up before the dinner, and they could stay over at the Smith family
mansion. It was something Erwin thought Eren should experience at least once, and Eren was kind
of excited about the whole thing. A real mansion wasn't an experience to ignore, and Erwin seemed
to think they'd be able to share a room.

What Levi was going to do, Eren wasn't quite sure; he'd reaffirmed that he was going, but didn't
seem particularly enthusiastic about it. He seemed to regard it as some sort of duty. Eren didn't know
if he planned to stay the night or not. He doubted they'd be able to sleep three to a room, either way.

When the appointed time actually approached, Eren started to wonder if he'd be too nervous to eat.
He'd dug out his suit and checked it for moths and brushed off any dust and he looked, well, like a
guy who wasn't used to wearing a suit. He sat around half-heartedly picking at his phone, and
keeping away from Missy in an attempt to reduce the number of cat hairs on his clothes, even though
he would have found petting her comforting right then.

Erwin's Mother. Well, she already knew about him, so it wasn't going to be a surprise, but Eren was
now feeling, regardless of his gender, she probably wouldn't think he was good enough for Erwin.
Too young, too awkward, just a student with loads of debt and okay marks; not a match for someone
like Erwin at all.

It didn't matter to Erwin, obviously, but Eren was feeling lonely and cut off from his own family; it
would have been nice to be welcomed into another one, even just a little bit.

He was so caught up in these thoughts he was caught by surprise when he heard someone knock on
the door. When he opened it Levi was standing on the other side, wearing a suit, and after saying
hello to Eren he crouched down to accept Missy's greeting. Missy had already eaten most of the
fancy turkey cat food Eren had bought her as a Thanksgiving treat, and she purred and rubbed
against Levi's hands. It was hard to know if she remembered him or was just being her friendly self.
Eren smiled and watched them play until Erwin leaned impatiently on the Aston's horn, and they bid
Missy farewell.

“You know, you can always visit to say hello to her,” Eren said. “I won't get jealous.”

“Hm.” Levi just looked self-conscious. Eren was endlessly amused by his love of cats.

“Have you been to the Smith house before?” Eren asked Levi, as Erwin pulled out of the driveway.

“No, but Erwin has told me about it.”

“It's worth seeing at least once,” Erwin said. “It will look its best tonight.” Eren didn't know what
kind of mood Erwin was in, which was strange; Erwin had always seemed easier to read than Levi,
but tonight he was wearing a professional mask. Levi seemed relaxed, but the sort of relaxed he was when he stepped up to a student to spar; alert.

They drove to an old and expensive part of town, and along a street lined with closed gates to the only one that was open. The Aston looked at home here. Eren found himself leaning forward for a glimpse of their destination.

Eren’s first thought was that it looked like the White House. It was that sort of old-fashioned and expensive. It was all lit up, and there was a roped-off area of lawn with valet parking, attended by a valet who looked quite miserable standing out in the cold evening. Erwin ignored him and drove further down the driveway to the garage beside the house. No one tried to stop him; Eren supposed the car was identification enough. There were some very nice vehicles parked on the lawn, but Eren thought the Aston was a cut above them all.

Erwin parked outside the garage, killed the engine, and sighed.

“Well, here we are. I hope we have a good time.”

“Um, Erwin? About your mom,” Eren began.

“Don't worry,” Erwin turned around to smile at him. “She's not going to pick on you or anything. Relax."

Easier said than done, given how fast Erwin's smile faded, but that was their cue and the three of them got out. They were wearing the exact same thing; a suit, but as they walked around the side of the house to the front door, Eren reflected on how different it looked on them. Eren was sure he looked like he was going to a family wedding, Erwin looked like a movie star and Levi like he'd been paid to show up and put a bullet in someone's head.

They were met at the door by someone who could have been a bouncer or a butler, and who bowed the three of them in as soon as he recognised Erwin.

Inside was warm and well lit and huge, and Eren was very glad Levi was here because while Erwin didn't seem to notice, Levi looked about as uncomfortable as Eren felt. Even though he'd walked in with the heir to the house he felt like an interloper.

“Look at all this money,” Levi murmured, and Eren wasn't certain if he meant the decor or the other guests. “The food's going to be great though,” he added, and Eren smiled dutifully and wondered if he'd ever feel like eating again.

“You'd best meet my mother first,” Erwin said. “Get it over with so you can relax,” he said reassuringly.

They didn't have a lot of choice, as the guests left the atrium they were greeted in turn by a woman who could be no one else but the head of the household. She wore an elegant silver dress that almost matched her hair, and even at this distance Eren could see the resemblance between her and her son. She was beautiful now, and must have been stunning when younger.

Erwin took Eren's arm, and Levi stood on the other side, expressionless as they approached her.

“Hello Erwin,” her voice was soft and cultured and Eren could hear the iron in it. He forced himself to smile politely, as she turned her imperious gaze on him.

“Mother, may I introduce my boyfriend, Eren Jaeger.”
Eren stared into cool blue eyes the same colour as Erwin's, lit from below by a diamond necklace probably worth more than he was. He wasn't sure if he should offer his hand or not and he ended up bowing awkwardly.

“It's a pleasure to meet you, Ma'am.”

“Of course, how wonderful to meet you. Thank you for coming. I do hope you have a nice time.” There was no real warmth in her words; it was like being given a handful of polished river stones.

“Thank you, you too,” Eren said, and winced.

Erwin covered for his awkwardness, or tried to, by introducing her to Levi, saying he was an old friend without anywhere else to go for Thanksgiving, which was probably true as far as it went. Levi gave her a roguish smile and held out his hand, and she blinked in surprise, or maybe Eren imagined it. She shook Levi's hand politely, and the three of them moved on to allow the next set of guests their turn talking to the hostess.

“Were you flirting with my mother?” Erwin murmured. For the first time that evening he actually looked amused.

“I didn't want her to think we were all gay,” Levi said, completely deadpan and Eren surprised himself, and a couple of the other guests, by laughing, and the tension eased. He was glad Levi was here; Erwin was obliged to take it seriously, and Eren wasn't self confident or experienced enough not to take it seriously, but Levi brought them down to earth.

“Come on, let's have a look around. We've got a while before dinner,” Erwin said. A waiter was circulating with a tray of drinks and Erwin took a glass of wine while Levi picked up two glasses of orange juice and handed one to Eren.

“Why is it always orange juice at these things?” Levi muttered.

“You could probably get them to get you something specific.”

“It's fine. At least it's not soda.”

Eren suspected he was one of the youngest people there. Almost everyone else was middle-aged or older. Friends of the family, Erwin had said; either his mother's or his grandfather's friends then. If any of them had kids of their own they'd probably be grown up by now. Most of them seemed to recognise Erwin, although none of them greeted him with any real enthusiasm. Levi was looked upon with puzzlement and Eren himself with open curiosity.

What was their problem? Erwin had been out for years; he shouldn't be that surprising.

It was a relief to get away from the bulk of the guests. They were mostly clustered in what Eren guessed was a ball room and a parlour, taking snacks from trays (Levi snagged a few himself) and talking, so once Erwin started the tour they were mostly on their own.

There wasn't that much to see; just expensive furniture. It didn't seem like much of a fun house to grow up in, however; there were an awful lot of things a child would be forbidden to touch lest they damage something valuable.

“This is my room, well, was my room. Is my room for tonight again, I suppose.” Erwin pushed open a door. Eren was deeply curious, but despite being well-furnished the room looked oddly empty. There were a few posters on the walls, and high school textbooks arranged in a row above the desk, so it hadn't been cleared out since Erwin had moved out of home entirely, but it seemed oddly
 impersonal, even more so when Eren considered what Erwin's actual home looked like.

Erwin said the garden was the best part of the house, but it was too dark and cold to explore it, and wouldn't be looking very good at this time of year anyway. They made their way back to the more public areas, and Erwin swapped his empty glass for a full one.

“I suppose I should do some networking. This is going to be boring, I apologise.”

“I don't really mind,” Eren said. As long as he was ignored he was happy.

Levi seemed to fit in surprisingly well, given he usually lurked at HotFreeRange functions, but Eren quickly realised why; he was acting, whereas among HotFreeRange regulars he was being himself. Once they discovered he was a martial arts instructor, there seemed to be some people, mostly wives, who wanted to talk to him about exercise regimes and diets. Levi responded professionally, and if he felt condescended to he didn't show it.

Erwin was professional too. His conversations revolved around clients and office gossip, and now that Eren knew he was a contender to take over the company, the idle talk seemed less idle; but no more interesting for all of that. He hovered at Erwin's arm for a while, smiling politely when he was introduced, and trying to look vaguely interested the rest of the time. No one paid him a lot of attention, and Eren wondered why anyone would want to be arm candy; it was fucking boring.

Eventually Levi got away from his admirers and he and Eren retreated to the side of the room to eat little fried things and wonder when dinner proper was going to be served.

“Why are you here?” Eren asked. “This isn't really your thing, is it?”

“It's not yours either. And it's not Erwin's, not really. He's putting up a good show, although I don't know why. Normally he goes to these things to be rude to people, but I guess it's different this year; no Grandfather Smith, and he will have to see everyone again on Monday.”

“Yeah.” Erwin hadn't mentioned the firm to Levi, and it was odd to know something about him that Levi didn't. Eren almost wished he had; it would be good to get Levi's opinion.

They lurked until a gong was struck to announce that dinner was to be served. The dining room was enormous, and Eren could kind of understand why the Smith family held these events; there would be no way to use the room as intended any other time, and it would be weird to sit down the end of the long hardwood table, bracketed by dozens of empty seats.

Tonight the table was lined with candles and silverware and glass, and Eren went along the table until he found his name on a card. Eren was seated next to Erwin, who in turn sat at his mother's right hand. Levi was banished halfway down the table, and he met Eren's eyes and shrugged.

Erwin's mother said grace, and then, finally, the evening started to look up, as the caterers began to bring out the food. Only Jean's mother could have competed with the largesse provided, and once Eren felt safely ignored, his appetite returned with a vengeance. No one expected him to talk with his mouth full, and so he put his head down and ate. All the traditional Thanksgiving favourites were there, making up for the lack of homemade charm with flawless presentation.

Erwin ceremoniously sliced a turkey, but there were several of the birds required to feed such a large gathering and it was whisked away quickly for a professional to finish the job.

Eren was really starting to slow down by dessert. He now understood why he and Levi were the only ones clearing their plates. Levi just looked determined, but Eren felt like a nap. He wondered how late this thing was going to go.
He managed to make it through half his slice of pumpkin pie before calling it quits.

“Hey, what happens after this?” he asked Erwin, who'd spent most of the meal politely talking to his mother about people Eren had never heard of.

“Brandy,” Erwin replied. “Are you all right?” He frowned at him, concerned.

“I think I ate too much,” Eren groaned. He was definitely not up for anything more exciting than sleeping in Erwin's bed tonight.

Erwin chuckled and nudged his arm, “That's what Thanksgiving's all about, right?”

“I guess.”

Eren thought the atmosphere before dinner was boring, but he found himself missing it, as the atmosphere afterwards was far more tense. Somehow about a third of the gathering, mostly men in suits and including Erwin, ended up syphoned off into a sort of parlour, and the conversation inside seemed quite serious indeed.

“That's the real point of this evening,” Levi said in Eren's ear. “No doubt Erwin's grandfather would have taken this opportunity to make pronouncements and discuss how things were travelling but without him things are much more chaotic.”

“Where's Miss Smith?” Eren muttered, looking about for Erwin's mother.

“Steering clear apparently.”

“Erwin kind of looks like he wishes he'd done the same,” Eren said. Whatever good humour Erwin had maintained earlier it was gone. He was sipping brandy and watching the conversation with narrowed eyes, the corners of his mouth turned down. The old boy's network, Eren thought, and he's in it whether he wants to be or not. Erwin seemed to be listening more than he was speaking.

No one seemed to have any great desire to talk to either Eren or Levi and so they just stood back and watched, listening with half an ear to the lighter conversation swirling around them in the ballroom, and watching the heavier one through the open door to the parlour.

“How much has he been drinking?” Levi asked abruptly.

“I don't know,” Eren said, startled. He thought back over the dinner. “I wasn't really watching. I was eating.” Everyone except him and Levi had had wine with dinner, and the waiter was always flitting around topping up people's glasses. He looked at Erwin more closely, but he had no idea what sort of drunk Erwin was. He seemed to be hitting the brandy pretty hard, but it didn't have any obvious effect.

“He looks pretty sober to me.”

“He would.”

“Should we stop him?” Eren asked.

Levi shook his head. “No. He's a grown man, and an experienced drinker. He can make his own decisions. And hey, it's not often you get this much quality booze for free; I don't blame him if he wants to take advantage.”

“But?” Eren prompted. He was sure Levi had spoken up in the first place for a reason.
“We're his only friends here, really. We should keep an eye on him.”

“At least he's not driving home.” Eren frowned as a thought occurred to him, and he glanced at Levi. “Did you expect this would happen? Is that why you decided to come?”

“I thought it was possible,” Levi said. He frowned, “I know he's been at a loose end lately; he was so pleased his grandfather had died he rushed back to reclaim what he'd always considered his, and now he's not sure he wants it. I know Erwin; he likes basking in the glow of burning bridges, and you know, they're his bridges to burn.” He sighed, “But it's not really fair to you to throw you into this mess unprepared. So I thought I'd come along, just in case you needed a bit of backup. In case he did.”

Eren wasn't sure how he felt about that.

Levi must have read his ambivalent expression, because he nudged his arm. “Hey, if you weren't here, I'd probably be doing the same thing anyway. I've dragged Erwin out of trouble more than once before, but with you around, I feel better about things too. You and I, we're his team; and once that big stupid bulldozer gets going it probably will take both of us to get him under control.”


“That's just it,” Levi said. “You never know. Sometimes all I have to do is stand back and applaud.”

“How dare you,” Erwin said, loudly and clearly. The conversation around them didn't stop, but it did falter and reconfigure slightly as people turned to see what was going on.

There wasn't much to see; Erwin was glaring at a guy in a suit, like he had been for the past half an hour. Erwin didn't sound like he'd lost his temper, more that he was deliberately letting it off the leash, and it was a well-behaved beast, staying at its master's side until ordered to do otherwise.

“Well, I suppose we're about to find out,” Levi murmured, folding his arms.

“Shouldn't we do something?” Eren said. “He looks like he's going to shred him.”

“Fuck no,” Levi said. “I want to see what he does next first. Besides, it's about time someone said something to these complacent fucks. I would, but it's not my place.”

“But—”

“We'll rescue him if we have to, don't worry, but for now he knows what he's doing, I think he does, anyway.”

Erwin stalked forward, looming over the man. “I don't think I'm going to put up with any more of this without saying something,” he began.
Chapter 42

“I have approached this company, and the people who work there, with an attitude of respect and open-mindedness. I am aware of the importance of the Smith family legacy to this city and to a great many individuals.” Erwin spoke like he was on television, not shouting, but somehow his voice reached out even into the next room, and gradually the other conversations fell silent.

“Has he got a speech prepared?” Eren murmured in Levi’s ear.

“I doubt it.” Levi had an odd look on his face; it might have been pride. “He can pull this sort of stuff out of thin air.”

“We command a great deal of respect,” Erwin said. Paused. Narrowed his eyes. Here it comes, Eren thought. “Respect we clearly do not deserve and are not earning,” Erwin declared through his teeth.

“The way we treat our junior staff institutionally is a disgrace. Can we call ourselves a successful firm on one hand and then declare we cannot afford to pay our employees a just wage on the other? I don't care if it's the industry standard; just because industry standards have been falling does not mean we are obliged to follow suit.” Erwin shook his head, “But it's not the bookkeeping. It's people like you, Rod, treating your interns like they're party favours. This is no longer the nineteen-fifties and you know that. You know that because you sign off on the policies and anti-discrimination procedures; we all do. You cannot claim ignorance, and I can see you're about to turn purple so please don't think for a second I'm going to accuse you of breaking any of the rules. Heaven forbid.”

Erwin's contempt was clear now in the curl of his lip, and he ran his hand over his hair as he marshalled his thoughts. Eren's stomach was now a ball of nerves; how much trouble was Erwin going to get into after this? His mother had returned, and Eren glanced nervously at her. She stood off by herself, watching with a perfectly unreadable face. Clearly she wasn't going to intervene, whether or not she approved.

“Should we do something?” Eren whispered to Levi.

“Fuck no. Eren, look at him. Even tanked he's magnificent. He's telling these people exactly what they deserve to hear. Be proud of him. Don't worry, we'll rescue him if we need to.”

Eren took a deep breath. It didn't really help that much. Maybe he was magnificent. Maybe Eren did kind of want him to make his points and sweep him upstairs. But oh God he was going to get in so much trouble.

“We don't break the rules because we make the rules and then we pat ourselves on the back for doing so well. How many years has it been since we took a case in the public interest?”

Erwin was not going to keep a roomful of lawyers quiet for long, and his opponents had by now recovered from their shock and started to argue back. But first, Eren noticed, they appealed to good manners.

“Do you really want to raise this now, rather than through the proper channels, Erwin?” A tall, avuncular gentleman asked Erwin in a fatherly manner. “This is your mother's house and her gathering. There are proper times and places to raise these concerns.”

Erwin looked at his mother. Half the room did.

Miss Smith drew her wrap a little closer around her shoulders in a gesture that was reminiscent of a
“Finish what you start,” she said, and it could have been addressed to anyone.

Erwin didn't exactly smile, but he did nod in acknowledgement.

Erwin might have started off speaking of respect, but the more he spoke the clearer it was that he had very little for the people around him. Eren didn't understand all of it; he referred to clients and cases without pausing to explain their significance, but he got the gist. Erwin was furious and articulate and spoke clearly and quickly, like he knew his time was limited. Maybe it was. Eren could see the way the others looked at each other, taking a step back to let him run his mouth; Erwin had no power other than his own oratory, and even then, how could you sway an audience like this one?

But he had to say it. Despite the fact that Eren was now clutching Levi's upper arm with the effort of not throwing himself into the fray to try and diffuse the situation somehow, he knew they were right to hold back. Erwin's list of grievances was long and polished and he must have been adding to them, considering them, for weeks. It was inevitable that he'd air them sooner or later. Whether or not he was listened to he was drawing his own lines in the sand, making it clear where he stood.

“The people you treat with contempt notice,” Erwin said. “I notice. I don't have to care. They do because you hold their livelihoods in your hands and they have no choice but to put up with your shit. You don't deserve the people you have working for you.”

Levi heaved a sigh. “Erwin might not be fired on Monday,” he said quietly. “But I suspect some other people will be. He's basically told them that the interns have been complaining. They will not like that.”

Eren looked at him in alarm.

“I know,” Levi said. “But he'll fix it. We'll make sure of that.”

Eventually Erwin finished. He looked around the room and met Eren's eyes briefly but passed over him. His eyes lit on his mother as she gracefully turned to leave, and Erwin stalked after her.

The room relaxed once he was gone, the men in suits putting their heads together to assess threat and damage, both of which Eren suspected, for all of that, were minimal.

“We didn't need to rescue him after all,” Eren said.

“Mm.”

They waited around for another five minutes.

“Do you think we should go and look for him?” Eren asked. He was extremely glad Levi was here.

“May as well. I don't think this party is going to be much more fun anyway.”

“Are you going home?” Eren really didn't want him to go.

Levi smiled compassionately, “Well, not just yet. Don't worry, I won't abandon you. Either of you.”

“Good.”

They ran into Miss Smith and Levi politely asked her where they might find her son.

“Glowering in the study I expect.”
“Thank you,” Levi said graciously.

Eren still couldn’t read her. Whatever Erwin had said to her it had made absolutely no outward impression. And he thought his own father was frustratingly aloof; Miss Smith was on a whole different level. Her gaze passed over him, as she turned to go and then she paused.

“How old are you, Eren?”

He considered lying, just for a moment, but he wasn't that stupid.

“Nineteen.”

“Ah.” She continued on her way, and Eren felt about three inches high.

“She probably thinks I'm a gold digger,” Eren said.

“I'm sure Erwin doesn't care what she thinks,” Levi said. “Come on.”

Erwin's earlier tour hadn’t included the study, and thus they found themselves exploring upstairs without any clear idea of where they were going. The evening had taken on something of the texture of a nightmare; endless rooms full of terrifyingly expensive things, and the vague feeling they'd get in trouble if they were caught up here.

Eren really wasn’t sure he wanted to spend the night. He was starting to regret not going home for Thanksgiving. He definitely wanted to go home now.

But on the other hand, Erwin needed him.

They paused when they heard Erwin's voice, quieter now. Tired and unhappy, and someone else Eren didn't recognise. They followed the sound along deeply carpeted corridors to a wooden door.

“Why spend six months working there only to blow it all up?”

“I didn't think it would be like this,” Erwin said. “I'm entitled to at least try.”

“I could have told you-”

“I didn't really want to talk to you, Nile.”

Levi met Eren's eyes and mouthed, 'oh shit.'

“Maybe you should have. It might have saved you a lot of trouble.”

“Nile.” Erwin sighed. “Why are you here?”

“Because you clearly need someone to talk to who actually cares.”

“No I mean, why is it you?”

“Now we rescue him,” Levi muttered. He gave a perfunctory knock and opened the door before Eren could voice an opinion. “Because we got lost in this huge fucking house of yours,” he said, strolling in.

The study looked like the sort of place one found the body in the genteel sort of detective shows. Erwin was sitting behind the large, mostly empty desk, a decanter of what Eren guessed was scotch on the table and a tumbler in his hand.
Standing across from him was a thin man about Erwin's age, with dark, greying hair and a goatee that didn't really suit him. He regarded them with a startled look. Erwin just smiled.

“I suppose introductions are in order,” Erwin said. He sounded, and looked, very tired all of a sudden. He was looking at Levi. “This is Nile Dok. Nile, this is my boyfriend, Eren, and my best friend, Levi.”

“I'm Levi,” Levi clarified, as Nile looked between them, a bit puzzled.

“I see.”

“Hello,” Eren said cautiously. He got the impression that everyone else in the room knew a lot more about everything than he did. He shook Nile's hand then for want of anything better went around the table to stand next to Erwin.

“We can take it from here,” Levi said, without animosity but very firmly.

Nile looked like he was going to say something more, but in the end he simply wished them goodnight, and left.

“Are you all right?” Eren asked.

“Yeah.” Erwin put down the tumbler and picked up the decanter to pour himself some more. His movements were slow and deliberate and Eren realised he had to be pretty drunk.

“Are you really planning on drinking more?” Levi asked.

“Do you have any other suggestions?” Erwin asked. “There's nothing we need to clean.”

“I think it's time to go home.”

“Goodnight,” Erwin raised his glass. “Thank you for coming.” He glanced up at Eren. “And for looking after him.”

“Erwin,” Levi frowned. “Let's all go home. Look at Eren. He doesn't want to sleep here. And neither do you, given the amount of spirit you're putting away just to get yourself used to the idea.”

Eren realised they were both looking at him.

“Yeah,” he said, feeling relieved hope. “Let's get out of here.”

Erwin sighed and set the glass down on the table. “My mother will not approve.”

“Yeah, well, she doesn't need to know.” Levi walked around the table. “I'd rather you not pick any more fights right now, so we are not taking our leave, we are escaping.” So saying he spun Erwin around in his chair and started patting him down. Erwin let him do this with a rather puzzled expression.

“What are you doing?”

Erwin squirmed as Levi's hand burrowed into one of his pockets and pulled out a set of keys. “Eren, you're driving.”

He tossed them to him and Eren fumbled to catch them. “You fucking what?” The keys had the Aston Martin logo on them.
“Eren, I haven't driven a car in ten years, and he is definitely not driving anyone anywhere.”

“Nope,” Erwin said.

The Aston. Okay, so, Eren had daydreamed about driving the machine, and it was probably something Erwin would let him do if he asked, but he'd sort of pictured it on a nice sunny road with Erwin himself in full command of his facilities in the seat beside him.

“Is it okay?” Eren asked Erwin, part of him hoping he wouldn't get permission. How bad could it be to wait for a taxi, even with Miss Smith's disapproval?

“Do what you like,” Erwin said.

“Come on then.” Levi put the stopper back in the decanter. “Can you walk?”

“Yes.” Erwin stood up abruptly and swayed, grabbing the edge of the table to steady himself.

“You are going to regret this so much tomorrow,” Levi muttered. “Okay, you're going to have to give us directions to get out of here or we're going to end up in a broom closet or something.”

“That wouldn't be so bad,” Erwin said, smiling at Eren.

Eren smiled back nervously. Oh God, he was going to drive the Aston.

Levi took one of Erwin's arms and Eren the other and they sort of steered him. He could walk well enough but not in a very straight line. Erwin put his arm around Eren's shoulders and cuddled him, nearly making them both trip.

There was, luckily, a side-door down a flight of stairs that led to the garage. The Aston wasn't in the garage but the garage itself had a door and Levi left Erwin in Eren's care while he went to look for a light switch.

“Pretty clean,” he said approvingly as the fluorescents reflected off a matching pair of BMWs.

“Are you really commenting on the garage's housekeeping?” Eren asked.

“Credit where it's due,” Levi said, returning to help Erwin stumble down the last couple of steps.

Erwin wasn't saying much, he just seemed sort of sleepy. He let them lead him past the cars and outside into the cold. The Aston was where they'd left it and Eren endured a fresh attack of nerves as he looked at it. He wished he'd never looked up how much it cost.

He hit the button on the keys to unlock it and he and Levi loaded Erwin into the back. He stretched out on the back seat and Levi didn't seem to think it was worth trying to wrangle him into an upright position.

“Just remember if you feel like being sick, it's your car,” Levi warned.

“M not gonna be sick,” Erwin mumbled, curling his knees up so Levi could close the door.

Eren looked up at the house, still well-lit.

“Do you think we should let them know we're going?”

“Why? I don't think she's gonna call the cops on us for kidnapping him.” Levi put a hand on his shoulder. “Are you okay? The streets should be quiet. And you're a safe driver, don't worry.”
“Have you ever been for a proper ride in this thing?” Eren asked. “It's amazing. That's a lot more power than I'm used to.” He took a deep breath. “But I don't want to stay here and I don't want to leave him here. So, okay.”

There was so little he could do for Erwin. His problems were ones Eren couldn't begin to unravel; the least he could do was drive him home.

Eren got into the driver's seat and Levi sat beside him.

“Okay, Aston. You know me.” Intimately. Fuck. He hoped the car didn't hold a grudge. He glanced over his shoulder at the back seat. Erwin seemed to have fallen asleep, his head pillowed on his arm.

Right then.

The Aston purred to life and Eren fumbled around with the satnav for a while. He wasn't really sure where they were, but luckily Erwin's apartment was saved as 'home.' It seemed like a long way away.

Eren kept the car in very low gear as he turned and made his way down the driveway at little more than walking speed. Levi sat back, radiating calm without comment and Eren was glad of it. He almost forgot to indicate as he left, although there were no other cars on the street. He felt like he did when he'd first learned to drive; everything he needed to remember jumbled up uncomfortably in the front of his mind.

The Aston rolled sedately through the Smith's neighbourhood, and Eren gradually felt himself relax, even as he jumped when the satnav told him he needed to turn. He went as slow as was safe; he knew the power the Aston had in reserve, he could feel it in the way she changed gears, the smoothness. It was like the car was barely awake.

Which was fine.

Thanksgiving dinner still sat like a rock in Eren's stomach, but he could breathe. It felt like the longest drive Eren had ever made, and when he recognised Erwin's street he could have cried from sheer relief.

“You need a pin number to get into the garage under Erwin's apartment,” Eren said.

Levi turned and looked at their sleeping passenger. “I really don't think interrogating him is going to get it out of him. Just park in a visitor's spot.”

“Yeah.” Eren was relieved to take Levi's advice. Aston was much longer than his Swift and he didn't feel all that confident about parking her neatly. When he finally turned the engine off and took his hands off the wheel, Eren realised they were shaking slightly.

“You did good,” Levi said, reaching over and patting him on the back.

“Yeah.”

“Come on, we're nearly done.”

“You've done this before?” Eren asked, as Levi opened the back door, grabbed Erwin's feet, and hauled him partially out of the car so he could get an arm around him.

“Yeah, once or twice. He doesn't pull this sort of shit often at least.” Once Levi had levered him out of the car, Eren locked up and then went to help him.
“He's worried about, well, firm stuff.”

“Yeah, I figured something was up.”

“He's ruined it all now though hasn't he? I mean, he blew up everything.”

“Maybe it's what he intended all along.”

They didn't talk more, instead concentrating on getting Erwin safely up to his apartment. Eren found his house keys in Erwin's pocket and let them in, feeling happier than he'd ever been to see the inside of Erwin's apartment. They frogmarched him to the bed and tossed him on it. Levi took off his shoes and socks, leaving Eren to unbutton and roll him out of his suit.

Erwin muttered a few times and opened his eyes once, but Eren managed to get it off him without his help, and without dislocating either of Erwin's arms. You silly old thing, he thought, smoothing Erwin's hair away from his face. Even if he had blown up everything, it was okay; he would look after him, Eren decided.

Levi returned with a glass of water and they made Erwin sit up and drink it before letting him loll back against the pillows.

“I'll leave another one and some pills for when he wakes up,” Levi said. “He's gonna need 'em.”

Eren decided he couldn't be bothered trying to get Erwin into sleeping clothes and instead he tucked him up under the blankets and kissed his forehead before leaving him to sleep.

When he looked at his phone Eren was surprised to see it wasn't that late. It wasn't early, but it wasn't the 2am it felt like. When he walked back into the living room he saw Levi had put on the electric kettle and was going through Erwin's cupboards.

“Tea?” he asked.

“Yes. Please.” Right then, Eren wanted nothing more but a comforting drink. He walked up to Levi and Levi knew why he was there and they embraced, hugging each other fiercely. He was so glad it was over, and he buried his face in the crook of Levi's neck and whined. Self-indulgent or childish it might be but he'd earned it and Levi ruffled his hair and held him until the water had boiled.

While Levi poured water for tea Eren shed his tie and shoes and coat and unbuttoned his cuffs and the top button of his shirt before slumping down on the couch. It was so good to be home.

“Hey,” Eren said, after staring at nothing for a few moments. “Who's Nile?”

“I've never met him before, but I've seen photographs,” Levi said. “He and Erwin went to the same school and their families move in the same circles. So, childhood friend, and first love.”

Eren looked up as Levi carried the cups over. “First love?”

“Youh. Erwin was very open about his family situation, but he didn't talk about Nile unless he really trusted you.” Levi sighed and sat next to Eren. “He wasn't as uncompromising or as gay as Erwin. He's married now; kids, that sort of thing. He's a good guy, I think. Erwin called him a hypocrite but when Erwin burned his bridges, Nile offered to help him rebuild them, you know? I think he knew what Erwin did for a living, but he never told anyone.”

“But we rescued him from Nile?”
“We rescued him from the whole house. Look, it took Erwin a long time to get over Nile. To see them reconcile wouldn't be a bad thing, but they haven’t spoken in years as far as I know, and those were not the right circumstances to rebuild a friendship.”

“You're probably right.”

“Besides, couldn't you hear how much he was missing you in his voice?”

“I didn't notice.”

“Takes practice.”

Eren picked up his cup and put the teabag on the saucer before taking a sip and sighing happily.

“Thank you. For everything.”

“He's a handful.” He sounded fond. He was fond, Eren knew. Sometimes Eren felt it was an honour to witness their friendship; it was definitely a bit strange, and very rare, and it made him feel good about the world.

He wrapped his fingers around the teacup and settled closer against Levi's side, curling his feet up onto the couch. He was so tired. Levi picked up his cup and idly ran his fingers through Eren's hair with his other hand.

“The next time I see my grandmother,” Levi said. “If you're free, you can come along if you like.”

“I'd like that.”

Levi nodded. “Well, she's not easy to get along with, that is, not easy for me to get along with, but she's nowhere near as scary as Erwin's mother.”

“I'm so glad it wasn't just me,” Eren said. “It was like she could see right through me.”

“Nah,” Levi said. “If she could see through you, she would have been much happier to meet you.”

Eren sighed and gently butted his head against Levi's chest, mostly to hide his embarrassment.

“Are you staying here tonight?” Eren asked.

“May as well. Why pay for a taxi? I assume you're staying.”

“Yeah. I gotta look after him, right? I'll just squeeze in around whatever side of the bed he's not sleeping on.”

“I'll take the couch,” Levi said. “I've slept on worse.”

“I'm glad you're staying,” Eren said.

“Well, I've got some words to say to Erwin when he wakes up.”

“Don't be too hard on him,” Eren said.

“We'll see.”

Eren snuggled down against Levi's side and sipped his tea, letting his eyes drift closed just for a few moments.
Chapter 43

Erwin's consciousness didn't so much return to him as congeal on the inside of his eyelids. Everything hurt, and his mouth felt like sandpaper. And he wasn't where he expected to be. Even before he remembered where he expected to be, he knew this wasn't it. It was because of this mismatch between reality and his expectations that he clawed himself towards wakefulness.

This was not the bed he'd grown up sleeping in. There was no smell of dust and furniture polish. It wasn't cold. This wasn't the house.

He cracked open one eye and realised he was home. There was a light on in the living room and he flinched away from the glow in the doorway. Now he had this information he started to piece the rest of it together, almost against his will. He just wanted to go back to sleep to escape the pain in his head.

Now he had to piss as well. He fought against the urge for a while, before resigning himself to the awful fact that he had to get up.

Clamping his eyes shut against the glare he made his way to the edge of the bed and braced himself to sit up. When he risked opening his eyes again he saw a glass of water and some painkillers on the table next to his clock.

He didn't question his good fortune, as he gulped down some of both, although when he saw how neatly his shoes were lined up next to his bed, he guessed Levi had a hand in it somewhere. He wondered where his suit was. Didn't care. Levi wouldn't have stripped him down like this though, which meant-

Oh Eren, what you must think of me now.

He was too fucking old to overindulge like this, he thought as he levered himself upright. Once he'd have tossed back the pills, slept for another eight hours, and woken up good as new, but for the past few years hangovers had been getting progressively more vicious, and he'd cut down on overindulging accordingly. He knew he had a whole day of misery to look forward to.

One hand raised against the light, he shuffled into the bathroom. He avoided looking in the mirror, relieving himself and washing his hands practically by feel, his eyes mostly shut.

He wondered where Eren and Levi were and instead of going back to bed he ventured into the living area.

He saw Levi first, still in his suit, his head lolling against the backrest, his mouth slightly open and his eyes shut. Eren was stretched out along the couch, his head in Levi's lap and his arms around his waist, his face buried in his stomach. Levi had his fingers threaded through Eren's hair. There were unwashed cups on the coffee table so sleep must have caught even Levi by surprise, or he'd decided against disturbing Eren, which was more likely.

Erwin leaned on the wall, squinting against the light and despite how thoroughly disgusting he felt, he smiled. He vaguely remembered Levi telling Eren he needed to drive, and it looked like he'd got them all back safely. Erwin wanted to go back to bed but he padded over to the linen closet and found a spare blanket to drape over Eren before turning out the lights. Neither of them stirred while he did this, although Erwin wasn't totally convinced by Levi; he'd always said he was a light sleeper. Erwin then crawled back into bed to wait for the painkillers to kick in.
When he woke up he could see light filtering around the edges of his drapes. He rolled over to face the other way and went back to sleep.

The next time he woke up he heard voices and he needed to piss again, and so he reluctantly peeled his eyelids open and the blankets back.

When he opened the bedroom door he recoiled at the smell of breakfast cooking, his stomach churning at the very idea of scrambled eggs and his head throbbing in time to the obliviously cheerful conversation in the kitchen. Erwin went to the bathroom.

He risked a glance in the mirror and he looked about as good as he felt. He forced himself to take a long drink from the tap, since he didn't feel like going and retrieving the glass. He brushed his teeth. Everything else was too much effort and he was counting the steps back to bed when he left the bathroom.

Levi was leaning against the opposite wall, arms folded. He was unshaven and looked pretty tired, but seemed wide awake, as he always did in the morning.

“Morning,” he said, his voice low and quiet and Erwin appreciated that.

“Mm.”

He had to be here for a reason, and Erwin waited to find out what it was.

“I'm not going to keep you long,” Levi said. “But I need to remind you that there are things you will have to do when you're feeling better. You do remember what you said, don't you? About that intern.”

Erwin hung his head. He remembered. He shouldn't have used Petra's story as ammunition, but it had made him so furious. To do nothing was to be complicit, but he'd betrayed her confidence.

“Anything else?” he asked. “How's Eren?”

Levi shook his head, “Not that I know of specifically. And Eren's fine. What did you think you were doing?”

Erwin sighed, “Backing myself into a corner. I fight better there. Did Eren drive us back?”

“Yeah. It took a bit of prodding though.” Levi smiled faintly.

Erwin wasn't surprised. “Thank you, Levi.” What more could he say? He knew they understood each other, that he didn't need to put things into words, but it didn't seem enough. Love him, Eren, he thought, love him with that big, beautiful, generous heart of yours. Love him the way I don't, but the way he should be loved.

He sagged against the wall, not sure he trusted himself to say anything just then.

“He's awake!” Eren exclaimed, sticking his head around the corner, and Erwin flinched at the noise.

“Marginally,” Levi said. He unfolded his arms. “I'll take care of the eggs if you want to talk to him.”

Eren handed Levi a spatula as they crossed paths and then walked up to Erwin, regarding him with big, worried eyes.

“Are you okay?”
“I'm too old for this, but I'll live. I'm sorry I worried you.”

“It's okay.” Eren shrugged. Erwin didn't think it was, really, but there was nothing to be done about it now. “I drove the Aston.”

“I heard. Thank you.”

“It wasn't much fun.”

“Given the circumstances I'm not surprised.”

Eren looked at him and then he stepped forward and hugged him, resting his chin on Erwin's shoulder and squeezing him harder than was actually pleasant. Erwin didn't object. He wrapped his arms around Eren's shoulders. He smelled a bit like butter and Erwin fought off a wave of queasiness. It was a small price to pay to be worried over and looked after and to be held so tightly.

Erwin just wanted him to understand what it meant, how much he appreciated everything that Eren did and was.

So he told him, eyes closed, his aching head resting against Eren's.

“I love you.”

He hadn't meant to say it. Not here. He wanted to save it up for some jewel-encrusted sunset or flawless blanket of snow. He wanted Eren to hear it charmed and dazzled and perfect. Not like this, not while he felt so old and crumpled and sick, not after inflicting such an awful evening on him.

But he had said it, and he felt Eren gasp as the words sunk in.

“O-oh.” He buried his face in Erwin's bare shoulder and then lifted his head. He was smiling, and Erwin only had to take one look at his face to know this was the first time he'd heard those words from a lover. His eyes looked watery. “I love you too.” It didn't come out well; only the 'too' had any sort of vocalisation behind it, but Erwin read the entire thing off his lips.

Of course he did. He'd never felt so good and so terrible at the same time, and they smiled at each other.

“You should go back to bed,” Eren said, still smiling, still startled.

“Yeah.”

He let Eren lead him, clasping his arm against his side. Eren asked him if he wanted anything, but Erwin shook his head.

“Head home, if you want.”

Eren shrugged, and didn't seem very keen on the idea. He waited for Erwin to get back into bed and then reached out and ruffled his hair. Erwin closed his eyes and felt Eren's lips on his cheek.

“I'm going to fight for it,” Erwin said. “The firm. I can't say all that stuff and then do nothing.” It was get up or get out, he knew.

“Is that why you did it?”

“Yeah.” He hadn't entirely planned on it, but he'd been aware of his own momentum building as he'd circled around his colleagues. He had to decide, even if he had to force himself. Eren deserved a man
who would not run away from his responsibilities, even though Erwin was sure he'd love him no matter what he chose to do.

He brought out the best in them; Levi as well. Levi dragged him home, always, but beyond that would usually let him suffer his hangovers without pity.

“I'm sure you can do it,” Eren said. “If there's any thing you need me to do, you just have to ask.”

“Be patient, probably,” Erwin said. “It's going to be a lot of work.”

Eren leaned over and hugged him and told him to rest for now, and then he walked out looking over his shoulder and smiling.

Levi went home once Erwin was feeling well enough to put on pants and make himself some coffee, but Eren stayed, wearing the clothes he'd stashed in Erwin's closet some time before, and one of Erwin's hoodies. He watched TV, and was generally quiet and unobtrusive while Erwin got over his hangover. Occasionally he'd look in on Erwin and if he was awake ask if he needed anything. It had been so long since Erwin had let anyone look after him like this. He felt a bit guilty and self-indulgent, but it seemed to make Eren happy to wait on him.

When he was feeling better Erwin migrated from the bedroom to the living area and stretched out with Eren on the couch to watch DvDs from the collection, not too loudly. It was good to have someone else in the house again, Erwin thought. As much as he and Levi had irritated each other, life would have been a lot lonelier on his own. Eren was even better.

Erwin couldn't face cooking and they ordered take-out for dinner and didn't speak much; they'd said what they'd wanted to.

Eren went home early the next morning to feed his cat, and Erwin gave him a lift home. When he got out of the Aston he told Erwin he loved him, shyly, still trying the words out.

They spent the weekend working. Erwin wasn't yet ready to call his mother and make his case, instead he spent the weekend going through company files. He had to convince her he had what it took to run the place; she loved him in her own way, he supposed, but the firm was still very important to her as it had been to her father. If he couldn't convince her, she'd refuse him.

It was important to Erwin too. Now he'd made up his mind, he felt the rush of an oncoming challenge. He'd felt it when he'd first attended college and when he'd started making porn as well, but over the years it had become routine. He'd been looking for something new, and maybe this was it. Eren was studying that weekend, and they'd exchange texts occasionally, reminding the other to take breaks and asking how it was going.

The firm was a behemoth; changing its direction wasn't going to be painless or easy. A lot of people who'd spoken against Erwin at the party would conveniently change their tune should he be placed in charge, but he couldn't rely on anyone to get him there. He drank a lot of coffee, made himself work out Sunday morning, sent far too many stupid little heart symbols to Eren just to watch him textually splutter over them, and by Monday he liked himself again.

But he still had something to do.

He got up very early on Monday. He had the feeling that Petra was one of those people who tried to arrive before everyone else. He waited in the same coffee shop he'd first met Eren, sitting by the window watching specks of rain collide and trickle down the glass and the Monday crowds to-ing and fro-ing outside. He smiled to himself as he remembered that first, awkward meeting; it had only
been a few months ago, but it felt like forever.

He broke out of his daze when he saw Petra, striding past the entrance of the shop towards the elevators, furling her umbrella.

“Petra,” he called. She paused and looked at him, startled. He smiled reassuringly. “Can I buy you coffee?”

Her smile was professional, but he could see the gears turning in her head as she tried to work out what this all meant.

“How was your Thanksgiving?” she asked politely as they took their seats.

“Bit of a mixed bag, really. And that does bring me to why I wanted to talk to you before you came in today.” Erwin laced his fingers together. “I owe you my sincere apologies.”

He told her what had happened at the party, quoting as much as he could remember and paraphrasing the rest. She was clearly trying not to react too much, but her eyes got bigger and bigger as Erwin told her exactly what he'd said to her superiors.

“You're-?” Petra shook her head. “Wow. I always wondered why you have the reputation you do, and now I think I know.”

“Some of it,” Erwin said.

“What does this mean for me? What are you going to do now?” She was regarding him with mild alarm, as if upon seeing a friendly dog bare its teeth.

“I’m going to try and make it up to you. I don’t really know how Rod is going to react to all of this. You know him better than I do.”

“He's probably going to,” Petra frowned. “Well, chew a strip off me for running to tell you, even if that's not how it happened. He's going to try and cover his own arse, if it needs covering. He'll get me to admit he did nothing wrong. Nothing easily explained, anyway.” She took a deep breath, “And then I expect he'll get rid of me. I didn't mean that much to him in the first place, after all. Do you think he'll make it difficult to get another job? God, I can't ask him for references.”

“You can ask me, if you want,” Erwin said. “I don't know if he'd be that vindictive, but either way, Petra, I have a proposition for you.” He shifted his coffee cup to the side. “There is a job out there that badly needs doing, and I think you'd be excellent at it. It will require patience, good humour, and excellent organisation skills. It won't be in the industry, but I assure you, you will be paid and treated fairly.”

Petra frowned, “Are you poaching me from your family's own firm?”

“There's no guarantee it will remain my family's firm for much longer, but yes, basically.”

Petra sat back in her chair, frowning and smiling at the same time. “I-you're really full of surprises today. This might sound cynical, but you didn't do all of this just to offer me this position, wherever it is, did you?”

“I haven’t offered it to you. You will still have to convince the managing director. But I'll help. And no, this is damage control on my part. Believe me, of all the troubles I've heaped on my plate over the weekend yours might concern me the most from a personal perspective, but I have many more waiting for me upstairs. To be honest, I don't want you to get caught up in whatever's coming next.
You deserve better than all of this. If you decide to try and stay I'll support you.”

“I think I'll go upstairs and face the music first,” Petra said. “But I want to hear more about this mysterious position.”

“It's only fair,” Erwin said. “When I graduated I started a company with a couple of friends, which is where I've been working for the past fifteen or so years.”

“There were a lot of rumours about what you'd been doing when you came back,” Petra said. “Starting your own company sounds so civilised and uninteresting by comparison with what people said you'd been doing.”

“I haven't told you what sort of company it was yet,” Erwin said. He sighed. “And I'd appreciate it if you didn't share this information with anyone. I don't really know how to tell you this without you getting the wrong idea, but I suppose I just have to say it. I made porn.”

Petra's jaw dropped.

“What?” She was practically laughing with disbelief, her eyes wide as she covered her mouth.

“I was in front of the camera, not behind it.”

“Are you— you are serious. Then this job of yours—”

“No,” Erwin held his hands up. “No, no, no. It's nothing like that. It's an administrative position. My director needs a PA incredibly badly and they're dragging their heels on getting one. You would not have to see the inside of a single studio.”

“This is like some sort of crazy dream. Should I be pinching myself?”

“Now you know why it was kept so quiet.”

“Yeah. Huh, I really can't imagine you.” She frowned, not meeting his eyes and clearly imagining him.

“Please stop,” Erwin said, smiling ruefully.

Petra laughed. “Sorry. Couldn't help it. I think—I don't know what to think.”

“That's not really surprising.”

She took a deep breath, “So how does this work? Do I have to submit a resume?”

“Well, it couldn't hurt to have one. But I can't imagine someone like you not keeping their resume up to date. I'll call Hange and arrange an interview.”

“What, now?”

“If you like.”

Petra thought about it for a few moments, pressing her lips together. “Do it,” she said. “I want to see for myself. Then when Rod gets in, if he decides to make an example of me, I can tell him to go fuck himself.”

Erwin stroked his chin thoughtfully, “You do realise that if I get the opportunity, I will try and headhunt you back to the firm once everything is sorted out.”
Petra looked at him, and understanding lit up her eyes. “Then I wish you the very best with that, sir.”

“Erwin,” he corrected her.

“Of course.”

Erwin took out his phone, “I'll call Hange.”

Hange was not particularly happy to hear from Erwin once he'd explained why he was calling.

“My system works fine,” Hange said.

“Must I remind you of Eren? It turned out all right in the end but really-”

“All right, I'll interview them! But no promises.”

“Thank you, Hange. I feel responsible for her potentially losing her job, so it means a lot to me that you're willing to give her a change.”


“Well spotted. So I'll see you in about half an hour.”

“You're not sitting in.”

“I know, I know. It's your decision entirely.”

“It sounds like you had to work to convince ...him?” Petra said when Erwin hung up.

“Them. Hange is unique. You'll see what I mean when you meet them. And of course I did. If Hange had been anything other than resolutely opposed to the idea this mess would have been fixed months if not years ago. I'm afraid you will have your work cut out for you.”

“I like a challenge.”

“Yes, I thought you would. I'll give you a lift to the studio if you want. Rod doesn't get in 'til ten at the earliest, does he?”

“I expect he'll be even later after a long weekend.”

“Then we have plenty of time.”

Petra spent the ride over going over her resume on her tablet and taking deep, focusing breaths. She was probably the first person Erwin had ever met who didn't even seem to notice his car.

Hange met them at the door and shook Petra's hand and glared at Erwin. Erwin grinned at them and amused himself in the break room, talking to Mike about his Thanksgiving. He didn't give him all the details, but he told him what he intended to do about the firm.

“Finally doing it, huh?” Mike said.

“I gotta do something. It might be a huge mistake, of course.”

“Well if it is you can always come back here,” Mike said.

“That's true.”
“Hey, Erwin, I think this is the right thing you're doing. You left kind of suddenly, you know? The old man died and you acted without a lot of thinking. The car was great and all, but it's good to think beyond it.”

“We all have to grow up sometime.”

Hange and Petra returned about half an hour later, shook hands and bid farewell. Something was up, but neither of them said anything until Erwin and Petra were walking back to the car.

“That office is a disaster area,” Petra said.

“Yep. Now you know why the place needs someone like you. So what did you think?”

“It's, well, I don't have the words yet. Hange said I could start whenever I wanted, and if I didn't want to they didn't care.”

“Hange likes the pigsty, even as they understand its drawbacks.”

“Hm.” Petra smiled, a little secretively. “You know, Hange showed me some of your pictures.”

Erwin frowned and heaved a sigh. “I see. Revenge I expect, for springing you on them.”

“They weren't that bad.” She stopped as they reached the car, looking more serious. “I do appreciate this. I realise how far out of your way you're going. You didn't have to do this.”

“If I didn't then I'd have to relinquish the moral high ground. I'm not willing to do that just yet.”

“Even so.” She smiled at him, and it wasn't professional.

Ah.

“Well, if you do decide to work for Hange, you'll probably get to meet Eren,” Erwin said brightly. “You'll like him.”

“Who is he?”

“I'm glad you asked,” Erwin took out his phone and showed her the lock screen; Eren sitting at his kitchen table and smiling. “He's my boyfriend. He works here, although this wasn't exactly how we met.”

“Oh, he's cute!” Petra tucked her hair behind her ear and smiled and effortlessly recalibrated and Erwin was glad she didn't stop smiling. He hoped he'd made a friend.

“He's too good for me,” Erwin said matter-of-factly, and put his phone away again. “Anyway, we're already late for work; we shouldn't delay any longer.”
Chapter 44

Eren didn’t know how to answer when Mikasa asked him how his Thanksgiving had been. There had been awful bits and good bits and in the end he told her how much study he’d got done and left the rest vague. Erwin getting fired up had got him fired up and when Jean had returned late Sunday afternoon, his bag crammed with Tupperware containers of his mom's home cooking, Eren had barely heard him he was so focused.

He appreciated the leftovers though. Jean had said they were specifically for him, and Eren spent most of the week working his way through them blissfully. He definitely had to get Jean's mom something nice for Christmas, he decided.

He and Mikasa had had a long phone call. Maria was nice, but tried a bit too hard. She’d told Mikasa that she didn't intend to try and become their mother, and that she hoped they could be friends instead.

“She's like thirty,” Mikasa said. “Don't you think that's a bit young for him?”

Grisha was fifty-two.

“No way,” Eren said quickly. “She’s old enough to know what she wants, right? Other than that it doesn’t matter.”

“Well, I suppose.” Mikasa sounded startled.

Eren spoke too, a bit haltingly, about his plans to talk to Grisha before Christmas. Mikasa offered to come with him, but he declined. He needed to do this himself or not at all, and she said she understood.

She sounded relieved. I'm sorry, he thought, for not growing up as fast as you did, but I’m getting there.

They talked about what they wanted to do for Carla's memorial day, and agreed to meet at Eren's house. Regardless of other commitments, they always managed to take that day off; Grisha had never objected to excusing them from school if required.

Jean knew about memorial day as well, and when the day dawned and Eren got up to make himself breakfast, his housemate was already halfway out the door. He said he'd be out with Armin until late. Eren nodded and waved him off.

It had been a long time since Eren had cried for his mother; the moments when loss rubbed his soul raw grew further and further apart in time as the years passed. These days were melancholy but in a sweet way now. They cooked her favourites and listened to music she'd liked, remembered her as she was before the cancer had drained the life from her, and wondered how many more years would afford them the luxury of time for reflection.

Mikasa brought flowers, although she'd already left some on Carla's grave when she'd gone back for Thanksgiving. Eren stood them in a jar next to a picture of her that he kept on his desk. Mikasa sat on his bed with Missy in her lap and they talked to her, their absent mother, telling her that they were doing fine. That they missed her. That she didn't need to worry about them.

They made Carla's favourite casserole, and as always it wasn't quite right, even though every year they got a bit closer to the original flavour. Eren wondered if Erwin would be able to help. He'd told
his boyfriends what day it was and what he planned to do, and like he'd hoped they didn't make a big deal about it.

Halfway through the day he checked his phone and saw that Erwin had texted him.

*L and I going to watch my bday dvd tonight at my place. You are invited but not expected.*

Eren wasn't sure, and he left the text unanswered, knowing there was no pressure either way, and knowing they were letting him know they were there for him if he wanted.

“It's been a weird year,” Mikasa said. Eren had told her that he'd do the dishes later, and they sat on the couch watching *Legend* with the sound turned down; it had been one of Carla's favourites.

“Yeah,” Eren said, knowing she was referring to his job. “But not bad, overall.” He grinned at her, “No regrets.”

“Your marks better not suffer,” she said sternly, but he could tell she wasn't entirely serious. “I can't believe you're going to try and talk to Dad.”

“Neither can I really. Don't get your hopes up, it could all go horribly wrong.”

“She'd want us to try though. She'd be happy.”

“Yeah, I know.” He'd felt guilty about the way their family had fractured around Carla's death, and he'd known it hadn't been what she'd wanted, but he'd been a kid and hadn't known what to do about it. As he'd let go of the anger, he'd felt the guilt start to shift too.

All he'd ever wanted was to make Carla proud.

He drove Mikasa home after dinner, and they wished each other well on their upcoming finals; he wasn't sure they'd get the chance to meet up again until after semester ended. He was driving home when he changed his route halfway, feeling grown-up and lonely like he often did on this particular day of the year once Mikasa had left. This year he had somewhere he could go, somewhere he would be welcome.

He parked in what was becoming his usual spot at the base of Erwin's apartment building. Carla would approve of him reaching out to Grisha, of that he was sure, but the rest of it? He'd avoided thinking about it for the most part. She'd died long before he'd realised he was gay, let alone come out.

He supposed Grisha might have some idea what she'd have thought, but that was a strange conversation for the far future, if at all.

His breath steamed in front of his face as he huddled by the intercom. Thirty seconds after he'd pressed the button for Erwin's apartment he was let in.

The movie was almost over. Erwin hugged him at the door and Levi hugged him on the couch, and he settled down to watch the end between them. Levi started to explain the plot but Erwin shushed him and Levi rolled his eyes and Eren grinned to let him know he didn't mind. He was sure the bad guys deserved it either way.

When the credits were rolling Erwin gently asked Eren how he was, and Eren told them that the day had been good.

“I um.” Eren glanced at Erwin. “Thought about what you said, about Dad, and I've decided to give
him one last chance. I'm gonna try and talk things out with him first. Mikasa says his new girlfriend is pretty nice and well, yeah, that's my plan."

"Why are you looking so nervous about it?" Erwin asked, eyebrow raised. "I'm not going to get offended if you don't follow my advice to the letter." He smiled, "I really hope it goes well for both of you."

"Okay," Eren said. "Well, I just wanted you to know. And I guess that means I'm going home pretty much as soon as I have my last exam. Sorry, guys."

"It's only a week or two," Levi said. "We'll live."

"I wanna try and come back for New Year's," Eren said. "Maybe we could swap presents and stuff then."

"I could cook something nice," Erwin said. "If you don't mind staying in on New Year's Eve."

"I don't mind," Eren said. "I think that would be really good. So are we gonna watch another movie? It's not that late." If he was honest, he didn't really want to watch another movie right then, but he did want to sit on the couch with his boyfriends, and if they watched something that would mean it wouldn't be strange if they didn't talk. He felt like he'd done enough talking for one day; all he wanted now was quiet human contact.

"Mm, okay," Levi said. "You pick."

Erwin asked if anyone wanted hot chocolate and even Levi caved and said yes. Eren discovered why when his mug arrived and the contents had to be eaten with a spoon. He tried not to think about how many calories Erwin must have packed into it. He suspected he was being spoiled—more than usual at least.

By the time the second batch of mysterious international terrorists had been thwarted Eren was yawning. Today had been long and pleasant but emotionally draining as well.

"Bedtime?" Erwin asked.

"Yeah, I guess," Levi said.

"We're staying here?" Eren asked.

"Only if you want to," Erwin said.

Eren had been partially draped over both of them; his leg over Levi's knee and Erwin's arm over his shoulder, but there had been no heat in it. Now he was confused; he'd assumed the three of them in one bed would always mean threesome, as he'd figured out the other two didn't really like sharing with each other under other circumstances.

"The three of us? Just go to bed?"

"Yeah," Levi said. "We thought you might like that."

"Of course I would!" He loved cuddling them, and he'd honestly spent most of the movie just basking in their warm presence rather than paying attention to the plot. "I just thought, you know, it would be weird."

"It will be weird," Erwin said. "Probably. But it was pretty fucking weird sharing your cock with
him and we managed somehow.”

The words were a reminder of the last time they’d gone to bed, and an extra heartbeat accompanied them, but Eren ignored it. He wasn’t sure what to say. He was being given a subtle gift.

So he said, “Thank you.”

And that was that. He realised Levi had a bag sitting near the front door and he went and retrieved a toothbrush and some clothes from it. They really had talked this through first, Eren realised, even though there hadn’t been any guarantee he was even going to show.

The three of them rather awkwardly got changed and climbed into bed and Eren found himself trying not to laugh as Levi stared stiffly at the ceiling, the room lit only by Erwin’s bedside lamp.

“It's like we're camping,” Erwin said.

“Fuck I hate camping,” Levi said, without any real venom.

“How can you hate camping?” Erwin asked in a reasonable tone. “Out under the stars, campfires, toasted marshmallow-”

“Insects, woodsmoke, stones, dirt, rain, cold,” Levi intoned.

Eren smiled and snuggled down under the covers, listening to them debate in low tones.

“I'd go camping with you guys,” he yawned. “Might be nice.”

Levi sighed in defeat. “Maybe.”

Eren opened his eyes and it was morning already. He couldn't even remember dropping off. To his surprise, he wasn't alone. Levi had edged right to the edge of the bed, his back to them both, and Eren could feel Erwin's breath on his shoulder, his arm draped around him loosely.

They were still here.

It couldn't be that early; the sun was definitely up. At the very least Levi would have woken up by now. They didn't have to go so far for him, Eren thought, all this so he wouldn't wake up alone this time.

It was very sweet.

From his sleep-addled brain a thought surfaced, one that felt like it had been rising from the depths for some time, pushed back by lighter, more immediate concerns, but now unstoppable.

Mom would never get to meet them.

Mom would never get to hear him explain what they did for him. She'd never get to try Erwin's cooking, or hear Levi's jokes. They'd never get to meet her and he was so proud of her, and he was sure they’d have loved her; their own mothers absent or strange. She would have made them family, probably.

She would have trusted that he'd chosen well, he was sure of it.

Eren barely had time to crush his fist to his mouth as sob squeezed itself out of his chest. An old grief re-examined from a new angle, sharp and shiny as if it were yesterday he’d last seen her smile and his eyes were swimming in it as he pressed his lips together, shuddering as silently as he could under Erwin's arm. Warm and safe and sad, and his stifled squeak was enough to make Levi lift his head.
Eren held his breath, but it was too late and Levi rolled over, and he had nowhere to go as tears squeezed out through his eyelashes.

“Eren,” Levi muttered thickly. “Eren.” He shifted across towards him, reaching for him, snaking an arm under his neck. He reached over Eren with his other hand and Eren felt his arm move as he jabbed, and Erwin convulsing as Levi prodded him awake. “Eren, what's wrong?”

Eren shook his head.

“Hmm?” Erwin rumbled behind him.

He gave up; there was no hiding it now. He let himself cry into his hands, and they held him, all arms and warm breath and muttered reassurances and fingers in his hair. They didn't argue or shuffle about to give each other space, Eren was pretty sure Erwin's leg was hooked over both him and Levi. It was almost too warm.

It only made it worse; the kinder they were, the more he missed her.

They didn't ask him to explain, they just waited for him to calm down. And he did, eventually, the bed too hot and his hands covered in snot and his breathing eventually evening out. Levi's arm was still wedged under his neck. Now he thought about it, it was pretty uncomfortable.

Still he waited until he could breathe, until he could speak again.

“Guys.” His voice sounded rusty and disused. “Sometime, I want you to meet Mikasa.”

“Your sister?” Erwin asked.

“Mm. It's just,” his voice hitched. “You never got to meet my mom,” he confessed. They heard what it meant in his voice and instinctively squeezed him a bit closer.


“Yeah.”

“Good.” Eren nodded and gently pushed and they untangled from each other, kicking off the blankets with relief, and Levi massaging his arm, flexing some life back into it. Erwin told him to shower first.

When Eren emerged he was feeling slightly self-conscious about his earlier display. Erwin and Levi were sitting in the kitchen, watching the steam rise from their cups, unshaven and hair askew.

By now Eren knew how to use Erwin's coffee machine, and he told Erwin not to get up.

“I think Mikasa has already figured it out that I've met someone,” Eren said. “Well, not that there's two of you.”

“You are going to tell her in advance, aren't you?” Levi asked.

“Yeah.” He was feeling nervous, but he loved them so much he didn't think he'd be capable of keeping them a secret from Mikasa over Christmas anyway. He was going to smile too goofily at his phone or blurt something out sooner or later. He was going to miss them a lot over the holidays.

It would be okay, he told himself. Carla would have loved them, so Mikasa will like them. Probably.

“You're dating two guys at once?”
The conversation was going about as well as Eren thought it would; that is, he felt like he'd eaten half a bucket of live worms and they were poking around his stomach looking for the exit. He clicked aimlessly on his desktop as he held his phone to his ear with his other hand.

“Yeah. I know it seems weird.”

“Like a threesome?”

“Well-

“No, stop! I don't need to know that much. I guess I've heard of that sort of thing. I mean, as long as you're happy, right?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I'm really happy. I've put off telling you for ages, and I'm sorry. It's just weird to talk to my sister about this. But you're kind of the only family I have right now, and I guess I was thinking about things the other day.”

“And you want us to meet?”

“Mn. For coffee or something. It's probably going to be super-awkward, sorry.”

“Don't say that until you know for certain. Okay, I'm free this weekend. I can put off study for a few hours.”

So they organised a time and place and Eren contacted Erwin and Levi to let them know, and he was actually feeling pretty positive about the whole thing. He wanted Erwin and Levi to feel welcome in his life, even if they were unlikely to join his peer group.

He had, of course, completely forgotten that Mikasa was also a subscriber to HotFreeRange, at the very least until quite recently.

So he nearly jumped out of his skin when he entered the cafe, flanked by Erwin and Levi, all three dressed neatly and respectably, and Mikasa practically shrieked.

“Eren!” She slapped her hand to her mouth when she realised half the cafe was looking at her. Her eyes were huge. Eren approached her table, his boyfriends in tow, and she hissed at him, “Axel and Armand?”

Oh.

Yeah.

Levi made an unhappy sort of noise and directed his gaze out the window, looking like he deeply regretted getting up this morning.

Erwin smiled, “It's always nice to meet a fan.”

Mikasa was going a deeper and deeper shade of red the longer she looked at them.

“Can we just sit down?” Eren asked through his teeth, feeling like everyone in the cafe was staring at them.

As soon as they sat down, Mikasa stood up. “I'll, I'll be right back. Order something. You know what I like.”

“Yeah, sure.”
Mikasa made a beeline for the ladies and the three of them looked at each other.

“Well at least we don't have to worry about her finding out later,” Erwin said reasonably.

Levi pinched the bridge of his nose and frowned.

“I should have seen this coming,” Eren said. “She gave me the link to HotFreeRange when we were teenagers.”

“Seriously?”

A bearded waiter dropped by to take their orders, cutting that thread of conversation short, much to Eren's relief. A few minutes after he'd gone, Mikasa returned, her make-up looking freshly-applied.

“Sorry about that,” she sat down.

Eren took a deep breath. “Okay, well, these are my boyfriends, Erwin and Levi, and this is my sister, Mikasa.”

“It's a pleasure to meet you,” Erwin held out his hand, and Miksasa shook his and then Levi's, and then she glanced at her palm for a moment.

“You are a fan!” Eren blurted out in sudden realisation, and Mikasa's cheeks flamed again.

“Shut up!”

Erwin looked like he was trying not to smile and he coughed.

“Well, this was always going to be a bit awkward,” he said, intervening before Eren completely wrecked the conversation. “But Eren's told us a bit about you and I've been looking forward to finally meeting you. I hear you looked after him when you were younger. It must have been difficult.”

Eren frowned, but Mikasa smiled.

“I tried. But it wasn't just on me. Eren did his bit too.”

“I did?”

“You never gave up, on anything,” she said. “When things got hard, I'd think about how you'd never give up, how you tried even if you didn't always succeed, and sometimes that was all that kept me going.”

“I just thought you were worried about me.”

“That too.” She looked from Levi to Erwin, “So you guys met at work?”

“No,” Levi said quickly. “I suppose you could say we met through work but we've never worked together like that.”

“Good?” Mikasa ventured.

“Yeah, it is,” Levi said firmly.

Their drinks arrived and Erwin asked Mikasa what she was studying and they looked duly impressed by the answer. Erwin revealed his plans for the family firm, in general terms and Levi told him not to
Mikasa seemed pretty interested in Levi's classes and he told her she was welcome to attend one if
she wanted and gave her a business card. It was all very civilised.

“How does it work?” Mikasa asked during a lull in the conversation. “Don't you guys get jealous?”
They glanced at each other.

“No.” Erwin shrugged.

Levi frowned, “It's like, I don't feel crowded out by Erwin.” He looked at Eren. “I accept there will
be clashing schedules and at some points you'll have to prioritise one of us over the other, but you'd
do that for Mikasa as well. Everyone shares their lives with multiple people.” Levi shrugged,
awkwardly struggling with what he was trying to say. Eren wished he could help him but he was
holding his breath, waiting to see what he'd say next.

“You, he, cares so much it's written all over your face and everything you do and how could I
possibly be jealous? I have far more than I ever expected.”

“Oh.” They were in public so Eren didn't feel Levi would appreciate a hug, so he reached out and
gripped his arm for a few moments. Levi himself seemed startled by his own eloquence and hid
behind his teacup, not looking anyone in the eye.

“What he said,” Erwin said, smiling.

Mikasa just stared at them, her expression strange and unreadable. She smiled when she caught
Eren's eye, but it was slightly sad.

No one seemed to know what to say after that, and Levi excused himself to take a piss and Erwin
excused Levi's language and the two of them left the siblings alone for a few minutes.

“So what do you think?” Eren asked.

Mikasa shook her head, “Well, I can't believe you're dating those guys. Did you have to grab them
both?”

Eren laughed. “I really didn't intend to.”

“I know.” She sighed, “Well, no law against looking. You'll have to bring them to the beach if we go
next summer.”

“Seriously?” Eren asked. “You want to ogle my boyfriends?”

“Yes.” Her smile faded. “It's strange, okay? I'm going to have to go home and get used to it and all
of that, and I dunno how three people are going to work out long term, but,” she shrugged. “They
like you. You like them. And I know better than to try and argue with you about this sort of thing.
Oh boy, do I.”

“I thought you'd be worried, cause, you know, of what they used to do and how old they are.”

“I know! I feel I should be worried, but I'm not.” She shrugged. “They seem to be a good influence,
and if we can be friends I can keep a closer eye on them to make sure they remain a good influence.”

“A very close eye, I imagine.”
“Oh shut up. You look so smug.”

They smiled at each other.
“Visitors’ Parking is that way,” Levi said, reading the sign. “Sorry I got us lost, I usually walk from the bus.”

“It’s fine,” Eren said, driving carefully at the regulated ten miles an hour and scraping the Swift over a speed bump every two minutes.

They were in a retirement village. Village wasn’t quite the right word for this strange conglomeration of tiny houses, laid out in what Eren was sure was the most confusing manner possible. He wondered how the more easily muddled residents stood it, and imagined some of them simply avoided leaving their rooms if they could.

The streets were deserted; it was too cold for the residents to be out walking. The visitor’s parking spaces were empty on this blustery Tuesday afternoon.

Levi didn’t bother signing in at the front desk, despite the signs that indicated visitors were to do so. He’d called Eren up the night before and said he was going to visit his grandmother rather than going to the gym and was Eren still interested in meeting her.

Eren had said he was.

“I don’t like to give her a lot of advance notice,” Levi said. “Only a day or so to make sure she hasn’t got anything else on. Too much notice and she can get worked up about it.”

“Does she know I’m coming?” Eren asked, locking the car and zipping up his jacket.

Levi shrugged. “Well, I told her.”

They strolled along deserted streets, Levi reading the numbers outside the little apartments. He looked inscrutable and calm, and by this Eren guessed he was feeling some strain.

“Are you going to visit her on the holidays?” Eren asked, spotting Christmas decorations in some of the windows.

“No, they have events and things here that she enjoys more than she’d like my company. I got her a present.” He showed Eren a carefully wrapped package that he had in his pocket.

“What is it?” Eren asked.

“Just soap. You know, bath stuff. The sort the girl at the shop assured me old ladies would like.”

“Is she going to get you anything, do you think?”

“She didn't last year.”

“Do you have any Christmas plans? Erwin said he was going to spend it at the house, probably plotting a hostile takeover of the firm with his mother.”

“Mm. Well, Annie said she was going to do some baking and that I was welcome to come over. I might do that. She doesn’t really have any family.”
I think she does now, Eren thought, but he stayed silent on the subject, along with the topic of Levi’s birthday. Levi didn’t know he knew, yet, and if he let on he was sure Levi would talk him out of doing anything.

Levi walked up one of the garden paths identical to all the others; the gardens were dead and cold. It was too late for any autumn leaves to enliven the scenery. There were no decorations in the windows of this apartment.

Levi pushed the buzzer, and they waited.

Eren wasn’t sure what he was expecting of the woman who answered the door. An aged crone maybe, spiteful and unforgiving, or an old battleaxe, her face hard and set against any possibility of reconciliation.

The woman who answered the door was just old.

She could have been anyone’s grandmother, all trace of individuality lost behind a thick pair of glasses and several layers of warm clothing, despite the fact that the room behind her was adequately heated. She had white hair cropped into a neat bob, and she peered at them through her glasses. Eren couldn’t see any family resemblance at all.

“Hello, Grandma,” Levi said tonelessly. They didn’t smile to see each other, but Levi bowed his head and she recognised him.


They stepped into an apartment that was little more than a single room with a bathroom attached. There was no kitchen, just a bed and a TV with a recliner in front of it and a bench with a bar fridge and microwave. The room smelled slightly odd; of sweet floral perfume and cheap cleaner.

“Grandma,” Levi said. “This is Eren, my boyfriend.”

Eren stepped forward, putting on what he hoped was a friendly smile.

“Hello, Ma’am,” he said. He wasn’t sure if he should hold out his hand or not, and when she didn’t seem to expect it he decided against it, giving an awkward little bow instead.

She looked him up and down. “Hello,” she said flatly, like someone unexpectedly addressed by a stranger in the street. “I’ll get coffee then.”

“Levi doesn’t like-” Eren began, but Levi caught his eye and shook his head minutely.

She opened a cupboard and started fussing about with mugs and things, and Levi didn’t offer to help so Eren took his cue and remained silent. He ended up sitting on a footstool while the old lady took the recliner and Levi leant against the wall. She served instant coffee heated in the microwave and a plate of shortbread cookies. Eren thanked her and took one, but Levi set his mug on the table and didn’t touch it again.

“Mister Eddings, down the hall,” she said abruptly in the awkward silence. “They’re going to take part of his bowel out.”

“Oh,” Eren said. “I hope the operation goes well. Is he your friend?”

“He’s a crook and a liar,” she replied. “Leaves his toenail clippings on his patio in summer, too.”
Eren met Levi’s eyes, his eyebrows raised in silent enquiry but Levi just shrugged. They didn’t really need to say anything after that. They were given a thorough run-down on all the ailments of the other residents and any personal habits that Levi’s grandmother deemed unpleasant, and after a while Eren realised his polite questions were completely superfluous.

The only time she addressed Levi directly was to tell him who had died since he’d last visited. It was weirdly exhausting. The woman herself seemed as healthy as a horse, and regarded the suffering of others as something doubtlessly well-deserved.

Levi was right, Eren realised, she had absolutely nothing else in her life.

The cookies, Eren discovered, were slightly stale. He was so bored he ate three of them anyway in the three-quarters of an hour they endured the monologue.

Eventually she ran out of words, and Levi stepped into the gap to give her the wrapped present.

“Merry Christmas,” he said formally.

“Yes. Thank you,” she replied, equally formally. They both seemed a bit relieved when the exchange was complete. That was an indication that the visit was nearly over and she gathered up the cups and plate while Levi pulled on his jacket.

She was seeing them off at the door when she looked at Eren, perhaps for the second time since they’d met. She didn’t smile, but she gave a strange nod.

“Well, it might be for the best that you are homosexual,” she said, glancing at Levi. “Children never brought anyone in this family any happiness.”

Levi didn’t so much as flinch.

“I’ll see you in the new year, Grandma.”

“I’m sure you will.”

“Merry Christmas,” Eren ventured.

The cold and desolate street outside looked incredibly inviting. They walked down it in silence, stoic on Levi’s part, stunned on Eren’s.

After a minute or so indecisive longing, Eren reached out and took Levi’s hand.

His fingers were cold, and he looked a bit startled.

“No one’s here to see,” Eren said, but he wouldn’t push it if Levi didn’t want to. He smiled when he felt Levi’s fingers curl around his a few moments later. It wasn’t much, but it was all the comfort Levi was likely to let him give—and take—for now.

“That went well today,” Levi said. “Having a stranger there kept her, well, politer.”

Eren honestly had nothing to say to that, and he squeezed Levi’s hand, trying to warm his fingers up.

Levi didn’t pull away until they were back at the Swift, making to separate so they could get in. Eren tightened his grip, frowning.

“I love you,” Eren said, awkward, the words crisp and matter-of-fact in the cold air. “I just want you to know.”

The corners of Levi’s mouth curled upwards, and light and warmth returned to his eyes. “I know. And thank you, Eren, for coming with me. I know it wasn’t much fun.” He looked down at their joined hands. Eren swung them a little.

“No, but I’m glad I came. And I’ll come next time too, if you want me to.”

“She’s not going to warm up to you, Eren.”

“You never know,” Eren shrugged. “And you can’t think it’s entirely pointless or you wouldn’t keep visiting her.”

“Fair point. I just don’t want you to get disheartened.”

“I’m doing this for you, not her.”

“I know,” Levi said softly. They smiled at each other for a few moments and then Levi added “Are you done? I’m freezing my nuts off out here.”

“Yeah,” Eren grinned and gave Levi’s hand one last squeeze before releasing him. He suggested they have dinner at his place and to his surprise Levi agreed and ended up spending most of the evening sitting with Missy while Eren studied.

Eren drove Levi home, and watched him brush the cat hairs off his shirt, and realised he was probably going to do something very stupid very soon. He didn’t have a lot of time left, after all.

Eren didn’t get the chance to do anything stupid for a couple of weeks, as it turned out. The approaching finals seemed to eat up all other considerations. Eren’s social life was reduced to study sessions with his friends. He didn’t have time to do any work for Hange, but he’d known this in advance and budgeted for the break and was doing okay, although he really hoped he’d get some cash for Christmas.

He was stressed and exhausted, and everyone around him seemed in exactly the same state. He squeezed in phone calls to his boyfriends whenever he could and drank a lot of coffee.

And then.

And then it was all over and he was packing and organising things with Mikasa and Jean and trying desperately to brainstorm Christmas presents and where the fuck had all the time gone?

The evening before he had to leave, he found himself driving to Levi’s place. They were expecting him; he’d sworn he’d make time to see them before he left, but he’d deliberately chosen to see them separately.

He’d made a decision about Levi’s birthday, and he thought it would be best if Erwin wasn’t there.

He glanced at the cardboard box on the seat beside him and then up at Levi’s lighted windows. Well, there was no point in putting it off any longer. He’d taken longer than expected finding Levi’s present.

He carried the box gingerly in both arms, making sure the flaps at the top stayed closed and set it down by his feet before knocking on Levi’s door.
“Hey,” he said when Levi opened it.

“Long time no see.” Levi smiled at him, and Eren knew he’d been missed.

“I um.” Eren took the plunge. “I got you something for your birthday.”

Levi's face fell. “Eren, you really didn't have to.” He glanced down at the box, and his expression softened a bit. “Is that a vacuum cleaner?” He actually looked sort of happy.

“What?” He’d wanted a vacuum cleaner? “No, that's just the box. Look, just let me in and open it.” He stooped and picked up the box before Levi could and Levi stood aside. “Please don't get mad at Erwin.”

“Of course it was Erwin,” Levi said.

“It's just a present. No cakes, no singing songs, no big deal.” Eren put the box down in the living room near the couch. “I just wanted to give you something.”

Levi sighed and then his smile returned and ruffled Eren's hair. “All right. But don't feel you have to do this every year.”

“We'll see how this year goes first,” Eren said with some apprehension. “Open it.”

Eren gnawed on a knuckle as Levi sat on the couch and lifted the flaps, his eyes on Levi’s face. Levi froze when he saw the green eyes looking up at him from the dark interior of the box.

“Eren. No.”

“Levi-”

“No, no, no.” Upon seeing a way out the cat tried to leap out of the box. Levi was too fast for it, however, and caught it mid leap, gripping it gently but firmly around the middle. It was not a large cat, black from whiskers to tail.

“He's two years old, he's neutered, he's house-trained, and he's had all his shots,” Eren said, a bit desperately. “It's harder to place adult cats, and black cats especially.”

The cat's tail thrashed nervously and Levi realised he was stressing the animal and changed his grip, tucking him close to his chest and letting him sit on his lap, holding him gently with one hand and rubbing him behind the ear, trying to calm the creature down, all the while giving Eren a very unimpressed look.

“I can take him back to the shelter,” Eren said, eventually. “If you don't want him.”

Levi looked down. “It’s all right,” he said calmly. “Stop fussing. Eren, I can’t possibly-”

The cat started to purr.

Levi stilled his hand immediately, but the cat rumbled on. It was a large noise, considering the cat himself was rather small. Levi narrowed his eyes.

Eren stepped around them and sat on the couch next to Levi.

“I spent a long time looking for him,” Eren said. “I didn’t choose him randomly. I asked for a quiet cat that wouldn’t be too much trouble. I went to every shelter first before picking him. I’m sure he’s a good cat.”
“He’s still going to shed,” Levi said.

“You like cleaning?”

Levi raised an eyebrow, “You little shit. I assume you think you've thought of everything.”

“I’ve got some food and litter and stuff in the car. Enough to get you set up. If you didn’t want to keep him I could always use it for Missy.”

“What’s she going to do over the holidays?”

“She’s coming with us. She actually kind of likes sitting in the car. I think she finds the vibration soothing.”

“I see.” Levi looked at the cat. The cat looked at Levi.

“Why don’t you let him go and see what he does?” Eren prompted.

Levi lifted his hands and the cat hopped off his lap and started doing a slow, wary circuit of the room, carefully sniffing at the furniture. Levi watched him. Eren watched Levi. Please, he thought, I know you want the cat. I can’t be here all the time to keep you warm.

Eventually the cat wandered down the hallway and Levi got up to follow him.

“Levi?” Eren asked.

Levi sighed. “Go on, get the stuff,” he said. He glanced over his shoulder. “This is just a trial, okay? Just over the holidays to see if I can stand having a furball hanging about.”

“Understood,” Eren said. He hurried back out to the car, careful to close the front door behind him as Levi was still shadowing his new cat, watching it with a suspicious air. Cat and man actually seemed pretty similar at that moment. Eren grinned to himself; they were adorable together.

Eren was putting the groceries on the kitchen bench when he heard Levi say firmly, “No. You are not allowed in the bedroom.”

Good luck with that, Eren thought, and went in search of them.

They were in the spare room, Levi standing by the door with his arms folded, the cat winding his way around the weights on Levi’s floor, watching him and occasionally rubbing his head against things.

“He seems pretty relaxed already,” Eren said encouragingly.

“Teacup.”

“Huh?”

“His name’s Teacup,” Levi said. The look he gave Eren was heartbreaking, but he didn't explain it further and Eren knew better than to ask. “Thank you, Eren.”

Eren stepped forward and hugged him, and to his surprise Levi gripped him back, so tight it was almost uncomfortable. He rested his forehead against Eren’s collarbone and it was the first time Eren really felt taller than Levi. He wrapped his arms around Levi’s broad shoulders and squeezed.

They stayed like that until the sensation of a small, furry body rubbing past their legs made Levi
draw back. Eren loosened his grip, assuming Levi was going to follow the creature but instead he reached up and cupped Eren’s face.

“I’m going to miss you,” he said.

“I’ll miss you too.” Eren found he had trouble meeting Levi’s eyes. It was like the way he was looking at him was too intense.

“Fuck,” Levi said softly. The corner of his mouth deepened in a rueful look. “Okay, I have to say it now, don’t I? I love you.”

“Yeah?” Eren wasn’t sure he’d heard right. It was weirdly hard to breathe all of a sudden, and his chest felt tight.

“Yeah.” Levi ducked his head and dropped his arms and looked away. “Where’d the cat go?”

“Oh no, you’re not getting away.” Eren felt like he was a thousand million feet tall and he pounced on Levi, hugging him just as tightly as Levi had. “You can’t escape,” he said although Levi wasn’t actually trying to do so, even if he did seem slightly bemused. “I love you too. I love you lots and lots and-”

“Yes, I get it! I get it,” he added more softly, reaching up and patting Eren’s head. “Don’t wear it out.”

“Mm.” Eren buried his face in Levi’s neck. Loved him. Loved him so much. Was loved, and knew it but never thought he’d say it out loud.

“Eren we have to see what Teacup’s doing,” Levi tried again. In the end he went to search for his cat with Eren’s arms still around his neck and Eren himself shuffling along behind, grinning like an idiot.

Teacup was exploring the laundry. Eventually he got tired of being under such close observation and he slid under the TV stand and stayed there, only the tip of his tail sticking out the side gave any indication where he was. Levi seemed slightly put out that his cat was out of view and Eren was quite sure he fucking adored the creature already, even if asking him to demonstrate it was probably a bit much.

Levi sat back down on the couch and Eren wrapped himself around him and they stayed like that for a while.

“I don’t want to go home for Christmas,” Eren said. “I want to stay here.”

“I know. But you promised.”

“Yeah,” Eren sighed.

“You should go soon.” Levi tilted Eren’s face up. “Someone else is waiting to say goodbye to you.”

“Yeah.” Eren leaned up and closed the gap and kissed him. Tried to kiss him for two weeks upcoming, tried to kiss him for the weeks prior he’d been so busy. Kissed him until his breathing was ragged.

And then he had to go.

Eren felt a bit silly, blinking watery eyes at what was only a temporary parting, but Levi just smiled at him and told him to call whenever he wanted.
“My classes have broken up for the year so I’m going to be bored out of my fucking mind,” he said.

“What about Teacup?”

“He’ll be bored too, I’m sure. Go on, Eren, before I change my mind and keep you here.”

Eren laughed and kissed his nose. It was too cold for long goodbyes in the doorway and Eren hurried to the car, his breath steaming.

One more stop before he returned to the half-packed nightmare that was his apartment. Jean was probably wondering where he was.

Erwin was waiting for him, as Eren knew he would be, and he greeted Eren with a hug that smelled of gingerbread. Actually his whole apartment smelled of gingerbread. He just happened to be making some, he claimed, in what Eren was sure was not a complete coincidence.

Eren laughed and hugged him and let Erwin kiss his face and after he’d greeted him thoroughly Erwin pulled back to look at him properly.

“Look at you, all bright eyed,” he said.

Eren felt like he was glowing; it wasn’t a surprise that Erwin noticed his buoyant mood.

“He loves me,” Eren said in a rush, still not quite sure it had been real.

Erwin looked at him for a long moment and he smiled, relieved and fond and oddly proud. “Of course he does.” He pulled Eren in again. “Of course we do.”

“I got him a cat,” Eren said to Erwin’s shirt.


“I was so nervous, I thought he was going to be mad at me.”

“So he actually has a cat now?” Erwin seemed to be having a hard time quite believing it.

“Well, he said it was just a trial over the holidays,” Eren said.

“But?” Erwin prompted.

“He loves it,” Eren said softly. “He was following it about.”

“Oh, this is great,” Erwin said, grinning in a rather catlike manner himself. “I’ll have to give him a call about it later.” He stroked Eren’s cheek. “Much later.”

Eren sighed, “I can’t stay too long.”

“I know, long drive, right?”

“I gotta pick up Mikasa before we leave tomorrow.”

“Well, let me get you something for the journey.” Erwin stopped Eren’s protests by handing him a gingerbread in the shape of a star and while Eren was eating it filling up a container with more of them. His entire kitchen was a mess, used trays piled up near the sink, and icing still drying on dozens of stars laid out on the counter top.
“Wow,” Eren said through a mouthful of gingerbread. “You've been really busy.”

“I’m making some for everyone at HotFreeRange. The Christmas break-up party is tomorrow. It’s a shame you won’t be there for it.”

“Yeah, maybe next year.”

“They’re going to show our last film,” Erwin said.

“The last episode of Wings of Freedom!” Eren said, a bit more excitedly than he meant to. “Ah, I’ll see it when it goes up on the site, I guess,” he backtracked, although given the way Erwin was looking at him he suspected it was too late to play it cool.

“Still a fan?” Erwin asked, amused.

“I want to see how it ends,” Eren said.

“I'm not sure it is ending,” Erwin said, carefully sealing the box of gingerbread. “Hange said they might make another series next year with an all new cast.”

“ Seriously!? Did they say who they might cast?” Eren asked eagerly.

“I'm afraid I can't tell you any more.” Erwin winked. “Confidential information for shareholders only.”

“Tease.”

“Yep.”

“It won't be the same without you guys though.”

“Probably not. Might be better.”

Eren wasn't going to argue, he had more important things to do with the minutes he had remaining, and he led Erwin over to the couch and did them, sprawling on his stomach and sharing soft words and firm kisses and looking forward to the last day of the year.

Chapter End Notes

There's fanart for this chapter by Porcelain Blue and it's wonderful. Look at it here.
Chapter 46

It was a long Christmas. Eren had talked and Grisha hadn't said much. He hadn't known what to say, clearly, and they'd sat nursing coffee and Eren realised that his father, the colossus who bestrode his childhood, the man who saved other people's mothers, was some guilty, middle-aged guy who didn't know how to talk to his son. At some point, he'd even stopped being tall, Eren realised.

Knowing this didn't make everything magically better. Grisha's silence frustrated him, but when he offered Eren a halting apology, bracketed by a helpless shrug, Eren swallowed his bile and accepted it because what else was he there for? They shook hands and Eren retreated upstairs to his old room and called first Levi, then Erwin, and missed them and was missed and he didn't exactly feel better because they were hours and days away, but he came downstairs when dinner was called and it wasn't any worse than any other visit had been.

Mikasa bore the brunt of his pining and so when he announced he was heading back before New Year's Eve, she backed him up. He shook Grisha's hand and dutifully hugged Maria (he was glad she looked nothing like his mother, and she didn't try too hard to be his friend; he thought they'd probably get along, in time) and with only Missy for company he went home, if home is where the heart is.

He'd dropped off Missy and his bags and showered, and the elevator in Erwin's apartment building felt slower than it ever had. The traffic had been woeful; revellers heading in for New Year's Eve and workers heading out early to make the most of the long weekend had meant the city had snarled itself to a standstill under a frozen sky. Eren had beat his hands impatiently on the steering wheel, and it was well dark before he finally arrived and practically ran to the intercom.

Levi answered the door. The intercom had alerted them and he was waiting for Eren; opening the door almost instantly after he'd knocked. The warm air of Erwin's apartment carried a wave of appetising scent that made Eren's stomach growl, but Levi smelled even better. They barely had time to smile at each other before Eren was stepping up to him and Levi grabbed the front of his jacket and pulled him down into a bruising kiss.

Levi made up for lost time, devouring his lips until Eren was nearly dizzy with lack of air. Only Erwin's amused, “Are you actually going to let him in?” broke them apart.

Eren let his bag and coat slither off his shoulders to the floor as he bounded across the room to be swept up in Erwin's arms, swung around like he was the heroine of a musical while Levi picked up after him and shut the door.

Erwin clearly didn't want to let him go, but he had things to cook.

“Christmas dinner,” he informed Eren cheerfully.

“He doesn’t want any help, he says,” Levi added, slinking up beside him and wrapping his fingers around Eren’s wrist.

Eren wanted to be between them again as soon as possible, but he recognised that Erwin was putting in a lot of effort and so he sprawled on the couch, letting Levi pet him as they talked about their respective Chistmases. Eren slyly asked Levi how Teacup was getting on and Levi was non-committal about whether or not he’d extend the trial. Eren caught Erwin’s eye and he grinned.

Erwin said he had his mother’s backing to make his move on the firm early in the new year.
“Preferably while they’re still getting over their hangovers,” he said. He looked reasonably confident, and a lot calmer now that he’d made his mind up. He said he’d been making plans for the firm.

“It’s been fucking tedious, he won’t talk about anything else,” Levi said, running his fingers through Eren’s hair. Eren knew they’d spent Christmas apart but had met up later, as Erwin had sent him a selfie of them both; Levi had been scowling at the camera but at least he hadn’t looked away.

Eren had plans to make it his desktop wallpaper.

They sat down to a spectacular but relatively small Christmas dinner, and Eren fell upon it like one starving. He’d missed Erwin’s cooking as well as the rest of him.

They couldn’t keep their hands off each other. They weren’t teasing, but an empty hand was an invitation for it to be held, they nudge and stroked Eren’s arms and arranged his hair and Eren returned the favour, reveling in the fact that they were once again within arm’s reach.

At around eight they heard the first lot of fireworks, for the children in the audience, and Eren stood up hopefully to peer out Erwin’s window since he was so close to the river but Erwin shook his head.

“There’s a building in the way. Can’t see shit from here.”

“I think the view in here is pretty good,” Eren said, sitting down again.

When the meal wound down Eren expected they’d go to bed, no matter how early it was but Erwin said he wanted to give out some Christmas presents.

Erwin and Levi had got each other DVDs and they swapped them solemnly while Eren crouched on the floor fishing his presents out of his bag.

“You’re really hard to get things for,” Eren told Erwin.

“I know. I apologise.”

Levi handed Eren a bizarrely shaped package he’d tried to wrap neatly that turned out to have a pair of gloves for MMA in it. Eren grinned and tried them on; finally he could stop using the old communal ones. They were stiff and smelled new, and he flexed his fingers in them before putting them aside to hand Levi a box wrapped in garish paper he’d recycled from his family Christmas.

Inside was a hand-held vacuum cleaner.

“It’s good for cat hairs,” Eren explained.

Levi looked at it. Erwin looked at Levi with a thoughtful expression.

“That is a really weird present and you actually really like it, don’t you?” Erwin said. “It’s just what you’ve always wanted.”

Levi glared at him and smiled at Eren, “Thank you, Eren. It will be very convenient.”

Erwin shook his head, “All these years and the answer was obvious.”

Eren laughed, pleased lightning had struck twice, as it were.

He’d probably have to get him a DVD next year though.
Eren had bought Erwin some tickets to the band they’d seen that night in the city, for lack of anything better. He handed them to him in a Christmas card he’d written a few sappy things in and in exchange Erwin gave him an object wrapped in silver paper.

It felt like a book.

It was a book, small and slender. Leather bound, it had the word *Neuromancer* embossed in gold lettering on the cover. Eren frowned, confused until he opened it, and behind the leather, the front page was the soft, battered cover of his mother’s old paperback.

“Oh,” he said softly, flipping through it. “You had it bound.”

“It’ll probably last longer than we will, now,” Erwin said.

In truth, Eren had all but forgotten about the book and his heart leaped to see it whole—more than whole—and he leaned up and wrapped his arms around Erwin’s neck.

“Thank you.”

“Merry Christmas, Eren.”

The fireworks had ceased for now, a lull that would last until midnight, and Erwin’s windows cut all sounds of celebration from the river. Eren laid his gifts aside and grinned, “We’ve still got a while ‘til midnight.”

“That we do,” Erwin said.

Eren got to his feet and held out his hands, and they took them. They stood and slid closer, nuzzling his neck and sliding their arms around him.

“We missed you,” Erwin said.

“I missed you too,” Eren managed to say, although it was hard to speak, hard to breathe. Levi didn’t say much, but he didn’t have to. All he had to do was lift his head from the crook of Eren’s neck and look at him and Eren understood.

They weren’t tense any more. They escorted Eren to the bedroom like it was the most natural thing in the world, and it was. Eren didn’t have anything specific planned. It wasn’t the sort of night for daring surprises or teasing. It was a reunion.

They reunited. Eren slid his hands under Levi’s shirt and sweatshirt, trying to concentrate even while Erwin was breathing on the back of his neck. Levi helped Eren get his shirt off and then Eren turned around to unbutton Erwin’s shirt while Levi reached around and unbuckled Eren's belt before pulling his jeans down off his hips, sinking to his knees to bite the swell of Eren’s left buttock, making him jump and laugh. Lips followed hands and they stumbled onto the bed, shedding the last remaining clothes.

Eren’s breathing hitched. He loved being between them, being the focus of their attention. It wasn’t so forced now, they weren’t rigidly ignoring each other the way they once did, and oddly enough that meant there was more of them for him.

He squirmed, reaching for them with hands and legs and mouth and they met him halfway, stroking him like a cat and he practically purred. He brushed his fingers over their cocks (yanking off to them in the room he’d grown up in had been both weird and oddly nostalgic and it was good to get his hands on the real thing again.)
Levi’s hands were on his arse, not yet slicked, just teasing him for now. Erwin pulled his mouth away from Eren’s neck and trailed his hands down his chest.

“Eren,” he said.

“Mm.” If he’d forgotten condoms again, Eren had a backup supply and he was never going to let him live it down.

“I want you on top,” he breathed.

Levi’s hands stilled, and Eren heard him make a soft sound of surprise. Eren was pretty stunned too; he’d assumed it was on his ‘no’ list given he’d never seen it on camera.

“Are you sure you want to do that tonight?” Levi asked cautiously, probably wondering if Erwin had forgotten he was there.

“Yes, dammit,” Erwin frowned. “If I didn't I wouldn't have asked, would I?”

“Yes,” Eren said. “God yes,” he added for good measure. “Do you want me to-”

“No, I’ll do it.” That was firm and Eren backed off.

Levi’s teeth were on Eren’s shoulder blade and his arms were around him as he tugged him back onto his hands and knees.

“You can watch then,” Levi said. “And I'll take care of you in the meantime.”

“Mm.” Eren wanted to hold his breath, half afraid Erwin would change his mind. Did he want to top Erwin? Of course he fucking did. He was beautiful and when he unwound it was perfect and, Eren wanted to unwind him. He supposed he'd learn the whys and wherefores later; right now it didn't really matter.

Erwin moved up the bed and retrieved the lube. And then he looked Eren right in the eye and spread his legs.

He was perfect. Gorgeous. Eren's mouth was full of spit just looking at him, the curve of his cock and the way his balls hung beneath it. The fine golden hair that framed them. Eren curled his fingers into the sheets instinctively, and his cock tapped up against his stomach as he drank in the sight.

“I suppose it's fairer this way,” Levi said, waiting for Erwin to hand him the lube, running strong fingers down Eren's back and making him arch slightly. “We don't have to take turns.”

Eren whimpered. Sounded good to him.

When he managed to drag his gaze up Erwin's torso to his face, he realised Erwin was watching him just as intently as he was watching Erwin. His expression wasn't seductive exactly, but it was very intense. It made it hard to look away but when he slicked his fingers and slid them between his legs, Eren couldn't help but follow the movement, even though he could feel Erwin's eyes on him.

Erwin tossed the bottle to Levi with his other hand and Levi sat on the end of the bed, and Eren heard him take the cap off.

Erwin waited, teasing himself, spreading the lube around, until Eren felt Levi's fingers return. He glanced up to meet Erwin's gaze and realised he wasn't watching Levi at all, he was concentrating on Eren's reactions, and when Eren dropped his jaw, Erwin pressed his own finger inside himself. Eren
wasn't sure where to look. No one on HotFreeRange ever got to see this.

The way Erwin moved his hand suggested he'd done it before, but Eren realised this was a very private performance. Levi must have realised it too because he sat facing the other way, stretching Eren with the skill and gentleness that Eren was familiar with. Levi bent his head to add teeth marks to Eren's buttocks, but gently. Eren suspected he was holding himself back so as not to distract him too much from Erwin.

Eren's shoulders ached slightly, and when Erwin flexed, lifting his hips instinctively as he fucked his own fingers, his elbows threatened to give out as well. His neck was craned up; he couldn't look away even though Levi was starting to take him apart in earnest, and his breath was hitching and uneven. He was probably leaking precome onto the blankets but he couldn't look down to check and didn't care that much anyway.

Eren was ready. He was more than ready. Levi was keeping the pressure off his prostate and it was maddening. Eren's hips were working empty air, his lower lip between his teeth; he guessed he was giving Erwin a show almost as much fun as the one Erwin was giving him.

Erwin finally slid his fingers free, and rolled over to collect the box of condoms. He tossed them lazily in Eren's direction. Eren was sure he heard Levi mutter 'about fucking time.'

He was so eager and nervous he nearly dropped the condom twice trying to get it on. He heard Erwin chuckle; he sounded pretty relaxed but Eren wanted to do a good job and he was a bit worried he wouldn't. He was just so young and inexperienced compared with-

He felt Levi's hand on his arm.

"Relax, Mister Sparks. You've done it all before.”

"Can you believe I forgot I'm a porn star?” Eren asked.

Erwin laughed then, and Levi smiled and swatted his arse.

"It's one of the many charming things about you, Eren,” Erwin said.

The way they looked at him was making him feel different kinds of butterflies and his body spared enough blood to send some to his cheeks.

"Guys,” he muttered.

"Come here,” Erwin said, holding out his arms.

Eren didn't need to be told twice. He flung himself into Erwin's arms and Erwin wrapped his legs around Eren's hips.

"Oi,” Levi said softly. “Leave room.”

"Yeah, yeah,” Erwin breathed against Eren's mouth. “In your own time, Eren.”

In his own time? That was five minutes ago. He reached for the lube and Levi put it in his hand and he knelt between Erwin's legs, touching his large, beautiful cock with his other hand while he slicked himself up.

"Okay, okay. Tell me if-”

"Yes, Eren. It's fine.” Erwin smiled reassuringly at him.
Someday, Eren realised, all this was going to be as natural as breathing. It was getting there already.

Erwin lifted his hips and accepted him, smiling and letting his head loll back as Eren pushed in. Erwin frowned but squeezed Eren encouragingly with his legs. Eren gripped his hips with sweaty hands, his hair hanging in front of his eyes.

When he finally stilled himself, he felt Levi's hands caress his back, and Levi kneeled up to whisper in his ear.

“Hold still.”

Oh fuck. He knew what was next and he wasn't sure he could handle it. Erwin was perfect, hot and tight and trusting and Eren could see his pulse in his cock, his stomach smeared with precome and he was looking at Eren like he was a fucking sex god and he'd done practically nothing, and now Levi-

Levi did not take his time. He knew what Eren liked, what he could take, and Eren braced himself on Erwin’s chest as Levi filled him perfectly, making his toes curl, swift and sure.


“Yeah,” Erwin said. They’d learned their lesson and Eren had most of his weight on his knees, so Erwin wouldn't be flattened.

Eren nodded, not quite trusting himself to say anything. It was almost too much and he tried to take deep breaths. It was perfect, they were perfect; this was where he wanted to die.

He didn't die. He fucked. Fucked and was fucked, awkwardly and without much rhythm, rather like the first time the three of them had been together. They were obliged to go slowly, Eren pushed and pulled from both sides, and Eren let Levi hold him up, freeing his hands to stroke Erwin's cock and Erwin curled up and kissed him, flopped back and made happy, pained, desperate sounds and somehow found the breath and thought to curl up and kiss him again.

To Eren's delight, and surprise given the way Levi made him feel, Erwin came first, with a gasp and a sigh rather than a shout, telling Eren how amazing he looked, how wonderful he felt and Eren couldn't talk, his eyes teary and his mouth hanging open. But he smiled, proud and absolutely not going to last as he watched Erwin come on his own chest.

“Hang in there,” Levi gritted out. “Come on, just a bit longer.”

But Erwin was twitching, hot and spent around him and Levi shouldn't have said anything because his voice told Eren how close Levi was and what he probably looked like by this point and Erwin managed some sort of whimpered apology, but he was unable to last any longer. He garbled Levi's name and nearly blacked out as he came, Erwin's arms joining Levi's in supporting him as his own finally gave way. Eren was still shaking when Levi sank his teeth into his back and rutted him hard enough that Erwin winced on the other side.

When Levi relaxed again Erwin basically threw them off him, rolling them to the side and Eren whimpered, feeling bereft and over-sensitive in more places at once than he was really prepared for.

He could have gone to sleep, their arms draped over him loosely, sweat drying and skin cooling, save for where the other two pressed close. He'd be fine. They'd freeze.

After an unknown length of time in which Eren floated happily somewhere on the edge of sleep, Erwin kissed his forehead and sat up to look at the clock.
“Come on, we can still make the fireworks.”

“I thought you said you couldn’t see shit,” Levi mumbled, more interested in rubbing his cheek against Eren’s hair.

“Not from my apartment, but there’s a great view from the roof. Come on,” Erwin said with sudden energy the two younger men entirely lacked at that moment.

“I want to shower,” Eren said. Were they really doing this? He’d been driving all day and hadn’t slept well the night before, such was his anticipation and it was very tempting to just stay here.

They were doing this. They hauled themselves upright and Levi sorted out their clothes while Eren ducked into the shower, Erwin giving him two minutes before shooing him out so he could have a turn.

“Five minutes!” Levi called, reluctantly foregoing his own turn under the spray in favour of getting dressed for the cold.

Eren laughed, stumbling into his trousers, tugging on his shoes without doing up the laces. They were down to two minutes when Erwin grabbed his keys, the others hovering impatiently by the door. Even Levi was getting into it.

They summoned the lift and then decided it was too slow and took the fire stairs up, their footsteps echoing around the stairwell. They pounded up them like schoolboys, gasping as they bounded up four floors—well, Eren and Erwin were. Levi looked like he could have gone another twenty.

They burst out onto the roof, stumbling and laughing, the cold air a stinging shock on their faces, the countdown roaring up from the streets below.

Nine. Eight.

They were just in time. Eren grabbed their hands, pulling them over to the railing.

Six. Five.

He tilted his head back, his ears already freezing, gazing up at the dark sky. Levi let go of his hand and wrapped an arm around his waist instead. They were the only ones up here; Erwin’s neighbours not the type stand on a small, bare rooftop in the cold on New Year’s Eve.

Three. Two. One.

“Happy New Year,” they breathed, and Eren’s view of the first volley of fireworks was entirely obscured as his boyfriends each claimed a corner of his wide grin.

“You’re missing it!” Eren protested, squeezing them, trying to kiss with both sides of his mouth.

He loved them. So much.

“I love you,” he said. “Now watch, you’re missing them.”

“I’ve seen fireworks before,” Levi said, but he turned to the sky anyway.

Erwin chuckled and wrapped an arm around Eren’s shoulders, and Eren could smell the gunpowder drifting on the cold breeze as the sky sparkled.

His ears and nose and fingers were freezing, but Erwin and Levi stood close, and that was warmth
enough.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Eren made sure his vacation weeks were locked in a year in advance, every year. And every year, some disaster at the last moment would see him tapping away at the keyboard, throwing together graphs and running data while cicadas sang outside the window left open to coax in whatever breeze was drifting across the lake.

Well, whatever. He was used to it by now, and as long as it didn't eat up more than a day or two he could deal with it.

“Eenereeen!” A distraught wail had him abandoning his work and rushing out of the room, looking for its source.

“Isabel!”

His little sister (the half seemed needless pedantry at this point) was standing in the hallway, tears streaking her cheeks.

Eren's heart lurched in fear.

“What's wrong, sweetheart?” Eren knelt in front of her, looking her up and down for signs of injury. “What happened?”

“The-” she hiccuped around a sob. “The shaark died!” she wailed and flung herself into his arms.

“What shark?” Eren asked carefully.

Sharks had been Isabel's obsession for about a year now. Eren hadn't realised just how many shark-themed items were available for the discerning child until he had to buy her birthday presents and she didn't own much that didn't have a shark on it somewhere.

Isabel was still sniffling into his shirt ten minutes later as they sat on the couch, Eren explaining again that it was just a rubber shark, not a real one.

Eren broke off when he heard the familiar purr of the Aston and the crunch of gravel outside. He stayed where he was, listening to the car doors closing and cheerful conversation.

“We're back,” Levi called as he walked in the open door, making a beeline for the kitchen as his arms were full of groceries.

“In here,” Eren said.

“What happened?” Erwin asked, pushing his sunglasses up onto his head, looking worried as he took in Isabel's expression.

“She watched *Jaws* and the ending made her sad,” Eren said.

“They watched *Jaws* and the ending made her sad.”

“Why on earth did you let her watch *Jaws*?”

“I didn't! She found it herself and then came in every so often to say hello to me so I didn't go out and see what she was up to.”
“That's pretty cunning,” Levi said, joining them in the living area. At his praise Isabel smiled a little.

“Are you feeling better now?” Eren asked her.

She nodded. “Did you get any treats?” she asked Erwin and Levi shyly.

“I don't know,” Levi said. “I can't remember. Do you want to help me unpack?”

She did. Isabel followed Levi back to the kitchen and Erwin flopped down where she'd been sitting.

Eren groaned and rested his head on Erwin's shoulder. “I hope Maria doesn't find out about this. Every year I wonder why they leave her with us for a whole two weeks.”

Erwin smiled, “I don't think it's done any permanent damage.”

Isabel seemed to have forgotten the shark, for now at least, and was obediently following Levi's directions. Eren wondered if Maria handed her over partially because Levi instilled good habits; she'd mentioned his influence before.

“She's really good with her,” he was saying as they puttered around the kitchen area. They'd only rented the house for a few weeks but Levi gave great thought as to how he wanted the kitchen organised and Eren and Erwin knew better than to argue. To be fair, his organisation was usually pretty good.

“I let her watch *Jaws*, Erwin,” Eren said dubiously.

“No, she outsmarted you and watched it herself. Which, admittedly, doesn't bode well for the next few years.”

Eren sighed, “She's growing up so fast.” It felt like yesterday she was chewing on her own fingers and learning to say his name.

That evening after Isabel had been put to bed they sat on folding chairs, watching a bonfire on the other side of the lake and drinking beer. Levi had gone for a run and Eren felt vaguely guilty he hadn't joined him, but he'd eaten too much at dinner.

“I just realised,” Eren said. “She watched a shark terrorise a town for the entire movie and was on the shark's side the whole time.”

“It's going to be interesting when she's old enough to watch our monster movie collection with us,” Erwin said. “I'll have a look around for a movie in which the sharks win. There has to be at least one.”

Eren leaned down to slap at a mosquito on his foot and when he looked up Erwin was watching him.

“What?” Eren asked. He knew that look.

“I think Levi should take Isabel to the park for a while tomorrow. We've got a private little cove and it seems a shame not to use it. What do you think?” Erwin raised his voice as Levi jogged out of the darkness.

“I think it's fucking hot and full of fucking insects,” Levi muttered, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. “I'm gonna shower.”
He was back five minutes later in clean shorts and he unfolded a third chair with one hand, holding a glass of mineral water in the other.

“What are we talking about?” he asked as he sat down.

“Eren wants to go skinny dipping and you need to entertain Isabel for a while,” Erwin said smoothly.

“I didn't suggest-” Eren objected.

“Okay,” Levi said. “If you take her for a drive after lunch.”

“Guys,” Eren said. “We're supposed to be going on a hike on Tuesday, and I'd rather like to be able to walk straight for it. Can we spread this out? I'll take her out tomorrow afternoon. She wants to visit that cafe that does that disgusting sundae she likes so much again.”

The other two groaned. The cafe didn't serve tea and the coffee wasn't to Erwin's standards.

“Exactly,” Eren said. “But I said I would. So the oldies can cuddle up and have a nap while we're gone.”

“We weren't cuddling,” Levi said, frowning.

“No of course not,” Eren said. “You just had a nap on the same bed. It's just that it looks that way in all the pictures-”

“Different topic, did you get your work done?” Levi asked him before he could take his phone out and show them the evidence, again.

“Most of it,” Eren said. “I got distracted. I'll get it done tomorrow morning if I get up early enough.”

“You need to take over your company. No one tells the boss to work on his vacation,” Erwin said.

“No, but the boss would work on his vacation anyway if his partner didn't order him not to,” Eren retorted. “Even though Petra's perfectly capable.”

“I know, I know. I didn't say anything this year.”

Levi twisted in his chair and looked back at the house as Eren heard the fly-screen door open behind them. “What are you doing up, Sharkbait?” Levi asked.

Isabel stood in the doorway regarding them shyly, dressed in her shark-pattered pyjamas. Technically they were boys pyjamas but Isabel cared very little for such trivialities; they had sharks on them and that's what mattered.

“Couldn't sleep?” Eren asked.

She nodded and then crossed over to them. Knowing she'd be welcome anywhere she picked Erwin, since he was in the reclining deckchair. He shifted his drink to his other hand and let her clamber onto him.

“I wonder how Dad's getting on,” Eren mused. “A skiing holiday at his age. It's his own fault if he breaks a leg.”

“He's not a horse,” Erwin said. “You won't have to put him down if he does.”

“I think Maria wanted to do the skiing but he wanted to visit The Shire so he agreed.”
Levi muttered something about 'interminable fucking evening of holiday photographs' under his breath, but Isabel didn't seem to hear him so Eren didn't say anything. They watched the fire across the lake for a while.

“Isabel did yo-” Eren was about to ask if she wanted something to drink, but he broke off when he saw her sleeping peacefully on Erwin's shoulder.

“It hasn't even been five minutes,” Levi observed softly. “Why'd she even come out here?”

“Bedtime, I think,” Erwin said, finishing his drink and carefully getting to his feet, Isabel cradled in one arm against his hip.

Eren and Levi stood up as well, folding the chairs and carrying them in. Levi made a grab at Eren's arse as he walked past and Eren grinned invitingly as he skipped away. It was hot. Too hot to sleep. Erwin heard them clowning and glanced over his shoulder, but didn’t say anything, mindful of disturbing Isabel.

Tonight would be whispered endearments and keeping an ear out for small, bare feet and sleeping, eventually, as far apart as possible to keep cool.

And tomorrow, tomorrow would be brilliant and bright.

Chapter End Notes

Man, where do I start? Six months ago, or thereabouts, I posted the first chapter of this fic, and woke up the next morning to forty kudos and about fifteen comments. I was completely stunned and it only got better from there. It's been a whole lot of work and I've lived and breathed this story for what feels like years, but you have made it all worth it. I couldn't have asked for a better audience; you've been kind and enthusiastic and it's been a pleasure to write for you. I don't respond to every comment but I read them all multiple times. The kudos, the messages, the art--thank you. Thank you for everything.

I'm going to miss all of this, and if you want to swing by my tumblr and say hello or whatever, you are more than welcome.

There's been some amazing art made for F:ML, and if you've missed any of it, please check it out and give these amazing artists some love.

Pickletea: [Chapter One](#).

Mizozoh: [Chapter one](#), [Chapter two](#), [Chapter three](#), [Chapter four](#), [Chapters five to nine](#), [Chapters ten to twelve](#), [Chapter twenty-four](#), [The whole goddamn thing, really](#).

Syn: [Chapter twenty](#), [Chapter twenty-one](#), [Chapter thirty-five (nsfw.)](#) [Chapter thirty-five (sfw.)](#).

Petora-raru: [Chapter thirty-five](#).

Tanekore: [Chapter thirty-five](#).

Hakorin: [Chapter thirty-five](#).
Porcelain Blue: [Chapter forty-five](#).

Milujuamaluju: [Levi and Teacup](#).

Kioskishitaka: [Chapter thirty-five](#), [Chapter thirty-six (NSFW)](#).

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