Not The Monster You Wished For

by JustAWritist

Summary

Eren never thought he needed group therapy. Eren never wanted group therapy. Even getting him into physical therapy was tough. But now, one car accident and two worried friends later, Eren finds himself thrust into the world of group therapy for people like him. People with PTSD, the wounded veterans. Little did he know that this group would be made up of the people who haunt him in his nightmares. Including, but not limited to, the man who he blames for the loss of his lower leg. The man who led him into battle. Corporal Levi.

Notes

So, yeah! I guess this is it. The first chapter of my first chaptered fan fiction. Wow. Well, welcome to Not The Monster You Wish For! It will be updated every Wednesday, and I hope you all join me on the adventure! Welcome, again!
“If you had three wishes, what would you wish for?” Hanji Zoe looked genuinely excited about asking the question to our group. She looked to her left, where Armin was sitting. For a brief moment I pitied Armin, he’d only been dragged into this because I was too stubborn to go alone. Then Armin answered the question with such an earnest joy that my pity melted away.

“Well, I suppose the first thing I would wish for is…” Armin started off. I was busy thinking about what I would wish for.

One, I would wish I wasn’t here. Not that I came along willingly to begin with, Armin and Mikasa practically forced me to be here after that accident. Only now I really wished I had fought against coming even more, perhaps I would’ve been late and they would have assigned me a different group.

If only I hadn’t flipped out on the road, both in the literal and figurative sense.

I shudder as I remember driving, it was just down the road to the grocery store, a trip I’d taken multiple times before. Except this time it was raining. It wasn’t that it never rained, in fact it was that rainy month in the middle of fall. The rain was just in those thick, round drops that slammed against your windshield and sounded like… Well, to me they sounded like gunfire. I couldn’t see, the rain was too thick, and that reminded me of the dust that kicked up in the dry areas when we ran through. It set me off, it reminded me of when I was on the battlefield.

More than that it reminded me of the day I lost my leg.

It set me off, I started panicking. I couldn’t differentiate the road and the mine-infested battlefield. Each stripe on the road was another mine that the squadron I was a part of couldn’t see but tried to avoid anyway. It came to the point where the lanes merged and I was suddenly afraid to touch the line, as if they would set off an explosion. Just like had happened, now almost a year ago, off on some dry, deadly battlefield.

I got scared, I swerved, the car lost traction on the water, and the next thing I knew I was practically sitting on my head in a ditch, being held up and suspended in the air by my seatbelt. My vision was clouded white and my brain was fuzzy from being hit face-first by the airbag. A surprised driver behind me had pulled over and called 911. It was pretty damn easy for Mikasa and
Armin to get wind that I was in the hospital after that. I could see on their faces that they were worried this would happen again, and I wouldn’t be saved by an airbag and a muddy ditch the next time.

I hated to admit it but they were right, the panic attacks had already been waking me up at night. I tried best I could to hide those from Mikasa, but she knew, somehow she knew.

Thus I experienced a month of recovery from a terribly broken arm and then another, figurative, bomb dropped. Mikasa and Armin had signed me up for a PTSD recovery group. They tried to make it sound more appealing by saying that Armin signed himself up too so I wouldn’t be alone. It didn’t help at all, since I’d spent the last year, plus or minus a few weeks, resisting professional psychological help.

Nonetheless, my adoptive sister and best friend managed to drag me out of bed today and to a large white building that reminded me of a child’s building block. It only furthered my resistance when I entered the building block and was greeted by a set of faces I honestly wished I never saw again. The very same people that I’d come here to escape were the people in my group.

It was the fucking squadron that I’d fought with.

I still couldn’t leave, not only because Armin was gripping my sleeve and trying to drag me back, but because our group’s psychologist was a mentally insane psychopath that blocked the door and took it upon herself to shove me into the cramped white room I now sat in and shove me down on one of the six identical wooden chairs, and one open space for the wheel chair. Thus bringing me to my current predicament.

Damn PTSD.

In my reverie of past events, Armin had finished saying his three wishes. And from the embarrassed look on his face it seemed as if Jean, aka Horseface, had chosen to pass. Armin must be thinking that nobody else is going to share and he’d just screwed up big time.

Luckily for him, Marco at least had some human decency in him unlike Jean. Marco gave Armin a freckled smile and turned back to an expectant Hanji.

“My first wish… would probably be to find some new passion to pursue. It’s been hard to find something that doesn’t set me off because it reminds me of… well, this,” Marco gestured to his
prosthetic limbs, his entire left half, “And set me off.” Marco finished.

“Very good, Marco! This gives you a goal to work towards, now! We’ll start by working together and see if there’s something we can find that you’ll be interested in!” Hanji chirped, but I barely paid attention to her chiming. I now had my second wish.

Wish two, I wish I had my leg back. Well, the half I was missing at least.

Of course Marco had it worse than me, he was standing to my left, he was the one who actually stepped on the mine that blew off what was the majority of his left side and my left leg below the knee. But at the same time, at least it was his full arm and full leg that was missing. He could have complete prosthetics as he did now, as well as a wheelchair.

He was missing something full, and when something full is missing, you have the ability to fill up that missing hole with the entirety of something else. I was missing half of a leg, you can’t fill up half a hole with half of something else. It didn’t work, it was an awkward fit, like my prosthetic leg. I still walked with a lope due to the stiff metal rubbing against my knee, well, knee-stub. Even after a year of nightly jogs, every night, to get used to working with the prosthetics, I still couldn’t fully run. I could only jog. It was terrible. It was trying to fill half of a missing piece and the two halves just didn’t fit correctly. In a way, Marco with his wheelchair. his scarred face, and missing limbs, was lucky. Because he could find something full to fill that which was lost.

“My second wish would be to have more comfortable prosthetics,” Marco laughed a little on this, “They can rub my skin through the padding occasionally.” He said, reaching up his right hand to lightly touch the metal arm that latched onto the side of his chest.

“Thats the right way to think Marco!” Hanji spouted excitedly, Marco looked a little confused, “You’re not wishing that you had your limbs back, but trying to make it comfortable and live happily without them.” She gave him a nod of approval, “The genie would be proud of you.”

I guess the genie wouldn’t be very proud of me. I’ll live with it.

“My third wish…” Marco started, but I didn’t hear him.

My third wish was that I had never signed up for the war.
I only signed up for it in the first place out of some idiotic burst of anger and wish for... Well, shit, I don’t know. Vengeance? My mother was a nurse on the front and died in a bombing. I wanted revenge for her, and that’s really the only way to put it.

I’ll bet that pissed off the genie a bit.

“Thank you for sharing, Marco! Eren,” Hanji turned to me, and I looked up at her glasses-rimmed eyes, “would you like to share?” I looked over at Armin, he had also been a soldier. In my squad, yes, but he’d left before the incident with the mines due to being shot through the lung and then being unable to fight, or do anything terribly physical really, got discharged. Armin looked hopeful that I’d share, looks like it wasn’t only the genie I was pissing off.

“Pass.”

Sorry, Armin.

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“Thank you everybody, for the perfect introductory meeting! If any of you have any last thought you’d want to share with me I’ll be staying after for a while! I can’t wait to see you all,” at this Hanji glanced at me, there was a threat hiding behind those glasses, I know it, “and I mean all,” She returned her gaze to the majority of the group, “tomorrow! Goodbye everybody!” She left us with her excited dismissal. I stood up, Armin walked across the room towards myself.

“You should have shared.” He chastised me, but my blue-eyed friend was smiling.

“I agreed to come, not to participate.” I replied. Armin rolled his eyes, his eyebrows going up in his exasperation and almost disappearing into the bangs of his blonde bob.

“This is supposed to help you, Eren.” Armin pointed out. I glanced around at the group dispersing. Jean was talking to Marco as he wheeled him towards the door.

“Yeah, well, that backfired.” I muttered. Just being around these people set me on edge. I had tried to get rid of anything that could remind me of the battle, anything that could set me on edge, and now I was surrounded by reminders.
Armin held open the door for Marco and Jean as they approached the main lobby. I waited for him and saw Marco offer Armin his thanks. Jean and Marco passed by me and Jean grimaced at the sight of my face. Not so say I wasn’t doing the same.

“Eren.” He said simply,

“Horseface.” I replied.

“Jean…” Marco chided from his wheelchair. Jean glanced at the freckled face… well, half-freckled. I hadn’t seen Marco since before the incident, but it stunned me now that I saw him in person, and up close too. The left half of his face was red, scarred, and… Well it didn’t even look like a face. It was twisted and the burn marks were painfully obvious. His words were slightly messy, he couldn’t move the left half of his face. All the freckles on the left half had disappeared, replaced by an ugly red scarring.

Okay, maybe he wasn’t so lucky.

Marco looked up and smiled at me, it was almost painful to watch. Yet somehow… he looked happy. Happier than I’d be in his position. Hell, happy than I am in my own position.

“Hey, Eren. How’s…” Marco hesitated, then gestured to my left leg. It was blatantly obvious, my pants were always rolled up to the knee to reveal the skeletal metal leg and foot. If I let my pants hang loose, they got caught on the leg and I would trip.

“Well… it’s… a leg.” I reply, not exactly how to say it’s shitty, and I wish it had never happened, to Marco when he was… well… missing half of his body.

“I get that.” Marco nodded, and I actually believed he did, not like when other people said that they understood, he actually did.

“Marco, we should get going.” Jean piped up, I glanced back up at Jean. Did his face… soften when he looked at Marco? Maybe they stayed in contact. Marco nodded,

“Right. I’ll see you tomorrow, Eren, Armin.” Marco waved to us with his natural hand and Jean
pushed him forward to the door, using the small button that automatically swung open the door for disabled people.

That’s what we were, disabled.

“Bye Jean, bye Marco.” Armin called out to their backs. The two of us then exited through the front exit and stood outside in the growing cold. Most of the leaves had fallen away and winter was beginning to rear its ugly head. I shivered and tugged my hoodie closer to my body. Armin zipped up his coat.

“Want a ride back?” He asked, there was worry in his eyes. He knew that I wasn’t happy being around familiar faces, he was worried it might set me off. Besides, Mikasa was the one who brought me here originally so that ride was gone.

“I think I’ll jog, I don’t think I’ll be able to later.” I glanced up at the sky, dark and grey with storm clouds that looked ready to burst. I turned my head down and caught a glimpse of Hanji and the other two people from our group exiting. I watched them for a moment.

The first was a petite woman with orange-brown hair named Petra, I’d never really talked with her all that much, but she seemed nice from what I could gather.

The second was the face I hated the most. The one who haunted my nightmares and who was responsible for the incident. He was our leader, a short man with a temper. Levi, Corporal Levi. He was the one who sent us into that damned battlefield where I lost my leg and Marco his left half. Levi lifted his eyes and met my gaze, it was almost as if he could tell I was staring. Creepy.

He shot me a glare. What the hell? Why the hell did he think he had any, any right to glare at me? He was the reason I’d lost my leg. I returned the glare. Fucking bastard, who did he think he was? We were off the battlefield, he had no rank on me here.

“Eren?” Armin’s voice attracted my attention, I turned my head to him, letting my eyes linger on Levi’s, unwilling to break this glaring competition now that it started.

“Yeah, sorry, just…” I sighed, pulling my eyes away and looking back at Armin’s concerned face, “Sorry.”
“You seem angry.” Armin could be really observant when he wanted too. His eyes flick back over in the direction I’d been glancing in. There was a brief moment of confusion before a reluctant kind of realization drew over his face, “You can’t blame others for everything, Eren.” Armin sighed as we approached his car, a familiar black SUV in which Armin, Mikasa and I had taken many road trips in. It held a lot of memories for us, which was funny, because none of us were attached to the car itself, only the memories.

“Not everything, just this.” I replied to Armin as he opened the driver’s seat and climbed in. He shut the door behind him and rolled down the window to continue talking to me. I leaned on the edge of the car window.

“Not even this, Eren, none of what happened was his fault.” Armin, as always, being my voice of reason. The angel on my shoulder that I never listened to.

“He was the one who sent us through there, he’s the reason Marco’s stuck to that damned wheelchair.” I muttered.

“And you to your metal limb.” Armin was too observant for his own good.

“Half-limb.” I corrected. Whatever Armin was about to say was interrupted by a boom of far-off thunder. Together we glanced at the sky, but the grey clouds had yet to relinquish their torrent.

“You sure you’ll be alright?” Armin asked, I looked at his face, he was obviously concerned.

“I have a hood, besides,” I gave him a smile, “If I get sick maybe I can miss the meeting tomorrow.” I tease. Resting my head on the open windowsill.

“Don’t count on it, you’re resilient.” Armin reminded me, then returned the smile, “Sometimes too resilient for your own good, but I believe that’s called being stubborn.”

“It’s one of my many charms.”

“Cocky, too.” Armin finished, before igniting the engine. I backed away from the car.
“It’s called confidence.” I jokingly remind him then I hold up a hand to wave goodbye, “See you tomorrow, Armin.”

“Stay safe.” Armin gives his goodbye, and then the black SUV peels out of the parking lot and onto the open road.

I watch the back of the SUV disappear around the curve. Then I turn and start walking up to the sidewalk again, as I do I feel something akin to a burning sensation pinpricking my back. I turn my head and catch Levi’s stiff glare as he stares at me. Seriously, the hell was his problem? I throw up my hood and start running.

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I used to want to be a runner. Professional, I mean. I was always pretty athletic, nothing much and nothing really award-worthy. Well, not if you didn’t count the few small county awards from neighborhood and inter-school marathons I’d won in high school.

Obviously, I’d given up on that dream a long time ago. Almost a year ago to be exact. Now I didn’t have anything I was working toward in particular. I wasn’t exceptionally smart, or artistic, and definitely not athletic anymore. Who am I kidding? I was never exceptionally athletic. Just a bit more than your average passerby.

Nonetheless I kept jogging. At first for physical therapy, and still so now. But more because I could go blank. Running didn’t require any mental activity. It was the time when I could let my mind go absolutely nowhere and it was the time I was happiest. When I wasn’t thinking. When I wasn’t remembering. Of course even that was harder now. Everything was harder since a year ago, even trying not to think. And why? Because the universe has conspired against me to make my life a living hell.

Now when I ran the exact opposite happened, my thoughts ran with my legs. Or jogged with my leg, the rocky pace driven by the off-beat thump of my metal leg often jarred me into reality. It was the time when I would think, and actually keep my thoughts to myself. It was how I kept secrets. How I dealt with problems.

Armin and Mikasa especially encouraged me to keep running. That was really the only reason why Armin didn’t drag me into his car and drive off with me screaming bloody murder in the back seat. They were happy that it was my outlet instead of… other activities like they’d seen with others in our predicament. Mikasa especially, she had been in the army for a year and a half before I joined. She left, her required two years up, just a week before the incident. I’d been the one to practically
force her to leave instead of staying another year to be with me.

_We weren’t in the same squad._ I argued.

_I can still kill anybody who hurts you._ She retorted.

_How? Your group is heading in the other direction._ I pointed out.

_I can find a way._ She insisted.

_Go home, Mikasa._ I asked, or demanded, I don’t really remember all that well.

My foot hits a rock and I stumble forward before catching myself. Shit. The prosthetics really don’t take well to… anything, really. With a sigh, I tap my metal foot against the ground to make sure it isn’t dented or anything, and then I pick up my jog again.

It’s not that Mikasa staying would have helped at all. If anything it only would have made things worse when I came too. I would’ve been sent home and Mikasa wouldn’t have been there, and while I still would’ve had Armin, I’d definitely needed both of them there those first few weeks.

“Ha,” I let out a dry laugh. Who am I kidding? I still need them here.

I keep running, soon my thoughts are all left behind on the pavement with that stubbornly disruptive rock.

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I arrive at the apartment Mikasa and I share together. I’d opted a long while ago not to stay in a dorm at my college. I don’t think my roommate, no matter who they were, would take kindly to my night terrors.

I shove my hand in my pocket, and feel only the fabric of my hoodie. With a troubled expression, I reach into my front left pocket. Nothing. My front right pocket chooses to be empty as well.
“Goddammit.” I curse and pat my back pockets, neither of which have anything with any semblance to a key-shape in them.

I knock on the door, once, twice… No answer. I pound the door once more for good measure.

“Mikasa! You in there?” I shout, a door down the hall swings open and I’m met with the wrinkled face of our silent old-lady neighbor. She was some ninety-something widow who defiantly wasn’t the friendly old lady in a flower gown type. We’d lived here for three months now and I still didn’t know her name. She shushed me and I turn away and walk down the hall to the staircase. We lived on the third floor.

I sigh and pull out my phone from my left back pocket, at least thats there.

One ring, two rings, three rings.

*Pick up Mikasa… Come on…*

“Hello?” The deadpan voice of my adoptive sister greets me.

“Mikasa, hey. Are you nearby?” I ask, and hear an audible sigh on the other side of the phone.

“Eren… Did you leave your keys in the apartment again?” She asked.

“Well, when you say it like that it sounds like it happens often.” I point out.

“It does.” Deadpan, “Don’t worry, I’ll be over in about ten minutes. Just don’t hurt yourself while I’m gone, okay?” While to others this request might have sounded somewhat sarcastic, I knew that Mikasa was asking me seriously. She was constantly worried for me, and in sequence that made me worried for her.

“You give me too much credit, Mikasa. I can’t get into that much trouble in ten minutes.” I joke in an attempt to lighten her mood.
“Yes, you can.” Attempt failed.

“Alright, alright, I’ll be good. See you in ten.” I agree.

“See you soon.” Mikasa’s phone line goes dead, I snap my phone shut. I still had one of those old flip phones that you had to be careful not to flip too hard or else the top half would fly off… Which admittedly had happened to me several times before.

Now, with ten minutes to myself, I expected to just wait around patiently. Sadly I wasn’t very patient. So I decided to walk down the street to a local café where Mikasa, Armin, and I had gotten lunch several times before.

The Rose Café was one of three places Mikasa, Armin and I met up at. It was a nice little café with outdoor seating under a striped yellow and red awning. The inside was always warm and filled with the scent of whatever was the daily special. The inside had the classic dark brown booths and tables that were often found in family restaurants. The seemingly family-restaurant oriented interior for a small hang-out café was mainly because The Rose Café only came into business about three years ago, and took over for a run-down family restaurant called Hole in The Wall. The old restaurant was falling apart from it’s glory days back when I was just eight years old, so I was glad when they fixed up the Hole in The Wall. Even if it meant a loss of my childhood restaurant. Besides, The Rose Café had even better food than Hole in The Wall.

It still hadn’t rained, even though the sky only seemed to be getting darker with each fleeting minute. Nonetheless, it didn’t deter me from ordering a coffee and an Armored Sandwich, nobody knew where the name for the café’s signature sandwich came from, and sitting outside.

The Armored Sandwich was always tough to eat. The bread was baked to an almost surreal level of crispiness. There was a rumor that somebody once tried to cut into the sandwich with a knife and the knife broke against the bread. I don’t believe it though. After all, though it was a struggle to eat it, I still could, no knife required.

It was a challenge, and I liked eating it because it seemed to be the only physical challenge I could still accomplish. Maybe I should go on that TV show, Boy Vs Food. Mikasa had once said that I must have a titan-sized stomach. Whatever that meant.

I glanced up from my sandwich as somebody else entered the veranda.
Holy shit.

My eyes meet with a familiar gray hue. Levi walks out onto the veranda with a mug of what I assume to be coffee or tea or some shit in his hand.

He meets my eyes for a second, seems to almost scoff at me, and walks off to a table closer to the thin black metal railing that encloses the outdoor space.

What the actual fuck?

It was official, the guy was an ass.

I tear into my sandwich with even more of a ferocity than I expected and glared at his back.

Just turn around, go on, I dare you.

Yet Levi remains completely passive across the veranda.

Muttering to myself I tear into the bread again. Perhaps with a bit too much ferocity, I cough, choking on a piece of bread. I hit my throat and dislodge the stubborn piece of food.

When I look up, Levi is looking back at me with a cold, amused smirk tugging on the corners of his lips.

Good god, the universe really was conspiring against me.

Either that or I pissed off that genie more than I meant too.

Or both, probably both.
I felt my neck heat up. Great, just fucking perfect, now I gave Levi a reason to laugh at me.

When I look back at him he was looking back at his drink, a stoic expression on his face. Stone cold, no hint of the smug smirk that was there before. I wasn’t even that interesting to him.

He wasn’t just an ass, he was an asshole.

Whatever, it doesn’t bother me that I’m not even that interesting to the guy.

Really, it should be common courtesy that when you laugh at somebody you at least show some interest in them afterwards. Guess not.

Whatever.

It really doesn’t bother me.

I swear.

I stare at Levi, but I don’t realize I’m staring until he lifts his narrow eyes and meets my gaze once again.

I realize that our tables really aren’t all that far apart, that there’s only one other couple sitting a few tables away on the veranda and that the only thing separating us is a single empty table with two chairs. Since when were we this close?

“Do I have something on my face, brat?” Levi inquired from across the empty table. It shocked me, the harshness of his tone. His voice was low, it had this weathered quality to it, almost like a growl reverberating under the normal tone.

“N-no.” I answer at first shocked, my eyes dash away and land on the pavement. What am I doing? I’m not going to let this ass get a reaction out of me. I raise my eyes again, and glare at him, “No.” I answer more sternly.
Something in his eyes changes, as if it went from annoyance to irritation.

“Really? Because you’re staring at me is really fucking annoying.” Levi threatened, although it wasn’t a direct threat, there was something threatening about the way he formed his words, there was something behind them and I couldn’t figure out what exactly it was.

“Well, good, that’s kind of the point.” I state matter-of-factly. For a moment I’m afraid I may have overstepped my boundaries. That I may have just really, really pissed off a man with whom my only shield is an empty table and a few chairs.

Levi clicks the tip of his tongue against the roof of his mouth, stands up, and walks towards me.

Yep, I definitely screwed up.

I stiffen in my chair as Levi approaches, he sets his cup down on my table and then grips my shoulder. Damn, his grip is really fucking strong. I wince and Levi leans down my ear.

“Watch it, brat.” He says, “I may not be the monster you’re thinking of.” He then releases my shoulder and picks up his cup before walking inside.

Had… Had I just gotten off?

I rub my shoulder, it probably wouldn’t bruise but that didn’t mean it didn’t hurt. I watch Levi’s back as he leaves.

Seriously, what was wrong with him?

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I arrive back at the apartment a few minutes before Mikasa arrives. She takes one glance at me and then speaks.

“What happened?” She demands, not asks, but demands. I jump a bit, I wasn’t that transparent was
“Just dealing with an asshole.” I shrug it off like it was nothing. Like I didn’t have to see the guy tomorrow and probably daily for the next few months or however long Armin and Mikasa forced me into this.

“I can take care of anybody if you need me to.” Mikasa reminded me. Really, Mikasa’s overprotectiveness got on my nerve sometimes, but it was also pretty helpful.

“Don’t worry, this is somebody I can take care of.” I say. Mikasa holds my gaze for a beat longer before opening the door and stepping inside.

Soon as I’m inside my mind drifts back to The Rose Café.

*I may not be the monster you're thinking of.*

What had he meant by that?

Damn it, this group wasn’t going to help me at all.

I sigh and flop down on the couch, silently trying to plot a way to avoid going to the group tomorrow.

Sadly, I came up blank.

Chapter End Notes

Exposition, Exposition, Rockin’ Everywhere!

So, yeah, that’s the first chapter of NTMYWF. Please comment with critique, praise, or general thoughts about the chapter so I can continue to improve!

Special thanks to my wonderful, fabulous, lovely editor!

You can contact me on my tumblr:
goldie-the-cat.tumblr.com

And look for items tagged fic: NTMYWF

I hope to see you all next week!
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I let out a wide yawn, only to be elbowed in the side by Armin. I didn’t sleep much last night. I had nightmares, worse than usual.

My guess was that it was seeing the people in this damn group that set me off.

I’m staring right at the door as Hanji kicks it open, but it still makes me jump and startles me awake.

I hear somebody laughing silently to themselves and look towards the sound. I glare at Jean as Marco appears to be scolding him. Jean meets my gaze. Our faces say it all.

_Horseface_  
_Jaeger_

“Hello, everybody!” Hanji claps her hands together as she walks, well, bounds, to her seat in the circle.

“I have a wonderful exercise today which means that everybody, and I mean everybody,” She emphasizes glancing in the direction of myself, Jean, and then Levi. Did he not answer last time? I hadn’t noticed. Hanji continues, “is required to answer.”

I slump back in my seat with a small sigh. I glance over to Armin on my left, he seems as attentive as ever.

Somehow I’m reminded of a small golden retriever puppy. Sweet, loyal, attentive, and far too smart for it’s own good.

Hanji’s loud voice drags my attention back to her.

“Since the majority of yesterday was spent getting to know a bit about each individual, I figured we’d all get to know each other as a group.” She chimed in her one-too-many-cups-of-coffee voice… Did Hanji even drink coffee? I shudder at the thought of what would become of her should the woman ever ingest caffeine.

“As you all have figured out by now, this group was decisively put together because you had all shared a past experience with each other.” Hanji explains.

It was on purpose?

I’m here, with these people, on purpose?
I was woken up last night with memories of seeing their faces contorted with fear and pain on purpose?

A small flare of anger fills me, a tiny spark that burst into a candle’s flame and now quietly lit the way to the grand reveal.

Armin and Mikasa set me up.

No doubt they knew that the group they were sending me to was made up of solely the people who were in Armin and my squadron. Goddammit, didn’t they know that was all it took to send me over the edge? If they wanted to help me then they’ve really screwed up now.

Hanji’s still speaking, I know I have to tune into her words or else I’ll be caught off guard when the question comes around. Although, now I really wished I could pass.

“So, raise your hand if the question applies to you, and together we’ll find out a few of our differences and our similarities.” Hanji finished the instructions. Oh damn, I hope there wasn’t anything else that was too important, just those rules, right? I could follow that.

Hopefully.

Maybe.

Shit.

“Alright, I’ll go first!” Hanji chirped happily. “Have you ever wanted to dissect a human?” Her perky voice is met with stone cold silence. Hanji’s face remains it’s energetic, lit-up expression for a few seconds before her face falls. “Nobody?” She whimpers, she looks like a kicked puppy.

“Of fucking course not!” Levi scolds her from his seat next to her.

Okay, so it isn’t just me he was an ass to. It’s everybody.

“Oh come on! It’s a perfectly good want!” Hanji sounds exasperated. Then Hanji groans, “I’ll change it.” She seems to put some serious thought into her question this time.

“Alright then… Have you ever wanted to dissect an large mammal? Any mammal, whale, elephant, or maybe even human!” She chirps, Levi sighs next to her.

“Fucking really?” He asks. Shyly, Armin raises his hand next to me.

“Actually… I did once want to be a veterinarian… I found the dissections kind of interesting.” He admits sheepishly. Hanji lights up like an exploding firework.

“Ha! You see, Levi? At least somebody in here has a sense of adventure in them!” Hanji spouts happily. Levi rolls his eyes to the side, uninterested.

“Alright, Armin! It’s your turn now!” Hanji continues happily, unfazed by Levi’s lack of… anything.

“Oh, okay.” Armin starts, he pauses, I can tell by his face that he was thinking about something to ask. “Has anybody ever…” He mumbles at first, debating his options, then speaks normally, “Has anybody ever wanted to know what it would be like to live life from a different perspective? You know… see what other’s see?”

Petra and Marco both raise their hands.
“Wow! Two hands! Alright, well… we’ll just move in circle order then. Marco, you go next.” Hanji skips over to Marco. I’m beginning to get what we were doing. You listen to what the person wanted, if it applies to you then you raise your hand, and then it’s your turn.

Easy enough.

Marco seems to already have his ‘want’ down, so he starts speaking right away.

“Mine’s somewhat derived from Armin’s,” He smiles, “I suppose that’s why I raised my hand for his to begin with.” Then he starts with his actual wish, “Has anyone ever wanted to get out and see the world? And I mean the entire world, that is.”

“Actually, that was also pretty similar to mine!” Petra perks up from across the circle, her hand raised again.

“How perfect! Alright then, Petra, it’s your turn!” Hanji nods over to Petra, who’s quietly deciding on what to say now that it seems her wish had been said already.

“Has anybody ever wanted to work with animals, professionally I mean.” She has a small smile on her face, “It seems like it would be fun.”

Much to my surprise, Jean raises his hand.

“Jean? Really?” Hanji sounds almost as surprised as I feel. Almost.

“Yeah, well, I worked with horses once and I liked it, turns out I’m pretty good at it.” Jean shrugs. Suddenly the name Horseface seems all the more fitting. Go figure.

“That’s great Jean! That’s something to work towards! Alright, now what’s your wish?” Hanji asks with a bright smile.

“Right, right…” Jean stumbles over his words, as if unprepared for his turn, “Um… Have you ever wanted to… Well, have you ever wanted to find out what really makes you happy? Like, a job or something that you’d want to do for the rest life.” Jean finishes.

I hate to admit it, but that was one I can raise my hand to.

“Alright, two hands again!” Hanji cheers, I look to my left at Armin. His hand is still down. I look to my right then, past Jean at Marco, whose hand is also down. I then look across the circle. And-Levi’s hand is raised, if not reluctantly, but raised nonetheless.

Is it too late to put my hand down?

I want to share nothing, and I mean nothing in common with that… monster. Besides, somebody like him, somebody who carelessly throws away lives as if they mean jack-shit, didn’t deserve to find something that made him happy.

“Alright, Eren, you go next!” Hanji encouraged me.

“Pass.” I mutter.

“You can’t pass on this exercise.” Hanji states.

“I still want to pass.” I say.
“Well isn’t that just too bad? Now, say what you want and see who shares that in common.” Something in Hanji’s eyes, an unsaid threat, pushes me to decide to suck it up and say something instead.

“Yep, it is too bad.” I mutter before sighing and reluctantly giving in, “Fine, then. Have you ever wanted…” Shit this was harder than I thought. “Has anybody ever wanted…” Oh goddammit I don’t know, “Has anybody ever wanted to talk with somebody you can’t talk with anymore?” I blurt out the first thing that comes into mind. I’m thinking of my mother.

“Fucking hell.” A sharp voice sighs from across the circle, Levi raises his hand again. We share a glance, and I can tell we’re both thinking the same thing, “Again?”

“Well lookie here! Isn’t this wonderful!” I’m beginning to get really tired of Hanji’s obsessive optimism. She opens her mouth to call Levi’s turn next when the alarm on her phone beeps, signaling the end of the session.

“Oh shit! That time already!” Hanji jumps up, as if afraid we’re all about to flee from the scene. Which in all honesty I’m completely ready to at this point. “Before you all go, I wanted to announce the reason we did this exercise.” Oh, so there was an actual reason to this torture. I thought it was because you enjoy my pain. Fooled me. “You all came here specifically with somebody else, now, in order to get us all to know one another we’re going to split up in two pairs and one group of three with people of whom we don’t know. We did this exercise so that you would be paired up with somebody who you raised your hand with.” Hanji beams at us all, her eyes excitedly sparkling behind her glasses like those little glowing dots on dolls.

Wait. Did she say we’d be paired up with people who we raised our hands with?

“The groups will be as follows: Marco and Petra,” Shit, please tell me I’m in the group of three. “Jean, Armin, and myself,” Don’t say it- “And Eren and Levi!”

I’m sure I visibly wince at my pairing being called. I look across the circle. Levi is casting a death-glare at Hanji. As if he feels my eyes on him he turns his glare to me. I’m frozen stiff in my seat by what I see in his eyes. Hatred, so cold it burns into my skin.

“It’s up to each of your groups to set up a special meeting time and place! Each group will meet up with each other at least three times a week to talk and, well, do whatever you want to do. That’s all for today, have a nice day everyone!” Hanji chimes. There’s the usual rustling of chairs as everybody begins to stand. Armin stands next to me, and seeing that I haven’t moved, shakes my shoulder lightly.

“Eren? Eren are you alright?” He inquires, concerned.

“Armin,” I begin quietly, Levi breaks the gaze and stands with Petra, the two of them walk over to Hanji, “I’m fucked.”

I really hate this group.

- - -

“Really, Eren, you’re being melodramatic. You don’t even know him!” Armin sighs, his breath coming up in a little wisp of white smoke. It’s colder today. I wish I’d brought a better jacket.

“I know that nobody with any human emotion would send that many people to their death.” I
mutter, “I know that he must be a monster.” I say, wrapping my arms around myself and shivering in the cold.

“You don’t know that, you’re assuming that. Besides, he took orders just like we did.” Armin’s trying to comfort me, I know this. I know this, and I still get angry at him.

“Goddammit Armin, why can’t you just side with me for once?” I say a bit too harshly. I see Armin recoil a bit at my tone, “Sorry… I didn’t…” I sigh, “I’m sorry.”

Armin smiles, reminding me that he’s far too nice for his own good. Life’s been a bitch to him too, and yet he’s handling it so much better than I am. I really shouldn’t be taking out my anger on him. I don’t have a right to.

“It’s okay, I know you’re just panicked.” Armin reassures me. Why can’t he just break down once? Just once, to assure me that I’m not insane. That… how I act doesn’t mean that I’m mentally deteriorating.

But if I’m honest with myself, I probably am. Fuck if I know.

“Hey, brat.” That terrible voice again, I don’t turn around at first and Armin gives me a sympathetic smile.

“I’ll be in the car, I’ll wait for your verdict if you want a ride home.” He turns, then stops as if he remembers something and looks back at me, “Play nice, Eren.” He gives me a cheeky smile. I muster up what mental strength is left, which happens to be stuck in a slow atrophy, and return his smile.

“No promises.” I joke, Armin shakes his head as if he doesn’t know what to do with me, but the smile is still on his face. Honestly, I wouldn’t blame him if he didn’t know what to do with me. I don’t know what to do with me. And I am me.

How sad is that?

I turn around and face a shorter man whose face is really the last one I want to see right now.

“What do you want?” I snap, and then flinch away when Levi sends me one of his blood-curdling glares. No, I won’t give him the satisfaction of seeing me flinch. I straighten my shoulders, it’s a bold move but height is all I have on him right now.

“Show some fucking respect, kid.” Levi spits out the words at me, “Look, shit-headed Hanji paired us up and I may not be good with people but it’s pretty fucking clear you want to do this just as much as I do.” At this point Levi sighs, “But I also don’t want to get my ass chewed out by over-excited four-eyes so let’s get this the fuck over with. Ten o’clock, The Rose Café, Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, don’t be late.” Levi states it simply, then he turns as if to leave.

“Wait!” I call out, my voice a bit higher than I would have wished it to be. Since when is my voice that high? I’m panicking aren’t I?

“What do you want?” I snap, and then flinch away when Levi sends me one of his blood-curdling glares. No, I won’t give him the satisfaction of seeing me flinch. I straighten my shoulders, it’s a bold move but height is all I have on him right now.

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“Wait!” I call out, my voice a bit higher than I would have wished it to be. Since when is my voice that high? I’m panicking aren’t I?

“What the fuck is it now?” Levi asks, turning his head around to look at me. I clear my throat, forcing my voice back down to it’s natural range so I don’t sound like a thirteen year old bird who’s just started going through puberty.

“I have class at ten.” I say. Levi sighs, exasperated.

“Of course you do.” He mutters, “Well, what time then?” I take a moment, running a quick check
through my mental calendar.

“Six o’clock is best, but… not on Wednesdays, so… maybe Saturdays? No, Sundays.” I explain and then look at Levi for approval. He’s on his phone, looks like the calendar? Must be entering it on his calendar, I presume.

“Fine, whatever, great. See you tomorrow, brat.” Levi says, somewhat distracted. “Six o’clock, don’t be late.” Then he leaves, I see Petra waving him over from where she stands.

Wait, tomorrow?

I walk briskly over to Armin’s car, where he’s leaning on the side.

“What day is it, Armin?” I ask, Armin looks at me curiously.

“Sunday, why?” He explains, “Wait, don’t tell me you forgot-.”

“Shit!” I exclaim. I have a paper due for my Political Science class tomorrow. Armin sighs,

“Alright, I’ll take you home and help you on it, how much do you have done?” Armin asks.

“Um… two pages. Wait, no, two and a half.” I mention sheepishly. Armin raises an eyebrow at me. “I know-“ I groan.

“It’s supposed to be ten pages.” Armin replies.

“I know, I know. It’s just- I wouldn’t be taking the class if I didn’t have to okay?” I sigh, walking around his car and opening the passenger’s seat door and climbing in as Armin climbs into the driver’s seat. I’ve been banned from driving myself anywhere since I crashed, and thusly Armin has become my chauffeur of a sort, since we go to the same college it’s been pretty easy with him so far.

“You don’t have to.” Armin tells me as he buckles himself in, “Seatbelt.” He reminds me as I reach for the buckle and pull it across my torso.

“You know I can’t do that.” I sigh. Armin was suggesting that I actually tell my dad that I don’t want to go into a profession in politics. He was the one parent I had left, and despite his consistent absence on business trips, I actually wanted to make my time with him worth it. If that meant he’d visit more often to talk to me about whatever branch of politics I was currently most interested in, the answer was actually none of them but he didn’t know that, then so be it.

“Alright, I won’t push you with this.” Armin said, igniting the engine as he began to pull out of the driveway, he cast me a side-smile. “Now let’s get that paper done.”

“What would I do without you?” I seriously mean it when I say that. Armin, like Mikasa, was my support pillar, without him or her I’d be lost. I smile back at Armin.

“Let’s hope we never have to find out,” He sighs, “Because I don’t want to be around for that train wreck.” He jokes.

“That’s kind of the point.” I reply.

“True. In that case, I’ll be leaving tomorrow.” Armin tilts his head towards me a tiny bit.

“Ah, geez, I was waiting for this to happen.” I sigh with a playful shake of my head.
“What can I say? You’re too high maintenance, Eren. I’m a bird, I need to spread my wings.” Armin says dramatically.

“Am I being broken up with?” I ask,

“Yep, our bromance is officially over.” Armin continues our banter.

“Oh, shit... Well, I suppose that it’ll be a whole lot easier to keep up my side affair now.” I say.

“Side affair?” Armin inquires,

“Yeah, I’m secretly having a double-affair with food and my bed.” I reply.

“Huh, so that’s why Mikasa always complains about finding crumbs in your covers.” Armin ponders.

“Cat’s outta the bag.” I laugh, Armin’s smiling also. It’s because of moments like this that I’m assured I would die without Armin and Mikasa by my side. They’re much too precious to me.

This is why we’re best friends.

---

“So then you’d talk about the etymology of Capitalism.” Armin points at the space after the paragraph that I’d just finished.

“The what?” I say, slightly distracted by thoughts of the fact that I’d rather be cleaning up my mess of a desk than write this paper. Now that’s something.

“The etymology, the origin of the word?” Armin explained.

“Oh right. That. Wait, why do I need to talk about the origin of the word Capitalism when I’m writing about the concept of Capitalism?” I ask, it seems like it’d just be more work.

“Well, you talk about the origins of Capitalism and, at this point, any filler is good filler just so that you can get this paper done on time.” Armin sighs. We’d managed to increase my previous two-and-a-half pages to a whopping four pages. Almost halfway there… Yay.

“Right. Right…” I say, “So… uh… what is the etymology of Capitalism?” I ask, Armin looks at me with a wayward glance.

“He said that during the first week, Eren. Don’t you pay attention at all?” He asks. This was another advantage of having Armin here, he took some of the same classes as me. Only difference was, he was actually interested in this stuff.

“Honestly? No, not really.” I admit with a sheepish shrug.

“Alright, well… Let’s take it from the top then.” Armin starts, shuffling around to get more comfortable in the chair I’d pulled into my room from the dining table. This was going to be a long day, I could tell.

Armin’s already begun talking,

“Paragraph one, types of Capitalism. Do you want to start with Mercantilism or State capitalism? We could also talk about laissez-faire.”
The sun is setting when Mikasa comes home from her part-time job. Even though our dad always helps pay off our shared apartment, Mikasa insisted that we have to learn how to handle and care for ourselves. It’s because of that mentality that she decided to get a part time job as a grocer. Nothing fancy, and so far her only complaints have been about the idiot shoppers who take too long digging through their purses for money.

I tried to get a job to help her out, but apparently that’s been substituted for mental help. I would rather I have the part time job than a recovery group.

Mikasa, as usual, brings home takeout for dinner, I’d told her that Armin was helping me out with a paper, so she brought enough for all three of us. Our fridge was almost always in a state of near-emptiness, only filled now and then when I was in the mood to actually cook something.

I’d actually become pretty good at it, mainly because my mother had decided early on that I was going to be her assistant chef. Well, I guess watching her cook and learning it myself stuck with me, I was definitely better than Mikasa, who was all about healthy, protein-packed items. It’s not like she was a bad cook, just the ingredients she chose were a little… off-kilter.

Like her infamous boiled-egg-and-kale smoothie. On the contrary Mikasa said everything I made was too sweet.

Such as my infamous double chocolate-caramel dessert topping, a recipe I’d experimentally made one day near Armin’s birthday when we both realized we’d forgotten to get a cake in our rush to buy presents. I didn’t want him to be stuck with some normal cake-mix chocolate cake so I’d made my own topping. It was so sweet that nobody finished their own piece. Still tasted good, in my opinion.

Nonetheless, there was now an unspoken agreement that since our tastes in didn’t line up all that well, we’d just get take-out from whatever was close. Tonight it was turkey burgers with italian dressing and cheddar-baked fries from the local burger joint near Mikasa’s work.

“Welcome home Mikasa.” I greet her as she enters through the door, plastic bag in hand.

“Hello Mikasa!” Armin waves, we were both sitting at the table with two lemonades open.

“Hi Armin. Did you finish your paper, Eren?” Mikasa inquires. I roll my eyes, “Of course I did. I have Armin here.” I say, Armin smiles, as if embarrassed.

“You would have finished it by yourself.” Armin always gets sheepish when compliments are involved.

“Yeah, but not before the due date.” I sighed, taking a sip from my drink.

Mikasa walks over and sets the bag down on our wooden table that sits against the counter that separates the kitchen from the couch and tv combo that makes up our living room. Our apartment is relatively small, considering that the kitchen, dining room, and living room have all been technically merged into one room; there’s two other rooms besides that. To the left is the door to my messy room, and to the right is Mikasa’s room. There’s a small bathroom, but it’s honestly more of an elongated closet with a shower, toilet, and sink. It wasn’t the biggest apartment, but it was a nice apartement.

Mikasa pulls out the third chair and sits with Armin and myself. We all pull out a small white box
filled with food. We begin to eat, the silence occasionally broken by chatter and sometimes laughter between the three of us. It’s times like this that I enjoy the most, just being with my adoptive sister and best friend.

It’s times like this when I honestly don’t care about my leg, and that’s a wonderful feeling.

---

On Mondays, my first class is an english class at ten o’clock, which allows me to sleep a bit before actually having to face the day. At one thirty, I have political science, which is what I’m at right now.

The professor drones on, I play with the edge of my printed-out paper. I glance at the clock. It’s been two hours of nonstop lecture in the three-hour class, I sigh and lean back into my seat. One hour to go… I close my eyes, the finishing touches on the paper had taken me long, especially since Armin had to leave, and I ended up going to bed late…

Well it didn’t exactly help that I’d spent half an hour procrastinating, and then another hour making a midnight snack that I’d found the recipe for online.

And then subsequently suffering from a sugar rush that both allowed me to finish my essay and kept me from sleeping… Sleep… I could really go for some of that now.

Oh god, people need to stop packing up I just want to sleep.

Wait… Packing up?

Shit.

I snap to and look around, people are packing up and getting ready to leave the class, I see our professor taking the papers from people by the door. I hurriedly shove most of my class shit into my bag and force the zipper closed before grabbing my paper and making a hasty exit.

As per usual, I simply pass the papers to my professor as I walk, I don’t look at him as if I’m afraid he’ll ask me a question on something I don’t know.

After exiting the lecture hall with it’s open and echoing room and uncomfortable brown bench-like seating, I step into the stone pathway outside on campus.

Even if half the classes I took were just boring required classes that I was barely passing, mainly because I didn’t try to get a good grade in them, I have to admit that I love the campus.

It’s that it’s spectacularly beautiful with blooming trees and flowering bushes or any fancy shit like that, but rather it’s simple.

The campus itself is made up of mostly just plain grass, it’s set in such a way that all the buildings have this feeling of openness once you step outside. Small pale grey stones snake through the courtyards and there are always one or two black metal benches along the path.

There are trees, but the most of them are deciduous so they turn multiple shades of oranges, reds, and yellows and add a little color to the green and grey of fall. There are a few pines dotted here and there, though, that always remain bushy and thickly leaved.

By now it was the tail-end of fall so most of those trees were barren with only a sparse scattering of dark, crinkled brown leaves.
I know that Armin has a tutoring job to go right after class and, considering I’d fallen asleep, had probably already left. So I walk alone under the grey sky and barren branches.

The branches, no matter how much I love the way they look, make me nervous. They’ve always made me think that there’s a hand hovering above me. Waiting to strike or… Something. I don’t know.

I pick up my space, this is where I usually jog, but not because I want to.

Because I’m terrified.

It’s just trees, and it’s a stupid thing to be afraid of. Or so I often scold myself.

But I can never shake the feeling that someone has their hands placed just above me, ready to bring them down on me. It’s creepy.

Then the trees are hands, some curve inward, their gripping something. Be it knife or some other weapon I don’t care to find out.

I speed up again, it’s hard because the metal doesn’t bend right… It never bends right.

I can’t run fast enough. I can’t run at all.

My leg hits the metal when I step the wrong way with a clang and I fall forward, my hands skidding along the stone as my face hits the ground.

Damn it, that hurt.

I push myself up and rub my leg, my actual leg. There’s going to be a bruise… I know it.

With a sigh, I stand up and look at my hands, both are scraped up and there’s a small trickle of blood on one. I clench that fist, getting sick at the sight of the red.

I pick up my jog again, it’s a bit past four thirty and I have to meet Levi at six… I should probably get cleaned up.

I really don’t want to

Chapter End Notes

Wow, you people actually stuck around for Chapter Two. Color me pleasantly surprised. Not a lot happened here either but... Chapter Three is where shit starts to go down, so get excited.

Or scared.

Whichever works for you.

As always thank you to my lovely editor! You're fabulous and I hope you know that!

Comments and kudos are greatly appreciated.

Oh, and also,
My tumblr is goldie-the-cat.tumblr.com

And there'll be updates and other on the tag fic: NTMYWF
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

I will be gone for a week or so. So no update next week.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It had taken me a solid ten minutes to walk home and get cleaned up, I didn’t try to jog again. That’d been the last of my running career for today.

After that I’d had an hour or so of free time so I’d messed around, playing games on my own before I’d looked at the clock to find it was five minutes past the time I should have left. First and foremost my thought was ‘shit’ and then I dashed outside and down the steps.

It was then that I realized, what was I running for? I didn’t like this guy, and I didn’t want to do this anyway.

Then I thought that maybe if I was late enough, he’d get impatient and leave, and I wouldn’t have to do this at all.

Sounds like a good plan, right?

Not on your life, Jaeger.

I’m thirty minutes late and as I walk to the door of The Rose Café, and to my surprise sitting in the outside table in-between the two that we’d sat at last time, is Levi.

“You’re still here?” I ask as I walk along the black metal fence that separates the veranda from the sidewalk. Levi looks up at me with, surprise surprise, the usual glare. Only this one seems a bit more pissed off than just generally annoyed.

“Yes I’m still fucking here. We’re you actually trying to be late?” His eyes narrow a bit more, as if trying to burn a hole through my head. Which, in all honesty, he might be trying to do just that.

For once I don’t blame him.

“I… uh…” All of a sudden I feel my neck heat up. Yes, I was trying to be late, but saying it out loud now sounds like I was purposefully trying to be dickish. I mean, I wasn’t, really, I just didn’t want to do this.

“The fuck happened to your hand?” Levi interrupts, I blink, before following his gaze down to the hand I’d scraped against the sidewalk. Now wrapped around with toilet paper serving as gauze because I couldn’t find the bandages.

“Well… I fell.” I say, and shrug.

“So you wrap it with toilet paper?” Levi raises an eyebrow, lifting his eyes back to mine, I look away and shrug. No way am I blushing in embarrassment like a giddy teenage schoolgirl who accidentally flashes people when her skirt flies up in the wind.
“Yeah, we were out of bandages, so what?” I ask and then direct my eyes back to his.

“So that’s disgusting.” He looks back at my hand, “Holy shit, do you honestly not have any bandages?” He says it like he’s in utter disbelief at the prospect.

“They’re somewhere in my apartment, I just couldn’t find them!” I say defensively.

“How fucking messy is your apartment?” he asks in that harsh, reprimanding tone of his. “Never mind, I don’t want to know. Probably in a shitty state.” He sighs, reaches down and takes hold of the small white cup of coffee on the table before taking a sip of the brown drink. His eyes go back to the newspaper that I hadn’t noticed was in his lap before.

My apartment isn’t that bad! I mean, my room is worse than the others… But Mikasa lives there too and there’s no way she’s going to let her apartment get messy, so she keeps it orderly. Even my room, for the most part, is in place except for a few shirts and pants tossed here and there in the daily rushes.

“Why do you say that?” I demand. He has no basis to judge me, he doesn’t even know my apartment or what it looks like. Part of me is tempted to drag him over there and show him that it’s not as shitty as he so rudely assumes it is… Another part of me knows I’ll be missing more than just a leg if I do that.

Levi looks me up and down, as if I’m seriously asking him on what basis he makes his judgements.

_Hey, yes I am seriously questioning you._

“You’re a brat.” He answers simply, as if that would explain it all. I fume, and am about to retort when Levi speaks again. “Now go get a seat, it’s fucking freezing and I don’t want to be here for too long.”

I blink, and look past him to the door inside the café. “Why didn’t you just sit inside?”

“I don’t like the inside, brat. Now get your ass over to the table so we can get this over with.” Levi sighs, taking another drink from his coffee cup.

I walk in the front door and a waitress comes to show me to a table, I explain that I’m going to sit with Levi and walk back around to the outside tables and sit down across from him.

“Alright… so… um… how do we do this?” I ask, becoming aware as to how awkward this situation was. Neither of us like the other, and here we are trying to have a casual conversation at a café like two old friends.

“Haven’t you ever actually talked to somebody before?” Levi inquires sarcastically, “Because you sure don’t have a time berating and challenging others.” Levi sighs.

“Well, gee, thanks for making this easier.” I say, “Besides, it’s not everybody I challenge. Just you.” I mutter.

“Wow, I’m honored,” Levi says in that sarcastic tone of his, and rolls his eyes at me.

“Don’t be, it’s reserved for people I really hate.” I sigh.

“What was that, brat?” Levi challenges. I sink back into my seat, I want this to be over.
“Nothing…” I mutter.

“No, it wasn’t fucking nothing.” Levi says, and I look up. “If you have something to say than just say it, not like you’ve held back before.” He leans back in his chair and crosses his arms.

“I said that it was just with people I hate.” I repeat after a while.

“Glad to see we’re on mutual ground now.” Levi sighs into his cup as he drinks from it again. How is it not empty after thirty minutes? I watch him as he drinks from it and then sets it back down. I notice that he takes really, really small sips.

Levi notices my noticing. “Do I have something on my face, brat?” He inquires.

“You take really small sips.” I say.

Oh my fuck.

Literally what the fuck did I just say?

To my surprise Levi smiles… or he would if he were capable of smiling. He smirks.

“Noted.” He begins, “you really don’t hold anything back do you?”

“I’ve been told I just don’t have a filter,” I mention with a shrug.


“Besides,” I point out, “you’re not exactly reserved with your comments either.”

“No shit, I have an opinion. Therefore I’ll state it,” Levi mentions, his smirk falling, but that slight inclination of amusement doesn't leave his tone.

“I’m getting that.” At least he seems amused. If nothing else than that’s a step-up, I think.

Fuck if I know.

This is by far the strangest thing I’ve done. I mean, I hate the guy and it’s damn obvious he hates me too. Yet here we are, talking, chatting, having a pleasant afternoon… Is six in the afternoon still even the afternoon? Pleasant evening? But it’s not even pleasant. Okay, so I’m not having a bad time, but I wouldn’t exactly count this as pleasant.

“Do you do that a lot?” I snap to attention when Levi asks me a question.

“Huh?” I ask.

“Stare into space, like you’re in the middle of some miniature epiphany or some hippie-voodoo shit like that. Do you do that a lot?” He explains.

“Hippie-voodoo shit?” I ask, a small smile tugging at the corners of my mouth. Wow, really? *That’s a new one.*

“Answer the fucking question.” Levi demands, his face contorting into a scowl.

“Okay, okay.” I say, “Yeah, I guess so. I have a lot to think about…” I hesitate, “a lot of hippie-voodoo shit on my mind.” I smile. *You’re digging your own grave, Jaeger… And god is it fun.*
“Christ, you’re a brat.” Levi sighs.

“It’s a gift.” I shrug.

“And a curse to everyone else.” Levi takes another sip of his coffee. There’s a small moment of silence before he starts up the conversation again.

“So who is it that you’d want to talk to?” He asks.

Well, that was out of nowhere.

What does he even mean?

“I’m sorry?”

“The thing you wanted to do. The one that got us stuck in this shitty situation,” He gestures to the table. Well, glad you find me such great company. I can certainly say the feeling is mutual.

Personal feelings aside. What does he- Oh. The group. I’d said that I wanted to talk with somebody I couldn’t.

“That’s a personal thought.” I don’t want to share that with him not the beast who made me lose my leg…

Wow, Armin was right, I am putting the blame on Levi. I hate it when Armin is right. Sadly, he usually is.

Well, it doesn’t make the guy any better in my eyes.

“Fine, go ahead and make the conversation harder than it has to be.” Levi looks out to the road as he says this. I watch him pull up the sleeve of his coat, looking at a watch underneath. I hadn’t noticed before but he looked more formal than casual. Must have just come from work, I guess. Would explain the business suit and tie.

“What about you?” I change the subject. “You raised your hand, which means that you have somebody you want to talk with too.”

“Oh no, brat. If you don’t share yours, I’m sure as hell not going to be sharing mine.” Levi turns his head back towards me.

“Aww, come on, it can’t be that bad, right?” My curiosity will kill me one day, I know it. At least I already dug my grave. “Not even if I shared mine?”

“No.” Levi snaps.

“What if I guess? Will you tell me if I’m right?” I ask, leaning forward and resting my elbows on the table. I always wanted a deep grave anyway, less cramped, more roomy.

“No, and get your elbows off of the table. It’s disgusting out here.” Levi crinkles his nose.

I keep my elbows on the table.

“Friend?” I start.

“No.”
“Sister?”
“No.”
“Brother.”
“Haven’t got one.”
“But you have a sister?”
Levi remains silent.
“No.” He answers after a while.
Interesting, I may be getting somewhere with this. I smile and continue.
“Aunt?”
“What the fuck is this twenty-questions shit?” Levi seems irritated.
“So it is an aunt?” I seem happy.
“Holy shit, you’re not giving up. No, not an aunt.”
“Uncle?” This is actually really fun. Well, pissing Levi off is, not so much the questioning itself. At least now he’s showing an actual emotion and not just an emotionless expression.
Then his watch beeps.
“Thank God.” Levi sighs and stands, taking the small half-filled cup with him. “I need to leave.”
I pout, “You never answered whether or not it was an uncle.” Shoot, my fun is coming to an end.
“Great, one less inquiry to deal with.” Levi walks towards the entrance.
“You’ll have to answer it on Friday!” I call as he walks away. Levi doesn’t reply and just enters the café. This might be a bit more fun than I’d realized.
I suppose I’ll have to wait and see.
-
I drag myself back to my apartment. I say drag back because I’m not looking forward to all the homework I have.
I would rather be stuck in an awkward conversation with Levi than do my Political Sciences homework. Our professor had assigned us a reading and, if I’m being honest, I’m probably going to read the first page and then drop it.
What can I say? I don’t like working on things that don’t interest me. As long as I pass the tests, I’m good. It’s not like grades actually matter after college. Not like employers look at your freshman year grades.
Not like I know what I’m going to do once I get out of college.
I sigh and push open the peeling red door into the lobby of the apartment building. As per usual, the sleepy building manager is snoring away at her desk. Miss Livingston is her name, and she only
ever opens her eyes when the door squeaks open. Which she does just as I enter.

“Eren…” She yawns, her blonde bun a messy disarray of stray hairs. I like Miss Livingston, she doesn’t give me shit for having a prosthetic limb and sometime I question if she even notices it. Which is just how I like it, I’m nothing special to her, so she remains on my good side.

“Hello, Miss Livingston.” I greet her as I pass. The one thing I hate about the apartment is the way it echoes. The lobby has a cement floor and it’s wide and open, it’s because of this that the squeak of metal follows me around in the lobby. It annoys me to hell and back.

“What time is it, Eren?” Miss Livingston stretches up, she is older. I don’t know her exact age, but I guess she’s around forty or so. She has lines from her nose to her mouth and slight crinkles around her blue eyes.

I remember Armin took one look at her and said that she must’ve been pretty when she was younger. I think she looks somewhat sad now, sleeping all day and just… missing out on life.

God that would bore me. I can barely sit still for a three-hour lecture, if I had to sit at a desk all day long and even into the night, waiting for people that may or may not come to rent an apartment… Well, shit, I’d sleep all day too.

“Seven,” I state, pulling out my phone and looking at the bright numbers. Wow, I hadn’t noticed that it was so late… I guess it was kind of dark out.

“Huh, it got late. Well, have a nice night.” Miss Livingston puts her flat footed black shoes up on the desk and leans back, off to sleep again.

“Night,” I say, and then proceed to the stairwell. Perhaps it’s strange but I’ve always felt inclined to take the stairs rather than the elevator. Every time I did it I regretted it. The sock that I wear to keep the metal from rubbing against my… leg-stump? Well, whatever you call it, the sock for it doesn’t work. By the time I get to the third floor, our floor, the skin is red. The cherry on the top was the painful ache I always got in my own leg from having it take most of the weight.

Stairs are my mortal enemy, and it’s because of that very special relationship we have that I must take them head-on.

My hand goes for my pocket. Please, please tell me I remembered my key. I close my fingers around the cool metal of keys. Oh, thank God. I pull them out and push open the door to my familiar apartment.

I walk straight into my room, where my school bag lays haphazardly thrown onto my bed. I sit on the floor, my back against the bed frame, and pull the backpack down next to me where it lands with a thud.

Technically I have a desk… But who uses desks anyway? The floor is much more comfortable.

I shuffle through the textbooks and papers before I get to the folder holding my homework.

*Introduction to the Positive Political Theory*


At least it’s positive?
Sadly, I’m proven wrong even in that aspect. Apparently ‘positive’ political theory is just using social choice theory, game theory, and statistical analysis to study politics… Or something.

What the fuck do these even mean?

I get the first section, the one about social choice theory, before going into skim-mode.

I mean, this is a formal paper, so the introductory sentences should give me all I need to know anyway.

Good going, Eren. This is exactly how you pass a class.

I sigh, mentally tell myself to shut up and let me do things my way, and continue on with my work.

It’s already late by the time I finish everything else. So I head off to bed…

Which, for me, is proving to never be a good idea.

---

There’s dust everywhere, it gets in my eyes, nose, lungs. I can even feel it clogging each pore of my skin. I blink, but my vision is dotted by the dust, it’s like a broken TV. I take a breath but the air is hot and heavy, it rushes down my lungs and the dust clots in my throat, tearing the thin layer of muscle. I cough up sand, red sand that should have been a bright yellow like the world around me. My ears are ringing, and my neck under my left ear is wet. It’s sticky too.

The dust moves, coiling and recoiling like a living being. There are shadows, three, some taller and some smaller. There are people around me. I slip and fall into a ditch, I land next to the shadows. One in particular is closer to me, on my left side. One of the shadows is yelling at us, a howling sound swallowed up by the wind. Or maybe the sound is the wind. The ditch is slowly sinking, we’re going to die. I claw, digging my nails into the sand as the gritty terrain digs itself into the skin under my nails. My hands bleed and I leave a scarlet trail as I grab fistfuls of sand like it’ll change something. Like it’ll get me out.

I push on the sand with my legs, like I’m trying to swim up the ever growing hill. A shadow’s hand grabs my collar and hauls me up onto the more stable sand. The shadows begin to run away and around me. I stand, I have to catch up. I don’t want to be left alone in this endless swirling. I dash after them, stumbling to catch up. I can’t see them, they’re disappearing in the dirt, I reach out with a bleeding hand. As if I could catch them. They move around me, some strange, fluid dance as they run… Panicked.

I latch onto one of the shadows to my left. My hand barely makes contact with it’s shoulder before it opens it’s mouth, filled with sand, and screams. It’s like listening to claws drag down a chalkboard. It screams and it’s blackened figure begins to expand, parts of it’s skin tearing to reveal fire beneath the figure of flesh. Half of the creature bursts into flames and the rest of the shadows yell in panic. I open my mouth but find it filled with sand. Too much sand. I’m being suffocated and I can’t scream. I’m drowning in sand and I can’t stop it. I feel myself fall, and I’m falling out of myself. I can’t move. I can only watch my own body buried underneath the dirt.

Then the fire reaches me.

I shoot up from my bed, panting. My hands are clenched around my left knee, right around the pale, stretched skin that they stitched together after removing my leg.

I can’t breathe.
I try to take deep breaths but my chest expands and deflates too quickly for me to actually get any air. I’m hyperventilating. I’m drowning. My stomach drops like I’m falling down a flight of stairs and my vision is still spinning. I can still taste the sand on my tongue.

**Water.**

I swing my legs over and drop from the bed. I collapse on my floor, my prosthetics aren’t on. I don’t want them on. I hoist myself up on the nightstand and half drag myself, half hop, half drag myself out of my room and to the bathroom.

*I’m dying.*

No, I take a moment and tell myself that I’m not dying. Am I in the bathroom? Yes. I turn on the sink and lean against the side, and cupping a hand in the water, I splash the cold liquid against my face.

*Calm down, it’s okay. Calm down, it’s okay. Calm down… Calm down…*

After my breathing evens out and my vision stops wavering. I turn off the water and lean against the sink. I feel like retching. My throat hurts. I look up and face the mirror in front of me.

I’m wide-eyed. My hair is wild and dripping wet. My face is pale and with a distinct sheen of sweat making my face shine. I look terrified.

*I’m terrified.*

No, I’m not. I refuse to be afraid. I won’t be afraid and I’m not afraid. It’s just a damned dream.

I sigh, and look towards the entrance, there, clothed in her sweatpants she uses for sleeping, stands Mikasa.

“Mikasa!” I exclaim, startled. She stays silent, giving me that distant, veiled look she always has when she’s trying to conceal her own emotions.

“You aren’t wearing your prosthetics.” She states simply. Monotone, as usual. If I didn’t know better I’d say she was fine. That she hadn’t heard me wake up screaming and stumble into the bathroom. Hell, she probably heard me fall out of bed too.

“Uh, yeah. I…I really needed to pee.” I say, wincing internally at my own lie. I know that she knows the truth. But I still don’t want to acknowledge it. If I acknowledge it, that makes it real. That makes it a real problem.

“Bladder’s a bitch.” She sighs and looks down at the floor.

“Yes.” I reply. There’s an awkward moment of silence. Damn my hand is getting tired from holding myself up. I may hate prosthetics, but I also hate being without them. It’s like I have a useless leg stub swinging in the wind then… And It’s hard to balance on one leg too.

“Eren-” Mikasa starts.

“Well, I’m really tired and I still have Political Sciences tomorrow, and, well, you know how much I hate that class.” I interrupt her and hobble past. I slip on the bathroom rug and Mikasa, quick as she is, latches onto my shoulder and holds me upright.

“Eren, please-“
“Thank you. Sleep well, Mikasa.” I stop her before she can continue. Mikasa, refusing to be completely ignored, slings my arm around her shoulder and half supports, half carries me back to my room. Once we reach the door I grab hold of the doorframe.

“I can take it from here.” I say, avoiding her eyes.

*Don’t give me that look.*

I can see it in my peripheral vision. That… sad look. She looks so depressed, and I can’t help but feel like she feels that way just by looking at me… It’s never a good feeling and I especially don’t want Mikasa feeling it.

“Let me at least help you.” She asks. Somewhere, in the back of my mind, I know that she’s not talking about helping me to the bed.

“I can help myself.” I reply.

“No, Eren, let me help you.” She says, a tiny bit of anger seeping into her voice.

“I don’t need any help!” I snap. Mikasa takes a step back, a surprised look on her face. I don’t usually snap like that at her.

Guilt wells up in my chest.

“I don’t need you.” I say, my mind is lagging behind my mouth, and I’m saying things I want to be true… but not in the way that I’m saying them.

“I’m not a helpless animal, Mikasa. You don’t need to baby me and I don’t need you babying me. Quite frankly, it’s making things worse. I can help myself! So don’t try to help me. Goodnight, Mikasa.” I slam the door closed, blocking out her face.

I don’t want to rely on her. I don’t want her to suffer because of me… Had I said any of those it would have been true… But instead I’d messed up.

I collapse to the floor against my door. Sure, Mikasa and I have had sibling squabbles… But I don’t snap at her like that. I don’t slam the door on my sister. I pull my leg up to my chest. I stare down at the gnarled stump below my knee. Twisted, pale, ugly. Like a monster’s limb.

That’s… just what I am. Isn’t it?

I let my head fall and my shoulders drop. I watch as my still wet hair drips and makes a small pool of water below me. I close my eyes and lean my head up and back against the door. It lands with a small thump.

“Eren?” Mikasa’s still on the other side of the door. I hear beyond the door a sliding sound. Then a flop as she sits against the door on the other side. “I’m still here.” She states quietly.

*I know.*

“When… If you need he-... something. I’m here.” She assures me from the other door. “You can’t shut me out that easily, Eren.” She persists.

Mikasa was protecting. She was kind-hearted and still tough and sometimes a little cold. She never left my side, never left me to fend for myself. Even when I snapped and slammed the door on her.

“Goodnight, Eren.” She says, and I don’t hear footsteps or the sound of her getting up.
I'm a monster.

Chapter End Notes

What did I tell you? Okay so we're actually done with exposition which I know two chapters was a lot but... there was a lot to set up. Should be smooth plotty sailing from here on out!

Special thanks to my fantabulous editor! Love you so much!

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated!

Talk to me on tumblr:

goldie-the-cat.tumblr.com
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Well, I finished the rest of my packing early so I decided to go ahead and put this chapter up to make up for the week I'll be missing. I hope you all like it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Why the fuck am I on the floor?

I push myself up and look around, completely disoriented as to why I happen to be on the messy floor instead of the bed a few feet away. It’s not too soon before the memories come flooding back in bits and pieces, like a scratched movie disk skipping from scene to scene. The nightmare, Mikasa finding me in the bathroom, and finally my slamming the door on Mikasa until I passed out on the floor.

I’m a monster

The feeling is still fresh in my mind. I can recall it perfectly. Guilt, understanding, abandonment when I’m the one abandoning.

No, it’s, what? I check the clock, nine in the morning, it’s too early for this…

But that doesn’t mean I don’t have a shit ton of self-loathing to do later on. I sigh and glance across to the bedside, only a few feet away, where my prosthetic leg is laying against the bed, ready and waiting so I don’t have to walk to get it. We see how well that worked out.

I grab onto the door handle and pull myself up. I steady myself, and hobble over to the bedside where I’m able to sit down and simply scoot over to the edge where my leg is. I sigh once I reach the end and look down at the gnarled end by my knee. It really does look twisted. I reach over to the nightstand and grab the small white sock before pulling it over the stub and smoothing it out.

It always creeped me out how all nerves on the end are null and void. All I feel is pressure, no brush of my own fingertips or, once I strap the metal on and stand up, cool of metal. Only the pressure of the ground traveling up through the metal. Only pressure, and nothing else. It was… creepy, off-setting. Sometimes in the mornings if I didn’t take the time to adjust myself to the feeling I wasn’t able to walk correctly. Not that I was ever able to walk correctly, anyway.

I hesitate at the door, my hand hovering over the doorknob. If I open this… will Mikasa be on the other side? Do I want her to be on the other side? Part of me does… Because that would mean she hasn’t given up on me yet, that she still has some hope for me and even if that causes her pain I so want that to be true… And I know that’s selfish but… I can’t help but want her to not give up on me. She’s the last family member I have full contact with and to lose that would break me.

At the same time I’m scared she’ll be there, sitting there, and I’ll have to talk to her. I’ll have to explain myself and I’ll have nothing to say because there is no explanation. There’s nothing to say because this is just who I am. Selfish and terrible, the kind of guy who slams the door on his sister. And… I can’t say that, I can’t face her and when she asks why I shut her out say that it’s because that’s who I am. Even if that’s true, I can’t say it.
With a sigh I wrap my hand around the bronze colored doorknob, the cold feeling spreading from fingertip to wrist and I twist the door. I open it a crack and peek out, upon seeing no face appear at the small squeak of the doorknob my heart drops from my chest. I open it all the ways…

She’s not there.

The room devoid of life greets me like a slap to the face or a punch to the gut. I look around, as if to assure that she’s not there, that my eyes aren’t somehow missing something. Nope, nothing. No Mikasa in the room. I can see across the way that her room is open, and the light is off. I walk over to the dining table, where a small sticky note is pasted to the table. I pick it up, and my heart lifts, if even for a minuscule moment.

‘Eren - I’m going to work early today. Call me when you wake up. We need to talk about last night. - Mikasa’

I can tell it’s her handwriting by how neat and small it is. All spaced out equally and curved ever so slightly. I hold the note for a moment longer, before walking over to the trashcan and throwing it away.

I don’t call her.

---

I’m sitting through the usual english class about an hour later and, while the professor drones on about the assigned reading from last night, of which I didn’t do, I doodle in my notebook and let my mind wander. It begins to backtrack, and it’s already been through last night so I just go ahead and skip that whole fiasco and go the next thing that had happened to me.

Or, in other words, Levi.

*I still hate him.*

I decide that as I continually doodle in my notebook, small stick figures peering over a giant wall where smaller stick figures run around in terror. A small, mischievous idea pops into my head and I draw some hair on the larger stick-figure peering over the wall. Some pointed, yet oddly delicate, eyes and a scowl that stretches across the face. I smile and snicker to myself. I’ve made Levi the monster over the wall.

But… *Talking with him isn’t as bad as I’d thought it’d be.*

I admit that to myself and sigh, erasing Levi’s face from the titanic monster and drawing a different face on it instead. Levi was still on my blacklist but I had some fun teasing him.

Call it ironic, call it retribution, hell, call it patty-cake, I don’t care. Point is: I can get through talking with him if it gives me a chance to annoy him.

But more than that… he actually has me curious. I have to find out who it is he wants to talk to again. I mean, he didn’t look to pleased to be raising his hand when I’d called that out so it’s got to be somebody important. Important enough to make him do something he wouldn’t want to do just in order to acknowledge them… But also somebody whose memory is either painful enough, embarrassing enough, or… whatever that he wouldn’t want to admit who it is.

I turn away from my doodles and begin to write down a list. I start with all the ones I’d listed before hand.
Friend, sister, brother, aunt, uncle. I cross off everyone except ‘Uncle’, even though that’s hardly likely. I also jot a question mark by ‘sister’. Something was up there. No doubt he wouldn’t tell me but that doesn’t mean I won’t pester him for an answer anyway. I begin to list other options.

Mother, father, cousin, best friend… Child? Levi was old enough, certainly… but a child raised by him? I pity the poor kid. Levi’s not somebody who I can see loving anyone.

What about lover?

The thought seems so absurd it might actually be true. Levi, actually loving somebody? Don’t make me laugh. He’s so cold, so rude, so… Dammit the guy sent three people to their doom in a war zone. He practically cut my leg off himself.

I hate him, I really hate him.

I realize my fist is balled up on the desk, my nails digging into my skin. I unclench my fist, my knuckles going from white back to their normal color. I sigh and look back to the list. Now’s not the time, now’s not the place.

Back to lover. I jot it down on the list, I hesitate, tapping my pencil against the paper. If Levi had a lover, would it just be a fling? Or would it be a long-term relationship? I write down a little arrow from the word ‘lover’ and jot both down. Then I stop at long-term relationship. Was he into guys or girls? Or both? Hell, maybe he was into neither and I was just a long ways off from the actual truth.

I put down both ‘boyfriend’ and ‘girlfriend’ under the long-term relationship.

What if it was a friends-with-benefits kind of thing? I can’t write it down because the professor is announcing something loudly.

“Your papers are on the desk, please pick your up when you leave.” He states, and people around me begin to pack up. I look at my list once more before closing my notebook with a sigh and putting it in my backpack. Following the ebb and flow of the people around me, I slowly make my way to the desk where our papers are stacked.

I wouldn’t put it past Levi to have nothing more than a physical-only relationship with somebody… Then again… I don’t know something about him doesn’t fit right with that. Ugh, maybe he would? Shit I barely even know the guy.

Before I know it I’m finding my paper in the stack, a large 85 is tacked onto the front of it with red marker. A solid B, well, it’s one of my better ones. I walk outside and see Armin standing on the side of the building as he waits for me.

“Hey, Eren.” He starts with this tone, this worried, slightly hesitant, I-have-to-talk-to-you-about-something-I-don’t-want-to-talk-about tone. I bet I know what this is about. I sigh.

“Before you patronize me know that I already feel like shit.” I explain.

“I’m not going to patronize you, Eren,” Armin replied, part of me expected him to smile, to reassure that maybe this wasn’t what I thought it was about, but on glancing over to his face I realize that this is totally what I think it is about. Armin continues, “I’m worried about you.”

“Well, now this sounds like an intervention.” I interrupt,

“Let me finish.” Armin sounds so stern I’m shocked. He looks around, as if worried that somebody
is eavesdropping on the conversation.

“Let’s walk.” I suggest, and Armin nods. The two of us begin walking down the green courtyard with it’s overhanging, leafless trees and stone path.

“Alright,” Armin sighs, “Continuing, I’m worried about you and Mikasa is too. And no matter how much you try to push us away-“

“I-“

“Eren! Let me speak first, please.” Armin sounds desperate. I shut my mouth. I don’t want to push you away I just… I just don’t know what I am.

“Well, no matter how much you try to push us away,” Armin repeats, “we’re not going anywhere.” Then he sighs, “But… obviously you’re either too close to us or… or something. I don’t know what. Point is; you’re not talking to us and all that’s happening is you’re distancing yourself from everybody. I mean everybody! Me, Mikasa, I don’t know when was the last time you talked to your dad and God knows you are anything but amiable to the rest of the support group.” Armin stops here and takes a breath, as if preparing for some sort of extreme reaction…

Shit, shit, shit that’s never a good sign.

“So, Mikasa and I have scheduled for you to meet with a private therapist.” He begins, and then quickly continues before I can intervene, “You’ll still be doing the group therapy since that may help and we were thinking that you’d only meet with him once a week or so, more if needed. I mean, it’s not that big a deal plenty of people do it and, who knows? It might be good for you!” He gave me a shaky uncertain smile. He looks so nervous, like I might snap at him like I did at Mikasa.

Which, in all honesty, I was about to. But I stop myself and grit my teeth together.

“I won’t do it.” I state firmly, shortening my words to just those four.

“Eren, look-“ Armin tries to convince me,

“No! Armin! I won’t do it.” I stop him before he can continue, “You say it’s going to help me but it’s not! I mean, hell, it was probably just that damned group that set me off in the first place! What if this makes it worse! What if-“ I don’t want to continue, but my mind does. What if I hurt myself? What if I really go off the deep end? What if it just keeps getting worse? What if it never goes away? What if it gets so bad that…

“You don’t know that will happen.” Armin said firmly. “You know me, Eren, you know that I care about you and I wouldn’t drag you into anything that I thought would hurt you. I’ve heard recommendations for this guy and I’ve looked him up, this is his specialty. And he’s good at what he does. Try it, Eren, please.” Armin is practically begging me now.

“I won’t do it. I don’t need it.” I repeat my argument again.

“You do! You do need it!” Armin sounds exasperated, “You refused to admit it but something’s wrong with you Eren! With all of us! We have PTSD, that’s a thing. That’s real. And that’s not going away any time soon if we don’t do something about it!” After his vent, Armin quieted down, and a silence settled between the two of us. He looks at me, as if waiting for a response, of which I don’t have to offer.
After a while Armin’s shoulder slump, “Just… just think about it alright?” He asks, “I’ve got to go but if you decide you want to do it then… Your appointment will be tomorrow, eight o’clock so after your class.” He looks up at me hopefully, “Promise me you’ll take it into consideration?”

“I…” I stop, “I can’t promise anything, Armin.” I reply and Armin returns to looking defeated, which of course makes me feel like a little shit. “But… I’ll try.” I say and look away. In my peripheral vision I see Armin’s face light up.

“Really? Great!” Happy with my answer, Armin and I continue our walk in silence. It’s hard to refuse him when he looks so… so much like a kicked puppy.

*Why is it so damn hard to refuse a kicked puppy anyway?*

Tomorrow at eight o’clock. Sounds like hell but I’ve already been through that.

I mean, maybe it’ll be a way to make up for what I did to Mikasa last night. Besides, what’s one session?

It’s just talking with somebody, once. I mean, can’t be worse than talking with Levi.

---

With a sigh, I plop down against my bed, pulling out the notebook from class. I don’t really have anything to do, and I’m in the lethargic mood I get often; the one where I want to do something, but nothing sounds appealing. I flip through my notebook and come back to the list I’d been working on in class. Part of me wishes Levi were here, then I’d be able to pester him.

Like I said, call it retribution.

*What was it I wanted to put down before…?*

I rack my brain for the answer as I stare at what had been the last few written down. Lover, long-term, boyfriend, girlfriend, short-term.

*Oh yeah, friends with benefits.*

I jot down friends with benefits under short-term… Then again could that be a long-term relationship? I mean, you could have some kind of ‘I fuck you, you fuck me’ relationship for several years if you really wanted. But do those kind of things even last that long? I wouldn’t know, never had one. Don’t want one either.

It’s too… noncommittal. I mean, yeah, I’ve had casual sex with people back in high school. Well, like, two but that’s beside the point. Each and every time I felt somewhat awkward around the person after that. Especially when they comment on whether or not they’d like to ‘do-it-again’. Those two times… I think I was drunk. I don’t get drunk often, to be exact I’ve been drunk those two times, neither of them have ended well. Why did I even do it in the first place?

Oh yeah, some damned idiot had heard that I wasn’t going to drink at the party and decided that I couldn’t hold my liquor and we got in a drinking challenge… What can I say? He was an idiot and I wasn’t about to prove him right. Who was it anyway? I haven’t kept in contact with almost all of the people from my high school, excluding Armin and Mikasa of course, but I should still remember who it is.

*Who was it? Dammit, Eren, remember!*
I close my eyes and try to recall the people I knew from high school. Most of them are just semi-blurry faces with vague names that I can put together…but for some reason the guy that challenged me to the drinking challenge just…isn’t coming up.

Okay, this is really starting to bug me.

So, of course, who do I call when something is bugging the shit out of me and it has to do with my faulty memory? Well, at first I’m about to dial Mikasa’s number on my phone but then I remember what happened last night…I’m still not ready to face the reciprocal. Even though, knowing Mikasa, she won’t be too mad at me… hopefully.

So instead I dial in Armin’s number and hold the phone to my ear as it rings. Once, twice, three times. Then I hear a voice on the other end of the phone.

“Eren? What’s up?” Armin greets me.

“Hey, Armin, remember back in high school there was a guy, I can’t remember his name but he challenged me to a drinking contest when he’d heard I didn’t drink?” I ask.

“Oh, yeah, the three times you’ve been drunk have never ended well.” Armin’s laughing on the other end of the phone.

“Three times?” I sputter.

“Yeah, three.” Armin replies, he sounds curious as to why this surprises me.

“I remember the two times I woke up with… other people, but, wait, what was the third? I only remember being drunk two times in my life.”

“Really? Wow, the third time you weren’t even that drunk, plus that was one of your better moments… Do you really not remember?” Armin sounds surprised as well.

“No, Armin… What happened the third time?” I ask. Armin laughs again.

“Nothing too strange really, started off as usual with you two fighting but it actually ended up being the one time you and Jean actually got along in the end.” He continues to laugh, “Sure you had a bloody nose and Jean had a black eye but-“

“That’s not possible.” I interrupt.

“We couldn’t believe it either, but yeah, the two of you can actually get along.” He continues.

“No, I mean, that’s not possible because, Armin, Jean never went to our high school.” I’m so confused. What the fuck is he talking about? I’ve only ever known Jean from when I joined the Army at eighteen.

“Eren, what are you saying? Jean was in our high school. Don’t you remember? The two of you would get into fights half the time.” There’s a pause, neither of us say anything, “You really don’t remember? I mean, he was there when you signed up to join the army for pete’s sake.”

“Yeah, that was… the first time I met him, wasn’t it?” I ask, my head hurts. It hurts a lot, I press a hand to my temple. Why… what was Armin saying? I clearly remember meeting Jean at the sign-up. I mean, we didn’t like each other right off the bat. He was too cocky to be joining the army. That was the first time we’d fought, the first time we’d met and disliked each other. Right?
“I don’t know what you’re saying, he was definitely in our high school… Hang on…” I hear rustling and shuffling on the other side of the phone, until a triumphant ‘aha’ sounds.

“Right here,” Armin says, “Er… right in front of me. I’m holding our old yearbooks, he’s in them. Freshman through Senior year.” I can hear more shuffling, he must be adjusting the phone. “We’ve only been in college for half of a year or so, Eren, do you really not remember high school?” He asks.

“No, Armin, I remember high school.” I say, I can recall all important events, but just not Jean, “Just… not with him in it.” I can even recall the part where, apparently Jean, had challenged me to a drinking contest. But I can’t put name to blurred face. It’s as if I wasn’t challenged by anyone at all, but just by somebody nonexistent. Somebody that wasn’t there in my mind.

“Why… Why can’t I remember?” I sputter, I’m panicking again. This isn’t right. I mean, just hearing the name should jog my memory but even in knowing that Armin’s right I can’t accept that I knew him from before everything happened. I can’t- My head hurts. It hurts a lot and I don’t like it. “Armin, Armin my head hurts. Why does it hurt? Why can’t I remember? This isn’t right.” I’m scared. I’m terrified again and I don’t know why.

“Eren,” Armin suddenly sounds much more serious, “Relax. I’m sure it’s just a defense mechanism or… something to make the mental stress easier on yourself. Stop panicking, Eren, everything will be fine. Look, I’ll head over there right now if you want? Just, don’t go anywhere.” I can hear him on the other side of the phone, the jingle of keys as he tries to soothe me. But he can’t, I’m still panicked and I don’t know why. I can’t be forgetting memories. I can’t lose my mind as well as my leg. No, that can’t happen. I take a deep breath. Armin will be here soon. He lives on campus and the campus is close by. It’ll all be fine. It will all be fine…

I keep searching through my memories, thinking that maybe, maybe somewhere back there is proof that I’m not insane… that I just… can’t remember. It’s that bad, it’s just one face that I can’t put back into my mind. That all. That’s not that bad. I’m fine.

There’s a knock on the door, must be Armin. I push myself up off of the ground and walk over to the door. When I open it, Armin’s standing on the other side with a concerned look on his face.

I’ve always hated when he looks so concerned just because I flipped out for a second. It’s not even that bad. It’s fine.

So I smile at him.

“Hey, you know, you didn’t have to come over!” I say with what I hope sounds like a happy, calming-tone. But in all probability sounded like a pre-pubescent boy singing soprano in a choir.

Armin searches my face for a mere second before sighing, “You know I did.” I step aside and he walks into the apartment.

“So,” He starts off, “You okay?” He asks. The concern still hasn’t left his face.

“Armin, please, I’m not that fragile.” I smile again, “It was a momentary panic and a headache. I didn’t sleep well last night so I’m probably just tired.” I say.

*Exactly, you’re just tired, Eren, stop being such a kid.*

I keep smiling at Armin, trying to convince myself as well as him that I’m alright. But I’m already convinced, aren’t I? Of course I am… Of course I am.
Armin stays there, and we stand in silence.

“Want anything?” I offer, “I mean, you came out all this way. Let’s see what we’ve got.” I walk over to the tile that serves as a distinction between the living room and kitchen. I always mentally wince at the sharp klang of the metal prosthetic against the tile. It doesn’t sound pleasant, it doesn’t sound good.

“Eren, are you really alright?” Armin asks, disregarding my offer. Despite this, I continue to the fridge and open it up.

“Let’s see, we’ve got plain water, no sparkling, sorry. There’s also some tomato juice,” I wrinkle my nose, “Mikasa has such strange tastes but if you want that I’m sure as hell not drinking it. Umm, we also have some milk, is that even still good?” I pull out the milk and look at the date, it’s a few days old. I uncap the lid to smell if it’s still alright or smells sour.

“Answer me, Eren!” Armin demands suddenly, “You’re scaring me, whenever you do this. Just… shut away like everything’s alright. So just… tell me if you’re not alright.” He pleads.

“I’m fine Armin,” I say, looking down at the carton in my hand. I sniff it. It’s definitely sour. I close the fridge and walk over the trashcan, as I open it and throw away the carton of milk I continue, “I mean, it’s just high school. I’ve been wanting to be rid of that place since I stepped in it. So no wonder I forgot about one of the worst people there, right?” I smile again. looking up and meeting Armin’s eyes. He still looks worried.

“Okay,” He says after a while, “Okay, fine. I’ll take that for now.” He pauses, there’s still something he wants to say.

“What is it?” I prompt.

“Just…” He looks around, as if looking for someone to help him, but there’s nobody else in the room. “Just promise me that if you won’t talk to me, or Mikasa, you’ll try to talk to somebody else.” He finally relinquishes his request and looks back at me.

“You mean the psychologist?” I don’t miss a beat.

“Yes.” Neither does he, “The psychologist.”

I pause. I don’t need a psychologist. But I also can’t have Armin and Mikasa worrying over me like this. Maybe I’ll even find out why I can’t remember. It can’t hurt, as I’ve said before. It can’t hurt.

“Alright,” I say after a while, closing the lid of the trashcan.

“Really?” Armin sounds surprised, but pleasantly so.

“Yes, really,” I say, turning back to Armin. “If you're that worried about it then I’ll go.”

“Thank you, Eren.” Armin’s relieved.

“Besides, knowing you and Mikasa, you’d probably just drag me over there anyway.” I tease.

“Hey, that was a one time thing!” Armin replies.

“Yeah, well, maybe next time you’ll have the decency to chloroform me before you drag me out of bed so that I can at least stay asleep.” I reply.

“Noted.” Armin smiles at me. It seems as if his worries have been calmed, at least for now. Good,
I’ll take it for now. Besides, I have more worries on my mind now. Like what the hell am I going to tell the psychologist anyway.

“Besides, you like the group even if you won’t admit it.” Armin pipes up again.

“Did you hit your head on the way here or something?” I ask, “How in hell have I ever seemed as if I like that group?” I actually do want to hear his answer for this.

“You like talking with people, you may act like a hermit half the time but you’re actually a pretty social person, Eren.” Armin shrugs.

“Am I now? I’d always prided myself on being a recluse and social outcast.” I reply, “Adds to my air of mystery, you know.” I shrug.

“Oh, well, you at least have to admit you like your partner chats.” Armin mentions.

“My partner chats?” What’s he talking about.

“Your talks with Levi? I mean, you seemed like you enjoyed the first one at least.” Armin explains.


“Huh, well, it certainly seemed like quite the opposite.” Armin replies. “I mean, afterwards, when I’d talked to you afterward you’d actually seemed a little happier.”

“Yeah, because I found a way to get on his nerves.” I shrug, “Payback, maybe, I don’t know.”

“Oh, I was wrong,” Armin continues, “You really like him,” He smiles.

“How did you get that from ‘I found a way to get on his nerves’?!?” I ask.

“You try to annoy the people you like, Eren, it works sometime but after knowing you for as long as I have it becomes mostly endearing.” Armin continues to hold up his cheeky smile.

“No, I try to annoy people I dislike.” I correct him.

“Sure, you keep telling yourself that.” Armin says, “Look, I have to go, but don’t forget, tomorrow you have the psychologist appointment. I’ll be here to pick you up at around seven fifteen so we get there on time okay? It’s not a walkable distance so I’ll take you.” He explains. I sigh,

“Alright. Fine. I’ll see you tomorrow.” I say, Armin nods.

“See you tomorrow, oh, and Eren,” He pauses before he turns to leave, “Call Mikasa sometime today, alright?” He asks.

“… I will.” I say after a slight hesitation. Armin stands there for a minute more, as if checking to see if I’m serious.

“Great!” He says, obviously happy with what he saw. He turns and walks toward the door. “I’ll see you tomorrow, call me if you need anything!” I walk with him to the door and open it for him as he exits and walks down the hall.

“I will!” I call and shut the door, turning back to the now empty room. Well, I suppose I should call Mikasa.
Chapter End Notes

Sadly the call with Mikasa will have to wait for until I get back. But, yeah, hope this will tide you over until then!

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated.

Talk to me:

goldie-the-cat.tumblr.com
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

This one's a little shorter but the next one's a little longer so it'll balance out, hopefully :).

Hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

After Armin left, I wasn’t exactly ecstatic about calling Mikasa. But I promised him I’d call her and I’m not very fond of breaking promises to my friends, mainly because I’m not fond of when my friends break promises they’d promised me. In the end I’d ended up where I am now. Sitting fully dressed in my pajamas on top of my bed, Mikasa’s number displayed on my bright, luminescent phone screen.

If I don’t call her then I’ll have to talk to her face to face about this.

And that sounds even less appealing than calling her. With a sigh I press the small green call button and hold the phone up to my ear. I wait for her to pick up, impatiently.

How should I start this? Do I just apologize and move on? Do I dwell on it? Maybe I shouldn’t bring it up at all. Just say I’m calling and asking about what we should get for dinner. But I’m not that hungry so that might not work if I don’t eat whatever we get. What If I just ask about how her day was?

I half laugh at myself at this last idea.

Oh, yeah, hey Mikasa. How was your day right after I completely blew up at you and slammed the door on you even though you were just being a good sister to your dickhead of a brother. Yeah, that’s a real good conversation starter.

"Eren." Mikasa’s voice shocks me, I’d gotten lost in thought.

"Shit! Uh, no, wait, that’s not how I wanted to start this." I babble, “Shit, wait, no, fuck, uh… Hi! Mikasa! Been a while!” Yeah, since I slammed the door on your face.

"So… how’s work going?" Great start, flawless start.

“Eren-“ Mikasa starts

“Wait, uh, can I get a redo? That wasn’t how I wanted to start this phone call.” I ask. There’s a moment of silence and my stomach drops. She’s going to refuse. She’s sick and tired of me and all my shit and she’s done with me.

“Go ahead,” Mikasa says slowly. Okay, so I’m not totally screwed over yet.

“Uh… Okay,” I take breath and start over, “Well, I guess I should start with… I’m sorry.” My lips are moving before my mind has the time to catch up with the words that they’re saying, and for once I think that’s a good thing. “I’m sorry because I said some terrible fucking things to you and I shouldn’t have said them, I was panicked and I didn’t mean what I said. Wait- no, I mean, I did
mean what I said, but not how I meant them. Shit, no, not like that, that’s not what I meant. I meant that I meant- I mean what I said but only partially. I meant- mean, that I don’t want you to worry over me. I don’t want you to have to dote on me and interrupt your life for me and I didn’t say that but I should have, and I didn’t. I didn’t and I’m sorry and I don’t really know what to say other than that, or what I’m saying right now but I’m just going to keep talking until I actually know what I’m saying. But I probably won’t so you should probably stop me before I fuck up again and-“

“Eren?” Mikasa interrupts.

“Yeah?” I ask.

“Nothing, I’m just stopping you before you fuck up again.” She says, and she sounds happy for once.

“Oh, right, okay.” I mumble.

“Oh and, I accept your apology, Eren.” She continues, “But, please, don’t be afraid to come to me. I’m your sister, I’m here to help you. I’m here so that you have somebody to talk to.

I can’t help but breathe a sigh of relief. She forgives me, I haven’t lost my sister, not yet. Hopefully not ever.

“I should tell you, Armin convinced me to talk with a psychologist, one on one. So you won’t have to deal so much of my shit anymore.” I explain.

“He actually convinced you?” She sounds surprised, I don’t blame her.

“Crazy, right?” I ask.

“Yes. But I’m also not sure I like the idea of having you talk to a complete stranger.” She sighs on the other line.

“If that’s the case then I’ll be sure to save some of my psychological troubles for you, but only the light ones.” I joke.

“Please do, otherwise I might just feel a bit left out.” Mikasa replies.

“Wouldn’t want that.” I say.

“Never. Hey, Eren, I have to go, just finishing up at work. Want anything for dinner?”

“No, I’m tired, I might just go ahead and sleep.” With the anxiety about calling Mikasa out of the way, I find myself mentally drained.

“Alright, goodnight Eren. I love you.”

“Night, Mikasa.” I say. “Love you too.” And then I hang up, and put my phone on the night stand. After that I bend down and undo the straps on my prosthetic and lay it to the side of the nightstand with the sock next to it. I then curl up on my bed and stare into the pillows. I fall asleep, for once, content.

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The next day I feel anxious. For the entire day a sense of foreboding, a sense of what I’ve agreed to and what it entails follows me around like a loyal dog all through my class. For a brief moment during the day I wonder if it’s too late to call Armin and ask him to cancel the psychologist. Say
I’m feeling sick or that my leg joint isn’t working right and I have to see what’s wrong with it. I mean, I’ve fallen enough times for something to be knocked out of place. Some joint or something.

But, no. I just keep reminding myself that I promised him and I have to uphold that promise.

It works, for the most part, doesn’t make it any easier when seven thirty rolls around and Armin comes knocking at my door. I mean, it got me in the car and on the way there but it didn’t stop me from dreading talking to this stranger… And bitching about my worries the entire way there.

“This is going to be terrible.” I say, clicking the seat belt into place.

“Now you don’t know that, Eren.” Armin points out.

“You said the same thing about the group,” I retort, “And look what that got me: a nightmare and a fight with my sister.”

“You like the group, you’re too stubborn to admit it but you do!” Armin didn’t take his eyes off of the road as the car started down the street.

I stay silent and watch the cars go by, “Who is this guy anyway?” I ask.

“Are you really so worried that we’ll set you up with someone bad, Eren?” Armin returns my question with a question of his own.

“Yes. Yes I am.” I say.

“Wow, I can feel the trust.” Armin smiles nonetheless.

“Hey, you were the one who set me up in a group filled with the people I want to forget.” I remind him.

“Well, yes, I was. But it’s good I did.” He shrugs as he said this, flicking the turn signal and turning onto a street I’ve never been in before. Mainly because the streets are always crowded with shoppers and all that’s here are apartment high-rises and a few office buildings scattered throughout. Not my favorite place. Too many people that don’t care whether or not you have a fake damn leg, they’ll still push you around if there’s a sale.

“Remind me again, why it’s so good that you did?” I inquire.

“You weren’t getting better,” Armin doesn’t miss a beat, “In fact I’m pretty sure you were just getting worse. You kept blaming everything, the leg, the PTSD, everything not on the fighting itself but on the people you fought with.” Here he glances at me out of the corner of his eyes, “Especially Levi.” Then his eyes go back to the road, “You still are, a bit, but I think even just after seeing that they too need help, that they too were affected by this, you kind of realized something.” He fades off at the end.

“What did I realize?” Because I sure as hell don’t know.

“That you’re not the only one hurt,” Armin’s eyes bounce back to me for a moment before going back to the road, “I don’t mean that in that you were selfish… I mean I think you thought that you were alone. And maybe you haven’t realized it yet but you’re not alone. All those people in that group went through exactly the same thing as you did, they were there, Eren… And I think that the loneliness was hurting you psychologically, and I was worried it’d become physically too.” He finishes, and as he does we pull into the parking lot of a giant red brick building with multiple glass windows. “We’re here.”
I step out of the car, leaving our conversation at that. The building looks like almost every other building on this street. Much too big with uniformly colored red bricks and neatly lined glass windows curling around the building. Two large glass sliding doors loom in front of me, a ‘caution, automatic’ sign pasted onto each one. The light pouring out of the lobby inside creates a small circle of illuminated sidewalk in the otherwise dark evening.

“You’ll be alright?” Armin asks.

“You’re not coming?” I turn around, Armin nods.

“No. I wish I could meet the guy too but I have somewhere to be.” He sighs, “I’ll be back when it’s over though, so just text me when you head back down. He’s on floor four, room four-oh-one.” Armin then turns and opens the door of his still-running car. “You’ll be okay?” He repeats his first question. I give him a smile in return.

“I’ll be fine, Armin, I’m not a kid.” I say. “Go have fun with whatever you’re doing.”

Armin looks down at his car and then back up to me, “Okay, I’ll be going then. Goodbye, Eren.” He slips into his car, “Oh, and, try not to give the psychologist too much of a hard time.” He says.

“No promises.” I reply and hold up my hand in goodbye as Armin pulls out of the driveway and disappears back onto the road. I suck in a breath and turn around to face the giant glass doors once more.

Here we go…

I step forward and, as the sign said, the glass automatically slides smoothly open. The light seems even brighter now that I’m inside. Although that could be the recently waxed, brightly shining cream tiles beneath me.

I think I already hate this place. Mainly because the tiles, with their clean wax, make it hard to walk. My prosthetic keeps slipping around because there’s zero traction.

Shit, fuck, no, stop. I catch myself on the side of the elevator and try to stand straighter. I find myself heavily leaning on my own leg since it’s obviously too much to ask for to simply stand like a normal human being. I glance down at the fake leg.

I really hate you. Great, now I’m talking to it. I sigh and press the up arrow as it shines brightly to alert me that it’s actually been pressed.

Goddammit does everything in this building shine?

I wait for a while for the elevator, which decides to take a much longer than necessary time to actually get down to the first floor.

How many floors are on this building anyway? I wonder as I glance up at the roof with it’s fluorescent lighting.

Can’t be that many, right? The elevator dings and I look back down as it creaks open, resting with it’s door wide open with a ding. I step around and look at the inside of the elevator. It’s all wood with a cream colored carpet floor, like the elevators you see at hotels. I step inside.

Floor four, floor four… I look down the numbers until I find ‘four’. I press it and the elevator’s doors close as it begins to move upward. I look at the number panel as it does, apparently this building has twelve floors. Plus ‘R’ which I’m guessing means roof, and ‘B’ which is probably
basement.

The elevator dings and soon the doors slide smoothly open. I step out into a carpeted hallway.

*At least I won’t have to worry about floor-skating here.*

It’s pretty easy to find, considering that there’s a giant brown plate that almost smacks you in the face soon as you walk out of the elevator dictating which way rooms four-oh-one through four-thirteen is. On the other side is four-fourteen through four-twenty-one. I would know, I almost hit my nose on the twenty.

*Note to self: look up when walking in these halls.*

They’re pretty cramped halls, too. Enough room for two people and two sides of doors, one even one odd, but besides that… not much else. A claustrophobic patient would be fucked. Not very smart considering that this is a *psychologists* office.

Ah, well, maybe that’s just me.

Room four-oh-one turns out to be one of the bigger rooms. Two bigger brown wooden doors with a small golden plate on the left one dictating the room’s number greet my eyes. I hesitate, looking at the plate with the number and the name of the person underneath. I jot it down in my mind so that I won’t look like I just blindly stepped into a session without any sense of who I’m talking to too.

Even though that’s exactly what I’m doing. But I don’t want anybody else to know that.

With a sigh I push on one of the doors, just as someone on the other side is pushing on the other door. Sadly, the design isn’t the best to we almost end up hitting each other with our doors and have to jump to the side so that we’re both facing each other and- oh my shit in fucking hell.

My mind finally catches up with what's happening. *Why is he here?*

“Why are you here?” I ask, a bit dumbfounded. Its only now that Levi, too snaps back into the present and glares at me.

“In case you haven’t noticed, you’re not the only one with problems, brat.” Levi snaps, in that same venomous tone.

*No shit, sherlock.* I think, remembering the many times I’ve seen Armin or Mikasa break down, the whole trauma has been haunting them, too. *And I haven’t been helping…* I think, with more than a little guilt. I wonder if Armin was talking about himself when he told me there were other’s who had been hurt, too... The guilt must be written over my face, because Levi then says,

“You’re just now realizing that? Fuck, you really are as ignorant as you seem.” He comments.

“Hey!” I snap, “I’ve known for a long time now that there are other people who have it like I do, some even worse than I!” I defend my stance. I’m not going to let him one-up me.

“Then why the fuck did you look so damn guilty?” Levi asks, retaining his calm state as he leans against the door, almost displaying actual interest in my state of mind.

“I just…” *Dammit, Eren, don’t let him win!* “None of your business.” I don’t look away, because
that would be giving in to him. Levi holds my gaze. We stay, caught in some kind of staring contest waiting for the other one to blink or look away. Neither of us do. Neither of us are willing to bend to the other’s demands, the other’s wants. At the same time, neither of us say anything. Neither of us push the other to bend to our own will.

For the first time, I respect Levi. He’s not forcing me to do something I’m completely opposed to, but he won’t back down from his position of pushing me to cave. What do you know? The guy has one redeeming quality.

We’re broken from our contest of will and stares by the opening of a secondary door in the room which we hold open the entrance of. I look over and, as if signaled by an invisible cue, Levi begins to leave. The door he was holding slams shut behind him.

“Hey-!” I begin to turn my head and call out to him. *Wait, why am I trying to stop him? Haven’t I won?* I stop, my eyes following his figure as it retreats to the elevator, before they’re pulled back by a voice.

“Eren Jaeger, I presume?” The voice is soothing, scarily smooth, and has a strange undertone to it that makes me want to back away slowly. I turn and meet shockingly blue eyes and slicked back blonde hair.

My first thought is that he must be the psychologist.

My second thought is ‘no way in hell’.

The man extends his hand to me, but it’s not his hand. It’s prosthetic, metallic, and cold to the touch. I take his hand and meet eyes with the man once again.

“Yes… That’s me.” I say quietly, “Nice to meet you…?”

“Smith,” He says, and gives me a smile much too charming to be sincere, “Erwin Smith.” He glances back at a small cream carpeted waiting room with a few brown cushioned chairs and a door behind him.

“But, why don’t we head to my office?” And he leads the way.

Chapter End Notes

I wonder if anybody predicted who the psychologist would be? I’m curious.

So as some of you may have figured out by the fact that I always have at least some other short story or whatever updating at the same time, I like to multitask in my writing. So while I will be keeping up with NTMYWF and Memorial, I also have a little three-part short story I’m working on currently, the first part is almost done so I’ll upload that in a month or two. Something to look forward to. Nothing will change schedule-wise though. Just a heads-up.

Special thanks to my lovely editor!

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated.

Come talk to me:
goldie-the-cat.tumblr.com

Check out the tag fic: NTMYWF for updates and more.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Ahhhh I fucked up! I went through the entire day thinking I was forgetting something, even went to my AO3 account and LOOKED at NTMYWF, and it STILL didn't occur to me that today is WEDNESDAY. So it JUST occurred to me in the shower. Now I'm several hours late posting... Shit.

Welp. Okay. I fucked up, but it's still Wednesday! It's not too late to salvage my consistency streak! So, before Wednesday ends, here's Chapter Six!

(Also since I keep forgetting to put these at the end and then end up having to edit them later I'll just start putting these two things here:)

Come talk to me!
goldie-the-cat.tumblr.com

Special thanks to my lovely editor, you're amazing!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Erwin leads me into a small, box-like room that seems as if it was decorated to resemble a living room. There’s a bookshelf in the back that sits next to a recliner, a window just behind the chair illuminates the completely cream-colored room. What is up with this building and it's cream color obsession? On the left wall there's a brown couch with a floral patterned blanket draped over it and just across from the couch is a desk with a laptop sitting closed, a couple of papers, and a blue coffee mug filled with pens. Erwin gestures to the couch, “You can go ahead and sit over there.” He says, I nod and walk to the couch, next to it is a glass coffee table with assorted knickknacks strewn around it. A pearly seashell, a lamp, and a book with the title ‘For The Lost’. I look back up, and I notice that these kinds of knickknacks are all over the room. There’s a little green alien that looks like something won out of a claw-machine resting on the bookshelf, it’s back against some creepy humanoid plush figure that still resembles nothing of a human with it’s unfeeling eyes and gaping smile.

What the hell kind of kid would want that as a plush? As I think this I look over at Erwin. Okay, so that kind of kid.

“Are you usually described as curious, Eren?” Erwin asks, he’s pulled the chair from the desk around and sits in it with his own elbow resting on the table, he’s leaning into his hand. His legs are crossed and his metallic hand rests on his knee. I see a pen and paper pad in his lap. I look back at the table with the pearly seashell.

“Nosy, mainly,” I say with a kind of cheeky attitude. Erwin smiles at me,

“Well, so am I.” He says, “But then again, that’s my job. Do you know what a psychologist does, Eren?”
Good God, is this kindergarten? The way he talks, it may be kind but it’s demeaning, like I’m a child, like I don’t understand. This man irks me already.

“If I didn’t, do you really think I would be here?” I ask, looking up at him again.

“True enough,” There’s some kind of light in his eyes and damn if that doesn’t creep me out. “I suppose you’re getting impatient, so let’s get started.” He clears his throat.

I wonder what clued you into that.

“So, Eren, why are you here with me today?” Erwin starts.

“I thought you knew,” I reply.

“Of course I do, but I’m still asking you. What’s your problem?” He repeats.

“Why should I say it if you already know?” I retort.

“Because in order for me to do anything, you have to acknowledge what’s wrong with you, and I have to know that you’ve acknowledged it.” Erwin’s voice stays steady.

I sigh, and lean back into the couch, this would be one hell of a Wednesday night.

“I have PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder, whatever you want to call it.” I say.

“And?” Erwin continues, I see his prosthetic hand move from his knee to his notepad as he begins to write something.

“And what?” I repeat, “I’m having dreams about the war, I’m flipping out on my friends, and life fucking sucks, I have PTSD, what else is there?!” I demand.

“Nothing, well…” Erwin smiles at me with that same much too charming smile, “Nothing yet.”

And you’re supposed to be helping people. When does this start helping?

“Yet?” I ask.

“Yet,” He replies, and continues on, leaving the single word hanging in the air around us, “You mentioned you’ve been having dreams, what do you see in your dreams exactly?” He asks.

“I see the war, the bomb, the time I lost my leg, but wait, hold on.” I rush through a brief explanation, “What did you mean by ‘yet’?”

Erwin leans back into his chair, “Do you know what ‘yet’ means, Eren?” He asks.

“Yeah, I do.” I reply.

“Well, I meant ‘yet’.” Erwin replies with a shrug.

“But you said ‘nothing yet’, does that mean that there will be something else?” I ask, talking with this man is exasperating. Everything is roundabout with him, or so I’m getting the sense. It irks me.

“Most likely, yes.” Erwin admits, “There’s a process to recovery, Eren. I had you state what was your problems to see if you were in Denial.”
“Am I?” I blurt it out, I can’t help it.

“Yes, in the case of severity it seems you refuse to acknowledge that you’re problem is a severe one. But you still acknowledge it’s existence so that’s good.” I’m about to interrupt again but Erwin holds up his hand to stop me and continues, “I say ‘yet’ Eren because it always gets worse once you acknowledge how severe it is.” He seems to be examining my eyes, as if watching for some reaction that might set me off, “But you have to acknowledge it, it has to get worse, if you ever want it to get better.” He seems to be finished so I interject,

“That can’t be right!” I protest.

“Oh?” Erwin asks,

“Why does it have to get worse before it gets better? I mean, I know I’m fucked up, and I know it’s pretty damn bad, so how can it get worse?” I gesture to my knee, “I don’t have a fucking leg for christ’s sake!”

“And I don’t have an arm.” Erwin leans back, “I can tell you from experience, it’ll get worse, but that’s only natural.”

I hate you.

At this point I’m not sure whose worse, Erwin or Levi. Right now I’m leaning towards Erwin, but that could just be because I’m talking with him.

“Don’t hate me, Eren,” Erwin interrupts my thoughts, I jump. Great, now he’s a psychic too.

“I’ve seen that look before, just keep in mind that I’m here to help you.”

I stay silent, there’s nothing else to be said on my part. Erwin sees this, and continues,

“Now, why don’t we go a bit more in-depth into your dreams, hmm?” He asks. I sigh and begin to describe my nightmare.

“Well, it starts out where I’m in this… sandstorm, I guess. There’s three other people around me, but they’re not exactly people, more like shadows.” I pause, what happened next? “We’re running through this desert, hiding in ditches… I have trouble getting out of the ditch, so one of the shadows pulls me up. The next thing I know is that we’re running again, and then one of them screams. It turns to me and it’s face is filled with fire…” I trail off,

“Then?” Erwin encourages me.

“Then… It explodes, and the fire’s rushing towards me, I fall and for some reason I’m no longer in my body, I’m just standing outside of it, I can’t move, only watch it become engulfed in flames.” I wait, there’s a beat of silence, “And that’s it.” I finish. Erwin is writing things down in his notebook.

“Well, it seems clear to me that your dreams are of war. Did you lose your leg in a bombing incident?” He asks me, never looking up from his paper, he’s writing with his metal hand.

“Yes…” I say, trailing off to look down at the prosthetic.

“Then its obvious your dreams are of that incident.” Erwin clicks his pen shut and lays it across the notepad, “I’m not a psychiatrist so I can’t prescribe medication. But I would suggest going to the doctor and seeing if you can get a recommendation for some sleeping pills.”
I shudder at the thought of not being able to control when I go to bed and when I go to sleep, there’s no way I’m taking sleeping pills.

“Alright,” I say nonetheless.

“Besides that, this event is haunting you, Eren.” Erwin points out the obvious like it’s something new.

“You think I don’t know that?” I ask,

“I think you know it.” Erwin clarifies, “However, I also think your having trouble accepting it. From what I’ve been told, you continually try to pin blame. Blame your leg, blame the others who were with you, blame yourself, whoever it is you always find someone to put blame on.”

“Okay, so now what? You’re going to say that I give the blame to others to avoid taking it on myself?” I ask. “That’s not true, you said yourself that I put the blame on myself too.”

“That’s right, I did.” Erwin mumbles, “And that’s what makes your case so… intriguing, Eren. You’re not trying to avoid blame. You’re trying to create it for yourself. Perhaps out of pity or self-inflicted hate, but for whatever reason, you want there to be somebody to take responsibility for what happened to you.” Erwin paused, “You’re creating your own demons, Eren. There really don’t need to be any.”

“If it’s no one’s fault, then why did it happen?!” I demand.

“Call it what you will,” Erwin shrugs, remaining calm as ever, “Fate, chance, destiny, it all stays the same that you lost your leg in an incident that nobody wanted, or made, happen.”

That’s not true, if I hadn’t been sent out into that battlefield I never would have lost my leg.

I fume in silence, but then I remember something more important than my own anger.

“I have a question.” I say, Erwin looks up, as if surprised by the turn in conversation.

“Yes?” He asks.

“One of the people in the army, Jean, was there when I lost my leg.” I start, “He also went to high school with me, but here’s the thing: The first time I remember meeting him is when we were signing up for the army.” I pause, “Why? Why did I forget him?”

“Were you good friends in high school?” Erwin asks. I think back at Armin’s reminiscing at our competing.

“Definitely not, I could never be friends with that guy,” I say, “But from what I’ve heard, it sounds like we were more like rivals.” I look back at Erwin, he’s writing in his journal, again.

What is he even writing anyway?

I’m about to try to lean over and peek past his elbow but Erwin starts talking again.

“Well, my guess is that your mind is blocking you from previous memories of him to protect your own sanity.” He explains,


“It makes it easier for you if it was just you that got hurt, and not those you cared about. Who else
“Was in your squad?” He asks.

“A woman named Petra, a guy named Marco, Jean, myself, our leader Levi, and Armin, my best friend, and a few others whose faces I can’t quite recall.” I say. There’s something in Erwin’s eyes, some kind of light has changed… I don’t know what. But it doesn’t make me any more comfortable.

“Which, out of those, were there when you lost your leg?”

“Levi, Marco, and Jean. Armin went home after he got shot in the lung and had trouble breathing.” I explain.

“I see.” Erwin was writing things down, again.

“Did you have any previous relations with Marco?” He asks,

“You think I would know?” I ask.

“Eren.” Erwin says, a new tone in his voice, threatening?

Shit, have I acted out too much?

“Look,” I say, “If I knew Marco before all this,” I say, gesturing to my leg, ”I have no idea! Maybe I did! Maybe I didn’t! Who knows? Obviously I can’t trust my own mind!” I say. Then I freeze.

Oh god, what if there’s more I’ve forgotten? I can tell that my panic is showing on my face because Erwin stops as well,

“Eren, calm down.” He’s so calm, how? “Take a deep breath.” I do.

“How… How much have I forgotten?” I ask, looking to him as if he has the answer.

“I don’t know,” Erwin explains, “But it doesn’t seem as if you’ve forgotten anything too important.” He says.

“How can you know!” I snap, “I mean, how much have I forgotten? What if there’s stuff about Marco that I’ve forgotten? What if there’s things about Armin that I’ve forgotten?” My voice raises a bit.

“Relax, if there is anything, there’s others who remember for you. You can recover your memory from them.” Erwin stays collected.

“But what if they won’t tell me?” I say.

“And why wouldn’t they?” He asks.

“I don’t know, to protect me or something stupid like that!” I’m not yet panicked, close, but not quite.

“Ask them,” Erwin suggests, “If there’s something you need to know, they’ll tell you. Now, try taking deep breaths. Relax.” I stop, although I want to keep inquiring, I follow Erwin’s instructions and try taking deep breaths.

In. How much have I forgotten?

Out. Will Armin tell me if I’ve forgotten something?
In. Is there anything so bad that he can’t tell me what happened?

Out. I have to find out what I’ve forgotten.

“Very good.” Erwin says, and then checks his silver watch. “Well, I suppose our time is up.” He stands up, and I push myself off of the couch. He opens the door for me and I walk out into the small waiting room. As I push past him I make a beeline for the door to the hallway but his voice stops me.

“I expect to see you next week, Eren. No matter how uncomfortable this is, you need it.” He tells me.

“You don’t know what I ‘need’.” I reply and push open the door before walking into the carpeted hallway.

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I stand in the elevator as it rolls downward to the lobby. Going over what Erwin said in my head.

I hate him.

I pull my jacket around me tighter, it’s too cold in this damn building.

He’s even worse than Levi.

I let out a small laugh, I didn’t think I could find someone worse than Levi but I’ve found him, and his name’s Erwin Smith.

Speaking of which, Levi had stepped out of his office before me. I guess Erwin also does therapy sessions with Levi? Wow, that must be hell. But still… I can’t help but be curious. I wonder what they talk about? I wonder if it’s about the person Levi misses? Or maybe the war too? What kinds of problems do Levi have anyway? I mean, obviously a lot, but besides personality-wise, what else? Part of me wants to ask Levi… but part of me also knows that would just be poking a very sarcastic, short, sleeping tiger.

The elevator doors ding and slide open to show the lobby. I step out, slide, and steady myself, looking around. Part of me is disappointed, I guess I’d been hoping that maybe Levi was there so I could ask him. Of course, that’d be stupid, expecting him to stay in the lobby. Why would he anyway? I shrug it off and half walk, half slide outside. Once my feet, well, foot and other, are on the sidewalk, I feel relieved to not have to slip around anymore. I glance around, I see lights in the driveway and watch as Armin’s car pulls into the driveway and stops in front of me. I wave and walk over, opening the passenger seat door and sitting down, closing the door behind me.

“Hey,” Armin greets me, “How was it?”

“Terrible.” I say, “Remind me again why I decided to go along with this?” I ask.

“That bad, huh?” Armin sighs, “So that’s it then.” He leans back and begins to pull out of the driveway. I think back to my curiosity about Levi. I mean, maybe if I keep running into him I’ll be able to figure it out.

“No…” I say, “I think it might get better.” I say. Armin lights up,

“Really?” He asks, excited, looking toward me. I smile at how easy it is to lighten his mood.
“Yeah, yeah, now look at the road before we crash into a telephone pole.” I say, Armin turns back, a smile still on his face.

“I’m proud of you, Eren.” Armin says, I look at him, a little surprised, “You’re… actually trying to get better.” He says.

“Gee, thanks dad.” I tease him. Armin laughs and the two of us ride comfortably back home.

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“How was it?” Mikasa asks as I open the door to our apartment.

“Honestly? Terrible,” I say with a sigh, “But I’m still going to go back. It might help.”

“What did he tell you?” She asks.

“That ‘it’ll get worse before it gets better’.” I quote Erwin, “Which I hope it doesn’t, because I don’t see how it could ‘get worse’.” I catch Mikasa eyeing me, “What?”

“He’s right, you know.” She says quietly before going back to her coffee mug at the table.

“He is?” I’m a little stunned that she agrees with him.

“Yeah,” Mikasa replies, “I had the same thing, Eren. You and Armin were still out in the field but… I was home alone for a year.” She doesn’t drink from her cup, just holds it in-between her hands. “I went through the stages… It gets worse. Then it starts to get better.” As she says this I move around to the other side of the table.

“Oh god,” I say, “That’s right you were alone here when…” I trail off. “I’m sorry.” I apologize, I know its not much and it can’t make up for not being there for her but I apologize anyway. Why? It seems like the right thing to do…

“It’s okay.” Mikasa meets my eyes, “I was glad, afterward, that you and Armin weren’t there to see my meltdown.” She explains.

“When did it happen?” I ask.

“When I got word that Armin had been shot through the lung,” Mikasa sighs, I see her hands tighten around the mug. “He was in recovery and all I could wonder was if he was going to die or… what was going to happen.” She leans her head to the side, “It was also a wake-up call. You were still in there, Armin had already gotten hurt and was being taken out but more than that my brother was still there. I was scared something was going to happen to you too…” She straightens up her head, “You can only imagine my reaction when I was told you’d lost your leg.”

Mikasa… wasn’t usually open like this. This was new, this wasn’t something I was used to. Usually she didn’t show any emotion, even now her face still looked placid though her words were mournful. It goes to show how much it hurt her, if even she wants to talk about it.

I want to apologize again but I don’t, instead I wait and see if she’s going to continue. I’ve had very few heart-to-hearts with my closed-up sister, but when they do happen I’ve learned its best to just let her say her part first. Then we get to the rest afterwards.

“It will get worse, Eren.” She repeats, “But, don’t let it get so bad that you can’t come back.”

“What did you do, Mikasa?” I ask.
“What did I do?”

“Yes, when it… got worse.” I clarify.

“Nothing,” She replies, “Nothing that succeeded.” She left it at that, standing up and walking over to the sink where she poured the rest of her mug into the drain and washed the cup. “It’s late, you should go to bed.” She tells me without lifting her eyes.

I want to ask more, but I’ve learned patience is key with Mikasa, so instead I simply say ‘good night’ and walk to my bedroom. Wondering what she tried, and apparently failed, to do.

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I have these days that seem to pass in a haze of sorts. Usually my thoughts are all occupied by one specific thing and then… poof, the day’s past and I’m waking up the next day wondering where the hell Thursday went.

I say Thursday because that’s exactly how I felt this morning, Friday morning. I mean, I guess I know where Thursday went. It went to wondering how is it going to get worse and what Mikasa did that she didn’t want to tell me. Neither of which were pleasant thoughts and both of which kept me occupied enough to miss an entire Political Sciences lecture.

Now I have no clue what the professor is saying since it’s an extension of yesterday’s lecture. Whoop-de-doo.

I can’t even remember if I slept, which would explain why I’m tired as fuck. I lean into my hand, it’s the only thing keeping my head up. I sigh and close my eyes as I let my hand rest from it’s doodles. I have the dizzy sensation that I get when being really tired, as if the room is slowly turning round-and-round.

I force my eyes open, only to see that the world’s not actually spinning. I try to listen to the professor, anything to distract my mind.

“Now then, we move onto Criminal Law which, as most of you can hopefully figure out; Criminal Law has to do with crime, but keep in mind the main focus of Criminal Law is not the punishment of the criminal, instead it’s the much less interesting dispute resolution and, of course, victim compensation. This remains standing even though criminal retribution remains the most prominent goal…”

No use, this is just exhausting me even more. I look back at my notebook, some crazy swirls dominate one corner while the image of the giant man leaning over the wall still takes over the other side. In the middle of it all is the ever growing list of Levi’s possible relations.

Oh, hey, I actually get to ask him about this today.

But I’m not sure if I’ll even have the energy to do that. Ah, well, I have to keep it up somehow. I’ll get a coffee or something and hope for the best. I’m drawing a small cup of coffee that looks like a demented pot of soup on my page when the professor calls time. I pack up and walk out with the flow of people. It’s four thirty. I have an hour and a half to get there.

Instead of jogging to my apartment and walking there, I decide to just walk to The Rose Café and bypass my apartment completely. At this point, the coffee sounds like the most attractive thing in the world.

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I’m actually ten minutes early this time. So I’m holding a cup of coffee in my hand and looking for a table before Levi’s even here. I’m about to sit inside when I remember what Levi said last time, that he hates the inside.

*I could always sit in here out of spite.*

But the caffeine hasn’t kicked in yet so I’m still much too tired to annoy him so early on. So I end up outside drinking down my large cup of coffee at six o’clock and praying that the buzz doesn’t actually hit four hours later as it sometimes does.

Levi’s early too, by five minutes. I can tell by the voice behind me,

“‘You actually managed to make it on time.’ I turn around and see him standing by the door of the Café on the other side of the bars.

“I like to make a good second impression.” I say with a smile, cheekiness often proves to be the best way for me, mainly because it comes naturally.

“Well, you fucked that up last time.” Levi sighs.

“But last time was the first impression.” I protest.

“No, the first impression was at the support group.” Levi replies.

“That doesn’t count. That’s a group thing.” I shrug.

“Then what about that day you just happen to stare at me while I was just trying to enjoy a nice drink outside, eh brat?” He asks.

“Sorry?” When did this happen?

“Don’t tell me you fucking forgot. It was at this very café for fucks sake.” What is he talking about? We met at this café before?

“How long ago was this?” I ask, Levi turns from annoyed to confused.

“I don’t know, a week and a half ago? Does it really matter? Look, I’m just going to go in and get my shit before I have to start talking to you. Okay? Okay.” Levi enters the café.

*A week and a half ago?* I rack my brain… I can’t remember. I should be able to remember something that happened so soon. I mean, I should. I should, and I can, I know I can. I-

Wait, no, I remember. When Levi’d left he’d said something…

What was it?

*Come on, Eren. You’re not insane, you can remember thing’s that happened a week ago.*

“‘Wow, shit, you went pale. You okay?’” Levi asks as he sits down. I look up at him, he actually looks somewhat concerned.

“I may not be the monster you’re thinking of… Right?” I ask, somewhat frantically.

“I’m sorry?” Levi looks confused again.

“That’s… What you said, a week and a half ago at the café. Right?” I can hear the panic in my
“Yes, that’s what I said…” Levi’s talking slowly as if unsure what’s happening, “Kid, you alright? You don’t sound very good.”

I need to stop, and calm down. I take a deep breath and try to lean into the back of the chair, but I still feel stiff and unsure.

“Yes, I’m good. Sorry about that I-… I just couldn’t remember for a moment.” I explain.

“So? We all forget things?” Levi asks. I stay silent, but he’s watching my face. “What’s wrong?” I look back up at him.

“Why do you care?” I retort.

“Maybe because I’m actually a human being with shitty emotions that make me care about what the fuck is wrong with someone else, okay? Is that so damn hard to believe?” He asks. I jump a little. Even though this type of tone and language isn’t unusual with Levi… I guess I wasn’t prepared.

“I know…” I say, “I’m sorry.” I sigh, “It’s just… I’ve been forgetting a lot of things lately. Well, people mostly and it’s kind of…” I stop, at this point I don’t even care who I’m telling this too, even if it’s Levi, “Well, it’s really frightening.” I admit. I mean, if I was to tell anybody might as well be the person I was paired up with for this very reason.

“What are you forgetting?” Levi asks.

“Well, I forgot that Jean used to go to my high school.” I say.

“So? You think I remember half of my high school class, let alone one fucking person?” Levi replies.

“Well, here’s the thing: Apparently Jean and I would compete. A lot. Like, all of my high school was spent competing with him. So why, if we spent that much time together, do I not remember him? I remembering competing with someone, but I couldn’t put face to name.” I say. Levi stays silent for a moment.

“Shit.” He finally replies.

“I know,” I say, somehow his blunt curse actually lifts my mood. Because in that one word, ‘shit’, he accurately described my situation. Strangely enough ‘shit’ was more comforting than any ‘it’ll get better eventually’ or ‘we’re here for you’ that I’ve heard. Because those are just skirting around the problem, those are just saying; ‘well, we don’t know how bad it is, so we can’t really sympathize, but we can still try to help you out’. Which is nice and all but it lacks understanding. Somehow ‘shit’ contains more understanding, because it’s looking at what the situation is right now. Which is to say: the situation is shitty.

“So that’s why you were there with Erwin.” He states, as if he’d just realized.

“Well, yeah, but also because Armin guilt-tripped me into going.” I say with a shrug. “Why were you there?” Levi pauses.

“That’s my own reason, brat.” He replies.

“Oh come on! I just told you why I was there.” I say,
“Yeah, and it looks like you needed to. You were flipping your shit before, and, unlike you, I don’t need some damned heart-to-heart.” He replies, leaning back in his chair.

“A man of many secrets.” I observe, Levi shrugs. “Which reminds me!” I say, reaching beside me to my backpack, I pull out my notebook that should technically be for Political Sciences.

“The fuck are you doing?” Levi asks.

“Uncle?” I jump right into the questions.

“Oh hell no, not this again.” Levi groans.

“Should I take that as a yes?” I push.

“No! It’s not my damn Uncle.” He replies.

“Oh, but you do have an Uncle.” I lean forward, resting my elbows on the table. “Well, this is good. Before I couldn’t even get out of you whether you had a sister or not.” I say.

“Goddamn brat.” Levi leans back in his chair, crossing his arms across his chest.

“Hey, don’t look so sad, this is a good thing.” I smile.

“Is it?” He snaps.

“Yes, Levi,” I laugh, “This is called bonding. We people do this.”

“Fuck you.” Is his reply.

“And we’re back to square one.” I sigh, “You just love making things harder for me, huh?”

“Oh?” Levi breaks in, “So now you’re trying to get closer to me?”

“Wait- What?” I’m caught off guard. The tables have been turned, and I’m not sure I like the new view…

“Wow, well, I hate to admit it but you hit the nail on the fucking head, brat. I guess we are bonding.” Next it’s Levi’s turn to lean forward, “Who knew you, of all people, wanted to get close to me.” His breath smells like tea, mint tea.

I lean back, “Who said I did?”

“Well, it was pretty damn clear between the bonding and how disappointed you were that we were ‘back to square one’.” He put’s small air quotes around the words.

“Nobody said they were disappointed.” I reply, “Hell, maybe going back to square one is everything I’ve ever wanted.”

“Is that so? Well, then why did you say I loved making things harder for you?” You’re cornered, Eren. He’s beaten you, and you led yourself right into the damn corner. “Unless, of course, you meant harder in a different way. In which case, nice try brat but you’re not my type.” I jump at this

Like hell I’m letting him win.

“Great, so now I can add ‘perverted’ to your list of charms.” I retort. Levi shrugs,
“You flatter me.” He replies. There’s a moment of silence, but strangely it isn’t an awkward silence like I’d expect between Levi and myself. Somehow, in some way, it’s actually peaceful.

“What about a mother?” I start up again.

“Holy shit.” Levi replies.

Chapter End Notes

The plot thickens.

A longer chapter to make up for my late post and previous short chapter TuT. So sorry about posting late, again!

Comments and Kudos will be well taken care of.
“Alright everyone!” Hanji claps her hands together, drawing everyone’s attention to our over-energetic group leader. “So along these past few weeks I’ve been trying to get you all to find out if there’s something you could each work towards independently. A personal goal to motivate you.” Hanji looks around the circle, as if for emphasis on her point, “So? Anyone have any goals.”

The room fills with silence, nobody moves or answers her. Hanji pouts, “Ah, come on you lazy bums! There has to be something!” She says, Hanji looks around again, and then her eyes land on Armin. “Armin!”

*I’m so sorry Armin but there’s nothing I can do.* I mentally apologize. Hanji makes her attack, “You’d mentioned before that you once wanted to be a veterinarian. Is that a goal you could work toward?” Hanji asked, her eyes shining excitedly, her prey found and trapped under her metaphorical claws. Armin’s doomed.

“I… uh… I guess so?” He replies meekly.

“You guess so?” Hanji exclaims, “There is no ‘guessing’ in life, Armin. You have to grab Life by the dick and pull!” Hanji wags her finger as she says this, as if giving a lecture at a community college. Which certainly isn’t a college I want to go to.

“Oh.” Armin says, his face going red.

“You can’t half-ass a hand job. Then it’s just… not good.” Hanji shrugs.

“Wow, well, no shit.” Levi comments from the other side of the circle. Hanji turns on her heel, her sights now set on him. For once I’m thankful for his snarky remarks, it made him the target instead of Armin. I’m much happier with that.

“Oh? And do you give Life a good hand job?” Hanji asks as she approaches him.

“Really, Hanji?” Levi sighs, Hanji apparently refuses to be brushed off so easily, as she leaps towards him and grabs him by the shoulders.
“Come on, man!” She exclaims, “What’s your goal? Your purpose in life? Why do you give life a hand job?”

“Get off of me, you demented sex pervert.” Levi grumbles, shoving her hands off of his shoulders. Hanji sighs and stands back a bit.

“Fine, fine, maybe you don’t give life a hand job but a cold acknowledging stare. Why do you do that, then?” She waits for a moment, unsatisfied with his silence, “Levi! What’s your goal?”

“Goddammit, let me think will you?” He snaps at Hanji. Who crosses her arms and actually waits for once.

After a while of intense silence when it seems we’re all waiting for Levi’s answer after that little display.

Why am I so interested anyway? I realize I’m leaning forward and force myself to sit back in my chair. There’s a small thump as I do and Levi’s head, which had previously been looking down with his eyes closed in concentration, snaps toward my direction. We don’t say anything, just hold our usual little staring contest until he turns back to Hanji.

“I don’t have one.” He answers. I can practically hear the collective sigh passed around the room.

“You have to have something to work towards,” Hanji urges, “How else will you ever get better?” She asks.

“Fine,” Levi cuts in before she can continue with some other sexualized metaphor, “Then that’s my goal. Get better and get out of this damn group.” Hanji lights up like a christmas tree trying to outdo the menorah next door. Levi happens to be the poor menorah.

“That’s the spirit!” Hanji exclaims.

“Is it?” I hear Jean sigh to my right.

“Armin!” Hanji starts up again, “You never answered me. Do you want to be a veterinarian or no?” She asks. I turn to look and see the face of despair on Armin, but surprisingly I don’t. It looks like he has his answer ready.

“Actually… no, I don’t think I could do that since I don’t want to be a veterinarian anymore.” He answers.

“Good! Now we’re being decisive.” Hanji pulls her empty chair from the head of the circle to Armin and swings it around so that she sitting on it backwards, facing him. “So what do you want to do?” She asks, leaning her arms on the back of the chair.

“Well, I like reading and learning about new places. So perhaps an archeologist or something more intellectual like a chemist.” Armin replies, it looks like Hanji is about to intersect when he keeps going, “So I guess my goal is deciding which. They both seem great, I just have to choose.” He shrugs. Hanji smiles,

“Very good!” Hanji exclaims, but her eyes are already moving around the circle to her next unlucky victim. Her eyes settle on Petra.

“Oh Petra!” Hanji gives a drawn-out chime. I mentally tell Petra to run before it’s too late. “It’s your turn. What’s your goal?” She asks.
“I don’t know Hanji.” Petra replies with a sigh. “I guess I just want to get my life back in order, really settle down and get back to work. I was happy in that life before so I’m just trying to rebuild that life again. Or something akin to it.” She shrugs, brushing a stray piece of hair away from her face. I’ve noticed it before but I especially notice it now, both Petra and Levi talk with Hanji differently than the rest of us. The three of them actually seem like… friends. I guess. At first I’d just thought Levi was rude to everyone but it seemed… different, with Hanji and Petra. Something akin to comfort or some twisted friendship.

“That’s it!” Hanji shocks me back to reality, “There’s your goal! Settle down, get back into the flow of things! That’s your goal, Petra!”

“Huh, I guess so.” Petra replies but Hanji is already moving around the circle.

“Jean!” She exclaims, and then waits for a response.

“Huh? Oh. Right, goal.” Jean sits forward, scratches the back of his head, and stares at the floor in what appears to be deep concentration. I didn't know the guy was capable of deep concentration. “Well, I recently applied for a job, part-time but if all goes well I’d like to turn it into a full-time job after college. So I guess get a job? More specifically, that job?” He says, rather vaguely, making me wonder if he even really has a job or if he’s just trying to get Hanji to move on.

“Great!” Hanji claps her hands together and then moves down again, “Marco?”

“Learn how to walk again,” He replies immediately, “I got these prosthetics for a reason, I’ve been doing well with the hand but the leg’s been a challenge.” He sighs, “I don’t want to be confined to a wheelchair for the rest of my life.” I can sympathize with Marco, there. I look down at my own prosthetic leg.

*I still can’t walk correctly, either.*

It was true, as much as other’s denied it I felt the limp I walked with. I knew that I was always slightly struggling to keep up with Mikasa and Armin. It was definitely better than at the beginning, now you have to actually focus on the way I walk to notice it, but it was there, and I hate it.

I hate it so damn much.

“Eren!” If I ever need an alarm clock I’ll just record Hanji… Scratch that, waking up to her voice yelling at me is not a pleasant thought. Which leads to more unpleasant thoughts… “What’s your goal, Eren?” Hanji asks me, happily breaking my derailed train of thought.

“My goal?” I repeat, slowly, as if testing the words on my tongue. I have no goal, if I’m being honest. I haven’t had a goal since I lost my leg. Why? I just… haven’t known what to do with my life. I seem to be ruined, as far as I can tell. After all, I’m only three and a half-fourths a whole person, counting by arms and legs. What kind of goal can someone who’s not a whole person have?

“I don’t know.” I reply with a sigh. Hanji’s about to speak up but someone else interrupts her.

“Bullshit.” I’m not sure what surprises me most: The fact that Hanji was actually interrupted or the fact that Levi is the one speaking from across the circle. I think it’s a tie.

“Look, I don’t have a goal, at least I don’t know what it is! Okay?” I ask, Hanji looks like she wants to break in but, strangely, she let’s Levi continue.
“No, that’s not okay.” Levi replies, “I’ve only been stuck with you two times now but even I can tell that you ‘not having a goal’ is bullshit. You’ve got plenty of goals.” He replies.

“Oh really?” I ask.

“Really!” He rolls his eyes, as if it’s so obvious to everyone but me.

“What, exactly, are my goals then?” I say.

“One: Annoy the shit out of me.” Levi replies, “I don’t know why but you do, purposefully, every damn time.” He sighs at this point, and then continues, “Two: You actually want to get better, believe it or not. You said you jog, for fucks sake! You have half a leg and you still fucking jog, that’s trying to get better, that’s actually fucking caring about something.” He pauses, leaning forward in his chair, “Do I need to go on or is it finally getting through that thick skull of yours?”

We’re subdued by silence, in an escape attempt from the situation I look around for some sort of alliance. Marco’s politely looking away, Jean looks amused, Hanji is still waiting for her time to break in, Petra is fiddling with her hands in an unsure manner, and Armin, who was watching my actions, is now staring down at the ground.

“Great point, Levi!” Hanji pipes up again and the tension seems to shatter over our heads, “A little vulgar but correct nonetheless! So, Eren, what’s your goal?” As she states those few words again, it seems all eyes go back to me.

I don’t reply, instead, the alarm on Hanji’s phone rings and the session from hell ends. Hanji looks disappointed, Jean begins to grab his backpack that was slung up behind his chair, Armin and I stand, Petra’s tugging on Levi’s sleeve to get him to stand, but he’s still scowling at me.

“Okay! Well, Eren, you’ll have to answer this tomorrow. First thing!” Hanji warns me, “Give it some thought.” She advises and then turns to the rest of the group, “See everyone tomorrow!”

Tomorrow… I’ve never hated the word so much.

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“Well, that was certainly an interesting group.” Armin comments as we walk towards his car.

“I’m not in the mood, Armin.” I sigh, trying to think up some lie that will get Hanji off of my back.

“No, I mean this earnestly, Eren.” Armin stops suddenly, so I stop and look back at him. He has a serious look in his eyes. “That was something else.” He continues, this time quieter, as if he’s speaking to himself.

“Yeah, okay, so I tend to cause a scene no matter where I go!” I throw up my hands, “Sue me.”

"I don’t mean that.” Armin remains calm, “Well, yeah, I suppose partially I do. But mostly I’m talking about Levi calling you out.” He continues.

“The guy’s an ass, so?” I ask.

“An ass?” Armin asks, his head dropping to one side as he thinks, “Or a friend?” He continues.

“How was that friendly?” I reply, gesturing to the building we’d just walked out of.

“He was making sure you were honest with yourself.” Armin straightens up, “Or, I think so. Maybe not in the most gentle of ways-“
“You think?” I interrupt. Armin, unfazed, continues,

“But I think he was watching out for you, Eren.” Armin finishes.

I’d like to ignore Armin’s comments, I’d like to turn and keep walking without giving it second thought. Sadly, a part of me won’t let me. It was strangely… un-Levi-like, but in a very Levi-way.

Levi, with his perpetual apathy and everlasting scowl, isn’t someone I’d imagine calling ‘bullshit’ when someone talks about themselves. Well, scratch that, I couldn’t see him doing such a thing to help someone, but I could completely see him doing it to annoy someone.

*Maybe that’s all it was. Just trying to get at me.*

But… it didn’t seem like that. Mainly because instead of just annoying me and going back to… whatever he was doing before hand, talking with Petra or something, he actually tried to push me to realize that I had a goal. Which, at that point, isn’t just annoyance…. Right?

He wasn’t just trying to provoke me… Right?

He was actually trying to help me?

But why?

*It doesn’t make sense. Why would he want to help me? People like him don’t help people! They kill people!*

*Do they?*

It’s been one of the first times I’ve doubted myself twice in one day and I really don’t like the feeling. Armin had mentioned, almost a week ago now, that I was just making Levi into my own personal demon… Or something along those lines.

Then there was what Levi said. “I may not be the monster you’re thinking of.”

“Huh?” Armin looks confused. Shit, I didn’t mean to say that out loud. Armin’s still standing there.

“Oh, sorry, uh…” I mumble an apology, “Just speaking my thoughts aloud.” *I never asked him what he meant by that.*

I look around, had he left already? How long had Armin and I been standing here, anyway?

I don’t see Levi, or Petra for that matter. Jean is helping Marco get into a car, and I see Hanji entering the building again..

“Eren, are you even listening?” Armin asks, I jump, I guess he’d been speaking.

“Sorry, sorry. I just have a lot to think about.” I answer. Armin pauses for a moment, before sighing.

“So you’re jogging home, then?” He asks. I smile.

“You know it.” I reply.

“Alright, well, be careful.” As per usual, Armin sounds worried.

“I will, mom.” I roll my eyes, he worries too much. I’ll be fine.
“And don’t forget to eat your vegetables.” Armin wags his finger at me, imitating a more mature voice. I can’t help but smile and neither can he.

“Ew, but, those are disgusting.” I retort. Armin shakes his head,

“You teenagers and your terrible diets,” He heads towards his car, waving to me as he does so, “I’ll see you tomorrow, Eren.” I hold my hand up in turn.

“Yep, bye Armin.” I wait until he gets to his car and opens the door. Then I turn, and start running.

---

When was the last time I jogged? It must have been a while ago since my leg is especially awkward today. The part that connects to my knee isn’t bending right so I have to swing it out to the side a little.

I can feel people’s eyes on me. I don’t like it.

I know I’m stared at, often, it’s one of the thing’s that makes it harder to run without feeling tense. But usually it’s not so obvious, because I can run semi-normally. Today my leg is stiff, today I stand out and today people are staring, watching, fascinated and maybe horrified just by the sight of me.

I turn a corner and slow down to a walk. I can’t do it. I can’t run and have these people watch me. Judge me.

I’m not a sight!

I’m not something you can just stare at!

I want to scream that at the lady who’s watching me from across the street. Her kid is tugging on her sleeve but she just stands there, watching me as if she can’t believe what she’s seeing.

A one-legged boy running.

That’s probably what she’s thinking. Not even with pity or without pity just… she can’t believe it. She doesn’t know why or how it happened and she doesn’t care. All she cares about is the fact that to her, I’m a sight, I’m something to look at.

Not even someone, just something.

She finally realizes that, yes, the boy is staring back at her. She turns her head away, and quickly guides her kid into the store that the kid has been so desperately pulling her into.

Is she ashamed? Probably.

Is she actually guilty? Probably not.

I know, very well, that most people watch me, judge me, question about me and maybe some even hate me without ever talking to me. I hate it.

I hate it. I hate it.

I really hate it.

I should keep running. My leg won’t loosen up if I just keep walking but… I don’t want to be a
sight anymore, and I can blend in if I walk. So I walk. But this time I’m not heading home. I’m not really heading anywhere. Just walking and thinking to myself because I can’t go home like this.

Mikasa would see that I’m upset, she would ask me what’s wrong and in the end it will be like it was the night I slammed the door on her. That’s how it will go, I know it. I can see it now.

Are you okay? Leave me alone. Eren, I want to help you. Just go away! Eren, please. No, Mikasa! Please, I’m your sister…

I care about you.

And maybe that’s the worst. When she, or Armin, or anyone says ‘I care about you.’ Because with them… It’s indisputable. I know they care about me, but when they remind me- actually tell me the words ‘I care about you.’ It makes me feel like they think I don’t know that.

And if I continue to fight against them, maybe they actually forget. Maybe they’ve already forgotten. Maybe they’ve even forgotten that I care about them too.

I don’t want them worrying over me, breaking their backs because they’re trying to find some new psychologist or whatever. They need help too! I should be helping them! I should be helping them…

But, instead, they’re helping me. Why? I keep breaking down. I keep losing my shit and then they worry, they worry that I might totally break…

I need to stop. I need to hold it together for their sake. I’ve been out of control and I need to learn to control myself.

Even if that means hiding from them. So be it.

I’ll hide from them, from everyone. I’ll be normal, or as normal as I can get. I won’t rely on them, I’ll learn to handle it myself. I’ll help them, instead.

I can do this… I can help them… I know I can.

I won’t let them see me break down. Not anymore. Not ever.

- - -

I got lost in my thoughts. Maybe a little bit too lost.

“Shit.” I turn around, looking for some street sign or something.

You fucked up again, Eren.

Shut up.

I walk to the end of the block, finally a small green sign on a pole indicates where I am.

The street name sounds familiar… Where am I?

Oh, there’s a neighborhood park up this way… I think.

The park should be nearby The Rose Café. That is, if I’m correct. If I’m not then I’m even more lost than I was before.
Well, it’s as good a guess as any, might as well.

I begin to head up the street, it’s only two blocks before the park begins to come into view. As I cross the street I begin to see a few people dotting the greenery. A few mothers sit watching their children play on brightly colored swing sets, some read magazines or newspapers. On the flat green part there’s two guys throwing a frisbee around while a large black-and-white border collie chases the flying disc between the two. Other people walk through the winding pathways and there’s one guy in a track suit who fell asleep on a bench.

It’s warm, sunny, but not too hot because it’s starting to get a bit later in the afternoon. It’s actually pretty relaxing.

I take a moment and walk into the park. There should be a map on the billboard in the middle. I follow the pathway until I get to the faded map of the park and the town nearby. A list of shops and diners are sprawled out below the map and a bright red dot with the words ‘You are here’ in all capitals below. Only the ‘e’ has been scratched out so it looks like it’s saying ‘You are her’. Below someone wrote ‘Sam, is that you?’

Vandalism at it’s finest.

I look through the listings under ‘eateries’ and sear for The Rose Café. If I can find it then maybe I can find my way home. However my search is disturbed, rather unpleasantly too.

“Holy crap, I can’t fucking escape you.” With a snap I turn my head towards the speaker.

“I could say the same.” I retort with a sigh, straightening up. “And it was such a nice day too.”

“Watch your mouth, brat.” Levi scolds, there’s a pause, “You okay?” He asks.

“Huh?” My genius reply.

“Usually you’re a bit more spunky with your comebacks.” He points out.

“Spunky?” I can’t help but smile at that one.

“I don’t fucking know,” Levi goes on the defensive, looks like I actually embarrassed him, or hit a nerve, I never know which with him. “I just got used to your damned energy. And you don’t seem like the persistently energetic little shit you usually are, so something must be wrong.”

I remember my promise to not let others see me break down. I guess now’s a good a time as any.

“Aw, that’s sweet, Levi’s actually worried about me.” I smile, avoiding his previous accusation.

“Dammit,” Levi sighs, “Don’t avoid the fucking question.”

It’s not working on him, I need to step up my game.

“Well, you didn’t say you weren’t worried so I guess this is a step up.” I say. I’m waiting for Levi’s reply, for his comeback or one-upmanship or something. I’m met with a silence that quickly becomes uneasy on my part.

“Fine, fuck it, I’m worried about you. Happy? Now tell me what’s wrong.” He crosses his arms and waits for a reply.

I’m caught off-guard.
I didn’t actually expect him to say he was worried about me. I’d expected him to refuse and we’d do our usual little tete-a-tete, but no, he went right out and said he was worried.

“I- uh… I“ I stutter, unable to respond.

“Well?” Levi urges me for my response. I can feel the heat rise to my face. *Real smooth, Jaeger.*

But on a more serious note, I can’t let *Levi* of all people see through me. I mean, if he can, then Mikasa will easily be able to.

“I’m lost.” I admit that much, maybe if he thinks he’s gotten it out of me then he’ll leave me alone. Levi waits for a little longer, then sighs.

“Fine, you won’t tell me.” He says, “Fucking great.” No such luck on my part.

“No, really, I don’t know where I am.” I say.

“I know you’re fucking lost. But you wouldn’t be so wound-up over just that.” Levi shakes his head. I’m dumbstruck, how do I respond to him? “Where are you trying to go?” Levi asks.

“The Rose Café.” Well, great, words formed, and actually were said, correctly, for once. Yay.

“Okay, well, we’re nearby, follow me.” Levi begins to walk the opposite direction.

*Is he…? What?*

I hurry up to catch up with him.

“You can just point me in the right direction, I can take it from there.” I say, for a short man he walks fast, and I have to actually try to keep up with him. But I won’t run, I refuse to run and get stared at again. Especially not in front of Levi.

“Yeah, I could, but I won’t.” He replied, “So suck it up and follow me.” He walked a little faster, making it even harder for me to catch up to him.

“Well, then you could slow down a bit.” I reply.

“Why?” Levi continues to confuse me.

“Why? Because the person next to you has half a leg, that’s why.” I say. *What are you trying to accomplish, here?*

“Yeah, and he jogs. Or so he told me before. So why is it so fucking hard for him to keep up?” Levi turns his head to glance at me as he asks this.

“I never said I’m fast.”

“No, but obviously fast enough to fall and get one hell of a scraped hand.” Levi uses logic, I hate when people use logic. It always seems to work against me.

“You do realize it’s possible to fall and get a scraped hand while going slowly, right?” I’m trying to divert the course of this situation.

“Not that bad.” Levi stops. My tactics continue to fall flat on their face, an action I’ve grown rather used to. “What the hell’s wrong, Jaeger?” He asks.
“Nothing, you’re just walking too fast.” I stop as well.

“The fuck I am. If I was you’d be sprinting to outdo me.” Levi’s right, well, maybe a little bit exaggerated, but right all the same. So how can I change the subject.

“How far is it to The Rose Café?” I try what’s probably the worse diversion tactic next to hold up a giant red arrow that say ‘look over there while I run the other way.’

“You’re still trying to change the fucking subject.” I can see Levi get more and more agitated as he speaks.

“I can take it from here. Just point me in the right direction.” The verbal equivalent of holding up the giant red arrow.

Levi’s mouth twists down into a scowl, he stays silent for a moment. Then his face alights, his eyes widen with some sort of internal epiphany and I fear the worse. I wince, even before he speaks because I have a feeling as to what’s coming.

“You can’t run, can you?” Okay, well, he missed the mark a tiny bit.

“I can!” I say, rather defensively. Usually. When my leg’s not stiff and awkward.

“Then… you don’t want to run, or walk quickly for that matter.” Levi’s right, this time.

“I mean, why would I? No reason to if you could just slow down.” I remain persistent.

“What? Are you afraid of people staring or some shit like that?” I hate it when he’s correct. I hate it when anybody’s correct. Unless I’m correct, of course. I’m trying to think up a reply.

“Holy fuck, you are.” Levi looks aghast.

“No! I’m just thinking!” I insist.


*Oh I noticed, and it’s a pain in the ass.*

This is why I hate talking to Levi. This very reason right here. He always, always calls me out. Always, for some reason that I don’t know, and can’t comprehend, feels the need to call out when something’s bothering me. When I’m wrong, when I’m lying to myself, when I’m panicked at the Café. He always pushes and pulls the damn truth out of me and I don’t know why. Why should he care?

“Is this guilt?” I demand, it has to be, there’s no other reason for him to do such things.

“Guilt? What?” Levi seems slightly confused, but his agitation is winning him over. “Why the hell would I be guilty?”

“Oh, wow, I don’t know.” I say, “Maybe because you fucking led us into a deathtrap!”

“Well, shit, you’re still all about that.” Levi’s tone changes to sarcastic, “Well, maybe I should shed a little light on this subject, because obviously you can’t see the other damn side!”

“Please do.” I say.
“We all got hurt in that, Jaeger. I was told that area was fucking clear. It was supposed to be easy but it backfired on all of us! Including Marco, including Jean, and, yes, including me!” I take a step back, I’ve really pissed him off now.

“Including you?” I repeat. Looking at Levi, he doesn’t seem scarred or mangled like Marco or myself, and I’ve never seen if Jean was affected.

“Yes, including me.” Levi sighs, “So, no, it’s not fucking guilt that makes me want to help you.”

“Then… what is it?” I ask, the situation is starting to calm down but now I’m confused all over again. If it was guilt I’d get it, he’s trying to redeem himself. But if it’s not then… Why bother?

“I have my reasons.” Levi mutters, the tension in the air fizzles out, leaving empty silence.

“I’d like to know what those reasons are.” I reply, “Since, you know, they kind of affect me.” I shrug.

“I don’t like being made into someone’s personal demon.” Levi straightens as he says this.

“What does that mean?” He’s lost me again, something I’ve grown rather used to.

“Holy fuck, are you actually that dense?” Levi looks exasperated, “I mean the exact same thing I said before. I’m not some damned villain and you’ve been making me into one.” I wince when he explains. I’m not sure why at first but then I realize it’s because… he’s right. It’s the same thing Armin has been telling me all this time. I guess hearing it from ‘the monster’ himself finally started to drive it into my skull.

And how can I reply to him? Reply to the man who I’ve been antagonizing. I can’t, not directly.

“Sorry…” I mutter, because there’s nothing else to say. Levi looks surprised at my response.

“You’re actually apologizing.” He even sounds shocked.

“Yeah.” I say, “Yeah… I’m sorry. I guess I- I don’t know. I needed somebody to blame? No, then that sounds like I’m trying to pass the blame-“

“You are,” Levi interrupts me, “You were and you probably still are. To who? Fuck if I know. But that’s what we do, Eren. We pass the blame, even when there’s no one to blame in the beginning.” Once Levi finishes, there’s more silence. Neither of us say anything so Levi begins walking, slower, and I follow him.

“You were right you know.” I speak up, and Levi looks at me from the corners of his eyes, “About not wanting to run, because people would stare.” I explain, “Usually they don’t but I haven’t gone running in a while, so my leg is stiff and now it’s awkward when I run and I can’t run because otherwise people stare and-“

“I didn’t ask for your fucking life story.” Levi shuts me up with his blunt retort, “But why do you care, anyway?” His tone softens.

“Because I have half a leg.” Isn’t that obvious? “That’s not exactly a usual thing.”

“So what? Oh, I see, it’s not a usual thing so you’re embarrassed. Congratu-fucking-lations, Jaeger, you’re different. Big whoop if people you’ll never see again notice that. Big goddamn whoop.” He’s harsh but… somehow it makes me feel better. I guess because he’s honest, or so I think so.
“You’re not so bad, you know. A little bit of an ass, but other than that, you’re actually okay.”

“Shit, we really are fucking bonding.”

“I know. New time for everything, right?” I laugh. I can’t believe I’m actually having fun with Levi.

“No shit.” Levi sighs. I couldn’t have said it better myself.

---

I open the door to my apartment, Mikasa’s already inside, sipping tea quietly at the table.

“Hey.” I greet her, she looks up and studies me for a second.

“You okay?” She asks.

“Huh?” I’m actually confused this time. I don’t feel bad or anything…”Why?”

“You’re practically glowing.” She says, leaning back in her chair. *Okay, that’s a bit different than usual.*

“Oh.” I’m a little dumbstruck. I mean, yeah, I guess I’m happy but glowing?

“Did something good happen?” Mikasa inquires. It doesn’t take a lot to list the good things that have happened to me today. Mainly because there’s really only one. I smile.

“Yeah, I guess so.” Something good did happen to me today. Something short, something that curses a lot, and something that’s pretty damn confrontational.

Someone good.

Chapter End Notes

I keep going back and forth on whether or not I like this chapter... The first time I read it I’m like ‘ah, yes, something actually went right’ then I read it again and I wonder what the hell I did. So! Tell me what you think of it! See you next week!

Comments and Kudos will be loved and cherished.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Ah yes, the infamous POV switch. There won't be many Levi POVs, only a few and most of them will be short. Maybe there'll be one chapter in his full perspective... maybe... *rubs chin thoughtfully*.

But yeah! Enjoy!

Come talk to me:
goldie-the-cat.tumblr.com

updates will be tagged fic: NTMYWF

Special thanks to my lovely editor!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Levi’s POV

Sometimes I wonder if it’s too fucking much to wish for a day to myself. One shitty day after another can leave you wondering that.

Even if it wasn’t to myself. Just one day where nothing fucks up the good time I’m having.

Obviously even that’s far too much to ask. Because if it’s not one idiot getting in my way, it’s myself.

So I sit here, the scent of fresh polish drifting up from the coffee table, getting in the way of actually having one good fucking day for once. And why?

Eren fucking Jaeger.

I mean, I can’t blame the brat himself. He did nothing to deaden the day I was having. If anything he’d elevated my mood, at first. But it was something he’d said. Wondering if I was guilty of all that I’d done.

Of fucking course not. Or so I said. But that damned brat is making me rethink my answer. Mainly because afterward, after I’d so easily swayed his opinion to thinking that I wasn’t actually all that bad, his words stuck with me. Three shitty words was all it took to bring back that which I’d thought was buried and dead.

It’s not guilt for that. You were just to hard on the kid while you were talking is all.

Mentally I cringe. He’d opened up to me, and what was my reply. I don’t need your fucking life story. Sure, that kind of thing would be fine with Hanji or Erwin, even Petra would understand. But Eren? Fuck, the kid’s unstable as shit already. I don’t want to be thing to push him... over the edge.

The hell was Hanji thinking, pairing us together?
That woman is bat-shit crazy. When it’s not dissections it’s sex, when it’s not sex it’s the occult, when it’s not the occult then it’s experimenting and all goes to hell from there. And then when she has nothing to talk about, she goes and screws with everybody’s life.

Fucking hell, why didn’t she pair him up with Marco?

The freckled kid is nice, he’s got a soft heart, and he and Eren actually share a fucking problem. There’s nothing I can do for the brat but make him worse off.

*And meanwhile, now I can’t look at either of them without feeling like the worst piece of shit this side of the country.*

I didn’t feel guilty before. We were told the area was clear, in and out, easy as it gets in the middle of hell on earth. It wasn’t my fault.

Now it fucking is. Now it’s my fault and I have no clue why I feel so shitty because I shouldn’t.

“That’s what I’m told.” I sigh out the words. I suppose it’s in my nature to not like following incompetent orders. I’ll be damned if telling me ‘not to feel bad’ is the shittiest order out there. How the fuck am I supposed to change how I feel?

And you know what I feel?

I feel like shit, that’s what.

I stand up from the coffee table and push the chair in. I walk over to the window on the back wall of my apartment and stare out at the more city-like area of the town. I watch as a few cars slowly roll along like lit-up bugs in the night time. People walk in and out of stores and a group of college-age kids seem to be staggering through the streets drunk for one stupid reason or another.

Nobody notices them. Nobody notices anyone else in this damned town unless you’re missing half a leg.

*Why the hell should I feel so defensive anyway?*

I shouldn’t, really. But I do. I do and it drives me bat-shit crazy. Almost as bat-shit crazy as Hanji, and that’s a whole new level.

I’m not loving this level.

Of course the idea of *it* being my fault had crossed through my mind before. But I’d never really looked at the thought seriously. Then again, I hadn’t seen the results up close before. Talked with them, seen how they were affected.

Ignorance really is fucking blissful.

It’s also unrepairable, and once it’s shattered there’s no way in hell that it’s coming back.

I sigh, standing here, wallowing, is getting me shit. So I turn and walk over to the door to my bedroom. I begin to change into my sleep-wear. I unbutton my white shirt and pull it off, over my head. As I do I catch a glimpse in the mirror hanging on the wall of my left side.

I didn’t lie to Eren when I’d said I’d been affected by the bomb as well.

Burn marks, pink and etched into my skin crawl up the side of my body like, well, fire.
They’re faded, but still visible. Stuff like that doesn’t just pop and vanish. No matter how fucking much I want it to.

Especially when they’re fucking everywhere on that side of my body. Up and down my thigh, my abdomen, the underside of my arm. Thank god they’re at least covered by clothes. Otherwise there’d be a hell of a lot more explaining to do when I walked on the streets.

I guess I understand Eren in that aspect, except while his scars are glaringly visible, mine are hidden away, under sleeves and shirts. He doesn’t have the luxury of hiding them.

_Fucking hypocrite, telling him not to worry what others think. Just because you can hide and he can’t._

There comes shitty guilt again. I pull on a t-shirt and change my pants quickly. I just want to get to bed and sleep.

I have to go to that damned group again tomorrow. And then face Eren at the Café.

Not exactly my cup of tea for a day.

Fuck it. I just want to sleep.

I crawl into bed with that very intention. Sadly my mind plays against me for the majority of the night. I’m going to be exhausted for the rest of the day tomorrow. Like usual.

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_Eren’s POV_

“So, do you have your goal ready?” Armin asks as I buckle in and he pulls into the street.

“Goal?” It takes a moment for my mind to process what he’s talking about. “Shit.”

“I’ll take that as a no.” Armin smiles, “How did I figure?”

“Wow, thanks for the vote of confidence.” I retort.

“I’m kidding,” Armin turns to look at me for a moment, “I think you’ll come up with something.” He turns his eyes back to the road.

“I’m kidding,” Armin turns to look at me for a moment, “I think you’ll come up with something.” He turns his eyes back to the road.

“Like what?” I ask, already trying to come up with something to say.

“I don’t know. That’s for you to decide, in the end.” Armin shrugs, “Levi listed a few ideas yesterday but I don’t know if you want to say ‘annoy the shit out of Levi’ as your goal.” He’s still smiling.

“No,” I say quietly, and idea coming to mind, “No I think I have a different goal in mind.” I smile to myself.

“I knew you would.” Armin nods.

As we pull into the driveway Armin parks next to a dark red car where Jean is helping Marco get out. I step up as Marco steps, not into his wheelchair, but onto the ground, with two crutches under his arms. He spots me and waves, I walk up to the two of them, Armin trailing behind me.

“Wow, Marco, you’re really trying to learn how to walk again!” Armin says brightly. Marco
laughs embarrassedly.

“Yeah, well, I’ve been trying for a while. I just haven’t been getting the hang of it… I actually wasn’t sure whether or not I could even try with the crutches but Jean convinced me to do so.” He cast a smile over at Jean, who looked both embarrassed and pleased.

“So you can show sympathy and basic human kindness.” I say, “Nice job, Jean.” He looks like he’s about to retort but Armin beats him to it.

“Eren!” Armin reprimands me.

“Sorry, sorry. But, really, nice job Marco!” I say, “You’re already doing better than I was when I first tried to relearn how to walk. God that was a pain.” I groan, remembering all the therapeutic ‘activities’ including having to walk while holding onto these long railings which made me feel like an elder in an old-folks home.

“Thanks, Eren. Hopefully I’ll be able to walk completely, soon.” Marco smiles, “But I’m surprised it was hard for you. You walk so naturally, it makes me jealous.” He admits sheepishly.

“Really? Wow, because I still feel like a pirate with a wooden peg-leg.” I joke with a shrug. “But… thanks.”

“We should probably get in before Hanji drags us in there.” Jean comments as he watches a familiar brunette ponytail walk inside. Armin nods and we go ahead as Jean and Marco take it a little slower, making sure that Marco’s comfortable with his crutches. I turn my head and watch them as I walk inside. Marco’s struggling a little bit but I think he’ll get it soon. He’s doing well.

“They’re a cute couple.” Armin comments.

“Couple?” I’m a little shocked. So I turn my head and watch them again. Sure, Jean’s a little close to Marco, and he’s always helping him around but…

“Yeah, it’s obvious Jean’s head over heels for Marco.” Armin replies, “You didn’t notice?”

I watch them closer, “I mean, I guess I knew they were always together but… Wow.” I wonder what made Marco fall for a guy like Jean. “Didn’t think Jean was Marco’s type. I would’ve seen him with someone… nicer.”

Armin shrugs next to me, “We fall in love with strange people, I guess.”

I turn my head back as we approach the sliding glass doors. As I do I see Hanji walk inside chatting happily with Petra... and Levi.

It’s weird, but I no longer feel burning hatred when I look at him. Are we friends? I have no idea. I guess just... friendly acquaintances? I don’t hate the guy anymore...

Wow, it feels strange. To see someone you used to hate but now... you don’t. It shouldn’t be that simple, should it? Shouldn't there be some lingering fire? Something? But the more I think about it... the more it makes sense. Hatred is strange like that, it's as fluid as friendship. In the same way you so easily break the bonds of friendship by doing one misdeed, you can repair bonds broken by hatred with enough acts of kindness. Not that I would call Levi's acts kind... But I have to at least admit that talking with him hasn't been terrible. And, occasionally, it's even pleasant.

We walk through the lobby and push open the door to the square white room. Somebody put a green leafy plant in the far corner, as if it was a weak attempt to brighten up the place. The chairs
are already put in a circle.

“Oh, Hanji, we’re going to need another chair today.” Armin pipes up.


“Marco’s actually walking.” Petra claps her hands together when he says this.

“That’s great!” She exclaims.

“Yes!” Hanji’s exclamation easily drowns her out, “Haha! What did I tell you, Levi? The whole choose-your-goal does work!” She gloats.

“Fuck off, Hanji, the kid was determined even before you came along.” He snaps.

“Aww, don’t be mad, Mister Grumpy Pants.” Hanji actually hugs Levi at this. I half expect him to tear her throat out for touching him but instead he just shoves her off.

“Get off of me, dammit, when was the last time you washed those clothes anyway?” He brushes off his sleeve. I can’t help but crack a smile.

“Two days ago!” Hanji proclaims happily.

“Disgusting! Now I have fucking dirt all over me, and whatever the hell else is on your clothes.” Levi wrinkles his nose in disgust. I let out a small snicker. “Something amusing, brat?” He asks.

“Nope!” I say, smiling broadly, “Not a thing, ‘Mister Grumpy Pants’.” Levi scowls at me and taking his seat.

“Fucking brat, you’d better not try to piss off on your ‘goal’ today.” He puts air-quotes around the words ‘goal’.

“I won’t.” I say confidently. Levi’s impassive face seems to show surprise for a split second before returning to it’s previous cynical impassiveness. Maybe it’s me but I think I see the shadow of a smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

“Ah! Yes! Eren, you still have yet to tell the group your goal!” Hanji chimes. “It sounds like you already have an idea! I can’t wait to drag it out of you!” She smiles widely. Something about her wording creeps me out and makes me, like usual, want to run out of this group screaming bloody murder before there is a bloody murder. And I’m the victim.

“Creepy as fuck.” Levi mutters, Hanji takes fake offense.

“Hey!” She says.

“Um, guys, we still need to get a chair.” Petra chimes up.

“Right!” Hanji smiles, hugging Petra as she does so, “Thanks for reminding me!” She lets go, and I hear Petra suck in a breath as if her air had been cut off. Which, in all honesty, is a viable possibility considering that it’s Hanji who hugged her. Hanji leaves the room, and without her there’s a sudden, foreign noise.

Which is to say: It’s silent.

We all take our seats and, with the sudden silence, the room fills with a kind of awkwardness. Or maybe that’s just me.
“So…” Petra starts up a conversation, “You have a goal, Eren?” She asks. I nod in response.

“Er, yeah, I guess I do?” I phrase it more like a question this time, less confidently.

“Do you or don’t you?” Levi chimes up, his eyes were closed as he leans against the back of the chair, he opens them and stares at me. “Because you don’t sound very sure.”

“I do!” I say. I hear Petra laugh next to Levi.

“What’s so fucking funny?” He asks.

“You sound like Hanji.” She explains.

“I don’t.” Levi retorts.

“You… kind of do…” Armin says sheepishly, but a sharp glance from Levi makes him quiet up.

“I don’t,” He repeats, “If I did I would have called it a half-assed hand-job of an answer and choked you to death in a hug when you finally answered correctly.” He rolls his eyes. Petra giggles,

“True.” She says. I smile as well.

“Well, half-assed hand-job of an answer or not, I still have my goal.” I say, leaning back. It feels strange to be relaxed, I guess I’m finally adjusting to this group.

“Huh, well, glad you decided to actually step up and realize that.” Levi crosses his arms across the circle. “So, what is it?” He asks.

“You’re going to have to wait to find out.” I smile, even if I’m actually on neutrally-good terms with Levi, doesn’t mean I don’t like annoying him, somewhat. It’s like playing with fire; you know it’s dangerous, but it’s also kind of irresistible.

Levi just turns his head to the side. “Fine.” He says, he sounds annoyed. Then again, when does he not?

At this point Hanji comes barging in, dragging a chair behind her as Marco and Jean walk in after her. She sets the chair down in the circle and Jean helps Marco sit before taking a seat himself, Hanji strides confidently into the center of the circle.

“Alright! Let’s get this party started!” She fist-pumps the air. Nobody responds. “Aren’t you all excited? Come on! Show some energy!” She gestures for us to do something, what, exactly, I’ll never know.

“Whoop-de-fuckity-doo, can we just get on with this?” Levi sighs.


“And I think I know what for!” Hanji claps her hands together, her eyes turn onto me. A wild gleam in them as she spins around wildly.

Fuck.

I will never get used to her energy. Ever.

It’s like being near an over-excited puppy, one who has yet to be potty-trained so you just hope it doesn’t pee on you.
“Eren! What is your goal?” Hanji asks.

“Well, it’s kind of an open-ended goal but…” I start, “I’m in college and I still have no idea what I’m going to major in. So my goal is to find a major. Stick with it, and get my degree, and then hopefully a job in that major.”

“That’s a perfect goal, Eren!” Hanji says, then turns to everyone, “And that includes all of you, as well! Keep your goals open. Life changes, bends, and twists in unexpected ways, and therefore so should your goals! Don’t be dead-set!” Hanji smiles broadly at all of us.

“Now, let’s move onto the next activity!” She smiles, taking her seat at the head of the circle.

---

As I stack my chair along with the others and begin to head toward the exit, Hanji calls out to us.

“Well, that’s it for this week! I’ll see you all next week! Oh, and don’t forget to work on your goals! Don’t half-ass the hand-job of life! He’s a hard one!” I can hear Petra shush her as she says this, Hanji responds with a laugh.

Armin and I exit to the lobby where Jean is holding the door open for Marco.

“You really don’t have to worry so much, Jean. I need to learn to do these things on my own.” Marco’s saying, but I can see him smile from across the room.

Wait, is Jean actually blushing?

“I know, but… Hey, let me do what I can, okay?” Jean stammers a bit. I can’t help but let out a small snicker.

*Smooth moves, Horseface.*

Although I do give the guy some credit, who knew he could actually be nice and courteous to someone? I’m starting to see what Armin was talking about, more and more. Good for them, I think Jean needs a little bit of Marco in his life. Someone who can teach him to not be an ass twenty-four-seven.

As per usual I say goodbye to Armin at his car and turn to jog back to my apartment. I glance down at my leg, it’s even stiffer since I didn’t jog yesterday either. Today’s going to be awkward as fuck.

I look up, and surprisingly end up meeting eyes with Levi. He doesn’t look away and neither do I. For a second I wonder if we’re going to get into our one of our one-upmanship staring contests, but instead he just nods and turns back to talking with Petra and Hanji. I think he knows, especially after our conversation yesterday. When I don’t move he looks back up with a scowl and gestures his head to the side, a sort of ’go on, get a move with it.’

I think he’s encouraging me but I’m not fully sure, since it’s Levi after all.

Either way I smile at him, I can’t see his full expression from over here but I don’t think he expected that.

‘Thanks’ I mouth back to him but he’s looking back at Hanji and Petra, I think I see him nod, though.

I turn and begin running, and yes, it’s awkward as hell because my leg keeps swinging out to the
side like it’s asleep, but I just keep running. I don’t even notice if there’s anyone staring at me from across the street.

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After a short while I fall into a rhythm, and then my leg settles back into the strange feel of the metal bouncing against the pavement. Not feeling the pavement itself but feeling the pressure. I get used to it, again, and start to actually move like a normal person.

Which, of course, gives me time to think.

I still don’t know what I’ll do for my major. Sure, it’s still freshman year and we don’t have to declare until sophomore year. But I should start planning it out now.

Then again, I still don’t even know how to plan it out.

I never really thought past high school. I guess I always thought I’d major in Political Sciences because it was there and that’s what my dad wanted. At the same time… There’s no way I’d be happy in that.

Hell, there’s no way I’d pass that. I’m barely scraping along a passing grade right now. I don’t even know what my grade is. I need to pay a little bit more attention to that. Just a bit.

I don’t have a passion… And it sucks.

I have nothing to be passionate about.

Nothing.

And no one but my best friend and my sister.

Wow, great life you’re leading there, Jaeger. So successful, so full of life.

We’re all our own critics.

I shake my head as I run. I just need to… I don’t know. Try something new?

No way in hell am I ending up at some cubicle desk-job. So I can scratch those out.

Something artsy?

I’m not an artsy type, though. It’s not something I find pleasure in, and I’m not even the biggest fan of walking around through museums and such.

My feet slow to a stop in front of my apartment building. No time to wonder about that now. I’m going to meet Levi soon.

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When I get to The Rose Café, Levi’s already sitting at our usual table with a coffee in front of him. I walk into the café and make my way around the tables to the outdoor veranda, when I open the door Levi looks up and we meet eyes for a second before he glances back down at a book in his lap. I go over and sit across from him.

He wears reading glasses, huh.
“Hey,” I greet him. Levi slips a bookmark onto the page of his book and sets it aside, taking off his glasses as he does so.

“So, before you launch into your usual persistent questioning of who the hell I want to talk to again, let me ask you something first,” He starts off, I can’t help but smile because, guilty as charged, I brought my notebook in my backpack. “Do you have any clue on what the fuck you want to major in?” He asks.

“No, but… That was kind of part of my goal, remember? Find out what I want to do and then do it?” I reply, curious as to what makes him so interested in this.

“Still, how do you expect to find out?” Levi presses.

“I don’t know, go out? Try new things?” Maybe I haven’t given that part of my plan so much thought but… I’m sure I’ll come up with something!

“Hmm…” Levi looks down for a moment, his hand subconsciously playing with the edge of the book pages. At least, I think it’s subconscious. Levi looks up again, folding his hands in his lap. “Alright.” He says, and leaves it at that.

“Oh,” I remember earlier today, back when I was about to go for my run, “Thanks, by the way.” Levi looks confused.

“Thanks? For what?” He asks, leaning back against the chair.

“You know, earlier today you seemed to… I don’t know, encourage me? When I was jogging home. Thanks for that. It helped.” I smile and he looks away.

“Yeah, great, you’re welcome.” He clears his throat and then looks back up at me, “How did it go?” He asks.

“How did what go?”

“Holy shit, your fucking run. What else would I be asking about?” There’s the Levi I know. I was surprised when he didn’t curse for the majority of our conversation.

“Oh, right, it… went well. I didn’t notice if anyone stared so I was actually able to fall into a normal running pattern,” I shrug, “And not look like a one-legged flamingo.”

I think I hear Levi slightly laugh at that, not sure, it was more of a small smirk than anything. But it’s there and, obviously, I can’t resist the temptation to tease him about it.

“Wow, you actually smiled. I didn’t think that was possible.” I say.

“Fuck off, I’m not smiling.” Levi’s smirk falls into his usual scowl.

“Fine… smirking.” I clarify.

“No.” Levi immediately rejects the idea.

“Oh, come on, you’ve got to give me something.” I sigh, leaning back against the chair. “Well,” I begin, reaching down to my backpack, “If you won’t admit to smiling maybe you’ll admit to something else.” I hold the notebook up triumphantly and smile.

“Are we going to do this every fucking time?” Levi sighs, placing the cup he was just drinking from down.
“Until you tell me who it is, yes.” I flip through the notebook until I find the page with the list written down.

“You’re a persistent little shit, you know that?” Levi glowers.

“Yep. Wouldn’t want to be any other way.” I settle on the page and look for where we left off last time. “We got past mother… father… Ah! Cousin?” I look up as I ask.

“No.” Levi sighs, crossing his legs, resigned to his fate.

“Best friend?” I continue on.

“No.”

“Child?”

“How old do you think I fucking am?” Levi glares at me.

“I don’t know! Old enough?” I hope that was the right answer.

“How old is ‘old enough’?” Wrong answer, thanks for playing.

“Fuck, uh, shit, um…” Levi doesn’t look old at all, hell he could be in his twenties… But at the same time he was my senior in the army and the way he acts… "Forty? No- wait- twenty. No, shit, maybe twenty-five?” I look away, trying to figure out the right measurement between insulting and too young to be true.

“You’re not even fucking looking at me! How old do you think I am?” Levi repeats.

“Let’s just move onto the next one!” I try to dodge the question.

“Oh fuck no, you’re answering this!” He crosses his arms.

“Lover?” I skip to the next question anyway.

“Eren,” Levi warns me.

“Girlfriend?” I skip down the list.

“I’m not straight. I’m gay, Eren. So no, it’s not a ‘girlfriend’. ”


“Fuck that,” Levi sighs “You didn’t know.” His expression changes a bit there, his scowl softens, “Which are you, anyway?”

“Which… what?” The sudden turn of conversation has lost me.

“Wow, shit, do you need everything clarified?” Levi sighs.

“Hey!”

“Which are you, straight, gay, bi, pan, asexual, et cetera, et cetera. You know the scale, I hope.” Levi takes a casual sip of his coffee as if he didn’t just question me on something kind of personal.

“Uh…” I hesitate. I know what I am, I’ve been openly gay for a long ass time. Mainly because if I
was with a girl, well, I’d almost feel like I was with my sister and that’d just be fucked up. Plus, I mean, I find guys attractive, what can I say?

“Oh god,” Levi groans, “Don’t tell me you’re homophobic.” He sighs, “Great, just my fucking luck.” He says this under his breath.

“No!” I protest, A person from across the veranda looks up, so I quiet myself down, “No, I’m not homophobic.” My face turns red, “I’m gay, too. It’s just… That’s a little personal, don’t you think?”

“What, are you still ‘in the closet’ or whatever the damn expression is?” Levi asks.

“No, I’ve been open for a while. I just… I don’t go parading around throwing my sexuality at every passerby.” I sigh.

“This isn’t fucking parading, brat. This is answering a question that’s actually just one aspect of the whole damn personality. You think I give a fuck about what the hell you are? There’s kind of more to a person than just their fucking sexuality.” Levi sighs.

“I know, I know.” I lean back with a sigh, “Oh, you never answered my question.”

“We just went through the whole ‘I’m gay’ shit and you still ask if I have a girlfriend?” A look of disbelief passes over Levi’s face.

“No girlfriend! Boyfriend, little bit of a difference there.” I clarify.

“I get it!” I interrupt Levi before he can continue with that sentence. Has he zero shame? Or just zero fucks to give?

“I get it!” I interrupt Levi before he can continue with that sentence. Has he zero shame? Or just zero fucks to give?

“Calm your shit, brat. No, it's not a boyfriend.” Levi shakes his head.

I think he has zero fucks to give.

“Oh, okay.” I say, but my mind is repeating back our conversation, one line doesn’t stand right with me. “When you asked if I was homophobic you said it was ‘just your luck’. Why?”

“Well, being gay and getting paired up with a homophobe isn’t exactly a fucking picnic.” Levi picks up his drink to take a sip, but scowls when he finds it empty, and sets it back down.

“True…” I say, but part of me feels like there’s a bit more to the story. “Friends with benefits?”

“You did not just fucking ask me that.” Levi grimaces, his face contorting in a look of disgust.

“I guess you don’t like the whole friends with benefits thing?” I can help but smile, Levi’s face right now looks so funny to me. The man who shows no emotion looking like he just stepped onto a dead rat, well, then again I have no idea if Levi would even react to a dead rat.

“Not anymore.” Levi mutters, his face relaxing into it’s neutral expression.

“But you did before?” I inquire. Levi looks up at me.

“I would say ‘fuck off’ but I’m getting the sense that such a thing has no effect on you.” Levi crosses his legs as he leans back.
“See? Now you know me on a personal level. So why don’t you just tell me who it is?”

“Part of me is screaming irony.” Levi replies in a dead-panned voice, it almost makes me think of Mikasa, almost. “Since you’re always the one questioning as to why I care about your personal life.”

He has a point.

Shut up, now is not the time.

“This is different,” I protest.

“How?” Levi catches me on my half-lie.

“Well…” I stumble over my reasoning, “I mean, you’re always calling me out on things. Here I’m just questioning you.” Levi stays silent for a moment and then he sighs.

“Alright, Jaeger, you want to play this game? Great, I’m shitty at games but I have a feeling you are too.”

“Hey!”

“Why do you care so fucking much about my personal affairs?” Levi watches my face, having turned the very same question I keep asking him on me. I’m at a loss. I don’t know why I care so much, because it’s fun? Because it’s something to talk about? Because pestering Levi is fun?

Maybe I actually want to know, I am curious about the answer.

“Well, I want to know the answer.” I say.

“I know you’re dead-set on the answer to that. But it’s not just that which you pester me about. It’s fucking everything. My age, why I go to Erwin, my sexuality-“

“That one just sort of came up!”

“Fuck if it did, it’s yet another thing you put down on your shitty list. It was going to come up one way or another.” Levi has a point, “So I want to know; why are you so curious about me, Eren?”

Why am I so curious about him? Well he doesn’t give me any real fact! I know all that’s seen on the surface and somehow, for some reason, I want to see what’s underneath all that. I don’t know why, I don’t know how, but I do!

Even if he’s an ass. Some part of me thinks he’s not an ass-through-and-through.

Why else would he care?

“The same reason you’re questioning me.” I answer, “I want to know, because I don’t know. Speaking of which I still have no fucking clue why you care so much about my problems anyway.”

Levi stays quiet after that. I guess it was an acceptable answer, or not. I can’t really read his face right now, it just looks… thoughtful. I guess. He looks calmer than he has before, but deep in thought. Suddenly he sighs,

“Fuck it,” He mutters to himself. He checks his watch, “I need to go.” He stands up to leave.

“Wait! You still haven’t answered me.” I grab hold of his sleeve and stand myself. There’s no way
you’re getting away that easy.

“You didn’t ask a question.” Levi shakes me off as he says this.

“Fine,” I roll my eyes, “Why do you care so much about my problems. And no more of that ‘I’m a human, I have feelings and compassion’ bullshit. Not every person cares for everyone else’s problems.”

“You’re right, not everyone’s problems, there are people I don’t give a fuck about.” Levi sighs.

“Then why mine?”

Levi takes a deep breath.

His answer only confuses me more.

Chapter End Notes

So I did a little thing with this chapter, it's something that is a minor bother now n then when I read other fanfics. They never actually establish that the other one likes men. Unless that's the whole point of the fan fiction (be it either they think the other is straight or they are straight but turned gay/bi/pan by falling for the other one.) Part of me always mentally cheers when an author remembers to establish that in some way/shape/form, it's not a big deal just... A small thing. Although a really funny fan fiction would be someone who they thought was gay, but was actually straight, and then turned gay/bi/pan after interacting with the other person. Fun times.

But yeah, I felt the need to establish that in some way/shape/form to not fall into that minor trap! Tell me what you think!

Also cliffhangers because otherwise this chapter would be too long and the next too short :/.

Comments and Kudos much appreciated :D
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

I find myself looking forward to these weekly updates more and more with each chapter! I guess I’m getting even more attached to this fic as I work on it! Which is good, because it makes both writing and editing it all very fun for me!

Anyway, this chapter is short but there’s a lot of plot set-up and it’s basically setting up everything that’s going to be happening in the next few chapters or so. Hope you all enjoy!

Come talk to me:
goldie-the-cat.tumblr.com

Special thanks to my lovely editor!

“I don’t know.” He answers flatly, blatantly. There’s no embarrassment or shame in his eyes or expression, just plain-out ‘I don’t know.’

“You don’t know?” I ask, incredulous with his answer. “Really?”

“Do you think I’m in the business of bullshitting people?” Levi narrows his eyes. “If I knew I would tell you, but I don’t.” He sighs, “Maybe it’s because we’re paired up together so I’m supposed to give a shit, who knows?”

“If you don’t know then why did you continue to push me, that time when I couldn’t run?”

“Look, brat, I don’t have the time right now. I’ve got to go.” Levi turns towards the cafe.

“But—” I’m cut off by the slam of the door closing behind him as I watch Levi walk up to the cashier to pay for his drink. I’m tempted to stop him as he comes out the other door but some part of me knows that won’t help. So instead I just watch him as he exits, he meets eyes with me. Holding my gaze for a second before looking ahead and leaving.

My shoulders sag. I may never get to understand his motivations.

I want to know.

I want to know why he cares about me, of all people. I get Mikasa caring, she’s my sister. I understand Armin caring, he’s my best friend. But why the hell does Levi care?

Either way, standing here won’t help me. So I leave the café. I’ll be seeing Levi tomorrow again, either way. Maybe it’ll give me some time to think about what happened here…

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Mikasa’s home early today.
“Hi.” I say, surprised, she glances up at me, a paper and pen in her hands. “What’s going on?” I ask.

“Bills.” She sighs and places the papers down.

“Fun stuff.” I tried to help out the bills once, almost ended up paying the electrical bill what was due for the water bill, ever since then, Mikasa’s handled most of that business.

“Also a letter from Dad.” She slides the open paper envelope, the corners of a letter sticking out of the open edges. I never know what to think when we get a message from our father. After my mother was killed he suffered deeply. He loved her, and losing her broke him. It was terribly hard for him to walk around the house she once lived in, and near impossible for him to look at me without crying or at least tearing up.

So he left. Just left to go somewhere else for his job, and since then he’s been sending us mail and letters from time to time always from someplace new. I have… mixed feelings about his absence.

He tried, and I have to hand that much to him. He tried hard to stay and still tries to help us out with apartment payment and education payment. But that doesn’t change the fact that he’s not here and hardly ever addresses us.

So, I have mixed feelings. The first few letters he sent made me straight-out hate him, and after Armin tried to make me see things from his point of view I began to feel sad when we got letters from him. Now I just choose to not feel anything. I treat them as if he were on… vacation, or something.

He’s gone. But he’ll be back.

Even though I know he won’t, not for a long time.

There are still some letters that make me mad, like when he asks how we’re doing but I know he won’t ever get the reply, so why could he care to ask anyway? And there are some letters that sadden me, like when they seem completely impersonal, almost business-like. As if we’re not his kids and he’s just sending a business letter to an associate.

So, with little to no idea about what awaits me, I pull the slightly-crumpled paper out of the envelope and open up the page. It starts off like it’s going to be one of his more impersonal letters. Those seem to be coming more and more often nowadays.

Dear Eren and Mikasa,

His handwriting is square, stiff, and the ink seems to be laid on thickly, as if it took him longer to write each letter and word.

I’m across the country right now. And I’m afraid work is moving me yet again.

Nothing new there. Most of his letters start out with some ‘I’m sorry but…’ or ‘I’m afraid that…’, as if we’re not used to this. As if we don’t expect that when we get a letter from Grisha Jaeger it’s going to tell us that he’s moving to some new place or traveling off to some different country.

The majority of the letter is normal, talking about the things he’s done or the places he’s visited. He has a new leather bag because his old one ripped and he’s going to send a present that he thought would help Mikasa with keeping track of expenses since he knows that she’s been trying to grow more mature and take care of us on her own. Then I get to two parts that make me stop. Two parts in one paragraph.
As of now I’ve started dating my fellow co-worker, she’s a younger woman and I think the two of you will like her. I’m hoping to bring her back there sometime so that the three of you can sit down and meet. I think Mikasa especially will connect with her, having another woman around to talk with. Perhaps she’ll even become your new mother. Who knows?

I feel anger burst to life in the pit of my stomach. Who knows? Who knows! I know! I know that nobody can be our ‘new mother’! Our mother is dead! Dead! Goddammit, how can you just say that?

Then the next part of the paragraph.

Meanwhile, on the subject of money and education. I’ve come across a special opportunity but it’ll take a while for me to get all the preparations in place. In the meantime I’m going to need the rest of the money for the next month or two. I’m sending up some extra money but after that I hope the two of you will be able to manage for rent. If not then I’ve talked to the college board and if need be the two of you can move onto campus which would be cheaper and more efficient. I wonder why you’re both so insistent on staying in an off-campus apartment to begin with?

Does he not remember that his only son has nightmares which wake him up screaming? Does he not remember that such a thing might just disturb a college roommate? Does he ever think of us? At all? I fold up the paper and place it back down onto the envelope, a little harsher than I’d wanted to. The slam makes Mikasa’s head snap up.

“Goddamn him!” I exclaim, Mikasa nods slowly before turning back to the bills. I pull the chair out next to her and plop down. “What the fuck is he doing…?”

Mikasa places the pen down and lowers her papers.

“Which part? The ‘special opportunity’? Or his ‘new girlfriend’?” She asks, putting air quotes around them both.

“Both of them.” I sigh, resting my head in my hands, curling my hair around my fingers. Mikasa nods.

“I suppose we should be happy for him,” She sits back, “Life seems to be going uphill for him.”

“Well I’m sure as hell not happy for him.” I say, Mikasa just stays silent. “He’s abandoning mom!”

“Mom is dead, Eren.” Mikasa doesn’t miss a beat, she was probably expecting that outburst.

“I know she’s dead!” I yell, Mikasa doesn’t flinch, move, or say anything, she doesn’t even blink. Just waits for me to calm down. I take a deep breath. “Mom is dead… I know that.” I repeat quietly, “But…” I can’t put it into words.

“But you don’t want to move on from that.” Mikasa tilts her head to the side, her red scarf falling behind her shoulder, “And you don’t want him to move on from that, either. Because if you continue on, you feel like you’re abandoning her, like you’re disgracing her memory.”

Mikasa’s on point, as per usual.

“What about you?” I ask, “What do you feel about all this?” Knowing Mikasa, she probably won’t tell me all of it, but perhaps she’ll tell me something if she knows it’ll help me.

“Grisha’s life is no longer entangled in our own, Eren.” She reaches for the bills, holding them up,
“This and that,” She points to the letter, “Are the only two things left connecting us. So what he does doesn’t affect us.” She places the bills back down.

“Long as we’re able to stay warm and keep the lights on, I don’t care what he does.” Mikasa leaves it at that, and I notice she doesn’t touch on the subject of what she feels towards mom. Or how this makes her feel towards mom.

“Do we?” I ask, “He mentions he won’t be able to pay for another month or two.” Mikasa glances at the pen, she then picks it up and nods quietly.

“Yes, I’ve saved up enough by now. A month or two won’t do us any harm.” She clicks the pen and begins to go over the bills again. I watch her, she’s focused, intense, and beyond her impassive expression I see a slight crinkle in her eyebrows. She’s worried, too.

I can’t let her take this on her own.

“I’m going to get a job.” I declare, and Mikasa’s head snaps up again.

“Eren…” Mikasa’s face darts around mine, as if trying to find some fault in my resolution.

“Look, we both know free-time isn’t exactly the greatest thing for me.” I say, it’s true that most of the time I get to ‘think’ or ‘relax’ will end up with some episode like it has before. With not remembering high school or something else that’ll make me panic, “So as long as I keep busy I won’t have any time to panic.”

“Or any time to learn to stop panicking.” Mikasa replies.

“That’s what the psychologist is for.” I say, “I think this’ll be good for me, Mikasa. Especially if it keeps the lights on.” Mikasa doesn’t reply, just lets out a small ‘hmm’ before turning back to her papers. I may not have her full approval, but I at least have her consent.

I smile at her and retreat to my room. The realization dawns on me that if I get a job, I’ll have even less time to work on schoolwork, and barely passing Political Sciences is hard enough right now. I shut the door to my room and pull out my backpack.

Mikasa was wrong, there’s one thing not made of paper that connects us to dad.

Politics. Political Sciences if you’re really being specific.

I remember his letter, it’s impersonal tone, the lack of care that he’s leaving us on our own without knowledge of how our expenses are going already. Paper is thin, paper is weak, paper’s not a strong bond. Maybe ideas are stronger. I pull out my reading and get to work. It may be boring as hell but it might be one of the only ways to actually turn his head, make him realize that this isn’t right. This isn’t the way to live.

Time to actually get more than a B.

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I learn quickly how to fill out several online applications in only a few minutes. Most of them are complete shit but the jobs don’t seem too good either so I don’t try so hard on those ones. The first few were hard to answer, but as I get into a rhythm I start to predict the questions. They’re all pretty similar.

*Do you have any previous experience in this line of work?*
Have you ever been to our establishment?

Probably not.

Do you have a history of drug abuse or alcoholism?

Happily no.

Have you ever been arrested?

Mikasa would have killed me if I ever was. Or did anything to warrant it. So, for the sake of survival, no.

There’s only one or two that really interest me, so I pay more attention to those. The one that catches my eye the most is for a small shop I pass by occasionally on my jogs. It’s small, doesn’t get a lot of business but occasionally has a small line trailing out the pale cream doorway, and always smells like macaroons.

Which macaroons are, in fact, one of their sales items. It’s a tiny little sweet-shop. One of the only for a while, or so I’ve seen. Mikasa occasionally picks up one of their tiny cup-cakes for birthdays or other special events, and Armin’s a sucker for their lemon bars. But who wasn’t? They're great.

I’ve even seen my health-nut sister go down on one of their tiered chocolate cake slices like it’s one of her vegetable smoothies.

Who knew the place was hiring?

I have a sweet tooth, and can cook cavity-inducing treats, so why not? If nothing else it would at least be an excuse to sit behind the counter and just smell the scent of macaroons and freshly-baked cupcakes.

So I actually try to make myself seem impressive on that application. Which is harder than it looks considering I’m an unemployed, one-legged college student who hobbles around on a metal prosthetic like some hybrid-tinman.

No matter, I click submit on the application and lean back against the headboard of my bed with a sigh. My three-quarter finished reading lies opened next to me. So I close my computer and pull it back onto my lap when my phone buzzes rapidly.

It’s Armin, I click the small green phone and hold it up to my ear.

“Hey.” I greet him.

“Hi Eren, Mikasa just told me about the letter from your dad.” Armin says. I still have mixed feelings about the letter. I’m mad but at the same time he still sent it. He still wants to keep in contact with us… right?

“Yeah,” I sigh, “Well, if nothing else he’s at least doing what most dads do.”

“What’s that?”

“Forcing their lazy son to get off of his ass and get a job.” I smile as I say this. A job will be good for me. It’ll give me less time to think. Which is always good in my case.
“You sound like you’re taking this pretty well.” Armin sounds surprised.

“What did you expect?”

There’s silence on the other end of the phone. I sigh, “Another panic attack?” I ask him.

“Well, it was always a possibility.” Armin points out, he sounds shy, embarrassed at being found out.

“I know it’s just…” I try to find the correct words. “I’m done, Armin. Done being scared of every damn thing. I know I’m not cured but I’m done, and I don’t want to keep losing myself each time something goes wrong. Especially when life seems to have it out for me.”

“Life doesn’t have it out for you, Eren!” Armin protests, “You’ve just hit a rough spot. So have we all.”

“I know, I know. I didn’t mean that in a pessimistic way, Armin.” I reassure him, “It’s just the road is rough and it’s always going to be a little bit harder for me, that’s a fact, don’t deny it. But that doesn’t mean it won’t get better, eventually.” I feel like I’m reciting someone else’s words. Many people’s words, in fact. Mikasa’s, Armin’s, and to some extent I’m even repeating Levi’s words. Do they ring completely true in my head? No, not completely, but partially. Enough that I figure I’ll give it a shot. If not for my sake then for the health and worry of my friends.

But the one part that is completely true? I’m done with being scared all the time. I hate the way that even just falling asleep poses a challenge and I hate the way I jump at the smallest thing. Like a fucking road in the rain. I know I can’t put a total halt on all my fears and panics but… I just want it to be over. I’m sick and tired of being afraid. I want to fight it. I want to kill the fear that bubbles under my skin, waiting to lash out at whoever’s in front of me, like I did with Mikasa.

“Okay…” Armin says after the pause. He takes a deep breath, I can hear the whoosh of air from the other side of the phone, “Okay, just, if you need any help, you have friends, Eren. Friends that can help you.”

“Thank you, Armin. But I don’t want to ask for help from you, you have enough to deal with on your own.”

“Not just me.” Armin points out, “There’s a whole lot of people out there who care for you, past just me and Mikasa.” I laugh at this.

“In case you haven’t noticed my social life isn’t exactly a blooming rose.” I hadn’t gone out much or had really any human contact past Armin and Mikasa after I got back from the hospital the first time. All of my past friends kind of faded into sepia color; old, gone, and nowhere to be found or searched for.

“Maybe not, but it’s gotten better.” Armin replies, “I mean, everybody in the support group cares for you, we all care for each other. That’s what happens when you spill your guts to a group of people on a weekly basis. You start to actually care about them. At least I do.”

I think through the members of our little psychologically scarred troupe. I can’t deny that everybody looked damn proud when Marco walked in instead of being wheeled in. They all- We all cared to see him get better, still do. Jean’s an ass but I don’t wish the guy any ill-will… Psychologically, of course. And while he hasn’t shown much wrong I’m sure there’s something. And he certainly cares for Marco. Petra seems sweet, not that I’ve been able to talk to her much, so I hope whatever she’s going through gets better. She also appears to be the type of person who
would worry for everyone, PTSD inflicted or not. Hanji is… Hanji. I can’t tell if it’s worry or the
want to dissect our brains that made her take this job, but she is undeniably trying to help us get
better. Armin cares for every living thing, and he’s my best friend so of course I care for him. And
Levi is…

Levi is the one I just don’t know about. It’s strange, because even when I hated him we would still
be able to sit down and actually talk. Not fight, although we both tried to piss each other off, just
talk like… friends. Or at least friendly acquaintances. Even though now that I no longer hate him,
our conversations haven’t changed. Mainly because there was nothing to change. We were already
comfortable just talking to each other. That’s why I don’t know how to describe my ‘care’ for Levi.
Like I’d told him, it was because I was curious. I wanted to know more about him, and said that it
was because he didn’t answer my questions. But why did I keep pushing? Is it because, as Armin
states, I care for Levi?

That would mean I cared for him when I hated him, too. How is such a thing possible?

I don’t know. Those had been Levi’s words, I wonder if he knew that he was speaking for the both
of us?

I want to know, because I don’t know. That had been my answer. Hadn’t it? It was true but it still
left one glaringly obvious fault. Why do I keep pushing? Is it just curiosity?

Of course it is. There’s nothing else for it to be.

“Hey, Armin, I have to go and finish my homework, but I’ll talk to you later, okay?” I say into the
phone.

“Wow, you’re doing homework, willingly?” I can hear… pride, in Armin’s voice.

“Yeah, yeah, it’s not as fun as you make it out to be, by the way.” I smile at Armin’s happiness. It’s
so easy to surprise people, and yourself as well, as I’m learning.

“Great! Well, not great if it’s not fun. But great that you’re doing it! I’ll talk to you later, Eren!”
Armin’s cheery goodbye keeps me smiling even with the prospect of homework lain out before me.

“Yeah, I’ll talk to you later.” I say, and then hang up. When I turn back to my homework, an idea
comes to my mind.

I have something to tell Levi next time I see him.

Chapter End Notes

So for those of you who follow my tumblr I apologize for not posting my daily AU
head cannons. I’ve been sick and haven’t written all week (which is also why I haven’t
updated my other fic, I’ve fallen behind on everything sadly). But! I’m getting better so
hopefully I’ll resume writing soon. (I have a two-or-so hour drive with friends this
weekend so I’ll be sitting in the back of the car typing away, good thing I don’t get
carsick easily.) But yeah! That’s about it!

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated!
Seven thirty Wednesday came just as quickly as I thought it would. By the time Armin knocked on my door I was already ready, my shoes on and tied.

“Hey,” Armin greets me, “You ready?”

“Yeah,” I reply, a smile forming across my face. With any luck I would bump into Levi again on the way inside, and then I could tell him what I’ve wanted to say since Monday.

With luck it’ll make him trust me a bit more. Maybe then he’ll actually reveal something to me. Maybe then I can find out why the hell I care so much, or if it is just idle curiosity. After all, if that’s my reason then soon as I find out what I want to find out, I shouldn’t be curious anymore. I shouldn’t care anymore.

If it’s not then… I’ll cross that off of the list of possibilities.

When Armin drops me off at the building with the sliding glass doors, he asks me if I’ll be alright once again.

“Yes, Armin,” I say, “You don’t have to worry so much.” He smiles at me when I say this.

“Of course I do, you’re my best friend.” I close my door, Armin scrolls down the window, “I’ll see you in about an hour?” He asks.

“See you then.” I wave and wait for the lights of his car to disappear around the driveway’s bend. Then I turn, take a breath, and walk inside.

I don’t want to risk Erwin coming out and pulling me into the session until after I’ve told Levi what I want to. So I take a seat on the bench across from the elevator.

Then I wait. Strangely, I don’t think. My mind doesn’t wander to whatever the hell’s bothering me because there is nothing bothering me.

For once, I’m comfortable with what I’m about to do.

The elevator dings and the doors open, Levi steps out and I stand up.

“What the hell were you doing down here?” His greeting is true to his character. I don’t want to waste time getting into something with him, so I go ahead and say it.

“It was my mom, by the way.” I admit, his face goes from surprise to confusion, the change is subtle, barely there, but there nonetheless. I clarify, “The person who I wanted to talk to again.”

Levi takes a moment, then I see in his eyes that he registers what I’m saying. “Huh,” Is his only
comment. Then he narrows his eyes, the elevator doors close behind him with a ding. “Why are you telling me this now?” He asks. I shrug.

“Trust,” I say, “You don’t trust me, you hardly tell me everything and that’s kind of the point of the pairing. So I’m telling you something personal so you trust me more.”

“Do you trust me?” He asks, and I can’t say the question caught me off guard. I was expecting suspicion.

“Yes,” I admit, then I hesitate, “To some extent, yes, I do.” I can tell Levi wasn’t expecting me to admit I trust him. Because, once again, he looks surprised.

“What happened to me being your monster?” He then asks, quietly, not with the usual conviction that he spoke with. I wasn’t expecting that.

“I guess monster’s look scarier in the dark.” I smile, “In the light you’re more like a cat with claws. Won’t hug you, but not so bad.” He glares at me,

“You better not fucking hug me.” Levi snapped. He went quiet after that, a thoughtful look on his face, “You know you were right, about me being guilty.” He sighs. I don’t interject, just wait for him to continue. Levi seems to be waiting for me to say something as well,

“Shit, didn’t think you could be silent.” He comments.

“I’m a man of many talents,” I smile.

“Brat.” Levi smirks, but only for a minute, then his smirk falls again, “Look, kid, you asked why I care. I was honest, for the most part. So, while yes I have no fucking clue why I take it upon myself to call you out on your shit when you’re trying to put yourself down, I do know that part of it is guilt.” He pauses, then continues again, “But I didn’t bullshit you when I’d said that I wasn’t guilty, key word being wasn’t. I blame you for that.”

“What do you mean?” I don’t get it, how can he have not been guilty, then all of a sudden become guilty? Wouldn’t he have felt guilty beforehand, if he were to feel guilty now?

“I hadn’t seen what it did to you,” Levi scowls, “Or to Marco or anyone else in that damned group.” His face relaxes then, “I hadn’t really thought about what happened to you afterwards. I thought that long as they weren’t dead, they must be fine. And I hadn’t gotten any notices of deaths, so I stupidly thought that it was fine, is fine.” I follow his eyes down to my leg, “Obviously I was a fucking idiot.”

“So now that you see what the aftereffect is…”

“I know that I fucked up,” Levi shrugs, “But I can’t do anything about it, and shitty as that is,” There’s venom in his tone as he says that, “I just have to live with it.”

I feel like I should say something. I have the urge to reassure him that it’s not his fault, he was following orders, not purposefully throwing us into a trap…

Ironic, since the that’s the idea everyone’s been trying to drill into me, never thought I’d be on the other side of such a conversation. Especially not with the man I used to blame.

But I don’t say anything, and the conversation never happens because Levi walks out without another word. I watch him leave, the sliding glass doors opening and closing behind him. I watch until he reaches his car, his hand digging around in his jacket pocket, and finds his keys. I look
away when the car starts to pull out of the driveway, then I step forward, and press the elevator button.

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“Well, now, I’d thought you might’ve skipped out,” Erwin greets me with a smile when I open the door to the waiting room. His prosthetic arm and real arm are both crossed across his chest, and he’s leaning against the second door to his office. “Good to see you again.”

“Yeah, well…” I mutter, I’m not in the mood for this now. I think I messed up terribly back with Levi. I should have said something, anything, instead I just… didn’t do anything. He actually opened up to me, for once, and I didn’t help at all.

Great friend, aren’t I?

Wait… When did I start considering him a friend?

_Now’s not the time._ I shake that thought away and look back up to Erwin. His eyes have that analytical gleam to them. Like he knows more about what you’re thinking than you know.

“It looks like you’ve got a lot on your mind, Eren.” Erwin observes, “Why don’t we get started with the time we have left?” He walks inside without another word.

_Shit, I totally forgot I’d be late to this. How long did I talk with Levi?_ My neck heats up, not exactly the best second impression. _Good going, Jaeger, making friends all over._

I follow Erwin inside, he shuts the door behind us and sits down in the chair across from the couch. I sit on the couch and he pulls out his notepad and pen, just like before.

“So, if memory goes to serve, the last time you were here you were anxious over not remembering certain pieces of your past…” Erwin folds his hands together under his chin, “Any more of that?”

_Anxious, he says. That’s one way to put a panic attack._ I shake my head, “Not that I would know of,” I say.

“Have you been looking into that at all?” He asks.

“Not really,” I admit, I hadn’t exactly been searching for whatever else I’ve lost.

“Alright,” Erwin nods, “I also believe I told you that it would get worse before it gets better, have you been seeing any of that? More frequent nightmares or panic attacks?” Erwin asks.

At this I smile, “Actually I think you were wrong,” I say, “It’s been getting better, not worse. I haven’t had a nightmare in a while and I’m getting better at managing my panics. I think that… if there was a worse part I’ve gotten through it.”

“So you think yourself cured?” The skepticism in his tone is practically tangible.

“Not by a long shot,” I clarify, “Everything’s still shitty, and I still have to struggle to manage it, but I’m just saying that… whatever the hell happened last week hasn’t happened again.”

“It’s only been a week, Eren.” Erwin replies. _Wow, you’d think the psychologist would be happy to hear that it’s getting better._

“I know, I’m just saying…” I trail off, unsure of how to explain my resolution to Erwin. He sighs and leans back,
“If it has gotten better, then I’m happy for you, however,” Erwin uncrosses his legs, “I want you to be careful. Many people think that it’s gotten better because of one good day or even one good week. The problem there is that if it’s not better, if it really was just one good week, then soon as life goes back to the way it was it crushes them. And they run the risk of becoming even worse then they were before.” I think he sees the stubbornness to hold onto the idea that I’m getting better in my eyes, “I don’t want you getting to a point that’s dangerously bad, Eren. That’s not my job. My job is to help you get to a point where you don’t need me anymore.” Erwin remains calm, collected, he never falters when he talks.

Part of me hates him for that calmness. How can he be so calm? He… He must have seen the same things I have. After all, his arm… Was it lost in an incident like mine?

“How did you lose your arm?” I blurt out before I can stop myself. If he lost it in… any way similar to my leg, then he must know how important it is for me to get better.

Erwin smiled, the question didn’t catch him off guard at all. “I was in a military van, we hit a mine and the van flipped over, crushing my arm. So, yes, I do understand a bit about what you’re going through. If you were wondering.”

Then his face went sullen and serious again, “However my position still stands. You must understand that, for most cases, it takes more than just a week to be… free of what haunts you.”

“You mean cured,” I say,

“I try not to make it sound like you’re ill.” Erwin sits back against the chair, his notepad lies blank in his lap, but I don’t doubt him recording all this in his mind, “This isn’t an illness, and this isn’t a curse, Eren. It’s a change. And it’s only as bad as you make it.”

“As bad as I make it?” I scoff, it’s my turn to be disbelieving. “I lost my leg! And no matter what words you use to describe that, it’s not good! And it will never be good! More than that,” I snap before he can interrupt me, Erwin shuts his mouth and listens calmly, “I don’t want to make it good. I want to see it how it is, not bad not good, just how it is. And here’s how it is: I have half a leg! That’s not coming back, there’s no way to undo it. So, yes, I’m not getting better on some level because I can’t get better. My leg’s not going to regrow! But I am getting better, mentally, if I’m not panicking. And no matter what you say, that much is true.”

“Is it?” Erwin doesn’t miss a beat, “Are you really getting better? Or are you just setting it aside in lieu of bigger problems?”

My face pales. My dad. He wouldn’t know that? Would he? How would he, if he did? “What are you…”

“I do know about the letter your father sent,” I can feel my blood run quicker as my heart begins to pound against my chest, I recognize the suffocating feeling, anxiety. “Your sister called me.”

“Why would she…?” I can’t finish my sentences, my mind is running ahead of my mouth. And I can’t keep up.

“To see if you would still be able to afford meeting with me. Psychology isn’t cheap, Eren.” Erwin glances at the clock, “And neither is it long.” He sighs and stands, “I’ll see you next week, with any luck, you’re right and it’s not just one lucky week you’re having.” He holds open the door, I walk out without much thought, and without a goodbye. Instead I exit to the elevator and press the lobby button.
I hadn’t even thought of extra expenses. I mean, if anything it solidified my resolve to get a job to help support Mikasa but...

I’m more of a setback than I realized.

What could Mikasa do, with that money, if I wasn’t using it all up with things like Erwin and… the support group? Would she have a better life? Maybe there are things she’s wanted that she hasn’t gotten simply for my sake.

And of course she wouldn’t tell me. She’d want me to be happy, to think she was comfortable with our modest lifestyle even if she wanted more. I wouldn’t know, because she wouldn’t let me know.

Mikasa… how much have I troubled you?

I step out of the elevator heavily, I barely slip on my way to the parking lot because I walk slowly. When I get there, I see Armin wave to me from the driver’s seat of his car. I raise a hand in return and walk up to the passenger side.

“Hey,” He greets me, “You okay? You look a little down.”

_How much have I held you back, too?_

“I’m great!” I smile. A few days ago I’d promised myself to never let Armin or Mikasa see me panic again.

I’ll extend that to everything. I can’t let them think that I’m still bad. Maybe then they’ll stop focusing on me and start telling me their problems. I’ve troubled them enough. I need to learn how to help them.

“You sure?” Armin sounds skeptical. How many times have we been in this very situation? Me, lying through my teeth and Armin trying hard to see through it. I was too damn stubborn to let him through, though.

“Of course, why?” I ask, feigning a puzzled look.

Armin stares at me a moment longer, looking for some break, some twitch or give-away in my face. Finding none, he turns back to the steering wheel.

“No reason,” He sighs, starting up the car and pulling away from the building, “None at all…”

Sorry Armin, I really hate lying to you… But I won’t bother you any more.

---

When I step out of the car in front of the apartment building, Armin stops me again.

“You didn’t talk much on the ride back.” He comments.

“Nothing much to say,” I shrug, then smile, “It’s not like I go on wild, crazy, introspective adventures whenever I step into a psychologist's office.” I keep the mood light, maybe then he’ll believe that I’m fine. Armin considers my response, then smiles himself. It worked.

“Alright,” He says, “Well, I’ll see you tomorrow, then.” He says, I nod and close the door, waving to him as he drives away. I turn and push open the door to enter the building.

Now for Mikasa.
When I unlock the room I call in, “I’m home!” Before entering and looking around. If she’s still at work she won’t respond, if she’s home already…

“Welcome back.” She’s home already. I hold back a sigh and close the door behind me, pocketing my keys. Mikasa’s head pops out from around the corner of her room’s doorway. She walks into the living room. “How was it?” She inquires.

“Great,” I say, “I learned absolutely nothing at all about myself.” Maybe if I can convince her it’s useless, she’ll drop it all. Erwin’s services and the group, all deadweights on what Mikasa can do. If I can convince that I’m fine, and that we don’t need them, then maybe she’ll loosen up on herself as well. Not work such late hours and actually spend some time to take care of herself…

“Nothing?” She asks, I nod, and I look to my room. I hate trying to trick my sister and Armin, it makes me feel terrible. But I have to. It’s for their own good.

“Nothing at all.” I nod, then turn back to face her, I can’t read her expression, “I need to do my homework, I’ll… uh, I’ll talk to you later.” I say and quickly retreat into my room. I can feel her eyes on me as I throw my keys onto the desk and gather up my schoolwork from out of my backpack.

She may not be fully convinced yet, but I have to do this. For her, and for Armin.

But why do I feel saddened at the idea of leaving the group?

---

“And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.” The english professor set down a book on the countertop. “The poem that inspired the title of the book I’m sure you all read…” I hear someone laugh, bitterly, to my right. “For Whom The Bell Tolls, Ernest Hemingway.”

I doodle in my book, a giant bell on the edge of the page next to a person with a cape blooming out behind them.

“I’m sure all of you have some kind of glorified idea of war,” The professor continues, I hold back my own, equally bitter, laugh. *Glorified isn’t exactly the word I’d use to describe... “But war is bloody! Brutal! And many don’t come out as they went in.”* I sketch a prosthetic leg, eerily similar to a human leg but still… not. *You have no fucking clue. “The Civil War was no exception...”*

The professor prattles on but I tune out. I sigh and click my pen, laying it flat against the paper. I roll my shoulder, stiff from sitting in the uncomfortable seating, and crane my head back to get an upside-down view of the clock.

Six thirty? No, wait, it’s upside down. Almost twelve, then.

Once I’m done with this class, I head to my first day of work.

Admittedly I’m excited. Even if it is probably just sitting behind a counter and taking people’s orders… I’m happy. I wanted to work at Maria’s Sweets, and I honestly wasn’t expecting such an early reply. Or such a positive reply, at that. I smile as I think of what it’ll be like to actually have a job. Sure it won’t be grand, but it’s something.

But I don’t have the job yet, this is just a preliminary trial. They want to make sure I’ll be able to handle working there. Which I’m pretty sure just means they want to make sure I don’t eat the sweets behind their back.
I’m fairly sure that’s happened before. At least, I wouldn’t be surprised to find out it has.

If anything it means they’re at least interested. Willing to see if I can still work with… my disability.

I won’t fail. I can’t.

The professor calls time, and all the students begin to stand in unison.

I exit the classroom with nerves tingling my every step. Adding a little bit of shake to my usual stride. I pull my phone out of my pocket, having pre-entered the destination to be sure I don’t take a wrong turn anywhere. Maria’s Sweets. Down the street and to the left, only a few blocks away from The Rose Café and my apartment.

I shove my phone back in my pocket, take a breath, and begin to run.

---

All of my thoughts are preoccupied with the task before me. I go over my introduction in my head.

Hello, my name is Eren Jaeger, I’m here for the trial run, I believe you got my application? … Pleasure to meet you. Good enough, hopefully not too formal. I don’t want to sound stiff, even if my back is tense with nerves. I roll my shoulder as I jog.

I can’t get more nervous than I already am, there’s a lot riding on this. Think of something else.

It’s getting even colder. Winter’s fast approaching. I wonder if it’ll snow. I hope not. I grimace at the thought, I used to love the snow. I loved the way it sparkled on the ground and added some kind of eerily still life to the normally dead season. But now… Now it was just a nuisance to maneuver. I’d only been through a few snows with the prosthetic leg, and they were all hell. I guess it gets better with time…? Yeah, I’m not reassuring myself. I guess winter’s just dead for me.

I’ll have to start thinking about Christmas gifts for Armin and Mikasa. I slow down, I can see the pastel pink sign with baby blue writing in curly bubble letters; Maria’s Sweets it reads. I slow to a stop and pause before the painted red door. It used to be peeling but they’ve put a fresh coat of paint on recently, so the brick red door and slightly golden-brown hinges look new. There are two glass walls extending from either side of the building, so inside I can see a waitress working behind the counter, her blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail as she wears a particularly displeased expression, and all the customers that line up, unaffected by her off-putting demeanor. She sits behind a green countertop and cash register, and glass displays of sweets stretch behind her to the end-wall. The shop is filled with a warm yellow light and there’s a red cushioned bench protruding out of the other side of the wall. Four pink tables with green legs stretching out like limbs line the side, there’s a yellow chair on the opposite side of each. Someone opens the door and walks down the two small brick steps, when they do a little brass bell jingles and the smell of baked goods wafts out and into the open street. Brownies, today’s special must be their brownies.

I’m right, as I approach the store I see the little chalkboard that rests against the brick steps, pink-and-green chalk in that same curly bubble writing talks about their daily specials. Double Fudge Brownies, and Titan Cakes, whatever those are.

There’s a sudden hesitation. What if I screw this up terribly? What if they don’t like me? All are very real possibilities.

But then the door opens again, and the smell dances onto the street. It’s comforting, homely. Takes
me back to a memory I never had of a grandma baking little cookies for her grandchildren when they come to visit. Or a mother and her kids baking on the weekends.

That’s one I do actually have. Baking with my mother on the weekends. I blame her for my sweet tooth. She was the one who taught me how to add just the right amount of cinnamon to a brownie to give it a little extra something.

The memory comforts me, and I step up the little brick steps and push open the door. The jingle of the bell greets me like a happy worker. As if on cue, the blonde waitress’ head snaps up. She seems to glare at me as if to say Another customer?

*How the hell can anyone be so unhappy in such a pleasant place?* I wonder before walking into the center of the cream colored tiles. I’m not sure where to go next. I look around and spot two people cleaning tables, one is a bubbly girl with brown hair who’s chatting excitedly with a guy who sports a shaved head. They’re employees, I can tell by the signature green apron and yellow uniform underneath. I take a breath and walk up to them, tapping the brown haired girl on the shoulder.

“Excuse me…” I start, she turns around, a large smile on her face.

“Hi! Welcome to Maria’s Sweets! If you want to buy anything, go see Annie at the cash register! If you buy something and don’t want it, feel free to give it to me!” She recites the verses excitedly.

“Sasha!” The bald boy says, but he doesn’t sound reprimanding at all, as if this is just a daily thing.

“What? It’s food! Good food! We can’t let anyone waste it, Connie!” The girl, Sasha, places her hands on her hips when she explains this with a grave face. As if the fate of the world hangs in the predicament of wasted food. Which I suppose is deeper than I think Sasha means it to be.

“Actually I’m not here to buy or waste food,” I say. Sasha and Connie look at me with the same expression on their faces, confusion.

“Then why are you here?” Connie asks.

“Er, uh,” I try to remember what I’d practiced in my head before, I hold out my hand, “My name’s Eren Jaeger-“

I’m interrupted when Sasha grabs my hand and gives it a hearty shake, “Ah! So you’re Eren! Nice t’meet ya! My name’s Sasha and this food waster here is Connie!”

“What’s with the food waster title?” Connie asks, Sasha shrugs.

“You are what you are.” Then Sasha turns to smile at me again, “So! Eren, I think you’re suppose to start behind the counter. Just take orders and then Annie should get them out and them to you, then you get the money and wish them a nice day!”

“Simple enough.” I say, the tension releasing from my back. Maybe this won’t be so hard.

“Awesome,” Connie nods, “Let’s get you started.”

---

I’m right. Once Connie shows me how to work the cash register, and tells me that Sasha’s banned from being behind the counter due to eating customer’s orders, I get the hang of it quickly. I also pick up that Annie’s not one to talk. She’s quiet and sullen and kind of harsh at first, but after the
first hour I relax and realize she’s not bad company. She may not talk as much and when she does it’s curt, but she’s not too bad.

I sit on a little green stool that swings from side to side when I turn, and take order after order. It seems like whenever one person leaves another person comes in. Maria’s Sweets had always been popular… but I’d never realized just how popular it was before now. I guess your perspective really changes when your on the other side of… whatever you’re doing. In this case, the counter.

“One mint fudge brownie, please.” The customer in front of me orders, I pause. That’s… not on the menu. At least I don’t think it is. The customer gets impatient and rolls his eyes, “Did you not hear me? One mint fudge brownie, please.”

“Um.” What do I do? Shit, I haven’t even started officially and I’m already screwing up.

“We don’t have those until Christmas.” Annie states shortly, the man turns his gaze to her.

“Yeah, well, it’s fucking winter already, close enough, right?” He’s obviously on edge.

“No, actually, it’s still fall.” Annie sighs, as if she’s used to having to put with this. She barely reacts to his growing annoyance. “Come back in December if you want one, until then we have a double fudge brownie.” She shrugs. The man fumes.

“No,” He hisses out the word, “Thank you.” He turns and stomps towards the door. The bell jingles as he opens it.

“Have a nice day!” Annie yells across the store, a sarcastic drip to her tone. When I look back at her, she’s smirking ever so slightly. The man looks furious, but leaves anyway.

“Wow, well, there’s one customer complaint before I even start.” I state, taking the next customer’s order who was too busy on his phone to notice the whole exchange.

“We get assholes all the time, Eren,” Annie opens the glass case and uses the prongs to reach for the customers cookie, “Learn to deal with them.” She puts a chocolate chip cookie the size of my entire fucking face, A Maria’s Sweets special, in the bag and hands it to me.

I pass the bag onto the customer and take their money, I think of my times with Levi, “Trust me, I know how to deal with assholes,” My mind flickers back to our recent conversation, when I let him walk away, when I was very much the asshole. Why did I do that? I’m a goddamn idiot. “They’re not as bad as you think…” I add on in a softer tone. Annie doesn’t give it a second thought, she simply shrugs.

It’s Thursday, today. Which means I’ll have to face Levi again tomorrow. I wonder how he is… I hope he’s alright.

If I leave the group, who’ll he talk with then? I suppose Hanji would use the group of three, so he’d either be paired up with Jean, Armin or Hanji herself.

Stop thinking into this. I shake my head, I’ve got other things to focus on right now and I don’t want to screw up a customers orders on top of pissing one off today. I smile at the next customer, pushing everything else out of my mind,

“Hi!” I give large, cheerful smile as was instructed, “Welcome to Maria’s Sweets, how can I help you?”

How can I help you? Easy, I can’t.
Chapter End Notes

Ah, yes, introspection and relationship progress. (Well, if you count that as progress. At least they're being more open with each other.) Fun times. Also I know one or two people called Erwin's little 'remember what I said...' portion...
Also a few of you thought Eren's motivation wouldn't completely backfire on him and result in him hiding everything from the people he loves. Oh you poor, poor, innocent little souls. Love you all :D.

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated!
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

I actually did calculations to make sure I wasn't fucking up Levi's age in this thing. If I am then please let me know. Math is not nor will it ever be my forte. Fun times.

Come Talk to Me:
goldie-the-cat.tumblr.com

Special thanks to my lovely editor!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Thanks for coming in today, Eren!” Sasha grins broadly, she holds a bag with two of the brownies in her left hand, the other arm is draped around Connie’s shoulder. “You did great!” Sasha continues to beam. Annie’d told me, in her brief, blunt way, that Sasha always used the last ten minutes of opening to buy something for herself, which she was made to do after Ymir, the manager who I’ve yet to meet, caught her trying to sneak sweets out with her on multiple occasions. Another reason she’s banned from going behind the counter.

“Well,” I say, “Hopefully I’ll be able to come back as an employee.” I shrug, my hands curling into my jacket pocket. I feel the little crinkle of a bag Connie and Sasha had given me as a ‘congratulations for surviving the first day’ kind of thing. I hadn’t fucked up again after that little ‘chat’ with our displeased mint-brownie customer.

“I think you will. Looked like Annie liked your ‘shut-up-and-work’ ethic.” Connie nods, “And since she’s the one filing the report to Krista since Ymir isn’t here… that’s a good thing.”

“I hope so.” I say, all the names swimming through my head. Krista, who Connie had told me was the owner of the sweet shop. Her actual name was Historia but she used Krista as a pseudonym on her cookbooks, so she was naturally called Krista by her employees, and Ymir. Connie had warned me about her, said she was kind of crass, and an occasional ass.

Well, I certainly know how to deal with those. Other than that there were two other employees who filled in for when Connie and Sasha had their off days, Reiner and Bertolt.

Either way, I have to get hired before I worry about meeting these people. I wave to Connie and Sasha as they head their way and I head mine, back towards my apartment. Today was… fun, actually. The people at the café seem alright, even Annie with all her quiet harshness.

I decide not to jog, but instead I just walk at a leisurely pace. It may be cold, but it’s a relatively nice day out and, for once, I’m relaxed.

- - -

When I open the door, Mikasa’s not there yet. So I set the bag on the table, peeking inside to see a mint-fudge brownie.

I’m not sure whether to laugh or be angry, they left me hanging but they have a sick sense of irony, so I do a little of both.
I settle down and get to work on my homework. I get halfway through by the time Mikasa arrives. I hear the door click and swing open. I stand and walk over to greet her, she’s staring at the bag open on the table.

“How’d work go?” She asks, lifting her eyes from the bag to me.

“Well, as you can probably guess.” I smile, she nods. But behind the red scarf she’s begun to wear again as it gets colder, I see the faint glimmer of a grin. She pulls it up, over her mouth. But not before I see the ghostly smile fall.

“They didn’t comment on your leg?” She asks in a hesitant voice, her eyes flicking down, and then back up to my face as quickly as they had before. She’s always careful whenever questioning me about my disability.

“No,” I say, I sound surprised. Hell, I am surprised. It hadn’t even come up, hadn’t even occurred to me that nobody batted an eyelash at the boy with half a leg. It didn’t even matter to them. It felt like they didn’t even notice. It felt like I didn’t even notice, for once. It just… faded away, into the background. I was normal, for once. “They didn’t even notice it.”

The specter smile is back, the edges prodding the corner of her red scarf, betraying her stoic features.

She’s smiling, she’s smiling because my leg isn’t a bother. To me, to her, to anyone. It solidifies my resolve to never let her see me break down again. She’ll be relieved if she thinks that I’m over it. She’ll be… happy.

I want to let her smile again, without any worries. And being the thing that’s stopping her hurts. I won’t stop her anymore. I refuse to.

- - -

Neither Mikasa nor I ended up eating the brownie. Mikasa didn’t like mint and I was still partially pissed off that they didn’t tell me there was one I could’ve sold to the customer to get him off of my back. I’d called Armin to ask if he’d want it but he said no, and I didn’t want it to go to waste. Which is why I’m currently carrying a mint-fudge brownie in a bag to The Rose Café, with hope that maybe Levi actually has a sweet tooth.

Some part of me doubts that he does, he seems to sour to like anything sweet. But at the same time… some part of me feels the exact opposite. That he’s so sour that he must love sweet things in contradiction. I suppose I’ll find out in a minute.

I sit at our usual table, the metal chair is cold against my jacket and makes me shiver. I watch grey clouds slink across a darkly lit sky. I’m one of two people outside, all the indoor tables are taken. The café radiates the scent of broccoli-cheddar and chicken-noodle soups. The laughter of people and the sound of the oven rumbling along as it cooks all drift outside with a warm golden light whenever the door opens. I take in the sounds and smells with a smile, leaning back against my chair with my eyes closed. A small smile on my face. It’s nice, despite the biting pre-winter chill that gnaws at the edges of my face, it’s peaceful.

I open my eyes when the door opens and meet Levi’s eyes, greeting him with a nod as he sits down across from me. I straighten up and push the paper bag forward. He gives it a skeptical look.

“The hell’s in there?” He asks.
“Aren’t you just a ray of sun on this glorious day,” I smile. There’s a certain familiarity in his coldness now. Fitting, for the weather. Levi replies to my statement with a glare. I give a mock-roll of my eyes, “Alright, alright. It’s a mint-fudge brownie.”

“What for?” The skeptical look hasn’t faded from his face.

“Celebratory means for my first day of work at Maria’s Sweets.” I grin, it sounds so...professional. Even if it is just a part time job. It’s something I’m doing, and on my own no less.

“So why do you want to celebrate with me? What about Armin, aren’t you two close or whatever?” He asks, I shrug.

“Well, I would offer it to my sister, Mikasa, but she doesn’t like mint. And Armin said he doesn’t want it.”

“And why don’t you want it? Don’t like mint? Or chocolate?” Levi inquires, leaning against his seat as he pulls the collar of his black jacket up with a gloved hand.

“No I just…” I try to explain, “Well, I have a vendetta against this brownie.” Levi raises an eyebrow. His expression seems to say go on... and he doesn’t say anything past that, so I launch into an explanation of how I came to want revenge against a delicious baked good.

“Wow,” Levi says when I finish my story, he leans back and crosses his arms over his chest, “He’s a fucking asshole.” I nod, smiling.

“Couldn’t have said it better myself.” I gesture to the brownie, “So now I’m not sure whether to be amused, or pissed off that they actually had one in stock.”

“Well, be amused at the brownie and pissed off at your co-workers.” Levi shrugs. “Then you don’t have to be pissed off at a desert.”

“Hopefully co-workers, I haven’t heard back if they want me to continue.” I clarify quickly, “Fuck details. Co-workers, you work with them, even if it was only for a day. And, shit, it sounds like you’ve got the job. At least from my perspective.” I know he doesn’t really mean anything by it but...

“Thanks, Levi.” I grin. Something about having that little boost of confidence, even it is from someone who wasn’t actually there, is nice. It’s a change from people preaching caution and ‘wait, else you might be hurt when bad news comes in’. That’s almost like saying ‘I don’t think it’s ever going to happen so don’t get too happy about it.’

“What the hell are you thanking me for?” Levi mutters, his eyes tilting to the ground. He takes a breath and sits forward, “So, you going to eat this brownie or not?”

“I gave it to you.” I reply.

“I’m not going to eat the entire fucking thing.” Levi sighs, as if exasperated, as if it’s obvious.

“It’s not that big, you know.” I smile. “But, if you’re so adamant, why don’t we split it?” Levi simply nodded his approval and I broke the brownie in two.

When I took a bite, all my qualms about how ‘this brownie’ wronged me fade away. It’s delicious. The kind of thing that melts in your mouth and has a taste that sticks to your tongue even after you swallow. It’s a comforting kind of taste, something to eat after a broken heart or bad news. But it’s
also a happy, welcoming kind of taste, something to share with a friend or a lover.

I glance over at Levi, is that what we are? Friends? I had told myself so… a short while ago. But I was curious if he thought so, too. I swallow the piece of brownie in my mouth and begin to speak.

“Are we friends, Levi?” I ask. He looks up at me with a curious expression. He wipes at the corner of his mouth with his thumb.

“I don’t see why the fuck not.” Levi sighs after a pause, leaning back against his chair.

“Good,” I say, “Because I thought so, but I wasn’t sure if you thought so, too.” At this Levi raises an eyebrow.

“I thought you hated me, still.” I’m not quite sure if he’s joking when he says this.

“Well, I did…” I admit, I’m actually embarrassed by the idea now. I blamed Levi for something that wasn’t his fault… But still the idea that he was the one to send us out into that battlefield had a bite to it.

“You still do, don’t you?” Levi sounds… Sad? Relieved? Somehow I can’t quite pick between the two, how odd.

“No!” I deny it so quickly I surprise even myself, “No, I don’t hate you! I just…” I look around, as if something in the cold late fall air could help me. Nothing can, of course, so I settle my eyes back on Levi, who sits with his arms across his chest as he usually does, one leg draped over the other as he leans back casually against the seat. There’s a keenness to his eyes, he’s always so attentive, and even if he looks disinterested it feels like he takes in every word you say, for better or worse. He’s an ass, and stubborn as hell to remain secretive. I still know shit about him, besides the fact that he feels guilty about sending us into the battle that lost me my leg and Marco half his limbs, and that he’s lost somebody who he wants to talk to again. I would like to know more about him, but it’s too damn hard to read his face, although I think I’m getting better at it. Or at least I’d like to think so. Well, I now one new thing now. I know that he considers me a friend.

“Well?” Levi urges me to hurry up. I blink coming out of my thoughts.

“I don’t hate you,” I repeat myself, slowly, still not quite sure how to explain it. “In some kind of weird way, I like you. But… There’s still that hesitation, I guess.” I shrug. I look to Levi’s face, his expression is unreadable, blank, and I can’t tell if he cares or not. “But,” I add quickly, “I’m trying to get past that, it’s a stupid hesitation anyway, and you don’t deserve it.” Then I smile, “Even if you are an ass.”

Levi scoffs, “You’re not exactly the most pleasant person to be around either. You’re still a brat.”

“Hey!” I protest, but Levi’s smirking, ever so softly and barely there. I’m reminded of Mikasa hiding her smile behind her scarf. It’s that same ghost-like smile. Barely there, but there all the same. “And who was the one who affirmed we were friends?” I attempt to turn the tables.

“Who was the one who asked if we were friends in the first place?” Levi retaliates, The tables have made a full swing, and now it’s back to you, Jaeger.

“Well with a grumpy old man like you it’s kind of hard to tell.” I shrug, mentally struggling to turn the table back around.

“I’m not that fucking old, brat.” Levi glares at me.
“Oh really?” I ask.

“Yes, fucking really.” He replies.

“How old then?”

“Thirty-three.” He says, and I’m a little stunned. Sure, I didn’t think Levi was that old to begin with. But damn if he doesn’t look younger. Levi smirks at me, “Something wrong with that, Jaeger?”

“No, just…” I shake my head, “You look really good for thirty-three.” I say absentmindedly, my head tilting to the side.

“Huh,” Levi says, “From hate to friendship, and now you’re flirting with me, you just can’t settle on a relationship can you?”

“What?” I sputter.

“Sorry, but I don’t think I’m ready to commit to that with you just yet.” Levi’s smirking, he’s practically flipped the damn table over and now I’m pinned.

“That’s not what I meant!” I protest, my voice raises a little bit higher than I’m comfortable with. My ears are burning, I hope it’s just the cold.

“Mm,” Levi hums, “You know I hate liars, brat.” He leans across the table, “Not exactly the best way to try and seduce me.”

“Holy crap, Levi,” I protest, flustered, “I’m not trying to seduce you!” The table is a rather uncomfortable piece of furniture, as I’m quickly finding.

“Relax, kid,” Levi leans back, the smirk still visible on his face, “I’m just playing with you.” He tilts his head to the side, “Wow, that really got you riled up, huh?”

“Shut it.” I snap.

“Bet you regret befriending me, now.” Levi remarks casually. I see an opening, I attempt to push the table away.

“Nope,” I say, grinning, “No, I don’t regret it. If anything I’m going to use it to annoy the shit out of you.” Levi meets my eyes, he looks surprised that I’ve taken on the challenge.

“Well, crap.” He sighs, his face falling back into it’s neutral, impassive expression.

“I’ll drive you bat-shit crazy before you know what’s hit you.” I swear.

“Great, now I’ve got two psychos on my hands.” Levi mutters.

“Two?”

“Hanji and you.” He clarifies.

“She’s pretty crazy, huh?” I say, leaning back against the chair.

“You have no fucking clue, kid.” Levi sighs.

“She and Petra… You seem to know them outside of the group, right?” I ask, I had noticed it before but I had never inquired.
“They’re old friends of mine.” Levi replies quietly.

“Wow,” I grin, “You actually have other friends. Surprising.”

“Shut it.” Levi snaps, “I’m not a fucking hermit.”

“Really? Now that I struggle to believe.” I say, still grinning.

“Hm,” Levi hums, “Well, trust me, with Hanji, it’s pretty damn impossible to get a moment to myself.” Levi glances at me out of the corner of his eyes, “You know she was an army officer, too.”

My eyes go wide, “No shit.”


“Her poor, poor troops. Serving under her must’ve been…” I struggle to find the right words.

“A living hell?” Levi finishes, I nod. “Yeah but get this, she had this crazy obsession with prisoners of war. Spent half the time investigating them, interrogating them. She was more interested in capturing enemy soldiers than fighting.”

“But why?”

Levi shrugs, “She called it information. I called bullshit on that. Sure, that may have been her ulterior motive but I’ll be damned if she didn’t some kind of joy out of it.” He raises an eyebrow, “Why do you think she went into psychology for veterans, anyway?”

“Wow…” I mutter, Levi nods. I would like to say I’m surprised, but in all honesty… It seems so fitting that I’m not surprised at all. Sure the army officer part shocked me a little but after hearing about what she did it just seemed… natural.

“Huh,” Levi comments, I look over, he’s glancing at his phone screen.

“What is it?” I inquire.

“I’d thought the sky looked dark for a second,” He says, putting his phone away, “Didn’t expect that we’d go that late.”

“What time is it?” I guess we had been talking more than usual. The conversation just… kept going, I suppose.

“Eight.” Levi says, my eyes go wide.

“P.m?”

“No, A.m.” Levi rolls his eyes sarcastically, “Yes, it’s fucking eight p.m. What the hell did you expect?”

“Well, sorry! I just wanted to be sure!” I say. I should get home before Mikasa starts worrying.

“I’ve got to go,” I say, pushing the chair away as I stand.

“Alright, then.” Levi stands up as well.

“You don’t have to leave if you don’t want.” I say hurriedly.
“What the fuck am I going to do here?” Levi asks.

“Eat? Drink? I don’t know! I’m being polite!”

“Well stop,” Levi replies sharply, “It doesn’t suit you.”

“Gee, thanks.” I shake my head, but I’m smiling. The two of us exit through the café, the warmth and the smell of soups and scones cling to us briefly as we make our way around the inside. We don’t really talk after that, and eventually we get to the door and end up back on the outside. The cold air greets me like a slap to the face as I open the door and wind rushes in. The man in the table closest to the door mumbles something about how they should have gotten a table farther away. Levi and I exit the café, we get to the street and I turn to face him, only to find him facing me as well.

“Well,” I say, rocking back from heel to toe, “I guess I’ll see you tomorrow?”


“Oh, and Levi,” I add quickly, before he can turn away. “You… er… You were just following orders, right? So don’t feel guilty about… you know.” I shrug, the words sound awkward on my tongue. I’d gotten so accustomed to saying that it was his fault, that he should feel guilty. So the words sound… false. And yet, I believe them. So how can I make them sound true?

Levi’s expression is unreadable. I have no idea what he’s thinking. “Yeah, well, thanks kid.” He says. He turns briskly and walks away, his shoulders slightly hunched over from the cold. I nod, watching him walk for a moment before turning myself and walking down the street, my back to the wind as it picks up.

Did I just fuck up? Or did I make it better? I have no idea.

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Levi’s POV

Guilt is one tricky motherfucker. You spend half your time trying to get over it and the other half of your time is spent trying to make it worse because you feel you need to. It’s the most bipolar emotion next to friendship and love.

And guilt is made even trickier, when the shitty brat who you feel guilty about has just declared that he holds nothing against you.

Or some kind of sappy shit like that.

Which is exactly what I had told him to do, wasn’t it? I had told him I wasn’t his monster. Weren’t those among the first words I’d said to him?

Fuck guilt.

I sigh, if only it was that easy. But it’s fucking not. Guilt is like your crappy uncle who always ends up drunk on the couch. It’s not like others care about him but he’s an embarrassment to you. And he keeps you up at night with his snoring and won’t let you sit on the fucking couch to relax because he’s taking it all up.

I pull my jacket off as the door to my home closes shut behind me. Folding the jacket in my hand I drape it over the couch that surrounds a small gas fireplace. I rub my hands together, it’s cold as
shit outside and my skin seems to have chosen to catch and hold onto the cold for some crappy reason.

I pull down the little black remote from the top of the fireplace and press the ‘on’ button. The flames burst to life and begin to lick the air in the small contained space. It’s not long until I feel heat against my legs. I crouch down and let the feeling spread to my face. I fold my hands in front of my face, watching the fire dance and spin.

*It never did help when people said to just ‘not feel guilty’. I reminisce, scowling. All it ever did was bring up bad thoughts. I close my eyes to let blackness surround my vision. The front half of my body is warm, but my back is still cold from facing the open room where the heat of the flames have yet to reach.*

I thought that it was best if he got over blaming me. If he decided to do exactly as he has today. To realize I’m not his personal demon.

But would it have been better if he’d stayed the way he was before. If he still blamed me? Was he happier this way? Who was his monster now? Did he even have one?

I’m beginning to regret those first few words I’d said to him, so long ago now.

Mainly because I’m afraid of who he’s making into his demon now.

*Damn it, Eren, why the hell did you have to forgive me? It would have been better if he just kept hating me…*

My eyes drift upward, to a photo resting on the fireplace. He hadn’t even tried to inquire about who I wanted to talk to today. I stand up straighter and pick up the photo.

Truth is, I wouldn’t know how to answer. So he’s probably already hit the nail on the fucking head and I probably said ‘no’ because I just don’t know what the hell to call whatever we had.

Family? Friends? Fuck if I know. Somewhere between the two, I suppose.

Relationships are crappy like that. You never know just what to call them. I place the photo back on the top of the fireplace with a sigh, then put the remote down next to it. I walk over to the window on the back wall, it’s a common habit of mine to watch the nightlife before I, myself, fall into sleep or join the scurrying crowd.

Well, crowd is never the right word. There’s always only a few people, sullen, quiet little figures walking in and out of shops on their own agenda. Sometimes a car will zoom by, headlights emitting a circular glow of yellow light on the dark street. The street lamp went out a day or two ago, so it’s even darker than usual. I lean my head against the side of the wall, and cross my arms across my chest.

*There’s more people out today than usual. Perhaps because it’s Friday and all those shit-headed college students are out partying and getting drunk to celebrate the weekend.*

Eren better not be out there, getting his ass drunk as well.

I almost laugh at the thought, he doesn’t exactly seem like a ‘partying’ type. I try to picture Eren at a wild rave party or some other kind of crap. But he just… doesn’t fit in.

*I need a drink.* Not an alcoholic one, just something to soothe my edged nerves. I head over to the kitchen, my feet tapping lightly against the floor, and begin to make tea.
I wait for the water to start boiling while I open the cabinet and grab a cup. The first thing I do is inspect it for any kind of leftover dust. But of course there isn’t, I clean the cabinets. I bring the cup and a small tea bag over to the water that’s now emitting steam and has small bubbles floating to the surface and popping with small noises piercing the air.

A strange thought occurs to me. One that had been in the back of my mind before, but always said in a different form.

*How long will I be in Hanji’s group, anyway?* It’s not thought with annoyance and bitterness like it usually is. Just… curiosity.

Sure, the group is shitty and Hanji’s turning us into her psychological lab-rats, but… How long do we all have left? Will any of us ever see each other again afterwards?

I know I’ll remain in contact with Hanji and Petra. It’s not like one fucking group is the be all end all for us. But the rest of the kids…

I idly pour the water into the mug and dip the teabag in to soak while I set the pot down to dry on a rag.

*How will they go on in life, after this group?*

I close my eyes. There’s still plenty of time, none of us are anywhere near ‘done’. So I guess we’ll just have to wait and see.

Good thing I’m patient.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaanntd now everything begins to roll downhill. And like most things rolling downhill it picks up speed the longer it goes on. So things will only get more intense now, fun times. Hope you all enjoyed this chapter!

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated!
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

It's that time of the week again! Weird to think that this little project of mine has been going on for twelve weeks now, eh? But I guess so! I decided also to go a bit more in depth into what it's like having a prosthetic, for the sake of clarity and, well, reality. So I ended up watching a video on how to put on and take off a below-the-knee leg prosthetic and stuff like that. So yeah! I've started doing my research! (Twelve chapters in... *coughs awkwardly*)

Anyway! The usual stuff is all here:

Come talk to me:
goldie-the-cat.tumblr.com

Special thanks to my lovely editor!

I blink open my eyes, I sit up in my bed and look around, slightly delirious. I’m still in my day clothes so I must have fallen asleep studying for my upcoming Political Sciences test. Mikasa must have seen me and dragged my sorry ass into bed.

I swing my legs over the edge of the bed and feel an odd and familiar emptiness. I look down, she must have taken off the prosthetic. I look around and see it resting against the nightstand like usual. I reach over and snatch it up, the material is cold from sitting out through the night. I slip on the sock with the pin at the end, rolling it up the length of my remaining leg before slipping the prosthetic on over. I stand and hear the small click that means the pin’s gone into place and the prosthetic is on. When I walk to the kitchen there’s a few more clicks before it falls silent. Just the tapping of the small black ‘foot’ against the floor.

Mikasa’s up, as always, before me. She’s browsing our near-empty fridge for some kind of food, if there is any.

“Morning,” I say, Mikasa nods her eyes settle on something in the fridge.

“Did you sleep well, Eren?” She asks, she doesn’t work on Saturdays, and her shift is shorter on Sundays.

“Yes,” I reply to her, and it’s honest. I didn’t have any nightmares or… anything last night. Which was nice, for once. Maybe Erwin really is wrong, maybe I am getting better. One night without nightmares doesn’t prove much of anything, but perhaps…

“I found cereal.” Mikasa announces as she pulls two bowls down from the shelf above.

“Yeah but the milk was bad so I threw it out.” I tell her, Mikasa shrugs.

“Then we’ll have dry cereal.” She replies, “And I’ll go shopping later.” Mikasa pours the cereal into both of the bowls, and hands a small red bowl that’s filled to the brim with small circular flakes of wheat.
“Cheers,” I say, and go to sit at the table with Mikasa. I don’t mind the dry cereal, even if it lacks any sort of flavor whatsoever, it’s just nice to be with Mikasa, and not be worried about how badly I’m screwing her life up.

Armin and I hit traffic, so we end up late to the group. Armin nervously fumbles with his belt buckle as he tries to undo the lock and get out of the door.

“Relax, Armin,” I say, opening my door, “It’s Hanji, I’m sure she’s already gotten the group started on something.”

“That’s exactly what I’m worried about,” Armin catches my eye as he hops out of his side of the car, “If we come in late, there’s a high probability that Hanji’s going to subject us to today’s exercise without any knowledge of what we’re doing.”

“Shit,” I say, thinking back to all of Hanji’s previous exercises and how confusing they were by themselves. “Let’s get moving.” I close the door as Armin and I half-jog up to the building. I open the door as Armin and I run through, we turn the corner and enter the room we’re usually in. I have a half-apology, half-excuse, ready in mind.

But apparently I don’t need it. The room is empty.

“Um…” I turn to Armin who looks just as bewildered as I am, “It is Saturday, right?”

“Yes, so… They should be in here.” Armin looks around. I lift my head, it’s the same white box-of-a-room that we usually had our group meeting in. The clock on the far wall ticking endlessly away. The plant trying to brighten up the room. But without the normal green fold-up chairs it looks… empty. All of those are stacked in a pile that’s leaning against a corner in the wall.

“Okay, so, then, where are they?” I ask, turning to Armin, he shrugs.

“They must have moved to another room in the building. Let’s go try some other doors.” Armin turns around and walks out of the door. I hesitate, glancing back as if I expect Hanji and everyone else to jump out from behind the small potted plant.

I wouldn’t put it past her.

But eventually I, too, turn and walk out of the room.

“Do we just walk down the halls, opening all the doors?” I ask, Armin shakes his head.

“No, I mean, they have windows so…” Armin shrugs, “Just look through the windows and see if they’re in there.”

“Alright.” I answer, and Armin and I start down the hallway across the lobby. Wordlessly we take to the opposite sides, I look in every room on the left and Armin looks in every room on the right. The majority are empty, then there are a few business meetings and other groups meeting.

“Sorry!” Armin says every time someone meets eyes with him from inside the room.

“They can’t hear you!” I remind him once he starts to lag behind.

“I know but it feels like the polite thing to do.” Armin answers back, then continues with a, “Sorry!”
“Was that to me or the person in there?” I smile, glancing into another empty room.

“The person in there,” I look back, Armin’s smiling as well, “You… I’m not sure I owe an apology too.”

“Gee, thanks.” I say.

“It’s tough love.”

We fall into silence after that. And soon the doors all seem to pass in a blur. No sight of Hanji or anyone else.

We trek back down the hallway and into the lobby. I sigh and look around,

“There’s only one hallway, right?” I ask. Armin nods.

It’s all tinted blue shimmering tiles that reflect the bright, rectangular fluorescent lights above. A few plants placed in the hexagonal lobby, one branch of a hallway extending down, and the large room we’re usually in, with two white double doors and a plant on the far back wall. Well, that and the brick-red security door labeled ‘employees only’.

“Any idea where they went?” I turn to look at Armin, who’s staring at the security door. I follow his gaze. It is the only door we didn’t check. “You don’t think…?” Armin nods, then walks forward to the door. His hand is hovering above the door when it swings open and he’s wrapped up in one of Hanji’s choke-hold hugs. I hear a noise akin to a strangled breath, and Hanji releases him, putting her hands on his shoulders. The rest of our group files out from behind her.

“Good job, you two! You passed the test!” Hanji exclaims happily. Jean and Marco walk to the left of her, Marco’s still in his prosthetics… He’s walking easier, too.

“Ah, it’s too bad you guys found us,” Jean smirks, “I was having fun watching you flounder around like an idiot.”

“Who are you calling an idiot?” I ask, grimacing. Jean opens his mouth to reply but is cut off by Hanji.

“Alright everyone!” She says, releasing Arming and turning around to face the group. I walk next to Armin as Hanji back peddles into the middle of the lobby. “I want you all to take this lesson to heart!” She proclaims, hands on her hips as if she’s striking some kind of victory pose.

There was a lesson in this?

“Persistence,” Hanji emphasizes each separate syllable, “Never give up even when it seems like there’s simply no way to succeed. If you keep pushing on, then you’re bound to have some success!” Hanji claps her hands together, “And if you can succeed at small things like this with a little persistence,” She gives Armin and myself a grin, “Imagine what you can do with a whole lot of persistence and a giant problem!” Hanji drops her hands, there’s a small pause as she looks around. “Also, it teaches you to never be late for my group.” She smiles again, a conniving kind of smile that would send shivers down the spine of anyone who didn’t know Hanji.

“Well,” Hanji says, “We’re out here already, so why don’t we take a few minutes to relax and just talk on our own, say whatever you want!” With Hanji’s dismissal the group begins to shuffle itself until people are talking with their friends.

It’s all the usual groups; Hanji, Petra, and Levi; Marco and Jean; Armin and myself.
“Huh, you know for Hanji I was expecting something a little bit… *more.*” I say, Armin looks at me with confusion in his eyes.

“More?” He asks.

“Yeah, more. I mean,” I look around, “I’d always thought that her kind of teaching would lead to something a little bit more extreme in the ways of practical jokes.” I shrug.

“I don’t think this was done in lieu of a joke, Eren. She meant what she said about persistence.” Armin corrects me.

“Yeah but,” I look towards the lobby with it’s ever-so-slightly-blue reflective tiles, “It seemed pretty low-key for her, still.”

“What would you have expected?” Armin asks.

“That she’d lock us out of the building and force us to crawl through the air ducts in order to get inside.” My brows furrow as I say this, trying to mentally picture Hanji locking every door just for the sake of an experiment… I can easily picture such a scene.

“Oddly enough I don’t think that’s too far fetched.” Armin replies.

“Persistence, really Hanji?” I hear the person behind me sigh, I turn my head. It’s Levi talking to Hanji and Petra.

“Oh come on! I thought it sounded inspirational. Like kitten-hanging-on-a-tree, poster-in-your-room inspirational!” Hanji argues.

“No, it sounded like a bunch of crap.” Levi corrects her.

“Says the man *persistent* to be in a foul mood twenty-four-seven.” Hanji nudges him with her elbow. Petra seems to sense the danger and steps forward to try to stop the situation.

“Guys, really it doesn’t matter… It’s a nice thought to give us all confidence.” Petra smiles over to Hanji, “Right?”

Hanji nods, she slings an arm around Petra, “Exactly! Glad to see someone here understands motivation!” Hanji nods, as if she’s just won the argument. Levi seems to disagree.

“Motivation my ass,” Levi scoffs.

“Would you rather they all give up, Levi?” Hanji asked.

“Hell no, that’s not what I’m saying.” Levi sighs, “Persistence and motivation are two different things and you seem to not understand that.” He comments. “I would rather they be motivated than persistent.” Hanji tilts her head to the side, leaning on Petra.

“Then what’s the difference?” She asks.

“Persistence can be good, but it can also be fucking idiotic.” Levi frowns, “If you’re persistent about *every damn thing*, then you’re also persistent about doing the things that hurt you, even subconsciously. And when your tactic just isn’t fucking working, guess what? You still keep on going with the shitty ways you were doing it before. And why? Because you’re *persistent.*” Levi spits out the word, “Motivation doesn’t focus on the way you get there, but focuses on getting there nonetheless. If something isn’t working or what you’re doing is going to harm you, it allows you to
change how you get there. But you’re still motivated to do what you want to do."

Hanji ponders this for a moment, her hand slips from Petra’s shoulder as she crosses her arms across her chest. “But what if motivation isn’t enough? What if they don’t act on just that alone?”

“The same could be said for persistence,” Levi sighs, “It all depends on the person. Those who don’t do what they’re motivated to do don’t deserve to achieve what they want. Right?” Levi shakes his head, “The world’s a bitch like that.”

“He has a point.” Armin says from next to me. I jump a little, I must have gotten so absorbed into listening to Levi and Hanji’s conversation that I completely forgot about Armin at my side.

“He does,” I say once I regain my nerves.

“So what’s your take on it all?” Armin asks me, I shrug.

“I can’t say for sure.” Once the words leave my mouth Armin laughs slightly, “What’s so funny?”

“It’s just,” Armin says, quelling his laughter, “I guess I expected that from you.” He smiles widely, “Since sometimes it seems like you can’t tell the difference between the two anyway.”

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After the groups end and I go home, I expect very few things. I expect that I’ll get my homework done, maybe study some, and maybe fill up any free time with… something else. I haven’t thought that far ahead.

What I do not expect is the small red ‘one’ next to my inbox when I check my email for any news from anyone. It’s from Maria’s Sweets.

Shit, is this good or bad? I let the mouse hover over the white email bar. I read the title of the email.

‘CONGRATULATIONS’

It’s… congratulatory?

Please let that mean what I think it means…

I open up the email, my heart is pounding even though I already know what’s coming must be good… It has to be.

Dear Eren,

It sounds so formal I can’t picture Connie or Sasha composing the email. It must be Annie’s writing or one of the employees I haven’t met yet.

Yet.

That’s one hell of a hopeful word.

Let me be the first to welcome you to the staff of Maria’s Sweets…

I exhale, and the tension in my chest decrease. My head feels lighter but my heart is still jumping around. I grin, then I start laughing to myself.
What was I worried about? It said ‘congratulations’ didn’t it?

I lean back, against my bed frame. I got the job.

I got the job! I got the job!

They’re either idiots or I actually did well. Now the next challenge is making the latter true.

I close my laptop and pull my phone from my pocket. I’m buzzing with energy from excitement. I click on the first name at the top of my message list, Armin. I text him the news and it’s only seconds before he replies back.

*That’s great! I’m so proud of you, Eren! When’s your first shift? Mikasa and I will be some of your very first customers!*  

Actually, when is my first shift?

I should probably read the rest of that email.

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My first shift will be next Sunday. I’m going to fill in for Annie on her off days, but since Annie had to help out Historia whenever she was absent, Annie will also be teaching me how things worked and keeping an eye on me during my first few weeks. Fair enough.

On Sunday, Annie won’t be there, though. So I’ll meet Reiner, Bertolt, and Ymir who are working tomorrow, and they’ll teach me the basics. My shift starts when the shop opens, and ends halfway through since Annie can usually only work a half-day shift on Sundays. Which works well for me since it ends at eleven thirty, leaving me time to get to the group. They’ll tell me my other hours once I get there.

I jot everything down on my phone as reminders and stand up. I have way too much energy to sit down and study quietly, but I’m not in the mood for jogging.

I guess I’ll just go for a walk before it gets cold as hell outside.

Once I get downstairs I push open the door and I’m greeted by the usual crisp air. Today’s a little warmer than yesterday, though. The sun isn’t hiding away behind a canvas of clouds. Instead the sky is it’s normal clear blue that gets lighter towards the horizon. When a car passes by it’s side shines with a reflection of the sun, I wince against the reflective light.

Even though it’s still cold out, there’s more people around today to catch whatever they can of what may be the last late-fall sun. I watch people walking, smiling, talking to each other. Hands slip together, lacing fingers together like they’re sewing the seam on a ripped shirt. I start walking down the street, joining the trickle of human activity.

It’s funny how the sun changes everything. What was once a grey world, filled with walls on either side and devoid of life is now a city. The sidewalks aren’t so much a deep grey as they are a slightly grey-tinted white. The buildings aren’t walls but places where people live and work. They’re the red-bricked homes of many families and the glass-walled stores where those very same families may make their living. The world isn’t grey and silent but multicolored and lively. The sound of my own uneven steps, the sound of the prosthetic hitting the ground, is lost in the sound of chatter and laughter. Lost in the group-step whenever someone passes by me, or the rumble of a car that shakes the ground when it zooms by. The clank when the car dips down and hits one of our few potholes only to bounce back up and charge on. The sky isn’t an overbearing container, a
grey hand suffocating the city and sucking the life out, but a wide blue open plain. A seemingly-endless open-air space, with only a few clouds drifting lazily along and casting mismatched shadows on the ground somewhere far away. It’s alive, and it’s somewhat beautiful… But I still don’t feel fully comfortable in this environment.

Maybe it’s the city aspect, with the noises of construction far off, the creaks and clanks that disturb the other sounds of the city. Or maybe it’s those sounds themselves, a constant barrage of noise between cars and people, the ding of a door opening from a store or the sound of music blaring from a car’s open window. Perhaps it’s even just the people, lost in themselves, never noticing anything or anyone else unless it’s interesting to them. Maybe it’s the buildings, and how they can feel like a high wall, trapping you within them and blocking you from exploring that vast open plain the sky dictates exists beyond the city. I don’t know…

I don’t know but it’s not… pleasant.

And maybe it never will be. Perhaps I never will be fully comfortable because I’m not a perfect fit to… anywhere. I’ve said it before myself, if you miss something full you can fill it with something new, but I’m only missing half of something. And you can’t keep one half and replace it with the half of something entirely different. It will never be a perfect fit. Even if you force them together they’ll be mismatched and they won’t fit together…

And maybe that’s why I’ll never feel ‘at home’. I accepted that fact a while ago, or so I’d convinced myself to believe. But maybe I was wrong. Maybe everything is just as bad…

I shake my head, Come on, Eren, why the fuck are you thinking like that? That’s not true! You’re fine, you’re just being dramatic.

I take a breath, I’ve been walking for a while now. I should go back to the apartment.

- - -

When the door opens later in the evening, I know it’s Mikasa coming home.

“Welcome back,” I call to her, standing up from where I was sitting. When I walk around the corner I see her placing a brown paper bag on the kitchen table as she adjusts her red scarf to be looser around her neck. “What’s the bag for?” I ask.

“Celebration,” Mikasa answers, looking up at me, “Armin told me that you got a job.”

“Aw, man,” I sigh, “I was going to surprise you myself.”

I catch the hint of a smile under Mikasa’s scarf, “Yes, well, sounded like Armin couldn’t wait to tell someone. We’re both very proud of you, Eren.”

I smile myself, “Now you both sound like you’re my parents.” I glance towards the paper bag, “So what did you get?”

“Maria’s Sweets.” Mikasa answers, “I thought it’d be fitting.”

“Well, I’m not complaining.” I answer and sit at the table with Mikasa. Mikasa reaches into the bag and pulls out two small boxes with rectangular cake-slices inside. I already know their flavors; strawberry for her, and chocolate for me. She hands me the small white box with light pink decorations weaving in and out of each other, I open it up. I’m right, chocolate. We begin to eat in a comfortable silence.
Then Mikasa hums as she eats, just a small monosyllabic noise like a thought has just occurred to her.

“What is it?” I ask.

“I was just thinking,” Mikasa sets her small plastic fork that came in the bag down beside the box and leans back. She looks around the apartment, “This place feels a lot more like home when I know we’re the one’s actually working to make it ours.”

“Oh,” I say, my fork hovering above the box, a small piece of chocolate cake caught in the middle.

“Do you think so too?” Mikasa asks, my stomach drops. If I say no, I’ll ruin it for her, won’t I? If I say yes, then I’m lying to her face. I struggle to keep my face neutral, But it’s for her own good, right? She can’t keep worrying about me if she doesn’t know anything’s wrong. She’ll worry if I say no. She’ll worry if I say this isn’t my home. This isn’t my home.

“Eren?” I look up and see Mikasa’s brow furrowed, worried. No, you can’t be worried. That’s not… that’s not what I’m trying to do.

“I’m fine,” I say, I force myself to give her a smile, I hope it looks natural. “I was just thinking about what you said,” I look around, the smile still carved into my face, “And, yes, this does feel like home to me.” Mikasa doesn’t reply, I look over and see her hands are folded under her chin as she stares at me. She opens her mouth to speak,

Believe me, believe me, believe me, just this once just-

“What’s wrong?” Believe me. Mikasa’s eyes stay on mine. I keep the smile on my face, not letting it falter.


“Nothing?” Mikasa asks. I’m fine.

“Nothing, I’m fine.” I reply.

“You can tell me anything you want.” She says. I can’t.

“I know.” I say, then a small fear sparks like a fire dancing around in my chest. I feel my hands grip my knees under the table, my nails digging through my pants trying to find some traction in my skin. Don’t say it-

“You can trust me.” She said it. My hands tighten around my knees, my fingers brush the edge of my prosthetic and I feel my stomach drop at the reminder of why all this is happening. Don’t just sit there, say something, anything to reassure her that you’re fine. I give a dry laugh,

“Oh, come on Mikasa. You’re my sister. Why wouldn’t I trust you?” At this notion I stand before she can say anything else. I grab the box and throw the fork inside. “Anyway, I’m kind of tired so I think I’m going to crawl into bed now.” I say as I walk over to the kitchen and throw my cake away, half of it is still left inside of the box.

“You didn’t finish.” Mikasa states simply.

“Not hungry.” I answer through clenched teeth. I have to get out of this situation before she starts questioning me again. I walk into my room, my back always turned to her, and before she can say anything else I shut the door.
Why does my throat hurt? I’ve been holding my breath. I sigh and take a deep breath before heading over to my dresser and getting changed for the night.

I trust you, Mikasa. It’s just the people I trust the most are the hardest to talk to.

Chapter End Notes

Pretty short chapter, sorry. But it has to end there so that the next one can pick up at the correct place. The next chapter is one of my favorites character-wise because it's where we're all going to learn a lot about some of the characters that haven't gotten much spotlight up until now... It's also where things happen. But yeah! Hope you all enjoyed this chapter! Have a lovely day!

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated!
Hey everybody! Well, now we get to learn a bit about what happened to everyone else (or most everyone) in the support group and why they're there. I wanted to shed a little light on these side-stories which may or may not make a more significant appearance in the overall plot. Either way I wanted to get their stories out there!

(Half-trigger-warning-ish-type-thing. Not really but just for the sake of being careful since some people might take it in such a way.)

As per the usual:

Come talk to me:
goldie-the-cat.tumblr.com

Special thanks to my lovely editor!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s water, not sand, that I’m submerged under. I open my mouth but only a salty, wet taste rushes in and makes me gag. It’s completely dark, pitch black and I don’t know which way is up and which way is down.

My lungs burn.

Oh god they burn so badly. Fire constricting my throat and filling up the space in my lungs. I reach up a hand to claw at my throat but it’s so dark I don’t know where my hands are.

I kick with my legs, I have to go somewhere, anywhere but where this fire is. But it’s my leg that’s weighing me down. My half-leg, the prosthetic is heavy and useless, dragging me down deeper. I panic and start to kick and move my arms rapidly. But I only seem to be falling faster when I move. I twist and turn and somewhere in the back of my mind is a small fear that if I keep twisting I might snap my own back. In a darker, more bitter corner of my mind I wonder if that’d be better than my current situation. I crane my neck in what I assume is up, and I think I see the surface of the water. There’s no light, no grandiose illumination to show that it’s there where I’ll be safe. Only a soft wave, like a distortion in the edge of my vision. I reach a hand up but my arm’s not long enough. Only my fingertips brush the edge of the surf, and for a small moment I feel a gust of air against the edge of my skin, but my leg pulls me down further, and the air against my fingertips is washed away by the water.

How did I get here? I wonder, then I remember.

I jumped.

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I shoot up in my bed, gasping for breath. My back and neck feel cold and wet and for a moment I panic, thinking that I’m still under the water. But I’m not, it’s just sweat.
I realize how loud my gasping is in the quiet, pitch-black room.

Mikasa. I slap a hand over my mouth and force myself for a moment I can’t breathe before I remember to force myself to breathe through my nose. I can’t let her hear me.

A dream, A nightmare. I fall back against my bed, my head sinking into the pillow as I try to steady myself, my hand still clamped against my mouth. I close my eyes and when I do I feel something wet squeeze out of the edges and trickle down the side of my face. I sniff, but that’s too loud also.

What the hell are you crying for? It was just a dream. But that doesn’t help at all. I remove my hand and turn my face into the pillow, hoping to smother any noise. I feel the tears seep into the fabric and spread across my pillow-case.

It could be worse. I always hate when people say that. Of course it could be worse! That doesn’t mean it’s not bad! Now I’m telling myself that, the irony. I would laugh but instead I just take a shaky breath and set my jaw to prevent myself from sobbing.

Stop it. I take another shaky breath.

Stop it. A stray sob escapes and I bury myself deeper into the pillow, hoping Mikasa hasn’t heard anything.

Stop it. I lift my head for a moment to wipe furiously at my eyes, rubbing until the sting before muffling myself again.

You don’t deserve to cry. If I cry Mikasa will just hear me and become worried again. I’ve worried her enough already. You don’t deserve to cry.

I don’t think I’ll be going back to sleep tonight.

- - -

“Alright! You ready?” Armin asks cheerily as he buckles into his car. I nod, my head heavy in the palm on my hand as I lean against the car window. I didn’t go back to sleep last night. I just pretended to sleep in until Mikasa left for work.

The car doesn’t start up right away and I look over to see Armin eyeing me suspiciously.

“Are you okay, Eren? You look exhausted.” He says, worry creasing his eyebrows. No, not you too, you can’t worry. You can’t worry, stop it. Stop it.

“I’m fine!” I grin, “I slept in is all so I’m still waking up.” Liar. Armin hesitates. No, no, no. He knows I’m lying. He can’t know. He doesn’t know. He does, he knows.

“Alright,” Armin nods and turns the key, the car bursts to life and and I sigh, dropping my hand and leaning back against the seat. “Let’s go,” Armin pulls away from the apartment building. I lean my head back against the seat, my jaw set tight. I close my eyes and stay silent for the trip.

I can’t let them worry. I won’t let them worry. I take a breath, hold it for a moment, and exhale.

- - -

The trip was silent, and when we arrive I’m the first one out of the car. When Armin doesn’t get out right away I become worried, so I give him a smile again.

“You alright?” I ask, just smile and it’ll be fine. Armin sighs, looking over at me,
“I’m fine.” The way he says that makes my chest constrict. I feel my smile falter but hold it up on my face nonetheless. Armin gets out of his side of the car and I close the door. Walking ahead of him to the glass doors of the building.

He can’t know. He can’t worry. I push open the doors ahead of Armin, who’s only two steps behind me as we enter the building. I don’t look back at him, just enter the familiar white tiled room with the potted plant in the corner. As per usual Hanji, Petra, and Levi are all already in the room, the chairs all set up in a circular formation.

“We’re not locking them out, Hanji.” Petra has her hands on her hips, she’s face to face with Hanji in the center of the circle. Hanji has a devilish grin on her face and is gesturing with her arms wildly as she talks. Levi stands to the side, it seems as if he tried to break up their spat but ultimately failed.

“Oh, come on, Petra!” Hanji exclaims, “It worked so well last time!”

“One time!” Petra huffs, shaking her head, “One time it works well does not mean that you should do it again.” Armin enters the room behind me and the door shuts after his entrance, Hanji’s head whips around and a grin plasters their face.

“Armin! Eren!” Hanji greets us, “How would you like to lock Jean and Marco out?”

“Hanji, no!” Petra protests again. I look over at Armin, when I catch his eye he simply shrugs and walks over to the seats in the circle, Hanji and Petra appear to have forgotten about us for the time being, resuming their previous fight. I walk over to the circle of chairs as well.

“By the time they finish Jean and Marco will have already arrived.” Levi comments, I jump a little at the sound of his voice. I didn’t notice that he moved closer to where Armin and I stand. Levi glances over at me with that same, impassive expression, “You okay, kid?”

“I’m-“ I’m about to reply with ‘I’m not a kid’ but… What if he thinks I’m avoiding the question? What if he thinks I’m lying? I look away, anywhere but his face, the plant in the corner. “… fine.”

Levi doesn’t say anything, I see his eyes narrow in my peripheral vision but I keep staring at the plant. Eventually Levi sighs and looks back at Hanji and Petra.

“You’ve got really dark rings under your eyes.” He states, he doesn’t follow up with a question as to why, exactly, I’ve got such dark rings. But I can almost feel the question in the air, hanging like a fish caught in a hook. He knows I’m lying. He knows, oh crap, he definitely knows.

“College.” I force what I hope looks like a casual shrug. He can’t know. I won’t let him. I won’t let anybody. If I do then they’ll just worry. That won’t help me. That won’t help anyone.

“Hmm,” Levi hums, he doesn’t say anything more and neither do I. Seconds pass and I listen to Hanji and Petra argue. Then the door opens and I turn around to see Jean and Marco enter. Marco still walking on his own, and he looks like he’s almost fully comfortable with it.

“Aww, now I’ve missed my chance.” Hanji pouts, then she sighs, a grin slowly forming on her face, “Ah, well, there’s always Plan B.”


“You’re no fun.” Then she rolls her shoulders and places her hands on her hips, “Well! If we have to go to Plan C, I’m still going to keep things interesting! Somewhat. Maybe.” Hanji shakes her head, “But! Let’s mix things up a little. Today we’re all going to sit with someone different! So no
sitting with who you usually sit next to!” Everyone in the circle begins to look around, trying to remember who they usually sit with and who they don’t want to sit with. Hanji sighs, “Come on! Sit down then!”

I walk across the circle and sit down next to where Marco is taking his seat. On the other side of me I see someone else sit down. I glance over and see Levi leaning back in the seat. Levi looks over,

“What? We haven’t sat with each other in this group.” He snaps, I just shrug.

“I know. Just…” He knows and he’s trying to see if I’ll break. I can’t break. I won’t break.

“I guess I’m surprised this counts since we we’re assigned together beforehand.”

“Well, I say fuck it. Whether it counts or not doesn’t matter.” Levi turns his head back to facing Hanji, who now sits across from us next to Jean and Armin. Petra sits in-between Armin and Marco.

Okay! This is good,” Hanji grins at all of us, “You see this is a new environment, something that can be frightening to many people.” She throws her hands out, palms up to encompass the whole circle, “You’re with people you don’t know, or only vaguely know, and the one person you know well is now farther away than they were before.” Hanji puts her hands back in her lap, the grin still plastered on her face as her eyes shine behind the glasses, “And yet here you all are, still comfortable enough to sit down and put yourself in a position of weakness.” Hanji stands up and reaches over, she grabs Jean in a headlock-esque hold.

“What the hell?” Jean exclaims, he flails his arms out to the side at the unexpected gesture.

“See?” Hanji states, releasing Jean and striding back to her own chair, “You already got so comfortable that you didn’t expect that!” Hanji plops down in her seat.

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?” Jean asks, rubbing his neck. It didn’t look like she grabbed too hard but with Hanji… you never know.

“Mmm…” Hanji thinks, “Good, most people won’t grab you in a headlock.”

“No shit.” I hear Levi mumble in the seat next to me.

Okay! Now that we’re in a formation we’ve never been in before, lets do something we’ve never done before!” Hanji’s eyes make a sweep across the circle before settling back in the middle. I notice that she’s got a serious look in her eyes, all of her previous mirth has faded away. Hanji? Serious? What’s going on? “Up until now, we’ve been focusing on goals and the future and how to get there. But we’ve also been skirting around the very thing that brought you here.” I know what that means. I suck in a breath and grip the edges of my seat.

No, no, no, we don’t need to go back there. We don’t need to talk about that.

I feel someone’s eyes on me, I turn my head and see Levi’s staring at me again. His eyes flicker down to the chair, where my hands hold them with white knuckles, then back up to my face. I release my hands, trying to keep my face impassive. Nothing’s wrong, please believe me. Don’t worry about me. If you start worrying too, then… “If anyone feel uncomfortable they can pass.” Hanji adds, and I release the air I was holding in my lungs. Levi’s eyes still haven’t left me, Look away, goddamit. Don’t know. Don’t figure it out. He knows. He’s figured it out. No, he couldn’t have. Right? That’s impossible. He doesn’t know. But he may. No he can’t. “Armin, you can start.”

Armin seems to shift around a little, as if he’s uncomfortable with talking about what brought him here. “Pa…” He starts, then closes his mouth and stares at the ground. I see Petra lean towards
him, she places a comforting hand on his shoulder.

“Sometimes talking about it can help you,” Petra gives him an encouraging smile, “But don’t push it if you don’t want to.” She leans back in her seat and Armin stares at her for a moment before giving her a shaky smile. I’m thankful she did that, it’s what I should have been doing all this time. But instead he was too busy worrying about you to show how uncomfortable he really is. You’re terrible. You’re the reason he never tells you about his problems. Because he’s afraid you’ll break. Why the hell did you do that?

Armin takes a deep breath of air and begins, “Well, I’m here because I was shot in the lung, I was sent back home for rehabilitation and recovery.”

“How did you get shot?” Hanji asks.

“How most people get shot,” Armin gives her a shaky smile, “With a gun and a person holding it.” He shakes his head, “No, but… I don’t really know. All I remember is that there was shouting and chaos all of a sudden. Then there were many more people than there had been before, and it was pretty disorienting. Then my back was on the floor and I had no idea why I couldn’t breathe.” Armin shuffles in his seat, “I figured out what had happened once I started coughing up blood.”

“Then what?” Hanji presses, I wish she would stop it. Armin already looks uncomfortable. Just stop it, Hanji, he’s already said enough. I bite the inside of my cheek to contain myself.

“I passed out, reacting to everything was just too much, I got overwhelmed.” Armin shrugs, “When I woke up, it was only for a moment, and it was surrounded by doctors asking each other about my rates of survival. None of them looked very hopeful.” Armin sighs, “And then I woke up again, once more, with some doctor clad in white telling me that I survived the surgery, against the odds, and was going to be sent home on account of injury and rehabilitation.” Armin takes moment and looks around. “So I was sent home, and that was that.”

I remember getting the news that Armin had been shot and sent home. At the time I wasn’t sure whether to be relieved, since he had survived and was going home, or enraged, because somebody had shot him in the lungs. Both, in the end, won out. Part of me wishes I had been there, to protect him, to help him. But another part of me is actually thankful that he was sent home, though I wish it was under better conditions… Armin wasn’t, and isn’t, a fighter.

But you weren’t there to help him, and he got sent home because he almost died. Now all you do is make things harder for him.

Which is exactly why I have to make him think I’m fine. I won’t be something to worry about. I’ll be someone he can worry to.

“So why are you here, then?” Hanji asks, her hands folded under her chin as her elbows rest on her knees.

“Why am I here?” Armin wonders, Hanji nods.

“Yes, that’s what got you here, but why are you here?” She gestures around, “Why did you come to this group, Armin?” Armin pauses, looking around at everyone.

“I’m here because…” Armin glances towards me, then down at his hands, “I’m here because I’m still scared. Terrified, really, of what happened.”

“You’re out of the battle, though.” Hanji points out.
“Yes, but,” Armin shakes his head, “I know it’s stupid but some part of me is still terrified that it’s going to happen again. That every time it’s too quiet or too calm something is going to barge in and raise hell. Shoot me again, maybe even kill me.” Armin looks around, seeing everyone so silent, so attentive for once must make him nervous, because he shifts in his seat and stares at the ground, “I mean, obviously that’s not going to happen and it’s a lot better than when I first came home, but…” He shrugs.

“Armin,” Hanji starts, “This is perfect!” She grins widely.

“What?” Armin wonders aloud, Hanji stands, nodding enthusiastically.

“It is!” She walks over to Armin, grasping his shoulders, “You see you’ve admitted what’s wrong, and you did so with minimal hesitation! You know something’s wrong but you also tell yourself that it’s not going to happen. You’re trying, Armin! Trying to get better! And that’s exactly what you need to do.” Hanji releases him, turning to face all of us, “Besides, it’s not like anybody can just snap their fingers and magically be free of their worries. But if you can teach yourself that what your worrying about is only due to past experience, and that in the here and now none of that will happen to you, then you can start to recover! And isn’t that what you’re all here for?” Hanji looks around, I follow her gaze and scan the circle.

Armin looks… reassured. He’s smiling like Hanji’s words really mean something to him. Which maybe they do. You wouldn’t know. You haven’t been there for him, or Mikasa. How would you know whether or not they’re scared?

Petra is looking at the ground, but a gentle smile is on her face. Very slightly there, and very peaceful. I get the sense that she came to terms with… whatever happened to her a while ago. At least it looks like that. But you never know, do you? She could be smiling to everybody else so that they don’t notice her. I wonder what happened to her? I wonder if she’s actually at peace with it? I hope she’s not hiding it, she seems like a good person, she deserves to have her worries heard if she’s still suffering.

Marco is watching Hanji with a fascinated look. His hands, prosthetic and natural, are both folded across his lap and I see his own hand squeezing the prosthetic limb. No doubt he’s remembering the explosion. How bad was his recovery? How long did it take him to… accept the fact that he no longer has half his body? I look up at his face, where the faded pink twists down the corner of his mouth as it crawls up and disappears past his hairline. What did he think when he looked in the mirror for the first time? I wonder if he’s even accepted it yet. Or if he’s still trying to fight against the fact that he’s missing half of his body.

I look to my other side, where Levi is sitting. He’s not looking at Hanji, nor at the ground like Petra. I don’t think he’s even looking at the circle, he seems to be more staring past everyone. His jaw is set as he simply watches the wall. I try to read his expression, but as per usual he holds an impassive look on his face. However, if I look hard enough I see small things. How tight his jaw is clenched, the furrow his eyebrows, and the slight squint in his eyes. Whatever he’s thinking about, it doesn’t seem pleasant. Is he… going to pass? Part of me expects him to do so. But part of me… really hopes he doesn’t.

I look past Levi to Jean. Jean’s foot is shifting around nervously on the floor. He seems to be gritting his teeth and as I watch he lets out a small ‘tsk’ before shifting his head to the side. He’s… annoyed? I frown, exactly what I’d expect from that horseface. But… still, he seems nervous. Actually, what did get him sent home? He certainly didn’t lose any limbs in the bombing… and I don’t see any visible burns… What happened to him? Or did he just… go home after his two years were up?
Hanji claps her hands together again, calling my attention back to her as she now stands behind Petra.

“So! Petra, mind following up on Armin and telling us what happened to you?” Hanji asks, Petra nods.

“Alright, then,” She takes a breath, “Well, my story is actually somewhat similar to Armin’s… Minus the being shot in the lungs.” She looks around the circle, she tucks a piece of hair behind her ears. Nervous habit? “It was supposed to be a calm, quick, and easy in-and-out kind of thing.” She lets out a small, semi-nervous laugh, “I actually don’t even remember what the point of the mission was.” Petra shakes her head, “Whatever it was, we didn’t complete it. We got halfway there, just far enough that it would take backup too long to reach us if something went awry. Which it did, we ran into enemy forces.” I see a different light in Petra’s eyes, one that I hadn’t seen before… In fact it’s not a light at all, but a lack of light. A haunted look. “It was… seconds before shooting started. I’d been in fights before but none as crazed as this one. They weren’t just shooting to kill but they shot to *slaughter*. We called for backup but, like I said, it took too long for them to get there. By the time they did there were probably only four people left out of the original twenty of us that had gone out. And even less on the other side.” Petra shook her head, “We were taken back and… I just… I just couldn’t handle it that time. I started to break down. I stopped eating, eventually stopped sleeping, and then… I left. My time had been up and I was given the choice to leave or stay and I was terrified. I left because I couldn’t take it anymore.” Petra looks around the circle, but she’s not looking at the people in the circle, just the circle itself. “And I… Well, I tried to get better. I still have trouble sleeping but I find sleeping medication helps with that. Eating is easier, I can actually stomach food now even if it’s a pain to prepare it. So… yes, I suppose I’m getting better.” There’s a moment of silence after Petra finishes. She clears her throat to break the silence. “So, er, that’s about it.”

“Great job, Petra!” Hanji says, clapping Petra’s shoulders, “You’ve acknowledged your problems, but you also acknowledge that you’re getting better! Long as you continue to know what helps you and what hurts you, I have confidence that everything will be fine!” Hanji turns her head, her hands still on Petra’s shoulder.

“Marco? Would you like to share as well?” Hanji asks, she releases Petra’s shoulders. I see Marco look around the circle, he connects eyes with Jean for a moment, who looks a bit more focused this time around, and then continues looking around the circle until his eyes land on me. He looks down at my leg for a moment and then over to his prosthetic leg.

“Well, I…” He starts, I see his hand, his real hand, clench and unclench. He tries to do the motion with the prosthetic but I see frustration furrow his brow as the hand only shifts a tiny bit.

“You can pass if you want.” I hear myself say. Marco looks up at me with surprise written all over his face. Then he shakes his head, “No, I don’t want to pass.” He replies. “But…” He looks around, “I don’t think I’m ready to give the extended version yet.” Marco smiles, hesitantly, shakily smiles. “Well, I… Er, we,” He looks from Jean to Levi and then to me, then he continues to stare at his prosthetic hand. “We’re heading through this… field. It was supposed to just be a travel mission, safe, no threats in the area but… We were misinformed or… something. I don’t know. We, um, well, we were running across this field to get to where we needed to be and… My… my leg it… Um…” Marco clenches his own hand, I see his jaw stiffen before he shakes his head, and takes in a ragged breath. “It hit a landmine… They were scattered all over the field and… it exploded… it… it… My leg was… and my arm…” Another shaky breath, “My leg and my arm were blown off. I… I blacked out after that and… when I woke up I was…”
“If this is too hard,” Petra interjects, Marco’s head whips up, surprise written over his face as if he were lost in the memory. “I know what that’s like. ‘You can stop.’” Marco shakes his head.

“No,” Marco sighs, “No I think I should finish it.” Marco straightens himself, “When I woke up I was in the hospital. They were speaking to me but I didn’t really hear them. But I still… processed their words, somehow. Like I didn’t know the words they were saying but I knew what they were saying. Telling me that I’d lost my leg and my arm. That I almost died, that I lost almost half my blood and needed to rest now. That they had to give me infusions. So…” Marco shrugs, “I did, I rested and I wasn’t really sure how to feel about it. I would go through periods of disbelief, where I would wake up and wonder why my side felt so… empty. Why I couldn’t feel my arm. And then I would go through periods of depression. I didn’t know what I could do. I was literally half of who I used to be. And I just didn’t know what to do with what I had left.” I see Marco clench his prosthetic hand in his real hand. “I still…” His voice fades off. He doesn’t pick up the sentence again. But I know it, because I’ve had the exact same thought.

I still don’t know what to do with what is left of me.

Part of me… isn’t even me.

I’m not even fully myself.

I feel my hand tighten around my own arm. My heart seems to be trying to make a break for freedom by pounding against my chest. I guess I can’t blame it, I would too, if I was stuck in an incomplete body. I stare at the ground. In my peripheral vision I see someone staring at me. I don’t care enough to look and see who it is.

“This is good, Marco.” Hanji lays a hand on Marco’s shoulder, “You’re acknowledging your problem.” Marco looks up at Hanji, who offers him a grin, “You’ve told your story and you know you’re not ready to move on yet. But that’s why you’re here. And I’m here to help you!” Marco simply nods, he doesn’t reply. Hanji gives his shoulder a pat then releases him. She looks to me. I release my arm and sit up straighter, I see Armin’s head turn to me from Marco.

He looks worried.

No, no, no, that’s not the plan at all. He’s not supposed to be worried. I steel my gaze on Hanji’s bright grin.

“Eren, would you like to share?” She asks.

If I just say ‘pass’, Armin will think something’s wrong. If I share, I might slip up and make him worry even more. I have to do something.

So I offer a small, dry laugh that sounds fake even to my own ears. My stomach churns, Please, let this work. “I think Marco’s covered everything I would need to say. So I’ll pass.”

Hanji, nods, a look of disappointment crossing her features. I look over to Armin, trying to keep a small smile on my face.

Now… he looks sad.

My smile falls.

“Levi?” Hanji asks. I look over, just as Levi glances from Hanji to me. He sighs and crosses his arms, leaning back in his seat.
“Pass.” He states simply. Hanji looks as if she expected that, she looks past Levi.

“Jean?” Hanji asks.

“What is there to say?” Jean sounds irritated, his foot tapping lightly against the floor, his jaw set, “I got sick of being scared all day and having goddamned nightmares about being shot all night, so I left. My time was up.” He looks up with a glare, “That’s. It.” He emphasizes each word. Hanji stays silent for a moment, watching him.

“Okay, then.” She accepts the answer with nothing more than a bat of the eyelashes. Her calmness is… unusual. Even with my reaction she looked disappointed. Was there something more behind Jean’s words that I missed?

Who knows.

“Well,” Hanji glances at the clock, “It looks like our time is up, so we’d best be going.” She gives that energetic, bright smile to the entire group. “I’ll see you all next week! This was a great session! I hope you all reflect on what you said here today, and what your comrades said as well! Who knows?” Her grin grows wider, a wild look in her eyes, “Perhaps you’ll even find out something new about yourself! And maybe it’ll help you get better!” As she says these closing words, everyone begins to stand and drag their chairs to the corner where the stack is. “Thanks for coming today, everyone!” Hanji dismisses the group as she, too, drags her chair to the back wall.

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Armin and I open the door, and I shiver as a gust of cold air blows straight into our faces.

“It’s getting colder quickly.” Armin comments.

“Yeah,” I say. I hope it doesn’t snow…

“I hope it snows.” Armin smiles up at the grey sky, “It's always so beautiful when it does.”

“It is, isn’t it?” I reply, shoving my hands in my pockets. But it makes it harder for me to move… Oh shit what if it snows and Mikasa or Armin try to help me get around? No, they can’t do that. They can’t. If it snows, I’ll just grin and bear it. I have to practice somehow so they don’t see me trudge through. But how do I practice? Place clothes on the floor and wade through them? No, Mikasa might see that and worry. She can’t do that, she-

“Eren,” Armin asks, and I snap back to attention. “You okay?” His eyebrows crease together, “You spaced out there for a moment.”

“I’m fine.” I give what I hope to be a convincing grin. Armin stares at me for a moment longer. He suspects you’re lying. He can’t suspect that. No, just keep smiling and wait for him to stop being suspicious. Damn it, Armin! Why can’t you just believe me? Armin sighs, hope flares in my chest. “If you say so.” He mumbles, I exhale in relief.

“Well,” I say as we reach the edge of the curb, “I think I’ll run back today.” If I’m not there then there’s nothing to worry about.

“You sure? It’s pretty cold out, Eren. And the sky’s getting darker…” Armin glances up at the clouds slinking across the sky. Dark like someone threw a large grey blanket over the world.

“I’ll be fine.” I reply, Armin looks back at me, he nods once.
“If you say so.” He accepts my decision and begins to walk to his car. I wave to him as he leaves. When Armin reaches the door he waves back and gets inside. I turn to begin walking back, not in a running mood. When I come face to face with, and nearly bump into, Levi.

“You running today?” He asks, his eyes are narrow, more focused and less bored. The breeze picks up again and I try hard to resist the temptation to avoid eye contact. *If you do that he’ll just get more suspicious.* In my peripheral vision I see the hem of his black coat wave in the breeze. I shuffle my hands deeper into my grey sweatshirt’s pockets.

“No,” I answer, keeping my eyes level with his, “Walking, it’s too cold for running.”

“Hmm,” Levi hums. He looks towards the sidewalk, “I’ll walk with you then.”

“What?” I say. Levi turns back to me,

“Are you fucking deaf? I was right in front of you when I said that.” Levi shakes his head, “We’re heading to the same place anyway, so it’s not like I’m going to go a longer, and shittier, way.”

*Heading to the same place?* Oh, wait, that’s right. Sunday. Levi and I meet at The Rose Café on Sundays. But it’s only three. We meet at six, why is he…?

*He knows. You fucked up and he knows you’re faking it.*

Fear nests in my gut, curling up like a cat basking in the sunlight. He can’t know. If he goes with me, he’s no doubt going to question me. But if I refuse, he’ll know for sure. No, no, no. This isn’t good! This isn’t how this was supposed to go!

“A… Alright.” I reply, my chest clenches, trying to suffocate my far-too-fast heartbeat. I force myself to take steady, even breaths. But they sound far too loud to my own ears. Levi’s expression doesn’t change.

“Good,” He says, turning, “Let’s go then.” He walks ahead of me. I take a moment, curling my hands into themselves as I squeeze my fingernails into my palms. I swallow and force my legs to move. For a moment I’m caught off guard by the prosthetic hitting the ground, I stumble. Like I used to before I got used to walking with the false leg. I throw my hands out against the side of the building to stop myself from falling. When I look up, Levi’s staring at me with that narrow-eyed look.

“Sorry,” I try to grin again. I think of Hanji with her tooth-filled, happy grin, I try to copy that. “My foot hit a rock.” I lie. I see Levi’s eyes scan the ground. No rocks in sight. He frowns. I keep the smile on my face and straighten.

Levi waits for me to catch up to him, when I do, I try to walk past him. He stops me by placing a hand on my shoulder.

“Eren,” His voice is cool, even, it’s a tone I haven’t heard him use before. No, I’m wrong. I have heard him use it before. Long, long ago. What seems like a lifetime ago. Back when I was in the army. It was the tone he used whenever we went into a dangerous scenario. I can practically feel the blood drain from my face.

Levi is about to speak, but I know the word’s he’s going to say before he says them. They’re the one’s I’ve been trying to prevent anyone from saying this entire time.

“We need to talk.”
So! See you all next time to see what Levi wants to talk about!

Anyway, I have a thing to ask everyone about:

So summer is coming up, yay! (Of course exams are hell and that's just about to start but I'll survive. Fingers crossed.) However, I'm very rarely at home during the summer. Since I like to travel a lot and explore when I travel. I don't really stay in one place. That being said, I do not want to put this fic on a summer hiatus. Which means I'm going to mess with the 'Chapter Publication' feature of AO3. That being said, I have two options which I want your guys' opinions on:

1. While I do stay ahead of the current fic chapters, I'm not so far ahead that I'd be good for the amount of time I'm away. I could split up the chapters into smaller chapter-lets and space them out week by week over the summer so it's more like each chapter is a half-chapter, but the fic keeps going with the main plot until the year begins again.

2. I could write a series of short, side-chapters which explore the stories of the other characters in this fic. The chapters here would be like a series of miniature short stories. We would leave the main plot be for the meantime, only having one or two main chapters happen because of information that needs to get out there, but just explore the stories of Petra, Jean, Armin, Mikasa, Marco, Erwin, Hanji, whoever really. I think this could be fun and interesting if you guys are up for it.

I'll continue to write over the summer, the only problem will be updating. So leave your opinions in the comments, please.

Thanks guys! Talk to you later!

Comments and Kudos much appreciated.
Heyyo! So, this will probably be the last full-length chapter for a while. Starting on the next one, everything will be a bit shorter than usual but hopefully that means I'll be able to write enough in this coming week to make up for the entire time I'll be gone. Hope it all works out!

Come talk to me:
goldie-the-cat.tumblr.com

Special thanks to my lovely editor!

“What about?” I feel my smile falter on my face, but I force the corners of my lips to stay up.

“You.” Levi replies.

“Okay, well,” I look for something, anything to get me out of this. “We should probably wait until we’re at The Rose Café since it looks like if we stay here it might start raining.” Three hours, that will give me three hours to prepare an answer.

“This building covers us.” Levi states, I feel my smile slide again, instead of flickering it releases and my face falls into a neutral look.


There’s silence between us, it’s uncomfortable and I’m not sure what to do. I shift uncomfortably. It seems as if Levi isn’t fully sure what comes next anyway.

“You looked pretty damn uncomfortable back there.” Levi states simply.

“Well, it was an uncomfortable subject.” I reply.

“Yeah but there’s a difference between a this-is-kind-of-shitty uncomfortable and full-blown-panic uncomfortable.” Levi shrugs as he says this, as if it’s a casual conversation. Not a confrontation.

“I hope I was the former?” I ask.

“It seemed like you were trying to be.” Levi’s voice stays even when he talks, “But it looked like you were the latter, just hiding it.”

“Oh, well,” I turn my head, so that he’s just in my peripheral vision. I try to find some interest in the darkening city, “I’m just not all that good with… what happened.”

“No shit,” Levi sighs, “At this point? I’d be questioning your sanity if you were completely comfortable with all this.” I turn my head back to him at this.
“It’s been a year.” Shouldn’t that be long enough to adjust to something new, even if that something is bad?

“A year’s a lot shorter than you think.” Levi crosses his arms across his chest, he leans back against the wall, “A lot can happen in a year, and a lot can stay the same. But it’s still much shorter than most people realize.” Levi leans his head against the wall, it’s his turn to stare out at the parking lot. “Especially when it’s just one out of a hundred.”

“I doubt I’ll live a hundred years,” I say in a dry tone, I lean against the wall next to Levi.

“You never know.” Levi’s shoulders drop, “But I’m not here to talk about how long we live.” He turns his head towards me, “What’s wrong, Eren?”

There it is. He knows. He knows that something’s wrong.

But he doesn’t know what.

“Nothing.” I answer, steadying my voice.

“Bullshit.”

“No, really,” I push myself off the wall. I’ll have to deal with him in three hours again but I need that time to prepare what I’m going to say, “Nothing’s wrong, Levi.” I look past him, at the sidewalk, my escape. “I appreciate your concern but I really have to go, my sister might be at home and worry about me.” I’m lying through my teeth, Mikasa doesn’t get home until later, after Levi and I have our meeting. But it’s the only chance I have.

Levi doesn’t say anything, he doesn’t even look at me, just stares out at the parking lot.

“I’ll see you soon, then.” I say, I walk past Levi and out into the parking lot. Behind me, I hear him mutter.

“What the hell was that?” Then I hear the sound of footsteps heading in the opposite direction.

He’s going to question me more, isn’t he?

I have three hours to come up with answers… But what if I can’t come up with any?

Maybe I just shouldn’t go…

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Six thirty rolls around and I’m still sitting in my apartment, a Political Sciences reading on my lap. I’ve been on the same page for the last thirty minutes.

It’s not too late. He might still be there. Maybe you should go. He’ll just get more suspicious if you don’t.

Goddamn it, I can’t think straight. Guilt is gnawing at my stomach like a damned vermin and I can’t get rid of it.

I’m broken away from my thoughts when I hear the door unlock and open. Is it Mikasa? No… but… she’s half an hour early. She comes home at seven.

“Mikasa?” I call out, I stand up and walk to the doorway. There’s no reply from her. “Mikasa is that you?” I poke my head out from around the corner of my door.
Mikasa stands with her back to me, her hand still on the doorknob. The other hand holds the key’s, half-twisted and paused as if someone pressed the stop button on a remote before she could lock the door.

“What are you doing? You’re half an hour earlier than usual. Don’t you have work?” I ask, Mikasa turns her head, ever so slowly, ever so slightly.

“You’re actually here…” She mumbles to herself. What?

“Um… Yeah, this is… kind of where I live, you know?” I step out into the main room. Mikasa pulls the key out from the door and turns to face me fully.

Her face is blank, but in a way so that it looks like she’s restraining something.

“Are you alright?” I follow up. Mikasa’s face stays blank.

“Why are you here, Eren?” Mikasa skirts around my question with a question of her own.

“Um…” I’m at a loss for words. What… does she mean?

“You… you have that meeting… or whatever it is, around this time, right?” She looks to the side, a gesture so casual it could have meant nothing. Does she mean my meetings with Levi? Mikasa’s eyes flitter back to me, “That’s what Armin said.”

“Er, yeah. But… I don’t see why this is such a big deal.” I try to smile at her, hoping to dissuade… whatever it is that’s making her act like this.

Mikasa hums slightly to herself, “Armin told me you didn’t answer today.”

Is… Is that what this about?

I try to search Mikasa’s face but her eyes are turned away from me, her face is stone cold.

She’s worried about me.

No, no, no! This isn’t what I was trying to do!

“Marco went through the same things I did, he answered before me so… I felt no reason to say anything more.” I lie. Mikasa’s eyes stay trained on my face.

“Why are you lying to me, Eren?” She asks, her face hardens, and if I didn’t know her better I’d think she was angry.

No, she’s not angry. She’s… hurt. I can see it in the way her eyes squint and how tightly she grabs her hands at her sides.

“I’m not.” I have to keep this up. If I do then maybe she’ll break and believe me. Believe that I’m not lying, that I’m fine. If that’s so then maybe she’ll stop fretting over me.

Armin had… so much to say at the group. What if Mikasa’s the same way? But she just isn’t sharing it because she’s too busy worrying over me? The thought fills me with fear, it makes my chest clench up and makes it hard to breathe.

“What are you hiding from me?” Mikasa presses. I see one of her foots step forward, she angles her body as the other slides backwards. It’s a stance I’ve seen her take many times as a kid, whenever Armin was bullied and she placed herself in-between me, recklessly trying to beat the cruel kids,
and the bullies. It was her fighting stance.

“Nothing,” I straighten my shoulders, mimicking her defensive posture. If she wants to play it as a game of will then so be it. I. Won’t. Lose.

“I’ve lived with you for long enough, Eren.” Mikasa’s hands clench and unclench at her side, the red scarf partially falls off of her shoulder, revealing the edge of the grayish-green turtleneck underneath. “I’m your sister. I know when you’re lying.” Her voice doesn’t waver, it simply stays level, cool-headed. She’s still as marble, the only movement comes from the shifting of her hair whenever an awry draft brushes by, misplaced in our small apartment.

“Then you’d know I’m telling the truth.” I grit my teeth, part of me is reminded of the night… a week or two ago, when I’d snapped at Mikasa and slammed the door on her. If I’m not careful this could end up just like that…

How many times have I hurt the ones I love?

How many times have they brushed aside their own fears, desires, worries, anything at all just for my sake?

How many times will I continue to hurt them, even when I’m just trying to end all this madness?

I suck in a breath, Mikasa’s saying something now but I’ve lost the ability to hear anything around me. It’s just this whirring inside of my head, I don’t know if it’s anger, or panic, or both. Whatever it is, it’s making it too damn hard to breathe and think and I feel like I’m going to pass out. The room seems to be wavering, but maybe that’s just me.

“I’m going for a walk,” I cut her off mid-sentence, “I need some air.” I brush past her.

“Eren, you need a jacket-” Mikasa begins, but I cut her off by swinging the door open unintentionally hard. It slams against the side wall but I keep going, pulling it closed as I walk forward. “I’ll go with-“ Mikasa’s cut off again by the door shutting.

I’m just repeating last time.

Except this time I’m not confined. I’m in the hallway that leads outside, not stuck in my room. I’m practically jogging down the hallway before I get to the end and start half-running down the stairs.

My breath catches in my throat when I move too quickly and my prosthetic slips on the unpolished metal. I grip onto the edge of the railing but my jaw hits the bar nonetheless. I stand up, my leg is shaking but I stand up nonetheless and rub my jaw. I mutter some unintelligible curse before continuing down the stairs at the same pace as before. My breath is slamming against my lungs like a deranged prisoner hitting the bars with his body over and over again. It hurts. But I just have to get outside. I’ll be able to breathe once I’m outside, right? It has to be.

I get to the small, cubic lobby and waste no time hitting the front door with my palms before rushing into the piercingly cold air.

I suck in a breath, instead of body slamming it needles my lungs with it’s sharpness. I cough into my elbow, shocked by the sudden cold.

Damn, my jacket is back in my room.

I’d taken it off when I got into the apartment, but now… Now I was left in a t-shirt and sweats and it was freezing cold outside.
I shivered, feeling goosebumps start to make a military-like formation on my forearms.

I should go back upstairs, apologize, grab my jacket, maybe come back outside if I still feel the need to.

But then I’d have to face Mikasa again.

I’d have to make her worry and question me again.

So I turn on my heels, and begin walking down the sidewalk. Earning a few glances from several people entering and exiting shops and other buildings.

*Who’s the one-legged kid in a t-shirt?*

I almost laugh at myself, I’d been so worried before about making a spectacle of myself and here I was. Parading down the street, pant leg rolled up for the entire world to gaze at my fake fucking leg, wearing a bright t-shirt when I can see my breath dance in front of me.

I might as well be holding up a giant arrow and a neon sign saying ‘Hey, Everybody! Look at me! Bet you’ve never seen anyone like this, huh?’

But almost is the key word.

At least I can breathe now.

There’s still a painfully obvious tightness in my chest but I’m not gasping for breath anymore.

I suppose that’s the bright side to this whole situation. The single bulb in a darkly lit room.

I need a new light bulb.

It’s pretty soon when I find myself at the crosswalk. I look from left to right, the end of my block and I have no idea where I’m going. I should turn back, Mikasa’s probably worried sick about me and that’s not the point of any of this.

Hell, I’ve already thrown the point to all this madness out the window. I’ve basically affirmed her suspicions about everything not being okay. I should just go back and accept the fact that I’ve fucked up grandly.

But what would happen if I just kept walking?

If I never returned, if I just started walking and kept walking until my legs gave out.

Or until my leg gave out. I mean, I’ve already lost one so what’s another, anyway? It’ll just complete the set, anyway.

I laugh, actually laugh, at that. It’s dry, it’s bitter, and it’s full of hate and irony but I laugh. And why? Because the idea just occurred to me: What if I lost one leg, and got a differently styled prosthetic?

I have an image to keep up, anyway.

My fingers tingle with the beginnings of numbness. I wiggle them around to keep the blood flowing. My toes are cold too…

I’m not even wearing shoes, just socks.
I’m a fucking mess.

There’s no cars, and I still have yet to make a decision. Walk until my leg gives away and I probably end up sleeping out in the cold like a homeless kid, or turn back and face Mikasa after what I’d just said to her?

I keep walking.

Now that I’m aware of it, there’s a hole in my sock too. I feel the cold concrete on the ball of my foot. It’s really strange, feeling the concrete on one foot, and nothing but pressure on my knee on what remains of my opposite leg.

Actually, it almost feels like that leg hurts.

It’s painful, like needles have been driven into skin that’s just not there anymore. Phantom pain. It’s been forever since I’ve had one.

I wince as I walk, like I’m stepping on needles and they’re just slowly being driven in, deeper and deeper. But it’s a dull pain, too. Like someone had me swallow a painkiller before all this started and only now is it starting to take effect.

*Just... keep walking.*

What else is there to do, anyway?

I feel my eyelids become heavier. I rub my hands up and down my arms but my hands are so cold that I doubt they’re doing anything, anyway. I shiver, hearing my breathing shake as I do so. It’s choppy, cut up breath, which makes me wonder why the white smoke I exhale is still together in one piece. Shouldn’t it be broken up, too?

The lights cast warm yellow glows onto the otherwise grey and black sidewalk, all emanating from shops or restaurants of some kind. The buildings press up against each other, huddled brick trying to shelter themselves from the cold. A few awnings sputter out here and there, striped or fully colored, protruding from red and grey buildings. A few cream colored walls give the feeling of some life and brightness to it all. Artificial ivy crawls up the side of a familiar building with a red-and-yellow striped awning, and empty outdoor seating surrounded by a waist-high black fence with empty red clay flower-boxes attached to the sides.

There’s a sound of roaring thunder. The sky rips open and, like most unpredictable storms, my surroundings become a flood of rain splattering against the ground.

“Shit!” I exclaim as I feel water begin to pour against my skin, making my t-shirt stick to my sides. I dash under the nearest awning, the red-and-yellow striped one. As I do a man walks out and the welcoming scent of freshly baked bread and soup wafts out on a single, warm breeze.

“Damn, it’s picking up quickly.” He mutters to himself and pops open a black umbrella. He sees me in his peripheral vision and his eyes widen in surprise. He gives me a once over, soaking wet, probably looking like a drowned chihuahua, and then his eyes settle on my prosthetic leg. He spends far too long staring at it for my comfort.

I cough purposefully into my hand. The man’s eyes shoot up and he clears his throat, leaving. No acknowledgement, no apology, just clearing some lodged phlegm or food and scurrying off.

Nothing new.
If my eyes were heavy before they’re anchored now. I lean against the building, I can’t go in unless I order something and I don’t have my money with me. I exhale through my nose in frustration.

I want to go back.

But I don’t want to walk through the rain. I don’t want to face Mikasa. And…

I just want to be warm.

That’s the thing that’s bothering me the most. The cold. It’s changed from nipping at my body to full on biting. The water doesn’t help, either, it just acts like glue and makes the chill cling to my body like a possessive lover. The cold’s hands scrape along my nose and eyelids, my ear tips feel frostbitten and my foot is… well I can’t feel it anymore.

Again, nothing new. I suppose.

I blow a piece of wet hair away from my face, my eyes are closed and I’m just listening to the faint cafe music playing from behind the brick wall and the sound of the rain hitting both the pavement and the awning above me.

My chest is tight, but it’s not in panic like usual.

I’m just…

I’m sad.

I’m frustrated and sad and I want to bitch about it someone and cry on their should but damn it… I can’t. I promised myself I wouldn’t break down in front of anyone and that means I won’t. I feel like shit but that’s my fault. I don’t deserve to whine to someone when all that’ll do is make them worry. I don’t deserve to be worried about, I should be worrying about them!

But… Here I am. Standing in the rain, trying to make it easier on Armin and Mikasa but all I’m doing is making it harder.

I can’t do it.

I can’t do anything.

Perhaps it would be better if I just kept walking.

I’d be out of their lives forever. They’d forget me in time and then move on with their lives. Maybe they’d even start to seek help themselves instead of scheduling it for me.

It’d be easy to do, too.

All it takes is just one step. Then I’m on my way.

How will I manage?

No, no, there’s no need for that. I’ve already taken enough. I’ll figure that out once I get there.

All it takes is just… one… step.

Since when was walking so hard?

I should just do it, go, leave. They’d be better off that way.
“Thought I’d find you here.” There’s a sigh in front of me. I whip open my eyes, shocked, “You know, I just didn’t think you’d be soaking wet and dressed like it’s the fucking springtime and you’re lounging in your goddamn apartment.”

“Levi…” I mumble, my words sound awkward, my lips are cold and stiff. “What…?”

“Oh don’t tell me you didn’t fucking expect this,” Levi rolls his eyes, “After you try to keep your shit together when you’re so obviously losing it and then don’t turn up to the goddamn meeting?” Levi scoffs, “I’d have to be blind, deaf, and not be able to fucking feel anything to know that you weren’t about to do some crappy idea.” He looks me up and down, “Just didn’t think it’s be walking out in the freezing fucking cold and rain.” His eyes settle on my leg… no… my foot. My own foot. Not my prosthetic leg. “What the hell happened to your shoe?” His eyes flicker back up at me.

“Um…” My words are cut in half, choppy when I shiver. Levi shakes his head.

“No, you know what? Don’t answer, I don’t care. We need to get you somewhere warm.” Levi turns on his heels, “My car’s just down this road, can you make it? Sorry, don’t have an umbrella. Didn’t expect the sky to rip it’s ass and decide to flood us all like it’s some damned religious story or some shit.”

“That’s fine but…” I look from the cafe to Levi, it had been six thirty when Mikasa had come home, and surely we’d talked for a while… then… I had to walk here and… “How long have you been here?”

“I drove around a while,” Levi answers curtly, “Figured you’d out be doing some kind of stupid shit, just didn’t know where.” He shrugs, “But this is the only area I’ve ever run into you in, so I did a perimeter check, common sense and crap like that.” Levi raises an eyebrow, “Now, are you going to come with me or do you want to sit here and freeze your ass off?” He asks.

“Right…” I mutter. Thank you, I add in my head, but I can’t bring myself to say it out loud… This is exactly what I was trying to avoid. Leaning on someone. But I set myself up for this, didn’t I? Even when I try to separate myself, all I end up doing is making others worry about me even more. All I end up doing is making things even worse. This needs to stop. Somehow, in someway, I need to make this stop.

I follow Levi back through the rain drenched city. Water pours onto us and I watch as it drips off of the hair on the back of his head. My shoulders are hunched over, my arms curled into myself as I try to keep warm. It’s not long before I see a small, somewhat sporty black car. Nothing gaudy just… classy. It fits.

“Get in the passenger seat and try not to fucking drip everywhere.” Levi instructs with no sympathy, as usual.

“That might be kind of hard seeing I look and feel like a drowned dog right now.” I shake my head before opening the passenger door and sliding into the car. I close the door behind me as the seat squeaks. Levi gets in on the other side and closes the door behind him as well.

“Fucking shit it’s cold…” He mumbles to himself as he places the key in ignition and turns the car on. He reaches over and sets the temperature to ‘high’ and puts it on full blast. The air comes out cold for a moment. I shift and shiver uncomfortably, I feel my jaw shake like my teeth try to chatter. But I bite down to prevent them from doing so. I’m not about to add ‘sounding like a laughing skull from some PG horror movie’ to my life achievements for the day. Soon the air warms up and I sits back with a sigh.
I close my eyes and lean my head against the tan leather seat. The heat feels nice on my face. I get the pins and needles feeling in my fingertips, so I open my eyes and hold them out towards the air ducts to feel the numbness slowly fade away with a dull buzz. My foot has the same feeling as well, and I wiggle my toes to get the blood flowing back in them. While I warm up I take a look around Levi’s car.

It’s the same kind of design on the interior as the exterior. Sleek, classy. Tan seating with dark brown wood accents. Not gaudy, again, since that’s really all there is to it. I look over at Levi next to me. He’s sitting against the seat, his arms crossed on his chest and his eyes closed. Is he asleep? No… doesn’t seem like it. Just resting I suppose.

Did he do this out of guilt?

I’m not sure how I feel about that thought. I mean, I’m grateful to him for finding me but… I guess guilt really isn’t why I would want him to do it. Then again, I don’t know what would be preferable, so I’ll take what I have.

At the same time… I don’t want him to feel guilty. That’s what I’d told him before, that it wasn’t his fault. But did that even do anything?

Levi’s eyes snap open, they turn to me and watch me for a moment. “What the hell is it?” He asks. “Huh?”

“You’re staring at me like I’m a fucking stranger, so what the hell is it?” He asks again. The cold, even tone he’d used the last time we talked is gone… I’m thankful for that, at least. That voice brought back too many things I didn’t want to remember.

“Just,” I look back at the car’s front window, at the raindrops splattering against the windshield and obstructing our vision. It makes the outside world look like an oil painting, all the colors slightly mixed and blended. “Did you do this because you’re still guilty, Levi?” I look back to Levi, and his eyes are trained on the windshield. Okay, maybe I shouldn’t have asked it out loud.

“If I was, what would you think?” He inquires, he doesn’t shift his gaze and his voice doesn’t change.

“I’d think that I’m grateful, but I still don’t want you to be guilty.” So he is-

“And if I wasn’t?” Levi asks, still staring at the windshield.

Wait so… he isn’t guilty? Or he is?

“I mean, I guess I’d be happy but… Levi, what else is there?” I ask.

“Hmm,” Levi leans against the door, head in his palm. He shrugs, but doesn’t reply verbally.

“So… Is it guilt?” I ask. I watch as water collects on the tip of his hair and then drips off of the edge, it lands on his cheek and trails down to his jawline before dropping off again.

“No, it is guilt,” Levi answers and I look back to his eyes, “Partially.” He finishes.

“Partially?” I repeat, “So what’s the other part?” Levi looks back over to me,

“I’m not going to tell you-“

“What?” I grimace, Levi rolls his eyes,
“Holy shit, do you ever let anybody finish?” He sighs and waits, when I stay silent he takes that as the okay to continue. “I’m not going to tell you, until you tell me what it is that has you on the edge of a breakdown.”

Oh.

He does know.

I slump back in my seat, the feeling of defeat settling down and taking rest in my gut.

“Oh come on,” Levi sighs, “It was pretty damn obvious you were upset.” He waits, maybe for a response from me, I’m not sure. If he is waiting for a response, he doesn’t get one. Levi takes a breath, “Okay, I’m not sappy and shit. I’m not like your blonde mushroom friend who can pat your shoulder and promise you it’s going to get better. I can’t do that, kid. But, I know you’re dying to get it off of your chest even if you’re convincing yourself you don’t want to…” Levi narrows his eyes, “For some fucking strange reason.” He shakes his head, “I also know you’re dying to get whatever answer you can out of me for… a lot of things.” Again he gives me that quizzical look, “For some other fucking strange reason.” I look up and meet Levi’s eyes, “So, while I can’t be some soft shoulder because that’s just not how I work, I can be someone to vent to. So here’s my proposal, a secret for a secret. You tell me something, and I’ll tell you something, good?”

“You want me to tell you what’s wrong?” I paraphrase his words.

“At this point? I just want you to stop looking like somebody kicked your damn puppy.” Levi says with a sigh, “And, frankly, I don’t know what the hell else there is to do. You’re not giving me much to go off of.” Levi finishes and sits back, waiting for my decision.

But… I’m just not sure.

Just a few minutes ago I was thinking about how badly I wanted to tell someone, anyone, even Levi what’s wrong. But now that the offer’s placed before me…? I just… I don’t know if it’ll help or if saying it out loud will just make it all the more real.

I have a problem.

Saying those words out loud feels like I’m sealing the deal. When I don’t say them out loud, when I don’t do anything about them it feels as if it’s natural.

I don’t have any trouble.

It’s just natural.

But it’s not, and that’s the part that I know. It can’t be! It… can’t be.

“Maybe…” I form my words carefully, each one feels like I’m slowly letting go of some lifeline Levi’s thrown out in front of me, “Maybe some other time.” I reject his offer. I wince, as if I’m scared he’ll hit me or get angry. But I open my eyes and find him staring at me. No anger, no disappointment, there’s nothing there. Levi shrugs,

“Fine,” He says, “When you want to tell me, I’ll tell you what you want to know as well.” He reaches over to the ignition and starts up the car.

“That’s it?” I ask. He raises an eyebrow in my direction, sitting back in his seat.

“What the fuck else is there?” He returns a question, placing both hands on the steering wheel,
“Are you expecting some kind of crappy outrage? Or maybe me breaking down and going bat-shit insane, sobbing and crying and bitching at you to just tell me what the fuck is wrong?”

“Well, yes, I guess I was.” I shrug.

“You’ve got some damn hero and villain complex then, brat.” Levi answers, “I’m no villain who’ll hit you just because you chose to respect your own fucking privacy, nor am I some white knight who’s about to force you to let it all out ‘for the sake of your own good’.” I can hear the air-quotes around his words, “No,” Levi continues, “If you’re going to tell me, you better be telling me on your own fucking terms or not telling me at all.” He takes the parking brake off. “So, if that’s it then I don’t want to sit here while you get my fucking car dirty with your wet-ass clothes. So where do you live? I’ll drive there.”

I should say that I’ll walk. The rain is still pouring but I shouldn’t bother Levi anymore than I already have.

“Erm, it’s just back down the road, opposite of The Rose Café, two blocks down. Red brick apartment building.” But of course I end up giving him directions, and why? Because I’m selfish. Because I don’t want to go back out in the rain so of course I give him the correct directions. I let the conversation fall to silence as Levi presses on the gas pedal and pulls into the road before turning around and heading down the street.

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Levi pulls in front of my apartment building. I unbuckle my seatbelt as he kills the engine with a sigh.

“Eren?” I’m about to get out when he stops me, so I turn back to face him, my hand on the door. Levi doesn’t say anything, he’s just staring at his hands.

“What is it?” I urge him on, releasing the door for a moment.

“Just…” Levi looks up, “Don’t do anything this stupid again, okay? It’s cold as balls outside.” He grimaces.

I can’t help but smile,

“You know me, Levi.” I grin, “No promises.”

“Brat,” Levi smirks, “Now go, you’ve already dripped all over my goddamn car.”

“Think of it as a parting gift.” I tease.


“I get it, I get it.” I laugh, “Get off my lawn you damn kid. I’ll go.” I open the door and leave before Levi can retort. Immediately the rain hurries to assault my skin and suddenly I find myself missing the warmth of his car. I wait for him to drive off but Levi just nudges his head in the direction of my apartment building. He must be waiting for me to go inside so he makes sure I don’t go wandering off in some other area. I roll my eyes in an overly-dramatic way, as if to say ‘Really? You’re acting like my mom, now.’ I wave to Levi and turn around. Talking with Levi was… uplifting. Crass as he is he makes my mood lighter. And maybe I will take him up on that offer of trading secrets… If nothing else maybe I could use it to finally know who he wants to talk to. I cross into the apartment building, a smile on my face.
My smile falls soon as I’m surrounded by the familiar, plain lobby of my apartment building.

Now… I have to face Mikasa.

Talking with Levi was good… But maybe it would have been better if I hadn’t stopped, if I’d just kept walking.

---

“Mikasa?” I call as I enter the apartment. My stomach sinks when I do so. *Shit, I shouldn’t have done that. Maybe I could have snuck past her and gone into the bathroom. Damn it.*

Mikasa’s door opens and I see her head whip out from around the side, her eyes wide as she stares at me.

“Eren… You’re back…” She mumbles, half to herself. I’ve seen that look once before, when I was in high school and my friends and I were being idiots. I had been challenged by some guy, my money’s on Jean now that I know he and I went to high school together, to see if I could climb to the roof of the building. Our high school had a slanted, tiled roof so I stupidly took on the challenge. Halfway up one of the tiles slipped and I fell. Almost broke my neck, when I sat up the world was spinning and my head was gushing blood. I’d apparently passed out for several minutes, and Mikasa and Armin were trying to wake me up. She had this look then, too.

*She was afraid I wasn’t going to come back.*

Well, now I feel like shit. Even more than I did before. “I’m… I didn’t mean to make you worry.” I opt away from saying I’m sorry. It would have sounded fake. Mikasa shakes her head, closing her eyes and she uses the edge of her palm to wipe at the corner of her eyes at something. Then when she lowers her hand her face is back to her usual blank expression.

“You’re soaking wet.” She deadpans, and I’m not sure if this return to the norm is what I want or what I was trying to avoid.

“Yeah, I got caught in the rain near The Rose Café…” I answer, trying to keep a normal tone. But why didn’t she press for more information? Why doesn’t she seem to be as worried as she would normally be if I came home sopping wet?

*Wait… This is what I wanted? Right?*

I was trying, specifically *trying*, to make Mikasa worry about me less. But now… why does it feel like she’s forcing it? Maybe it’s just my imagination. I watch as Mikasa’s eyebrows raise.

“The Rose Café? How did you get back so quickly? It only started raining a few minutes ago.” She asks, walking into the main room.

“Levi found me, he took me back.” I decide to answer honestly because, really, what’s the point in lying anymore?

“Levi…?” Mikasa looks confused. Why does she look so- wait. She wouldn’t know Levi, would she? I guess I’d just gotten so used to having him as a part of my life I forgot I only see him three times a week, so Mikasa wouldn’t know him. I’m so familiar with having Mikasa in every part of my life it’s… strange, to have a part she doesn’t know about.
“Yeah, he’s the guy I meet with. My… well, my friend.” I explain.

“He was still there?” Mikasa questions, she looks bored, but there’s a light in her eye, like she’s planning something. What is she thinking?

“He was driving around,” I shrug, “Why do you care?”

“No reason.” Mikasa replies, she looks back to her room, “You should probably go dry off, I don’t want you getting sick.”

It is pretty cold in our apartment, not as cold as outside but being wet as fuck doesn’t help. But still… the way Mikasa is just letting this go is… strange. Even for her.

“Okay,” I say suspiciously, “Okay, right… I’ll talk to you later?”

Mikasa turns her head back to me, she nods. I shuffle from foot to foot for a moment before seeing that she’s not going to respond and walking into the bathroom. Mikasa, just what are you planning?

Chapter End Notes

Okay as said above this’ll be the last full-length chapter. The next was originally just one chapter all in Levi’s POV to show his side of the recent events, however it became a gargantuan chapter so I figured it was a good place to start splitting things up, so the next three chapters will all be in Levi’s POV. Have a lovely week everyone!

Comments and kudos are greatly appreciated
Okay so here's a thing that happened:

So I tried to set the chapter publication date in the future to see if it would work (I tried to set it for Wednesday like usual.) However I keep getting the message 'Publication date can't be in the future.' Which makes me wonder why they have that function set there anyway, but nonetheless this poses some problems. (Also upon further research I found out that this is if you want to set the publication date to look as if it was posted in the past... Which still confuses me but I suppose there might be situations where such a function would be helpful? I've yet to need that so I've yet to understand that.) Such being said, I still don't want to put this on a summer hiatus (I'm much too stubborn for that). So this means we need to come up with new options...

So, two new options are:

**Option 1:**
I have split up most of the chapters already. I could just post all of them at once and I guess you could either have the choice of regulating reading week by week or day by day or even all at once as you wish?? This might be the best option.

**Option 2:**
Parts of my summer schedule are a little wonky right now so the time I'm gone is uncertain during a specific period, however I will be back home for a few days at certain intervals and could post what I believe to be the amount of chapters that will stand for that interval, return home, and post the next for chapters for the approximate length of the next period that I'll be gone?? If you prefer that then this might work but I also run the risk of having it be a little too chaotic.

So yeah, comment with whichever you guys would like best. Please do so soon so I can figure out what to do. Thanks and sorry things didn't go as planned.

*Also, this chapter is in Levi's POV*

Come talk to me:
goldie-the-cat.tumblr.com

Special thanks to my lovely editor.

If I were to write down all the things that could annoy me in this world. I’d have my autobiography down on many, many damned pages.
Near the top of that list is ambulances.

And not just because they’re fucking dirty, and nobody can persuade me to think otherwise; no amount of antibacterial cleaner can clean up that amount of shitty disease and blood. No, it’s also because of that iconic, crappy noise. The beeping, the sirens that wail into the night to wake up everyone around to a heart attack at the fucking sirens.

Ironic, since that’ll only increase the number of ambulances slinking around.

No wonder hospitals are so fucking rich, they make their own damn cases.

Which is why when I’m awoken, unpleasantly and with my heart jackhammering like a fucking destruction worker on steroids against my chest, by an ambulance zooming past my street, I find it hard to fall back asleep.

So here I sit, at my kitchen top counter with a mug of coffee in my hands because it’s three a.m. and if I’m not going to sleep I might as well be fully awake and ready for the day.

With a sigh I take a sip of my coffee, I can practically feel the dark rings under my eyes from nights like this.

They make me remember shit that happened a while ago. I throw my coffee back and drain the last contents of the cup before standing up and walking to the kitchen. The sirens are fading but I can still hear them ringing in my ears.

The scariest part of that experience, I think, was waking up cold. It sounds like it should be the baby shit compared to the fact that my heart was beating against my ears much too quickly to be healthy, or the fact that I was hyperventilating like I was a claustrophobic stuck in a shrinking box, but it wasn’t. It was waking up, and not being able to stop myself from shivering because I was so damn chilled.

Now that was where the army drew the line, shipped me back home after treatment.

After I had been shoved in an ambulance and shipped off to the military hospital.

And that was where I was coldest, and where the nausea set in and, like a crap-cherry on a cake of shit, my lungs started to fail.

Now, I have nothing against hospitals, since without one I’d be fucked over. It was just the ambulance ride, the constant forcing me awake when all I wanted was to go to sleep. The urging for me to stay awake because they just didn’t have the shit to do what was immediately needed but I wasn’t in control of my own consciousness. It felt so damn disorderly. It felt like I was going to die.

And I was not okay with passing away in some crappy ambulance where I doubted even the doctor could hear himself over the sirens.

Sepsis, it was called. A body’s last-ditch fuckery to try to stop a serious, wide-spread infection, subsequently killing itself in the process.

Sometimes our bodies make crappiest decisions.

But I guess I’m not all that innocent either, I was the one who denied further treatment after I was declared ‘okay for now’ with severe burns up the entire goddamn side of my body. I was trying to get the doctors to focus on those who had just been through hell and back most recently, and I
stupidly thought it’d be fine for me to just let it rest. Sadly, injuries don’t work like that. As I learned pretty fucking quickly and clearly.

But it got me sent home, and in the end I needed to go home and just break away from it all. Even if I didn’t admit it then, but I was damn tired of having to put a fight that I didn’t think was worth the lives anymore.

Which brings me here today, washing cups at my sink and wondering who the hell else would be up at this ungodly hour to waste away with.

I know of one very specific bespectacled woman who might just be interested in such a pastime.

I rinse the soap off of my hands and dry them with a towel, I grab my phone from it’s place on the counter and scroll through my short list of contacts until I get to Hanji’s number. It rings once before I hear a very awake, and very energetic, voice on the other line.

“Levi! What’s a grump like you doing being social and actually calling me?” She chirps.

“Hanji, what the hell, it’s three in the fucking morning how the fuck are you actually energetic right now?” Although, I expected her to be like this. This only assures my suspicions. The woman lives energetic.

“Says the man who called me at, what was it? Three in the fucking morning?” I can hear Hanji giggling on the other side of the phone.

“You’re right, I’ve made a terrible mistake.” I roll my eyes, even though I know she can’t see me do so, “Goodbye.”

“Wait!” She stops me, “Aww… Don’t go…!” She groans, “Levi, I’m bored, nobody’s awake, don’t leave me!” She whines.

“Well it was you’re goddamn choice to be up this early! Crazy bitch.” I sigh, exasperated.

“Why, thank you! I am a crazy bitch, Levi. The craziest one of all!” She giggles again.

“Most normal people would be insulted, not take it as a compliment” I remind her.

“Good thing I’m not like most normal people.” Hanji replies, “But, on another note, what has you up so early? I mean, I know you wake up early but… this is early, even for you.” I pause for a moment, the sirens have faded but it’s not pleasant remembering them.

“Goddamn ambulances.” I offer no further explanation, there’s none needed, anyhow. Hanji knows what happened. Hell, she was the one who came to pick me up after it happened. IV jammed into my arm and all.

“Oh,” Hanji says quietly, “Wow, the response team must be having some fun with those sirens, there’s nobody even on the road! They’re just throwing their own ambulance-rave-party!” She exclaims, and the comment earns a small smirk from me.

“I’m pretty sure there’s a law or regulation somewhere saying that they have to have the sirens on.” I say.

“Yeah, but, that won’t stop them from having an ambulance-rave. I would go to it.”

“Pretty cramped rave.”
“That’s the fun part,” I can practically see Hanji’s wicked smile, “You can try to avoid dancing sexually with some stranger but because it’s so cramped, you’ll always fail!”

“… Crazy fucking glasses.” Is my only response, Hanji barks out a laugh on the other side.

“Don’t you forget it!” Hanji chimes happily. There’s a pause, “So… My guess is you didn’t just call to exchange pleasantries.” Suddenly her voice drops, her tone becomes serious, “It was… the ambulances, wasn’t it?”

I sigh, “Yep, pretty much.”

“I’ll head over soon,” Then Hanji’s voice goes back to the playfully cheery tone she usually carries, “And I’ll be sure to bring company!”

“No,” I say sharply, “You know I don’t like your shitty wine, and I don’t plan on getting drunk before the sun even fucking rises.” I pause, weighing what else she might do, “And don’t drag Petra or Erwin out of bed either.”

“No promises!” Hanji chirps, “Except for the wine, I save that for special occasions you know! And it’s not shitty!”

I roll my eyes, “You keep telling yourself that.”

“Oh, I will!” Hanji responds, “See you soon!” I hear the line go dead on the other side and I hang up as well, setting my phone down on the counter. I’m going to need caffeine for this, and Hanji will no doubt try to raid my own kitchen for coffee if I don’t have one at the ready when she arrives, and if she does drag someone along…

I should probably make three cups, just in case. If she actually listened to me, for once, then I’ll use the second cup myself.

---

Hanji does end up dragging someone along with her.

“Hi, Levi!” She smiles, Petra stands awkwardly behind her.

“I thought I told you specifically not to drag someone else out of bed.” I sigh.

“I didn’t, Petra was already awake.” Hanji’s grin widens, Petra gives me a half wave.

“It’s okay, really. When Hanji honked in my driveway I had already been up.” She assures me. I look at Hanji with a raised eyebrow,

“Honked in her driveway?” I ask.

“It’s the best way to see if someone’s awake yet.” Hanji shrugs. I shake my head.

“And let me guess, you did the same for Erwin?”

“Nah, Petra’s house is closer and I figured one more is enough to annoy you but not enough to make you kick me out.” Hanji explains this as if it’s simple math.

“And you just fucking live for that…” I sigh, then stand aside to let the two of them in. Hanji strides in confidently and Petra offers me an apologetic smile.
“Sorry, Levi.” She says.

“You’re not the problem,” I explain, “It’s crazy fucking glasses over there that drives me insane.” I say, Petra laughs.

“Well, you’d be sad if she left. Admit it.” She urges me, I shake my head,

“Like fuck I’m admitting to that.” I say, and close the door. The two of us walk over to the couch where Hanji sits, a cup of coffee already grasped in her hand. Petra snags one from the countertop and so do I. Then we join Hanji, Petra sits next to her on the couch. I start up the fireplace and then sit in the cream colored armchair across from them, facing the fireplace as well. I take a sip of the coffee, preparing myself for whatever Hanji looks like she’s about to say, and stare above the fireplace. At the small, sparse assortment of knickknacks. The black remote to start the fire and turn it off, a vase with a single fake red calla lily in the jar. Normal flowers died too quickly and I just never had the time to replace them, although I would prefer a real flower to the fake one. But I made due with what I had. Next to that was the photo I both cherish and hate. I cherish the photo because it keeps me from forgetting what they looked like. Who they were. The possibility of forgetting is one of the things that terrifies me the most. But I hate it because it’s a reminder. It makes me remember that the photo is all I have left, not the people themselves, not their voices, just a photo. It’s painful to look at. I can see them but I can’t hear them. It makes me wish I had a recording of their voices.

Sappy, I know, but fuck it all, even just hearing them saying ‘goodbye’ would be enough.

That’s another reason I hate ambulances, they mean that someone, somewhere, has a chance of being saved.

And they didn’t have that chance.

Will I have to tell Eren who I want to talk to, who is in that photo, if he tells me what’s wrong? Part of me is still reluctant to, it’s something I don’t exactly enjoy sharing. But I know it’s a damn near idiotic reservation to have.

Those in the photo are dead, but Eren’s alive and he’s been acting so fucking strange lately. I’m not Erwin nor Hanji, I’m no psychologist, I’m not someone who spends their life trying to help people. But I know when shit’s hitting the fan and I know when I’m responsible for all the crap going down the drain. Both of those seem to fit Eren right now and I’ll be damned if I’m going to let that brat ruin himself.

Well, no, he’s not ruining himself. I’m the one who pushed him. This is just my fucking fault, but I know I can do something to fix this fucking mistake.

“Levi,” Hanji jolts me back to reality, she was quiet, uncharacteristically so. “I know that look,” Her eyes are narrowed, “What are you thinking about?”

I could say ‘nothing’, but knowing Hanji she won’t take that crappy answer. At the same time I don’t feel like having her go into psychoanalytical mode, that never ends well.

“Why the fuck did you pair me up with that brat, anyway?” I ask, cradling my now lukewarm cup of coffee in my hands.

“Huh?” Hanji seems confused by my sudden change of the subject, “Oh!” Her eyes widen as she catches up to my train of thought, “Same way I paired everybody up, who’s goals or wishes are similar.”
“It was a crappy decision.” I comment, I don’t even bother to drink my coffee now, too cool.

“Was it?” Hanji muses, her shitty grin returning to her face, “Because I think it’s the best decision I’ve made for the entire group.”

“Ha.” I say dryly, I think back to Eren standing outside The Rose Café, obviously bothered by something, a very empty look in his eyes as his clothes hung against his frame, shivering in the freezing rain. “Tell Eren that.” I knew the look on his face, empty eyes and all, self-hate. It’s a shitty feeling, and it confirms all of the fears I’ve had about what I did to that kid.

“I will,” I glance up as Hanji says this, her eyes are focused, the smile wiped from her lips in favor of a tight line. “Levi, I’m serious when I say that you needed to talk to Eren, and Eren needed to talk to you.”

“Oh, really?” I scoff, “Look where the fuck it got us!” I lean forward, the coffee cup gripped in my hands, “Hanji, I found him standing, soaked to the goddamn bone, outside of The Rose Café. It was cold as hell and he was in a t-shirt, no shoes,” I narrow my eyes, “Tell me again that having him paired up with me helped him, of all things.” Hanji stays silent, I lean back in the chair, “Exactly.”

“It helped him.” Petra speaks up, both Hanji and I turn our heads to her sudden outburst. Petra looks from Hanji, then back at me, she shrugs, “Well, you helped him.”

I almost laugh, almost, instead I opt for asking, “How?”

“The way he looks at people, at everyone in the group at least, is different from when I first saw him.” Petra begins, “Before it was like he didn’t really see them, he was much too lost in what was happening to himself to see what was happening around him. Not just people, but things, too. He wasn’t… He wasn’t…” Petra lifts her hands, as if to charade the word she’s searching for, “He wasn’t there, to put it simply. He didn’t see the world around him because, to him, it didn’t exist.” Petra lowers her hands, folding them on her lap, “That’s not living, Levi. That’s existing, but not living.” A small smile crosses her face, “Now, when he looks at others, he sees them, too. He’s beginning to see the world around him and, well, he’s beginning to live.” Petra looks down at the floor, at her ankles crossed politely, “And the world’s an intimidating place.” Her voice gets softer, “I know that, too.” She looks up again, her voice becoming stronger, “But, you have to get past that intimidation, that fear, before anything can seem alright. After he talked with you, he started to see the world, that’s intimidating him, because now he sees all that’s wrong. But once he gets past that,” Her smile falls, her brows furrow as a serious look passes over her face, “And I know that he will,” Her eyes relax, the look passing, “I think he’ll be fine.” Then Petra offers up a kind smile, “Maybe you should even talk to him again, help him get past this part as well.”

Talk to him again? I mean yeah, no shit I’ll have to if he ever decides to take me up on my offer but…

“If I do that, talk to him again, won’t I just push him over the edge?” I ask. Eren’s already teetering in-between what’s safe and what’s not. My interference might end up in the worst possible way. Fuck, he might already have fallen. “If I haven’t already.”

“If you really think that,” Petra’s voice is stern, “You should go and see for yourself.”

I scoff, “I already have,” I say, “And it’s not pretty.”

Sorry for the semi-abrupt ending but keep in mind that this was originally just 1/3 of a chapter that I'm cutting into three pieces. So endings will be a bit abrupt. Sorry again.

Also yay for staying up late at night researching diseases that come from infected wounds. Which made me freak out because A. I have a scar on my knee from an incident involving a treadmill and the garage wall and B. It was fucking late and I was tired and couldn't think straight even though I know my scar is really just a ghost of a goddamn thing and I probably looked like an idiot but that's what happens when I'm tired.

The result of this excursion: Sepsis. For more information, you can use this website here: http://www.healthline.com/health/sepsis#Treatment7

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated. (And as aforementioned comment which of the two new options you guys like better, sorry and thank you again.)

See you all soon!
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

This chapter is in Levi’s POV

Okay, so I said I would post the chapters tomorrow at the usual time, but since most of them are ready I figured it’d be best to just post those that are ready today and post the rest tomorrow. Space it out a bit better for anyone who decides to binge-read. :D

Hope you all enjoy!

Come talk to me:
goldie-the-cat.tumblr.com

Updates tagged:
fic: ntmwyf

Special thanks to my lovely editor!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mondays are also on my list. Mondays are the shit-holes of the week. They feel like something new should be beginning, but all they become are reminders that you’re about to slog through another week. My work offers little to no help with easing me into the week. It’s not something I enjoy, it’s not even something I plan to do for the rest of my life. It just is. It’s just something I’m good at. So I sit back, and I don’t really think about it.

By the time my shift ends I’m always ready to leave the office. My bag packed as I walk down to the employee parking lot and slip into my car for the ride home. Today’s no different. It’s always the same routine. Get up, or be waken up, get dressed, get caffeinated, go to work, work, go home. Monday’s are no shittier than the rest of the week, the only reason they annoy me especially is because they tell me the week is about to begin again. Rinse, repeat.

Although, I suppose now Monday’s are a bit different.

Monday’s, Friday’s, and Sunday’s.

The car slowly rolls to a stop at the red light, there’s a few other cars scattered around me here and there. I sigh and lean back, if you hit one red light on this road, you hit them all.

I’m not going to bullshit myself, I admittedly enjoy spending time with the brat. The only downside is that I start beating myself over the head with guilt afterwards like a goddamn teenager at her best friend’s slumber party. I’m anticipating a fucking chainsaw killer to burst through the door and end it all.

The light turns green and the cars slowly move forward, picking up speed as they realize it’s okay to go. I press on the gas lightly.

Which brings me to a whole new dilemma. I like to spend time with Eren, but at the same time I know I need to stop. Hanji and Petra tried to tell me that I made him better, but I’m still convinced
I fucked up badly.

*Where the hell did they get that damned idea anyway?*

Shitty fucking glasses, and to think she dragged Petra into the mix as well.

Part of me wouldn’t be surprised to find out Hanji had told Petra to say what she’d said. But another part of me knows Petra wouldn’t take that, and Hanji may be crazy but I don’t think she’d stoop that low.

I exhale, sighing through my nose, as the car rolls to the next red light. I roll up my sleeve and check my watch. I should have just enough time to pop into my apartment and get out of this goddamn suit and into something more comfortable before I have to leave and meet Eren.

What do I do if he decides to tell me what’s wrong?

The light turns green and I press forward again. I replay our previous conversation in my head.

*Partially.*

*What else is there?*

I smirk to myself. *A damn fine question, Eren. What else is there?*

Well, there’s a lot of things.

- - -

I slip on a black, long sleeved sweater and jeans when my phone buzzes rapidly. I hardly ever leave the noise on. The chimes are too fucking annoying. I pick it up and see Erwin’s name pop up on the screen. I consider leaving it to voicemail, but Erwin hardly ever calls just to share pleasantries, it must be something of necessity.

“What the hell, Erwin? I’m busy.” I sigh, holding the phone up to my ear. I comb a hand through my hair, the edges got ever so slightly knotted from leaning against the car seat.

“Pleasure to talk to you, Levi,” Erwin sounds as calm as ever. “And I know you’re busy, you’re about to leave to see Eren, if I’m not mistaken.”

How the hell did he…?

“Hanji,” I grit my teeth together, “So she’s dragging you into this as well?”

“You know me,” Erwin responds, his voice smooth and low, like it usually is when he’s trying to make a point, “I’m never ‘dragged into’ anything I don’t want to do myself.” I release my jaw, glancing at the clock.

“Alright, you’ve got ten minutes, better make it fucking work.” I pick up the folded suit from my bed and place it in the small wicker basket near the doorway. I exit my bedroom and sit on the couch by the empty, turned off fireplace.

“I’ll get right to the point then,” Erwin’s voice doesn’t waver, “You’re receding back into what we tried so hard to get you out of, Levi.”

I grip the edge of the armchair, “Like fuck I’m ever going back to that.”
“You are,” Erwin corrects me, “Whether you know it or not, you are.” There’s a pause, “Do you still have Farlan and Isabel’s photograph?” He asks.

“Of course I fucking do!” I snap, “I’m going to throw it away just because you think I’m going to shit.” I hiss out the words, I don’t intend for them to sound so sharp but they do. This might take a bit more than ten minutes. Fuck.

“And I’m not suggesting you throw them out,” Erwin doesn’t seem affected by my tone, “I’m suggesting that you’re getting caught up on them again.”

“Well, you’re suggesting wrong, Erwin.” I correct him.

“I think you should-“

“No.” I stop him, “Listen to my words very carefully, okay?” I don’t wait for his response, “I don’t regret my past. I feel guilty about everything I’ve done. They’re different and neither you nor fucking Hanji can seem to get that through your goddamn skulls.” There’s a pause, I can tell Erwin’s calculating his response.

“Fine,” Erwin forms his words carefully over the phone, “My point still stands. You’re falling back into that guilt.” Erwin pauses, “But it’s not just a reaction, this guilt seems to be your safety blanket, your excuse.”

“Excuse? How the hell is taking responsibility for what I’ve done an excuse?”

“It’s not to pass the blame, it’s to not do what you want, say what you want. You’re trying to avoid getting closer to Eren, and excusing doing so by saying your guilty.” Erwin explains.

“Well, fuck me for feeling guilty. Not like I can help it.” I think for a moment and then add, “And you know, Erwin, you’re right. I don’t want to get closer to Eren, in fact, I wish the brat still thought of me as his monster.” I feel my jaw tighten with frustration, “Maybe that way he would still be alright and not about to fucking push himself into some kind of shit for whatever goddamn thing he’s blaming himself for.”

“Like you are?” Erwin doesn’t miss a beat. “Eren isn’t the only one trying to blame himself for something that isn’t their fault. You’ve just grown used to dealing with it.”

I don’t respond, how can I? The fucker played that damn card.

“Levi,” Erwin starts slowly, “Is it really so bad that someone you like enjoys your company as well?”

I sigh, I check my watch. Fuck, I’m already late to my meeting with Eren. “You know what, Erwin?” I say, standing up, “Fuck your psychological shit, and fuck this conversation. I’m late to meet someone.”

“Before you hang up,” Erwin’s voice stops my hand, hovering above the ‘end call’ button, “Just think about this: If you hate seeing him suffer so much, then what can you do to help him?”

I laugh, dryly, “Don’t you think I’ve already thought about that? I’m not an idiot, Erwin.” I press the small red button and the call screen minimizes before going away completely. I shove my phone in my back pocket and open the door, grabbing my winter jacket from the coat rack as I do so. I glance back at the photo on the fireplace, then I exit and shut the door behind me.

What can I do to help him? Not much. At this point, I can just try not to break him.
This is the problem when your best friends are in the psychology business.

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I park a block away from the cafe and walk the short way up. I see the familiar brick building and colorful awning, I glance towards the small black gate. There’s nobody on the outside veranda.

_Shit, did he think I wasn’t coming? Or… Is he doing some stupid fucking shit again? Damn it._

I contemplate whether I should wait around for a minute or hop back into my car and drive around to see if Eren’s wandering again, but then I turn my head and see an SUV parked outside the cafe. Eren’s speaking with a taller, black haired woman who has a blank expression on her face, and a smaller blonde boy. Wait, the boy is Armin. What the hell is he doing here?

“I’m surprised to see you didn’t waltz out in a goddamn t-shirt again.” I greet him as I approach the car. Eren turns and meets my eye.

“Levi,” He says, “Er… I would say sorry we’re late but you’re late as well, so…” He looks away quickly, eyes flicking from the ground to the door of the café. Whatever was going on before I arrived apparently wasn’t very pleasant. I look over at Armin and Tall-Dark-and-Mysterious to my right. Armin’s hands are clenched into fists at his side, like he’s frustrated or upset. His eyes are trained on Eren’s. The girl is also staring at Eren, the only thing I can gather from her expression is extreme focus. I turn back to Armin,

“So,” I start, “Why do you look like something got stuck up your ass and it’s annoying as fuck?” This type of thing is usual for me, but obviously Armin’s a little shocked by my sudden language. His eyes go wide and he’s slack-jawed for a moment.

“I… er… um…” Armin coughs into his hand. The woman with the red scarf wrapped tightly around her neck has turned her expression to me, glaring.

“No worries, Armin,” Eren turns his head back to the group, “This is… usual, for Levi.” He glances over at me, then his gaze drags back to the door. He wants out of this situation. Something’s wrong. Like usual.

_Oh, yes, because this is what it’s like when you fucking help someone._

“Nevermind,” I sigh, “We should probably get going,” I say to Eren. He nods,

“Yeah,” He looks briefly at his friends, “Mikasa, Armin, I’ll… er… I’ll talk to you guys later?” He doesn’t wait for a response, just walks towards the door. I turn as well,

“Wait, Levi?” I turn my head back at Armin when he calls out. The woman, Mikasa, is watching me carefully. Armin swallows, then he talks again, “I…” He looks from Mikasa, then back to me.

“Well? Spit it out, kid. I’m don’t have all fucking day.” I don’t mean to sound harsh, I just do. Armin nods,

“Right…” He clenches and unclenches his hands, then he sighs, his shoulders sagging, “I’m sorry. It’s nothing.” Defeated, Armin turns and walks around the front of the car. Mikasa watches him walk, I can see the edges of her lips pressed tightly together from underneath the scarf. But she doesn’t say anything either, just opens the door and gets in the car. I wait for a moment longer, but they make no move to tell me… whatever the fuck that was.

So I walk away, and into The Rose Café.
Whew, okay, few more to go for today. (Just going to apologize in advance for how short they all are. I had to make sure I would fill the summer requirements.)

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated!
“Well,” I say, pulling out my chair to sit across from Eren, when I sit down the outdoor seating is fucking freezing, but there’s no way in hell I’m sitting inside that stuffy café. “That was uncomfortable.”

“Sorry about that.” Eren murmurs, glancing down at his gloved hands. He doesn’t add anything else. I rest my elbow on the arm of the chair and wait. He has that same, empty look. Despite the fact that the last time we talked he left smiling, it looks like that didn’t do shit.

*Did I make it worse?*

No, fucking stop that. This is exactly what Erwin was trying to talk to me about.

But what if I did just make it worse? Or what if it’s something else?

“I should ask you the same question I asked your friend,” I comment lazily, when he looks up I let my eyes drift to the side. They tried to plant flowers in the previously empty clay flower boxes, but the cold seems to have shriveled them up. What the fuck were they trying to pull? It’s too damn cold for planting.

“You mean, what got stuck up my ass?” In my peripheral vision I see the beginnings of a smile on Eren’s face.

“And is fucking annoying. Can’t forget that part.” I smirk, turning my head to face him. Eren shakes his head.

“Right, because that’s so important.” Eren rolls his eyes.

“It is, brat.” I snap, “If something *just* got stuck up your ass, you could like it, you never know with these kinds of things.” I shrug.

“You realize if anyone else was out on this veranda they’d most likely be wondering what the hell is wrong with us?” Eren leans back, his shoulders dropping from their stiff position, he’s relaxing.
“Good,” I say, “The less shit-headed idiots that approach me, the better.” Then I look around, “But you, on the other hand, seem to attract shit headed idiocy considering you contain it yourself.”

“Gee, thanks.” Eren sighs.

“Well,” I say, turning back, “It’s a good thing it’s cold as balls outside and nobody wants to fuck around with the cold.” I cross my legs.

“Of course that may make people wonder what’s wrong with us, too.” Eren replies.

“Well, fuck them, then.” I say. Eren moves to stand,

“It doesn’t change the fact that they’re the sane ones.” He looks towards the door, “I’m freezing, I’m going to get a coffee or something warm,” He glances back towards me, already making a move for the door, “Want anything?”

I shake my head.

“Alright, be back in a minute.” Eren opens the door and for a moment I smell freshly brewed coffee wading out of the shop, he disappears into the warm light of the café and I’m surrounded by the fresh, unscented wintry air.

At least he’s smiling again. And it’s not that fake as fuck smile he was trying to force yesterday at the support group. I lean into my hand. Smiling is good, smiling means I’m not fucking up, smiling means I’m not forcing him into some spiral of depression or some shit like that.

But smiling also isn’t solving the problem.

I click my tongue against the roof of my mouth, my eyebrows furrow in annoyance. Sure, it makes me happy to see him smile instead of just having that empty fucking expression on his face, but I know that soon as the conversation stops or takes a turn for the worst, that’ll just come right on back.

I wonder if he’s thought about my offer at all?

I’m not going to force him to open up to me if he doesn’t want to. Part of me is also scared he will, since then that means I’ve got to tell him something as well.

Fuck me and fuck social situations. The two just don’t mix well.

I glance into the shop. Eren’s standing in a rather long line that winds around one of the tables. It looks like he’ll be in there for a while. Which means I’ve got time.

I know that the smug bastard will be rubbing it in for days on end but fucking hell, I need help. And I’m not so much of a hard-ass that I’m going to struggle and risk making things worse then they already are. So I open up my phone and go to the recently called list. I click on the name at the top and hold it up to my ear,

“Well, I certainly wasn’t expecting to hear from you again.” Erwin’s voice is laced with a knowing tone.

“Fuck that shit, you knew I was going to call again.” I snap,

“True.” Erwin doesn’t deny the accusation, “I simply didn’t think it would be so soon…” His voice trails off, “Did Eren not show?”
“No, he’s here.” I say, glancing back to the inside of the shop. The line hasn’t moved at all, “He’s waiting in line to get a coffee because it’s cold as hell outside.” I take a breath, “Which is why I don’t have time for your word-bending crap, I need your advice minus all the strings and clever wordplay.”

“Alright,” Erwin sounds serious, “What is it?”

I take a breath, “So I got the kid to smile and loosen up a bit, which is good. But this isn’t a fix, Erwin. This is avoiding the problem.”

“And you… want to fix him?” Erwin sounds surprised, or about as surprised as Erwin can sound. Meaning he probably expected it, but had expected it to happen a bit differently.

“Of course I fucking do.” I say.

“It’s not an obvious choice, Levi.” Erwin corrects me, “Especially for someone of your… persona.” A pause, “Which makes me wonder why you’re so intent on taking my advice and helping him.”

“Later,” I brush his curiosities aside, “Right now we need to focus on the how, not the why.” The line moves slightly. I’m running out of time. “I made him an offer.”

“What would you tell him?” He asks.

“Yeah, if he tells me what’s bothering him or something along those shitty lines, I’ll tell him something he wants to know about me.” I explain. Another pause as Erwin weighs my words.

“An offer?”

“What and when Eren tells you is up to him.” Erwin’s answer doesn’t help much, but Eren’s walking back to the door with a cup in his hand.

“Well,” Erwin draws out his words, the line moves again. “If I were you, I would judge how he’s going to react to the question. If he’s unstable, perhaps it’s best only to hint at it. If you think he’ll be fine, ask him directly. But really, the best choice is to wait for him to make the decision to tell you or not. Only remind him if you truly think he’s forgotten about your… offer.”

“Okay, okay,” I hurry him on, Eren’s ordering now, “And what do I tell him?”

“Whatever you want.” Erwin replies quickly, sensing my urgency, “That part, Levi, is up to you. The same way that what and when Eren tells you is up to him.” Erwin’s answer doesn’t help much, but Eren’s walking back to the door with a cup in his hand.

“Well, that was fucking helpful,” I say sarcastically, Eren opens the door, “I’ve got to go,”

“Good luck, Levi.” Erwin answers, I shut the phone as Eren sits down across from me.

“Hey, sorry, crazy line. Hope I didn’t keep you waiting?” He asks, pulling out the chair and taking his seat again.

“No, it actually worked out well for me;” I answer.
“Phone call?” Eren asks, I nod, “Business or friend?” I smirk.

“Well, don’t you enjoy prying into my personal life?” I say, “Must be a hobby of yours.”

“You can’t blame me!” Eren protests, “You never tell me anything, after all.”

“I would,” I say, taking Erwin’s advice to hint at the offer. I’m not sure how Eren will take it but it’s probably better to ask while he’s still smiling and not standing in the freezing fucking rain, “If you told me something about what’s bothering you.” Okay so maybe that wasn’t hinting but more taking a giant fucking neon sign and slapping him across the face with it. Subtlety is overrated.

Eren’s smile wavers, he tries to keep it up for a second then it falls.
Shit, what did I do.

But he doesn’t look panicked or cornered like he did when I questioned him before, instead he looks like he’s thinking. His lips are pressed into a tight line and his eyebrows are furrowed. Causing small crinkles on his forehead. I watch his face, keeping my expression impassive before Eren sighs and looks up at me.

“Well,” He starts. Holy shit is he actually going to tell me? I find myself sitting a little straighter, but I try to keep my expression neutral. “I… hate the snow.”

“The snow?” I ask, raising my eyebrows. That… wasn’t what I expected. It’s not even snowing yet. Is he bullshitting me?

But no, I don’t think he is. Eren smiles hesitantly, it’s a strange expression, and I’m not used to seeing hesitation on his face.

“It’s no big deal,” He starts quickly, “But I used to love the snow…” He shifts, his hand unconsciously moving to the side of his prosthetic leg, “But now with the prosthetic…? It’s just a pain in the ass and I hate looking like a fish trying to flop around on dry land. It’s really hard to move through.” His hand grips the edge of his rolled-up pants leg by the prosthetic, “And I can’t ask for help because otherwise I’d just be a bother to everyone else…”

“No big deal, huh?” I repeat. I’ve used those words many times when it is, in fact a big deal to myself.

“Yeah,” Eren shrugs, “It’s stupid I know-“

“The fuck it is,” I interrupt him, this obviously isn’t everything that bothers him, but I’m starting to get a sense of his mentality, “I’d be annoyed as shit if I had to wade through snow with a fucking prosthetic.” I fold my hands in my lap, “In fact, I’m impressed, kid. You have to deal with that kind of shit but you do it. Nice job.”

Eren looks surprised at my comment.

“Besides,” I add, “If you flop around like a fish you better fucking do it with pride, you’re surviving the winter.”

“A proud fish?” Eren’s face cracks into a small, not hesitant anymore, smile.

“Be the proudest fucking fish alive,” I say, “It’s your ‘fuck you’ to the snow.”

“Well,” Eren laughs, “I’ll do my best.”
“You better.” I say, “Otherwise you’ll be letting the snow have it’s way.”

“And we don’t want that.” Eren leans forward, “Okay, it’s your turn now.”

“My turn?” Fuck, I hadn’t thought this far. “Okay, well…” I lean back, racking my brain for something I could tell Eren.

“You could always tell me who you want to talk to one last time.” He prods.

“Pushy brat, aren’t you?” I smirk, “But no, you have to work harder to earn that information.” I say, an idea occurs to me. “Okay, here’s something.” I lean forward again, “I wasn’t actually discharged on the basis of burns.”

“You weren’t?” Eren looks shocked.

“No,” I say, mentally thanking Hanji for giving me this idea with her damned group, “Although they were severe, they weren’t so bad that I was going to be bedridden for a lengthy period of time.”

“So…. then what did send you home?” Eren looks curious.

“The burns,” I shrug.

“But I thought you said they weren’t that severe?” Eren tilts his head, confusion written across his face.

“They weren’t, when taken care of.” I sigh, “I didn’t take care of them, and they got infected.” Eren’s face turns into one of recognition, no doubt when he’d first lost his leg they’d warned him about infection. “Sepsis.” I say, “Look it up if you want to know more.”

“Must have been really bad if it was enough to get you discharged.” Eren’s face contorts in something recognizable… concern? Why the fuck is the brat concerned about something that happened to me in the past?

“Yeah, pretty much.” I shrug. Eren’s hands circle around his cup, his lips pressed together. We sit in silence as he occasionally takes a sip from his cup. I lean against the chair.

Silence. Is this good or bad? I can’t quite tell from looking at his face.

But… I got him to tell me something, which is good. Sure it’s not the main thing but it’s good enough. For now.

I’m apprehensive about this whole ordeal, I’m not particularly inclined to share my fucked up life story with anyone who doesn’t already know it. But I’m willing to sacrifice my shitty hubris if it’ll get him to open up.

Why the hell are you so different?

I respect Eren, and respect is something hard earned. Of course I thought this was all just acting on guilt but… key word is thought. I don’t really think so, anymore. Of course the guilt’s still there, but I’m also damn worried about him. Fuck knows why.

Eren glances towards the road, I watch his eyes trace the asphalt up the street and back down. He looks worried. Why does he look worried?

“Levi,” Eren breaks me away from my thoughts, he turns his head back to me, “I’m really sorry
about cutting this short but Mikasa and Armin are going to be here soon… and…” He looks down.

“You don’t want to repeat whatever the hell caused that tension back when I first arrived?” I finish, Eren nods. I sigh, “No problem, we can call it a day.”

“Thanks but…” He opens his mouth to continue, closes it, then speaks, “I don’t want to bother you, but I don’t want them thinking I just wandered off… Could you tell them I walked back to the apartment?” He asks.

I narrow my eyes, he looks sincere enough but considering last time, “Will you walk back to your apartment?” I ask.

“Yes.” Eren answers, and I hear honesty in his voice. “I know after last time you’d be hesitant to trust me but…”

“Okay,” I say, Eren looks surprised for a moment, before smiling with relief, “But,” I add as I stand, “If I find out you ran off again I will personally drag your ass back to your apartment and lock you in your room.” I threaten. Eren grins.

“Well, I better not run off then.” He stands as well. The two of us walk through the cafe, and the brief warmth clings to me before I exit on the other side of the gate. Eren glances at me, “Thank you again…” He stops, “I’ll see you Friday?”

I nod, “Yeah, see you Friday.”

“Alright,” Eren turns and begins walking down the street, “Well, bye, Levi.” He waves. I lift a hand in turn and watch his back until he disappears down the street. I walk to the side of the cafe and lean against the wall, waiting for Eren’s friends to arrive.

It’s a matter of minutes before the familiar SUV pulls in front of the cafe. Mikasa gets out of the passenger seat and Armin out of the driver seat. I push myself off of the wall and walk up to them. Mikasa’s eyes stay trained on me and Armin looks nervous as I walk up.

“Eren left to walk back to the apartment.” I tell them, “He wanted me to stay behind so you two didn’t flip your shit when you realized he was gone.”

“We know.” Armin says. I look at him, damn, the kid’s even shorter than I am.

“You know?”

Armin nods, “That’s… actually part of the reason why we’re here.” He glances to Mikasa, who gives him what I suppose was an encouraging nod. I don’t speak, just wait for Armin to continue. “We… want you to help us, Levi.” He waits for me to respond but I don’t. Armin takes a breath and continues, “Eren’s getting worse, as I’ve heard you’ve noticed. And… it seems like the harder we try to help him…” He takes a breath, his voice is shaky. Eren’s not the only one upset, it’s obvious that what’s happening has been taking it’s toll on blondie, too. “It feels like he’s just pushing us farther away and we’re just making it worse.” Armin’s voice is broken up by a sniff, I see tears start to pool at his eyes. I shift uncomfortably, I’m not good with criers. Mikasa lays a hand on Armin. He wipes his eyes and continues, “And I think I know why…” Armin tries to steel his voice, he clears his throat and proceeds in a clearer tone, “Eren doesn’t want us to worry… He’s scared about… something. Whether it’s really making us worse or something else, I don’t know. But no matter what it is, he won’t tell us.” I stay silent as Armin continues, “But for some reason… he’s opening up to you.” Armin explains.

“And what makes you think that?” I interject.
“Well,” Armin past me, to the door of the café, and then back to me, “Mikasa can tell you more about that…?” He looks hopefully up to Mikasa. Who’s lips are pressed tightly together. She glances at me, I wait for her to speak.

“He always seems to be more at ease after he comes home from talking with you,” Her voice is chilled, she must be annoyed by the current state of affairs, “for some reason.” She adds, an icy tone to those last few words.

“It’s true,” Armin replies, “He seems to be a bit more open with you.”

“So what the fuck do want me to do?” I ask, “I’m not a psychologist, I can’t analyze what kind of shit is going on in his head and get it back to you.”

“I know, I know.” Armin shakes his head, “But… We want you to keep him from doing anything… drastic. At least, and if you can help him get better, we were hoping you could do so… But… just keep him safe is all.” Armin sounds so worried. I can’t lie to this kid.

“See, Armin, that’s the great fucking problem of it all,” I sigh, “I may have been the one to make Eren like this.”

“What do you mean?” Mikasa interrupts before Armin can ask. I scowl,

“I told the damn kid that I wasn’t his monster,” I explain, “Since he decided to take my shitty advice and not make me his own personal demon. He’s having himself fill that role.” I exhale, “Or so I think.” I look back to the two of them, “Now, if I keep going, keep interacting with him, I might just push him further.”

Mikasa opens her mouth to speak but Armin interjects, “No,” He says quickly, “No that’s not true, not at all, Levi!” After his little outburst, Armin quiets down. “I know Eren, and I know that he won’t let himself, wouldn’t let himself, be pushed into anything without him agreeing to it. Whatever is wrong… He’s doing it to himself.” Armin looks up at me, “Not you.”

I should feel relief, this is the kid’s best friend. If anyone could read Eren it’d be him… But if he’s right and the problem isn’t me, but Eren, then that makes everything a whole lot harder.

“For Eren’s sake?” I say, Armin looks hopeful for a moment, “I hope you’re dead wrong.”

Armin’s hope deflates like a balloon in front of my eyes, Midas’s hand tightens on his shoulder and her eyes narrow on me.

“Well…” Armin asks, “Could you… could you at least try?”

At this point I can’t help but smirk to myself. I’ve already been trying, little does he fucking know. But, still, why have I been trying?

“I will,” I promise, Armin seems to perk up again. I think back to my most recent conversation with Erwin, he’d asked me why I was so intent on helping Eren. And back when Eren asked me if I tried to find him out of guilt, which was partially true. That other part, I hadn’t told him. Hadn’t even known it myself. “I will,” I repeat, “But first I’ve got to work something out myself.”

“Alright,” Armin nods, a determined look on his face, “Thank you, Levi.” He smiles, as if relieved. I shake my head,

“Don’t go singing shitty praise just yet,” I say, “Wait until I can actually do something.”
“Okay.” He agrees.

“Levi,” I look up, Mikasa doesn’t sound as cold anymore. She’s looking away, the glare gone from her face as it looks smooth, her stance is much more relaxed, “Thank you.”

“Well,” I say, “I was beginning to think you weren’t able to say something with an intention other than ‘fuck you.’”

“Hmph.” Mikasa doesn’t reply past that. I hold up a hand to the two of them,

“Well, my work here is done.” I say, I turn and begin to walk in the direction of my car.

“Goodbye, and, thank you again!” Armin calls after me. I don’t respond, just keep walking. I reach into my pocket and pull out my phone.

I’ve covered the ‘how’. It’s time for me to find out the ‘why’.

Chapter End Notes

*coughs into hand* Because you like him *coughs again, turns to person next to me*

Sorry, did you say something?

Nothing much to say here other than the usual.

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated.
Chapter Notes

Back to Eren's POV

Now we learn what happened before Armin and Mikasa dropped Eren off and why they asked Levi for help.

Come talk to me:
goldie-the-cat.tumblr.com

Updates tagged:
fic: ntmywf

Special thanks to my lovely editor!

I’m getting used to waking up and wishing that Mikasa’s already left for work. It’s… not fun to want but somehow I want it nonetheless. Especially after two days ago.

I never liked the term ‘intervention’, it always sounded like you were interfering, and that words seems to carry a pretty negative connotation.

You’re interfering with someone else’s life.

Nonetheless, the car ride was awkward as hell. And it got even worse when Levi walked up just as the tension was beginning to bubble.

Why did Mikasa have to recruit Armin? I replay the conversation in my head and cringe.

"You need help, Eren. Yet you won’t let us help you.” Armin sits in the driver seat, I see his eyes glance up to the mirror to try to catch a glimpse of my face but I turn and stare outside.

“You worry too much, I’m-”

“You’re not fine.” Mikasa interrupts, I lift my head and stare at her in the passenger seat, her body is twisted around to watch me, her lips are pressed tightly. “You ran out in the rain.”

“One time!” I argue.

“One time is enough.”

“Oh, so you’re faulting me for being upset because you were doing… exactly what you’re doing now?” I huff, I turn to Armin, “Pull the car over, Armin. I can walk the rest of the way.” Armin doesn’t reply. “Armin?” I repeat, he presses his lips together. “Armin!”

“I’m sorry Eren…” Armin says softly, “But… I’m not sure I can trust you with yourself.” He admits. I sit there, stunned. The car pulls to a stop at a red light. There’s no one else on the street.

“Fuck this.” I mumble, I unbuckle my seat belt. I’m ready to jump out of the car if need be. This isn’t what I wanted. This isn’t what I tried to do. This isn’t what I wanted for them.

“Eren?” Armin’s voice raises as if he’s panicked I really will jump out of the car. His fear is justified.

“No.” Mikasa says in a stern voice. She unbuckles herself and leans across, pushing me back against my seat and holding me down. “Armin, drive.” She demands.
“The light’s still red.”
“Drive.” Mikasa repeats, Armin looks left and right and pulls through the red light and onto the next section of road. “Now keep driving, around the block if you have to.” She instructs.
“You have to stop in front of the Café.” I sigh, “We can’t be late.”
“We can.” Mikasa insists, “and we will.”
“Mikasa you… you should really buckle up… this isn’t safe…” Armin tells her. Mikasa keeps a level eye contact with myself.
“I won’t put on my seatbelt until I know you’ll stay in this car.” She plays her card, she knows I won’t risk her safety. I huff, grabbing my seatbelt as she takes her hands away. I say nothing, but place it into the lock with a click. Mikasa nods and turns back in her seat, pulls her seatbelt across her body as well. Silence ensues. Eventually Armin breaks the tension,
“We just want what’s best for you, Eren.” He tells me in a shaky voice.
“You think I don’t know that?” I don’t mean to yell, I really don’t, but I do. “You want what’s best for me but this? Locking me in a car? Threatening your own safety just to get me to sit down?” The more I speak the louder it gets, my own ears ring, “Goddamn it Armin! I thought you were smart! But this? This is just stupid! This isn’t what’s best for me!” If I can’t get them to not worry about me… I have to get them to leave me alone, “This is only going to make it all worse.” I hiss the last words out through my teeth. And I want to say I’m lying for their sake. I want to say that I’m only saying those words because if I don’t they’ll just continue to worry about me. But I’m selfish so of course I have to pin the blame on someone. So I can’t lie. Even though I know that the only person that’s to blame for all this is myself.
Why do they care for someone like me?
I expect them to reply, to say something, anything. I want them to, but I’m scared of what I’ll hear. Instead all I’m met with… is silence.
Armin pulls up in front of The Rose Café. I’m the first one out of the car.
Silence.
I groan and turn over in my bed, digging my face into the pillows. I don’t want to get up. I don’t want to do anything.
It would have been better if I had just kept walking.
But I know I wouldn’t have. That would have just been running away from the problem and running always pissed me off more than facing it when I didn’t want to.
Either way, I can’t stay in bed forever.
I roll over and stand. I’d gotten up a while ago and put on my prosthetic, but I wasn’t sure if Mikasa was still in the house. It’s been some five or ten minutes now and I’ve heard nothing. She must be out.
That’s good… isn’t it?
It must be.
I stand and walk to the corner of my room where I haphazardly threw my bag yesterday.
When Mikasa had told me Armin was going to come over and drive me to The Rose Café I’d expected something bad, but I didn’t expect her to get in the car as well.
That still doesn’t excuse what I said to them on Monday.
Since then I’ve just been avoiding the two of them. I can’t apologize for what I said, that wouldn’t sound right. But I can’t face them and act like everything’s okay. And now Armin will be here to
take me to my session with Erwin later today. And how am I going to deal with that?

There’s only one good thing that’s come out of all that, and it’s not even that big a thing. Just… being able to tell Levi about my hatred of the snow felt good. I’d actually contemplated telling him what was up beside that but… I chickened out last minute.

*Still, at least I told him something.*

I smile as I remember his response, according to the weather it’s supposed to snow Saturday which means I’ll have to wade through the streets to get to Maria’s Café. Well, it’s my chance to be the best fish I can be, I guess.

Which reminds me, I’ll have to look up sepsis later today. Maybe before Armin comes to pick me up…

And I’m back at the beginning of my worries again.

I bend down and pick up my bag, shuffling through to make sure I have everything needed for my Literature class. It looks like I have everything. I sling my bag over my shoulder and cast one last glance around the room before turning off the light and walking out to head to my class.

---

“Other authors that have strived to portray the terrors of war include Xenophon in the Greco-Persian Wars, and Jakob Walter in the Napoleonic Wars. Walter was a German soldier who would later go on to retell his story in the Grande Armée which, if you did your reading, you would know was an army commanded by Napoleon during the Napoleonic wars…” The professor continues to rattle on, but I stop listening.

I don’t want to learn about war, I’ve been through it myself. I lean back in my seat, it’s always strange to think that. Whenever we picture a ‘veteran’, people always think of some grizzled old man with white hair and an old army-style suit gathering dust along with a couple of medals in some back closet.

Obviously, I fit nowhere in that picture. Then again, neither does Levi, or Mikasa, and Armin certainly doesn’t fit with what most people would define as a ‘war vet’. Even Jean seems more like a jock than an army brat, and Marco… well, nobody would have guessed he’d be the person behind the barrel of a gun. Or at least I think not.

I guess you just never know with people.

I glance up, the professor’s back is turned towards the board, there’s only a few minutes of class left. I pull out my phone, when I get home I’ll have to prepare to face Armin and then meet with Erwin. So I might as well look it up now while I have the time.

I type ‘sepsis’ into the search bar and press go. I click on the first medical webpage that pops up and read the general analysis.

*Caused by bacterial infections… can cause major organs to stop working probability… Symptoms include rapid heartbeat, chills, shaking, fever… Shit.*

I put my phone back in my pocket. No wonder Levi got discharged, sepsis sounds nasty.

And to think he seemed so calm when talking about it before… I have to hand it to Levi, he seems like he’s handling the reciprocal pretty well.
Or he could be hiding it, like Armin was, like Mikasa probably is, like you should be.

I clench my teeth, leaning into my hands as I rest my elbows on the small desk. Did he speak at the support group…? No, he didn’t, he passed as well. Which, honestly didn’t surprise me considering it’s Levi and all. He’s not very open about… well, anything. But what if he’s hiding things as well?

Why is nobody open? It would all help them, wouldn’t it?

I just… I just don’t get it. Why would you hide what hurts you? That’s only going to make it worse. They should know this. At least Armin opened up at the support group, that must have helped him.

Marco seemed so relieved after he talked, too. Petra as well.

Jean… Jean didn’t answer either. In fact he seemed kind of defensive about all of it. He must be hiding something, too.

But why? Why would you do such a thing?

Wouldn’t that only hurt you in the long run?

Chapter End Notes

Irony is a dick-slap-to-the-face by Life. Disgusting, painful, and often times the result of miscommunicated intentions.

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Why is this one extraordinarily short? Because back when this was all one chapter there was no suitable stopping point and making it longer just made it more awkward. So I apologize for the extreme shortness, that'll happen with one or two more chapters. Mainly due to the fact that the other stopping places either made not-enough-chapters or were just too awkward to actually stop there.

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Updates tagged:
fic: ntmywf

Special thanks to my lovely editor.

I hear the doorbell ring and I know it’s Armin. My first reaction is to freeze in place like a dog caught tearing up his owner’s tax papers. I stare at the door for what must be a little longer than is intended because Armin knocks at the door again.

“Eren? You in there?” He asks, I stand up slowly and begin to hear worried mumbling as footsteps sound like they’re going down the hall. He must think I’ve run away again.

I half jog over to the door and whip it open harsher than is intended, I have to catch the edge before it slams into the side wall. With all the door-slamming that’s been going on recently I’m starting to get worried Mikasa and I will have to start saving up for new drywall replacements. Armin, now halfway down the hall, turns on his heels as I poke my head out of the door.

“I’m here!” I say, “Sorry, sorry, I was just…” I struggle to find some excuse, but there is none. “I was just slow to the door.”

“You alright?” Is his greeting to me, I wince at that. I don’t mean too and by the way he snaps his mouth shut he must think I’m annoyed by the question. I’m not, I just wish that wasn’t the first thing on neither Armin nor Mikasa’s mind when they see me.

“Fine.” I respond, I’m not really sure how to tackle this. Armin’s eyes are everywhere but me, like he’s afraid that I’m going to snap at him again and I don’t blame him for that. I could, and I wouldn’t be able to stop myself. It’s a shitty reason for not being able to converse with someone I’ve known practically my entire life but it’s all I have to justify the silence.

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“He’s trying to do things my way. And I’m sick of it. I press the button and watch the small black down arrow light up.
“Let’s… um, let’s take the elevator today, okay?” I ask, awkwardly pointing to the steel doors. Armin hesitates then nods, he walks over to where I stand. Armin opens his mouth, as if to say something, he pauses as if he remembers something and then closes his mouth.

I should say something, ask him if he’s alright because there’s something off about him and part of me is afraid it’s because of what I said. The other half suspects that must be it. The elevator dings and we step into the metallic box with it’s creaky wooden interior. I press the ‘L’ as a cream light envelops the bold black letter. The elevator groans with effort and begins to creak and shake it’s way down to the bottom floor.

*Maybe I should ask how his day was. That’s how we normally start off our conversations like that, right? Right?*

Why is it so hard to remember how we normally talk? I mean, it’s Armin. He’s my best friend. This should come naturally, we should be talking naturally. Apologizing and laughing about how fucking stubborn we were because that’s what we normally do when we fight… right?

So why aren’t we?

I suck in a breath and hold it. What if I’ve fucked up more than I realize?

What if I’ve ruined my relationship with Armin and Mikasa?

What if things can never go back to the way they were?

What if… what if they hate me now?

But… then they wouldn’t worry about me, right?

So maybe that’s good… right?

But… I didn’t want for them to hate me. I don’t want for them to hate me! That wasn’t the plan, that wasn’t my intention, that’s not… that’s not…

Not what I want.

But that’s just me again. Me putting myself first. If hating me is what’s best for them then they should hate me… right?

But how do I know that’s best?

Well, it’s certainly got to be better than them doting over me. Maybe then they’d pay attention to themselves rather than myself.

Who will I have then? If I lose Armin and Mikasa then who will I have?

No, that doesn’t matter. I shouldn’t be thinking like that. They’re the ones who I need to worry about, not me. And if they should hate me… then I’ll make them hate me.

But what if I can’t? What if it’s too painful? What if-

“Eren!” Armin’s shout snaps me back to reality, he’s standing with his arm extended past the elevator doors, holding them open. His blonde brows are furrowed in worry over concerned blue eyes, “You okay?”

“Yep!” I respond immediately, I exhale, I was still holding my breath. I shake my head, “I’m fine.”
I brush past Armin.

Let’s just get this over with.

Chapter End Notes

Enter left, psychologists with flower pots and casual conversations about just how crappy Eren is at being on time to things.

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Last one for today, folks, the rest'll be posted tomorrow. This one is also v. short due to awkwardness and timing.

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fic: ntmywf

Needless to say the car ride is dominated by an uncomfortable silence. The only time Armin speaks while I open the car door to exit.

“Eren,” He stops me, I glance back, Armin’s hands tap nervously away at the steering wheel. “Well,” He starts, he seems to be choosing his words carefully and I don’t blame him. “I just think that this, that Doctor Smith, could really help you.” Armin tells me.

“I know,” I respond. I know you think that, but I have yet to agree.

“Okay… Well…” Armin pauses, “I hope you know that he’s not the only one who could help you, as well.” Armin adds. I press my lips together and slide out of the car.

“I know.” I repeat. I close the door and step onto the sidewalk. I hold my hand up in a wave as I watch Armin pull out of the driveway and onto the street.

How many times have we done this by now? It's amazing how quickly simple actions turn into habits, how something becomes just another part of the weekly routine so quickly. I turn and face the light spilling from the glass doors onto the dark sidewalk. It gets darker earlier, now. So by eight it’s already pitch black. I step into the doorway as the elevator doors open in front of me.

For a moment I’m caught off guard when Levi steps out of the elevators, but then I recall that he, too, has sessions with Erwin Smith. I wave to him as he turns and approach. I’m getting used to the waxed floors, meaning it’s less of an awkward ice skating ring and more of an actual lobby.

“Hey, Levi,” I smile as we cross paths.

“Eren, nice to see you show up to some of your meetings on time.” Levi observes, I can see the edges of a smirk on his face.

“Haha,” I fake a laugh, “Two times and you’ve already got me pegged?”

“That’s two times too many in my book.” Levi responds, his smirk falls back to his face’s neutral impassiveness. “So, how’d walking back home go?”

“Wow,” I say, “You really don’t trust me, do you?” I ask.
“No,” Levi answers blandly, “I think that with your level of idiocy you’d get lost on the way to the shitter.”

“Thanks for the confidence,” I snort.

“It’s all well deserved,” Levi shrugs, he glances towards the elevator, now slowly closing, “You know, unless you want to add this to your running list of tardies, it’d probably be in your best interest to catch the elevator before it leaves without your ass inside.”

“Oh, right,” I walk past Levi, towards the closing doors, I catch them with my hands as the automatic doors screech to a halt and begin to open slowly. I grin back at him, “Thanks for that.” I press the button for Erwin’s floor.

Levi doesn’t walk away, I just watch his back as he stands in the center of the lobby, the doors slowly closing. I wonder why he doesn’t just leave? Was there something else he wanted to say? It looks as if Levi’s about to turn, which direction I have no idea because the doors close and the elevator begins to slide upward.

Oh well, I guess whatever he wanted to say will have to wait until I see him next.

---

I step out of the elevator and glance to the left, Erwin’s door is left open so I walk inside. I glance past the slightly claustrophobic waiting area and peek past the doorway into his office. Erwin’s sitting with his back turned, he appears to be reviewing his notebook, peering intensely at something written.

“Hello?” I call as I rap my knuckles against the doorway, Erwin looks over at me, there’s no trace of surprise on his face and part of me wonders if he actually heard me walk in.

“Oh, Eren, my apologies.” Erwin gestures for me to sit at the cream couch, today there’s a small knitted blanket thrown over the back like a drapery. I sit and notice that the various knickknacks on his side table have been changed. A blue orchid rests in a ceramic bowl and next to that is a small miniature rock and sand garden with a child-sized wooden rake resting against the polished black edge.

“The room needed a change, I’ll do that ever so often.” Erwin comments when he catches me staring.

“Where do you get everything from?” I blurt out my curiosities, “And where do you put the old ones anyway?”

Erwin chuckles, as if the questions amuse him. “Well, I used to travel a lot. So many are from my travels, such as the ceramic the orchid rests in.” I turn back to the bowl as he gestures to it. White with a blue inside, it has a painted pattern of black birds flying in a wrap around the bowl. “I got that from an artisan shop in England.” Erwin explains. “Others, like the orchid itself and the sand next to it were gifts from friends.” He adds. “The rest are either in storage or gifted.” I look back to Erwin as he shrugs, “Whatever suits the item best.”

I nod, glancing back at the bowl momentarily before looking back at Erwin as he flips the page from whatever notes he’d been examining before to a blank page. His own hand clicks the pen as his prosthetic rests on his knee.

“So, Eren,” Erwin begins, “How has your week been?”
“Good,” I lie. Good is barely the way to describe it. Erwin pauses, his eyes flicking up to me, holding my gaze for a moment as if he’s caught my bluff, before they turn back down to his notepad.

“Good,” Erwin repeats, “So I can assume that there’s been no nightmares?” He asks.


“I see…” He murmurs, he clicks the pen closed and lays it across his lap as he folds his hands under his chin. “And how’s your family life going?”

“My… family life?” I repeat his words. I can feel my hands tighten around my knees as I grip my pants. Erwin hadn’t asked about this before, so why now?

“Yes,” Erwin repeats, his voice level, “Is everything alright, Eren?” Erwin asks.

Relax, breathe, this isn’t the first time you’ve lied.

“Yes.” I answer, my voice steady, it surprises me. “Everything is fine. My sister is busy with work so I suppose we don’t interact much, but we still talk on a regular basis.” Why is it so easy to lie? “I suppose it’ll be a little more hectic considering I got a job.” I attempt to deflect the conversation, guide it in a different direction.

It scares me how easily I lied. But it appears as if my deflection has worked, Erwin’s eyebrows raise a bit.

“You got a job?” Erwin asks.

“Maria’s Sweets,” I inform him, “I’ll just be a cashier once a week, maybe help clean up the store… But it’s a start.” I shrug.

“Well,” Erwin sits back straighter, he scribbles something in his notebook, “You must feel very proud of yourself.”

“Yes…” I answer slowly, “Yes, I am.” It’s the one thing I have to be proud of this week.

Chapter End Notes

See you all tomorrow with the rest of ’em! Have a lovely day!

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Sorry I'm a little late. Traffic + Language refresher lesson for trip = lots of frustration and going through a short playlist. *Coughs* Anyway, here's the rest of the summer chapters!

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Updates tagged:
fic: ntmywf

Special thanks to my lovely editor! (Tbh at this point I have no idea if they're even reading them anymore I'm more just on my own now... but still, they helped me get the courage to start this whole thing so I still thank them! :D)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Well, Eren,” Erwin sits back, he checks his watch, “I think that’s about all the time we have today.” He stands and so do I. Erwin holds out his hand and I take the cold prosthetic and shake his hand.

“I’ll… see you next week, then.” I say, internally sighing with relief. The rest of the session had gone without any inquisition about my familial life. But I can’t help but wonder if perhaps Mikasa or Armin had called Erwin and asked him to talk about that.

Nothing I can do about it now, either way.

I exit the room and close the door behind me as I enter the hallway. I stop when I reach the elevator.

I can always ask Armin if he called Erwin… but what if that starts another fight? I… don’t want to fight.

For once in my life, I just don’t want to fight.

A feeling of defeat weighs down my chest as I press the arrow and wait for the elevator to arrive.

For as long as I can remember, I’ve always wanted to fight, always wanted to keep going even when I knew I was just going to hurt myself. But when the person I’m fighting becomes Armin or Mikasa…? I feel like I’m losing the will to keep up with them. Since if I approach them I know I’ll want answers, but if I want answers I have to struggle to get them, and I just don’t want to end up hurting those I care about in the process. It feels like I’m then restraining myself, and at the same time I’m twisting against those restraints.

The elevator dings and opens, I step into the carpeted box as it closes around me. I watch my feet shuffle, changing the color of the maroon carpet from it’s light underside to darker, original color, until the elevator opens on the lobby’s floor. I walk out, past the slippery floor where, for once, they were actually bothered enough to put up a ‘danger, slippery when wet’ sign, and into the cold
parking lot.

There are clouds covering the sky, making it even darker than before. One of the parking lot lights is out across the driveway, the rest cast small circles of yellowish light, like dots in an otherwise dark blue world. The black silhouettes of trees wave in the wind that chills my skin and moves my hair around on my head. Black buildings stand unmoving, channeling the wind into occasional, especially strong gusts and then smaller, sporadic breezes.

Where’s Armin’s car?

As if on a cue, the black SUV pulls into the driveway and around until it stops in front of the office building. I wave to Armin’s figure on the inside as I walk around the front of the car and crawl into the other side.

“Sorry I’m late.” Armin apologizes, “Traffic was pretty crazed heading this way. It’s supposed to snow tonight, so of course everyone’s freaking out and gathering last minute supplies like they’re about to board up for the winter.” He offers a small, shaky smile.

Did you call Erwin? I ask in my head, “Wow, you’d think that most people would know by now that it’s not the end of the world when a snowflake touches the ground.” I say aloud, shouting hypocrisy in my head, since I was quite ready myself to hole up for the winter at the sight of snow.

“How… was the session?” he asks, “You’re at least talking to me now, which I guess is good.” He means no harm by it. I know that. He doesn’t mean to hurt me by saying that. But… Fuck if he didn’t just make me feel terrible.

I wanted to before! I wanted to but I just couldn’t handle another fight! I can’t handle another fight. I can’t bear the silence either. It’s a lose-lose situation and I’m stuck in the goddamn middle not sure which direction to take.

I can’t stand lying to Armin and Mikasa, and yet it’s become so easy, it’s my default, my go-to and the only way I can suffocate the habit is by shutting up and not speaking at all. But that hurts them and at least lying lets them think I’m alright.

I should just swallow my pride and lie… that’s best for them. Best for me. Best for everyone. It’s becoming easier, so it’ll only continue to become easier.

Maybe they’ll even forgive and forget. Forgive me for being such an ass and forget the fight we had. Then they can continue being happy, and wasn’t that the point when all this started? To let them be happy without my interference? Good job I’ve done of that so far…

“Eren?” Armin casts sideways glances to me, “You okay? You were spacing out there for a minute.” He asks, apprehension making his voice waver. He’s speaking so carefully, like I’m a time bomb and he doesn’t want to speed up the countdown. He’s completely justified in thinking so.

“Yeah…” I answer, “Yeah, I’m just a little tired is all.” I answer, and give a fake yawn as if to emphasize my point, “Let’s just hurry back, okay? I have Political Sciences tomorrow and I need to be rested so I don’t fall asleep on my desk again.” I offer up a joke.

“How’s that going by the way?” Armin asks, “I remember you saying you were going to try harder in class…” He trails off.

“Actually,” I admit, “Pretty well. I’ve raised my grade to a B, bordering on B-plus.” That’s the
truth. Studying has become something to do instead of thinking. Since thinking will, no doubt, lead me to doing more selfish things that’ll make Armin and Mikasa worry more. The result? I’m earning decent grades.

“That’s great!” Armin chimes, a grin spreading on his face, “I’m so proud of you Eren!”

Well, that makes one of us.

Chapter End Notes

*singing 80s rock ballads about secrets and lies*

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated!
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

I hate short chapters. Why? I feel like I’m being lazy even though it was originally a longer chapter and I’m just breaking them up so that there’s enough for the summer. Strange but, ah, well. I’m curious if anyone can tell where the original chapters ended and started?

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Special thanks to my lovely editor!

Since the silence was apparently making Armin so worried, I decide to break my excommunication with Mikasa as well. When she comes home the next night, Thursday night, I’m placing down some leftover microwaved pizza on a plate at the table.

“Eren.” She states, I can see her move stiffly in my peripheral vision, carefully. Not so much walking as she is maneuvering towards me. “What are you doing.”

I shrug, a second plate with a second slice in my hand, “Well, I figured we haven’t actually eaten a meal together in a while, so why not start again?” I try to grin at her, hoping to make her relax. Mikasa’s eyes flick from the pizza on her plate to the one in my hand as I walk around the table and sit at the other end. After a moment’s hesitation, she takes a seat across from me as well.

She picks up the pizza, inspecting it with dull eyes.

“Sorry,” I apologize, “The salad was already gone, I know your not the biggest fan, but it was pretty much all we had on stock.” I shrug, Mikasa shakes her head.

“No…” She answers, “No, it’s fine.” She tentatively bites into the cheese, eating slowly. I take a bite myself, it’s been refrigerated and reheated so of course it’s not as good as it was when fresh, but it’ll do.

“So…” I start off awkwardly, finding myself in the same place I’d been in with Armin yesterday. I can’t remember how we talk normally, “How was your day?”

“Good,” Mikasa answers, “A man tried to steal a pack of candy from the store today.”

“Did he get away?” I wonder, I feel the grease from the pizza start to dribble down my chin so I grab the napkin from the edge of my plate and wipe it away.

“No.” Mikasa replies, “I stopped him.”

“Oh, well, good job.” I congratulate her, shifting uncomfortably in my seat. I try to smile again,
“Nobody can escape you, huh Mikasa?” Mikasa just shrugs in response. She places her barely-eaten pizza back on the plate and settles for watching me as I eat mine.

“What is it?” I ask between two bites of pizza. Mikasa shrugs and glances away. I swallow and lean forward, “No, really, what is it?” I repeat.

“How was Erwin?” She asks.

“Good.” I say slowly, where’s she leading with this?

“That’s good.” Mikasa responds, settling into silence again. I wait for her to pick up the topic again, prod into how it went or if I had a breakdown or… something, anything but the silence.

Funny, but in doing this I never thought that she’d turn my own tactic back onto me.

“And Armin? He drove you, correct?” Mikasa turns her head to face me. I try to read her expression but there’s no twitch of the eyes to give away any inner thoughts.

“He was okay,” I shrug, “Same as usual.”

“I see.” Midas’s mouth twitches, barely, but it does. A split-second frown. “It’s supposed to snow later tonight.”

“It was supposed to snow last night, that didn’t happen.” I reply to the sudden change of topic. “So, who knows?” I ask. Mikasa just nods. She picks up her plate.

“I’m full.” She states. She walks to the garbage and pushes the rest of her pizza in before putting the dish in the sink and running water over it. I watch as she does so, waiting for… something else. Mikasa walks to her room, she turns her head towards me, “Goodnight, Eren.” She says.

“Goodnight,” I reply, surprise widening my eyes. Mikasa enters her room and shuts the door behind her.

That was… far from what I expected.

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It did snow last night. A lot, actually. So much so that as I struggle in my heavier winter coat and pants just to get to my apartment, I wonder if I should just detour and head straight to The Rose Café to avoid being late yet again.

Fuck the snow. Fuck the snow so much.

Yes, it’s pretty and it makes the grey sky and drab atmosphere a little lighter but where it’s not paved? It’s basically a cold hell.

I drag my prosthetic through the next drift of snow as workers shovel pile after pile on the sidewalk a few feet down the way. I’m so close, yet so far.

Maybe I’m exaggerating a bit, I mean the snow is only up to my ankle, but it’s enough to be a nuisance.

The fish metaphor returns to my head as I lift my prosthetic leg higher into the air, swinging it around the white snow and digging it into the next patch.

I’m so close to the shovel street, just a few more steps.
You can do it Jaeger, you can beat this like you’ve beaten it every winter before.

With a triumphant sigh I stumble onto the salted sidewalk. My knee quivering with the effort that dragging a fake leg through the snow requires. I take a moment to catch my breath, the stinging cold shuddering down my throat before I straighten and continue to walk normally.

No jogging for me today.

My shoe is pretty much soaked through and part of me is tempted to just say ‘fuck it all’ and head to my apartment to change shoes. But I’ve already been late twice now… scratch that, three times if you count our first meeting where I cut my hand.

Okay, so I’ve already been late three times to meeting with Levi, and that’s just a bit too many. Two times too many, according to the man himself.

Funny, he must’ve forgot about the first meeting as well. Ah, I suppose it wasn’t that big of a deal. And that one was done more out of a vendetta than anything else. Well, a vendetta and the fact that I did, really, cut my hand.

Back then I would’ve done anything to avoid meeting with him. Now I actually look forward to talking with Levi. And I know I’ve marveled at it before but it really is amazing how drastically the way you see someone can change.

I feel like I can trust him, now. Which is maybe why I opened up to him about the snow.

Perhaps I should tell him the rest… But, no, I don’t want to bother him. That’s not the point of all this. I’ve slipped up enough times already.

At the same time, he doesn’t open up easily. And with his deal, if I tell him something of mine, then he’ll get something off of his chest as well.

I remember how relieved Armin looked after the last group session, a weight lifted off of his chest, and not from receiving advice or medication or anything helpful, really. Just by talking. Levi didn’t have that look because he didn’t talk. But maybe I can get him to… The only requirement is relinquishing my secrets.

This could all be justification for me acting in my own interest but it’s all I have to maybe help Levi. I mean, I’ve been so worried about Armin and Mikasa holding in their own secrets, and while I don’t know for sure that there’s something they’re keeping in, I know Levi has something to himself for sure.

I haven’t touched the list in my notebook since this all started, but maybe it’s time for me to go back to that… Only in a less direct way.

Maybe I should actually tell him what’s going on, piece by piece until he tells me what’s wrong as well. Maybe then… I could actually help somebody.

Chapter End Notes

Eren finally begins to get the right idea.

Next up is some of my favorite dialog scenes between Eren and Levi. (Okay, if I'm
being honest, every dialog scene between them is my favorite. The two are so much fun to write together! It's always those parts that fly by the quickest.)

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated.
Even though my foot is freezing cold from being slightly damp, I do decide to head straight to The Rose Café. And even though I decide to head straight to The Rose Café, I still end up five minutes late due to slowness in regard to the fact that my foot is damn cold.

So it’s no wonder when Levi’s already sitting outside, the snow brushed off of the table by some employee who no doubt questioned why in hell somebody would want to sit outside when there’s snow on the ground. I lean on the metal railing, in-between the small spikes.

“So what exactly is it that you have against the inside?” I ask. Levi’s head turns towards me.

“Look who’s right on time as usual.” Levi remarks, I roll my eyes.

“Well, excuse me for not being able to move quickly due to my foot being a block of ice.” I reply, I see Levi glance down at my shoe.

“And what in your goddamn brain malfunctioned to tell you it was okay to not change your fucking shoe?” He asks, glancing back up at me.

“Well, I decided to try and be on time, for once.” I stand up from against the fence and head towards the door.

“Eh, you still have a strike,” Levi shrugs, “And I won’t fault you if your foot is about to fucking freeze off because your shoe is wet.”

“Actually,” I grin, “I’m out of strikes already.” I open the door and shuffle my way around the tables before exiting back into the cold on the other side of the fence. I walk over to Levi’s table
and pull out the seat across from him.

“What the fuck are you going on about?” Levi questions.

“Three strikes, right?” I say, “Well, strike three,” I hold up a finger, “If we’re working backwards, was when Armin drove me.” I hold up another finger, “Strike two was when I missed it completely by running out in the rain.” I hold up a third finger, “And strike one was the first meeting.”

“What happened then?” Levi looks as if he’s trying to rack his brain, remember what happened.

“I decidedly waited until I knew I was going to be late in spite.” I say, “And I also fell and cut my hand and had to wrap it up.” I add.

“Oh yeah,” Levi leans back, “You wrapped it in fucking toilet paper of all things.”

“I couldn’t find the bandages!” I sigh.

“So you use fucking toilet paper? That shit is nasty, Eren.” Levi wrinkles his nose in disgust.

“It hadn’t been used, Levi!” I explain.

“Still disgusting.” Levi shakes his head in disapproval. I sigh, there’s no way I’m getting through to him on that, it appears. “But, still, I wouldn’t have faulted you if you took ten shitty minutes to just change your shoe for the sake of preventing hypothermia.” He shrugs as he says this. I must look a little dumbfounded by this pseudo-act of kindness, as Levi scowls soon after. “I’m not fucking heartless, you little shit.”

I grin, “Alright, well if I lose my foot I won’t blame you.” I joke. Levi doesn’t laugh, he just looks down, I feel heat rise to the back of my neck, realizing the fault, “Sorry, bad joke.”

“No,” Levi exhales, small wisps white smoke leaves his mouth and crawls into the air, “It’s fine.”

I shuffle around in my seat, silence dominates the air. I guess now’s my time to act, “So…” I start, “Um…” Levi’s head snaps back up to meet my eyes, I toy with a pile of snow that managed to remain on the arms of the chair. If I want him to talk, then I have to tell him something about myself. But what do I say?

I’m not ready to come on out and confess about everything, so I might as well start small.

“You know on that day when both of us were late?” I begin, glancing back up to meet Levi’s eyes. “Strike three.” Levi replies, and I can’t help but smile a tiny bit. Some of the apprehension fluttering off of me like, well, snow in the wind.

“Yeah, strike three.” I nod, “The reason I was late that time was because Armin, Mikasa and I all got in a fight.” I admit, I wait for Levi to ask what about. Since that’s what most people would ask in this situation. Instead he just leans back in his chair, and waits. So I continue, “It got pretty intense,” I admit, “And I know that they were just looking out for me but… well I yelled at them for it, and I feel terrible for doing so.” I admit, I shrug, there’s nothing more I’m willing to say.

“Well,” Levi begins, “Take it from someone who feels like shit most of the time, what’s happened has happened.” He folds his hands on his lap, “You can apologize, but it happened and I can’t pat your back and tell you that you can change what happened. Which you probably already know, but,” Levi tilts his head to the side in a half-shrug. “Still,” He continues, “You acknowledge that
you did it, and that you feel wrong about it, so that’s got to count for some shitty thing, right?”

“Now you sound like Hanji,” I laugh.

“Oh fuck no,” Levi immediately replies, “No way in hell am I becoming that crazy-ass woman.”

“It’s okay,” I know what I’m about to do could endanger my life, but I’ll be damned if I don’t do this at least once in my life, “You’re a bit too short to become her.” I tease, Levi’s expression darkens for a moment.

“Eat your goddamn words, Jaeger.” He replies, I hold up my hands in defense, a grin on my face.

“Hey, not my fault she’s tall.” I deflect.

“Great fucking excuse,” Levi scoffs, sitting back against his chair. I wait for a moment,

“So?” I urge.

“So what?” He asks, “Are you expecting a goddamn standing ovation because you deflected my anger?”

“No,” I reply, “If I recall correctly, the deal was that I open up to you, and then you open up to me.”

“Oh,” An expression of surprise crosses over Levi’s face for a second, then settles back into neutrality as he leans against the palm of his hand. “You’re actually taking me up on that?” He wonders aloud.

“I did last time so…” I shrug, “I figure why not.”

“Hmm…” Levi hums into his palm, his eyes close for a second as he searches for what to tell me. His eyes open, “Okay, here’s one. Before I was in the army, when I was young and a bit thereafter, I was really fucking poor.” He tells me, “As in, don’t get sick because we can’t afford medication kind of poor.” He continues before I can interject, “And don’t you dare start pitying me because I don’t pity, nor do I hate, that part of my life.”

“Really?” I wonder aloud, Levi shakes his head.

“Yes, really,” Levi sits a little straighter, “It was a part of my life, and while it wasn’t comfortable, I wasn’t miserable. I grew up thinking that it was normal to be cold. Normal to be hungry. I didn’t give it much thought nor did I wallow in self pity like how it’s portrayed in movies or whatever shit the media comes up with. We didn’t beg, we worked to get food, to learn how to make blankets and whatever shit was needed to get through the cold or warm or whatever life fucking threw at us. And we weren’t miserable twenty-four-seven. We had fun, hell, at times we actually had a lot of fun. Even if I didn’t always admit to it.” He smirks at this, “I was as much an ass back then as I am now.” Then he continues, “And, if anything the only effect it’s had on me today is that I appreciate what I’m given. I don’t take it for granted, I know that it’s something that can slip away.”

“Huh.” I say, mulling over this new information. I can see Levi roughing it, in all honesty. He seems like someone who can handle himself. But at the same time… “Who’s the ‘we’?” I ask.

“We?” Levi repeats, realization crosses over his face, “Oh, well.” He leans back, “One thing at a time, if you want to know that, you’ve got to tell me something else about yourself.”

“Aw, really?” I pout, “I mean, even when it’s connected to the story?”
“Yes, now stop acting like a shitty brat.” Levi sighs, “You know the deal.”

“Alright, well…” I search my brain for whatever else I can tell him.

Chapter End Notes

Rough ending is rough, but this is a long ass conversation and needed to be split up if I wanted to keep the lengths at least somewhat even.

I mean, hey, they may be unbearably short, but at least they're consistent.

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated.
“So…” For a moment I want to tell him that I’ve been hiding everything because I’m afraid that Armin and Mikasa are keeping everything in. For a moment I’m about to come clean, but not yet. Not until I get him to come clean as well. When he does that… I’ll reciprocate. But he’s not going to tell me until I say something of substance, I think. “Well, I have nightmares a lot.” I admit. “Most of the time they’re about… the time I lost my leg.” My heart beats rapidly against my chest. I’m not comfortable talking about something like this, especially when I’ve been trying to hide it from everyone for… over a week now. “They’re a little sporadic but there are also times when I wake up terrified even though I can’t remember what the dream was. So I just assume it was another nightmare.” I shrug, the back of my neck heats up, “Um… Occasionally it kind of makes me not want to go to sleep. You know, to avoid dreaming at all.” I shuffle my hands together, “But the most recent one… well it was a little bit worse but at the same time… a lot less dramatic.” I shift uncomfortably.

“What was it about?” Levi urges me on. I suck in a breath, “Well it started with me being in the water and not being able to tell which way was up or down, I tried to swim but I was being weighed down… So I tried to figure out how I got in the water anyway.” This is the part I hate, “When I realized I jumped in the water myself.” My entire body feels tense, I don’t really want to look Levi in the eyes because I’m scared of what I’ll see there. He stays silent, is he waiting for me to go on? I glance up momentarily, but there’s really no readable expression on his face. He just sits there, staring at me. “Well, say something?” I offer up with a small, uncomfortable laugh.

“You know they say dreams can represent our innermost desires,” Levi begins, shifting in his seat to cross his legs, one over the other, “And our greatest fears.” He adds with a bit more emphasis. “Are you scared?” He asks.

“What is there to be scared of?” I return his question with an inquiry of my own. Levi shrugs, “A lot of things. Life’s full of shit that can makes us afraid,” He sighs, “And that’s not to say it’s a bad reaction. Hell, fear was designed to tell us to get the fuck out of whatever situation we’re in. It’s a survival mechanism.” He tilts his head slightly to the left, “So, are you scared?”
“Well,” I say, my voice a bit more shaky than I would like it to be. “That’s another thing to admit.” I grin, it’s a small grin, but I mean it.

“You little shit,” Levi smirks. “Alright, so be it.” He pauses, “Well, I’ll give you a second part for a second part.” He straightens his head, “The ‘we’ when I talked about my childhood changed overtime. I was born with my mother, but she died pretty early on so I don’t have a lot to remember her by. I lived with my uncle for a while but fuck knows where he is. The majority of my time was spent with two people who… I guess became my family as time went on.” He shrugs, but there’s something very stiff in the way he does it, like he’s restraining himself on purpose. “Isabel and Farlan were their names.”

“Were?” I repeat quietly.

“They’re dead.” Levi admits, he returns to covering his mouth as he rests his head in his palm.

“Oh…” I say quietly, Should I say sorry? That’s what most people do, right? When they’re told something like this?

“It is what it is.” Levi’s voice is partially muffled by his hand, but then he turns back to me, a small smirk on his face, barely there, the same ghost-of-a-smile that I’ve seen on his face before. “Thanks, for not apologizing by the way. Apologizing is a shitty way to react to this kind of thing in my opinion.” He lowers his hand, “It’s more of a way to change the topic, avoid it.”

“I think that it just makes most people uncomfortable, they have no idea how to react to it.” I shrug.

“Lucky for me you continue to be an abnormality.” Levi’s smirk grows a bit.

“Thanks, so touching.” I say.

“Hey, normal is boring.” Levi shrugs, “You don’t get to have deep as fuck conversations like we’re having now.”

“Pretty sure most people wouldn’t want to be in the positions we’re in now.” I point out, Levi shakes his head.

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I’m having a grand ole goddamn time.” He says.

“Oh? So you admit to enjoying your time with me?” I tease.

Levi rolls his eyes, “Turns out I’m not a total ass, surprise, surprise. Stop delaying, it’s your turn.” He narrows his eyes, “In fact I think you owe me two confessions.”

“Why two?” I ask.

“I told you who the other people in ‘we’ was, and I told you that they’re dead. Two confessions from me, two confessions from you.” Levi points out.

“Ah, come on, that’s not fair!” I exclaim.

“All’s fair in love and war,” Levi shrugs.

“Where’s the love or war?” I tease, “Unless, by golly, are you confessing?”

“Did you seriously just fucking say ‘by golly’?” Levi wears a look of disbelief.
“You avoided my question.” I continue to tease.

“Fuck off, I never said it was love, could be war.” Levi points out, he catches his chance and continues, “But that’s just another mystery you’ll have to exchange for.”

“Wow, so this is what our relationship is now, huh?” I sigh, “Alright, so be it. Two confessions, huh? Let’s see…”

Chapter End Notes

Cutting chapters is by far the worst part of all of this and I excitedly await the time in which we can return to the normal lengths.

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated.
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

The amount of mini-chapters made up of just this one conversation somewhat astounds me. I didn't even realize it was that long. Who knew?

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Special thanks to my lovely editor.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So for my first trick of the evening,” I begin,

“Actually,” Levi interjects, “This is your third trick of the evening.” He smirks,

“Specifics.” I brush off the comment, but my grin falls quickly afterward, “For my third trick of the evening, for those keeping count, will be the answer to your question…” I pause, “Yes… I’m really fucking scared.” I laugh dryly as I say so, “I’m scared too many little things and not the things I should be worrying about, like did you know, I was more concerned with the fact that it could snow a couple of inches than about the fact that I hadn’t talked to my own sister in a day or two? I even lied about the latter to Erwin’s face.” I don’t know why I admit the last part, but I do.

“Bullshit, knowing Erwin the smartass probably called you out on the lie.” Levi replies.

“Nope, scribbled in his notebook like usual.” I almost say it with a kind of sarcastic pride.

“But… why hadn't you talked to your sister?” Levi asks.

“Okay, well,” I sigh, leaning back against my chair, my shoulders slacking. “I guess that’ll be my second confession.” I glance back up at him, “Fourth, if you’re still keeping track.” I won’t say everything yet… I haven’t gotten what I want out of Levi. “I’ve been avoiding Mikasa and Armin, admittedly, ever since our last meeting. I… didn’t want to talk to them.” I struggle to find the right words to explain, a heavy feeling, akin to a stone sinking, weighs down my chest. “I was afraid it would end in another fight. I was scared, am scared, that if I talk to them, I’ll get pissed off again and maybe say something that goes just a bit too far. Far enough that either I’d do something I never meant to do or that… they’d leave.”

“You really don’t trust them to stick with you just through a little bit of shit-headedness?” Levi interjects.

“No! No, not at all… I’m just scared of how far ‘a little bit of shit-headedness’ will last before it becomes too much.” I explain, falling back into silence as I watch Levi weigh my words.

“So what is it that’s so goddamn awful that you can’t bear to talk about it with them?” Levi
“Well,” I say, “You have to tell me something else about you first. I’ve done my two.” I sit straighter, “And I’ll tell you what?” I know that if he takes this I’ll have to confess to everything, to all that’s been going wrong and to all that I’ve been doing. But… somehow if it’s Levi I’m okay with that. I’m okay with telling him. “I’ll answer two of your specific questions, including that, if you answer two of mine.” Levi pauses, a look of interest on his face.

“Okay, you’ve got me curious, what’s your first question?” He inquires.

“Who is it you want to talk to?” I ask.

“Ah, you’re still hung up on that?” Levi wonders, I nod in response. He sighs and leans towards me a bit, “Well, I’m actually surprised you didn’t figure it out. I thought that after my previous little spill it was fucking obvious, but…” He tilts his head, “I guess it is you.”

“Hey.” I protest, Levi smirks for a split second.

“Okay, the people I want to talk are, there’s two of them mind you. You actually did kind of guess. Somewhere between family and friends.” He waits, as if trying to see if I’ll get it.


“Yeah, those two.” He admits, “So I save you your second question, they died in an accident, not a car accident, that would have been too easy.” Levi’s voice drops a bit for the last part, “Isabel thought that a frozen lake was stable enough for ice skating, something she’d done a thousand times, something she thought was safe. Even if Farlan wasn’t the biggest fan. Isabel was out on the ice for a while, and it was fine, for a while. But, well, exactly what you’d expect to happen happened, she fell through, Farlan tried to save her. They got out but it was too cold, we didn’t have anywhere particularly warm. They got sick, sicker, and I tried to help them, save them. Tried to call a doctor but we didn’t have any money so we got refused. I tried everything, anything, but they just kept getting sicker and sicker, and the weather got colder and colder until… poof.” Levi sits back, “I got too exhausted and pass out on the couch, only to wake up to find two lifeless bodies in the next room over.” I wait, watching his face as it contorts, trying to keep an impassive expression, “It’s not a fucking elegant way to go. It’s a shitty way to die and I should have just fucking called the hospital, money or no money. It was preventable. And that’s the crappiest part.”

I stay silent as I watch Levi recollect himself, eventually he takes a breath and turns his head to face me.

“Well, enough of my emotional shit, what’s your deal?” He asks, “What’s your crap?”

“Hah, you know now I feel like shit for dumping my shit on you right after that.” I reply.

“That’s our deal, Jaeger, don’t you fucking back out on me now.” Levi threatens.

“I won’t, I won’t.” I say, I take breath. “They wanted me to open up to them, thought something was bothering me and that I was hiding something from them.” I clench and unclench my fists, “They’re right, too. It’s actually the very thing that’s bothering me that’s making it so goddamn annoying when they put pressure on me to open up to them.” I find myself growing exasperated, all my pent up frustration spilling over. “I mean, why the hell are they so worried about me when they have their own problems too? They never open up to me, they never talk about what’s bothering them. And you, you saw Armin spill his guts in front of the group, too! There’s stuff that they
won’t tell me because they’re afraid I’ll break. They… Armin and Mikasa spend all their time worrying over me, fretting over my problems and yet I never once hear about them searching for their own psychologists. How can I accept their help to shoulder whatever I’m going through when I don’t even know how much they carry themselves? I can’t do it! I can’t open up to them because I don’t know how much more they can take. Fuck, they could be on the verge of a breakdown and I wouldn’t know. I… wouldn’t know.” A sense of defeat fills me, my voice quiet, “We’ve been together through nearly everything, at least as much as I can remember. We’ve never really kept secrets from each other because there’s never been the need to… But now, and I know they’re trying to protect me, but it just feels like… they don’t trust me with what’s wrong. And then… I have to wonder how close I really am to breaking. I have to wonder why they think that I’m so unstable. I don’t want to be unstable, Levi. I really don’t. I just want to go back to how it was before all this shit began, but how can I? When even I don’t know what kind of mental state I’m in…?” I quiet down as my rant finishes. Levi doesn’t reply and I sag back in my seat.

“If you were batshit crazy you wouldn’t acknowledge it.” Levi pipes up and I lift my head a fraction to look at him. “People who are actually mentally unstable, they don’t know it. They think they’re fine and keep going. You’re trying to change it, and while I think it’s a fucking stupid way to try and change it, at least your trying.” I take his words to heart.

“Thanks,” I reply, “But… unless you can suggest a better way, I don’t know how else to go about it.” I admit with a shrug.

“How about actually sitting down and asking them what the fuck is wrong?” Levi suggests, “Just a fucking obvious course of action,” He gives a half-shrug, “No big deal.”

I can’t help but smile a bit at his reaction, “Well, I’m not sure I can, yet. But talking with you is a start.” I say. I watch as Levi pauses for a moment, caught off guard by the comment, before nodding slowly.

“Yeah, I guess it is.” He admits, the ghost-of-a-smile returns to his face, but it’s not sad like it was before.

It may even be happy.

“Okay,” I say, forcing myself to brush the lingering feelings aside for a moment in favor of a larger curiosity. “Time for my second question.” I place my elbows on the table as I lean forward, “You said the reason you were helping me was partially guilt… Levi, what else is there?”

Chapter End Notes

Fact: these summer chapters may end on a bit of a cliffhanger, sorry.

Fun fact: I actually may be able to upload an extra chapter or two in the middle of summer to ease up the cliffhangeriness of it all but there's no promises.

Extra fact: My computer's fan is giving me a headache but I will make sure all the summer chapters get uploaded if it's the last thing I do.

Well known fact: Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated.
Levi’s silent for a moment, I almost don’t think he’s going to reply. But part of me knows that he won’t lie, nor will he back out of a deal.

“Well, Eren, I’ll hand it to you,” Levi leans forward, “You asked the one goddamn question I wasn’t fucking prepared for.” He folds his arms on the table.

“Oh?” I smile, “So are you saying that I actually caught you off guard?”

“Don’t fucking get ahead of yourself,” Levi reprimands me. My smile changes into a full on grin, “Wow, I really did. I can’t believe this actually happened.” I say.

“Eren-“

“I should add this to my list of accomplishments.”

“You fucking brat you better not.” Levi scowls.

“Don’t be so mad, Levi, it’s surely not the first time I’ve surprised you.” I chirp happily.

“You’re right, you surprise me with how fucking stubborn you can be sometimes.” Levi retorts sharply.

“It’s a gift.” I return, “Now, don’t avoid the question.” I remind him.

“What if I don’t have an answer?” Levi asks.

“But you do,” I say with certainty, Levi raises his eyebrows, as if to urge me on, “If you didn’t have an answer you would have said so outright. You don’t dance around questions. Instead you said I asked the question you weren’t prepared for, which I believe you’re telling the truth. Because you don’t bullshit people, at least I don’t think so.” I finish.

“So? What’s your answer?” I prod.

“You know it’s a shame,” Levi sighs, “I was hoping to hint at it and see if you could fucking get it through your skull without my slapping you over the head with it.” He tilts his head to the side, I hadn’t noticed before but the table’s actually somewhat small when we’re both leaning towards each other, I can watch as his bangs fall over his eyes. Up close they’re easier to read, curious, calculating. “But I guess this is better. Can’t fucking trust you to get it just through hints.”

“Hey,” I reply, “You never know, I could be smarter than you realize.” I point out, “I think you haven’t tested that out.”

“Oh really?” Levi almost laughs at my statement, it’s more of a snort if anything. Curiosity melds into amusement. “Okay, then here’s a quiz to answer your question. You get five hints and the question comes at the end.” He removes one of his hands, holding it up in my peripheral vision. I see a single black gloved finger held up in the number one. “Here’s your first hint, I made sure you had even just a shitty goal when you tried to bullshit the group into thinking you didn’t.” He holds up another finger, two. “Second hint, I drove in the fucking rain because I knew you were about to pull a crappy move and there was no way in hell I was leaving until I made sure you somehow got safe.” Three, “I offer to do this goddamn thing, share all my fucking secrets which I’ve kept locked out of the know-how of almost every goddamn person I meet. Long as you open up and let the shit storm flood on your side, too.” Four, “You get lost and end up in some crap pool of self pity because your fucking leg is stiff, so I walk you back and make sure you know that it doesn’t fucking matter what other people see.” Five, “You flip your shit because you forget one goddamn thing and suddenly you think your an amnesiac, but instead of walking away like any sane person would do, I sit there and talk it out with you.” The hand stays up, “And those are just a few of the hints I could list. So, tell me, Eren, what the fuck else is there besides guilt?” He waits while I stare at him, trying to put the pieces together.

Making sure I had a goal, trying to get me safe, opening up and letting me open up, reassurance and helping me through something…

What does that make? They seem rather disconnected.

Except…

“You care?” I phrase it like a question, Levi nods.

“Well, close enough.” He accepts the answer.

“But why? I mean, isn’t that the question? Why else, besides guilt, do you care?” I ask. Levi sighs, “Fucking hell, Eren, I thought you were on the verge of the answer for a second there.” He tells me. Before I can interject he maneuvers the hand that had previously been holding up the five fingers and puts it around the back of my neck.

“Wha-?” I mumble, but I sputter and stop when Levi leans forward and kisses me on the forehead. Softly, lightly, and very briefly before the hand slides off of the back of my neck and Levi sits back in his chair.

“You’re a lucky brat,” He scoffs when he sees my look of disbelief. “I said you were only going to get five hints, but you can consider that a sixth.”

I sit there, stunned and silent because….

What the fuck do I say to that?
My mind falters, not able to form any coherent train of thought as Levi waits for a reply. He frowns when I don’t react, don’t move, and stands.

I should stop him.

I need to stop him.

But I sit there and watch his trail with my eyes as he walks over to the door, casting one last glance back at me.

“My second question, Eren,” He calls, “Is that I want to know your answer to the quiz.” Then he opens the door, and leaves me sitting in the cold.

I breathe out, I hear the jingle of the bells behind me as the door opens, and the crunch of snow as Levi walks away.

I should stop him.

But I don’t.

Chapter End Notes

To be fair I warned you guys about the kind-of-cliffie that this would end on....

*coughs into hand*

Have a great summer! :D See you all in the middle/in the fall depending on how things go!

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated.
Ahhhh, it feels good to be uploading again! I can now happily say that I've caught up on writing so I can upload this chapter, which feels good. It felt so strange to have every Wednesday go by without having to upload a new chapter. I guess I've gotten used to this, eh? It's fun!

Anyway, I'm not fully sure how I feel about this chapter. Albeit half of it was written at night when I was exhausted (usually I write morning-afternoon), so parts of it to me seem a little... eh, I guess so-so would be the best words. But, I did the best I could and hopefully it's a good chapter to start getting back into the swing of things!

Now, Eren's reaction may be what some of you didn't expect. Hope you enjoy!

Special thanks to my lovely editor!

Come talk to me:
goldie-the-cat.tumblr.com

There are several points in life in which something happens. Something that may not even be very big, but affects your life in at least a minimal way. It’s when we come to those points that we find ourselves sitting, rather shocked, at a cafe table outside with our breath climbing up into the sky in white wisps, the only movements around us until some passerby or car breaks the stillness. Well, maybe the café’s a bit more specific to my predicament, but nonetheless we end up with the same question.

What now?

I could go running after him like they do in the movies. Shouting for him to wait just as he’s about to get in his car. He’d see me shouting and stop, stand, waiting for my answer patiently as I, out of breath with my hands on my knees, try to gather my words. I’d take a breath, straighten up and declare that like him too. He’d smile and we’d ride off into the sunset or some cheesy shit like that.

But knowing Levi, he wouldn’t smile, he’d smirk and make some remark like ‘I’m surprised, thought it would be at least another month before you had an answer’.

But I’d probably slip and fall on my way there and end up missing him.

But I’m not sure that’s what I want to do.

I mean, Levi is… attractive, sure. His eyes are gorgeous, and even when he scowls, which is most of the time, the gray color is so direct and the thin curve of them make his eyes seem steady and strong, but also beautiful. His hair frames his face damn well and it’s a damn good face to frame. I’m completely comfortable with him and, despite his crassness, he’s someone I find myself turning to in my distress of late. He’s a comfort and also someone who’s advice I value. I love being around him but… do I love him?
Well, no, even if I was assured that I wanted to be with him, I don’t love Levi. I haven’t known him long enough to say that much.

So, do I like Levi? Do I want him?

See there’s these other points in life, points in which part of you wants to leap at an opportunity and there’s this other part of you holding the shoulders of the first part and dragging it back, then there’s this third part who’s watching the other two struggle, being yelled at by both for the third part to help both of them, and the third part just isn’t sure what side to take.

I clench and unclench my fingers, feeling the nip of the cold through my black gloves. I stand from the table and walk through the cafe, savoring the short moment of warmth that strips away the chill from my body. But soon as I open the door, the cold clings to me like a possessive lover. Grabbing onto my body and latching itself there, refusing to let go or budge, pushing all the warmth away.

I shove my hands in my pockets and begin the slow trudge back to my apartment.

What is it that’s holding me back anyway? What’s making me question? Why do I not know?

It should be easy. You like someone or you don’t. You’re attracted to them or you’re not. Simple, right?

Well, I can start by answering the first question.

Am I attracted to Levi?

I’ve already praised his eyes. But there’s more than that, he may be shorter than me but it actually works really well for him. He’s in great shape, psychically, or so it seems. I’ve never actually seen him without a fully sleeved shirt… But my mind is not going in that direction. Not to mention, he’s always been there for me, but never coddling me, just pushing me to do what’s best for myself. He’s listened and now he’s started to open up to me. Levi is someone who… I don’t want to keep secrets from. I want him to tell me everything that’s wrong and I want to tell him everything that’s wrong. But not even just the bad things. I love to share with him the good news, or no news at all. Just to talk and be together. I like it. On some level I can say that I want it.

With a sinking feeling, I begin to understand what I’m telling myself.

You’re attracted to Levi. I’m attracted to Levi.

So why didn’t you stop him?

My neck feels warm, like someone’s peeking into my private thoughts and listening in. As if someone could hear my questioning. I feel heat rise to my cheeks and I hike up my jacket and put my shoulders up against the breeze that lifts snow in small drifts.

When he kissed my forehead… It didn’t just pass by like if a family member or close friend had done it. The feeling stuck with me, sticks with me even now. A small lack of pressure, lack of warmth, a hole on the top of my head that makes me greedy for something to get back that feeling.

And I can only know that I feel that way because I am attracted to Levi. While I haven’t ever thought about being with him… I like the idea. But even liking the idea, and admitting you find a person attractive, doesn’t mean you like them but… perhaps I’d like to see where the idea goes, what it becomes.

So why didn’t you stop him?
I repeat the question over and over again, as if the answer lies in the question itself.

I sigh, my boot crunching through the snow that’s scattered along the sidewalk in haphazard clumps. The sky is still grey and it looks like it might snow yet again. There’s not a lot of people out today, the cold has driven most inside. But those that do all have their shoulders hunched over as the curl around themselves, heavy winter coats hiding faces and any distinguishing form. Only a few cars brave the road, driving by slower than usual to avoid any stray ice or snow on the slick road. I wonder if Levi’s in one of those cars but the thought is left hanging when a realization comes attached like a small package in the mail that you didn’t ask for or want.

Tomorrow, I have the group meeting tomorrow.

And that means I see Levi tomorrow. Do I have to have a reply ready right away? But, shit, that’s only one day to think about it!

No, I mean, maybe I don’t have to reply then. I’ll just not talk to him. It’s a large group… Well, it’s a group with more than two people. I just won’t talk to him then and thereby I won’t have to answer him. That’s a good plan, I think.

But it doesn’t change the fact that I do have to reply eventually.

My first reaction is to talk to Armin about all this, he’s smart, he’ll know what I should do.

But…

This is just another thing that I’m stressing over, and if I take it to him it’ll be just another thing he puts in front of his own needs because I’m stressed out, it’ll just become another thing that I’m doing wrong and ends up hurting somebody else.

I tighten my hands into fists under the jacket. I can’t keep fucking up. The list of people who have put aside they’re own worries for my well-being just keeps growing longer. Mikasa, Armin, maybe even Levi. No, definitely Levi. I mean, he listed all the things he’s done for me because he cares, because, for some twisted reason, he likes someone like me. Why would he do that? All I’ll do is cause trouble for him. That’s all I’ve done for Mikasa. All I’ve done for Armin. Why would it be any different for Levi?

I would only cause him trouble, no matter whether or not I want to be with him he… He’s wrong. He doesn’t like me. He can’t. If he does then he’s wrong, or would find out that he’s wrong soon. He’d begin to see who I really am, all those little pieces that seem to keep fluttering away in some unrelenting breeze. While he may have hears about the nightmares, the fear and the arguments. He hasn’t seen them, he hasn’t experienced them. He doesn’t know.

I give him a week, max, before he’d realize what I really am, and leave before I drag him down.

That’s all I give anyone who meets me now.

Even Armin and Mikasa, if they weren’t already my best friends… they probably would leave me as I am now.

I mean, who wants to be around someone who wakes up screaming in the night? Someone who struggles to do basic, daily activities? Someone who snaps at you and never asks if you’re alright but instead slams the door on you? Someone who will never ask how you’re doing because they’re too wrapped up in their own shit? Who likes someone like that? Who wants to stay around them? Who? Who?
No one.

So even if I returned to Levi, telling him that I know the answer to the question and that I want to be with him, even if he accepts, even if things seem to start out smooth, even if all goes according to plan for the first couple of days…

It would never last.

We’d be doomed from the moment I opened my mouth to say ‘yes’.

And that’s why I have to say no.

Why I have to stop this before it starts. Convince him to just be friends or… just leave me alone.

Let him leave before he knows he wants too.

And yet…

I don’t want him to go.

But that’s just you being selfish.

I shake my head and blink, walking back home has become almost auto-pilot and before I know it I’m standing in front of my apartment building’s doors. I place my hand against the cool metal, the cold seeping through the glove like I’ve submerged my hand in freezing cold, icy waters. I push the doors open and step into the lobby, heading straight for the door and ignoring the usual snore of the landlady. I want to curl up in bed, myself.

I pause before the stairs, shifting my weight in-between my prosthetic and my own leg. I turn and go for the elevator. I just want to go to bed and sleep.

I’m exhausted from trudging through the snow all day.

At least that’s what I tell myself.

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I sit in a dark room. Legs crossed on the floor, there’s no chair. Just a single lightbulb swinging slightly left and right like a pendulum. It hangs above me, casting my moving shadow across the small pool of light. My legs hurt, and yes it’s my legs, no prosthetic, just skin and flesh and bone covered in clothes. But they hurt like hell, like I’ve been walking for miles only to end up sitting here. Where am I? Where’s everyone else? I place my hands on the floor and stand, my legs shaking with the effort. I watch my shadow swing across my line of sight as I struggle. I try to push myself up only to have my legs collapse in on me as I hit the floor with a soft thud. The light keeps swinging over my head like it’s been disturbed by… something but who knows what? I place my hands under my chest and push myself up again, putting my feet on the ground as I fight with myself for the right to stand up. I can hear the hinges that the light dangle from creak as it swings back and forth, like an old rusted door. The floor is cool under my palms, it feels slick, as if it’s marble, but there’s rough, minuscule indents in the ground like concrete, past the ever-moving pool of light it’s pitch black, and I have no idea what lies beyond. I force myself up, wobbling as my legs quiver before standing up straight. I steady myself, and walk towards the edge of the ring of light. Where’s everyone else? The thought keeps repeating in my mind. I had been with someone before, who I can’t remember. Or was it multiple people? I don’t remember, but I want to find them.
But I’m tired. Oh, so tired.

If I keep walking, I might have a chance at finding them, but if I lay down I may not be able to get back up. The light swings back and forth and I watch my shadow’s head disappear into the foreboding darkness before swinging back to life. I take a step towards the barrier between light and dark, then another, and another. I can hear soft, faint voices in the distance. It’s the people I came here with, wherever this is. I open my mouth to call back but my throat is dry and all that I can manage is a feeble croak of a call. I step forward again. The voices are louder, and I’m at the edge of the darkness. I glance back at the center, just below the pendulum light. I won’t be able to sleep in the darkness, it’s too dark, too unknown. If I want to sleep, and I’m exhausted, I should do it here. Do it now. I turn, my legs suddenly feel stronger, the shaking has stopped. I walk to the center of the circle of light and stare up at the lightbulb, it’s wire disappearing up into the black sky. The voices are quiet now, almost silent whispers. Are they looking for me? I don’t know. If they are then… maybe they’ll find me, anyway. I sit down, my muscles aching with relief at not having to carry my weight. I stretch my legs out and lay on my back, watching the light swing. The light goes out, or I close my eyes, I forget which comes first.

- - -

It’s odd to wake up with your heart pounding, in a cold sweat from a nightmare that wasn’t terrifying. So why does the dream disturb me so? I’m panicked, but not like usual. Usually I wake up smothering myself to stop from screaming, disoriented and not knowing where I am even though I’m where I’ve always been. Usually the urge to flee, to run from whatever the nightmare was, is so overwhelming my legs ache when I stay in bed.

But this time? This time I’m frozen in place. My muscles stiffened and my fists clenched, arms and legs tightened. I’m terrified, so much so that I’m afraid if I move I’ll set off some disaster lurking around the corner. There’s nothing wrong, I know that. I know where I am, what’s happening, why I feel like this. I’m completely oriented and yet that doesn’t help.

And that’s what makes it even more terrifying.

I suck in a breath, and realize I’m shaking, shaking horribly. I brave movement and curl up on my side, pulling the blanket to my chest and clutching it against myself as a steadying object. But the shaking doesn’t stop, I feel it in the way my fingers can’t get a solid grip on the blanket. I try to stiffen my leg and control it but it does nothing. I squeeze my eyes shut, as if tensing my entire body, even my face, could help. The edges of my fingers dance around on the blanket involuntarily as I feel myself shiver.

My leg hurts.

But not my leg. The empty space where the prosthetic is attached. The area that’s not there. Phantom pains. I’ve had them before. Pins and needles pricking into skin that’s not there anymore, feeling in places where there’s nothing to feel. Pain shooting up a limb that doesn’t exist. Fire singing nonexistent hair. Whatever you want to call it, it hurts and I want it to stop. I want it and the shaking and everything to just stop. Just for a moment. Just to let me catch my breath before we continue on with this endless struggle. Just let me rest. Just… let me sleep.

I roll over, onto my back. The shaking has died down some. Now it’s just a small twitching in my fingers and toes. And that may just be because I’m cold. There’s no way I’m going back to sleep so I throw the covers to the side and sit up on the side of my bed. Half-asleep I put on the prosthetic, I stand and take a step.

“Shit.” I hiss as I stumble forward, I grab onto the edge of the nightstand and stop my head from
hitting the floor. The pin must not have clicked into the lock. I straighten myself and sit back on the bed to fix the prosthetic. I stand and test the leg, hearing the usual multiple clicks before it finally quiets down and I’m able to walk again. I glance towards the clock on the nightstand, what time is it anyway?

The bright red blocky numbers read eleven thirty. Eleven thirty? I would have thought it was four a.m.

I yawn, I’m still exhausted. Is it Saturday? That means…

I groan in frustration, I slept in. I slept in because of a goddamned nightmare. I feel a small chill when I think about the eerie dream, like a bad thought stuck to the back of my head. There’s no time to ponder, I need to get changed. Armin will be here in fifteen minutes to take me to the class. I hurry to the bathroom to brush my teeth and comb through at least some of my hair, then I rush back to my bedroom to pull off my sleep wear and throw on a white t-shirt, a red plaid jacket, and some brown pants. I’m rolling up the one leg of my pants so that the prosthetic doesn’t get caught when the doorbell rings.

“One second Armin!” I call, I stand and pull open my sock drawer, at least I never have to worry about matching. I grab a sock and slip it on, grabbing a shoe and a winter jacket from my closet before half-jogging to the main room. I put on the shoe and open the door while slipping on my jacket.

“Hey,” I say, a little disoriented from having to rush around, “Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“No problem.” Armin replies, grinning under his large blue scarf. A hat is pulled down on his head to his eyebrows and that, combined with the oversized jacket and scarf, makes him look even shorter than usual. Much like a mushroom of sorts.

Armin looks me up and down, he gives me as quizzical a look as he can from behind the layers of scarf and hat, “Did you sleep in?” He asks.

I nod, “Yeah, sorry. We should probably get going.” I urge, even though I know Armin’s more likely to be the one keeping track of the time. Armin grins, like someone just told him good news, “What?” I ask, but he shakes his head.

“Oh, nothing.” He turns and walks down to the stairs. I cast a glance at the elevator. Maybe I should take it again. I didn’t do so well with walking this morning. And I don’t want to start off today with a trip to the hospital.

“Eren?” Armin calls my attention back to himself, his hand is holding open the door. He looks so… worried. His eyes flicker from the elevator and then back to me.

Would you leave if we hadn’t already been friends?

“Sorry.” I say, “Just groggy, still.” I lie and walk past Armin to the door. He nods and steps aside to hold the door. I stop by the top of the stairs as Armin begins to walk down them past me. The clank of his heavy winter boots against the metallic stairs fills the empty stairwell. I take a breath and grip the side rail with one hand before slowly proceeding down the stairs. Once I’m sure that I won’t be sliding down the stairs on my face but walking down them normally, I pick up my pace a tiny bit. Just enough to catch up with Armin at the bottom of the stairwell.

“Are you sure you’re okay, Eren?” Armin’s previous grin has long since faded, “You seem a little… shaky, today.”
“No…” I sigh, “It’s nothing important.” I give a small nod to Armin, “Come on, we’re going to be late if we wait any longer.” Armin hesitates a moment longer and then follows me out to his car.

As I slip the buckle over my chest I hear Armin begin to talk again.

“It must have felt good to sleep in,” He smiles, “Since you’ve been waking up so early, recently.” He states.

Feel good? It didn’t even feel like I slept in.

I nod in reply, silence dominates the car. Part of me feels like I should fill the silence. But another part of me is reluctant to talk. So I let that part take over and leave the silence to rest.

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Ten minutes later I’m standing on the outside of the car, looking up at a familiar white building with a sinking feeling in my gut.

Today, I have to tell Levi that I don’t want to be with him.

He wants to leave. I know it, he’d know it soon enough. So why bear the pain that a relationship would bring? I’m not worth that, it’s not worth that. Why pursue something doomed to end so quickly? All I’m doing is sparing both of us.

If I wait any longer than today, it’ll just be harder to say. I have a problem with procrastination, but not today.

“Come on, let’s go inside.” Armin closes his door as he calls over the car to me. I half drag myself over to the doors of the building. Partially there I see another car pull into the spot next to Armin’s car. I glance back and watch as Marco opens his door and steps out on his own.

“Wow Marco!” Armin chimes, “You look really confident walking now!” He sounds so happy for him. Marco smiles sheepishly.

“Uh… Thanks, Armin…” His sheepish smile is soon replaced by a full-on grin, “Jean’s been helping me a lot. He’s been going with me to physical therapy and making sure I walk mostly everywhere for practice.” As he says this I see Jean step out of the other side of the car.

Marco’s been conquering his problems with such ease… how does he do it? How does he stay so confident and happy? How is he able to so easily recover from something like… that?

I grimace, jealousy is welling up in the pit of my stomach and I know I shouldn’t be jealous. I should be happy for him. Happy that he’s so much better. But why does it just make me feel so hopeless

Shouldn’t I be better by now as well then? But I’m not… So what’s wrong with me?

“Eren!” I hear Marco’s voice behind me. I steel myself and make my face relax into a smile. I turn as the others walk up to me. A bright smile makes Marco’s freckles crinkle around the edges of his cheeks, “Hey, how have you been doing?” He asks.


“How neat!” Marco exclaims, He glances back at Jean who trails just a few feet away from him, “Oh, so Jean and I were thinking of holding an early Christmas party. The week before to get
everyone in the holiday spirit.” That’s true… with all that’s been happening I’d forgotten that this coming week was the week before Christmas.

I still haven’t gotten anything for Mikasa and Armin. I need to do that.

“So, think you’ll come? It’ll be an ornament exchange party, so be sure to bring something to put in the batch as well!” Marco invites me.

“Oh… uh,” I hesitate, I used to love social events like parties. Small ones, of course, with just my friends. But right now? It doesn’t seem like the best idea for me to go to something too social.

“So Armin’s going?” Jean steps up to prod, “And Mikasa can come too.”

“I repeat, how does he…”

Right, Jean went to high school with us. So of course he’d know Mikasa. I shake my head.

“Right, yeah.” I say, “I’ll tell her and, er, I’ll think about it and get back to you.” I explain. Jean shrugs while Marco nods excitedly.

“Sounds good!” He walks past me, pushing open the door, “The invitation stands.” He tells me, I nod as he and Jean walk inside. Armin and I follow in suit.

When I enter the spacious white room, I see they’ve replaced the small plant in the corer with a twisted up miniature palm tree. The chairs are all laid out in a circle, Jean and Marco take their seat at the far end. My eyes swerve down the line of people; Marco, Jean, Petra, Hanji, and then there’s Levi. I watch the back of his head for a moment, he doesn’t see me yet. Good.

Armin sits down next to Marco, which means I’ll be between him and Levi. Not good.

I can’t talk to Levi until the end of this group session. I’m not ready yet… Not yet. I’ll do it later. I have to, after all.

Maybe he won’t ask yet. I mean, we are in a group session. He probably won’t ask. So I’m safe for now. Right? Of course.

I take my seat in between Armin and Levi. I can’t help but glance over and check to see where Levi’s looking. As I do he appears to do the same thing and we connect eyes for a moment.

I can’t read his face. Can he read mine? What would it even say?

I look away first, staring across from me, towards the palm tree. The air conditioning is on, the thin spindly leaves wave slightly in the artificial breeze. Their weak limbs are barely enough to even hold them in the pattern they were placed into. I see a knot forming in between two willowy leaves.

“Okay, everybody’s here!” Hanji calls my attention as they begin the meeting. The glasses on their face reflect the light as they cross their legs in their seat. “So, a while ago I asked you all about what your goals would be for… however long we’re together!” They grin, “Hope you all remember what you said! Because right now we’re going to do a check up on how those are all going!” Hanji turns their head to Petra, “Petra, would you like to be the unlucky volunteer to start?” Hanji asks, I can’t help but notice the use of the word ‘unlucky’… Apt.

“Erm, sure.” Petra agrees hesitantly.
“Perfect!” Hanji sounds happy, “Start by reminding us of your goal?” They suggest.

“Okay, well,” Petra tilts her head to the side to remember her goal, “My goal was to get back my 
life, or settle into it, or something along those line… I think.” She shrugs and sits up a tiny bit 
straighter, “Well, it’s been good so far! I’ve decided that my old apartment held too many… 
memories. So I’m moving to a slightly larger area, one closer to work, which should make my 
schedule a little bit easier.” Petra smiles softly, as if she’s sharing an inside joke with herself, “It’s 
nice, the idea of moving on my own schedule makes me feel more in control of what’s happening.” 
Petra fades off, seemingly finished.

Hanji nods, “Nice job. It looks like you’re progressing nicely.” They look around the circle, “And 
you know what? Let’s change things up too!” Hanji sighs, shrugging. “We go in circles so often… 
let’s call randomly today!”

Great. Usually I rely on her circle pattern to plan what I’ll say. Guess now I’ve got to be on my 
feet.

Hanji looks around the circle, their eyes settle on Marco, “Marco! How about you? You’re goal 
was to walk, right? Well, you’ve almost conquered that! Might be time for a new goal!” They let 
out a hearty laugh. Marco turns red in the face.

“Oh, uh, yeah…” Marco constrains a smile, like he’s trying to be humble about his 
accomplishments in recovery, “I go to physical recovery four times a week… it’s been helping a 
lot.” He says so breathlessly, as if he can’t believe that he can walk, too. “But, yeah, I guess my 
next goal is to reconnect. I lost a lot of contacts while I was… in a worse place.” Marco smiles, 
“I’d like to get back together with some of my old friends! I miss them, and it’d be great to see 
them again.”

“That’s a good goal.” Hanji nods approvingly, “Now that you know you can, you’re trying to 
rebuild your life.”

Now that you know you can… Is that my problem? I mean… I know it’s possible… But can I really 
rebuild my life?

After everything I’ve done…

I shake my head, I have to pay attention in case Hanji calls on my next.

“Armin!” I’m safe for now. Hanji’s head is turned towards Armin, I just narrowly missed her range 
of sight.

“Well,” Armin jumps right in, “My goal was to decide what I want to do. While I haven’t fully 
figured that out. I’ve been trying to find a nice middle ground. I thought about it some more and 
the idea of a historian seems really appealing, but now so does doctor. I know I can double major, 
so I might just do that for the time being.” He explains.

Armin as a doctor… He’d be good at that.

“Good job, you’re progressing, even if you haven’t reached your goal yet. And you’re allowing it 
to flex and not be set-in-stone.” Hanji praises Armin, she turns her head, “Jean?”

Jean pauses, he sits deep in his seat and looks distracted, as if he wasn’t ready for the question even 
though Hanji’s been going around for a while now. He sits straighter and takes a breath.

“I don’t know.” Jean says dismissively. “I’ve sent in a few applications and looked at different
places but... It’s going, okay?” He huffs.

_Geeze, no need to be an ass about it._

_Oh like you have the right to berate about that._

“Well!” Hanji continues, unfazed by Jean’s passiveness, “Keep trying! I’m sure you’ll get results eventually!” Her eyes swoop across the circle and I make eye contact with her, she grins while holding eye contact with me. _Oh shit._ “Eren!”

“Oh, uh...” I stammer for a second, “Well, I mean, I still don’t know what I want to major in...” I feel my voice quiet down a bit, “But! I got a job recently so that’s something!” I add quickly. Can’t sound like a complete failure.

“A job!” Hanji sounds excited, “That’s great! You may not have accomplished one of your main goals but this is still a big step!” Hanji offers their approval. Her eyes swiftly move to the side of me, “Levi? Would you do the honors?”

I can’t help but look over at him. What was his goal again? I should remember this...

“Well,” He says, raising his eyes to meet their eyes, “I’m still here aren’t I?” He snaps. Hanji lets out a laugh in response.

“True! So I guess not much progress has been made, huh?” They grin. Levi scoffs, letting his head roll to the side.

_Oh yeah, it was to get out of the group._

But that doesn’t seem right... Sure it seems like something Levi would say but is that really his only goal? I let my eyes linger a bit too long, Levi must sense it because his eyes flicker over to meet mine. I gulp and turn my head away to stare straight. In my peripheral vision I see Levi do the same. Hanji begins some speech about how proud she is we’re following our goals. But I tune out soon as I hear Levi begin to speak next to me.

“So, you got the job.” He comments casually. I nod.

“Yeah.” I say shortly, sucking in a breath as I speak. I find myself holding my breath, waiting for him to speak. Levi doesn’t speak, not at first. He just nods.

“Do you like it?” He asks.

“Yeah.” I repeat. “Well...” I add, I grip my knees under my pants, I stare at the floor between my feet, “I haven’t really started yet. My first day is tomorrow.”

“Good luck.” Levi turns his head ever so slightly.

“Thank you.” I say. I wait for him to continue the conversation but he doesn’t.

He doesn’t ask.

He doesn’t pressure me or push for an answer.

“Thank you.” I repeat, sighing, my body collapses against the back of the chair as if a weight has been lifted from my back.

“No problem.” Levi crosses his legs next to me. I wonder if he even knows what I’m thanking him
Chapter End Notes

Well how was it? Like I said, not my best (in my opinion). But necessary for plot. That being said, I'm still happy just to be uploading again! I missed this, it's a lot of fun for me to write and then see what you all have to say about my writing!

Also, I know I'll be gone for a week again, but I think I'm here next week so we'll get one more chapter in before a short break again. If I leave sometime before Wednesday I'll probably just upload Ch 28 early because I don't like leaving large gaps without a chapter. Okay, well, that's all from me! Have a lovely day everyone!

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated!
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

Here it is! I feel accomplished to be able to upload it on the actual day again! It's nice to be back in routine. Either way, here's Chapter 28! Hope you all enjoy!

Come talk to me:
goldie-the-cat.tumblr.com

Special thanks to my lovely editor!

The group comes to an end after a few more activities put together by Hanji. I’m waiting in the short line behind Petra to place my chair against the wall when Armin passes by me.

“I’ll meet you at the car.” He explains. I nod and Armin exits the room from the doors on the other side. I take a breath and exhale as Petra splits away from the wall and I place my chair on the stack. Today’s group went… a lot better than expected. I sat next to Levi but it was easy. He didn’t ask about what had happened at all.

I’m not sure if I should be happy or disappointed.

I opt for happy and break from the line, brushing past Levi himself and walking outside. I reach the door, just as it closes behind Hanji, and hesitate. I risk looking back at Levi placing his chair against the wall. My hand is out of my pocket, half extended towards the door.

Now’s your chance. If you want to say it, say it now. I lower my hand, turning around as there’s a the clack of metal against metal as he sets the chair against the vertical stack. Another dark blue chair against identical others.

“Levi…” I call out softly, my voice sounds so loud when the room’s devoid of noise, it almost makes me wince. The ac is turned off and Hanji’s voice is missing from it’s usual resonating form. Levi stands straight and turns around. I feel the air catch in my throat and for a moment I’m afraid I’ll choke and not say anything.

Just do it.

“Erm…” I stumble across my words.

Just end it now.

“If you’ve got something to say, you might as well fucking say it.” Levi shrugs, End this now. “I’m not going anywhere.” He reminds me. Before anything starts.

“Right…” I reply, taking a shaky breath.

End this before he knows he wants to leave you.

“About that… quiz.” I hesitate. Don’t be selfish, you’ll just cause him pain. You know that.
“Oh?” Levi smirks slightly, no, it’s not a smirk, it’s that ghost-of-a-smile I’ve seen so rarely before. “Guess you finally figured it out, huh?”

“Well?” I can’t help but say so, I can’t help but smile myself. I’ll miss this. “You made it pretty darn clear.” I’ll miss talking to you.

“Had to,” Levi replies, “Wasn’t sure if you’d fucking get it otherwise.” He rolls his eyes, but his tone is light. I’ll miss you.

“You give me too little credit!” I protest. But I have to stop thinking like that. “I would have gotten it eventually.” This is just me being selfish.

“Maybe, maybe not.” Levi drawls. Stop procrastinating. “So?” The ghost of a smile wavers, and then falls uncertainly, Just do it. “What’s your answer?” He asks.

“End it now.”

I take a breath. Don’t be selfish. He’ll want to leave you eventually. All your doing is saving both of you the pain that will… that would come. “Right, my answer…” I trail off. Why bother? Why try? When it would all end so miserably? He would just want to leave you eventually. I raise my eyes and meet Levi’s gaze. It seems stoic, placid, but I can just barely catch the nervousness behind his eyes, as well as hope.

Why do that to him?

Exactly, it would only cause him pain. All I’m doing is sparing him. I can’t… I can’t put Levi through what I’ve been through. What I’m going through. I straighten my shoulders.

“Look, Levi,” I say, the words seem to come with ease but in truth I’m choked up and feel like I’m struggling with each syllable, “It’s been a lot of fun talking to you, but I just don’t really feel… that, about you…” Lies. But for the greater good. “I’m sorry.” I finish, and even as the words leave my mouth and hang in the air I still feel as if I’m saying them. I watch Levi’s face, his jaw stiffens and I see the hope leave his eyes. For a second it seems like a shadow is cast over his face before all becomes as still as the room we stand in.

I’ve heard about silence being suffocating. But so rarely do I find silence in my life that I’d always doubted something so open could be ‘suffocating’.

Not anymore.

“I see.” Levi eventually breaks the perpetuating non-noise. I wait for something else, but all I’m met with is, “Well, see you tomorrow, then.” He walks past me, his boots clicking against the floor. I stay still for a while, only my eyes turn to trail him as he walks out of the door.

I wait for the telltale closing sound.

My chest hurts. The door closes.

I exhale, I didn’t know I was holding my breath.

But my chest still hurts.

I turn and face the door. I don’t know why I’m surprised to see it closed. I heard it close myself. I guess it hadn’t fully registered with me until now that I just did that. That he heard me reject him, there was no misunderstanding to my words, and now the door is closed. I shake my head.
Well, you did it. You actually fucking did it. Now isn’t this better? Now you don’t have to go through everything else... You dodged a bullet. You did it.

I leave the room, when I enter the main lobby I take a moment to look around the empty area. I’ll have to come back here tomorrow. And who knows how long I’ll be here after that? How long have I been coming here anyway? When did this all start? And why am I thinking about this now of all times?

I exit through the sliding glass doors. As I exit the second set I look up and see Levi talking with… Armin? What? He turns as I exit the second set of sliding glass doors and I expect us to make eye contact. But his gaze glides easily past me as he walks away. Armin looks defeated. He’s staring at his boots, a sad look clouding his eyes. What were they talking about?

Were they talking about me?

I find my breath catching in my throat. If they were… Did Armin set this whole thing up? Did he ask Levi to confess to see if I’d reject him? No… No, that doesn’t seem like something Armin would do. Then why were they talking?

Is Levi actually upset by me rejecting him? The thought fills me with some fleeting, horrible kind of hope that maybe he actually wanted to be with me. Even after knowing all my shit.

But the feeling is gone as soon as it arrives. Because he may know, but he’s only ever seen it once… And then it caused him so much trouble. I caused him so much trouble. He had to drive me all the way back home, and maybe once was only a minor annoyance. But if we were together… who knows how often he’d have to do that? It would get on his nerves eventually. It’s inevitable.

He may care about you now, but he won’t in the future. You have that effect on people. That’s why you saved him.

The hope is all gone and I’m left numb. Not full of despair or sadness just… numbed. Painfully numb… But how can it hurt and be empty at the same time?

I walk towards Armin’s car. Armin lifts his head in time to see me coming and gets in the driver’s seat, I sit in the passenger seat next to him.

“Let’s go home.” I say, my voice sounds hollow, it has that same effect that it had when I told Levi I didn’t want to be with him. Like it’s not my voice, but I’m listening to someone who sounds like me speak. Armin nods, and the car revs to life. I lean against the window, and close my eyes.

- - -

I don’t remember falling asleep. Or even dragging myself into bed and taking off the prosthetic. All I know is that when I wake up, my prosthetic is leaning against it’s usual spot and my alarm is blaring much earlier than usual on a weekend. Five thirty.

Why is it so early?

I sit up and turn off the alarm… Why did I set it so early?

Oh, right, I have my first shift today.

My body turns into autopilot as I put on my prosthetic and go through my morning routine. By the time I’m finished I glance at the clock, it’s five thirty. I walk outside and see Mikasa pouring coffee into two different mugs.
“Good morning,” She greets me without turning. I nod in response.

“Morning.” I say as she turns and hands me one mug. “I’m not exactly fond of coffee, Mikasa. Why make one for me?” I inquire, holding the warm cup curiously. Mikasa leans against the counter and takes a sip from hers. She’s fully dressed for work as well.

“Get used to it. You’re going to start working. And you’ll learn to appreciate caffeine for it’s many varied benefits.” She tips the mug up and drinks the rest of it’s contents in one go. “It doesn’t taste as bad if you drink it quickly.” She comments, setting the mug in the sink.

I stare down at the mug, the brown liquid sloshes back and forth when I move my hand. I wrinkle my nose. Bottoms up, I guess. I take the mug to my mouth and begin to drink. At first I have to lower it and gag from the bitterness of the taste.

But Mikasa has a point. I’m so tired I can barely think and that’s not exactly the best way to start off my new career. I solidify my resolve and tip the mug back, downing the rest of the coffee. I cough when I lower the mug, I still feeling like gagging. But I’m already starting to feel more awake.

I head for the door, but I’m stopped by Mikasa’s voice.

“Do you want me to walk you there?” She asks. I shake my head,

“No, I’ll be fine. Wish me luck.” I slip on my winter coat and open the door.

“Good luck.” Mikasa calls from the kitchen. I close the door behind me and walk outside of the apartment. I nervously rub my hands together. I have enough time to get there before six. I should be early for my first shift.

“Good luck.” I repeat under my breath, hopefully I won’t actually need that today. I open the door to the stairs and begins my walk downstairs.

According to the email sent to me, I’ll be training with Annie today. Sasha and Connie will be there for the latter half of the day so I’ll see them just as I leave. Today I’ll be meeting the rest of the people who work at Maria’s Sweets.

What were their names again?

I rack my brain as I exit the apartment building and enter the icy cold outdoors.

Reiner was one of them… Historia’s the manager, then there’s Ymir, if I remember correctly I think Sasha told me that the two of them have some sort of relation. There was one other one… Bertolt, I think?

Okay, so maybe I do need the good luck.

I take a breath. I can do this. I have to do this. If I just do what I did last time, then that’ll work out well. I’ll just be taking orders and getting money from people. Easy enough. I’m sure. I hope.

---

I hesitate in front of the chalky colored building. The lights are on but I only see two people inside, and neither of them are Annie, sadly. A short blonde girl with her hair tied back in a ponytail and a man with short cropped blonde hair both work away. The girl is drawing something on the chalkboard that displays the day’s specials while the man turns over one of the chairs that rest
upside down on the tables. I take a breath, might as well go inside now. I reach up and push on the
doors, the jingle of bells turns both pairs of blue eyes towards my entrance. I hesitate in the
doorway, before stepping inside.

“Um…” *Great start, Eren. “My name’s Eren Jaeger…”*

“Ah!” The man grins, I swivel my head towards him, “The new guy!” He strides forward,
 extending his hand, “The name’s Reiner Braun, nice to meet you, Eren!”

I feel myself relax a little, he seems welcoming. I shake his hand as the girl walks up behind him.

“Historia Reiss,” She smiles, “Nice to meet you.” She extends her hand as well and I shake it.

Historia looks past me to the door, a frown on her face, “Annie should be here soon… Ymir’s late
too.” She sighs, shrugging, “Then again there’s nothing new there.”

“So, Eren,” Reiner draws my attention back to him, he stands with his arms crossed in front of his
cHEST, “Why’d you end up here, at Maria’s Sweets of all places?”

“You make that sound like a bad thing.” Historia points out.

Reiner chuckles, “Not at all, we’re just not exactly the most prominent bakery on the block.”

“Oh, actually, I already knew of Maria’s Sweets.” I interject, “My sister and I tend to get our
celebratory cakes and such from here. So when I saw you guys were hiring I thought, well, why
not?” I explain. Historia nods,

“Well, glad to see you’re well acquainted with the store. Training can be fun but also kind of hard
when you keep having to show the new employees where every little thing is,” She sighs.

“Hey, remember when Connie thought that the toilet was where the stock room was?” Reiner
gives a hearty laugh, “He was so confused about why we were stocking toilet paper!”

“Ymir wouldn’t let him live that down.” Historia smiles at me, “Everyone here is nice… plus or
minus Ymir or Annie. But they both mean well, no matter how harsh either of them act.”

*Well, I know what it’s like to interact with harshness.* I think back to the first time I talked with
Levi, I’d immediately labeled him as an asshole who I’d never grow to like…

Funny, how life likes to bite you in the ass.

But I guess our roles have reversed now, huh? That’s probably not too far off from what he thinks
of me now…

I try to shrug away from those kinds of thoughts, they’re bringing my mood down. But the small
cloud of sadness hovers behind my mind like fog at the edge of my vision.

The bell rings and I turn around as an extraordinarily tall man and a girl with freckles and hair
parted down the center walk in.

“Bertolt, Ymir, come in and meet the new guy!” Reiner calls. Bertolt, looks from Reiner to me
before offering a small wave and a smile in greeting. Ymir’s eyes glance towards me, then slide
past before settling on Historia next to me. She gives her a sly grin and struts down past me until
she gets to Historia, she wraps her arms around Historia’s shoulders and leans on her head.

“Are you hiring newbies again?” She drawls, hugging the smaller blonde closer, “Geeze, Connie and
Sasha were such pains in the ass to train last time, surprised you want to go through that again.”

“You’re such a pessimist.” Historia scoots away from Ymir for a second to frown at her, “At least do your part and help train him so that it doesn’t take as long this time around.” Ymir grins and leans down to kiss Historia on the forehead,

“Maybe I will,” She playfully retorts, “Depends on how much you want me to.” Historia only rolls her eyes in response.

Some kind of relation seems like a bit of an understatement now. The bell jingles again as I look to the entrance. I see Annie enter as she begins to take off her winter scarf and fold it on her arm.

“Annie!” Historia pipes up, “Good, you’re here. Help Eren into his uniform and get him situated behind the counter, please?” She asks. Annie nods, “Perfect,” Historia casts a glance at the clock on the far wall while she speaks to me, “Eren, Annie will give you your uniform and name tag, you’ll just do cleanup and counter service today. So don’t stress too much.” She looks back at everyone, “Everybody ready? Okay, let’s get to work!”

---

There’s a back room in which is split into men and women changing rooms, as I’ve learned today. Now I sit at the counter, comfortable in my ‘uniform’ which is basically just a green apron with the label ‘EREN - In Training’ taped to the chest thrown over my own t-shirt and shorts. The so-called changing room is being held just to hold my jackets. Soon as the bakery opened at seven thirty the steady inflow and outflow of customers began at a steady rate.

I take a small glance at the clock, it’s already ten, and for once in the last few days I can’t help but feel… happy.

And it’s not even because of the job itself, although so far it’s been pretty easy. But it’s because nobody commented on my leg. Not even Ymir who, after my few minutes of getting to experience her crassness, I would have considered the most likely culprit to make some snide remark about hiding my prosthetic under the counter or something of the sort. But no, it was like none of them saw it.

Well, except Bertolt. I caught him staring slightly when I walked out of the changing room, he got embarrassed when he saw that I’d caught him staring at my leg. He apologized but I told him not to worry about it, I’m used to people staring after all. And it’d be a little weird if absolutely everyone completely disregarded the fact that the new guy only has one leg.

But other than that, nobody cared. And that made me happy.

Or as happy as I could be.

I stare at the clock in the small inbetween where the few customers that occupy the stores already sit at tables with sweets in hands. The minute hand moves an inch or so. Ten O’ Six. I have an hour and a half until my shift is over. And then it’s only fifteen minutes until I leave for the group…

The group… where I’ll have to see Levi again.

All day, each time I think of something that has to do with him my chest aches. An iron grip grasping at my lungs, contracting my heartbeat till I hear the blood in my ears, making me struggle for breath. Causing the ugly thought to resurface again.

You just saved both of you from the pain it would bring… Stop being so upset… Stop being so
guilty… You made the right decision.

Do I often regret the right decision?

“You okay?” Bertolt asks, he stands next to me, ready to bag whatever delicious baked good the customer asks for.

“As I’ll ever be.” I try to offer up a smile that ends up like a lopsided grimaces on one side of my face.

“You know,” Bertolt looks out towards the street, “I know we all just met, but something you’ll learn quickly here is we all become like an extended family.” He rubs the back of his neck, “Cheesy as that sounds.”

“Sounds nice.” I comment.

“It is, but…” Bertolt shrugs, the bell jingles as someone else enters the shop, “Well I’m just saying that even if you don’t want to talk now, don’t be afraid to dump all of your problems out with us.” He grins, the customer comes up to the register and orders a chocolate-caramel cookie, his daughter's face pressed against the glass as if trying to eat the goodies inside with her gaze. Bertolt bags the cookie and passes it to him with a smile as I take his money and put it in the register before handing him change, he thanks us and walks out, handing the bag to his excitedly bouncing little girl. “Everyone here knows I’ve definitely poured my guts on the occasion.” Bertolt finishes.

“Thanks for the offer.” I say, “We’ll see…” I would mean it. But even if they’ve all jammed about their own problems together, they haven’t seen my shit.

It would just be another group of people forced to put up with me. Maybe Historia would even find some way to fire me. Who knows?

“Yeah, well,” Bertolt shrugs, “Something to think about.” We fall into silence after that.

- - -

Five minutes to my shift end and the bell jingles. I look up to see who enters the shop.

“Armin?” I voice as he walks happily into the store and grins at me.

“Hey Eren!” He strides up to the counter and looks in the glass, smiling, “Wow, you’ve really got a lot of sweet stuff in here, huh?”

“What are you doing here?” I ask, Armin straightens and shrugs.

“I mean, I’d have to pick you up anyway, so I figured why not come and check how you’re doing as well?” Armin grins, “So how’s it going?”

“Well,” I answer honestly, “I don’t think I’ve fucked up yet, so far so good.” I look down at the cash register, “So, may I take your order?”

“Yeah, I’ll take one croissant please.” Armin gives me his order as I ring it up.

“Anything else?” I recite the lines that I’ve been saying all day.

“Nope.”

I can’t help but laugh slightly to myself, “Funny, I would’ve thought Mikasa would be the one to
come into a shop that specifically sells baked goods and just get a plain croissant.”

Armin shrugs, “Eh, I like to switch things up now ‘n then.” He hands me the money needed and I place it in the register. As I finish organizing the bills, Ymir’s head pops out from the kitchen,

“Hey, Eren, get your ass back here. Your shift’s over.” She calls before shutting the door behind the counter and disappearing on the other side. I slide off of the seat behind the register and push open the door, as I walk to the changing rooms I take off my apron. I find myself dragging my feet.

Now I have to go to the group...

I get to the men’s changing room, opening the locker Reiner showed me was mine. I bite my lip, putting my apron inside as I pull out my jacket.

I can’t go back. Not after what I’ve done. I can’t see him again. Not now.

Even if I avoid seeing him during the group, I have to see him later today for our meeting…

“Goddamn it…” I can’t help but hiss the words through my teeth. As I do the door opens and Reiner walks in. I quiet down and turn to pulling on my jacket.

“So,” Reiner is apparently conversational, “How was the first day of the job?”

I sigh, Later. You’ll solve everything later. “Good.” I answer. He stays quiet after that. I pull on my winter gloves when he begins to speak again.

“You know, you don’t have to answer if you don’t want, but I’m curious.” He speaks, I turn and see him leaning against the lockers. “How did you lose your leg?”

Of course, the question had to come up now, of all times.

“I was in the military for a short while.” I answer, “During that time… I got caught in an explosion.” I shrug, what else is there to say at this point?

Reiner just nods, there’s no reaction of horror or guilt for asking, he just nods.

“Well, gotta say I’m a little surprised. You don’t exactly seem like a military type to me.” He grins, “And I would know, sometimes seems like my entire childhood was all about joining the military.” Reiner turns around and opens his locker, “Never did though. I almost did, once. Went to military school, through all that training, but in the end I realized I didn’t like what they were fighting for, so I left before I got in too deep.”

“People surprise you.” Is all I can come up with.

“Yeah,” Reiner nods, “Well, see you next week, Eren.”

“See you.” I say and walk towards the exit, I open the door and head towards the main bakery area.

- - -

“See you tomorrow, Eren!” Historia, now behind the register, smiles at me as I leave. I give her a small wave and follow Armin out into the cold. Not even my jacket can protect me from the piercing cold wind that whips wildly around outside, blowing my hair into my eyes. We walk past the glass of the café and down the street.

“I’m parked two blocks up, bit of a walk but it should be okay, right?” Armin glances back at me.
I’m staring at the ground. “You okay?” He asks, worry tingling the edges of his voice. I stop walking and Armin halts a few feet in front of me.

No.

“You know, Armin… I don’t feel too well, maybe I should just skip out on the group.” I come up with some excuse, hopefully he’ll buy it.

“You sure? You seemed fine back in the café…” His voice trails off.

In the café I didn’t have to think about anything… I can’t go to the group. I can’t face him.

Yeah, well, I guess waking up early is catching up with me.” It’s complete bullshit. I’m so used to being exhausted all day that it never has an effect on me anymore. But Armin doesn’t know that.

“What’s wrong, Eren?” Armin asks, I look up at him, he looks stiff. “You’re never like this. Usually you push through even when we all tell you to stop. But now it’s like you don’t even care anymore.” Except that’s the exact opposite. I care. Too much. Armin waits, then he sighs and I get the feeling I was supposed to reply. “Should… I just go without you?”

No! No, please don’t leave me alone.

“Yeah, just go on ahead.” My mouth works separately from my brain. Armin hesitates, then nods.

“Okay… I’ll… I’ll see you later then.” He turns his back and walks away. I linger on the side street for a second, before I turn myself and walk the opposite direction.

I knew it. I knew that they wanted to leave me. I’m the one keeping them tied down. If I let them go… they’ll go.

I look inside Maria’s Sweets briefly as I pass by. Connie’s inside, he must have come in while Armin and I left. I pick up the pace before any of them look out the window and see me pass by.

I made the right decision, letting Levi go. He would have wanted to leave anyway.

Not many people are out, it’s mostly just me and the now-brown snow that lines the edges of the street.

All I’m doing is keeping them from doing what they want to do…

I drag my feet as I walk, I see someone walk out of a store, on a cellphone, she brushes past me, too distracted with arguing with the person on the other line about some trivial thing.

But they won’t leave until I tell them too. They’re tethered to me.

I can see my apartment in the distance.

I need to make them leave.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: I actually plan out how each day is going to go with the plot. Whether I need to skip a day or what days of the week each thing takes place, etc. It's so that I don't
get lost in the timeframe of the story. (I do this with a lot of longer projects that I
write). Anyway, originally the way the plot lined up and the days of week lined up
together, I'd messed up and made the whole rejection thing and Eren's first day at work
different. But realizing the amount of stuff that needed to happen for the rejection to
make logical sense (aka Eren's demonizing himself and such), they would need to
happen very closely together. As a result I had to change something: In the original
plan it was going to be Levi that walked in to check up on Eren during his first day at
Maria's Sweets. But considering what just happened... that didn't exactly make sense.

Other fun fact: I actually found a place called Maria's Sweets the other day.

Hope you all enjoyed the chapter!

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated.
Chapter Notes

So I will be away for two weeks starting early tomorrow, which means no chapter next week or the week after. Sorry! But after this we will be able to fully resume a normal schedule, so last time, everybody! Thanks for sticking with me despite the craziness!

Question: So since I realize that this fic has a fair amount of cursing in it, plus some... heavier themes. I was wondering, should I or should I not raise the rating to 'M'? I'm still new to posting stuff online (as this is my first time trying it with this fic), so I'm still not quite sure what raises the bar from 'Teen' to 'Mature'.

Thank you!

Come talk to me:
goldie-the-cat.tumblr.com

Special thanks to my lovely editor!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sitting alone in my apartment, I try to look through available apartment ads. If I want to stop bothering Mikasa, I’ll need to leave. I can’t make her leave. She’s been accommodating enough, putting up with me through… everything. Should I even tell her? Or should I just leave?

I close my computer and pull my leg up on my bed, I wrap my arms around my knees. At least she’ll be happy to see me leave...

If I can only be a bother to her, then I shouldn’t be anything to her at all. The same goes for Armin. I can’t ask him to drive me around anywhere anymore. So I guess I’ll just walk everywhere. Or actually try to get my liscence...

Yeah, because driving went so well for you last time.

How long ago was that now? Feels like a lifetime.

If I hadn’t crashed, would I be sitting here, looking for apartments to move into?

I close my eyes. I probably would be. Mikasa and Armin have probably been getting sick of my shit for days, maybe even weeks now. All I’m doing is saving them from having to put up with me further. That’s it. I lay back in my bed, grabbing my phone from the nightstand I check the time. It’s five fifteen. I have to meet Levi at six.

I turn over, burying my face in my pillow. What’s the worth? He probably thinks I hate him. I did avoid the group session after rejecting. He wouldn’t be the first, and definitely won’t be the last to think so lowly of me. I just make everything worse for those around me. I’m a monster. Simple as that.

It would be better if I just stayed here.
But how long would he wait? I check the time again; five seventeen. I lower my phone and stare at the wall. Have I ever skipped one of our meetings before? Oh right… That one time, he stayed, and looked for me. Will he do that again? No… If he did that, then he did it when he cared for me. There’s no way he cares about me anymore. I rejected him. He’ll probably just go home and brush it off. Then again, I wonder how much he actually cared in the first place? He seemed so… unaffected by my rejection.

My phone buzzes, I pick it up and the bright screen displays an announcement. *1 new message: Armin Arlert.* I swipe open my phone and read the text.

_Do you feel better?_


Yes.

No need to make him worry. No need to strike up a conversation. My phone buzzes again. Armin replied.

_You know, you weren’t the only one missing today._

_Oh_ It’s not a question, not even a statement. I delete the message before it sends. Planning to leave it at that I set my phone back down on the bed, but it relentlessly vibrates again. I pick it up and read Armin’s next message.

_Levi was missing too._

Levi? Why was Levi missing? Is he sick or something? I wonder what’s wrong… I place the phone down on the bed again, I don’t want to bother Armin, so I’ll just leave it there. The phone buzzes once more but I let it rest. I close my eyes, if Levi’s ill then he probably won’t even be there. So what’s the point in going to our meeting? I’m not tired, but I feel… lethargic. I let my body sink into the bed, and it’s not long before I’m drifting in and out of a restless, dreamless sleep.

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It’s so strange when you wake up feeling even more tired than you felt going to sleep. My eyes snap open when the front door slams closed. What time is it? I grab my phone, it’s seven thirty. Mikasa must be home.

I sit up, I’m about to reach for the prosthetic when my hand hovers over the false leg. Do I tell her about the apartment? Do I ask if she wants me to leave?

_No, if you do that she’ll say no. Even if she wants you to, she’ll say no._

I retract my hand, do I even go out and greet her? What if she has something to do? I’d just be a bother, like usual. I wait, listening, there’s silence in the other room. Then I hear footsteps heading towards my room. In a panic reaction I throw myself back on the bed and squeeze my eyes shut, trying to pretend that I’m asleep. I hear the door creak open, and footsteps coming up towards my bed. Silence. My heart jackhammers my chest. Please, please, please don’t let her see that I’m awake. Please just let her leave. Let her think I’m asleep. I can’t talk to her. I can’t face her.

“Eren.” Mikasa’s voice is steady. “Eren I know you’re awake.”

Shit.
Slowly, I let my eyes creak open. I stare at the other side of the wall, but I can feel her presence, standing behind me.

“Are you sick?” She asks.

“No.” I answer shortly.

“Do you not feel well?”

“No”

“Then why did you skip your group therapy?” She inquires, I can feel her gaze, sharp against my back. I don’t reply. “Why didn’t you reply to Armin?” She continues to question. I can feel her gaze shift, she must glance at the message light still beeping on my phone, because next she asks, “Did you even read his message?” I say nothing, the light should speak for itself. I wait, and then I feel pressure push the edge of the bed down near my back. She must have sat on the side of the bed, “Why won’t you answer me?” She whispers. I say nothing in reply. How do I explain that I know? That I’ve come to realize how much she must detest my presence. How much of an annoyance I am to her, to everyone. I grip the covers of the bed, Mikasa sits on the edge of the bed in silence.

“You can leave.” I speak in a quiet voice. Mikasa doesn’t budge, but I can practically feel her stiffen. Eventually she stands, and, without a word, leaves the room, shutting the door behind her. I don’t move, but I can’t go back to sleep.

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I end up waiting until I hear the door to her room shut close. Then I sit up, put on my prosthetic, and walk out to the main room. I grab my winter jacket and put on my shoe before exiting the apartment, I check and make sure I have my pair of keys in my pocket before shutting the door behind me and walking over to the elevator, pressing the down button.

I need to get out. I need fresh air. I don’t care if it’s late and dark out, I just need to walk around some.

I push open the glass door and feel the familiar stab of cold air, made even icier by the crispness that the night brings. I suck in a breath, feeling the sting as my lungs struggle against the sharp taste of the breeze. I cough into my hand, then I turn and begin to walk.

I don’t really have a destination in mind, that’s not my goal. I just want to walk a familiar path. No exploring, no adventuring, just the same old path I’ve walked time and time again.

Will I get to see these sights again? If I leave the apartment, then I’ll have a new neighborhood, won’t I?

I look at dissimilar, familiar buildings. Small giants that rise above my head, some are still lit, others I can see people cleaning up for the day, and some are darkened inside already. I’ve never really paid attention to what these buildings are. Now I see that one’s a small clothing shop, the employee inside is folding up pink t-shirts and placing them in stacks next to a head model that wears a large black and white striped floppy hat. There’s one to my right that’s some kind of pub or bar. I see a long counter with the stools piled high atop the marble. All these places, just minutes away, and I never even noticed that they existed. Just all space that’s been filled.

I look around, watching as employees and owners trickle out of their store, saying goodnight to each other as one locks the door before both split and scurry separate ways.
It’s not long before I arrive at The Rose Café. The familiar red and white overhang and steel gate both tinted in a slightly blue, dark light from the night. I spare it a brief glance before I walk past, my eyes lingering on the outside tables, the umbrellas folded up and leaning to one side or another.

I should turn around, I don’t usually walk past The Rose Café. I don’t want to get lost and make Mikasa worry…

Would she even bother worrying? She’d probably be happy to see me go, only worry for the sake of being a good person.

Despite that, I don’t particularly fancy sleeping out in the cold, so I turn and head back home.

I should tell her I’m leaving. Give her a heads up. Maybe I’ll actually be able to make her happy for once.

---

I unlock the door and push it open, when I do I’m surprised to see Mikasa sitting at the kitchen table.

“You’re back.” She says noncommittally, “I heard you leave, so I decided to wait until you get back.” My computer lays on the table as well, my stomach drops because I know what she’s seen. “Why were you looking at apartment ads?” She asks.

Because you don’t want me here.

“I’m leaving.” I shrug, “I was going to tell you once I found a place I could afford.” It’ll be better for you. You won’t have to worry about me. I’m doing this for you. You won’t be bothered by me. I’m doing this for you.

“I see…” Mikasa stays quiet, “Is there a reason?” She whispers, “Is there… something that makes you want to leave?”

Yes, it always ends up like this. I hurt you. You try to hide it. You stay quiet. I explode. You reassure me, and act like you forgive me. But how long will it keep going on like this? Before you start to grow tired of this? Before you start to hate me? Do you already hate me? Don’t be afraid to say it. I wouldn’t blame you if you did.

I say all that in my head, I almost say it out loud as well. But if I do, nothing will change. She’ll tell me she doesn’t hate me. And maybe Mikasa doesn’t, maybe she and Armin actually still want me around. But that can’t last forever. They’ll want me gone. I know it. Who would want to be around somebody like me?

“I don’t like it here.” I say instead. If playing the villain is the only way to show them exactly what they want, or what they will want, then I’ll play the villain. “It’s so claustrophobic in here. I feel like I never have any time to myself. I’m an independent person, Mikasa? Why does it matter to you what I do? I can make my own decisions. So stop being so clingy.” I walk up and snatch my computer from the table, “And don’t look at my stuff.”

Mikasa doesn’t move, is she even stunned by my outbursts still?

I explode. You reassure me, and act like you forgive me.

She doesn’t say anything. So I take my computer back into my room, shutting the door behind me.
But not this time.

I’m woken up by the sound of Mikasa talking in the other room. I check my phone, what time is it? One a.m. *What is Mikasa doing up at this time?* I sit up groggily, I try and fail to put on my prosthetic.

“Damn.” I hiss through my teeth as I try again, successful enough to stand and walk over to the door without falling flat on my face. I press my ear against the door, curious as to why she’s up so late.

“I know Armin, but…” Mikasa’s voice is muffled, I can only hear her speak when her voice picks up. *Armin? She’s talking to Armin?* I strain to hear more. “… He really told you that?” *Are they talking about me?* I wouldn’t be surprised. In fact I wonder how many times the two of them have gotten together just to talk about all the trouble I’ve caused. The thought saddens me, I get that clenching feeling in my gut that’s something almost like anxiety. I shake off the feeling and listen more. “Even if he thinks so … I don’t know if I trust him … I know.” There’s a long pause where I don’t hear anything on the other side. Armin must be talking. “He what? Why not?” More silence. “Okay… Goodbye Armin.” I wait, but all I hear next is the sound of Mikasa retreating into her room and gently closing the door. I stand back from the door, my arms wrapped around each other.

Were they talking about me? What was Armin saying? *Did Mikasa tell him I’m moving out?* I walk back to my bed, taking off my sloppily put on prosthetic. I let my legs hang off the desk, I see my computer placed haphazardly on my nightstand after my conversation with Mikasa. I grab it and open up to the page that illuminates my face brightly. I need to find an apartment. I can’t stay here.

I sniff, a drop of water lands on my ‘n’ key. Why is there water? I reach up and rub my eye with my palm. It’s wet. *I’m crying.* I release the computer for a moment and angrily swipe at my eyes. Why am I crying? I’m doing this for the good of everyone. This will be good. I choke back a sob. If Mikasa hears me… Will she even come check? Is she so sick of my shit that she’ll just pretend to be asleep? I slam the computer lid shut with more force than is probably necessary and grab my pillow to smother my face. I won’t let her hear me. I won’t let her pretend she didn’t.

I’m not going to sleep tonight. But it still feels like I’m having a nightmare again.

I sit in Political Sciences class, and the largest struggle is staying awake. I’ve been moving like a zombie all day, too tired to really process anything… But maybe that’s good, maybe this is just how I should live the rest of my life. Because whenever I think, it always seems to be about the worst things. The class is just starting, the last few people are filing in. Somebody sits in the seat next to me.

“Wow, did you sleep at all last night?” My head snaps up to see Armin placing his books on the desk next to me. It’s not odd for him to sit next to me but… I almost wish he didn’t.

“Why do you care?” I snap, I don’t really want to snap. But after hearing him and Mikasa talk last night… All of my suspicions have been confirmed. It’s obvious they want nothing to do with me. I might as well make it easier for them. Armin looks shocked, he opens his mouth to say something in response but the professor walks into the center of the room and calls attention to the board. I turn to my notebook, not really paying attention, more just staring at the blank page that my pencil taps against. Armin writes something down on his notebook before tilting it my way. I turn my
eyes and read what he wrote.

_Is something wrong?

I look away. My jaw clenched, I don’t write anything more. Armin scribbles something below his first sentence. My eyes flicker towards the notebook more out of curiosity than anything else.

_You can talk to me…_

He’s not going to give up. So I scribble something beneath his neat handwriting in my own chicken-scratch.

_I don’t want to. Now just leave me alone._

Armin reads the sentences, and in my peripheral vision I see his eyes go wide. He looks hurt. _No, he must just be surprised. He’ll be happier if he leaves me alone. I know it._

I turn back to the blackboard, Armin slides his notebook back to himself, he stares down at it, unmoving. Neither of us say anything else.

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I walk out of the classroom with my bag slung over my shoulder, after our… talk, Armin and I didn’t speak or even look at each other the rest of the class. Now I see him walking away, his shoulders hunched over his notebook, probably from the cold.

_It’s better this way. This is just like with Levi, all you’re doing is sparing them the pain._

Levi… We have another meeting today, don’t we? It’s been two days and I still don’t want to face him. I can’t. Not when just thinking about him makes my heart ache terribly. Like someone’s got an iron grip around it and they’re slowly dragging my heart down through my body. And as a result my heartbeat fights wildly against it, pounding rapidly.

I take a shaky breath, I can’t avoid it forever… Can I?

I stare at the ground, I begin to walk in the direction of The Rose Café, trying to think of what I’ll talk to him about. Can I talk to him about anything? If his name carries pain with it, what will actually seeing him be like, talking to him?

_It would have been better if Hange never paired us up._

If Hange hadn’t… Then I wouldn’t have to do this now. I would have stayed hating him, although that thought seems impossible now. I wouldn’t have fallen for him, and I wouldn’t have had to reject him. But it’s too late, and there’s no way to go back.

I wonder if Levi has realized he hates me yet? I hope he has, maybe then he won’t talk to me and I can just avoid looking at him. That would be what’s best for us. Best for him. That’s all that matters at this point. I’m a lost case, aren’t I? Have I always been? Maybe so, maybe all of this has just been me digging myself a deeper hole. But it’s impossible to crawl out by now. I might as well lay there, and accept it for what it is. Break or bend, or in my case… Break till you bend.

And Levi, I wonder if he feels better now. Maybe hating me will make him feel less guilty. He’ll think to himself, ‘Oh, that brat deserves what he gets, it’s not my fault he’s a wreck.’ Maybe then he’ll be able to heal, himself. That would be nice… At least I’d be good for something. Even if I don’t get better, I want him to. I want him to learn to fall for someone else, care for someone else.
Leave me and live a happy life where he’ll be better and his relationship won’t be doomed by the other’s goddamned problems. That’d be nice… That’d be… That’d be…

*I’d be sad.*

I sniff, I feel wet streaks running off of my eyes and down my cheeks. I pause in my walking and rub my gloves across my eyes, they come back with little dots of water. No, no, no! I wipe rapidly across my eyes. I can’t be crying, if I do, what will Levi think? If he sees that, will he think that something’s wrong? Will he care again? I can’t cry! He can’t care! He has to leave me! He has to move on! I don’t deserve him, he deserves someone better.

Why… won’t I stop crying? I back against the building of the wall behind me, and slide down it’s side. I don’t care that I sit in dirty snow, I need to stop crying before Levi sees. I cover my faces, trying to soak up the tears with whatever I have, my glove or my sleeve or something, anything. I take shaky breaths, trying to count how I breathe. But my mind gets muddled, I sniff, curling my legs up to my chest.

*I wish Levi was here.*

No, that’s wrong. I don’t, I can’t. He’d probably try to help me. He can’t, he needs to hate me. He can’t be here and he can’t see me cry because he needs to think I don’t like him.

Shakily I stand, pushing up off of the building. My entire body aches from not having slept last night.

I just have to keep walking. If I do, then eventually I’ll reach the café, and then everything can go quickly. Just keep walking. Just. Walk.

---

I’m not the first one at the café. And I wish I was. I wish that he’d gotten stuck in traffic or something and that I’d had time to sit and prepare what I’ll say, try to figure out what he’ll say. Guess I’m not that lucky, huh?

I open the door to the outdoor veranda, Levi looks up and meets eyes with me. I breathe in, holding my breath. I don’t meet his eyes, just look at the ground as I sit down across from him. I stare to the side, it’s only in my peripheral vision that I see his eyes on me.

“So,” He starts the conversation, “I hear you missed yesterday’s group, too.” I nod, so he really did miss the group yesterday. There’s a pause, “You sick?” He asks, I shake my head, my throat is choked up. I can barely breathe, let alone talk. Levi’s eyes sharpen onto me, “Something wrong?” *Isn’t that a question I’ve heard a lot of recently?* I shake my head again. He’s not going to let up until I speak, though.

“Tired.” My voice fits the statement too, it’s heavy, rough and choked up from crying. I wince at how I sound to my own ears.

“Tired, huh…” Levi repeats, he crosses his arms, “Is that why you won’t look at me? Like I’m infected with the fucking plague?” I wince at his accusations. I turn my head and stare straight at him, but there’s no challenge in my gaze, not this time.

“Happy?” I ask. Levi sits there, and I can tell by the ever so slight widening at his eyes that something he sees surprises him. What it is, who knows? Maybe he finally sees what he’d have to put up with had I not rejected him. Maybe now he’ll be happy I rejected him. Maybe all I had to do was let him see exactly what he’d have to put up with, and he’ll stop caring about me.
“You know what, Eren?” Levi says, he sits forward, and I know what’s coming. He’s going to drop me, get up and leave and never look back because that’s what’s best for him, and we both know it. I look to the side, I can’t look him in the eyes for this. “No, I’m not happy.”

Okay, well, that’s a little bit different from what I expected. I glance at him from the corner of my eyes.

“I’m not happy, because I thought we were past you fucking around and pretending you’re all right and me having to force all the crappy details out of you.” Levi sounds exasperated, “And I’m fucking confused, because everything I’ve heard about you shows that you feel shitty about rejecting me. So I keep looking for some goddamn misunderstanding but there is none. You fucking rejected me and, fine, I’ll respect your decision,” Levi’s eyes narrow, “But it almost seems like you’re as depressed by it as I am.”

“I…” I close my mouth soon as it opens, what he said… It’s all true. There was no misunderstanding, my words were clear as day. But… As I am? He’s… upset? Over being rejected by me? Doesn’t he see that I’ve saved him from something that would just bring us pain? Isn’t he happy I stopped him from being with someone as fucked up as I am? I stand up quickly, I have to get out of here. I wasn’t prepared for this. “I have to go.” I say quickly, I turn and scurry towards the door.

“Are you running away?” Levi stops me, my hand on the door. He sighs, “You know what? Do what you fucking want, Eren. I won’t force you to make a decision you don’t want to make. But,” He warns me, “Know that if you walk out that door, then I’ll think you want nothing more to do with me. Like I said,” He pauses, I hear him take a breath, like what he’s saying is hard to say, “I’ll respect your decision.”

We won’t have to talk again. We won’t have to see each other again. Now is my chance to break off all ties and give Levi the life he deserves, one that’s not full of my shit. One where I won’t be fucking up all of his life plans. My hand is frozen on the doorknob. I… don’t want that. But it’s what he wants, whether he realizes it or not he wants me to leave. I feel my vision blur, and I’m about to break down again. I can feel the pressure building up like a dam about to burst and flood the town. My chest heaves against the heaviness, the dam is cracking, and I turn the doorknob.

“So that’s it…?” I hear Levi whisper behind me, almost too quiet for me to make out the words. My chest is shaking, my arm is shaking, my entire body is shaking and I’m scared to step out of the door, and I’m scared I won’t step out the door.

The door closes behind me.

Numbly, I keep walking. Until the second door closes behind me, until Levi’s unmoving back is behind me, until the street is behind me, until everything is behind me, and I can’t see what’s in front of me.

Chapter End Notes

To dig the hole even deeper, here’s a song that I found fit this chapter very well, enjoy \(^{\wedge}\wedge\wedge\)

X
Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated!
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Annd it's back to updating again!

You know I try to respond to every comment 'cause it's always so awesome to talk to you guys, but the bad part of these week-long trips away is I come back and I want to respond to them but it's already been way too late. (¬¬;)  

But I still love reading all of them, it's so much fun! And thank you all so so so much for your encouragement! (It still astounds me you people actually read this. Especially since this whole fic is the first time I've tried doing something like this!)

But I digress.

Special thanks to my lovely editor!

Come talk to me:

goldie-the-cat.tumblr.com

I get back to the apartment much too early. My leg is shaking by the time I return, and it’s all I can do to hold myself up until I get to the couch. I flop down, my prosthetic resting on the armrest and my leg hanging off of the side. It’s so hot, why is it so hot in here? It shouldn’t be this hot.

Oh. I’m wearing my jacket and gloves still. I sit up with a groan, all the energy has depleted from my body, and unzip the jacket with shaking hands.

“Come on…” I mutter when the zipper gets stuck on itself, “Come on don’t do this,” I plead, “Not today, just not today…!” I throw my hands up in frustration, and flop back again, jacket still on, much too hot. I’m too tired for this shit. I peel off my gloves and hold them in my hand as it rests against my eyes. “Of course today…” I mutter, I let out a dry laugh at myself.

Even I know I’m a wreck. A lost cause.

_Good thing you left the café. Because this is what Levi’d have to put up with if you hadn’t left._

I turn on my side, facing the back of the couch. My throat is constricted again, my chest feels like there’s a heavy weight pressing against it, I should be crying but there’s no water left in my body for me to cry.

I’m too hot.

I close my eyes, squeezing them shut like I’m trying to force myself to sleep. Honestly I wouldn’t mind having a nightmare right now, it’s probably better than the reality of the situation either way.

It’s so hot.
But despite my desperate attempts it seems I can’t even manage going to sleep. All I end up doing is laying there, trying hard to breathe normally when I can barely breathe at all.

The heat is oppressive.

Sweat pools at the back of my neck, I can feel it dripping down the side of my back and pricking the edges of my eyebrows. It’s sticky and uncomfortable, I want to move and I want to sleep but I can’t do both, and I can’t do either.

I need to take off my jacket.

I sit up again, my body straining in protest. I jiggle the zipper, it’s still stuck and it can’t come undone. “Dammit…” I hiss, tugging the zipper up and then back down.

I can’t take off my jacket.

It goes past the area of struggle and for a second I think I’m home free when it gets stuck just a few inches down. I suck in a breath of frustration.

It won’t come off.

I try again, and it gets stuck again.

It won’t come off.

It’s stuck. It won’t come off. It’s stuck and won’t come off. It won’t…

“Goddamn it all!” I yell, I tear off the jacket, struggling since it’s still partially zipped, and throw it across the room. Irritation bubbles in the back of my mind, rising to form anger that paints my vision red. I stand, I want to do something to get rid of this rage. Break something, hit something, anything. I go to the bathroom, slamming the door shut behind me with all the force I can manage. At least that helped some. But a piece of wood at the edge of the door, already cracked from use, falls to the floor. Fuck it all, who even cares anymore? I move to the sink and cup my hands under cold water. I need to calm down. I splash it on my face to clean off the sweat, and look up for a second to see my reflection in the mirror.

All the anger drains away.

My eyes have thick, dark rings under them, they’re hollowed out by bags that line the skin underneath. My eyes themselves look dark, the previous fire that came from rage flickering out to leave an empty space. My face is extremely pale, my cheeks only flushed by my outrage, other than that I look like a ghost. My cheeks are sunken in and I must look much older than nineteen to anyone who sees me on the street.

I reach up, my hand is shaking as I touch the mirror, touch my reflected hand.

So this is what it’s like I tilt my head, watching the still eyes in front of me, to come face to face with your demon. I drop my hand, leaving a small smudge print on the side of the mirror.

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Once the rage drains away, my newfound energy goes with it. I end up right back on the couch, my foot up and my eyes closed. I drift off somewhere in the time I’m laying here. But I’m not asleep. I’m in that strange subliminal space where you don’t feel connected to anything, and time seems nonexistent. I just lay there, unmoving, and my chest seems hollow.
Recently it’s seemed like the world is spinning and I’m just being swept along with it. Being still for once makes me dizzy, strangely enough, because with sudden severity I’m hit by all that’s happened.

I’ve lost Levi, I made sure of that. I’m losing Mikasa and who knows if I’ve already pushed Armin away or if he’s still going to try to stick around. I have nobody else in my life and I’m going to be alone. I’m going to move out and live my life alone because they were part of the few people who didn’t judge me or stare at my leg for uncomfortable amounts of time. They were the few who knew my story and what was wrong with me and nobody wants to be around someone like that. It’s who we’re taught to avoid. Who we’re taught to drop and move on and never look back at. I’m alone, and I’ll remain that way.

I’ll do nothing, go nowhere because nobody wants to hire someone like me. It’s a miracle I ever got a job at Maria’s Sweets but who knows how long I’ll last there. If Historia somehow keeps me around then surely she’ll leave eventually and someone else will come in and fire me. I’ll probably lose my home at that point, and I’ll just be another lonely beggar on the streets. I already know my life is doomed. At this point I’m just struggling to move forward, desperately dragging myself down this path I’m creating. But what other options are there?

“Eren?” Mikasa’s voice shocks me back to the reality I never left. I turn on my side to face the far wall. “You’re on the couch.” She says it like a surprised statement. She kneels next to me, one hand on the armrest nearby where I lay. “Armin said you might have gone home…”

So he hasn’t given up yet. I’ll have to make sure he does. He can’t keep worrying about me, he can’t keep thinking about me.

“He also said you were harsh to him today.” Mikasa’s eyes are steel, cold against my skin, her voice stays level, “And I know you’ll try to stay silent, but this time you have to respond to me, Eren.” She says it with such confidence I feel a flicker of doubt in my excommunication form in my stomach. “What is going on with you? You’ve never been this bad.” Haven’t I? Or have I always been like this, and only now are you starting to notice.

“Nothing’s changed.” I croak out the words weakly. “Nothing at all has changed.” You’re still here, Armin’s still here, I’m still me. All that’s happened is that I’ve lost Levi, and that hurts, but it’s what he wants, he just doesn’t know that yet. Or maybe he does now.

“What do you want to change?” Mikasa asks, her voice stays level but even I can hear the hope just responding has brought her. I can’t let her get hopeful, she might think she can cure me but she can’t. She has to leave me, she wants to leave me. I stay silent.

Mikasa moves her hand from the armrest to my shoulder, “What do you want?” She changes the statement, the grip on my shoulder is tight, like a trap, she’s not going to let me escape.

“I want you to leave,” I whisper out the words and let them hang in the air. I feel her hand grip tighter on my shoulder. The words are honest and dishonest. I squeeze my eyes shut. “I want you to do what you want to do, and leave me.”

“What I want to do?” Mikasa repeats my words, an astounded tone lacing her own. I nod,

“You want to leave, you and Armin and everyone. You just don’t know it yet. Or maybe you do, and you’re hiding it. It’s okay. It’s okay to leave.” I don’t open my eyes, but I feel her hand release. I hear Mikasa stand, and after a few sets of footsteps, I hear her door close. I don’t open my eyes.
“Wake up,” I feel my shoulder being shaken, words are muffled and come through in a haze. I shake my head and open my eyes, it’s bleary but I recognize Mikasa as she comes into view.

“Mikasa?” I mumble, the apartment is dark, the living room retains an eerie, blue-black light. I must have passed out on the couch. “What time is it?”

“About two a.m.”

“Two a.m?” I’m aghast, why did she wake me up so early?

“It took a while to get directions and call Armin.” She explains, call Armin? She stands, extending a hand out to me, “Now come on, you’re coming with me whether you want to or not.” I sit up on the couch.

“Call Armin? Mikasa, what’s going on here?” I ask, I’m still disoriented from having been shaken awake at such an early hour.

“I need to show you something, now,” She grabs my arm and hoists me off of the couch, “Grab your coat, and follow me.” My coat? It’s still on the floor from where I tossed it, partially zipped up… I pick it up and slip it over my head despite the unhappy knowledge that I’ll have to go through the process of unzipping it again. Mikasa’s holding the door open so I follow her out, in the ever present light of the hallway I begin to see that her eyes are red and slightly puffy. Was she crying? Guilt gnaws at my stomach. You did what you have to do. Maybe she’s taking you to your new apartment, drop you off there. A last act of kindness before you part ways. I stare at her heels and the floor beneath them as we walk down the stairs.

So now she knows it’s what she wants too… good. I shouldn’t be the one to hold her back. Now that she realizes just how much of a bother I am she’ll be able to leave me without regretting anything. Maybe her only regret will be that she didn’t drop me off earlier… That’d be nice, right? Of course it would be. It’d have to be.

She pushes open the door, it’s even colder out in the early morning before the sunrise. I look up and see Armin standing nearby his car. She called him, right. So maybe both of them have realized how much of a wreck I am and this is their goodbye.

“Here,” Mikasa hands Armin her key to our apartment, correction, her apartment. “We’ll be back soon.” Armin nods and exchanges our apartment key with his car key. Maybe Armin’s taking my place and so Mikasa won’t have to juggle rent on her own. Something I’ll have to do soon.

As Armin walks past he pauses in front of me, mouth open like he wants to say something, then he just shakes his head and enters the apartment building silently. Mikasa opens the passenger’s door.

“Get in.” She walks around to the other side of the car and hops into the drivers seat. As soon as I’m buckled up Mikasa starts up the engine and pulls into the street.

“So where are we going, exactly?” I think I know but I ask either way. Mikasa doesn’t respond, I wait for a response but none seems to be coming. “And why must this take place at two in the morning?” No response. I’m beginning to see what it’s like to be on the receiving end of the silent treatment. I sigh and lean against the door of the familiar black SUV. My breath forming small spots on the window as I watch the sleeping city pass by. Just a couple of minutes ago I was a part of that sleeping city, I wish I could go back to that…

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“We’re here.” My eyes snap open at the sound of Mikasa’s voice. I must have fallen asleep. I sit up
straighter, I peer out the window to try to see where we are, but my side just faces a street. I unbuckle and slide out the car, as I shut the door I see the building that the car’s parked in front of.

“Is this…?” I know the building, even in the dead of night when only a few ground lights illuminate the entrance way, which despite the early morning hours still has light pouring from the inside. The red brick walls that sprawl out and curve around the parking lot. Windows lining in two separate rows of windows reflecting the light that they catch.

“You were taken here, for physical rehabilitation,” Mikasa starts, she turns to face me. What is going on here? Why are we here of all places? She swings her arm back and points at the front entrance, “The day you walked out, actually walked, on your own, out of those doors, was one of the happiest days of my life.” She explains, “You looked confident again, Eren. Back when you first came home, the first time I saw you, you looked so… hopeless, so broken. But when you walked? I thought, I was so sure that… everything was going to be okay…” She trails off, shaking her head, her hand falls back to her side. “So don’t ever say that I want you to leave. Because you’re an idiot if you think so. You’re my brother, Eren, and I love you.”

“Mikasa…” I want to believe her, I want to hear her words and have all of my doubts just fly away but… “What if you change your mind? The amount of times I’ve snapped at you, hurt you, reject your help… How can you put up with me?”

“Because that’s not you.” She protests, “You can be hotheaded and an idiot, sure, but whenever you’re purposefully trying to hurt Armin or myself? You’re not being yourself, you’re being who you think you are. And for some reason, you think you’re some kind of monster.” Mikasa crosses her arms, “Like I said, I love you. Armin, too, we’re all family. You can’t get rid of us, we don’t want to go, so stop trying to push us away.”

“But even if I’m not pushing you away!” I’m exasperated, if I accept her apology and everything returns to… ‘normal’, then she and Armin will just go back to putting themselves second. “I still hurt the two of you! You’re always, always putting me first, Mikasa.” I clench my hands into fists, “I never know if you’re struggling, or if you’re sad, or any of that, because you’re always asking how I am! I want to help you, too! But how can I do that if you never tell me what’s wrong?” I finish my rant, Mikasa looks shocked. She glances back at the center, then nods at me, her face falling back to it’s neutral expression.

“Get in the car, we need to start heading home,” I’m about to protest, but she stops me, “I’ll tell you exactly what’s happened with me on the way back.” She finishes and opens the car door. I gulp, bracing myself for whatever is to come. At last, now I’ll learn what she went through.

Mikasa revs up the engine, she pulls into the street. I sit silently, for a second I’m not sure if she’s really about to tell me what’s wrong. But then Mikasa starts speaking, “I came back before you and Armin returned, as you know.” Her voice is steady, her eyes never waver from the road, “When I came back, I was fine, at first.” She says, “I began to suffer from nightmares and the occasional suspicion that there was someone, somewhere, watching me, waiting to attack. I didn’t want to freak you or Armin out when you came home, so I tried to manage it myself.” Mikasa’s voice never wavers, “Obviously I wasn’t able to help myself, most people aren’t. So I sought out help, and I got better, for a while. I would occasionally have something really terrible, once I thought that this woman was following me in the grocery store, I was about to turn around and confront her when I saw that she was just a mother grocery shopping with a toddler in her arms. I was ready to strangle her, but I realized it was my paranoia making me react.” Mikasa shrugs, “So I walked away. Tried harder than ever to stop acting the way I was. Reminding myself each and every day that I wasn’t going to go insane, long as I got over this. Still, I thought it was only a matter of time before I hurt someone, physically. I became scared of what would happen when you and Armin
came home.” She swallows, “Then I got the news that Armin had been sent home because he’d been shot. I was terrified that the two of you weren’t going to come home at all. I was cured of my previous paranoia, but it was replaced with a new anxiety. I thought that when I said goodbye to you in the army, it was the last thing I would have said to you, ever.” Mikasa frowns, “I almost joined the army again, you know.”

“Really?” I’d never gotten any news that she was trying to join again.

“They didn’t let me, of course. I wasn’t mentally stable.” Mikasa sighs, “But that didn’t help at all. It just made me even more paranoid. I didn’t know what I’d do if the two of you died. Briefly, I wondered if I would die too… by my own hands. But I stopped thinking like that, after all, what could I do to remember the two of you if I was dead too? I got better, eventually, when Armin was released from the hospital. But then… You were sent home, and we were given the news of the amputation and…” Mikasa shakes her head, “You should have seen me then. I was ready to burn down the doors of the hospital if they wouldn’t let me see you, and they didn’t. You weren’t open to visitors until they were sure you’d survive the burns. That was the darkest I’ve ever been… I barely remember it, even. I think I just moved in a trance, not really aware of my surroundings, but ready to snap at anyone who came too close. If Armin hadn’t been there, I probably wouldn’t be alright today.” Her eyes flicker over to me, “Then you were declared okay for visitors. And when I went in, I saw how… dead you looked, even alive. It was like looking in a mirror. I knew that if I acted like that, too, you would never have a reason to snap out of it yourself. So I forced myself to go back to acting like how I used to. Forced myself to realize that it would all be okay, but only if I made it okay. Then you were released, you could walk and you didn’t look dead anymore. And, like I said, it was one of the happiest moments of my life. And it was the first time since I’d been sent home that I was happy. It gave me hope, Eren. It let me know that I was right, that everything would be okay. Long as we made it so.” Mikasa finishes, as she does we pull up in front of the apartment. She kills the engine and sits back in her seat, her head turns to me. “So, to reiterate, I don’t want you to leave, neither does Armin.”

“But… are you okay now? You never talk about having any problems… How am I supposed to know if you still feel like that?” I can’t shake the thought that she might still have dark thoughts, be depressed or panicked or… something. I can’t help her if she doesn’t tell me.

“Am I okay now? No. Not when you’re like this.” She says it so steadily, “But, I will be. Once you stop thinking that I want to abandon you, only then will I be okay.” She unbuckles her seat belt, “I never talk about having problems, not because I don’t have any, but because I’ve learned how to deal with mine.” She opens her car door, “We all have our own coping mechanisms, we have to find ones that work, ones that set us up in a way to cure ourselves. I’ve found mine, and now I’m trying to help you find yours.” She gets out of the car.

“Wait!” I say as I get out of my side as well, “What is it that you do, then?”

Mikasa smiles, it’s not a phantom smile, but a smile that’s plainly present on her face. “I see you and Armin, and I remind myself that it’s over now, we’re together, and we don’t have to be apart. Then I’m able to become happy.” She enters the apartment building. I stay standing for a moment. She’s not lying. I know Mikasa well enough to tell when she’s lying. Then… I can’t leave. If I do, it’ll just hurt her. I start smiling, I can’t help it but a large grin breaks out on the sides of my face. My cheeks sting from the early morning freeze, but I don’t care. I was wrong. I was so, so wrong. And I’m oh so happy to be wrong.

But, if that’s true about Mikasa? What about Armin? Was I wrong with him as well?

I need to apologize to Armin.
So now we know what happened with Mikasa back before Eren came home! Things are starting to look up, eh? ... right.

Also... I think I'm going to stop putting "special thanks to my lovely editor" up at the top, they said they needed to take a break 'cause they were swamped with work but... well, that was about two months ago and I haven't heard anything back. If they contact me, then great, but looks like I'm responsible for my own spelling errors now! (Well, I've been trying to do that for the last few chapters as well. Hopefully haven't missed anything yet.)

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We're doomed.

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated!
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

Haha, updating two fics in one day feels strange. Good strange, but strange. Either way, I see a lot of happiness going on with Eren seeming to get better and I don't want to spoil anything that'll happen yet but... probably next week I'll tell ya about what's coming up. (So... a teaser for the teaser? Idk, bud.)

I also realized that I've been forgetting to put the tag up here so y'all know how updates are tagged, haha, sorry about that.

So anyway:

updates are tagged - fic: ntmywf

Come talk to me:

goldie-the-cat.tumblr.com

“I never really apologized.” Maybe it’s a bit late now, but it’s all I can think to say to Mikasa as we climb the stairs back up to the apartment. “So I’m sorry.” I don’t mean for it to sound half hearted, it’s really not supposed to. The apology is genuine and I want Mikasa to know that I never meant to cause her pain, I was only trying to help her. But I fucked up. I fucked up very badly.

“It’s okay, Eren,” Mikasa replies, “As long as you promise never to try something like this again.” I can’t help but smile.

“I promise.” And I mean it. I never wanted to leave, I only thought it was what’s best, but now I know I’m wrong. My smile turns into a frown, “But… Armin… What should I say to him…?”

Mikasa pauses on our floor, one hand on the door to the hallway, she shrugs.

“Tell him what you told me, why you were acting so strange. He’ll understand, it’s Armin.” She pushes open the door, I follow her down to our apartment.

“Does… does he really still want me around?” I can’t help the doubt that clings at my back like a possessive lover. Mikasa gives me a passing glance, she smiles.

“Ask him, you’ll see.” She pushes open the door, I swallow my hesitation and walk back into the apartment. Armin stands from the couch, Mikasa exchanges keys with him again. She looks back at me, giving me a small nod before removing her coat and walking towards her room, “If you need anything, I’ll be in here.” She closes her door, leaving Armin and I alone in the room.

“So…” I start, how do I go about this? Do I simply ask ‘Yes or no, are you completely repulsed by the fact that I am slowly losing my sanity?’ Seems like a pretty direct way of getting to the point, but I’m not sure I could ask that…

“You know, when Mikasa told me what you said, it made sense.” Armin begins the conversation himself. “Everything you’d done, all of it made sense. Why you looked so depressed, but still acted
so aggressive, only to look even more depressed afterwards.” He gives me a small, sad smile, “Of course I felt like an idiot for not picking up on it, I mean, I’m supposed to be the smart one. I should be able to read my own best friend’s emotions and help him out when-”

“But that’s exactly what I don’t want you doing, Armin!” I protest, cutting him off, I sigh, “You’re always trying to help me out, trying to make me feel better when I feel worse than usual. And I appreciate it, more than you know, but…” I sigh, shoving my hands into my pockets, “I can’t help but wonder if you’re pushing your own problems away. And then I can’t help but feel like I’m making it worse for you, and I want to help you, too. But I can’t, it just seems like if I’m around you’ll ignore your own problems.”

“Well, I…” Armin takes a moment to think of a response, his mouth opens and closes, then he shakes his head, “Okay, I’ll admit, there are points when I’m feeling a lot worse than I should be-”

“Exactly!”

“But!” Armin stops me before I can continue, “I’ve been seeking help myself. Just… maybe not as much as I should be…” He admits, then he shrugs, “I mean, how do you think I found Erwin? I was looking for a psychologist I could go to as well.”

“Oh…” I shake my head, “But even so, you never tell me when you feel bad. I’m always the one who dumps my shit on you, and you always seem fine even if you’re not.”

“Fair enough…” Armin ponders, he gives me a smile then, “Then how about this, I swear to give you all of my crap, even when you don’t want it, if you do the same.”

“Okay.” I agree, “And… I’m sorry. I didn’t mean what I said yesterday… Er, wrote.” I apologize awkwardly, “I wanted you to stop worrying about me, and… Well, I was so sure you didn’t want me around.”

“Why would you think that?” Armin seems puzzled by my logic.

“Because of how often I snap, I was so assured that neither you nor Mikasa actually enjoyed being with me, and that you just put up with it for the sake of being good people.” I sighs, letting my shoulders slope, “And I didn’t want to put either of you through that pain.”

“Was, so… Mikasa made you realize that we definitely don’t think so?” Armin looks hopeful, I give him a sheepish smile.

“Well… she was pretty convincing.” I mumble.

“Then I’ll be more convincing.” Armin nods, “Eren, you’re my best friend, and trust me,” He rolls his eyes, “You’ve been volatile before PTSD.” He grins, “Remember how Mikasa and I would always try to hold you back in highschool? You were always doing something stupid, like trying to climb onto the roof.”

“Hey! I would have been able to!” I protest, Armin gives me a skeptical look.

“Sure, getting up, maybe, but you would have broken your neck trying to jump back down.” He shakes his head, “Even if now you’re energy is being put into something a lot less funny than climbing onto a roof on a dare, you’re still the same person that became my best friend back when we were kids. Why would I want to abandon you? It just doesn’t make sense. You’re practically my family.”

“Even if I do things that make you upset?” I ask, I shouldn’t push it, shouldn’t make him
reconsider, but I have to know.

“Everyone does, Eren.” Armin replies, “But just because you screw up now and then doesn’t mean I don’t want to be your friend.” I nod, my chest feel light with relief.

“Oh, but, Armin, I have two questions for you.” I think back to when I heard Mikasa on the phone with him.

“Shoot.”

“What were you and Mikasa talking about? I… I was eavesdropping,” I admit sheepishly, “And I heard her saying that she ‘didn’t trust him?’ ‘Even if he said that?’” I rephrase what I’d overheard. Armin’s brows crinkle together,

“Oh!” He exclaims, remembering what I’m talking about, “Well,” Now it’s his turn to look sheepish, “You see, Levi had called to tell Mikasa and I that he thought something was seriously up with you…” He must anticipate my next question,

“Levi? Why did you have his number?”

“Mikasa and I… We asked him to watch after you, see if you’d open up to him because you were being so closed off with us.” Armin explains.

“You… asked him to get closer to me?” I paraphrase, Armin scratches the back of his head, “Well, I mean, I guess that’s one way to phrase it…” He admits.

“So… did he ever even care about me? Or was he just doing all of that because Mikasa and Armin asked him to? “Oh shit, no, Eren, don’t over think this,” Armin interjects hurriedly, my face must look horrified, because he’s mirroring my expression, “Eren, he told me that he confessed to you, that wasn’t us. He was already getting closer to you, of his own volition, it wasn’t… ah,” Armin leans back, “I shouldn’t have said anything…”

“No,” I whisper, “No I’m glad you did…” Even if Armin tries to reassure me that Levi wasn’t just acting, it makes sense. So that’s why he seemed so unaffected by me rejecting him… He didn’t have said anything…"

“Ah…” I can’t fully believe Armin, not yet, “Even so… I fucked up really badly.” Either I’ve fallen for someone who doesn’t even care about me, and never has liked me, or I just prevented myself from having any shot at being with him.

“No, you’re not. I know that look, Eren.” Armin solidifies his tone of voice, “He really did have feelings for you, still does, most likely. When he came to talk to me, he told me he couldn’t do it anymore, he looked like he was desperately trying to keep himself together, Eren. He knew something was up with you when you rejected him, but he wasn’t sure if it was just that he wanted something to be wrong with you, to show that maybe you really didn’t want to reject him.”

“What do you mean?” Armin furrows his brow, I sit on the couch, burying my face in my hands.

“If what you say is true, and I’m not saying it is,” I add when Armin gets a hopeful expression, I would have to hear Levi say it himself, that he wasn’t just doing what Armin and Mikasa wanted him to do, “Then I’ve already destroyed my last chance at being with him.” I lean back against the couch, “And if not then I’ve fallen for someone who never even cared about me…”

“Don’t start this again,” Armin warns me, “You’ve seen how badly it goes when you go off like this.” That’s Armin, always my voice of reason. “But… why have you lost all hope? What
I explain, I tell Armin everything, pour my heart out. I tell him about why I first rejected Levi, and how I didn’t want to, how I broke down sobbing before meeting him. And then how he gave me one last chance, and I *shattered* it, I chose to walk away from him. Armin listens intently, and by the time I’ve finished Mikasa is leaning against the door, listening in as well.

“Oh, Eren…” Armin shakes his head, I can tell he’s trying to think of a way to help.

“So why don’t you tell him?” Mikasa chimes in, her arms crossed, she’s changed from her winter jacket to a t-shirt and shorts, but her red scarf still hangs on her neck.

“Tell him?” I repeat slowly, Mikasa shrugs,

“Sure, you said you doubted if he even ever had feelings for you, right?” She points out.

“Thanks for rubbing salt in the wound, Mikasa…”

“Doesn’t matter, point is,” Mikasa steps away from the wall, she ambles over to where Armin and I sit, “If he really does care for you, if he has feelings for you, then he’ll understand. Maybe he’ll be angry at first, but he’ll know you well enough to know this is something you’d do.” She shrugs, “And if he leaves you? Then he was never worth it.”

“It’s not exactly that easy, you know…” I can’t help but smile slightly though, Mikasa’s always blunt, and it’s nice to know someone as candid as she is thinks there still might be hope.

“And why not?” This time it’s Armin’s turn, “You never know, if you tell him, maybe everything will all turn out okay!” He seems so hopeful for me, and I wish I could share his hope.

“And then what?” I inquire, “Begin a relationship that’s doomed to end horribly?”

“Do you really believe that…?” Armin asks sadly.

“If you do then it’ll never work out.” Mikasa interjects, “If you tell yourself that it’s doomed, then you’ll doom it yourself.” She takes me by the shoulders, “I told you that I forced myself to stop being paranoid, and now you need to force yourself to stop being hopeless.” She gives me a hardened stare, and I can’t help but feel like I’m a small child being lectured by his mother, “Repeat after me, ‘there is hope.’”

“Mikasa-”

“There is hope.”

I sigh, I’m not going to get anywhere with her, “There is hope.” I repeat, she leans back, nodding.

“Now say it with feeling, and it might actually come true.” She explains, I roll my eyes.

“Says the one of us who’s always monotoned.” Mikasa just shrugs in response. Armin reaches for his pocket,

“Here, I can text you Hanji’s contact information, they can help you get in touch with Levi again. But…” He glances at the clock on his phone screen, frowning, “You might want to wait till later in the day.”

“Why?” I ask.
“Because it’s three thirty in the morning.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.” Armin stands, he smiles at Mikasa and I. “I should probably get home, but,” He looks towards Mikasa, “Thanks for telling me what’s up.”

Mikasa shrugs, “Wasn’t going to do it without you.” She says, Armin nods, he turns to me.

“And Eren,” His grin grows, “You can expect a lot of my shit to be dumped on you now, but you’d better do the same.”

“Will do.” I promise, I watch as Armin leaves. Then I stand, I turn to Mikasa, “I’d better get to bed, don’t want to be too exhausted tomorrow.” I pause for a second, “Er… today.”

Mikasa nods, “Goodnight, and Eren?”

“You?”

“There is hope.”

I sigh, shaking my head, “We’ll see.”

Mikasa hesitates, then she shrugs, “Good enough for now.”

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I don’t dream at all, I just… sleep. While it’s not exactly the most peaceful sleep, because anxiety about the fact that I have to call Hanji tomorrow keeps me from being placid, it’s at least restful. I wake up later than I usually do, but missing Political Sciences is honestly the last thing on my mind today. I sit up in my bed, the door’s still open and I can see light pouring into the room from the small window at the back corner. I feel… rested, for once. Even if there’s still that uncertainty gripping at my stomach, talking with Armin and Mikasa helped, a lot.

They want me around, they’re not sick of my presence.

The idea almost makes me break out laughing. It still feels partially like a dream… or rather that I’ve woken up from a nightmare much too long, and I need to make myself remember that I’m awake. But I’m not fully awake yet, not until I know whether or not anything Levi told me was true…

And thus the nightmare still lingers.

But there’s hope, even if it’s a miniscule, fleeting little thing. I need to try it out. See what happens, and if worst comes to worst… at least I still have Armin and Mikasa. And that’s not going to change. Not for a long time.

I put on my prosthetic, checking to see it’s correct, and then walk over to where my phone is charging on my nightstand. One new message from Armin, and it’s Hanji’s phone number. I swallow, my hand starts to hesitate, shake with anticipation of the worse. What if they don’t want to tell me? I did reject him… twice, too… There’s only one way to know. I call the number.

The phone rings. Once.

I hear my heart beating. Twice.
Please, just pick up. Thrice.

“Hello?” The fourth ring never comes, I stumble.

“Oh, uh… Hi!” I try to sound happy, but it comes out like a pathetic squeak, I correct myself quickly, “Er, is this Hanji? Zoë?”

“Speaking.” Hanji sounds slightly skeptical, they must not recognize my voice over telephone.

“Oh, this is Eren. You know, from the support group? Armin’s friend? He… uh, he gave me your number…” I explain slowly, delaying, trying to come up with some way to segway into the real reason for the conversation. There’s a pause, I hear some mumbling off to the side, multiple voices. Are they with others? Shit, did I interrupt something. The sound on the other side sounds a bit more agitated, like a frantic, hushed whisper. Then Hanji begins to speak again,

“Oh, hi Eren!” Hanji’s voice becomes considerably more cheerful, but also slightly distorted, like something about the way they’re using the phone changed “So, to what do I owe the pleasure?” That was… strange.

“About that…” I mumble, my chest hurts, how do I ask for her friend’s number when I’d rejected him twice? “I… well, I know your friends with Levi, right?” There’s a pause.

“Yes…” Hanji says quietly.

“Um… Look, you’ve probably already heard about what happened but…” I sigh, “There’s something I need to talk to him about, and it’s kind of important and I know he probably doesn’t really want to hear from me but I need to clarify something with him.”

“Clarify?” Hanji doesn’t miss a beat, “I think you made everything pretty clear, Eren.”

“I know!” I sound agitated, I take a breath, “I know,” I repeat, “But see that’s kind of my problem.” How do I explain this? “Do- do you know how to get in touch with him?” Silence, and I’m wondering if they hung up on me.

“Sure, is this your own phone?” They ask.

“Yeah, yeah it is!” I can’t help but sound hopeful.

“Okay, I’ll send you where to meet him, and what time.” Hanji instructs.

“Really?” I can’t believe it, I might actually be able to clear everything up. If I can… then maybe Mikasa was right. “Thank you, Hanji!”

“No problem, and don’t worry, Levi will be there.” Hanji hangs up. I stare at the phone screen for a second, grinning. It may not be okay yet, but this is the closest I’ve come to having good luck in a long time.

Erwin’s words come to mind, a while back when we had one of our last meetings. *It has to get worse, if you ever want it to get better.* I really fucking hope that this is it getting better.

Chapter End Notes
Not gonna lie the one thing I dislike about this chapter is it feels too... quick, in the end I decided that was appropriate because it's Eren and the kid moves a mile a minute but... I just felt like maybe I was rushing things? Idk, tell me what you think.

Also I'm thinking of writing a special short story for halloween next month, yay or nay?

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated!

See you next week!
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

Wow, you know, it hit me today as I was figuring out which chapter I needed to upload, that this has been going on for about 32 weeks now. Wow. Just... Huh. I feel proud of myself for being able to keep it going and everything. But it's weird, this has become routine for me, a happy routine, something to brighten my day each and every day because it's basically just for fun. I guess I realized all this because I finally finished plotting out this story and how it'll eventually end. (We still have quite a few chapters to go though... we're probably a little past the halfway point now? Idk.)

Fun times.

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I haven’t been able to stop fidgeting all day. Armin has reminded me that I keep checking my phone and to just relax… maybe three times now? I have no idea, but nonetheless I’m still impatiently waiting Hanji’s text. Or call. Or whatever it is.

The class is dismissed by the professor, I stand and gather my things, flipping my phone face up from the table to check. No new messages, fantastic…

“You’d think you were waiting for the results of some life or death medical test.” Armin chides giving me a wry look. I grab my phone and shove it on my pocket.

“Maybe I secretly am, Armin, you never know.” Joking around with him will help ease my nerves. Armin can always look at things in perspective, he’s always able to see the ten thousand foot point of view. I envy him for that. I’m much of an ‘in the moment’ kind of guy, and it’s gotten me in a lot of shit. But old habits die hard.

“Great, just another thing I have to put on my list of things to worry about.” Armin sighs, he follows me out of the lecture hall and into the icy air. There hasn’t been any snow lately, so the snow on the ground is now either lumped from many footsteps, or brown and mucky. But it’s still cold enough that it hasn’t quite gone away, and the ice sill coats the tree limbs, giving them an almost metallic sheen. I can’t help it, I check my phone again.

“They’ll call.” Armin reminds me, “Or text, or whatever they’ll do. You know Hanji, they’re not one to leave an empty promise.” He shrugs.

“They’re probably just going to talk to Levi, convince him to talk to you again.” Armin theorizes,
we walk down the cleared pathways. The salt crunching under our boots like the snow itself.

“Great… I’ll be surprised if anyone can convince Levi to do… anything.” So it’s hopeless then. No, I shake my head, there’s no way in hell I’m going down that goddamned road again. Armin eyes me, as if gauging my reaction. He smiles reassuringly,

“It’s not hopeless.”

“I know,” I reconsider my words, “Er… I’m trying to know.”

“Well, that’s a step forward.” Armin grins, “You’re not being so stubbornly pessimistic anymore.”

“Nope,” I return the grin, “Now I’m stubbornly trying to be optimistic. See how that works out.” I can feel the itch in my fingers, I’m like some fucking teenager with a crush. Did he text me? Did he? Oh no! He didn’t! He doesn’t like me anymore! I imitate a young preteens voice in my head, and laugh to myself. But the itch is still there. Guess that imitation was more accurate than I thought. Shit.

“You know,” Armin wonders aloud, “To change the conversation and hopefully keep you from grabbing at your phone again…” He knows me too well, “I signed up to have sessions with Erwin as well.”

“You did?” I wondered aloud, “That’s great! I’m sure you’ll like him a hell of a lot better than I do!”

“You just don’t like anyone who tells you how to think.” Armin responds, “But I, on the other hand, am capable of actually taking criticism and advice, Eren.”

“Hey,” I shrug, “I like to make my own mistakes and learn from myself.”

“But it sure takes a long time to learn.” Armin murmurs.

“Wow.”

“It’s the truth.”

“But wow.”

Armin grins at me, “No offense,” He pauses, his face getting that faraway look whenever a thought occurs to him, “But doesn’t that mean that I meant offense either way? Wouldn’t no offense technically mean that I understand that the sentence in question holds context that could be considered offensive?”

I’ve lost him to the scholars. I think. While he’s distracted I reach for my phone and click on the screen. No new messages blares up at me in bright white lettering. I suck in a frustrated breath and shove my phone back into my pocket. This is going to be a day. This is going to be a long, long day.

- - -

“Honestly, Eren, you’re worrying too much.” Mikasa’s voice comes through on the other end of the phone, she’d told me yesterday that she was going to start checking in on me once I got back home. “I’m sure… whatever their name was-”

“Hanji”
“Will call.” She finishes, I hear her sigh from across the phone. “I think you’re just stressing yourself out needlessly.”

“But Mikasa, you don’t get it. Twice I fucked up and walked away, rejected him when I should have stayed.” Everytime I say it the situation seems more bleak than before. What if Levi refused to see me? Hanji said they’d try, but that doesn’t mean they’ll succeed in getting him to agree.

*I’ll respect your wishes.* Well, fucking don’t.

“Most people get three strikes?” Uncertainty tinges her voice. “You may have messed up horribly, but he must have known you weren’t completely…” She trails off.

“Sane?” I offer.

“I was going with stable.”

“Either way… I don’t know if he actually realizes what was happening…” I mean, he did ask me why I seemed to depressed. So he knew something was up, but… “And even so, that’s not an excuse. There is no excuse, and worst of all there was no misunderstanding. So I can’t say the whole ‘it was a misunderstanding…”’ What will I even do, if he does agree to see me?

“You’re over thinking this,” Mikasa states, “You messed up, you weren’t in a good place, that’s it, Eren, that’s all he needs to know. And if he doesn’t like you after that? Then he’s not worth it.” She sounds so certain.

“If only it was that easy, Mikasa.” I can’t help but laugh. After everything she still makes it sound like a simple event. But nothing’s ever simple, not that I’m finding.

“It is.” She attempts to convince me, “Listen, my boss is calling me back, I’ve gotta go but I’ll talk to you when I get home, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I love you.”

“Love you too.” Then the line is silent.

Flopping back on the couch, I lay my phone on my stomach and curl my arms around my head.

*Why did Hanji agree to help me anyway? They know what I did and they’re friends with Levi… Why would they give me another chance with him? Or try to anyway…*

What did they think they would accomplish? Or maybe they just said so in order to get me off of Levi’s back. I hope not… But I can’t shake the feeling that they might’ve. I mean, it’s already one fifteen, and I’ve gotten no word from them.

So many things could have happened. Levi could have refused to see me again, Hanji could have been lying, or maybe… maybe they just forgot all about it. At this point that seems like the most optimistic answer. At least that way I know it wasn’t out of spite from Hanji or scorn from Levi.

My phone buzzes on my chest, I sit up and it falls down to my lap. *Oh shit, please don’t let this be some ad or just Armin checking up on me.*

An unknown number, is that a good sign? Or does it mean that I’ve been sent one of those fake ‘you’ve won…’ messages?
Hey Eren, this is Hanji...

It’s… actually them. Relief lightens my chest and makes my shoulders sag. Thank god it’s actually them.

*It took some convincing but Levi will meet you later today, I’ll send you the time and place in a little bit. You’ll probably head over to his apartment.*

I grin to myself, I can’t believe it actually worked. I flop back on the couch, clutching my phone in both hands. *Thank you Hanji, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you.* I’m not going to fuck up this time around. I’ll be honest with him. Anything he’ll ask I’ll answer. But how do I even start the conversation?

I still have no idea how I’m going to do this, but at least I’m really doing it.

My phone buzzes again a few minutes later with the address and time. I dial in Armin’s number,

“Hey, Eren, what’s up?” He greets me.

“I got news from Hanji, can you drive me somewhere?” I ask, the address is a bit too far to walk.

“Sure, where to?”

Where to? Hopefully somewhere good.

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The building at first reminds me of Erwin’s office building. It’s all linoleum and looks like it actually has a regular cleaning crew. Funny, it fits for Levi.

The only difference is that there’s no benches in the center, there’s just an entrance way with a single elevator in the back of the room. I check the text again, he’s on the fifth floor.

When the elevator opens a woman holding a large white purse and talking on the phone in another hand steps out. She pauses mid sentence when she sees me, but I’m used to this now. The momentary confusion, the thought of *Where is that kid’s leg?* Even here, even when I’m just waiting for the elevator, that’ll trail after me. I can’t help the bitterness that I feel, but she continues on.

I just have to remember why I’m here. I’m here because I fucked up, and now I’m trying to fix that. I press the button and with a small bounce, the elevator begins to rise.

I’m here because I need to make things right with Levi. First floor.

I’m here because I need to let him know that I don’t mean what I said. Third floor floor.

I’m here because I like Levi, and I need him to know that. No matter what the end result is.

The doors open onto well-lit a dark green carpeted hallway lined with spaced out doors. But as I approach the light brown door labeled with his number, I can’t help but feel doubt start to take the edge off of my persistence. I stand in front of his door, and reach out. My hand hovers above the doorknob. Thoughts are racing around on some twisted circus ride of torture that’s set much too fast.

*What will I say? Will he even really be there? Maybe he chose not to come here. Maybe I’m walking into an empty room. If I am, what will I do? Do I wait for him to come, just in case he’s*
late? Or will I just be standing there like a fool? What do I even ask him? ‘Did you ever even like me…’ that’s much too whiny. I was the one who rejected him, I need to acknowledge that, but I need to know… What if he tells me outright that it was all an act on behalf of Armin? I guess that would make it easier… But I can’t help but hope that’s not the case… If it is…

If it is then I’ll say what Levi said, ‘I’ll respect your wishes’. I’ll be sad, devastated even, but I’ve caused him enough trouble… But even if I say that, I don’t know what I’ll really do. I grit my teeth, the idea of just rolling over and giving up it’s… it’s too much like what I’ve been doing before. I’m sick of it. Sick of just letting things happen. But… if he doesn’t want me, doesn’t even care for me, how could I fight for him? I’d just be pestering him, just be a nuisance.

Which is exactly what you tried to do when you first got paired up together.

Irony is a sick and twisted person.

My hand clutches the doorknob, the chill of the metal sends a shockwave up my arm. The cold freezes me in my place temporarily, reminding me of the fear that has both driven me to do this, and kept me from opening the door and finding out. Can I really do this? My arm shakes, and I feel my leg quiver, but I know my resolve, shaky as it is. And I’ll never know his answer if I stand here quaking. I steel myself, and open the door slowly.

I shut the door behind me, the room is neat, put together, orderly. Exactly what I’d expect of Levi’s apartment. The window on the far wall has that newly-cleaned sheen to it and the couch facing a fireplace is so exactly lined up you’d swear it was designed professionally. Everything is neat and orderly, and part of me is afraid to step further in, not just out of nerves for what’s to come, but because the thought that I may track dirt in such a pristine environment is rather intimidating.

I look around the dimly lit room, the lights aren’t turned on yet and I can’t see anyone else… Where’s Levi? Hanji said he’d be here, and this is his apartment.

Did he chose not to come? Did he not want to talk to me?

The thought makes my heart plunge towards my stomach, was this all for nothing? I wouldn’t blame him, after what I did…

But Hanji said he’d be here.

I step forward,

“Le-“

“If you’re going to come in, take your shoe off by the door.” My head swivels towards the voice. The lights flicker on and I see Levi, his hand still on the light switch, leaning against the doorway to some other room. He crosses his arms across his chest, and I stand there numbly.

He’s here, he’s really here!

Honestly, it shouldn’t make me so hopeful, it is his apartment after all. But… This means I at least have the chance to talk to him, and that’s all I need to explain things. All I need, to make me stupidly hopeful that this might just work. I stand there like an idiot before his words register, I look down at my foot, to the left there’s a small carpet where shoes are neatly lined up.

“Oh, right, yeah, sorry.” I mumble, I bend down and untie my shoe, when I stand back up, Levi’s still leaning against the doorway unmoving. What do I do now? I grip my hand into a fist, in case it
starts to shake again. How do I start? What do I do? I’ve come this far, but I don’t know how to proceed.

“Before you say anything,” Levi begins, pushing himself off of the doorway as he ambles over to the center of the room, “I would like you to consider the fact, Eren, that twice now I’ve told you exactly how I feel. And you rejected me both fucking times.” He stops, several feet away from me, “So if you say that it was some goddamn convoluted misunderstanding then-“

“But it wasn’t!” I protest, cutting him off. My mouth snaps shut quickly, Levi’s eyes narrow. He waits for me to continue, but I don’t fancy digging myself into a deeper pit than I’m already in.

“Then if it wasn’t a misunderstanding, and you actually mean to reject me, what the fuck is making you come back here?” His voice is level, artificially so, it’s not the usual steady tone I hear him use, it’s different, strained. “I already told you I’ll respect your decision, but it’s damn hard to do that when you won’t.”

I hesitate, and my hesitation registers with Levi. He takes a deep breath, and starts to turn. I panic, “I meant to reject you!” I cut in quickly, “But I didn’t want to!” I admit, and it sounds idiotic even to my own ears.

“What the fuck?” Levi’s face briefly passes into confusion before taking on his suspicious expression again.

“I… I thought it would be best for you.” I begin, and I can’t shake the feeling that I’m pleading guilty in front of a jury for a crime I didn’t want to commit. I can see that Levi wants to interject, wants to ask how it would be better for him, but he waits patiently for me to explain. “I thought that a relationship between us would be doomed. Not on your part, but because who in their right mind would stay with someone who’s losing their mind?” I give him a small, sarcastic smile, I can feel my hands shaking, “I knew that I would only be a bother to you, and I convinced myself that you only said you liked me because you didn’t know what I was really like… when I flipped out or went into one of my panics… You didn’t know, don’t know, what I’m like then. And I knew that when you saw what I was really like, you wouldn’t want to be with me. I was scared that if we dated, it would only hurt you.. And I couldn’t hurt you, not like that. And I was scared that I’d be hurt, too, that once you saw what it was like to be with someone who can so easily turn into a… a fucking monster,” My voice grows bitter, I feel my nails dig into my skin, clenching my hands into fists to stop them from shaking. But now my entire arm is shaking “You’d leave. I wouldn’t blame you if you did, but I didn’t want you to.” I force my hands to release, to lay flat at my sides, but the shaking doesn’t stop. “Which is why I rejected you, both times. Because I wanted to save you before all that happened…” I trail off, watching Levi carefully. I can feel the space between us like a weight pressing down on my chest. I want to know what he thinks, hear his reply. Levi looks stiff, held back. He’s calculating his words, carefully, and I can tell that there’s a lot he wants to say. There’s a lot I still want to say as well. The pressure beats down on my lungs, and I’m scared I won’t be able to talk either way.

“What did you want to say?” He inquires, still as steady and controlled as before.

“I wanted to tell you that I like you to.” I confess, Levi sucks in a breath, subtle but I can see it in the way his eyes widen. “I have feelings for you, Levi.” I can feel myself breaking though, because the thoughts are still there. Screaming doubt into my ears when I thought that I’d brushed them aside.

He’ll just leave you. “And I know even saying this you probably still want to leave me,” I blurt, giving them a voice I never wanted them to have. My own voice, it’s my own voice I hear ringing in my ears and fucking hell I want it to shut up. Who would want someone like you? “Because, you
know, who wants someone who’s about to snap?” I grin, but there’s something salty slipping into my mouth, slipping out of my eyes and rolling down my cheeks. Someone who’s… “Someone who’s hopeless? We both know I’m breaking Levi and I’m sorry, I’m so so goddamn sorry that I had to take it out on you. That you got caught up in all this and I just… can’t help more.” My mouth is working even faster than my mind, spewing all this shit before it even occurs to me. “I’m sorry you had to meet me. You really would have been better off never knowing that I made it out of that damned bomb alive.” My entire body is shaking now, and I’m scared I won’t be able to hold myself up but I have to. I have to because I can’t collapse in front of Levi. Even if all the cracks are visible by now.

But I don’t have to collapse because it takes all of a few seconds before I feel myself encased by arms. It’s warm and it’s comforting and I curl into the feeling, sobbing into Levi’s shoulder, my hands grabbing onto the sleeve of his shirt. He just stands there, and lets me cry into his shoulder, until my breathing quiets and I can’t sob anymore because my voice is raw.

All at once, I feel him relax, release the tension that had been slowly building in his posture. His shoulders slope and he drops his arms, sighing, “I can’t believe…” He mumbles, Levi shakes his head, “You are really, and I mean really, fucking hard headed, Eren, you know that? Don’t you realize…” He speaks softly, slowly, “That I know what it’s like to flip? To break, snap, and freak the fuck out at whoever is nearby me? How long will it take you to get it through your goddamn skull,” He pulls back, front of me, separated by just a few inches, “That you’re not alone?” He sounds so sure, “You’re not hopeless, not by a long shot.”

“How can you know…?” The words fall out of my mouth, laced with uncertainty that gnaws on my gut on a daily basis.

“Because you’re a persistent little shit, and you’re not going to give up until you fix this.” Levi smirks, a gesture so familiar by now that it’s comforting to see. I laugh, but mainly because of how honestly he thinks I can fix this, and he’s probably right. I’m going to fix this. I have to. I just have to.

My heart is hammering wildly in my chest, like it’s trying to push me forward, but I work against it and take a step back. “I-I have one more thing, something I have to ask you.” I stammer, steadying myself. I want all this to be true, all this to be the end of it. That Levi really believes in me, and that he doesn’t think I’m hopeless but… There’s one last thing I have to know.

“What is it?” Levi asks, suspicion tinging the edges of his words.

“Armin told me that he and Mikasa asked you to get closer to me, to try to figure out what was wrong with me…” I can practically see the gears turning in his head.

“If you’re about to ask if I confessed to you just to get closer to you, then you better fucking stop right there.” Levi warns me, I close my mouth, he nods. “The answer is no.” He rolls his eyes, “There’s no way in hell I’d ever stoop that low.” Levi smirks, “In fact, Eren, I didn’t even offer to open up to you on account of them, that all happened before they came to me. Believe it or not, I actually care about you. And, I actually like you.”

“Really?” I can’t help the disbelief that enters my voice, “Still, after everything I’ve done to you…?”

“Yeah, I know, I’m just as fucking stupid as you are, huh?” Levi retorts.

“Wow, thanks for compliment.” I grin. This is it. I think, watching Levi’s face, which is much more relaxed than he was when I first came into the room, This is what I want. My grin stretches
against my cheeks.

“The fuck are you so happy about?” He raises an eyebrow,

Selfish or not this is what I want, this is what I want to fight for.

“Nothing,” I lie.

“That’s a shitty lie and you know it.” Levi remarks, I shrug.

And if I’m going to fight for it… “Levi,” I call his name, Might as well start now. “Do you forgive me?”

There’s a beat of silence that’s only really filled by the panicked thump of my heart, but then he speaks, “On two conditions.” I nod, listening attentively, hope fluttering back up in my chest. “First of all,” Levi begins, “Never pull any crap like that again. Don’t give up on something because of some fucking doubt you have, and you’d better not send yourself into another shit-storm of a downward spiral. If you feel yourself slipping…” He pauses, then nods, as if deciding something for himself, “Come to me.”

“Okay.” I say, and I mean it too. Last time I tried to distance myself it backfired horribly. Never again.

“Second condition,” Levi pauses, for a fraction of a second he looks unsure, like he’s hesitant to say what’s next. I practically hold my breath, but he seems to shake his head and solidify his resolve, “The second condition is, you go on a date with me.”

“A date?” I exhale, what was first just a small fluttering hope has swelled into something akin to excitement in my chest, I can feel it, and it’s foreign and it’s wonderful.

“A date,” Levi affirms “Not just our usual meeting but an actual date, Eren. And if things go well… then, we’ll see what happens from then on out.” He explains, and I can see that he’s the hopeful one now.

How can I help but be a brat? “I don’t know…” I draw out the words, for a split second Levi looks worried, “You drive a hard bargain,” But he catches onto me and shakes his head, smiling, “What would this date hold?”

“Goddamn you,” He sighs.

“Well if this isn’t simply the most graceful way anyone has ever asked me out,” I retort, my cheeks hurt, I can feel my smile stretching the sides of my face.

“Well you didn’t exactly make it fucking easy.” Levi points out, “Okay, how about this? Give me your phone number and I’ll text you with the details to a plan later.”

“Sounds good.” I agree, he reaches into his back pocket and pulls out his phone. He hands it to me and I type in my cell, then hand it back to him. Levi glances at the number in his phone, and I catch the hint of a smile, before he puts it back. “I’ll talk to you soon, then?” I ask.

“Yes,” Levi nods, “I’ll text you.” He tilts his head, “Do you have a way to get home?”

“Yeah, I do.” I say, I can feel my chest swell with happiness. I did it. This is really happening. Things are… good. “I’ll see you later.” I backpedal to the door where my shoe rests.
“Goodbye.” Levi gives me a small wave. Shoe on, I exit, closing the door behind me.

I exhale. My chest hurts, and I’m used to it hurting, but not from being happy.

Chapter End Notes

Took them long enough, haha.

You'll be happy. Because for the next couple of chapters I'm going to focus on relationship building. Which means: It's fluffy time! (Long deserved, eh?) Then we'll get back to the real plot... but for now, enjoy a short break of fluff and romance. :D

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated!

Fun fact: I also realized today that this is the first chapter-based book with a romance-centric plot that I've ever written. I've had romance in some of my stories before but I'd never actually written romance before this. So sorry if some scenes sound awkward, still figuring out how to do it. ＾_＾(°ω°)／
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

Eren’s starting to get his life back in control. So, yay! Not much else to say, so I hope you enjoy!

Come talk to me:
goldie-the-cat.tumblr.com

Updates tagged:
fic: ntmywf

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Did it go well?” Armin’s voice is ever so slightly worried, needlessly so, on the other end of the phone line.

“Better than ‘well’, Armin.” I close the door to my apartment behind me, “We’re going to go on a date.”

“A date!” Armin echoes, “Wow, Eren! That’s great! When? What are you guys going to do?” He launches into the questions, just like a mother would when her son is about to go on his first date. I laugh,

“I don’t know yet, I gave him my number, he said he’d text me later with an idea.” I explain, pulling my coat off of my shoulders and hanging it on the coat rack.

“But… you know now that we didn’t put him up to anything, right? You’re all good now?” Armin asks for assurance.

“Yes, I’m fine now.” I affirm, pausing, “I’m… I’m happy Armin.”

“Wow, well, doesn’t that just feel great?” Armin chuckles on the other side.

“Yes.” I roll my eyes.

“Okay, well, I’ve got to go, Eren.” Armin informs, “But I’ll call you later, okay?”

“Alright, talk to you soon.” I reply, “Oh, and Armin, don’t you dare forget our promise. If anything ever bothers you, you’d better call.”

“Wouldn’t dare to forget, see you.”

“Bye.”

I collapse on my bed, letting my hand with my phone fall off to the side. I stare at my ceiling, wondering how, when everything seemed like it was doomed, I could have gotten here.

*It’ll get worse, but then it’ll get better.*

I didn’t take Erwin’s words seriously beforehand, but I should have. I really, really should have.
Now I can only hope that I’ve gone through the worst, and this…

*It’ll get better.*

Well, this is definitely better.

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When Mikasa comes home I’m doing my homework on my bed, she checks in my room first, as I’ve a feeling she’s going to start keeping more of an eye on me. “You have a desk, you know.” She reminds me, her eyes glancing towards the cluttered paper-holder technically called a desk.

“I know,” I respond, “But there’s really no room on it.” Mikasa eyes the trash bin, empty, next to the desk.

“You also have a trashcan, lots of those papers could go there.” She raises her eyebrows, but I just shrug in response. I’ve never been one for organization, Mikasa knows that. She sighs, “Well, how was Levi? Did it end well? Is he okay with you?” I can tell she’s not going to stop until I answer, so I cut in to ease her barrage of questions.

“He was… well, not so good at first but things got better. Yes, it ended well, and yes, he’s okay with me, we’re going on a date sometime and-”

“A date?” Mikasa sounds incredulous, “But… isn’t that a little early?”

“You know, technically we’ve been doing date-like things for… a while now.” She’s just being a worry-wort, I love my sister for it, though. It’s nice to know someone cares for you. “And I’m pretty sure that if anything it’s a little *late* considering everything else we’ve been through just to get to the first date.” I laugh out the words.

“Okay…” I can see in Mikasa’s eyes she’s fishing for other questions to affirm the fact that I’ll be safe, mentally or physically I don’t know which she’s more worried about but either way I’m already screwed over in both of those categories. “But, you feel good about this?”

“Mikasa,” I sigh, “this is honestly the best I’ve felt in a long, long time. “Fuck, I’m even looking forward to telling Erwin that I feel better tomorrow.”

“Wow,” A look of surprise takes over Mikasa’s face.

“I know, right?” I laugh, “Maybe I am insane after all.” I can see her surprise quickly transform into a frown, “It’s a joke,” I roll my eyes.

“I know but… still.” Mikasa sighs, she shrugs her shoulder. “I’m happy for you, Eren.” She admits, pulling her scarf up towards her nose. It’s been getting colder in our small apartment. Mikasa and I haven’t dared to touch the heating system because even with both of us working, I know the budget is tight.

“Mikasa, do we have enough to pay the next rent?” It had slipped to the back of my mind with everything else that’s been going on. But now that I’m free to think about other things… well, I have other things to worry about.

“We should… but not much else.” Mikasa tells me honestly, “I want to know how long Grisha’s going to take on his little… escapade.” She glances towards the door, “Hopefully not to long…” She mutters.
“I can ask Historia if I can start working a double shift.” I offer, and when Mikasa turns to protest I stop her, “Don’t tell me to focus on my studies or something else like that. I won’t be able to focus if we don’t have enough to keep a roof over our heads.”

“Don’t overwork yourself. You still need to get your degree.” Mikasa informs me.

“Ha, yeah, and you can bet Dad’s going to be totally happy when he learns it’s not a Political Sciences degree.” I snort out the words. I can practically imagine his face now. Guess there’s one good thing about having an absent dad, you can’t see his disappointment.

“Who knows? Maybe he’ll be happy for you,” Mikasa shrugs, “Do you have any idea what you want to go for?” She inquires, I shake my head.

“No but… I’m going to find out. Soon, hopefully.” I explain. Mikasa nods her head with appreciation for my decision.

“Okay, well, if you need any help—” I cut her off by holding up my hand,

“Thanks for the offer, Mikasa, but that is something I have to find out by myself. And I’m going to,” I grin, “Just wait.” I can tell Mikasa wants to offer more help. But she can see my resolve, and she acknowledges that by backing off from the conversation.

“Okay, well, I’m heading off to bed, don’t stay up too late.” Mikasa retreats towards the door.

“Goodnight!” I call as she exits. I turn back to my work. My shoulders slump as I sigh. I guess I’d forgotten about… everything else. Majors and rent and everyday life had slipped to the back of my mind when I was so preoccupied with everything else.

*From one problem to another. No rest for the wicked.* I take a breath, and continue on with my work.

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I’m walking out of my class the next day when the phone buzzes, I don’t recognize the number and I almost put my phone in my pocket when I remember. *Maybe it’s Levi?* Even just the thought makes me happy. There’s no more worry attached to his name just… it just makes me happy. How can a person do that? I don’t know, but I don’t care to know, long as it doesn’t go away.

*Hey brat, it’s me, how does a movie on Friday sound? There’s one showing during the time we usually meet, so we can just go then.*

I grin, leaning against the wall so I can type a reply.

*Sounds great. Can’t wait... what movie is it?*

It takes mere seconds for the reply to come through.

*A surprise, you’ll see.*

And then below that.

*Although Hanji was the one who recommended it so come prepared for anything.*

Hanji huh? I have to thank them. Not just for movie recommendations but because there’s no way I’d ever have a chance without their help. I owe them one, and I’ll have to pay them back somehow.
In the meantime, I have a meeting with Erwin tonight. And I’m actually excited to tell him that things are going well. Which is weird. Who knows, maybe I’ll be able to drop his sessions sometime soon?

Well… maybe not soon. I have to be careful this time. Last time I thought everything was going well, it took a sharp downturn. And I can’t have that happen again. Not now, now I simply can’t afford it. I’ll watch myself, watch how I think and act because I can’t let it get to that point again. And Erwin’s hired to help me with that…

Sadly that means I’ll probably have to start actually participating in the group and begin actually talking to Erwin. Not exactly my favorite activities but… If it’ll help then I’ll do it. At least if I’m in the group it means I’ll get to spend some more time with Levi, that’s a bonus.

And I’ll get better. I’ll keep moving until I’m as good as Armin is, be able to go back to my old self, and be happy, like Mikasa. If they can do it, then I can, right?

Of course, there’s no question. I mean, even Marco seems to have achieved some level of happiness. And he’s worse off than I am. So I can do this. I can. I know that now.

I dial Armin’s number on my phone and hold it up to my ear as I amble my way back to the apartment.

“Hello?” He asks cheerily.

“Hey, Armin,” I greet him, “What time are we leaving today? To go to Erwin’s office?” Armin laughs lightly on the other side of the phone, “Hey, what’s so funny?”

“Just, you actually seem excited to go today.” Armin explains.

“Yeah, well,” I glance around casually at the people milling about, “I think I’ve realized I’ve gotta be less fucking stubborn and just accept their help if I ever want to get better.”

“Huh…” Armin sounds surprised, “I’m proud of you, Eren, it seems like you’ve gotten a bit more of a mature outlook. Wouldn’t have anything to do with Levi, now would it?” He teases.

“You know me much too well,” I grin. I can picture Armin’s face when I hear him sigh, he’s probably smiling, shaking his head like he doesn’t know what to do with me.

“True enough. Anyway, it’s at eight so I’ll be there at around… seven forty? Sound good?” He inquires.

“Sounds great, I’ll see you then.”

“Bye, Eren.” I hang up and shove my phone back into my pocket. I inhale slowly, letting the air chill my lungs as I walk. Things are going to get better, they already are.

- - -

“Hey,” Armin greets me, he’s leaning against his car outside my apartment, “You ready?”

“Yeah, let’s go.” I reply, getting into the car. Armin starts up the engine and we pull away from the building, now just a shadow against the dark night sky. Windows pass by in blurs of light and color, silhouettes of people flashing by, like frames in a series of stop motion photos. My shoulders relax as we roll along. The car rumbling quietly, the near silent hum of the heating system blasting warm air on my cheeks.
“How long do you think this’ll last?” I blurt out the words as they come to mind, facing forward. I see Armin glance at me from the mirror, an eyebrow raised in inquisition.

“What do you mean by that?” He asks, his eyes returning to the road diligently.

“Just this pattern,” I explain, “I go to class, go home, you pick me up, go to Erwin’s, et cetera, et cetera.” I wave my hand through the air for emphasis. “I mean, it’s a good pattern, there’s nothing wrong with it… But it’s not going to be this way forever, so how long do you think this’ll last?”

Armin weighs my words with a tilt of his head, he shrugs. “You know, I’m not sure. I’m never sure how long these types of things are supposed to last, let alone how long they actually do last. I guess… I guess it all depends on how long you actually want it to last? I mean, yeah, we can’t keep doing this forever. Eventually we’ll graduate or move or our life will somehow be disrupted but… You can drag it out as long as you like.” He smiles sheepishly, “Sorry, that made it sound like a bad thing.”

“You’re not incorrect, though,” I point out, “Wouldn’t it eventually become bad? If we needlessly went on with the same thing everyday?”

“But when does it become needless?”

“I…” I frown, shutting my mouth, “I guess I don’t know the answer to that.” I look back out at the window, “But… I don’t actually think it’ll last a lot longer.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I dunno,” I shrug, “I just have the feeling that something’s changing pretty rapidly.” I sigh, watching the small round dot of white form on the glass of the window. “But that might just be me. Then again, maybe not, who knows?” I lean back, “I’m not really sure if that’s a bad thing though.”

“So it’s changing in a good way?” Armin perks up, “That’s hopeful.” He comments.

“I mean, I didn’t say it was… I just feel like it is. Small things I’ve noticed.”

“You noticed something?” Armin teases. “Wow, I mean, congratulations, something really is changing.”

I roll my eyes at him, he’s grinning, “Thanks for the vote of confidence, buddy.”

“Anytime.” Armin pulls up in front of the familiar brick building. I open my car door, casting back a quick goodbye, before scurrying into the building. The florescent lights reflecting on the familiar polished floor.

The elevators open before I reach them, I glance up and see a figure walk out of the elevator, looking to the right before turning his head over my way.

“Levi?” I mutter in confusion. Oh, right, he goes to meet Erwin before me, I’d forgotten. I smile, “Fancy seeing you here.”

“Brat,” His ever so eloquent greeting. I still can’t help but grin. I’m so happy that I’m not avoiding him anymore, and even more than that… it’s just so much better this way.

“Gee, you sound enthusiastic to see me.” I joke, shaking my head. He smirks, “Oh, yeah, you know me, just can’t fucking stay away.” He snorts, shaking his head.
“Well, now, don’t take it personally. I’ve just got that kind of a charm,” I throw in a wink for good measure.

“Cocky little shit.” He returns the jest, “You just think you’re all that, huh?”

“You know I am.” I laugh out the words. It’s strange, you’d think something major would have changed in the way we talk since we both confessed but… I think I’d be sad if it did. Levi’s the one I like, so I’m perfectly happy if we just stay like this.

“Actually, what I do know, is that you’re about to lose your elevator.” He nods to the closing doors behind him, my grin falls.

“Shit.” I dash past Levi and flash out a hand to catch the elevator, the doors come to halt and then slide back open. I sigh and step inside, looking back at Levi as the doors close, “I’ll see you Friday!” I shout past the closing doors.

“You’d better not be fucking late!” Levi calls, the doors close and block him from my sight. I sigh and press Erwin’s floor on the panel.

“Woudln’t dream of it.” I whisper under my breath. If things are going to be like this then… then I’m happier than I’ve ever been.

- - -

“Eren,” Erwin greets me with his usual gentleman’s smile, still too slick for me to really think it’s genuine, “Pleasure to see you again, I hope you’ve been well?” He guides me into the living-room-esque room. The little chotchkies have been swapped and moved around for a new feel to the room.

“Yeah,” I answer, taking my usual seat on the couch, hands in my pockets, “You can say that.” Erwin gives me an appraising gaze while slipping on his glasses and sitting at his desk, notebook and pen in hand. His prosthetic holding the pad still on his lap.

“You seem to be happier,” He comments, “Something good happen?”

“Something,” I reply, smiling to myself, “You know, I hate to admit it, mainly because I just really hate admitting things. But, you were right, it got a lot worse…” Erwin raises one of his bushy eyebrows, “But I think it’s actually getting better now.”

“Hmm…” He hums to himself, and for a second my hope falters, is he going to tell me that it’s going to get worse again? That I haven’t actually gotten better at all? He was right before, if he’s right again… “I’m happy for you, good job, Eren.” I exhale a breath I didn’t realize I was holding in anticipation. He leans forward, the pen relaxing in between his fingers as he folds his elbows over his knees. “I hope I didn’t give you a scare last time by saying that, I simply wanted you to be prepared.”

“But that’s it?” I ask hopefully, “Now that I’ve gone through the worst of it… It’ll just get better now, right?” I search for some sort of confirmation, but he’s as collected and composed as ever.

“If you keep trying to get better, then yes, I’m sure it’ll get better. Long as you have the motivation and will to,” Erwin sits straighter again, “But don’t be disheartened if you feel bad again. Use each time as a learning experience, Eren. Because that’s exactly what they are, you’ll learn as you go along how to handle and cope, and eventually, with a lot of work and plenty of time, you’ll have a shot at getting better.” He speaks so diplomatically. Not too hopeful, but not trying to dissuade me.
I think that’s part of why I think I’ll never be good friends with someone like this, way too calculated. But, he has a point, as always. “So what do I do to get there?” I ask.

“Well, first we have to start with what’s stopping you from getting there.” Erwin clicks his pen, he lays the tip against the paper, his eyes scanning the empty lines, as if predicting my responses. “What do you think is hindering your progress?” He lifts his eyes to me again, waiting for my response. Part of me feels like he already knows what I’m about to say.

“I think…” I mumble at first, biting the inside of my cheek. But I know the answer to this, because it’s the very thing that almost made me lose everyone in the first place, “I think I’m my own enemy.”

“Explain,” Erwin urges me to continue.

“Well…” I hesitate, how do I phrase it? I can’t exactly say that there are times when I think I’m hopeless, when I’m so assured that I’ll never get better… and how do I just explain that there are times when I’m not myself? When I look in the mirror and everything feels as detachable as my leg? “I feel like I can hold myself down.” I try to explain, I even remove my hands and hold them up, as if trying to give the words a physical shape. A weightness, something tangible to show instead of tell, “I think that I’m the one hurting myself, not in a physical way but… mentally? I mean, is that even possible?”

“Self-loathing,” Erwin states, he lays the pen flat from its swerving escapades, “And yes, it’s a very real possibility, and one hard to get by. But that doesn’t mean it’s impossible,” He adds in, quickly, before I can think that it’s hopeless. “And not uncommon. You just need to learn to, well, prove yourself wrong.” Erwin explains, “You may think you have no self-worth, but you need to prove to yourself that you do.” He pauses in thought for a second, “Try telling yourself positive things, it’s okay to be vain now and then. Good, even. Acknowledge when you do something right, and spend time with people who love you. You’ll learn, you’ll have to teach yourself, but you’ll learn that you’re not despicable.” Erwin advises, and I nod.

But he makes it sound so easy. Like it’s so simple to look in the mirror and not notice the painstakingly obvious false appendage jammed beneath my knee. Be vain… sounds so simple, but I guess people who find it simple aren’t missing part of their body. They don’t have faded scars twisting up the skin and curling in on itself. They’re not like me…

But I’ll try. Erwin, strange and enigmatic as he is, has yet to be wrong. And he was dead-right about it getting worse before it gets better. So I’ll try. For the sake of Mikasa and Armin, for the sake of Levi and even for the sake of myself, I’ll try whatever he has me do. I mean, I’ve got to get better somehow, right? And if this won’t work, then nothing will.

“Okay,” I answer, there’s no hint of hesitation in my voice and I think he picks up on that, “Okay… so what else?”

Erwin leans back into the chair, the smile creeping up on his face. I think, in Erwin’s strange way, he knows that I’m going to try.

Well, he’d be right. Because, fuck it all, I’m going to give it my all.
Erwin would make a good psychologist. It just fits.

You know, I'm writing really quickly now. Like the next chapter is basically only Eren and Levi's date, and it went by really quickly. I think I write fluff fast. So I'm pulling ahead of how I usually keep up with chapters, which is cool, less pressure for the whole one-week time limit to write, reread, edit and all that.

Either way, it's all just fun.

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated.
Chapter 34

I’m 100% convinced that Eren and Levi would be the couple that can’t stop talking in the movie theater if the movie isn’t up to standards. I’m also 100% convinced that Eren is someone who will take advantage of every chance he gets to be a brat.

Come talk to me:
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Updates tagged:
fic: ntmywf

Trying to do what Erwin wants me to do has been… hard, to say the least. But it’s only been two days since I saw him last, and like he said it’ll take time to get better. So I’m not about to give up yet. But, still, I can’t help but notice that whenever I try to be “vain”, my eyes just trail down my leg, down to that damned prosthetic and I think, Who the fuck would ever find that appealing?

Not exactly being “vain”. But, I’ve been spending time with Mikasa and Armin again. Yesterday Armin came over and we all had dinner together, family-style and all that. It was nice. And Erwin’s right, being around the people you love does make everything seem even just the tiniest bit brighter.

So I guess today should be great, then. After all, I’ve got my very first date with Levi in… half an hour or so?

Shit, I’m still not ready and I need to start leaving in fifteen minutes. My hands fumble in my sudden surge of panic and I miss the button on my shirt. Cursing under my breath, I redo the button and look at myself in the mirror that we keep in the bathroom. Levi said it was movie, but what does that mean? I mean, it’s our first date so I don’t want to overdress, but my normal wardrobe consists of jeans, a t-shirt, and maybe a sweater over the t-shirt if it’s cold outside. But is a button-up too much? It’s already the fourth time I’ve changed shirts but the maroon button-up shirt looks way too formal.

I huff and half stomp back to my bedroom while unbuttoning the shirt. On my way I grab my phone from the countertop and dial in Mikasa’s number.

“What’s wrong, Eren?” Mikasa immediately goes into worry-mode. Can’t blame her, she knows what’s coming and, add in the fact that I never call her at work, she’s bound to be worried.

“What should I wear?” I blurt out immediately, shrugging the button of and placing it down on the bed next to the other clothes.

“What should you…?” Mikasa echoes my words, “Well, something warm, movie theater’s are cold.”

“Not helping,” I sigh, eyeing the options I’ve laid out. I honestly can’t believe that my nerves have
gotten to the point where I’m asking my sister for fashion advice. I’ve been someone to care about what I wear. And if I do it’s usually just to blend in, because otherwise it’s usually not the clothes I wear that people notice. So if all their attention is immediately going to go to my leg, why bother looking nice for them?

“Well,” Mikasa’s voice breaks me out of my thoughts, “What are you thinking of?”

“I’ve got a that t-shirt that I got for my birthday, the button down you gave me a while ago, a green long sleeved shirt, and that polo I got when we were applying to colleges.” I eye each one, the polo and button down feel a bit more formal. But am I underdressing if I don’t wear them? Does it even matter, if we’re going to a movie theater and it’s dark inside either way.

Holy shit, I sound like some high schooler freshman with their very first crush. This needs to stop.

“Wear the long sleeved one, it’s the warmest in case it gets cold out,” She pauses, “And the color looks good.” I can read in between the lines of her advice, you’re worrying too much. She’s probably right, too.

“Thanks Mikasa,” I pick up the green shirt, “Love you, see you afterwards.”

“Bring a jacket.” She manages to squeeze in the advice as I hang up. I shake my head, she’ll just never stop worrying. At this rate I’ll be in a retirement home and she’ll still remind me to put on a jacket if it gets below fifty degrees. I slip into the shirt and check the time. If I leave now I shouldn’t be late.

Grabbing my keys and jacket. I exit the apartment, locking the door behind me.

It’s really stupid, but as I head for the stairs, I feel like humming. The way they do in those cheesy musicals Armin loves to watch, where soon the entire world starts singing along and before you know it you’re wondering why the main character is swinging on light poles and why nobody calls the cops on him for public disturbance. Sadly I don’t think I’d be as lucky as the hero of a musical, so I just smile to myself and keep a bit of a bounce to my step as I walk down the street.

- - -

I check my phone, the theater is just one block down and I’m right on time. For once. I look up and glance around, I’m not someone who usually goes out, unless it’s with Armin or Mikasa. And if I am out, I’m jogging my usual path and not going to the movies or something of that sort. So I looked up the directions on my phone this morning, now all I can do is hope that I didn’t take a wrong turn somewhere or missed it.

I look for some building that could house a theater. My eyes settle on a small, cream colored building with a sign jabbing upwards into the sky. Colossal Theater, fitting, considering their sign is so damn big. Must be the place, though. Underneath the sign stands a very familiar figure in a black coat. He must have come early, why am I not surprised?

I walk up to Levi, the smile still present on my face. He’s wearing earmuffs to protect his head from the cold, that’s… kind of adorable. I almost snicker, Levi and the word adorable don’t exactly seem like a perfect match, more like a perfect mismatch. But, strangely enough, the word fits. He turns his head and I see his nose is slightly red from the cold, my face must be too, considering the sting I feel in the tip of my ears and edge of my nose. But I don’t mind it.

“Hey,” I greet as I come up in front of him, “Told you I wouldn’t be late!” I exclaim triumphantly.

“All right, I’m impressed.” Levi nods, “But, honestly Eren, on time shouldn’t be that much a
fucking achievement. It should be natural.” He smirks, “I guess you’re just special in that regard.”

“Wow, what a lovely start to our first date.” I tease. I think I scared Levi with that, because for a second his eyes widen like he fucked up. “Wouldn’t have it any other way.” I shrug, and Levi relaxes again.

“Sorry I forgot the goddamn roses and fucking chocolates in the car.” He sighs, tiny wisps of white puffing out into the air and promptly disappearing again. “Probably frozen by now anyways, it’s fucking cold outside, let’s get inside.”

“That’s called winter Levi.” I laugh, following him side by side into the theater. There’s a wide, round roof that arches over our head, and the first thing that greets me is a blast of hot air that circulates around the open room. A single ticket booth with a bored looking ticketer rests in front of a velvet rope. A confectionary sits in the back of the theater, displaying an array of tooth-rotting, butter-dripping movie snacks. “So what movie are going to see, anyway?”

“Something called Boys, Hanji suggested it, and I have no fucking clue what to expect.” Levi leads Eren up to the ticketer, he starts pulling out his wallet and Eren quickly reaches for his own, but he’s stopped by a threatening glare by Levi. “Fuck no, I’m the one who asked you out, I’m the one who pays. That’s how it works.”

“What? No way.” I pull out my own wallet anyways, “At least let me pay for the food?”

“Nope,” Levi turns back to me, holding two tickets in his hand. “But perhaps you don’t get it, Eren,” He hands me one ticket, his fingers lingering on my palm, “Just the fact that this is happening, that you’re here, with me, makes me happier than I’ve been in a long, long time. And I have to show that somehow, got it?” Very quickly, his hand drops from mine and he turns to the man by the velvet rope, flashing him his ticket and entering the main lobby.

I’m stunned. Did he just say that to get me not to pay? No, Levi wouldn’t do that. But then…

I grin, showing the man my ticket. “Theater seven.” He repeats in a bland, monotonous voice. I catch up to Levi quickly, but he takes care to keep his back to me. Is he embarrassed? I lean over to his shoulder,

“You know, Levi,” I whisper, “The exact same can be said for me.” He stops in front of me, and good thing I have quick reflexes because I almost crash into his back. He tries to turn around but I skirt my way around in front of him, and in the line for the confections, “Which is exactly why I’m helping you pay. Now, what do you want?” I see Levi’s eyes widen a bit, there’s still some red tinging the edges of his cheeks, but I like to think that it’s not from the cold anymore. I know mine sure isn’t. He shakes his head and smirks,

“Fine, you’re stubborn as hell, anyways.” He relents.

“Always am.” I let my grin widen a bit as I turn to the display, expressing a grand assortment of butter-drenched and sugar-coated confections. “Should we get popcorn? I mean, we should, since we’re at a movie theater, and it is tradition. But do you want any?” Great, now I’m rambling, like my previous cocky confidence has been stripped from me. Fantastic.

Still, Levi seems to enjoy my babbling, I’m sure he’s used to it by now. “Sure, fucktons of butter on cooked corn sounds like good. Let’s get that.”

“Wow, what an optimistic way to put it.” I shake my head, turning forward to the line. Quickly I reach the countertop and order a large bag of popcorn. Little do I know, because large apparently
equals gargantuan, and it’s only a few seconds later that my arms are filled with, what I assume, is the weight of a small child in popcorn.

“Holy shit, did you buy out the entire store?” Levi looks at me incredulously, I shift around the red bag, a few kernels spilling over the top and bouncing against the floor.

“I ordered a large, but... uh... wow. I didn’t expect it to be this large.” I reply as Levi eyes the bag up and down.

“You don’t fucking say!” He frowns, “Crap, how are we going to finish this?”

“Uh...” I pause, “Want to have an eating challenge?”

“What?”

“Well,” I shrug, “We’re obviously not going to finish this, so why don’t we see who can eat the most?” Levi looks at me like I’ve just suggested that we rob a bank. “C’mon, it’ll be fun!” I grin, “And, don’t worry, I won’t hold it against you if you lose.” I attempt to egg him on. His brow furrows,

“Oh no, there’s no way in hell I’m losing to you. But if we end up vomiting in some shitty movie theater restroom, I fucking blame you.” He then turns and walks briskly towards theater seven.

Well, this’ll be fun.

- - -

“Okay, so what are the rules to this ‘competition’, of yours?” Levi asks as I take my seat next to him, placing the bag of popcorn in between us.

“Soon as previews start, start eating, I guess you should... count? Whoever eats the most before either feeling sick, reaching the bottom of the bag, or the movie ends. Whichever comes first.” Levi nods in compliance, I look around. The theater is near empty, there’s only a few other people scattered about the red plush seats. “So... do we have any idea what this is about?”

“No fucking clue, I’m about as in the dark as you are.” Levi informs, as he says so, the lights dim. And the previews start, “Ready to be crushed, brat?”

“Nuh-uh, I ain’t losing to you!” I hiss under my breath as the theater quiets down. Soon as the first preview screen loads, I shove my hand into the popcorn bag and bring out a fistful of popcorn.

Wait, I have to count these.

I hear Levi snicker besides me as I peer over my palm trying to count the kernels.

Fifteen, there’s fifteen of them. I shove them into my mouth, almost choking in my rush. Okay, guess this wasn’t the smartest plan. Shit, I’ve fallen behind.

“You could always give up now,” Levi reminds me, a smirk edging his features in the dark. “I won’t blame you.”

“Like hell I am,” I pick up two more pieces of popcorn, seventeen. “Besides, I’m stubborn as fuck.” I pop them into my mouth.

“Couldn’t have said it better myself.” Levi murmurs in reply.

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Okay, in hindsight, I knew I was going to feel sick. But the movie hasn’t even started and my stomach is already aching. How many have I eaten by now…? Oh shit. I lost count. The last preview ends and I lean back in my seat with a sigh, glancing over at the popcorn bag, half-full still. I cringe at the sight of it. I ate way too fast. Levi’s not eating anymore either.

“Do you feel as sick as I do?” I whisper over as the opening credits start.

“Yes. Yes I do. That was a terrible fucking idea and next time you suggest something like that, there’s no way in hell I’m doing some crap like that.” He sighs, slouching back in his seat, “Next time, we get a small bag.”

“Agreed.” I follow his example and lean back in the seat, the movie starts up with the scene of an empty, grassy plane, a few trees scattered about here and there, dotting the landscape with bare limbs. Creepy. “So… How much did you eat?”

Levi looks my way, “You’re still competitive, even when you’re feeling like shit you still have to know?” He shakes his head, but I can see the hint of a smile in his eyes, even in the dark they seem to catch what little light there is. Half of his face is illuminated by the movie screen, a sharp contrast between light and shadows that highlights each line and crevice of his face. “I lost track after forty. You?”

“Now who’s the competitive one?” I tease, “But, yeah, I lost track too… after… uh… shit.” I honestly can’t remember. I think I just forgot to count.

“Great, so nobody wins and the only thing we’ve gained from that is a goddamn stomach ache.” He sighs.

“Well, it was fun.” I stay on the optimistic side, Levi gives me a curious look.

“You have a strange definition of fun, Eren.” He points out, I’m about to reply when the person below us, who had apparently been getting more and more annoyed with out quiet chatter, turns around and shushes us. I snap my mouth closed, but Levi just sends a glare back their way. He leans on the armrest and I turn my head back to the movie.

It now shows a large house, in ruins, as the narrator explains to the audience that his family once live there. The house goes through a series of camera lens flashes that would make an epileptic have a seizure until it settles back on it’s suburbia, past-self. The narrator says he left when he was nineteen to go to college, and he’s the only one that remains today.

“Oh!” I say it a little bit too loudly, the person below us turns around again with a glare. I turn my head rapidly back to Levi, “Levi, I know what this is!” I take care to whisper excitedly this time.

Levi raises an eyebrow in response, “It’s a horror movie!” I hiss under my breath. Sure enough as I say that the image of a woman with a bloody face and a flowery skirt walks through the halls to the kid’s bedroom. Levi frowns,

“Goddamn it Hanji,” He scowls, “A horror movie isn’t exactly a first-date movie…” Some light comes into his eyes, and he sighs, sitting up straighter, “Oh fuck them.”

“Why?” I inquire, Levi faces me, gesturing to the screen with his hand.

“They told me that it was perfect for a first date, said that it was the kind of movie that led to cuddling and crap like that.” He gives the ghost, holding up a knife on-screen a murderous look. I’m not sure which would scare people more. Probably Levi. “More like gripping to each other for dear life.” Sure enough, as he says that, a scream fills the movie theater and the couple below us
grasp each other’s arms in a death-grip like motion.

“Levi…” I draw his attention back. Sure, we might be in a movie room watching a ghost brutally dismember small children on screen, but that doesn’t mean I can’t still tease him. “Did you want to cuddle?” I can see his jaw go slack, ah ha! Caught him in the act.

“Fuck, forget I said anything.” Levi groans, “Ugh, just. I didn’t have any goddamn ideas, Eren. Dinner and lunch are shit we do all the time so that was out of the question, anything sounded good when I was running out of ideas. Even shit-eyed Hanji’s idea, okay? Okay.” He’s rambling, he’s completely and utterly rambling and I’ve finally got the upper hand. To hell if I’m not going to milk this moment.

“Aww. don’t be embarrassed Levi.” I coo, grinning, I grab onto his arm, wrapping my arms around in and resting my head in the crook of his neck. “Better now?” I ask, there’s no response so I turn my head up towards him, Levi seems to be trying very hard not to look my way, I rest my chin on his shoulder and pout, “What’s wrong? Didn’t you want this?”

“Oh fuck you, you goddamn brat.” Levi hisses under his breath, “Don’t think I don’t know what you’re trying to do here.” I snicker, tilting my head into his shoulder.

“And what, exactly, am I trying to do here?” I ask, an idea comes to mind as the ghost appears on screen again, silently stalking behind the idiot protagonist who’s wandering into the dark basement. “Oh, hold me Levi! I’m scared!” I mimic the whine of a fake-frightened teenage girl. I hear Levi snort in laughter besides me.

“What the hell was that voice?” He raises an eyebrow at me, but he’s laughing, I can tell by the way his shoulder shakes lightly up and down.

“It was the voice of fear, Levi, the voice of fear.” I reply seriously.

“Fear? Really? Who the hell would be afraid of this ghost?” Levi gestures to the screen, “I mean, all you have to do is leave the house. Fuck, he’s acting all terrified and he hasn’t even tried the front door! Jump out of a window for god’s sake! It’s one story and it’s open right next to you!” He hisses at the screen, and now it’s my turn to laugh. The protagonist turns and screams, running past said open window and opting to hide in the dresser right next to it. “You have got to be kidding me…” Levi slumps back in his seat. I laugh and snuggle closer, not to keep up the act but because he’s actually really comfortable.

“Oh my god, is the ghost actually that stupid?” I point at the screen, where the ghost fumbles around, looking for where he possibly could have hidden, “He literally hid, right in front of her, she was watching!” I retract my arm and wrap it back around Levi’s. He doesn’t seem to mind, he doesn’t shake me off, at least.

“You see my point.” Levi sighs, the ghost stares for a good second at the dresser before vanishing. “You’re fucking kidding me!” Levi exclaims, a bit too loudly for the people in front of us. Who both shoot us daggers from their eyes, Levi scowls at them in return. They turn back to the screen.

“I wonder who they’re more scared of,” I take care to whisper this time, “You or the ghost onscreen?”

“Better be me,” Levi scoffs, “Because at least I’d know to check in the goddamn dresser.” I chuckle, turning back to the screen as the protagonist steps out of his sloppy hiding spot.
The rest of the movie is spent very much in the same way. Levi and I remarking whenever the main character or the ghost herself makes a stupid move… Which results in the majority of the movie being spent in conversation and laughter. I think the people who sat below us must really hate me now. But I don’t particularly care. It was a lot of fun! I’m almost sad to see the lights come up in the theater, but it’s time to get moving.

I sit back up, I hadn’t realized it, but I’d stayed nestled into the crook of Levi’s neck for the entire film. Shit, I hope he didn’t mind, it was nice and comfy so I just kind of forgot to sit back up. Levi doesn’t seem agitated though, not by me at least.

“Why are horror movie characters always such idiots?” He sighs as we head out of the screening room and towards the entrance of the theater.

“Stupidity seems to work, though! He made it out alive.” I point out, Levi scoffs in response, holding the door open as we exit.

Please, the only reason he survived was because that fucking ghost acted with even more idiocy than he did.” Levi grousches, I thank him as we head out into the cold again. The wind’s blowing now, and the grey sky seems heavy. Is there a prediction for snow? I shiver with the sudden change in temperature, hugging my jacket around my body.

“Well, stupid or not,” I grin at Levi as he zips up his coat, “I had a lot of fun, thanks for this.”

“Good, I’m glad,” Levi sighs, causing a puff of white smoke to billow up from his frosty breath, “I wasn’t quite sure how shitty the movie would be when Hanji suggested it.” He smirks, “No doubt they’re going to pester me for details, now I can honestly say that they have a crap movie taste.”

“Well,” I laugh out the words “Next time we can come up with something ourselves.”

“Next time, eh?” Levi repeats, it takes me a moment to realize what I’ve just said.

“I mean, if you want to.” I add on, feeling the back of my neck heat up.

“Of course I want to, I was the one who confessed to you, wasn’t I?” He retorts. Okay, now my neck really feels hot. Levi waves me forward, I walk towards him before he takes hold of my arm, pulling me down slightly so that he can plant a kiss on my cheek. It’s just a brief brush of his lips on my skin, but when he releases my arm and I stand straighter, the spot feels warm. “Until next time.”

My face aches, my cheeks ache, because I can feel my smile stretching my skin. “Until next time.” I echo his words, Levi gives a nod, the edges of his ears are red, maybe from cold, but maybe not. Neither of us move for a moment, just lingering like the moment is hung, stuck in the air, suspended by time. Then my phone buzzes, and no doubt it’s Mikasa asking if I’m on my way home. That breaks the spell and, without a word, we turn and walk our separate ways.

Chapter End Notes

I watched my first horror movie recently. It was called The Blob and none of the actors managed to look scared. It was just levels of constipation. The worse the situation got, the more they had to take a shit.
Well, that's my story, what's up with you guys? Enjoy it?

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated.
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

Slight YumiKuri in this chapter. Because, I mean, Ymir and Historia. Not much more needs to be said.
Also Hanji is the type of friend who would definitely try their damnedest to put a couple in every single situation they can think of.

Come talk to me:
goldie-the-cat.tumblr.com

Updates tagged:
fic: ntmywf

For the first time in a long, long while. I have a happy dream. It’s nothing particularly special, hell, I can’t even remember it now that I’m awake. But I wake up smiling, feeling… good, for once. It’s odd, but it’s nice. I could get used to this.

It’s Saturday, which means I have the group today. For once in my life I’m not especially adverse to the idea of trudging down and going through Hanji’s insane exercises. I still owe Hanji, immensely, so I’ll have to thank them today and ask what I can do to make it up.

Pulling on my shirt, I hear knocking on the door. Must be Armin.

“Be right there!” I shout, grabbing my jacket from the bedside and hurrying to the front. When I pull the door open, Armin grins up at me from under his layers of clothing. He reminds me of a small blonde puffball.

“Hi Eren!” He greets me cheerfully, then hesitates when he sees what I’m wearing, “A t-shirt?”

“Yeah, I’ve got a jacket.” I hold up said jacket and wiggle it to emphasize this point.

“Yes, you have a thin, grey jacket. Eren! You’ll freeze!” Armin’s face is aghast.

“I’m sure it’s not that bad.” I frown, already slipping my arms into the jacket.

“It’s snowing outside.” Armin states blandly. Is it? I haven’t looked out the window, or checked the weather for that matter.

“Ah, well, I’m sure it’ll be fine, besides, we’ll be late if we don’t hurry!” I’m out the door and locking it before Armin can object. “Come on!” I wave for him to follow me, already strutting towards the staircase. Armin hurries behind me to catch up. He watches me with a grin on his face.

“You’re certainly chipper today.” He nudges me with his elbow as we walk down the empty staircase. “Good date?” He inquires.

The date. I still feel warm thinking about it. “Yeah,” I respond under my breath, smiling to myself like it’s my little secret to keep. “You could say that…” I hum out the words, drawing on his
curiosity.


“Horror,” I laugh out the word, Armin’s acting like how I’d expect Mikasa to act. A worried mother. Armin looks shocked.

“Horror? Doesn’t seem like a ‘date’ movie genre…” He raises an eyebrow.

“Hanji had suggested it to Levi, but he didn’t know it was horror.” I explain, “But honestly, I’m really glad they did.” If they hadn’t then maybe I wouldn’t exactly have gotten an excuse to cuddle up like that. When I think of it, I can feel my cheeks burn and I’m sure Armin can see my face turn red. But I regret nothing, I would do it again in a heartbeat. “Besides, we spent half the movie talking anyway, the protagonist was an idiot.” I roll my eyes, quickly changing the subject before he can inquire as to ‘why’ I’m glad. Guy’s gotta have some secrets to keep to himself?

“Well, that’s great.” Armin smiles softly, “I’m sure the two of you must have annoyed anyone else in the movie theater…”

“Hey!” Although he is true.

“I’m glad you had fun, Eren.” Armin opens the door in the main lobby, and I’m met with snow to the face, thrown my way by a strong gust. Almost immediately I shiver, and, okay, maybe Armin was right about the t-shirt and jacket. I probably should have worn something slightly warmer. But we’ll be in the car soon, anyways… I dash ahead of Armin to the car, throwing the door open and sliding in as he laughs, taking his time to get in the other side while my teeth chatter.

“Please turn the heat on, Armin, it’s fucking cold outside.”

“Don’t ever tell me that I don’t warn you about these things.” He grins, smug, but revs up the engine either way. Putting the heat on full blast.

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I’m chatting with Armin as we get out of the car, I can see Jean and Marco entering the building in front of us. Armin catches me looking and smiles,

“Given any thought to their holiday party?” He inquires. That’s right, Marco invited me to a holiday party that they’re throwing for Christmas. It’s been a long time since I’ve gone to anything like that, usually I avoid them to avoid being confined in a situation that requires being social. Since it will undoubtedly lead to someone staring at my leg, or uncomfortably asking what happened. Or, even more uncomfortably, trying to avoid the subject completely all the while I can just tell they want to ask my why I only have half of a leg.

But I should try it… I should put myself out there more. I mean, maybe it’ll end well. Armin’s going to be there so at least I could always just hang with him. “Yeah… yeah, I think I will.” Armin’s grin grows, looks like he was hoping I’d say that.

The doors push open to the familiar blank white room. Well, not so blank anymore, it looks like they’ve put in a second fake fern. The leaves waving around as it’s right under the vent for the ac. Jean is already sitting down, his hands crossed across his chest as he slumps back in his seat. Marco is talking with Petra and Levi while Hanji’s digging through their bag for… something. Honestly who knows what with them.
Levi looks up as the door closes behind Armin and I, I catch his eyes and smile. I think I see the slightest curve of his lips in response, but Petra nudges him with her elbow, she gives him a sly look. Does she know? Levi frowns at her, saying something in response that I can’t hear from across the room.

Armin goes to find a seat, we’ve still got a minute or two. I should thank Hanji. “I’ll be there in a second.” I say as Armin sits down. I cross the room and stop behind Hanji, who’s still intent on digging through their leather bag.

“Erm… Hanji?” I call their attention. Hanji whips around, and upon seeing me, gasps and wraps me up with a large hug.

“Eren, darling!” I feel the breath squeezed out of me in their bear-hug before they place their hands on my shoulders, pushing me away for a moment to get a better look at my face, and luckily allow me to breathe. “Good job with… well, you know what!” They give me a wink and a laugh, “I’m proud of you!”

“Uh, yeah,” I stutter, my lungs still trying to expand after having been shoved to the back of my spine. “I wanted to thank you for that. For convincing him to talk to me…” I trail off, because Hanji’s laughing again.

“Oh, sweetie, I barely had to convince him to do anything. You know, he was there when you called!” Hanji informs me, my face goes blank, “He was pretty upset after you’d left that second time, Petra and I could tell, so we’d been going over to try to make him feel better. When you called, I put it on speakerphone so he could hear what you had to say.” Hanji explains. Of course, those strange pauses that I’d heard, those must have been Hanji and the others talking. “It took a little bit of push after you hung up, but since he’d heard you himself, he already knew that you wanted to speak with him about something important.”

“Wow… Well, thank you.” It doesn’t sum up how grateful I am, but it’s all I can think to say. Hanji gives one more chuckle.

“Anytime! Afterall, I’ve always been told I’m a good matchmaker!” Hanji gives me a devilish grin, “Oh, by the way, you’d said you have a job now right?”

I nod in response, “Yeah, why?”

“Where do you work?”

Where do I work? Why do they want to know that, “Uh, Maria’s Sweets. It’s a small bakery store.”

“Maria’s Sweets…” Hanji repeats the word under their breath, then nods, “Thanks! Now then, we’re about to begin!” They release my shoulders and clap their hands together to call everyone to attention. “Hello everybody! Okay, for today, we’re going to sit next to someone we haven’t sat next to yet. So, take your seats, okay?”

Someone we haven’t sat next to? I haven’t sat next to Jean, Marco, or Petra. I take a seat next to Marco, Petra plopping down beside me. Hanji waits till everyone has found their own seat, then they sit in the last remaining chair.

“Today,” They start with a large grin, “We’re going to focus on our goals again, but through something a little different. This is called a four-front assessment. It allows us to analyze our current environments, and where we can use it to our advantage.” Hanji places a hand on their chest, “For example, my goal in life is to be a successful psychologist and help others overcome
their problem. I’m currently working as a psychologist, so that environment is pretty beneficial to my goal! All I have to do to use that environment, is go to work everyday!” They finish on a cheery note, then turn to their left, to Armin. “Your turn!”

“Er.. Okay, well, I started out with my goal being to decide which path I want to pursue in life, and I’d narrowed it down to just a few…” He scratches the back of his head, “I, um, I think I’ve narrowed it down to really just Art History, since that’s a lot of fun. And I go to college, where that’s a major… So I guess I’ll declare Art History as my major and take classes in that subject?”

“Perfect!” Hanji praises Armin, who gives them a shy smile in response. Jean’s up next.

“I wanted to do well in a job, I have a job.” He sighs, “Not exactly rocket science.” He slumps back in his seat, still as reluctant as ever to be here.


“My goal is to get out of the group, wasn’t it?” He replies, “Well, not exactly sure how being in the fucking group will let me get out of the group.” He raises an eyebrow.

“Ah-ha!” Hanji lets out a sound of triumph, “And there’s a problem that we’ll all run into! If our environment can help us, it can also hurt us, and it’s our job to acknowledge how it may hinder our progress, and find ways to work around or with that obstacle!” She nods to Marco, “Marco, Eren, Petra, we’ll get back to you in a minute, but let’s backtrack. Jean! How might working in your job prevent you from achieving your goal?”

Jean gives Hanji an incredulous look, “I’m pretty sure my job is my goal.”

“Wrong, sir! Your goal is to do well in a job! If you want to do well in a law firm, but you were simply the prostitute the boss hired on his more stressful nights, are you doing well in the law firm?” Hanji questions.

“The fuck is up with that analogy?” Levi speaks up, but Hanji just shrugs.

“If the sock fits…” They trail of.

“I thought the expression was ‘if the shoe fits’?” Armin says absentmindedly.

“I’m not talking about a sock for your foot, sweetie.” Hanji winks. Jean makes a gagging noise, Levi’s scowl simply frowns, Armin still doesn’t get it, staring at Hanji like they’d just landed in a UFO. I see Marco’s face turn red and Petra giggles beside me. Sometimes I question if our psychologist also needs some form of therapy… “Jean!” Hanji shocks us all back to attention with an exclamation, “You still haven’t answered the question!”

“Uh… I guess…” Jean sits up straighter, scratching the back of his neck, “I guess since I’m still just a beginner, I’m not getting a lot of attention for my work?”

“Perfect!” Hanji nods, “So how do you plan to overcome this obstacle?”

“Work harder…”?

“And?”

“Do some extra hours or something, I don’t know!” Jean throws his hands up in frustration, slumping back in his seat again. Hanji gives him an approving look.
“Very good, now you’re thinking about what to do, so you can come up with a solution to work through this! Armin!” They turn back to Armin, who’s still confused about the ‘sock’ analogy. Knowing him, he’ll come up with the answer eventually… Sadly. “What about you? What obstacle is in your way? The roadblock you must illegally crash through with your car in order to get the best action shot?”

“I’m… uh… not sure that’s a good idea.” Armin hesitantly murmurs.

“‘Course it is! Just look at all those badass action sequences!” Hanji argues, “It’s best if you’re holding onto the outside of the car, your lover trapped on the inside while explosions flare up behind you! But I digress.” They gesture for him to respond.

“Still not sure that’s a good idea. Even less so now. But, I suppose my blockage would be in the fact that there’s other requirements I must still take to get my degree.” He ponders this for a second, “But all I have to do is take those classes, and then…”

“Boom!” Hanji interrupts, “Dynamite, explosion, action sequence done and your goal is accomplished!”

“Oh, yeah… sure.”

“And you survived, that’s always a plus. Levi!” In a flash their eyes are back to him. “What’s blocking your goal?”

“Besides the fact I’m still here?” He asks.

“Don’t be grump. Grumps don’t have amazing movie shots.” Hanji waits for him to reply, but Levi’s look tells them enough, they sigh. “Very well, no explosions for you. Marco? Start with your goal, then do how the environment helps, and afterwards how it hurts and how you plan to overcome the bad part.”

“Well, my goal was to walk… But I can actually do that now,” He gives a light laugh, “So I guess I have to come up with a new one?” His laughter dies down as Marco takes a second to ponder this, “I guess I still can’t use my arm very well, so I’ll focus on that now. As for the environment… Well, I’m in a place where there’s lots of ways to practice using my arm. Like writing or cooking or things like that…” He sighs, “I guess the only harm would be the fact that I’m usually pressed for time, so I don’t really have the opportunity to specifically use my arm. But… I’ll just have to readjust my schedule?”

“Sounds like a plan.” Hanji gives him a nod, “You do physical therapy, correct? You can also ask them to help you focus on your arm.” They suggest, Marco gives them a smile in return.

“Yeah… I think I’ll do that.” He muses.

“Great! Now not only have you completed your first goal, but you’ve already set a new one to work towards!” Hanji gives Marco one of their largest grins before turning to me, “Eren! Your turn!”

Okay…” What was my goal again? Right, finding my major, “Well my goal was- is, to find my major and eventually end up working in that field. Uhm… I’m in college, so I guess that’ll help me out a lot because that’s where you actually get a degree and choose a major…” But how is it stopping me? My mind drifts back to Political Sciences, the amount of time wasted on an unrequired course that I don’t even want to be in. I sigh, “I guess it’s just the fact that there are classes I take and find I really don’t want to go into as a career, but I take them instead of exploring
my options.” So that would mean I’d have to drop Political Sciences? Ha, my dad wouldn’t exactly be happy with that choice. “In which case, I should drop the class, I suppose.”

Then again, how would he even know? He really wouldn’t, he only sends us letters through a mailbox and he’s on the move so much that we can never send letters back. Well, he used to, anyway. His last letter made it sound so… final. I guess he’s settling down with whoever he said he found.

Fine. So be it.

“Alright! Now that you know what to do, you can take the steps to put that in action, eh?” Hanji suggests, but she turns to Petra before I can reply. Yeah, yeah I guess I do.

- - -

The rest of the day passed uneventfully. After the group, it looked like Levi wanted to talk to me but Hanji and Petra pulled him aside. Armin drove me home and I fell asleep a few hours later. Mainly because of right now, when it’s five in the morning and I’m getting dressed to go to Maria’s Sweets.

Mikasa’s taken to actual grocery shopping, and for once I can smell the sound of cooking in our kitchen, despite the fact our tastebuds are polar opposites. She’s making eggs, something we can both agree tastes good. I’d like to say that it’s because we’re going towards a healthier lifestyle… but the truth of the matter is that takeout is expensive, much more so than eggs. So we’re going to need to adjust a bit more.

I’m going to ask Historia if I can work a second shift during the week. See if she needs help anytime. Maybe that’ll help and I don’t mind, really. I actually enjoy working, who knew?

“You off?” Mikasa turns to ask me as I head for the door. “No breakfast?”

“Yeah,” I reply, opening the door as I say so, “Just put them in the refrigerator, I’ll eat when I get back.” Mikasa accepts this answer by shoveling half of the frying pan’s contents onto her plate, and pulling out a plastic container from the cabinet.

“Be safe. I love you.”

“Love you too.” I close the door behind me. Trotting down the stairs, I pull my gloves on. It’s just been getting colder and colder recently, more than that, it’s snowing again today. If the weather prediction is correct again…

Which, it apparently is. I take a moment and stare up at the small white flakes twirling around in the air as they fall onto the ground. Covering what was once all brown snow with a newer layer of white. I walk down the street, leaving small footprints in the thin layer. It’s early out, so my prints are a part of very few. They’re pretty distinguishable, since the prosthetic looks different from a normal footprint. Half-amused, I wonder what some early morning commuter would think when he stumbles upon such odd looking patterns.

In a few minutes, I see the familiar warm orange glow of Maria’s Sweets. Historia is already inside, it seems. Ymir sits at one of the tables, not really working, more just leaning her head in the palm of her hand as she chats with Historia, who’s drawing on the sign as per usual. The bell rings as I open the door, Historia’s head snaps up and looks over at me, she gives me a soft smile.

“Eren, welcome back.” I nod in response, Ymir seems slightly annoyed that their conversation was interrupted, but nonetheless she holds up her free hand in a lazy wave. Historia turns back to Ymir
soon after so I silently make my way towards the changing rooms in the back. Is nobody else here yet? I push open the door as Connie is tying up the back of his apron.

“Ey, Eren!” He grins at me as I walk up, “Glad t’see you’re back! Thought we might’ve scared you off too!”

“Too?” I open up the locker I’d been given before, shrugging off my jacket. Connie trots up behind me, a devilish smirk on his face,

“Most people can’t handle the intensity working here brings, gotta be the best of the best!” He puffs out his chest with a sense of pride.

“Ah, yes, because the smell of cookies and brownies is just oh-so intimidating.” I snort, Connie just takes the challenge.

“It is! You can get a sugar coma from inhaling too much sweetness, you know! Real serious medical condition.” He’s headed towards the door, backing up with his arms raised like the narrator of some horror movie, “I heard someone died from it once…” He whispers the last sentence as he slips out from around the doorway. I grab the uniform from the locker and roll my eyes, pulling off my shirt.

*He’d definitely hide in the dresser.*

When I step back into the main shop, Annie’s entering through the front door already and Ymir passes by me to head to the kitchen. I give Annie a brief nod as she follows Ymir into the back room. Connie’s wiping down tables.

“Ah, Eren!” Historia waves me over to the counter, “You’ll be working cashier again today, you know how everything works now, right?” She inquires, I nod in response.

*I have to ask about working extra.*

“Ah, Historia,” I catch her sleeve before she turns to leave, “I was wondering if there’s any other time I can come in and help?”

Historia thinks for a moment, “Yeah, so don’t go tryin’ anything on her, okay?” She gives a halfhearted warning, although I can almost feel the real underlying threat beneath it. I’ve seen the way she looks at customers who wander in, and are immediately captivated by the blue eyes of Historia when she pops out from the kitchens. It’s murderous.
But still, even just the thought of me trying to hit on Historia makes me laugh. “Oh, trust me, that’s not happening any time soon.” My response earns a questioning look from Ymir. She studies me for a while, then begins searching the pastries because a customer’s just walked up.

“Not that it’s my business, but you seeing someone?” Ymir asks as she hands me the brown paper bag while I accept the cash from the man’s hand. Am I seeing someone? I mean, I guess I am. Levi and I aren’t officially a couple, we’ve only been on one date, but…

“Yeah,” I hum, closing the register as I put away the money, “I guess I am.” The thought makes me smile in its strangeness. I never thought that it would ever happen, that I’d actually be with someone. Strange.

The next few minutes fall into comfortable silence, occasionally Ymir will comment about one of the people that file through when they leave. It’s always a slightly snarky comment, along the lines of ‘Wow, did’ya see how sweaty he was? I’m gonna have to mop the goddamn floors again.’ Or some other comment about someone who particularly catches her attention. It livens the mood, and keeps the time we spend from getting too mundane.

“You know,” Ymir calls to my attention three hours into my shift, “A little well known trick is to bring something to do when this place is slow as shit.” She gestures to the counter behind her where we assemble coffee and other drinks, there’s a book on the table. “I’m not a fan of reading and all that, but when you’re fucking bored, it can help.”

“Smart, I’ll remember that for next time.” I can bring schoolwork here or something else to occupy my time. The telltale bell rings and my head snaps to attention. “Huh?” I make a noise of confusion as Levi walks up to the counter with an equally surprised look on his face.

“Eren?” He raises an eyebrow, he looks around, “Oh, so this is where you work. I thought the name sounded familiar…”

“Levi, what are you doing here?” I ask.

“Well, why do people usually come to bakeries? I’m here to buy food, what the fuck else?” He sighs.

“Didn’t take you to have a sweet tooth.” I grin, it’s not unpleasant to see him. Quite the opposite actually, but… I wonder why he’s here.

“I don’t. Shit-faced Hanji asked me to pick her up something at Maria’s Sweets,” He sucks in a breath, “Of course now I know why that is…”

That must be why Hanji asked me to tell her the name of where I work. Of course.

“Well, what would you like?” I ask, using my sweet, customer-service voice. A look of confusion passes over his face before he snaps back to attention,

“Right, uh… what’s the least shitty?” He asks. Translation being, what’s the best option?

“Hmm… Well, you could always get the mint brownie, those are in stock now.” I suggest.

“I thought you had a vendetta.” He smirks, so he does remember that after all.

“I’m trying to get rid of them.” I add a wink at the end for good measure.

“Oh? So you’re dumping them on me? How fucking considerate.” Levi rolls his eyes.
“Actually, I’d be dumping them on Hanji, technically, and I figure maybe you’d help me with that…” I tempt. Levi ponders this,

“Okay, you’ve got me sold. Glasses will take one of the mint shits.” I nod to Ymir, who watches with an ever so slight upturn of the lips, is she amused by this?

“Oh,” I turn my head back to Levi, “It looked like you’d meant to ask me something yesterday, sorry I left. But what was it?” If there’s ever a time.

“That,” Levi scratches the back of his neck, “… well,” He pauses, frowning at something off in the distance, “I’ll ask you that later. We’re still on for today, right?”

Today? Right! It’s Sunday.

“Six O’Clock, The Rose Café.” I take the bag from Ymir and hand it to Levi with a smile, “Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

Levi smirks, “Better not be fucking late.”

“Hey, I was on time!” I protest.

“Once.” Levi takes out his wallet and hands me a five dollar bill, I reach for the change but he stops me, “Just put it in the tip jar. You’ve got one of those, right?” I nod, and he glances towards the door. “Good, well, I’d best be going before Hanji throws a fucking fit. I’ll see you later.”

“Bye!” I call to his back as he exits the bakery. I sit back on my stool with a grin over my face. Ymir watches me with a knowing smirk. My grin falls as I catch her, “What?” I frown.

“He the one you’re with?” She inquires. My frown falters, I feel my face heat up and I glance to the side.

“Uh, yeah.” I say, nodding, “Yeah, he is.”

Chapter End Notes

I am sick. Probably the flu.

Which means I haven’t worked on the next chapter. But it’s all plotted out, so it’ll go quickly. Either way, it looks like I know what I’m doing this weekend.

But, I mean, hey, a weekend of writing fluff isn't a bad weekend. Sounds pretty good to me.

Also it gave me an idea, so yay or nay: Do I write ye ole cliche fluff chapter in which either Eren or Levi gets sick and the other must take of the sick one?

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated.
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

Okay, so it's kind of impossible for me to do just fluff because I also have to keep up with plot. But I think I've figured out a way to actually include plot in the fluff and it's given me more ideas for fluff which I may or may not include just for the sake of the sheer amount of fluff chapters to not be too much. Either way, we'll see.

Hope you enjoy!

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I stare at the window, the snow’s piled up against the side of the bakery, blocking our view from the window. It’s a near-complete white-out. Those who do dare the wintery wrath have their hoods pulled low of their heads, their knees lifting high to trudge through the unplowed drifts. Fucking perfect.

I sigh and stare at the clock, technically, I’ve only got five minutes left and I’m allowed to go and get changed to head home. But I don’t exactly fancy an afternoon of flopping through the snow to get home. Ymir plays on her phone, soon as the snow picked up the customer's died down. Mainly because there’s just nobody outside. Those who are outside, though, they come in. Because if you're in hell already, at least Maria’s Sweets is a small taste of heaven. But then you’ve got to go back to hell. Fun times.

Besides, Reiner is supposed to take over my shift, but I haven’t seen him yet. Sasha arrived about an hour ago to relieve Annie. she was covered in snow head to toe and immediately began showing Connie photos of, as she claimed, the world’s biggest snowman that she made with her own two hands. Annie just walked outside like the snow was nothing. Hands in pockets, head held high as she walked straight through the storm.

I’ll admit, as someone who loses all mobility in the snow, I’m impressed.

The door jingles and Reiner stumbles in, the hood of his winter jacket frosted at the tips and, when he pulls it down, there’s still snow dotting his hair, quickly melting in the warm bakery heat.

“Heh sh*t!” I can’t help but exclaim, “You look like a yet, Reiner.” That earns a hefty laugh from Ymir.

“Feel like one, too.” Reiner comments, he scoots his way behind the counter, heading towards the back room, “Your turn next.” He calls as he slips into the kitchen to get changed. I frown at the wild white flakes whipping around outside.

“I’m so excited…” I grumble sarcastically, slipping from my stool and following Reiner into the
I’m zipping up my winter coat when I get the email from Hanji. Apparently the group is canceled today on account of the fact that they can’t get there because the road is iced over. Well, I still have to trudge home through winter’s pissy mood but at least I won’t have to move after that.

Oh shit, except for meeting Levi today. Will the storm calm down by then? I stand by the doorway of Maria’s Sweets, my own reflection staring back at me in doubt.

I hope we won’t have to cancel, he had something to tell me before. But if the snow doesn’t calm down by then…

“Try not to freeze your dick off out there, okay?” Ymir calls from behind the counter.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.” I call back.

“Just saying, I mean, be considerate. Think of your boyfriend, he might not exactly like it if you did.” Ymir comments casually, she adds on a shrug.

*What goes in on your mind?* I reach for the handle. My hand is stopped when Historia exits the kitchen.

“Ah, Eren!” She walks up to me, “Good, I caught you before you left,” She’s scrolling through her phone, “You’d asked about taking on a second shift, and we’re pretty understaffed Tuesdays, could you some in starting at seven and stay till closing time?” She asks.

Right, I’d asked her to check on that, “Sure,” I agree, “I’ll see you Tuesday, then?”

“Yep,” She gives me a happy smile, “See you Tuesday!” Historia waves happily to me as I open the door and enter the white wind. I can’t help but feel like she’s sending me off with such a cheery smile into the depths of hell. But I’d always thought that hell was supposed to be fiery and hot. Not freezing cold and stinging you in the face with icy winds.

Not sure which I’d prefer.

Nonetheless, it takes me three times as long as it should have to walk home. My prosthetic doesn’t like snow, and when the snow is above your ankle, it’s really not happy. By the time I make it to the building, I’m practically out of breath. I take the elevator out of sheer exhaustion.

I hope Mikasa is going to be able to get home in the snow. Hopefully by the time she’s heading home the roads will be plowed.

I unlock my apartment door and shrug off my jacket, collapsing on the couch. It’s twelve fifteen, I’m meeting Levi is six hours. Albeit that is a lot of time, and maybe they’ll have at least partially cleared the streets by then, but maybe I should just cancel now…

Damn, I kind of want to know what he wants to tell me.

But I shouldn’t be so self-centered, if the roads aren’t free of snow by then, I don’t want to have him trudge through the wintry hell to get there… And maybe I’m not too fond of the idea myself.

I pull out my phone and scroll through my contacts until I get to Levi’s name and number. I haven’t turned on the apartment’s lights yet, so the glow of the phone is bright on my eyes and I have to
squint until I adjust.

Should we cancel for today? On account of the snow? -Eren I text him, swinging my prosthetic over the couch’s arm and letting my leg bounce semi-impatiently against the carpeted floor.

My phone buzzes as the reply comes in.

Do you want to? It might not be easiest to move around in this kind of weather. Are you still at work? -Levi

His text sounds worried, and maybe it’s a little bit selfish of me but I can’t help but smile at the thought that maybe he’s just the slightest bit worried about me.

Nah, my shift ended a while ago. It was just a trudge back. -Eren I mean… I don’t really want to cancel, but it’s pretty shitty outside, so I don’t want you to have to try to maneuver around the snow. -Eren

You got home alright, though? -Levi

You know what, let’s just cancel for today. It looks like some goddamned yeti decided to take a piss on the sky outside. -Levi

Ah, well, that’s too bad… It would have been nice to see Levi today. But I guess that’s that.

Do yeti’s even piss snow? -Eren

I don’t fucking know, ask shitty-glasses, that sounds like something they’d study. -Levi

I laugh to myself. Even if I can’t see him, it’s nice to be able to talk to him. Of course in-person would be preferable, but this way he’s not really all that far away. My phone buzzes again.

Do you like ice skating? -Levi

Ice skating? I used to, but I haven’t been since I was a kid because… well…

I mean, yeah, I used to. -Eren

Used to? -Levi

I scratch the back of my neck, hesitating a moment before I type a reply.

Um… The prosthetic kind of prevents me from doing things like that. -Eren

Prosthetics + skates doesn’t exactly = good things. -Eren

The reply doesn’t come for a minute or two, so I sigh and sit up on the couch. Albeit, I got somewhat lucky missing a leg and not an arm or something that you would use more… But there are still things I can’t do anymore. Things that I used to love to do, or maybe I wasn’t particularly fond of them but I still liked to do them. Now I can’t. Nothing too vital, luckily, but the disability stings. It stings a lot.

I glance at the phone, resting comfortably in the couch cushions, still no reply. Maybe I made the conversation awkward. Shit.

I stand and stretch, my back pops from stiffness that comes from the cold. Even the apartment is somewhat freezing. It’s not exactly t-shirt weather outside but, well, I’d hoped that maybe it wouldn’t be time to wear a long-sleeved shirt and a secondary layer inside. But I guess it’s gotten to that point too.
Still, I don’t dare touch the heating dial. The thought of making our rent anymore than it already is sends a shudder down my spine. At least Historia gave me a second shift. That should help some.

I open up the fridge, there’s still some plastic-wrapped scrambled eggs kept from this morning’s breakfast. I heat those up on a plate. Maybe having scrambled eggs at one o’clock is a little strange. But I’ve done stranger things.

My phone buzzes again as I retrieve the plate from the microwave.

*Tomorrow, don’t go into the café, just meet me outside, okay? -Levi.*
*I’ve got something planned. -Levi.*

That’s odd. Wonder what it is.

*Sure, will do. I’ll see you tomorrow. -Eren*

*Don’t be fucking late. -Levi.*

I can feel a soft smile on my face.

*Are you ever going to let that go? -Eren*

*Not on your life, brat. -Levi*

I tuck my phone away, I flick on the lights and sit back in my chair by the table. It’s hell outside, but it’s not so bad inside.

- - -

I’m woken up by Armin tapping my shoulder in class. Everyone else is packing up… shit, I slept through it all didn’t I?

“Wow, you seem exhausted.” He comments as I lean back, feeling my muscles stretch and pop in stiffness from sleeping at an awkward angle on the lecture desk.

“It’s fucking cold in the apartment right now.” I twist my neck, it aches from leaning forward, “Didn’t sleep much last night.” I stand up and begin to shove my notebook into my backpack.

“You guys really have to be careful with the heating, huh?” Armin murmurs, half to himself. “You know, I have an old space heater or two. They won’t do much but maybe you and Mikasa could put them in your rooms? Might help.” He offers as we walk out of the classroom.

“Really? That’d be great, Armin.” I grin, I don’t know if I’d enjoy standing another night of trying desperate to wrap myself in blankets so as to ward off the cold. “Thanks so much.”

“No problem,” He shrugs, “I’ll drop them off later tonight.” He looks down, checking his watch, “I’ve gotta go, you meeting Levi today?” He adds the last part with a sly grin.

“Uh, yeah,” I nod, “He’s got something planned… but to hell if I know what it is.” I inform him.

“Well, have fun with… whatever it is.” He waves goodbye and I watch as Armin turns and walks down his own path The roads are cleared now, and it’s finally stopped snowing. So I have time to head home and drop off my backpack before walking to The Rose Café.

I really don’t know what Levi wants to do today. The comment about ice skating was… odd, to say the least. But I can’t exactly go ice skating, like I informed him. So that’s off the table. I mean,
whatever it is… I won’t mind. That much I’m sure of.

The snow is all piled up, high and glittering softly in the sunlight, away from the roads and streets. It adds a certain brightness, with the sun uncovered by clouds, and I can’t look directly at it because of how it reflects the light. It’s rather beautiful, which feels odd to admit.

I’m just glad it’s out of the way. No more trudging around, struggling just to move from place to place. It makes walking to and from my apartment a lot easier. I’m there and back out on the street in half of the time it took me just to get back from Maria’s Sweets yesterday. Much better.

Surprisingly enough, Levi’s not here as I walk up. I check the time, it’s six o’ one.

**He’s late.**

Sure, not by much, but that doesn’t mean I won’t give him hell for it. I grin to myself at the thought, since he always teases me about being late, this is a perfect opportunity for retribution.

I lean against the side of The Rose Café, waiting for Levi as I watch the snow piled up on the side of the brick café. One of the owners took it upon themselves to build a small snowman by the entrance of the café. It’s cute. They put a little hat on it and everything, a twig for a nose. The arm is made out of another stick, and hooked on the side of it is a coffee mug from the café itself. I crouch down by the snowman, it doesn’t have a mouth. I trace my finger along the snow, drawing a small smile on its face. It probably won’t last… but why not? The little guy looks like he needs a smile.

I stand up, shoving my hands back in my pockets, admiring my small addition to the miniature structure.

“Eren!” I turn when I hear my name called. Levi’s walking down the street, towards me.

“Well, well, look who decided to arrive.” I tease, he tilts his head at me.

“You’re kidding me, I’m barely late.”

“Says the one who always gives me grief about being late!” I smugly raise my head, smirking. Levi rolls his eyes,

“Don’t be a fucking brat,” He scoffs, checking the time, “Shit, we’ve gotta get going.” He grabs onto my arm, “I had trouble finding a parking spot, I’m about two blocks down, come on.”

“Where are we going?” I hurry to catch up to him, side by side, but he doesn’t let go of my wrist.

“A surprise.” He replies bluntly.

“But that’s no fun!” I protest, “Come on, you owe it to me. You were late arriving after all.” I point out.

“Two minutes, two fucking minutes, Eren. Do you have the patience of a goldfish?” He glances at me out of the corner of his eyes.

“Maybe.” I shrug, “I’ve been told I’m impatient before.”

Levi pauses, “True,” He relents, “But, you’ve been late almost every other time, so this is just evening out the score, Jaeger, and I’m still ahead.”

“Must you always be so competitive?” I muse, maneuvering my hand so that I’m holding onto his
hand, and he’s not just grabbing my wrist.

“Not competitive, just punctual.” Levi smirks at me, giving my palm a squeeze as we walk. He keeps up a brisk pace, but I’m used to his fast walking style by now.


“Oh please,” I can see his smirk grow, “You’ll know when it’s a low-blow, Eren. I can do much better than that.” I break out laughing,

“Okay, then, I can’t wait to find out.” I reply once my laughter dies down. “And, huh, who’d have thought you’d turn out to be a flirt?” I say it half to myself, “Between the cuddling and this flirting, Levi, I might start to mistake you for a romantic instead of a grump.”

“I’ll have to redeem myself then,” He lets go of my hand when his car comes into sight. I recognize it from the day that Levi found me wandering about in the rain… The memory should send a cold shiver down my spine, and I do feel my gut twist a little at the thought of it… but still, remembering how he helped me, even in my most fucked up state, I can’t help but notice the warmth in my chest.

“What? Not gonna be a gentlemen and open the door for me?” I ask as Levi walks around to the driver's seat of the car.

“Open your own damn door, brat.” Levi slides into the car.

Redemption, indeed. I grin, getting into the car next to him. Levi starts up the car, immediately the hot air comes on, and the familiar tingling in my cheeks soothes the chill that’s become a close friend of mine. Levi pulls into the road, and I watch the scenery of a familiar place zoom by in a blur of color and vibrant life.

“So…” I turn my head back to Levi, staring ahead at the road, “Not even a hint?”

“You already got a hint.” I don’t reply, Levi takes the care to elaborate, “Our texts last night.” Our texts last night? We talked about ice skating, but…

“I already told you, I can’t go skating.” My eyebrows crinkle on my forehead, “Prosthetic? Remember? Kind of hard to forget.”

“I didn’t forget,” Levi rolls his eyes, “I just figured you were giving up too damn easily.”

“I’m not giving up, it’s just a fact that I can’t wear skates.” I protest, my face turning into a frown. What’s he trying to do? He should know that this won’t work.

“There’s ways around that, apparently.” Levi hums, “Well, if he’s right anyway… Either way, I’d trust Erwin’s recommendation more than Hanji’s, but they recommended the same person… so let’s just hope that they’re actually reputable.” He informs, as if that’s going to cue me into anything.

“Well… you’ve got my curiosity… if nothing else.” I relent, sitting back in the seat and staring ahead.

Ten minutes later, Levi pulls up in front of a seemingly harmless white house. It’s a bit further away from the city, somewhat secluded, enough so that it’s in an actual suburban neighborhood instead of just a city street like my apartment building. Levi gets out of the car, I follow him silently as he walks up to the door and knocks on it.
“I’ve got to say, out of all the places that I’ve been taken to with others… this is one of the oddest.” I comment, Levi returns with a knowing smirk.

“Just you wait.” He replies ominously.

A tall man with light brown hair and brown eyes opens the door. “Oh, hey, Levi right? Hanji told me about you.” He sighs, “Er… more like exploded to me about you and your… um… special someone, as they put it.” He glances behind Levi at me, “Yeah.” He says, shrugging. “But I guess I should introduce myself, my name’s Moblit Berner.”

Levi nods, he turns to me, “Moblit used to work with Hanji, apparently.”

“As a researcher and medical assistant,” He finishes, “But now I just specialize in prosthetics.” He smiles, “Which is why you’re here right?”

“It is?” I ask, turning to Levi.

“I asked Erwin, Moblit’s helped him out with things before, and if he’s right…” He nods to Moblit.

“Oh, uh,” Moblit hops to attention again, “Well, I should be able to make a prosthetic for skating. I’ve done it before, lots of people who are missing legs want to try it out… so…”

“You’re shitting me.” I say, my eyes growing wide, I turn to Levi, “He’s not… serious, is he?”

“You think I’m the kind of asshole to play a trick like that?” Levi inquires, “He’s being serious.” I can see a smile forming on his face.

He can… but… holy sh*t, is that even possible? No, no it can’t be. It’s just… there are things I can’t do and…

“You’ve done it before?” I ask.

“Yeah, plenty of times. I just need to make sure it’ll fit correctly.” Moblit informs me. He gives a reassuring smile, “Besides, I owe Hanji big time, so this is kind of me repaying a favor to them, so you can bet I’ll do my best.”

There are things I can’t do and…

And…

And…

And I guess sometimes there are things I can do.

I can’t stop it before it comes, my eyes are already watery, and it’s just a few seconds before I start crying.

“Oh my god, you okay?” Moblit asks worryingly, “Sorry, did I offend you?”

Levi steps in front of me, “You okay?” He asks, a look of worry crossing over his face. I stare at him for a moment, tears rolling down my face, before I lunge forward and wrap him up in a hug.

I want to thank him, I want to thank him over and over, until I can’t say it again. But I’m already so choked up that I can’t say anything. I try, once, but it comes out as a rather pitiful noise. Levi wraps his arms around me, squeezing me close to him.
“You’re welcome,” He responds to that which I want to say, rubbing small circles on my back. I feel his head turn to look back at Moblit, “We’ll be there in a second.”

“Okay, I’ll just go get ready.” Moblit disappears into the house by the sound of it. I can’t see, my head is buried into Levi’s shoulder. He rests his head against mine.

“Worth the lateness?” He asks, I laugh, water still leaking from my eyes, into his shoulder. My body bouncing up and down softly. I’m not quite ready to speak yet, so I opt for nodding instead. “Good,” Levi kisses the side of my head, “I’m glad.” Me too.

Chapter End Notes

You know when I was figuring out what to do for fluff chapters, Ice skating came to mind, but my immediate reaction was 'No, that can't work, it's cute but it can't work.'

BUT THEN I DID RESEARCH.

I actually found some really sweet stories of people who had lost legs, but enjoyed ice skating in the past, and how their families or loved ones got them special prosthetic attachments for that, and other really inspiring stories of people who pursued them on their own for the sake of continuing their passions.

This is part of why I love writing this fic, I like to research different medical things to make it as accurate as I can, and these kinds of stories always come up. They make me really happy. Little joys.

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated.
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

I still can't believe I'm already on Chapter 37. Like, 37 weeks? Holy shit, man. Thanks for sticking with me through this crazy adventure, everyone, I'm so happy to have you along for the ride and hope you'll stick around for the rest of it!

In the meantime, this chapter was just so much fun to write. I think it's probably the happiest chapter in this fic yet. Idk tho, you'll see. (Haha, the flirting sounds awkward to me though because I have never even flirted with someone so like, whoops, haha.)

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

Moblit told me that it would take a few days for everything to be ready, that it should- if everything goes according to plan- be at my doorstep by Saturday. The result was a bout of extreme excitement that both carried me through the week and made it unbearably slow. Everything seemed so small in comparison to what was coming up.

I had my first Tuesday shift at Maria’s Sweets, it was slow, but relaxing. Not a lot of people come to the bakery during it’s last few hours. Those that do usually just sit and enjoy a late night sweet before going on their way, so there was no trouble there.

Erwin seemed amused by my newfound energy. And for once, he didn’t really have any advice for me. It made me feel… accomplished, in a way. Like what I’m doing really is working. I’m actually getting better this time and it’s not just some delusional timebomb waiting to blow when I think I’m happiest.

Everything went by so slowly, though. I’ve been complaining to Mikasa almost every day this week about how slow it all seems. She acted sympathetic, but I could see the smile hiding behind her red scarf the entire time. Armin did a worse job of hiding it, blatantly bemused by what I perceived to be some kind of happy torture. He said that after I go with Levi, the rest of us should go together. Which adds yet another thing to be excited about, since I haven’t been with him and Mikasa since we were little kids.

Levi and I agreed to move our Friday meeting to Saturday, so that soon as the skate came in we could try it out. I came close to leaving my apartment for The Rose Café nonetheless. Funny, how hard it is to break habits even just once.

And then there’s today, I’m on my way to the group meeting; the skates haven’t come in yet but none of the mail’s arrived either.

“This is probably the most energetic I’ve seen you in a while.” Armin comments as we pull into the parking lot in front of the familiar curved white building.
“Well, I finally have something to be energetic about.” I say, grinning, “I mean, even if I was, not like I could do anything beforehand. I can’t even jog in the winter, it’s too damn cold.”

“True, don’t want you slipping on ice and cracking your head open.” Armin replies.

“I did not crack my head open.”

“You needed stitches, Eren.”

“Still.” I shrug, opening my car door to the now-familiar feeling of ice boring into my skin. Armin and I are the last ones to arrive to the group, everyone else is just getting seated, and we quickly take our places as Hanji struts to their place at the head of the circle.

“Hey,” I turn my head as Levi slides into the seat next to me, “Has it come in yet? Moblit told Hanji that he sent them in.” He whispers, watching as Hanji digs through their leather case for something before the meeting starts.

“Not yet!” I reply excitedly, “But it will probably be there by the time I get home, so I can meet you at the usual spot if you want!” He sent them in, this is really happening. They’re going to be there and this is real.

Levi nods, Hanji lets out an exclamatory noise to call everyone’s attention back to them as they hold a set of cards in their hands.

“Hello again everyone!” They start off with a usual sweep of the circle of familiar faces. “You all look great today! How are you? Doing well? Great!” Sometimes I feel as if they’re more of an MC than a therapist. Hanji clears their throat and continues, “Well, I hope you’re all excited because it’s time for a special exercise today!” Or maybe a celebrity workout coach that you’d find on the television. Hanji passses around cards, one per each person, face-down. They give instructions not to look at that card. They then pass out a second round of cards, these ones are face-up. I stare at the card in my hand.

‘I’

A single letter dotting the page, ‘I’. Well, is it the letter or the word?

“This is a teamwork activity,” Hanji begins, taking their seat again. “These cards create a sentence, but the ones on the bottom create a different sentence, and the trick to the puzzle is this,” Hanji leans forward, as if revealing a deep, dark secret that could hold the balance of the world. “The word on the bottom card is in the same place of the sentence as the card you see, so in order to form the second sentence you first have to figure out where to put your first word. However, you cannot show or state directly what the letter on your first card states. There’s six of you in all, so try to help each other out. They’re fairly common sayings, so it shouldn’t be too hard.” Hanji grins, “Ready? Go!”

Nobody moves at first, we all look around as if confused about how to begin. Petra eventually stands up, she glances at the card she’s allowed to see then walks to the center of the circle.

“Um…” She begins, she scratches her head, staring with a puzzled look at her card. Then she puts her cards on the floor, reaches up to her chest and motions for a heartbeat, “This, this is my word.” She says quietly. We all stare at her,

“What?” Jean wonders aloud, Petra frowns.

“Er…” She stops, then folds her hands together in a shape, index fingers folded against each other
in two curves, thumbs pressed together. “This?” She wonders aloud, glancing between us.

“Ah!” Armin stands up, “Heart! It’s heart, isn’t it?” He asks. Petra nods, grinning.

“Oh… Oh! I get it now!” Marco brightens considerably, “It’s like charades!” He stands as well, looking his card over again. “Well, then…” He frowns for a moment, then he smiles as he places a hand against his chest.

“Me?” I wonder aloud, Marco shakes his head. Jean stares at him intently. Marco looks around, he turns to his chair and then gestures from the chair to himself. Well, that just made it more confusing… Jean’s scrutiny intensifies.

“My! It’s my!” He exclaims, Marco nods happily.

“Yes!” He replies, Jean leans back smugly.

Okay… well,” Armin looks around, then does a sweeping gesture across the room, “Mine is like this.”

Hm…? Petra ponders, “Do it again.” She urges, Armin nods and repeats the gesture. Petra’s frown deepens. Levi watches him speculatively.

Everything…? He muses, then shakes his head, “No, no it’s not that…” He leans forward in his chair, his eyes following all that Armin gestured to. “Oh.” He sighs, “It’s ‘all’, right?”

Ah! You got it!” Armin exclaims, happily nodding his head.

Nice!” Hanji pipes up from their place, “You’re halfway there with the words, everyone!”

Okay, well, mine is pretty easy,” I say, getting up from my seat, then point to my eye, “It’s this.”

Eye?” Marco inquires,

Kind of…” I assume he’s not quite there yet.

Oh, I! As in, ‘I’ like ‘me’, right?” Armin clarifies for him. I give a nod of approval. He grins happily at having solved the puzzle.

Jean, Levi, just you two left.” Petra looks in between the two.

Ugh, but… mine’s impossible.” Jean grumbles, sinking deeper into his seat.

Try.” Marco encourages him, Jean gives him an ‘are you serious’ look before standing up reluctantly.

Okay, fine,” He walks towards the middle of the circle with Petra, “Er…” He looks around for something to help him act out his word. “It’s like this,” He gestures in between Petra and himself. “We’re uh… oh, shit, that would be giving away the word.” Petra gives him a blank stare. Jean scratches the back of his neck.

Next to? No that’s two words…” Marco guesses and then dismisses his own guess.

Do something else.” Levi sighs irritably.

Hey! I’m trying!” Jean defends, he looks around, then walks over to Marco, “Marco, c’mere for a sec.” Marco gives him a puzzled look, then stands and walks next to Jean, Armin’s eyes
immediately brighten with an idea.

“With! It’s with!” He exclaims proudly.

“I haven’t even made the gesture yet.” Jean’s eyes widen in surprise, “But, yeah, how’d ya know?”

Armin grins mischievously, “No reason.”

“Okay, well, now all we need is yours, Levi.” I turn to him. He stands as well, now everyone is on their feet.

“Yeah, well, mine’s sappy as shit.” He looks around, “It’s kind of like yours,” He shrugs to Petra.

“Like mine?” She inquires, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah… what was it again?” Levi wonders for a second, “Oh, right, this thing.” He lifts his hand, making the small heart symbol.

“Heart? Again?” Armin inquires.

“No, not heart.” Levi shakes his head.

What else does that stand for? I press my lips together in concentration. I remember Ymir once showed that to Historia when she got scolded for ‘accidentally’ spilling coffee on a customer after they’d flirted with Historia on Tuesday.

What did she say…? Oh, right,

“Love?” I inquire.

“Ah, of course!” Marco nods his approval, Levi drops his hands.

“Yep.” Is… that a smirk I see? “Nice job, brat. You’re less clueless than normal today.”

“Wow, I’m so flattered.” I roll my eyes.

“Okay, well then we’ve got love, with, I, all, my, and heart.” Armin’s face scrunches up with concentration, “And it’s a common phrase. So that means…”

Silence fills the room as everyone contemplates the answer, I can see Hanji grinning like a madman in my peripheral vision.

“Oh!” Petra breaks the silence, her eyes widening as she practically jumps up with excitement at having found the answer, “I love with all my heart! I love with all my heart! That’s the answer!” In the background Hanji breaks into joyous laughter.

“Nice job!” They yell to us.

“Ah…” Marco’s face relaxes as he puts it together as well.

“Sappy as shit.” Levi shakes his head. “Of course,”

“Well, let’s put the cards down!” Armin places his down, and everyone begins to fill in theirs around his. I place mine at the front.

“Well, did it work? Check with the other sentence?” Hanji urges. We all take out our secondary
cards. I flip mine over, reading the word on it and committing it to memory.

‘Life’

I place it down under the ‘I’, and step back as everyone else finishes placing theirs down as well. Sure enough, the second phrase is complete as well. The two rest comfortably, one above the other.

‘I love with all my heart.’
‘Life is a box of chocolates.’

“Heh, wow, cheesy much?” Jean sneers from down the line as we all stand admiring our handiwork. But even he has a smile on his face, and he stands with pride at having solved the puzzle. In fact, everyone looks considerably happier after having worked together to successfully put it all together. Even Levi does. I look past the line to Hanji, and behind their glasses they catch my eye and give me a knowing smirk, as if to say ‘See, I know what I’m doing’. Which, in an odd and strange way, I suppose they do. I suppose they always have.

Fitting, considering it’s Hanji I’m talking about.

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As the session comes to an end, we all fold up our chairs and go to put them against the backwall. Everyone’s… talking to each other. The process that is usually a silent time filled only by the clank of the metal chairs landing against one another is filled with casual chatter. It’s not even the usual groups, either. Petra is chatting with Armin, Marco is casually standing around with Hanji while Jean looks off to the side.

The whole atmosphere seems friendlier, more of a singular group than a bunch of individuals forced in a room together. It’s nice, it’s comfortable.

I place my chair against the others and turn to scan the room for Armin.

“Eren,” I turn around, pausing my search to face Levi.

“Hey!” I beam as he walks up to me, “You ready for today?” I inquire. I still haven’t forgotten about ice skating today, how could I? It’s been what’s propelling me through the week.

“Yeah,” He nods, and I can see the smile on his face. He’s excited too, isn’t he? “I was wondering, why don’t I just take you home instead? That way we can spare the shitty extra trip and just head out right after you pick it up.” He asks, glancing to the side wall because something has apparently captured his interest.

“Oh! Good idea, I’ll go tell Armin.” I turn around and half-run to where Armin stands, talking with Marco. I slow down as I approach them, Armin turns to me and checks his watch.

“Oh, hey, Eren, I’ll be ready to go in one sec.”

“That’s okay,” I stop him, “Levi offered to take me home since we’re heading out again afterwards either way.”

“Levi?” Marco’s voice is full of surprise, his eyes glancing back towards where Levi stands. Armin gauges his reaction and laughs,

“I’ll explain later,” He reassures Marco, then turns back to me, “Okay, cool. Have fun, Eren!” He gives me a wave goodbye as I return back to Levi.
It seems that Petra’s maneuvered her way back over to Levi, she seems to be having fun in their conversation, by the looks of her mischievous smile. But judging Levi’s scowl… well, he’s always scowling. I know he enjoys her presence.

“Holy shit, Petra. Would you stop?” Levi groans as Petra lets out a light laugh. His eyes flicker to me as I approach, “Ah, Eren, good. Come on, let’s get out of here before I have to suffer more of this goddamn harassment.” He brushes past Petra taking ahold of my wrist as we walk towards the door.

“Have fun you two!” Petra chimes from where she stands.

“What was that about?” I raise an eyebrow as we approach the door. Levi sighs, his pace slowing a bit.

“Petra was acting like Hanji. And fuck knows that I’ve got my hands full with just one of them.” He informs me, frown deepening on his face.

“Sounds like you were having the time of your life.” I laugh, Levi gives me a look of disbelief.

“Okay, okay, I get it.” I roll my eyes, “It was absolutely **horrible**.”

His eyes narrow at me, “Is that sarcasm I detect?”

“Hmm… maybe.” I draw out the word, “But never mind that, come on! Let’s hurry up, I want to get home quickly so we can see if it really fits.”

“Well now, somebody’s excited today.” Levi says so in a teasing tone, but I can tell it’s a genuine look of happiness on his face. Mine, too, of course.

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I practically run up the stairs at my apartment, Levi lagging behind me. When I get to the top of our floor’s flight I peek over the edge of the railing and call for him to hurry up. I half-jog down the hall and wait, rocking back and forth, for Levi to reach my door. I’m out of breath but it’s damn worth it.

“You’re so slow.” I snort as he approaches, turning to unlock the door.

“It’s not a goddamn race, so maybe you should just slow the fuck down.” He replies, I shrug, digging through my pockets until I hear the familiar jingle of the apartment’s keys.

Mikasa was home today, so the package must be inside. She’s always the one who checks the mail religiously. Sure enough, when the door swings open, a package rests on the kitchen table, unopened, the wrapping still concealing what lay inside. It’s long and rectangular, perfect for a leg.

“It’s here!” I gasp, darting forward until I reach the brown paper-wrapped box. Undoing the string that ties it all together, I hesitate, my hands hovering above the packaging. I feel like a kid on Christmas morning again, but I’m scared the feeling will shatter.

“It’s cold as fuck in here.” Levi comments, coming up by my side, he places his hands on his hips and waits for me to unwrap the package. I can see a growing suspicion in his eyes when I don’t tear into the wrapping like a savage dog. “What’s wrong, got cold feet?”

“No, it’s just…” I hesitate, “Well, yeah, yeah I do, actually.” I place my hands down on the chair in front of me, leaning back, “Just, what if it’s not actually the leg? Or it doesn’t fit? I mean, I know he took measurements and everything but…”
“You’ll never know if you don’t open the package.” Levi shrugs, “Besides, there’s a pretty high chance that neither of those things will happen.” He waits, but I just stare at the package, hesitation gluing my fingers to the chair. “Do you want help?” He asks softly. But that seems even louder than his normal voice in the otherwise silent room.

“No,” I shake my head, “No I can do it.” I unstick my hands from the chair, reaching slowly towards the shipment. I peel away the paper first, and then the box, layer by layer. Inside it’s filled with styrofoam, and on top of the styrofoam rests a slightly crinkled letter on manilla paper. I unfold the paper first, instructions from Moblit on how to put it on and take it off.

It’s the leg, it’s really my prosthetic leg.

I reach into the box, my hands wrapping around something smooth and cold. I lift it up out of the box, the first thing that surprises me is it’s lightness. It’s practically weightless compared to the heavy metal walking leg I usually use. A flash of doubt strikes through my mind, how can something this light hold me up? I hold it up in the dim lighting of the apartment, it looks so sleek.

It’s white, and the foot itself looks a lot less human than my current prosthetic. While my old one, the one I’m currently using, has a skin-colored foot imitation at the end, this one has a white curved feature connecting to a skate, hardly resembling something human, but I don’t mind it. Because it’s really here, it’s in my hands and I still can’t believe that.

I can see Levi’s eyes in my peripheral vision, carefully studying my face for any sign of reaction.

“We… we should try it on… to make sure it actually fits.” I turn to face him, the leg clutched close to my chest, he nods.

“Okay, um… how do you…?” He looks around with a look of confusion, I can see the embarrassment hiding behind his expression, “Sorry, I’m shit at things like this. How do you put your leg on?”

“It’s okay,” I laugh, “I do it myself, I don’t need help.” I walk over to the couch, and sit down as I extend my current prosthetic out in front of me. The socket is black, and it encases the area just below my knee, holding what’s left of my leg in the sock underneath. It connects to a metallic rod, the pylon, which finally ends in a pseudo-foot. The skin color that’s painted on is actually a different shade than my own, not so much that you can really tell but I’ve stared at it so much, sometimes it feels like I’m looking at the foot of someone- something, else. I unclick the pin that keeps it all together and remove the prosthetic leg, placing it to the side of the couch. I hear creaking as Levi leans over the back of the couch behind me. According to the letter, I put on this prosthetic much the same way I would my other.

Sure enough, it clicks, it fits. I stand, and wobble because I’m not used to the different pressure that comes from the skate. But it… it feels like I’m wearing skates. The feeling itself is a nostalgic wisp of my childhood. And I can feel the grin spread across my face before I know that I’m smiling. I turn, slowly, to face Levi, and I can see a smile plastered on his face as well.

“It works…” I whisper out the words, if even that. It’s so quiet, but I’m afraid to speak up for fear that noise itself could shatter this, “It fits, it really fits.”

Levi’s around the couch in a second, his arms are around me and he pulls me close to kiss the side of my face.

“See? What did I tell you?” He smiles up at me.
“You didn’t tell me anything,” I laugh, “You just said we wouldn’t know until we saw!” I accuse him, but Levi just shrugs playfully.

“You know what I meant. Now come on,” I watch as his smile grows into a slyer smirk, “Let’s go ice skating.”

---

I put on my normal prosthetic so that I can walk correctly until we get to the rink. I carry the skate in a duffle bag from my room. The rink is a little ways out of town, and I get more and more energetic the closer we get to the rink. When we pull into the parking lot, I see the place is littered with cars here and there. The building is large and oval, with a sloping roof and red walls. Glass automated doors welcome up with a burst of air that’s even colder than it is outside. The place has soft music playing from loudspeakers above, but that’s mostly drowned out by the people chatting happily. To the side is a restaurant advertising their specials; hot cocoa and hot dogs. A booth to the left rents out skates and in the center of it all is a large rink filled with people moving in circles or doing tricks out to the middle. Levi goes up to the man behind the counter to order three skates, he gives us a weird look when he hears that we want one pair and one singular skate of a different size. And I see him do a double take when he spots my leg, but honestly, what could I expect? Nothing else.

We sit on the bleachers that surround the rink, and as Levi laces up his skates I switch prosthetics again and put on my own skate. I extend my legs and stare at the difference between the slightly-ratty red rental and the sleek white prosthetic. It’s so strange, so surreal, to see them next to each other and think that both of these are connected to me. I wouldn’t believe it myself if I hadn’t been living in that weird limbo for the past year.

“Ah, fuck these things.” Levi mutters as he stands, wobbling as he gets used to balancing. I let out a laugh before hopping off of the bleachers myself, only to be proven wrong as I half-crash into Levi. I’m only saved from getting a faceful of rug when Levi catches my hand. He has a knowing smirk on his face, “Now who’s laughing at who?” He teases. I just roll my eyes in response, “Yes, karma’s a bitch, I get it.” I reply, straightening myself up.

“She’s also a useful ally.” Levi shrugs, “Shitty that she’s usually working against me.”

“Eh, she hates us all,” I respond nonchalantly, “Now come on! Let’s hurry up.” I tug on his hand, Levi sways a little with the motion, but steadies himself quickly and follows me to the small plexiglass door that leads to the ice rink. I stop in front of the white ice, staring out at the people moving around in such fluid, graceful motions. There’s no way in hell that’s going to be me.

“Hey, Eren,” Levi lets go of my hand and steps out onto the glasslike surface, he slides out a ways, then extends his palm again towards me, “Hurry up, brat.”

“Wow, I’m going to look like a fish out of water, aren’t I?” I say, Levi sighs.

“So you’re a fish, whoop-de-fucking-do. What ever happened to being the best damn fish you can be?” He raises an eyebrow, the playful smirk still toying with the edges of his lips. I smile back.

“Never said I wasn’t! Just stating the obvious,” I reach out and take his hand, moving onto the ice one foot at a time. My first foot slides out a bit too far, and I grab onto the side of wall to keep myself from falling. Levi skates a little bit closer and helps me straighten myself.

Now for the tricky part, testing the prosthetic out on the ice. I lift the fake foot, placing it down on
the ice carefully. It feels unsteady at first, and I cling to the side of the wall. But I’m inside, I’m really inside. I take a breath, and feel a little squeeze in my hand. Levi stays by my side.

“Let’s just… start out on the wall, okay?” I ask, my voice sounds about as unsteady as I feel. Levi gives a small nod, we begin to move, slowly, with the rest of the people on the rink. I keep one hand against the wall, and at first I feel extraordinarily unsteady, like I could fall at any moment, but as the time goes on I begin to feel steadier and steadier. We pick up speed little by little, and soon we’re able to keep pace with most of the people in the rink.

“Hey, Eren,” I turn my head as Levi calls to me, “Want to try letting go of the wall?”

“Uh…” I look in between him and the wall, sure I feel steadier now… But still, if I let go, I’ll probably fall, won’t I.

“Come on,” He encourages me, skating a little ways out, tugging on my hand, “I won’t let you fall, so don’t worry, alright?” He may say so but…

I let my hand trace the wall a little longer, then I sigh and retract my palm, “If I fall, it’s on you,” I say, shakily skating out to meet him.

“If you fall, it’s because of your shitty balance.” Levi snorts.

“Gee, thanks for the encouragement.”

“Well, prove me wrong then,” He shrugs, “In fact, I’ll even help you prove me wrong.”

“Wow.”

“I know. Savor the goddamn moment because that’s never fucking happening again.” I tighten my hand around his, sticking close to Levi as a balancing pole. He moves a little faster, and in consequence so do I. He keeps that speed for a while, testing to see if I’m still comfortable. I don’t speak, simply concentrate on not falling on my ass on this cold ice floor. Once I’m comfortable, Levi pulls us along a little bit quicker, and I’m able to catch up and keep pace a lot easier now. This goes on for a while, and most of my energy goes into keeping upright as I stare at the ground. Eventually I feel steady enough to look up.

We’re actually passing people now. I glance around with disbelief as some of those who had been casually skating circles around us before fall behind as we drift by them. Levi catches my wide-eyed look and gives me a smirk.

“Well, what do you know, Darwin was right. Evolution exists. Shit.” Levi looks ahead, “Surprised you’re not actually a fish?”

“Yeah, really,” I respond breathlessly, “Thank you, really just… Thank you for… this… for everything.” Levi glances back at me, I watch his smirk fall quickly. There’s a hint of red on his cheeks and the tips of his ears. Levi slows down a little, until he falls slightly behind me, I skid to slow down my pace as well until I fall back in line with him. I open to my mouth to inquire as to what’s wrong, but he stops me by speaking instead,

“You don’t have to thank me,” He responds quietly, “You shouldn’t, really.”

Shouldn’t? Why? “I want to.” I inform him, “I want to show how grateful I am, Levi, more than you know.” He scoffs at this, glancing towards the other end of the rink. “Hey,” I reach towards his face with my free hand, drawing it back towards me, “Really, I am. More than I can say or show… It’s just… I’m happy, Levi.” I smile softly, “And I don’t think I’d be this happy, if it
weren’t for you.” Levi slows us down, until we’re at a standstill in the thinly occupied ring. He stares at me with a look that I haven’t seen before on his face. Or no, I have, but only very rarely. The slightly widened eyes and hardened features softened in a look of surprise.

“I…” He begins to speak, then seems to decide what he was going to say isn’t good enough. Because he shakes his head, interlacing our fingers, “Fuck it all, Eren,” He sighs, “You know I’m not exactly good with words.”

“It’s fine,” I feel my shoulders bounce with a light laugh, “You don’t have to be.”

“You’re right,” He nods, “But that doesn’t mean I can’t use actions instead.” He takes hold of the edge of my coat, pulling me down until he can reach up and press his lips to mine. They’re slightly cracked, from the winter cold, and there’s nothing really soft about the kiss itself besides the message behind it. It lasts for a few beats filled with the sound of my heart against my ears. And then it’s over, quick, chaste, and beautiful. I stare at Levi’s face when we pull apart, the red has spread across his cheeks and dusts his nose, I’m sure my face is the exact same way.

I step forward, forgetting for a brief moment that we’re on the ice, my foot skids out and I feel a rush of wind as I yelp, tumbling down. My hand tugs on Levi’s arm and he topples down as well until we’ve both landed on the ice.

“Shit!” Levi curses when he hits the ground. Frowning, he scratches the back of his head, “Well, that moment was romantic for a few fucking seconds at least.”

I start laughing, loudly, “Hey, you know, that was your fault for not waiting until we got off the ice!”

“Oh no, you’re not pinning this one on me!” Levi refuses, “That was all you, Jaeger, I was trying to make it romantic and shit, and look where that fucking got us!”

“Asses on the ice together.” I state, my words still broken up by laughter, “Honestly? It could be worse.”

“Fuck that shit, this is cold.” Levi pushes himself off of the ice, dusting his pants as he stands.

“Help me up?” I hold out my hands.

“Fuck no, you pulled me down, you’re getting yourself up.” He crosses his arms, sliding in front of me.

“Pretty please? I’ll give you another kiss when we get off of the ice if you do.” I offer, I try to pout but my smile prevents me from doing so efficiently.

“Wow, one kiss in and you’re already getting greedy?” Levi huffs, but he grabs my hand either way and pulls me up, “I’ll have to take that as a compliment.”

“Oh? Says the one who took my offer.” I tease. Levi frowns at me, “Ah, goddamn it.” He sighs, beginning to skate towards the entrance.

“Hey!” I follow him, quickly catching up, “Okay, I’ll admit, you’re pretty good.”

“Just pretty good?” He raises an eyebrow.

“Well, I’ve yet to see all that you can do.” I remind him.
“Hmm, I’ll have to show you sometime then.” Levi replies.

“I look forward to it.” I give his hand a squeeze, and then we step off of the ice.

Chapter End Notes

Well, was it fluffy enough? Did it give you cavities? I hope so, that was my goal :P

Also, y'all know what's coming up next...

That's right.

sick fic time

ALSO!

This Saturday will be the Halloween short side story upload.

So another thing to look forward to! :D Hopefully you all like it!

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated.
Halloween Special Chapter

Chapter Summary

Happy Halloween!

Chapter Notes

Happy Halloween everyone!

This is a little side-story that takes place away from the main storyline. Hope you all enjoy it!

Come talk to me:
goldie-the-cat.tumblr.com

Updates tagged:
fic: ntmywf

I think it makes sense, in the long run, that Hanji is the one who decides to hold a giant costume party to celebrate Halloween three days in advance. Most people would, of course, host a Halloween party on the day itself, but Hanji justifies their decision by saying that the holiday itself must be used for trick or treating. Whether or not Hanji actually goes out, decked out in costume and all… honestly I wouldn’t be surprised. But I’m still curious.

“Do they really go trick or treating?” I turn and ask Levi, we’re walking hand in hand through the park. I just got the invitation earlier that day, Levi has one as well, of course.

“Yes, and they have the fucking gall to try to drag me into it every year.” He sighs, frowning, “They take Erwin and Petra into the mix as well.”

“Have you ever actually gone?” I can’t help but smile, the idea of Levi trick or treating is hilarious. Going from doorstep to doorstep, he probably wouldn’t even say ‘trick or treat’, that’d be Hanji. I can practically hear him urging them to just get a move on, probably saying something like ‘get the fucking candy and move it.’ I snicker to myself, and Levi shoots me a glare, no doubt he knows what I’m thinking.

“Sadly, I’m often not given any damn choice. It’s either trick or treating or they bring wine into my apartment and get shit faced and not leave me alone until I get shit faced too and do something equally as stupid.” He scowls, as if it’s an unpleasant memory, but it sounds like fun to me. “So, yes, I’ve gone with them before, but wearing a costume that makes sure nobody knows it’s me. And a mask, hopefully one that won’t let me see what kind of crap they’re doing at the time.”

“You make it sound miserable,”
“It is.”

“Sounds like fun to me.” I reply, Levi gives me an incredulous look. “Either way, I bet you secretly like it, even if you won’t admit it.” I nudge him with my elbow, and Levi’s look just grows even more sour.

“No fucking way, it’s terrible.” He crinkles his nose, as if disgusted by the idea. “And I hate costumes, they’re too much fucking effort and money for something you only use once a year.”

“Aww, you’ll dress up for the party though, right?” I grin, “For me?”

“No, no way are you about to trick me into dressing up like a goddamn child.” Levi immediately rejects the idea, I pout.

“Aww, please. It’ll be a treat.” Levi pauses, halting our walk when I say that, he raises his eyebrows.

“You did not just fucking turn that into a trick or treat pun, did you?” He asks, I laugh in response. Levi rolls his eyes, “I’ll go to the party, but no way in hell am I dressing up.”

“Fine,” I smirk, the edge of my mouth curving upwards, “I’ll just have to make sure you wish you had.” At this, Levi raises an eyebrow, but I just give his hand a squeeze before letting go and skipping forward, “I won’t tell you how, though.”

“Alright then, let’s see what you’ve got in store, Jaeger.” Levi challenges. Challenge accepted.

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I know I’ll need help on this. So of course the first people I turn towards are Armin and Mikasa. Mikasa’s first reaction to the question is subtle disapproval. Armin looks excited, although he’s always loved Halloween. Ever since we were kids, he would always come up with crazy and insane ideas for costumes. Some masked hero or villain, a demon or someone other than himself. He once told me that he loved the chance to be someone other than the ‘short, smart blonde kid’. I think that’s why a lot of people like Halloween, and I’ve been even happier about the holiday ever since I came back home, because it’s the one day that nobody questions my leg. They just assume it’s part of some costume, even if it has nothing to do with the costume they tend not to question it. And that’s completely fine with me, long as it keeps them from staring. Heck, it’s even considered normal on same level. Long as they think it’s fake… Which I suppose it is, either way.

It’s also comforting to have him help me, and know that he’s going to the party as well. Since he knows Hanji a bit better than I, as they’re partners for their weekly meetings.

“Okay, well, do you want to go sexy or fun?” Armin asks, he’s already on his computer, no doubt browsing potential costume ideas.

“Not sexy.” Mikasa interjects.

“I’m a grown man,” I remind her, “And not a virgin in case you’ve forgotten.”

“You were drunk.” She retaliates, Mikasa’s never really been comfortable with the idea of me and relationships. Not that I blame her, the thought of someone hitting on my sister, or the idea of her even getting into bed with someone makes me, admittedly, want to grab whoever it is by the collar and question their intentions with her. I guess we’re both just a bit too protective of each other. Not that it’s going to change, because like hell I’d ever let someone I thought was going to hurt her touch her.
“Once.”

“Twice.” She frowns.

“Fine, twice,” I sigh, “But I’m not going in some child’s outfit. Besides, I’m not going to wear one of those weird, string-based costumes they label as ‘mature’,” I roll my eyes, “Way too uncomfortable. And it’s kind of a party with multiple people so…”

“Not sexy.” She finished. I shrug, leaning over the back of the couch where Armin sits to see what he’s scrolling through. The majority of them are the usual, ghosts, witches, skeletons and the like.

“Nothing sexy? Might be hard…” Armin sighs, frowning. “It seems like the older you get the more you have to reveal.” He’s right, there’s a ‘mature fireman’ outfit without a shirt. Just two red straps, and tight, spandex-like, neon yellow pants with red rubber boots.

“Since when did Halloween become a stripper club?” I sigh into the couch. breathing in the dust and familiar scent that comes from an ever so slightly dirty fabric.

“Since we aged past ten.” Armin explains. “You could always be a superhero? Those are pretty hard to sexualize…” He presses enter on the search bar, and I see the tips of his ears go red as he backspaces to the previous page, “I… er… uh… J-just… Never mind.”

“Isn’t there anything else?” Mikasa wonders aloud, I hear the creak of wood as she leans back on her chair at the dining table.

“What about a cop? Maybe those are-” I stop Armin placing a hand on his shoulder.

“Just think before you type.” Strange, usually he’s the one to say something like that.

“Huh…? Oh.” Armin comes to a slow realization, “Oh. That’s true.” After a brief pause, he closes the computer screen with a sigh, turning towards me. “So what else is there?” I look back at Mikasa, who simply shrugs and pulls her scarf up around her nose. Armin scrunches up his nose in thought, “Well, we could always call Hanji.” He suggests.

“Hanji?”

“Yeah, I mean, they are the one throwing this party… Plus they know Levi well. Maybe they can help you find a good costume to wear.” He shrugs.

“Well,” I pull out my phone, “I don’t have any other ideas, so why not?” The phone rings, once, twice, three times before a cheery voice picks up the other line.

“Eren, sweetie! To what do I owe the pleasure?” Hanji’s excitable voice chirps as I lean against the back of the couch.

“Hi, Hanji. I’m trying to figure out a costume to wear for your party… do you, uh, have any ideas?” My ears are filled with the sound of a high pitched squeal.

“You want me to help you pick out a costume?” I can practically picture them jumping up and down like an excited child, “Eren, oh Eren, this’ll be so much fun! I’ll send you my address-” They break themselves off with a gasp, “What about Armin? He should come too! I can dress him up as well!” I can feel a slight bit of fear for our well being. I’m not going in alone.

“Yeah, he’ll come too,” I turn to Armin, flashing him a smile as his eyes widen in recognition, “We’ll see you then.”
“Bye, honey!” Hanji chimes as I click my phone shut.

“Did you just drag me into this as well?” Armin asks hesitantly.

“It’s called the draft,” I joke, “Besides, you don’t have a costume either, so this’ll help us both out.” My phone dings, the message light blinks as I open up Hanji’s text. There’s a happy smiley face next to an address.

“Is it bad to be concerned?” Armin inquires.

“Nope.” I cast a glance over my shoulder at Mikasa, “We’ll be back soon.”

“Drive safe.” She gives me a small wave.

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Hanji lives in a small cream colored house near the edge of the city. It’s a neighborhood area and reminds me of something you’d see in an ad for real estate. When our car pulls up on the road, the door swings open on some unseen cue and Hanji comes jogging down. By the time we’re out of the car they’ve got Armin trapped in a bear hug and they lift him up to their chest.

“Eren! Armin! Welcome to my humble abode!” They drop him, opting for taking both of our hands and half guiding, half dragging us inside. “Come on, we haven’t got much time to lose!”

“But- I have to lock the car!” Armin digs out his keys, slapping down the door lock button just as Hanji shoves us inside.

I slightly feel as if I’ve just driven myself to my kidnappers house. But in a good way, which is strange. I guess not so much kidnapper as crazy distant relative. All that’s missing are mounds of cats walking around the house and piles of self-knit clothing items. Luckily, there are no cats or knitted sweaters. It’s actually surprisingly neat. The house still reminds me of a real estate ad, but it doesn’t look… lived in.

“Wow,” I say the word absentmindedly. Hanji turns and gives me a wide grin,

“Surprised? I don’t spend much time here, usually I spend most of my day outside, so I figure, why decorate? All of my knick-knacks are in my room, so you’ll see them in a second.” Hanji informs us as they lead Armin and I upstairs and down a small, well-lit hallway until we enter what I suppose is Hanji’s room.

They’re right, compared to the sparse decorating downstairs, this place is a cluttered mess. There’s photos and posters from all around the world hung up on the walls, different souvenirs are haphazardly tossed here and there, mostly piled up on cabinets or the dresser in the back. The only two things that really designate the room as a bedroom is Hanji’s bed, pushed back into the far left like an afterthought, and the closet that Hanji digs through.

“Woah, where are all these from?” Armin looks around with wonder in his eyes. He stares at a photo of a sandy shore, taken from a bird’s eye view as the photographer peers down a rocky cliffside.

“My travels, or souvenirs from friends,” Hanji sticks their head out of their closet for a moment with a grin, “I can’t sit still, so whenever I get the chance, I like to go somewhere new and different. Usually on a research project of some sort.” They shrug, before diving back into their closet.
“Wow,” Armin muses, he’s still engrossed in their photos when Hanji lets out an exclamation of success and turns back to us, a large box wrapped in their hands. They place it down on the bed.

“I keep alot of my old halloween costumes,” They explain, opening up the box.

“Will they fit us?” I ask skeptically, Hanji’s pretty tall.

“Maybe, but if it’s too large we can always adjust it.” They shrug, then give us a wicked grin, “Besides, some might fit you better than others. I have costumes I’ve tried to dress Levi or Petra in, as well as my own.”

“Did it ever actually work?” I inquire, maybe for Petra, but with Levi…? Although I’m not going to lie, I am curious to see what Hanji picked out for him.

“Sometimes, with a bribe.” Hanji shrugs, “Depends on the costume and what the bribe is.” Part of me wants to ask what he agreed to, but Hanji is already pulling out costume options.

“Alright, enough chatter, let’s get to the fun part!” They turn away from the box and look between Armin and I, “What were you thinking of?”

“Well,” Armin and I share a glance, “We don’t really know…?” He scratches the back of his head, “Nothing too sexy? That was kind of the problem with shopping online.”

“Aww, that’s no fun.” Hanji pouts, they think for a moment, their eyes closed in concentration and their arms crossed, then a slow smile spreads across their face, “Although, you did say nothing too sexy. So I guess a little sexy couldn’t hurt, right?”

“Uh…” Armin is at a loss for words. I give Hanji a skeptical look. If someone even mentions the words ‘fireman’ or ‘cop’, I’m out.

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At first, I thought Hanji had misheard us when we said ‘nothing too sexy’. Although, as they pointed out before and are very willing to point out again, we did say nothing ‘too’ sexy. And it’s certainly better than a stripper fireman or slutty cop. Admittedly, it doesn’t show much. Everything important is covered, the only thing it really shows is my midriff, arms, and legs, the last of which I was immediately adverse to- but Hanji told me that it just made it all the sexier… I disagreed, but the following arguments turned out in their favor.

Besides, I’m ninety percent sure Armin and I will look conservative compared to the majority of the costumed party-goers. Especially Armin, he didn’t even want his stomach showing, so he used one of Petra’s old costumes. Mine is Hanji’s, which explains a lot.

He’s Count Dracula, fake blood and all. White face paint used to make him look even paler than usual, blonde hair tied back in a small ponytail. The torn-up black and red cape is still a little big, and brushes the floor as he walks. Meanwhile, I’m the Cheshire Cat. A tail attached to the shorts and ears glued to a headband on my head. It’s all made out of different shades of purple in stripes, and Armin helped me use face paint to create a cheshire-grin on my face.

There’s boots with bells that come with the costume, but since I’m only able to wear one, Hanji took the bell from both boots and put one of them on a little red ribbon to tie around my neck.

“Reathy tho go?” Armin calls from the bathroom, the fake fangs make it hard for him to talk. His words are slightly muffled by them and he can’t really pronounce consonants. Weirdly, it adds to the costume. It’s still funny though.
“Yep.” I stand up from the couch, my fake tail swinging out behind me as I walk. It’s showtime, I guess. Let’s hope this doesn’t fail miserably.

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I can’t say that having a costume took all the nerves away. In fact, it added a bit more to the pile if I’m being honest. Suddenly, the costume doesn’t fit right. my prosthetic doesn’t even fit the theme of it so why did I chose the Cheshire Cat anyway? What if nobody else goes in costume? What if people stare at my leg?

Well, all of my worries fade away when we pull up to the house that was once so peaceful. Now there’s lights flooding through the curtains, music pouring through the open windows, and people in all sorts of costumes wandering their way up to the front door, propped open by a skeleton in a top hat.

“Quith the changth.” Armin mumbles, he sighs and takes the fake teeth out of his mouth, “These things are annoying.”

“Yeah,” I chuckle, heading towards the orange light that spills from the open wooden door. “But they add to the costume.”

“Ah, yes,” Armin rolls his eyes, “Because Dracula, the all-intimidating bloodsucking demon from hell, is bound to have a lisp.”

“Hey,” I shrug, “You never knowth.” I fake a lisp as Armin shakes his head pitifully, popping the fake teeth back into his mouth.

“I’ll juth not talk.” He mumbles, dragging the torn cape around himself as we enter the familiar living room we saw yesterday. Except… familiar might be stretching it.

The place is transformed into some kind of haunted frat house. Cobwebs hang from the ceiling, draping down low over everyone’s heads. People dressed as ghouls and monsters, both of the sexy and non-sexy variety, dance in the middle of flashing lights and booming music. The living room itself is darkened, while the rest is bathed in the warm orange light, the dance floor itself is dark, only lit by a purple glow that comes from some fluorescent light hidden to the sides. I immediately spot Hanji, dressed as a zombie, with green face paint on their skin, only broken up by tattered, raggy clothes that hang loosely on their frame, and eerily accurate red and pink face paint to create the effect of gore underneath their rotting flesh.

“Eren, Armin!” Not very in-character, they shout happily and dash up to us, wrapping both of us in one of their choke-hold hugs. “So good to see you! The costumes fit wonderfully on you! Ahh, you’re so cute!” They blabber excitedly.

“Ah, Hanji! You… uh, you’re choking them…” All I see is a hand placed on Hanji’s shoulder, they release us and, as I catch my breath. I find I have a mummy-wrapped Moblit to thank for saving me before I suffocated.

“Thanks Moblit,” I wheeze, standing straighter from the hug, “Nice to see you again.”

“You too.” He gives a small smile.

“Come on! Talking is boring!” Hanji tugs on his arm, “Let’s go get drunk! This is my home so I don’t have to drive anywhere!” They exclaim, dragging Moblit back into the party.

“That’s, uh, maybe we should slow down, Hanji…” His protests are lost as he disappears into the
crowd. I hear Armin giggling beside me.

“What is it?” I ask, turning to him.

“Juth thinking, they make a gooth couple.” He shrugs.

“Moblit and Hanji? I don’t think that they’re dating...” I stare after where they disappeared.

“Really?” Armin gives me a confused look, “Huh, well, they look gooth together.” He comments.

“Ha, it’s hard to imagine Hanji tied down by anyone.” I reply, grinning. We wander a little bit deeper into the pit of costumed bodies, dodging wings and tails and other extra appendages that are a part of costumes. Halfway through the first room I hear another voice call out to us. As Armin and I turn around I catch Erwin walking towards us. He’s dressed as some kind of Dia del Muerto-esque skeleton. Flamboyant colors swirling across skeletal facepaint, a black suit-type outfit on, and on his one hand is a black glove with white skeleton print, his hair is slicked back for the full-effect.

“Pleasure to see the two of you,” He walks up, a smooth and easy smile on his face.

“Ah, Erwin!” Armin greets him with his own energetic smile.

“Armin, Eren,” Erwin drawls as he approaches us, his own grin seemingly extended by the paint on his face, “Pleasure to see you both made it. How are you enjoying the party so far?” His eyes flicker in between us. I’ve seen Erwin, and Hanji as well, so where’s Levi?

“It’th great!” Armin pipes up in my silence, he frowns at his own words, “Thorry, the the fangth aren’t really uther friendly.” He sighs. I can see from the bounce in Erwin’s shoulders that he’s laughing to himself.

“No apology needed,” He dismisses the excuse with a wave of his real hand. I sigh, there’s no way I’m going to find Levi in a crowd like this. Erwin, with his ever-present eerily accuracy, snaps his eyes to me. “Levi’s talking with Petra in the kitchen, it’s just to the left of the living room... or should I say dance floor?” He informs me with an amused smile.

“Oh, uh,” Shit, he could read me that easily? “Thanks.” I turn to Armin before I leave, “You’ll be okay?”

“Yep,” He nods, “No problem here!”

“I’ll make sure he doesn’t get lost in the crowd.” Erwin assures me.

“Okay, okay cool. I’ll see you later.” I give a small wave to the two of them, then begin weaving my way through the crowd to the darker part of the room. It’s only slightly difficult to maneuver my way through the mingling, dancing crowd. And I’m back into a well-lit, much less occupied area in just a minute or two. I spot Levi and Petra almost immediately. Ironically, mainly because Levi’s one of the few people not in costume. More than that, it’s one of the few times he’s actually dressed casually, black t-shirt and jeans. Next to him, Petra has a half black-half white costume. On one side spreads the wing of an angel, and on the other side something that looks like red bat’s wing. She’s half demon, half-angel, even her makeup is contrasting. One half of her face painted in reds and dark blacks, the other half with golden lipstick and white eyeshadow.

Levi spots me first, his eyes flicker away from Petra for a second and soon as he sees me I see his eyes lock onto mine. I can’t help but grin, which feels fitting considering my costume. I trot up to the two of them, and Petra gives me a warm smile.
“Eren! You look great!” She greets me.

“You too, I mean, wow, that’s a really cool costume, Petra!” I return the compliment as I approach. Petra tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, shrugging nonchalantly.

“Oh, it’s just something small. Thank you, though.” She replies. Levi wraps an arm around me as I lean against him.

“Hey,” He smirks as I lean into his touch, “Well now, looks like you really went all out, Eren.”

“I had to prove myself right, didn’t I?” I purr out the words, “Well, did I win? Do you wish you’d dressed up as well?”

“Hmph, if you think I’m giving in that easily…” His smirk grows just the tiniest bit at the premise of the challenge.

“True, I didn’t really expect just that to work. But maybe I’d hoped to be just the tiniest bit lucky tonight.” I shrug.

“Hmm… well, if you didn’t have to try, it wouldn’t be fair now would it?” Levi retaliates, “I suppose we’ll just have to see if you can convince me.” He finishes with a quick peck on my cheek.

“Ah! There you are!” Our conversation is broken up when Petra yelps happily at finding someone else in the crowd. “I’ll you two later!” She disappears into the crowd.

I tug on Levi’s hand as well, “Come on,” I urge, “We should probably go see if there’s anyone else we should talk to as well.”

“Ah, yes,” Levi pushes himself up from leaning against the counter, interlacing his hands with mine, “Because conversing with shitfaced people is just my favorite fucking pass time.” His tone drips heavy with sarcasm.

“Can’t handle it?” If there’s one way to goad him into doing something…

“Fuck you, of course I can, the question was whether or not I wanted to.” And he takes the bait. I giggle to myself as I lead him back through the crowd.

The night passes relatively tamely, we danced a bit, talked with a couple of Petra’s and Levi’s friends and acquaintances who I didn’t know beforehand. We also met up with Moblit, Erwin, and Armin again; all of whom were trying to control a hopelessly drunk Hanji and prevent them from getting alcohol poisoning by the end of the night. Erwin eventually took charge by keeping them seated on the couch, away from the drinks. Moblit hovered by within an arm’s reach the entire time, though. Obviously worried for them.

I couldn’t help but notice that throughout the party, it still felt like a few people’s eyes were on me. I would have thought that since it’s Hanji’s and thereby Erwin’s friends that they’d be used to seeing someone with prosthetics. But considering the fact that the number of eyes seemed to grow by the end of the night, I guess not. It admittedly made me pretty damn uncomfortable, especially since I’d been so looking forward to the one day where that didn’t happen. But each time I felt the number grew, I also felt Levi draw me closer to his side. He must have known, it’s… funny, how he’ll surprise me like that. I didn’t complain, of course, and pretty soon it was easy to forget about those who were staring at me with Levi by my side.

When the party eventually dies down, Hanji’s asleep on the couch. Most of the people have left,
and there’s just Petra, Erwin, Moblit, Armin, Levi and I left to clean up the mess.

“Sorry,” Petra turns to me to apologize, “You really shouldn’t have to do this. We’re all used to cleaning up after their mess… but you two should really just go home.”

“It’s no problem!” Armin took out the fake teeth long ago, he washed them off thoroughly and gave them back to Hanji to put in their closet again. That never happened, on account of their drunkenness, and so the teeth now rest half-in and half-out of Hanji’s own mouth after their attempt to vampire the liquid from a beer can. It didn’t end well. Which is why I’m cleaning the stains out of their carpet right now.

“No, really, we insist.” Erwin stands up, his makeup is slightly smudged, and his arms are full of decorations in boxes that we’ve all dragged out of their supply closet. “Go home, you both have studies and work to do, no doubt. It’s already late enough, and we appreciate the help you’ve done so far.” He disappears around the corner.

“Right!” Petra finishes up for him, “Levi, walk them out and make sure they get to their car alright?”

“Fine,” He stands up from where he was desperately trying to rub a stain out of the carpet. “Don’t fuck everything up while I’m gone.” He leads the way to the front door, holding it open while Armin fishes for his keys.

“Ah ha!” Armin sounds triumphantly, producing keys from a pocket hidden under his cape. He walks towards the car. I follow him, stopping at the edge of the porch.

“Oh, Levi,” I turn around.

“Hm?” He leans against the doorway, I give him a happy smile.

“You never said whether or not I won.”

“You’re still going on about that?” He gives me a look of disbelief, but I can see the smirk ghosting the edges of his face. “Ah, well… I don’t know Eren,”

“Come on!” I urge, “You really can’t admit that dressing up in costume is fun?”

“I ain’t admitting to anything.” He scoffs, “But, fine, next year, I’ll dress up, too. We can have matching costumes and all that couple shit.”

“Haha! I knew it!” I exclaim triumphantly, “I knew you secretly enjoyed dressing up!”

“Oh no, it’s still fucking awful.” Levi rolls his eyes.

“Oh… well, then why do you want to dress up next year?” I inquire. I mean, sure, I won, that’s great. But I honestly expected that he really liked it, that he’s just a grump and refuses it as so.

“Because that way, nobody will question that you’re not available.” He replies, and I can’t help but notice the slightly bitter tone in his voice.

“What does that mean?”

“You’re kidding,” He asks, disbelief painted over his face, “Did you not notice all those people staring at you during the party?”

“Huh?” Does he mean everyone that was staring at my leg? “Levi, they were staring at my leg, not
“No,” I see his expression steel, “No they weren’t. Trust me, I followed their eyes, they weren’t looking at your leg, Eren. Is that really why you thought people were staring?”

“Well, uh, yeah,” I shrug, “I mean, isn’t that kind of to be expected?”

“People were staring at you because you’re attractive, Eren. Holy fuck, this is why I had to stay attached to your hip to make sure no asshole creep tried to pull some shit.” He sighs.

“Really?” Maybe it’s wrong, but the idea can’t help but make me excited. I mean, people weren’t just staring at my leg? That’s amazing! And more than that… “So… you were jealous, huh?”

“Yes, yes I damn well was.” Levi surprises me by admitting to it, “And I’m going to own up to that, because, fuck it all, I’m not about to let some asshole try to harass you while I’m around.”

I laugh, “Wow, well, maybe I should dress like this more often, if it brings this side out of you.”

“Oh you little shit.” Levi shakes his head, “I shouldn’t have said anything.” He turns, as if to leave, but I catch his arm.

“No, no come on. I’m kidding, I’m kidding.” He turns back around, “But… thanks, Levi, I’m flattered.” I give him a quick peck on the lips, “And who knows? Maybe next year, I’ll have to be the protective one.”

Levi smirks, “Hah, that’d be a sight to see.”

“Just watch me, I’ll be the knight in shining armor.” I wink I hear the car start up behind me, I should get moving.

“Well, I look forward to seeing that.” Levi snorts. He waves to me.

“Oh, just you wait!” I wave back, half-jogging towards the car. Tonight was fun.

And I still won the competition.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Halloween!

Comments and Kudos greatly appreciated.
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

Okay, so, I have these really stupid points in time where I forget what I'm doing or what I've done or even other things like that. I was scrolling through this tumblr recommendation page for ereri fanfics, and I found a description of NTMYWF, with a link to NTMYWF, and my first thought was: 'Hey! That sounds like the one I'm writing! Cool!'...

It took me til I actually started reading the first chapter to realize that it was, in fact, this very fic right here..

...

Not one of my better moments.

Come talk to me:
goldie-the-cat.tumblr.com

Updates tagged:
fic: ntmywf

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“’You’re kidding me.’ I hold the phone up to my ear, standing outside against the building as Armin finishes up talking to Marco inside. Levi wasn’t at our group therapy session today. I was, admittedly, slightly worried especially since he seemed fine yesterday during our date. When I asked Hanji about it, they just suggested that I call him.

“I can’t believe you got sick from that!” I can’t help but snicker.

“Stop laughing, you little shit.” Levi snaps on the other end of the phone, his voice sounds clogged and congested from the cold. “I probably had it before hand, and the cold did jack shit to make sure I didn’t get fucking sick.”

“Well, someone’s a grump when they’re sick.” I pause, “Then again, you’re always a grump so what’s new there?”

“Haha, I’m dying of laughter.” Levi deadpans on the other end of the phone. There’s rattling and then I hear him coughing on the other line. “Scratch that, I’m just dying.”

“Okay, okay, I get it. Well, misery loves company, how about I bring you some soup or something to help you feel better?” I genuinely mean the offer. I tease but at the same time I hope this isn’t anything serious, being sick is horrible and I want to help him get better if I can.

“No. What if you get this cold too?” Levi immediately rejects my offer, his voice is scratchy.

“I’m pretty sure that if you were to give me the cold, you already would have.” I point out, smiling to myself as I say so.
Levi’s silent for a moment, then he sighs, “Okay, true. Still, this is shitty and I don’t want to risk it.” He breaks out into a coughing fit again, I wait for him to calm down.

“Uh-huh, because you really expect me to leave you all alone when you sound like that?” I question him, I see Armin walk out of the building, he gives me a small wave. I wave back and mouth to ask for one more second. Armin gives me a quick nod of approval and walks towards the car.

“You need to stay healthy, college and all that shit.” If that’s really his only excuse then…

“Unless you tell me directly, and mean it, that you don’t want me there while you’re sick, and I mean want for yourself, not for my own health, then I’m bringing you some soup.” I protest, there’s a pause.

“Stubborn little shit.” He sighs out the words.

“You know I am.” I grin; I’ll take that as an okay. “I’ll see you in a few.” I hang up the phone and chase after Armin, hopping into the passenger seat of the car.

I buckle in my seat belt as Armin inquires as to what that was about. I inform him of my conversation and as if he can just drop my outside of my apartment. Armin agrees and the rest of the conversation is dominated by trivialities and whatever else comes to mind for us to talk about.

It takes a little bit longer to get to my apartment than it usually does, due to traffic. But Levi’s apartment is a short walk from here, I wave Armin off and then start down the street. There’s christmas lights and wreaths up all over, the holidays are coming up soon. Now that I think about it, so is Marco and Jean’s Christmas party. Do I need to bring a gift for that? I’ll have to ask Armin.

I need to start thinking of gifts for everyone, either way. Who do I need to get gifts for? Usually it’s just Armin and Mikasa. But I need to get a gift for Levi as well. Does he even celebrate Christmas? I’m not sure, actually, I should ask. Either way, I’m sure everyone appreciates a present now and then.

I stop in at The Rose Café on my way to Levi’s apartment to pick up some soup. It takes a few minutes but I’m sure that he’ll enjoy it. After that, it’s a quick walk to the apartment building, the soup’s barely cooled down.

Now that I think about it, I was only here one other time. Back when I’d walked out on Levi and attempted to cut ties. Things have changed a lot since then, and yet it feels like time’s barely passed. I listen to soft elevator music as I head up to his floor. Once again, I’m struck by how much more… clean, his apartment building looks than mine. While the small two-bedroom that Mikasa and I share lies in a somewhat dusty, but decent, old building this one seems a lot more formal. The hall is well-lit and the carpet underneath muffles any noise that could come from my footsteps. I knock on Levi’s door,

“Hey,” I call as my knuckles tap the wooden frame, “It’s me.”

It takes a few seconds but the door creaks open, Levi’s eyes travel from me to the bag in my hand. His eyes are slightly red, as is his nose, but other than that he looks particularly pale. He’s definitely sick.

“What the hell are you doing here?” He mutters, his voice is congested and rough from coughing. I laugh, half-heartedly, in response.
“Didn’t we go through this already?” I muse, Levi doesn’t close the door on me, he simply turns around and walks inside. “I said I would help you get better, so that’s what I’m doing!” I chirp happily.

“Whatever, just… take your shoe off when you enter.” He disappears inside, I follow him, “And close the door behind you.” He finishes. I obey the admonitions, as I close the door I turn my head in time to see Levi collapse against the couch again, a blanket tossed to the side and a trashcan by his feet, a box of tissues placed conveniently in front of him. Poor Levi… I can’t help but feel even just the tiniest bit guilty for his illness. Perhaps it wouldn’t be so prominent if we weren’t out in the cold all day yesterday. Not much to do about it now, though, but make it up to him by helping him feel better.

I take the soup out of the bag and lean over the top of the couch, holding it out to him.

“The fuck is this?” Levi gives me a skeptical look.

“Chicken noodle soup,” I say, handing the soup towards Levi’s disinterested face, “It’s supposed to help, you know.”

“That’s a myth so that they sell more.” He scoffs.

“Come on, it’ll help, even just a little.” I urge, giving him a small smile, “Would it help if I said please?” Levi rolls his eyes, but he takes the soup from me either way. I watch as he pops off the lid of the container, sniffing the soup and giving a small, satisfied hum before taking the plastic spoon and swirling around it’s contents. I reach over and place a hand on his forehead. Levi skirts away,

“Oh no, if you touch me, then you’ll just catch this asshole cold, too.” He frowns.

“I’ll wash my hands,” I shrug off his warning and reach for his forehead either way. It’s a little warm, but not by much, “Not too bad, but you might have a fever. Have you had anything to drink recently?” I inquire, retracting my hand as I head for the sink.

“I get it, Eren. I’m sick,” I can hear Levi’s sarcasm through the congestion, “Thanks for the soup and shit but you don’t have to go full-nurse. I’m a grown ass man and I can take care of myself.”

“That’s probably true,” I hum, turning on the sink as a steady flow of water washes over my hands, “But that also doesn’t mean I’m going to leave you alone when you’re sick.” I glance back at Levi, only to find him staring at me from over the top of the couch. I give him a playful smirk, “Now, come on, what can I get you to drink?” I offer again.

Levi gauges my resolve with a carefully calculated look. Eventually, he sighs, “Tea, it’s in the pantry, get the chamomile one and… don’t fuck anything up.” The pantry? Well, time to go searching through the cupboards above my head.

“No promises.” I toss back the words before going to work. It takes me only a few minutes to find the tea, as everything is neatly organized and placed above, and then start the water boiling. I cast a glance behind me now and then to check and see how Levi’s doing, and I catch him drinking the soup with a small, satisfied smile. I knew he’d like it.

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“How do you feel?” I inquire as I set the still-steaming cup of tea down in front of him, exchanging it for the now-empty bowl of soup.
“Like shit.” Levi replies, he coughs into the tissue he’s holding, before reaching for the tea and picking it up in that odd-way that he does.

“Should I take your temperature?” I inquire, still kneeling by the couch.

“It’s a cold, Eren, not the fucking smallpox.” Levi mutters into his cup as he takes a sip, he pauses for a second, “Well, color me impressed, you didn’t fuck up the tea.”

“I’m honored.” I roll my eyes, “It was just such a difficulty, you know. Boiling water and everything, so hard to do.”

“Brat.”

I stand up, grabbing the edges of the blanket by Levi’s side and pulling them over his lap, “Try to get some rest, you’ll feel better if you do.” I say quietly, “Is there anything else I can get you?”

“I should get sick more often,” Levi ponders aloud.

“Don’t count on it,” I shake my head, “Knowing you, you’re too much of an ass for even a cold to stay around for too long.”

“What can I say? I don’t like sharing. Especially not when it comes to my body and a foreign virus.” Levi replies casually, taking another sip from the tea. “You put honey in this.” He sounds surprised.

“Yeah, whenever I get sick and cough a lot, Mikasa always makes me tea with honey to soothe my throat.” I shrug, “I figured it must be the same for you, painful, unpleasant.”


“Well, if that isn’t the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard.” I chuckle. I should get back home soon, but I don’t want to leave him until I know he’s all set. “Is there anything else I can get you?” I inquire.

“No, you’ve done more than enough already, Eren.” Levi sighs, the steam curling through his fingers and dissipating into the air.

“What can I say? I’m a talented nurse.” I grin, “Do you have a thermometer, we should be sure you don’t have a fever.”

“I don’t.” Levi replies curtly.

“Levi-”

“I don’t, stop worrying. I’ll check later, and, if it worries you that much, then I’ll tell you if I do.” He rolls his eyes.

“Hey, don’t blame me for caring.” I smirk, “But, okay, that sounds good.” I lean over and give Levi a small kiss on the forehead. “I ought to get back home before Mikasa arrives, but I’ll call you later to check up, okay? Drink lots of water and if there’s anything else, don’t be afraid to call.”

“You do realize that you’ve just doomed yourself to infection?” Levi smirks.

“I’ll take my chances.” I walk towards the door where my shoes lay, stopping for a small moment to turn back to Levi, “Ah, also… do you celebrate Christmas, Levi?”
“Christmas, why?” He gives me a confused look.

“So I can get you a present.” I explain.

“Ahh, well, I’m not one for all the jingle-bell cheer or whatever you people call it,” Levi shrugs. “Usually it’s just Hanji who drags me out for some double celebration or whatever the fuck they come up with. So don’t bother.”

“Double celebration?” I repeat

“Right, well,” Levi looks… embarrassed? “Forget about it. It’s just Hanji and their crap. Point is; don’t bother with any of that shit.” He frowns, “I… It’s not worth it.”

Something’s definitely up here. He stares at his tea, apparently bringing the conversation to an end, or trying to. Well, whatever he’s not telling me, he did tell me where to find out why. Hanji. And knowing them, all I have to do is ask.

“Okay, well, I’ll call you later. Feel better, okay?” I open the door, Levi mutters some goodbye in turn as I exit into the hall. I’ll wait until I get home to call Hanji, then I’ll find out what it is that Levi meant when he mentioned a double celebration.

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I amble back home at a leisurely pace. Taking the time to view all the shops that line the streets, looking at them with a bit more scrutiny in case I find anything that could serve as a present. There was that shop I saw a while ago, the one that had a scarf in it that looked identical to Mikasa’s. I laugh at the idea of getting her the same scarf. Maybe as a joke-gift, that would work well.

I pass by an old, used-books library. This would work well for Armin. I make a small detour and enter the room that smells of leather and old pages. The atmosphere is relaxed, calming. I peruse through the shelves for a while before I stumble upon the section that has books all pertaining to geography. There’s one on the oceans of the world. Armin and I have always talked about going to see the sea, ever since we were kids. The books a little ratty, obviously used and loved by its previous owner if the dog-eared pages and little ink scribbles throughout are any indication. But it gives it a nice feel… personality. I buy the book and think of where to hide it in case Armin comes over sometime before Christmas.

When I get back to the apartment, the first thing I do is bury the book under a pile of clothes in my room until Christmas. I cross Armin’s name off of my mental gift list, and now I know at least one of the things I’m getting Mikasa. But Levi is still a big ole’ question mark. And the whole double celebration still seems odd to me.

I dial up Hanji, holding the phone to my ear as I let it ring. Once, twice, three times before they pick up with a joyful hello.

“Hey, Hanji.” I greet them.

“Eren! What might I help you with today?” They inquire.

“Oh, well, nothing much. I just went to see how Levi’s doing.” I explain.

“Did you now?” They let out a loud laugh on the other end of the line, “Let me guess, he wasn’t exactly a willing patient, now was he? Well, darling, don’t let Levi’s grumpiness get to you, I’m sure he appreciated it more than he lets on. In fact,” I can practically hear the slow smirk creeping across their face as their voice changes, “I think you’ve just given me something new to tease him
about! Levi’s little nurse… Sound good, eh?”

“Um…” I’m never quite sure how to reply to Hanji. Do I laugh? Back away slowly? Both?

“Never mind that, doll.” Hanji chuckles, “So what did you call about?”

“Well, I asked him if he celebrated Christmas, to get him a gift and all…” I trail off as I hear Hanji hum with knowledge on the other side of the phone, “You know what I’m about to ask, don’t you?”

“His birthday right?”

“Birthday?” I echo the word.

“Yeah, birthday, it’s Christmas.” Hanji sounds puzzled.

“It is?”

“Ah, shoot, well, if you didn’t know, I probably wasn’t supposed to tell you.” Hanji murmurs on the other end, “Ah well!” They perk up immediately, though, “Easy come, easy go!”

“What am I going to get him?” If it’s his birthday then I’ve really got to put effort into this, even more than before. Well, Christmas shopping just got a whole lot harder.

“You’ll come up with something!” Hanji assures me, “And if you don’t, you’ve always got yourself!”

“Myself?” I repeat, scratching my head in confusion.

“Aww, ain’t that just the cutest thing!” Hanji chirps out the words, “Well, dearie, don’t worry about it. Oh and, don’t tell Levi that I’m the one who spilled the beans, okay sweet?”

“Alright…”

“Great! Thanks hun!” And then there’s a click as the line shuts down. I hang up on my end and toss my phone to the side.

So it’s his birthday. Why did he say it wasn’t worth it then? That’s definitely worth a gift! A thoughtful one, too…

So then what’s a thoughtful gift…?

Well, I’m in deep shit.

Chapter End Notes

It’d be really cool if somehow the chapter where Christmas takes place were to line up with the week of Christmas, but that’s probably not going to happen sooooo haha, I guess that’s also the Christmas chapter? Haha, ah, well, we’ll see. Either way, there’s about 2-3 more fluff chapters left before we get back to the plot, which I guess is sort-of the second arc of this story? It’s the last arc, so we’re at the 2/3rds mark for this story now. Hope you all enjoy what’s left!
Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated.
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the short chapter guys. This one was mainly because I wanted to add this to the fluff pile... but in the end I'm not fully sure if it's too deus ex or not. Either way, I wanted some fluff to show that it isn't just Levi and Eren's relationship that's getting better, but even just Eren's overall view on life itself, that he's more able to find the happiness in small moments and such. Thus, this chapter was born. Either way, I hope you enjoy it!

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“Do we need to bring a gift for this thing?” I lift up a mug, on the pristine white front the words ‘Merry Christmas Motherfucker’ are printed… Probably not a good gift for Marco and Jean’s party. I set it back down and turn to where Armin is shuffling through holiday cards.

“I probably would, just in case.” He picks one out and opens it. ‘We Wish You A Merry Christmas’ starts blaring from the card, slightly distorted from one too many plays. Armin visibly winces and sets the card back.

We’re going Christmas gift shopping for Mikasa, and now also Marco and Jean. I told Armin about the store where I found a replica of her scarf. We’re going there next but first we’re perusing through this little knick-knack store to see if there’s anything for a real gift alongside the joke gift. I also have an eye out for something Levi would like as well. But do I get him two separate gifts? One for Christmas and one for his birthday? Or just one in total? That seems like I’m coming up short handed. I’ll get him two gifts, then, but what?

“So besides the scarf,” I pick up another card, opening it with more hesitation than Armin did. “What else am I going to get Mikasa?” Luckily, the card stays silent. A shirtless Santa flexing his muscles- draped with christmas lights greets me instead of music. I would have prefered the music. I put the card back down and turn the revolving card-holder to the next set. This one is normal, two kids in a sleigh as a horse prances over a snowy field, a christmas tree glowing softly in the distance. I keep the card, it’ll work well for Mikasa.

“Maybe something to go with her scarf?” Armin suggests, “Like, wrap it up in the secondary scarf as the joke-gift and then present it to her like it's just the other scarf?” He picks up a plate with a reindeer on it, the cartoon is dancing as music notes splatter the rim, the word ‘Dancer’ is written above is curvy writing. “This is cute, maybe they have it in a mug form… that would work as a housewarming gift.”

“Yeah.” I agree, then move on to helping the treasure hunt for the mug. “But Mikasa doesn’t really like new clothes as a gift. Besides the scarf, I don’t think it’d be… meaningful, you know?” I find the Dancer mug, and hold it up triumphantly to Armin.
“Ah! You found it!” He chimes, excitedly taking the mug, “This’ll work well for Marco and Jean’s party!” I turn back to peruse the lining of other holiday-themed mugs.

“Hey,” I say, picking up one that has a reindeer lounging on the side of the mug, exaggerated eyelashes and bulging red cartoon lips adorning it’s face as it gives a seductive wink. The reindeer wears a black bra and the word Vixen graces the top in cursive. “What do you say that I pay for this one and we hand it in as a set gift from the both of us?”

“You just want to mooch off of my gift idea,” Armin rolls his eyes, he hums to himself, considering my offer. “Okay, but only if you get that one as well to make it a full set.” He points to another cup that has a reindeer in a black leather jacket, smoking a cigar with dark aviator sunglasses on a motorcycle that has flames spewing from the back. In thick block letters is the word ‘Blitzen’ across the top.

“At this point, shouldn’t we just get the full set?” I murmur, looking at the reindeer in a diaper, little wings keeping them afloat as the hold a golden bow and an arrow with a heart for the head. ‘Cupid’ appears in comic sans, of all the fonts.

“Don’t you know the saying?” Armin smiles mischievously, “You always gotta leave ‘em wanting more.”

“I’m fairly certain that’s not what they mean by that.” I snort, rolling my eyes as we walk up to the cashier.

“True, but do you really want to spend all that money on a reindeer cup?” He inquires.

“Eh, you’ve got me there.” Still, they make a good christmas gift… Checks all the boxes of the classic gift, cliché, festive, and something that’ll end up either being re-gifted or buried in the depths of your belongings, never to see the light of day until next Christmas. It also knocks another thing off of my to-buy list. Which is good, because it’s still much too long for how close we’re getting to the holiday itself.

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I find my gift for Levi- my Christmas gift for Levi- when I go searching through a store down the street from the little clothing retailers after Armin leaves. It’s a moving snow globe that plays music. The tune is soft, mysterious, and beautiful. Little bells tingle out of the snow globe as people move in circles around a frozen lake. The snowflakes drifting around in small swirls when you shake the globe. It has a soft, blue hue to it, and besides the small figurines of people, the only details are the mounds of snow piled around and two pine trees, airbrushed with white to create the illusion of snow weighing on their branches, rest around the lake. Simple, but beautiful. More than that it reminds me of going ice skating with Levi, so I think it’ll fit well.

As for his birthday… well, I’m still screwed there so far. After all, a Christmas gift is easy to get when Christmas is just around the corner. There’s already a plethora of late holiday shoppers to follow into all the good stores. But shopping for a non-Christmas gift seems impossible. Everything is holiday themed, with snow and bells and mistletoe not just decking the halls, but the whole goddamn town.

Of course the good news is that this also makes it fairly easy to find something for Mikasa. Since each store advertises Christmas sales for appliances and hardware, and Mikasa’s not a very sentimental person, I figure she’ll like something practical. Plus, my sentiment is in the scarf. So I end up getting a battery powered heater-cooler for her room. Practical, like Mikasa is.
Which means my gift list is down to one, and one very important one at that. But at least it’s a lot less than before.

But the Holidays are coming up soon, and so is Marco and Jean’s party. I wonder who else is going, besides Armin and myself?

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When we pull up to the address, I’m surprised to see it’s actually a house. Albeit a townhouse, but in the center of the city I didn’t expect Marco to live in an actual house, more of an apartment like I do. It’s made out of red brick and wedged between two other townhouses of similar design. The decorations are simple, a wreath adorns the brown wooden door and Christmas lights of the red and green variety dangle from the windows, emitting a bright glow that extends to the snow covering red-leaved bushes in their small, yard-like area. Armin holds a box with two of the cups while I take the other one, both wrapped in fitting Christmas decorations.

Armin knocks on the door, breath trailing up from his mouth in white smoke. I shift my gloved hands to get a better hold on the box and wiggle my fingers to prevent them from being numb. It’s only gotten colder, and spring seems further away than ever.

The door opens and Marco, in a santa hat and brown Christmas sweater, gives us a large freckled smile.

“Who is it?” A feminine voice calls from the inside… I… recognize that voice? The energetic, happy, and half-muffled tone sounds eerily familiar, in some strange way.

“Jesus. Who do you think?” A sarcastic voice, also strangely familiar, replies.

“Could be,” A third tone… again, I know the voice somehow. “It is getting closer to his birthday after all. Maybe he wants a present?”

“Or to mooch off of the cake.” The first voice replies.

I definitely know these people. How the hell do I know these people? Why do I know these people?

“Welcome to the party,” Marco interrupts my train of thought, but I can feel my face still contorted in a look of confusion. “Thanks for coming!”

“Thanks for inviting us,” Armin holds out the box, “These are for you and… uh, Jean, I guess? Do you guys live together?” He inquires. Marco laughs, a good-natured, delicate laugh and nods,

“Yep, have been for the past year or so now.” He admits, Armin steps aside and I hand him my gift as well. Marco stands to the side, “We rent the place out from my parents, both of us have jobs to help out. Come on in.” He ushers us inside with a wave of his hands. The entranceway is narrow and partially cramped by a small brown table with a vase of flowers resting on it.

Marco disappears to put the gifts away, but he directs us straight down the hall, first door on the right, to the living room where the rest of the party is taking place. I follow Armin down the hall to the door, fake holly hanging from the doorknob, as he swings open the door to a warm orange light.

The entire room is homely, with a red rug and two cream plush couches surrounding a mahogany coffee table, a small Christmas tree, assaulted with decorations, rests comfortably in the corner while bookshelves line the far back wall. My eyes drift to the couch where…
I knew I recognized those voices.

But… How?

Connie lays sprawled across the lap of Sasha, who sits with a plate of cake and a fork, shoveling the confectionary into her mouth. From the decadent smell I’m guessing the cake, and other sweets that pile the coffee table, are from Maria’s Sweets. My guess is only more probable as Ymir has her arm thrown around Historia, who holds a cookie in both hands. Reiner sits crossed-legged on the ground, deep in some discussion- or argument, with Jean while Bertolt half listens in, and half talks with Annie from across the table.

Sasha’s the first one to spot me, she gives a large wave, and tries to say hello. But with her mouth half-full of cake the sound comes out like more of a garbled, unintelligible noise that quickly turns to something a lot like choking. Needless to say, it attracts the attention of the majority of the room, who turn their heads around to see Armin and I in the doorway.

“Eren?” Historia’s the first one to exclaim her surprise.

“Huh, whaddaya know.” Ymir raises her eyebrow, giving me a mildly disinterested glance, “Welcome to the party. The fuck you doing here?” The retort earns an elbow in the side by Historia.

“I think…” She corrects Ymir, giving her a sidelong glare, “That Ymir means to ask how it is you know Jean and Marco.”

“Oh, uh… we’re in a… group, together…?” I reply awkwardly. Saying the words ‘support group’ allowed seems a little… Well, I don’t want to say self-degrading, they all already know I don’t have a leg- it’d be strange if they didn’t, and I’m sure they figured it was from something. But I don’t quite know how they’ll react to exactly why it is my leg is missing, which the subject of the support group would no doubt bring up.

“He means to say we’re all pretty fucked up and birds of a feather and all that.” Jean shrugs casually, I cast a sidelong glare towards him but he just grimaces in return.

“Yo, Eren that’s so cool!” Connie sits up from the couch, “Does this mean you know how to fight? Oh! Oh! Have you ever tried attaching a knife to your leg, oh man, that’d be so epic. You could some kind of vigilante!” He stands up on the couch, mimicking a kick to some invisible figure in the air.

“Cool…?” I echo.

“Hell yeah!” Connie smirks, “Just imagine it, you could be a superhero! Or villain, if you want to go that route.” He shrugs, then turns to kick the air again, “Just try not to blow up the world, ’cause I’ve kind of got a lot invested in it existing.”

Historia frowns at him, “Don’t be insensitive Connie.” Then she gives me a knowing smile, “I’m sure Eren’d be a superhero, right?”

“Yeah, Connie, don’t be an ass.” Ymir translates Historia’s language.

“Ymir!” Historia’s outburst only earns a joyous laugh from her girlfriend.

“Ah, who are you?” Bertolt nods to Armin, who was standing back watching the scene play out with me, a small smile on his face.
“Oh, my name is Armin, I’m in the group as well.” He introduces himself with a nod.

“That’s cool, so you must know Jean and Marco through that?” Bertolt and Armin start up their own conversation, I move to the empty space next to Annie.

“So how do you all know Jean and Marco anyway?” I inquire as I sit next to her. Annie shrugs noncommittally.

“I met them through Reiner. He, Connie, Historia, and Sasha were all pretty good friends with them for a while, apparently. Ymir probably got invited, and met them, because of Historia… And Bertolt because of Reiner as well.”

“Small world.” I comment.

“Only eight billion people.” Annie deadpans in return.

“Eh, that’s not that many.” Annie gives me a disbelieving look as I smile with my reply. Marco appears back in the room with a stack of paper cups and a jug of apple cider, he places both on the table and sits next to Jean as he joins the conversation that Armin’s started up between Bertolt, Jean, and himself. Sasha and Connie argue about which is better, peppermint bark or pumpkin pie while Ymir, Historia, and Reiner all discuss between each other. I grin as I pull my legs up to my chest and wrap my arms around them, occasionally offering up my own opinion to one conversation or another, filtering between the few or simply enjoying the silence with Annie. Somewhere into the night Sasha turns Christmas music on her phone the gang begins to sing raucously, and out-of-tune, along until that turns into a music competition between everyone. Which Connie gets very passionate about and attempts to surf the one-woman crowd of Sasha… it ends with his head crashing into the ground on the other side of the couch. Very easily we all settle into one large, happy group. A community. Friends.

Chapter End Notes

Well, there's one more fluff chapter left. And then we have the last segment of actual plot. (Which will probably take a few chapters, either way.) :D

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated!
Chapter Notes

Last fluff chapter everyone! Is that worthy of a celebration or a mourning? Either way, I'm excited!! Are you?

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

““This is bad, this is very, very bad, Mikasa.” I watch the disinterested face of my sister as we stumble through the mall, weaving in and out of people hurrying around for late Christmas gifts. Holiday music, butchered by multiple songs playing from different stores, blares a distorted tune throughout the white walled building. The glass sunroof above lets in a grey, weak winter light only further obscured by darkening clouds. Snowflakes have already begun to drift lazily from the heights of the sky.

“You’re worrying too much, didn’t you already get him a gift?” She replies, turning her head to casually glance at the windows proudly displaying an array of products. I’ve been looking all over the small shopping area nearby our apartment, but Christmas Day is tomorrow and I still haven’t found Levi’s birthday gift.

“Yes, a Christmas gift. Not a birthday gift.” I counter. All of these stores are either sold out or selling Christmas-specific items. I huff, walking over to the side to get out of the way of the ceaseless flow of people, and lean against the side of the store. I never go to the mall, why would I? I don’t know where good shops are and so far it’s looking like there are none. Mikasa stands next to me, her eyes lazily scanning the luminescent names of each shop, displayed proudly above and drenched with holiday themed decorations.

“Why don’t you just take him out for dinner?” She inquires frowning as she turns to inspect the price tag hanging from the jacket in the window, “Expensive…” She mutters.

“But we do that all the time. Three times a week!” I protest, “It’s not special if we just go to a café or restaurant, Mikasa.”

“Isn’t that what makes it special, though?” She retaliates, straightening up, “It’s something that just the two of you do, close to your heart, et cetera, et cetera…” She waves her hand to emphasize her point. “It’s ‘your thing’, isn’t it?”

I would expect a talk like that from Armin, but Mikasa…?

“Hey, why did you agree to help me anyway?” I ask, “I know you’re not exactly the biggest fan of Levi, and now you, off all people, are giving me romance advice?”

Mikasa shrugs off the question, “You look happy.” She explains, as if that clears it all up. Of
course it doesn’t, she can tell by my look that it doesn’t, “You weren’t happy before, you’re happy now.” She adds on, “And if he’s going to help you stay happy, then…” She trails off. Even if she monotones it, I know Mikasa cares for me, this is her way of showing so.

“Thanks, Mikasa.” I grin, but she just shrugs it off again. “And… you know, you’re right- about the dinner idea. I mean, it has kind of become something special… And that’s what Christmas is about, right? According to the movies, at least.” I add on the last part as I glance at the stores with bright red and green stickers displaying holiday sales, “Capitalism might disagree.”

“The amount of Christmas decorations is kind of atrocious.” Mikasa nods, “Where the hell is Kwanzaa?”

“Or Hanukkah.” I suggest.

“Or any other holiday.” Mikasa finishes, she pushes herself away from the wall, “Let’s go home, this music hurts my ears.”

“Can it even be called music, at this point?” I say as I listen to the garbled demonic summonings of late in the holiday season.

“I have no idea.” Mikasa replies, a look of disappointment in society’s choice of blasting multiple Christmas songs at once- or perhaps just society in general- passing over her features.

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Once I’m back in the semi-warm, somewhere above freezing temperature of the apartment, I text Levi to inquire if he wants to get together for a Christmas dinner. I go to take off my jacket, but reconsider soon as it’s off of my arms. Even through my long sleeved shirt and the t-shirt over that, I can still feel the chill of our cheaply heated apartment. I slip the jacket back on.

“How long before you think Grisha’s going to start helping out again?” I inquire, Mikasa responds with a bitter look and a shrug.

“At least we’re managing, better now with your second shift. Thanks for that, by the way.” She glances towards the thermostat, a small frown forming creases on her usually smooth face. I give her a small nod.

“No prob, maybe we’ll be able to actually turn up the heat for once, huh?” I joke, but the humor is lost on my ever-serious sister. “It could be worse.” I try optimism instead.

“It could always be worse, Eren,” Mikasa retaliates with realism, and optimism deflates like a balloon animal at a volatile three-year-old's birthday party. I can hear the children crying in the background while the clown scrambles for a pie to smash in his face. I suppose I’m the clown here? Well, I suck at my job, then.

“Yeah, but we’re not freezing to death, nor are we starving. So far, so good, eh?” I smile, “Just a couple of poor college students surviving off of instant noodles and cheap apartment pricing.” The good news is that now I know I made the right decision in getting Mikasa that space heater.

I hear the telltale ding from my phone that signals a reply.

“Since you brought it up,” Mikasa calls my attention as I reach for my phone, “I’m going to head out to get groceries, anything you want?”

“Nah, I’m good.” I give her a wave as she tightens her scarf around her neck and heads back
outside. I pick up my phone and look at the text, it’s a reply from Levi, as expected.

_Aren’t you doing something with your friends? -Levi_

_We like to get together Christmas Eve, since Armin goes to his grandfather’s house for Christmas Day. So I’m wondering if you want to go out on Christmas Eve? -Eren_

_And your birthday_ I add on the last part in my head. Levi probably doesn’t know that Hanji told me his birthday is December 25th.

_Alright… where to? -Levi_

_Well… there’s the part I didn’t quite think of yet._

_That’s a surprise. -Eren_

_I’ll have to research some places to take reservations. Nothing too fancy, so that I can actually afford it- and there’s no way in hell I’m letting Levi pay. But something nice. Time to break out the piggy bank, if I still had one._

_So in other words you have no fucking clue yet and you just asked me out on the offhand chance that maybe you’ll think of something not too shitty just before we actually meet? -Levi_

_I snicker at his reply. Well, he’s not wrong._

_Maybe, maybe not. -Eren_

_So yes. -Levi_

_That’s not what maybe means, Levi D: -Eren_

_Please tell me you did not just send me a fucking frowning emoji. -Levi_

_Maybe, maybe not ;) -Eren_

_Holy shit. -Levi_

_This is getting off-topic quickly._

_Anyway, so, yes or no on the dinner thing? -Eren_

_Wow, what a goddamn elegant way to ask me out. I’m flattered, Jaeger. -Levi_

_But yes. -Levi_

_Good! Now I’ve got my birthday dinner for Levi, and my Christmas gift for him. All I need to do now is wrap up my gifts, celebrate with Armin and Mikasa tomorrow, and then with Levi the day after. I’m going to have to call and make a reservation somewhere, since no doubt most places are already all reserved. Okay, let’s get started._

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_I wake up the next day, feeling my fingertips buzz with excitement, or maybe that’s just the cold. Either way, it’s Christmas Day! Armin, Mikasa and I are spending the whole day together, hanging out like we used to. It’s been way too long since we’ve done something like that, and so I can’t help but feel happy about it._
Armin’s coming to our apartment, since he stays at the dormitories of the college it’d be kind of cramped to go where he is. By the time I’m dressed and ready, I see Mikasa pulling out the two small boxes of Christmas tree decorations we have, a tiny bushel rests on the table.

“I went out and got it early this morning,” She explains, setting the boxes that barely even fill one of her arms down on the table. “I figured it’d be nice to decorate a tree together.”

“Mikasa, that’s a bush, not a tree.” I grin at the small plant nonetheless, “I like it.” A tree would be way too big for our apartment either way, and there’s something that fits about having a small, pseudo-tree with half of it’s pines missing and the other half falling onto the table one by one. Mikasa must think so too, because she looks at the pitiful tree with a small smile.

There’s a soft knock at the door, Mikasa and I both hurry to open it as Armin stands on the other side, bundled up in a heavy winter jacket and scarf and carrying two different gifts wrapped in festive paper.

“Hey there!” He greets us with a warm smile, I step aside as Armin stumbles inside, the gifts weighing him down and obscuring part of his vision.

“Here, let me help.” I take one of the packages and tote it over to the table, Armin takes one look at the small “tree” and breaks out into a grin.

“I love it.” He responds without needing to be asked, we set down the gifts under the table as Mikasa retreats into her room to grab her gifts, I do the same. It’s only a few moments before we all settle back by the table, and without needing to be cued in we tear into the boxes of decorations.

“Oh, wait, before we start decorating-!” Armin pulls out his phone and presses a button, Jingle Bells begins to blare festively from the small white device. “Gotta set the mood.”

“Wow, Armin, I’m flattered, but also taken.” I tease, rolling my eyes.

“Not like that!” He protests, defaulting a shade of red akin to the small ornament in my hand, “Eren, you know what I meant!”

“You must be careful with your phrasing, Armin,” Mikasa chastises him, “Eren will take any chance he can get, good or bad.”

“True!” Armin’s embarrassment quickly dissolves into laughter with Mikasa’s comment.

“Hey, now! Don’t make me sound desperate for a comeback!” I protest, but half-heartedly.

“Is that what it’s called?” Armin muses.

“Not you too!” I’m aghast, and feign a look of betrayal, clutching the red orb close to my heart, “And to think I once called you my best friends.”

“I never did.” Mikasa attempts a deadpan, but even I can see her stoic outlook cracking as a small smile tugs at the edges of her lips.

“Wow, I’m offended, Mikasa.” I reply, putting special emphasis on her name as I hook the small ornament onto the Christmas bushel, the limb slowly drooping as the orb drags it downward. Armin simply laughs beside me as he attaches his own decoration- a reindeer with a wreath winding around its horns, and Mikasa places a small childhood doll with a hole drilled into the bottom of it in the place of an angel at the top of the tree. Since we never get big trees, Armin was the one who came up with the idea of cutting a hole into a Barbie-esque doll we dug up from the
depths of the closet. We cut out small paper wings and glued it to the back of the doll, there used to be a halo made out of pipe cleaners but it got lost several years ago. We all just stand back and stare at our creating, half of the limbs bent awkwardly due to the weight of the decorations and the doll with the paper wings and the hole in its leg standing lopsided on the top of the tree.

“Modern art.” I suggest with a shrug.

“Looks like anything else you’d find in a museum.” Armin snorts.

“Maybe we can sell it.” Mikasa shrugs.

“Nah,” I dismiss the idea, “Too special.” Then I clap my hands together, bending down to grab onto the presents I took time and care to wrap- although they still look like they were half-assed by a fourth grader. But wrapping is difficult, and I will stand by that creed until I die. “Present time!”

“You just want to open yours.” Armin accuses me.

“Maybe,” I hum, “Maybe not. But come on! Let’s go sit down!” I lead the procession to the couch as Mikasa and Armin follow me, their own wrapped presents held tightly in their arms. We have a tradition for present unwrapping, as we do everything else. So as the song switches to ‘It’s Beginning to Look A Lot Like Christmas’ we sit on the couches and hand out the presents to those who they’re meant for. We all end up with two of our own, and pick out one of them randomly, our hands hovering inches over the paper, taking a small moment to share a knowing look and a small smile, savoring the moment before someone, usually Armin, gives the queue.

“All right,” It is, as stated, Armin who places his hands on the wrapping first, “Go!”

We all tear into the wrapping, Armin methodically taking apart the tape while Mikasa slowly peels back each layer. As for myself? Well, I don’t really have a system, I just open the present. Armin finishes a few seconds before me, and I hear him let out an excited gasp. I glance over, smiling triumphantly to myself as I see him stare at the book I bought for him a few days back. I hear Armin let out an excited gasp. I glance over, smiling triumphantly to myself as I see him stare at the book I bought for him a few days back with an excited look on his face. I turn back to my own present and find a box beyond the wrapping. I throw back the lids of the box, and slowly lift out a dark brown winter jacket, the color of chocolate, I can tell by the fabric that it’s a down jacket, it looks warm… and the zipper works!

“Do you like them?” Armin asks her, “I remember that one day when we were walking down the street, and I caught you looking at those. You insisted you didn’t want them but,” He shrugs, “I thought I might as well give it a chance.”

Mikasa nods, half-hugging the set to her chest, “Yes, thank you, Armin. I really do like them.” Then she turns to me, “And what about you, Eren? You were having trouble with your previous jacket,” She smiles, “I found this on sale, and it’s getting colder.”

Perfectly Mikasa, practical, comfortable, and thoughtful. “It’s great!” I smile, “Now I won’t have to strain my arm every time I try to just get out of a jacket.” The memory elicits laughter from me.

“Was it really that bad?” Armin wonders aloud.

“It was.” Mikasa nods sagely.

“Huh…” His eyes trail back down to the book as he drums his fingers against the spine, “Hmm… Now who got mine?” Armin ponders aloud, “I’m going to guess… Mikasa.” She shakes her head, “No?” Armin’s face swivels to look at me, I just give him a cocky grin in return, “Huh! Whaddaya know? I can’t imagine you setting foot in a bookstore, Eren.”
“Gee, the thanks I get around here.” I roll my eyes. We reach for the next set of presents, and I lift up the one that must be from Armin.

“Ready, go!” Armin calls, and the process begins again. I rip open the package, and in my peripheral vision, Armin lifts out another book. I catch the cover of it ‘The History of Sea-travel’ I can already see the grin pushing against his face as he reads the title. I pull out my own gift, and immediately break down in laughter. A mug, and on the front of it is a reindeer, on fire as it orbits a small cartoon sun, the name ‘Comet’ emblazoned in fiery script on the top. Underneath it is the familiar one for Vixen and Blitzen. Mikasa, her gift half-opened, raises a quizzical eyebrow to me. I hold up the three mugs triumphantly and turn to Armin.

“You didn’t.” I can’t help but grin at him as he shrugs, but I can practically feel the sense of smugness radiating from his small stature.

“Course I did. Almost got the Cupid one, too, but they were sold out.” He smirks, but my attention is drawn back by another set of laughter. I turn to Mikasa as she pulls out the scarf, a full on grin on her face. She gives me a sly look, and then wraps the scarf around the one currently on her neck,

“What do you think?” She gestures to her outfit with open arms. Armin flashes her a double thumbs-up.

“Perfect!” I state as she picks up the small space-heater.

“Ah, I’ve been needing one of these.” She nods, pleased, and gives me a happy look, “Thank you, Eren.”

“Merry Christmas, Mikasa.” I reply. The song changes again, this time to Ukrainian Bell Song, Armin gasps as he claps his hands together with a revelation.

“Guys, guys! We have yet to listen to the greatest Christmas song of all time!” He says, setting his books aside as he stands.

“Which is…?” I inquire, twisting around the couch as he rushes to the phone. Armin simply smirks at me as the music pauses. A few seconds later, ‘All I Want For Christmas Is You’ begins to blare from the small phone.

“Oh god.” I say, “No, I had enough of this shit in the mall the other day. We are not going through this again.” I stand, making a grab for the phone, but Armin skirts out of the way,

“Oh yes we are, come on, it’s, like, the only tolerable Christmas song!” He chimes, dashing towards the safety of Mikasa, “Come on, tell him I’m not crazy, Mikasa!” but Mikasa simply grabs onto Armin, holding him captive.

“Eren, hurry.” She calls, pulling Armin down on the couch next to her.

“Not you too!” He protests.

“Give me the phone, Armin!”

“No way!”

“The phone!”

I feel a smile plastered on my face, wrestling with Armin and Mikasa to grab the phone while the Christmas songs enter an unholy shuffle between each different classic from the motion. I really
can’t think of any way I’d rather spend the holidays.

- - -

Christmas Eve arrives with a sudden force. That force, namely, is a snowstorm that takes the form of heavy snowfall in the morning, piling up a good foot of snow by the time it ends at around midday. I had a small panic at that time, what if Levi couldn’t make it to the restaurant on time? One phone call later, I was assured we were still on- they were already plowing the roads.

Ever since midday I’ve been hoping that it doesn’t snow again. So far, so good. Which is lucky because my date is in a few minutes, and it’s one of those rare times in my life when everything seems to be flowing smoothly. I found a good restaurant with reasonable prices and spectacular reviews. I’m all ready, and all that’s left is to slip into my new jacket, the one with the working zipper, and wait for Levi outside my apartment. Since I don’t have a car, he’s driving us there.

“You look good.” Mikasa tells me without needing to be asked.

“Thanks.” I say, pulling the zipper up to my chest with a satisfying, smooth motion.

“Are you nervous?” Mikasa inquires, leaning against the door. I hesitate at the thought.

“No,” I say, grabbing Levi’s Christmas Gift, the small snowglobe wrapped in blue Christmas paper, “Not a lot, anyway. I think that by now, I’m mostly just excited, not nervous.” I grin as I affirm my own realization. It’s nice to know, that even when the nervous energy during the newness of dating fades away I’m still left just… happy, and excited to be with Levi.

“Have fun, and be back soon, alright?” Mikasa calls out one last goodbye as I open the door.

“Will do, love you Mikasa!” I respond before shutting the door and half jogging towards the stairs and down the steps of the apartment. The ring of the metal staircase echoes around me as my feet hop from one step to the next. It sounds oddly musical, still discoordinated, with the artificial clang of the prosthetic, but all it does is add to the rhythm.

When I push open the door, I’m assaulted by the wind, still left over from today’s snowstorm. The snow itself clambers up my foot and leg, it’s definitely over a foot with the culmination of all the winter’s snow. The powdery layer shimmers orange and yellow in the lamplight, it’s already dark out. The road is unobscured, though, from today’s plows. The only other light comes from the headlights as cars whizz by sporadically, casting rays of white light out in front of them to illuminate the way. As I rock back on my heel, comfortable in my new, warm coat, I see a black car pull over to the side of the road in front of me. I feel my grin grow on my face.

The window scrolls down as Levi hangs one arm out of the car, smirking my way, “You gonna keep standing out there and freeze your ass off?” He inquires. I snicker in response and walk over to the side of the car, I bend down to the window level and give him a quick kiss before handing the blue present to him through the window.

“Merry Christmas,” I say as he takes it from my hands. I walk around to the other side of the car, and Levi’s staring at the present as I get in. “Not gonna open it?” I wonder.

“I just… didn’t really expect you to get anything.” He raises an eyebrow at me, “Thought I told you not to,”

“Ha, like hell I’m not.” I roll my eyes, “You should have expected me to.”

He shakes his head, “You know, I really fucking should have.” He places the present in his lap and
reaches into the back seat, “So it’s an especially good thing I got you something as well,” He pauses to cast a stern glance my way, “And don’t your dare fucking say ‘You shouldn’t have’ or whatever the fuck it is that you come up with.”

I hold my hands up in defense, “Hey, never said I was going to. Besides, who would I be to turn down a gift?” I copy his smirk.

“True, you’re too much of a brat to reject a present.” He comments, grabbing a green wrapped box from the back and handing it to me.

“Wow, well, didn’t you just tell me not to do that?” I tilt my head to the side, “Hypocrite, much?”

“Never said I wanted you to,” Levi copies my previous answer, a sly look on his face as I take the present from his hands. “Merry Christmas, Eren.”

I hold it in my hands, I have no idea what it is but even just seeing the small, green box sitting in my lap makes my chest feel warm. It wards off the chill of the snow. “I’ll open mine if you open yours,” I offer quietly. Levi nods in silent agreement and we both tear open the wrapping paper of each other’s gifts. Admittedly, I’m a lot more careful opening this one than I was with the ones Armin and Mikasa got me. Perhaps a small part of me wants to save the paper that Levi put effort into putting together.

I peel away the lid of the box, and inside- partially covered with styrofoam to prevent it from breaking, is a small glass heart as a paperweight. On the inside of it, seemingly frozen in time, is the image of a red rose, petals streaming out in a spiral pattern across the heart. On the surface of it, engraved, are words.

*Something was bound to go right sometime today*
*All these broken pieces fit together to make a perfect picture of us*
*It got cold and then dark so suddenly and rained*
*It rained so hard the two of us were the only thing*
*That we could see for miles and miles*

Beside me, I hear the soft song of the snowglobe playing, I look to the side and see Levi staring at the moving people across the ice skate with a gentle smile on his face.

“Ice skating, huh?” He asks, turning towards me as I hold the heart close.

“Nobody’s fallen down on the ice, yet.” I shrug with a smile, turning back to the heart as I trace over the words with my thumb.


“They do.” I affirm, I look back up at him and lean over to his side of the car, “Thank you.” I whisper.

“I should be thanking you, too.” He replies softly, brushing out lips against each other.

I’m the one to pull back with a smile, “Come on, we’ll be late to the reservation.” I reach into my pocket and pull out directions, “I’ll guide you,”

“Right,” Levi leans back into his seat, he takes off the parking brake and pulls out into the street, “So where are we going, anyway?”
“That’s for me to know, and you to be surprised!” I chime happily, holding the instructions with a kind of triumphant look.

“Shitty brat.” Levi smirks.

“You know it.”

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The restaurant itself is decorated with simplicity in mind. It has pine trees and bare trees lining the parking lot. From inside pours the sound of soft music and merry laughter, it bathes the front in a warm orange glow. The restaurant itself smells of warm, delicious food. The scent of soup and steak, of chicken and rice and spices all emanate from the back of the kitchen. A waitress with a tightly pulled back ponytail leads Levi and I to a brown table by the window. As we sit down she hands us two different menus and asks if we’d want anything to drink to begin with. After ordering water, she leaves and Levi turns to me,

“This place seems nice,” He comments, “Not completely shitty.”

“Wow, I really did well, then, huh?” I grin, opening up the menu to view what’s an option.

“You did good.” He nods appreciatively, “I’ll give you that.”

I pause, and stare at Levi for a second. It’s his birthday today, and he willingly chose to spend part of it with me. Perhaps it’s strange, but even just that makes me happy. The light bounces off of the window, showing Levi’s reflection as he stares down at the menu, his face glowing warmly in the interior light, the other half of it shrouded in the cool shadow that comes from the outside world. Our coats are on the back of our chairs, and it’s amazing to see how lean he looks underneath the thick winter layers. Lean, but fit. Even though I’m used to seeing him, I see him every week- and multiple times at that, but I’m still stunned by him. Levi looks up, the light makes his eyes look a little less silver than they normally do, he catches my staring.

“What is it?” He wonders aloud.

“Happy birthday.” I say it so quietly, for a moment I’m not sure if he hears me. But he stiffens and then my heart plummets, did I say something wrong?

“How the hell…?” He trails off.

“Hanji.” I say, “They, erm… let it slip?” I scratch the back of my head, it feels hot in here even without my coat. But Levi sighs, and he relaxes, a look of annoyance replacing the scarily stiff look that he wore beforehand.

“Of course they did.” He folds the menu and crosses his arms as he leans back in his chair, “You’re attempting to pay for this aren’t you?”

“Yes, it’s your birthday gift.” I nod, there’s no way I’m budging on this.

“No, you already gave me a gift.” He waves it away.

“A Christmas gift,” I keep speaking before he can interrupt, “You can stop, you know. I already told the waitress when I called to make a reservation that I’ll be paying. And I’m not going to let you pay, Levi. This is my birthday gift to you, let me do this.” It’s a bluff, of course I didn’t think that far ahead. I think Levi knows this, but he also sees my resolution.
“Fine…” He relents, the waitress breezes by, setting down two glasses of water before continuing on her way. He picks up one of them and takes a sip out of it, a frown etched into his face. I reach across the table and grab ahold of his free hand.

“Why is this a bad thing?” I inquire, giving his hand a small squeeze. Levi holds my gaze steadily, the frown deepens, then relaxes, he sighs and returns the pressure.

“It’s… not,” I’m not convinced by the way he says that, “It’s just… unnecessary. It’s unimportant.”

“It is to me!” I protest.

“Why?” The speed with which he counters me knocks my thoughts off balance for a moment. But I quickly regain myself,

“Because you’re important to me.” I say with a stern expression. Or as stern as I can manage, really. Levi’s face softens, and I see the ghost-smile begin to pull at his lips.

“Thank you.” Is all he replies. I don’t let go of his hand, but intertwine our fingers and smile in response.

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When we step out, I expect to see the parking lot and the car as we left out. Not another white-out storm.

“What the fuck happened here?” Levi muses, squinting as snow pelts the side of our face. I give a shiver, feeling my muscles tense up with the sudden cold. It feels like the temperature’s dropped as well.

“I thought the storm passed!” I exclaim, my voice lost to the whistle of the white wind. Levi takes one look at my face and then grabs ahold of my wrist.

“Fuck this shit, let’s get home.” He half pulls me to the car. I look around worriedly at the storm, will we be able to drive in this weather?

Even in the car, the chill claws at my back, Levi starts up the car, turning the heat on full blast. He grimaces out into the storm, visibility down horribly. Slowly, he pulls into the street, turning on his brights in an attempt to see something other than white. It doesn’t work very well.

We drive slowly, and in silence. I can feel the tension hanging around the car. The storm just gets worse and worse until we can barely see.

“We should pull over.” I break the long-held silence and Levi replies with a nod as he directs the car slowly to the side of the road. There’s the screech of the car sliding forward a few feet as it grinds to a halt next to the curb, and I instinctively grab onto Levi’s arm. He gives me a concerned look,

“You okay?” He inquires, I nod slowly. Levi unbuckles himself and leans towards the dashboard, a green street sign is partially visible in the snow. He grimaces, unable to see it from here, “Hold on.” He opens the car door, and the howl of wind fills my ears as he steps out, slamming the car door behind him and leaving but a few snowflakes in his place. Levi reads the street sign and the walks back around to my side of the car. He knocks on the window and I open the door, feeling the wind blast against me and scrape against my cheek. I blink rapidly as snow assaults my eyes. I see a few flakes of it sticking to Levi’s hair.
“I know where we are. My apartment is within walkable distance from here. Do you think you can make it?” I nod in response, standing up out of the car. I feel my leg start to skid sideways and I grab ahold of the side of the door for balance. “Careful, it’s slippery out.” Levi helps me onto the snow covered street as he closes the car door behind him, locking the car. When I look around, I see the shadows of other cars resting against the street, no doubt people in positions similar to ours, caught by surprise in this blizzard.

The trek is long and hard. We move slowly and my prosthetic gets caught in the snow more than once. I feel snow and ice cling to my eyelashes, and I wrap my arms around myself in an attempt to keep some sense of warmth within my jacket.

It’s probably only a few minutes before we arrive at Levi’s apartment building, but it feels like it could’ve been hours.

“F-f-fuck it’s c-c-cold.” I stutter out the words, Levi nods in agreement, we both hurry to the elevator. As we stand in the elevator waiting to get to his floor, I feel Levi put his arms around me, rubbing my arms up and down in a futile attempt to somehow stay warm.

We stagger into his apartment, and Levi removes his arms for a moment as he heads over to a gas fireplace and starts it up. I follow him, and feel the warmth that tries to rid my legs from the cold. The only downfall is that as the snow melts, everything ends up wet.

“I… don’t think I’ll be able to get you home tonight,” Levi says as he casts a glance towards a window on the back wall, the snow has completely blurred out his view, “Sorry. You can stay here tonight, though.”

“It’s fine.” I reassure him, “I’ll just need to call Mikasa and inform her.” He nods, “Okay… you can borrow some of my clothes but… I’m not sure they’ll fit.” He offers.

“Thank you,” I sigh, “Sorry to be a burden.”

“Hey, not like you caused this shitstorm.” He shrugs, “I’ll go get changed and grab you something dry to wear while you call your sister.” He retreats into a room to the left. I take a moment to hold my numb fingers to the fire until they begin to tingle with pins and needles,

“Eren!” Mikasa’s voice sounds worried, she must be panicked, because she picks up after only one ring. “Are you okay? Where are you? Are you freezing? I’ll come and get you!”

“I’m fine Mikasa,” I shush her worries, “I’m at Levi’s apartment, we pulled over nearby. But I won’t be able to make it home tonight, Levi offered to let me stay.” I inform her of the situation and wait for a response. I expect an immediate one but that doesn’t come, instead all I hear is silence. “Mikasa?” I wonder.

“I’m… not sure if this is a good thing or a bad thing. Do you want me to come get you?” She asks.

“And get us both frostbite? No thank you. Not on my Christmas list.” I say, “I’ll be fine, don’t worry. It’s Levi.”

“That’s why I’m unsure, Eren.”

“It’s fine.” I insist, “I’ll be fine, and I’ll call you in the morning, okay?” I’m met with silence once again, “Okay?” I urge.

“Okay, okay… Stay warm.” She still sounds slightly worried, but at least she’s relented.
“I love you.”

“Love you too.” She finishes up, I hang up the phone and turn around as Levi walks out of what I assume is the bedroom. He has a bundle of clothes in his hands. He’s wearing a black tank top and sweatpants.

“How is she?” He asks.

“Worried, but she’s not going to lead an expedition out here to get me… hopefully.” I crack a grin as Levi places the clothes down on the couch.

That’s when my grin falls, because I see the underside of his arms. Large, almost blotch-like scars that curve around the side of his arm, mainly faded but the edges are still slightly pink, and the insides have a small discoloration to them, stretch marks that come from healed skin- scars, fill the space between the winding scars.

“You can try wearing these, but like I said before I’m not sure if they’ll fit. You’re too damn tall…” He trails off when he sees my look, “What is it?”

“What happened?” I blurt out the words before I can stop them. The scars look faded, like they happened a long time ago. Levi’s face clouds in confusion before a look of horror takes over.

“Fuck,” He curses, “Fuck fuck fuck,” He glances towards his arm, grimacing, “You weren’t supposed to see that shit.”

“Levi, what-”

“Just… hold on.” Levi interrupts me, his face is hidden by his hands, I see his shoulders rise and fall as he takes a deep breath and then drops his hands from his face. “I… fuck,” He cuts himself off when he glances at my face, then he looks to the side and crosses his arms across his chest, then uncrosses them, he shuffles his feet. “Look, shit, I wasn’t exactly ready to show you this.” I stay silent, and wait for him to continue, if he should choose so. My lips are pressed tightly together to keep me from interrupting as he fights his own mental battle about whether or not to explain. Eventually he seems to just… give up. His shoulders sag and he closes his eyes.

“This is what’s leftover from… *that*, physically anyway.” He admits.

That?

What is…

Oh.

Oh no.

Of course, I remember him telling me about how he got sent home. Horrible infection from severe burns that weren’t taken care of.

Burn scars.

Those faded things winding around the underside of his arm, and disappearing into his shirt are burn scars.

“Why were you so afraid to show them to me?” I can’t help but ask him this. Surely, he should know that if anyone is going to understand, it would be me. He shrugs,
“I just…” He shakes his head, “I shouldn’t be the one worrying over what came out of that physically, right? It feels… wrong, to be dumping that shit on you when…” He trails off, but he doesn’t really need to finish. “Besides, they’re not exactly something I’m proud of.” He gives a dry laugh at this, turning to face me again, “Some asshats show off their scars like it makes them a badass bitch, I’m… well, these aren’t exactly fucking attractive like some facial scar, huh?”

Another dry, sarcastic, hate-filled laugh. I move towards Levi, and wrap him up in a hug. The way he did whenever I broke down, just sitting there, staying there for me. I try to copy that same gesture, block out whatever it is that’s going through his mind right now.

Because I know what that hell looks like.

“It’s not the scars on the surface I care about Levi,” I say, “I know what those look like well enough.” I attempt a joke, and am rewarded by a small, shaking laugh from him that I feel against my arms, “I care more about the scars under the skin.”

“Well,” He exhales, and wraps his arms around my torso in return of the gesture, “I’ve got a fuckton of those as well…”

“Good, so do I.” I reply, “So hopefully we can help each other out there.” I rest my head atop of his, his hair is soft, slightly damp from the snow. I close my eyes and recall the image of him with the flakes sticking to it’s edges.

“Yeah, but before that,” Levi disrupts the hug and pushes me away, “Get changed, you’re really fucking wet.” As if to emphasize this point he brushes invisible water off of his shirt.

“I will!” I say, reaching down to the clothes on the couch, “But… do you feel better now?” I pause before leaving the room. Levi catches me concerned look and responds with a soft smile.

“Much… now go get changed before I have to deal with your hypothermic ass.” He halfheartedly tries to push me away.

“Yes sir!” I chime, and hurry towards the bedroom.

Levi’s got his fair share of scars too, sometimes I forget that what with how put-together he seems. But I’ll have to try harder from now on to notice, them, because maybe I can help him.

Chapter End Notes

Annnnnnnnnnnd that’s all of the fluff. Now it's back to plot! (With the latter half of this chapter being the transition into what's coming up next!)

The song that the lyrics are from, in case you're wondering, is Daylight by Snow Patrol. You can listen to it [Here](#).

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated!
Hey everyone, sorry about there not being a chapter last week. There was no internet at my house, and then it was supposed to come back by Friday but that didn't happen either. But all's good now! So here's the chapter we missed beforehand!

Also, I suppose just a few things to get out of the way for this one, warnings and such:

**Minor depictions of gore for the first three paragraphs.** Shouldn't be too bad, but if it's something that might make you uncomfortable, don't want that! So it should be fine after the first three paragraphs. :D

Also,

**The POV switches partially through.** That's right! Remember way back when we had those three Levi chapters? I said there would be one or two minor sections narrated by him again? This is one of those! There's a little notice when it switches so you don't get tangled up in all that jazz, but yeah!

Hope you enjoy!

Come talk to me:
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See the end of the chapter for more notes

This time it’s fire and noise. There’s no color, nothing, just an empty blackness that seems to suck all air out of the room and leave it with just immense pressure. Then it comes in with a burst. Fire-red, orange, yellow, burning and blazing and twisting and clawing it’s way up the side of my body and it’s eating me. Gnawing at my leg with some sick, burning desire. Then there’s the noise. The fire itself screams, yellow mouth ripped open, orange flesh torn and caving in before it spits it back out, red with crimson blood. I’m screaming too but the fire is everywhere and then it’s inside of me. Ripping and tearing its way down my throat, digging it’s wispy claws into my lungs, into my heart, filling them, clogging them until I can’t breathe.

I. Can’t. Breathe.

I feel it, in my stomach, shredding it, burning it, taking me apart piece by piece. Dethreading me vein by vein, pulling them away like little strings and cackling, watching my skin set ablaze as it falls away to reveal red, raw muscle and white bone. I would claw it away but I can’t move, I can’t move and the paralysis only adds to the fear because there is no escape. I try to turn and run but my legs feel so heavy. My eyes are weighted down. I’ve been running for a long time but it was all futile. It was going to catch up with me and I was only delaying the inevitable, wasn’t I?
This was coming. The fire has always been coming for me. It’s a hound and my blood is splattered all over this place. It’s what made this place. I was running from my mind by hiding in my flesh, and I knew it was going to catch up to me. I just didn’t want it to.

- - -

“Eren! Eren hey!” The voice breaks through the barrier first, and I’m awake. The dream- no, the nightmare fades away but I still can’t open my eyes. I can hear and I feel my finger twitch involuntarily, feel the wet streaks still actively running down my cheeks, away from my eyes. I can feel the pressure, the hand on my shoulder, shaking me. I can hear myself sob, without meaning to, without knowing it, sob and take another audibly shaky breath. But I still can’t open my eyes.

“I…” My voice breaks down. I can’t open my eyes. I don’t want to. What will I see if I wake up? The hand is removed from my shoulder and my hand twitches again, trying to grab at it like an anchor but too scared to let go of my death grip on the sheets. I’ll fall if I do, at least that’s how it feels.

“Hey, hey…” The voice is soft, gentle, the panic it once held is replaced by a quiet sympathy… and fear. There’s fear evident in the way the shaking fingers trace the water lines on my cheek. That’s what cues my eyes to open by themselves, still I have no control over myself and I would rather they stay closed because I’m scared what I’ll see.

I can hear my heart, in my ears, roaring above the soothing voice whispering “It’s okay, you’re okay.” Over and over on a broken record. It’s wild and not-quite rhythmic, or rather it’s too fast to tell the rhythm in it. And I can’t focus on it either way.

“Come on, it’s okay, shh…” The voice persists until my eyes are fully open, and my vision is blurry. Blurry enough that I can’t see sharp lines and I feel like if I look to the side then there’s something I wasn’t able to see before there, and that’s terrifying enough. But sharp enough that I can make out black hair, pale skin as a face hovers above mine, I can’t read the expression until the hand wipes away the water from my eyes and I start to blink and clear out the blurriness from my head.

Levi. It’s Levi. His steel eyes are crinkled at the edges, rapidly darting around my face, worried—perhaps as terrified as I am. His lips aren’t pulled down into a grimace, or a scowl, or a frown, or even the ghost smile or any other expression I’m so used to seeing. Instead they’re still pulled down, but slightly open and moving as he continues to whisper the same set of phrases over and over. I feel my chest shake and I give another involuntary sob.

Everything begins to settle into place and reality takes over the last bits of dream. The room is dark and if I listen closely I can hear the wind still howling away outside as the snow storm rages on into the night. I recall where I am, in Levi’s bed at his apartment. We’d been on a date, and gotten snowed in. The shirt that clings to the side of my arms that’s a bit too small is Levi’s shirt because mine were wet. This is what happened. This is where I am. Safe.

Then why don’t I feel it?

My back is still tight with the sense of fear. I can’t shake the feeling that there’s some kind of cold, invisible claw hovering above my neck, ready to dig itself in and drag me back down to whatever hell rests in my subconscious.

I force my hand to release the sheets. Levi sees the small motion, even though his eyes never leave my face as he watches for something, something that I don’t know.
“Are you alright?” It’s a stupid question to ask and I’m sure he knows that. But what else is he supposed to ask?

“No…” I answer honestly, and I watch his face break in front of me. A look of concern, of sadness, of empathy. I turn onto my side, but all that accomplishes is the feeling of fear resettling into a new form. I can’t see what’s behind my back, although I know it’s Levi I can’t shake the feeling there’s something- someone- else lurking there. I cover my eyes with my arm, slinging it across my face. I feel the cool slick of a cold sweat. I breathe in and I can feel my bones rattle with the action, my breath is shaky, “I had another nightmare,” even the words are unsteady.

Levi doesn’t say anything, instead he sinks into the sheets next to me and presses his chest around my back, throws his arms around my torso and hugs me close to him. My back is covered, I’m safe. Aren’t I?

“I thought…” My voice breaks down again, into crackles and sobs and more unsteady breathing, “I thought I was getting better,” I can feel him stiffen against my back, I should say something else- redirect the conversation, but I’ve lost what little control I had over my body again and now my mouth is working as it’s own agent. “I haven’t had a nightmare in weeks maybe even a month, everything was going great. Near perfectly, and it was getting better,” I sob, everything is broken up by sobs, nothing is whole, “I thought I was on the path to being cured! I… I already hit my low point! How could it get worse than that? Oh god, oh no oh no oh no oh no” My throat strains for breath when I forget to take one, I gasp in order to keep going, “It can’t get that bad again, Levi. It can’t I don’t…” Another broken sob, “I don’t want to be that bad again.”

“Eren-”

“I was getting better-”

“… Eren-”

“I swear I’m not lying-”

“Eren-!”

“I was getting better I can’t just relapse like that can I? I was getting better I was get-”

“Eren!” My mouth snaps closed, hard. Hard enough to make my teeth clack together and whatever sob was coming halt in its tracks. Levi takes a breath, and it feels steady against my back, “You are getting better.”

“But-”

“You are.” Levi insists, “Everyone backtracks, this is normal.”

“It can’t be.” The fear settles, nesting in my stomach, in my heart, in my mind, “If this is normal than I’m never going to be fine, am I?”

“You will,”

“I won’t,” I protest. More than fear I can feel exhaustion. How late is it? The same feeling of weighing down my limbs, my eyes, it’s exactly what I felt in the dream. The fear rears it’s head as terror, but terror is being overtaken by a forceful sleep. I can still feel water leaking from my eyes, is that what’s sapping my energy? “I’m scared.”

“I know…” Levi sighs, “But trust me when I say that this is normal, I would know.” A small
pause, my thoughts begin to quiet down as well, mixing together, “You’re fine, Eren.” I feel his hand run through my hair, the action is repetitive, comforting. I feel my body relax into the sheets, “You’ll get better.”

“I will…?” My thoughts become even more garbled until they’re just a dull buzz, ringing in my ears and only drowned out by the soothing sound of his voice.

“Of course you will.” A light pressure against the side of my temple, a kiss. My eyes close, involuntarily. The streaks of water are still visible on my cheeks but I’m too tired to continue sobbing. My breathing evens out and then I fall into a more peaceful sleep.

- - - Levi - - -

I can’t go to sleep. Not after that. Once I’m assured Eren’s asleep I detangle my arms and sit up in the bed. I stare towards the entranceway, my lips pressed tightly together as I focus on the darkness that spills from the next room over. Mentally trying to push down the crappy thoughts that are slowly nudging against the surface of my consciousness.

You did this.

Well, fuck, there it is.

I suppose I can’t help but think so, I mean, I knew it was bound to happen. People like us don’t just magically poof better after one or two good dates. But I can’t stop myself from thinking that, perhaps, part of it was seeing the burn scars. After all, they are a reminder of that time.

So then this is my fault.

Fucking stop that.

I shake my head and move carefully, the bed creaking as I slide back onto the floor. Eren turns over in his sleep, but he doesn’t wake up, good. I proceed to the living room where there’s less of a chance that I’ll wake him up. I need to think this over, because if it was the seeing my scars that set him off… fine, so be it. I never particularly wanted to hide them from him either way. I was just… afraid of this.

Well, that’s a shitty lie to myself.

I breathe in and exhale slowly. If only I was that selfless. Honestly, I’ve always been reluctant to let people see these scars of mine. Like I said, they’re not pretty. More than that, they’re a reminder of all the things I’ve done wrong in life. A question of how many people are dead because I gave the order to go ahead. Might as well have shot them myself, I see no difference.

Yes, I was afraid that Eren would react negatively to them… But perhaps more for my sake then for his. Which just solidifies my crap personality, doesn’t it?

Enough of that, I can make up for it, can’t I? Somehow, in some way, I can make all the shit I’ve done worth it. That’s what Hanji always says, what Erwin consistently preaches, and if the two psychologists are in on it then there’s a chance it’s not just some psychological fuckery to get you to spend more money on a stress-ball or whatever the fuck it is they advertise now a days.

Still, none of this changes the thought.

You did this.
Oh fuck off.

I scowl at my reflection in the window, as if I could send it away with a glare.

But maybe I have a point. After all, what would Eren’s life be like if he hadn’t met me? Maybe he’d have made it out of his service with his leg, and so much shit would’ve just… never happened. Sure, maybe he’d still be a little fucked up, most of us are, who go through that kind of hell. But he wouldn’t be suffering like he is. Crap, maybe he really would’ve been completely better by now. Healthy, happy, with his family and friends to spend time with and a bright future ahead of him that even he can see. If only he didn’t know me, then he wouldn’t be suffering like this.

No, no. I shake my head and turn away from the window. That’s not the case. That can’t be it, it can’t be that simple.

But what was it that he said, it seems so long ago now, when he confessed?

“I… I thought it would be best for you.”

A fucking lie. What’s best for me is… What’s best for me is…

I have no idea what’s best for me. But I’m still sure as hell that my life is better with him around.

“I thought that a relationship between us would be doomed. Not on your part, but because who in their right mind would stay with someone who’s losing their mind?”

Losing his mind. That’s how he phrased it. He believed- still believes if tonight is anything to go by- that he’s losing his mind. Is that my fault?

“I knew that I would only be a bother to you, and I convinced myself that you only said you liked me because you didn’t know what I was really like… when I flipped out or went into one of my panics… You didn’t know, don’t know, what I’m like then. And I knew that when you saw what I was really like, you wouldn’t want to be with me. I was scared that if we dated, it would only hurt you. And I couldn’t hurt you, not like that. And I was scared that I’d be hurt, too, that once you saw what it was like to be with someone who can so easily turn into a… a fucking monster,”

He doesn’t know what a monster is, not if he thinks that he’s one.

I’m tempted to laugh, bitterly, because it’s so easy for me to say that and yet there’ve been countless times when I’ve accused myself of being the very same thing. We are our own demons.

“Someone who’s hopeless? We both know I’m breaking, Levi, and I’m sorry. I’m so goddamn sorry that I had to take it out on you. That you got caught up in all this and I just… can’t help more… I’m sorry you had to meet me. You really would have been better off never knowing that I made it out of that damned bomb alive.”

I grit my teeth. Biting down on the inside of my cheek, I use that feeling to draw myself away from the memory. How long has it been since that one? A week? Two weeks? A month? I’ve lost track of time, and it’s been out of sight for who knows how long.

I think I stopped counting the days after that one, because I felt like perhaps there was a chance that I no longer needed to.

Maybe, just maybe, the worst of it was over and I wasn’t just waiting anymore.
I was goddamn wrong, wasn’t I?

Somehow, Eren dragged himself out of that pit, he did so on his own, by his own will, and was able to claw his way out and see all that he knew he had to fix. Will I just drag him back down there?

What would his life be like, without me?

Would he be more confident? Happier?

Guilt is a shitty old friend of mine. And I can feel it gnawing at my stomach, ripping at my more coherent thoughts that tell me that I shouldn’t be thinking this way. Guilt always wins. He’s a fucker like that.

*Is it too late?*

The question hits me like a truck. I can feel all other thoughts shatter beneath the weight the four words carry. Is it too late to let him rebuild his life and live it as he wishes? Without being tied down by all my shit? Is it too late to undo what damage I’ve already done to him? Is it too late to redeem myself, the selfish motherfucker I am? Or is it too late to let go?

I walk back to the bedroom, Eren’s still asleep, the blankets curled around him like a lover’s arms. Funny enough, even just the idea brings a spark of jealousy to narrow my eyes. But the fuck am I getting jealous of blankets for? I scoff, and I suppose I know at least the answer to the last question. My answer, either way. Perhaps it might be different for him.

I would force myself, either way, to let go if that’s what’s best. If I’m hurting him then…

*Of course you’re hurting him. That’s what you do, isn’t it? Hurt people, it’s what you’ve always done and what you’ll always do.*

*Monster.*

That’s the word he used to describe himself. But he was wrong, so, so wrong and he doesn’t even see it. He doesn’t even see that this entire time the monster has been in front of him, hasn’t it? It’s right in front of me, too, whenever I look in the mirror.

Chapter End Notes

As you can tell, the fluff has ended, hahahaha... *nervous laughter*

Anyway, back to the plot! Some of you guys guessed that this chapter would be mainly focused in on Levi’s mentality and downfall and such, sooo... you were right! Congratulations! :D

...

Not sure that being right about such a thing is something one would want to be congratulated on. Either way, hope you enjoyed! See you next week!

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated!
Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

Happy Wednesday! Middle of week, tests for some, or long-term projects. Hopefully this is a nice break from your daily life... a break with drama from drama. Enjoy!

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I’m not exactly ‘cold’, the blanket itself keeps me warm, but I can still feel some warmth missing. It doesn’t take much to figure out why this is, though. I blink open my eyes, the bleariness fading away as I look over at the empty bedside beside me. Levi’s gone. He must have woken up earlier than me.

I sit up, a slight ache in the back of my head and my eyes are still tired and weary- from crying. I rub the space under my eyes even though the trails of water have long-since dried.

I had a nightmare last night.

The thought makes a feeling of despair sink into my stomach. A familiar panic creeping up the edge of my back- no. I have to remember what Levi told me. That this is normal. That of course it was going to happen again. I’m not relapsing or falling back… even if I’m not fine now.

I’ll be okay.

The words… they sound truthful, and the looming feeling of panic teeters away, leaving only ghostlike fingerprints of an emotion on the back of my mind. I swing my leg off the side of the bed and glance around for my prosthetic. It’s lying against the wall next to the bed, dutifully waiting.

In a short manner of time, I have my prosthetic on and I’m heading towards the kitchen. As expected, I see Levi there, cradling a cup of coffee in his hands as he sits on his couch. I walk up behind him, he must hear me but he doesn’t turn around, and wrap my arms around his shoulders, burying a kiss on his cheek.

“Good morning,” I greet him, a noncommittal noise comes as a reply. “I need to thank you,” I begin, “And also apologize… for last night. I—”

“You don’t need to apologize.” Levi cuts me off, “In fact, never apologize, not for something like that.” He closes his mouth, but his lips are hard-pressed like he wants to say something more, but he doesn’t. Instead his eyes slowly, listlessly trail towards the far wall, looking away from me as he takes a sip from the mug. He’s stiff from under my arms, tension locking his shoulders.

Is something wrong?

I release him, leaning back as I wonder if maybe something isn’t quite okay with him. Did
something happen after I pass out? He’s never seen me during one of my darker times, did it scare him? Or bring up bad memories?

“Are you… alright?” I ask slowly, and he stands with a jolt as if I’d given some verbal cue.

“You should call Mikasa,” His words are quick, terse, “She’s probably worried about you.” He briskly walks across the room, setting the cup down on the counter as he moves, not stopping. Before I can ask him what it is he’s doing, he continues to speak, “I’m getting changed, your clothes are by the fireplace, they should be dry. Your phone is next to them.” Then the door to the bedroom closes, and silence becomes the dominating force in the room.

What… was that?

I narrow my eyes at the door, as if my gaze could force it open and make him come out and explain what it is that’s going on. What it is that’s bothering him. How I could help.

I wait, and wait… and wait. But just staring at the door doesn’t make it open, of course. With a sigh I turn towards the fireplace, where sure enough, my clothes from yesterday are neatly folded next to Levi’s. The fire is still crackling, a heat filling the room after that cold conversation.

I take my time getting changed, with the hopes that maybe Levi will emerge before I start dialing Mikasa. It can’t take him that long to put on clothes… But no such thing happens. And I’m standing in the middle of his living room, I even took the time to fold up the clothes he lent me, clutching them close to my chest and staring at the door again as if it wasn’t just a physical barrier between us but also whatever verbal barrier he just put up as well.

Maybe I’m overthinking things.

I feel the frown dig into the sides of my jaw as I set the clothes I folded next to his, a sloppy comparison at best. Maybe he’s just a little tense after seeing me react, maybe he thinks I’m still in a volatile stage and he’s just making sure I’m not going to explode at the slightest thing, or maybe it brought up some of his own unpleasant memories and now he’s just dealing with those… in which case I could be of help, but I won’t push too hard, I don’t want him to be uncomfortable. Which could really be the case, considering he also showed me his scars last night…

He opened up to me, and I freaked out.

The late guilt dawns on me like someone threw a blanket over my shoulders. A cloak of realization that, oh shit, I really could have handled that better. I should have been there for him, but instead he was the one who had to be there for me. I can’t let it get to me though. I’ll just have to make it up to him. I shake off the quivering blanket of guilt and opt for a resolute decision. I’ll find some way to make it up to him. To show that I care, and that I’m here to listen to him no matter how bad it gets. I’ll care for him, not just have him care for me. Because that’s what we do. Sometimes we need people to care for us, and sometimes we need to care for others.

I wait another minute for Levi to come out, but the door stays tightly sealed. I feel the edge of my determination begin to flit away with the ticking minutes. But no, I won’t let it. He just needs some time to himself, that’s it. It’s probably not even been as long as I think it has been. Time’s fickle like that, and my mind can distort it, make it seem much longer than it really is. I just need to preoccupy myself in the meantime. I’ll call Mikasa, and give her an update on how I am. I turn around and grab my phone, dialing Mikasa’s number. She picks up after only a single ring,

“Eren, are you okay?” Her voice is rushed, still with her usual, semi-monotonous tone, but I can
hear the strings of worry tugging at the words.

“I’m fine,” I half laugh at her worry, “You can relax, I didn’t get eaten by a polar bear.”

“Really?” Sarcasm begins to fill in the gaps that worry left, “I’m surprised… I hear polar bears are running rampant this time of year, you know.” But the worry is still pulled taut, “Anyway, are you home? I wanted to wait for you, but they needed me over at work.”

“I’m going to head home soon.” I inform her, “I just wanted to let you know that I actually survived the night, so that maybe you wouldn’t be so freaked.”

“Okay.” She sighs, and I can practically hear the weight being lifted from her shoulders, “Call me when you get there, though, okay? Just so that I know.”

“Will do.” I agree, “Now you should probably get back to work before they notice you slacking off.”

“I’ve already filled my quota,” She responds matter-of-factly, “But alright, I love you.”

“Love you too, see you when you get home.” The line closes with a final beep as I place the phone back in my pocket. As I do I hear the door swing open, and Levi steps out of the bedroom dressed in normal day clothes. “Hey,” I keep an upbeat tone, maybe he’s still just a little shaken after what happened… I know I would be, “I called Mikasa. Thanks again for everything, Levi, I really owe you one.”

“You don’t owe me anything.” He snaps, the response comes out daggered, and I almost wince in surprise. He heads for the coat closet by the door, not saying a word. I trail after him, slowly.

“I-I… I, well, I really do though.” I sputter, treading a bit more carefully this time. Something’s definitely up, and now I know I’m not just imagining things. Overthinking… maybe, but something is going on. “You, um, you okay, Levi?”

“Okay?” He echoes the word with that same meaningless emptiness that someone repeats a word from a language they don’t know yet. “Yes,” He speaks slowly, calculating each word with carefully weighted cautiousness, “I’m fine.” Not revealing anything. Not opening up to me.

“You sure…? I mean, I know this is, like, the fifth or so time I’ve bugged you about this today…” I laugh, not out of humor but to try to cut up the awkwardness with something that’s supposed to signify happiness, joy. “But, um, you really don’t seem… okay?” He turns to look at me, slowly, my words slow as well, as if reacting to his movements. Levi doesn’t say anything, just gives me a steady stare. “Um…” The word hums and hangs in the air. “You can talk to me?” It comes out a question, it’s supposed to be a concrete statement, hell, it is a concrete statement, but it comes out like a question.

“Why would I need to talk to you?” The response continues the long domino effect of shattering any hope for him to just tell me what’s wrong. “Nothing’s wrong.” Another piece falls and breaks.

“Nothing’s wrong…” It’s my turn to speak a foreign language. Levi turns on his heels, shrugging his coat over his shirt as he opens the door.

“Right, now come on, you should get home.”

You should leave, is what he means.
Levi drops me off in front of my apartment. He doesn’t say goodbye, not really, not beyond a murmured phrase- only said out of courtesy.

I know I told Mikasa I would call her once I got into the apartment, but the thought ends up among the reserves as I recoil from my morning conversation with Levi. It was the first time he’d ever acted like that, and he didn’t want to tell me anything, he even seemed eager to push me out of the apartment and get away from me as fast as he could. I can’t shake the horrible feeling of dread clinging to me as I walk past the couch, then turn and pass it going the other direction. Turn, walk, turn, walk, pacing to think instead of jogging.

*I pushed it too far.*

That seems the most likely answer, that I just took it too far last night by asking about the scars. He opened up to me unnaturally, before he was ready, and all because I just had to go sticking my nose into places where it didn’t belong. No surprise there, though, I suppose. But now it may have lost him.

What if he’s lost his affection for me? If he no longer likes me? Would it be because of what I said or did I just grow irritable to him.

*Exactly like I said it would.*

No, no, I’m not doing this again. I’m not going down that road again. At least… not until I know for sure that’s the reason why-

No, not even then. Whatever this is, whatever happens, I’m not going through all that shit again. It leads nowhere, I know at least that much.

Besides, Levi’s already told me he likes me, has actual, real feelings for me. Several times over now. What could lead him into such a one-eighty?

*Feelings fade.*

But this quickly? It seems so… unlikely.

Although maybe that’s just me grasping at straws.

I stop my pacing, all I’m going to accomplish at this point is running the floorboards through and having a very unpleasant visit with our neighbors downstairs.

*You’re insecure? Fine. That’s not going to go away? So be it. But dwelling on your own insecurities won’t get you anywhere. In fact all it’s done is get you to bad places.*

Something’s wrong with Levi, and it could be me. But I’ll just have to assume it’s not, ignore that notion until I can’t think of anything else. And if it’s not that, then it’s gotta be something that Levi thought up himself. Levi’s careful, and he’s good at keeping a blank face, so I need to ask someone who can read him, even better than I can. Lucky for me, I know two.

Hanji and Petra.

- - -

“Thanks for meeting me.” I say as I slide into the booth at the diner. It’s a quaint place, has a nice retro-60’s feel complete with red leather booths and a reflective glass wall that makes the small place look twice as big as it actually is. Hanji and Petra sit across from me. Hanji with their usual
large grin and Petra with a small, shakily concerned smile.

“You make it sound like we’re holding some kind of espionage… I like it!” Hanji chirps, a menu open in front of them.

“We should thank you for calling us,” Petra nods, “After you did I asked Levi if he wanted to go to lunch and… well, he refused initially but…” She shakes her head, “Yesterday we finally got him to go out and you were right, he did seem different.”

Yesterday… It’s been three days since I called in the two of them. And I haven’t seen or even talked to Levi since that morning. Normally, this wouldn’t bother me all that much. We’re busy and I get that… but with how he’s been acting, I can’t help but have the smallest twinge of fear that stems from dead silence on his part.

“Different? How?” I distract myself and refocus back on the task at hand. Petra shares a glance with Hanji, her eyebrows crinkled above her forehead in a delicate look of concern. Hanji just shrugs,

“Well, he was his usual ass-self.” Hanji begins, shrugging, “Except… more of an ass.”

“More irritable,” Petra fills in, “But he also was apologetic, which was strange, to say the least.”

“Apologetic?” I echo the word, “What do you mean?”

“Well, he kept apologizing after every comment.” Hanji explains it so clearly, and somehow that’s probably what scares me the most out of all this. There’s no joke or hint of a smile on their face, no side comment or sexualizing or… anything that Hanji would normally do. “And it wasn’t even his usual brand of grumpiness, it was… well…”

“More like he wanted out,” Petra explains, “Usually he’ll just grump about it but go along anyways, this time it was like he was looking for an escape route.”

That’s… exactly what it felt like when I talked with him. I can’t help but feel a slight, guilty twinge of relief at this. It’s not me, at least, if he’s reacting this way with Petra and Hanji. But that just means that something’s bothering him, and pretty badly too…

I’m not sure if this is better or worse.

“So what should we do?” I lean forward, crossing my arms on the table,

“What do we do? Go detective!” Hanji cheers, “We need to find out what’s wrong with him, right? So, it’s time for some good ole’ fashioned espionage!”

I nod in agreement, “I can ask him what’s wrong but I’m not fully sure if he’ll open up…” I trail off as Petra shakes her head.

“No, no, I know Levi, and he’ll pick up on us trying to pry… I think it’ll just make him close up more.” Petra gives Hanji a fair amount of side-eye, “So no detective.” She sighs, “I think… I think that this is something Levi needs to work out for himself.” She fidgets, her thumbs twiddling in her lap, “He’s struggled before but he’s never quite come to peace with himself, and I think this is just that same thing again.”

“Okay, but what do we do? We can’t just leave him alone, what if this goes… poorly?” I squeeze my arm, remembering how quickly just ‘leaving me to myself’ backfired. I don’t want that to happen to Levi, it can’t.
“Well, we can’t really help him…” Petra frowns.

“But we can be there for him!” Hanji suggests, “We’ll make sure it doesn’t go poorly, by doing all that we can to be there for him.” Hanji looks between the two of us, “I mean, shouldn’t be too hard, right? We all know what makes him happy, what he enjoys, few things there are.” At this they give a grin, “So let’s just make sure he doesn’t forget about that!”

“I guess… that’s the best plan.” Petra nods in agreement.

Is it really that simple? The plan seems so easy, something so minor, so miniscule that it can’t possibly be all we can do… and yet… I can’t come up with anything else, and Hanji is a psychologist… Well, if it’s making him happy that will help him figure this out, then I’m sure I can manage something. I’ll just do what he did for me when I was in a dark place, I won’t leave him alone and I’ll make sure he knows that I care.

“Alright,” I lean back in my seat, “I’ll do whatever it takes.”

Hanji’s grin widens on their face, “I know you will.”

Chapter End Notes

Always be careful what you say you’ll do.

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated! :D
I was expecting him to shut me out, I was hoping that he would at least be angry with me and steam over it for a few days before coming to the proper conclusion that maybe things aren’t working, and I was terrified that he’d leave me. But I was not expecting this.

**Hey, Levi! We should go out to the Rose Café sometime! It’s been awhile since we’ve done that, huh? -Eren**  
**How about lunch? My schedule is free around noon if that’s okay with you! -Eren**

They’re just words on a page, I remind myself, having to double check to make sure they say what I think they do, You can’t actually tell if he’s mad or not. I don’t type a reply, I just let the phone fall back into it’s place in my drawer. I turn back to the contract I was working on beforehand but… I can’t focus, not like this.

The fuck does that brat think he’s doing?

I thought I made it clear enough, even for someone as thick-headed as he is. I could tell that he knew I was shutting him out beforehand, and of course I was, I wasn’t about to burden him with something else.

Bullshit.

I just couldn’t say it myself. They’re just three words, three goddamn words that shouldn’t be so hard to say if I want to do the right thing.

**Let’s break up.**

There, that’s it. It’s done… not aloud but… That would be all I have to say, and I couldn’t. I got attached, I was already fucking attached from before we started dating. And now he’s being hurt by some asshole who can’t let go. Fuck him for being so goddamn endearing, and fuck me for being so crappy and gullible. If I said those three words, then I could be done with it all, with everything. I could quit the group and let him live his life while I went on and lived whatever semblance of a life I’ve got left in me, even less so without…

A little ding catches my attention. A new email, most likely for work. I sigh and click on it, I need to focus on this right now, and push Eren out of my mind.
Ignoring him isn’t going to make it go away. I know this, but it’s all I can do right now. Maybe it’ll even help him realize what’s best as well.

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I arrive half an hour late, at 12:30, partially on purpose and partially because work really did keep me late. But I could have been here at 12:05, I almost was. I got about half a block away before I parked, got out the car, turned around, backtracked, and did a loop to go around the long way, detouring twice before finally arriving on foot in hopes that he won’t be there. Ironically enough, it’s a trick I learned from Eren himself, when he went out of his way to avoid me, when he was at his lowest.

When you pushed him too far.

But the tables have turned now, flipped on their goddamn heads, and sadly Eren is prepared for shit to go down. Or so I assume when he stands up and waves from a reserved table, on the outside as per usual. I didn’t even text back to say I was coming, how long was he going to wait out here?

How long were you prepared to wait for him?

Fuck this flipped bullshit, he couldn’t have been out here that long. Brat was probably twenty minutes late himself.

“Levi!” Eren chimes, his voice does that weird tilted thing, a kind of melodic slide upwards in volume and pitch when he grows happier or more excited. I say ‘weird’... but I enjoy it, perhaps because it’s one of the many indications that Eren fails to hide at how he’s feeling. He’s happy, and for some estranged reason, which for the love of fuck I can’t piece together, he’s happy because I’m here. “Look who’s late,” He teases, shaking his head like a patronizing parent with a coy smile playing against his lips.

“Work.” I answer briskly, and it’s not a full lie.

“Ahh, busy day?” He doesn’t waver, doesn’t bat an eyelash. Is he prepared for this? I don’t reply, simply study his face for some sense of irritation, of disappointment, of… anything sane. “Well, come on then! I ordered drinks- tea, right?” I don’t reply, he doesn’t wait for a reply, “Come sit with me.” The invitation is urged with him gesturing to the seat in front of him. Again, I chose silence as a preferable method of communication, and move through the warm atmosphere of The Rose Café- filled with misplaced laughter and broken conversations- and back out to the veranda where I sit down across from Eren.

His hands are folded in his laps, the twiddling of his gloved thumbs the only thing betraying his nervousness. That- and the slight bounce of his leg. He’s wearing that new coat, and his breath comes up in wisps of white smoke that dance around his eyes, which stare down at the table with an expression that looks somewhat thoughtful, or about as thoughtful as Eren can get, and near… vulnerable?

I’m tempted to apologize, but I grind my teeth together instead. Too hard, as pain shoots across the bone of my lower jaw and pressure builds in my cheek. I relax my jaw, pressing my lips into a thin line instead, as if sewing them shut, and take the seat across from Eren. He looks up at me, and the look vanishes from his eyes, replaced with that familiar bright enthusiasm, the glow that spreads from his pupils to his irises and gives him a vibrance that I can’t seem to find on anyone else. There’s red dusted across his nose and the tips of his ears from the cold, frost is formed in the shape of a light white hue on his eyelashes and the tips of his hair. He really has been out here a long time.
Guilt gnaws at my stomach, hungry for more to feed off of, and it easily finds what it’s looking for. I can’t help but feel that this light in his eyes is faked for my sake. Of course it is, I’m acting like shit and this… this is just going to hurt him more, isn’t it? But if he doesn’t leave, then he’ll continue to get hurt by being around me.

Shit… There’s no good way out of this.

I know that me being around is just going to be worse for him, but if I push him away, then that’ll just hurt him.

What do I do?

“You know, I realize that we’ve never actually eaten here together,” Eren laughs as he says this, is the laugh strained or am I hearing things? “We always just have something to drink or talk. I’m surprised the owners haven’t kicked us out yet.” What do I do?

“Well, like you said we still get something to drink… any money is good money, I suppose.” I respond without really thinking. I watch as his face lights up, even just that much can make him happy, give him useless hope. What am I doing? What should I do? I feel my frown dig into my face. This can’t keep going on, but I can’t bring myself to hurt him. Something on my face must look off, because for a brief second Eren’s smile falters.

I knew it. I knew he wasn’t happy. He’s just faking this. Faking it for my well-being.

“That’s true! But we should probably actually get something to eat today to make sure we don’t get kicked out.” He suggests, and this time I know I’m not imagining the strain in his voice.

“Alright, why the fuck not? Let’s see what they’ve got.” The least I can do is try to act normal, just this once if never again. Besides, this could be our last time together. That would be ideal, wouldn’t it? I’d like to leave him with a happy memory of me instead of a sad one.

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I can’t seem to speak normally. Everything I say sounds off to my ear, odd, distorted, it doesn’t sound like me. I know that Eren notices this. He’s struggling more than ever to keep the smile plastered on his face. Is this what we’ve become? Both of us faking it in an attempt to drag out something doomed? One of us trying to keep it together, and the other… trying to do what’s best.

He’s not happy with me, he’s just masking it for my sake. He’s putting his happiness aside. This is exactly what I was trying to avoid, this is why I need to leave him. He needs to put himself first, for once. He needs to be happy, but what’s he doing? He’s giving me a false smile. Even now as he prattles on about whatever he can come up with, he’s struggling for a topic to talk about. I can tell in the way his eyes search around the area for an idea, in the way his smile keeps falling and then he’ll catch it and put it back on again- unnaturally. He’s trying his best to make me happy and that’s the very thing I don’t want him to do.

Why can’t you just be happy for yourself, for once? Forget about me.


“Yes, why?” I keep my voice even.

“You were… uh…” He looks to the side, but he’s not searching for anything this time, he’s just looking away from me. “Well, you were glaring at me.”
“Oh?” I force my face to relax, “Sorry, it’s not you… I was just… deep in thought.” I watch as Eren’s eyes hesitantly move back to where I sit, then he nods. He’s lost his smile again, and this time he doesn’t notice it, doesn’t try to fix it.

“Ah, I see.” He wants to ask what I’m thinking about, it’s obvious in the way he clenches his jaw and his hands curl around the fabric of his pants in an effort to not inquire. “So… um, Levi, I was thinking that maybe we should… um…” Eren scratches the back of his head, “Armin told me about this play that’s being put on next week by this traveling acting group, I don’t know if it’s really your thing but… Maybe it’d be fun?”

Next week? Why does he want to drag this out so long?

“I’ll have to check my schedule.” I answer, but I really should just refuse. I suppose it doesn’t matter either way. This needs to end, and soon. We shouldn’t even be together still by the time next week rolls around.

“Oh, well,” He’s still trying? “If you want maybe we could do something later this week, then-”

“Look, it’s getting late,” I interrupt him, and begin to stand, the check lays on the table; we haven’t even bothered to go over the usual argument of who pays, “I should go.” I take out my wallet, and place the money on the table. Eren opens his mouth to argue but I just turn to leave, “Goodbye.”

Saying ‘I’ll see you later’ seems too false. This should be the last time, this should have never even happened. I should have just broken up with him already and made sure he went on his way, so that he can be happy, so that we don’t drag this out more than we should.

“L-Levi!” I stop when Eren calls my name, he’s rapidly standing from the table. “I’ll… let me walk you to your car!” The words are rushed, like he’s afraid to let me escape.

“There’s no need.” I dismiss, “It’s just a block or so down the way it’s not the far.”

“But still!” Eren catches up with me, he’s not going to let me go, is he? I grit my teeth, but there’s no way I can ask him to leave me alone without sounding harsh again.

“Fine, but keep up.” I speed-walk out of The Rose Café. Eren trails behind me, lagging just the tiniest bit before he catches up again and tries to keep pace. I don’t say anything as I head for my car, but that doesn’t stop him.

“It’s still really cold out, isn’t it?” He muses, that shaky, fake smile is back on his face again. My chest hurts, and I fucking hate it. “I can’t wait for the spring to come around again.” He continues, unbothered by my lack of response, “Ah… but I suppose that won’t be for a while, huh? It’s still just December!” He waits for a response that doesn’t exist, or maybe he’s not waiting for me to respond at all, maybe he already knows that I’m not going to reply. “Oh, New Year’s Eve is coming up soon, isn’t it? We should do something special!”

“Don’t you want to spend it with your family?” Surely, they’d be much better company than me. They’d make him happier, he’d be able to smile, really smile, with them. They’re not like I am. Not like it matters, I don’t plan on making us last more than we need to. That’s what’s best. That’s what I should do.

“Well, yeah, but I can always do more than one thing in a day, right?” He shakes his head, “Who says I can’t spend it with both you as well as Armin and Mikasa?”

“There it is.” I cut him off from anything further by pointing out my car in the distance. “You turn around here anyways, right?” Eren’s eyes are wrought with concern, the lines in his face are tell-
tale signs of worry, he can’t seem to hide it no matter how hard he tries.

“Well, yeah but-”

“Goodbye.” I repeat what should have been our final words at the café. I hold Eren’s gaze for a moment, before turning on my heels and walking away.

“I’ll… see you later.” Eren’s voice sounds weak behind me. I don’t dare turn around.

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_He must hate you. If he doesn’t then he will._

It’s not often I find myself crying, and I’ll be damned and fucked over if I ever let anyone see me when I do. But for some reason it’s hard to see the road and it takes me a moment to realize the blurriness is my own eyes betraying me. Fucking eyes.

I stop in front of my apartment. I take a moment to breathe, my knuckles white against the steering wheel even though the car is parked. I shut my eyes and inhale slowly, waiting for everything to stop spinning and calm down for once. Of course that won’t happy, and it doesn’t, but I’m able to get calm enough that the only thing to betray my innermost thoughts is a ring of redness around the whites of my eyes.

I open the car door, and step out into the tilting world. I focus on breathing to steady myself until I can get to my floor, my door, my home.

The walk is a blur, everything is a blur and I fumble with my keys because fuck me if I’m going to let the neighbors see me like this. The keys clatter to the floor.

“Shit…” My voice comes out in a wisp as I bend down and pick them up. Struggling to keep my hand steady enough to fit the key in the lock before I hear the click through the mist and shove the door open. I barely remember to retrieve my keys, my lungs hurt. I remind myself to breathe again and shakily lock the door behind me.

It’s odd that my first reaction is to go through things as normal. I place the keys in the bowl on the counter and turn on the lights. I light the fireplace to fill the room with warmth and make tea with silently quaking hands. The only noise is the sound of my footsteps moving around the apartment and the pounding of my heart in my ears. Everything is a blur, and I move on autopilot to avoid hitting my side on anything. By the time I sit on the couch with the tea in my hands, I don’t even bother to drink. I just sit and feel it grow colder and colder in my hands. My face tingles as the feeling seeps back in, returning from the cold. It’s then that I feel the trickle of water running down the sides of my cheeks. The tea grows lukewarm, I raise it to my lips but the liquid inside splashes around with my unsteady hands, and my hands are usually steady as a fucking rock. I nearly spill some on the couch, so I give up and put it back on the table. I cross my hands in my lap. I don’t move. I don’t blink. I just stare at the fire and wonder why I can’t do it.

Even though I know I’ve just fallen too hard. And that’s what’s screwed him over.

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Chapter End Notes

_Whoops._
Comments and Kudos are Greatly Appreciated!
Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

Sorry for all the lateness, lots of tech troubles.

Come talk to me:
goldie-the-cat.tumblr.com

Updates tagged:
fic ntmywf

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It didn’t work. It didn’t work at all. For a second I thought that maybe it would work, when he actually started responding to me and talking. But he was faking it, the entire time, every word was laced with a forced tone. Like he had to physically push each sentence out of his mouth and he was struggling to do so. It didn’t work. That was… worse than before. Because before he wasn’t trying to act normal. But now it almost felt like he was lying to my face.

Not that I was any better, really. I was faking it the entire time as well… and he could tell, couldn’t he? This isn’t helping him, it’s hurting him! That’s not what I wanted!

Damn it…

What do I do now?

I reach for my phone, I need to ask Hanji or Petra, even Armin might have an idea about what to do in this kind of situation. They’re all much better with people than I am…

But I stop halfway, my hand hovering above the blank screen before I retract it. Because I think… I think I know what I have to do… Or, what I should do, because I really really don’t want to.

You should break up with him.

My knee-jerk reaction is to immediately deny the idea. That would only make it worse, wouldn’t it? A breakup is the last thing someone who’s suffering would need. But… if he truly is suffering because of me, then wouldn’t separating myself from him fix the problem?

That would mean… I am the problem.

It’s exactly what I denied but what if that’s really what’s happening? I can’t deny the possibility. I know that this extends far past me, and there’s probably more to it then I’m seeing but I’m not helping the situation.

Can’t I help him somehow? Without it coming to that? It can’t come to that. But what if it’s the best way?

No, no, no, no, no. That’s not the best way, I can’t keep saying that. If I do… If I do then even I’ll start believing myself.
And if I’m tricking myself?

I’m not.

But what if I am? What if I’m clinging to an imaginary hope? I’m making it worse for him. I’m a reminder of what’s happened, a visual reminder at that. How can he let go of his past when it’s walking right beside him, literally?

I can help him some other way. I know it. There has to be another way. I… I don’t want to lose him.

Yes, I don’t want to lose him. But how do I know that it’s the same for him? He seemed perfectly fine leaving, perfectly fine saying goodbye and just leaving me there.

But he didn’t, and that’s the strange thing. He seemed to be trying to get rid of me but he kept staring at me, kept drawing it out himself with this… sad look on his face.

And what if that’s just my imagination? What if that’s still just my invisible hope, nonexistent but made-up for the sake of my own sanity?

“Eren?” Mikasa pokes around the corner of her room, “Ah, I thought you’d come home…” She watches me with a level gaze, Mikasa already knows what’s happening. I’m done keeping secrets from her and Armin, after all, “How did it go?” She phrases the words carefully. She sees something on my face, as if the split itself is crack down the middle of my body.

How did it go? “I… I have no idea?” I exhale the words, plopping back down on the couch with a defeated sigh, “However it went… it wasn’t in the right direction.” I slump forward, my spine itself giving into the weight bearing down on my back. What is the right direction? Perhaps if I truly should break up with him then this… strangeness is the best course of action, distancing ourselves whether we want to or not… and he seemed to want to. So perhaps it was in the right direction after all… just not the way I wished it was going. Although is that selfish of me to say? Or is it simply selfishness speaking with little to no input on my part?

Mikasa stands still, and part of me expects her to threaten to beat him for me or… something. Tell me to break up with him, call him an asshole, the usual. Instead she silently sits next to me, and places a comforting hand on my back.

“What are you going to do?” She asks, her monotonous voice seems softer for some reason. The question said aloud seems to weigh on me much more than it ever did in my head. Before it was just a thought, airy, light, no real physical form outside of what I wish it to be. But when it’s set free unto the world the question lays on my chest like a weight, its hands pressing into my throat to try to force an answer out of them, even when I still can’t find one there.

“I might… I might have to break up with him.” I wince at the words, but I expect the pressure to be released. It is… and yet the answer itself carries a much heavier weight of its own. Such a thing would have been better left without a response.

“You want to?” Not even Mikasa can hide the surprise in her voice, and I find myself shocked stiff at the words themselves. The very thought…

“No!” I shoot up, my eyes wide at the accusation, “Of course not I…” I stop, and swallow my words, along with them flies away whatever train of thought had been about to crash through the barriers of thought. The thought is still there, but now buried under soot and soil of more pressing matters. In short, I don’t respond, although Mikasa waits, one eyebrow raised in inquisition, “I…
honestly…” I take a breath, “I’m scared, Mikasa, I’m scared to lose him…” I bury my face in my hands. The words are inadequate, and I find myself hating them for that. Hating myself because downplaying it seems like lying to her. So I take the chance to rephrase, “I’m terrified, paralyzed by the idea of being without him, and yet… I can’t seem to shake the feeling that I’m at least some part of what’s torturing him…” I admit, my voice muffled by my hands.

“So… you’re willing to let him go…” She mumbles, staring towards something past me with a thoughtful look, her next words are barely above a whisper, and I don’t quite register them. Nonetheless she doesn’t look pleased, but she doesn’t look particularly pained either. Instead her emotions seem to flip flop in her eyes, the crinkling and relaxing showing a tug-of-war between thoughtfulness and resignation.

“What did you say?” I look up, but Mikasa just shakes her head, both falling away from her eyes like a curtain to reveal a slate of determination.

“I never did quite believe in that saying.” I give her a confused look, but she doesn’t elaborate, instead she fixes me with a stern look, the determination still evident in the way she raises her chin, a tone mixing accusation and inquiry fills her voice, and it seems louder than before, more sure.

“You believe he wants to break up with you?”

“Y-... yes…” I admit.

“Why?” She removes her hand from my back and crosses her legs, all sense of coddling or softness is gone and replaced with an almost militant stance. I briefly think of a commander about to prepare a troop for war.

“I think he hates me…” I say, but then follow it up with, “Even if he doesn’t know it. I think something inside of him resents me for… what I represent.” I gesture to my prosthetic, “For what I remind him of.”

“Ask him.” She advises. “Make him answer to his actions and explain what it is he wants.” She holds up a hand to stop me from replying, “You’re both dodging around the answer, and neither of you are going to get through this if you don’t know what the other wants. Nobody is telepathic, Eren, we can’t read minds or know what others want. That’s why we talk to the people we care about, it’s about as close to mind-reading as anybody’ll get.” She stands, “If you don’t take my word for it, ask Armin, he’ll tell you the exact same thing I am.”

“What do I do if I’m right?” I can already feel the dread pinching my spine, crawling up it.

“Then that’s up to you.” Mikasa’s voice is still level, but the words she says seem less hard-edged, smoother, delicate, “But I don’t think you’re right.”

Armin does, in fact, say the same thing. He suggests that I get in contact with Levi as soon as possible and yet… talking and speaking about talking are two entirely different things. Worlds apart, in fact, and I happen to have the unlucky position of standing right in between the two. I’m done with speaking about talking, and yet I find my hand hovering above the door, reluctant to knock for fear of who it is that will greet me on the other end of the line, and for fear he won’t.

This has happened before, hasn’t it? The hesitation is familiar, whether from a screen brightly displaying his name, or this door in front of me, they are all familiar. But from when? A good part of me suggests that it’s happened more than once. Sometimes out of fear and sometimes out of excitement. With the promise of good or the wariness of the bad- hesitation has been a companion
I’ve tried hard to be rid of. Yet it’s nails are dug into my back, it’s caught me and it refuses to release me. I could probably shake it off, get rid of hesitation and yet it prevents me from doing such a thing as well. And why? Because I’m afraid that it’s so dug in, that it’s become so attached to me that shaking it off will break my very foundation.

Although I’ve been shaky enough as it is, so maybe that’s a good thing. Maybe starting over… deconstructing myself and rebuilding from the few good scraps that are left over is exactly what should be done. That being said, I’ve few enough to rebuilding a piece of myself, let alone my entirety.

I’m not about to lose what little good in my life I have.

I knock.

I can count the seconds in heartbeats. A few too many to pass and the question of whether or not I’ll actually pass out at this rate flutters in my subconscious. Then I hear the footsteps, on the other side of the door, soft, barely audible over the sound in my ears. The hallway of the apartment building is silent, save for the ticking of a clock at the end of a hall. But surely I can’t be the only one who hears this rapid beating, who hears my heart, in accompaniment? Maybe he will, when… if he opens the door.

And he does, there’s much less flourish than you would see in a movie. When the couple fighting have their grand confrontation it’s usually accompanied by the best song, one slamming the door on the other, they stop it though- fingers barely escaping the bear-trap of the wooden frame. Screaming, yelling, slanted camera angles would accompany the crescendo of the song before both fall into some passionate, silly embrace, grasping at their clothes because how could they ever be apart? Then the song would finish, the screen would fade to black, and they would live in happily ever after.

But no, there is no music. Only the ticking of the clock and the roaring everyone else would be deaf to. The closest thing to a yell comes in the small exhale, the expulsion of relief and fear, “Levi,” I sigh out the word, most people breathe in to begin a speech but I find myself in desperate need to emptying the air I’d been holding before. He regards me with that same artificially cold gaze, even, smooth, and yet I can see the slight twitch, the shaking fingers in my peripheral vision.

“What is it?” The beginning of his words are choked, like it’s an effort to get them out. He doesn’t look me in the eye but instead finds something behind me interesting.

“You…” How to start? I’m not in need of way, rather I have far too many. I take a gamble, and choose whichever will fight its way to the surface first, “You want to break up with me.”

Shock. There’s no emotion, but the only way to describe the stillness that settles over him is through that word. Stone cold shock. “Is that a question or a statement?” A forced chuckle, and it’s about as rigid and mirthless as the way he stands, one hand gripping the doorway, the other still shaking.

“An observation.” He didn’t deny it. He didn’t confirm it but that thought is overtaken by the fact that he didn’t deny it. “Am…” My eyes flicker to the side, mimicking his own glance past me. Now neither of us are looking at the other. “Am I right?” My sentences are long, short words filled with extended pauses because that horrible creature called hesitation is still eating away at my back, tearing it apart with every second that passes, and reveling in the longevity of its task.

I can practically feel his eyes move towards my face, away from the apparently intriguing wall
behind me and focusing in on… whatever it is he sees. I’m not trying to hide, and I’m fully sure all that I feel is laid bare on whatever expression I wear. Not that I’ve control over that anymore.

“You should come inside.” He moves away from the door.

*He didn’t deny it.* The words hiss in my ear.

I step in past him, habitually taking off my shoe by the doorway as I do so.

*He didn’t deny it.* Hesitation licks its lipless mouth and bares its teeth to dig in again when I stop, staring at the fireplace as Levi retreats towards the couch, flopping down on it unceremoniously. Memories haunt the scene like ghostly actors replaying that which happened.

“I’ve been trying, you know,” This was supposed to be an inquisition, not a confession, “To not blame myself for this, it’s a nasty habit, and a hard one to break.” The fire is dead but I can practically hear it’s crackling, and the absence of its warmth is horribly obvious to me. “To try to focus on you, and understand what it is that’s got you… as you are.” My eyes slip over to Levi, and he’s staring at me with that same calculated gaze, I force them to halt there. “I want to help you. I want to make sure you can be as happy as you’ve made me. If it’s as a friend… fine.” My voice cracks a little at that part, and it may be a half-lie but if that’s what it takes then I’ll make it the truth. “If what’s best is for me to leave… then I’ll do that. Break up or… never talk to you again, just… let me help you.” The last words are barely above a whisper because I didn’t dare breathe and let hesitation pounce. Levi’s eyes are still guarded but they shake, his focus quivering the same way his hands did, tell-tale traits, traitorous things that try to give up whatever it is he’s holding back.

“Don’t you hate me?” The words are broken and fractured, they come out rough as if he’d been crying and now that I look at it it seems as if his eyes carry a ghost of redness.

Hate him? Hate *him*? How could I?

“No! No, of course not…” I want to move towards him but hesitation has it’s tail chaining my legs to the floor. “I was sure- am sure, that you hate me.”

“Hate you…?” Levi repeats the words with a strange mysticism, “How could I?” He stands, and I can see the water welling up in his eyes. “I don’t- how could you think-…” His words are rapidly strung together and I can’t decipher them. But he stops as he stands, and I can practically see the phantom at his side as well, hesitation, weighting us both to the ground.

“What is it that’s wrong, Levi?” I urge, and I can feel my heart clenching because he’s on the verge of tears and the last thing I want is for him to cry again. But I have to do this. I have to get him to tell me and he won’t if we just follow the movies and hug it out. That will come afterwards, if all goes well, but for now I need to know- he needs to say- what it is that’s happening.

“You… you must despise me,” His hand is shaking again, “After all the bullshit you’ve gone through because of me? I’m the fucking root of it all, aren’t I? You can trace back all this crap to my decisions and actions. Even this,” He sounds exasperated, throwing his hands across with a wide gesture, “Even this damn confrontation is because of how I’ve been trying to fix all that’s gone wrong. What did I do, though? I hurt you, again! I made you think… that I…” He shakes his head, “You’re life goes to shit whenever I’m around, everyone’s does. It’d be better if you just… left. If I wasn’t there anymore you could be happier. You’d be better off if you resented me.” A feeling of deja vu settles over me, “For what I represent. For what-”

“You remind me of.” I finish, and Levi’s cracking facade gives way to shock. I lift my hands to my
face, covering my eyes and curling my fingers in my hair, not quite sure whether to laugh or cry.

“That’s… right.” Levi affirms. I take a breath, steadying myself, and lower my hands.

“One secret for another.” An old promise, but one between us nonetheless. “That’s our deal, right?”

Levi gives me a strange look, “Yes… But why-”

“Good.” I cut him off, “It’s my turn, then.” I take a deep breath and steady myself, “The happiest I’ve been, the most stable, and the best state of mind I’ve been able to get to in the last two years of recovery, is with you, and because of you.” I give him a half-shrug, keeping my palms up and open as if I were holding out some prized possession, “And I know I fucked up when I inquired about your scars, you should have shared them with me when you were ready and I forced you into that, albeit subconsciously. That being said. My secret is that I don’t hate you Levi, I care about you, and I don’t want to lose you. You’ve helped me, so don’t ever think that my life is better off without you… because I honestly don’t know where I’d be if you hadn’t come along, and it’s terrifying to think of all the possibilities of what could have happened. Of how close I came to fucking everything up even more. You didn’t make it worse, Levi, you saved me.”

“Bullshit.”

“It’s true.” I say, “Like it or not.”

“Bullshit,” He grimaces at me, “I’m a-”

“You’re not a fucking monster.” I stop him before he can continue with that sentence, “If anything you’re a hypocrite, telling me to not think so lowly of myself while still keeping your own harmful thoughts.” Hesitation peels away from me with less than a silent shriek of despair, and I step forward, one foot at a time. “We’re still keeping secrets from each other, but I don’t want that to be the case anymore, Levi…”

I stop in front of him, my hand extends to close to the gap between us, “So please, keep your promise to me. Don’t keep any more secrets, share your thoughts with me and in turn I’ll share mine with you. Okay?”

He stares at the hand like a foreign object, I watch his face go change in a swirl of emotions. Disbelief, despair, hope, sadness… all swirling and changing with the creases in his eyes and near his lips until I speak up,

“Levi,” I draw his attention back to my face and all that falls away, “Do you hate me?”

“No,” The words are confident, sure and unshakable, “Never.” Then that confidence seems to crack, “Do… you hate me?”

“No,” I echo his words the same sense of assuredness, when his eyes flash surprise I crack a grin, “If you wanted me to hate you, you’re gonna have to try a hell of a lot harder than you’ve been.”

He scoffs, and for the first time in what feels like a long time, I see the smile I love so much.

“You’re cocky, you know that?” Then he takes my hand.

Chapter End Notes
Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated.
The next couple hours are spent with us sharing anything and everything. Even the smallest details of our everyday life are somehow brought up, what annoys us, what made us happy in the last day or so, small things. Even so miniscule and unimportant as favorite foods, colors, or music genres. We laugh so hard we cry and, admittedly, a few tears are shed when we talk about more... painful things. By the time I glance towards the clock above the fireplace, it’s already late in the evening.

“Oh shoot.” I interrupt whatever it was I’d been saying beforehand, after the first hour or so I think both of us stopped being careful about what opinion or “secret”, albeit some of these things are mostly common knowledge, about what we said. “I should get home or Mikasa’s going to get worried.”

“What time is it?” Levi turns to follow my gaze.

“It’s almost eight.” inform him, starting to stand, I cast him a grin as I do so. “Guess we lost track of time.”

“Why do I get the feeling that happens a lot when I’m with you?” Levi shakes his head, “If I’m ever late to meeting or some shit I’m just going to blame you, you know that right?”

“Now that’s not very fair,” I muse, “You talked just as much as I did.” The fire was never lit but I still feel warm, like my chest has become it’s own personal heater. It’s a nice feeling, but perhaps the part of it I like the most is the thought that comes attached. I could get used to this. I had been getting used to it before, hadn’t I? This was a bump in the road that, for a second, made me terrified that we wouldn’t make it further down. I was afraid that I wouldn’t have the chance to get used to this warmth, the feeling of safety- a person with whom I can share anything and everything no matter how big or small. I’ll have to thank Mikasa.

“Let me drive you,” Levi offers, “It’s too dark to walk on your own.”

“Oh, so now you’re worried for me, huh?” I roll my eyes as if this fact annoys me, as if it could.

“Of course I’m fucking worried for you,” He smirks, the sentimentality followed up by a sarcastic, “Knowing you, you’d walk right into a pole without seeing it.”

“Wow, you’re confidence in me is astounding.”

“And not without reason.” Levi’s already moving to grab his keys. I don’t complain, simply lace
my fingers through his as we walk out the door.

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I smile the entire way walking up to my apartment. The stairs seem… less, somehow, and I can’t shake the feeling of openness that surrounds the usually clustered hall. It’s not an anxious, unknowing openness either, but the feeling you get when standing in a meadow, staring out over a scenic view. Who knows what lies beyond the ridge, but… you’re not really worried for whatever it is.

“Mikasa? Sorry it’s late, everything went really well and we-” I pause as the door swings open to Mikasa sitting at the table, a mug that must have once been hot sits, only a slight trail of steam wisping from it’s rim, untouched by her elbow. This image is not one I’m unused to, but something about the cold, hard way she stares at the open envelope and piece of paper laid out upon the kitchen table before her gives me pause. I silently close the door behind me and she gestures for me to take a seat. I do so, and though I am wordless my mind goes down it’s usual raucous route. The edge of the hill seems a whole lot more menacing all of a sudden.

“It went well?” She starts slowly, her lips forming her words carefully the way they usually do when she’s about to bring up something unpleasant. Not dancing around the subject, Mikasa isn’t one to take an indirect route, but instead beginning the conversation with something… easier, to speak about.

“Yeah, very well- what’s up?” I’m a little less tactful, my eyes skim the letter, an unfamiliar return address pokes it’s head out from around the corner edge of the envelope. Another state, close enough that I can nearly recognize, a blip in my memory from a family vacation when I was younger.

“Dad… Grisha is coming home.” Mikasa hands me the letter. I look from her to the small scrap of paper as I take it delicately in my hands. Pinched between thumb and forefinger and held away from my face as if I were farsighted, or as if it were a dead rat of some kind. The script is definitely his, I can tell by the sharp letters. I barely skim over the letter, a feeling of disconnected disbelief muddles what little words I manage to capture.

But she’s right, he’s coming home- coming here. Apparently whatever it was that he’d mentioned in his previous letter, his reason for leaving us financially stranded, it’s been completed now. He has something he wishes to tell us, something he’s excited about to explain in-person. The only good news I can find is that he broke up with his girlfriend.

When I set the letter down, I can feel Mikasa’s eyes staring at me. Level, waiting, judging my reaction because she’s not sure if this is good news or bad news. I’m not sure either.

“Well… I guess you can start taking some breaks from work now, huh?” I try to crack a joke, a way to break the tension in the room. Thick, the air is like half-frozen water. “Maybe if we splurge, we can even turn up the heat?”

“Are you upset?” My response wasn’t enough for her, so she opts for the direct approach. I sigh, leaning back as the chair creaks under my weight.

“I don’t know,” I reply honestly, then smile a little, “He’s coming back, so I should be happy, right? This is good?” I scratch the back of my head, as if doing so will dig up whatever answer lies in wait, then cross my arms across my chest. “But shouldn’t I also be mad at him? For leaving with no explanation?” I shake my head, “Honestly I think even if I would be upset I’m too happy to let something like this ruin my mood.”
Mikasa weights this answer, then she nods her approval. “Good, I’m glad, then."

“Really? You’ve got no qualms for this at all?” I can’t help but sound shocked. Mikasa’s worked even harder than I have to make up for what Grisha hasn’t done, I would expect some resentment on her part for that.

“Doctor Jaeger… I think he has his reasons.” She idly picks up the paper, it flimsily flops around in her hand. “I don’t know what they are, and I don’t know if I like the way he’s gone about them… but I think he has them.” She lets it drift back down to the wooden table, “And I want to hear what they are, before anything else.” Mikasa scoots her chair back, it squeaks against the floor as she stands, extending her arms above her hands to stretch, “So I’ll reserve judgement, for now. In the meantime, I’m going to get ready for bed. You showering first?”

“Go ahead,” I say, “I’m… I’ll shower a little later.” Mikasa picks up her cup and takes it to the sink. I glance at the small piece of paper once more. As I do I can’t help but think back to the last time I saw my dad and… his voice is harder to recall than it usually is. A lot like mom. Of course I’ve gotten used to struggling what to remember what she sounds like, the dead can’t speak back to us no matter how much we wish they could… but it’s strange, he hasn’t been gone for nearly as long as she has and yet… It’s even harder to remember him. I suppose we also give the dead more attention… Ironic, considering we’re surrounded by the living.

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“It occurs to me,” Mikasa begins our conversation the next morning as I groggily stumble out of my room, dressed and moving towards where my coat usually ends up. Which is to say, unceremoniously strewn across the couch. “That I never did ask exactly how it went with Levi.”

“Oh! Oh yeah,” The blurriness that comes from having just woken up fades away as the question slowly makes it way through my brain, “It did go really well! The thing is, we were still kinda holding back on each other, you know?” I shrug, “We… well, we weren’t really comfortable sharing things because we were scared about how we would react.”

“And you worked this out?” She inquires, I can tell by the look on her face that even after seeing how joyful I was yesterday she’s still worried about me.

“I think so. I hope so.” I hum the reply.

“Good, because I wanted to ask you about something you almost said.” Well, now, that’s… not quite what I expected.

“What I almost said?” I pick up my coat, but I don’t put it on, not yet. Although I haven’t much time to spare, considering my Political Sciences class starts soon.

“Well, what I think you were going to say and… also another thing.” Mikasa eyes the clock on the wall, she knows my schedule, usually she’s the one making sure I stick to it. “Which class do you have?”

“Political Sciences.”

“Really? Good, skip it. Get notes from Armin if need be.” Suspicion leads me to follow her words more than simple compliance. Mikasa isn’t one to advocate skipping classes or missing homework, she’s the one who makes sure I don’t do these things. The sudden change sparks a feeling of
curiosity, though also cautiousness. Is this something to do with my dad? If so, then why did she want to talk about Levi? Is it something with him? I’ve always known that Mikasa wasn’t- isn’t, still, his biggest fan but she’s never seemed to really have a problem with him. More like… she always just makes sure I’m not getting hurt. So I set my coat down and stand there, arms crossed, waiting for her. Mikasa doesn’t say anything at first, until finally she takes a deep breath of air and exhales slowly, the words riding along the wind.

“I think Grisha plans to push you further into Political Sciences… or something more to his wishes.” This wasn’t something I ‘almost said’ so this must be what that ‘other thing’.

“So? Nothing new there, I’ll just move up next year and keep him happy, right?” I shrug, it’s no big deal, really. The class is hard and no doubt will only be getting harder, but maybe Armin and I will end up together again- since he actually enjoys the stuff. He can help me like he did this year if it’s not too much trouble.

“But, Eren, that class eats away all of your time,” Mikasa stares at me with her level gaze. The one that bores right through you, stripping you away of any lies that might flutter to the surface, “You don’t know what it is you want to do and you say you’ll try to experiment, to find your passion, but you’re not doing that. All you’re doing is focusing on keeping him happy.”

“It’s one class, Mikasa, I think that’s over exaggerating.” I roll my eyes, waving away the words.

“Is it?” She shakes her head, “You keep saying that you’ll just continue on with this class, just to keep him happy. At this rate you’ll end up exactly how he wants you to end up, and he’ll be happy and proud- sure. But you’ll be miserable, Eren.”

“So I tell him I don’t want to do it- after I graduate.” This subject has always irked me, she knows this, why is she bringing it up? “Let him have his fun-”

“And what? By the time you graduate you’ll have no idea where you want to go, what you want to do. I don’t want you to be that hopeless again, Eren, and not knowing your way is an easy path to slipping back into that hole.” Her eyes narrow, almost accusatory, “You’ve seen how easy it is to fall, both in yourself and the others around you.”

She’s… got a point. But still, isn’t it the job of a child to make their parent proud? Isn’t that what every parent wants for their kid? Just to be proud of them, that’s what we were created to do. Participating in a class, just one, singular class, it’s all I need to do, isn’t it? Such a simple long-term solution.

Although I’ve never thought about afterwards. Maybe the solution isn’t as long-term as I thought.

“You- you had another thing you wanted to talk about?” I divert my gaze, trying to redirect the conversation before it goes into more unpleasant territory. I do that a lot, don’t I? Just hope that it doesn’t crawl back to whatever reality lies beyond the pretty silk lie. Which I suppose I am lying to Grisha, doing the class makes me seem interested, and I’m not.

But I don’t know what I’m interested in. So it can’t really hurt that much to just… seem like that’s what I want to pursue. Who knows? Maybe I’ll learn something through that? It… it’s not as simple as she makes it sound.

“Ah, right, well…” Mikasa leans back in her chair, “Before you went to confront him, when you were talking with me, it seemed like you cut yourself off.”

“In saying what?” I try to crack a smile, break some of the leftover tension still hugging the air,
“I’m pretty damn sure I had something close to a mental breakdown with you, and it’s kind of hard to hold yourself back once you get going on one of those, you know?”

“Well, I suppose so, but…” She tilts her head slightly, “Now, I don’t want to put words on your mouth. Eren, how do you feel about Levi?”

“How?” The question is puzzling, I would have thought that’d be clear considering the fact that we are together and I continually fought to make sure it stayed that way. “Isn’t it obvious? I like him?”

“Is that all?” She presses, “I mean, when you say ‘like’, in what way do you mean it?”

“The way you’re speaking I would’ve thought that you’d be his sister instead of mine,” I can’t help but chuckle, “Here I am, trying to get my own sister’s blessing to date my boyfriend.”

“Eren,” Mikasa is not amused. Not if her frown is anything to go by, anyways.

“Sorry, sorry,” I halfheartedly apologize, “But… What do you mean by that?”

“I… can’t say.” Mikasa sighs, “If I say it then I’ll be putting words in your mouth, so I want you to say it for yourself.”

“Say what?” I feel the corner of my mouth twitch in a frown, “I can’t tell you what you want to hear unless I know what it is you want me to say.”

“I don’t really have anything specific that I want you to say, I just want you to be honest.” She shrugs, “I want… to prevent another disaster. You’ve had enough already due to density.”

“I… still have no idea what you’re talking about.” Due to density? Is she talking about how dense I am? I know I’m not the most observant but what is it that she’s looking for? Mikasa eyes me up and down for a few more seconds, but evidently whatever it was that she’s looking for isn’t there. So she gives up and stands from her place.

“Nevermind, I suppose.” She shakes her head. “Ask Armin, he’ll be better than I am at this.” She looks at the clock again, “And I should get going before I’m late to work.” Without another word, she exits the room. Leaving me still utterly puzzled by whatever that was.

*How do I feel about Levi? What does she mean by that? Of course I love hi-*

Oh.

*Oh.*

Chapter End Notes

Well, shit.

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated!
Three more chapters, wow.

I’m going to give you a fair warning, though, the way it’s playing out it looks like the next two are going to be giant balls of angst in one last angstsplosion to wrap up the rest of the plot. SO enjoy this chapter while it lasts!

Come talk to me:
goldie-the-cat.tumblr.com

Updates tagged:
fic ntmywf

Shit, shit, shit. Mikasa was right, well, inadvertently so. She didn’t actually say that she knows I’m in love with Levi but I’m pretty sure she knows. Which, really, I should be celebrating. You’re in love! Yay! Congratulations on falling neck-deep into a whole bunch of shit you’re not prepared for because you have no idea on how to tell him let alone know whether you should tell him or even what to do in this kind of situation because you haven’t exactly been in love before and this is new territory and you’re not good at new territory and-

I’m not even speaking aloud but my thoughts are so deafening that I’ve been holding my breath. Breathe, but breathing is hard when your chest is so tight it feels like someone is strangling your lungs. The asshole, don’t they know I kind of need lungs if I’m ever going to tell Levi how I feel?

What if he doesn’t love me?

It’s a thought that I’ve always laughed at in romance movies. Because of course, he loves you, haven’t you seen all that you’ve been through together? Nonetheless, it’s suddenly eerily real and I don’t fancy the thought of being the air headed ‘cutesy’ protagonist that usually has these thoughts.

Armin, call Armin, he’s good with stuff like this!

But is he? Armin’s never been in love with anyone, he’s hardly ever dated anyone! Usually I can go to him for anything I don’t know. Armin’s smart, I’m not, he knows things I don’t. But this time I get the sinking feeling that I’m stuck in dark waters without a lifeboat.

Usually when people love each other, both already know it. The confession’s been gotten out of the way and they can go about doing their business. You don’t see couples confessing in public like you see them walking down the street holding hands. It’s not that obvious to outsiders until the aftermath.

Love is… supposed to be a good thing. I thought it’d feel warm, soft, light and fluffy like a cloud or a blanket. Like how I usually feel around Levi. But love is heavy, it weighs on my mind and presses down on me with both hands digging into the bone in my body. It’s not so flippant as a cloud nor is it as easily shrugged off as a blanket. It’s like my very skin itself, trapping but also…
comfortable, protective. It’s where I belong and that much I know.

Love is supposed to be beautiful, and it is but… why do I feel so damn scared?

I still have no one else to call to, so before even I can realize it I’m dialing up Armin’s number. Listening to the impatient ring before a voice picks up the other end of the line,

“Hello?”

“I’m in love with Levi.” I blurt out the words before I can stop myself. Then they’re there, floating about in the open like the tiny puffs of air that all words are.

“So… I take it the confrontation went well?” Armin sounds pleased, like he knew this all beforehand, of course he did. Armin knows these things, more than that he knows me, often times guessing my actions before I’ve even decided what I’m supposed to do. Best friends are like that.

“Yes, but Armin, I’m in love.” I reiterate my point although I know he heard me the first time, he must’ve by the smug tone in his laugh before he speaks, and when he does I can practically see the knowing look in his eye.

“I know, you’re in love, with Levi. You’re scared to tell him?” He pauses, and I can see in my mind's eye the look of contemplation that crosses over his face whenever he’s lost in that forest of thought that is his mind, “Or… you don’t know how to?”

“Both,” I can’t help but feel my shoulders sag in relief because he understands. He’s able to articulate what I never could, or maybe what I could but only in my mind. And sometimes I doubt my mind, often, in fact. So hearing someone, especially him in specific, say it aloud makes me feel less crazy. Makes me feel like this might be okay. This is normal. It’s another thing to get through and I’ve gotten through a lot of things. The difference is that this time it’s actually something good.

Something good…

Someone good.

“Why is it,” my voice comes out soft and quiet, a delicate thing when I don’t consider myself a delicate person. How odd. “Why is it that love is always coupled with fear?”

A sigh, one that knows what I’m talking about, not through empathy, because empathy usually begets silence and reflection, but through sympathy, which brings with it a voice to fill whatever void we’ve created for ourselves. “I don’t know, Eren.” Armin supplies that voice with the same tenacity he has for almost everything else I’ve seen him set his mind to, “But let me advise you this- holding this back isn’t going to do any good… though I suppose by now you must know that at least?”

“I do, I’m still scared though.” I admit the words half-sheepishly, half because part of me is embarrassed but part of me is glad. If I didn’t have some fear then it might not be real, fear makes things real, it assures us that we’re not insane… sometimes. Other times it’s less kind.

“Of course you are, it’s only natural.” Kind, his voice is kind and reassuring and it takes away some of that fear. If not taking it away then he at least smooths it down to the point where I know it’s not malignant. “But who is it you go to when you’re afraid?”

“Well, you, and Mikasa…” I pause, because my mind is lead down the path he’s set, just as he planned. Not a realization but an acknowledgement, “And Levi.”
“See? You already talk to him when you’re scared. Just think of it like that.” He suggests, “You’re still just confessing a fear, this time it’s a good one. One that will lead to something even greater than the happiness you already have.”

“May,” I remind him of that margin of error, however small or large it may be, “May lead me.”

“Oh it will,” He sounds so sure, how can people sound so sure when there’s so much we don’t know? “I know it.”

“You more than me.” I half-laugh, and even the fear that was once so crushing is now just a gentle press against me. A push to do something, to not let it fester there and sit in silence. “Thank you, Armin.”

“Of course, what else am I here for?” His tone is joking and he chuckles as well, “Are you going to tell him?”

“Yes, yes, I will.” I nod to myself, as if I’m also telling any and every smidgen of doubt that rests within my heart that this is true. “I don’t know when but… I will.”

“Why not as soon as possible?” Armin’s voice flutters over to a tone of confusion. “Well…” He hasn’t been told about Grisha coming back yet, has he? “My dad is coming home.”

Silence. Empathetic silence? Perhaps. Armin knows exactly what I lost when my father left. He’s experienced it himself, the death of close family members. That’s why he grew up with his grandfather, and why his grandfather remains the closest family member he knows today. Even though mine didn’t die… sometimes I forget the difference.

“When?” Armin’s lost all the cheeriness, the lightness of the conversation beforehand. Instead replaced with a sullen sense of duty, he knows what this means.

“I don’t know.” I admit, “He sent a letter but it didn’t say… all it said was that he has something he wants to show me.”

“Then tell Levi soon as possible,” Armin urges me, skipping back to our old topic and dragging it into this new, much less pleasant one. “I… we don’t know what he has to say, you don’t know what Grisha is coming with. But… I have a feeling you’ll need Levi’s support, even if it’s something good,” he adds on the last part quickly, more of a hope then a premonition, “Things like this are delicate and, well…” He trails off.

“I don’t want to have any regrets?” I fill in the gaps.

“You make it sound like his coming is going to kill you.” Armin says it half joking, but there’s an odd seriousness to his tone that makes me wonder how much of that statement he really thinks is a joke.

“Ha, well, he’d have to do more than send a letter for that to happen,” I attempt to dispel any worries he might have, but with just the phone distorting tones and keeping me blind on expression I can’t tell if it worked, “Either way… I get it. I’ll… I’ll tell Levi… somehow. Before Grisha comes.”

“Good,” Armin sounds much more sure now, relieved- almost. Like this is a weight off of his chest as well, “And… good luck, as well.”

“Thanks,” I sigh, my shoulders sagging as the tension begins to ease, “Hopefully that won’t be needed.”
The weather’s warmer today. As winter slowly fades from the city I find that the cold slips away from the streets. The snow is all gone too, leaving us with just mud in spots where the grass was drowned out, and a bright blanket of green everywhere else. The brown coat I was given now hangs in the closet, waiting for next year’s use.

Today is especially Spring-like, what with the spike in heat. Despite this, part of me still feels frozen to the floor. Today’s the day that I’ve asked Levi out on a date, and I plan to tell him I love him. I stand in front of the bathroom mirror, not really adjusting anything about my appearance but more just staring at my face. Mystified by the fact that the dark rings under my eyes have nearly faded, and wondering, a small question that floats up in the back of my mind, if this is how my father felt when he was going to tell my mother that he loves her for the first time. It’s an… odd thought, to say the least. I hardly ever think about things like that, but the nervousness I feel, the kind that makes my heartbeat overtake any other sound, it’s the kind of thing that you wish you had someone to ask about. Mikasa isn’t one for dating, Armin hasn’t found anyone yet, all I have is the idea of my father feeling like this in one point in time. But he’s not here, not yet, anyway. So I’m left on my own, with only the thought to comfort me.

Then again, the thought of not having anyone who can relate to what I’m feeling isn’t new territory. Marco’s the only other person I know who’s lost a limb… maybe it would do us both good to talk about it sometime. I’m sure Jean’s no help at all. But that’s for a later time.

With a deep breath, steadying myself as I’ve done so many times before, I walk out of the bathroom, surprised by the confidence with which I walk. I haven’t really felt so sure about something in a long time.

Part of me expects Mikasa to make some encouraging remark when I leave the house, but she’s already at work. So I’m left with silence and my own thoughts… I guess I’ll have to make up for her absence, then.

You can do this. You know Levi, you love him, this isn’t going to ruin anything.

And now I’ve given myself yet another thing to worry about. Great, I’m simply wonderful at the whole pep-talk thing, aren’t I?

Our plan is to meet at The Rose Café… I… wanted to do something more special but I didn’t want him suspecting anything and getting scared away. Being ditched would be so much worse than being rejected face to face… or so I thought.

Besides, this is still romantic, right? It’s where we usually meet, where he first confessed to me, we’ve got a thing going here, right? This is good. This is normal, and… maybe that fits even better. Loving him, being in love with him, it feels… normal. Like it’s right, it fits, it’s how I’m supposed to feel. For once everything just fits together, full, absolutely nothing missing. So I guess it works that we’d go where it’s natural for us to meet. There’s something romantic in that, isn’t there?

If not, if I fuck this up too…

Well there’s something fitting even in that.

The weather’s warmer today. That statement is proved truthful as I step outside and feel the heat rising on my neck. I take off my coat and drape it on my arm. But maybe the weather isn’t as warm as I think it is. Maybe part of this is just my nerves. Maybe I’m hallucinating. Hopefully I don’t faint.
Well, wouldn’t that just make for a lovely confession.

*Levi, I wanted to tell you I…* And then I’d probably hit the floor, blood spilling everywhere, the whirring of an ambulance. But watch it just be my nose bleeding because of the way I landed, get everyone all worked up for nothing. Then I’d have to confess with a nasally voice, words all mangled and, what the hell, let’s add a black eye in because I landed on a poorly placed rock. Maybe my prosthetic got misplaced so I’m also hobbling around on one leg. *I’d still bring flowers, though, gotta be classy somehow.*

Shit. Should I have gotten flowers?

I check my watch, do I have time to turn around and grab some flowers or is that too cheesy? Is there *even* a flower shop around here? The Rose Café is already right in front of me, but I don’t see Levi… maybe I should get him something, that’s what people do, isn’t it?

*“Hey Eren!”* I jolt up from my reverie and turn to face Levi.

*“Le-”* I start to stumble over my words. In thought the sequence of events was bad enough but seeing him in person, in the real, physical realm, makes the nerves all the worse. I can’t hear anything over my heart, and it’s not even a rapid, but steady, beat anymore. It’s just a ceaseless roar constantly going off in my ears. Are my cheeks red? They feel warm, they must be. I must be blushing like an idiot. And he sees it doesn’t he? His grey eyes, focused with that same pinpoint accuracy, flicker around my face with a look of confusion. I inwardly recoil, hoping he doesn’t see through me before I get the chance to say… *that*, outloud. His hair looks nice today, it usually does but it, like everything else about it, seems so much clearer. Like I’ve just focused the lense of a camera onto his face and suddenly I’m seeing all these little things. His eyes seem brighter, the dark rings under them are still there but they seem less purple and more blended in with the rest of his skin. He’s still pale, though, an almost ghostly white from days of working and the winter’s weak sun having offered little to no help. It makes what purplish hue resides under his eyes pop out. His shirt is long-sleeved, of course to cover the burn scars. I wonder if he ever gets hot during the summer, always trying to cover up his arms? He shouldn’t, maybe they make lighter clothing, he wouldn’t be comfortable exposing them but maybe there’s something less heavy I could get him so that he’d be cooler. Next time. If there is a next time.

*“You okay? You’re staring off into fuck knows where?”* Levi raises an eyebrow and that’s when I notice, very faint, nearly invisible, miniscule lines by his eyes. Laugh lines. Were they there when I first knew him? I feel like I would know, but I feel like he’s never been this clear before. Still, the sight of them makes me happy inside and I don’t fully understand why. Maybe it’s because of what they mean. Maybe it’s because of what I know about Levi. Maybe it’s both.

*“I’m fine.”* I reach for his hand, interlacing my fingers with his. My hands are larger than his but not by much. Not-so absentmindedly I trace the ridges of his knuckles with my thumb. *“Let’s go get a seat.”* Levi watches me for a moment more, perhaps he knows that something is different this time. I wouldn’t put it past him to see through me. And I know that look. The narrowness of his eyes and slight curve downward of his lips. He’s making sure nothing is wrong, checking to see what I’m thinking.

*There’s nothing bad here to see.* I say the words mentally, as if he could read my mind. Which sometimes I think he does, or at least he knows the lines on my face well enough to. I lean forward and kiss the corner of his mouth, the part that’s pulled down in worry.

*“You look so concerned, come on, it’s a beautiful day out, we can sit outside without freezing our asses off, let’s enjoy it.”* I tug on his hand and he nods, the frown quickly turning into a smile when he gauges that there truly is nothing to worry about.
“Alright, it’s not bad out, to say the least.”

“See?” I laugh, “Now come on, we’re blocking the entry.”

- - -

My confidence may have fluttered off when I saw Levi but there’s a sense of comfort that’s replaced it. Comfort and warmth. Familiarity. Home.

*I’ve got so much to lose. So damn much to lose if this goes wrong.* Outloud I laugh along with his snide remarks and play along with our usual banter, internally I can feel hesitation rising up from the dark pits I keep banishing it to, using my legs as an anchor to rear it’s ugly head. *So much to lose... but nothing to gain.*

*I already have all I need.*

“Hanji wants me to rejoin the group,” Levi sighs into his cup of tea, “I thought I’d told them before that I was quitting when I stopped coming, but they keep fucking insisting.”

“Do you think it’ll still help you?” I inquire. *No, that’s a lie.*

“Honestly? The only thing that helped me through all of that shit was meeting you,” Does he realize what he says, how happy that makes me feel? The way he says it, so casually, so nonchalantly, as if it’s just an everyday normal thing, natural for him to say it... I can’t describe it. The warmth, the feeling of belonging, for once in my life not missing a piece. *I need him to know.*

“I guess this means I’m going to have to get a new partner.” I sit back, a playful smile on my lips, “Would I have to start taking them here too?” Never, I never could. It’d be wrong to take someone else here. To this place, our place.

“You little shit,” Levi draws out the words, he knows I couldn’t, no more than he could, “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Hey,” I hold my hands up defenselessly, feigning innocence, “I’m not the one who’s quitting.”

“You cocky little bastard,” The words are said teasingly, without malice, more as a term of endearment the way he says them, “And here I thought I was also avoiding looking like the psycho as fuck boyfriend who hangs around twenty-four seven. Aren’t you glad to be getting a little space?”

“Never,” I shut my mouth quickly as I open it, I spoke too quickly, without thinking. Sheepishly, I look to the side, avoiding eye contact, “I-I mean, ‘space’ isn’t exactly how I’d describe being with Hanji.”

“I’ll raise my glass to that,” Levi shakes his head, doing just as he said with the teacup in his hand. I smile and turn back to him. Filled that same feeling, the warmth... Like sitting by the fireplace at his apartment that one night. I’d had a nightmare that night and he stayed there and comforted me, then when he had his downfall I refused to give up and confronted him. He’s been there for me and I’ll do my best to be there for him. I love him, and I have to tell him that, no matter the risk.

“Hey, Levi,” I begin, leaning on the table. I let my one hand rest palm up on the table while the other cradles my head. Levi catches the cue and sets his teacup down to place his hand in mine.

“Hm?” He asks lazily, relaxed in the sunlight and warm weather.
“Got any secret to share?” With this Levi’s eyes trail back to me curiously.

“Now?”

I shrug, “You’re quitting the group… if we’re not going to meet anymore weekly, well, let’s do the tradition one last time, right?”

He squeezes my hand, “Alright, fine, well…” He pauses, looking around. Puzzled, his eyebrows scrunch together and he sighs, “Shit, Eren, I can’t think of anything… I guess you just know too damn much about me, huh?” He shrugs, “You go first.”

I laugh, “So, what? Now that I know too much are you going to have to kill me?”

“No,” He smirks, “Just capture your sister for ransom.”

“Damn, I knew this day would come.” I roll my eyes.

It’s now or never. I smile, and in doing so I surprise myself. It’s the same thing I’ve been saying before. This feels right, this feels natural. Hell, it’s hardly even a secret.

“All right… I squeeze his hand, and hold it tight for just a moment, because if this does go downhill, I want to remember the feeling of his hand in mine. I take breath, and feel my face flush red, the roaring back in my ears so loud I can barely hear my words above it, they sound more like a whisper, soft, quiet, delicate words. No more than puffs of air but with so much inside of them, “I love you.”

Levi freezes in place.

All I can think is I fucked up. Fuck, fuck, fuck, I shouldn’t have said it like that. I shouldn’t have said it yet. This was moving too quickly I shouldn’t have done this this is bad very very bad.

“I…” I can feel my heart roar so loud that I lose all hearing of anything else. Is he going to break up with me? He didn’t say anything, he hasn’t said anything, he’s not saying anything. I think I say that maybe I should go, I start to pull my hand away but then he curls his fingers around mine and stops me.

“Wait.” I pause, still half turned in my chair. Levi sighs and his shoulders relax but his hand only tightens around mine. He shakes his head, “You- you caught me off guard, don’t leave.” He leans back in his chair, sighs again, looking away from me, to the road, and that’s when I notice that his face is completely red. Is that… a good sign? “You know.” I snap to attention as he sits forward again, “You stole my thunder, shitty brat.”

“I- what?”

“I had this whole plan,” Levi explains, removing his hand for a moment, “Hanji even fucking helped me get it together, okay? You see how desperate I was? I asked motherfucking Hanji for help.” He shakes his head, a smile on his face- not a smirk, but a smile, slowly stretching as he speaks, “I mean, this was going to be some sappy shit, moonlight restaurant, walk in the park, I had a goddamn plan, Eren. But you… you little shit, you just had to beat me to it didn’t you? You just had to confess first?”

“You had a plan? You were…” I trail off, then perk up, sitting ramrod straight, “Wait, does that-”

Levi leans across the table, planting a kiss on my lips and stopping me from speaking, then he leans back, flushed, and grinning. Levi is actually grinning, the laugh lines are visible and his face
The boy’s face is flushed red, his voice breathless when he returns with, “I love you too.”

**Chapter End Notes**

**H OOLY SHIT**

I JUST REALIZED HOW LITTLE THREE CHAPTERS IS. LIKE THAT JUST HIT ME. JUST PUTTING THIS CHAPTER IN HERE HIT ME.

WOW.
WOWOW.

I *cannot believe* that I’m actually finishing this fic.

Like did I ever tell you guys how I got the idea for it? Maybe I will on the last chapter. But I’ll tell you this, the idea for this fic came to me *two years* before I started writing it. Why? I honestly thought it would go nowhere.

Sure it’d be fun but nobody would read it, I wouldn't do anything with it. It’d just be wasted time and effort and in the end it’d be another unfinished story piled high atop the list of things that haven't gone anywhere.

**BUT THIS**

I did not expect NTMWYF to become what it has. And I can't tell you all how happy I am to have decided to write this. To have met all of you and gotten to go through this experience with you. You're all amazing people and it's become one of my favorite things to do is just to talk you guys and hear your theories and comments and critiques it's just been... *amazing.*

I've always been way too shy to show anyone other than really my best friend my writing, not even family, which was never good since my dream is to one day become a published author. So when I started writing this... I just... kinda decided I wanted to try reaching out to a larger audience than just one person. I thought maybe I'd get two people, maybe three or four if I was lucky, to read a chapter or two and then be done with this entire thing.

I never expected 40+ chapters.

I never expected 100,000+ words.

I never expected to get so much support from so many amazing, lovely people and even start talking to a few of them and getting to chat with some just extraordinarily kind people. You're all lovely, you're all so amazing and I hope you have a great day, and a great life. And I hope you'll all stick along with me for the last three chapters of this wild ride. Thank you so much, for your support, and your reading of this little fic that grew beyond what I ever imagined it would be. Thank you.

Thank you.
Chapter Notes

So, lots of snow. I apologize for not uploading yesterday but I didn't get home until late because of said snow.
Now we're supposed to have a blizzard. Hopefully it's not too bad but we'll see.

Two chapters lefts holy shit.

Come talk to me:
goldie-the-cat.tumblr.com

Updates tagged:
fic ntmywf

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Life goes on. But at the same time, it’s different. I always knew that being with Levi felt right, so even now, even after telling him that I love him, nothing’s really changed. Nothing tangible, at least. But it’s easier, now. Easier to live. Easier to do, it doesn’t matter what. Things, simple things, like getting up in the morning and going to class, talking with Armin, working at Maria’s Sweets and even participating in the therapy group- all of it is easier.

Not to say my life’s been perfect. School is stressful- college always is- and especially so after getting a… less than desirable grade back on my Political Sciences paper. Apparently the etymology of capitalism paragraph “wasn’t flushed out enough”… Armin’s helping me with that, though.

Speaking of Armin, and Mikasa, I’ve been spending more time with them, too. The apartment feels more and more suffocating as the weather gets warmer. I mean, it’s not winter anymore, so it’s not unbearable to be outside. It’s nice out, so that’s where I want to be. Armin’s also trying to start on his New Year's Resolution to be spend more time outdoors, so he’s started joining me when I go out for some of my jogs. At first I was worried he wouldn’t be able to keep up, despite the fact that he’s literally competing with a one-legged jogger, but he’s surprisingly athletic. Mikasa comes along too, and she blows both of us out of the water.

I have more fun with them around. We get to talk and half the time we don’t even jog, just walk around town and chat about this and that. One crazy professor or Mikasa’s insane boss who’s now decided to do “team building exercises” during the employee's break to impress their superiors.

More than that, I’ve also gotten closer with a lot of my coworkers at Maria’s Sweets. It turns out Ymir and Historia have been dating for several years now, and I think that once Historia gets out of grad school Ymir is going to propose to her. She hasn’t said anything yet but it always seems like she gets antsy whenever Historia mentions the fact that she’s graduating this year. Not to mention she’s not very subtle about trying to get Historia’s ring-size. I once caught her enlisting Connie’s help to measure Historia’s finger when she passed out over her textbooks in the back. That plan failed pretty badly when Sasha, who was trying to sneak a cookie from the fresh batch, burned her fingers on the cookie pan and backpedaled into Connie, effectively knocking him onto Historia’s lap. Ymir… wasn’t exactly pleased with that turn of events.
I think I’m impressing Erwin with my progress. Not that he’d ever say so, but it’s the small nods and... less cocky, know-it-all smiles that have cued me into such things. Hanji’s a bit more vocal in how proud they are towards everyone in the group. Jean gave an announcement that he was leaving the group, so he didn’t just slip away like Levi did. But... I’ve gotta give the guy some credit, he got the job he’d been so mysteriously cloaking from the rest of us. Turns out, Jean was in medical school. He’s a doctor. More than that, a prosthetist, and I can’t help but wonder if it was perhaps Marco who inspired him to take such a path. I think Petra’s going to be the next to leave, she just got a big promotion at her job, and it looks like she’s really starting to look on the upside of life. Marco might go soon after her, now that he’s fully capable of using his prosthetic arm as well as his leg- he doesn’t even use the crutches anymore, and he walks confidently. If that happens then I think it’ll be my time to go too, Armin’s already showing up less and less. Busy with schoolwork and he’s always been better than any of us at coping.

So imagine my surprise when I get a call from him, and the first thing I hear is him sobbing on the other end of the line, begging me to come over before he does something drastic.

“Armin where are you?” I’m not sure if he hears me, all I hear is the shaky, gasping breath I’m unhappily familiar with, sobbing. “Where’s your roommate?” I was on my way home from a walk but now I’m half jogging towards the campus.

“O-out.” The word is choked, forced out, his voice is raw and cracked- how long has he been like this before he called me? “I’m in my dorm...”

It was surprising to say the least. I saw his name on my caller ID, I didn’t think anything of it before. A homework question or something else, but not this. Not what he said to me right after I picked up the phone, not even enough time to say hello.

My grandfather died.

He was holding it together then, I could tell by how strained his voice sounded, then the break down. The quick disintegration to hurried, rambling, confused explanations muffled by tears and the shattering that comes with it. I’ve seen it more times than I care to, but hearing it- hearing my best friend go through that and knowing I’m not there to see it? To hug him and physically reassure him that the world isn’t caving in on itself no matter how much it seems like it? That’s so much worse than I could ever imagine.

“What are you doing right now?” I keep him talking, it’s the only indication I have until I get there.

“I-I’m...” He pauses, but it’s not silent, there’s never a moment of silence with these things. Not after the breakdown. Before, when the pin drops and your heart plummets into your stomach while somehow simultaneously rising into your throat and choking you, that’s the only silence you get. And it’s deafening, so loud that you can’t hear anything else. Then you fill the silence, fill it with choked breath and mangled, twisted words to pierce that deafening silence. But it’s already charred and gone, and in the end you’re only left with a shattered heart and red, raw lungs. “I don’t know, I don’t know what to do. I’m in my dorm, I’m on the floor- I’m- I’m-” Armin stops speaking again, words silenced by a snivel. Weak whimpers taking the places of verbs, of nouns and adjectives. There are no ways to accurately describe what something like this feels like, after all, only noises. Only sounds.

“Don’t move. Just keep talking.” Sometimes it feels like you’re staring into a pit of blackness. I remember that when my mother died. I would blink and I’d be somewhere else, like someone was constantly flicking a lightswitch off and on and I didn’t know where I was moving and when. It’s scary, you’re not in control of your own body but your still the one moving it.
“He’s gone-” Again, I don’t know if he heard me, but I let him speak. “He was the last family I had, Eren. And now he’s gone. He’s gone- I’m alone, aren’t I? I don’t have a sister, you’ve got Mikasa but I don’t have a sister. I had my grandfather, but now he’s gone. He can’t be gone but he is. How can he just leave? How can he just be taken away? How can- how…”

How far away is the campus? Whenever I walk to class it feels too quick, like the distance is too short to allow me enough time to gather my thoughts. But now it just feels far away. It just feels long and miserable and I’m moving at a run now, struggling to keep my breath steady, sprinting. Pushing people out of my way and not bothering with apologies despite outcries springing up sporadically. Time is long, extended and stretched till the very seams scream.

“You’re not alone.” He stopped talking, I have to keep him talking, “I’m almost there, Armin, I-”

“Almost,” There’s a sick irony to his voice, twisted fake amusement, and I know the smile that goes along with it. Strained, a mask trying to push down the bubbling pit of despair, but that kind of smile- it doesn’t help, it only makes it worse. And we know it, we all hurt ourselves by smiling. “Just like he almost didn’t die, right?”

“Armin-”

“Just like the ambulance almost made it, just like the heart attack almost didn’t kill him, just like there was almost enough time to save him. Almost, Eren, almost is what gets us killed.” This isn’t how I wanted to direct his thought. This is bad, I fucked up, I need to redirect the conversation and- “I wasn’t even there.” Armin speaks again, “I wasn’t even there, nobody was. Oh god, oh god oh god oh god, Eren, what were his last words? I’ll never know if he even said anything. If he had a last wish or- or-… I won’t even hear his voice again. I’ll never see my grandfather again, will I? Never get to talk to him, look at maps and mark where we wanted to go- oh no. Oh no we never made it to Germany did we? Eren we had plans, we had plans over the summer to go to Austria and see the Alps. We were going to go this summer and now-” He breaks off when he begins to wail again, his voice always raising in pitch and I can’t help but wonder where the fuck anyone else is who lives on his floor. Dorms aren’t soundproof, so why doesn’t anyone hear this and go to help him?

I can practically feel the cement under my feet skid when I slide to a stop in front of the dorm buildings. I’m out of breath, and my leg aches horribly from having sprinted for far too long. Doesn’t matter, though, things like that aren’t important now.

“Armin… I’m outside your dorm…” I take a deep breath, trying hard not to sound like I’ve just run a marathon, “Just hold on, okay?”

“O.. Ok…” The phone line, much as I wish I could stay on, goes dead. I’m just outside, and I need to call Mikasa anyways, tell her what’s happening. I would have called her sooner but I had to get here first. Now that I’m here, part of me is scared about what I’ll see. It’s always terrifying to see someone you know and love broken by something terrible.

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“Armin?” I call, “Are you… in there?” I know it’s silly, only a few seconds passed- just long enough for me to explain the situation to Mikasa- in the time since I last talked with him. But anything and everything makes me nervous in a situation like this. Armin was so good, he was getting better much faster than anyone else in the group, he didn’t even need the group, really. He
only went so that I wouldn’t be alone.

How far back is this going to knock him?

The door opens, Armin doesn’t say anything. His eyes and nose are both red and swollen, there’s still tears puddling but the streaks from having been crying are just as evident.

“Armin…” I trail off, I know what I felt when I lost my mother. But I don’t know what Armin’s feeling now. I don’t know what he wants to hear or what’s the right thing to say. If that even exists.

“I keep trying to tell myself that he was old…” Armin stares past me, into the hall, as if there’s a ghost over my shoulder. Or maybe it’s as if there’s nothing there at all. No walls, no floor, not me and not even himself. Just nothingness, devoid of color and light, of shape and anything real. “He was old and this was coming sooner or later…” There’s an emptiness to his voice, too. Nothing there, not even sadness, because that state, being devoid of anything and everything, it’s worse than depression, isn’t it?

I can’t say anything so I hug him. Armin stiffens, like he’s just been shocked back into reality. That’s something, if nothing else. He starts sobbing, wailing, tears soaking the side of my shirt as he grabs at the sides of my jacket. Not so much a hug as a desperate cling.

Still, nobody else opens their doors to check and see what’s happening. Maybe there’s nobody there but… somehow I find that unlikely.

“Let’s go inside, Mikasa will be here soon.” I say, guiding him into the cramped dorm. Just two beds and two desks. Not very homely, and the only thing to make it look like a lived-in space is the semi-mess on Armin’s roommate’s side. Armin’s is neatly organized… well, it was. The books, usually stacked by author’s last name like in a library, are strewn across his desk. Not all of them, just the ones on geography. He must have been going through them. Maybe when he was telling me of all the places he and his grandfather meant to go…

I’m so sorry.

Armin slumps against the floor, not even bothering to make it to his bed, just half-collapses down and leans against the bed leg. He doesn’t say anything, just draws his knees to his chest, wrapping his arms around them, curling into himself, hiding away and making himself smaller than he already is.

I sit next to him, still not sure what to say but I want him to know that he’s not alone. Feelings like that only ever make it worse. I place my hand on his back and rub small circles, my mother used to do that to me whenever I got upset as a kid. I’d always found the action soothing so maybe it’ll help here.

Although I know just soothing someone isn’t going to help. Nothing really does, because it’s not a situation you can just fix and make better again. It’s hard, and the road is long… about as long as your life, really. People, even when they die, don’t just go away, they stay with you, and you learn to live with that. You learn to carry their memories as a part of you and maybe that’ll make it easier or maybe it just makes the burden lighter… I don’t know, I’ve barely handled grief myself and now Armin has to go through that?

“Do you remember that time we got lost in the forest?” Armin’s voice is soft, tentative, breakable like a vase balancing at the edge of a tall table. “We were camping over the summer, you, me, and Mikasa. Your parents couldn’t make it so my grandfather took us?”
“Oh yeah,” I reply, the old memory fading back, “You’d brought that survival guide and I got it in my head that we should try it out and leave the campground.”

“Not even Mikasa could find our way back,” Armin laughs softly, though it’s less of a laugh and more of a weak hiccup, “Grandpa, he… he was so worried when he found us.” His words are muffled as he buries his head in his knees, hiding his face, “He thought we were lost and he wasn’t going to be able to find us again- ready to call the campground police and everything.” He goes silent for a moment, “I wish… I wish it was that simple. That we could just… call someone, anyone- I don’t care who- and have that found again.”

“That?”

“Simpler times.” Armin clarifies, “When our biggest worry was not making it home in time for dinner. When those who loved us, worried about us, were still around to worry and love.” He sighs, a shaky breath, “When we could actually be happy, and stay happy.”

Silence, again. No sounds, no nothing.

“I know.” I say quietly, exhaling out the words, slowly, carefully, “I know.”

- - -

Mikasa arrived a few moments after. We spent the rest of the day just talking, reminiscing, sharing stories and mourning together. I didn’t get home until late that night. I couldn’t sleep. I just rolled from side to side and eventually got up and walked around the kitchen. To my surprise- or… I guess I wasn’t really surprised at all… Mikasa was up too. Making herself some hot chocolate. She offered me some and together we sat at the kitchen table in silence. The letter from Grisha was still there. Untouched by either of us from when we first opened it. I wondered if he knew, if he’d gotten the call that Armin’s grandfather died as well… they did know each other beforehand, after all.

I didn’t go to class this morning. Neither did Armin and Mikasa got the day off from work. All of us just… tired. Not just from not having slept but from the emotional exhaustion of loss. So, not knowing what else to do… I took a walk. And that’s where I am right now, just walking with no destination in mind.

I stopped paying attention to my surroundings a while ago, and, honestly, looking at the street sign in front of my now I have no idea where I am.

This reminds me of that time I walked out in the rain. Back when I was tempted to leave my apartment with Mikasa and cut both her and Armin out of my life for good. Cut everyone out, in fact. If it hadn’t been for Levi that time I don’t think I would still be sitting in the apartment at four a.m, sharing a cup of hot chocolate with my sister because misery prefers company over being alone.

And Armin, he’s not alone now, is he? I called him this morning but he was so distant, he barely sounded like he was actually there and more like… a memory of himself. A memory calling out from a long tunnel, words faraway and airy, barely there and with no real physical form at all. I offered to come over but he denied it. He wants to be alone.

I know the feeling, and I’m not sure it’s a good one.

But could he have fallen so far? I was already a lost case, and it was a miracle that I ever dragged myself out of that pit, but Armin? Armin? Of all the people, he was the one who dealt with grief,
with trauma and his fears the best. He had a logical viewpoint on almost everything and all else he saw in only the best light possible. He was so close to being fully better, even his personal psychologist had little to recommend him— a fact he often laughed about with me. How can someone so stable, so optimistic and smart, regress so quickly?

Will that happen to Mikasa? She’s perhaps the only person I know who is— well, was, better than Armin. Is she going to fall back into a pit? Levi’s just clawed his way out of one, he’s already volatile enough, how much would it take to shake his newfound confidence?

And myself? I’ve had my ups and downs but I only just learned how to manage them… Armin knew how to manage his, he’d practically mastered it. And yet he’s fallen so far…

Is there ever any hope? Is this all just… useless? Trying so hard for just a moment of happiness, of joy and peace before everything comes crashing in on itself? If that’s true then… what’s the point? Of any of this? Of trying so hard if we’re all just going to fall again?

It can’t be so hopeless…

It can’t and yet…

All I’ve seen is telling me that it is. That this is the end, no matter what path we take. We end up back here.

Levi, Mikasa, Armin… Even Jean, Marco, Petra and the others they… I don’t want them to suffer like that. But what could I ever do to help? When I, too, am doomed to such a fate? There’s nothing… nothing I can do. This is just how life will go, isn’t it? For all of us, and not only will I have to suffer through it time and time again but I’ll have to watch them suffer too. Have to watch the people I love rise and fall only to claw their way back, and by the time their hands are bloody and they stand triumphant at the top of the long hill… they’ll just be knocked back down again. And it’ll keep going like this until we die.

Then our death will knock someone else off.

And so on.

It never ends.

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There’s a car in front of the apartment. One I don’t recognize. It’s not overly sleek but it’s not beaten up. It’s just there. It just is.

I walk up the stairs, nothing is different but the way the air feels. Heavy, pressurized, there’s that buzz of silence ringing loudly in my ears. And I don’t react to it. What’s the point, anyway?

The door to the apartment feels larger, like it looms over my head, the shiny painted gold numbers glowing down upon me. Staring me down. I open the door.

At the table sits Grisha.

“Eren, so good to see you.” He stands and comes to hug me. I look past him to Mikasa. She looks strained. Her eyes stay locked on mine like she’s looking for a reaction, she always is.

Whatever she sees gives her pause. Because for a moment she goes slack jawed as if something’s shocked her. I don’t know what.
“Eren, son, I’ve got wonderful news.” Grisha steps back, hands still on my shoulders, “I’ve found a program, like a degree but it’s even better because you’ll get real experience working for a politician. They’ve even got boarding for the participants, all you have to do is fill out the application! Isn’t that fantas-”

“Eren,” Mikasa stands from the table, the squeak of her chair draws Grisha’s attention. “He wants you to leave. If you take this opportunity you’ll go and start working in Political Sciences.” Her eyes are level, “Are you okay with this?”

Am I okay with it? What a strange question, Mikasa.

What does something like that matter for?

Chapter End Notes

I told y'all there'd be angst. And I'm not one to break my promises. *nervous laughter*

Also I think that the 50-chapter estimation is correct but it may be 51 chapters depending on the next one. We'll see, probably not but we'll see.

Either that or we just have a super angsty-monster-chapter in order to wrap up all this plot.

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated.
“It’s really great,” Grisha rambles on enthusiastically. I don’t know how long he’s been speaking about this trip. I can’t even remember the name of it. “You get to stay in a dorm with lots of other people of similar interest, and then during the day you do an internship with a politician of your choice. Of course they’d have to accept your application but it’s better than just some boring classroom study, isn’t it?”

“Of course.” My voice sounds odd. It doesn’t sound like mine. Grisha nods happily. Mikasa stands off to the corner. I can feel her eyes digging into my neck. Waiting for me to speak up. About what, I don’t know.

“You’ll make lots of friends Eren, and they’ve got special accommodations for…” He pauses, glances towards my leg. His eyes flicker back up, a soft, pitying look to them. “You won’t have to deal with stairs.”

“That’s good.” Monotony, that’s what it sounds like. Monotony.

“Is it?” Mikasa pipes up from her place. She’s leaning against her doorframe, as far away as possible while still being in the room. I don’t know whether she’s avoiding me or Grisha. Frankly, I don’t care.

“That’s good.” I repeat, my head lolling downward to stare at my hands, curled around each other in my lap.

“It really is an amazing opportunity, Mikasa.” Grisha turns his attention to her, still blindly enthusiastic. “And Eren seems to like the idea.”

“Are you kidding me?” Mikasa hisses out the words. Grisha seems shocked back for a moment. I can still feel her eyes piercing my neck. Needling their way into my mind and trying to read my shoulders for emotion. “Grisha, Dad, mind leaving us alone for a while?” Mikasa doesn’t look at him. I can tell because I still feel her eyes boring into my skin.

“Oh, yes, of course.” Grisha stands, in my peripheral vision I see his figure get up from the chair. It squeaks against the floorboards, the chair always does that. It’s something that may never change. “I should check into my hotel anyway, it’s getting late.” Grisha turns towards me, “Eren? I’m proud of you, son.”
I don’t reply, I don’t say anything and all I give is a noncommittal nod. With that Grisha leaves. And it’s only moments after the door clicks shut that Mikasa is at my side.

“Eren what’s wrong?” She doesn’t skip anything.

“The same things.” I answer blandly. “I’m tired.”

She stays standing for a while, hesitating, then, quietly, a hand landing softly on my shoulder, “Please, Armin needs us both now. I can’t hold you both up on my own.”

“I’m not lying, Mikasa.” I turn my head and look into her grey eyes. They’re sad, shaking like she can’t focus correctly. “I’ll be there for Armin, and I’m here for you.” I gently move her hand off of my shoulder, “I’m just tired.”

I can see she’s scared but I’m not sure what scares her most, what I said or the fact that I’m telling the truth.

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Come morning Mikasa is gone as usual. What wakes me up isn’t my alarm for class, I turned that off last night, but my phone buzzing on my nightstand. The little green message light is flashing as it vibrates against the table. Slowly, limbs heavy with sleep, I pick up the phone just as the buzz cuts out. Rubbing my eyes to make the bleariness fade faster, I unlock the bright screen to see six new messages glaring up at me in harsh light.

One from Armin.

Three from Mikasa.

Two from Levi?

Huh, I can get Armin and Mikasa but I wonder what Levi has to say. Still, I should check Armin’s first. I can already guess what Mikasa is asking. Am I alright, how did I sleep, the basics.

I need to get out of here. Are you free later today? -Armin

Still half-asleep, I sit upright on my bed, my missing leg dangling off the edge of the bed.

Sure, what time? -Eren

At least he’s willing to get out and see someone today. That’s good. He’s getting better.

But he’ll fall again, soon or far it’ll happen. It always does.

More out of politeness than curiosity, I skim over Mikasa’s messages. No surprise, they’re all exactly as I predicted. Snippets of worry played out over three different basic questions and greetings. I type back a similarly basic reply to all of them. How am I doing? Fine. Did I sleep well? Sure. Did I get to class on time? Yes. The last one was a lie, but Mikasa was so on edge last night that it’s become necessary to lie. She’s about to fall too. I can tell. Soon we’ll all be down and out, with nobody else to drag our sorry asses out of the pit. I wonder if that’s where it all fars apart completely? I suppose I’ll see. No use wondering about it now.

Levi’s texts… surprises me. For two reasons.

Eren, are you alright? -Levi
Mikasa told me that you seemed off. Is it your dad? Is he home? -Levi

I didn’t know Mikasa had Levi’s number. I didn’t even know she talked to him. But I guess it makes sense. Usually she turns to Armin, but that’s not happening right now. I’m about to type out a reply when my phone buzzes again, Armin’s reply.

Six-ish? We can meet outside my dorm. -Armin

Sounds good. -Eren

I’m not sure if him being with me is the best thing right now. I don’t want to lie to him but if he asks me if it’ll get better… Even if I did lie it’s been proven that I’m not very good at it.

Not very good at anything these days. I can outrun Armin but most people can. I can’t even keep pace with Mikasa anymore. Maybe this Political Sciences thing is my only option, whether I want to go or not.

I’d have to leave my life here behind. I’d have to leave Mikasa and Armin. I’d have to quit my job at Maria’s Sweets and stop taking classes at college. I’d have to break up with Levi, probably, and right after I just told him I loved him, too.

Life has a sick sense of irony. But I’ve always been a victim of that, haven’t I? Nothing is new. Nothing has changed. Nothing will ever change.

I scroll back to Levi’s texts. I type out the words that should be said. For what it’s worth I’ll miss you. But should be said and can be said are two different things. I delete them soon after.

Nothing has changed. Nothing will ever change. It’s all just the same.

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Warm breezes kiss the side of my face and run their fingers through my hair. The snow has turned the grass into a glistening green mess, the sidewalk darkened by the melted ice. Winter’s last fingers are pried from the city as Spring lays their hand in the form of small buds and loving, warm winds. Although I’ve always heard the phrase that cold hands hide a warm heart, so maybe it was Winter’s icy tips that were loving, and Spring has come to rip that love away in honor of a ‘new start’. That much would be fitting, wouldn’t it?

“Ah, Eren!” I turn at the sound of my name. Armin walks out of his dorm, the red brick catching the orange light. It’s not dark yet but it’s getting close to sunset, the days longer and brighter as Spring becomes the dominating season.

Armin looks better than he did when I last saw him. He’s put together, his eyes no longer puffy, the only betrayal being a bit of redness I can still make out if I focus hard enough at the edges of his eyes. He’s wearing a t-shirt and is dressed casually but he moves stiffly. Still not used to being outside, still not used to this new reality of his. I know the feeling.

“Yo, where are we going?” I inquire, letting him take the lead. I told Mikasa I would be there for Armin and I intend to keep my promise. Maybe we’ll all end up in that dark, lonely place but at least I can cushion the fall. Or delay it until I’m gone. Then it’ll be up to him to balance for as long as he can, until the inevitable fall.

“Library?” Armin suggests, “I need a distraction.”

Don’t we all.
The walk is spent in mostly silence. Occasionally Armin will comment on something or another, studies, current events, a book he wants to read. I’ll go along with it until the conversation ultimately dies out, neither of us particularly interested in talking. When we reach the library, we end up separating. I see Armin off to the side, browsing books and milling through their pages as he picks them up off of their shelves. I wander around the library for a while, just staring at the rows of dully colored spines, displaying names and authors in varying fonts.

I pick a random book out and pull it from it’s place. The others slump against the side of the shelf with a soft thump. Limitless Time is displayed on the front cover in large block letters. I thumb through the first few pages, finding it’s about a man who can’t die, but is instead stuck reminiscing about all the loved ones he’s seen grow old and die before him. One line in particular stands out to me, “Isn’t it ironic how death is such a great fear, and yet the lack of it creates such a big tragedy?”

“Iren!” I snap the book closed as I turn towards where Armin sits at a table with a book laid out, open in front of him. I put the novel back into it’s spot and go sit next to him. The book in front of him is huge, almost as big as Armin himself, and it’s open to a map of the world. Armin traces down the map with his finger until it lands on a coastal region in a small island I recognize as one of the Hawaiian islands. “There, page 365.” He mutters to himself, before rapidly flipping through the pages. I pull up the chair next to him and watch as images flip rapidly across my vision. Briefly, in their passing, I see a volcano spewing red lava onto a black stone landscape, a tundra filled with large- almost sculpture-esque mountains of ice, and a desert where the sand piles in bunches reminiscent of the folds in a wavy dress. Armin comes to a stop on an image of a tropical beach, a bright red hibiscus flower folds open on the page with soft beauty. The waves are shining and a beautiful blue, the palm trees whisked off to the side by some unseen wind. On the top, in fancy, bubbly cursive writing, it tells of the island of Molokai.

“I was thinking, my grandfather never got to go there,” He starts to explain, drawing my attention away from the tropical image of a horseback riding trail through lush, green mountains, “But he wanted to, both of us did… Maybe one day I’ll spread his ashes there. Since he always talked about Molokai.” Armin takes a deep breath. He doesn’t sound as shaky as he did that first day when he called me. Quietly, slowly, he turns his head away from the pages, and looks to me with a soft smile. “It’ll be alright.” Then, looking back at the description of the island, “I’ll be alright.”

For a while, maybe. All I can hope is that he’ll be fine for as long as possible, before the inevitable.

“That sounds like a good plan.” I reassure him, not able to honestly agree with the latter statement.

“Anyway, I had another thought,” Armin thumbs to the next page, and the image of islands disappears. “I know none of us can afford it now, but maybe later, once we’re older and we all have jobs, you, me, and Mikasa should all take a trip. Every year, somewhere new. One trip, just so that we don’t lose contact with each other.”

“Why do you say that?” I wonder, “Why do you think we’ll lose contact.”

Armin shrugs nonchalantly, “We’re all on such different tracks in life. I know I’m not going to stay here and I doubt either you or Mikasa are going to remain in the city either.” He pauses on the page of a forested land in the amazon. A helicopter shot shows a snaking river cutting a long blue path between a canvas of canopy, “Mikasa told me what Grisha… offered.”

“She shouldn’t have bothered you with that.” I lean back against my chair. He has so much on his mind right now the last thing he needs is to worry about me.

“No, she should have.” Armin gives a dry, sarcastic laugh, “Do you really think it would’ve been
better for me to just wake up and- whoops, guess what? Now you’re best friend has left you as well!” He mimics some kind of announcer voice, nasally, sarcasm dripping from every tone. Armin shakes his head, “Trust me, I appreciate the heads up.”

“I wasn’t going to-”

“Oh cut it out, Eren.” Armin sighs, “Don’t lie to me and say you weren’t going to up and leave without any notice…” His shoulders slump, eyes strained onto the book again. “You almost did, before, when Mikasa caught you looking at apartments.” Slowly, his head turns towards me, “Why are you so desperate to make yourself miserable, anyway?”

I… don’t have a reply. So I say nothing.

“What is it that’s gotten in your head to make you think that this misery is the only way out for you? Is it some kind of self-loathing? If so, why?” Armin shakes his head, the way he does when faced with a particularly puzzling math or science equation, “You’ve got people who love you, Eren. People who are here and trying to get you to open up to them because they actually care. And you want to, I know because you’re happiest when you do. Yet you always try to make it harder for yourself.” He closes the book slowly, “I want to know why. Do you just hate yourself that much? To the point where you’re willfully trying to make it impossible for you to be happy?”

Again I’m silent. Armin waits, but I don’t think he’s waiting for a response. He knows well enough that he’s not getting a response. Instead he’s waiting for a reaction. The way he’d examine two chemicals mixing together to form some explosion or disintegration.

“You deserve to be happy, Eren. We all do.” Armin stands, holding the book against his chest, “It’s hard, probably the hardest thing right now, so don’t make it worse.” With that he goes to return the book. And I’m left sitting at the table, wondering if such a thing is really possible.

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I drop Armin back at his dorm, as I’m walking away my phone buzzes in my pocket.

*Are you alright? - Levi*

Levi? Oh, I guess I never did respond to his texts earlier this morning. Now I have all three of them, Levi, Armin, and Mikasa, worried about me again. This isn’t what I want, it’s never what I aim for yet it always seems to be the result. I should text him back. But what will I say?

*I’m sorry Levi, my father’s come to take me on some Political Sciences trip and because I really can’t seem to shake all this shit off I’ve decided to just give up and go with it. I’ll see you around but I guess I won’t be seeing you anymore?*

I can’t shake the feeling that Armin knew what he was talking about. He usually does, in these kinds of situations. He’s smart, he’s logical. But I’m not a logical person, so how do I know that his tactic will work for me?

Yet there he is, having fallen but still picking himself up and continuing on. Learning to solve his problems and getting better at doing them…

*Could* he be right? Mikasa seems to live by the same creed and she’s still functioning, has been for longer than either of us. Yet it all seems so hopeless I… I have to know, but I’m scared to find out.

I don’t really know when I pressed the call button, but my phone is held up to my ear and I’m counting the rings with a slow breath to keep myself calm.
“Eren?” Levi’s voice does better than breathing ever could.

“Did I tell you that Armin’s grandfather died?” I start talking slowly, and for a strange second I find myself relieved to hear that I don’t sound as monotonous as I did when talking with my father. Sad… but saddened feels better than empty. Levi pauses,

“No… No I didn’t realize, I’m sorry. Are you alright?” His voice is filled with concern. Armin’s was too, and Mikasa’s almost always is. I wonder if this is what Armin meant, when he said that I had people around me who loved me.

“I don’t know,” I speak honestly, Levi and I made our agreement to share our secrets, if there’s anyone I can ask it’s him. “I watched Armin… I don’t know how else to phrase it- I watched Armin just crumble and he’d been doing so well I…” I pause, and Levi lets me pause, waiting patiently for me to continue, “I can’t help but wonder if there’s any point to it anymore. If the past, if all our shit can creep up and pounce in such a small moment, what’s the point? Is there any point?”

“Yes.” He sounds so confident, even distorted by the cheap phone reception he still sounds steadfast.

“How do you know?”

“The past is always going to be there, Eren.” Levi explains, “And sometimes we’ll be reminded of that shit- you saw that with me- and it’s going to try to topple us over.” He sighs, “But that doesn’t mean the future is hopeless. It just means we have to fight damn hard.”

“I’m tired, Levi.” I cradle the phone close, wishing now that I’d done this in person, where I could see him there with me, hold his hand, feel warm instead of… nothing. “I’m tired of fighting.”

“So am I,” He doesn’t disregard it, “But see there’s the shitty irony of it all, you think you’re tired now but you’ll be fucking exhausted if you give up.” There’s some humor in his tone, light, sarcastic, jaded humor. The way a veteran talks about their war. “We can rest, once this is all over, let’s relax together, okay?”

Such a future seems impossible to comprehend. And yet I can’t help but feel like it already exists. In those moments both small and big, talking at The Rose Café, taking walks together, that’s where I’ve already had a taste of what such a future entails. It’s existed for a while now too, when we went ice skating stretching back even to our very first date going to see what we thought was a romantic comedy but turned out to be a horror… how fitting. But that doesn’t mean it can’t end happily, right?

“Right.” I don’t know who I’m agreeing to, myself or Levi… but I think I’m agreeing to both of us. Because it’s a shared future, one involving both of us. “You know, Grisha- my dad- asked me to leave, to come with him on a… well, I wasn’t really listening, I think it’s an internship? Out of town, maybe even out of state. Leave everything- everyone- behind.”

If a pin dropped on the other line, I swear I would’ve heard it, it’s so silent.

“And?”

“I… I’m going to tell him I can’t do it.” I say quietly, “I still have no idea where I’m going in life but… it’s not there.” I pause, smiling to my own little inside joke, “I wouldn’t be happy there.”

“Well… Good.” Levi breathes a sigh of… relief, I think is what I hear in his voice.
“Yeah, oh and Levi?”

“Hm?”

“Thanks, you didn’t even try to push me one way or the other when I told you so… thank you.”

I hear laughter, soft, no longer sarcastic but genuine, laughter, “I trust you, Eren, and I’m not here to hold you back. Only to push you forward.”

“The only way I’m going forward is if you come with me. So get ready to be dragged along.”

“Damn, and I was just getting to like it here.”

“Trust me, it’s better where we’re going.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that.” Levi takes a breath, “Eren?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

I smile, softly, and notice the warm feeling even without him being physically next to me. “I love you, too.”

I have some things to talk about with my father.

Chapter End Notes

I... don't really know what to say here anymore. We've got one last chapter and then it'll all be over. This has been going on for... about a year now and it's probably the longest project I've ever completed... which I'm still surprised I did complete. Thank you for all the support and love and just... everything.

For the last time, I'll see you next week.

Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated.
“You mustn’t be so dramatic, Mikasa.” Well, on the list of things I expected to hear before talking with my dad, this certainly wasn’t one of them. I didn’t even expect him to be in our apartment but here I am, standing outside our door, listening to my father’s voice argue with my sister.

“I don’t think this will be good for him.” Mikasa sounds serious, even more so than usual. From her tone I can practically picture her standing, arms crossed and back straight, ready to fight but not yet willing to do so physically. Not budging. Are they talking about me?

“You don’t know that-”

“With all due respect, you don’t know it any more than I do.” She pauses, “In fact I think I would know more than you. You haven’t exactly been around.”

“I’ve been trying to help.” Grisha pleads again, “I’m a busy man, Mikasa. I want to be here for you and Eren but I can’t always be around. You must understand.”

“Thank you for your help,” Mikasa doesn’t exactly sound thankful, “We can handle ourselves, though.”

“Mikasa, you’re making it too hard for yourself,” Grisha’s voice again, he sounds more patronizing, like a parent scolding their child and- well… I guess technically that is what he’s doing. Funny, didn’t occur to me at first. “What about that scholarship? I got a copy of it electronically. Are you just going to abandon that to stay here?”

What scholarship?

“I know you want to care for him but this could be the chance for both of you to finally pursue your passions. You can’t be tied down like this.”

“Or it could be a disaster.” Mikasa retaliates, “Trust me when I say that Eren leaving would not be pursuing his passion at all. In fact I have a sinking feeling that it’s only going to harm-”

“You’re being melodramatic.” Grisha interrupts her again. “I know what’s best for my son.”

“For a son you barely know?”
I should intervene before this escalates any further. With a single knock on the door both voices fall into silence. I swing open the front door and see both of them standing by the table, and sure enough, Mikasa has her arms crossed and her spine rigid. I look in between the two of them, Grisha averts his eyes and Mikasa stares straight at me. Both of them clearly know I’ve overheard their conversation. Grisha looks somewhat ashamed for that fact while Mikasa just seems to be studying me, like usual, like she’s scared I’m still on edge.

I smile at her, and I watch as her shoulders relax, her frown slowly softening on her face because with just such a small, genuine gesture she knows that I feel better now. Not perfect- but better.

“You can thank Armin and Levi.” I tell her, a short pause and then, “Also… yourself.”

That seems to get through to her. Mikasa smiles at me, actually smiles. Not the ghost-of-a-smile I’m so used to seeing but a genuine smile. It’s small, soft, and half hidden under her red scarf. I can’t quite tell if she’s wearing her new one or the one she’s always worn. She nods to me and it seems to say, Okay, I trust you. Then she looks to Grisha, giving him one last stare before leaving the room. Grisha watches her back until her door closes and then he turns to me.

“Eren, son, I’m glad you’re here. I came because I wanted to talk about what you’ll need to pack for…” He trails off when I hold up my hand.

“Dad I…” I pause. This talk is a whole lot more awkward when I actually have to give it. Nevermind the fact that I was expecting time to actually rehearse it and think of what I want to say rather than wing it but… fuck it. My life has never been something expected anyways. “I don’t want to go on this trip.” I watched his face fall, I could almost see the excitement seep out of his eyes. “I don’t… I don’t like Political Sciences.”

“Oh…” Is that all he has to say? Is that it? “I…”

“It’s really not your fault,” I follow up, hurriedly, like I have to reassure him, “I just… I’ve never been interested in Political Sciences. I’m barely managing a passing grade in the class to begin with I- I really don’t want to take it anymore.”

“Then… why did you?” He inquires, “Why make me think that you wanted this? I only pursued this internship because I thought that…”

“I…” I bite my lip, looking back on it, it was a stupid reason. I was never interested. I was never going to pursue it. I only kept at it to make him happy but… why should I try to please someone else when it’s my life, not theirs, that it’ll affect? “I did it because I thought it would make you happy, make you proud of me.” I sigh, it sounds even more illogical when said aloud. “But it’s not what makes me happy and it’s not what I want to do with the rest of my life.”

“Then what is?”

And there’s the question. The question I wish I had an answer to because it would have made everything so much easier. If I had a purpose, a goal in life, some driving passion that would have given me a reason to tell him that this isn’t what I wanted to do earlier on. “I don’t know.” I answer him honestly.

“You don’t know?” Grisha’s eyes narrow in suspicion, perhaps he’s thinking that this is some kind of teenage rebellion, maybe he suspects that I’m lying to him. I have no idea, I don’t know how he thinks, I don’t know him. “Then how can you be so sure that this wouldn’t be what you want.”

“Because it doesn’t make me happy.”
“Lots of things we do aren’t for our happiness, Eren.”

“It makes me miserable.” I rephrase carefully, clenching and unclenching my hands by my sides to keep myself from getting angry. Grisha stares at me a moment longer, his eyes are wide and his mouth slightly agape. He looks… shocked by this revelation. As if he never comprehended the idea that his own son could turn on him like this. Guess I’m just a surprise to everyone, aren’t I?

Then he surprises me. His mouth closes and he looks to the side for a moment, as if trying to regain his composure. Grisha sighs and gives me a quiet, regretful, tight-lipped smile. “I see.” He answers slowly, “You’re my son, Eren. I will support you but…” He pauses, his hand reaches up and scratches the back of his neck, eyes not looking at me but past me, in the distance, towards a future that could have been his ideal. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

*Never have, never will.* I reply back in my head… but choose to keep those words to myself, lest I make my own father have some stress-induced heart attack. I can already tell this decision alone is wearing down on him. He looks a lot more weary than when he first walked into the apartment. I can clearly see the bags under his eyes and the lines in his face. I wonder, briefly, if my dad chose to pursue something that makes him happy. He’s never around so I’ll never be able to tell but… perhaps the distance in his letters wasn’t just from his own distaste of my sister and I. Maybe I’m being hopeful, though. Wouldn’t that be something new?

“I hope you’re happy, dad, really.” I speak honestly, and that seems to snap Grisha back to some sense of reality.

“Yes, well, isn’t it the parent who’s supposed to tell their child that?” He sighs, his hand drops to his side, “I’ll have to give them a letter withdrawing your application but… I’m proud of you Eren,” He chuckles to himself, “Or, I will be, once you find what it is that makes you happy.” Then he pulls back his sleeve, a watch ticks away silently, “I’ve… I’m leaving again.”

“Today?” I can’t stop my eyebrows raising in surprise. He’s barely been here for three days, how can he leave so suddenly?

“Yes, I was only able to segway in order to help you get organized to leave but…” He shakes his head, “I guess that won’t be happening.” He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small slip of paper- a plane ticket. “If you change your mind I won’t tell them you’ve withdrawn until after the trip leaves. Don’t want to regret anything, right? And when you find what you want to do… follow it through, that’s all I ask.” He places it on the table, pats it once and gives me one more remorseful look, a wan smile still stretched tight across his lips. “Take care of yourself Eren, I love you.”

“Uh, yeah,” I shuffle my feet awkward, “You… too.” The words don’t sound exactly right on my tongue. But they seem to make Grisha feel better all the same.

“Tell Mikasa I say I love you.” And with that, my father walks past me, and leaves our apartment to disappear again.

The first thing I do is walk over to the table and pick up the plane ticket. The internship was, apparently, halfway across the country. Quietly and without remorse, I throw it in the trash. I won’t regret this, because this is one of the few times in my life that I’m sure of the right decision. I know, for once, what will make me happy.

It’s… a good feeling.

I turn around and give a little start when I see Mikasa leaning against her doorway. She’s so silent I
didn’t even hear the door open. But there she stands, smiling at me proudly- no, not smiling, but actually grinning for once.

“I guess you heard?”

“I’m proud of you.” She answers my question indirectly. “Really, I think you’re finally starting to get it, huh? How to recover, I mean.”

“Yeah, well, took me a while.” I answer sheepishly.

“It takes everyone a while.” She shakes her head, “I’m just glad… well, I’m always worried for you, you know that.”

“Hey, I could say the same about me to you.” I roll my eyes, “You gotta let me be the worried sibling now and then, Mikasa, I’ll get left in the dust otherwise.”

“I… don’t quite think I have the same level of worry needed as you do, Eren.” She raises an eyebrow, perhaps surprised by my answer. Can’t imagine why, though, she knows I’ll care and fret over her if need be. She’s my sister after all, we’re family. “Wow, okay, rude.” I pause, “Justified, but still rude.” Then my brows furrow together, “But, y’know, speaking of worrying… Grisha mentioned a scholarship? I heard it through the door.” Immediately the grin fades, her expression darkens considerably and I wonder if, yet again, I’ve fallen head first into dangerous territory.

“Ignore that.” She shrugs nonchalantly, her free hand uncrossing from her chest and pulling the red scarf up, over her nose, muffling her words, “It’s nothing.”

“Oh, no, no, no” I say, “No double standards, Mikasa. If I’m going to be honest with you, you’ve gotta be honest with me, okay?” I narrow my eyes, mimicking the stance she always takes, arms crossed. Mikasa looks at me with surprise for a moment before relenting.

“… Fine, but only if you promise not to keep anything else from me.” I nod my agreement and she sighs, “I applied a while ago for a scholarship opportunity, we don’t exactly have the funds to afford my schooling as well and I… want to finish college and get a job, a real job, not just working in the pharmacy.”

“And you got accepted?” I can’t say I’m surprised. Mikasa’s more talented than anyone I’ve ever known, she’s always been in the top of her classes, competing with Armin, even in athletics she rules the field. Mikasa nods slightly. “That’s great! I’m so happy for you!” My excitement is quickly stunted when her expression shows no joy, “Why aren’t you happy?”

“It’s… in another state.” She grimaces “I’d be gone, Eren… How can I leave you by yourself? To pay the bills? Care for yourself? I can’t… I can’t do that.”

Oh. So she’s holding herself back for me?

A couple of months ago that would’ve been the very thing to send me off the edge. It’s been exactly what I’ve been trying to avoid but… Things like this can’t be ignored, and they can be fixed. I smile, softly, “Mikasa I have a job, and Grisha is going to start sending checks again now that he’s gone. And you’re not leaving me alone, I’ve got Armin and Levi.” I shake my head, “This is what I was trying to avoid, all those times. Please, don’t hold yourself back for me, that isn’t what I want.”

“How can you be sure you’ll be okay?” She’s unconvinced, her eyes still shine with worry as she speaks.
“I can’t.” I answer honestly, “And I’m pretty sure I won’t be okay, not completely, not forever. But I’m getting better at managing it… and I’m learning how to pick myself up and stop myself from falling completely to begin with.” I sigh, “I appreciate everything you’ve done for me, and I love you, but you need to live your own life… and don’t worry about me, I’m getting pretty good at trying to be happy, you know?”

“I…” Mikasa trails off, her eyes cast to the side, “I trust you.” She sighs quietly. “I’ll think about it.”

“Do what makes you happy.” I grin, “I need someone to be my role model, after all.” Mikasa half-snorts at that,

“Alright, well, I’ll just have to do that then, won’t I?” Then, softly, “Thank you.”

“Of course, what else would I wish for you?”

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I drop my Political Sciences course pretty quickly. Of course it’s too late in the year to sign up for anything else but… Well, the year is almost over so I guess I’ll just be spending my summer looking for something new to do. Surprisingly enough, I find myself being more and more drawn to what Jean quit the group to do. Well, a little deviated but…

I’ve been thinking of studying to become a physical therapist.

But if he ever finds out that Jean, of all the people, helped inspire me there’s no doubt he’d never let that go. So I simply won’t ever let him know. Not to mention medical school is fucking expensive but… well… that’s what the job is for. Also maybe I’ll follow in Mikasa’s path and try to get some kind of scholarship, and perhaps this fucking prosthetic will finally be useful for something.

It’s on a warm evening that Mikasa comes home unusually early. She brought a small cake and called Armin to come over. Only when all three of us are sitting around the cake that she announces that she’s going to take the scholarship and go away. We had a tiny celebration, just the three of us, which consisted of eating too much cake and watching one too many movies that were free or on sale. Most of them were complete and utter shit but there was one… I think it was a romantic comedy? Honestly, it was one a.m. by that time and tears had already been shed over Mikasa’s announcement to leave but all I remember is Armin bawling into the pillows and screaming about how stupid the heroine was, and how she should’ve just gone with Token Hot Guy Number Two because apparently Token Hot Guy Number One was undeserving. I think Armin remembers, but whenever I try to bring it up his face either contorts in anger or he grows embarrassed about his behavior.

Armin’s doing a lot better too. It’s only been about a month now but he’s really gotten back up on his feet. He still needs to call either Mikasa or I late at night just to sob it out or go out and distract himself but… he’s happier, really, and getting better by the day. He’s even returned to classes and he’s finally settled on becoming a cartographer and just generally studying maps and geography. Which… honestly I don’t know why none of us thought of that sooner. It’s like he’s finally found the perfect path in life, no more switching around. He’s even been looking into jobs once we graduate from college and, as he and I both know, it’s going to mean a lot of travelling on his part. But I don’t plan on losing contact with him, or Mikasa. We’ve all got our yearly trips to start looking into, after all, and Armin’s going to be able to make some great recommendations.

I had to drop my sessions with Erwin to save funds, which was regrettable but… he understood.
He’s friends with Levi so I don’t think it’ll be the last I see of him but, in a very Erwin-esque manner, he left me with rather cryptic words. “I think you’ve finally found it, Eren.” He said, a look of almost… pride on his face, “Now, try not to let it go. Any of it.” Not that I have any idea what ‘it’ is, but I’ll figure it out in time. I usually do. If not then someone else will hit me over the head with it.

I’m still in the therapy group. Well, what’s left of it. Which is really just Hanji, Petra, Marco and I. But… it’s nice. We’ve all got our problems to work through and we all make it easier for each other. The only funny thing is that now it feels like everyday, the last ten minutes of our meetings turn into some kind of gossip circle. Between Marco talking about his relationship with Jean, Hanji’s now blooming romance with Moblit, Petra’s beginning to put herself out again, and myself with Levi the four of us somehow always end up just gossiping. I don’t mind though, Hanji made the joke that we’re all like an old knitting circle of elderly people, gossiping about our lovers. Which, what do you know, is surprisingly fun. But if Hanji suggests we actually take up knitting, I’m out.

As for Levi, well… That’s what I’m off to right now. We still meet at The Rose Café once a week, tradition is hard to break. And today happens to be that kind of day.

I… can honestly say I’ve never been happier than how happy I am with him. It’s funny but as time has passed ‘I love you’ has become both easier and harder to say. I’ve become used to saying it, and I can say it without all the struggle that I once had but… I can’t help but feel like the longer I’m with him the less it says everything I want to say. Actions speak louder than words, I know, but still it’s hard when words can’t suffice. But still, there’s something that makes the words even more special when you’re trying to get across… everything.

“Levi” I call as I half jog up the rest of the block to The Rose Café. He turns around, one hand still on the door, and smirks when he sees me.

“Eren, I’m shocked, when I didn’t see you I half expected you to be late again.” He holds the door open as I catch up with him.

“Oh, come on, I’ve been good about being on time, haven’t I?” I thank him for the door and head inside.

“Really, now? Guess I must not have noticed it when you left me waiting half an hour last week, maybe I was just early,” He rolls his eyes sarcastically, “My mistake.”

“Okay, that wasn’t my fault,” I shrug, “My professor said he had to talk to me about switching courses next year, I didn’t think he would mean lecture me.”

“Uh-huh, you just keep telling yourself that.” Levi shakes his head as we take our seats at the usual table, outside on the small fenced in veranda. They’ve replaced the flower boxes with newly painted ones, bright red flowers beginning to unfold their petals to the spring sun.

“Oh, I will.” I assure him. Levi gives me an incredulous look before shaking his head, intertwining our fingers.

“Of course, nothing less, right?” I only grin in response, he follows it up with, “Oh, how’s Mikasa doing on packing by the way?”

“Uh… doing well,” I shrug, “She leaves… what? A few weeks from now?” I sigh, my shoulders sagging, “It’s gonna be hard with her gone but… Well, I’ve got you, don’t I? And Armin too. I’ll manage.” Levi reaches under the table, I link my hand through his, intertwining our fingers.
“Of course you’ve got me, don’t you dare fucking hesitate to ask for help if things get too difficult, okay?” He reassures me with a gentle tone but stern words.

“Please, if I didn’t, you’d just kick down my door and barge on in anyways. Or Mikasa would fly back and do that herself.” I shake my head, “Either way, I’ve gotta be careful if I want to keep the apartment intact.” As I speak I notice Levi’s eyes flicking off to the side now and then. He’s shifting in his seat and his lips are pressed tightly together. He’s nervous. “Hey,” I give his hand a squeeze and watch as his grey eyes slide back towards me, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong.” He answers quickly, then a smile slowly forms on his face, “Trust me, everything is… great.” He sighs, and squeezes my hand in return, less of an act of reassurance to me but more like he was checking my hand was still there. “Look, I’ve been… considering some things.”

This… doesn’t sound good. But I shouldn’t jump to conclusions, it’s Levi, afterall. I trust him. I don’t say anything and just wait for Levi to continue.

“I know you can handle everything but I don’t want you to have to juggle all that shit, Eren. Not to mention it’s something I’ve been thinking about for a while but I didn’t want to put more crap on you,” Levi shrugs, “And I don’t want to rush things but we’ve been together for a while now.” He takes a deep breath, “I was wondering if you might consider moving in with me?”

“What?” Is my first, and perhaps less eloquent reply. Quickly, I follow it up with, “I mean, it’s just, you really want me there?”

“I really…” Levi echoes, “What the fuck, Eren? Do you honestly think I’d bullshit some question like that?”

“No! No, I’m just surprised.”

“Really?” Levi deadpans, “Shit, Eren, I thought it was damn obvious that I was going to ask you. I’ve been so on edge recently even Hanji’s been giving me crap about it.”

“But I’m so messy.” I counter, “You’ve seen my room, and you’re so neat!”

“I like to clean, I don’t give a flying fuck about that.” Levi leans forward, one arm resting on the table, “Eren if you don’t want to all you have to say is no, I’m not a kid.”

“No! That’s not what I mean!” I shake my head quickly, “I mean, yes, yes of course it sounds wonderful to me, but are you sure that you want to?”

“What the fuck? I’m the one who asked!” Levi sounds exasperated, “Of course I’m sure!”

“Well, uh…” I blink, “Wow. I… I didn’t really expect you to ask.”

“No shit,” Levi rolls his eyes.

“But, yes,” I feel the grin spread before I know I’m smiling widely, “Yes, of course. That sounds amazing.” I lean forward, across the table, and meet Levi halfway, “Thank you.”

“I could say the same,” He whispers quietly before kissing me on the lips.

The road ahead looks bright and beautiful, especially so with him by my side.
An airplane roars overhead as the white body glitters in the sunlight. Mikasa pulls her bags out of Armin’s trunk. She slips her duffel bag over her head and turns to Armin, myself, and Levi. Two days ago it was made official by Mikasa and I finally selling the apartment. Funny enough, I don’t think I ever called it ‘my’ apartment, or even home. Still there was something nostalgic about it all. I moved my stuff over to Levi’s before spending Mikasa’s last day with us at Armin’s. The three of us having one last sleepover before she goes off on her scholarship.

And here we are, in front of the airport. Mikasa’s red scarf blowing on a windy day as she grips the handle of her rolling suitcase so tightly that her knuckles have turned white. Armin smiling and my grinning widely but all three of us with tears in our eyes. Nobody says anything at first, then Mikasa wraps the both of us up in one large hug, which we gladly return.

“Don’t disappear on us, now.” I joke into her shoulder, Mikasa nods.

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” She answers quietly.

“Take good care of yourself.” Armin gives his piece before she gives us one last, lung-crushing squeeze and releasing us, going back to the death-grip on her suitcase. “I’ll miss you both.” Her voice isn’t as monotonous as it usually is, but instead it’s filled with a bittersweet happiness. The kind that’s on the verge of sadness but still full of hope. “I love you two.”

“Hey, don’t get so sappy.” I shake my head, “That’s not like the Mikasa I know.”

“Oh, I’ve a feeling she’s going to come back an entirely different person.” I see Armin grin as he says this, “Five piercings, a tattoo… maybe multiple. Smuggling a bottle of beer in the airplane back.” I see Mikasa half roll her eyes at this.

“Ha, you’d better not. Because if I’m supposed to be the responsible sibling then we’re all screwed.” I give her one last tight smile, “I’ll see you sooner than you think, Mikasa. Love you.”

“Right,” She nods in agreement, eyes flicking between Armin and I. One last hesitation, a deep breath and then, “Goodbye.” With that, she pulls her scarf up a little higher and walks inside. Armin and I stay to watch her retreating back as the sliding glass doors separate the three of us for the first time in… as long as I can remember. I see Armin shaking slightly in my peripheral vision and lay a hand on his shoulder.

“You okay?” He wipes at his eyes and turns to me, a bright smile on his face.

“I think I’ll be better than I ever was before.” He sighs, steadying himself, “This is really a new beginning isn’t it?”

“Eh, life doesn’t really ‘begin’ so much as just…” I shrug, “Happens. So it’s a new happening, yeah. But I think this never really ended for something new to begin.” I turn back to the doors, Mikasa’s disappeared into the ebb and flow of the crowd inside, “Honestly, I don’t think it will end,” I grin, and pat Armin’s shoulder, “So, sorry buddy, but you’re stuck with me.”

“Oh, I knew that,” Armin shakes his head, “Trust me, I’ve been resigned to that for a long time, Eren.”

“Hey!”

“And it’s only feeling longer.” Armin smirks at me, “But, really, the future looks pretty bright right now, so I think I’ll be okay…” Armin turns to me, “What about you?”
How does the future look for me?

I start laughing, Armin looks at me like I’ve gone insane. “Sorry it’s just, well, it’s funny but I used to think the future was doomed.”

“And now?”

“I have no idea,” I answer, “But I think I actually have one now.” I say, “And I’m determined to be happy in it.”

“Out of curiosity might ‘happy’ be equivalent to ‘with Levi?’” Armin raises an eyebrow.

“You know me too well,” I shake my head, “But other things too, you know.” I take a deep breath, the fresh air feels good on my lungs, “I can’t wait to reach it.”

“I don’t think it’s ever really possible to ‘reach’ the future, Eren.” Armin puts air-quotes around the words.

“Let me have my fun, will ya?” I shake my head.

“Sorry, sorry,” Armin glances at his watch, “Well, I need to go. We’ll hang later?”

“Of course,” I remove my hand from his shoulder and offer him a wave instead as he walks back to his car. Then I turn and see Levi leaning against the door of his car. Feeling lighter than I have all day, I practically prance back to where he stands, giving him a quick kiss on the cheek.

“You okay?” Levi asks, returning the gesture.

“Better than okay,” I say, “I think she’ll be happy.”

“And you?”

“What about me?” I shrug, “I already am happy.” I pause, “I mean, yeah, I’m sad to see Mikasa leave and I know Armin’s going to leave in a year or so too but… Well, I’m not alone, and… I’m happy.” There’s really no other way to say it. Happiness is happiness, and for once I know what it feels like.

“Good,” Levi pushes himself off of the side of the car, “And of course you’re not alone, you really think I’d let that slip by?” He smirks. “You know I love you.”

“Really? Hadn’t noticed.” I reply cheekily.

“Brat,”

“I love you too.” I shake my head, Levi walks around to the other end of the car and as I open my door I catch my reflection in the window. Briefly, a thought passes through my head, I wonder if it’s really possible to love a monster. Then I start laughing. Levi looks up from over the car, expression showing silent inquisition.

“I just called myself a monster,” I explain, “And, you know, it really didn’t fit at all.”

“Of course it didn’t,” Levi replies seriously, “You’re not a monster, after all.”

“Yeah, well, neither are you.” I say. Levi rolls his eyes,

“ Took us both long enough to see that.”
“Better late than never.” I slide into the car next to him, Levi smirks at me.

“That’s just your motto isn’t it?” He asks, buckling himself into the carseat.

“Wow, low blow, Levi.” I say. He leans over and gives me a quick kiss on the lips before he sits back and starts up the car, casting me one last look in the corner of his eyes, a smile playing at his lips.

“Alright, alright, let’s go home.”

Chapter End Notes

I don't know whether to laugh, scream, throw a party, or cry. Or in what order.

Thank you so much for sticking through me through all of this. I've loved getting to hear everyone's feedback you’ve all been so supportive and kind and just you're all amazing people and I hope you all have many happy days ahead of you.

Thank you thank you thank you thank you.

And for the last time...

I hope you all have a lovely day. And a lovely future ahead of you.

Thank you.

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