Summary

Every road leads somewhere, but sometimes to take a particular path you need to walk with someone who was walked it before.

As Eren Jaeger's reasonably comfortable life begins to crumble, he must learn to rely on people to help him down an unfamiliar road towards true recovery, even if that is the very last thing he wants to do.

Notes

WARNING: If you are triggered by;
- self harm
- suicidal thoughts
Or anything in the tags, please care for yourself, and do not read if you are sensitive to that material.

If you find any mistakes, don't be afraid to drop me a line to let me know! Just give me the chapter and a roundabout location of the mistake and I'll fix it up right away.

If you have any questions, please send them in:
What Was

"But the bruises never heal! They never heal. The aching fires of battered limbs, and the discarded memories of those you once held dear and close to your heart... they are still."

Bright lights illuminate the sweat on his forehead, and the microphone highlights his nervousness as it shakes his fingers. I frown, lips pursed in worry. He always overthinks things. And this should be read with way more feeling. Something is off about the way he's speaking tonight. I just can't put my finger on it. Maybe something is just off about the way I wrote it. Yeah, that would make more sense. Jean always reads with passion - I always write things half-assed, ever since high school. God, I bet they all know, too.

"How? How can it have come to this? Lonely children entering an even lonelier world, with no knowledge of anything! It's as though the universe has beaten us from the beginning, given us the cracked and broken path and sentenced us to a steep hike of pain and loss and suffering and there is no way to escape because if you fall, you fall from the mountain and then there is more nothing than before!"

Cool applause echoes throughout the auditorium and Jean regains his composure, leaving the stage allowing for the next to follow after him, readjusting the microphone stand and taking up a stool. I believe her name is Nanaba, she's a regular here. The empty space beside me on the moth-eaten lime green couch is soon filled by the poet previously on stage. He's a little sweaty but nonetheless composed. I'd give him credit if I want a little jealous.

"How was I?" He asks, wiping his palms on his light-wash denim jeans. He's still shaking, still sweating. Sometimes I wonder if I'd be able to go up there and do it, without shaking or sweating. Probably not.

"Great. You did it really well," I reply, staring blankly ahead at the stage, clutching a glass of untouched whiskey. Maybe I should be more honest with him? It's not like he can find his own flaws as easily as I can find them.

He cocks his head, smiling slightly. "Really?"

He's too hopeful. I don't want to crush that. I nod and take a sip of room temperature alcohol as does Jean of his own. It gives off enough buzz to keep me awake, and just enough comfort to satisfy my anxious needs. Anxiety isn't something I'd pin myself down as having, but I would be lying if I said that I didn't get anxious in public places. Especially places where I'm sharing my so-called talent. There's always more judgment then, even from yourself.

God, I'm pathetic.

More people take the stage, one at a time, proclaiming experiences through many forms of poetry. My nerves settle when I'm certain people are only paying attention to who is on stage, reacting accordingly. But this place isn't for entertainment. Not really. This is a place for the sad and lonely, the ones who have nowhere better to spend their Thursday nights, instead choosing to channel their anger and sadness and pain, their energy, if you will, through a collection of eclectic sounds and poorly-rehearsed prose. We proclaim the songs of our souls, as Nanaba would put it. It's a pitiful existence, for all of us I suppose, so we come together to share it.
The cool outside air is a heavy contrast from the humid theatre-like basement, un-ironically named The Basement. Couples leave with their significant others, or people they've just picked up in drunken need, as they leave the bar directly above The Basement. This place, however downtrodden and sad and piteous, manages to lift the spirits of the many lonely people who manage to find someone each week to go home with.

And then there are others. Others like myself and Jean who have no one but each other to leave with. The same lonely people who leave that place every Thursday night, at the same time, feeling sweaty and buzzed. Enigmatic, on occasion. We walk side-by-side, silent, letting the crickets and humming streetlights be the only form of sound to confront us, besides our breathing and an in-tune stomach grumble from both of us. It's 9:00 pm, and we are both yet to eat, as usual.

By instinct we take a left at the traffic lights, turning onto Garrison Drive, and head towards Recon: the best restaurant in Trost. It's expensive, so we only eat here every couple of months, but it's worth saving up for. Well, I save up for it. I'm sure Jean just pulls the funds out of his ass.

Live bands play contemporary jazz on a well-lit stage, and a shiny grand piano dazzled with lights is situated in the corner, often played between intervals. On freezing winter nights, groups of people gathered outside around the air vents, which give off heat from inside. The 50's decor and the atmosphere are nostalgic in the interior, and the high-class elderly regulars are quite fond of having young people in their presence. The ones like Jean and myself who don't disrupt their mealtime, that is.

The waitress greets us at the door with a smile and a skip in her step, adjusting the apron around her full figure. "Good evening, gentlemen! Table for two?"

"Yes, thank you," I say, and she leads us to the regular window table we have silently claimed as our own. Number 104 is the best table in the restaurant, in our opinion, as it overlooks the picturesque tourist attraction of Trost: the fairgrounds. The gigantic Ferris Wheel illuminates the lake by which it resides beside, and the carnival rides and atmosphere are quite a sight from a high-class restaurant and bar such as Recon. Although I've never been there, it's a place I've always admired. It's something about finding beauty and wonder in the things you can't have, right?

"It's beautiful," Jean comments, taking a moment to look up from his menu and observe life outside of the brightly-lit dining hall. "I'm glad they did it up again. It was really going to the dogs for a while."

"Yeah," I acknowledge before I scan the menu for something cheap and satisfying. It's always a hard pick. I enjoy meal times, but all the really good stuff is way out of my price range. I have a feeling Jean has the same dilemma, but probably more personal choice than price.

Jean sighs. "God, it's too hard to pick here. The chicken focaccia sounds great and all, but I have that every time..."

"Mm." I nod. Always quick to make an observation, Jean. Never once has he failed to express his thoughts on a situation. I'm not sure whether to be grateful or annoyed, really.

"Are you guys ready to order?" A waitress ks, notepad in hand and sporting a rather confident stance. She's got the kind of confidence you want to achieve, but never quite make it to. Unless that's just how she acts at work to bring in customers.
"Uhh, yeah, can I get the, uh... chicken focaccia, thanks." Jean decides, although seemingly unsure with his answer.

She nods cheerily. "Sure can, and what about you, hun?"

"I'll have the same, thanks," I say, gathering both of our menus and passing them to her. She writes down our orders, and we sit in comfortable silence for a short period of time. Jean's phone is placed on the table, and the screen lights up at 9:21pm, displaying the name 'Maman.'

"Your mom still checks in on you?" I question as he unlocks the screen to read the message. My mom would never do that. She loves me, of course, but she wants Mikasa and I to be independent. Though, Ruth Kirschtein is a nice woman nonetheless.

"Yeah," He sighs. "She says she's not coming home tonight."

I raise an eyebrow. "Again?"

Jean shrugs. "Mm... she must be working out of town, I guess." He hands me his iPhone, the latest model I note, for me to read the message.

From: Maman

Hi sweetie, I won't be home tonight, I've had a call out to the other side of the city, but there's some leftovers in the fridge for you to have if you and Eren don't go out tonight. You can always have them for breakfast though! Love you and take care of yourself, Mommy x

"She stills signs 'Mommy'?" I grin, before Jean snatches the phone away from me.

"C'mon Eren, lay off of it, you know her..." He growls, blushing slightly.

I smile and nod. "Yeah, she's too nice for her own good."

I think back to when I was a kid, and Mikasa was taken to hospital after breaking her arm. I stood in the rain for a whole hour, and when Ruth picked Jean up from soccer practice, she drove me home, even though she had a dentist appointment on the other side of town that day. Now that I think about it, she's pretty similar to my own mom. Maybe that's why I like her so much.

The waitress (whose name tag reads Sasha B, which is strangely familiar) returns to our table with a can of Cola and one of Dr Pepper, along with two glasses. I recognise her from somewhere. Pictures, or a party or something. "Here you go boys," She says with a slight Texan drawl, placing the glasses and cans in front of us.

"Thank you," I say, and she throws me a wink, followed by a 'no worries.'

"It's not often they hire people like her," Jean comments, pulling the tab on his Cola can and pouring it into his glass.

"What do you mean?" I ask, doing the same with my own Dr Pepper, but not pouring it into the glass. I'm not as classy as Jean, I guess. It just means less dishes to wash, right? I'm really doing them a favour.

"I don't know, I guess her accent- it's just a breath of fresh air for this place. Too much class gives it a kinda 'rich bastard' feel, no?" He chuckles, and I do too.

I nod. "Yeah, you're right. Though she seems classy enough..."
We spend the next 10 minutes discussing the events of evenings poetry night. It's not too often we get as many turn outs as today, but it was refreshing to see some new faces. Plus, that's the best rendition of my poetry Jean has ever read aloud. Soon, Sasha the Texan waitress returns with our meals, setting them down cheerily and hurrying off to serve more customers at the desk.

"How come you didn't get up today? All your materials great, and you know it," Jean asks, already digging into his food.

I shrug. "Didn't feel like it... You read my stuff better than I do."

And it's true, he does. I prefer writing material and giving it to Jean to read. It's far more interesting watching someone else convey your message, and it gives them a chance to put their feelings into it too. The more feeling is put into it, the better a slam poem becomes. I don't have the same emotional connection to my writing as others do, either. I've never been through a break-up, or major trauma - my life's been pretty good, save for dad's involvement in it.

Besides, I don't think anyone would appreciate me being up there as much as they do Jean. He's a natural for the stage, I have to put a lot of thought into it - It would just look stupid, me standing up there.

"That's not true, Eren," Jean chides, his fork colliding with the plate, before his face contorts into a smile. "God, you remember back in primary school, how you tied your shoelaces to the teachers during assembly?"

"And then he stood up and started walking, and I was flung face forward into the brick wall? Yeah, I remember" I chuckle. That's one of Jean's favourite moments of our time in primary school. I suppose it brings memories for the both of us, really, though mine more painful than his.

"Oh man, that was the funniest thing - the teachers were so pissed at you, but because you cried so much they practically tore Mr Pixis apart," Jean starts to laugh now, going red in the face. "And your face was so red and bruised the next day, I swear you'd lost some teeth!"

I place my knife and fork down quickly, and Jean immediately stops. "Hah, Yeah..." I try. I remember that. I'd forgotten all about that, too caught up in the good memories. God... I'd pushed that thought so far back into my sub-conscious that I'd nearly forgotten that had happened. Jesus, Jean... Fuck, I forgot that happened. I'd forgotten it, dammit, why couldn't it stay that way?

"What's wrong? You okay?" Jean questions, quickly turning back to his usual shade of pale.

No, I'm not. Why does remembering have to hurt so much more than actually being there?

"N-nothing. I'll be back, just going to the bathroom.” I stand and head quickly for the double doors near the kitchen, and follow the tiled corridor towards the far right corner where the men's bathroom is clearly in sight. There are two sets of bathrooms at Recon, and because this one is so far away, not many use it. For that, I am forever thankful.

It's empty, and each stall is open. I run towards the nearest and kneel in front of the toilet bowl just in time. I retch, and the contents of my stomach quickly stain the porcelain bowl a pale yellow, then darker again. I heave uncontrollably, feeling the water rise in my throat several times before the rest of the acidic bile and digested food project from my gullet. I'm shaking, and my fingertips feel numb.

"You idiot! How dare you make a fool of us!"

One slap.
"Grisha, he's just a child, he was only having a bit of fun!"

"Shut up Carla, age has nothing to do with immaturity!"

Two slaps.

I fell, hard onto the concrete of our backyard. I was crying, bruised and beaten by my own father. He locked me outside for most of the night. He stood inside and laughed when it had started to rain, and I was stupid enough to stand in the same place he left me - the middle of the yard. He laughed at his own poorly treated child, whilst my mother disappeared from sight, yelling at him from the depths of the house.

I was alone. I am alone.

Why did I ever think that had changed?

-x-

"You sure you're okay, Eren? You were gone for at least half an hour," Jean questions for probably the fourth time that night.

I want to tell him the truth, to tell him that I freaked the fuck out and that it was literally all his fault. But I don't. Why would I? It would only cause trouble. He's start asking questions and feel like he had to get involved. He always sticks his nose where it isn't needed... I know he's trying to help, but sometimes it's more of a hassle than anything else. "I'm fine, I just felt a little ill," I lie, furrowing my eyebrows in protest.

Jean looks sceptics, but shrugs anyway, swallowing what I'm sure was a bitter remark about trust or friendship. "I think that chicken was off, anyway... I might complain next time. You know, if it happens again or whatever."

"Yeah, sure."

We continue down our street and part ways shortly down the road. The house beside us is mine; brick, a front porch, and a pitiful looking garden complete with dry, dying grass. The house directly across the road, is Jean's: a large, cream-coloured, two storey structure, with wrought iron pillars and a balcony that has the best view of the ocean and most of the city. It's something out of a Hollywood movie, I swear, and it looks so entirely out of place it draws too much attention to our usually quite little street.

It's a pity they chose to live here, otherwise they could have been famous with that thing. Well, more famous than the Kirschtein name already is, in the entrepreneur world. MTV would love to get their hands on that thing, I'm sure, regardless of their surname status.

Living across the road from one another has its perks. We've never had to walk home alone, nor have I had to worry about forgetting things when I've slept over. But, there are times when the quietness of the abandoned street late at night doesn't help the anger and cries emitting from a certain bricked home. I can't lie, in those times. There isn't a single coherent thought in my mind to even come up with a lie in those times, anyway.
Jean places a hand on my shoulder when we stop close to my house. "I'll see you tomorrow, Eren. Get some sleep man, you're pale as hell."

I nod, giving his shoulder a firm pat. "You too. See you, Jean..."

He lingers a few seconds, before giving me a wave and taking long strides across the road to his own home. I stand on my porch to watch him go inside. A force of habit, I suppose. I take a deep breath and fish through my pocket for my house key, before carefully unlocking the door. The air is stale, so not much has gone on since I've been out, and the stench of alcohol lingers throughout the small living room. I can smell it even headed down the hall to my bedroom. The house is quiet, oddly so, and it makes my steps apprehensive.

I was having such a good day, too. I'd forgotten about do many things. Why did I have to remember?

My sister Mikasa is awake, the brightness of her T.V shining beneath the gap of her closed bedroom door. There's no sound, so I guess it's on simply as a habit. I decide to knock, quickly and quietly, and I hear her tired voice say, "Come in." She knows it's me.

I open her door quietly, then close it behind me, striding across her neat and orderly room to sit on her bed. It smells of nail polish remover and hairspray. And if that doesn't tell a tale, the tired look on her face and the red, swelling around her eyes does; she's been out, and it's evident she didn't have a good time.

"What happened?" I ask.

It's not too often I ask 'how are you,' because I know that's only going to make the wounds deeper. And because I know the answer to that question, for most people will be 'good,' even when they're not. Her eyes don't leave the T.V screen, but tears well at the corners as she starts to speak. "I went out with Thomas this evening," she starts, hugging her legs tighter to her chest. "It just didn't go too well..."

Thomas Wagner. I remember him from middle school. I say that like I don't know him currently, but I do - some people just don't deserve to take up space in your mind.

"His ex came into the restaurant, asking for a reservation under his name, and the waiter said that the reservation was already taken... She caused so much trouble, Eren. T-there was so much fighting, and she r-ruined everything," Mikasa blinks, for the first time since I've entered the room, and her tears spill down her face. "I tried to t-tell him that we should just leave but...- He kept going on and on at me, t-telling me it was m-my fault, that I should have... Should have chosen a better place... Then he stormed out, dragging me with him..."

"We got into his car and- he drove like a maniac! I thought we'd die, and he kept y-yelling until we pulled over at the park and- his ex was there. He got out, and they started arguing and... I just couldn't take it. She kept pointing at me and saying how much of a m-mistake he was making and... He told her I'm not worth getting upset about... I'm not worth anything with him... So I left. I g-got out of the car and ran and she just laughed and I look back and- he's kissing her..."

I've never seen Mikasa look like this before. It's not sad, or lonely, or depressed; she's broken. The strongest person I know, is broken. There's no hope for anyone, now.

"Mikasa... I-

"Don't. Don't tell me 'I told you so,' I don't want to hear it!" She cries, her voice wavering and more tears threatening to caress her face.
I swallow, softly shaking my head. I don't want her to get mad at me. That would just put the icing on my sh*tcake of an evening. "I wasn't going to. Has he called you?"

She sniffs. "A lot. I've just turned my phone off... I can't do this, Eren, I can't take it anymore."

"Wait," I start, Mikasa lifting her head to look at me for the first time this evening. "Wait until morning. You like him, right?"

She nods, slowly. God knows why...

"Then wait until morning. Sleep as much as you can, relax and take a break - he's not worth getting sad over, okay? You're strong, and smart, and beautiful and you are worth it, okay? People deal, or don't deal, with things in different ways. I can guess Thomas probably didn't know how to deal with the situation either... And who's to say he was returning the kiss? I'm not justifying his actions, they were wrong and hurtful and he should have known that. But don't let one little stuff up ruin your evening, okay? I mean- there's still cake in the fridge from dad's birthday," She starts to chuckle, lightly. "Eat that. You'll feel ten times better!"

Sometimes I can't believe the bullshit I sprout from my mouth. If anyone said any of this to me I'd deck them, knowing just how useless their words were.

Mikasa chuckles for a little while longer, before sitting up into her knees and embracing me softly. Her hugs are always something to look forward to, because she means them. I hug her back, and she whispers a soft and sincere, "Thank you, Eren," into my ear, before pulling back. "I'm... I'm going to eat that cake, and then I'm going to get some sleep..."

I smile at her and nod, as we both stand up to leave her small room. I cross the hall to my own bedroom, and she heads off towards the kitchen. I hear the flick of a switch and the kitchen lights turn on, just as I close my bedroom door.

Thomas... If he does anything to hurt Mikasa, I will chop his balls off and hang them from his ex's' ceiling...

I change into sweatpants and an ill-fitting black singlet, before switching my bedside lamp on and turning off my bedroom light. I can only just see my way around the clothes and other various things that litter my bedroom floor.

I scroll Tumblr for a few hours, and before I know it, it's 3am. Sighing, I flip the switch of my bedside table and shove my earphones in, putting my iPod on shuffle and quickly falling asleep to the music blaring through my earphones.

As soon as it registers to me that there are footsteps trudging down the hallway, I open my eyes and sit up, grabbing my phone from beside me. If I can at least pretend I have been awake, the wrath won't be as bad.

Someone knocks. It's Mom. Dad would never knock, and Mikasa isn't here at goddamn 4pm. "Yeah?" I ask, trying my best not to sound tired.

"You have work at 6 honey, are you even awake?" She chuckles, opening my door. By the look on her face, she knows I haven't been awake. Her shocked expression soon turns ruthless, and she crosses my room to open my blinds. "Uh-uh mister, this just isn't how we do it around here! You
need to get up and get showered and be ready by 5:30pm or you can walk to work!" There's a lightheartedness in her voice that relaxes me a little.

I can't help but slump back into my pillows with an annoyed chorus of, "But mooooommmmm."

"Don't you 'but mom' me, c'mon, you've got work to do!" She chuckles, turning on my bedroom light as she exits my room. She shouts something along the lines of, "You're not fooling anyone with that bed hair!" and I smile. I love her, I really do.

I begrudgingly get up and strip myself of my bed clothes, choosing to shuffle to the shower naked and grab a towel on the way there. Someone whistles from the kitchen, and I (stupidly) walk out there to see who it is.

Mrs Ruth Kirschtein.

"Holy shit!" I shout, moving quickly to cover my privates. I mean, she's seen all of me before, how can't she when I've known Jean all my life? But, at college age? Nu-uh.

"Eren! Get in the shower!" Mom laughs, shoeing my buck naked-self into the bathroom.

Mrs Kirschtein shouts, "Don't work yourself silly!" And I get the double meaning. Very funny, ruthless Ruth, very funny.

It takes me 30 minutes to shower, and by that time Ruth has left and I am free to roam the house as naked as I please. It's probably a bad habit, but I just feel so free. I can't do it around dad, he says its indecent. But mom, she just lets me do as I please. It's not creepy, she doesn't stare at me or anything - she's probably embarrassed by it, but she's always told us to embrace who we are, so I do. I really do.

"Are you looking at having dinner before we go?" Mom asks from the kitchen, over the boiling water. "Or is Connie bringing food tonight for you?"

"Yeah, that'd be good, I'm in 'till 12 tonight!" I shout in response, toweling myself off in my room and throwing on my work shirt and denim skinny jeans. "I don't even know if Connie's working today..."

"Alright, takeout or home cooked?" She calls, as I pet myself down to feel for my phone and house keys in my pocket. Is that even a question?

"Takeout, obviously! Who do you think I am, mother?" I joke, and I hear her chuckle from the hallway.

"Naw, you still wanna eat with your mommy?" She coos.

"You can sit in the car," I dead-pan. She hits me playfully, picking up my towel from the floor and taking it into the bathroom. She's not normally this nice, so something's obviously happened. Not that I'm complaining. I brush my hair into something semi-reasonable, before shoving my feet into my tattered purple Vans and picking up my wallet. Store discount if I have my workers card, what a blessing.

"So, Ruth tells me that you and Jean have started performing at The Basement now," Mom starts, giving me a knowing side glance. She sure does like to tell my mom things I should be telling her...

Rhetorically, I ask, "Is that right?"
She nods, enthusiastically. "Yes, she says Jean's being quite different now, more happier, you know. Do you have anything to do with that?"

I chuckle. "Probably not. Jean's a capable guy, he knows what he's doin'."

"That's not how I hear it, but I guess you might be having an influence on him."

How does she hear it? Jean doesn't tell his mother, or anyone really, anything. Without my response, mom continues. "I'm glad you're having an impact on people, Eren. I was so worried about you in middle school - you were such a terror of a child, so angry! Do you remember getting called into the principals office after you bit the head off of someone's art project?"

I feel myself flush. "Oh god, I thought you'd forgotten! I'd forgotten! God, now I'm gonna be cringing all day, thanks mom..."

"Ahh that was a funny day..." Mom chuckles, wiping a fake tear from her eye. "The girls at work all thought you were a monster, except Ruth... She's always been fond of you, especially for being there for Jean."

"Of course she's fond of me, she's seen me naked at least eight times." Mom and I both laugh at our shared humour (and possibly the fact that we know it's true), before she grabs her car keys off of the kitchen island.

"C'mon, let's blow this joint," She smiles, immediately putting on her 'hip mom' facade. She seems to think it'll get her 'more friends my age so she looks cool.' It's embarrassing, but if I let her know that she'll do it more, so I play along like the good son that I am.

Mom and I both get meals at KFC, before she drives me to work. Working at On The Run has its pros and cons, but one of the major pros is that it's close to KFC, meaning I'm eating literal fat at least three times a week; and that's okay with me. She drops me at the entrance and blows me a kiss as I get out of the car. I return it as flamboyantly as possible, and wave to her as she drives out of the entrance. Well done, mom, another mom-point for you.

As soon as I walk in the door, I'm excitedly greeted by my fellow OTR colleague and close friend, Connie Springer. So he is working tonight. "Eren, my man! How's it been, how ya going?" He greets, opening his arms for us to engage in our 'bro-hug' that has become our regular greeting. A few customers give us weird looks, but many of them have seen it before; it's nothing new.

"It's going well, man, what about you?" I ask, walking behind the counter through the employee door, rather than jumping it as Connie decides to do. He's gonna get in trouble again, he never learns.

"Alright, alright. Sasha's back from her trip abroad so life's just gettin' sweeter!" He chuckles, and the name he mentions rings a bell. Sasha...

"Con, she's your girlfriend, right?" I question.

He looks skeptical at my question, but answers anyway. "Yeah, she's my girl. Why?"

"Does she work at Recon?"

"Yeah...?"

"Does have a Texan accent?" I ask, finally, ignoring his varying facial expressions.

He lowers his eyes, almost comically. "Yeahh, look man- I don't know where this is going but she's
mine, and you just gotta deal with that-

I chuckle, waving my hands dismissively. "No, no, she served me and Jean last night for dinner! You're a lucky guy, man."

A bright smile appears on Connie's face, and a blush forms across his cheeks. "Heh... Yeah, I know, she's quite the catch. I love her to pieces... God, I'm so freaking proud of her man... I just love her so much!"

Oh no, now I've done it. "And to work at a restaurant, she's so brave and amazing. I- she's just amazing and incredible and oh my god... I'm in love, Eren, I'm so in love with her."

"Is Connie taking about Sasha again?" A deep voice calls from inside the office behind the counter. "We really need to impose some rules about conversational matters that are spoken about too often..."


"So when're you two tying the knot?" He jokes, and Connie goes bright red.

"W-We are not! At least, n-not yet! Gosh, why do you guys have to criticise me all the goddamn time! Ya'll are mean.."

"'Ya'll'?" I smirk, and he throws me a dirty look.

Even with a shift that goes from 6pm to 12am, it goes by quickly. With Connie's antics and Erwin's occasional input of humour, the night just doesn't get uninteresting. The customers tend to vary in that regard, but that's a given when working at a gas station/convenience store. Especially in the later of the evening hours.

12:00am approaches quickly, and soon Connie and I are exchanging goodbye's, before locking up and walking to our own cars. Well, not actually our own; Sasha picks Connie up, and mom picks me up. Win-win for both of us, right?

"How was work?" Mom asks, although significantly less enthusiastic as when we left. It's late, she's probably just tired.

"Alright, I guess. Ms Lebrandt came in today and tried to haggle with us over the price of pickled onions."

"Oh, did she?" Mom chuckles, but it's very put on. I'm sure she finds it funny, Mrs Lebrandt usually makes her laugh until she cries. "That woman's a god-send."

"Hah, yeah," I agree, leaning against the window of the car. The drive home seems longer than usual, and when mom starts softly singing along to a rather depressing song, I know something's up. "You okay?" I ask, startling her from her daze.

"O-oh, yeah, I'm fine- E-Eren, honey, do you think you could just give me some quiet time?" She exasperates.

I swallow thickly. "S-sure."

Something's really up.

We pull into the driveway shortly after, and I don't take my time walking to my bedroom after seeing
the second car in the driveway. Mom's upset, and dad's home. I don't need to ask any further to know what's happened. Mom follows quickly behind me, and we both breathe a sigh of relief to see he's passed out asleep on the couch in front of the T.V.

"Thank goodness," Mom whispers, probably already regretting she said that aloud.

We walk to the beginning of the hallway, before heading in separate directions to our own bedrooms. "Goodnight Eren, sorry for snapping at you in the car - it's been a long day," she sighs, blowing me a kiss before entering her bedroom and closing the door.

I didn't even get enough time to tell her goodnight... Stupid, I know. A college-age kid can't even feel right at night if he hasn't told his mom he loves her, or to sleep well. Pathetic, I'm sure.

Mikasa's bedroom light is off, so I head straight to my room without further distraction. Something's definitely happened, Mikasa usually waits up for me. God, I hate not being here when dad gets home - no one ever tells me anything when he's involved, he's that much of a prick.

I strip myself of my clothes as per usual, and slowly slip into my sweatpants and singlet, yet again. Following my usual routine, I'm on Tumblr for a few hours before finally turning off my lights and going to sleep.

My thoughts wander for a while, which is a little unusual. I'm normally quick to fall asleep, but I suppose the universe has a different plan for me tonight. As soon as dad comes home, everyone changes for a while. It's nothing new, and it'll never be anything old. When he comes home, life itself changes for a while. I hate him. He always does this to the family. Grandpa's probably turning in his grave knowing what his own son does to this family.

Loud footsteps walk down the corridor, and I hear mom's bedroom door open, and a surprised gasp. It slams shut, and I need not keep myself from my music any longer. iPod on shuffle, and music turned up louder than usual, I know I'm in for a rough sleep.

It doesn't come easy that night, and I don't really need to think about why.
The morning comes with an unpleasant surprise: dad's still home. I can hear him and mom arguing as I exit my room hesitantly, wondering whether or not I should go downstairs and face the music or retreat back into my room and block out the world for a few more hours. Do I want to go down there? Of course not. But there's always been that part of me that makes awful decisions, and the part that can't keep away from trouble. Plus, it's 7:00am, so there's no doubt in my mind that if I don't make my presence known now, I'm going to be late for work today.

But would that really matter?

"Eren, you finally dragged your lazy arse out of bed," Dad starts, looking up from his newspaper with a scowl on his face as I enter the kitchen. My footsteps are telling, showing just how nervous I am to be there. I resist the urge to give him the finger, or punch him, noticing that Mikasa isn't nearly awake enough to help me if he lashes out. She looks as though she's about to pass out in her cereal.

"Good morning to you, too," I retort sarcastically, shuffling towards the cupboard to grab a glass and pour myself some water.

Dad just about slams his newspaper down. "Don't back chat me boy, you don't have the right," He snarls, as mom scoffs at our bickering.

"C'mon you two, all I ask for is one morning of family time, is that too much to ask for?" She sighs, shovelling eggs and bacon onto the plates on the counter. Dad grunts in response, but I know he's not going to let the situation drop just because of mom.

Speaking so fondly of rights, he happens to know exactly how to take them away.

"You know, family time would be far more family orientated if our sorry excuse for a son actually did what normal 19 year old's do, instead of deciding to grace us with his presence no less than 15 minutes before his shift," He starts again, and I can tell by the collective looks on both mom and the now awake Mikasa's faces that this isn't going to be a pleasant morning.

I don't care anymore. I don't think I have for a while.

"Oh yeah? Like what, doing drugs and fucking every chick with a skinny waist and fat ass?" I retort bitterly, making sure my glass lands on the kitchen counter with a loud noise. "Does that remind you of anyone, dad?"

Mom nearly drops her cutlery. "Eren!"
And that does it. Dad stands to his feet and looms over me, taking me by the collar of my shirt and lifting a threatening hand to me. I'm used to it, so the threats don't have the desired affects anymore, much to his distain.

"You want to repeat yourself there, boy?" He spits, as mom quickly rounds the counter to separate us.

"Don't do it Grisha, for gods sake, just sit down and eat your breakfast!" She shouts, removing his hand quickly from my shirt. "This isn't primary school."

Dad scoffs, letting go of my shirt reluctantly. "Don't interfere woman, this is none of your business!"

Mom points a finger at him accusingly. "Don't interfere woman, this is none of your business!"

Mom raises a hand and slaps her across the face. Before any of us have time to react, he calls her a "filthy whore of a wife," and strides across the kitchen to grab his jacket and put on his boots, as if nothing happened at all.

Mikasa is speechless, and mom stands with her hand held to her face in shock. No ones doing anything, too afraid to move, and dad is about to leave the house after hitting his own wife; my mom. Rage engulfs my being, clouding my mind, and my fists ball at my sides. "Don't you ever hit mom again, you son of a bitch!" I shout, storming towards him, ignoring the cries of mom telling me to stop.

"What gives you the right to speak to your father like that you delinquent! Don't you ever approach me like that, you have no respect for anyone do you?!" He shouts, as we both stand over each other in an attempt to threaten the other. It doesn't work, for either of us. Stubbornness runs in our blood. I'm just as, if not more, stubborn as dad. And I hate that.

"Back off you old man, don't you ever raise your hand at mom," I growl, just as he begins to open the front door with a scowl upon his face. I'm sure I've won, I'm sure I've finally got him to back down.

Being sure just isn't good enough.

I let my guard down as he goes to walk out the front door, belting that I've finally managed to defend myself and my family, but it's too late. He sets himself on me and punches hard in the jaw, a sickening crack created by the force of his bony hand colliding with my face. I'm pushed back by the blow and thrown against the wall. He gives a sickening chuckle, leaving with a partially bloodied hand and a triumphant smirk. "I'll deal with you properly when I get home. Now I will be late for work."

Mom and Mikasa are quick to kneel beside me. I can't move, nor speak. I'm speechless.
Dad, my own father, punched me.

He raised his hand to mom without a second thought, letting his hand collide with such force that not even she could react. A strong woman speechless at her own husband's actions. He raises a hand at his only son, careless and violent in an act that surely was not an accident.

He meant it. That wasn't a threat, that was real.

I'm pulled to one of the kitchen chairs. Mom applies ice to my jaw and Mikasa passes me a glass of water and two pain relief capsules, still unable to speak. She's pale, and so is mom, aside from the heated oval wound swelling rapidly on her cheek.

"Eren, I can't believe he would do that, I'm so sorry," Mom starts, but I cut in before she can finish. "You shouldn't have to be involved. But you know he's stressed, and he was drinking last night, and-
"

"Don't make excuses for the bastard, mom. I can't believe he'd do it to you. Who cares about me, he hit you mom - he fucking hit you!" I shout, angry tears threatening to leave my eyes. I'm seething with anger and pure hatred for the man that calls himself my father. The man whom I once thought was the greatest man in the world - a hero. My hero.

Mom sighs reluctantly, touching my swollen and bruising face softly. "I'm sorry Eren, you shouldn't've had to witness that, let alone be apart of it..."

*She says that like its a normal occurrence. Is it? Does he hit her all the time? All the times when she says she's fine but it's so obvious she's not, are those the times when she's managed to escape his relentless hand? He's supposed to be a caring figure, he's a fucking doctor for Christ sake! I hate him!*

Mom soon leaves for work, telling me to meet her at the mall after work instead of going home. 'The more time away from your father, the better.' Mikasa finds my work shirt and pants and brings them to the kitchen for me, including a clean pair of underwear and my tattered Vans. I thank her, and she tells me she's leaving for a movie date with Thomas, and asks if I'm alright to get to work on my own. I tell her, "Yeah, I'm fine - just shocked about dad, I guess. I can get there by bus."

She takes the bait. I wish her luck and she kisses my forehead as she leaves. "Take care Eren, and don't work yourself silly."

I don't think I was that believable, but if she's not asking anymore questions, I'm fine with that.

It doesn't take me long to get dressed, but it takes me a while to adjust to the stares of strangers as I catch the bus to work. When mom doesn't drive me, I usually feel independent and confident. But when my face is as bruised and swollen as it is, I can't help but feel powerless. Half these people don't even know why it's like this. I bet they'd change their minds if they knew I wasn't some beat up thug, staring at me like all my bad choices make up that one part of my face.

*This isn't my own will, you bastards.*

I stop two stops early, having enough of their accusatory stares and whispers, and decide to walk it out. My pop always said that if you've got a problem, find a way to get it out of your system. I enjoy walking, so it's not hard to use that as my escape.

People don't stare as much on the streets. Or if they do, I don't notice, because I'm too busy fuming on the inside over dad.
He's never done shit like that before. At least, not to that extent. Hitting me? Hitting mom? You can't justify that! I don't like making excuses for people who know full well they fucked up, and this doesn't excuse that. No bastard should ever hit someone just because they're in a foul mood.

My loathing almost makes me miss the On The Run on the corner. I brace myself for Connie’s questions, and enter the establishment, taking quick note that Connie isn't on register today - or at least, not yet. Instead, it's Ymir.

All I can say is thank god it's Ymir.

"Mornin'," I say, giving her a brief wave of my hand and stepping behind the counter. She has a mouthful of croissant, but manages to mumble a lazy 'morning' to me anyway. She's the true meaning of social grace, really. She looks tired, and bored. More so than usual. My guess is that Connie had made up some excuse to come in late today; morning classes, homework, sick relative, constipation - he's tried them all. "Where's Connie?" I ask, kind of in awe at the lack of customers. Usually we've got a fair few lurking about at this time of morning.

She swallow thickly, a few crumbs scattering across her cheeks. "Had to pick up something from the boarder."

"Jinae or Karanese?"

"Karanese," She says. He shouldn't be too long, then. Unless Ymir doesn't actually know and is only attempting to make conversation today. "What happened to your face?" She acknowledges, taking another bite of her croissant and lazily propping her feet up on the counter.

Fuck. "U-uh... Street fight?"

She raises her eyebrows, unconvincing. "Right. And you got totalled, I'm guessing?"

I chuckle. "Don't I always?"

She cracks a smile at that, and we both go about our business for a while. When we share shifts, no matter how short, she always takes first counter. She does tend to get frustrated easily, which can be intimidating to most customers, but activity slows considerably when Ymir's on counter. For that, I'm grateful. She's grateful for that, too.

Meanwhile, I restock shelves, help customers find things in the aisles, and mainly just hang around in the back room. 'Working' has never been easier. The doors slide open and a few people come in. Two approach the counter, obviously paying for gas, and the others go off towards the cold drinks. Nothing exciting, just the same old boring routine.

Except that I'm sporting a slack, aching jaw adorned with a bruise.

The digital clock turns over to 8:30am, and I sigh outwardly. I'm rostered on until 12pm, which means I've got three and a half hours until I can leave. It's the slowest in the mornings, and without Connie here to entertain me, the stinging and heaviness of my jaw seems to consume me. Every movement brings back the pain, physical and emotional. I can still see dads hand colliding with my face, and my mind cursing me for not having reacted quick enough to get out of the way. It was a real blow to my pride, and my mood.

"Eren, c'mere," Ymir calls after the customers have paid and left. I shove the rest of the tinned milk onto the shelf and dawdle along to the counter. She's holding out a large paper bag, and motions for me to take it
"Yeah?" I question. "What's this?"

"Just some stuff. I ain't much of a philosopher or a doctor or whatever the fuck people need these days, but like - you need to take better care of yourself for christ sake before you end up a danger to society. Or yourself."

It's lighthearted and fun, but she's serious. Ymir; no care, no problems, no worries. She just is who she is. You don't need to ask twice for whatever you wanna know. She's rude, yeah, and unapproachable, standoffish and blunt. But, a little affection comes out of her every once in a while. And it's always so genuine, you can't help but smile.

"Thanks, Ymir..."

She rolls her eyes playfully. "Don't get sappy on me Jaeger, go and mop the back tiles, they're sticky."

I nod and quickly jog to the back room to put the bag away. I don't look inside it. I have a fairly good feeling I know what's in there anyway; the bottle shape being a dead giveaway. It offers comfort, I guess, but probably not the best healing method in the world.

12pm approaches faster than I'd expected, and my time-waster arrives just as I need him. If I had to be picky, he could have got there a little earlier. You know, before the old hag showed up.

"Ma'am, I'm sorry, but we just don't stock that brand anymore," I reason, giving the old woman an apathetic look. She sighs, and once again tries to tell me how I, the employee, am wrong about the products we do and do not sell here.

"Well, Eren, I was here just the other day and there were plenty on the shelf! My dog doesn't eat any other brand and I know I bought it from here!" She argues.

Stubborn old women, I tell you.

"Look, I can get ahold of the manager if you'd like, but I can't help you anymore than I have. We don't sell that brand of dog food anymore, but I'm sure the store down the road has an aisle full of-"

"No, no it's fine. Don't worry. My dog will just have to suffer for a while. Thanks for nothing," She calls angrily, storming out of the store muttering to herself. I clench my teeth, watching her talk to herself on the way over to her car. Fuckin' old bitch. It's not my fault we don't sell it, I don't decide what we stock and what we don't. Stupid ass mo-

"What's up her ass?"

I turn hastily to face the voice. And it couldn't have appeared any sooner.

"Connie, thank god you're here!" I say, returning his attempt at a 'bro-hug.' (Literally just a one-sided hug and a high five - he's not very creative)

"Wouldn't miss this for the world," he deadpans, as we walk back to the back room for him to put his backpack away. "That bruise looks nasty, by the way. Ymir said street fight, I say otherwise - wanna explain?"

Ah. Not really, Connie. "I just had a run in with my bedside table, didn't wanna come off as a wuss in front of Queen Butch out there," I joke, chucking lightly.

He smirks, shaking his head. "Yeah okay, sure thing man. But when you're ready to tell me who's ass I have to kick, hit me up aight?"
I smile. "Yeah, yeah. Thanks broski."

"Don't. Let's not repeat that day again." We joke and chat for a while, before Ymir tells us she's leaving early and that we have to 'get our lazy asses on the counters before she tears us a new one.' Needless to say, we're out there serving customers quicker than you'd think.

"So," Connie begins after the last customer leaves the building. "How would you feel about coming out with me and a few guys tonight?"

I quirk an eyebrow. "A few guys?"

He nods. "Yeah. They're pretty fun, and I'm sure they could cheer up that weird melancholy thing you've got going on today. Too much poetry I think, it's mellowing you up."

"Hah, thanks Con."

Do I really wanna go? I'd only know Connie... What if he's better friends with them than me?

I think for a moment, fiddling with the bluetac behind the counter. "Where's the place were going out to?"

Connie shrugs. "Was thinkin' The Walls."

I raise an eyebrow. "That club over on Sina?"

He nods. "Yeah. Been there a few times, but I think the atmospheres better when you've got friends with you."

"You went alone?" I question.

He shakes his head with a laugh. "Nah, I had Sasha with me - just..didn't feel right, you know? You've gotta have a whole crew with you to feel the true groove of life."

"Poetic," I laugh, and Connie rolls his eyes.

"You poets, freakin' comedians aren't you."

I smile, lost briefly in my own thoughts. I really only would know Connie there, and maybe Sasha. I'd be a real pain in the back if I clung to them all night like a needy little kid... "Can I bring a plus one?"

Connie lifts his index finger and thumb to his chin, stroking his 'beard' in thought. 3rd grader in a 19 year old's body, I tell you. "Only if it's Jean," He decides.

I chuckle dryly. "I don't have anyone else, Connie - aside from you, he's literally my only friend."

Connie laughs. Honest to God laughs at me, before pulling a slip of paper from his pocket and jotting down an address and numbers.

104 Sina Dr
The Walls

XXX-XXX-XXX - Sasha's No.

"My phones in for repairs, so give Sash a call if you get lost or something. Don't bother about bringing drinks or money or whatever, it's my treat. For you, not everyone - I'm not that charitable."
"And Jean?"

"He can afford his own shit, we both know that," Connie chuckles, handing me the piece of paper. I chuckle a little too, and glance briefly at the clock on the computer. Three minutes until my shift ends.

"I'm gonna go get my stuff, I'm clocking out," I say, heading to the back room and grabbing my backpack. I shove the bag Ymir gave me into it, and grab a new roster from Erwin's door. He obviously hears me, calling out a "See you!" as I leave the room. I return it with a "Bye!" and pass Connie on my way out.

"You're kidding me. I actually come to work for you and you're leaving?" He complains.

"Have to, mom's taking me out. And you should be coming to work to work, not for me," I joke, to which he blows an exaggerated kiss as I exit.

"See you tonight, Jaegerbomb!" He shouts after me. I'm shaking my head with laughter leaving the On The Run. Connie manages to brighten everyday, and for that I am so grateful.

The bus is on time, and it's less crowded, so I don't have to bother hiding my bruise from too many people. Nor do too many look. I get off at the intersection, and walk towards Petra's Tea House, where I can see mom waiting at a table patiently. When she sees me, she waves her hands and puts her phone into her bag, sitting up a little straighter.

"Hey baby, how was work?" She chides as I pull up a chair in front of her.

I shrug. "Alright, nothing too interesting. Yours?"

She hums, tapping her finger on the table. "Mm, same old same old. Oh! Mrs Springer said to tell you that you looked handsome in your suit on Friday."

My blood runs cold. "Mom! You showed her?!

"It's on Facebook darling, I just didn't tag you." She's smug. Of course she's proud of herself. *Smart move, mom.* "I ordered you a chai, I hope that's alright. It's been so long I can't remember."

"Sugar?"

"Two."

I nod, "Yeah, it's alright then. What'd you get?"

"Orange rind herbal," She smiles.

"That's gross," I tease, and she pokes her tongue out at me, chuckling. It's nice to do this: to just get away from the house and spend time with mom. She has on and off days, but I'm glad this is an on day. "So, what're we getting?"

"Oh. Nothing. I just wanted to have lunch with you, see how things are going, you know. Just want to be in with the hip kids," She gestures a peace sign, and then something that looks like a seagull struggling to fly.

"Maybe don't do that, mom." She just laughs. We small-talk for a while; about the weather, Hollywood and celebrities, even the latest football scores. But of course, simplicity and comfort doesn't last long in my family.
"Eren... I um- I want to apologise, for your father's behaviour last night," Mom begins, setting her tea down and holding her hands on the table. "And for mine."

I sigh. "Mom, please, you didn't-"

"I know, I know, and that's why I'm apologising. I didn't. I didn't do anything, and I should have. I know it's no excuse but your father had a bad day at work the night before and he did and said some things and he just... He hit the liquor too hard and I know it's not your fault and it's entirely his but I just-"

"Mom," I start firmly, taking her hands in mine. "It's fine. And all that crap he said? I'm used to it - it doesn't affect me anymore."

"But honey, it shouldn't even be said to you! You should have to be used to it!"

If I'm glad for one thing in my life, besides Mikasa and mom, it's that Jean always knows the right time to make a call. My ringtone blares from my pocket and mom gives me a slightly reassuring smile as the go-ahead to answer the call.

"Hello?" I answer, breathing a sigh of relief.

'Eren, it's me.'

"Yeah, you are in my contacts, 'it's me.'"

'Fuckin' comedian aren't you? Anyways, Connie just texted me about some clubbing tonight, sayin' that I'm your plus one or something. What's up with that?'

Oh right. "Sorry, I forgot to text you earlier. Yeah, it's tonight - I was thinking you could drive us there?" I ask, pulling a quizzical expression. Moms face turns puzzled, almost suspicious, but I try to ignore it as Jean continues.

'Yeah that's cool, my mom's not home till about Tuesday, so I can do whatever. What time you need me to pick you up?'

"Can you give me a sec? I gotta ask mom."

'-fucking mommas boy-'

"Connie invited me and Jean out tonight. It's not too far from here, and I know I've got work, but I'll be home before one and all that jazz," I admit, stretching the truth just a little. It's not like we're doing drugs or anything, I just know she's very protective.

She clicks her tongue. "Why not? As long as you keep me posted about what happens. Need me to drop you off?"

"No, it's fine," I put the phone back up to me ear, and Jean's crunching loudly on the other end. "It's all good, just pick me up around eight, I should be ready by then."

He chuckles through a mouthful of (presumably) food. It sounds crunchy. 'Kay, so you'll just walk the fifteen steps over to my house at eight? Or is that too much for you...

"Ha. Ha. You're hilarious. See you later."

'Bye.'
He hangs up first - he's definitely eating something. If there's one thing to learn from being friends with someone as pretentious as Jean, it's that he likes to spend all the time he has when he's eating only focused on the food. 'Savouring and appreciating the taste,' He'd say. It's borderline creepy, in my opinion.

"So," Mom starts. "Where are you guys going? I assume that was Jean." A waitress arrives at our table with two small mugs and some sugar, smiling brightly as she sets them down in front of us. We both thank her before I answer.

"Yeah. Connie just invited us and a few friends of his to a-" I can't say club, I'm not 21 yet..."-house party. His girlfriend's family just moved into a new place and they're going away so she's celebrating I guess."

Mom nods, stirring her tea lightly as she goes over what I said a million times in her head. "Uh-huh, so you're drinking and clubbing, or something like that."

The look on my face must be priceless, because mom loses it and almost pisses herself laughing. "H-how did you- What?!"

Between bouts of laughter, she manages a brief explanation. "Don't think I wasn't young and crazy once, I know what goes on with you lot. You're not exactly discreet about the smell of alcohol and god-knows-what else."

That takes a lot off my mind, and we soon head into the mall because mom 'actually has stuff she needs to buy, but didn't want me to leave early.' She's a smart woman.

We do a small shop, simply buying necessities such as toilet paper and a few items from the main food groups. (Junk included - I do have a say in this) After a few rounds of groceries, mom decides that if I'm going to be showered and shaved before going out, we should head home.

And the traffic is hell; horns from all ends, an accident on two main roads, and roadworks on the freeway. "Good thing we left when we did, I have a feeling this is only going to get worse," Mom comments, sighing and putting her window down. The fumes of the accident are pungent, so that window is quickly put up again. I check my phone. It's now 6:04pm - we left at 4:00pm... This is ridiculous, how can these people just not be moving?

"I'm about to go out there and take care of things myself if these traffic guys don't do their job right," I spit through my teeth, tapping my feet impatiently. Mom chuckles and simply turns on the radio to some indie rock station. It doesn't relieve the frustration, but at least it's something.

At 6:29pm the cars start up again, and we're moving once more, headed onto the freeway and then home - the quickest possible way with these roadworks and shit.

"We should be home by 7:00pm, so you'll have time to get ready," Mom decides, checking the rear view mirror as we turn a corner.

"Awesome." Aside from the radio, we drive in silence. Mom hums along to a few songs, and occasionally mutters something about bad drivers, but never starts a conversation. Her breathing so irregular, so she's worried about something.

"You okay?" I ask, as the freeway turns into suburban streets, and street lights don't quite illuminate the sidewalks.

"O-oh, yes, Eren I'm fine - just... Trying to remember something for work that I need to write down," She stammers, giving me a sideways smile. Unconvincing, but nice try.
"I'll write it in my phone for you," I suggest. "If you want."

She fake ponders my offer. "No, no, I really should just keep it in my mind. Helps the memory, you know? I don't want Alzheimer's in my lifetime!" She chuckles. I feign amusement, for moms sake, but there's something deeper. *I'll bet it's got something to do with that asshole at home... Dad. He's controlling our lives, and I know he's damn well aware of it.*

*But why haven't I been aware of it all this time?* I subconsciously touch my jaw, where the swelling and bruise are still predominant. *Shit... I can't have Jean seeing that, he worries too much.*

We turn into our street, and then down our driveway. Jean's house across the road is alive - lights on in every room of the house, whereas ours is dim and bleak, and only Mikasa's bedroom light is on and visible from the street. "Eren," Mom starts at a whisper. "Enjoy yourself tonight, and try to smile okay? A frown doesn't suit you." She ruffles my hair, leaning in to kiss my forehead. She locks the car and we both head inside, but I make sure to enter the house first.

I was born with reasonably good reflexes, thank god.

"You bastards!" Dad shouts, staggering towards the doorframe and hurling an empty beer bottle towards my head. "You've been gone far longer than necessary! Where were you?"

"There were a lot of roadworks, dad," I try, but he doesn't take it.

"You liars! You were out fucking another man, weren't you Carla!" He shouts, striking fear in my veins. "Why isn't dinner ready for me?"

Mom cowers behind me, but when we lock eyes, she straightens her back and takes a breath. "No, I was out shopping for your dinner - I wanted to make you a meal you'd enjoy."

His eyebrow quivers, and he attempts to stand straight, regaining his composure. "Good. That's how it should be."

How can his mood change so drastically? I give mom a hug, out of sight from dad, but she quickly breaks it and tells me to go and get ready. It's 7:13pm, so I have plenty of time to get ready. I know that dad pays the house bills, as mom pays medical and insurance ones, so I make sure to flicker the switches of every room I enter, and to take a long-as-fuck shower. I turn on my T.V before walking down the hall to the bathroom. I run the hot water for a good five minutes before getting in, and then I take my sweet time washing myself.

The water burns a little on my bruise, so there's probably torn flesh somewhere in the blue mess.

I finish up and towel off, walking to my room with my work clothes bundled together. Mikasa's bedroom door is open, and as I walk past she calls out, "Going out?"

I stop at her doorway, slightly cold due to the fact that I am half naked and not entirely dry. "Yeah. Connie invited me and Jean out - you're welcome to join us, if you'd like."

"No thank you, I'm going to have a quiet night in, but enjoy yourself," She says calmly giving me a small smile. I nod and walk to my own room, just as Mikasa turns her T.V on. Her and Thomas mustn't be talking, yet again.

I shove my iPod into its dock and shuffle it, changing my dressing pace to match the song, then plug in my phone to hopefully charge it up a little before its time to leave. Going out for a whole night without a fully-charged phone isn't my idea of a good time.
I go for light wash skinny jeans, a plain grey tank top, and my tattered Vans. They're my signature shoes, it's not often I'm not without them. I leave my hair to dry naturally - I've been told it has a natural style to it, so why mess it up?

I don't plan on staying too late, but I know that my plans probably won't see the light of day, so I pack a small backpack with clean underwear, my toothbrush, and boxer shorts to shove into the backseat of Jean's car. Chances are if one of us gets smashed, the others going to too.

At exactly 8pm, Jean texts me.

From: J.K
8:00pm

im not waiting for your facial hair to grow
hurry up! ;p

I smile briefly at the stupid emoji. He doesn't often use them, so I guess he's in a good mood because of the invite.

To: J.K
8:02pm

Yeah yeah I'm almost ready, just packing some stuff
U got extra stuff in case we get sloshed?

From: J.K
8:03pm

no? ill sleep naked it's all g

Mom knocks on my door, telling me I should get moving because Jean's in the living room. That bastard, he could've told me. For good measure, I throw my phone charger into my backpack too, turning off my lights and closing my bedroom door in my way out. Jean is in fact waiting in the living room, and I sure to God wish he wasn't.

"So Jean, what do you do for a living?" Dad asks, clutching a glass of whiskey, seated across from an awkward-looking Jean.

Why did he do this to himself?

Jean swallows. "Uh well, I'm an aspiring artist, I guess-"

"Artist?" Dad scoffs. "That's not exactly a well-paying job..."

"O-oh, I know. My parents are okay with it though, so..." He notices dad become agitated, and quickly changes his sentence. "I'm also looking into law-"

"Law? Now there's a job that'll earn you cash! And plenty of women too," Dad chuckles, and Jean gives his best attempt at a laugh. It's pitiful and uncomfortable.

"C'mon man, let's hit the road," I say practically grabbing Jean by his hoodie. I have to lay the man on hard, as dad already assumes that Jean has turned me gay. He hasn't, of course. I've realised I've been pansexual for a long time, and Jean has been openly bi for a while too.

Not that I would admit any of this to dad.
"Son, don't be home too late," Dad warns, and I nod in acknowledgement as Jean and I leave the house quickly.

"Your dad is mental, no offence," Jean says, hopping into the drivers seat and starting the engine hastily.

"None taken, he's a prick." The conversation goes no further, and I give Jean the directions to The Walls. As it out, it's close to the red light district, so we make a silent pledge to keep each other away from the alluring neon signs of naked women (and men). Soon enough, we’ve found a parking spot not too far from the clubs, and we follow the thundering beat of the music to The Walls. Two bouncers stand tall out the front, and Jean and I both throw each other glances; neither of us have legal I.D’s.

"I.D please," The first asks, holding out his large hand for me to hand him the nonexistent I.D. I feel my gut rising, and I'm almost certain that anything I've eaten within the past few hours is going to come up on the shirt of this huge guy-

"They're with us G, it's all good," a Texan voice calls not too far behind us. I recognise the distinguishable slight Texan-slight Manhattan drawl immediately; Sasha, and presumably Connie.

The bouncer simply nods and steps aside as Connie and Sasha join us. The four of us walk in together, and Jean manages to thank them over thirty times as we walk through the door.

"It's no problem you guys, we should have warned you first I'm thinkin,'" Sasha says, grabbing the two of us by our hands and following Connie to a private booth near the bar. There's a reservation on the door labeled 'Springer-Braus,' and we enter the booth.

It's illuminated by placid blue lighting, and there are already four beers on the table. The couches are firm, but soft to the touch, and there's enough room to fit at least ten people. Maybe that's how many are coming?

"So, who's coming?" Jean asks, already making himself at home and stretching across the couch.

Connie begins, Sasha whispers something in his ear and kisses his cheek, leaving the booth quickly with her phone. He throws her a wave and sits in front of us. "Uh well, Sasha's friend Mina is going to be here soon, she's just gone to get her. She's known her since her primary school days so they'll be pretty buddy-buddy tonight. Then there's Reiner, he's an old friend of mine from my gym and surf days who just moved back here a couple months ago," Connie takes a sip of beer and places his phone on the table.

"Ymir's bringing her cousin Marco, apparently he needs some time to chill after a bad break-up. Aaanndd Armin, a dude me and Sash met at a music festival last month. He was cool, real party man so you're bound to have a good time with that guy," Connie chuckles.

They don't seem too bad, I guess. And Connie and Sasha don't seem to know them too well either, so I guess no one is going to be left out, right? The booth doors open and Sasha follows behind a small, black-haired girl with pigtails and a muscular blonde guy who is most definitely Reiner because there is no way this guy isn't a fitness freak.

"Alrighty guys, this is Reiner," She gestures to the blonde (and I so called it), "and this is Mina!" Sasha says cheerfully, and Connie moves over for Sasha, Mina, and Reiner to pile in beside them.

"Nice to meet ya," Reiner greets, offering both hands for Jean and I to shake. He's got a ridiculously firm grip, and I feel very self conscious about it. Mina offers a shy wave to the both of us, and Sasha
is quick to tell us why.

"Mina's ex is gonna be here, so let's keep it real and just try to have a good time, alright?"

*I'm guessing it's Mark. Marco? Of course, it could be Ymir. But she hasn't gone through a break-up recently.*

Reiner's quick to offer to get more drinks to fill the table, and the possibility of jello-shots crosses my mind when he voices that opinion. As he leaves, two more people enter the booth, both nicely tanned and covered in freckles. I'm almost glad to see Ymir's shit-eating grin as she shoves the guy into the booth before her.

"'Sup bitches, how's it hanging?" Is her greeting, loudly announcing herself to everyone as the type of person who does-not-give-a-fuck. The taller guy in front of her is clearly a little uncomfortable. An incredibly attractive, uncomfortable taller male, I might add.

"Hey, how is everyone?" I see him visibly pale upon meeting eyes with Mina. He's definitely the ex. But, if it affects him, he doesn't show it - he greets her just as he greets everyone else, and she seems to relax at that. Ymir moves to sit next to Mina, and although there seems to be some tension, once she's downed an entire beer upon Reiner's return in under a minute, she seems cool.

"Alright, Armin's just texted saying he's out there already by the DJ, so you guys wanna drink a little then fool around out there?" Connie asks, and it's a mutual agreement that they do. Though I do wanna meet this Armin, especially since he hasn't bothered to say *hi* to us yet.

-x-

Four and a half beers later, and after downing two Jaeger shots, Connie announces we hit the club dance floor.

I struggle to stand, but Jean and I both lean on each other to help us get where we want to get. He also clings to Marco's sleeve, and Marco clings to him just as tight - they've become very close over the course of the evening.

"Okay, okay Armin's over there," Connie point out, barely slurring his words even though he has consumed the most alcohol (Ymir excluded - she's definitely passed out in the booth).

Before we even make it over to the infamous Armin, someone approaches the DJ booth and requests something. Judging by Connie and Sasha's cheering when the heavy beat starts up, it's Armin. He practically jumps from the rails, partially crowd-surfing his way to us.

"Guys! Sorry I didn't come and see you before, got too caught up in the vibe you know?" He chuckles, showing his insanely white teeth. He is definitely not what I expected. Shoulder-length blonde hair, partially tied into a ponytail, similar skinny jeans to my own, a graphic tee, and arms adorned in glow sticks. I notice he's wearing some sort of Buddhist coin necklace.

I also notice his Australian accent.

*I really notice that.*

"So who's ready to get fucked up?" He shouts, and there's a chorus of cheering from all of us, following him deeper into the pit of sweaty teenagers and horny middle-aged men. We take shots by the DJ and grind into the sea of people moving to the steady beat of the music at their own pace. Everything's kind of hazy, but it's not a bad feeling. I'm running on a buzz - a feeling that suits the atmosphere of the club.
I'm not drunk, but I'm definitely not sober. I can stand on my own two feet, but it's kinda hard.

After Reiner downs one too many Jaeger shots, and I am yet again deemed the champion of 'drinking my ancestors,' as Reiner put it, we all pile back towards the booth in a drunken hoard.

"H-hey," Armin slurs, "where's Jeen and Mark?"

"'Bout to get freaky," Reiner suggests, chuckling to himself and pointing towards the booth. "Let's help 'im out, huh." Before Ymir can pull him back, he sets off towards the DJ and requests something. Immediately the music changes, and I recognise the song as 'Hey Mama.'

We all cheer and approach the open booth, and Jean (in his tipsy state) gives us a wonky thumbs up and a lop-sided grin. Marco looks slightly embarrassed, but nonetheless enjoying and knowing full well what's about to go down. We all do, and that's probably why most of us get our phones out.

Jean's hips sway to the music as he approaches Marco with alcohol-induced confidence that he usually wouldn't possess. Marco's surprised, at first, but soon sits back against the leather of the couch as Jean unbuttons the top buttons on his shirt, showing off his bare chest.

*If only Ruth could see her son now.*

He runs his hand through his own hair, thrusting his hips forward in Marco's direction; surprisingly sexually, for the action. The music starts to build as the chorus approaches again; Jean straddles Marco, Marco grabs Jean's waist. It's not so much a lap dance anymore, but Jean grinding desperately down onto Marco's lap, and Marco trying to discretely return the action without us noticing.

Reiner hoots and whistles, while the rest of us cheer them on from the sidelines; someone snaps a picture. I can also hear Connie narrating a video, laughing along at his own commentary.

We really are terrible friends.

Jean *grinds* down into Marco's lap, running his hands behind him to grab at Marco's sides, sensually lifting himself to rub against his stomach. Marco groans, and Jean takes that as his queue to turn around. Jean finally faces Marco and starts to grind against him, crotch to crotch, Marco resting his hands on Jean's hips and locking eyes with him. Jean moans, *loudly.*

"It's amazing how Jean can fall apart after one look from Marco..." Mina comments quickly, rushing past us holding the hand of a guy who was most definitely not with us when we got here. Sasha giggles at that, but I have a feeling he's coming apart from more than Marco's looks. There's a lot more going on down there.

The song comes to a close, and as we're all coming down from our laughter induced high, Armin points out that Jean is attempting to undo Marco's zipper, palming at his arousal. Marco isn doing anything to stop it, either.

Connie rushes to peel Jean away from Marco amongst bouts of laughter, to which Marco thanks him begrudgingly. Jean complains, shouting abuse at Connie for cock-blocking him and taking away 'his sweet-ass Sex Angel.' He tries to grab at Marco once more, but Connie's having none of it.

He sighs, palming Jean off to Ymir, who has him in a headlock almost instantaneously. "Alright guys, I think it's time to head off - what time is it?"

I hazily check my phone. It's 2:46am. Holy fuck, it's almost 3 in the morning.
Mina gets her new 'boy-toy' to call us a cab, and it arrives within 30 minutes, taking us back to Connie's place. Armin says he's staying at a hotel not too far from the club and decides to walk home. Sasha doesn't relent easily, making him promise to send her a text when he's back and safe, even if it's a drunk one. He replies with a hearty chuckle, eyes a little unfocused.

Once Armin's on his way, we all clamber into the taxi to Connie's place.

It's a handful, dragging not only Jean's sloshed arse up the three flights of stairs, but also Reiner's. It turns out he's a very affectionate drunk. If my lack of alcohol within the later hours of our adventures didn't sober me up, Reiner licking my face certainly did.

After Connie found everyone somewhere to sleep (Jean and Marco kept as far away from each other as possible - I warn them all about Jean's drunken grabby hands, too) we all pass out. It's not falling asleep, it's definitely passing out.

I wake up with a pounding headache and a set of limbs draped around my body that are certainly not mine. I recognise the pasty white skin anyway, but it was a little bit of a shock. We collectively groan when someone sneezes, clutching our heads in unison.

"Wakey-wakey eggs and bakey," Sasha coos, standing over Jean and I entangled together on the couch. We attempt to sit up, and she hands us both two aspirin and water. "Breakfast is on its way, you two hang tight now."

We thank her with the best half-smiles we can manage, and she skips off back into the kitchen. Reiner's on the other couch clutching his head similarly, and attempting to keep his eyes open. If there's one word to describe this hangover, it's pain. Nothing more than pure pain.

Sasha organises eggs and bacon, and Connie brews coffee for us all. Armin made it home safely, Mina changed her Facebook status to 'in a relationship,' Ymir left in the early hours of the morning to go back to the club, and Marco left not too long ago for work. It's not until I finish eating that the time even registers to me.

"Sash," I try with a mouthful of food. "What time is it?"

"Its nearly 11am, why?"

Shit. "Shit, I really have to get home. Jean, can you drive?"

Jean looks as though he might cry. "Mm-Hmm."

We leave quickly, thanking Connie and Sasha, and they both say they want a round two in the near future. I'll hold them to that, though with less drinking I think. We catch a taxi back to the club and find the car, driving back to our street in almost record time.

"I fucked up," Jean says as we round the corner.

"What?"

"I had a dream that I- that I lap danced that Marco guy last night... I don't even know him and I think I'm in love with the guy."
I swallow, trying to conceal my smile. "Uh... You didn't dream that - there's a video."

Jean's glare could cut through steel. "What."

I tell him to check his Facebook newsfeed as he turns into his own driveway and I retrieve my backpack and phone from the back of his car, rushing to my own house. Dads words ring in my ears. 'Son, don't be home too late.'

I'm fucked.

As soon as a walk into the door, I'm greeted by my father standing in the kitchen. If looks could kill, I would have exploded then and there. "H-hi, dad," I start, trying to calm the beast before it attacks.

"That is all you offer me? You are out all night, and you don't text once? Welcome home, ungrateful asshole. The women of the house are out, so we can have a little private time to go over things, just you and me." The menacing look in his eyes and the flare of his nostrils puts me on red alert. Mom isn't here. Mikasa isn't here. I can't get away.

He approaches me threateningly, and my bag drops to the floor with a sickening thud. Or maybe that was just me being thrown to the ground.

Chapter End Notes

This is an Ereri fic, I promise - it's very slow build. Also, apologies for anything that seems to be just shoved in without much context, sometimes I just have to fit something into a chapter for it to make sense later. Thank you for reading, I love and appreciate you all! ^^
Have you ever woken up in a pool of your own blood? I’d hope not, because it's not exactly the best feeling in the world. The dampness of my sheets isn't comforting at all, stained crimson from my father's will. And on top of that, I'm sporting that same pain-induced headache from the early hours of this morning.

To put it straight; I feel like complete and utter shit. I undoubtedly look like it too.

I'm in my bed, and I definitely wasn't in it when I was knocked out. Someone put me here, and I sure to God hope it was dad so that mom didn't have to see any of this. My muscles ache and my bones creak as I sit up, wearily. My head spins, evens struggling to adjust to the change of position. I'm still in my clothes from the party, and a thick layer of sweat keeps me from moving freely. I carefully peel myself from my tight jeans and shirt, sighing in relief at the cool air of my bedroom hitting my skin.

Sweet, sweet relief.

It's four in the afternoon, so I've been out for a little over four and a half hours. Mom is definitely home by now. I take tentative steps down the hallway towards the bathroom in my boxers, wary of the creaky floorboards, and close the door quietly behind me.

Disheveled isn't even close to what I'm soon looking at.

My hair sticks to my forehead, sleek with sweat and old blood, and my face is flushed and bruised. There's crusty blood down my neck, and my sternum is adorned in bruises appearing in the shape of a boot print. I feel sick.

My dad, my own father, did this to me.

I wash my face with cool water, and run it down my neck to clear away the blood. Brushing and shaking out my hair, I head downstairs in a clean pair of pyjamas, making sure the thin material covers everything it needs to. Probably not the best idea, but I'm not exactly in the best state of mind.

"Well, Grisha, if you'd come with us you wouldn't be needing all this information, would you?"
Mom spits angrily, scrubbing at the pan in the sink.

"I didn't need to go, it's a women's job to do as her husband requests and to see to it he knows what's going on." Dad doesn't sound remotely apologetic, his tone is that of an adult scalding a child. It's sickening.

I wait behind the banister a little longer. Maybe if I don't go out there until dad leaves, I'd be safer?
"Don't treat me like a child Grisha. You are a part of this family, so you need to start acting like it. It's not a women's job to do anything for her husband, unless he's physically disabled. Are you? Clearly not." I know mom is proud of herself for that one. I'm proud of her for standing up to him, even if not physically. She's always been good with words.

Dad lifts his head from his newspaper. "Oh I'm not part of this family, am I?"

Mom sighs. "I just said you are a part of this family, but you're not acting like it-"

"Tell that to your fucking son, Carla!" Dad stands and approaches mom, causing her to back off until her back presses against the cupboards. "He was out for over twelve hours last night and didn't text once! What kind of family lets that happen! That fuckhead could've been killed!"

Mom puts two hands on dads chest and shoves him backwards with a force. "Don't do this now, he's sleeping. If you actually cared about him, you'd let him know without using harsh language. Your approach is too brash, what kind of a father calls his child names and expects them to treat him with respect and know he's loved?! And why he was passed out on the floor and you didn't put him to bed I'll never understand..."

Passed out- I was fucking beaten to the ground! That lying bastard!

Dad throw his hands in the air in defence. "I do care! I'd show it better if he showed it to me! Respect deserves respect, being a lying, lazy, two-faced brat doesn't. And as for that, I knew he'd induced a lot of alcohol, I didn't want to be at fault for him swallowing his own vomit."

"You're a trained doctor!" Mom yells, and I take this as my chance to enter the kitchen. See how you like this dad, what would you do if I showed mom what really happened?

"Well I'm not a fucking trained babysitter-" Dad stops his yelling when I step into the kitchen, mumbling something under his breath and taking a deep breath. "Good morning, son."

"Mm.." There's no way I'm gracing him with a response, the pig.

Mom clears her throat, changing her demeure. "Eren, honey, I'm glad you're up - are you in the mood for anything? We've got leftovers from lunch I can heat up for you."

It's amazing how she can change her mood as if they weren't just arguing a minute before. I'd never noticed. Does she do this all the time? Have I been so ignorant for so long that I've neglected to see differences in my own parents' behaviour?

"Mm, yeah, thanks."

I take up a bar stool at the kitchen island-bench, and mom pours me a glass of water, setting it down in front of me. "How was last night?" Mom chirps, and I hear dad cough behind me. As if I'd tell her, not with you here.

"It was good. Made some friends, I guess," I reply bluntly, trying to keep my breathing regular to hide the fact I struggle to move. My chest hurts, inhaling and exhaling is killing me, let alone talking.

"Oh good! And what about Jean, did he have fun?" Mom coos.

"If-," If by fun you mean gave a lapdance to a freaking Greek God in skinny jeans and a black polo, then yes. "Yeah, he did. We kinda just mingled with Connie's friends and hung out..."

I hear dad stifle a bitter chuckle, and all heads turn to him. "Is this that Kirschtein boy from across the
street?” He asks, through a vindictive smile.

"Yes, we've helped them through a lot of flu cases..." Mom adds, wrapping cling foil around my soon-to-be lunch and placing it in the microwave. "Unfortunate family, that one. Always sick."

"I'm sure he had a lot of fun with Connie's male friends," Dad jeers, and mom scoffs at him.

"Grisha, that is highly unnecessary, he was an affectionate boy back then, he was only being friendly!"

"Friendly? Touching our son on the ass-"

"That was a third grade soccer game!" I yell, surprising both mom and dad. "That was nine years ago, get over it!"

Dad doesn't bite his tongue, as mom had suggested earlier. "He slapped you on the ass after you scored the winning goal! He's a perverted faggot!"

Mikasa enters the kitchen, probably knowing that if anyone has the power to stop a full-blown fight occurring between us again, it's her. She knows that dad would never hurt her, because he wants to set a good example for her. He couldn't give a shit about me, mind. Not that I care.

"M-Mikasa! I didn't know you were home," Dad says, regaining composure and sitting firmly in his seat. I hold back a smirk, silently thanking Mikasa for having the decency to come down.

"Mm," Is her acknowledgement, and she fills herself a glass of water before setting herself up in the living room, visible to us all.

Thank you, Mikasa. Thank you.

The microwave beeps and mom hands me my food and a fork. It's leftover potato-bake. I decide on eating in the kitchen on my bar stool. It would have been a waste of effort for Mikasa to come down here if I was just going to go back up to my room and hide. Even if I am uncomfortable. I can feel dad practically burning holes into the back of my head with his eyes, and it takes all of my self control to not just turn around and deck him until he passes out. See how he likes it.

"I have a late night tonight, so don't expect me home for dinner," Dad says, though no one pays much attention to it as he approaches the front door with an awkward gait.

"Is your leg sore?" Mom asks, without much concern.

"Mm, it seems I've strained it."

Yeah, kicking me, you bastard. That's a fair dose of karma for you.

"Alright, don't stress it too much at work, then."

He leaves without further word, and the tension in the air lifts as soon as he's out the door. It's almost as if a fog lifts whenever he is out of earshot. Mikasa and I simultaneously excuse ourselves a good ten minutes after dad leaves. Mom leaves us with a friendly smile, telling us that she'll order us a pizza before she leaves for work. Neither of us disagree with that.

Dad works as a doctor at Trost Medical Hospital as one of their leading surgeons and their after-hours doctor. He's on home calls a lot and often travels interstate for a number of days. Those are my favourite days.
Mom has a similar job, I guess. She works as the night nurse at the nursing home in the city. It's on the opposite end of the city to the hospital, thank god for mom.

But, with both of them having similar shifts, Mikasa and I have a lot of time to ourselves, and a lot of time alone at night. I'd need at least three pairs of hands to count the times that we've been huddled together during a thunderstorm as kids whilst mom and dad were both at work. Or a couple years ago when we both closed all the blinds and locked everything that could be locked to keep us inside and a local biker gang named The Titans out.

Even so, we're both used to it. Being alone, I mean.

"Eren," Mikasa knocks on my door, almost carefully. I try to get to the door quickly, but it's hard to do that and not step on oddly hard objects on the floor.

"Hey," I say, opening the door to find her grasping a towel in one hand and a toothbrush in the other.

"The lights blown in the bathroom, do you know if we have any spare light bulbs?"

"No, I don't think we do, but you can plug in my desk lamp in there if you want," I suggest and she nods.

"Thanks."

I unplug it and hand it to her, and she leaves without another word. She looks tired. I'll bet Thomas has fucked something up again. I sink into my pillows and cover myself with my blankets, trying to at least relax some part of me. I ache and groan occasionally, but I'm starting to be able to bear it.

Though I really shouldn't need to. I shouldn't feel like this anyway. Why do I feel like I deserve it though? If I am what dad says I am, maybe I do deserve to be treated like trash.

I've got three Facebook messages and quite a few notifications, so I check them out first. I've got a good 12 hours before anything even remotely interesting can happen.

**Connie Springer**

yo last night was awesome, thanks for being the greatest friends ever (And thanks to a certain dude for showing a little too much love to a certain Italian god) - with Sasha Braus and 5 others

I'm glad someone mentioned the boner-hopping.

I like the status and find a few inboxes regarding what Ymir meant and I decide to make my own post. It blows up fairly quickly, and I'm glad I've got friends like these.

**Eren Jaeger**

Great night last night, hella tired, though kinda concerned for the last of private dancers these days? Jean Kirschtein and Marco Bodt ??

Someone knocks on my door, and starts to open it. It's mom. "I'm off to work now, and I ordered you guys BBQ chicken, is that okay?" She asks, and I nod quickly.

"Yeah, that's great, how many?"

She chuckles slightly, "I got two just in case, I know you can both pack it away - God knows where it goes."
"Great, need me to get anything whilst you're gone?"

"No, no, I've got everything. You can go out if you want, I don't mind, just send me a text if you two decide to leave the house."

"Mom-"

"I know, I know. You're nineteen and twenty you can do stuff for yourself, but you still live here and I need to know you're alright."

Dad sure does have an impact on people in this household, huh. "Okay, have fun at work!"

"Ha ha, thank you. See you tomorrow, love you!"

"Love you too," I say as she closes my door. I hear her faintly talking with Mikasa, but she's quick to be walking down the hallway again. I can hear her car drive off from my bedroom, and I relax a little more once she's gone.

I love having her around, I mean, she's my mom. I guess it's just better to have no one around when you're injured and sore. I can sigh and struggle in peace tonight. Mikasa doesn't bother me much anyway.

-X-

At 6:10pm, the pizza guy arrives with our order.

Mikasa and I take our time going down the stairs, I mean, he took his sweet time getting here, it's the least we can do. When she goes to hand him cash, he tells her there's no bill. Mom must have payed over the phone, which allows our own pockets to sigh in relief. Metaphorically speaking, of course.

But this means I have more cash for the music festival coming up in September, and Mikasa can keep saving up for her college trip. She wants to travel with her ancient history class to see the ruins of Rome and Greece. There's an extra trip to Egypt she wants to go to too, but I don't think she can afford that, even with how hard she's already working.

"Chicken and barbecue?" I ask, even though I know. I always like to make sure so I don't get my hopes up. I always seem to be disappointed if I'm too excited.

"And a soda," Mikasa states, placing the pizza boxes in front of me on the coffee table and sitting beside me. We switch on the T.V and scroll through the movie channels, eventually deciding on 22 Jump Street and digging into our pizzas.

As Jonah Hill acts as Schmidt performing as Peter Pan, Mikasa and I have collectively eaten two large pizzas between us and finished most of the soda. No one will ever be able to tell you us Jaeger kids can't put it away, because we can.

Mikasa burps, loudly, and she almost looks surprised as we glance at each other. I give her a louder one in return, and we burst into small fits of laughter. No one would believe you if you said Mikasa Ackerman burps as loud as her brother, either. As the movie finishes and the credit roll, Mikasa switches the channel to MTV and turns to face me. It's a little past 9pm, so we don't really have much else planned after this.

"So, Jean and this Marco, huh?" She asks with a small smile. I can't even suppress my laughter at her sly look, and I pull up the video Reiner had sent to me earlier. (How he had got my number I don't know, but I guess I can't complain if I'm getting videos of Jean embarrassing himself. And Marco, to
I'm not sure what wakes me up first, the slamming of a fist connecting to a wall or the ear-piercing yelling between my parents. I don't think either of them noticed Mikasa and I curled up on the couch. We'd fallen asleep after another movie, *Shutter Island*, and neither of us had the energy to go back up the stairs. But, even so, the loudness of their yelling would've woken at least one of us up if we'd been in our rooms, too.

Mikasa and I give each other a worried glance, just as mom and dad's argument takes a turn for the worst. "Oh get fucked you lazy drunk, you work under the influence?" Mom screams, and I hear her shove him back away from her. His thundering footsteps are thrown for a second, but he easily steadies himself.

Even drunk he has unfairly good balance. "Don't you disrespect me, bitch! I didn't ask for this!" I retorts, probably shoving her against the wall, if the thud is anything to go by.

"And neither did I! You think I'd ask to have married a slob of a man like you?! You're a poor excuse for a husband and an even worse father! You kids aren't getting the nurturing and care they need from you because you're too drunk to do anything! You lie and you cheat and you always make yourself the victim when in reality, it's you who's the one ruining everyone else's lives-"

Dad slaps her hard and pushes her to the ground, and on impulse I stand up and vault the couch. "Back the fuck off you asshole!" I shout, startling both him and mom. She's bleeding, and she shakily stands to her feet, just strong enough to push dad away from me when he goes to attack me.

"Eren, stand back! This doesn't involve you!" She shouts, but dad's already got his sights set. It seems just seeing me flicks a switch in his Neanderthal brain.

"You think you're so valiant, you don't know what valiant is boy - don't try to be a hero when you're nothing but a convenience store worker and a terrible one at that!" He shoves me back a few paces, but I start to push back on him. He's stronger, though, and I'm soon pushed to the ground. "Go on, get back up, bastard," He jeers, pressing a foot hard into my stomach, finding the exact spot he'd stood on last time. I retch and try to squirm away, but to no avail.

Mikasa makes her appearance and tries to get him to step off of me, but not even her own strength can break the one he holds against me. "Get off of him!" Mom shouts as I cough flecks of blood from my throat, splattering it across my short front and dad's pants.

"Filthy brat," He shouts at me, before finally releasing his foot and giving me a chance to breath a little easier. "Back off," he says to Mikasa, slapping her hand away from him and moving towards mom again. Mikasa's eyes are fearful, and she hesitantly takes a step back, standing in front of mom who is wiping tears from her swollen eyes.

"Don't come between me and my son when I chose to punish him, either of you. Get upstairs, Carla, you've had this coming for you a long while. Mikasa, take that fuck-up upstairs and don't come out of your rooms. I don't want to see your ungrateful faces until morning."

Mom shakes as she's pushed up the stairs by dad, not daring to look us in the eyes. Mikasa also shakes as she helps me up off of the floor. And I shake as I struggle to find the right way to make it up the stairs. She doesn't ask me if I'm okay. She doesn't insist to hold me as I shakily make my way
up the stairs; a beaten, broken shell of a teenager. She doesn’t try to cover my ears from the bloodcurdling screams of mom coming from her and dad’s bedroom. She does nothing. She gives me the lightest of touches on my forearm, and lingers for a small moment, before disappearing into her room and locking her door.

The lights don’t illuminate under her bedroom door. She shut herself in for good.

I stagger to my bedroom, attempting to block out the screams and cries of mom from her bedroom. I could do something. But I can’t. My body has no energy. I struggle to even grip the door handle to close my door. I can’t make my way to my bed in a straight line. I can’t get the cries for help out of my head, coming from my own mother, being forced out by my own father.

There’s no escape. I can’t get away. We can’t get away.

Hot tears flow from my eyes as I curl up under the covers of my bed. I feel cold and numb and lost. I can’t breath properly. I can’t see. I can’t think. I’m lost; beaten and broken and confused. And angry. My tears cause me to close my eyes, and they burn for moments until I slowly slip out of consciousness, clinging to my sheets for dear life.

I dream of monsters. Large monsters breaking our house apart and killing us all. I’m the only survivor, and I stand small and broken among the lifeless bodies of my friends and family. My limbs threaten to drop off from the sheer ache of them.

I can’t fight anymore. I give up. I am over.

-X-

With morning, comes mourning. Flecks of blood are scattered around the house, and the struggle in the kitchen from last night is evident in everything around us. It’s strange for me to be out of bed this early, but I can’t help but feel uneasy. There’s something in the air that wakes me up that morning, and whatever it is, I don’t like it.

Mom is in the kitchen. She's crying, silent tears falling from her face in the dim lit kitchen in the early hours of this April morning. Not a single Spring flower could brighten this day.

"Mom," I choke, and she turns to face me slowly. She is beaten and bruised and bleeding. She looks defeated. The strong woman who raised her children to keep their heads high, and to never lose hope, has lost hope. There are bags by the door, and bandages cover the kitchen counter. She’s leaving.

The "Eren," she whispers barely makes it past her chapped lips. Even her voice is broken. She turns around again, and washes her hands, drying them on her shirt and quietly placing the bandages back into the cupboard. I didn’t even know we kept bandages in this house.

"I-I’m, so sorry," She whispers, no louder than before. She can barely speak, her throat is so dry. Her face is moist with tears, and blood, and she can’t even bring herself to look me in the eyes. "I can’t do it anymore."

‘Anymore’? How long has she been doing this for? How long has she hidden dad’s true colours from us? Cleaning up his alcohol induced vomiting, covering wounds, scrubbing stains, loading and reloading the washing machine when particular stains wouldn’t wash out?

I want to hug her. To hold her close and tell her everything will be okay. But I know that’s a lie. It always is, and it always has been. "Mom," I try again, but she shakes her head.
Tears fall from her eyes as she shakes her head solemnly. "Go back to bed, honey. I love you, don't ever forget that."

It isn't until the later hours of that evening that I awake again. There's no sound in the house, and my face is almost plastered to my pillow with tears and mucus. My head aches, a dull pounding housing itself behind my eyes, and my muscles are heavy and tight.

It's 7:40pm on a Monday, and Mikasa had sent me a text message a little under an hour ago.

From: Mikasa

Eren, I think you know by now that mom has left. Dad went after her, but couldn't find her, and told me he was headed to the bar. If he isn't already home by the time you read this, please find somewhere to stay tonight.
I'm headed out with some girlfriends of mine, and I won't be coming home.
I want you to be safe, please text me when you get this message, and promise me you won't stay home tonight.

Mom has left. Mom. Left.

He was headed to the bar.

Find somewhere to stay tonight.

I want you to be safe.

Fuck. Fuck this. Fuck everything.

I don't have any tears left. I'd cried them all out last night, I'm certain of it. So I shout. I get up and launch myself at the wall, punching it as hard as I can until my knuckles start to bleed. I sigh in frustration and pull open my door, storming down the hall and right into mom and dads room. There's blood everywhere. The sheets, the carpet, all over the fucking wall.

That bastard. I'll kill him!

"I'll kill him!" I scream, running back down the hall to my own room. I shove a pair of jeans from my floor and a wrinkled shirt into my backpack, along with a pair of underwear that may or may not be clean, and I throw a pair of shoes in for good measure.

I grab my phone and slam my door shut hard, storming down to the kitchen and grabbing a large packet of potato chips and four bottles of beer, throwing them into my bag and walking out of the house. I don't lock the door. I don't take my house key. And I don't look back.

Instead, I walk across the road to Jean's house. In only my boxers. At 8 o'clock at night. Both Jean's and his moms car are in the driveway, so I have the decency to knock instead of just entering like I usually do. Ruth Kirschtein comes to the door very quickly, as if expecting someone, but sighs (in relief?) when she sees its me. "Eren!" She says, maybe a little startled once she notices I have no pants on. "What are you doing here?"

"I have to get out of the house," I say flatly, and she steps aside, inviting me in.

"I'm glad you chose to come here, I'm headed out tonight and I think Jean needs some company," She chirps as I follow her up their large marble staircase. Jean's not the only one.

"You know where to go, just call if you need anything sweetie, you look terrible," She comments,
and I give her a nod and a small 'Thank you,' before entering Jean's room.

"Holy fuck- Eren?" He shouts, sounding exasperated and looking mortified. Jean Kirschtein with one hand shoved under his blankets, and the other keeping a laptop perched firmly by his side. Of course I had to walk in on Jean fucking Kirschtein jerking it.

"Jesus, fuck man!" I shout, raising my arms sorely in protest. "Can't you have some decency?"

"You just walked into my room at 8 o'clock at night in your underwear, and you think I need decency? This is my own home, I can masturbate if I feel like it!"

He doesn't question any further, and I take a (slightly awkward) seat on his bed as he walks to the bathroom to 'clean up.' About five minutes later he comes out, looking nothing if not relieved. "So, " He starts, closing his bedroom door behind him, "mind telling me what's going on? You look like shit, man."

"Parents," I offer blandly, moving over slightly for Jean to sit. "Dad came home pissed last night - maybe early morning - and got into a fight with mom. It got bad, mom left."

That's all I leave him with, but given the fact that my large bruise and many smaller bruises are all on show, and the dried blood on various parts of my body, I guess he can figure out the rest. "That's...tough. " He starts, rubbing the back of his neck. "S that why you came here? To get away?"

I nod. "What about Mikasa?"

"She's gone out with friends and she staying with them."

He nods. "What're you gonna do?"

"I don't know. There's not much I can do. I've given up, Jean, I can't function, I can't even fucking move because of that bastard!" I cry, and the tears I thought I didn't have fell down my face once more. I know Jean is awkward, and socially inept, and kind of a dick, but he's all I've got. I'm fine with that.

He offers the world's most weirdly placed hug, partly my fault, but mostly his, and leaves to get me a hot drink and heat rub. Yes, their family is the kind that uses heat rub and ice rub over actual heat or ice. Awkwardly enough, he rubs my back and shoulder and other sore places with the rub, and after the burn, it starts to feel a little better. It's not miracle cream, but the rub and the ibuprofen he offers both numb the pain.

He gives me the 'warmer' side of his bed and let's me use his wifi and drink my hot chocolate. I also send Mikasa a text to let her know I'm okay, and to tell her that I'm at Jean's house. I know she'll reply with something like 'that's too close' or 'won't dad know?' but I guess she can't help it. She's right.

Ruth knocks on Jean's door about an hour after I send Mikasa the message, and he gives her the a-okay to come in. "Sorry boys, I'm about to head out now and I won't be back until tomorrow. I'm leaving some cash here so if you need anything don't hesitate to go out, okay? Be safe. Love you Jean-bo! And of course, love you too Eren."

"Bye mom!" Jean calls after her, and I shout her a weak 'I love you too Mrs K,' I hear her chuckle as she leaves the house.

"Mikasa answered yet?" Jean asks, and I shake my head. His sighs out an 'oh' before returning to
scrolling through his own tumblr. It's all hipster shit and anime. He's such a nerd. Then, his phone buzzes, and his face lights up brighter than the sun. The contact reads *Marco <3* and I feel myself internally cringe. That's cute, but gross.

"Jean, are you seriously dating the guy you lap dances not two days ago?" I ask, earning an embarrassed glance and stern shove to the side. Then an apology for hitting me hard.

"I- We're not dating! We're just f-friends...besides, he was drunk anyway..."

"And the heart?"

"I can't help it if I like the guy!"

He is right. I guess it doesn't matter how long you know someone for, you can fall for them quickly. We switch out the lights at 11pm, and say our good nights before turning in opposite directions and attempting to sleep. My body still aches, and the emotional drain I'm feeling doesn't leave me.

I feel exhausted, and I've done nothing but sleep all day. Maybe it was the 15 step walk over here, that was kinda tiring... I feel almost relaxed, until about 1am, when Jean shakes me awake as my phone is ringing obnoxiously loud in the silent room.

"Eren! It's Mikasa!" Jean calls, too loudly for my tired ears.

I pick up, and it's not who I expected at all.

"Hello?"

'Eren? It's Reiner' 

"What? Why do you have Mikasa-"

'Eren you need to not freak out but we're on our way to the hospital now with Mikasa, she's in the ambulance' 

"What?! Reiner what-"

'Shh just let me talk and don't say anything until I finish-

The phones crackling and there's a struggle on the other end. I sit up straight and Jean looks at me worriedly.

"Hello? Hello? Reiner!"

'Hey, hey, hey, calm down'

"Who's this?"

'Sorry, I'm Bertholdt, I'm a friend of Reiner and Mikasa's. I'm going to tell you what happened but you need to be quiet, okay?'

I grunt in response and put the phone on speaker. I care for Mikasa, and I know that Jean does too. 'Mikasa told me about your dad and what had happened when your parents got home, and then suggested we all go out so she could take her mind off of this. Reiner and I know the bouncer of The Three Walls, so we went there with Mikasa, and her friend Hannah, and her boyfriend Thomas. Someone had slipped her a date-rape drug, and she'd left without telling us she'd gone.
Some guys found her and...'

"No! Is she okay?! What did those fuckers do to her, tell me Bertholdt where the fuck are they?!" I shout, and Jean and I immediately start putting on clothes to drive to the hospital.

'Eren, Eren, she is in the ambulance right now and we are following behind her. She's lost a lot of blood, and she's currently unconscious. You need to calm down, but I suggest moving fast to get down here.'

"Okay, we'll be there soon. Trost Med?" I ask, as Jean and I jog down the marble stairs and out the door, headed to Jean's Jag parked in the driveway.

'Yes, we didn't know if your dad would be there, but that's where we're headed.'

"Okay, thank you Bertholdt, we'll be there shortly." I hang up and Jean starts the engine quickly, speeding off down the street at an illegal pace.

"I'll kill them if they've hurt her," Jean says through gritted teeth, and we go through at least two red lights on the way there.

Neither of us say anything as we pull into the hospital car park and burst through the emergency building waiting room. Some people stare, but at are too beaten to do anything. We rush to the counter, and the nurse gives us both nervous looks.

"Mikasa Ackerman? She was taken here by ambulance," I wheeze, out of breath and muscles stretched.

"Ah yes, I'm sorry, but she's currently being overlooked by a specialist and is prohibited visitors until further notice. She has friends in waiting room two, if they could fill you in."

She didn't help, but we thank her anyway, and rush the halls to find waiting room two. I spot Reiner immediately, and both he and the tall, lanky brunette beside him stand to greet us. It's a fairly vacant room, safe for a mother and child in the corner by the T.V.

"Eren, Jean," Reiner greets, and we all agree to go outside to talk. We reach a small garden, usually inhabited by patents and nurses on smoke break, but it's empty when we step out into it. We all take a seat beside the vacant cafe, and nine of us are too sure of what to say.

"Did they catch him?" I ask quietly, my stomach aching and twisting at the thought of what had been done to Mikasa.

"Them..." Reiner mutters, and I feel myself pale.

"Them'? What do you mean?" I ask, but I know what he means.

"It was a group of about three men, probably a little older then us. They'd left before she did, and I guess they just couldn't keep their hands to themselves, sick fuck," Reiner says bitterly, crossing his hands in front of his burly chest.

"We left a little under an hour after Mikasa had left. Hannah got a text from her saying she'd found a guy to have a good time with, and that she'd be in touch. Immediately, Thomas freaked out, and we all left then. We found her a little ways down in an alley way. She was bleeding and covered in cuts and bruises, and she'd been treated roughly," Bertholdt says, looking as though he's about to cry.

"We watched them leave the alley, that's what made us go there. We heard laughing, and then crying
and screaming. Luckily we'd heard it, or we'd never have gone down there in the first place; too sketchy for out liking. When we got down there, they made a runner for it. As soon as we saw Mikasa it was just...I felt my blood boil," Reiner remarks, balling his fists.

"Reiner ran after them. I've never seen grown men so scared in my life. Myself and Hannah stayed with Mikasa and tried to clean her up, but she wasn't responding well. I ended up calling the ambulance when Mikasa stopped replying to Hannah's questions. Reiner got them, eventually, after beating them half to death. But, knowing the police around here, they're probably out on good behaviour or something as equally messed up."

I don't know whether to feel relieved or to burst into tears. My friend and sister, the one I'd suffered so much with, who took care of me and whom I took care of. The one person I love most in the world, the one so strong and so unbreakable; broken, and weak, at the hands of people who are old enough to control their urges.

"Why," I whisper shakily, anger rising through my veins, "why do people have to be so fucking stupid!"

Jean pats my back, and I know he's trying to keep his cool - better than I am trying. But before either of us can explode completely, a nurse opens the door to the courtyard, and asks, "For Mikasa Ackerman?"

Small, frail, pale and lifeless. The young woman before us is a shadow. She's barely there. Her eyes are closed, and her heart rate is slow, and as I pick up her hand to hold it in mind she feels weightless. So, so frail. Her strength is nonexistent. Right now, any form of strength and will she once had doesn't exist. She's been through hell and back, but nothing of what she endured matters in this moment because she is broken.

This situation takes away all of her strength.

Hot tears slide down my face once more, and I grip onto her hand for dear life, praying to whatever higher being will listen that she'll be okay. "The drug didn't affect her immune system to its full effect, she is lucky, in that sense of the word. The dosage was under the fatal limit, and her seemingly unconscious state was result of violent attacks performed on her as she was under the influence," The doctor, Nile Dawk, says.

I feel myself stiffen. "Could you repeat that?" I say tearily.

"She passed out as she was under the influence of heavy alcohol, and was taken advantage of because of that, resulting in two fractured ribs and puncture wounds along her abdomen, upper thighs and groin area. She should be fine to go home within the next couple of days, but only when we are sure of her situation. We'll keep her in until she is awake enough to talk to us." Dr Dawk leaves without anymore words, and his presence is not missed.

"Does he mean to say that it is her fault she was raped?" Jean says, and I stiffen once more.

"Don't say that word," I hiss, clutching Mikasa's cold hand in mine. Her face is almost at peace, but she looks worn out. Her features are stiff and not as soft as they usually are. She has been stripped of all strength.
At around 3am, Reiner and Bertholdt take their leave, wishing us all the best and telling us to keep in contact with them. I tell Jean that he can leave, but he chooses to spend the night with Mikasa and I. The nurses wheel in a small pull-out bed, to which I say Jean can have, and I fall asleep uncomfortably in the chair beside Mikasa's bed, never letting go of her hand.

The night passes, and the nurses wake me up around noon. I'm not holding Mikasa's hand anymore, and she's sitting up, picking away at the food on her plate. "Mikasa," I say, moving the chair to be seated closer to her.

"Eren," She sighs, placing down her fork.

"How are you feeling?" I ask, and she swallows nervously.

"Fine. I don't have to spend another night, they are sending me home this afternoon," she says, with the smallest of smiles.

"That's- great! I'm glad.."

There's not much between us we can say. I don't want to talk about what happened, and I know she doesn't want to talk about it, so we both sit in silence as she eats away quietly at her food. The nurse brings me a ham and cheese sandwich, and I thank her wholeheartedly, eating it quickly. I hadn't eaten in a while, I realised.

A little while later, the absent Jean makes his appearance. In one hand, he holds a bouquet of flowers; vibrant blues and pinks and yellows, wrapped carefully in red and white tissue paper and signed 'With Love.' In the other, a medium sized blue teddy bear, with a card attached to the ribbon wrapped around its neck, and cursive writing on its foot reading 'Take Care.'

He hands the teddy to Mikasa, and she gawks at it like a mother over her child. "Jean, you bought this for me?"

"The bear, yes, the flowers, no - my mom bought those for you," he admits sheepishly, and a faint blush appears across Mikasa's face.

We wait in the waiting room a few hours later for Mikasa to be done with the doctor. He gives her the all clear, and sends her home with a handful of medications and painkillers. Jean offers to drive us home, and he gives us both warm hugs before going to his own home. This time, he waits for us to get inside, giving us both one last wave before we close the door.

The lights are on, and dad sits in the living room on the sofa, no alcohol in sight. He doesn't turn to us, even though our entrance wasn't quiet. Instead, he raises his hand in acknowledgement saying, "There's take-out in the fridge. Glad you decided to come home."

It's bitter and undeserving, but we both hum in response and go up to our rooms. I tentatively enter the kitchen once more to get Mikasa and I our food, before going back up to her room and giving it to her.

"Thank you, Eren. I'm sorry this had to happen," She says quietly. I know she wants to cry, because that's the tone of voice I have when I want to cry. But I also know she wants to stand strong. That means not crying, at least. Not in front of people, I guess.

"I'm sorry too. Get some rest, I'll see you in the morning."

"Goodnight, Eren."
"Goodnight, Mikasa."

I close her door for her and enter my own bedroom. It's cold, even more so that usual, and I don't bother turning my lights on before stripping myself of my clothes and hopping into bed. My food is cold, but I eat most of it anyway, in the dark, and then I turn over and close my eyes,

I sigh, and patiently welcome the sleep that will take me out of reality, if only for a little while.

Chapter End Notes

I swear Levi is involved - I swear this is an ereri fic - I swear this is very, very slow build
For the first time in a long time, I have a good night sleep. Knowing Mikasa is safe at home, and that dad could have hurt me but he didn't, almost calms my mind. It's stupid, I know, but it makes me smile just that little bit when I wake up.

It's 8:50am when my alarm goes off, and I'm already awake enough to turn it off and sit up. My blinds are open, and morning sunlight pours through, warming my cold skin. I take a deep breath and stretch as much as I can, trying to relax my tense muscles. The ache has lessened, and I feel almost as if nothing had happened.

Though, good moments like these don't often stay good for me. I'm hit with the painfully reality that is my life when I walk down the hallway to the bathroom, and there's no scent of breakfast being cooked. There's no perfume to choke me when I walk down the hall, there's no sweet humming or out-of-tune singing from the kitchen, there's not even a 'Good morning, Eren!' waiting for me downstairs.

Mom isn't here. Mom will never be here again.

My heart sinks, and my smile deteriorates into a frown. I don't hear the T.V, so dad must be at work, which I guess should lift my spirits just a little - but it doesn't. I go to the bathroom, and then make my way downstairs. The T.V is on now, and Mikasa is curled up on the couch in her pyjamas and dressing gown, holding a steaming mug of tea close to her chest. "Morning," she says wearily. She looks tired, still. Her sleep was not as refreshing as mine, but there's no guessing as to why.

"Morning," I retort, pulling open the fridge to try to cook up some eggs at least. "How are you feeling?"

"Drained," She sighs, and I know just how she feels. Not exactly, not at all really - but I understand the feeling.

"Do you want a drink or something?" I ask.

"I've got one, thanks." Right, that was a stupid question. She's even less talkative today. I can't help but feel like I'm completely helpless right now. I don't know how to help her, I'm so useless. I can't even help my own fucking sister. Surely there's something I can offer her - advice, a hug? Anything.

"Do you want eggs?" I try, my stomach knotting tightly.

She shakes her head. "I'm not hungry."
Pushing through the feeling of utter helplessness, I boil extra anyway, and put them in the fridge. I let her know they're in there if she wants them. She offers me 'thanks' again, and I leave her to eat in my room.

I'm selfish, I know, but I can't be around her like that. I can't help her, I'd only make things worse if I tried to make conversation with her. Dealing with what she's dealt with, in only such a short timeframe, there's no doubt she's completely shattered. But, knowing she's detaching herself even more from reality, I wish I could do something to lessen the pain.

So I wait. I wait around for some miracle in my mind to get me to do something. But nothing comes to me. I come down from my room to see that she is still staring blankly at the TV, her tea untouched.

Around noon, Mikasa tells me she has a psychologist appointment, and asks me if I can drive her and pick her up. I tell her I can, and try to keep my happiness to myself. To be asked if I can help, to be asked for assistance - I feel a bubbling in my stomach, and I haven't felt that kind joy since I was younger.

She gets dressed (I think she only put on a bra and swapped pyjama bottoms for a pair of shorts) and we head off towards the city. The traffic is fine, and we end up there a little earlier than expected. She says she's fine to go in early, and that she'll be finished in an hour, before leaving me to my own devices.

I want to hug her. I want to at least smile at her. But whenever I feel like doing that, I know she won't appreciate it. To be smiled at when you're broken is like kicking a dog with broken legs. It's pointless, and it only leads to more pain.

I watch her mess of unbrushed black hair and slightly odd choice of clothing enter the building, before starting up the engine and driving further into the city. I make sure to stay away from the hospital side, just in case dad sees me and isn't as kind as yesterday.

I decide to eat at a fast food place, drive through or something, but find myself walking into an old-style restaurant instead. It's wooden furnishing and floorboards contrast to the 60's style tables and chairs. It's an odd looking place, and by the oddly coordinated outfit worn by the brunette at the counter, it's obviously owned by odd people.

"Welcome to Hanji's, I'm Hanji, what can I get for you today?" A tall brunette says cheerfully, answering the ringing phone and writing down quickly in a notepad beside her. I'm subconsciously walking towards the counter, missing the 'please queue to be seated' sign, but I'm stopped by an auburn haired woman holding out a menu.

"Welcome to Hanji's, I'm Petra, are you looking for a table for one?" She smiles, less creepier than the brunette behind the counter. Petra? Like the woman who owns the tea house. I wonder why she's working here... It couldn't be a coincidence that two people share that name.

"Yes, thanks," I stammer.

She giggles. "Right this way!"

Petra leads me to a one-seated table beside the window, giving me a good view of the city streets. It's slightly smoggy, and for a spring day it's almost overcast and cold. Trost is always cold, mind, it just seems odd for this weather at this time of year.

"Just go up to the counter when you've decided," Petra chirps, walking off with a skip in her step.
towards the bar.

Skimming the menu, I decide on a bowl of chips and a water and approach the counter. The woman, not Petra, smiles widely at me, clearly enthusiastic about her job, and leans over the counter. "What can I get for you?" She asks.

"U-uh, just a large fries and a water thanks," I ask, and she nods, writing away quickly in her notepad.

"Is that all? We've got a buy one take-away dessert get one free deal going on right now!" She says cheerfully, holding up a coupon to me.

"U-uh." I don't think I'll get away with saying no, this woman's rubbing me the wrong way...

"Yeah, sure."

Almost I possibly, her smile widens. "Great! I'll put your down for two...?"

My eyes widen as I take in my options of desserts from behind the glass. "Um, I don't know... Just the cake-thing I guess?"

"Cake-thing I guess," alright, your order will be with you shortly! Which table?"

"Five, thanks."

I walk off without another word and wait for my food. I'm not that hungry, but I know that I feel worse if I don't eat. At least, that's what mom always said.

People walk by the window and through the streets in a variety of clothing and numbers. One group of kids, probably pre-pubescent, walk down whistling and cat-calling at girls - their age and above. It makes me sick. I've never really thought about it before, but guys are jerks. I don't think there are even words to describe the types of guys that make life a living hell for women. I have never really realised that until it's hit so close to home.

Mom... I know what dad did to you. Why my own father would do something as disgusting as that to you I have no idea, but I will kill him if I ever lay my sights on him again. You didn't deserve that treatment. Mikasa... She didn't deserve that either. Being drunk doesn't just make it okay to be taken advantage of. I swear, if I ever see guys treating women like that, I'll kick their asses. Seeing what happened to Mikasa, I don't want that to happen to anyone... I don't want anyone to have to go through that.

Those thoughtless bastards.

The kids move along eventually, and it's not until I see them walking back down the street with ice creams that my mind wavers a little more. Kids are being taught that it's okay to grow up like this. That it's okay to treat women like their property.

I don't know why I'm even thinking about this - or how I've never realised it, but it's sick. It's disgusting. Pre-pubescent boys trying to flirt with girls by grabbing their dicks and shouting at them, what the fuck? What has the world turned into..

"Large fries and a sparkling water?" Petra stands holding my food, and I visibly jump before thanking her as she walks off again.

They're not the best fries in the world, but they're not bad either. Petra shows up again half-way through my meal and places two paper bags on the table, both containing a slice of cake. I thank her
again, and she smiles once more, hair bobbing behind her as she walks back to the counter.

I aim to finish quickly. The time tells me I’ve been here almost an hour, which means Mikasa will be ready to be picked up soon. I want to get there a little earlier, just so she doesn’t have to wait around. Petra wishes me a ‘good day’ as I leave, and I return it with a smile.

I dodge handfuls of people on my way to the car, all trying to avoid the ever-increasing rainfall. Given the time of year, rainfall in spring would be odd for most places, but not Trost. There’s never a week where it doesn’t rain here, no matter the season. It only gets worse in the colder months, too. You really wouldn't want to be homeless living in Trost.

I reach my car (Mikasa's actually, I don't technically have my license yet. I passed my exam, it just hasn't arrived for pick-up) and start the engine hurriedly, driving off as fast as the law allows. The Wellness Centres' car park has filled drastically since I'd been gone, and it takes me a few laps until I find a park. I text Mikasa where I am, but a phone buzzes in the console as it sends; Mikasa's phone.

Am I a doting brother if I go in and get her? Maybe I should wait for her to come out... She's 20, after all. But she's just got out of hospital after being taken advantage of, she might get worried and panic.

I decide to go in. I don't approach the front desk or the elevator, instead I take a seat on the couches by the front window. She'll see me on her way out if I sit here, and I won't look as worried. I don't think, anyway.

Ten minutes pass, and finally the elevator brings down a group of people, Mikasa included. I stand to greet her, and see she is in animated conversation with a blonde-woman wearing a grey hoodie and leggings. "Oh! Annie, this is Eren - my brother," Mikasa says, walking towards me with her friend, Annie apparently, beside her.

"Hi," She offers, with a small smile and nod.

"Hey," I say, a little timidly. She seems nice, but something about Mikasa being so friendly with someone from a psychotherapist meeting rubs me the wrong way. Maybe I'm just judgemental. Not that I have the right to be, I probably rub people the wrong way too, considering I'm a complete waste of space and all. Can't even order food without stuttering.

"So yeah, I'm in St Sina if you ever wanna hang out or whatever," Annie says, finishing her conversation with Mikasa before they'd seen me.

"Great, and I've got your number too, so I'll give you a buzz later in the week?"

Mikasa smiles. "That'd be awesome. Hey, you like popcorn?"

"Of course," Mikasa replies lightheartedly.

"Maybe a movie sometime then?" Annie asks, hands still shoved almost shyly in her hoodie pockets. Almost.

"That'd be- great, that'd be great."

Annie tells us she's being picked up from inside the building, and we both say our farewells. She offers us (probably Mikasa) a one-handed wave as we leave the building, sitting back on the chair I was seated in and putting her feet up.

"She seems... Nice," I say tentatively, and Mikasa nods her head quickly.
"She is. I'm surprised, honestly. When we first went in, everyone was so nervous and jittery, but she just looked like she was about to kill everyone. She didn't, though. She gave a lot of insight and offered us a lot as a group - she's definitely Mike's favourite, I think."

I feel my heart rising. Mikasa has never spoken this much to me in one shot in her life. She's never talked like this, especially not admiring someone else. "You enjoyed it, then? In a loose sense of the word..."

"I did. I'm glad I decided to go. It's definitely not what I thought it would be." We approach the car and get in, turning on the heating. Mikasa takes her phone from the console, and starts to type away furiously. I'm guessing it's Annie.

"What did you expect, then?" I ask. If she's in a good mood, I want to make the most of it. Make me feel wanted, please, Mikasa.

"Not that. I guess things online have made me think that getting help means you're crazy - but it doesn't. Those people are the most kindest and normal people I've ever met. It's hard to believe, but all those broken people are still the same inside, and that's all these sessions are about. They're not fixing us, they're giving us the mental tools to fix ourselves like humans do."

I'm cheering on the inside. She's happy. For once in her life, she's smiling. Her phone buzzes alive again, and she smiles - genuine and happy. "I'm glad you're making the most of it."

"Yeah, me too."

-X-

'Well that's what I was saying! I told the dude that I'd checked before I went out and that their machine was probably just fucking up, but he just kept on and on about it!'

Jean exclaims around a mouthful of something slurpy.

"What did you do?" I prod, feigning most of my interest in his conversation. He could've come over, I mean, he lives across the street - he didn't have to phone me.

'I went to the ATM and checked, and get this right? Zilch, absolutely nothing in there! I'd checked that fucking morning, and all my money was gone. It wouldn't even let me see where it went, so I went to the bank and they were all like,' he deepens his voice in a mocking tone, "sorry sir, a private account has transferred funds from your account, we can track it but it will take so and so working days and will cost you $150."

"You're kidding?"

'I'm not kidding! It's ridiculous! I asked mom and she said she had no idea, that her account was fine. I'm gonna get my passwords and shit changed. If some hack dude has fucking sole my cash I'm gonna go mental, I tell you."

I hear the front door open and close forcefully, and tell Jean I have to go and that dad is hope. He sighs and says it's fine, and we hang up at the same time. Mikasa and I are both walking down the hallway at the same time, to greet him in the kitchen. To our surprise, he's holding to take-out boxes of Chinese food. He doesn't look happy to be home, but he's not angry, or drunk, and the normally tense air is fairly light this evening.

"Evening, kids," He says, slightly exasperated.

"Hi," We say in unison, offering to take the carry boxes from him. He thanks us both and takes off.
his shoes, standing his doctors bag beside the shoe rack.

"I brought us all some dinner, I wasn't sure what you liked separately so I got the family meal," Dad explains, his tone lighter than usual and less malicious.

"That's okay," I say, and Mikasa nods her head in agreement. I can see her mood has decreased, but she holds her phone firmly in one hand.

We all sit down in front of the T.V. and dad lets us decide on a movie to rent. We wait to watch it after dinner, as dad says he'll buy popcorn before we start. Mikasa and I exchange a few looks throughout dinner. Dads being nice, and there doesn't seem to be anything for him to gain from it, so what's the reason?

"Mikasa," Dad starts, wiping his mouth on a serviette, "How are you feeling today? I hope your appointment treated you kindly."

"Yes. It's worth my money," She says, and dad nods in agreement.

"I agree, I'm glad you can take it from your own pay check too, it's very responsible of you. And Eren?"

"I'm fine. I dropped Mikasa to her appointment, and had lunch at some restaurant in town," I say, keeping the food remaining in my mouth out of the way to avoid being chastised for talking with my mouth ful.

"Good. Expensive?"

"Not really."

We don't talk much after that. Instead, dad tells us he'll go out and get popcorn, and that we can decide on a movie whilst he's gone. Mikasa and I are both suspicious of his motives, though. "He's never been this nice before, what's his deal?" I comment, scrolling through the movie channel.

"I don't know," Is her response, eyes glued to her phone in text conversation with Annie, presumably.

"What do you want to watch?"

"You pick."

I sigh and keep scrolling. I'm happy for Mikasa, I really am. She's found a friend she genuinely likes, why wouldn't I be happy for her? Maybe it's the fact that her mood is improving, and I'm not involved in it. Maybe I'm the one bringing her down... I've done enough damage to drive mom away, with the help of dad speaking about me the way he does, it would only make sense that I've done the same to Mikasa. I feel like a total...-

"What about, Jackass?" I ask.

*I feel like a complete, utter, useless jackass.*

"Which one?"

"All of them?"

"Okay."
Dad gets home and cooks the popcorn, with little conversation. I tell him what we've picked and he feigns mild excitement. After the first two Jackass movies and a few comments from dad about how 'irresponsible' they are and how they're 'influencing the young adults of today to mess around and never get anywhere in life,' we decide to stop it there and get ready for the night.

I shower once we've cleaned up after the popcorn, and put on fresh pyjama bottoms and a t-shirt. I'd worn the other pair for over a month, and I don't want to do anything to upset dad; it's only a minor thing, but I don't want to test the waters. Not tonight.

Around 11pm, dad comes up and knocks on my door. I startle, and try my best to look like I'm not expecting him to beat me or yell at me. Instead, "I just thought I'd come up and say goodnight. It's been a tough few days, for all of us."

I'm stunned. My mouth gapes like a fish, and I'm stuck for words.

"I haven't really been fair on you, both of you, really. I see that now. I can't make up for what I've done to this family, but I can prevent it from happening again. I'm sorry, Eren."

"I-"

I sigh, relaxing my shoulders and staring him directly in the eyes. "It's okay. Goodnight, dad."

He leaves with a smile on his face, and I hear him knock on Mikasa's door as well. I don't catch the whole conversation, but it's similar to mine. Aside from his spiel about how he will catch the guys who ruined Mikasa and will make them 'wish they were never born.'

Dad apologised. Dad treated us, me, like a real person. Like his son.

I'm left to fall asleep with the slightest of smiles on my face.

"Yeah, I understand. It's hard, and most people don't seem to get that.."

"I know! It's like it makes us lesser human beings for suffering the consequences of someone else's actions!"

The slight raise of a female voice brings me into consciousness. I recognise Mikasa's voice, and common sense tells me the other voice belongs to Annie from the clinic.

I sit up and stretch, popping my shoulders and letting my spine crack into place. My muscles feel sore. I must've slept awkwardly... I don't bother to change out of my pyjamas, opening my bedroom door and peering into the hallway. Mikasa's bedroom door is open, and from my room I can see her and Annie sitting cross-legged on the floor, leaning against her painted pale-red wall.

I'm standing in my own doorway, and my floorboard creaks, causing them both to peek outside at the noise. Annie smirks, most likely at my disheveled appearance and mis-matching pyjamas. Mikasa raises an eyebrow at me. "Yes?" She asks.

"Nothin', just woke up 's all," I mumble, yawning tiredly and leaning against the doorframe.

"We can tell," Annie adds, earning a snicker from Mikasa. "I was gonna ask, do you wanna hang out with us later? We're going to the movies, then we're headed out to watch a friend of mine play
Mikasa follows Annie's gaze, looking at me expectantly. "You don't have to. It's only that you'd be home alone if it was just Annie and myself," Mikasa adds.

"What time is the movie?" I ask, a little more awake. *Going out with Mikasa and Annie. Will I end up a third wheel on their day out?*

"It starts at 1pm, so we were going to grab a bite to eat before then."

"And when would we leave?"

They make a mumbled exchange that I don't quite catch, and Annie says, "We were going to head out in about half an hour, if you wanna start getting ready or whatever now."

I take it as they knew I wouldn't turn down the offer.

I close my door and put together my best I'm-'not'-trying-hard-but-I-really-want-to-not-look-like-something-the-cat-dragged-in outfit; my grey jeans, a plain black t-shirt and a dark grey beanie for good measure. I know it'll be cold out, but probably not enough for a jacket. I shove on my tattered Vans and meet Annie and Mikasa in the living room, both dressed to impress, clearly.

We leave soon after, taking Annie's car. She drives a fairly new silver Kia, but claims its second hand from her step-father. I'd be inclined to argue that fact, but I don't. Annie has a look about her from time to time that says she's not one to mess with.

After eating our body weight in drive-thru burgers and fries, we see a gold-class screening of The Snow Queen. Gold-class because a) Annie works there and can get cheaper tickets for better quality and b) the cinema is showing high quality re-runs of old hits from early 00's.

To my surprise, it's definitely not at all like the outdated, better but sloppier version of Frozen I had expected. The difference between the two is...- I actually enjoyed this one.

Annie drives us out a little further from the city, into Old Trost; the more historical part of Trost. Here, historians regularly find ruins and artefacts from times gone by. More recently, bones of 'giant people' had been dug up towards the outlier of the town. I, personally, think it's a scam made up by some stupid kids as a get rich quick scheme, but so far it's been proven as factual.

We pull into an old car park, with parking spaces marked by wooden logs and a chicken-wire fencing around a small patch of dirt. We pay an entrance fee of $4 (I have to pay for myself - thanks, Annie) and stand at the gate whilst Annie tries to scope out her friends.

"You can't miss him, he's big and muscly and blonde-"

"You mean him?" Mikasa says, pointing towards the grandstand where a familiar muscly blonde is seated alone high above the courts.

"Yep, that's him."

We approach the grandstand, and Annie calls out to him from below. He practically jumps from his seat and picks up the gear around him, bounding down the stairs to meet us.

"Sorry, I thought I'd sit up there to spot you- Mikasa? And Eren?"

"Hi, Reiner," We say, in variation. It's stuff like this that makes a small part of my brain believe in
"You know each other?" Annie asks, and the three of us nod.

"We met at a party of Connie's a few days ago," I say, and Reiner nods in agreement.

"And he saved my life barely two days ago," Mikasa clarifies, and Annie's eyes widen slightly at the recollection.

"I knew there were similarities in your stories," Annie says, and we all turn to look at her. "I mean, Reiner had called me to tell me about you, and the description is perfect. And you'd told me about a 'burly blonde man' and his 'blurry tall friend'."

A siren sounds, and we find front row seats in the grandstand. Apparently, this is a 'big tournament' in Old Trost. According to Reiner, the whole town turned out this week. I can count a grand total of ten people in a grandstand that can fit a thousand, not including myself.

"What a small world," Reiner comments, just as the game begins.

It's a men's netball game, apparently. I can spot Bertholdt immediately - he's not hard to find. We (Reiner) hoot and cheer for Bertholdt's team as they score multiple times throughout both halves, mostly thanks to Bertholdt's height and position as goal shooter.

But, it's not enough. As the final whistle blows, the other team score the winning goal, and the 'crowd' cheers in victory. Annie has to hold Reiner down as a member of the other team says something to Bertholdt that makes him retreat into himself. I don't notice it, but apparently Reiner can 'sense his unhappiness.' And also, from what I'd seen throughout the entire game, the guy is an absolute asshole anyway, so it's no surprise.

The end ceremony goes by fast, and as soon as medals and speeches have concluded, we're leaving the stadium with a sweaty (more so than the last I saw him) Bertholdt and a proud Reiner. Annie congratulates him with a pat on the back for his efforts, and Mikasa offers only verbal congratulations.

I shake his hand, and Reiner's (though for the sake of my muscle pain, I'd really like to only remember Bertholdt's handshake) and we pike into our separate cars. "So, what did you think?" Annie asks as we turn onto the main road, turning down the volume of the radio just a little.

"It's been a good day. I'm glad we could all spend time together," Mikasa says, genuinely letting a smile form on her lips.

"I'm glad, and Eren?"

"Yeah, I had fun," I say, completely telling the truth. I didn't feel like a third wheel, at all. Mikasa always made sure to include me as we walked or drive, and Annie always addressed me when talking, even if only to Mikasa.

It's strange, that two people so alike and so seemingly introverted can bring out the best in each other. I'm happy, for both of them. For all of us.

"Good. I'm glad you guys could come on such short notice, I wasn't sure if I could keep those tickets any longer without getting fired," Annie says, and then she chuckles. And then Mikasa chuckles. And now, I am overwhelmed.

Annie gets us home around 5:30pm, and says her farewells, saying we should do something like this
again sometime. I agree, and Mikasa tells me she'll catch up with me inside. I let her stay with Annie in the car a little longer, and walk into the house by myself.

Dad isn't home, and seeing the answering-machine light flashing, I remember that I didn't bring my phone out with me today. I don't check the machine, instead I double step the stairs and flop down onto my bed, peeling off my shoes with my feet and checking my phone. I never expect much, but not having it with me leaves a guilt in my stomach.

(4) Missed Calls
(3) Messages

They're all from Jean.

**From: Jean**
11:24am
hey um i don't know if ur up but i kinda need to talk, can i come over later?

**From: Jean**
12:59pm
ok ur not home and no phone with u, that's great

**From: Jean**
5:07pm
Eren please answer me, I really need you right now.

The last one was 23 minutes ago. I decide to call him, and he answers after the second ring.

"Jean?"

'Eren'

"What's wrong? I'm sorry I didn't answer, I've been out all day and didn't have my phone with me."

'I-it's fine....' He sighs, and his voice is fragile. It doesn't take a genius to know he's on the brink of tears.

"Jean?"

'S-sorry. I just- you know, you f-find out things you wish you didn't...and you just..don't know h-how to cope?"

"Mm."

'Y-yeah..that.."

"What's happened?"

He lets out another, longer shaky sigh, and I can tell he's rubbing the bridge of his nose to keep tears inside. He's never been one to let his emotions out to people. Not that I can talk. 'I- came home today f-from Marco's a bit early...and m-mom was on the couch w-with some guys and- she didn't even know I was-' He starts to cry. He sniffs and coughs, and I can hear the tears as he speaks.

"Jean? What's happened?"

'My moms a prostitute, I think, and s-she's doing it to p-pay the bills because we have no money and
d-dad took it all and that's why my b-bank is empty and m-mom's too and I- Eren...I can't anymore.'

He hangs up the phone. My blood goes cold and I don't bother shoving shoes on my feet as I run out the front door. Annie's car is still parked in the driveway, but I don't stop to see why. Instead, I run across the road and onto Jean's porch, not bothering to knock as I enter his house.

It's empty, and most of the lights are off - Ruth isn't here.

I run up to his bedroom, and knock before entering. Just in case. He's bundled in blankets and curled into a tight fatal position, an ignored meal beside his bed. "Jean?" I say tentatively, and he sniffs in response. "Jean, talk to me, please."

"Go away," He mumbles, mouth full of sheet and covers.

"No, talk to me. Don't just sit here and keep it all in. Just- even about the weather or something!"

"Go away, Eren."

"You called me less than a minute ago, and I have three messages to say you don't really want me to go away."

He doesn't respond. He sighs heavily and starts to sit up, and we're face to face. He's paler than usual, and sleepless shadows adorn his sharp features. What would be called stubble in most cases is almost too long to be called that, and dark shadows under his eyes suggest he's been thinking about this far too long.

And I am part of the reason why. I didn't have my stupid phone with me, and now he looks like this. Did I do this to him? I'm fucking up everyone's lives by being a useless son of a bastard.

"Dad's been taking money out of the bank for months now. He's trying to turn us bankrupt and I've been spending money like you wouldn't believe! My mom fucking has sex with strangers to pay our fucking bills, and I'm out drinking and buying useless shit that is only making our situation worse! What is there to talk about, Eren?! I'm fucking up everything and dad's fucking up everything and mom is fucking having to sleep with sweaty, fat old bastards just so we can eat each night!" He yells, eyes bloodshot and voice venomous.

"Jean-"

"Don't! Don't you fucking say anything, Jaeger! I'm sick and tired of being told that 'it's not my fault' because you know what? It is! I'm contributing to this family less than anyone I know! I've been spending valuable money day in and day out on fucking useless crap for my own selfish needs and mom didn't have the guts to tell me anything! And I don't blame her I blame myself for living like this! Living like a fucking spoilt, selfish brat!" His breathing is rapid, and the outline of a vein appears on his forehead. But, he starts to calm down.

"Everyone was right, you know," He says, bringing his voice to nothing but a whisper. "Back in school. They called me a snob... A fucking selfish, fat, spoilt snob who didn't give a shit about anyone else... They're right. I am. I'm a fucking useless, spoilt snob... I deserve all the shit life's throwing at us, but not mom... Not mom..." Tears spill from the corners of his eyes and fall onto his covers, and then he leans forward and presses his head into my shoulder. "I don't know what to do," He sobs.

I put my arms around him and pull him close. Yeah, back then he probably did deserve to be called that stuff. But not now. I've seen changes in this guy like you would not believe. Everyone who knew him back then has. I guess those things were all taken to heart, and all he sees now is the
person he used to be.

I guess that when you hate yourself, you begin to remember all the things that made you that way.

-X-

I want Jean to take a day out.

I'd gone back home after Jean had fallen asleep, and promised him we'd do something that didn't cost money and that wasn't boring the next day. So that's what we're doing. He comes over at 10am, and I serve him breakfast. Though, even after presumably a nights rest, he still looks like shit. "I made pancakes, so help yourself to as many as you like," I say as he takes a seat in the kitchen.

"Thanks," He mumbles, and I walk up the stairs to Mikasa's room and knock on the door quietly.

"I made pancakes," I tell her, waiting for a response.

"Oh, okay, I'll be out in a minute."

"Okay. Jean's here, by the way."

"Should I get out of my pyjamas, then?"

"It's up to you, though I think he's too tired to flirt." I hear her chuckle slightly. She's obviously been talking to Annie.

Back in the kitchen, Jean's consumed most of the pancakes already. "You know, we were all gonna have some of that," I tease, and he looks at me through lidded eyes.

He's tired, almost deathly looking. "Make more."

I do.

Mikasa joins us eventually, and Jean makes sure to treat her kindly. She tells him she didn't throw away the teddy bear he bought her, and he smiles like a giddy school kid. "You didn't?" He asks, carefully.

"No, it's on my bed."

"...Thanks, Mikasa..."

She looks puzzled for a moment, but brushes it off when I serve the next pancakes. I get to eat eventually, after about three rounds (for both Jean and Mikasa). Then, Jean and I take the bus to Trost Centennial Park, just outside of Recon. Completely my idea though, and not without questioning from Jean. He just can't take things as they are.

"Why here?" He asks flatly.

I shrug."Why not? I wanted to treat you to some ice cream and a walk in the park, since it's not raining or cloudy today."

And it's not, for the first time in about 6 months. There's barely a cloud in the sky, and although there's a cold wind, it's fairly warm. Well, for us Trost citizens, whenever even a single ray of sunshine is visible we're sweltering.

"I thought you said no money today-"
"And I just said I'm treating you."

Jean's reserved. It's almost as though he and Mikasa have swapped partial parts of their personalities. He's becoming less and less involved in the human world, and she's slowly going out into it. It's sad, and exciting. And also, kind of scary.

We eat out ice cream on a bench beside the fountain, watching kids jump and run through the water and parents chase after their toddlers who want more ice cream. Some kids snicker at us sitting side by side, one making a comment about us being 'faggots.' I want to punch that kid in particular.

Another group of slightly older kids make comment on Jean's beaten appearance. "He looks like a drug dealer, do you think he's gonna kidnap his friend?" He doesn't look as bad as yesterday. Those kids just need to shut their mouths and back off. They don't know anything.

We don't talk much, instead focused on the pleasant warmth hitting our skin and enveloping our beings. Until, of course, the mood shifts between us once more. "Eren.." Jean starts, breaking the comfortable silence. His tone of voice is wary, like he's unsure about what he's saying. Given his state of mind, I know he is.

"Mm?"

"I... Don't think we should hang out."

What. "What? Where's this coming from?" I ask, stunned at his comment. What does he mean? What does that have to do with anything?

"I'm not good for you... Please, just hear me out, okay?"

I nod, but reluctantly.

"You have a tough life, I know that. Your mom walked out on you, and your dads a prick, and then what happened with Mikasa I just- I'm toxic. I've got too much shit in my life to be a good friend to you. And you've got too much to be a good friend to me. And those kids? Talking about me likes I'm a drug addict or something?-"

"Those kids don't know what they're talking about! Jean, just ignore them! Why can't we hang out I don't get it-"

"Because we just can't! Please just get out of my life!" Jean shouts.

I can't fathom the conversation, and rationality leaves my mind. "What have I done that's made your life so miserable?!

"Everything in my life's miserable, I don't want to make anyone else suffer because of me!"

"So you shut yourself away from everything?! You avoid your problems because you think they'll just go away?! What kind of fucked up thinking is that?! Jean, I'm your best fucking friend don't push me away, I want to be there for you and I can be-"

"No you can't Eren, just fuck off and get the fuck out of my life!"

People are staring and parents are covering their children's ears and children and elderly people and shocked. So much attention is on us but neither of us care. The tension between is is think enough to slice with a blade and the anger boiling in our hot-headed minds is enough to light a forest fire.
"Go fuck yourself then, you stubborn prick," I spit. I don't look back. I throw the remains of my ice cream on the seat and storm off across the road. I don't go to the bus station, I just keep walking.

I don't care if people stare at me. I don't care if I look angry, because I'm not.

I'm furious.

*Why someone who claims to be my best friend would tell me to fuck off is beyond me. And what's his fucking problem anyway? He's got problems, we all do! Instead of fucking trying to compete and compare, why can't it just be what it is and let's just move the fuck on.*

The lights are red when I cross at the crossing, and people angrily honk their horns. "Fuck off," I mumble, pushing my way through the crowds of people.

*He's more than his fucking problems and he knows it. God. He's such a fucking arrogant drama queen. I couldn't care less about that prick. He's brought all this on himself. He really is a selfish snob.*

Chapter End Notes

You Should Know:
- Each character has a lot of changes throughout this fic. Not only as people, but their views and values, so please don't be too confused when you see those changes in characters.
- Grisha is an antagonist, so do not expect niceties like this in future...

Thank you to everyone who has left kudos/bookmarks and to every reader. I am so appreciative of every single one of you!
I haven't spoken to Jean in two weeks, mom hasn't contacted us since she left, Mikasa is spending every spare second with Annie, and dad brought home a carton of beer tonight. I don't want to go to work.

It takes every ounce of energy I have to roll out of bed and slip on my shoes. I've been wearing my work uniform since last night. I slept in it, even though I didn't work, because I haven't had energy since last week. Jean drained me. And without Mikasa around, it's like I'm living alone. Loving alone with an emotionally manipulative father, at least.

"Eren! Hurry up or you can walk to work!" Dad shouts, and my skin crawls. I'm uncomfortable with dad driving me to work. I don't like being alone with him, even though he hasn't touched or yelled at me for weeks now. Seeing that carton of beer sitting idly in the refrigerator rubbed me the wrong way.

"Coming!" I shout, stomping my feet into my shoes and rushing out the door after grabbing my phone. I don't take my backpack tonight, and I'd texted Connie to bring dinner for both of us tonight.

From: Connie
5:42pm
You better pay me back man, I'm short this week

To: Connie
5:42pm
You're short every week, you haven't grown since middle school.

From: Connie
5:43pm
You're a dirty player Eren

I smile at that, because I know he's laughing behind that macho facade.

Dad rushes me out of the house and we get into his car; an old 1950's thing with a hydraulics system that doesn't work but probably could if we got it serviced. Though, I don't mention it - it's not my car, and it's none of my business.

"Where do you work again?" He asks gruffly, voice muffled by the stubble left to grow around his mouth.

"On The Run, it's just around the corner from-"
"I know, I'm not stupid."

Right. 'Course not. You even know where your son works, I'm glad you picked up the Parenting 101 handbook for fathers, that's a great start.

The atmosphere has shifted since the first night Mikasa came home from the hospital. Dad was nice for a while, and both of us even opened up more, considering giving him another chance at being a good father. That didn't last for long, though.

"Eren, get down here!" He'd yelled from the living room, startling me and causing me to run a little faster down the stairs than I should.

"Yeah?"

"Pass me the remote, my back is sore."

He had called me down the stairs to get him the T.V remote that was not even a meter in front of him on the couch.

"Seriously?" I'd said, forgetting who I was talking to. But that doesn't matter, right? He's a changed-

"Why the fuck would I not be serious?" He'd bellowed. I went for the remote and handed it to him, though he snatched it angrily. "I don't like your attitude lately boy, you need to start respecting your dear old dad more."

Dear old dad, he'd said. That's what he called himself, like I'm supposed to agree or sympathise with him. Yeah, right.

We pull up at On The Run, and dad unlocks the car doors for me to get out. "Thanks for driving me," I say, and he hums in response.

"What time do you finish?" He asks, just before I close the passenger door.

"My shift ends at 4am, so I'll stay at Connie's for the night."

He doesn't respond verbally, instead nodding his head. I close the door and he drives off immediately, speeding around the corner, not bothering to wait for the incoming traffic.

Maybe one day he'll get hit and die. No, don't think shit like that - karma's a bitch, mom always said that. But still...

I see Connie waving frantically from the serving window, before pausing to wave a box of take-out around at me. I shake my head and smile, walking a little quicker to enter the convenience store. "You made it! Thought you'd never show up man, I was gonna have to eat this all by myself!" Connie exclaims, leaning against the counter.

"That'd be real hard for you, Connie, I'm sure," I deadpan.

He smirks, and opens the employee door for me. I throw my jacket into the back room and take a seat behind the second serving register next to Connie. He's already opening up the take-out and shoving it between us. "I didn't really know what was cheap that you'd eat, so I went for the classic burgers and fries deal," He starts, fishing out his own burger and emptying the box of large fries onto
the wrapping paper for us both.

"I can see that," I smirk, and he throws me a glare.

He grins. "The sass is back, I was starting to think it was gone for good!"

"Nope, I've still got it, even at my age."

Connie chuckles, and we both start to eat. My shift doesn't technically begin until 7pm, but I'd told Connie earlier that I'd come in so we could eat before starting. Ymir, having listened in on our apparently not-so-private conversation, took that as her opportunity to switch shifts with me.

I didn't say no, so it was almost a win-win for both of us. Almost.

Ymir has to come in later anyway to repair something in the employee bathrooms. As well as designated Alcoholics Assistant (cleaning up for and after the drunk people who come in around 2am every Friday and Saturday to buy loads of junk and energy drinks - then vomit all over something) she's also our resident maintenance woman. She'll fix any clogged toilet, broken sink, or even damaged tile for a slight pay raise. It's fair too, she's good at what she does.

Why she chooses to work here instead of finding a job in trade she's good at I'll never know.

"So," Connie starts, with a mouthful of food, "how'd you enjoy the party? I'm asking now since you were kind out of it last time I saw you."

"It was great, a lot more fun that I thought it would be, I've gotta say..."

"Oh yeah? Like real fun or 'I have to say it was fun even though I had a shit time' fun?"

"Real fun, I'm glad I didn't turn it down."

"Me too! I know you two didn't talk much but Armin likes you, a lot. Like, me and him and Sash were talking about having a beach party when the warmer weather kicks in. It's a little ways down the coast, but we were thinking of heading up to Karanese for part of the summer."

"You and Sash and Armin?" I question. Why would they bring Armin on what would likely be a romantic getaway?

"No you dope, all of us! If we can save a couple of weeks for the summer, we could all head up there and have a great time! Armin's already down, and Sasha can easily get a hold of her dad's caravan. Reiner has his own caravan too, so if he can come, that will cater for us all too. Plus, there's no way Ymir will turn that down, especially if she can bring her girlfriend-"

"Ymir's gay?" I ask, probably sounding more shocked than I should.

"How is that even a real question you ask someone? She's the gayest person I know, Reiner aside." "Reiner's gay?!"

"Holy crap dude, do you live under a rock? He's practically the poster child for stereotypical gay men around the world!"

"Uh...I guess I should've picked up on that..."

"Anyway, your lack of gaydar aside - Armin, Sasha and me can already go, so that's already a four person caravan secured. If Reiner can come, that'll be another four person caravan, and he'll probably
want to bring Bertholdt so that'll be fine...

Then, Ymir and Christa... Which leaves Marco, you and Jean! If you can come, Jean's sure to follow, and I doubt Marco will turn down the opportunity to see pony-boy for two whole weeks-

"I don't think Jean will want to go."

"Huh?"

"I don't think he'll want to go...just a feeling."

"Did you guys have a fight or something? Cmon man, I thought those fist fight days were over between you two!"

"They are, they are! It's just," I sigh, and put down the rest of my burger. I'm suddenly not hungry anymore. "He's got some stuff going on he won't tell me about, and he kinda lost it at me for no reason at all last week, and then I got mad and told him to fuck himself... We haven't talked since."

"No way, I thought you guys were super close?"

"Apparently not close enough for him to just let me help him..."

"Okay, first," Connie starts, swallowing the rest of his burger, "Let me delve into the wisdom sector of my mind, 'cause I think I can give you a few tips, if you don't mind." I nod, though slightly apprehensive. If Connie has advice, I'd better be prepared to work out what he's actually trying to say.

He begins, "Maybe he doesn't want help. I'm not a councillor or anything, but I know people who came to me for things, and I thought they wanted advice. When I went to give it, they lost it, telling me they only wanted someone to listen, not someone to treat them badly. I didn't understand at first, but it kinda made more sense as they talked. I don't know what it's like to be that person, but I know what it's like to be your person. I know how it feels to want to help someone, but have them not cooperate with you and make you feel like crap."

"He acted like he didn't want to talk to me at all!"

"Maybe he didn't! The person I talked to didn't want to either, it took a long, long time for them to even look at me after they got mad at me. But, we both knew where we'd stuffed up, and when Jean calms down he should be able to apologise. I don't have advice for you, I'm not good with words. All I'm saying, is that if someone has a problem - yes, they probably should talk about it - but they don't have to. Sometimes they only want someone who will listen, and sometimes they only need to know that someone cares for them, no matter what."

I'm honestly taken aback by Connie's complete change in person in this moment. Whoever this person is, they're obviously someone close to him, for him to be this serious about it. "Thanks, Connie."

"Don't thank me. Now eat the rest of that or I'll eat it for you!"

He ends up eating the rest of my burger, and I spend the rest of my break scanning the candy aisle for something sweet. Knowing full well I'm staying the night at his place, Connie and I split the cash on a packet of malteasers and box of caramel popcorn. It's fairly quiet, save for a few customers every now and then. Apparently, people have better things to do on a Wednesday night that to shop at On The Run.

It makes our shift fairly simple though, of only a little boring. We find paper in the back room and
doodle for a while; Connie showing me up in our 'draw the other person with your eyes closed' match.

Ymir joins us around 10pm, and observes an intense round of noughts and crosses between us, before heading out the back to 'see what she can do' about the plumbing.

"Who shat last?!" She shouts out to us, obviously unaffected that there could be customers out here. There aren't, lucky for her.

"I don't shit at work, it makes me uncomfortable and I can't concentrate," Connie admits, without hesitation.

"I haven't been in all week, so someone else has got to have been since then," I call back, and hear her sigh loudly.

"What about the Boss?"

"We don't know his poop-schedule, Ymir," Connie says, knitting his eyebrows together in mock humour.

"Well it wasn't me, and if it wasn't you two he's the only one who uses the employee bathroom!"

"No, that's the only bathroom that is fit for the handicapped, so they would use it too," I add, and Ymir groans from the bathroom.

"See," She starts, and I hear her put down her tools, "I was more comfortable fixing a clogged toilet that had been shat in by people I knew, but people I don't know? That's a bit much.." She fixes it, anyway. And the smell is horrendous. Good thing we work in a convenience store, as Ymir had said. She'd 'bought' a can of air freshener and detergent, and worked her magic in the staff bathroom. Soon enough we can't smell anything that isn't sea breeze.

"Thanks, Ymir," Connie says, and I add a thank you too, and she smiles proudly at us from the other side of the counter.

"Ain't no trouble, bros," Is how she accepts our gratitude, before telling us she has to head home because her girlfriend is coming over and she needs to clean up.

"This late at night?" I ask.

"Yeah, her flight comes in at 12:30am, and I'm picking her up, so I've gotta get my shit together before then," Ymir says matter-of-factly, before leaving the store with one last wave.

"We could learn so much from her," Connie sighs, rolling his eyes.

"Mm, she sure is a picture."

It isn't until around the end of our shift that a group of guys start coming through the doors, the smell of alcohol consuming the sea breeze air freshener. "Here we go," Connie whispers as they traipse loudly up and down the aisles, singing and yelling to each other.

"And in the last minute of our shift too," I add.

"At least Erwin comes in at 4am, so we don't have to worry about them making us work overtime.."

"Heeey so can I get'a pack of Marlboro and a'lil one o' dem donuts," One guy slurs, half-hazardly leaning against the counter for support. Given how his friends are laughing at him, he might be the
only one who is completely drunk.

"Sure," I start, grabbing his donut and cigarettes before returning to the counter, "is that all?"

"Yeah, thanks man."

They walk out, without purchasing anything else, and pass Erwin on his way in. "Mornin' boss!" Connie shouts, and Erwin gives a tired smile.

"Good morning, Connie, Eren," He acknowledges us with a curt nod, before striding to the back room to put away his bag. He emerges now without his rain jacket on, and tells us we can take early leave. "I know how it feels to be working late and having to stay when you really don't want to, so go on ahead, I won't dock your pay."

We leave with hearty thank you's, and Sasha is already waiting when we head out the doors with our things. I knew Sasha would be staying with Connie when I made the plans in the first place, so I don't mind. They don't get up to any 'funny business' usually.

"Hey, how was work?" Sasha asks when we get into her car. She drives off immediately, probably exhausted and wanting to get home quickly.

"Boring, as usual," Connie says, and I agree with him from the backseat. We don't speak much on the way to Connie's place. It's 4am, and we're all tired and worn out. Plus, I have compassion for Sasha - she's stayed up this late just to pick us up, when she's probably had work too, or has it tomorrow.

She's probably the greatest girlfriend a guy could wish to have. Connie lucked out in pretty much every aspect of her, and their relationship. I'm kind of jealous about that. Not that I'm looking for a relationship anyway, but still. It must be nice to have someone care about you like this. Someone who doesn't run away, at least..

We pull into Connie's apartment complex around 4:30am, and take the elevator to the third floor. Sasha wishes me a goodnight, patting me on the shoulder before yawning and retreating to her and Connie's bedroom down the hallway. Connie pours me a glass of water and leaves it on the coffee table. Then, he throws me their 'quality guest blankets and pillows' and wishes me a goodnight, too.

I charge my phone in the kitchen, and try to quietly open the forgotten malteasers. Three-quarters of the box are gone before I decide I'm too tired to stay awake, and I flip the switch of the lamp, retreating to the couch. Being older than time itself, it squeaks under my weight, and it takes me a while to get comfortable. But, I start to fall asleep quickly.

-X-

"Mm?"

'Eren, sorry it's so early, I know you work late, but I need to ask you something.'

"Mm." My eyes can't even open I'm so tired. It was hard enough shuffling to the kitchen to see who was calling, let alone talk to them.

'I apologise for the late notice but- Annie has invited me to move in with her.'

"What?!" I almost shout, completely forgetting about Connie and Sasha sleeping just a room away from me.
'She lives close to my university, and is even transferring to there at the end of the semester. I'm sorry to do this to you, Eren but- We've really connected, Annie and I.'

"But Mikasa! You can't! You don't even know her-"

'I know I'd rather live with her, than dad.'

She's practised this conversation.

"And you think I can without you?"

'Eren... I love you, and I hope you know that, but for me to be able to protect you, I have to protect myself.'

This can't be happening. "I-"

'I'm not capable of protecting you right now. I'm not strong enough, mentally or physically. I will only be interfering if I stay there. The session worker made it clear that in order for a victim of any harm to be a functional member of society, is to help themselves.'

"I- I know.."

I feel like crying, but the stinging pricks of tears don't go beyond their hesitant movements. They don't fall from my eyes, and my cracking voice starts to even out again.

"I trust your decision," I say, finally.

Mikasa sighs on the other end of the phone. Relief, nerves, I can't pinpoint it - but, if she is happy, I am happy.

"Help yourself, I don't need help. If you're happy, I can be happy, too."

'Thank you, Eren. I'll talk with you later.'

"Bye, Mikasa."

The kitchen lights turn on, and Sasha slouches towards the kettle in a purple rope and white singlet-black patterned shorts combo. "Morning," she mutters tiredly.

"Morning, sorry, I hope I didn't want you."

"Nah, I was awake anyway. Who was that?"

"Mikasa."

"Your sister, right?,

"Y-yeah." How does she know that?

"Mm, Connie told me about her," She starts, but stops herself quickly, "All good things, I promise!"

Ah, that's how.

"It's fine, I believe you," I try, feigning a tired smile.

"You up for breakfast? I was gonna cook, but I'll probably get McDonalds or something. And don't worry, I'm happy to pay!"
I hear Connie shout something from down the hall. Probably about him paying.

"I'm not really that hungry, but thanks for the offer," I say, and Sasha raises an eyebrow at me.

"You sure? Foods vital to live, you know, we kinda need it."

I chuckle, and she smiles, but I still decline. Connie appears a few minutes later in dark jeans and a heavy jacket. I don't plan on staying much longer, though I wish I had somewhere else to go besides home, but I don't like overstaying my welcome. Even if I'm told 100 times a day that I'm always welcome for however long I want.

"Okay then, let's get going Connie, I gotta get one of those wrap things before the sell out again," Sasha cheers, taking off her dressing gown and throwing on a jacket.

"Wait, wait, I've got bed head, I have to fix it up first."

Sasha and I both lose it at Connie's seriousness, and we break into fits of laughter. "Bed head?! You barely have any hair, Con!" Sasha jeers. Connie looks unimpressed, and puts a beanie over his short hair. My stomach hurts from laughter, but I tell them that I probably won't be there when they get back.

"It's fine, 's long as you're okay with that," Connie says, paying down his beanie.

"Yeah, I am. See you guys."

They leave with goodbyes, and reach around for my backpack. I'd packed a toothbrush, and go and brush my teeth, then slip on my Vans and leave their apartment. I make sure to lock the door, too, just in case. This neighbourhood isn't the best.

I probably look like I'm taking the walk of shame, but it doesn't really bother me. I'm too busy overthinking everything. As usual. Mikasa's moved out...into some dorm or apartment with a girl she barely knows, and I have to live alone with dad. How is that even remotely fair? Or ethical?

And tonight...poetry night, without Jean. He won't come. I've never missed a poetry night in a year and a half, so there's no way he'd go if he knew I was there.. Maybe I should ring him? Or would I feel worse if he ignored my call...

I narrowly miss being hit by a car when crossing the road, but ignore their frustrated shouts and continue with my never ending despairing thoughts. I can't go tonight...I'll look like such a tool by myself! But I can't stay home with dad.. He's better, but after the beer on the fridge, there's no way I can trust him. Maybe someone else will go with me?

I take a bus and get off one stop before my own. Walking before entering that dark house calms me down, usually. It's a little on the warmer side today, and the tightness of my three-day-old jeans makes it slightly unbearable. But, I get home. Thankfully, dad's car isn't in the driveway, and I can enter the house a little more relaxed. Before going in, though, I look across the street at Jean's home. His car is there, but his mother's isn't.

It's a weird feeling, and probably completely wrong, but something looks off. Almost as if his big, white, stand-out house is darker than even the black-bricked homes down the street. Something's odd. Different.

But I don't care. It's his problem, not mine.

I slam the door shut, mood changing within .02 seconds. It's not uncommon; Mom wanted to get me
diagnosed with bipolar syndrome, God knows why, but they all said I was fine. Hot-headed, I think they called it. *Whatever. If Jean's gonna mope around all the time it's none of my business. I'm only trying to be here for him, if he doesn't want help I can't help that. It's almost selfish, him keeping it all in. Stubborn prick.*

There's a note on the kitchen counter. Dad doesn't have a mobile phone - I mean, he does, but it's apparently only for work - so we usually find notes from him around the house.

_Eren,_
I've been called in to see a family in Jinae, so I am staying there over night. If you can post the letters for me when you go out tonight that'd be appreciated.

I saw them on the couch when I'd walked in.

_Hopefully you've heard about Mikasa by now. She should be dropping by to get the last of her things around 3pm, so give her a hand._
_Dad._

_She's coming around, huh. At least I can look forward to seeing her again, it feels like forever since I've seen her... I wonder what she's got left._

I throw my bag into my bedroom, and shuffle across the hall to Mikasa's bedroom. It's almost completely bare, save for two boxes filled with papers and photographs. Her painted wall adds to the emptiness of the room. I don't like looking at this, it's as if she's died and we've cleaned out all her stuff.

I do jack-shit for a few hours, browsing YouTube for useless videos and sending out a few texts. For a Thursday night, people seem to do a whole lot of stuff.

_To: Connie, Sasha, Reiner, Armin (from the club), Mikasa_
hey, are you free tonight? don't wanna go to poetry alone lol

I'm not usually a mass-texter, but I had to try. I seem desperate, but if I can help it, I don't want to go alone tonight. I'd even hovered over Jean's contact for a while but - I decided against it.

_From: Sasha_
I'm so sorry Eren, me and Connie are going down to the beach for a barbecue!! xx

_From: Reiner_
sprrry man me and bertl headed south for the weekend yesterday but goodluck x

_To: Sasha_
It's okay, have fun. :) x

_To: Reiner_
Don't worry about it, you guys have fun, though. :)

_From: Armin (from the club)_
Hi Eren!
I'm really sorry but I've got a full week booked up! I was almost free tonight, but earlier on I'd been invited to ElectroWave in the city. If you can't find anyone for whatever you've planned, you're welcome to join myself and some friends tonight!

I don't remember putting Armin's name in my contacts, but having him - a totally stranger, mind -
offer to have me with him is kinda nice. But, my hopes aren't lifted. At all.

To: Armin (from the club)
It's ok, thanks for the offer but I'll pass, you have fun though. :)

From: Connie
man I'm so sorry, me and Sash are headed for a bbq at the beach later with our fam. is jean srsly not going with you??

To: Connie
Haven't heard anything from him, doubt it though, he's ignored me completely for weeks.

From: Connie
what a douche, sorry man

To: Connie
It's okay.

It's nearly 3pm when I hear back from Mikasa. I really wish I'd pretended not to be looking forward to her visit.

Incoming call...
Mikasa
"Hey."

'Eren, hi. I'm sorry I didn't get back to you earlier.'

"It's okay, I guess you can't come out tonight?"

'I'm afraid not. I was going to come by to pick up some boxes, but I've been called into work.'

"Work?"

'Mm. I work at the day care centre as a receptionist.'

"Why would you be called in this late, then?"

'I don't know, but I need the money, so I can't say no. Sorry, Eren.'

"It's fine. I'll see you some other time, then."

'Cheer up, Eren. You sound down, but don't let bad days make you feel horrible.'

"Yeah, okay."

We don't say much after that. We hang up a minute later, and I throw my phone down my bed, having a slight panic attack when it nearly drops to the floor. How am I supposed to cheer up when my friends hate me and my own sister can't even make time for me? Her life is coming together and I feel like some prisoner in isolation.

I shower and get dressed; clean pair of skinny jeans, grey tee, light coloured hoodie, Vans. I'm not exactly trying to make a fashion statement at The Basement.
The air on the bus is thick, coated in cigarette smoke and something only describable as bus smell. Engine fuel, smoke, dirty people, unwashed asses. I stand, due to the lack of seats, and barely withstand being crushed between the sweaty bodies of the people around me.

I get off one stop before The Basement. I hate riding the bus into the city, it is always an unpleasant experience. Though, Jean can usually make light of it.

I'm not alone when I walk to The Basement, I'm simply lonely. Handfuls of people, the regulars, and headed there too, and I mingle between them. But, it doesn't help. You can't cure loneliness with the presence of other people, I don't think. It helps, but it's not a cure. Being surrounded by people and feeling lonely is like putting a bandaid over a bullet hole. It really doesn't do much.

The Basement isn't crowded, and with Jean's absence I feel vulnerable - in every sense of the word. It's warm inside, thanks to the fireplaces, and the classical music blends with background noise; it's hard to decide between the two which to focus on. Choruses of gossip and art-orientated chatter bounce off of the walls, and the grand piano and string ensemble mix complements the vibe.

Even if I am uncomfortable, it's nice to be able to kick back and relax without being bothered by people. It's almost like an unwritten rule:

*If you come to The Basement alone, you want to be alone.*
*If you come to The Basement with friends, you want to be with friends.*
*And if you come to The Basement and sit at the couches, you want to talk to socialise.*

As uncomfortable as I might be, I'm definitely far more comfortable than the guy sitting at the couches, who obviously does not know about the unwritten rules.

No less than five meters in front of me, a group of five people are seated on the secondhand vomit-green couches. A brunette woman chats idly to a short-haired blonde woman, completely absorbed in conversation, judging by her animated actions and attention grabbing excitement. I recognise the brunette as Hanji, from Hanji's restaurant. And, surprisingly, the less-scruffy blonde man as Erwin, the manager of On The Run. To think someone like *him* is *willingly* sitting and chatting to someone like *her*.

I didn't think she'd have such a normal looking group of friends.

On the couch across from them, two men (both well-built and blonde, although one is a little scruffier than the other) chat simply, occasionally turning their attention to the women, but otherwise content on relaxing and small-talking, taking occasional sips from their drinks. I note that none of them ordered alcohol, only soda.

They don't grab my attention, surprisingly. It's the short, dark haired pale one that catches my eye. He sits on the couch directly in my vision, listening in on both conversations at different intervals, but giving no input. He is just about gripping his mug of whatever for dear life, hands white at the knuckles. The guy looks around nervously on occasion, but his expression remains the same; plain, almost angry, but very out of place. He looks about as awkward as I feel.

I don't usually find myself enamoured by appearances, but I guess he's an exception. Something about the way he is - it's like looking in a mirror. Of course, we don't look similar. I've got dark brown hair, bright green eyes (depending on the lighting, really) and I only have one ear piercing. It's
something about his demeanour - the way he looks so out of place but fits in so well. Every uncomfortable feeling or thought I have, I can see him doing the same.

It's kinda nice. I mean, weird and horrible, but nice.

He makes eye contact with me, and I'm quick to blink and look away. *It wasn't awkward- who am I kidding, yes it was awkward strangers don't just eyeball each other like that without it being awkward.*

I make sure to look over there a couple of times per act. A few of those times, his eyes are wandering, or he and the less-scruffy blonde man are making small conversation. It's easier to look over when there's someone who is loud on stage. I guess he can't look away out of fear they'll yell at him. I get that too, sometimes. Or maybe it's for different reasons. It's probably for different reasons.

*He must be an odd sort of guy, and I don't even know him. I mean, if he's hanging out with Hanji he must be a little weird, but he looks so normal? If you count a lip piercing and small stretchers normal, I guess.*

The last act comes to a close, and an organiser of the shows (some guy called Moblit) says his usual conclusion and thanks everyone for coming tonight. I clap a little louder than usual. Maybe to get the guys attention, or maybe to make myself look less alone. Or less lonely.

It doesn't work, for any of those things. In the flow of people exiting The Basement, I don't get to see the normal-but-maybe-not-that-normal guy with the lip piercing. I do, however, catch two heads of blonde hair heading towards the stage. *Maybe they work here or something? Or at least the scruffy one does, unless Erwin has some sort of shady side job.*

I don't dwell on it. Instead, I make a beeline for the bus to secure a seat before other people get on too. I manage to take a window seat at the back of the bus, and less people get on for the return trip. I hadn't taken notice before today, but skyline where the ocean meets the sky is something I've never thought about before. Darkness meets darkness, and a thin line of illuminated city scatters itself among the darknesses, creating something extraordinary to the eyes.

*I wonder if other people can see this, too?*

It's a strange feeling, taking the bus after a show instead of walking home with Jean. There's no meal at Recon, no late night conversation or walk to the park, not even the brief waiting for one or the other to enter their home. *Maybe I should visit him.*

The bus stops, and I take slower steps towards my street. I haven't spoken to him in nearly four weeks...and he hasn't been active on any social media or anything. *Maybe he isn't that selfish - maybe he's just really not okay.* I've always been, no matter how quiet or moody I can get, compassionate. I'm not conceited, I just know that sometimes I can't control my emotions. This is one of those times.

*Perhaps I'm the selfish one? I'm the one who didn't contact him? I've been ignoring him, because I'm the stubborn bastard?*

I cross the street and stop at his front door. *Do I knock? Ruth isn't home, so he probably wouldn't answer the door. Wouldn't hear it, or would see me and ignore it.* The lights are off inside, but there's no way he's gone to sleep, it's barely 9:30pm. I don't knock, I open the door and call out, "Hello?" I probably sound pathetic. My voice cracks and I feel uneasy.

The air is heavy, and I can't hear anything. The whole house emits white noise, and lights from outside cast shadows on the walls that I swear have never been there before. I might even go as far as
to say that I'm scared right now. "Jean?" I call out, again, walking up the marble staircase without turning on the lights. I don't want to bother him if he really is sleeping, or not okay.

Still, nothing. There's no answer. The atmosphere is so silent you'd swear you could hear someone breathing, if they were home that is. Maybe he isn't home. Maybe Ruth took him out for dinner or a movie? Or they've gone on a holiday or something? I doubt it, but it doesn't hurt to try.

I approach his door, and open it slowly. There's nothing- no one in here. His bedside lamp is turned on, and his floor is littered with scrunched up paper. There is, however, a neatly folded one under the light of his lamp. A letter? It's probably private, I shouldn't read it. I approach it anyway and sit on his bad, opening the letter.

I wish this wasn't happening.

To whom it may concern...

Not many people come in here anymore, or in the house even, so you must be one desperate bastard or one lucky house robber. If you're reading this, it's too late. I'm shaky handed and my writings probably not even eligible but I've had enough.

Life gets too much and sometimes you just can't handle it and I couldn't handle it. Everything caved in at once and I was expected to deal with it on my own.

I didn't want to, I had to.

This is my final suicide note, the one I'm actually going to use. I can't stand it anymore. I'm worthless, and useless, and I don't deserve to breathe the air that I do.

Mom, I love you. I'm an asshole, and you probably didn't know I loved you because of how I acted, but I did- I do love you. Please don't give up, you're a lot stronger than I am. Marco, thanks for what you did. You're too kind to even speak to someone like me, let alone waste your time letting me cry and snot all over your shirts.

I wish we'd met at a nicer time.

Finally, Eren. Sorry I didn't listen to you. I'm an asshole, and I shouldn't've said what I did. You're the greatest friend anyone could ever hope for, I'm sorry I didn't realise that until it was too late.

au revoir, la conscience, je suis heureux de vous laisser

- Jean K.

"No," I sob, brokenly. I throw the note to the bed and tear open the various others scattering the floor. Some have been ripped, but even beneath my tears eyes I can read the fragments of a draft letter.

Fuck, this is stupid,

I'm an idiot,

I hate living,

Leave me to die,

Why can't I just do it?!!!

Coward, coward, coward,

I'm killing myself,
Rope,
Bathroom,
Shed,
Die, die, die.

The pieces of paper flutter in the breeze I leave in my trails as I rush out of his bedroom. This can't be happening, I'm too late! I can't say goodbye, I haven't even said I'm sorry yet.

The bathrooms are empty, but he'd been in them both. Pills and cloth and bottles of substances cover the tiled floors. Some had been spat out, some not even tried. I run out to their backyard. He'd said something about a shed. *What if he's hung himself?! I have to find him-*

There's a light on under the shed door, and I silently plead to myself that I'm not too late. "Please, please, please be alive."

I take a deep breath and throw open the door. I could cry.

"E-Eren?!" He chokes, holding the noose in between his fingers, standing high above the ground on a chair. His eyes are red and he's pale, dark shadows underlining them. He looks terrible.

"Jean!" I cry out, and rush to his side. He looks as though he's going to push me away and just keep on with what he was going to do, but he doesn't. He practically falls from the chair and into my arms, and his hot tears stream down his cheeks and down my neck.

"I t-though I was gonna die tonight.." He whispers softly, sadly.

"Me too."

I cling to him, making sure to rub my hands in circles around his shoulder blades and down his back, keeping him close to my chest. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I'm s-sorry for everything..." He whispers, and I bury my head into the crook of his neck. "P-Please don't leave me."

"I won't. I promise."

Even though he's slightly taller than me, he seems so small. He's fragile, and I can feel his bones pressing against me. He was skinny before, but he's almost clinically skin and bone right now. He shakes against me, sobbing loudly into my neck. I'm crying, too, but it's silent. *Thank you, thank you, thank you. I don't know who or what I'm thanking, but I'm doing it anyway.*

I wasn't too late. Or maybe, he wasn't quick enough.

We don't move for half an hour. We stand in the cold of the shed, holding each other as tight as we can manage. I don't want to let go of him, in case he crumbles to dust in front of my eyes. *What if I had walked in on him dead? I can't even sit in public without feeling terrible, how would I cope about finding my best friend dead?*

"Stop," Jean whispers. I pull away slightly, but don't let go of him.

"Huh?"

"You think too l-loudly."

He would have smirked, in different circumstances, but he doesn't. I guide him inside, after turning
the shed lights off and locking the door. I also make a mental note to take the rope with me when I leave. I can't leave it set up when he's so broken. It's only his words against mine.

"You need to sleep, Jean," I say, and he shakes with every step up the stairs.

"I know."

"How much have you slept?" I persist. He doesn't want to talk, but he needs to. I need to make sure he will be okay, or if I need to call an ambulance.

"An hour...m-maybe."

I sit him down on his bed, but he bursts into tears at the sight of the attempted suicide notes littering his bedroom. "I'm getting rid of these, okay?"

He nods.

I take a trash bag and pile all the notes into it, then make my way to the bathrooms. Every pill, bottle, cloth, and substance goes into the trash bag. If any of its important, I'll get the money to buy more, but for now it all needs to go. When I get back up to Jean's room, he's still in the same position: on the edge of his bed, head in hands, staring blankly at the floor in front of him.

"You know I need to ask you questions, right?" I say, softly, and he nods. "Have you taken anything? Please be truthful, Jean. I know you want to die, but I don't want you to."

He lifts his head and looks me in the eyes. "Nothing," he whispers, "I tried but...it wasn't for me."

His voice is barely audible, but I believe him. "Okay."

I make him drink a glass of water, and force him to take a shower. Whilst he does, I take down the rope from the shed and leave it on the front porch. Whether I leave tonight or not, I need to keep that away from him. It goes against my better judgement, but I text his mom. I don't know where she is, or what she's doing, but she needs to know.

Whether Jean knows it or not, she would put Jean before anything. And I think he needs her more than me, right now.

To: Ms K.
Hi Ms Kirschtein.
I don't want to alarm you, but if you could call me soon that would be really appreciated. It's important.
- Eren

She rings not a minute later.

'Eren, honey, what's wrong?'

"Sorry to bother you, but I think you need to come home tonight."

'Wha- What's wrong?"

"Jean almost made a terrible mistake. I'm not going to go into details over the phone, it's not my place to tell you, but he really needs someone right now and I don't think I'm the person he needs."

'Shit Eren, what's happened?! Is he okay? I'm leaving right now- just, please tell me he's okay!'
"Shh, shh. He's not okay, but he's better than he was about half an hour ago. Look, I have to go, he's almost out of the shower, but please hurry home. Don't be alarmed."

'Alright, alright, I'm coming, I'll be there shortly!'

"Thank you, and Ms K?"

'Yes, honey?'

"Please listen to him. I don't mean hear his words, I mean hear everything behind the words."

'I- Okay. You're a very sensible young man, Eren.'

"See you soon."

I hear him shuffling down the hall, so I open up Facebook and scroll through my feed for a few seconds. I make him change into comfortable clothes, before he makes a strange request.

"Can we go for a walk?" He asks, shakily and carefully.

"Sure." Whatever calms him down.

We walk down the stairs, and I follow behind Jean, typing out a quick text to Ruth.

To: Ms K
He wants to go to the park, but we'll be back. Send me a text when you get close?

From: Ms K
I'll come to the park. Pick Jean up and make him something nice? x

I don't think that's what Jean will want, but it's a nice gesture. I'm sure she knows her son well enough to know what will cheer him up - even if she doesn't know the circumstances.

He's jittery as we leave the house, catching sight of the rope. *Fuck.* "Where do you want to go?" I ask, trying to knock him out of his thoughts. As he answers, I throw the rope into the bushes. It's not hidden, but it's out of reach, for now.

"Park."

"Okay."

It's not that far, so we cross the street and walk slowly to the park. We've spent many night there after Recon. I guess this is a wake up call to just how we feel when we're out there, even if it's not shown on the outside. I keep my phone turned up, in case Ruth rings. It hasn't been that long, but I know she'll be back soon.

The bar across the road from the park is as loud and cheerful as ever. A heavy contrast to the darkness surrounding Jean. We sit at a bench beside the water feature, and watch as people enter and exit in varying stages of drunk-ness. "Why?" I ask, and Jean sighs.

"Everything gets too hard."

I understand. Not completely, but I understand.

"Is mom coming home?" He asks.
"Yeah."

"You told her?"

"No. I said you needed someone, and that I probably didn't fit the bill."

"....I'm sorry."

"For what?"

He sighs shakily, again. "For all of this."

"Don't be. Breaking point can't be pinpointed on everyone."

"Eren?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you for not abandoning me," He starts, looking me directly in the eyes. What? He thought I'd actually do that?

"I never thought that you'd be the one to find me, let alone stop me. Thank you, for not leaving me."

It happened fast, like nothing any measure of time could note. He leans in, chapped lips meeting my own, and wraps his arms around my neck. Weak and hesitant, but he didn't pull away. I kissed back, but didn't open my mouth. I've never kissed anyone before, but I don't want to tongue with Jean.

He pulls away then. "Sorry....I think I've needed to do that for a while."

"It's...fine."

"Don't think that I want to date you, though. Not even nearly dying could make me forget about Marco."

"Good."

I don't tell him about the note, or what he'd written. I know he likes Marco. I guess complete self-destruction makes you do things you usually wouldn't do. Ms Kirschtein's car pulls up in that moment, and Jean and I both stand to meet her halfway. "Jean, baby are you okay?" She squeals, engulfing him in a bone-crushing hug.

He thinks for a moment when she pulls away. Please Jean, please tell her the truth.

He stares at the ground, tears forming at the sides of his eyes. He's not going to. He'll make up some bullshit excuse and it'll all be over. Ruth looks as though she's about to cry, but she stands her ground. "You know it's okay to not be okay, don't you? No one will not like you for not being okay, Jean."

"Y-....No, mom. I'm not okay."

A bittersweet smile graces Ruth's lips, and she nods, bringing Jean in to cradle him against her. She mouths 'Thank you' to me, and I smile and nod at her. Jean hugs me goodbye, as does Ms Kirschtein, and they drive off. But, not before she insisted they give me a lift home. I said that I wanted some fresh air anyway, and they finally left.
I turn to walk the path back home. It is a nice night for a walk, anyway, and I'm feeling a little better. I'd stopped Jean from killing himself. I'd saved someone. Maybe I'm not as worthless as I thought?

"Eren!" An angry voice calls at me from behind me. That voice shouldn't be here.

"Dad? I thought you were in Jinae-" He's holding a half empty bottle of beer, and stumbling towards me. I run. He's drunk, so I can run faster then he can. "Stay back! You're drunk, dad!"

"C'mere you fag!" He's faster than I thought, and he manages to push me full force to the concrete.

"Argh!" I felt something crack.

"You and that Kirschtein kid! How dare you do this to me! I thought I raised a man not a twink!" He shouts, stamping his foot down hard on my abdomen. It's too late, and people are too drunk, to notice or to care.

"D-dad, it's not like that I-"

He kicks into my ribs, and grabs me by my shirt, lifting my slightly off of the ground. "You're a disgrace! I go out to have a good time and you ruin everything! You've ruined everything for me since you were born you ungrateful bastard! First Carla and then Mikasa, you've torn this family apart-"

"It's you! You're the bastard! You've done this to us you fucking asshole!"

He throws me to the ground, my head hitting the sidewalk sending a painful jolt down my spine. My vision blurs for a moment, but not enough to miss him throwing his beer bottle directly at me. He misses, and it smashes just beside my head, several shards finding their way into my skin. "Don't bother coming home! I want you out of my life by tonight! Pack your shit and disappear, I'm through with you. I wish you'd never had been born!"

He leaves me on the sidewalk, and returns to the bar.

I stagger home as fast as I can. Blood trickles down my face, and my body is hit with the dull and piercing aches of the past. I'd gotten to used to being okay, that I forgot just how much it hurt. Dad isn't home when I get there, so I rush up the stairs and pile things into my backpack. Why didn't I leave sooner? I don't need to be here. I'll be fine on my own!

I shove my phone charger, three tee shirts, a pair of jeans, some underwear, and my deodorant into my backpack. Even if I'm homeless, at least I won't smell like I haven't showered in weeks. I take the toothpaste from the bathroom and my toothbrush, and I take the shampoo too. He can buy his own shit, fucking bastard.

I catch a glimpse of myself in the bathroom mirror. Disheveled and beaten; blood in various places, cuts and bruises adorning my face and neck. I don't even want to imagine what my abdomen looks like. I wash my face, and tear out the shards of glass. I manage to find some band aids to put in my backpack, too.

I don't leave a note, I just leave.

I slam the door shut and storm down the road. I don't know where I'm going, I simply let my legs carry me somewhere. I can't go to Jean's, and I can't walk to Connie's, and I don't even know where Mikasa is living.
Suburban streets turn into city centres, and pass The Basement, and the bars, and Rose Centennial Park. Maybe my own parents won't have me, but I know one place that will.

Chapter End Notes

rough translation - goodbye, consciousness, I am happy to leave you
Where To Go From Here?

Chapter Notes

Song/s:
Therapy by All Time Low

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's nearly 4am when the bright lights of On The Run come into view. Erwin's car is parked in his reserved spot, and I see his frame serving a customer at the front counter. No one I know works this shift, as far as I am aware of, so I'm not sure what to expect when I walk through the doors.

--

"I'm inclined to tell you that, if for any reason you require assistance, let me know. It's not mandatory, but I like to have a good relationship with my employees, and I'm not so much your boss, but your friend."

Cheesy, I'd thought. He's trying too hard.

"Right, so we can come in whenever we want and just hang out?" Connie had asked, as Ymir snickered.

"Not to cause trouble, but if you are in need, then yes."

--

He was serious. I'd never believe in a million years that Erwin Smith, Manager of the Trost On The Run, would be as accomodating as he made himself out to be. Let alone would he offer his assistance to his measly employees on a serious note.

Well, it's time to live up to your promise, Erwin. I hold the door open for a customer to leave, then enter the establishment. Erwin looks more shocked than surprised when we make eye contact, not that anyone wouldn't be shocked, taking in the unsightly appearance of my face.

Hell, even I'm shocked, and I was there when it fucking happened, horrifically enough.

He swallows, eyes wide. "Eren-

I avert my gaze briefly, worrying my lower lip. "Erwin... I need some assistance."

Now he looks surprised. I'd used the word assistance, which he'd used when I first started working here. I guess that means I'm really serious, in his eyes. And I am really serious.

He nods promptly. "Of course. What do you need?"

I approach the counter, and I can see myself in the T.V from the camera. My bruises are several shades black and blue, and two of several cuts from the smashes bottle have left deep cuts on my cheek. I tell him, "I need somewhere to stay for a few hours. I'm tired."

Please don't ask for more details, please just understand I don't want to tell you how weak and pathetic I am.
"There's a couch in my office you can sleep on. Have you eaten?" He asks, already making his way out from behind the counter.

I shake my head. "I'm not hungry." And I'm not. I'm really, really not. I couldn't be hungry, not after what's happened. Who could be? People with their lives sorted out, right? People who would have gotten away from that situation before it escalated enough to take away their appetite.

"But have you eaten?" He prompts.

_Lie._ "Yes."

Erwin raises an eyebrow. "Is that so?"

_Lie, again._ "Yes, a few hours ago."

"Okay," He relents, and leads me into his office. "I can't offer you any blankets, but use my jacket if you're cold. I will turn the heat on for you. Is there anything else you need? I have to go back out to the counter."

"No, this is... Thanks, Erwin."

He smiles and nods, closing the door behind him as he leaves. _Thank god he didn't ask._ Trust Erwin to read a situation without freaking out too much.

He's like the type of person who deserves to be a father; someone who'd want to be a father, and a good one at that.

Heater or not, a few minutes later I've grabbed his jacket and draped it over me. He's tall, and broad, so it makes for a warm half-blanket; I hope to god he doesn't ask for it back when he leaves, or I'll have no choice but to leave too. But I don't have any idea where I'd even go.

-x-

I felt like I'd slept for hours when Erwin quietly wakes me up. I hadn't, it had been a little less than an hour, and the way my head throbbed was enough to remind me of that.

"Sorry to wake you, but I'm heading off now. Ymir's got the shift, so when she goes on break you can leave through the back exit if you don't want to be questioned."

_Considerate._ "Okay, thanks..."

I go to remove the jacket, but he stops my hands. "Don't worry about it. You work here, I'll get it tomorrow. Rest easy, Eren, and use your workers discount if you need to get anything to clean yourself up. I'm willing to make exceptions for people in need."

I nod gratefully, tiredly. "Goodnight."

It's not going to be a good night. I'm not going to get anymore sleep, I know that much. I turn on the light at Erwin's desk and rummage through his drawers for a pen and paper. I'm lucky, and I tuck them away in my backpack. I'm not awake enough to write anything, but at least I can leave as soon as I wake up.

I plug in my phone and lie down on the couch again, staring at the ceiling. My face doesn't contort, and my eyes barely blur when hot tears stream down my face without warning. I sigh deeply, and turn on my side. The tears flow freely and I snuffle, but I'm not really crying. My eyes just feel like
they're leaking. It's like those few droplets that fall after you've turned a tap off. I've cried so much in
the past few weeks that what's coming out now are the droplets from the faucet, not the forceful gush
of a tap intentionally turned on.

I reach around for my phone, making sure it stays charging, and open up Notes. I don't do this often,
and I don't talk about it to anyone, but I like to vent out in poetry.

*Life is difficult...*

It's weird, and probably stupid, but half of the material Jean uses when we go to poetry get is stuff
I've given him from my Notes.

*We spend around four years of our lives learning to speak, and even then we can't be understood. The only thing about being a child that can be understood, is the overactive and confident imaginations we all had. As we grow, that confidence with our imagination deters, and we are struck with the cruel reality that is existence.*

I type away into the earlier hours of the morning, but my eyes voluntarily close around 6pm. I blindly
turn off my phone, and hear it crash to the floor with a heavy thud.

I really hope that didn't crack.

---

Sunlight peeks through cracks in the blinds, and Erwin's office fills with sunlit particles as I open my
eyes. There only sign of entry in the office is a small plastic bag, which I look into to reveal its
contents; band aids, anti-bacterial cream, a bandage, two doughnuts and a water bottle.

I smile to myself, but let the bag slowly drop the the floor. *He shouldn't need to do this. He's taking pity on me... Fucking Erwin. God, I'm such a hassle. I can't even look after myself, and now my boss is practically feeding me? Why am I so useless? Nineteen and I can't even fend for myself for half a night.*

I check my phone: 11:32am. No cracks.

I don't know where I'll go, but I sure as hell cant live in Erwin's office for however long I'm gonna
be homeless for. And there's no way I'm going back to that hellhole I called home for so many years.
Not yet. Not now.

I pack my bag up again, and take the back entrance out, after leaving Erwin a small note:

*Thanks for the assistance, I'll be at work next week for my shift. If possible, please don't tell anyone the state I was in or where I stayed. Thanks.*

- Eren

After shoving the plastic bag into my backpack, I make a beeline for the back entrance. If I can avoid
Ymir, that'd be best. Really, if I can avoid anyone that would be preferable. I don't need people
taking pity on me. I don't deserve it, and I'm not worth it. There are people out there who truly
deserve pity; people like my father.

My muscles and bones ache with every step, every breath, and parts of my oily, sweaty hair have
taken the appearance of dreadlocks. Miss two days of washing my hair and I look like a hobo...
That's just great. I probably wouldn't even be allowed to catch public transport, even if I did have the money to.

Taking the backstreets, I make my way to Rose Centennial Park. There's a block of bathrooms at the West entrance, so I make my way around the crowded parts and enter them. Lucky for me, there's no one in there, and I can get myself cleaned up without arousing too much suspicion.

I go to the toilet, and I wash and dry my face with toilet paper, applying some of the cream to deeper wounds. The bandaids don't exactly cover what's underneath, in fact, they kind of draw attention to it. But I don't care. I don't want to get infected or whatever.

*I guess I've got a bit of mom in me after all...*

I throw away the rubbish and find an empty bench, taking out one of the doughnuts and the bottle of water. I manage to eat it all, considering its my first meal in over 24 hours, and drink the entire bottle of water, filling it up at the water fountain afterwards.

Sitting back on the bench, I'm lost in thought again, staring out at the vast expanse of sunlight and blue skies hidden behind rows of grey clouds. Story of my fucking life.

*Where am I supposed to go? I can't go home. And I don't know where Mikasa lives yet. I definitely couldn't walk to Connie's... At least, not without telling him why I'm covered in bandaids and bruises and why I didn't tell him sooner. And I don't want to burden him. I know he cares, but he's got enough stuff to deal with on his own. I could always ask Armin, but I don't know him that well. And he's at some rave or whatever - I definitely can't ask him. He'll be smashed.*

*I could always just call Connie and see what he's up to... I don't have to say anything, we could just meet halfway? Or I could just stop being such a useless fuck and find somewhere to stay. They have cheap motels, and I'm out here moping around like some childish moron.*

"Eren?"

It's almost comical, the way my eyes widen to dinner-plate proportions. I'm not a big believer in fate, but sometimes it's hard not to question if the Universe has plans for you or not. Even if they're pretty fucked up.

"Armin?"

The blonde makes his way over to me, panting slightly at his short jog. "What're you doing out here, man? You look terrible."

"Gee, thanks," I chuckle, and he holds his hands out in defence.

"Sorry, sorry, I didn't mean it like that!" He says, a large grin on his face.

"It's fine. No, I just... Kind of taking a walk of shame, I guess, but without too much shame," I try. *Please don't ask, please don't ask, please don't ask. This guy isn't Erwin, but surely he can tell when someone doesn't want to talk about stuff.*


I shake my head. "Nope. You?"

He takes a seat beside me on the bench. A few people give us odd looks, but I pass them off. He could be a girl, for all they know. But on the contrary, why is it so bad for two guys to sit together? I
"Nah, I was here for the ElectroWave festival. Crashed at a friends house, then came back down here to collect my phone from the collections desk," He laughs, and I chuckle lightly.

"Did you get it?" I ask. Keep me from my thoughts just a little longer, please. I want to feel normal for just a little longer - is that too much to ask for? ... Of course it is. I don't deserve normal, whatever that is.

He nods."Yeah, yeah. They said I was 'only one of 1500' so I guess they get this a lot when festivals come around."

"Yeah, you don't get many here in Trost."

That stops the conversation for a while. For the first time, I actually feel awkward not saying anything. Usually, silence is comforting. It's like, if you can be in the presence of someone else, then that's all you need.

That's all I've ever needed.

But right now, with Armin, I'm not feeling that. His presence is different to that of Jean's, or even Connie's. Connie doesn't stay quiet for long, but when he does, it's comfortable - I don't feel like walking away. With Jean, it's always been like that. Some of our conversations made us seem like casual acquaintances or salesmen, and other times like the rowdy teenagers we're supposed to be.

Armin, though. Something isn't right. This isn't the presence everyone could feel on the night we went clubbing. But what's so different about it? I just can't pick it up. He just seems different. Like calmer, almost. Or not as energetic. Have I done this to his mood? Has seeing me changed his mood entirely, because he's so filled with pity?

"You alright?" Armin asks, looking at me with concern. "Somethings off."

Nope, I'm fucking up the lives of everyone around me just by existing. I'm not okay at all, and you won't be either if you don't leave soon. "Oh, uh, yeah. I'm fine. Sorry, I got caught up in my head."

"That's always dangerous," He says, chuckling lightheartedly.

"Hah... Yeah, it is."

Fuck off. Just fuck off, Armin.

He sighs contented, standing to his feet, blocking me from the sun. "I should head off. Just wanted to check up on you- Connie said you were all weird when you left his place, and seeing you by yourself at a botanical garden centre is not something I had pictured you doing, if you don't mind me saying that."

"You don't really look like the type, either," I add, not spitefully, factually.

"I can see how you would think that... Anyway, goodbye for now, Eren. I suggest the wisteria arch or the meditation garden, they're always good places to clear your head when it gets cloudy!" He says, signalling a one handed wave and jogging off to a car pulling up across the road.

When it gets cloudy? Maybe he is like Erwin after all.

I take his advice though, and follow the signs first to the wisteria arch. As the title suggests, it's a long
arch of wisteria built right through the centre of the gardens. There are a few facts about it at the start, and I make sure not to get in the way of tourists taking photographs as I enter the wired flowery structure. For autumn, the number of bees is impressive. They don't bother anyone, though, which makes the walk a little more calming.

Every five or so meters, a ‘viewing window’ appears in the arch, where a platform is situated to view the rest of the garden. Most have signs displaying what exactly you're viewing, but some are older than those, and are simply there to look and interpret however you like.

I like those windows better, honestly.

At the end of the arch, I follow the road map that leads to the meditation garden. I don't know if Armin is aware of this or not, but the mounds of dirt and mid-refurbished pathways doesn't seem that appealing to me. During the remodelling of the so called meditation garden, the signs have been removed as well.

*Where do I go now?*

I wander for a while, passing a few kiosks, one of which I actually take directions from. I'm at the entrance of Rose Centennial Park around 1:30pm, and revel in the fact that I am so very stupid.

I can call Reiner to find out Annie's address.

**Outgoing call...**

**Reiner**

After the fourth ring, he answers. And he sounds exhausted. "*Sup?*

"Hey, Reiner. Can I ask you a question?"

'Shoot,' He huffs.

"Where does Annie live?"

'Well you're forward- She lives in the Maria Apartment Complex, close to Sina Academy.'

"You're kidding me."

'Nah, sorry, man.'

"What's her apartment number?"

'Look, I don't wanna disappoint you or anything but- Okay, it's 03. Happy?'

I smirk. "Yeah, thanks."

'Kay, see ya."

"Bye."

Filthy asshole. At least he's partially reliable.

By the time I reach Garrison Drive, the rain sets in. For ten minutes, a light drizzle prepares the city, then it starts to pour. As usual. I take cover under varying shop balconies, until I find my way to Recon.
I'm not going with Jean, but it's always warm inside (more for the old folks, I guess) and I know that if I pick wisely I won't spend my entire savings on one meal. I'm not even that hungry, but I know they won't let me sit in here and not order anything.

"Good evening Sir, table for one?" The waitress asks, holding out a menu for me.

"Yes, thanks."

The waitress named Hannah leads me to a table close to the one Jean and I usually get, but not close enough. An old couple inhabit that table, so I make do with the seemingly smaller table in the dark corner. "Come up to the front when you're ready to order," She winks, practically skipping off back to the entrance.

I'll start with a drink, that way I'm ordering and I can stay put until I feel a little hungrier.

I order a coke. Then, ten minutes later, another coke. By the third coke, a waitress tells me that if I don't order food soon I'll have to leave. By 5pm, my food arrives, and I take my sweet time eating it.

I don't care that I look like a loser, because I feel like one. Sitting by yourself is never a nice feeling, unless you want to be alone. Right now, I don't want to be alone. I've spent so long on my own that I'm used to it, but every now and then I want someone to just be there when I need them.

But, that's probably asking a lot.

Half an hour later, I've ordered another coke, and finished half my meal. I manage to draw out my eating until 6pm, when the chicken is getting cold. I still eat it though, and I waste more of my pay on dessert.

I know Recon will never let me through the doors again after this, but at least they're getting money, right?

It takes longer for my chocolate pudding to reach me than it did my main meal. Perhaps the staff know I've got literally no where to go tonight and they're okay with me sitting it out until closing hours?

That'll never happen, but I can hope, and pray, I guess.

My excuses run out when I finish my dessert, and the waitresses practically escort me out the door as soon as my fork hits the plate. I swear the manager was even out there, making sure I leave.

I didn't feel that uncomfortable, but I definitely do now.

They probably hate me.

Once I leave the building, I simply sit outside of it. The chairs are all packed up, and there's barely any lighting save for a dim street lamp a few metres away. I take up a seat in the corner of the fabric barriers, right beside the vent.

On cooler nights like this, rain or not, Jean and I have often stood out here and warmed our legs by the vent before making a run for it to get home. It's a painful nostalgia, being curled in front of a vent on the street. I haven't don't this before, of course, but before dad started beating me as punishment, he'd send me to stand in front of the gas heater naked, and press my bare ass to the metal until it burned me.

Not when mom was around, though. Only when he had me all to myself, and made me promise not
to tell anyone.

--

'If you tell anyone, I'll set you on fire, you hear me?!

'Daddy, why?!

'Don't call me 'daddy' you pansy, grow up and take some responsibility!'

I was four the first time it happened, and twelve at the last.

--

I check my phone; no new messages, no missed calls, no notifications. The rain continues to pour, and I can feel the cloudy feeling Armin talked about earlier setting in. I'm sitting on the street at 9pm, huddled to a vent outside a posh restaurant, covered in scars and bruises, and no one has even noticed?

That faucet that was leaking yesterday? It's turned on again. I sob to myself, pulling my knees tight to my chest to sniffle and cry into my forearm and the denim of my jeans.

Maybe I'm not a burden to anyone after all. They don't even care in the first place...

I'm sad; I can't believe what's even happening. Is sad even the right feeling? How can this even be described? How can something be so horrible you can't even describe what you're feeling because you don't even know yourself?

I'm angry; I want to punch and break things, I want to tear things to shreds, I want to see blood. I want to be able to just get everything I'm feeling out in one hit, whatever the hell it is I'm feeling.

But I can't.

Instead, I sit outside of Recon, slumped over in a heap sobbing and sniffling to myself, and huddled against the small vent of warm air that is probably gas. I can't hold it back any longer. I don't even care if people see me. I don't care if I look homeless, or broken, or lost because I am. I am homeless and broken and lost.

If whatever I had at home was something, now I have nothing.

I can't call Mikasa and ask to stay with her and Annie. I don't want to burden them. They've been through enough, I don't want to cause either of them anymore damage. I'd be useless to them. I'd be a burden too heavy to handle.

I am a burden too heavy to handle. I can't even handle myself for crying out loud.

The rain hits the pavement in heavy splatters, some relaying droplets onto my jeans and my bare arms. It's cold, and I feel tiny surrounded by tall shopfronts and bright lights illuminating the city. I'm glad that the people inside Recon are enjoying the warmth. That way they won't come out here and be disgusted by the filthy fuck-up sitting on the pavement, drenched in rain and mud and tears and blood - whether it's my own or dads I can't even be certain.

I close my eyes, and take a deep, shaky breath. It doesn't help to calm me down, or even make me feel better, but whatever it does - I stop crying as hard.
The tears flow freely now, and my nose has cleared just enough for me to be able to bat relatively normally. I grab my backpack and move closer to the streetlight, but still under shelter. I don't want to be seen, but I need some light to be able to see.

I dig around through my backpack, and find the paper I'd taken from Erwin's office. Taking the small pen I'd found earlier too, I begin to write with a shaky hand;

Mikasa,

Don't worry or anything, but I've been kicked out of the house by dad. Long story short, Jean and I kind of hugged for too long or something. It wasn't even intentional, and neither of us got a 'rush' from it, believe me. It just sorta happened and dad saw and he just lost his shit. I've found somewhere to stay, so don't worry about me, but it might take me a while to find a phone charger that fits my phone, so I can't contact you until then. Please don't worry about me or try looking for me, I'll contact you ASAP. I promise.

- Eren

I lied. I lied a whole lot.

I do have my phone charger, but I don't have anywhere to charge my phone. I don't have anywhere to stay, but she would only worry about me if she knew that, and I don't want her to worry. I don't want to cause her to stress.

She's been through enough. Having a useless, worthless brother to look after would only make her mental state worse.

I leave it at that and place it back into my backpack, underneath my clothes, before it can get rained on. I move back into the darker corner of the front of Recon, and lean up against the small vent of heat again. It's nice. It's not inside-Recon-eating-a-meal-and-not-freezing nice, but it's better than nothing.

Eventually, customers start to leave, and I curl up tighter to avoid being stared at. Some children notice me, being at the height of my slouched figure, but they don't say anything. They only stare.

After a while, the vent starts to lose its warmth, and the heated metal soon goes cold against the fabric of my t-shirt. I regret not bringing a hoodie. Or wearing a long sleeve at least. The lights inside Recon go out, and I hear the employees leaving through the back entrance. Their cars are quick to pile out from the alley way, and I feel almost empty without their sort-of company.

That is, until a shorter figure rounds the alley way. His hands are shoved into his pockets, and his small frame shivers against the cold bite of the wind. I try to keep myself inconspicuous, slumping down a little further so as not to draw attention to myself.

I've seen how some employees of big restaurants treat those less-fortunate who sit outside of their facilities. I don't want to be treated like vermin. Though, I probably deserve it.

I do deserve it.

The rain starts to fall harder, and in record timing the wind picks up. The man doesn't walk past me, so I assume his car is parked across the road and he can't get through the rain. The wind blows chills through my spine, and my attempt at being hidden is fleeting when I shiver loud enough to be heard over the soon-to-be storm.

"Chilly, isn't it?"

I look up, and his gaze locks with mine. Mouth agape, I struggle to find words. I'm not flustered, or
embarrassed. Maybe a little embarrassed, but it's more the fact I'm too cold to move my jaw. And the fact that I recognise this man from The Basement.

It's the same guy who made me feel a little better about how awkward I felt. And who probably thought I was a creep, given the number of times we made eye contact.

"Wha- Yeah, I guess," I respond, teeth chattering absently.

He gives me a once over, before it appears he's about to walk off.

Typical snobby asshole, sees someone like this and just pretends like he did- He stands next to me, almost a little too close for comfort, and pulls out his phone. Instead of resuming conversation like I thought he would, he only opens text messages and types something out quickly, before shoving it back into his pocket.

"This was unexpected," He says, looking out at the rain landing hard on the asphalt roads.

"U-um... I guess."

No it wasn't. It was forecast, wasn't it? Trost is never anything but rain and gloom, shouldn't it be common knowledge by now that it's going to rain?

It's not like I'm comfortable having some punk-looking stranger stand next to me when I'm covered in rain and mud and just barely finished crying my eyes out. But I'm almost happy to have company. Almost. He's also a strangely good source of heat, to which I find myself subconsciously moving closer to.

"Can I ask why you're out here this late?" He asks, looking down at me, raising an eyebrow in suspicion.

"You can, but I probably won't give you a truthful answer," I reply honestly. He smirks at that, and I feel a small smile of my own forming. A pitiful one, but a real one nonetheless.

"At least you're honest. What's the untruthful answer, then?"

"To sit with strangers outside prestigious establishments at 10 o'clock at night in the rain, and act as though we've known each other for more than thirty seconds," I deadpan.

He lets out a chuckle, one that is rather loud coming from a guy with such a straight face and calm tone of voice. I like it, it's refreshing. "I guess our evenings planned out according to schedule, then." It doesn't take him long before he stops the silence between us again. "Aren't you cold? You're not even wearing a jacket and it's below five degrees."

"Y-Yeah... I uh, forgot it. Or something."

"'Or something...' You live in Trost and you forgot a jacket?" He asks sceptically. "That's kind of stupid."

What? I don't even know this guy and he's calling me stupid? I try not to let my reaction show. "Thanks," I mutter sarcastically, and I can see his eyes widen in what might be shock, or maybe he just didn't expect me to say that.

"I didn't mean it like that," He clarifies, and his eyelids half close in guilt.

"It's okay, I was just messing with you." I wasn't, I thought he meant it for real. Being called names
all your life gives you a complex, I guess.

"Mm, okay."

It doesn't take him long before he tells me he has to go, but he makes sure to ask if I need a lift home. I tell him that my friend got delayed and is picking me up from this spot around midnight. He doesn't look too convinced, but he lets me go with that, and I'm definitely not complaining.

I watch as he runs across the road to his car, holding his hands close to him in a strange attempt to stay dry. He opens his car, but doesn't get in - he's looking through the back seat.

Before I know it, he's rushing across the road again, puffing slightly as he holds out a black jacket with brown faux fur lining the hood. "I don't know if it's too small for you, but if you're going to be here until midnight, you'll need to stay a little warmer," He says, slightly out of breath, steam emitting from his mouth as he speaks.

"O-Oh, no you don't-"

"No, I don't have to, I want to. I don't like it that much anyway, but it's good for cold weather." He goes to leave once more, but turns slightly to look me in the eyes before crossing the road again. "I suggest telling your friend to pick you up from somewhere else. It's cold as balls out tonight, and you'll freeze to death even with that jacket... They hold a bonfire over at Trost Memorial this time of night. It's under cover, so it runs even during wet weather - get them to pick you up from there."

His breath dances in the frosty air, intricate patterns like smoke forming around syllables. He leaves before I can thank him, and I watch as he drives off around the corner.

I didn't get to even ask for his name.

Not that I need it. Not that I even want it. I just didn't get to ask for it.

-x-

By the time I get to Trost Memorial, I'm drenched, and the man's promise of a bonfire is all but soot and flickering embers.

Not many people are around the remains of the bonfire, so I make my way up to stand beside it. There's not much heat, but it at least stops by fingers from contracting frostbite. Plus, the man's jacket is a good source of warmth, added to the one I had in my backpack but had forgotten about. I probably look ridiculous wearing layers upon layers of mismatched clothes, but I don't care.

As the remaining warmth of the bonfire goes out, people disappear, and I claim one of the benches as my own. Maybe I'll die here tonight? Alone and cold, in the middle of the city, with only half a doughnut and a bottle of water to my name. Plus whatever's left of my pay.

I wonder if anyone would actually notice if I just... Disappeared forever?

I wish I would just die here tonight.

"Psst hey, man, are you okay?"
The worried, wavering voice; a whisper disguised as an obnoxiously loud question. My crusty eyes open to reveal the form of an extremely shorthaired man in Lycra pants and a jacket, and a bike and helmet behind him on the grass: Connie Springer.

"Eren, talk to me. Why the hell are you sleeping on a park bench?" He questions, his eyes large in concern.

Sunlight floods my hazy vision. My chest hurts, my muscles ache, and the pounding in my heat is relentless. None if it is as bad as the ticking in the back of my mind that reminds me of why I'm here. How exactly do I put this, without it seeming like a big deal? Connie isn't street-stupid.

"Is there anyway to avoid telling you?" I try, and his mouth forms a thin line.

"Yeah, nice try, but no."

"Course..." There's no point trying to lie. But I don't have to tell him everything. "Dad kinda kicked me out, and I didn't know where to go."

Every emotion you can think of flashes across Connie's face in a second, before he sighs and sits next to me on the bench, placing his head in his hands, shaking it.

"Of all places... Trost Memorial, though?"

"They had a bonfire."

Connie looks blank-faced at me. He goes to open his mouth, but shuts it quickly. "You're really something, Jaeger."

_I did it. I managed to get a playful tone out of him by faking being okay and telling the semi-truth. Can I get by like this until my last days? Of course I can. There isn't any other way. Fake it 'till you make it, right? I can do that._

_I've done it this far._

Chapter End Notes

Short Chapter!
I faltered for a while, as I usually do, when writing the last chapter. I felt like this story wasn't going anywhere, and that the way I wanted it to develop wasn't quite the way it was headed..

ANYWAY, I have the ball rolling again, and although this chapter is significantly shorter than the previous ones, I really needed to get to this point quickly, and other areas of the story don't really 'fit the bill' of this chapter.
So, apologies and many thanks for the reads/kudos/comments so far.
They are keeping me motivated!
What Will Become of Me?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I know I'm stupid. I know I'm useless. I know that was reckless. I know I'm an idiot, please stop telling me that. And please for the love of god stop looking at me like that, gawking like I'm some dumb animal. I know what I am already, I don't need it confirmed.

"You're a real idiot, you know."

I know, Connie, please just stop. I fucked up. Leave it at that. I sigh, rubbing at my temples. I don't ever want to sleep on a park bench ever again. "Mm, I know."

"Wanna grab a bite to eat? I'll pay," Connie offers, picking up his bike off of the ground and hooking his helmet over the handle bars. I want to turn him down. But, he knows so much already, I need to be careful. If word gets out, I don't know what dad would do to me.

"Sure, but you don't have to-

Connie cuts me off mid speech with a hand planted firmly on my shoulder, grounding me. "I know, it's fine though, you look like you could use a good meal."

Doubt pushed aside, I tell him about Hanji's, and we decide to go there for breakfast. Part of me suggested it because I know it's warm in there. The other part knows that Hanji is friends, or at least acquaintances with, the guy from The Basement who lent me his jacket.

Hanji might give me a name. Or at least return his jacket for me. I'm not sure if I want to get it over and done with myself, or be rid of him by means of another.

The little bell about the door rings as we enter and become engulfed by the warmth and smell of fresh food. "Good morning! I'm Hanji, welcome to Hanji's!" Cheers the brunette, happily forcing menus into our hands. "Table for two?"

"Uh, three thanks," Connie says, and I stare at him open mouthed. I don't question it though, he's obviously planned something already. Cunning bastard.

She looks confused for only a fleeting moment, before smiling and walking just a little ahead of us. "Sure! Right this way!"

Hanji leads us to a table for four close to the buffet table, and tells us that we can take a chair away if we need to. We thank her, and I don't have a chance to mention the jacket or the man before she hops off and Connie starts to talk.

"My uncle owns an apartment complex down the street," He starts. "So I'm gonna give him a call, if you don't mind."

My mouth gapes. "Connie, no-"

"Shut it. I can arrange an affordable price. You'll have somewhere to stay, and you get free dinner every night there. Don't argue, and don't say no - think of it as an early birthday gift if you have to." He pulls out his phone and starts to call his uncle almost immediately.
"Connie..." I sigh, feeling tears prick at the corners of my eyes. I do my best to pretend they're not there, by feigning a yawn. I'm such a burden, such a fuck up. Why would Connie do this for me? I've never been half as generous as this. Fuck, I didn't even cover his shift last winter when his sister got sick. What kind of friend am I?

An awful one, that's what. I couldn't lend him a few hours of my time so he could see his sister, and now he's here finding me somewhere to sleep so I don't freeze to death. I'm a waste of space, a useless friend.

He should get out of my life before I have the chance to fuck him over along with myself, too.

"Hey," Connie says. I hear his uncle say something, but I don't quite understand. He gives a hearty laugh, too. "I have a favour, could you pop down to Hanji's on the main road? It's- Oh, you know it? Cool. Are you free? Great, thanks uncle Kev. See you." He shoves his phone in his pocket in favour of opening up the menu. "He's heading over soon, hurry up and order, I don't want to have to pay for him - the guy eats like a pig."

I sigh. "Connie, you really shouldn't."

"I want to, Eren. You're my best friend, man, I can't see you sleepin' on the streets, you don't deserve that."

Oh, but I do.

"Mm..

"Why didn't you call me, man? I would've come and got you, you know." Connie's voice is exasperated, almost desperate, like he feels victimised. I hate that I know the underlying tones of his voice.

I shrug. "I didn't want to bother you. You don't live close so-"

"'So'? There is no so, Eren, your safety is way more important than gas prices or distance, dude! I'm not that horrible am I? That you can't stand to stay with me?" He laughs, and I shake my head furiously.

I stutter a quick, seemingly guilty response. "No! Of course not! I just...I just didn't think, I guess."

Connie scoffs playfully. "Obviously."

Connie orders a one-person pizza, and I order bologna. His uncle gets there just after Connie places our orders, and I can see Connie internally smirk when he sees his uncle.

"Uncle Kev!" Connie shouts, a little loud for a restaurant, and his uncle waves his hands when he spots us.

"Connie, my boy! And you must be...?" He quirks an eyebrow at my probably tired looking figure. I can't begin to image what's going through his head as he peers at me, a possible resident.

"Eren Jaeger," I say. If Connie's doing this for me I can't stuff it up. He has to know I won't be a horrible client.

"Eren, please to meet you!" His big, meaty hands engulf mine in a handshake, and he takes a seat beside us both, the wooden chair creaking underneath his weight.

He's a balding man, with thick grey sideburns and a tiny moustache, and his shirt is (mostly) tucked into his trousers. He's wealthy, if the $690 price tag he forgot to take off his blazer is anything to go
"So, what's been happening?" He bellows, slamming his fists together on the table. A lot of people are looking at him - or maybe they're looking at me thinking 'how can some poor beaten up sorry excuse for a human being be sitting with not one, but two people who are actually functional and valuable members of our society?'

Probably the latter.

"Not much, but Eren here needs a place to stay." Right to the point, thanks Connie.

"Right, and?"

"He's a good friend of mine and Sasha's, Kev. He earns the same income as I do, because we work at the same place. Although, he works a lot harder than I do."

*Connie, why are you saying this stuff? I barely do any work! I work no harder than he does! Is he going to lie just to get me a place to stay? How strict is this guy? What will I have to pay?*

"I want him to have somewhere to stay until he sorts stuff out with his home-life."

*How does he-?*

"You come from a broken family, Eren?" 'Kev' asks me, seriously.

*Why do I have to do this in front of Connie...*

"I- kinda."

"And that's why you have nowhere to stay?"

"Mmhm."

"I'll need you to fill out a form," He starts, digging through a briefcase on the floor. "It's confidential, so only I will read it, but it's important you fill it out now if you want somewhere to stay by tonight."

"Really?" I exclaim, a little too loudly.

He chuckles, and Connie smiles. "Yes, really."

He hands me the form, and a pen, and I start filling it out straight away. It's fairly simple and straightforward, needing only simple answers. There's no way I can stuff this up.

---

**Full Name:** Eren M. Jaeger  
**Gender:** Male  
**D.O.B:** 30th March, 1996  
**No. Of Tenants:** 1  

**Occupation:** Convenience Store Clerk/On The Run  
**Weekly Income:** $160 - or $8 per hour  

**Do you have any history with alcohol/drugs?:** None.  
**Do you have a police record/Have you been in trouble with the law?:** No.  
**Do you have/Are you any of the following:**
Down Syndrome: No. Bipolar Disorder: No.

Why do you require a rental apartment?: I have been kicked out of home by my alcohol-abusing father and have no relatives close to my home town.

Can I even write that? Maybe I'll luck out and they'll do a background check a arrest the pig.

Does your income cover the cost of rent ($60 p/wk) and optional room-service ($26)?: Yes.

As Connie and I eat our meals, Kev looks over the document and asks me questions.

"Where are you from?" He begins, and suddenly I feel as though I'm being interrogated for some crime. Maybe I am. Is hating yourself for being such a fucking idiot a crime? It should be. I need to be locked up.

"Shinganshina. My mother is half-Turkish and my father is three quarters German."

He nods. "Is there a history of any illnesses in your family I should know about?"

"Alcoholism, but I've never had an alcoholic drink in my life."

Connie and I both know that's not true, but Kev doesn't need to know that. I'm hamming this up as best I can. At least if I can pay rent I won't be a burden, I'll be helping his business, and therefore Connie, too. Right?

"How long will you be staying with us?" He asks, finally. I stop chewing, stop eating, and place my knife and fork on my plate.

I hadn't thought of that. Where else can I go? Will I rent an apartment for the rest of my life, with the same job? I can't...

Can I even afford to do that?

Words escape me, but I wrack my mind for some sort of an answer. "I- I'm not sure..."

"At least until he sorts out his home stuff," Connie butts in. I silently thank him.

"Alright. Well, you're welcome to come in whenever you like, but not after 4pm. Ask for 'Big Kev' when you come in and they'll send you directly to me, okay? I'll get a room set up for you."

"R-really?" I stand, leaning on the table.

He chuckles. "Really. You sound like a good, honest kid. And if Connie's friends with you, and recommended me mind you, I'd be honoured to welcome you."

"Thank you! Thank you so much!"

"You can stop, man, I get it, and you're welcome," Connie chuckles, the two of us headed to the bus stop. I'd never been to these apartments, so Connie offered to take me there.
I think he just wants to see that his uncle keeps his promise about my room.

"I know, I know, just- thank you..." I sigh.

We board the bus quickly, and we're at Genesis Apartments within five minutes. "What's with the name?" I ask, and Connie laughs.

"Uncle Kev lost a bet, so this is the outcome of his 'big money scheme.'"

"Ah.."

"He didn't exactly lose, though. He's better off with this place than the other guy is with his bail," Connie laughs.

It looks rather run down on the outside, but as we enter the doors, I breathe a sigh of relief. The white tiles of the lobby are polished, and there are barely any marks or stains. The wallpaper is a pale blue, and the front desk is black marble, accented with gold trimmings.

I manage a small, "Wow," before a man at the font desk pipes up.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen, how can I help you?"

"Afternoon Nile, we're looking for Big Kev," Connie says, matter-of-factly.

The dark haired man almost glares at Connie, before mumbling a "Right this way," and leading us towards what looks to be the faculty room. "Stand here, please." He enters the room, and Connie almost snorts once he's out of sight.

"What?" I ask, voice a whisper, backpack slung over one shoulder, causing me a little uncomfortableness.

"That's Nile, you'll learn to hate him - trust me. The only reason Uncle K. hasn't fired him yet is because he does the overtime no one else will because he's 'got a wife and kid to look after' - not that he's not a rich bastard as it is, but still."

The door opens on cue, and Nile walks out with Kev behind him. "You made it! Right this way, we'll get your key sorted out. Nile, this is Eren, he's our esteemed guest for a few weeks."

Nile snorts and nods in my direction, before hurrying off behind the desk again. Kev hums, "What a prick - c'mon you two." Kev rummages through the drawers behind the front desk, and places two room keys on the counter. "Ones always good to keep in your room, in case you lose the other one. We can unlock the door if you lock yourself out, but if you break your key in the lock, you'll need a spare - always handy, huh?"

"Hah, yeah," I try, failing miserably at chuckling along with his humour.

Connie laughs, though, before I can practically see the lightbulb above his head glow brightly. "I'm gonna get outta here, I almost forgot I have a date with Sasha tonight."

"Anniversary, isn't it?" Kev asks.

"Yeah, six years... It feels like so long, it's a real milestone."

His uncle chuckles heartily. "Go get em' boy, I'll take care of your friend here."

Connie leaves, after I thank him at least three times in the same sentence. Kev tells me my room is
281, on the third floor, and sends me up the elevator.

The room is bigger than I expected; a queen bed, bathroom with a shower and toilet, and small lounge space. I throw my backpack onto the bed, and open the curtains, looking out at the view. I can see most of Trost from here, but mostly the skyline. The ocean meets the sky on the horizon; a trio of blues contrasting to the dark greys and pastels of the city.

I'm sure it will look even better at night, though.

I'm at a loss of what to do. Instead of actually doing something, I stand in the middle of the room and take a deep breath. I'm not free, I'm not even remotely independent, really, but I'm out. I'm out of the house, I'm out of the public eye, and most of all, I'm out of the way.

I can't get in the way, here.

I start by unpacking my bag - putting my toothbrush and toothpaste in the bathroom, and comb in the drawer, my minimal clothes in the small wardrobe (which I discover has a kettle, tea, coffee, sugar and a mini fridge inside). As I'm attempting to make them orderly, I don't recognise the feeling of one of my jackets.

It's black, with a fur trim around the hood. It's also a size too small for me. I remember now, back to last night; it's not my jacket, it's that mans.

*How am I going to give it back to him? I can't keep it, no matter what he'd said. Hanji knows him, they'd been at The Basement together. Maybe I should go back to Hanji's to return it? Surely she could give it back. But, she left when me and Connie were there. Maybe she doesn't stay late on Fridays?*

*I could always go to Recon. That is where we met, after all. And I wouldn't look like such a slob this time around either.*

*They probably won't let me near the door after the last time I was there - I ate them out of business.*

Sighing, I throw the jacket over the lounge chair, and plug my phone into the socket beside it. I catch sight of a label sticker on the bedside table: the Wifi passwords. Finally, I can have some well deserved internet time.

Whilst my phone comes back to life, I shut the curtains, kick off my shoes and lay back on the bed, switching on the T.V. There's barely anything to watch, so I put on some cooking channel and try to give it my best attention.

I could smile right now. I'm not free, but I'm out. All I need to be is out - out of sight, and out of mind.

The chef finishes explaining the various ways of sifting flour, before deciding on the best one to use for the red velvet cake, and continuing on with the recipe. I'm barely listening though, because Mikasa had called and texted me a lot yesterday.

*(5) Text Messages
(4) Missed Calls
Mikasa

**From: Mikasa**
4:54pm
Yesterday*
Hey Eren, just checking in to see how you are. I'm sorry I couldn't come and see you, but I'm almost done getting settled in, so we should go out for coffee or something soon.

From: Mikasa
5:06pm
Yesterday
Annie also says she's happy for you to come with us to another netball game soon - Reiner and Bertholdt both like you, which is good in her eyes.

Missed Call, Mikasa
5:10pm
Yesterday

From: Mikasa
5:27pm
Yesterday
Sorry, I'm a little freaked out. Please answer when you can, I feel terrible for not coming to see you.

From: Mikasa
5:27pm
Yesterday
And for leaving you with dad by yourself. It wasn't fair of me to do that..

Missed Call, Mikasa
5:30pm
Yesterday

Missed Call, Mikasa
5:42pm
Yesterday

From: Mikasa
5:44pm
Yesterday
Please answer when you can, you might be at work and I'm sorry if you are, but I need to know that you are okay and that you are safe. Are you safe? Do you feel safe? I need to know ASAP, because I will come and get you if you are not.

Missed Call, Mikasa
2:32pm
Today

Shit... I ring Mikasa immediately, fearful for my life.

Outgoing Call, Mikasa

She answers on the second ring.

"Mika-

'Eren! Thank god, I thought you were in terrible trouble.'

"No, no, my phone just ran out of charge and I-"
'Charge it! How am I supposed to know you weren't hurt, or even dead?'

Maybe if you hadn't left me you wouldn't need to be so freaked out because you'd know because you'd be there.

"Sorry, Mikasa."

'Please don't do it again, okay? How are you?'

"Good, you?"

'That won't cut it, Eren. How are you?'

I sigh. "I had lunch with Connie, so I'm eating well, I've had three glasses of water, I'm dressed warmly and I'm watching some cooking show. How are you?"

'Better, now that you've called. But, I'm good. Everything's moved in, and my classes start tomorrow, so I won't be able to see you until next weekend probably. '

"That's okay. I won't leave your messages unanswered 'till then," I chuckle.

'Good, I hope not..'

Silence. Tension silence, not comfortable silence. She wants to say something, but she's holding back. "What is it?" I prompt.

'Hm... Nothing, I was just thinking, sorry. I'll talk to you later, Eren. Thank you for calling, I was beginning to get worried. ' 

"It seemed like you were worried for more time than you're saying."

'I was,' She agrees, with a smirk in her voice. 'Anyway, get a good nights rest, and don't let dad make you walk to work - push him, he's your father, he needs to act like it. Have a good day, Eren.'

"You too, Mikasa."

I'd forgotten about work... That's not a good start to my new life. But dad doesn't need to drive me, I can take myself now. It's nearly 3pm anyway, so I decide to have a shower. I don't want to smell like I slept in the street, even if I look like it.

The hot water is slow at first. It's not even hot, it's more lukewarm, and it's not at a constant flow either, it splutters, and cuts out, and overall it's a really shitty shower. I'll just talk to the maintenance man tomorrow. I mean, it's gotta be more than Connie that gave me this room so cheap.

I dress into my work clothes, and rub dry motel soap over the shirt to make it smell a little better. I'd forgotten to pack deodorant, I need to remember to pick some up from work.

-X-

"Can't believe you were gonna walk there! In your state, I can't even walk to the bathroom let alone work," Ymir babbles, taking a sharp turn and making me bash into the passenger seat window. Even my death grip on the seat/window/anything-fucking-thing isn't helping me. She's a mad driver.

"Can't believe you actually offered to have someone else in your car," I chuckle lightly, and she nods with a stern face.
"Me either. Especially not your nasty-ass."

A few narrowly missed red lights later, and we pull up into the employee carpark behind On The Run. Ymir struggles to get the car doors to open, complaining loudly about her *piece of shit, rundown, fucking useless pile of junk car,* but eventually we make it out and walk hastily toward the back entrance out of the cold.

"Glad we've got the whole shift together, 'cause I don't have to come back and pick up," Ymir grumbles, sighing animatedly and slapping her work-cap over her head, and shoving her short ponytail through the hole in the back.

"You were gonna do that?" I ask, bewildered.

"'Course. You'd probably do it for me. Plus, now you'll owe me in the future. Win-win, right?" She smirks.

"Yeah, win-win."

We pace around for a while, restocking some shelves, serving the odd customer, and making small talk over whatever comes up. Eventually, Erwin comes out of his office and hands us both an invitation.

"Our annual Christmas in July party is coming up, so I made reservations for you both. It's a black tie event at a local bar, so keep it classy please. You don't have to come, but it's always fun later in the evening once we've got a few drinks into us!" Erwin booms, grinning happily.

"Thanks, Erwin," I say, smiling at the man. He's always trying so hard to keep his employees happy. Sometimes I feel like it's wasted effort, with me at least.

Ymir reads over the invite, and pulls a face. "Can we plus-one it?"

"Of course. The more the merrier!"

"Kay."

Erwin bids us goodnight around 9pm, and tells us that our shifts are finishing at 11pm instead of 1am, due to a cleaning inspection tomorrow. Neither of us argue with that. We're still getting payed full amount, after all.

"So, Jaeger, wanna get a drink with me after this?" Ymir asks, from one of the aisles towards the back.

"At 11 o'clock at night?" I question.

"Sure, why not?"

*I shouldn't. And she shouldn't - I've seen her drink, and now she wants to drive me home too? No way.*

I shrug; a reckless decision. "Okay."

*Stupid, stupid, stupid!*
"And then-hyuk- and then, we fucking jumped the fence right into his back fuckin' yard! I tell ya, we whooped that boys ass so fuckin' hard he couldn't walk for weeks," Ymir cackles, tears forming at the sides of her eyes as she manages to clutch a beer in one hand and her stomach in the other, laughing the hardest I've ever seen anyone laugh before.

I laugh too, but mostly at her. It's not as uncontrolled as hers either, as most of what I heard from her story was muffled with fits of giggles, but it's funny enough just hearing her laugh. Maybe I'm buzzed from the shitty alcohol we got on sale barely an hour ago, or maybe she's actually... Kinda cute?

"Aha... Ah, yeah, so that's my summer in Florida... What 'bout you?"

I'm snapped from my thoughts. "Hm?"

"You have any funny stories? Beer and humour work well together, I find."

"Ah... Not really."

"C'mon, man, you've gotta have something! Anything!"

I chuckle, wracking my mind for something to satiate her inebriated desperation for humour. "Well... You know the entrance to Markets?"

"Hah, yeah. Fuckin' hate that place - it stinks like old people."

"I know! It's gross, but like, you know the corridor by the water taps? Yeah, well." Now I start to laugh, and Ymir quickly joins in, sipping her beer once more, "-because me, Connie and Jean went out for Mexican a bit before, and Jean was the only one of us who had a car at the time, Jean drove us all there after - salsa didn't agree with him so we wanted to see his reaction, you know, to see if he's-"

Ymir cuts in. "A pussy?"

"Yeah! We put salsa in his food, and when he dropped us off he crapped his pants outside Asian crafts!"

Ymir and I burst into laughter, her spilling her beer over the dashboard of her car, and down her seat, cursing a little but still laughing along. "That's fucking hilarious! Oh my god- holy shit!"

"I know! God- best, best day of my life!"

We spend the next hour laughing and sharing stories and trying to keep our beers in their cans or in our mouths, not all over Ymir's car. We manage, for the most part.

Eventually, after much protest from me, Ymir drives me back to Genesis Apartments. She swerves a bit (read: a lot), but manages to get us both there in tact. The alcohol took off some of the edge from her appalling driving.

"You're 'kay to walk up there?" She asks, switching off the engine.

I nod, tiredly. "Yeah, 'm good. Thanks for this, it's been really freaking fun. I didn't know you were so cool."

"Don't blow me before ya know me- Or, somethin'..."
I laugh. "Yeah, something like that. See you later, then." I get out of the car and walk around to the sidewalk, headed for the apartment building, but Ymir catches my attention again.

"Hey!" She shouts at me, rolling her window down.

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for joining me! You're not as much of a stubborn prick as I thought you were!" She laughs as she drives off, without another word.

I'm laughing to myself like a maniac, walking into the building then up the elevator. No one says anything, though. I'm sure they can smell the alcohol.

I fumble with the key to get inside, missing the lock a fair few times, but I manage eventually. I sigh as I enter the room, struggling to rid myself of my pants and shirt. Once I'm underwear-clad, I find the music channel on the T.V, and turn it up full volume. Today's been a good day. I feel like I could run the world, right now.

I sing along terribly - though to my drunken self, I do sound quite good - as loud as I can, and bang on the walls, dancing in front of the open curtains, probably giving the people below a real shock. It doesn't matter though, I dance and sing, twirling myself around the room, buzzed on whatever toxic waste was in those ridiculous cans.

I'm stopped by the sound of someone banging on the thin wall beside me, and a shout of, "Turn that fucking shit off, it's one in the morning!"

I ignore them for a while, but their banging and shouting turns to, "I'll call the cops!" So I turn the music off and yell back a pitiful, "Sorry!"

You feel good for two minutes, and something just has to happen to make you feel like shit again. Or maybe that's just the beer talking? I shut the curtains and switch off the light, getting under the fresh covers for the first time. I haven't slept with fresh sheets for at least a year... This feels... Kinda odd.

The last thing that registers in my mind before I fall into unconsciousness, is that I'm falling asleep wearing my shoes and socks.

Chapter End Notes

Shorter? Maybe. Feels like it doesn't really fit into the storyline? Kinda. Does it matter, because the next chapter is where the real angst starts and Levi is going to show up for real in chapter nine and it's gonna be (mostly) great? Nooooppeee!
Waking up, it feels like I've been abused by the Hulk with a semi-trailer. I rub my eyes, wiping away the crust and sweat that had gathered in the corners, and open them carefully. Rays of sunlight peered in through the cracks of the curtains and my entire being retreats into itself at the sight.

I audibly hiss, and pull the covers as far over my head as possible, groaning at the pain throbbing through my head. It's pulsating behind my eyes, and forces them shut, until I can work up the willpower to keep them open long enough to form a functional thought process.

I feel around for my phone, and see missed messages from the one person I dread even hearing the name of: Dad.

**From: Dad**
**2:21am**
You've fucked up, boy, I hope you never come home!

**From: Dad**
**3:30am**
Don't come crawling back to me when things get tough, be a man and get yourself together. I had to.

**From: Dad**
**3:59am**
Fuck everything! You drove your mother and your sister out of the house, then you leave too? Fucking pathetic. You're a shitty excuse for a son.

I feel like hurling my phone against a wall, or into a shredder. It's not the first time I've been on the receiving end of his drunken texting. In fact, I'm probably the only one who receives it. *Fucking asshole, why the fuck does he have to pull this shit?*

It takes me over an hour to work up the nerve to phone room service, asking if they have an aspirin or panadol or anything that would aid my splitting headache. They do, and tell me they'll be up in a minute.

Thank god for that. Something to keep my mind off of the splitting headache and underlying hatred of dads messages. I throw my phone down beside me and run my hands down my face, clearing away the debris from sleep, and the stray hairs falling into my eyes.

I sluggishly drag myself to the bathroom, use the toilet and pull my lower eyelids down to inspect the colour in the mirror. Pale pink, almost white: I'm definitely not feeling well today. My forehead is slick with sweat, and I'd lost one shoe under the covers during the night; I welcome the oddly cool
feeling of the bathroom tiles on my left foot, briefly considering lying on the bathroom floor to cool myself down.

The peaceful hum of silence becomes disrupted by obnoxious knocking at my door. I groan again, yawning, and throw on the loosest pair of pants in my line of vision. I have to look at least quarter way presentable.

"Good morning, here's your aspirin. It's our last one until the next shipment, so maybe buy some more later today?" The chirpy brunette grins, handing me the package. Truth be told, there was only one left.

"Thanks," I say groggily, and she giggles.

"Rough night?"

Lie. "Good night, bad hangover..."

"Oh, poor thing. Get some rest!"

"Thanks."

She gets the message, and leaves in a hurry, waving as she waddles down the corridor. I hate morning people. Even worse than that, morning staff. They're always so cheerful and happy-go-lucky, it's kinda gross. It's no wonder they love their jobs though, I'm sure the sadistic bastards get a real kick out of waking people up at some ungodly hour of the morning to clean their rooms and rummage through their junk.

I take it as soon as I find the glasses, and flop back into the bed with a loud sigh. It's then that I realise I have work later today.

_Hadn't I told Erwin I'd work Saturday afternoon when he went to Karanese for his interviews on the 17th? I think I did... Connie couldn't make it that day, and Ymir was away when we made the arrangements._

I check my phone. It's the 17th.

_Fuck. Everything._

I'd slept in until 12pm, so I only had an hour and a half before the shift started. I take my sweet time showering, shaving, cleaning my teeth, and looking a little more presentable. I find my work shirt in the abyss of my floordrobe that had formed during the night, probably whilst I was dancing around. Or whatever the fuck I was doing, I can't remember much of it in clear.

_Maybe I could call in sick, and get Connie to take the shift? Or maybe Ymir, she'll probably be feeling shitfaced today, maybe that could be her way of making it up to me?_  

_Mm... Probably not._

Tugging on a pair of jeans, finding my left shoe in my bedding, and haphazardly combing my hair, I grab my keycard and exit the room. I feel sorry for whoever has to clean my room today, it's completely trashed. And I sure hope they don't notice the marks on the wall from my shoes.

I didn't think as far ahead as I thought, apparently, as I approached the train station. I didn't have any loose change, meaning I had to break a fifty. It doesn't sound like a big deal, but my wallet barely fits in any change, so it's gonna look pretty overweight sitting in my front pocket. More the reason to get
mugged, I guess.

Wouldn't that just improve my day?

It's only 10 minutes to work by train, so I'm there faster than I thought, and definitely surprised to see Erwin's car parked there. Isn't he in Karanese today? That's like the whole point I'm suffering my hangover out here instead of in bed.

"Oh, Eren, good morning! I didn't know you had a shift today, are you Ymir's swap?" Erwin asks casually, typing away at the computer.

"I- Huh?"

Ymir...

"Ymir's supposed to be on today, but she called in saying she'd caught the flu. I thought we were just going to be understaffed today," He chuckles.

"And I thought you were going to be in Karanese today. I was supposed to be taking your shift?" I question, probably a little harshly for speaking to my boss, but I don't really care.

Ymir... That bitch. Flu my ass, she's hungover.

"Oh. Oh no, that's not until August- I'm terribly sorry for the confusion, Eren. I must've told you July instead." Erwin looks remorseful, truly apologetic, but I don't care for it. Not at this time of the morning with my headache just this side of murderous.

"Mm, must've..." I mutter bitterly. "I'm not going home though, so can I just stay on for Ymir's shift?"

"Of course! Connie's coming in around 4pm, so you don't have to stay after that. I'm on all day."

"Okay."

I go to the back room to take off my jacket, as On The Run tends to get pretty warm inside as the day goes on. I take note of a sign just beside the sink reading:

**CUTS, SCRAPES, BRUISES? CLAIM WORK INSURANCE TODAY!**

**XXX-XXX-XX**

I don't know why it stands out to me, but something on the back of my mind is interested in it. Maybe I should cut my hand on something and claim work insurance? I don't know, my minds too fuzzy to think coherently.

After being rudely snapped at by the driver, I unload a truck of sanitary products for most of the day, taking the hefty boxes into the storage room and restocking some shelves, whilst the fat pig called out any flaws he could find with the way I was carrying the boxes, or walking, or puffing.

"You're sure unfit for a guy your size, how many trans fats do you eat a day, kid?" He yells, laughing heartily to himself and chugging a can of coke.

*Less than you, obviously.*

After unloading the rest of the truck, and flipping my middle fingers at the man once he was out of sight, I hang a few discount signs grumbling to myself. Eventually Erwin calls my name over the speaker to help a customer in aisle seven.
Fucking stupid people, can't they just help themselves? This is the simplest store ever to find shit in.

I pass Connie entering the building with a cheery smile on my way to the customer. Either early or later never inbetween. I barely greet him, but that doesn't stop his wave in my direction.

I clear my throat, and put on my best 'happy-employee smile.' "Do you need any assistance?" I ask.

"That's why you were called, you took your sweet time though," The man spits, holding two lightbulb boxes in his hands.

Well, this is a good start. Just don't say anything, Eren, tongue in cheek like you're supposed to- I snort. "No need to be rude, sir. What do you need help with-"

"How dare you speak to me like that, I'm a valued customer, and you're speaking to me like you own the damn place! I need to find this lightbulb, and I want you to check your storage to see if you stock it," He demands.

"I'm sorry sir, but I know we don't stock that bulb. That's a hardware store bulb, definitely not one we sell here," I admit, knowing very well we don't have it. After all I've just spend an hour and a half going through our fucking storage room with that fat pig.

"Well you're a useless excuse for an employee if you're not even going to check! Attitude and reluctance to do your job? What kind of place is this? I want to speak with your manager!"

"He's right at the counter, you bald headed twat, I'm sure you can find him," I spit, turning to walk ahead of him towards Erwin as the man verbally assaults me.

"Your employee is the rudest boy I've ever met! He refused to check the storage room for a lightbulb I was willing to buy if it was in stock!" The man shouts, pushing me aside.

"Sir, I'm sure he assured you we didn't stock that lightbulb," Erwin reasons, smart enough to know this guys an asshole, after inspecting the broken globe handed to him.

"He did, after calling me a twat. I'll have you know that I know people involved in the law, and good workers ethic suggests this guy gets a work suspension or else!"

"I really don't think that's-"

"No? You want this whole chain of convenience stores to be shut down because of some useless teenager?"

"I- Eren, if you wouldn't mind leaving early today? I'll contact you tomorrow, and we can sort something out-"

"Suspension! It's a work suspension, not a day off for fucks sake. I'm sick of the quality of workers getting off because their employers are slack and don't care at all about their valued customers-"

"Work suspension, Eren!" Erwin booms, probably unintentionally, visibly irritated by the arrogant man.

"Wha-"

"Go, now. I'll be in contact within the week."

I see Connie's face just as I turn to leave the store. I don't bother going back for my jacket, but as I storm out, I accidentally knock an old woman into the cans beside the door, making her fall.
"I'm sorry!" I say, quickly, as other customers race to her aid.

"Ohh, you stupid kids! Watch where you're going!" She shouts, pushing the people away from her and standing to her feet.

"I- Fuck it," I mutter, and angrily stride out of the store. I don't wait for the train, I take as much time out as I can so I don't offend anyone at the apartments. If I lose my temporary home and my job, I think I'll just shoot myself.

Speed-stomping takes less time than walking, and I'm back up at my room sooner than I thought. I struggle to get the keycard to work, and bang the door hard in frustration. "Fuck!" I shout, seething with anger at myself, and the world.

"Eren," Someone says, catching my attention. I turn to see Kev walking towards me.

"Wha- Hi, Kev.." I say weakly.

"Do you remember our agreement on the rent? How you'd pay today?" He asks, and I cringe internally. No? We'd never made an arrangement. He's bullshitting, I know it.

"I- no, sorry, I don't."

"Well, it was a part of your cheaper room deal, that your pay today to avoid extra fees. That's not a real good start, Eren."

"Yeah... I'm sorry. I'll get it to you as soon as I can. I'm sorry, again."

He gives me a stern look over, before retreated back down the hallway, everything creaking beneath his weight. I'm sorry, what kind of a ducking excuse is that? He's a manager, he won't take 'I'm sorry' as an excuse! Fucking great, I'm gonna be homeless and unemployed by the end of today.

I get in, and kick my shoes off in the direction of the wall to hit it. I throw myself face first into the bed and scream into the sheets, wrapping a pillow around my head.

"Fuck it! Fuck everything! I'm such a fucking screw up, no wonder mom left!"

Mom...

Tears of anger cascade down my face as I reach for my phone. Maybe I can find something to stop me from acting like such a fucking idiot?

My hands shake as I scroll through my old text messages, and my teary eyes make it harder to read them clearly. God, why does everything feel like a struggle? That stupid asshole, I was only trying to help him! Then that fucking old hag, now I'm laid off work? Just fucking great. That's not a real good start, Eren'. Yeah, I fucking realised that.

A shaky, heavy sigh escapes my lips and I tighten my grip on my phone as hot-blooded tears stream down my face and briefly stain my shirt and pillow.

God, why am I fucking everything up! My family, my friends, even my-fucking-self. I'm so sick of everything. I'm sick of living.

I've never been sick of living.

I scroll through my text messages, trying to find something to brighten my mood. Something from Connie, from Sasha, from mom- Anyone! Instead, my mind leads me through dads most recent
tyrants.

(1) You've fucked up, boy, I hope you never come home!

(2) Don't come crawling back to me when things get tough, be a man and get yourself together.

(3) Fuck everything! You drove your mother and your sister out of the house, then you leave too? Fucking pathetic. You're a shitty excuse for a son.

I know, I know, I know, I know. I don't need you to tell me what I already know. I'm stupid, I'm a screw up, I'm everything you knew I was going to be. Congratu-fucking-lations, Dad. You win, I lose.

I'm always gonna lose in life. When was the last time I ever won?

I can feel my headache from this morning returning threefold, and I curse myself for crying again - it's only making things worse. Why am I such a pussy? Why am I crying all the damn time? No wonder dad hates me. I hate me. I'm such a useless human being.

Yesterday... Mikasa. I'll talk to you later, Eren.

Maybe she'll call today? I can't talk with a headache, I'll just get pissy and then she'll get worried. I don't need her trying to find me.

I decide to walk to the pharmacy and buy some pain relief.

I dress slowly, wiping my eyes and nose on the inside of my sleeves, and find my shoes beside the entrance to the bathroom. There's a small mark on the wall where the shoes had hit, and a wave of disappointment washes over me. I pass Kev on the way out of the elevator, and he gives me a brief nod. He'd probably heard me screaming to myself. I have no fucking control over anything, not even myself.

The streets aren't busy, and the cool air serves to take away the flush from my face, and to let the puffiness of my eyes go down. Maybe I'll just look stoned, and not like I've been crying. I'd prefer that, probably.

I'm exhausted by the time I reach the store, even though it's not that far from my hotel room sized apartment. I'm so tired, I feel like my eyes are closing over and my head is clouding with lead.

I search the aisles, looking for pain relief - of any sort. I'd take arsenic if they sold it as a headache cure, right now.

It seems like the aisles have been rearranged, since the last time I'd been here with mom. The sign at the front counter announcing new management only confirmed my suspicions. God, why do people have to go changing things? Now I'm gonna have to actually look.

I don't wanna ask staff for help. I feel useless enough, and chances are, I'd ask only to find they'd been right in front of me the whole time. I go through the useless perfume, lip balm, sunscreen, and skin lotion aisle, then the self care, and finally antiseptics, before finding the pain relief sectioned off from the rest of the store.

Coloured boxes displaying blocked letters and information in the substances lined eight rows, and I had to blink a few times for my mind to actually focus on what I am reading.

Ibuprofen...Panadol...Generic Brand? What'll knock me out for a few hours...
My eyes fall to the bottom shelves. Scalpel blades. The labels announce their use for removal of plantar warts and moles, but I can only think of their other uses: **WARNING: USE WITH CAUTION, MISUSE MAY CAUSE HARM**

Oh, I know. It could do so much to me- for me. No, that'd be stupid. Why the fuck would I do that? I'm here for drowsy medication, not a death sentence.

I'd be better off dead, though.

No I wouldn't, I need to be here for Mikasa, and Jean- Yeah, Jean. He's in a bad place, I need to be here for him. He's my friend, and I'm not a coward.

But I could be. I don't need to face the world when I could just shut myself out from it.

I mentally slap myself and grab the ibuprofen, heading straight towards the front counter and paying, getting out of there as quickly as possible. **What was I thinking?** That'd be the world's stupidest decision. I'm not gonna become a cutter, I'm not a fucking suicidal idiot.

*Why would I even think about something so stupid? I'm not a coward, like those people. I'll never be one of those people. God, I'm such a fucking tool.*

---

Four working days after the incident at work, and I still haven't been called back. No one from On The Run has contacted me; not Erwin, not Ymir, not even Connie, one of my best fucking friends.

What's happened? I wasn't even rude to the guy, or that woman! Why aren't I being called in? Or at least fucking contacted about what's going on. I don't deserve this, do I?

I feel like everyone hates me. I'm even hating me.

I'll call Connie, then.

**Outgoing Call, Connie**

'Yo, Eren! What's up, man?'

"Hey, Connie... Can I ask you something?"

'Shoot, man'

"Have you heard anything about me? I mean- working, I mean."

*I'm such a fuck up.*

'Oh- oh geez, man, I'm sorry. I was meant to call you a few days ago, I just got so caught up with Sash 'n...don't worry, I don't have any good excuses. I just forgot. Erwin's been called out to Sina for the week, but next week we're having a meeting with the guy who was being a dick, and the board of directors- or at least, Erwin is.'

"Shit..."

'-the old woman isn't suing or anything, she's just got a discount from us for the remainder of her
short lifespan. And the guy isn't getting far, he's probably gonna have an assault charge put on him, but Erwin says for your safety he doesn't want you coming back until it's all sorted. 'S that okay?'

"Okay? Of course it's-" not fucking okay! It's not fucking okay, are you kidding me?! "-it's okay. Yeah, that's fine. And don't worry 'bout not calling, it's no big deal. Just more chill out time for me, I guess."

'Hah, true that man. Anyways, I gotta go. Chat later, see ya.'

"By-" Hang Up Call.

Bye, Connie...

-x-

"So, how've you been?" Jean asks, rubbing his hands together to keep them warm.

"Oh, great, and you?"

We walk to Jean's car from his front door. He'd offered to buy us both lunch, seeing as it's a poetry night tonight and the trains are all on strike or something. 'It's better if we have a late lunch, that way we're already there and we can get good seats, right?' It's a nice offer. Plus, I can't afford the train fair. I have to keep money saved for rent and to keep me alive.

"Not too bad... Mom's been around a lot more, which is good I guess, we talked things through and I- Yeah... It's good. It's really, really good."

"Good, I'm glad to hear it."

Conversations are short, and there's something between us that hasn't been there before. Not even when we hated each other. The traffic runs smoothly, and we arrive at Recon in under 20 minutes, plus parking time. But, before I can escape the confines of Jean's car, he breaks the silence with the dreaded topic.

"Eren... I'm really sorry about what happened that night."

"Hm?" I try to feign ignorance.

"Jean, if you only invited me out to lunch to talk about that, I will leave. I wanted to help you, and I always want to be there for you. And, I don't regret it. You were in a bad place, and I kinda didn't think before I did it. It was a kiss, not a proposal. We're still friends, okay?" I say it, right off the top of my head. It's all truth, and I can't avoid the topic with Jean. I need to be straightforward for things to run smoothly, even if it's hard for me.

"I- I don't regret it either, I just... Thanks, I guess- For being there for me, when no one else was. I just... I wanted to clarify that it meant the same to you as it did to me, because I don't think I could stand it if that thing stopped us from being friends. You're the best one I've ever had."

"You're so cheesy you put mozzarella to shame," I joke, too tired for sentiment.

He smiles his classic, cheesy grin and nods, before getting out of the car. "C'mon, we gotta eat fast to get good seats today, it feels like forever since we've been here!"

It has. Well, for you.
My stomach drops as we near the entrance to Recon. I really hope no one who was there on that night is here. Except...that man. I don't have his jacket, but at least I could get a contact name, right?

"Good afternoon, gentlemen, table for two- Eren! Ohh my little darlin'!" Sasha squeals, engulfing me in a huge hug. "I'm so sorry about your job, I can't believe that knucklehead forgot to call you!"

"N-no, it's okay!" Sasha don't talk about this in front of Jean.

"And Jean, great to see you! Y'all want the window seat right? Number seven?"

"A- Yeah, thanks Sasha."

She happily leads us to our table, and takes out regular orders. Jean pays for everything. "So, chivalry isn't dead after all, hmm?" Sasha winks, giggling as she trots off to the kitchen to deliver the order.

"Connie's girlfriend?" Jean asks.

"Yeah."

Jean hums in acknowledgement, then proceeds to pull out his phone and text someone, a cheesy grin plastered onto his face. I don't care for Jean's social life, much. I haven't ever really, not for a few years, but a small part of me is different today. "Who're you texting?" I ask, curiously.

Jean looks a little stunned that I'd ask, but answers with a chuckle. "Does it matter?"

'Does it matter? What kind of fucking attitude is that?"

"Don't need to be so bitter," I snap, glaring at him and opting to look out of the window instead.

"Woah, hey, don't get so uptight! It's just Marco, okay?" Jean says in defence, making a show of putting his phone down on the table and sliding it away from himself. "There, sorry if I was being rude, sometimes he's just too funny-"

My jaw clicks. "You can text who you want, Jean, I'm not your mom."

"O-okay? I'm only trying to have some respect for your compa-"

"Why are you being so picky!?"

Why am I getting so frustrated? It's only Jean, he hasn't even done anything! But still, he's pissing me off. This whole place is pissing me off.

"Eren, chill out, I'm sorry for ignoring you."

I scoff. "It's not that! Don't just not talk to Marco because I'm around! And don't tell me to chill out!"

Jean raises an eyebrow, putting his phone down and scowling. "Well if I do you're gonna get all pissed off at me! God, I can't please both of your personalities, you know!"

"And I can't please you, you son of a bitch!"

Oh no.

"Excuse me?" Jean fumes, adjusting his black framed glasses and leaning closer. "What the fuck did you just call me?"

"You're acting like a fucking idiot today, what the hell's wrong with you?!” He shouts, trying not to draw attention to us. He's angry but he keeps his voice low, careful to not make the scene bigger than it has to be.

"Everything. Everything's fucking wrong with me. "Nothing! You're just overreacting to everything I say! Why're you being such an ass?"

"Me!? You're the one who's got some kind of hormonal imbalance!"

"Hormonal imba- What the fucks that supposed to mean!? God, I'm so sick of you!"

"Why am I doing this? Why am I pushing him away? He doesn't deserve this, he's going through enough. He fucking tried to kill himself and I'm here being a total-

"Stop acting like a child and talk about whatever's making you upset! Don't just get pissy with me for no reason and expect me to ignore it! I'm your friend, Eren, I'm not going to let you go through things alone."

"Just fuck off!" I shout, causing people to turn their heads even further to our table. I don't take notice, though, slamming my hands in the table as I stand. "You can shove this stupid poetry night up your faggot ass for all I care! Just get the fuck out of my life!"

I regret what I say as soon as it leaves my lips, knowing the hurt that those words cause. Jean's sat far back in his seat, eyes blown wide in disbelief, and he's shaking all over. A text message icon pops up on Jean's phone, but he doesn't dare glance towards it. I see it's Marco, and something about that both boils and chills my blood.

"Sir," A voice cuts in from behind me. "You need to leave."

"I-" I go to speak, but I don't. I mutter the quietest of 'sorry's' as I leave the building, and my gaze meets Sasha's just as I exit the doors. "I'm so sorry, Jean. I didn't want to do that. I didn't mean to do that but I did and I'm so fucking sorry I-

I don't stop for traffic, hoping only to be hit by a truck or a car. But, just my luck - all the good drivers are out today, and not a single one comes within an inch of my slouched figure. Jean's face flashes in my mind. He looked terrified of me. Like I was some sort of monster.

"I am a monster... I'm a fucking useless monster!

Everything goes past in a blur. I don't know what I'm going to do, but at the same time, I know exactly what I'm going to do. My feet take me where my sub-conscience wants to go; where it wanted to be for a long time coming. I end up at the pharmacy again, and I take myself to the pain relief aisle and bend to pick up the box of razor blades without a second thought. I don't think about anything, only that I need to buy these.

The woman at the counter asks my use for them, and I tell her I have plantar warts on my feet that I need to start removing, with cream prescribed by the doctors. She believes me. Hell, I believe me. It's amazing what a mind in the wrong place can come up with on the spot.

I walk hurriedly to the apartment complex and take the elevator up to my floor. Kev isn't up there, and no ones in the halls. My keycard works without a problem, and I kick my shoes off to sit cross-legged on the bed as soon as I enter my newly-cleaned room.

I take the box, my wallet and my phone out of my front pocket, scattering the contents over my
bed. I open the box and take out a blade, flipping it over carefully between my fingers. I put it gently on the bed and roll up my left sleeve, letting my fingertips glide carefully over the paler skin of my forearm.

I have no thoughts, no feelings, not as I pick up the blade and drag it quickly across the flesh of my arm. It feels good. The welcoming sting of the blade courses through my body, and the sensations awakens the numbness I'd felt all day.

I stare at the droplets of blood forming over the deep cut in several places, like rain on a spiders web. But, my web isn't nearly as big enough.

I slice the blade over my arm again, and again, and again, until seven deep, crimson lines run across my forearm. It's satisfying to my eyes, and satisfying to my mind. The blood drips down my arm, and I raise it to watch the beads join together and run down my arm to the crease of my elbow, where it touches my rolled up sleeve.

My right hand shakes, still grasping the blade between my thumb and forefinger. For once, I feel like crying, but nothing comes out. All my tears released in the form of blood, and I've never felt crying to be so satisfying.
"C'mon Carla! He needs discipline or he'll end up like those fuck ups couch surfing and sleeping on the streets!" Dad boomed, pointing his finger at me accusingly. He'd staggered closer to mom, still centre in my line of vision, purposefully.

"He's only thirteen, Grisha! Don't yell at him like he's old enough to understand! He's not! We can't keep forcing the weight of the world onto him! Mom, don't you agree with me?" Mom shouted, standing in a fighting stance toward dad and turning to her own mother, my grandmother, with a plea.

"Don't get me started," Gran drawled, before turning to face me. "Back when I was your age, I was filing the car with petrol, mowing the lawns for my parents, loading and unloading the dishwasher, and finding my own way home from school. This generation's growing up to be a bunch of lazy-asses!"

I stood in the kitchen, watching the three of them fight; because of me. I couldn't walk away, or I'd be yelled at. I couldn't speak until spoken to, or I'd be punished. I couldn't even remember what I'd done to make them like this.

I backed myself up against the wall, their strings of torment and curses surrounding me like cigarette smoke in the alleyway behind the underground bar.

All I could do was stand there and listen to them, trying to keep my tears locked away and avoid cowering, out of fear of being hit again.

I'd woken up in a hot flush, sweat beading down my face, but there'd been a relief that'd washed over me whilst I'd slept. A harsh, painful truth, that I could play out as a beautiful lie; I am okay. I'm not at home, I'm not with dad or gran or mom. Hurting myself last night, and feeling my own burning, massacred flesh this morning...had made me okay.

I hadn't covered the wounds, and the fresh, white bedsheets housekeeping had put on yesterday were now spotted with varying shades of red in all shapes and sizes. My arm looks like target practise for a chef, but something about it is oddly satisfying.

One big part of me felt relieved that I have finally found a way to let out my emotions without feeling
like a burden or a useless asshole. But something in that small common sense part of my mind knows that if anyone sees what I've done to myself, they're going to judge me, for-

For being a screw up.

I stare down at my arm, running my fingertips over the sensitive lines etched deep within my fair skin. I've never been that pale, but having the red to skin tone contrast makes me feel all the more upset. God, why did I do this? I'm such an idiot!

Slowly, my half-awake state and pure self-hatred puts me back to sleep again. But not peacefully. If anything, I wish I could wake up.

"You idiot! I can't believe you! You're such a fuck-up, don't even come around here again!" Dad screams, slapping me in the face.

"Dad, no! Stop it! I didn't mean it! I didn't mean to do it!" I shout, tears pouring down my face and mixing with the snot gathered above my upper lip.

"Go fuck yourself you cutting piece of shit!"

He'd seen them. He forced my sleeves up over my head and beat my body, pounding bruises into my skin, cracking my ribs one by one and pouring vinegar over the fresh, bleeding slits of my wrist, rubbing it into my wounds.

He starts throwing dirt and mud and shit at me, kicking around buckets and waste and reaching for a wooden drawer. He pulls out a rusty key and a needle, before stabbing my forearm with the key and forcing me to watch my vein burst and the blood to spurt unevenly out of the brutal fissure. I scream in agony, and someone gags me from behind, stopping my screaming. Dad injects the needle into the hole he's created in my vein, and then into himself, before kicking me until I black out-

I cough and wipe tears from my eyes and I find the box of blades I'd bought, and look around for last night's. I find it glinting in the sunlight, so I pick it up carefully and shove it into the box, before hiding it in the cupboard under the sink, at the very back. Not even the house cleaners would look that far, would they? It's not like it looks like I'm hiding anything.

I sigh shakily, the lasting memories of my nightmare seeping into the back of my memory like dark paint on a pale canvas. It'll never be erased.

My eyes dart around my body, checking for signs of attack or mutilation. I find only what I had caused myself.

I can't have them seeing this. My bloodied sheets and shirt make for a crime scene, and I can't have housekeeping seeing the mess. I can't have anyone seeing anything to do with my stupid mistake.

I look for my long sleeved shirt, buried beneath the small pile of clothes in the wardrobe. They obviously don't wash clothes, because it still smells of alcohol and smoke from Connie's party over three weeks ago.

I haven't functioned properly for three fucking weeks, and I never even noticed.

I need to do my own laundry now. Mom isn't around to do it.

I need to re-join the world of the living and functional people.

I decide to put on a short sleeved shirt- the only clean one I own- and the jacket the man from Recon had leant me, to cover up the deep red lines on my left forearm.
I'll just have to wash it for him again some other time. I bundle the bloodied bedsheets and my clothes into my backpack. It doesn't close all the way, but it's better than nothing.

Hanging the 'do not disturb' sign on my door, I head out, counting the money in my wallet left over from rent. $67.30. I hope laundry isn't too much, I still need to be able to eat for the next God-knows-how-long, possibly without a job.

My forearm burns beneath the fabric of my jacket, and every time it slides against my side I have to hold in the need to hiss in pain. It's a weirdly comforting pain, though. I don't enjoy it, really, but I think I might like it. It almost makes me feel alive. Harming myself has taken away that numb feeling- I feel human again, even at the risk of my own discomfort, I'm feeling something.

I stop off at McDonalds on the way to the laundromat, much to the pleasure of my constantly groaning stomach. My intestines were almost at arpeggio once I sat down in the fast-food restaurant to eat my brunch. Just in time, too, I'd got there just as they stopped serving the ballast menu - meaning soggy, leftover hash browns.

My mind doesn't feel hungry, but my stomach does, so I eat three room-temperature-or-below hash browns and down a 'hot' chocolate. It leaves a bad taste in my mouth, the food, but I stomach it for the sake of not having to listen to my stomach growling at me all day.

By the time I've finished eating, the streets are relatively full. It's cloudy, and there's a bitterness to the air that usually doesn't come until full-blown winter. It makes me think that today might not be a good day. For interaction, that is. I'm not very superstitious, but sometimes things just give off bad vibes.

I'm sure everyone gets that feeling, though.

Walking down the street, I feel like everyone is staring at me. It's like they can see exactly what I'm hiding behind the fabric of the jacket and it makes me self conscious. Every movement, breath, blink is being monitored and judged by these strangers. I'm staring to forget how to even breathe, but by the time I round the corner, I feel myself relax. The laundromat's seemingly empty and the Chinese man behind the counter tells me he's heading out to lunch, but he'll keep everything open for me. I thank him, and I try to relax my muscles, focusing only on loading the watching machine.

Long-sleeve, jackets, bed sheets, underwear- everything's here, why do I feel like I'm forgetting something?

It's a tight squeeze, and I end up having to use two machines; one for my stuff, and one for the bed sheets. I'm sure that's what you're meant to do, though - something about mixing colours or something.

19 years of life and I've never done my own washing before; this is a new experience, and I'm not entirely sure I like it. Having responsibilities is one thing, but having to become an adult seemingly all at once is a whole other thing.

I lift my head after slamming the doors of the machines shut, my eyes falling upon a sign hanging just above eye level. 'PROVIDE OWN WASHING POWDER - SAFETY HAZARD'

I know for a fact that blood does not come out without powder, especially not in white fabric. Mom had that out with me a long time ago - for different reasons, of course. It's now that my mind registers what I'd forgotten to bring, or even buy.

I sign in frustration, running my hands through my hair. I kick the washing machine in anger, but quickly place my hands on it, looking around to make sure the owner or any cameras didn't see. But,
a man walking in through the front doors does. And he chuckles.

"Washing machine hurt your feelings, kid?" He asks simply, laughter still fresh on his tongue.

I lower my eyes at the name, watching him walk over beside me and start to unload his own washing. "Forgot washing powder," I admit, my voice a little harsher than intended.

I notice something familiar about his hairstyle, and his face structure. I've seen him before, but I can't remember where. He has that kind of face that is both unforgettable yet entirely a face in the background. It's weird.

I lean back against a dryer behind me, drumming my fingers on it in an attempt to think where I would buy washing powder without having my stuff stolen. I could alway ask him to make sure no one steals it. Or if I can borrow some powder. But I can't see a box with him, either. Then, I see the label on a uniform being slung into the machine by the man.

He works at Recon.

_Shit, this guy. This is the guy who I saw at The Basement, the very same who stood out in the rain with me and offered me his jacket and a ride and- Fuck, he's so much different in the light. Should I ask if he knows me? No, that'd be stupid. But surely he'd recognise his own jacket. Isn't it better to break the ice now?_

_I can't do it- I can't, I can't, I can't._

I feel my stomach knot, and my throat tightens in an attempt to speak. Nothing comes out, and I stand there staring at the side of his head, mouth agape like some sort of brain-damaged fish.

A part of me hopes he remembers me, so it's not too awkward when he recognises I'm wearing his jacket and that I didn't steal it, and so maybe he'll let me borrow some washing powder. The other part hopes he doesn't, because I was such a mess that night and he probably caught some kind of cold from being out there that long in the rain with me. I could always make up some lame excuse about being a familiar face or how I've had this jacket all my life so I'm emotionally attached to it and that's why it's a little small for me.

Thankfully, he speaks up first. "I didn't want to say anything in case you weren't too fond of remembering, but I've got to say, you've cleaned up far nicer than most of the other bums out there."

I'm taken aback at the slur. "Bums? What's that supposed to mean, I'm not a bum!" I object, feeling myself stiffen. So much for a nice guy, he's just as judgemental as the rest of them.

"Not what I meant, sorry," He replies simply, suddenly appearing disinterested. But, his atmosphere changes in an instant, probably as he feels the tension between us thicken. "I've got some powder you can use, if you don't want to go out and buy any."

I'm silent for a few moments, evaluating the man. "Thanks."

He hands me his powder in a zip-lock bag, after turning on his own machine, and I go about turning mine on and putting the powder in.

"Don't worry about it," He shrugs, "and for the record, if you're ever in a situation like that again, you can always come into Recon and let the staff know. We've got phone numbers for a number of places, and a number of reasons."

"I kinda out welcomed my stay, I think.." I chuckle, nervously. Can I really keep up a conversation
with this stranger? Should I keep up a conversation? I don't know him. But, my nerves have gone away - he's kind of intimidating though, judging by appearances.

"It's a hospitality business, you can't out welcome your stay, if you talk to the right people," He states, matter-of-factly.

I hand him back his powder with a curt nod and a breathy 'thank you,' and go silent for a few minutes, staring blankly at nothing in particular. I used to space out a lot when I was younger, but it stopped during my middle schooling years. During high school it started to happen more frequently, and that lost me a few friends. A lot, actually.

Connie and Jean never left, though. Connie because we worked together, and we both sealed the deal on the job for each other, really. Jean, well, we can't get away from each other. He might not be my friend anymore, though, after what I'd said to him.

I'm such an idiot. I've pushed away the one person who needed me most. Who I needed just as much..

Finally, the dark haired man speaks up again. "Sorry, manners aren't always something I remember on non-working days. I'm Levi."

"Oh, I'm Eren," I jolt, lost in thought. I decide to go for it, and add, "Do you always replace manners with washing powder?"

He chuckles, as I turn on my washing machine, "I'm inclined to say yes."

I'm relieved he didn't think too much of my corny attempt at a joke, and the remains of a smile fall gently from my lips. He doesn't waste much time in speaking up again, though, for which I am both relieved and irritated by. "So, about that jacket; turns out I do need it later in the week, and you're not washing it," He gestures to the jacket clinging tightly to my body, and unbeknownst to him, my wrist. "It's pretty cold out, so I'll let you keep it today, but how about we meet up sometime later in the week so you can hand it back?"

"T-to give back your jacket?" I stammer.

He pauses for a moment, and I realise what I'd said. "Yeah, to give back my jacket," He reiterates.

"I- Yeah, I guess. I mean, of course, not I guess."

He gives a small smile that quickly disappears, before preparing and starting his own machine. He chooses only a quick wash, no dry, so he's almost gone within fifteen minutes.

"See you tomorrow, then?" He asks, piling his clothes into his washing basket.

"Yeah, tomorrow's fine. Um, where do you suggest?"

"Outside Recon, I guess. I'm off at 1pm, so around then would be best for me, unless you've got plans, I can adjust."

"No, that's fine. I'll see you then, Levi."

"Have a nice day, Eren," He raises a hand in goodbye, car keys gripped tightly between his teeth in order not to drop his load. Of washing, I mean.

I struggle to be inconspicuous as I watch him struggle with the door handle of his car. I almost go out
to help him, but he gets it unhinged with his foot, and opens it skillfully with his hip. He pulls out a tissue and appears to spit in it, probably from having car keys in his mouth. He notices me watching him, and I quickly look away to hide my smile.

I feel my face inflame in embarrassment, both second and first hand. I get to see the very same guy who offered me his jacket and his washing powder, and who saw me muddy and teary and completely miserable not three weeks ago, tomorrow. It's so close to today.

*Does he really want to see me that soon? Is it because he doesn't mind seeing me that soon, or because he wants to avoid me as much as possible in the future?*

*Does he not realise I'm a failure? Who would want to see someone so soon? Let alone a fuck up who got kicked out of home and abandoned by his mother, and sat in front of a restaurant at fucking 12am trying to stay warm my huddling in the corner of a barrier like some rat? No one. He has to have alternative motives.*

*A friend of dads? Someone he hired to fake being my friend only to completely ruin my life just after we have some heart-to-heart talk about future and love and shit?*

*No way, I can't trust this guy. No one acts like this towards a stranger. No one. Even if they do give off the vibe that the world can go fuck itself, but can hold a conversation.*

-X-

I've long since dumped my washing in the wardrobe, and thrown my sheets into the corner of the room in anger. I couldn't get them on properly, then I took off my jacket because I got hot and saw my scars, and then I started crying and shaking and hyperventilating. I couldn't call Connie, or Mikasa, or mom, so I rocked back and forth with my head in my hands, sitting at the edge of the bed, for over an hour, trying to calm myself down.

It didn't completely work, so to add insult to injury, I stared at the lock screen of my phone for another half an hour, before finally deciding to do what I am now.

*Outgoing Call, Jean.*

He picks up on the sixth ring, just before it would go to message bank, but he doesn't say anything. '.......'

*I have to do this. I have to. This is my inky chance to calm the fuck down and make up with my one and only friend who might be able to hell me, "H-hi...Jean."*

He leaves a long pause. *'Hi, Eren.'*

I clear my throat, "Are you..busy, right now?"

'*No.*"

"I um...Do you wanna get lunch or something?" I can feel my voice becoming shakier, "Your pick."

*Why am I so scared of talking to him? We had a fight, I fucked up, I can admit that. So why am I so nervous?*

He doesn't answer, instead leaving the stomach turning silence he left last time I opened my mouth. *Please say yes, please say no, please just consider it.*

*Please, just say something.*
He sighs, and I can practically feel him rubbing his temples in frustration. And yet, he graces me with an answer, 'Sure.'

We agree to meet at the Centennial Park, with our own lunch, beside the fountain. There's a few picnic tables there, and it's in a nice spot. People around can hear us talk, but only if they go out of their way to do so.

It's perfect for a make-up chat. Or even just small talk. Right now, I'd settle for anything.

Having been outside for the majority of the day, walking to and from the laundromat, I know that it'll be hard to get away with two layers of clothing. So, I decide to put on my freshly washed long sleeve, and keep my skinny jeans on.

Catching sight of my scarred left arm as I cautiously throw the jacket over the bed, my stomach drops. I feel ashamed, dreadful, lonely, lost—there aren't enough words in my vocabulary to describe the emotional pain seeing those scars cause, even for a brief moment. I'm disappointed in myself for doing something so stupid. Yet, they're still sitting in the cupboard.

*Why haven't I thrown them out? I should do that.* I enter the bathroom and rummage through the cupboard before finding the box, and shoving it into the same front pocket of my jeans I shove my wallet into, my phone sitting comfortable in the other one.

I lock up and head out, stopping at a convenience store to buy a cheap sandwich, before heading over to Trost Centennial. It's nothing like Shinganshina, where I was born. We have visited there a few times, since moving to Trost, where we've met up with my grandparents and my aunt and uncle, plus a few cousins. The Centennial Park over there is a cemetery. Not literally, but that's where soldiers lost their lives back a few decades ago.

I spot Jean sitting close to the fountain under the shade of a tree, talking closely with someone. We have more company? I really didn't want to do this in front of people—a child's scream, closely followed by another, as the pair of them run in front of me playing a game of chase—more people than necessary.

Jean spots me as I approach, and gives me a wave. The mystery-person also pokes their head out from beside him. It's Armin.

With that revelation, I can feel my nerves start to settle a bit. I don't know Armin very well, but I feel like I do. He's the sort of person you're automatically comfortable with—it's like, no matter what's wrong with you, he wouldn't give a damn. Not that he wouldn't care, just that if wouldn't change who you are.

Yeah. Armin is that kind of person. My favourite kind, I think.

"Hey," Jean greets, through a mouthful noodles, his homemade lunch emitting hot steam from the container.

"Hi Jean, Armin," I nod, taking a seat across from them.

"Heya, Eren! Nice weather today, huh?" Armin smiles, lifting his head from his own take-away box of rice and what looks like chicken.

"Yeah, it is." I start to unwrap my sandwich, opening it to remove the tomato I didn't ask for, and to wipe off the dressing that I also didn't ask for.
I want to talk more. I want to focus on them. On Jean. Or at least, not on me. But food is obviously more important. Besides, I don't feel like eating - I haven't felt like it all day, really. But I take a few bits of each half anyway, just to keep the public appeased.

We probably look like the weirdest duo to eat lunch together. Even the oldies on the tennis courts look like they fit together more that we do, and they hate each other. Jean's wearing khaki knee-length shorts - the ones with the thousands of pockets - and his batman jacket, unzipped to reveal some sort of horror movie t-shirt, plus his everyday wear glasses. He tells me they're not a fashion statement, but sometimes I think he only wears them because they suit his look of the day. I know for a fact he in,y needs them for short distance reading. He's a fashion disaster, in any case, but everything he wears fits and suits him well. He could wear a garbage bag and it would look fashionable.

Armin, on the other hand, is dressed to impress, it seems. He looks like a model; tan skinny jeans, a light denim button up shirt, and fedora-but-not-really looking hat. He's also wearing glasses.

I won't bother comparing myself to them, because even whilst Jean looks like he shops in the child's wear section, he still beats my look. I didn't even brush my teeth this morning.

"So, how've you been? Jean and I were just talking about that girl from Karanese who lost her leg in that car accident, Mina Carolina" Armin says, and I have the feeling he'd asked me this before - without the car accident thing, I think he was trying to engage my attention - but my mind had wandered and I'd missed it. Now I feel like an idiot. I hope I wasn't staring.

"I've been good. And yeah, I heard about that. Did you know her?" I lie. I haven't been good, and I didn't know someone had lost their leg in a car accident. Who even talks about that stuff on an outing?

"Yeah, she's my cousin," Armin says, with a small smile.

And now I feel like an asshole. Thanks, brain.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. Is she okay? I mean, besides the obvious."

"Yeah, she's a tough girl. I haven't seen her for a while, but she was air-lifted to Trost Hospital yesterday, so I came to see her. That's why I'm here, by the way. I'm staying with Jean, and his mom's doing some spring clean thing so she kicked us both out around the time you called," Armin laughs, scraping the dregs of his container and shovelling the contents into his mouth, not leaving a single atom.

"Wow, busy week then," I feign a chuckle. I notice Jean hasn't said anything, but has been completed focused on our conversation. "What about you, Jean? How have you been?"

"Fine. Armin's staying with me, mom's got a job as an interior designer recently, and I've been hired to write a column for Scout, so that's cool I guess," He states coolly.

"For Scout? Seriously? That's awesome, Jean! How'd you land that?" Just a few weeks ago he'd attempted suicide because he felt meaningless, and now he's writing a piece for Trost highest selling magazine? I'm proud of him.

"Armin knows the editor, and Hitch slept with him."

"Really?"

"Yeah," Armin says, leaning across the table a little further, "I do a lot of travelling, and we met
whilst I was in Barcelona with Mina and her now ex-girlfriend, Hitch. He has a few jobs, so it was definitely unexpected that he'd tell us he was Scout's editor, but he's a nice guy. We talked a bit, then we were on the same cruise ship to Greece, so we exchanged numbers and I sent him a few photos for the travel guide edition."

"Those were your photos?!” Jean exclaims, putting his hands down and abruptly facing Armin.

"Your cousin dated Jean's cousin?!” I exclaim, my actions similar to Jean's.

Armin laughs at us. "Yeah, they were, and yes she did. Small world, huh? I've put a few photos in Scout. They always take submissions, but everything I've sent in had been requested. Plus, it helps that Hitch and him, uh.. Well, yeah. Cool, right?"

"Wow...that's amazing.. So, the mysterious editor is a 'he' huh?” I ask, intrigued. I don't read Scouts, nor have I ever planned to, but mom and Mikasa often read it and talked about it. They speculated whom the editor could be, and I know they've discussed the photos Armin has got published. I have more knowledge on Scouts than I should, really.

Obviously Armin knows about Scouts because he's featured in it, and he and his cousin travel. Jean's got Hitch, and she knows just about everything there is to know about tabloids and scandals and everything else in between. I've met her a few times, she's a nice girl, she just gets caught up with the wrong people.

"It's cool.." Jean finishes, closing the lid of his container and placing his face in his hands.

"You seem kinda...out of it," I comment, directing my tone at Jean.

"Marco hasn't replied in over an hour, he's starting to get worried," Armin cuts in.

"I am not!” Jean protests, "He has a life! He can do what he wants or see who he wants! I don't care!”

He's starting to get worried. "So, that party was the start of something new, huh Jean?” I tease, and Jean throws me a glare that could kill.

"Whatever."

For the rest of the afternoon, I feel functional. If it weren't for Jean's downer attitude, it may even be the best day of my life so far. Marco texts him back around 3pm, and Jean's face practically glows with excitement that Armin suggests he might combust. I think he might've been right, too. Shortly after, Jean says he needs to go home to work on his piece for Scouts, and Armin agrees that he should get going too, because Jean needs to drive him to work. He works at Target, and happily announces he's never been late for a shift.

Except for: 'this time' and 'this time' and 'that other time,' 'oh and that other time where...'

We stand to walk to the bin, before out last 'see you later's,' but a dull weight in my pocket alerts me of everything I'd been avoiding that afternoon. I had the box of blades still in there. I'd meant to throw them out when I went to the bin, but I can't have Armin and Jean seeing it. Shit.. Shit! What do I do? God, I have to walk back to the motel until I see a bin? I wanted to be over and done with those fucking things!

Armin and Jean both sense some tension, and Jean speaks up saying, "You okay? You've been a bit off. Everything's fine, Eren. I fucked up, you fucked up. I'm not holding grudges, and I know you won't either. Fair?” He extends his hand for me to shake it, but I don't.
I throw myself at him and hold him close, arms tight around his neck and shoulders. I notice Armin when I open my eyes, looking a little bewildered, so I hold put my arm and gesture for him to join us. He chuckles, but Jean and I pull him into it anyway. The three of us stand there and hug, beside the garbage bin, in the late afternoon whilst hundreds of people look at us - the odd trio who dress completely differently, look totally different, have different pasts and stories and personalities, yet fit together in a hug so well. I almost feel bad for Connie not being there.

"Alright, alright," Armin says, prying our arms off of him. "That was unexpected, and nice. Thanks, guys. I've had a nice afternoon."

"Me too," Jean says, shoving his hands into his pocket. I half expect him to pull his old high school 'no homo' shit, but he doesn't.

"Yeah, me too," I say. We exchange goodbyes, and I wave to the, as they drive past the park on a u-turn, Jean shouting 'Fuckin' looser!' At me as they drove past. I flip him the middle finger, laughing to myself as I kept on my path back to the motel.

I don't see a single bin the whole way back. I contemplate simply putting the box somewhere and 'forgetting' it, but I don't want any little kids picking it up and doing something as equally stupid with them.

I'll just have to do it tomorrow, and take them back with me tonight.

The nightglow of the city is the only thing I look at. I sit alone in my motel room, with the lights off, staring out the window at the city landscape. The moon illuminates the ocean, and the ocean meets the land where the lights of the city dim and shine and flash all at once.

I can hear the faint laughter from the room a few doors down, and their T.V down to mumbling voices. I'm in nothing but my boxers, after waking up in a hot sweat from a nap I took once I got home from the park.

I'm too tired to stand up and close the curtains, so I simply stare out at the world beyond the frosted glass of my cheap motel room - an open box of blades sat neatly beside my naked body.

I contemplate doing it again; hurting myself. I felt relief from the red plasma that flowed gently from the fissure opened by my own hand. A thought that had never crossed my mind, that I am completely in control of my own pain. I don't have to feel nothing. I can feel something. I can feel pain. I don't have to live with only emotional pain, I can rid myself of that by feeling the cool relief the stinging blade allows me.

Finally, I stand, taking one silver blade in my hand and walking to the curtains. I take one last look at the skyline of the city after hours; the late night shoppers, the lights, the sounds, the traffic- and then I close the curtains.

I sit at the foot of my bed, and think nothing of it as I slowly tear my skin apart. I drag it out as long as I can, making sure to feel the pain as the blood follows the razor across skin until it leaves my flesh.

I slice delicately, the vigorously, on both my left and right forearms, seemingly unable to stop. Every cut is relief, and every time I feel that relief I want more. More, more, more. I don't stop at my wrists,
I flatten my thighs and dig into the unblemished skin of my thigh, hissing at the pain of the deep
hacks I've created on my thighs.

I lay back onto the bed and smile to myself. The world outside moves on whilst I lay here and tear
myself apart one cut at a time and I love it. I love this feeling. It leaves me empty yet whole all at
once. The bittersweet sting of that razor sets my senses on fire and makes me feel alive.

I close my eyes and sigh, feeling blood pour out of my opened skin and down my arms, down my
thighs, and onto the mattress. I hadn't put the sheets on, and good thing too, I wouldn't have had time
to take them off before both destroying and regenerating myself. It's almost as if, without this relief,
I'd never have been able to continue living.

I'm alive only to kill myself, one cut, thought and breathe at a time.
There's a certain bone chilling thrill to being woken up by the sound of someone knocking on your door, especially when you're covered in your own blood and have wounds that still haven't closed up.

Adrenaline courses through my veins as I call out a pitiful, "I'm coming!" Whilst I shove on the closest pair of sweatpants and Levi's jacket, running to the door and trying to avoid thinking of the pain prickling my forearms and thighs as worn fabric re-opens wounds and soaks up blood. It's coming out a lot faster than last time, I notice. Perhaps I'd cut deeper than my conscience had intended.

"Hi, sorry," I breathe, crossing my arms self consciously and standing in the doorway. I'm more than surprised to find Armin standing there, shirtless and without shoes. "A-Armin?"

"Eren! Thank god this is yours! I'm really sorry, but I need to come in right now!" Armin says hurriedly. He's breathless, like he'd ran here from Jean's house or something.

"I- Uh, give me five seconds?"

"Okay, yeah, sure!"

I rush back inside and throw the open box of blades under the bed, hearing them scatter, and I fold the top sheets over the bloodstains on the mattress. "Alright!" I call to him, and he rushes through the door immediately, shutting and locking it behind him.

"What's happened?" I ask, sitting cautiously on the bed, and nervously glancing down at my clothes to make sure no blood is visible. I can feel it spreading on my thigh, and running down my arm. Shit, all over Levi's jacket. I'm gonna have to wash it before I see him later.

Fuck! I'm seeing Levi today and Armin's here! I can't leave him here, he'll find shit! My thoughts are interrupted when I notice Armin is talking to me, and I've been too wrapped up in my guilty conscious to pay attention.

"-and this drunk girl came in around closing time," He starts to pace around the room, holding his hand to his head, "I tried to tell her we were closing, but she didn't seem to understand. She was so
drunk, Eren, I didn't know what to do! I was the only staff member left when I found her! I tried to get her name, or her phone to call someone, but she wouldn't budge! So, I offered to drive her home. And she said yes, so I followed her directions and when we got to her house she invited me in. I don't know why I said it but I said yes and that's when it-" He stops pacing, and closes his eyes tightly for a moment, before starting to pace around again. His Australian accent is very pronounced when he's distraught. It's almost distracting, like he's not speaking English or something- but he is. I think I'm just too disoriented to comprehend anything right now.

"That's when she started offering me alcohol. She put music on, and we watched T.V and it was all good fun because I thought she was sobering up when I had beer and she had water, but no, ohh no, she jumped me! I was too buzzed and I couldn't get away and I woke up this morning to her caressing my fucking chest and playing with my hair and she called me 'baby' and I just- I ran. I've made a mistake. I ran from the girl I slept with, and she chased me four blocks in her underwear! I don't know if I managed to lose her, but I need to stay here for a few hours. Or anywhere even! You can send me to a fucking shelter or something, man! Please, Eren, I don't know what to do I'm so freaked out." He's pleading, and his eyes are desperate.

I can see he's covered in hickies and various other scratch marks. There are definitely bruises on his arm to suggest she put up quite a struggle last night. Still, I can't help but wonder, "How did you know I lived here?"

"Uh-...Connie isn't exactly discrete when he tries to avoid your whereabouts.."

"Connie told you?!! I barely know his guy and Connie's telling him my fucking life story and where I live? I trusted him not to tell! I swear he told me he wouldn't spread it around!"

Armin tugs at the drawstrings on his pants, "Mm...kinda.. He didn't say why, though, only where. I figured I wouldn't ask."

"Oh." I'm relieved, at the very least. I can trust Connie after all. Why was I so quick to jump to conclusions? Of course I can trust Connie! God, I'm such an asshole.

"You, uh, you don't mind if-if I stay here for a while?" Armin asks, tentatively.

"'Course not. You seem pretty traumatised."

"I am! Oh god, I am. I didn't mean to leave in such a hurry..but she freaked me out. I'm not ready to be committed! To anyone! I don't even know her name! But I don't want her to feel used.. I didn't use her, she used me! I was drunk, and so was she- neither of us could give legal consent! What if I'm charged for rape?! Or she's charged for rape?! I mean, technically she did come onto me but I- I didn't stop her too well, obviously.."

"Woah, woah, calm down, Armin. Think it through before-"

"What if she's pregnant?! I can't be a baby daddy! I can't even keep track of my own dietary habits let alone a baby's!"

"Armin!" I shout, standing to place my hands on his shoulders to keep him still. "Don't make assumptions until you know what's actually happened. To be honest, I think that even if you were drunk you'd be the type of person to insist on a condom or something. And, I think that you can handle this. But you need to calm the fuck down, okay? Maybe do something to take your mind off of it so the shock wears off, or something," I try, feeling his shoulders relax beneath my grip. "You need to try to think of something that could be of help to you. Calm down, then go find her and tell her exactly what you told me. About not wanting to be committed, and about the legal consent thing,
Armin's eyes are wide, but I can see his mind processing everything I've said. "Yeah...yeah, okay. You're right, Eren, I'm overthinking things. Hah, why would I even think any of that stuff could happen? I'm so dumb... Ah, you had breakfast? I'll shout."

I'm not hungry, at all. My stomach burns, and knowing what's happening beneath the fabric of my clothes almost makes me feel ill. I'm not sure if I can handle going out with the pressure of knowing that I'm so fucked up that I cut my own skin.

"...I ate already, then went back to sleep, but there's a nice breakfast menu here if you want to order something to come up," I offer.

He takes the offer. "Alright, sounds like a plan."

I look around for the menu and show him the phone. He calls room service and orders bacon and eggs, and a coffee (to which I'm not quick enough to tell him there's a kettle and coffee kept in the cupboard, along with the mini fridge).

"I'm really sorry about this, man. I hope it's not a hassle having me here, since you'd fallen asleep again and stuff," He says after he hangs up the phone, his tone of voice far more controlled.

"No, no it's fine. I'm meeting someone around 1pm today, so I did have to be up anyway. I need to get to the laundromat, too. You kinda helped me."

"Ah, sweet. Happy to help then, my friend!" He beams, sliding down the wall and sitting cross legged beside the coffee table beside me bed. I'd feel a lot more comfortable if he sat as far away from my bed as possible, considering that if he's going to lie down he'll find what I'm trying to hide.

Luckily, though, he's a stickler for routine. I think. "You don't mind if I use the shower after breakfast, do you? I don't want you to feel like I'm using you, 's just that I'm covered in all sorts of stuff and-"

"It's fine. I don't need to hear about your sexcapades, Ar, you can use whatever you want. Do you need a shirt to borrow?" I offer.

He chuckles, and nods. "You're awesome, man. Wish I'd met you sooner, I think you'd be a great travel companion."

"You travel?" I ask, sitting on the edge of the bed, above Armin.

"Yeah, loads. I've had the travel bug ever since my godparents took me to England back in middle school - it's just got worse since then. I've been to England a few times after that, too. Um.. Germany, France, Greece, Costa Rica, the Maldives, Budapest, Peru, all kinds of places.."

My wallet just about shrivels up at the thought of how much he spends. I chuckle awkwardly, "Wow, that's gotta be pretty expensive, huh?"

"Mm, a little. I use my grandpa's will money for most of it, though. He left everything to me when he died, seeing as he didn't have anyone else to leave it to. So, I sold the house, went to Uni, quit Uni, and started travelling. Next up's Turkey, if you're interested."

"Hah, thanks, but I'll have to decline for now. I don't have that kind of money, and I think your grandfather would prefer you spend time having fun without having to worry about other people."
"You're kinda right, but company's always nice. I can always shout you a plane ticket, instead of breakfast?"

I shrug, making an affirmative noise. I don't think I'd feel good about using Armin's money for an overseas trip.. Even if I've never been outside of this county.

Room service knocks to deliver Armin's breakfast, and his complementary coffee. I think the young woman who brought it up is both delighted and disgruntled to find Armin standing in the doorway and giving her a tip. Hot, shirtless Aussie guy with shoulder-length blonde hair and striking blue eyes answers the door. But, he's half-naked in the room of a disheveled brunette guy.

I can see the hope and confusion in her eyes as she wishes us, or Armin at least, a pleasant day. "The staff here are really nice, huh?" Armin comments. I snort, but nod in agreement.

He eats in quiet for a while, happily munching away on his bacon. I turn on the T.V and open the curtains, both of which he seems happy about. I also look through my pile of clothing, to find a shirt that would fit him. He's shorter than me, by quite a few centimetres, but he's no short-ass either. His build is also a little smaller than mine, so I know that nothing I have will fit him as well as I think it should.

Eventually, I find a shirt that looks suitable, and throw it towards him. He looks as though he'd seen a ghost as he looks up from his food, but his expression changes immediately once he notices I notice. What was he looking at? I decide to break the foreground silence, mainly to cure my curiosity, but also because I can't stand his slightly mortified expression any longer. "I need to ask, why did you quit Uni?"

Armin doesn't look fazed as he swallows the remainder of his breakfast, his expression returning to normal. "Got tiring, I guess."

I'm not satisfied. In fact, I'm almost mad at that answer. "That's it? You gave up, just like that?" I can feel my hot-headed self from younger years returning, very suddenly. The rush of adrenaline from earlier this morning is returning in the form of anger, and all because of Armin's simple, selfish response. "I couldn't get into a university or a college because I didn't make the cut. My scores weren't as good as people like you, yet you got into university and it was 'too tiring' to keep studying there? You travel, you have so much knowledge already, and you just gave up?! That's such a selfish thing to do! I could have gone, if you didn't want to go, but no one would have me because they were all full of people like you, who think they're too good or something?!

I don't know where this rage is coming from. I'm not even yelling the complete truth, but I can't stop. I don't even know him very well, and I just went off, like some kind of atomic bomb. I'm angry at Armin, but I'm angry at myself more, for having the audacity to yell at him like- like my father yelled at me...

I try to suppress the overwhelming urge to reach under the bed and slice my wrists to the vein. I can't do that in front of Armin, but I can't see any other option to stop me from completely going off at him. What if I hit him? Make him bleed? Send him out of here bruised, beaten, and afraid of me like I am of my father? Why are my thoughts leading me to become what I'm most scared of?

Armin doesn't even seem surprised by my outburst, and I throw myself onto the bed in front of him. It's almost as if he expected it. I'm visibly shocked at my words, and a throaty gurgle of an apology ghosts my lips. He sighs, slowly and careful not to upset me any further. "You're not the first one to have a go at me like that, you know," He starts. "I've heard it all before. You think I don't know that I gave up something so many others have dreamed of doing? I know that. I know what I did was selfish, and maybe even wrong, but I can't change it."
He leaves a silence, probably for me to continue my blind rage rampage, but I don't. "It was in 10th Grade," Armin says, hugging his knees close to his chest.

"We'll have both parts due at the end of the week, with appendix and references attached, alright?" She'd said, and I just...I don't know why I did it, but I put up my hand and said aloud, 'I've finished everything already, in one lesson.' Everyone looked at me, then at each other, and laughed. They talked about it for weeks, and I just- I couldn't take it. I'd moved to that school after my grandfather was transferred to Trost, so I didn't have any friends. Then, to make it worse, I did that- that stupid, stupid thing... It wasn't the first time, either. I just didn't learn, I guess.
I handed my work up early, because I didn't waste time talking in class. Hell, I didn't have anyone to talk to in class. I stayed back for homework clubs and stuff, because I didn't have anything to do after school. I was always the first one finished in exams and tests, because I'd studied weeks in advance."

"I was a nerd, and I hated it. High school wasn't what I thought it would be. I thought I'd be accepted, at least by someone, but no one did. I was dubbed 'that kid,' you know, the one no one likes and who gets told to kill themselves every waking moment of their pathetic life? Yeah, that was me. Every year before that, I'd loved school. It was my happy place- the one place I could escape everything in my life and do the things I enjoyed. Those people took that way from me, and I didn't know what to do. No one ever took the chance to get to know me. Instead, I spent my high school years having shit thrown at me, being forced into locker doors, shoved and pushed and beaten. I was so alone back then, and I couldn't go anywhere to get rid of that loneliness."

"I would love to reapply for University, I just don't know if I can handle being rejected again. I grew up being told how much people loved me - for being smart, funny, and kind - to the point where I actually started to believe that everyone would accept me like the preschoolers and my family did. I thought I was invincible, and that I could be successful and popular when I moved schools. I know learning and studying has nothing to do with being accepted, but I don't know if I'm ready to face the reality of being ignored and rejected by society. I don't want to be laughed at for being smart, again."

The sincerity in Armin's voice - in his face - could be enough to bring me to tears. He spilled his guts out to me after I called him selfish, but he wasn't being intentionally selfish at all. He's scared.

I can't believe I lost my temper at this guy. This guy who seems so carefree and happy-go-lucky, and outgoing; he's afraid of rejection. He acts like nothing can get in his way, like he doesn't care at all what anyone thinks, that his life is so perfect because he travels and fucks strangers but really- he's so human it's almost unbelievable.

"Sorry. I don't know why I told you all of that," He chuckles shakily, "I've never said any of that stuff to anyone before."

"Armin...I'm sorry I lost my temper at you. You didn't deserve that."

"No, it doesn't matter, I would've lost my temper at me too if I'd been in your position. You kinda forced the truth out of me...and I feel a little relieved to have that out in the open."

"Really?"

"Mm. It hurts, having that locked up inside for over five years. It's good to have it off my mind, at least for a little while." He stands up, grasping my shirt tightly in his hands, "I'd better shower now. You don't mind?"

"No, go for it."
He shuts the bathroom door, and I rush to quickly move the bed and expose everything beneath it. I hurriedly try to pick up the blades, one by one, and avoid cutting my fingers on any of them. I'm successful, and I place them neatly in the little box and place it in the bedside table drawer.

Then, I find my long sleeve shirt and a pair of dark skinny jeans, ridding myself of my sweatpants and Levi's jacket. Blood smears the inside of the sleeves, of my pants, and on my thighs and forearms. It's terrifying, knowing I did this to myself.

Knowing that I was ready and willing to do it in a heartbeat, in company.

But it looks good. I like seeing my body mutilated like this, it's satisfying, looking down at my slashed and barely bleeding body. I wonder how much blood a person can lose before they die?

It's almost like being powerful. Not the powerful that can build cities and colour skylines, but the kind that has complete power over oneself. I can control my own pain, and I can be the only one who can hurt me as much as I please, whenever I please.

I tug on a fresh pair of underwear, the jeans and my long-sleeve, then put on a clean pair of socks. I haven't showered, but I feel at least a little cleaner. I make a mental note to buy bandages after taking Levi's jacket to him.

Or maybe I should do it whilst I'm washing the jacket? Do a quick cycle and go to the store? I check my phones charge, %57, and plug it. I start to scroll through Facebook for a while, knowing that daytime T.V is worse than the Last Airbender film, and that's saying something.

According to her timeline, Mikasa and Annie bought a new couch for their apartment, and they're posing in front of it wearing a ridiculous assortment of clothing. It's good to see that Mikasa is happy. I'm happy for her.

I hear the shower turn off, so I sit up and turn the T.V up a little louder, pretending to be engaged in some fishing show. 'It's a big one!' One guy says, and Armin mimics the voice of the man in a taunting fashion as he exits the bathroom.

"You're into fishing, huh?" He chuckles.

"Not at all," I shake my head.

He chuckles, "Thanks for all of this, it means a lot, Eren. I'm gonna head out now, though, Jean's gonna be wondering where I am and I don't have my phone. Or at least Ruth is gonna be worried."

"Yeah, she's a worry-wart that one. Tell her I said 'Hi,' if you can," I say, standing quickly as Armin approaches the door in a hurry.

"I will. And hey, thanks again for everything. You're a really great guy, you know that?"

"Hah..thanks, Armin."

"I'll see you some other time, yeah? Take care of yourself!" He says, waving as he walks down the corridor with his hands in the pockets of his sweatpants.

I nod one last time as he disappears around the corner, and I look around for my shoes. They're buried beneath the pile of clothes, I find. It's 11:32am. How time flies when you're having fun- or something like that.

Armin had showered for a long time, so I hope there's enough hot water for me when I get back from
God, Levi, Levi, Levi- why does my entire existence seem to revolve solely around him now? I don't even know this guy, and suddenly every fucking thought I have has something to do with him! He's bad news, I already know that. I need one o'clock to hurry up so I can be rid of this stupid jacket and be done seeing his toxic-ass.

Besides, he looks like he does drugs for a living. I don't want to hang around with that, I'm already fucked-up enough. He's probably thirty years old or something, Jesus.

Taking the bus to the laundromat proved harder than I had originally thought, and having to sit next to some prim and proper rich-kid when I haven't showered in a few days doesn't exactly bring on the best of feelings.

The laundromat was empty, save for the Chinese owner flicking through a newspaper at the counter. I chose a quick wash, and had time to walk to the store and buy bandages. I chose the thinner ones, so I can layer them under my clothes. I can't have any telltale wrinkles or bumps that show there's something underneath the fabric.

I walked to Recon after it finished; there was, much to my dismay, a station that provided washing powder. I wonder now if Levi had seen that and laughed to himself at my idiocy, or if he hadn't seen it either.

Now, standing outside of Recon holding Levi's jacket close to me to keep in some warmth, I try to seem like I fit in. I don't want to look out of place like I did the last time I was here. I also try not to look it if the restaurant out of fear of seeing anyone I'd seen on that night. Unfortunately, it's ten past one and I'm getting impatient.

Maybe he forgot and has already gone home? What a waste of my time. I turn and look through the glass window again, still seeing only a billion people eating with clean cutlery and clinking wine glasses with a toast. Then, my eyes fall upon an auburn haired woman, what I presume is her child clinging tightly to her short dress, and Levi.

The woman leans forward and plants a soft kiss on Levi's lips, rubbing his shoulders with her small hands. He doesn't pull away, so he had expected it I suppose. In fact, he seems to lean into the kiss, his own hand finding its way to the back of her hair. The kid at her feet tugs on her dress, and their lips part with barely concealed chuckles. Levi takes the young boy's hand, and they both wave the woman goodbye. She leaves the restaurant, and at that moment, Levi and I make eye contact. He gives me a hand signal that I think means 'one minute,' but I could be wrong.

My gut churns, but I nod, turning to face the road again. I watch the woman get into her car, fumbling with her keys; she seems to be in a hurry, almost skittishly so. She's pretty, I can see why Levi would like her.

Levi and the boy come out from the side street not a minute later. "Hey."

"Hi," I say, a little harsher than intended. Why do I care if he's got a wife and kid? Maybe he really is in his thirties..

"Hope it's okay, this is Erd, Petra's son," Levi continues, motioning to the dark haired boy holding
Levi's hand tightly.

"Why wouldn't it be okay? Hi, Erd."

Erd avoids eye contact with me, but mumbles some form of a greeting. "I was thinking we could have lunch, actually. I didn't know I'd be running errands for Petra today, but it works out. Care to join us?" Levi asks.

It's the first time I've looked him in the eyes, but they're red and puffed, like he'd been crying. I doubt he'd cry, so I pin it on excessive drug usage, but I agree to his lunch offer. "Sure."

"Great. I'm taking him to our friend Hanji- she owns a restaurant down the road, so I guess we can eat there, if that's fine by you?"

"I know Hanji. Or I mean, I know of Hanji's place.."

"Hanji! Hanji! Hanji!" Erd cheers, pumping his fists in the air, hot puffs of air surrounding him.

I follow Levi and Erd to his car, and opt to sit in the backseat. Levi gives me a questioning look, but doesn't say anything as he clicks Erd into a booster seat.

Happy family car, huh? I didn't peg him for that, to be honest.

"So, how've you been?" Levi asks, adjusting the rear view mirror and settling it on me as he starts to reverse.

"Fine, great even," I lie. I can't have him thinking I'm not a functional, got-it-together member of society. Because I am. I may not have a wife and a kid and a car and a job, but at least I me doing fine, right? As fine as ever. So fine. Great! Fan-fucking-tactic, even. "You?"

"Not too bad. I just moved into a new apartment."

"Wow, that's nice."

"Yeah," Levi smirks. "So, just 'fine' or anything interesting?"

Why does he care? I haven't moved into a new apartment, that's for-fucking-sure. "A friend of mind visited this morning, so we had breakfast together and hung out. He's just been to Peru." Another lie. I don't know where he last went, and I didn't eat breakfast, but we hung out. At least, I think we did.

"Peru? Must've been a good time. The weathers better there, that's for sure."

"Yeah, it is."

My tone suggests it's time to stop. I don't want to small talk- hell, I don't want to talk at all. I don't do well with kids. In fact, I don't think I'm going to do well with Levi, either. He seems to be just as conversation-friendly as I am. I can't seem myself having a good time with him. He's got this kind of asshole face and demeanour I didn't notice the last times we met. I can't have lunch with him, I don't think I can stomach it.

I washed his jacket for him, and he wants to make small talk about the weather? No fucking way. I'm not a small talk person. It's shut up or have a proper conversation. Unless I don't want a conversation, then you can small talk.

...fuck, I'm so fucking hard to please. No wonder mom left, I can't even keep track of my own
emotions. Why can't I just be normal? I go from one extreme to another, of course everyone's leaving! Armin even left early, probably because of me!

Jesus, fuck, I hate myself! I fucking hate myself! Why can't I just die already, I can't fucking do this, I'm so over it! Fuck, fuck, fuck!

"Eren," Levi says, calmly. "We're here." His hand is on my shoulder, and Erd is standing outside of the car, looking at me with large, puppy dog eyes. It's almost as if he's pitying me.

"O-oh, sorry, I was lost in thought," I stammer, fumbling to undo the seatbelt buckle.

"Don't worry about it. Are you alright?"

"Y-yeah, I'm fine.. I guess I just-" I cut myself off, and shrug, laughing it off. I get out of the car, leaving his jacket on the backseat, and Levi shuts the door for me.

"Let's go eat, you look like you could use something to wake you up."

Yeah, like an ice bath in the middle of a lake, preferably. "Yeah, okay."

Levi holds the door open for myself and Erd. But probably only Erd. Yeah, why would I get a door held open for me? Especially by someone I don't even know.

Maybe I shouldn't stay for lunch..

"Um-"

"Levi! Erd! My tiny children, it's so lovely to see you!" A shrill voice calls. Hanji races towards us with open arms, and as Levi steps backwards with a grimace, Erd leaps forward into Hanji's arms in fits of giggles.

"Ohh I'm so happy to see you!" She chides, kissing him all over his face in a nibbling fashion. "And Levi! Do you want some kisses too?"

"No!" He's quick to say, putting his hands in front of him in defence. "No, thanks Hanji."

"Aw, you're no fun. And you! Do you want some kisse- Please tell me you're with Levi and Erd, and not a separate customer."

"I."

"Nope, he's not with us."

My blood runs cold, and I feel like my limbs are about to fall off. Fuck it! I knew I couldn't trust him! He's out to ruin my life! I can't get home from here, I don't have any bus fare and he's just going to let me walk in and out of an estuarine like some kind of fucking idiot!

Hanji's face drops, and she pales. "Oh. My. God. Sir, I am so sorry. Please, let me make up this uncomfortable situation with a free meal of your choice? I'm terribly sorry, I just assumed that you were-"

"Hanji," Levi cuts in, as my mortified expression softens only by here millimetres, "I'm kidding, he's with us. This is Eren."

"Are you fucki- Ahem, sorry Eren. God, you're such a dick sometimes, I swear! Cmon, I'll get you guys a table!" Hanji flusters, placing Erd in the ground and regaining her composure, as I do
internally. She tussles her curly, think brown hair, tightening her ponytail as she walks, before bending slightly to converse with Erd.

"It's okay," I say breathlessly, walking behind them and taking deep breaths to slow my heart rate.

I notice Levi drop back a little, as Erd practically sprints to keep up with Hanji's long legged strides. He leans into me and whispers, "Sorry if that made you uncomfortable, Eren. Hanji and I have a little game going, and I am winning."

"Don't worry about it. It's kinda funny, after the shock wears off, I guess."

Levi nods, "Alright, as long as you're not uncomfortable."

Hanji pulls out our chairs and hands us a menu each, before pulling up her own chair beside Erd and me. She's still wearing her red apron, so she's not stopped working yet. Or has she? Maybe she'll be joining us?

Wasn't I going to leave a few minutes ago?

"I'll have the usual, Hange," Levi says, sighing to stretch out his arms above his head. I don't take much notice of the way his shirt rides up a little and allows for a preview of a well-kept happy trail.

Hanji scribbles something on a notepad she seems to pull out of thin air, and Erd chants a happy, "Ravioli! Ravioli! Ravioli!"

Hanji chuckles, scribbling Erd's order too. I quickly skim the menu before she has a chance to ask me. "Um..ham and cheese sandwich, thanks," I squeak pitifully.

"Why am I even ordering, I'm not gonna eat it anyway..."

-X-

I eat it, anyway. Not all of it, but I eat one half, and half a side of chips. I realise I hadn't eaten since lunch with Jean and Armin yesterday, and the slight uncomfortableness in my stomach had only occurred just as I'd started to eat the sandwich.

By the time I've finished what I'm going to eat, Levi's phone starts to ring. He apologises, and says it's important, before answering.

"Hello?" - "We're here now." - "He's fine." - "I can do that. Is everything okay?" - "Okay, bye."

Levi sighs and rubs his temples. "Sorry, my ex. Erd, looks like you and Hange are gonna be having a little sleepover. Isn't that exciting?" Levi's expression and tone of voice are anything but excites, but Erd doesn't seem to mind that.

"Yay! Hanji! Hanji! Hanji!" Erd cheers, bouncing up and down in his seat.

I can't help but wonder why Hanji would look after his kid. I mean, his wife's obviously going out, and he doesn't appear to be going anywhere, so why Hanji? Maybe something happened.. God, I knew I shouldn't have stayed, I'm probably just in the way here.

Levi took pity on me, that's the only reason he invited me here. Why didn't I just see that? Who the fuck would want to have lunch with me, I'm a screw up; I'm angry and sad and scared all at the same fucking time. Why can't I just be normal again?

Hanji approaches the table, with the bill. "What's up?" She asks, sitting down at her designated
"Looks like he's gonna have to stay at your place tonight. Is that okay, or should I make other arrangements?"

"No, no, are you kidding? I love this kid! I was gonna head off soon, actually, once you'd payed your tab."

"Yeah, yeah, I'll do that now." Levi hands her cash, and tells her to keep the change. I watch the entire exchange without a word, even as another waitress comes over to take out plates.

Hanji walks into what I presume is the back room, or some sort of employee room, and returns with her handbag and car keys. "Alright, kid, let's get outta here. Me 'n you got a lot of movies to watch!"

As if those were the magic words, Levi quickly stands to his feet. I follow him, naturally, and we all leave the restaurant together, with Levi hot on Hanji's heels. "Nothing too scary, okay? And remember he has to actually sleep. And that Petra's trying him on gluten free so nothing too sugary, and make sure to-"

"Levi! Hun! Relax a little, okay? You'll do us all a favour. Its gonna be fine. How many times have a watched this kid?" Hanji chuckles, one arm around Erd's shoulders.


"And how many times have we made a trip to ER?"

"...None. Sorry, Hanji. I trust you."

"Good, and so does Petra, just remember who's looking after him here! You've gotta learn to relax a little okay? Don't be so uptight. I'm a grown-up, leave it to me petit."

Levi grimaces and scoffs, "Tch. Whatever, lunettes de merde."

They speak French? And if Hanji's a grown-up, what does that make Levi?

We wave goodbye to Hanji, and watch as her care drives off. "Don't be a stranger, Eren!" She calls out the window, winking at me from underneath her sunglasses. I feign a chuckle and nod, still waving at her.

Levi seems to be waiting a little longer that one usually waits after someone drives off. I don't want to come in on it, but I can't keep my mouth shut, and curiosity gets the better of me. "I didn't know you spoke French."

"The more you know, I guess."

My shoulders tense. Maybe I shouldn't've said anything. God, I'm so stupid. Now I've made him uncomfortable.

No. He shouldn't be such a snarky asshole about it. It was only a comment, I wasn't trying to offend him. He needs to pull the six-foot pole out of his arse and calm the fuck down, for fucks sake!

Levi sighs. It's a sigh I can recognise as one of frustration - I do it too. But, who's he frustrated with? Me? I can't believe it I only asked a question! I didn't ask for him to get all pissy with me.

Levi's demeanour has changed, since Erd left. I can't help but feel like he was putting on an act. Maybe to get back with his girlfriend? Was the girl he kissed at Recon his girlfriend? Petra, was it?
Does he want to impress Erd to be with her again?

I want to go off at him, or to at least ask why he's suddenly being such an asshole, but I didn't. Maybe I just never saw it because I was too busy thinking that someone actually wanted to talk to me? Stupid thought, I guess. Instead, I tell him that it's probably best I get going, and he offers to drive me home.

He tells me to sit in the front seat, and fiddles with the radio for a while, before finally starting the engine. "Sorry, kid."

I turn to stare at him, mouth slightly agape. I clear my throat, "For what?"

"Everything."

I go to speak again, to ask my usual tyrant of 'why's' and 'how comes,' but I don't. I feel like every ounce of energy or hot-headedness left me from the time it took to walk from the curb to Levi's car.

It's relatively silent, save for the radio serving as background noise to hum of the cars engine. His car smells fresh, but there's something behind it that is bitter and heavy and dense, like alcohol or weed killer or smoke. I haven't seen him smoke, though.

I tell him to drop me off 'a few blocks from my house, because I have errands to run,' and he complies. He drops me at the supermarket, per my request, and unlocks the car door for me to get out. He doesn't get out of the car himself, opting simply to stare at some blank space ahead of him.

I stop, mid-way out of the car, and turn to him. Something about him seems smaller, all of a sudden. Like he's shrunken into the seat, into some dark shadowy part of the car that only I can see.

I don't want to ask, though. I'm sick of asking questions.

"Bye, Levi. Thanks for lunch."


I shut the door of his car, and he drives off almost instantaneously. Seeing him go from normal to angry to forlorn and lost; it's kinda depressing. I know it can't be entirely my fault, but I can't help but want to take the blame. I didn't even apologise, he apologised. But for what? For reacting like an asshole or for something else?

I feel almost empty, walking the chilly Trost streets with my hands in my pockets. Thin blankets of ice lie over cars, street signs, and anything in between. I pass the frosted flowers in front of the flower shop, and the frosted-over door into the police station. Everything seems so quiet in the late afternoon. It's almost nostalgic, for whatever reason.

All I know is that my mind won't stop thinking and overthinking until I settle what I did to make Levi so upset. Maybe you really can't get to know someone that quickly? Or we do see through rose-coloured glasses when someone offers a helping hand or a piece of advice?

The sky grumbles like an empty stomach, and dark clouds roll in both over the city and over my head. The rain usually doesn't come in until winter, no matter how cold it is, but today's events have made winter feel ever closer.

I'd like to say to myself, 'at least nothing else can go wrong,' but I don't want to jinx it. The Universe seems to be plotting against me, in recent times.
The text-tone of my phone makes me jump, and I look around to make sure no one saw me startle before checking it.

**Unknown Number**  
5:07pm  
Hi Eren, I'm sorry about how I acted today. I really wasn't feeling well, but that's no excuse to treat you poorly. You also left a box of bandages in the pocket of my jacket. Do you need me to drop them to you later in the week?

**Unknown Number**  
5:07pm  
From Levi  

*Fuck.*

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Chapter End Notes

Eren's mood fluctuates, as he's kind of at that 'starting point' of the descent into depression, where you're either mad, sad, tired, or all three. Sorry if that's hard to keep up with.  
Levi? I haven't quite grasped how to write him, yet. If you have any tips to make his character more believable/relatable, that would be very nice!  
There will be more about Armin and the other characters later, too.

Thanks to everyone who has read this so far, I am overjoyed at the response this has gotten! I mean- WOW!  
Stay safe. xx
I slam the door of my room shut, kicking my shoes off into the room to hit a nearby wall or piece of furniture. "Fuck!" I shout, banging my hands against the wall. I keep banging them, a string of curses flowing from my mouth like a mantra, until I notice the plaster cracking under my knuckles.

I can't afford the fucking rent let alone to fix damages.

"I'm such a fucking idiot," I whine, leaning my head into my forearm.

I left my fucking bandages in his fucking car. You've got to be kidding me! What am I gonna say!? What am I supposed to do now! What kind of fucking fuckhead am I!?

My breath comes out ragged, and my legs shake, threatening to give way and send me toppling to the floor. I turn around and lean against the door, sliding down it's cool polished wood surface and throwing my head into my hands.

What the fuck is wrong with me... I can't even fuck up right.

It's barely evening, and the far-too-cheerful voices echoing down the hallway tell me it's going to be a long night. Drunkards, I can guess, coming back for a snooze before hitting the town again later in the evening - and probably waking me up with their childish yelling and chanting at some ungodly hour of the morning.

I want to cry. I need the natural release. But, nothing comes out. My emotions have dried up, and I'm stuck letting dry sobs escape me, causing me no relief but to cough.

What's the point of living. I really don't understand it anymore. It's not fun, it's not 'the best years of my life,' it's not even fucking worth thinking about. Life is fucking me up the ass right now, why the fuck can't I fuck it back? Have I really been that shitty of a person to deserve all of this?

...of course I have. Why would I even ask that? Of course I have. I'm a failure - a nobody. People don't want to be around me unless they need me. My parents don't want me, my sisters moved away from me. Why would I even think that I didn't deserve all of this?
My phone buzzes from my thigh pocket, sending vibrations along the butchered scar tissue that has yet been given the chance to air, let alone heal up.

**From: Dad**

6:17pm

Eren, I'm going to call you in five minutes. Please, answer your phone.
I'm worried about you.

*I'm worried about you.*

Worried.

Dad, is worried about me?

My stomach tightens, and anxiety rushes through my veins like bath water being sucked down the drain. It's a fast and cruel sensation that attacks my system all at once. I fear for what is to come, but not a single part of me is telling me not to answer.

Is it because he said he's worried about me, or because I want to be demoralised and beaten half to death again, knowing damn well I deserve it?

Incoming Call...

Dad

I'm shaking, my hands threatening to drop my phone into my lap. Or out the window, whichever is more convenient. *Fuck, fuck fuck - I can't answer it! He'll come and find me and fuck me over again I know it! He'll see what I've done to myself! He'll do something out of anger or frustration or whatever I just can't fucking do it-

I go to decline the call.

I touch the answer icon, completely by accident.

'Eren? Eren... Thank god. Are you alright? Where are you?'

"D-Dad I."

'Listen, I need to be upfront with you. Please listen to me, I need to know I have your attention, even though I don't deserve it.'

I hum, telling him to proceed. I can always hang up whenever I want, I haven't told him where I am yet. It would be as if this never happened. Besides, what exactly can he say that will make everything any better? Nothing, that's what.

'I've been a terrible father. I've looked out only for myself, and my selfish actions have driven away the three people I care about most in this world; Carla, Mikasa, and you. I had ambitions of having the perfect family, and I have done nothing but screw it up with my unhealthy habits. But it ends here. I'm changing, Eren. I've been in rehabilitation for the past two weeks, and I was discharged today. I want to see you, Eren. You're my first born child - my only blood child. I love your sister, too, but you're my flesh and blood. Please, let me see you, son."

I don't know what to say. What can I say? I don't want to see him, but he sounds genuine. Am I truly going to be resilient and let years worth of trauma be forgiven in less than an hour? Am I that weak?

Of course I am.
"When..."

'Pardon? What was that?'

His tone had risen, my gut tightened. "When do you want to see me?"

'I wanted to pick you up and take you home. I've been sober for over three weeks, and I haven't had an alcoholic beverage of any sort since you left. I'm safe and able to drive, and I've really missed your company.'

I lean the phone out of earshot and let out a shaky sigh. I can't do this, I can't do this, I can't do this! I can't fucking do this! I don't want to do this. I'm gonna fucking cry..

"O-Okay." I try to hold in my tears. I can't have him hear me crying, or he'll never let up on the fact that I 'can't look after myself.' Or that I'm a pissbaby, useless excise of a son. "I'm near Garrison Drive. I'll meet you on the corner, at the park."

'In ten minutes? Is that okay? Will you be safe until then? It is raining, maybe somewhere more sheltered?'

Will you be safe until then? What kind of- He actually cares for my safety? No. It's a bullshit excuse. I can't believe him. I can't trust him with anything, no matter what he says or does.

"Yeah, it's fine. I'll wait on the other side, then. See you."

As I hang up the phone, dread defines my existence, and my blood runs cold at the thought of voluntarily getting into the car with the very same abusive father who beat me half to death no less than a month ago.

He expects forgiveness, and unfortunately, I don't think I'm strong enough to say no. I'm not financially stable enough to say no, either.

I'd payed this week's rent already, so I guess they can't complain if I leave. Maybe I should get them to keep me on a reservations list? Do they even have one of those? Or can Connie work his magic again? Where do I go if they can't do that..

And what am I gonna do about those scars? I can't shower at home without them seeing them.. I'll have to bring my clothes into the bathroom. Fuck, I used to walk around naked, someone's gonna notice and question me! Dad never liked that behaviour though...I could bullshit something and say I've been changing too? Yeah, he'd like that wouldn't he. Maybe he'd even go softer on me if I said I was trying to change me ways too.

I can't bring myself to have another fit of anger, so I slowly and regrettably pack my backpack full of my clothes. Remembering the box of blades in the drawer, I take them out and neatly place them between my clothing. I'll unpack when I get home and hide them somewhere. The best place is my room, no one ever goes in there.

I should throw them out.. I said I would..

But at least then they're easy access for me. I won't have to leave the safety of my bedroom to seek comfort. I can just reach into my drawer, or beneath my pillow.

I don't bother to pack neatly, besides making sure the box of blades is secure. I throw on my sweatpants and a baggy tee, shoving my shoes into my bag. I'll go bare feet - if he's got any real compassion, maybe he'll know I'm not so much as a fuckup, but a product of neglect and
I read that in a psychology book once, that children are the products of their parents. Obviously that's true, I mean with DNA and everything - it doesn't take a genius. But I mean it in a figurative sense.

I never thought anything of it back in that dank old library, surrounded by thousands of books I'd never read and the stench of old people, urine and dope mingled between the pages of neglected high school theory manuscripts. I don't know why I'm thinking back to that hellhole now, nearly five minutes before I return to that hellholes’ sequel.

Home. If I can call it that.

I wonder what's changed? If anything? I'm sure it's colder without the body heat of three hot-headed people and Mikasa's constant need for the heater to be turned on. Maybe it's completely the same.

I take the key cards down to the front desk, and explain that I am heading home. Yes, I've paid my rent this week, I tell them. Yes, you can check my account. Yes, Kev knows I am a client. Are these questions even valid? I've paid, I'm debt free. I don't bother asking for an allowance if things don't turn out right. The small laminate sign on the office door that I see on my way out tells me that, "You're always welcome! Everyone's accepted."

I sure hope they mean that.

Dad's car is already parked on the opposite side of the curb when I arrive at the corner. He's reading a newspaper, seemingly jittery. Maybe I shouldn't do this after all. He spots me, and immediately jumps out if the car, completely oblivious to the oncoming traffic and other pedestrians as he approaches me. I can't help but flinch as his arms open wide, narrowly missing my fave, and engulf me in a large hug.

"E-Eren, I missed you," He mumbles into my shoulder, sniffling and patting my back. I return the hug, hesitantly and half-heartedly. I'm all to aware of the black car parked behind dad's, and of our location. We're outside of Recon. That's Levi's car.

I tense, and dad pulls back immediately. "D-did I hurt you? I'm sorry! Please, forgive me!" He shouts, in broken sobs.

"N-no, dad, it's fine. I'm just...cold, is all," I lie. It is cold outside, as always in Trost, but today is one of the chillier days. Dad now his head and chuckles, agreeing with me, before he motions to take my backpack from me whilst we walk to the car. "Oh no, I'll keep it with me, thanks."

We cross the road and I hop into the backseat. I know dad won't comment on it, but some part of me feels uncomfortable with sitting back here. Almost as if I'm wanting him to get mad at me, even though I'm not. I'm afraid of him, I know that, but I still feel guilt when treating him like a lesser being.

Another of one my many fucking flaws.

"So," Dad starts, steering out of his park and speeding off down the road. "How have you been, Eren?"

"Fine. I stayed with Connie. He's joined a youth group and asked me if I wanted to join them on a retreat, so that's where I was for the majority of the time I was away." Surely even dad isn't stupid enough to believe that I would join a youth group. Connie, yes. Me? No way in hell. I'm not motivated enough. But, I'm living on a little bit of hope at this point.

"Really? That's incredible. I'm glad you did something well with your time away." He took the bait,
and I internally smirk with satisfaction. But then, he clears his throat and starts to speak again. "Did you know that that Kirschtein boy is gay?"

I sigh, a little louder than intended. "He's not gay, dad. He's bisexual. But yes, I do know that."

"Bisexual? No such thing. That's codeword for confused. He's gay alright. Bought some poor confused boy home last night and he stayed over. What a waste of potential for such a handsome, wealthy looking young man. He could do so much better than that Kirschtein brat."

"It's pronounced Jean."

We don't speak for the rest of the drive home. Usually, I'd feel some sort of guilt about not speaking to anyone else in a car, but today, I just don't care. Why does he always have to bag my friends? I barely have any, so why try to drive away the ones I actually do have?

I don't deserve them. Maybe it'd be better if they were driven away...

Dad turns down our street, and my chest tightens. Similarly to the way your chest tightens when someone texts you at 3am, telling you that they need to talk; you think of every bad thing you've ever done and suddenly you can't breathe. It's suffocating, but this time for different reasons.

Stepping foot into this house again means that I've walked backwards. I left and made my own way as a way of moving on. Now, I'm being pushed backwards. Can I escape after retracing my steps? Or will I get lost again?

Mikasa's car is parked out the front of the house. The tightness in my chest leaves for a brief moment, before dad starts to speak again. "Your sister doesn't know that you ran away, so let's not mention that."

I can hear the snap in my mind. "Ran away!? You fucking kicked me out of the house!" I shout, throwing my hands in defence.

"Now Eren, let's not make waves. Mistakes were made, it's time to move on from that. Only tell her that you decided to stay with Connie on that retreat, not that you left without my consent."

"Whatever."

You fucking- Fuck! I never should have gone with you! Asshole! God, I'm such a fucking idiot for believing you!

The front door opens as dad pulls into the driveway, and Mikasa is leaning against the doorframe. As the engine is cut, I immediately get out of the car, hoisting my backpack over my shoulders and speed walking to the front porch. Mikasa meets me half way, and wraps her arms around me in a tight hug. Tears threaten to escape my eyes, but I hold them in as best I can and settle for sniffling into her shoulder.

"Oh Eren, I missed you," Mikasa whispers, pulling me impossibly closer and rolling strands of my hair between her fingers. Mom used to do that to me when I was hurting as a child.

Suddenly, I feel a lot smaller than I thought I was.

"Me too," I croak back. "Me too."

Dad passed us and tells us to get inside, out of the cold. "We'll put the heater on, maybe get a movie going, or go out for dinner. How does that sound, hm?"
"Sounds good," Mikasa answers. She doesn't let me go as we enter the house. It feels like her grip on my waist tightens, and she rubs at the fabric of my jumper. Dad walks up the stairs, telling us he's going to shower. As soon as we hear the bathroom door shut, Mikasa guides me to the couch.

"Eren," She starts. "How are you, really?"

I swallow thickly. "I'm fine. A little shaken up, I guess."

"About?" She prods.

"Being back. Here. With dad, and you. Aren't you living with Annie?" I ask, trying to change the subject. My mind is foggy, and my sentences won't form properly. I know I'm scared.

"I am, but I'm staying here for a little while. Where did you go? Dad wouldn't tell me."

"I- uh," I clear my throat. "I went with Connie, on a mission. We packed things up to send off to Ethiopia and camped out to raise money and stuff."

Mikasa looks skeptical. "The same Connie that Annie and I saw at the shops two days ago, after coming home from his anniversary get away with Sasha?"

Fuck. "Aha....that'd be the one..."

"Eren," Mikasa says, placing her hands on top of mine. "You don't have to lie to me. I'm not going to push you, but you need to know that I love you, okay? More than anything in the whole world. By blood or not, you're my brother, and you can't change that. Tell me where you were or not, I won't push you, but I need to know that you were safe with your choices. Were you safe?"

"I- Yes! Yes, of course I was safe! God Mikasa, just let me be, okay? I just needed to get out of the house, that's all-"

"Get out of the house by your own means, or were you forced?"

She hit the nail right on the head. She's always been intuitive. But, "I walked out on my own. I made my own choice to leave, and I was safe, and everything is okay, and you don't need to worry, okay?"

Mikasa looks me dead in the eyes and doesn't let her eyes wander.

"Okay?" I repeat.

"Fine. Okay. But Eren, if you're not going to accept help when it's offered, you'll never find closure for whatever's going on with you. That's all I can say."

What's that supposed to mean?

Mikasa stands up and walks to the kitchen, pours herself a glass of water, and tells me she's going to get ready to go out for dinner. "I suggest you do the same, that outfit looks terrible," She smirks.

I reluctantly take her advice and head up to my own room. The handle on my door feels heavier than that of the one at the motel, and the smell inside is stale. Dust gathers around the light as I switch it on, and I can see layers of dust on everything. It hasn't been opened since I left. Various clothes are still in the same position as how I left them.

I should be safe with the blades, then.
Carefully, I empty out my backpack, sorting through the clothes and finding the small box of blades. The cardboard is starting to become weak, so I throw the box into my waste paper bin, and stand holding the blades in my hand.

There's six of them. Two are larger, thicker blades, and the other four are thin, precise ones. I had used the thin ones, I know that much.

I wonder what kind of wounds I'd have if I used the big ones? Maybe it'd hurt. Maybe I'd bleed out. Maybe I'd just pass out again.

I flip them around in my hands, deciding on where to hide them. I decide to hide them in a pair of socks, which I keep separate from the other pairs, shoving them beneath the spare pillows beside the one I actually use.

I dig around through my wardrobe for clean clothes. It's cold, so I don't need to worry about looking weird wearing sleeves. I chose a clean pair of jeans, a short sleeved graphic tee, and a light jacket. Mikasa knocks on my door shorting after I brush my hair, telling me that they're both ready to go. "I'll be out in a minute!" I tell her.

I give myself a once over in the mirror. God, when did I get so shabby? They're not noticeable, but I can practically see the scars underneath the fabric of my clothes. Each line of cotton, or crack in the wall, reminds me of everything I'm hiding now. The mistake I made... Was it actually a mistake?

I'm not sure I can tell anymore.

"Eren! C'mon, I've only got an hour booking for the table!" Dad calls out from downstairs. I can hear him fiddling with the car keys, and Mikasa digging through her handbag.

"Coming!" I reply, messing my hair a little before grabbing my phone, switching off the light and shutting my door. It's only on 30%, but it'll get me through some awkward conversation, at least.

Dad hurries us out the door, after commenting on what attractive children he has. Surely he hasn't been sober too long, he's never once acknowledged me as his child, let alone attractive. I thought I was a sorry excuse for a son? I guess it's only when he isn't feeling like an asshole about being one. Maybe.

Mikasa channel surfs for a while, before finding a radio station that suits her taste. I don't mind letting her choose the music, or sitting in the front seat. In fact, I prefer it. The quieter I can stay, the better I'll feel. I prefer to be invisible than to be berated for one thing or another, as it often happens. Dad sighs loudly, before clearing his throat and clicking his tongue. "So," Dad starts. "What should we do after dinner?"

I can practically hear the sarcastic comment Mikasa makes in her head but refrains from sharing aloud. "I have an assignment I need to work on," She says. I know she's lying through her teeth - she wouldn't even think about going out to dinner if she had a paper due.

"Oh, right, right. Studies are important. And you, Eren?" Dad asks, adjusting the rear-view mirror.

"Um... I'm pretty tired. I'll probably shower and go to bed early, I think." Dad nods passively, but clenches his teeth. Go on, I dare you to say something.

"Sleep is probably best for you after that trip. You're both right. Looks like a relaxing night in then, hm?"

"Mm," We acknowledge. 'Relaxing,' you mean fearful and uncomfortable, right dad? I'm afraid to even breathe too loudly in fear that he'll loose his cool. People can't change unless they want to - I'm
not sure he wanted to.

-X-

The waitress brings over our orders very quickly, so we spend only about ten minutes making small talk together. I barely join in, but Mikasa seems to be at least trying. I can't help but feel like there's something more on her mind than just being home with me and dad.

Dad clears his throat, and with a mouthful of food says, "Your mother's coming back tonight."

Mikasa and I drop our cutlery. Wide eyed, we gawk at him. "What?"

"She was staying up in Ragnako Village with her sister. Apparently your aunt had another miscarriage, so they went to the doctors and she was told she's infertile. Poor dear, she's heartbroken." For someone telling us this news, he sure doesn't sound like he cares much.

"R-really? That's terrible.." Mikasa mumbles. "But, mom is coming back home tonight? Right?"

"Right."

"I'm so happy. I thought she'd never come back," I say, quietly lowering my eyes and shifting food around my plate. She's coming back home. Mom is coming back home! I didn't drive her away forever. I can't help the small smile that ghosts my lips as we start to eat out meals again.

I can't eat all of my lasagna. After a few weeks of only eating one meal a day, at seems my stomach isn't large enough- or can't take- normal portion sizes of food. I'm not hungry nowadays, anyway, but I figured I'd at least give it a try.

What's wrong with me?

Dad pays and tips the waitress, and we leave the little diner as quickly as we came in. Moms gonna be home. We have to be there before she gets there. I need to brush my hair, and put on that shirt she got me for my birthday last year, that'll make her think that I'm good enough to stay home with-

Dad grabs my arm tightly, pulling me back onto the sidewalk, and tears sting at my eyes immediately. "Watch out, Eren! You can't walk into oncoming traffic, you idiot!" He shouts at me, throwing my arm away. "Watch your fucking surroundings."

"A-h, okay. Sorry." I rub at my arm cautiously, feeling my skin burn around the edges of the cuts. *Fuck.*

"Oh c'mon, it wasn't that hard. Let's go, now!" Dad acts like we're five or six, telling us when to cross the road and to be careful of opening the door that's on the traffic side. *I'm not brain dead, I know when to fucking do these things. I'm nineteen for christ sake!* But being nineteen doesn't stop my arm from stinging where he grabbed me.

*It's a reminder that I can't look my best for mom, because if I take off these sleeves, I'll never look best for anything. I'll just disappoint her even more.*

*Why did I have to fuck up again? Why do I always fuck things up for myself?*

There's a slight energy in the air of the car as we turn down our long stretch of suburban road. Each large, two story house glows with bright lightbulbs illuminating through the windows, and front porch lights dazzling against the light drizzle of rain. Other, small houses like ours, sit quaintly behind their front gardens, with a dim light flickering on from sensors. Jean's mansion comes into
I take a deep breath, and place my hands on the door handle. It's okay. Everything is going to be okay. I know it.

I push the door open, and mom stands with open arms and tears pricking at the corners of her eyes. "I knew you'd be here first," She sniffs.

It's a tearful reunion. Mom wraps me in a tight hug, running her hands down my back and over my shoulder blades. She wetly kisses my cheeks, wiping hers and my own tears from my face, before embracing me again. "M-om," I choke, tears spilling down my face down the back of her shirt. "I missed you."

"Oh baby, I missed you too," She breathes, as Mikasa and dad walk through the open front door.

"Mom!" Mikasa says, barely above a whisper. She joins us in a heap on the floor, wrapping her arms around mom and me and mom brings her into it, and we stay there, not saying anything.

Dad chuckles. "It's good to have you back, Carla. We missed you."

I open my eyes and glare at a spot of carpet in front of me. 'We,' he says. There's no way he missed her. And how would he know if we did anyway? Fucking liar.

Mom pats us both in our backs, and we all stand up. "I'm glad to be back. But, we need to have a talk, first. Please." Her eyes are soft and shiny from crying, and her face is contorted into a small smile.

Being only an inch taller than her, she seems so small and frail compared to me. She looks it, I feel it. Mikasa is taller than both of us, and she's always looked (and been) so much stronger, both mentally and physically, compared to mom and I. I guess that's why she plays the role of 'protector' in my life, because she is probably the only person I have left who I trust not to leave me. Even though she did leave when mom did...

We all sit on the couch, and mom turns off the TV. I sit beside Mikasa, but not too close. Dad sits on his own armchair, and mom sits on the other armchair. "I want to say first, I am so, so sorry that I left without warning. Sometimes things get on top of us that we just can't handle, and we have to escape for a while."

You're not fucking wrong there, mom. She's thought about how to word this, I know it. It wasn't just life that got on top of her and fucked her over.

"I should have left a note, or at least turned my cell phone on, but I just couldn't. I needed to escape, and maybe it wasn't the best decision I've ever made, but I made it work for me. I didn't think of how you two would feel, and I'm sorry for that. Sometimes we act only on our impulses, and it really doesn't get us anywhere..."

"I'm apologising for everything I've done or haven't done that's caused you to worry. I love you all dearly, and I won't leave without warning again. I promise."
There isn't a dry eye in the room. Mom bursts into tears. I burst into tears. A few tears fall from dads eyes. Even Mikasa is wiping away at her cheeks to keep them from flowing down her face. "Come here," Mom chokes, and we both move to cuddle her on the armchair. Dad doesn't come over but he removes his glasses and dries his eyes.

*Maybe people can change for the greater good if they really want to. Maybe dad has changed his ways, for us?*

Someone knocks softly at my door, and I open my eyes carefully against the Rays of sunlight illuminating dust mites through the window. "Come in," I say groggily, messing my bed hair a little and rolling onto my side.

"It's just me," Mikasa says, opening my door.

"You stayed here last night?" I ask, one eye open.

"Yeah. Um, I'm just asking if you'd like to come out with us for a double date at the park. There's a festival going on in central, and Thomas invited me to go, but I was already going with Annie so-"

"Thomas? You're going with Thomas?" I sit up, hands on either side of me, and glare at her. "I thought you called it off with that fucknut?"

"Eren, please. He explained everything to me. It's fine now. But, Annie will third wheel if it's just us three, so I was wondering if you wanted to come? At least then it wouldn't be as awkward."

"You want me to play Annie's date," I deadpan.

"Not exactly... Will you come?"

I sigh. "When?"

"We'll leaving to pick Annie up in about half an hour, and then we'll meet Thomas at Central. Sound fair?"

"Fine," I groan.

"Thanks, Eren," Mikasa says with a smile, before closing my door and presumably going to get ready. Fuck. I don't want to go to this at all.... Oh well. It's for Mikasa, not for Annie. Mikasa's done a lot for me, this is the least I can do, right?

I put on my clothes from yesterday, but swap the jacket for a lighter one. My blinds are open, and I'm already a little hot from being in the sunlight for a few minutes as it is. I decide to swap the jeans for a pair of shorts instead, just in case.

Shorts, short sleeve shirt and jacket, and a pair my Vans. It's an odd combination, but it'll do. No, it has to do.

For autumn, it's pretty fucking warm outside. Mikasa and I get into her car, and she cranks up the air conditioner as soon as the engine starts. "How can you wear a jacket in this weather? I'm so used to it being cold all the time, this slightly above freezing weather is like a trip to Mercury."
"Yeah, I know. I just expect that it'll get cold as the day goes on. Even summer here is like autumn, so I'm not expecting miracle weather like this for too long," I lie. Well, I sort of lie.

"You're probably right."

The drive to Annie's isn't too long, but it would've been shorter if the traffic had run smoother. I hate afternoon traffic. It's probably the only thing that I'd ever chose to walk against rather than drive in.

We arrive at Annie's apartment in under half an hour, and Annie is sitting on a small wall on the curb, holding a large, fabric shopping bag full of stuff. She and Mikasa exchange waves, and she approaches the car as we pull up. Seeing me in the front, she mutters to herself and opens the back door.

"I've been exiled, huh?" She comments, only half jokingly.

"Yep, sorry Annie. It's sibling law," I state.

"Right, right."

Mikasa explains to us how the day will go, and that this is hers and Thomas' trial date, which is why she's glad we could both come.

"So, we're only dead weight?" I ask.

"No! Of course not. Annie and I were going to go and invite you anyway, it's just that it's better if you're both here so that if Thomas tries anything stupid, we can just leave."

"I'm glad we fit your backup plan," Annie dead pans. My stomach tightens, because I almost feel the same way, and I expect Mikasa to go off at her, but she doesn't.

"C'mon Annie, you said you were fine with this before! Toughen up, princess," Mikasa jokes. Annie cracks a smile, and I'm a little less (or more) intimidated. I can't entirely tell.

We arrive at Trost Central at around 3pm, and I can already see Thomas' prissy ass leaning against the hood of his beige Mercedes. I've never seen the stereotypical 'flaunting-my-rich-family-in-what-I-wear' vest and slacks combo, until now. He looks like a dick, does he know this? Probably. You are what you eat, right? Jesus Christ I hate him.

We pull into a carpark on the opposite side to him, and he walks over to us and greets us individually. "You're Annie? It's so lovely to finally meet you. I've heard only good things about you. Thank you for looking after Mikasa," Thomas says to Annie, taking her hand in his and shaking it with vigour.

"Yeah, thanks," Annie retorts, pulling her hand out of his grip very strongly. I think I might like Annie.

"And you must be Eren. Mikasa's little brother, right? My, you're nothing like I pictured you. I thought you'd look more like a ruffian, rather than a normal boy. It's a pleasure to finally meet you," He shakes my hand and leans into my ear to whisper, "soon-to-be brother in law."

No. Uh uh. No fucking way. "Yeah, you too."

That's never gonna happen. There's no way I'm letting Mikasa marry this fuck head. She's only 21! There's no way I'm letting her marry him! He's an asshole!
"Mikasa, my queen. I'm glad you agreed to come. I miss you every times you're not with me," He takes her waist and kisses her deeply. "Come, I've already reserved us seats by the Ferris wheel, beside the fountain."

I've never been more glad that Jean is the way he is. He's rich, sure, probably richer than Thomas, but at least he considers himself 'one of us' and not some ethereal being. He's not an arrogant wealthy guy, he's just a normal guy who happens to be wealthy.

_Fucking Thomas. Fuck!_

"Hey," Annie says, quietly. I notice I'm stomping my feet rather loudly as I follow Thomas and Mikasa closely behind. It's attracting attention. "Do us a favour, try not to cause another continental drift, alright."

"Fuck off," I seethe, shoving my hands deep into the pockets of my khaki shorts. Annie chuckles slightly behind me.

"Baby's got bite, huh? Listen, I'm not keen on being here either, but I am. We're both here for Mikasa, not for that gold-plated fruit cake. So let's both pretend to enjoy ourselves, if not for the sake of our own mental health, but for Mikasa, alright?"

I slow to walk at her pace and side-eye her. "Fine. You're right."

As we get closer to where Thomas had our reserved seats, Annie and I speed up to walk closer to them. He pulls out a chair for Mikasa to sit on, whilst Annie and I sit next to each other and pull out our own chairs. Annie whispers something along the lines of 'kiss ass,' and I chuckle under my breath at her completely unrelenting bitch-face expression, aimed wholeheartedly at Thomas.

If Thomas hadn't already proved to be an asshole, the look he throws the homosexual couple who share a kiss to our left really helps us make up our minds.

"Geez, maybe we should move," Thomas comments, pausing before he sits down. "We don't wanna have to look at them tongue-fucking each other the whole time we're here."

"What's wrong with that? Just don't look. They're only a couple," Mikasa says, smiling as she takes off her sunglasses to face the direction Thomas is looking in - right at the two men sitting by the fountain. "If it bothers you, do you want to trade seats?"

"No. It's not the kissing that bothers me, it's the fact that it's two dudes. That's fucking disgusting, you know? God, go do it some place that isn't in public. We normal people don't need to see that shit."

I feel Annie stiffen beside me, and she lowers her sunglasses to look menacingly at Thomas. "You a homophobe?"

"Of course not, it's their lifestyle, I just don't like seeing it displayed around all the time," He retorts, glaring at Annie.

"Sounds pretty homophobic to me, Thomas," She smirks. "You know, they're probably super thrown off by your sweater vest that they have to display their homosexuality to show you that they're like you."

A vein appears on Thomas' forehead. "I'm not gay!" He shouts, slamming his fists on the table. The gay men at the fountain look over and chuckle, hiding their laughter behind their hands, before standing up and waving girlishly at Thomas and leaving.
"That's the most tasteful Fuck You I've ever seen in my life."

"Eren, Annie," Mikasa sighs. "Could you two go and get some drinks? They steel soft drinks at the marquee by the front gate. I'll have a diet coke, please."

Thomas sighs, and sits down. "Good idea, Mika. I'll have a sparkling water, thanks."

Annie and I grunt, before standing up and walking off rather quickly. Annie shoves her hands into her hoodie pockets and scoffs. I do the same, almost. We're a few metres closer to the cafe marquee by the time Annie finally starts to verbalise her seething hatred.

"I'm not going to talk about them behind them back, but I have to say, Thomas is an absolute asshole," Annie says as we stand in the long line at the cafe.

"You only just realised? Yeah, he is," I agree. "What made you see that?"

Annie huffs. "Why do you think? He's a racist, sexist, homophobic piece of shit. He treats Mikasa like dirt, he swears at his family, and he has a meninist shirt he wears un-ironically!"

I chuckle, "Are you serious?"

She cracks a smile, stifling her own laughter. "Yes, I'm serious! God, he's an actual asshole. I don't want to come in on it to Mikasa, because she speaks so highly of him. I just can't see how she can't see what a piece of shit he is. I mean, what happened back there? I swear to God if Reiner or Bertholdt was around there would've been an all out war."

"He's an asshole, I agree. I wish Mikasa would leave him; he's toxic. But, we can't do anything about it...she's always been the type to trust only her own judgement."

"I know. It sucks. But there's not much we can do, right?" Annie sighs. I nod in agreement.

Annie buys the drinks and we take them back to the table. Apparently Thomas' mother rang and said that they couldn't stay very long because the Wagner's have some big, fancy dinner they've arranged for the family's business, and Mikasa is invited as Thomas' plus one.

He apologises for the inconvenience, and as he hugs Mikasa goodbye, Annie comments on his leave of absence not inconveniencing them in the slightest. I chuckle at that, and Mikasa stabs Annie with her glare.

We all walk back to Mikasa's car, and Thomas shakes mine and Annie's hands with hesitant kindness. He kisses Mikasa and Annie and I both pile into the backseat of her car, to wait for her.

"If I stayed out there, I probably would've passed out from the stupidity that radiates off of him," Annie says, flatly, clicking in her seatbelt.

"Agreed. I fucking hate him, and his homo-erotic sweater vest."

Annie laughs at that. As in, nose snorting laughter that only ceases as Mikasa gets into the car and glares into the backseat. "You two," She fumes. "Are in big fucking trouble."

Annie and I exchange glances, before bursting into fits of giggles. Mikasa doesn't understand, but sighs angrily and starts the engine. We drive to Annie's apartment, and Mikasa says she isn't staying there tonight, but that she'll be back by Tuesday. Annie nods, understanding, and hugs us both goodbye.
For someone so threatening, she gives me a soft and comforting hug, and I find myself missing her body heat as we part ways. The night is chillier, so she hurries inside the apartment complex, and we hurry back into the car.

We drive back to the house in silence, and I feel awkward. I can see Mikasa thinking of everything she can possibly say or do to make me feel bad for what happened with Thomas. She knows I hate him, but surely she knows I wouldn't come between them. Besides, Annie kinda makes it hard to hold back on the insults. She's amazing.

Besides, Mikasa can't just ignore me until we see him again. He had no right to be an asshole to people he doesn't even know. We pull into the driveway, and before Mikasa can get out of the car, I clear my throat. "What's up with you?" I demand.

"I'm sorry Thomas ruined your fourth wheeling, Eren," Mikasa sneers.

"Oh, shove off. You know he's a dickhead, and you got back together with him after what he did to you? Come on, that's just an idiot move and you know it-"

"Eren!" Mikasa shouts.

"What? You can't ignore me forever, you know! I'm not gonna do or say anything that'll upset poor, baby Thomas, but I'm not just gonna let him walk all over me- Or you!"

"He doesn't walk all over me, he's a very kind and compassionate-"

"Asshole! He's an asshole! He's a rich, fucked up, undeserving piece of shit that doesn't deserve to even breathe the same air you do, and you know it! I don't want you to get hurt again, Mikasa, you don't fucking deserve it! Why would you go back to that dick cheese when you could do so much better-"

"Because without him I have no one!" She shouts, tears pooling at her eyes. "He's the only fucking person who likes me for who I am! He doesn't only want to be with me because I'm athletic, or smart, or Asian! He likes me for me, and no other guy seems to be able to do that!"

"...Wha-"

"I'm not some ethnic doll to be put on display by guys who only want me to be their object! I'm not an object, I'm a human fucking being, and I like to be treated like one! Thomas treats me like a person, not like a doll, and I like that in a man, okay? So shut the fuck up and let me have something for myself, for once in my life!"

I can barely choke out any words, but Mikasa slams the car door shuts and storms inside in a huff. I'm speechless, and I can barely move out of my seat.

I had no idea she felt like that. I thought she liked the attention she got from being an athlete, and a pretty one at that. Does she not like being the main focus of her volleyball games? Or being the only woman at the gym who can give everyone a run for their money?

...Does she not like her racial background?

Chapter End Notes
It feels like forever since I updated, but here it is!
Thank you for all the lovely comments, and kudos, and hits holy moly that's a lot of people!
I am so absolutely greatful. x
I'd stood at the entrance to Hanji's for a solid fifteen minutes, debating whether or not I should go in or just go home and forget about the bandages. It's not like I couldn't go out and buy more, you know? I wish I wasn't drawn to people the way I am. It's like no matter how much of a shitty human being I am, I always think I deserve more than I do.

Selfish, isn't it? That I think I actually deserve Levi's company? The company of a total stranger? As the baby-boomers would call it: entitlement. God, I really am a big fucking joke. I wish I could just go home and die already.

"I'm glad you could make it," Levi says, standing up as I approach the table at Hanji's, fearfully tugging at the sleeves of my cotton jacket.

I can seriously just go and buy some new bandages. I can leave, and never have to see Levi again, and then avoid Recon for the foreseeable future. It doesn't seem I'm going to have much of a future now, anyways, if I ever even was. Or at least until I can change my looks completely. Then, Levi just had to see me and send a small wave my way. He looked to be fairly relaxed, though I panicked at how long he'd known I was there.

Would I make him feel uncomfortable if he'd known I was there for so long? I mean, more uncomfortable than my presence already is?

"Yeah, me too," I mumble nervously. I go to shake his hand, and he goes to hug me, but we fumble somewhere in the middle amidst awkward chuckles. "Oops... Aha. Fuck up. I'm a fuck up. Of course he'd hug me. Who even shakes hands these days anyway? God, I'm such a fucking idiot.

"Ah, yeah, my bad," Levi chuckles, briefly. "C'mon, take a seat. I started a tab - I got here a little early and ordered an entree. I hope that's okay?"

"Eren, honey, I'm leaving in ten! You need to be ready or you'll have to get there yourself!" Mom called out from the bottom of the stairs.

"I'm coming! It's okay!" I threw off my pyjama bottoms and finally put on a pair of skinny jeans, giving myself a once-over for the 100th time. I could hear mom messing around with her keys and bag, and I'd already stalled long enough. I had to be there late so I don't have to stay long. Maybe he'll just leave the, at the front counter or something because I took too long? One can only hope.

"Oh, am I- am I that late?" I stutter, looking toward the large Roman numeral clock above the counter. Of course I'm fucking late. I spent almost two hours checking myself over in the mirror and
brushing my hair, and I showered for like a whole fucking year. Of course I'm late! Why do I even care about meeting with this guy, I'm only here to get my bandages! He doesn't even look like he has them on him for christ sake.

"No, not at all. I never gave you a time, I just said mid-afternoon, I think," Levi says, shaking his head.

I nod. "Yeah, right. Sorry." Then, I pull out the chair, scraping it along the floor and earning a few irritated looks from strangers around me. My face flushes, and I try to turn my attention back to Levi, who's not-so-subtly covering a smirk with his glass.

I glare at him long enough for him to see it, before my features return to neutral.

It's not that I don't like the guy, I do. It's just that he probably knows too much for his own good at this point. He's seen me as a homeless person, as a complete wreck on the inside at least three times, and he probably saw me and dad getting into his car after he touched my scars. He even found the bandages - I mean, why the fuck would I buy bandages when there are no visible injuries?

I can't spend too much time here. I know he's the type to know exactly what to say to get me to speak up about things, and I don't want anyone ever knowing about what I've done. I just don't think I can stand to see disappointment in anyone else's eyes but my own. I'm used to my own hateful view of myself, but seeing it within someone else? That's when you can't make excuses anymore. That's when you and everyone around you knows that you're a fuck-up. That's when you can confirm it.

And Levi's nothing like what I expected him to be. He has this badass look about him, and he looks like the type not to take shit from anyone. But, ever since we first met, he's been different. I mean, he was weird when we first came here with- Erd? And he just kind of left but... He's never been as badass or rude as I thought he would be.

I place my set of house keys and my phone besides Levi's, and notice that we both have the same keychain; a pair of wings, one white and one blue, overlapping each other. Though mine has a chip on the white wing after dropping them so many times. It's supposed to be something about freedom, I can't quite recall why I was given it, or maybe I bought it myself?

I wonder who bought it for him?

"Well hello, my little munchkins!" A cheerful voice calls from across the room. The restaurant is fairly empty, and she does own it, but I get uneasy as I look over and see that mattered brown hair pulled into a pony tail, bouncing across the room towards us.

"Shit..." Levi mutters, sinking lower into his seat. "I thought she was off today."

"Aha, Hanji?" I chuckle pitifully, pulling up a menu to just below my chin. Maybe she won't come over? I do like Hanji, but she's a bit much to handle when I've been stressing about this lunch for days. She's got so much personality, it's almost hard to keep up with. And sometimes I swear I can see flashes of a hidden psychopath in her eyes.

"Little Levi, here for another lunch date I see," Hanji chides, poking Levi in the side.

He shoves her hand away, squirming from her touch, threatening her with a death glare. "No, Hanji. I'm returning property, and we're having lunch because it's lunchtime," Levi says flatly. "And don't do that."

I can't help smile inwardly at the bickering. Is Levi actually ticklish? The more you know.
"Uh huh." Hanji walks around the table to me and places a hand on each of my shoulders, leaning in closely. "And you, my little green-eyed casanova?"

I swallow. "Uh-

A young blonde haired man stands in the doorway to the kitchen, in a chefs outfit, with a handful of receipts- or orders- bawled tightly in his fist. "Hanji!" He booms, uncaring for the patrons of the restaurant. "Stop harassing the customers and serve table eight! You're the boss for crying out loud!"

Hanji laughs. "Sorry Moblit!" She then turns back to us and places her hands firmly on the table. "I'll be back for you two." She leaves us with a wink, hurrying off to towards Moblit and the kitchen, attracting a few whispers and giggles.

"She's a psycho. It's a wonder they haven't fired her yet," Levi sighs, gripping his glass of lemonade-possibly-soda-water at the top of the glass with his index, middle finger, and thumb.

"Doesn't she own this place?" I question. I take mental notes of his body language, something Mikasa taught me how to do back in middle school, to try and figure out his motives.

He's facing me, but only because the table makes it hard to face away without looking like a total prick. His arms aren't crossed, rather one holding his glass strangely, and the other placed comfortably on the table. He appears to be sitting with his legs open. An invite to become closer, I think? No. He's just comfortable here.

Levi nods. "Yeah. That doesn't mean she can't be fired though. I guess we can only hope for miracles." He takes another sip of water and looks out of the window.

His tone suggests he's joking, but with him, I can't be sure. Surely he wouldn't actually want his friend to get fired though - it's a horrible feeling, being out of work for some stupid reason.

"She likes it here though, doesn't she? I think it's nice when someone has passion for their work... Don't you?" I ask, carefully.

Levi returns his gaze to mine, almost lowering his eyes, but he refrains. "Yeah, I guess so."

We go silent, and scan the menus for lunch options. Why is it that we always end up having lunch or coffee when we meet? Last time I was only there to return his jacket, and we had lunch here. Now, he's only returning my bandages, and we're having lunch again. Is he trying to drug me and take me home? Am I in danger being here?

No. I'm overthinking things. Levi would never do that sort of thing... Would he?

"You think a lot," Levi says, not looking up from his menu.

"What do you mean?" I question, taken aback by the observation.

He shrugs. "It's just something I've noticed. You're in and out of thoughts a lot. Do you like to think about things, or does it just happen on its own?"

What the fuck? I clear my throat. "Are you analysing me or something?"

Levi shrugs, again. "I like to get to know people from the inside out, but not in a creepy, horror movie kind of way," He chuckles, at his own morbid humour. "I like to know what makes people tick - I guess I've taken an interest in you."
"I- Um... Okay..." I stutter, eyes wide. "Can I ask why?"

"It's hard to not invest just a little of your time thinking about a teenager you met soaking wet in the middle of a storm outside a restaurant," Levi says plainly, looking at me from beneath his eyelids. I'm shocked at his blunt statement, honestly, and he seems to pick up on it quickly. "Sorry, I guess I should have worded that better."

Is he mad?

I shake my head. "N-no, it's okay. That was just an unexpected thing to say, I guess..."

He thought about me? Who am I kidding, of course he fucking thought about me - you meet some stupid kid in the middle of a rainstorm and don't think about them? God. I can't believe my pitiful existence actually took up some of the time in his daily life. Sorry, Levi. I won't happen again.

Levi nods. "Even so, I need to learn hold my tongue." I can almost see the lightbulb appear above his head as he remembers something, putting down his glass and holding his index finger up at me. "Excuse me for a second, I've got your bandages in my car. I'll be right back, feel free to order your meal."

He grabs the keys from the table and leaves quickly; as soon as the door clicks behind him, Hanji approaches the table and takes his seat. I move back in my seat as she moves forward.

Was she watching us the entire time she was gone?

"Eren. How are you on this fine day?" She asks, eyes glazed over with something dastardly, and vaguely threatening. In the nicest of ways, I'm sure.

"I-I'm good, thanks. Uh, you?" I choke, subconsciously pulling my sleeves down a little further, and sinking deeper into the chair.

"Hmm, I'm fantastic, now that you and Levi are here!" She exclaims, resting her head on her hands. "That's good...-

She smiles wildly, taking out her notepad and pen. "Now, tell me, how have you two been getting along? Do you need any tips? I may not look like it but I am an expert on human anatomy, and I'd be more than happy to educate such a nice young man like yourself on the basics of sexual intercourse with a male."

"Hanji!" Levi exclaims, stepping up behind me. Hanji and I jump, and I turn quickly in my chair to see Levi glaring at Hanji with a killer stare. "Why are you here and not in the kitchen where you work?"

Hanji tuts. "Now, now Levi, I thought we discussed the usage of 'the kitchen' and members of the female sex-

"I don't mean it like that. And you know that," Levi scoffs.

"especially when you work in a kitchen yourself, it almost contradicts the point you are trying to make, I was simply discussing with Eren the basics of."

Levi squishes Hanji's cheeks together with his hand, and a thin line of saliva drips from her mouth. Levi recoils in disgust and Hanji laughs. "Serves you right, little man!" She coos, jumping up from Levi's seat and slapping him on the shoulder, pushing him forward a little. "What'll it be then, boys?"
Levi takes up his seat again and rolls his eyes, sighing. "Usual."

She nods, then looks towards me. "And for you, my sweet little Eren?"

I shrug. "Uh- I'll just have what Levi's having, I guess."

"Sure thing, I've got you covered," She winks. Then, she leans down to whisper in my ear. "We'll talk later, Eren." I nod furiously, trying to shake her off, and it works to a degree as she begins to retreat back to the kitchen.

"What did she say?" Levi says, intentionally loud enough for Hanji to hear.

I cough. "Oh- Nothing..."

Hanji laughs, and Levi raises an eyebrow, but he doesn't question further. Thank God... "Here, they're still packaged, so they shouldn't be dirty or anything." Levi hands my the bandages and I take them with a shaky hand.

"Thanks, Levi..." I mumble.

"It's fine. I hope you found a substitute for them - and that whoever they're for is okay."

Yeah, my jeans and sleeves soaked it up just fine. And I'm fine too, just struggling to breathe because every fucking thing in here reminds me of a blade or a cut, or another reason to not be alive. "Yeah, it was all sorted. Nothing to worry about." I fake a smile, and he nods.

"That's good then." He's not convinced, I can tell that much. But what choice does he have? He doesn't know me, I don't know him. He acts like we're friends, but I don't know the first thing about him. How can he trust someone as easily as he does me?

"I guess I'm going to have to break the ice. Do I want to? I'm not entirely sure yet. But I guess it won't help to see where this conversation goes. I clear my throat. "Hanji said you were a chef... Where do you work?"

He folds his arms in front of him on the table, and I put my head in my hands. I already know he works at Recon, but I've never seen him actually working. "I work at Recon, I'm the head chef," He says flatly.

God, I shouldn't have asked. Now I seem like a total nutjob. "Do you like it?" I ask.

"It pays the bills," He sighs. "It's not a bad job, but I have other things I'd rather be doing."

"Can I ask what they are?"

"I wanted to join the army when I was younger, but I threw that out the window when I watched some documentary on the cleanliness of army barracks. Since then, I want to try my hand at psychology," He shrugs, then pauses. "Or sell my art, I guess."

"You're an artist?" I insist, pulling my sleeves down to my hands to rest my head in them. I can't allow anymore slip ups. Not in front of Levi, and definitely not in front of anyone else.

He shakes his head. "Not exactly. I do it to pass the time really, it's nothing professional."

"I guess... It still counts as being an artist, though. I mean, if you're good at it I guess," I press.

"I guess. I'm not the modern day DaVinci or anything, but who knows - maybe one day. What about
“And you?” He asks.

I raise an eyebrow. "Hm?"

"What do you do? Or want to do?” He reiterates.

I sigh, and look at a spot on the table. "I work- or used to work- at On The Run. I don't know if I’ve been officially fired or not though..."

Levi leans forward. "On The Run, huh... Where?"

"Near the park,” I answer.

"Is your boss Erwin Smith?” He asks, raising an eyebrow.

I nod, surprised. "Yeah, you know him?”

"I do,” Levi says. "Trust me, you're not fired. He's told me this story; the old guy, the fiery teenager and the lightbulb, right?"

"You make it sound like a sitcom,” I chuckle. "Or some crappy joke."

Levi smirks. "It kinda is one, really. Anyway, what have you been doing without work? Do you go to college?"

"N-No, no college. I went backpacking with my friend.” It worked a little for Mikasa, maybe it'll work for Levi too? It's worth a shot. He never asked for the truth - he doesn't know me, I can be whoever I want to be. Levi hums in response, and we wait in silence for a few moments. Then I ask, "Did he really call me fiery?”

"Oh, yeah. He says you're a good employee, but you have a 'fiery nature,' and that guy was no match to you, that's why he got pissed at you."

"Really?”

"Really. It's nice to have victory over someone who argues with you when you're right the entire time, huh?” He comments.

"Yeah... It is,” I agree.

Hanji brings us our meals shortly afterwards. We eat in silence, besides Levi occasionally making wild assumptions about the strange people who walk past the window; people who Levi thinks are either drunk, mafia members, secretly drag queens, or all three at once. I kept my mouth shut, and nodded or hummed in answer.

I ate nearly half of the pasta, and apologised several times for having Levi pay for a meal I barely ate. After he asked if it was okay if he finished mine off, and I said yes, and he finished it, we quietly took our leave from Hanji's; we successfully avoided seeing her as we left.

"Just so you know, she is my friend, and I do really like her. She just gets a little... Overbearing sometimes,” Levi says kindly. "I'm sure you understand."

"I do, don't worry about it. She seems like a nice enough person,” I shrug.

"She is,” Levi nods. "She is a very nice person."
I tell Levi that I'm walking to the bus stop, and he tells me he'd be happy to drive me home. "Are you sure?" I ask cautiously. "I don't want to out-stay my time with you."

Levi scoffs playfully. "Are you kidding? You're not out-staying your time with me. I enjoy your company."

My stomach flutters at his apparent honesty. "Really? You don't mind?"

"Really, I don't mind," He confirms. "C'mon, I'm parked a few streets down. It's not too far." I follow him back past Hanji's, but once we've cleared a street he stops and turns back to me with a worried expression. "You don't... Feel uncomfortable doing this, do you? I don't want to pressure you into anything you're not comfortable with."

"What? N-No, no, I'm fine! I'm a bit- I guess I think I'm taking up your time, but I'm not uncomfortable being around you," I stutter, feeling my face flush against the chill of the afternoon air.

"You're positive?" He asks carefully.

"I'm positive," I confirm, and his shoulders relax as he starts to walk again.

He comes to a stand still and looks over at me from above his shoulder. "You don't have to walk behind me you know. I won't let you get lost."

"O-oh. Sorry."

"Don't apologise, it's fine."

I pick up the pace to walk beside him, subtly shortening my stride so I don't walk ahead of him. Although Levi's shorter than me, he's still evenly proportioned in leg and torso - he's exactly the height he's meant to be, all things considered. And he's still exerting himself to match my pace.

I've always had long legs, with a 'normal' torso, so I've always had to slow down my stride to stay back with whoever I went out with. I guess Levi's probably always had to walk a little faster. *Doesn't he know I won't walk off without him?*

We pass another street, then turn to our right, into the shadiest carpark I've ever been inside. It looks like the kind of place people come to deal drugs, or murder people. I never even would've guessed this was a carpark.

I can see which car is Levi's, even before we make it across the rows of other nearly identical cars. "This is it," He says, striding around to the drivers seat and unlocking the car manually. "Passengers seat's fine."

"Ah, thanks." I get into the passengers side, and quickly take note of how clean his car is. It might even be cleaner than moms, and that's a hard mark to beat.

"So, what's your address?" He asks, sliding the key into ignition.

"5 Maria Court, it's a few streets down from Garrison Drive, on the right," I say, clicking in my seatbelt and taking a deep breath. Levi nods and fiddles with the radio, choosing a pop station.

We don't talk for much of the way back to my house. Levi makes comments about the area and the houses, and clearly suffers from internalised road rage; the way he grits his teeth at every stop light and shoots millisecond death glares at pedestrians who press the button to cross the street.
We make it back to my house at 2pm on the dot, and Levi walks me to the door. The rain is just starting to come in as we reach the front porch, and Levi scoffs at the obnoxious roar of thunder that echoes down the street.

"Guess we just made it," Levi comments. "I hate driving with passengers in the rain."

"Ah, we're lucky then," I chuckle briefly. Another crack of thunder, a bolt of lightning breaking through the clouded sky, and then a heavy downpour of rain; all in a gap of thirty seconds.

I can barely hear Levi over the sounds of storm as he shouts. "Anyway, I'm gonna head home before this starts to get too bad."

"Okay, thanks for today Levi, I had a nice time," I say, a little quieter than intended. Levi watched my mouth to make out the words, and smiles.

"I'm glad, so did I." He tugs his jacket further around himself, tightening the fabric belt over the buttons and pulling it down. "Stay warm, this storms going to be a killer!" He shouts, giving me a quick wave before dashing across the front lawn to his car.

"Drive safely!" I shout to him, watching as he fumbles with his keys.

The rain is soaking him as he still hasn't found the right one, and attempt to stifle my chuckles as he gets more and more frustrated. As he struggles, I pat down my jeans to check for my house keys and phone; I'd hate to have to burden Levi with another call about leaving something of mine with him again.

As I pull out the set of keys in my pocket, and turn to put them through the door, I notice the clean cut edges of the winged keychain. These aren't my set of keys. I look out towards Levi, and my face pales. He throws his hands to his sides, before running back towards the porch, dripping with rain, and a slight humoured edge to his voice. "I think these are your keys."

"Yeah, I've just noticed that," I say, nervously exchanging his keys for mine. "Must've been the key chains."

"I think I picked up both sets when I went to get your bandages from the car. Sorry about that," He shudders, rubbing his arms from the cold. "I'll- I'll see you some other time, I guess."

"I'm sure we'll see each other around," I agree.

He nods, and stutters his steps for a few moments, as if he has more to say. If he does, he doesn't say it, and runs back out to his car, unlocking it in one go and starting the engine as quickly as he enters the car. I wave to him as he drives off, but the rain makes it hard to see if he waved back or not.

"Who was that?" A placid voice asks from behind me.

I jump back, turning to face Mikasa, who stands leaning against the doorframe in a burgundy cardigan, a pair of jeans, and a black tank top. "M-Mikasa!" I stutter. I must've missed the door opening because if the storm.

"Get inside you loser, it's freezing out here," She jokes, ruffling my hair and pulling me inside the house.

It's warm inside, and there's no sign of dad being home. "Where's mom and dad?" I ask, looking around as though I've never been in here before.
"Mom's at work, and dad's gone to do something. He didn't say what, but he's out of our hair for a while, so it doesn't matter."

_I couldn't agree more._ "What're you doing home? I thought you'd go back to the apartment."

Mikasa hums. "I am, but I wanted you to come over and see the place. I went around and handed in my resumes to a few places closer to the university, and Annie's out getting ingredients for a new pastry recipe."

"Annie cooks?" I gawk.

"She _bakes_," Mikasa corrects. "She's a dessert chef, and she's fucking amazing at it too. I wanted you to try some, seeing as she's planning on opening a bakery sometime soon. I'll probably work there when it's done, but I need to earn some extra money to fund it."

"You're helping her out like that?" I ask, dumbfounded. "She better not be using you." I don't want to see Mikasa get hurt anymore than she already has.

"She's not, believe me." Mikasa grabs her handbag from the kitchen, and I quickly run upstairs to get my phone charger. I know Annie will probably have one, but it won't be an iPhone 4s. She looks like the type to get a new one every time it gets released.

When I get back downstairs, Mikasa's eating a biscuit, and perks up as I enter the kitchen. Through a mouthful she says, "I should've called you, but Erwin rang earlier and says he wants you back at work on Friday for a short shift and a chat about whatever happened."

"He did? He wants me back?" I exclaim, butterflies fluttering at the edge of my stomach.

"Apparently. He seems pretty happy to be requesting you- says he couldn't get hold of your cell, but he just wants to speak face to face."

"I didn't even get any phone calls from his number, or the work one."

Mikasa shrugs. "Oh well. C'mon, the traffics going to be hellish in this weather."

We drive down the freeway in record timing for this hour, just managing to miss the peak hour traffic. Annie's apartment is a fifteen minute walk from the university, and we make it there in less than five.

I blindly follow Mikasa through the carpark, up the elevator, through the lobby, and up to their apartment. It's a split level, she tells me, knocking on the door and opening it. "Make yourself comfortable, Annie's fairly easy going."

Annie pokes her head out from the kitchen after hearing her name, and gives us both a light hearted smile and a faint wave of her hand. I'm taken aback by her apparent welcoming attitude, and the fact that she's still smiling as she comes over to greet us both. I decide she suits a smile.

"Good to see you guys. How've you been, Eren?" She asks me, giving me a timid, hasty hug. Mikasa's influence, I can guarantee that much.

"Good, you?" I ask, pulling away just as quickly as she does. My sleeves are riding up.

"Fine, fine. Take a seat, I've just boiled the kettle so I'll make you guys a coffee or something." Annie scuffs off into the kitchen and sets three mugs on the counter. She brings us coffee and sets down a decorative platter of pastries dusted with caster sugar. I didn't take her for the sweets type,
but after the first bite of a strawberry tart, my mindset changes.

"This is really good," I mumble, focusing on complimenting her and not biting my tongue with a mouthful of food.

She chuckles. "Thank you."

"I told you so," Mikasa says, matter-of-factly. "I didn't just move in here because it was convenient for my studies." Annie chuckles again and hits Mikasa playfully on the arm. Mikasa hits back, just as playfully, and they stare at each other, smiling for a few moments, before coughing awkwardly and looking away.

Annie's flushed. Mikasa hits pretty hard though, I don't blame her for being flustered, especially seeing as she's tough herself.

"So," I start. "You and 'Kasa wanna do this professionally? I think you could, you know. This is the best sweet thing I've tasted in a long time."

"Mm, it depends how we go during finals and things. I'm going to be working for the police if the bakery falls through." Annie sighs softly, setting her now empty coffee cup on the table. "Though, I can always do both; bake on the side, I guess. And with Mikasa getting an apprenticeship at the hairdresser, I don't think we could run a bakery full-time."

"What?" I gawk. "You got an apprenticeship?"

Mikasa nods. "I did. I was planning on telling you myself but," She glares at Annie, who shrugs nonchalantly, "I guess I don't have to anymore."

*She'd told me she put in resumes, not that she actually got a job.. Was she ever actually going to tell me? I swallow the bitterness left on my tongue from those thoughts. "That's amazing. Congratulations, Mikasa."

*So, everyone's getting their lives together, huh? And I'm still stuck drawing circles in the mud.*

"Thanks you, Eren."

After twenty minutes, mom calls to tell us that dinner is almost ready. It's early still, around 4:30pm, when we leave Annie's apartment. Mikasa says she'll be coming back that night, but she doesn't mind driving me home first, and Annie hugs us both on our way out. It's an awkwardly placed hug for me, like she feels as though she'll break me, but she fits like a puzzle piece in Mikasa's arms.

"She's nice," I decide, aloud.

"She is." I ask.

Mikasa nods. "Of course. I just said she's nice, didn't I?"

We drive at the green signal, approaching our street. "I mean, like her as more than a person. Or a friend."

Mikasa swallows thickly. "I'm not sure what you mean, Eren."

"Do you have a crush on Annie?"
I turn to her now, as we pull into our driveway. She smiles, hiding it slightly behind the layers of her scarf. She turns to look me in the eyes. "I think I do."

I can help the bitterness in my tone when I ask, "What about Thomas?"

She clears her throat. "That's something for another time. Say 'hi' to mom and dad for me, I'm going to head back to Annie's."

"You're not staying for dinner?"

"Not tonight."

Fuck.

She kisses me on the forehead before I get out of the car, and I smile bitterly and wave as she drives back down the street, beeping her horn twice as she goes. I can't help but keep the smile as I walk through the front door, thinking about Mikasa and Annie- thinking about Mikasa finally having a chance at true happiness.

I've never seen her smile so genuinely before. I hope Annie likes her back. That would be the best thing, even if they only stay friends. Mikasa's happy with Annie.

My smile quickly fades as a wine glass is thrown in my direction and hits the wall behind me, causing me to jump back. "Woah!" I shout, drawing my arm in front of my face in defence.

"Can't hide from the truth forever, can ya boy!?" Dad yells, throwing himself at me and trying to grab my neck.

"Hey, get off of me you drunken bastard!" I yell, pushing him to the side. "Mom? Mom!"

"She can't hear ya, so shut up and take what's coming like a man!" Dad lunges forward and grabs my shoulders, forcing me back against the wall. Something cracks in my back, and I hiss in pain as my head collides with the metal coat-hook on the wall.

"Get off!" I can't shake him. Even when he's drunk, he's strong on his feet, and he bashes me against the wall several times until I catch sight of blood flecks splattering to the floor from an injury in my head.

I throw my foot out and he stumbles, giving me a chance to run further into the house. "Mom! Where are you!? Let's get out of here!" I run for the stairs, hearing a muffled cry from my parents' bedroom. I make it three stairs up before dad pushes me and I trip, teeth colliding with the wooden stairs and splitting my lip open. "Fuck!" I seethe, wincing in pain as it shoots through my gums and nerve endings.

He steps on my head and kicks me down, before grabbing the back of my collar and yanking me up by the neck, choking me. "You good for nothing bastard! All I do is help you and you just disappoint me!"

I spit blood at him thought my swollen lips. "What have I done to you!? I haven't even fucking been home! What have I done to deserve this!?"

"You were born, you imbecile!"

A void envelopes my heart in the two seconds it takes him to form those words. My gut drops, and suddenly, I'm empty; numb. I barely feel him as he bashes my head in once again, slamming against
the staircase.

I should just let him kill me. Who cares? I've ruined his life. I may as well be punished eternally for it. What's the point of living if it's not for your own sake? No one gives a shit about me- hell, I don't even give a shit about me.

My vision starts to get hazy, but the home phone starts to ring before dad can draw the final blow. It leaves a message on the answering machine, telling dad to pick up - it's his boss. He spits at me, throwing me down, and stumbles towards the phone to answer it.

He's preoccupied, and I make a run for it.

I stumble and stagger towards the door, eyes blurring and crossing. I can barely make out one foot in front of the other, but dad doesn't notice as I open the door and make a run for it across the road to Jean's house.

I can't see how many cars are parked there, but I don't care. In what's left of my coherent thoughts, I know that dad is afraid of the Kirschteins, what with their queer son and police affiliation. I could get him arrested. If Jean's uncle would arrest him, in front of my eyes, I could cry of happiness.

I can barely knock on the door, and my heart drums heavily against my chest as I look back and see dad standing in the doorway. He's yelling profanities at me, but my ears are blocking up, and I can only hear my heartbeat and the faint opening of Jean's front door. Someone gasps, then calls further into the house. I pass out in their arms, my breath hitching and drowning out my surroundings.

Suddenly, I'm enveloped in the darkness I so longed for.

"I'm gonna take a shower real quick, I can't smell like horse shit forever... You guys gonna be okay?" Jean asks, placing his hands on my shoulders from behind the couch.

I'd been unconscious for an hour, and woke up fifteen minutes ago. Of course, I was bombarded with questions, but I only stared blankly ahead as Marco held the bag of frozen peas to the back of my head, and Jean bandaged an open wound on my neck. Jean guessed my dad, and Marco asked if he was the man yelling at me. I'd broken down crying, and that was when the questions stopped.

I'm not sure I can remember who held me for how long, but even though I wasn't expecting him to be here, having Marco hold me was nice. It's almost like being held by someone who loves you, not that I'm too sure what that feels like.

"We'll play nice, Jean," Marco says, winking at him. He stands up, gently removing his arms from my shoulders and petting my lightly as he walks into the kitchen.

Jean walks down the hall, and as the bathroom door clicks shut, I relax a little. I like Jean, of course I do, but I know he doesn't handle things like this too well. He can't even handle his own problems, why the hell would he need mine added on to that?

"I shouldn't've come here. I should've gone to the park again or some thing. I'm not welcome here - they're all nice and normal here, not like me. Not like this.

"Eren," Marco starts, pouring two glasses of water. "Do you have any movie genre preferences?"
I gulp. "I-uh..not really. I don't do drama too well, if that helps..."

"Alright, no drama. How about a comedy then? Or a horror?"

"Either or, I don't mind. It's your night, after all, don't stress too much about me," I say, feigning a chuckle. My head feels like it's been split in half, and my tooth is numb, and my lip is so swollen it alters my pattern of speech. I don't even want to see the wounds on my head.

One of Marco's eyebrows raise ever so slightly, like a twitch, but he doesn't pry any further. "You know, I used to share a dorm at college with Armin," Marco starts, walking towards the couch and sitting on the armrest. "Those were good times... I'm still at college, I just don't room there anymore. Armin's a good guy- he helped me with a lot of things back then."

I hum, croaked in my throat. "He's a little... Wild."

"Ah, at Connie's party?"

I nod.

Marco chuckles. "He was like that back then, too. It's all an act though. I'm not sure if you've noticed, but he only acts the way he does when he's with more than one or two people. In large groups, he's a completely different person to who he is alone. He's actually great company- both times, of course, but he's more genuine alone."

"Ah..." Why's he telling me this? Why should I care about who Armin is or how he acts? What does it matter? Is he only saying this stuff so I don't start talking about myself? Don't worry Marco, I'm not going to say anything that might allude to the fact that I'm breaking. I don't want to offend your heavenly values.

"You'll find a lot of people are like that, if you look hard enough," He says. "If you know what to look for, you can always see who's struggling- the ones who need help but are too scared to ask out of fear of rejection."

Is this about me? Does he know? What does he know? He can't know! I'm being pedantic. Still, I swallow nervously. "What's that supposed to mean?" I'm not sure if I actually wanted him to hear it or not, but he does.

He reaches beside the couch and pops open a bottle of pills, taking two in his hand and taking another pill from another package. I can barely read the label of the bottle through my hazy vision as he shuts the cabinet, but I recognise the colours.

Why would he take those in front of me? They're for depression. Mom takes them, I know those pills like the back of my hand. Does he want attention? Mom only ever took them in front of people when she wanted attention. Does he want me to ask? Is he really going to turn the spotlight into himself when I've been fucking beaten up by my own fucking father?

"I know what to look for, because I used to look like that," He says softly. "I'm not going to bore you with my tragic backstory or anything, I'm just letting you know that you're not alone- but I'm sure you're sick of hearing that."

The atmosphere has changed. It's almost as if a heavy fog has settled between us. I can practically feel Marco regretting taking those in front of me. I regret judging him too harshly before asking a
question. Maybe he only wants me to ask questions? But why? Why would he care? I don't even know him.

After a few moments, I break the eerie silence, even as my head swirls with pain. "You... Hide it really well," I say, voice just above a whisper as I stare at the pills in Marco's hand.

He doesn't seem to falter in his movement, taking the three of them at once with a single sip of water. "Mm... It's more that I don't want to burden others with my problems. I've been told by therapists and psychologists and doctors that I'm loved and cared for, but honestly, I've never felt that way. No amount of confirmation from people can make years of feeling unwanted go away." He rubs his nose softly, like an involuntary response, before sighing. "But, if that is the case, why would I want to drive away the ones who have stuck around with some sob story about my problems?"

"You mean that?" I ask hesitantly. He actually feels this way? You'd never know. He's so happy, and kind, and normal. And yet...

And yet he's just as fucked up as the rest of us.

"I do. With all my heart, I mean it." Marco nods, a pitiful smile on his lips. He takes the glasses and sits beside me, placing his on the glass table and handing the other to me. "You know, as soon as you walked through that door it was obvious there was something more with you than what's happened tonight. Probably not to Jean, but to me."

I give him a questioning look- or a half questioning look, from the side of my face that isn't beaten and bruised. He clears his throat, taking the peas from my hand and resting it upside my head for me, allowing me to relax.

"There's a big difference between Jean and I. He prefers to lock away his feelings and pretend he isn't feeling them - that they're simply not there. But I tend to cover them up; probably the same as you. I know I'm feeling what I'm feeling, but I don't want others knowing, so I fake everything. When you shot us that smile, when you first came to, I knew something had happened, because I send that same smile out to the world every day."

He doesn't break eye contact with me, and there's a softness and sincerity to his eyes that I hang noticed until now. Maybe it's because he's relating to me, or trying to relate to me, and I'm only feeling a connection because of that. Or maybe, it's because he isn't faking caring about others' feelings.

"I'm not going to sit here and tell you that everything will look up eventually, because as much as I say that, I'm not too certain I can believe it either, but... We have good days, and we have bad days; everyone has an even mixture of the two. We choose to remember the bad stuff, because it's so much easier to hate than to appreciate. It took me a freaking long time to remember that everyone feels like that. But, I guess some people just get so sick and tired of the bad days that even the good ones aren't good..."

He chuckles after a few moments, rubbing nervously at his neck. "Sorry, I'm not offering anything help at all here, am I?"

"No, it's okay.. I- this is going to sound horrible but... It's almost comforting to know other people feel that way too," I sigh. "I mean, other people who aren't over dramatic or anything."

"I understand that. It does get tiring when everyone seems to think they understand what you're feeling, but really, they only understand the generalised feeling, not the whole thing. If you get that..."
"Yeah, I do." You have no idea how much I get that, Marco. No idea at all.

We don’t end up watching a movie. I close my eyes, curled up on the couch in Marco’s arms, listening to everything that goes on around me. From Marco’s tempered breathing, to his and Jean’s quiet conversation. Everything sounds so much clearer with your eyes closed.

"How's he?" Jean whispers, placing the back of his hand against my forehead. "He's got a hell of a temperature."

"I know. You don't have any painkillers though, so I couldn't offer him anything," Marco says quietly.

The weight of the couch shifts as Jean sits beside Marco, petting my hair lightly. "I'm fucking sick of this."

My stomach drops.

"What?" Marco asks.

"Seeing him like this. It happens too much- that fucker he's got for a dad needs to get his just desserts. No one should have to put up with being someone's punching bag when alcohol doesn't numb the pain enough."

Marco makes a shushing noise. "Keep it down, he might still be awake."

"I don't care," Jean scoffs lightly, still petting my head. "Let him hear. I hate that bastard he's got for a father. Mine isn't even this bad, at least he used words instead of violence."

"Words hurt too, Jean."

"I know. But they also heal- you told me that..." Jean snarls, before his voice catches in his throat. Then, his tone softens. "Do you remember the day you told me that?"

I can feel Marco smile. "I do remember that."

If every ounce of my being wasn't aching, I might even have been able to get used to sitting myself between the two of them. Even as a tear rolls down my face and wet Marco's bare leg, and even as I start to snivel and shake, and even as he leans to wipe it all away, and the next few that follow, I almost feel at home. Like I could lie here and forget everything outside of this room, and it would all be okay.

Then I remember that mom is still inside that house with dad alone, and suddenly I don't feel quite as okay as I was.

Chapter End Notes

This one was a doozy to write, I tell you. I think I re-wrote it so many times it may not even make complete sense...anyway.

Thanks so much to everyone who's liked/kudosed/bookmarked and even just read. I'm so happy that people actually like my work! I definitely didn't think this would have as many reads as it does!

xx
Reprise of a Downfall

Chapter Summary

When you've got a mad case of the sads, they tend to give you the false impression that everything's okay when it's really not.

Chapter Notes

Song/s:
It's Been A Long Day - Rosi Golan

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I wake up slowly in a bed; much softer than mine, and warmer too. It's nice.

Almost too nice. I feel like I don't deserve to be laying in a bed as nice as this one, even if my body aches and creaks with the slightest movements, and even as it takes all of my will power to open my eyes from their crusty comfort.

My head is bandaged, and there's an ice compression strapped firmly to my shoulder. Apparently, I didn't move at all whilst I slept, because it all looks to be perfectly in place.

I can barely sit up, but I manage, groaning and hissing as pain shoots up through my abdomen and into my upper body. My head pounds, and my eyes can barely focus. I'm in Jean's room, though, I know that much. It's a lot tidier than last time I was here, but the windows are still shut up tightly. There's two white pills beside the bed, a glass of water, and a note;

Eren,
I hope you had a good sleep. We went out and bought some painkillers, so take them as directed, and we've bandaged up your wounds. Do you need us to make you a doctors appointment? You're pretty banged up - we didn't want to do anything without your permission (mostly Marco). Speaking of, he's gone to work and I've got a job interview, so we won't be back until about 3pm. I hope this is okay. You've got my number, and Marco's is written somewhere on my desk, but you'll have to find it. We've got Chinese to be delivered around lunch time, so I hope you're up by then. Feel free to have a shower and use up all of our wifi, the passwords on the counter. Stay safe, and rest as much as possible.
- Jean (and Marco) ;)

I can't help but smile slightly at the note, even as dread fills my gut at the last paragraph. I've never seen Jean so articulate in his hand writing before. It must be Marco's influence... There's a few lines scribbled out, much more like Jean, and then an extra note taped to the bottom half-heartedly.

Ps. Your mom came over this morning to get you. We're sorry if it isn't what you wanted, but we told her you weren't with us. Please call me or Marco if you want us to do something more about her, we just didn't want you back in that environment until we were sure you felt safe. (mostly me) Make yourself at home, you can stay as long as you want to.
I'd also never imagine that they would send my mom away. It's probably for the better though. She won't know where I am, but she won't make a police report because of dad. Deep down, she still loves him. She wouldn't want him sent to prison for abuse. But I'm sure she'd have no problem sending me to a psych ward for my own mental issues.

I weakly lift the sleeves of my shirt to see the scarring left behind. Most have faded to look like the aftermath of a cat attack, but there's too many to blame it on a cat. Whatever this depression is, and my own self-destructive behaviours escalating to the point of need and dependence...

I guess I really am the byproduct of my mom and dad. I sigh at the thought of that, putting years of confusion to rest for a while, and glaring at the stains on my shirt. I have to wash it, I've got work tomorrow.

I slowly get to my feet and mentally prepare myself for the journey around Jean's house to find the laundry. It's a real maze, considering its size, but there are only four rooms on the upper level (Jean's, Ruth's, the bathroom, and the unmade guest bedroom), so I make my way downstairs. I feel like a criminal, searching through Jean's house like I am. I probably look suspicious - even though there's no one to see me.

I pass though the kitchen and into the living room, then find the home cinema room. I feel self conscious walking past the many mirrors that cover walls in the corridor, so I go back to search the other end of the house, passing the double glass doors that lead out onto Jean's back verandah and deck. When did they get a pool?

Finally, I locate the laundry (and a second toilet). It's smaller than the other rooms, but manages to fit a clothes dryer, washing machine, sink and bench. I take off my shirt and pants, leaving me in my boxers, and shove them into the machine. I chose a half hour wash, because it'll take me that long to shower anyway, and because I need to have clothes on if anyone comes home.

I wonder where Ruth is.

I try to ignore the slowly-fading scars on my thighs and forearms as I make my way back up the stairs again and towards the bathroom. The sight of them brings an emptiness to my stomach that slows my pace, even just slightly.

I run the water and take off my boxers, standing in front of the mirror buck-naked, waiting for the shower to heat up. I stretch out my forearms in front of me - under the bright fluorescent globe of the bathroom, the damage seems to be far worse than I'd thought. I sigh, lightly tracing the horizontal scars across my left forearm, the ones more deeper and precise than those on my right.

Why did I do this? How can I be so fucking messed up that I'd do this to myself? I'd hacked into my own skin all for what- five minutes of feeling something? Five minutes of relief and then five years wondering why the fuck I was such a fucking idiot? Why did I ever think this was a good idea, having all these scars?

And why do I want to do it again, more than ever before? Why do I know that deep down I'll regret it later, but I still want to hurt myself more?

Maybe that five minutes of relief is worth the scars. Maybe someone as fucked up as I am only deserves five minutes of relief, at the risk of scarring my skin or potentially dying by my own hand.

I carefully remove the bandages on my wounds, wincing in pain, and place them on the counter. I step into the shower and run my arms and thighs underneath the water, hoping that maybe it's all just makeup and I've been kidding myself this whole time.
It doesn't come off. They don't come off. I want to cry, but I'm devoid of all emotions besides stomach-tightening guilt and rage. I'm guilty because who the fuck wouldn't feel guilty after mutilating themselves? I'm angry because... I'm such a fuck up. And no one can ever tell me otherwise. I'm fucked up for doing this to myself, and I'm even more fucked up knowing that the second I get a chance to do this to myself again, I'll inevitably take it.

As I go to wash my body, I lift the liquid soap to find that it's empty. Seriously, Jean, you dirty fuck. For the umpteenth time this morning, I sigh in frustration and step out of the shower onto the cold surface of the bathroom. I don't turn the shower off, hoping there'll be a refill of soap beneath the sink.

I dig around through the drawers first, hoping to find a bar of soap instead. There isn't one, in any of the drawers, so I open up the cabinet instead. I rummage through Ruth's beauty products - or Jean's, who knows - push aside cans of hair product, deodorant, and a box of tampons, until I see a second bottle of liquid soap pushed to the back. I just manage to get my fingers on it without slipping, and drag it towards the front. I don't take any notice of it as it crashes to the bathroom floor with an echoing thud.

Behind that bottle of soap, pushed to the back of the cabinet, is a box of gauze, taped closed with duct tape. I'm frozen for a moment, subconsciously deciding on whether or not to investigate. I reach forwards and just manage to hook my fingers in the corner, bringing it forward slowly.

It's slightly heavier than what a box of gauze would actually weight. Should I open it? Maybe it's private...

I tear off the tape and open the box. I nearly spill its contents onto the counter in shock. Inside is a roll of gauze, a few band aids, some ointment, and four shiny blades. They're nothing like the ones I bought though. They're smaller, but thicker. And incredibly shiny.

This can't be real. Jean- is it Jean? Or did Marco hide these here whilst he's staying here? Do they know about me? They bandages up my wounds, which wounds did they see?

I expect it to go by in a blur like the first time, but it doesn't. I contemplate the consequences for a few moments. How would mom feel if she saw? What's the weather going to be like tomorrow? Can I get away with long sleeves? What about work?

None of the questions matter. I decide that maybe that five minutes of relief is worth an eternity of further self loathing, and I slice across my left forearm in desperation. The seven cuts are long and deep, bleeding out a dark crimson as soon as the skin is broken. The blood runs through the cut like a river runs through a creak; it flows, both gently and quick that you loose yourself for a little while.

I don't care about precision, and I decide that five minutes isn't enough. I take to destroying the flesh of my right forearm, gripping the blade tightly between my left thumb and forefinger, before dragging the sleek metal across my forearm and hissing at the stinging sensation one particularly deep cut resonates.

It's like eating your favourite sweet and not being able to stop yourself; the taste is so good you keep going back for more, even when you're full. You can't help it. There's something enticing about doing something you know you shouldn't be doing; drinking, binge eating, breaking into abandoned warehouses - self harming. They each come with a thrill and a drive that keeps you going, it reminds you that you are alive, even if it could get you killed in the long run.

It's not like I care though. This self mutilation has become a form of narcotic for me. I don't think I'll ever stop it- I don't think I want to stop it. I feel guilty afterwards, and regret every cut I give myself,
but maybe it's worth the scars, to feel alive for just a few seconds; to be completely and utterly engrossed in the control you have over something as dangerous as pain, would it really be so bad to have this as my outlet? I don't think it would. It's not doing any harm to anyone else but me. No one else is suffering this, so why should I care what I do to myself?

Blood runs down both my arms, and I hack in all which ways across my thighs, breathing deeply and aloud in the bathroom. My silent cries are masked by the running water, or which I quickly take use of and sit beneath in the shower, letting the droplets cascade down my naked body and take the blood with it

Everything runs down the drain, even the tears that had formed at my eyes without me realising. I break down into sobs, throwing the blade across the bathroom, shoving my head in my hands as it hits the tiled wall.

Perhaps I'm wrong... Maybe this isn't a good idea.

See? There's that regret. Not a moment too late, I know I've fucked up. But... I'd do it again in a heartbeat, if I knew what time Jean and Marco would be home, and if I had my clothes in here with me.

I don't want anyone else knowing what I do to myself. They don't need to know. I want to be the only one who has control over this. Everyone has some form of control over me and my actions, so why can't I have something to myself? It makes me feel good. I know I don't deserve to be alive, but this brings me closer to death and reminds me that I can live. This control gives me the choice of life and death, with every cut I make I know that I can make that choice. Maybe one day I'll make that final choice and be over and done with these conflicting emotions, tearing me apart with every waking breath.

What's got me so thoughtful today? Perhaps the realisation that I can live or die by my own hand. Thrilling.

The scalding, burning sensation of the water feels good. I let the steam clear my nose as the tears dry up, and turn off the water, standing motionlessly to my feet. I feel like a zombie now. I dry myself off with one of the towels, carefully dabbing at the gaping wounds on my forearms and thighs, which are still bleeding heavily. There isn't much in the way of bandages in Jean's house, so I use the ones he and Marco had put around my head and shoulder to cover up my arms. Embarrassingly, I wrap gauze and toilet paper around the cuts on my thighs, keeping them from bleeding out onto my jeans.

I'm completely emotionless, packing up the bathroom so as not to draw suspicion to myself. The blade I used and threw halfway across the room is stained crimson, and the colour doesn't disappear as I try to wipe it on a towel. I wrap it in my underwear and walk down to the laundry to get my clothes.

I put my clothes in the dryer and paced up and down Jean's house, in order to keep myself occupied. I didn't know what I'd do if I was left alone with myself and the blade in my hand again. Even though I barely had any room on the places I'd already mutilated, I wanted to do it again. Desperately. Even though I have an internal battle with myself whenever I so much as think about hurting myself, I'd still do it again.

They need to be deeper - I need to see dark red marks for months. I need to see veins bursting. I want to see the blistering white of a hospital ward as my arms are bandages and nurses throw my pitiful looks, so I can spit in their faces and tell them that I deserve everything I get. I want to see dad come in as my doctor and tell me what a mistake I am, how I should've cut deeper, so I can tell him I wanted to but I passed out. Maybe he'll give me a chance later that day to take of my bandages and
unthread the stitching and tear into my skin with a surgical knife as he watches and prays that I leave
the earth as quickly as I entered it.

I would pray for that if I was him.

I haphazardly put on my clothes, avoiding tearing the gauze or unwrapping the bandages, and was
clothed just in time to answer the door for lunch. "Hi, order for Marco?" The guy says, wearing an
unimpressed scowl. It's similar to one I've seen a glimpse of before...

"Uh- yeah. That's me," I say, unconvincingly.

I raises an eyebrow, reaching into his bag to take out the order. "You don't seem too sure about that,
kid." His name tag read 'Aurou' and I know I've heard that name before. But where, I don't have a
cue. A friend of Connie's perhaps?

I nod. "I'm sure. It's been payed for already and everything."

He nods, hands me the bag, and walks off down to his car. I don't manage to say 'thank you' or even
'fuck you, asshole' before he's started up his car and halfway down the road. If you don't like your
job, just quit, Jesus Christ.

I don't eat much of the food, picking delicately at the soya chicken and fried rice. Once I've eaten
about a quarter of the container, I pack everything up into the fridge and walk back up to Jean's
room. Having no feeling makes you pretty tired, I guess.

I feel lonely sitting in Jean's empty room, in his huge empty house. Is this how Jean feels all the
time? As much as I enjoy his comfy bed, I can't stay here for too long, or else I'll have to make a
commitment to it... And it's too close to my house for comfort. Dad will only stay away for so long
before he cracks and decides to end me himself, even if he might run into Ruth's police friends.

I take out my phone and dial Connie's number, in hopes he can arrange for me to stay at his uncles
apartments again. He picks up on the fifth ring, just before the tone would cut out.

'Yo man, haven't heard from you in ages! How's it been? ' He asks excitedly on the other end of the
line. There's a lot of movement - I can only guess he's in the car. Probably with Sasha.

I hesitate. "Yeah... It's been alright. You?"

'Sweet man. Me too, I've been pretty chilled out these past few days. Now I'm headed up to Karanese
with Sash for a weeks' vacation.'

"O-oh? A week?" I swallow thickly, gripping the phone shakily in my hand.

'Yeah. Everything alright? You don't sound too good.'

"Mm, I'm fine. I was kinda hoping you could get me another room at your uncles place but ah- it's
okay, I've just remembered I can-"

Connie cuts me off, after mumbling something to Sasha. 'Eren, are you in trouble? Are you safe?
You're not in the park again, are you?'

"No, no, no - everything's fine, I promise."

'I really hope you're telling the truth, cos Kev's place is all booked up until early next year. All the
rooms are booked.'
I internally sigh, tears stinging my dry eyes. "That's.. Fine. Thanks Connie, you enjoy your trip okay?"

There's silence, then Connie sighs. 'I will. Stay safe, alright? Don't feel like you can't talk to us because we'd be more than happy to have you with us when we get back, Okay?'

"Y-Yeah... Thanks, Connie."

We say our drawn-out goodbyes and then I hang up, tears silently falling down my face. Fuck... So that's why I'm going back to work tomorrow - to cover Connie's shift. Does this mean I'm not officially rehired yet?

Where am I going to stay now? I can't stay here, it's too close to home... Could I just stay at work? Erwin might let me crash on the couch in his office on the days I work. And maybe I could stay with Armin? I'm sure he's got somewhere nice. I don't think he'd ask too many questions either. Besides, he goes away all that time, I could just offer to house-sit for him for free.

I'm tiring quickly, so I place my phone beside the bed and get under the covers. I don't sleep with the blade in my back pocket, choosing to place it beneath the pillow that my head isn't going to go on. I move a lot in my sleep, usually, and I don't want to stab myself in the hand without meaning to. That would take away the whole purpose of being in control of your pain.

I take the painkillers with the glass of water I'd neglected earlier and pull the covers up to my ears, breathing in the scent of something homely. I've lived in a home all my life, but not once has it ever smelt like Jean's house. He complained a lot as a kid about how it sucked to have such a big house because you feel like you're living in a hotel, not a house. What he never realised is that home is a feeling, not a place; and whilst I've never thought of my home as 'my home,' I've never had a nice feeling living there.

At Jean's, it's different. Maybe it's because I'm not beating up when I'm here. Or maybe it's because Ruth is like my second mother, and Jean the brother I never had (who I kissed once, but that's not what I'd do if he was my brother of course).

Yeah... I could fall asleep here.

And I do.

I dream about how I would kill myself, if the chance was ever presented to me. I'd want to go out quickly, I thought at first, but then maybe I deserve to suffer in my dying moments like I did throughout my life? That would probably be better.

I'd try hanging myself like Jean did. He looked shaky, but I wouldn't be. I'd walk into that shed, or even my own fucking bedroom, and I'd just do it. No suicide note, no clues, no nothing - just my lifeless body hanging from the ceiling fan and a knocked over chair beneath my feet.

Maybe I'd just take a knife and bury it deep beneath my skin, slicing right through the vein in my arm and watching as blood gushes out in spurts, staining the carpet and my shirt and my bedspread. It'd be gory, but it would take me a while to pass out. I'd breath heavily, clutching my arm and feeling the sting of the cut. It'd be too late before mom or Mikasa could call an ambulance. They wouldn't be able to stitch it, I'd go to the bone if I had to.

Or, maybe I'd drown myself. I almost drowned Jean as a child, by accident of course, and he told me he's had nightmares about that ever since. He's told me about the feeling of your lungs tightening in your chest, how your throat closes up and darkness enveloped your vision. How you panic and flail
beneath the water, trying to escape, but your mind shuts down. That'd be a traumatic way to die, but I wouldn't remember it once it was over, so would it really matter?

All I want to do is suffer more. I'm torturing my own mind as a way of getting by in the world, but what price am I paying? I've never thought much about my mental health. It's obviously not stable but... I don't think I really care.

It's scary that I'm prepared to die at any minute of the day. But at the same time, it's not that scary at all.

-X-

"Eren? We're back."

I open my eyes slowly to Jean touching my lightly on the shoulder, looking up at him blurry eyed. He's obviously just got back, as he's in a suit and not his regular sweatpants and band tee attire.

"Mmphf..." I grumble, rubbing my eyes.

He gives a toothy grin. "Good to see you too. I saw the leftovers in the fridge. Did you get the wrong order?"

I shake my head. "Mm-mm."

"Not hungry?" He presses.

I sigh through my nose. "Not really."

"Delivery guy scare you off?" He asks. It's more of a statement than a question though. I guess they must order Chinese here a lot. Or it's just the same unlucky bastard on the occasions where they do order it.

I nod slowly. "'S an asshole."

Jean chuckles. "Was it Aurou?"

I nod again.

"Yeah," Jean agrees. "He's the worst guy."

Jean tells me he's making coffee, and that Marco doesn't drink coffee, and asks if I will join him for a refreshing cup o' joe before Mr. Hot-Chocolate-Or-Sugary-As-Fuck-Coffee comes home. I mumble a yes, and Jean leaves me to wallow in self pity for a few moments.

I make sure to redress the bandages on my forearms before heading downstairs, keeping my sleeves pinned cautiously to my sides so as not to draw attention to them, on the off chance Jean as X-Ray vision. Or just good enough eyesight to see the bulge of the bandages beneath the sweater material.

What if he notices one of his blades are missing? What if he decides to make the bed or something and that blade falls out from beneath the pillow? I'm so fucked...

I walk down cautiously to the kitchen, seeing Jean just switching on the coffee machine. Of course he has a coffee machine...

"Bit of a mess in the bathroom," He mutters, turning around to lean on the kitchen island in front of where I am sitting. I stiffen, nerves invading my gut in record time.
"W-what do you mean?" I stutter, averting my eyes obviously suspiciously.

"Do you even know how to use a bath mat? The floors covered in water man, c'mon, don't abuse your privileges you animal!" He jokes, chuckling and slapping his hand playfully on the counter. I chuckle nervously, and suddenly I don't quite feel up to ingesting anything, for fear I might just bring it back up rather quickly.

Those words, 'mess in the bathroom,' brought those thoughts from earlier to the forefront of my mind, flooding my conscious all at once. I'd been planning my own suicide, I'd been wishing for death. I'd been harming myself in Jean's fucking bathroom, without a care in the world.

Everything went by so quickly. Did I clean up everything? Did I hide the evidence properly? Does he have cameras set up in there, or some kind of listening device?

I'm paranoid, and I swallow so thickly I hurt my throat. "You okay?" Jean asks, setting down a cup of coffee in front of me and taking a seat beside me.

I nod. "Mm."

"You need to relax a little, man. You're so tense it's making my muscles ache," He says, taking a sip of steaming hot coffee. "Wanna watch a movie or something later? I think they're showing The Breakfast Club on channel twenty."

*I fucking* love The Breakfast Club.

"Yes please," I say, half enthusiastically.

The front door opens and Marco soon appears in the kitchen. The right side of his chest drenched in some dark substance. Jean and I both frown, and Marco rubs the back of his neck, chuckling under his breath. "I uh, got into some trouble on the train..."

Jean scoffs, grabbing the washcloth off of the bench and pacing over to Marco, starting to wipe him down. "What happened this time?"

Marco takes the cloth from Jean's hands, thanking him with a nod. "Some twelvie tripped over a guy's bag and tried to have a go at him, so I stood up and intervened. Before I knew it, a bunch of his friends came at me with water guns filled with condiments... I got soaked with sauce."

"Did they get fined or something?" I ask, keeping well out of the way of Jean and Marco's interaction. I don't want to interfere with their intimacy thing.

"I don't know, I hope so. Mostly for attacking a helpless old guy, but partly because they really shouldn't be allowed to bring water guns onto public transport. They could've hidden drugs or something inside."

I nod, and Marco says he's going to change. "So, what's with the 'again'?" I ask, once Marco's well and truly out of ear shot.

Jean sighs. "He's always getting in on peoples' lives. Not intentionally, he's just always in the wrong place at the wrong time, I guess."

"Is that really a bad thing though?"

Jean shrugs. "Sometimes. When it's stuff like this it's fine, I guess, it's just when he comes home after being in some bar fight or covered in someone else's blood. He's just trying to help, but sometimes
it's like he does more damage than actual assistance..."

I nod, taking a sip of my own hot coffee. I can see Jean's worried for Marco's wellbeing, but isn't it a little selfish not to help people? I know he could get badly hurt someday, but at least there's someone out there doing something to help others. The rest of us are either too cowardly or the ones doing the beating up.

If Marco's really a good guy, shouldn't Jean be happy he's got himself someone who genuinely cares about others more than himself? I know I would be.

Marco puts on an eccentric accent as he re-enters the room, messing his damp hair with a small towel. "So, you guys are all refreshed, where's my hot beverage Jeanbo?"

"Make that sugary shit yourself, just looking at it makes me feel sick," Jean grumbles, pulling his head away as Marco goes to kiss his cheek.

"Why're you so grumpy?"

"I hate it when other people make good points." Marco knowingly grins at me, and I can't help my own smug grin as Jean glares at me from across the kitchen island. Checkmate, Jeanbo.

Marco makes himself a hot chocolate, Jean closes the glass doors to the deck as a downpour begins, and I make my way into the lounge room and look out at the rain. It hits the pool heavily, thrashing the chlorinated water about and soaking the pavement. The decking gets darker in colour, and droplets of rain race down the windows.

"This came in fast, huh," Marco comments, taking a seat beside me on the couch. "I swear it was supposed to be sunny today..."

"Are you kidding?" Jean cuts in, sitting on the other side of me with the TV remote in hand.
"Anytime Trost is forecast for sun you know it's bullshit. It's never sunny here. It's amazing you two have kept your skin tones - me and the rest of this town are all pasty-ass fuckers."

"I'm nearly full Italian, it's genetics," Marco chuckles.

I shrug. "Turkish on my dads side and German on my moms... I think you've just got shitty genetics Jean."

Jean sighs. "Thanks. I'll have to spite my French roots later. Anyways, are we gonna watch The Breakfast Club?"

I nod enthusiastically on the inside, but barely move my head on the outside. I wish I could be more enthusiastic. I want to be, really, it just seems like too much work. And I'm eating myself away at the thought that Jean or Marco are going to find a blade missing at some point and hunt me down for answers and find out what a fuck up I am and then we'll never watch The Breakfast Club together again or even breath the same air as each other because two fuck ups can't possibly work out well even just as friends - right?

The movie starts and ends rather quickly, and I'm left wondering if we ever ever switched it on.

"As good as the other eighty thousand times you've seen it?" Jean asks, playfully nudging my shoulder. I nod unenthusiastically and Jean chuckles. "I'm glad. Anyways, how about we go out for dinner or something? We haven't been to The Basement in a while..."

The Basement. Jean, Marco and myself, going to eat at The Basement together? It is a Thursday
night... That's poetry night. Will Jean give it another go - even with Marco there? I don't have any new material for him...

Isn't poetry night just mine and Jean's thing? Am I selfish in not wanting to go there with Marco too? ...Maybe Levi will be there...?

"Sure," I say, still lacking enthusiasm. Jean and Marco exchange cheerful glances, and it's clear to me they'd discussed this previously. Jean by himself is bad enough, but maybe Marco's influence isn't as sweet as it first seemed.

"I'll go throw in time cleaner pants. Want me to drive?" Marco says, standing from the couch.

"I'm planning on having a few beers, so you should probably drive," Jean agrees. Marco leaves the two of us on the couch, but not before offering me some clean clothes. I tell him I'm fine, that I'll be wearing these clothes tomorrow at work, and he agrees without any argument. Jean nudges me out of my blank thoughts once Marco walks upstairs, gaining my attention.

"You okay with Marco coming? I know it's been our thing for a while... It doesn't bother you?"

I pause, then shrug slowly. "I don't mind."

Of course I mind. It's selfish of me but I don't care, I don't want to go with you and Marco - it's our thing. It's always been our thing, and whether it's Marco or Levi or whoever else there, it's our thing...

Jean raises an eyebrow. "Really? You sure?"

"Really, I'm sure."

Marco is both a safe and reckless driver, and within a few narrow misses of red lights (and a running commentary by Jean who clearly regrets letting Marco drive) we arrive at The Basement. It's the usual crowd lining up outside the entrance, and I can easily spot Nanaba, the coordinator, and two of her stagehands keeping the peace before the doors open.

"Should we get take out to bring in, or eat up at the restaurant?" Jean asks, to whichever of us are listening.

I shrug, and Marco suggests take-out to avoid not getting any seats. I know that it never completely fills up, but I don't want to burst Marco's bubble of hope for a fun night out. We get burgers and fries, and when we get back to The Basement the doors are unlocked. The crowd has occupied the seats inside, so Jean, Marco and I take up the bar stools to the side of the room beside two large ferns and a fish tank.

I try not to let my brief excitement show as I spot Levi, sitting with Erwin and Hanji at the green couches they sat at a few weeks back. He's here... Should I say hello? I probably shouldn't, he looks like he's having a good conversation.
Hanji talks as animatedly as ever to both Erwin and Levi, and both of them contribute to the conversation. The three of them laugh heartily together, and Levi's gaze flickers over to me briefly, before he looks away and starts speaking to Hanji again, his arms crossed tightly in front of his chest.

Did he just- ignore me?

I try to let it go, but every couple of minutes I glance towards their table and try to catch Levi looking at me. If he ever does spare a thought, I never catch it. He's completely emerged in his conversation; chuckles, sipping his own lukewarm beer, crossing and uncrossing his legs, and thanking the waiter who brings over their meals.

"Eren...?"

Jean's looking at me with concern, taking me from my thoughts and occupying them once more.

"Mm?"

"Aren't you going to eat something? You've been staring off for the past twenty minutes. Your dinners going cold."

A sickness swirls in my stomach, one that's awakened from earlier this morning, and my head feels light. I shrug, unwrap the burger, and pick off the pieces of lettuce that are hanging out of the sides. Jean watches for a few moments, then turns his attention back towards the stage and the speaker. I take this chance to take a bite of the food, but my throat feels like it'll close over, so I don't have anymore after that mouthful.

I wrap it up quickly, as Jean chuckles at a joke, and tap Marco on the shoulder to let him know I'm going to the bathroom. Marco nods, and with the burger wrapped tightly and shoved in the pocket of my jacket, I quickly make my way over to the bathroom.

I flush the barely eaten food, passing two men who had clearly had a good time in the second to last cubicle, then wash my face off with cold water. Staring at myself in the mirror, my self loathing consumes my mind rather quickly.

God, what am I doing? I can't even eat one meal out with my friends? And Levi... Why would he ignore me like that? Maybe he didn't see me. He might not even have been looking at me, right?

No, of course he was looking at me. Seeing me with two successful people like Jean and Marco he must know I'm a total screw up. I don't scrub up the way they do, feeling like shit or not. He wouldn't want to be seen talking to someone like me with someone like Erwin around... He probably told him what a terrible worker I am and how I slept in his office because I got beat by my dad. Connie probably told him he found me in the park and now Levi knows and that's why none of them will ever speak to me.

I've fucked myself over, and now I'm fucking other people over too. Why can't I just stop living already, everyone would be better off. Mom, Mikasa, Levi... Jean and Marco too, and Ruth. I've messed up so many people's lives just by being alive.

What am I doing out here? I've got the blades at Jean's house, and I know he has rope somewhere. I could've ended it all while they were here for dinner.

I dry off my face with my jacket and leave the bathroom behind, dark thoughts lingering in the back of my mind as I take up the seat beside Jean again. The stage is dark, and I can barely make out the person sitting on a stool in front of the microphone. Once the stage is set, the room stops vibrating with murmurs and laughter, and the lights come down on the man; Levi.
He briefly scans the audience, and when he locks eyes with me, and gives me a small nod and smile. *That was directed at me, right?*

"It becomes so easy to shut out the world eventually," He starts, sitting with one leg higher than the other and taking the microphone in his hands. He's shaking slightly, I notice. "Once it's gone, that's it - you realise there's no point in trying to rejoin the world of the living when you're barely alive yourself."

I didn't know he was a poet. Or someone who could speak publicly without making an off handed comment about someone's dress style or dinner preference.

"Every waking moment is like living under constant anaesthesia. You feel *nothing*, and although you want to feel things, you can't; instead, you learn to embrace that numb feeling and sleepwalk your way through the day. I'm not a fan of sleepwalking, though. When you don't know what you're doing you don't have control, and then you make mistakes, and then you're sleepwalking again."

He stands up now, taking the cord around the stool to give him more stage room. "The thing about sleepwalking, is that you're not always walking. Most of the time, it's peeing on the kitchen floor, or moving furniture around. It's times like these, when one person is moving furniture and another is walking with closed eyes, that problems occur."

"It's hard to wake a sleepwalker, too. You're confused when you wake up, and sometimes hostile or violent. When you were asleep you moved around furniture, but you didn't know that doing that would cause issues for other sleepwalkers - not that you always know other people are sleepwalking."

Levi takes up his stool again, and I notice he has the attention of everyone in the room. "Studies say that everyone experiences some form of sleepwalking during their lives, but they don't always remember. Because of this fact, I know that it's not so bad to be a sleepwalker among others who are sleepwalking too. Numb, alone, *alive but not living* - it's all sleepwalking, and that's why I lock the doors at night."

The audience claps, some chuckle, and Hanji whistles with her fingers in her mouth, standing to her feet. I clap too, and when Levi and I make eye contact one more time before the lights go down, I try my best to smile at him. He smiles back too, softly, a glint in his eyes that I haven't seen before flashing before the lights go down.

"That was pretty good, huh?" Jean says, motioning to both Marco and myself. We both nod in agreement, and he takes a sip of his champagne. "Though, it wasn't really poetic, more of a life lesson don't'cha think?"

"Yeah, but it had poetic devices to it. I'd say he was speaking more from the heart, so it would probably sound superficial if he formed it poetically," Marco adds, knowingly glancing back up at the stage and down towards be for a brief second. "What did you think, Eren? I know you missed the girl before him. How are you liking it so far?"

I shrug in an agreeing gesture. "Yeah, I'm having fun. Better than sitting alone," I lie, tapping my shoes against the metal beam below the stools. "He was good, too. I think you're right about the experience thing."

Marco beams, and Jean rolls his eyes playfully. "All knowing and seeing Marco Bodt strikes again. Wanna tone it down on the perception for a while?"

Marco shoves Jean with a grin, and Jean shoves back just as hard. Then, Jean says he's going to the
bar to order another round of drinks for us all - I'm not even a quarter of the way through of mine, but I don't stop him.

Marco asks if I'll be alright alone whilst he goes to the bathroom, and I tell him I'll be fine. He leaves with one final smile, and then I'm left at the side of the room, staring blankly into the fish tank as another speaker is greeted with a round of applause. For some reason, it doesn't feel right at The Basement today. I probably talked myself into not having a good time because Marco would be there, but truth be told, he's lessened the tension between me and Jean that usually forms at one point or another.

It's never a bad tension, but we used to fight a lot as kids, to the point where neither of us knew whether we meant it or not. That's kinda how we became friends, beside being neighbours and attending the same schools for the entirety of our education. But, sometimes that tension will arise with a reaction to a harmless comment, or even just looking at each other wrong. With Marco, Jean's a little softer, which is nice.

I've always been sensitive, but I can't help but feel like I'm overreacting to things nowadays, even when I also feel like I'm reacting the way I should.

I don't notice Erwin, Hanji and Levi approaching me until rewind large hand claps me on the back and I am nearly thrown against the fish tank. "Ack-!"

"Eren! I'm glad to see you! It's been too long..." Erwin slurs, clearly a little buzzed. Or completely hammered, I can't exactly tell.

I'm stunned, to be honest. I barely manage a greeting. "Ah, Erwin-..."

"Don't mind him," Hanji cuts in. "He's having a hard time, so we're here to cheer him up. You look like a lost pup, everything okay? Where's your friends gone?"

"Bar and bathroom, I'm okay here though," I say, flashing a small smile. "You did well," I say, directing my attention to Levi, who's presence has failed significantly from when we first entered the room.

"Thanks," He says sheepishly. "It's pretty bright up there..."

Hanji wraps an arm around Levi's shoulders, towering over him by a few inches. "Now, now, don't be such a drama queen. You were great!" She leans down to whisper into my ear, "He's got after-nerves, if you know what I mean."

I do and I don't, so I just nod and let Hanji believe that I und stand her completely.

"Soo, when're you comin' back to work?" Erwin says, struggling to lean against the long table.

"Tomorrow, I'm covering for Connie," I say, slightly loud.

"Good, good." His voice is starting to drift, and his eyes go in and out of focus. Edwin's lips start to pale and he swallows twice in one go.

"Hanji- I think he's about to..."

Hanji takes Erwin by the arm and drags him off and out the door without another word, leaving Levi with me. He takes a seat beside me, on the opposite side to Jean and Marco's seats, and places his head in one palm. He looks me up and down before finally meeting my gaze. "You're pretty pale. Or is that just the lighting?"
I swallow. "Probably the lighting... I'm a bit tired, though."

Levi nods, and Jean and Marco both come back to the table at the same time. "Oh, it's you! You did really good, man," Jean says, offering a hand to Levi. He looks up at Jean, totally uninterested, but shakes his hand with little enthusiasm.

"Thanks," He says, yawning briefly. Levi does look tired- almost like a little kid, but I don't say anything. I notice him shaking, and figure it must be because he's cold and not because he's nervous. I would offer him my jacket, but I know the lighting in here will make things obvious - not that they're not completely obvious already, still bleeding beneath the bandages and my sleeves. I'm honestly surprised I haven't passed out yet; or died.

Hanji comes back for Levi within twenty minutes, introducing herself to Jean and Marco before taking Levi and making a beeline for the exit. Levi gives my shoulder a brief pat before leaving, with no more than a weak, "See you."

He looks exhausted, even more so than I feel. I hope he's okay.

Around 9pm, we leave early, and I nearly fall asleep in the backseat of Marco's car. He's a lot less nervous driving later at night, when the traffic has died down, so it's a calm trek back. I try not to look at my house across the road as we pull into Jean's driveway. They let me go first, keeping an eye out for anyone in the area, but the street is practically abandoned. I'm thankful for the elderly residents for once.

I go to Jean's bed and fall asleep nearly as soon as my head hits the pillow. Jean and Marco both offer their good nights, before walking down the hallway with their hands around each others waists. If I wasn't sure before, now I know they are together.

It feels like I sleep and wake within five minutes, but the curtains are drawn and my phone is wringing when I open my eyes in the later hours of the morning.

It's Mikasa.

"Hello?" I answer groggily. I'd be more happy to get a call from her if I hadn't just been woken up, if I'm being completely honest.

'You were right, Mikasa. You're so intuitive that there's no way you wouldn't be right. You're the smartest, bravest, kindest woman I know, and I don't think there's a better privilege to have other than raising a child like you.'

"What?" I ask. Why's she speaking like that? Surely she wouldn't drink this early in the morning, I don't think I've ever even seen her drink.

She continues with a sense of urgency, and I can tell she's reading off of something. 'We chose you, and I raised you. I've seen you do great things since you were only young, and I have no doubt that you'll continue to do great things. I love you, Mikasa. But I had to go. You know how miserable I was back then. I'm sorry for letting you be there to see me the way I was. I really, really am. But I can't stay in Trost anymore, it's not where I can live freely.'

'I can't say as much in this letter as I did to you that night, but please know that I love you, and I will hold you forever in my heart until we see each other again. Please don't try to find me, and please don't try to contact me. I've changed my number and I have a different mobile now. When I am ready, I will find you, and I will make up for everything that I have or haven't done during the times you needed me.'
He voice starts to waver slightly, and I try to ask if she's alright, but she continues with tears in her voice. 'Please, take care of your brother. I know what he's like, I don't want him doing or thinking things he'll regret later in life. He trusts you, and I trust you. Don't let his feelings run your life, but please help him help himself. I love you, Mikasa. Goodbye, for now. Your mother, Carla.'

I swallow. "M-Mikasa? What is that?"

She sighs shakily. 'Mom's gone again. Haven't you got a letter yet?'

I race to the front door. Lo-and-behold, there's a letter with my name written in moms loose handed scrawl. "Y-Yeah... I do."

I don't open it until Mikasa hangs up. She tells me not to worry, that it'll be okay - the usual stuff. I tell her I know, that mom is a strong woman and can handle herself, and then I tell her that I love her and we'll talk soon. I can barely keep my hands from shaking as I tear open the letter, sitting in the corner of the entrance hall. I hold it against my knees, and just the sight of her handwriting makes me nauseous.

Eren,
I've not told you enough how proud I am of you. You're strong, and handsome, and you're the kindest, most compassionate son I could have wished for. I love you, Eren. But I had to go.

I can't stay here any longer. I tried to come back, for you and Mikasa, but I just couldn't do it. Your father is a horrible man. I'm not telling you to think this way of him, but this is how I see him, and I can't wait around for him to change again, and again, and again, because he won't. People can only change if they want to. You can't change for someone else, because they're not your first priority.

Listen, Eren. I don't know if you love him or not, but he's your father, so I understand if these words are hard for you to read. But please be cautious. As soon as you can, find somewhere to go. Get out of Trost, Eren. It's not a nice place here. Everyone in Trost has some kind of bad history that you probably won't know about until it's too late. And when it's too late, how will you get away?

I love you. I'm sorry I've left you alone again. I'm not fit to be a mother, let alone yours. Remember that you're strong, and beautiful, and you've got one of the biggest hearts out there. Don't waste those traits.

Goodbye, for now. I love you dearly.
Your mother, Carla.

Ps. Please don't come looking for me. I've left my mobile at home and I'm changing my number. Your father managed to contact me last time, I don't want that happening again. One day I will find you, and I will make up for everything I've put you through. I will always love you, no matter who you are or what you become, you're my son, and I love all of you entirely.

My eyes glaze over with tears and fear, as shadowy figures approach me on Jean's porch. They're covered, I can't identify them, but I know my dads voice. I can't comprehend the fear that attacks my being as these strangers start to kick at my cowering figure. It's early, and the streets are empty, and the dew that formed on the surface of the porch soaks into my back as they kick and shout slurs.

"Thought you'd cower away like your mother, huh!? Fuck you both! I'm better off without the dead weight you leave around!"

A kick, a punch, and something heavy thrown towards my stomach. My face is swelling and I try calling out, but my voice is hoarse and raspy. The last thing I'd ever see is my moms goodbye letter,
and the last thing I'd ever feel is the wrath and hatred my dad feels for me expressed physically. I'm too quiet, this is it - *I'm going to die here.*

Quiet sobs escape me, and I obviously wasn't as quiet as I thought I was, because Marco appears and attacks my attackers. I can barely see anymore, but two of the figures double over and the other makes a run for it down the street, quickly followed by the others. Marco's only in his boxers, but he manages to chase off the attackers. He makes his way over to me and puts a protective hand around my shaking shoulders. "What happened!?" He asks. "Eren, are you okay?"

I shake my head, and he pulls me into his chest. I don't pull away, letting my hands slide around his back. He holds me close, and I feel like a small child being comforted by an older brother or father figure. It's nice, but it also makes me sad that I never got this as a child.

"It sucks how everything bad seems to happen not at all, and then all at once," Marco says, crouched low to the group and rubbing circles into my back. "Why are you out there? You shouldn't go outside this early when your dad lives right across the road..."

"Yeah," I sniff. "It fucking sucks..."

He holds me like that for a while before helping me back upstairs and telling me to get some more rest. He says he'll wake me an hour before my shift so that I can get ready, and he sets a glass of water beside my bed.

"Thanks," I say stiffly as he goes to leave the bedroom. He'd treated the new wounds, and tried to get some sense out of me because of what happened. I told him honestly that I didn't know what happened. One minute I was asleep and the next I was being kicked and punched undoubtedly by my dad and his friends.

"Anytime, so long as you're alright to be in here alone."

I nod slowly. "I am."

Marco leaves, and I hear Jean ask something just out of earshot. I know it's about me, but my eyes don't stay open long enough for me to register what they're saying before my mind shuts off completely and I fall asleep once more.

It feels like none of that even happened, that I had a terrible nightmare and I was never awake. But the empty pit in my stomach tells a completely different story, as it so often does; the truth.

-X-

"Don't overdo it, okay? Take it easy, I'm sure Erwin will understand," Marco says, leaning out the window of his car as I go to enter On The Run for my shift.

Jean sits agitated in the front seat, as he had to ride in the back the whole way here. Marco let me sit in the front because of what happened this morning, but he still hasn't told Jean what happened, for which I'm thankful.

"And if your living plans down work out, come back to us okay? I can only stand mom and Marco for so long yanno!" Jean calls to me.

"I will. Thanks Marco, you too Jean." I wave as they drive off, and feel both relieved and scared.

I told them I had made arrangements to go back to Kev's apartments, even though I know they're booked up for a long time. Where will I go? I don't know. But, I'm relieved to be out of Jean and
Marco's hair. I took the blade, the bandages, and everything I'd bought over there, so I've got everything I need.

I can change my phone in the back room, and I'm sure I can have a nap in between shift changes later today. I'll find somewhere - even if it's the park again. I have to be independent. Mom wants me to get away, so I'll do it.

Maybe I'll die of natural causes and not by my own hand?

Erwin is nowhere in sight, so I make my way to the back room to see him crouched over on his desk, obviously nursing a major hangover. I can see the moment he notices my poorly concealed bruises, but he doesn't say anything, so neither do I.

During my 1pm through to 6pm shift that day, I learn a few new things. One, that we have a new employee; Bertholdt.

"Ah, I'm glad my first shift is with you - it's better we already know each other... Kind of," He says, shaking my head unsteadily.

"Y-Yeah... It is," I agree, unconvincingly.

He later tells me that Armin nearly died yesterday, after he was involved in a car accident. He was crossing at the pedestrian crossing, but a car went through a red light and just managed to miss him, only knocking him over and causing him minor concussion. He says that Armin's still a bit frazzled, and hasn't walked outside since 2pm yesterday, that he's only travelled by car and stayed with his friends.

I make a mental note to text him and make sure he's okay, or invite him out to the Centennial at some point - I know he likes that park.

A few more hours into the shift, and dread starts to fall over me. I really don't have anywhere to go after 6pm tonight. That's two hours away. Where will I go? Connie and Sasha are gone, and I can't go back to Jean's. Would it be so bad to ask Bertholdt? No, I can't, I barely know him.

Maybe Armin? That way I can visit him and have somewhere to stay, even for just one night. No, that would make me a user, and I'd be more of a burden.

Erwin appears no later than 4:54pm, and apologises to myself and Bertholdt about his moody behaviour and lack of presence. We both tell him it's fine, though Bertholdt far more nervously than I do, and then Erwin tells us that he has a friend bringing him painkillers so he can get back to work.

This 'friend' of his arrives just before the end of my shift, and I'm honestly surprised to see Levi enter On The Run with a small bag of medication for Erwin. They barely speak during the exchange, Erwin ducking back behind the counter to down the medication, and Levi walking over to me behind the desk.

"When was the last time you ate something?" Levi asks, leaning against the counter to look up at me, as Erwin walks back into the back room, muttering to himself about making better drinking decisions. "You look pretty sunken- your face, I mean."

I shrug, and try to think of something to lighten the mood. I don't want to seem any more disheartened that I already am. "I might've eaten a booger when I blew my nose this morning."

Levi's face contorts in disgust, and I smirk inwardly. "That's... Disgusting."
I shrug again and Erwin walks out into the main store. "Excuse us for a moment, Eren. We need to speak in private for a little while. You're free to have a coffee break now, the machines just been cleaned."

"Okay," I say, not hesitant to walk back behind the counter. Something's seems off having Levi at my workplace. Especially because of how perceptive he is.

He must've seen the bruises. Not that anyone could miss them.

I walk out into the main building and towards the coffee machine, preparing a hot cup of month old coffee. I know the machines get cleaned regularly, but I also know that we haven't replaced the coffee beans in over six months, because only the employees are dumb enough to drink from this ancient thing.

My arms start to itch, and I have to resist the urge to scratch at them in case they bleed. Bertholdt serves his first customer whilst I'm at the coffee machine, and hearing him stutter makes me feel almost bad for him.

He wasn't this nervous when I first met him. Is this is first job?

"You look pretty beat up, kid. You should get some ice or something on those or they'll hurt longer." Levi had appeared beside me, with Erwin close behind, causing me to jump back slightly. I touch at the biggest bruise on my right cheek, which has swollen against my eye.

"Your shifts almost over. No mom to pick you up today?" Erwin says, looking out into the carpark. "I do enjoy some of our conversations."

"N-No... No mom today," I say nervously, taking my coffee. Shit... What do they know?

"Your friend called earlier," Erwin says, taking me further aside with Levi. "You do know that if you are ever in any danger, I can take action for you, as a guardian."

"Oh, n-no, it's fine really, it was just a-"

"Where are you staying?" Levi cuts in, arms folded across his chest. "You've got your whole room packed up in that backpack."

"Um.." I'm fucked.

"I'd like you to take me up on an offer," Levi says, looking me directly in the eyes. There's no judgement or annoyance. In fact, they're quite comforting. "Stay at my place for the night."

"W-What!?"

"I know this is an awkward situation, because we barely know each other, but I can't have you sleeping in the park. Again."

I avert my eyes quickly, rubbing my sides nervously. "L-Levi..."

"Eren," Erwin says, placing a firm hand on my shoulder. "As your boss, and a guardian, I'd like you to stay with Levi for a few days." My eyes open wide and I open my mouth to speak, but a reassuring pat on the shoulder stops me. "I know it's hard to take in, but I think you'd benefit a few days out of the hustle and bustle of the city. Don't you agree?"

"I... I don't...-"
"If you're uncomfortable, say no. We can arrange somewhere else for you to stay, or deer free to tell us to get lost. But for crying out loud, a nineteen year old kid shouldn't be sleeping on the streets or couch surfing or bench sitting," Levi says, his features contorted into concern. "Please, let us offer you some help."

With both Erwin and Levi standing in front of me, and Bertholdt looking over at us nervously from the counter, and two customers walking awkwardly around us to open the fridge, I don't want to cause unnecessary drama. I rub the back of my neck and sigh. "My shifts over now so... Let me get my stuff from the back."

And thus begins the journey forward, to Levi's home; the home of a guy who could read a mind even better than Marco can. The home of a guy which I will try to stay away from as much as possible, until I can get out of this town and burden only myself and no one else.

I'm a fuck up, a burden; I'm a fucking curse. Dad knows it and always made sure I knew it, Mikasa knows it and left as soon as she could, mom knows it and stays away so she doesn't get involved in my shit. Doesn't he know what he's getting into?

Chapter End Notes

Well, this took forever to write - and it's the longest chapter so far!
I hope this isn't too rushed... But, there's a lot of discussions from other perspectives that aren't included that make this make more sense. (Would Levi's P.O.V be an option in the future?)
Stay safe! xx
I've been independent for nearly my entire life. From birth, I've always been doing things my way or the high way - usually.

When Mikasa and I would help mom with the shopping, I'd always push the trolley, even though I couldn't see above it until I was ten years old. When I got lost at the mall during my first year of middle school, I walked myself to the concierge and got them to call my mom over the loud speaker to come and get me. You'd think a pair of thirty-something year old women had never seen a kid before in their life when they saw me headed for their desk.

In high school, I stepped in multiple times to stop Jean from being pushed into lockers or shoved around by older, bigger guys with more muscle density than brain mass. He'd always been a little on the chubby side, up until our senior year, so he was a prime target for bullying. Whether it cost me an arm, a leg, an eye, or two weeks of my free time, I stepped in and put an end to their bullying. How could I stand to see my best friend attacked every day of his life for something as meaningless as weight?

At the same time, I took care of myself too. I got myself a job in sophomore year, started buying my own clothes and saving money to go out with friends, and even helped out at the local (now bankrupt) fruit market down the road.

From day one, I've done things for myself. Day in and day out, dad would tell me how worthless I was and how I would never amount to anything - that 'humanity would be better off without me.' Well, dad, the message has finally got through my thick skull.

Back then, I was somebody. I would be somebody, if I'd stayed the way I had. I would be an asset to humanity, one way or another, and nothing would ever stand in my way; especially not myself.

But now? Now I'm standing at the subway with a guy I barely know, waiting for the train to arrive to go back to his home and stay there for however long I have to. Why? Because I'm useless, and I'll never amount to anything, and I'm a burden to all who I meet; just like you told me, dad. The prophecy is finally fulfilled. I, Eren Jaeger, am a complete and utter failure, and I have decided that the world doesn't need me living on it anymore.

I'm going to end it all. My suffering, and the suffering I've caused everyone around me. It'll all be over soon.

"Eren? Is everything alright?"

I abruptly look down at Levi's, who's staring at me suspiciously, tightly gripping a can of Dr Pepper in his hand. "Y-Yeah... Just thinkin'."
"What about?" He questions, taking in the sight of something behind me, obviously uninteresting. "You spaced out pretty far for a few seconds."

I shrug. "It's nothing. I just don't want to be a burden to you, is all."

"You're not a burden, don't worry. I enjoy your company, no matter the circumstances - I hope the feeling is mutual?" He lifts an eyebrow in question, and I nod hesitantly.

"It is." Mostly. I'm not sure I like being with someone as perceptive as Levi when I'm carved to pieces beneath the thin fabric of my clothes - and when the only clothes I have with me are the ones on my back and a single jacket and change of jeans and underwear in my backpack. I'm throughly unprepared for someone who has a lot to hide.

The train comes to a stop, and Levi and I board amongst the hoard of people just clocking off of work. It's hectic. I've only ever heard stories from Jean about the tube in London, but I can imagine that the Trost Underground is fairly similar. We're pushed between sweaty backsides and stomachs, pressed against each other, prodded and poked, and finally we make it to a clear space to stand at the end of the carriage. I hold into the hanging handle whilst Levi goes to pay for the tickets at the booth, midway between the two carriages.

It's nearly funny watching his struggle to get through the passengers, either too polite to say 'excuse me' (which I highly doubt) or just too short to be noticed by the large number of tall people on this train. The second choice is what I decide on, almost feeling compassion for the poor guy, nearly squashed between two people with suitcases.

Within five minutes, Levi's walking back down towards me, and he breaths a sigh of relief when he steps beside me and reaches up to hold onto the handle, fingertips just brushing against the plastic. "It's hell down there," He comments, brushing a few strands of flyaway hair out of his eyes.

"It looks like it. I didn't think you'd make it out alive," I joke, smiling briefly.

He nods, tipping slightly as the train stops to let on more passengers. "Surely this things full enough. Can't these guys wait another few minutes for the next train? Anymore sweaty pits and this place is gonna stink whose than it already does."

We ride in silence for ten minutes, before two people get off the train and Levi and I can finally sit down. Winter is slowly approaching, and the sky has already turned a darker shade of grey, tiny stars beginning to litter the skyline above the ocean.

"Beautiful, isn't it..." Levi says, quickly sucking in a breath. I'm guessing he didn't mean to say that aloud. But, I answer him anyway.

"Yeah, it is."

Finally, Levi motions for me to get up, and we leave the train at Survey Court. It's only twenty minutes away from Trost Central, by train, which makes me a little more relaxed. If we were up at a higher point, I may even be able to see Mikasa's university.

We walk down nearly to the end of the street, before we stop outside an apartment complex called Maria Estate. It's around twenty floors high, and fairly large in width. Most of the lights in the windows are on, too.

"This is it. Elevators broken though, so we have to take the stairs. Is that okay?" Levi asks, the two of us walking through the automatic glass doors into a small mail-room looking place.
"It has to be, I guess," I half-joke, following him closely behind. It's a stylish place inside, with white tiled floors and high ceilings. Honestly, it reminds me of Jean's house. *I wonder if Levi's apartment will look like Jean's house?*

After walking up four flights of wrought iron stairs, we arrive on Levi's floor, and walk down the corridor until we stop at room 34. He unlocks it, and holds the door open for me to step inside. "It's a bit cold in here, I'd left the air conditioner on," Levi says absently, shutting and locking his door behind him.

*Why would he have the air conditioner on when it's nearly winter? And Trost is never warm enough for an air conditioner, anyways.*

"My cats been to the vet with a temperature, so I kept it on to keep him cool. I'm gonna say fuck it now though, it's freezing in here." Speaking of, a long haired, soft looking black cat struts out into the living room, stopping when it sees me and staring me straight in the eyes.

"She's an asshole to strangers, so don't let her until she comes to you," Levi says, switching on the lights. "You're not allergic, are you?"

"No, I'm not," I say, awkwardly placing myself to the side of the room, avoiding the judgemental looking cat.

"That's one thing out of the way then. Make yourself at home, I'm sure you feel awkward right now," He says, eyes flickering over to me. "The bathroom is down the hall to the left, and my bedroom is on the right. The key to the balcony is kept on the bookshelf by the T.V, so just remember to put it back if you use it... I think that's all for now..."

"Okay," I say, a little stunned by Levi's introduction. I'm supposed to be living with someone I barely know, and this is how I'm supposed to get comfortable?

An awkward silence stills the air between us, before Levi runs a hand though his hair and sighs, placing his hands on his hips. "I've got work tomorrow, only for three hours though. Is that okay? You won't feel too uncomfortable here on your own for a while?" He asks, seemingly nervously.

*Finally, the opportunity I've been waiting for. "Yeah, that's fine," I say, maybe a little too quickly.*

*I can do it tomorrow. I can finally stop my heart tomorrow, and then Levi won't have to stress about showing me the bathroom or the balcony, and Jean and Marco won't ever have to have me burden them again, and mom won't have to leave Mikasa alone.*

*Myself, and everyone else, can finally be free.*

It's nearly 1pm when I wake up the next morning on the couch. Levi had insisted I sleep in his bed, that he'd take the couch until more comfortable arrangements could be made, but I refused. Why would I make Levi hurt his back, when I could do it?

The smell of eggs cooking in a pan woke me, if not the sizzling noises it makes and the cat meowing at Levi's feet. He's humming along to something, and I peek over the edge of the couch to see him with his earphones in, humming aloud to something on his iPod. I smile slightly, watching him sway and move ever-so-slightly to the music. A few words actually escape his lips, and they're nothing if
not in tune.

He looks... Happy. Even from behind, he seems to be in high spirits. Levi turns around to open a drawer and sees me watching him. He blinks it off, chuckling under his breath. "Enjoying yourself there?"

Of course I am. How would seeing someone as plain as Levi dancing in his socks not be enjoyable? I shrug, putting my lips together in a straight line. "Dunno."

Levi hums, taking his earphones out of his ears. "You want lunch? Or... Breakfast, I guess."

"No thanks," I say, shaking my head. "I'm not hungry."

He raises an eyebrow. "You sure?"

I nod. "I'm sure. Thanks, though."

Levi doesn't question it, and continues to cook and serve his own breakfast; two eggs, sunny-side up. He eats at the kitchen bench, and I stay on the couch, facing to look out at the balcony beside the TV. The curtains are drawn, and the view of Trost from here is great. It's cloudy outside, no surprises, and there is no doubt it's going to rain. There isn't much traffic, from what I can see, so I hope Levi takes his leave soon to avoid any that might appear.

That way I won't back out. That way I can end it all, no second thoughts whatsoever.

I'd slept well, barely remembering anything from when we got to his apartment. He never gave me a proper tour, and I never went to the bathroom, so I'm going to have to guess everything as I go along.

_I wonder if Levi will care if I get mess in his house? I'm not sure if hanging myself will leave too much mess... I guess if my organs come out or something then he'll have the ambulance people clean it up._

"Well, I'm going to head off soon. Do you need me to bring anything back for you?" Levi asks, taking his keys off of the hook in the kitchen. "I'll only be gone a couple of hours, unless someone calls in sick."

I shake my head. "No, it's fine."

"You're free to use the shower and the TV, and eat whatever I've got. There's not much, but it'll do. I just have one rule, don't let the cat out onto the balcony. He almost fell off last time, and I really don't want to have to deal with that."

I chuckle lightly, but it dies down as I think about Levi not wanting to deal with my suicide, let alone his cat's. Maybe I shouldn't do it in his apartment?

"Okay. See you when you get back, I guess," I say weakly.

"See you."

Levi locks the door behind him, and I almost feel trapped. I know this was Erwin's idea, and I'm sure Levi is just as happy about it as I am, but I can't help feeling like a trapped animal. Can I leave whenever I want? Am I allowed to go out shopping, or see movies, or my friends?

Speaking of friends, I have to see how Armin is. I pull out my phone and find his name in my
To: Armin Arlert
1:07pm
Hey, I heard about the accident yesterday from Bertholdt
hope everything is ok
- Eren

I don't usually sign my name, but I can't remember if he kept me in his contacts or not. *Is this a weird thing to do? Maybe I shouldn't have texted. We barely know each other. And we've only seen each other a handful of times because of coincidence, right?*

From: Armin Arlert
1:08pm
Hey! It's totally fine. I have a light concussion, so just killer headache spells and a crook neck. But it's not too bad. How are things with you?

I forget sometimes that he's Australian. I have to guess that 'crook' sore, but I could be wrong.

To: Armin Arlert
1:08pm
That's great news I'm happy for you :)
Everything's fine for me, just staying at a friends place for a few days no biggie

*Can I call him a friend? Is he a friend?*

From: Armin Arlert
1:10pm
Oh that's cool. Hey, do you wanna catch up sometime? I'm not travelling anywhere for the next three months, so I've got a while to fill in time.

To: Armin Arlert
1:10pm
Yea sure, that'd be cool
When?

From: Armin Arlert
1:11pm
Well if you're not busy, I've just bought loads of soda ;)

I smile at the winky face, shaking my head slightly. I tell him Levi's address, and put my phone aside for a few moments. *Will Levi mind if I have a friend over?* Oh well, it's not like we're going to do anything bad.

Unless Armin was flirting with me and we're about to have porn-plot sex on Levi's couch.

I shut my eyes for a few moments, revelling in the burning sensation, as moisturising tears form gently behind my eyelids. I take in the calming hum of Levi's refrigerator, and the ticking of a clock somewhere in the room that I can't locate. A loud motorcycle engine brings me back into reality, and I stand on my aching feet to locate the bathroom.

*I look like shit.*
My usually tanned skin is pale and clammy to touch. I have sweat patches under my armpits, and the dark circles under my eyes are forming newer, darker circles. I turn on the tap and rinse my face with water, before returning to the living room to put a different outfit together. I manage to find a clean pair of khaki shorts and grey tank top, so I'll throw on my dark lightweight jacket over the top.

Returning to the bathroom, I turn on the water and get undressed, repulsed by what I see on my arms and thighs. I hate what I've done to myself, but I love what it does to me. There's something almost intriguing about the seemingly strategic lines etching deep into my skin. None are even remotely close to healing, from countless minute of subconscious scratching and re-opening.

This intricate webbing of scars on sensitive skin makes me feel so small. I've done this to myself, and even though I want to do it again and again every single fucking day, I know that they're only only making me feel worse. I know this, yet I want to do it again. I need to do it again.

Self harm is my best friend now; my alcohol, my heroin. If this longing urge to dig something sharp into my skin and tear it apart is anything like what dad feels towards alcohol, then I don't fucking blame him for turning to it. At this point, I'm going to turn out to be the even more fucked up version of my father. Who knows, maybe I'll start cutting other people up, or having them watch as I tear open my skin just barely grazing veins that I so wish I had the guts to sever.

I shower quickly, tracing the thin, protruding lines with my fingertips. Out of anger, I punch the tiled bathroom wall as hard as I can, feeling my knuckles crack as they collide with the slippery surface. "Argh- Fuck!" I shout, clutching my throbbing fist to my chest to ease the pain.

I turn off the shower and wrap a towel weakly around my waist, inspecting the damage. My knuckles are almost inverted; swollen, red, and looking like they're bruising quickly. There's blood forming in the creases of my skin, and two chips have fallen from the tiles. They're not on the floor, so they jus have washed down the drain.

I dress myself slowly, unable to move my knuckles too much without wincing in pain. It lasts a lot longer than slicing into your skin does, but I don't necessarily mind the pain. It subsides to a numb once I'm fully dressed, but I decide to cut one of my bandages into a smaller cloth to wrap around my hand. It's definitely not completely broken, but I wouldn't be surprised if there's a crack in one of those knuckles.

I'm not going to tell Levi though. It'll heal on its own.

The door knocks within seconds of my hand being bandaged. It took me damn near ten minutes to do it right, considering my left hand is fucking useless. I stride to the door, momentarily forgetting about the pain in my right hand and going to turn the handle. I wince, switch hands, and put on a fake smile when Armin's eyes meet mine.

"Afternoon there, sir. Mind if I come in?" His tone is playful as he smiles brightly at me. He has a carton of soda in his left hand, and a plastic bag with colourful contents in his right. He's also sopping wet, as the afternoon rain obviously decided to grace Trost with its ever-present wrath.

"C'mon in," I say, holding the door open for him. He nods in thanks, ducking beneath my arm and setting his stuff down on the kitchen bench.

"Nice place. Who you staying with?" He asks, stepping back to look around the living room and kitchen area.

I walk down the hallway to the bathroom to grab him a towel, calling it to him. "Oh just- a friend of mine. He works at Recon."
"Recon?" Armin calls back.

I forget he's not a local. "It's a fancy restaurant down by The Basement, by Trost Central?" I hold out the towel for him.

Armin nods a thank you, taking the towel from my hands with a comforting gentleness. "Uh... Is it close to Trost Centennial?"

"Yeah, in a way."

"I'll have to look out for it then! How've you been?" He asks.

I'm unhappy, I'm scared, I'm fighting a battle with myself that I won't win. I want to kill myself. I want to escape everything and be alone forever so that the only person I can burden is myself. I'm so fucking unimportant it's not even funny anymore. I feel like absolute shit all the time, I can't keep down a full meal because I don't fucking deserve it. I'm a complete and utter loser. "Yeah, pretty good. How have you been?"

I invite Armin to take what he brought over to the couch, and we both sit down on opposite ends. Armin opens me a can of cola as he tells me about the car accident. There were two people involved, plus him. One guy pulled out of a carpark in reverse and didn't see another guy coming, who was on his phone. Armin was a pedestrian, and if he hadn't seen the car pulling out of the carpark before the other guy, he could be paralysed by now.

"Really?" I ask, wide eyed. I wish that was me. I wish I could have nearly been killed. I wouldn't've hesitated to step in between those cars and have the life pulled from me instantly.

Or maybe I'd've suffered. That would have worked just as good. I could go out feeling the way everyone felt when I was born. Earned irony at its finest, wouldn't you say?

"Yeah... It's more scary thinking about it now than it was at the time. I mean, I could just not exist right now, you know?" He sighs.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to just not exist though?

"Yeah... Scary stuff, huh?"

He tells me about how he almost died in Barcelona, falling into train tracks and not being able to get back up into the platform. The train was headed straight for them, and no one could pull him up. Eventually his friends got him up though, with the help of a woman with a 'seriously strong arm.'

I feel almost lonely, thinking about what I was doing whilst Armin was out seeing the world. I can't even remember, it was that unimportant. Was I at school? Work? Was I even awake? How much time have I spent sleeping through all hours of the day, when I could have been living the life I so want to not be living?

Am I taking the life I have for granted? I know I deserve to be alone. But do I deserve to be lonely?

"Armin..." I start, sipping the cool soda in my hand. "Can I ask you something?"

He nods, without hesitating. "Go for it."

I'm nervous as I speak, not wanting to hit some nerve in him that brings back painful memories. You can never truly know the right and wrong things to say to people, until it's too late and you've lost another companion because of your big mouth. But, I take a deep breath and go for it. "A while ago
you...- You dropped by my apartment, and you talked about your school. You said you felt lonely, and you hated it, even though you were achieving so much... Why is that?"

He takes in my appearance for a few moments, looking me up and down with his large ocean eyes. "I guess... I can't pinpoint just one thing. School made me uncomfortable. At least, that one did," Armin sighs, setting down his own cup and crossing his legs on Levi's sofa. "I felt like a total outcast, like people would judge me even just for breathing. Looking back, they probably weren't even thinking about me at all. I know some people threw me into lockers or chucked paper at me, but that wasn't everyone. I could handle that, to some extent."

"It was more the fact that being dubbed the smart kid also meant I became the replaceable friend. I had friends- not a large group, but a small tight-knit circle of people who I sat with. They weren't my friends, but we were companions. I thought that at first, anyway. It wasn't until about the beginning of Grade 11 when I stopped having friends. I wouldn't hear from them for months, then suddenly an assignment or report would be due and I'd have people from all over the school messaging me and asking how I was, before dropping the 'hey, what have you done for so-and-so' bomb. I felt good to be needed, but I stopped helping people when I realised that they were only my friends conditionally."

Armin shrugs. "It might have been a mistake, and feeling lonely was mostly my own fault for pushing people away, but I dodged a few bullets by doing it. It's not fair to only be someone's friend when it's convenient for you, you know? The worst part was, I didn't even know for so long. I actually thought I was doing good for once, that I had friends who needed me. But, they weren't there even once when I needed them. It was like our friendships were some huge document, and their conditions were in bold, but mine were kept in the fine print, so everyone would overlook them." He chuckles, looking off across the room and out the balcony window. "Stupid, isn't it."

"We are two completely different sides of the same chipped, broken, unforgiving coin. I shake my head. "No. It's not stupid, Armin."

"Hm?" He looks at me, hair swishing behind him as he turns his head in my direction.

"It's not stupid to do that, or think that. At least not in my opinion. I don't know what I would've done, but I know that not being a friend at all is better than being a conditional one. I'd rather have no friends than be a replacement."

Armin nods, taking in my features yet again, with a single glance. "I'm glad you agree. I've been ridiculed from a few people for doing that to myself. They've said that its my own fault I was bullied after that, and that I always felt lonely and hated school. But, although I was unhappy back then, I'm happier now knowing that I didn't keep on being replaced."

"Did anyone ever notice a change in you?" I ask.

He shrugs. "Some did. I guess I had a few acquaintances who stuck around, but removing myself from those others removed me from them too. I went through some internal struggles, and even the school councillors weren't helping my anxiety. I'd get physically sick thinking about going to school - it even got to a point where I didn't eat for nearly two weeks straight, just so I wouldn't vomit when I woke up. I lost nearly fifteen kilos, and when I looked like the byproduct of uncooked spaghetti and chicken legs, I had a few people ask me if I was okay."

"Of course,' I'd tell them. Why would they even ask that, you know? They didn't really care, otherwise they would've said something when I began avoiding them in the first place. I gave up with friends until the end of school, and by university I'd gained back most of the weight and even got myself a group of travel buddies. We quit uni after the first year and then travelled together for a
few months. After that, I went out on my own, and I've made some great friendships. Connie, Jean, Sasha, and you." He smiles at me, bright eyed and slightly embarrassed, by the slight flush to his cheeks.

"Thanks, Armin... You're a good friend to me, too."

I can't help but feel a little choked up. Here I am, keeping everything I think and feel to myself, even from people who have known me all my life. From Mikasa, my own fucking sister. From my own mom. And yet here's Armin, a guy I barely know, pouring out one chamber of his heart for me to feel just a little bit better about myself.

He's been lonely all his life, even when he's been surrounded by people. He's done that to himself, yet it was always going to happen.

Was this always going to happen to me? Or did I cause myself to feel this way? Perhaps dad isn't the only factor to me getting to this point. Maybe I've just always been fucked in the head, and I just decided to blame it on someone else to numb the pain just a fraction.

"Eren?" Armin says, nudging me with the edge of his foot. I'd been staring at the floor. "Are you alright?"

"Hm? Of course," I say, putting on a cheesy grin. "Of course I'm okay. Just tired is all, no biggie."

Armin raises an eyebrow, but sets his facial features into a neutral position again. "I should probably get going. I haven't been here too long, but I promised an old work colleague I'd meet her for lunch on the other side of town. You can keep all the sweets, I hope you're not too picky about junk food," he chuckles, getting up off the couch and downing the last of his soda.

"How can you be? It's all fattening and delicious," I grin, seeing him to the door.

"There haven't been truer words ever spoken."

We say our goodbyes and Armin walks down the hallway to the elevators, calling out one last, "See you! We'll have to catch up sometime for real!" before disappearing down the corridor.

I decide that I like Armin. He's both oddly confident and seemingly shy, but there's something about him that draws people to him. He has a different atmosphere compared to the rest of dreary old Trost.

I wonder if a guy like me would ever be able to find someone like him? Not that I'm planning on being here that long anyway. It's just a thought.

A clap of thunder jolts me, and the thought of whether Levi's cat is afraid of thunder storms briefly crosses my mind. The rain pours outside, and I shuffle to the balcony door of the dark apartment, opening the curtains; it's beautiful.

The gloomy weather usually strikes disappointment into the eyes of people, but not me. Especially not from here. Dim street lamps set the pavement aglow, and clusters of umbrellas move along the streets.

Unlocking the door, I step out onto the balcony to sit on one of the two wrought iron chairs beside the small coffee table, beneath the lone hanging plant with two discoloured leaves hanging from the main branch.

It's a little cold, but it's nice; refreshing.
The smell of rain and the polluted city air, ironically, goes well together. I let my arm outstretch, and my palm finds itself collecting droplets of rain, before it runs down my arm and into my sleeve, drenching it slowly.

It's now I realise I'm smiling. I don't know why, but I am. The rain falls from the sky quicker now, and people slip on the wet sidewalks and the aforementioned scardy-cat meows at the door for me to come back inside and a car honks at the traffic lights for another to go on the green signal but - I'm smiling.

It's almost like, if I leave my arm out there a little longer, the rain will wash away everything beneath the thin fabric of my sleeve, and I can breathe deeper again.

"It's nice, isn't it?" A deep voice says from behind me. I jump, causing the chair to scrape along the wet ground.

"Levi! I didn't hear you come it!" I stutter, quickly taking my arms out of the rain and pulling my sleeves to my wrists in a panic. What did he see? Does he know? How can I make excuses for this? Now he's going to think I'm even more of a fuck up than he already does! God, I'm so fucking stupid and selfish and-

"It's okay, you're allowed to be out here. It's a bit cold though. Do you want a warmer jacket? That one looks kinda thin."

I can feel the cool air hitting my skin through the fabric. I want to say no, but I have a feeling that if I do that it'll draw more attention to myself. But if I say yes, will I have to take this one off in front of him?

"Is it's not too much trouble..."

He smiles. "None at all."

He leaves and returns with two thicker jackets. He hands one to me and puts the other on himself, pulling up the chair beside me. I put it on over my other jacket, and Levi says nothing, so I try to relax.

*Maybe he isn't as perceptive as I thought?*

"It's nice to be able to do this. It stinks like shit when the smokers up top come out to enjoy the weather too, but for now, it's nice," He says, serenity within his words.

"Yeah," I sigh. "It's nice."

We sit in comfortable silence for a while, listening to the sound of the rain falling onto the pavement, and the plastic roof over the rooftop garden two floors above us, and the droplets dripping off of the plant and the railing.

I glance over at Levi, taking in the way his usually tight features soften. His eyebrows fall closer to his eyes when he's relaxed, but he doesn't look angry. He looks completely at peace with everything around him. His legs are crossed at the ankles below the table, and his hands are entwined with each other in his lap.

*Can I really trust this man? This guy I barely even know? This guy who my boss is clearly good friends with, but is clearly younger than he is? How old is Erwin anyway? I remember Levi saying he was twenty one, I think, but Erwin has to be older than that.*
Why did Erwin have to do this to me. If I wasn't here, I could be killing myself without worrying about messing up someone's home life. I could be cutting or drinking or even drugging myself to death. Anything better than worrying about other people worrying about you. Not that anyone ever would.

"Eren?" Levi says, breaking the silence. "Is everything alright?"

It's the same look that Erwin, Armin, Marco and Jean have given me, all within the span of a single week. It's a pitiful, sad look. The same look you give homeless people begging for change, or alcoholics picking up half smoked cigarettes off of the road.

"Of course. Why do you ask that?" I say, feigning ignorance. He's obviously not having it, however.

"I can't stop thinking about you and your dad. Of course, I'm not going to make you feel uncomfortable with discussing something you don't want to. I'll leave that for you to do on your own terms, with my or anybody else. I just need you to know that, even though I'm still a stranger to you, I'm willing to listen to you talk."

"That's kinda cliche."

"I know, but it's true. Even if you wanna tell me how shifty my cooking is, which I'll argue about 'till the death mind you, I'll listen...-"

Till the death, huh? Please do.

"-... If you wanna talk about life, or how the world works. Who you hate, who you love. Your least favourite Masterchef chef! I'm not always a great talker, but I'll be damned if I don't say I'm a good listener."

"Bit conceited there, Mr Nice-Guy," I chide. He sighs to conceal a chuckle, and I let my face fall.

Before I know it, I'm running my mouth without giving my mind time to catch up. "Living feels more like a task than just something you do," I shrug, staring out onto the city streets. "I want to live again, but I've forgotten how."

Levi raises an eyebrow at me, but I avoid looking at him. I keep my gaze forward, but Levi takes my single sentence mistake as his chance. "Living is a task, Eren. You have to put effort into everything you do until it becomes a habit; like breathing. But, I'm not going to lecture you. No amount of schooling or lecturing can prepare you for what life throws at you."

"You know I'm gonna get deep now, right?" Levi says, with a breathy chuckle. "You've given me a single window and I'm taking the entire pane. Are you okay with that?" One eyebrow is raised, as if asking for my permission to continue. In all honestly, I'm not sure which would be worse; letting him speak, try to help me, or completely shutting him down before he has a chance to.

"I figured," I agree, holding my legs close to my chest. "But I don't mind."

Levi nods. "Tell me if you do mind, and I won't. I do have some level of self control."

I shake my head slightly, looking towards him, but not at him. "No, it's okay. I'd rather you talk and I listen, to be honest."

"I'd like that to change sometime... But I'll humour you for now," Levi smiles. "People don't prepare you for the reality of life. They spend so much time telling you about fun and adventure, and happiness and wanderlust and love. No one ever tells you in that much detail about the less
glamorous realities we all face."

"We spend around four years of our lives learning to speak, and even then we can't be understood. The only thing about being a child that can be understood, is the overactive and confident imaginations we all had. As we grow, that confidence within our imagination deters, and we are struck with the cruel reality that is existence. Some people find pathways to follow that blind them from that, though, like religion or narcotics. But, the truth is, they're only temporary escapes, and reality is still there in the background, waiting for those little escapes to be over."

"I can't give you life-changing advice, whether you want it or not, but the fact is, it's unavoidable. They say you can't have calm without a storm, right? And you're sitting there thinking; 'I wish this guy would shut up, he doesn't know what he's talking about. There is no calm, it's always a storm, I hate that sappy bullshit,' right?"

"Mm.." I nod. He's good - too good.

"Let yourself think that, but remember to be grateful for every good thing that happens in your lifetime, no matter how small. Think of when you found five cents on the ground, or when you smiled at a baby and it smiled back at you. They're good things, right?" He asks, cocking his head to one side.

Or maybe... Maybe it was when I met you. "Yeah."

"Think of those. They're calms in your storm, even if they're small, they're not insignificant," Levi says, shrugging slightly. There's something to the way he's speaking that gets inside of my head. Whether it's the way he's forming his words, or his sentence structure, or the fact that has taking the time of day to speak to me like a human being, I can't tell. Whatever it is, I would listen to him speak all day if I could, even if I won't take a word of his advice seriously - I know it's all lies anyway, right? They always tell you this stuff, because there's nothing else to say. You can't hear someone say how much they hate living, and not say anything in return, can you? It's just human nature to try to be someone who makes a difference, even when you're not helping the situation at all.

The rain falls heavier around us, and just as Levi had said before, the smokers in the rooms above us had come out to watch the rain flood half the city. It does ruin the already polluted-rain scent, but neither of us make a beeline for the door. We stay outside, ignoring the cats pleas to join us, and someone yelling on the streets below.

Levi exhales sharply though his nose. "Let yourself accept the good with the bad. Don't treat life like a bad thing, because it's not. It's something that you'll never fully appreciate until it's gone, and... I'd rather it didn't get to that point."

I wouldn't. "Mm.."

Chapter End Notes

Fairly breezy chapter, just something I whipped up to give you all the false impression that everything will start looking up from here. :) (Hint: it won't - in fact, rough times await, friends)

As always, thank you all so much for reading! And stay safe! xx
Without A Warning

Chapter Summary

Good things, bad things, and then it just gets worse.

Chapter Notes

Wow! 2000 hits?? I am absolutely amazed! I didn't think this story would be as popular as that, but hey, I'm not complaining! Thank you all so much for your lovely comments and helpful tips, I always appreciate every single one. However, I don't think this chapter is exactly the kind of gift you will appreciate for all of that stuff...

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Song/s:
Please Stay - Westlife
My Funeral Boy - Nicole Dollanganger

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

I've never taken much notice of my relationships or how they progress. It seemed that for the most part of my life, people either took the time to bother with me or they didn't; that was that. Lately, I've seen and met more people than I have in my entire life. It's like the universe decided to take away whatever confidence I used to have and replace it with confident people, who would sooner or later become a part of my life.

From Armin dropping by so casually, and appearing so often, even though we'd never met each other before earlier this year; to Levi, whom I've now spent an entire week living with. He even took me up to Lookout Peak two days ago, where we sat in the hood of an abandoned car and spent more time in silence than we did actually looking out at the city below.

You could see the whole of Trost from up there, including every outlier town, and even the border of Karanese. It was beautiful.

It's almost ridiculous how much my social life has changed. From little to no interaction with people outside of work, to speaking with new friends on a regular basis. And yet, I still push them all away...

With Levi out grocery shopping, I'm left to my own thoughts, sitting out on the balcony and enjoying the oddly sunny weather. I can't seem to shake off dark thoughts, even as I'm sitting directly within the sun's replenishing rays, exposing my arms for only myself and the sky to see until Levi gets back; before then I'll have to throw on a jacket.

I'd gone nearly a week without hurting myself, though I so desperately wanted to. It wasn't until two nights ago that I lost it, after a call from my father. He called with a blocked number, and I stupidly answered it, only to be name-called and shamed over my moms disappearance. Apparently, he also
blamed me for Mikasa not answering his calls or dropping by to see him.

'You've ruined everything for this family, are you aware of that?' He'd asked me, breathing heavily through the receiver. I didn't answer, holding the phone away from my ear. Levi was in the shower, so I knew he couldn't hear what was happening anyway.

'Are you listening to me, boy? You've managed to ruin three people's lives. Your worthlessness and 'I'm so good' attitude drove away your mother and sister, and now you're acting all high and mighty by not speaking to me?' He'd hissed. 'Without me, you wouldn't even be here, you hear me? I'm the soul reason you exist, and you better be damn grateful for that!'

I'm not. The whole reason I exist the way I do is because of you, too, do you know that?

'If I ever find your sorry ass, you'd better start running, because I'm sick and tired of dealing with your mistakes. Get your shit together and start taking responsibility for your selfish actions.'

When he called, he was completely sober, and that made everything hurt more than usual. He knew full well what he was saying, and I knew full well that it was all true. I hung up after that, barely able to hold back my tears.

Where my mind couldn't find solace in simply ignoring the truth he spoke, my body ached for release; so I gave in. I'd hidden the blade from Jean's beneath my clothes in Levi's room, so I got to work on putting it to good use. I'd hacked quick and deep into my upper forearm, just below where it bends. It bled straight away, and I didn't wince at all, welcoming the forgiving sting of the cool metal taking away my pain.

I know I can't express how I feel in words very well, but God does it feel good to get it out of your system in some way.

I hid my blade again, quickly and loosely bandaged by arms, and put on a dark jacket. Levi was out on the couch not a moment after I sat down, and I hoped to God he didn't have a good nose, because the crisp iron stench coming from my unwashed bandages was heavy.

A bird flies overhead, casting a shadow over the balcony, and Levi's cat meows as it passes. My phone buzzes from somewhere inside the apartment, but I ignore it. I'm not sure that it won't be dad, but I'm fairly certain I know who it is, and I don't want to have to answer him either. It's not that I don't like him, I do - I've never had a friend quite like him before. Jean's my best friend, of course, but he's nothing like this honey-blonde reincarnation of sunshine. I've had Armin messaging me nearly every day, and we barely know the first thing about one another.

It seems like I'm getting on with a lot of people I don't know the first thing about, nowadays. I mean, I'm living with a guy who goes around sharing laundry powder with the next guy who forgets to bring it. Unless that was just my lucky day...

Maybe I'm better off only knowing people until I know too much, then leaving, that way no one gets hurt. Or maybe I just need to stop getting so caught up in other peoples' lives and start focusing on how I'm ever going to get through mine. Or end it. Three months ago, Jean nearly killed himself. Now he's got himself a boyfriend - the very same guy he gave a drunken lap dance to at Connie's get-together.

Is it true that people leave and enter our lives for a reason, or am I just being sappy? A whole lifetime worth of action has taken place over the past couple of months, and I'm only just realising it. Have I really been living in a blur? Does this mean that the rest of my life will be for naught; that it'll just pass and I won't even realise it until it's too late? Or is this my recognition of what I have lived,
so that I won't feel as guilty about taking my own life?

No matter how many thoughts I have about how things might get better, I still want to. Not a day goes by where I don't think about hurting myself, going as far as holding a carving knife to my wrist whilst helping Levi cook dinner two nights ago. I'd stared at it for god knows how long, and it wasn't until Levi took it from me to use that I realised I'd been edging closer to the protruding veins on my forearm, protect by a thick sleeve.

*I don't think I've ever been more sure about something in my life. I want to be nonexistent, even though so many great people have come into my life. I know that I'm selfish, not just by being told it many times. I'm aware that I'm being selfish by putting all of their good natured 'hello's' and conversations to waste. Even though so many good and bad things have happened since dads drinking picked up, I know I need to die. Could that be something I'm thankful for? The fact that, if he hadn't done what he did, I probably wouldn't have met these people? That I'd still be living in that hellhole and causing grief to my entire family and their connections?*

And the fact that I might still be living in ignorance, ignoring my minds internal desperation for an escape from something.

My minds dull haze is lifted when someone beeps their car horn far below Levi's balcony. My eyes wander towards the ground, and I stand painfully to my feet, edging closer to the edge.

*I could jump, right here and now. It'd be over before I even hit the ground. We're not even that far up - the worst I'd do is a broken neck, probably. But still, would it hurt that bad to try and end it this way? I've always liked the sensation of falling; the feeling of your gut rising and falling as you do, how you become lightheaded once you've defied gravity, for only a few seconds.*

It'd be nice to leave the earth feeling something that I enjoy. But I probably don't deserve that.

I deserve to feel pain, and leave painfully. I caused mom enough pain when I was being born, wouldn't it be repaying the universe to inflict some pain on myself? That way we'd both suffer, but she'd have less suffering once I was gone.

No need to check up on me, or get Mikasa to check up on me, or waste her time and breath writing me a letter because I so weak that I need to know my mother's whereabouts 24/7.

*I'm hopeless. This is hopeless. I'm too much of a weakling to jump, I know that.*

My phone buzzes twice in a row this time, so I sigh and shuffle back inside the apartment, careful not to let Levi's unnamed cat onto the balcony. Apparently even he's suicidal, as Levi keeps telling me that he'll jump if he's let outside. *You and me both, buddy.*

There are three text messages - and they're all from Connie.

**From: Connie Springer**

**11:23am**

*hey man hope ur doing well, listen I rlly need som advoce rite now nd I kno I can cont on u r you up for it?*

From his usually neat texting style to this, I know something's up. And apparently, I'd even missed two calls from him too, before the next messages.

**From: Connie Springer**

**12:04pm**

Eren please I don't kno what to do i in seri trolge
From: Connie Springer
12:04pm

Eren I know you are having a rough time but please your the only person I can turn to

I ring him immediately, and he picks up before the second ring finishes.

'Eren, thank god,' He exasperates, clearly shaking.

"Connie, what's wrong? I'm sorry I didn't answer you sooner, I was- caught up," I lie. I'm a terrible person. I didn't check because I thought it was admin and I don't appreciate the friendships I have and what if he's sick? Or someone's hurt? I've been ignoring these messages for nearly an hour god I'm such a fucking idiot-

'Sasha's pregnant.'

My eyes widen, I grip my phone tighter in my sweaty palm, and sit on the edge of the couch.

"What's that?"

He takes a deep breath. 'I got Sasha pregnant, and my parents are going to kill me.'

"How long have you known?" I ask. "Maybe you don't have to say anything just yet?"

'She's showing. Apparently she's known for a couple of months, but just never said anything because she didn't know how I'd react. Man, I don't know what to do. My folks said they'd disown me if I had sex before marriage!'

"I don't think they'd disown-"

'You're talking about two people who took their only child to Jesus Camp in fourth grade because he drew a star on a smiley face on the ground and they thought it was a pentagram.'

I chuckle lightly. "I guess you're right. What do you suppose we do?"

He swallows thickly. 'I guess I need to marry her quick.'

I take a deep breath. "Do you want to marry her?"

'I love her dude, with all my heart. I wanted to give her the world, and I wanted our wedding to be big and awesome and memorable but now- I don't know what to do.'

"I'm sure she'll love whatever you do for her. Does she know about how religious your parents are?" I ask.

'Yeah, 'course. I just... I know she loves me, I know that, but I wanted these milestones in our lives to be epic, you know?' He says with a sigh. 'She's epic, she deserves epic-ness. I just- I don't know if she wants to get married, or if she'd even say yes. We've never really talked about marriage, or kids, but she said she wants to keep it. I told her that I would be happy with whatever decision she made, and that was that.'

I listen without speaking, my thoughts running a tangent on a million different topics at once. I'm listening and taking in what Connie's saying, but it's so far out of my league that I'm probably in no better shape to help him than he is himself.

Another, long winded sigh. 'What do I do, man? I know you're probably in way over your head with this shit but I really don't have anywhere else to turn...'
I know I can't offer much advice to him, so I'm honest with him. I tell him that I'd need an hour or so to think things over, and that I'd get back to him as soon as I could. He thanked me, made me promise not to tell anyone about the baby until Sasha gives the A-OK, nearly ended up in tears, and then we hung up.

I feel almost bad for not having anything reassuring to say to him. But this is childbirth and a possible marriage, I don't have any experience with either of those things. I decide to wait until Levi gets home, and then I'll ask him. If he's so wise surely he can shed some light on the situation.

*I know that anything I said would be wrong, anyway. I mean, what was I supposed to say to him? Anything I said would be a complete lie, and he'd know that. I've been lied to before about how things are going to be okay. I don't want to become a liar too.*

I throw my phone a little ways away on the other side of the couch, sighing and leaning my head back against the couch. The front door unlocks, and Levi announces his arrival with an exhausted, "I'm home."

I find myself relaxing a little, knowing I can get back to Connie quicker, but icy dread quickly courses through my body as I realise what I'm wearing. A tee shirt.

"L-Levi! Ah- How was work?" I stammer, hurrying to lean across the couch and hide my hideous arms beneath the blanket draped over the side, pulling it into my lap.

He raises an eyebrow at my flustered appearance, setting his keys on the kitchen bench, before cautiously approaching this side of the couch to take in my stature and flushing face. "Fine, I guess. It was pretty busy... I had to re-do an order three times before this woman was satisfied," He smirks, but obviously a little furious about it. "How was your day?" He walks back into the kitchen to pour himself a glass of water, and I try to form words whilst my mind focuses on coming up with a solution to my revealing situation.

"Yeah, good. I sat outside for most of it. It's a nice today, isn't it?" I chuckle nervously. He nods in agreement, walking back over to sit on the couch alongside me, leaving a full cushions distance between us.

"It is, I wish I could've enjoyed it a little more," He agrees. "The sun's a nice change from the usual dreary weather, not that that's too bad either."

I nod. "Living in Trost all your life, you get used to it."

He takes a sip of water, sets it down on the living room table, and turns to face me slightly. "Are you cold? I can turn the heater on if you want."

*God, no. "N-No, I'm okay. I just like sitting with a blanket when I'm on a couch, it makes it more comfy, you know?"

He hesitates before shrugging. "Alright, but let me know if you're cold."

"I will."

Levi doesn't question any further, then tells me he's going to shower. 'I hate smelling like kitchen oil and fat, gets up my nose and I can't sleep,' he told me with a slight grin. I didn't return it, only nodding in recognition that I'd heard him. I only felt a little bad as he stood awkwardly for a few seconds, then nodded, walking off down the hallway tight-lipped. I didn't mean to be rude, if I came off as rude, I guess I just started to get uncomfortable.
As soon as I hear the bathroom door shut and the shower turn on, I make a beeline for Levi's bedroom to grab my jacket. I'd already moved my things into his wardrobe, so it's easy to find. Now more comfortable, I make my way back to the living room and grab my phone.

I open up Facebook and scroll through my feed, propping my feet up as I lie horizontally on Levi's couch. We'd already been through his 'rules,' which are really just making sure we are hygienic enough not to smell. And as long as I don't make a huge mess in his house, he's fine with what I do. Although, with how picky he is about the living room and the kitchen being tidy, I don't push it too much. He doesn't seem to mind mess in the bedroom, but everything else has to be pretty orderly.

I sigh at my Facebook feed, once it loads, eyeing the colourful pictures. I'm jealous, scrolling through photos and posts from people who are out living their lives whilst I'm stuck inside. Well, not exactly stuck inside; I'm stuck inside my mind, and that's a hard place to escape from.

According to my ever-increasing feed, Armin has been to three light festivals in the past 24hrs with two people I have never seen before; Jean and Marco have photos of them down by the pier, obviously a romantic thing, even though the reflection of Ruth and her car can be seen clearly in one of the lakeside images. I guess Jean finally came out to his mom about being bi... I'm happy for him. There's photos of Connie and Sasha's trip to Karanese, along with Reiner and Bertl's getaway too.

I'm almost envious of all of these images. I was invited out to nearly all of them, plus other situations that have been mentioned over the past week; I turned them all down, purely because I couldn't be bothered. Even Mikasa went out this week, twice with Annie and three times with Thomas.

*If I'm really that desperate to not be living, why haven't I ended it already? I hate looking at people living their lives with not a single care in the world. They're all so flawless and happy - why can't I have that?*

They all took the chance of me saying yes and asked me along with them. *Why did I push them all away?*

Levi plods down the hall with a towel around his neck, wearing a loose long-sleeve black shirt and a pair of blue boxers. He's completely relaxed. As he should be, in his own home. But I could never be as relaxed as he is, even in my own home, with some fucked up stranger on my couch.

"You're looking better than before," He comments, tussling his hair with the towel after glancing me up and down. "Still comfortable?"

I'm not covered with the blanket anymore, and I'm wearing a jacket. Hopefully he doesn't piece things together, not that he should. People don't just go looking for signs of things like that unless they have a reason to. *Clearly,* he doesn't have a reason to.

"Yeah, I- Yeah, I'm comfortable."

He sighs, loudly, hanging the towel over one of the bar stools before walking over to me. He sits beside me on the couch, a little closer than before. His eyes fall to my phone screen, just before I can turn off my phone. I shouldn't've been dwelling over that stuff anyway, it's not worth it. Soon I won't have to look at it anyway.

"You know... I don't want you to feel like I'm pressuring you or anything but, don't be afraid to talk to me," Levi says, looking at me through his glassy grey-blue eyes. They're so icy and bland; it's beautiful. I wish my eyes were that colour.

I leave him with silence, then I run my hands through my hair with a sigh. "Yeah, I know. Thanks,
but I'm probably not going to ever get out what I need to want to."

Levi looks as though he's come across something otherworldly, and I can tell he's probably feeling like he's getting somewhere with me. He's not, because he's not a psychiatrist or someone I've known long enough to trust with my feelings. Still, he looks pensive for a moment. "Well... Anywhere's a start, isn't it? I can tell something in that mind of yours is to do with whatever you were just looking at. Am I right?"

I shrug. "I guess. I don't know, Levi. I'm not good with talking about what I'm feeling - I don't even know what I'm feeling."

He thinks for a moment, looking away briefly, before turning back to me. "Your friends enjoying the weather?"

I tense, he notices. "Yeah, they're all away with each other."

"Did you plan to go away?" He's feeling guilty all of a sudden, that's clear. He thinks he took away my opportunity to go out, so I quickly shut that idea down.

I shake my head. "No. They invited me to go with them to various things but... I said no. I don't feel up to going out."

"But you regret not going now, don't you?" He asks. Okay, maybe he is a psychologist or a mind-reader or something. I'd thought that myself, but I didn't know that was what I felt.

Why can't he just talk and let me listen? He clearly knows more about me than I know about myself. At least, more about my feelings. How is that even possible? He doesn't even know my favourite colour.

I shrug, blankly staring ahead at the dark screen of the TV, and he moves to grab his glass of water to take a sip. "You know... Maybe it's irrelevant, so you can tell me to shut up if you want but... I started removing myself from peoples' lives before they could cut me out themselves."

My attention is grasped with just that sentence alone. Clearly, I'm not as good at hiding my feelings as I thought. But I know one thing; I don't want him to shut up. He doesn't talk about his feelings, ever, and there's no way I'm going to let this slide. He continues, knowing I'm not going to stop him. "Whether they actually would've or not, I never found out, but I just couldn't stand it anymore," Levi says, hands gripping and releasing his glass tightly. I glance sideways at him, seeing his face contorted in thought, probably wondering how to say what he's saying without being offensive or something.

"You know when you drop a coin in a wishing well, and all you hear is the coin hit the water, and nothing else? He asks. Please continue talking about you, Levi. I want to know more about you. Do you know what to say to me because that's what you'd say to you? Please don't stop talking.

"It's like that. Being replaced or forgotten, I mean. Every time I felt myself being pushed away or excluded, it was like someone threw a coin into that empty well. Everything around it echoed, and
made me realise just how alone I was in the world, even if I wasn't. It didn't matter about the coin, what mattered was the empty feeling that came with those small mercies. The feeling of having someone offer to sit with you out of pity. The feeling of having so-called friends bring you unnecessarily into conversation, because they feel sorry for you for not actually being included—because they don't want you there. The feeling of knowing that they're all slowly removing you from their lives because you're toxic. I'm the well, and those small, pitiful mercies they offer me are the coins."

"In the end, I hated having coins thrown into that metaphorical well, so I shut it. I removed myself from the remainder of my so-called friends, and opted to sit alone. Bathroom stalls, school library, home, the streets; wherever. I didn't answer my phone—hell, I don't even think I turned it on until a year after leaving school. But that was only because work required it," he chuckled, although unconvincingly.

"What did your friends do?" I prompt, not wanting him to let the conversation die down. If he stops talking, he'll want me to speak, and I won't, and then he'll want to have dinner and go to bed, and if that happens, I might wake up on the streets because this isn't actually happening and I'm only imagining this.

I've probably never even met Levi. He's too good to be true, even if he understands my feelings entirely. I've never known anyone who understands my feelings before. Not even mom...

"They never said anything. A few asked me how I was on the way to class or whatever, but I always told them I was good, or made up something to sound like my life was a little more or less than good. I never told the truth about how my day was going. Or how I was feeling. I didn't think they needed to know, really. I mean, if you actually care about someone, you'd have a good idea of how they're feeling just by looking at them, right?"

*Is he telling me that he actually cares, or is he just a good people-reader?* I look at him for a few moments. "Right."

*We don't talk for a few moments, both staring out into the open space of the living room. How did I ever miss this guy when I went out? One day, I don't have a clue of his existence, and the next day he's everywhere.*

*Surely that's not a good sign...*

"Tch, you'd think Hanji wouldn't get involved in our personal lives, wouldn't you," Levi scoffs, typing something into his phone with haste.

"Hanji's texting you?" I ask.

"Mm, she's always checking up on my life because, you know, it's so much more lively and productive than hers." His voice is coated with sarcasm, it's almost laughable, but it's clear he doesn't mind her texting.

"She's a good friend then," I say, slightly unaware that I'm speaking. As usual, I'm running my mouth without actually thinking about what I'm saying.

He nods, putting his phone down with a sigh. "Yeah, she is. For a while, I wished she would just leave me alone, but I'm grateful now. Somedays she's a bit much, but it's nothing I can't handle. She dealt with me for so long, the least I can do is have a conversation with her."

"Dealt with you?" I ask, cocking my head.
Levi's eyes widen slightly. "Ah- You know, put up with my mood swings, things like that."

Unbelievable. He thinks I can't see through that blatant lie? He told me all that stuff before too... Doesn't he trust me at all?

"Ah, right. That's nice of her then."

I've gone cold, and he knows it too. As Levi slowly averts his eyes from my direction, I can feel the tension in the air between us, thick enough to slice through with a blade. I knew I should've trusted him with my feelings. Was all he told me a lie? Just to get me to talk? What does he want with me? I've got nothing to give him except a piece of my mind, but I'm not remotely stable enough to do that without fucking it up and making it easier for him to turn the tables on my insults.

Maybe I should just ask to leave? I've stayed here a whole week, surely that'll be enough to satisfy Erwin. Beside, he's not my father, he shouldn't need to keep tabs on my whereabouts.

I'm not just going to not show up to work, if I'm ever called back, that is. I'll always give notice. And I'm sure that word will get around once I off myself.

"How would you ask someone to marry you?" I ask, breaking the silence.

He looks confused, then thinks for a few moments. "I'd probably just ask them, if we'd been together long enough. Why?"

I shrug. "What about someone who was pregnant?"

"I.- I can't say I have an answer for that. Can I have some context here, or would you rather not talk about it?" He asks.

"Wha- No! I haven't got anyone pregnant, if that's what you're thinking. A friend of mine, with really religious parents, got his girlfriend pregnant. He wants to marry her before breaking the news, because apparently she's showing, but he's not sure how to do it. I don't have much experience, but he came to me, so I can't just not give him some advice."

"Hmm... I guess, the best way to ask her is to be completely honest. Just, start saying what he's really feeling and thinking, then ask her outright. If she really loves him, she'll understand, won't she?"

Again, I shrug. "I guess so..." That was no help at all, thanks a lot you impulsive liar. "Thanks, anyway."

Levi seems to understand that I'm not thankful at all, but he doesn't say anything after that, opting to turn on the TV instead. I pull up my inbox, trying to decipher what Levi meant, if he even meant anyone different to what I thought. Maybe I should ask someone else... I'd ask mom but, I guess I can't do that.

To: Connie Springer
5:04pm
I haven't come up with much, but I think just be completely honest with her. She's a nice girl, and she obviously loves you a lot to have put up with you for son long. Don't make it a big deal, just talk to her like you talked to me, and she should understand. Good luck. (Sorry for being so unhelpful btw)

"Eren," Levi sighs, muting cooking show on TV. "If you want to go out you're allowed to, you know. I'm not going to keep tabs on you, you're free to go out whenever. Just... Let me know, if you're not going to come back, okay?"
I take in his appearance for a moment, trying to detect a lie somewhere. His hair is nearly dry, and fluffy around the edges. His usually calm and straight face is almost pleading. I almost feel sorry for him, but I'm not sure I want to act on it.

*Why do I keep falling into this weird mind-trap with him? I can't stay mad at him for too long, because he'll do or say or even look at me in a way that makes my stomach flip. It confuses me how he can turn my fiery mind into fleeting embers with a single glance. Why does that happen?*

"Thanks, Levi," I start, trying to sway the confusion from my voice. "Do you mind if I go out for dinner then? On my own, I mean."

"I don't mind at all. You're your own person, don't let living in my apartment stop you," He says with a warming smile. "You're not a dog, you don't need a leash."

I thank him again, then grab my Vans from his room. I'm surprised he hasn't noticed that they're starting to smell, because they really are. And if I'm noticing it, it must be getting pretty bad.

He's switched to the news, watching intently as the reporter reports a police chase in the suburban streets, when I walk back into the living room. I leave with a small wave, and tell him I should only be an hour or so. He reassures me he doesn't mind, and to be careful, on my way out. With that, I head out the door and over to the elevator.

Connie texts me just as I arrive on the ground floor.

**From: Connie Springer**

5:27pm

it's ok man, i'm just gonna lay it straight to her. I think I was just overacting yanno? thanks again for your help, I appreciate it a lot.

---

Being a half hour away from the city, it's hard to decide where to eat. There's no Hanji's or Recon, so I decide to try out Garrison's Kitchen, a cliche Hollywood-style place with only a handful of places left to sit.

I manage to get a table at the far back, by the toilets. I can see why no one sat here, too, because I could bet a lot of money that this place doesn't have many cleaners on today.

After fifteen minutes, I realise the waitress won't come to me, so I go up to the counter to order. I order a half serve of spaghetti bologna, and once it's at my table, I manage to eat nearly the whole thing. And then, I decide, that I should celebrate my first official outing with something alcoholic.

I'm not a big drinker, only even drinking when I'm out with Connie, so this is a first. I pay and leave a tip, then walk out onto the quickly darkening street. The street lamps are starting to light up, and someone screams, then laughs in the distance. It's still slightly warm, and I take a deep breath, filling my lungs with the slightly-toxic air of South Trost.

The lights of the liquor store are inviting, like a beacon or something. I'm walking quicker than anticipated towards it, then I enter and chose a reasonably large carton of beer. The guy at the desk doesn't even ask for my I.D, so I guess that I must actually look my age for once.

I stop in the middle of the street a half mile down the road, staring down at the carton in my now
shaking hand. I just bought a carton of beer... The very same that my dad drinks. I stare off down the road, at a woman who stares straight back at me, standing still with her handbag in her hand.

She starts to move towards me, and I suddenly feel vulnerable; everything seems to loom over me in a way that makes my skin crawl and my head tighten. I feel enclosed, and open at the same time, my chest heaving as I struggle to come to my senses. "M-Mom?" I squeak. Whilst my stomach churns, I don't stay still, instead quickening my pace towards her. Two police sirens howl in the distance, and I can see their lights reflecting from the shop windows. It's the car chase the news was talking about.

"Mom!" I shout, now running at her figure. I know my own mother, I know her face, I know her hair, I know her voice- say something, mom!

"Eren!" She calls, returning my pace in my direction. My mouth contorts into a wide-eyes smile, and I run faster towards her, ignoring the cries of the police sirens cascading over the near-silent city streets.

"Mom! Mom!"

It's something about the atmosphere, and the ringing in my ears as the police sirens draw near and my mother and I seem to get further and further from each other. Like a lightning bolt, neither of us see it jackknife over a speed hump, flipping in the air like a coin toss deciding fate.

Eyes wide and mouth agape, my moms soft frame and warm eyes are taken from me, as the dark coloured car takes her with it, skidding across the pavement. My breath is taken from my throat, and my voice comes out in a rasp. The police sirens stop, the lights still aglow, and my legs collapse beneath me.

City sounds fade into the background, and my hazy mind focuses on the splatter of blood soaking the sidewalk. I don't realise I'm knelt on the ground until a blurry police officer is by my side, attempting to get me standing.

"M-om," I choke out, staring blankly at the wreckage not five feet in front of me. Solemnly, the police officer sighs, and an ambulance arrives at the scene.

"Kid, that was your mother?" He asks. I don't- can't respond. He tries to move me from the scene, to get me to the other side by the police cars for whatever reason, but my eyes are glued. "You don't want to see what's about to happen, kid, you'd better come with me."

I ignore him, hot tears spilling from my face before what's happened even registries in my mind. The medical crew are lifting the car before my eyes, and that's when I see it- Her.

Mom's lifeless half-body, her served torso sticking to the underside of the nameless drivers vehicle, like gum to a shoe. A few people have gathered around, including a news crew, obviously keeping track of the chase. People are yelling, some screaming, some gasping or crying. I can't decide what I need to do.

A medic approaches us, his face ghastly white. "Sir, you need to clear the scene, you can't be here-"

The police officer cuts in, "That's his mother."

Silence. Bone-chilling silence, that sets my mind on the right path.

The car is fully lifted, and five or more medics take my mother from beneath the car, before lowering it. The driver is already out of the car, and is being placed in a body bag. Moms upper torso is nearly intact, stringy veins and organs hanging from her like the innards of a pumpkin. Her lower torso is
barely unrecognisable, but the police officer and another medic tear my face away from the scene.

"Hey sweetie, I'm Frieda. What's your name, honey?" A female medic asks, kneeling down to be level with me. I can't respond - I don't know how. What am I doing here? Why am I sitting at the scene of a car crash? Where did mom go?

"Hon? Would you mind telling me your name?" She asks again.

"E-Eren," I say absently.

She's writing on a clip board. "Eren... And your last name, can you tell me that?"

"Jaeger."

"Eren Jaeger... What're you doing out here, Eren? Do you have anyone with you?" She asks. I shake my head. "I see... Any relatives in the area? Do you have your phone with you?"

I nod, reaching numbly into my pocket and handing it to her. The police are putting up caution tape, and the public are now being told to go away. A publicity crew are reporting the accident, whilst a police officer is being interrogated by the news crew. One of the cameras are pointing at me.

"Can you stand up at all? I'd like you to be a little more comfortable." She helps me stand, shakily, and my legs move like Lego towards the ambulance. We pass directly by the car, and there are innards scraped along the asphalt. The bloodstains are still moist, and medics give me sorrowful looks as bright markers are placed on the ground.

Frieda sits me in the front of the ambulance, and tells me that we're driving to the hospital. I don't respond verbally, only nodding feebly as tears continue to stream down my flushed and warm face. She tries to ask me more questions about my home life, but I ignore her, eyes darting up to look in the rear view mirror at the body bag containing what's left of the only person who always cared.

She hands me back my phone, and I turn it off as we arrive at the hospital. I don't bother to rush in, taking my time to wait for the stretcher to pass before I even take off my seatbelt.

Mom...

She gave birth to me nineteen years ago. She adopted Mikasa when she couldn't have anymore children, saying her from a life of child slavery and poverty. She laughed when I pulled faces at her; when I put underwear on my head to turn into a superhero, and when I stepped on a slug and buried it, even though I screamed at the slime.

She drove me to work nearly everyday for two years. She payed my school fees with almost no help. She helped me through my downs and cheered me on during my ups. She was string and brave and put up with so much fucking shit and this is how she ends her life. Too short and far too pitiful to even be celebrated, wouldn't you think? She gave birth to a pitiful, sorry excuse for a son who drove her away. If I hadn't driven her away with my fucked up way of living, she wouldn't have even been out there at night. She'd be at home, in bed, or making dinner. It could have been me doing whatever she was doing, relieving the whole family of my worthless self.

Mom... You didn't have to got this far to be rid of me. You could have called me over to you, and then I could have been severed at the waist. I could be the one lying in the body bag, completely nonexistent. Why did it have to be you?

The nurses and medics don't see me leave the ambulance. I scribble a note on a piece of pad paper: 'drunk, that not my mom, just knew last name'
I run for it, leaving the hospital far behind. I'm still clutching the carton of beer, and I know exactly how to put it to good use.

It's not too far up to Lookout Peak, and I know that no one will go up there to find me. It's a hotspot for suicide, something Levi told me, and I know that the universe can't reject me if I'm taking my own life. I'll numb the pain with alcohol and use shards of glass to slit my own throat. Or maybe I can finally see what the insides of the veins on my wrist look like? That will be a better sight to see than my mom's body stuck to the underside of a car.

I open one of the bottles and drink it down, crying through the bitter, burnin taste it leaves in the back of my throat. I reach Lookout Peak and throw a full bottle at the abandoned car, smashing it.

"Fuck you!" I shout, hurling the empty glass bottle into the dark abyss below, with every ounce of strength I can fathom. "It's unfair! Everything is so fucking unfair, can't you understand that?? I've had enough! Just stop it! Stop, stop, stop, fucking stop!"

My emotional mantra echoes around me, bouncing off of the cliff walls and right down towards the city. I don't care how many people hear me, I want them all to know. I don't give a fuck anymore.

"Take me! Take me instead! Just bring her back you fucking prick! She didn't deserve this, I fucking deserve everything I get, she didn't deserve this!! I kick stones and dust, and slam my fists on the hood of the car, denting it in several places. My knuckles start to bleed, and a dull ache runs up my arm.

It's all aimed up to the universe, but I'm yelling at myself. No number of cuts and bruises and burns can give me what I need right now. I need to be yelled at, to be hated by myself more than I already am. I need everyone to know just how much I hate myself, maybe then they can hate me like that too.

"Hurt me! Make me fucking feel something! Anything! You can't hurt me anymore than I can hurt myself, you're just wasting your time you godforsaken universe! Just fucking give her back to me!" My angry cries turn to sobs as my voice cracks, bringing me to a whisper. My voice is broken, and my throat dry; "I can't do this...it should've been me...why, why the fuck wasn't it me at that fucking party...it was meant to be me....I hate her...I hate you...Go fuck yourself, you stupid cunt!"

I sink to the dirt, right into a muddy puddle. It sinks into my jeans, and into my underwear, but I feel nothing. My shaky hand reaches out to a shard of glass beside me, and I don't hesitate before rolling up my sleeve and slicing vertically down my left forearm. I give it three goes, then my vision is blurred by tears. I wipe them away, waiting the blood cascade down my arm like a crimson waterfall. It's not enough.

I hold the glass to my other forearm and repeat, using all the strength I can muster to cut through a vein big enough to kill me. My hands shake so much that the glass slips from my grasp. I sob and shake and rock backwards and forwards, holding my head in my hands. Dry, throaty sobs emit from my blubbering lips, and stinging tears continue their descent down the curves of my face. The rolling sound of an approaching car sets my mind into a frenzy, and I whisper, "Please run me over. Please just kill me.."

Headlights on low beam pick up dust turning around the corner. I don't need to look up to see who's there, nor to see the person who wouldn't kill me. The car door opens, and the crunching of stones beneath the weight of a person become ever clear on the balmy, quiet evening. "Eren.." He sighs, seemingly out of breath.
"Fuck off..." I mumble, trying to cover up my tears, but he doesn't. He doesn't move. Instead, Levi stands still in the same place. I can't bare to look up at him. I'm filthy, I'm angry, I'm bleeding; I'm a fucking sorry excuse of a human being. I don't think I can stand to see pity in anyones eyes, let alone his. But, I turn my head anyway, only slightly, and that's all I see. Pity.

He's barefooted. His hair is disheveled and messy. He looks like a walking corpse. "L-evi?" I choke, seeing him so distraught.

"Fucking hell, Eren!" He shouts.

I've done it. Now he hates me too. I can finally have a good enough reason to get the fuck out of this world and die. He doesn't leave, though. He doesn't even continue shouting. He runs over the stones and the mud, and crouches in the puddle beside me, pulling me into his chest in an embrace.

It's heart-felt and pure, and I return it as best I can. My vision is starting to fade, and I'm suddenly light headed, but I don't say anything, nor does he. He pulls me into his lap, until he's kneeling in the muddy puddle, soaking his own jeans, and I'm wrapped around his torso, clinging to his chest for dear life. He rocks me back and forth, and I feel like a useless baby. But, for once I'm my damn life I let him cradle me. I let him do the one thing it takes him an hour to even consider. I don't burden him by pulling away or protesting - I just accept it. I'm not very good at accepting things, though. This is probably a first for me.

He's touching me, almost intimately, and voluntarily. It isn't until I realise that tears and quiet snivelling are coming from him that he's genuine. "I'm sorry," He snivels, burying his head in my neck as hot tears run down his cheeks. I'm starting to fall for Levi Ackerman, and that is a bad, bad thing. "I'm so, so sorry..

With all the dark thoughts racing around in my head at once, telling me to smash the bottle and open my veins with the shards until I bleed to death atop this muddy hill like I know I can, there's only a single thought that isn't a haze in my mind.

I am falling for Levi Ackerman, but that will not get in the way of me ending my life. No matter my feelings for Levi, a single person can't change a lifetime worth of self-hatred. And with my mom officially gone from my life for good, I don't think anyone ever will.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry.
Levi held me until I could breathe on my own, rubbing comforting circles on my back to soothe my snivelling. All I could see was my mother's lifeless body in the forefront of my mind, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't open my eyes. They're swollen and red, and ounce of effort I put in to trying to stop crying goes to waste, because the tears don't stop.

My breathing hitches and my throat tightens with every breath. Levi's still holding me in his lap, caressing every inch of me that he can, but he doesn't say anything. We're surrounded by glass, some of it even has my own blood on it, but he still doesn't say anything. He's not even holding back his own tears now, and not an inch of my ever-fleeting willpower can get me to ask him to stop. *He doesn't need to cry for me. I don't deserve to be cried for. I should've been quicker and deeper with the glass...*

Levi's phone starts to ring, and his ministrations on my back come to a halt. He's hesitant to take his hands off of me, but he checks the caller ID with a feathery sigh. "Eren," He says, quietly. "I have to take this. Will you be okay for a few minutes?"

I nod once, wiping away snot and tears with my sleeve, but it doesn't do much to prevent me from crying again. Even through my blocking ears, I can hear the caller speaking to Levi, as he doesn't move away from me when he answers. "Hello?" Levi says, placing a gentle hand on my shoulder.

'Levi, it's me. Did you watch the news?'

It's Erwin, and he sounds worried, almost scarily so. Levi clears his throat. "I did," He says, with a choked expression.

'Are you with him?' Erwin asks.

"Yes."

Erwin sighs on the other side, and I can practically see his worried expression relax, although I can't tell for sure. "Thank god. I can't believe they would broadcast his face like that, after baring witness to such a horrible mess. Tell me he's okay as he can be?" His voice is uptight and forced, like even he doesn't believe what he's asking.

Levi halts his breath, starting to rub my back with his free hand again, and my tears fall harder down my face. "No, he isn't. I'm taking care of it though."

'Keep me updated, and give him my deepest condolences." Even when sympathising, he's as punctual as ever. Although I've worked for him for only two years, he feels more like a father figure to me that my own dad ever was. He'd sensed when I'd had a hard time at home for longer than I'd...
even realised, and he always said or did something to lift my spirits, even if only for the time I was at work.

Perhaps living in such a small world isn't the worst thing... Maybe Levi does care for my wellbeing, and he isn't just acting the way he does for Erwin's sake?

"I will. Thank you for calling," Levi hangs up, gently pushing his phone into his pocket before wrapping both of his arms around me again. "Eren, can you stand?" He asks, his voice far calmer than it was.

I'm shaking, but I try to get up on my own. Most of my weight end up leaning on Levi, as he hooks his arms beneath my own to lift me to my feet. I stagger to Levi's car, using him as support, and he sets me down in the front seat. "We're not going just yet, okay? Take some time to calm down."

He pats my thigh, then goes to walk back to where we had been sitting. I reach out my arm and tug at his shirt, shaking my head. "Please don't leave me," I stutter, words faltering, with fingertips barely holding onto his shirt. My voice is barely recognisable, coated with tears and mucus.

He takes my hand in his, motioning back towards me. "I'm not going anywhere. I'm just getting into the drivers seat, okay?"

He's quick to jog around to the other side, after shutting the passenger side door carefully. I let out a pitiful whine when I'm shut in, silently cursing myself for being so careless as to slit my own wrists without anything to cover the bleeding cuts with, besides my sleeve. Even I can see the dark stains increasing on the dark blue fabric. This is it... I'm done.

Levi gets into his car carefully, shutting the door with little force. "Do you need to take a breather for a while?"

I stare blankly ahead. "Just take me home."

He starts the car without another word, driving forward to do a U-turn back down the steep hill. He turns on the heater and switches the radio on, probably to take away whatever awkward tension I'm leaving in the air.

I've heard the song before, and my subconscious starts to sing along. I stare out the window at the city below us, and tears slowly fall down my face again. They're not hysterical; they're simple and calm. There are people down there; feeding their animals, kissing their children goodnight, cuddling each other, drinking, laughing; living. Everyone is living a life, and this is how mine is turning out...

Levi's near-silent humming escapes his lips, and whether he's aware or not, I can hear him start to sing softly. "Our son is losing his mind, his drugs that he hides, you can see in his veins..."

"The steps he's needing to take, his back it might brake, we both need you here..." Levi's voice is soft and calming, and he doesn't seem to realise he'd sing a verse aloud. He goes back to humming, before sighing as we approach the halted traffic lights. He turns to look at me, and catches me staring before I'm quick enough to look away. "Everything okay?" He asks.

"No," I say. "You should keep singing."

I could almost swear his face flushed for .5 of a second, but he chuckles breathlessly. "I do that sometimes, sorry."

"I liked it."
He raises an eyebrow. "Kind of a depressing song thought, isn't it?" He asks, accelerating as the lights go green.

I shrug lightly. "Kind if a depressing evening, isn't it?"

It's not funny, and I don't intend it to be. I realised a long time ago that I can be completely honest, but say it with just enough sarcasm to not be taken seriously. Obviously, I know Levi won't buy it, but old habits die hard. His eyes almost lose a little bit of light as he blinks at me, before facing the road again.

What am I supposed to say? Of course it was a depressing song. It reminds me of mom... I know that, because she used to sing House Built For Two when dad went away on long trips. Back when I thought everything was fine, but it really, really wasn't...

It isn't long before we turn down the street of Levi's apartment, and I follow him up the elevator without a thought. My mind is devoid of thought, just as my face is of emotion. I'm a completely blank canvas; a walking robot. I don't feel anything, besides the tightness of my face from where tears had collected and stained.

"Get some sleep, you can take my bed. Do you want a glass of water?" Levi asks, already in the kitchen.

I shake my head. "No, thanks."

I don't decline the offer of the bed, thinking arguing is more trouble than it's worth. I don't change out of my clothes, only taking off my shoes, then climbing into Levi's already unmade bed. He walks in with a glass of water not a minute later, as I thought he would. "It's best this is here, because your throats going to be sore when you wake up," He says, setting the glass down quietly beside me.

He turns to leave, with one last glance at me, before I reach out to grab his wrist. "Levi... Can you stay with me, please?"

He lifts an eyebrow, somewhere between surprised and anxious, but his features soften quickly. "Sure. But is this only because you're emotional, or would the normal you ask this?"

This is the normal me, Levi. I don't think you understand just how normal this is for me, to have everything taken from me at once; to feel like shit; to want to slit my wrists deeper than I already have. "Please?"

He doesn't question further. He walks to the other side of the room and turns off the lights, before getting into his side of the double bed, not changing out of his own clothes either. "Thank you," I mumble, through a face full of pillow. I hear my own voice crack, as tears are already forming, as they so often do when it's dark, so I know Levi hears it too.

He puts a hand on my back and pets me, motioning reassuring circles around my shoulder blades. "You don't have to deal with this alone, Eren. I'm here for you if you ever want me, remember that."

Neither of venture very far from Levi's bedroom the next day. I barely slept, thinking and over-thinking about everything that had happened. It was broadcast on the news, which means there's over a 100% chance that my friends already know. I don't dare look at my phone, out of fear of how
many people I'm going to have to talk to in the next week or so. Besides the five relatives that have already called so far, all of whom I don't even know.

*I don't understand why people can't just levee you alone when things like this happen. Who wants to speak to relatives and friends when someone they live has just died? Not fucking me, that's for sure.*

Levi's stirs in his half-sleep, having already been to the bathroom today, and not quite going back to sleep. He'd cancelled his shift at work today to stay home with me, for which I'm both grateful and annoyed. He shouldn't have had to cancel working and earning money just to lie around with my sorry-ass all day.

*But I'm glad he is. He's keeping me from destroying myself further, and I can't do that just yet. With a funeral to plan, why on earth would I kill myself? After all my mom did for me, the least I can do is not be ungrateful and give her a big send off.*

Levi turns into his back, yawning, before glancing over at me. "You're up," He states. "Did you sleep?"

"No," I say, truthfully. I figure that if I tell the truth for little things like this, I can get away with bigger lies. Killer logic, I know, but so far it's working.

"Oh."

He sits up and stretches, his spine cracking back into place loudly. "That's gross," I comment, as he glares at me through tired eyes.

"You're gross," Is his comeback, and I can't help but think his childishness is cute, even as he lets out another silent yawn. It's not the morning, so besides not being a morning person, I'd say he's more of a 'not-waking-up-person.'

He blinks wearily, before turning back in his side to face me, resting his head in the palm of his hand. "So, how're you feeling?" He asks. His eyes aren't entirely focusing on me, which makes me almost want to laugh. He looks like a child.

"Okay, I guess," I answer.

He scrunches his nose, lifting an eyebrow at me. "You guess? What does that mean?"

I roll my eyes. "I'm tired. I didn't sleep much."

He nods slowly. "Wanna just stay in bed?"

"Yes, please."

He stays stationery for a few moments. I sink back down the headboard to lie down, and he moves closer to me, wrapping an arm around my waist and resting his forehead on my side. Nerves engulf my stomach as he sighs, hot breath tickling my skin. "$This is home, huh?" He asks, voice slightly muffled by the comforter.

I'm slightly tense, skin prickling at his arm wrapped around me and his warm breath against my skin, where my jacket and shirt have ridden up. "$What?" I ask, trying not to sound affected by his sudden physical attention. He's usually so distant.

I can hear him smirk. "$Last night, you said 'just take me home.' So is this home, or was that purely to shut me up?"
I sigh, with a small smile on my face. "I guess it is..."

I want to turn to face him; to wrap my own arms around him, so we can hold each other close and not let go for the entire day, but I'm not confident enough. I settle for sinking further into the blankets and moving only slightly towards Levi as I do, playing it off as only a change in position. He keeps his hand around me, and every so often soothingly grazes my bare side with his fingertips.

I'm holding my breath at the feeling. I haven't been held like this for so long, not since I was a lot younger than I am when mom would hold me after I threw a tantrum to calm me down. My breathing is laboured, and I'm afraid that if I move at all he'll get the wrong impression and move away.

*I kind of want to kiss him right now.*

Our plans of staying in bed all day are taken from us as Levi's phone starts to ring, only an hour after we'd settled down. Neither of us moved during that time, and Levi eventually even moved closer to me, letting his palm sit firmly on my side. I'd nearly combusted, but he hadn't opened his eyes at all, so he didn't have to see me like that.

He sighs into the bed, reluctant to remove himself from the warmth we'd created between us. "Urggh," He grumbles, sweeping hair out of his eyes as he sits up to reach his phone. As soon as his hand is taken from my body, I feel almost naked; like I had som vital organ taken from me. "Hello?" Levi answered, rubbing his eyes.

"I- Yeah, I don't think he's... Okay. Right, I'll put him on." Levi's facial expression quickly changed, to something almost scared, before he hands me his phone and whispers, "I can't deal with that."

I tentatively take the phone, and Levi tells me he'll leave the room whilst we talk. "Hello?" I ask, sitting up.

'Eren... Sweetie, how are you?' A small, half-hearted smile graces my lips. It's Ruth Kirschtein.

"Hi, Ruth. I'm okay." I sound exhausted, so it's clear she'll know I'm lying, but I don't need to tell her everything. I'm sure she's already seen it.

'I don't have the right words to say to you, and I know nothing I say will change what's happened, but I just needed to call and make sure you were alright,' She starts, beginning to get teary. 'Jean and Marco both tried calling you, but you wouldn't pick up. It was probably silly of me but I drove down to your work, and your boss gave me this number. Eren, honey, are you eating well? And you warm at night? Has he done anything to hurt you? I swear, I will come down there right away and-

I chuckle lightly. "It's okay, I'm fine here. Levi's nice."

She sighs. 'Okay...- Good, I'm glad. Are you sure you're alright? I need you to know, sweetie, that if you ever need anything at all, please don't hesitate to call me, okay? Your mother she--... She was a wonderful, truly beautiful woman. I know I'm not her, but if you ever need a mom figure, please come to me. I've raised two kids, I know how it goes, believe it or not!' She chuckles lightly, still sobbing beneath it.

"I will. Thank you, for calling. Tell Jean and Marco I'm sorry for not calling back, okay? I probably won't be calling anyone for a while," I say, honestly. There's no point in lying to her, and besides, I'm sure she knows the feelings attached with loosing someone you love. She has to.

She takes a deep breath. 'Alright. Well, love, do you... Do you want me to organise anything with you? You know for...-'
We pause, and my stomach drops. "That would be really... Nice. Do you- do you think mom would mind if you set up her funeral, instead of me?" I ask. I'll fuck it up. I'll ruin everything. It won't be nice if I do it, I know it. She'd hate me more than she left this earth hating me.

'I'm sure she'd be fine with it. But are you sure?' She asks, hesitantly.

"I'm sure."

She tells me she loves me, and that Jean loves me, and that she's always here if I need someone. I thank her for everything, tell her the dates that would be best (really I just made some up, I have no clue what days would be best for a funeral), and then we hang up. Levi walks in not a moment later, with a bowl of popcorn.

"I, uh- I don't have any cereal, so... This is it," He shrugs, handing the popcorn to me so he can climb back into bed.

I shake my head softly as he sits beside me, sitting cross-legged and shovelling a handful into his mouth. I stare in disbelief. "Your first meal of the day is going to be popcorn?" I ask.

"So's yours," He says, dropping a handful into my lap. "Eat up, you've gotta eat something."

I don't argue, and I don't exactly eat much, but I try my best to eat a few handfuls. It amazes me how much Levi can eat, when he wants to. Of course, he's not sickeningly depressed, so I guess that's a factor. But still... He's so small. He's not stick thin, but he's not exactly fat. He's almost perfect, and he'd probably qualify to be an underwear model or something, if he were taller. Not that I'd tell him that. I think anyone below 6'5" is pretty insecure about their height, and I don't want to start anything. Having to deal with Connie when I mentioned height was bad enough, way back when.

"Who was that on the phone?" He finally asks, after sitting there for nearly ten minutes, practically itching to ask me.

I swallow my last handful of popcorn. "Mrs Kirsteinstein, she's Jean's mom."

Levi lifts an eyebrow. "Who's Jean?"

"A friend of mine from school," I say, nearly smiling at his sudden interest in my life, outside of being homeless and fucked-up.

He nods, eating another handful of popcorn. "Ah. Was his mom close to yours?"

I go silent, then mumble, "Yeah, they were pretty close." Obviously, my reaction put something between us, because Levi stops asking questions. With his silence, I start to think about how little of her life my mom got to live; and how she was stuck living it with someone like dad. And someone like me.

All I'd done was make her life hard. Whether it was by getting into too much trouble at school, or being so damn moody, she was always stuck with dealing with it. I took her for granted, and I made her life an added misery. If I'd've known what dad was doing to her, I probably would've killed the bastard. Hell, not probably, I would have.

He ruined our lives. All of us. He took away moms chance at finding better, because he thought she was happy where she was. 'A woman like yourself should count herself lucky she's got a job half as good as what she has,' he'd told her. What bullshit. Mom could've done so much more with her life. She could've done so much better than him, too. He took away Mikasa's chance of doing something she actually enjoyed, and was good at. She wanted to do kickboxing, he forced her no to ballet. And
who did she meet there? Thomas. And what's he done for her? Nothing. He'll become the next
generation of dad, if he and Mikasa have kids. And then, there'll be another generation who turn out
like me. Fucked in the head, useless, selfish, loser; me.

Levi fidgets beside me, and I feel like he's going to get up and leave. He said he would stay in bed all
day, but he'll probably leave - everyone else does, what makes him the exception? Instead, he moves
to lay down beside me again, pushing the popcorn aside. He pats the bed with his hand, looking up
at me. "C'mere," He says, motioning me to lie down again. I do, after a moment of hesitation, edging
slightly towards him.

When I look at him, halfway down to his level, he sighs and rolls his eyes, reaching out to pull me
down with him. "Ah, hey!" I laughed, letting him pull me down and wrap his arms around me,
snapping me from my thoughts. "What?" I ask, as he rests his chin on my stomach and glances up at
me.

"What goes on up there?" He asks, looking further up to my forehead before making eye contact
with me again. "Don't let you talk yourself down. If you're thinking things that probably aren't too
helpful, write them down, or talk about them. It doesn't have to be to me. 'Could be Jean's mom or
something, but you shouldn't keep it all locked away."

I nod slowly, but I don't agree, and I'm sure he knows that. "Mm. I guess I prefer to keep my
problems to myself, 'cos they're not really for anyone else to handle." I try to lay the sarcasm on as
best I can, without sounding completely rude. I know how rude I can be, and I know how many
people I've probably put off because of it. I don't want Levi to become one of them, even if it's only
for a little while.

Levi smirks. "You've got guts, kid, I'll give you that."

Something flutters within my stomach. "You should know, you're leaning on them."

Levi's almost disgusted face contorts into a cheesy grin, as he face palms against my stomach and
shakes his head. "Alright, you win. Enough heart-to-heart for today, I'll quit."

I smirk now. "Thanks, Levi."

True to his word, he doesn't try to get me to open up for the rest of the day. He gets up after about
two hours of silence to grab two cans of soda, which he'd neglected to remember were in the fridge
for the entire day. But, to my surprise, he settles right back down next to me once he's finished.

I was sure he wouldn't lie next to me again.

It must be pity, I sigh. He pities what's happened, he doesn't really care. I'm sure he's got a nice
family somewhere, people who care about him. He probably feels great about life, and couldn't
understand how I'm feeling even if he tried. Who would? I mean, who could if they were so content
with their life.

There's only so much imagining you can do. I'd thought that Levi genuinely cared, but he hadn't ever
cuddled up to me like this for the whole time I've been here. What's that now, three weeks? More? I
can't recall, but I know that people don't just go from distance to intimacy like this.

He has to have ulterior motives.

-X-

Levi wakes me from a nightmare in the late afternoon, trying to stop me from falling off of the bed in
a fit of screams. I dreamt of mom; her lifeless body in the clutches of a giant, who'd broken her free from the wreckage and started to maul her. In my dream, I couldn't do anything to save her. Something was holding me back, but I wasn't restrained. Sometime after Levi had managed to get me to settle, finally letting me get off of having to tell him what I dreamt about, I realise that I was restrained by my own mind. That thought alone was enough to destroy me inside, so I sat in chilled silence, ignoring Levi's soothing touches and words. I didn't need them. I was a monster, and no amount of situational care would tell me otherwise.

We sleep in until the early evening, and by then, we're both wide awake. It was probably a decision we'd regret in the future, but we both silently accepted the fact that we most definitely messed up our sleep schedules.

Whilst I sat in the living room, mindlessly staring at the TV as a show I didn't recognise was presented, my phone vibrated on the side of the couch. I reach over to grab it, awakened from my daydream, and check the caller I.D: Connie Springer. That bigger part of me that I don't like says, 'don't answer it, it's just about Sasha again,' but the more reasonable part of me urges me to take the call.

"Hello?" I say, almost surprised at how my voice escapes as nothing about a raspy whistle. I clear my throat and it stings, reminding me of how much I'd cried.

'Eren,' Connie says, seemingly lost for words. 'Eren I-...'

Eren scoffs. "I know you're sorry, Connie." He'd heard it all before. This wasn't the first all he'd gotten in the past 24 hours either. "Everyone is. And I keep telling them it wasn't their fault, so don't make me say the same to you."

Connie swallows. 'Eren... I know this is hard for you. I can't even being to imagine what you're going through right now, man. And it's probably selfish of me to even say this, but Sasha and I changed our wedding date so we can attend the funeral.'

What?

"Huh?" I'm gobsmacked, both at how he has the stomach to mention their wedding at a time like this, and the fact that a funerals already been arranged. Is time really meant to go by this quickly?

'Jean's mom organised it and sent out invitations. You should've got one, she posted them all late last night apparently,' Connie says, choosing his words carefully. 'Did you know?'

I shake my head into the receiver. "No. No, I didn't."

'Are you oka-

"I'm fucking fine Connie, alright? I'm fan-fucking-tastic!" I shout, digging my nails hard into my thighs through my jeans. "Stop asking, just like I've always told you, I'm doing great! My moms dead, but who gives a shit, right? Who cares? No one. No one really cares, because if they did, it wouldn't've had to take some freak accident for them to show it."

I'm fuming, but I don't regret anything I said. It's all true. I know that people don't give a shit about me, but the least they could do is pretend - but pretend all the time, not just when it's convenient for them.

Connie sighs, 'I'll see you at the funeral, Eren. Take care.' The line goes dead, and I listens to the white noise for nearly two whole minutes, wondering where I'd began to descent into this mental hell.
I just pushed away the last person I had left...

What the fuck is wrong with me?

I can hear pacing footsteps in the hallway, but no vice to accompany them. Great. Levi heard me shouting. Now I'm gonna get a lecture about it. Who does he think he is, my fucking grandfather? Fuck off, Levi. I was better off without you.

...No, I wasn't. But I damn well wouldn't be here if it wasn't for him, so he can fuck right off.

"Eren?" He says, walking stiffly into the living room and standing a little ways in front of me.

"What."

He exhales through his nose sharply, biting his lower lip. "I brought up your mail." Levi hands me my mail, then says he's going out to buy some things. He asks if I want anything, and I flatly decline, hoping he gets the message that I really just want to be left alone.

He does, and leaves without another word.

I'm hesitant to open the letter, knowing what I'll see, but I do it regardless. This is an invitation to my own mother's funeral. One that I didn't have the guts to organise. One that shouldn't even be happening. What happened between my childhood and adolescence? Where did all those memories go? The ones that had to be fun, that had to have good feelings of warmth and happiness attached. Is time really meant to go by this quickly?

I steady the invitation on my lap, unable to read it with my shaking hands clutching desperate at the sides of the craft paper. This is an invitation to my own mother's funeral...

Please join us as we celebrate the life of Carla Monique Jaeger.
Now gone but forever in our hearts.

17 Sina Court
November 12th, 12:30pm.

Together we can bear well the beautiful woman who raised and protected her children until the very end. Please give your love to Eren Jaeger and Mikasa Acerman, and Carla's family and friends.

My eyes well with tears as I re-read the invitation. It's going to be held at Jean's house in only a day's time. It's going to be right across from my own house, the house where everything went wrong; the house that mom was driven out of by her own family; the house that holds so many memories I can barely stand to imagine its screaming walls.

Ruth has attached a letter, so I wipe my eyes and pull it from the envelope.

Dear Eren,
I hope you're as happy as you can be with this invite. I've addressed it to the people closest to your family, with a little help from Jean. I hope this is okay.
Mikasa gave the date, and a headstone is being prepared at Shinganshina Cemetary. Mikasa says Carla wished to be buried there.

Your father is very distraught, and will be attending. Unfortunately, I couldn't do anything about that, but someone had given him the date and address. I didn't think he would agree to go, given the location, but it didn't drive him away. I promise you will be safe with us. Rest as much as you can, and know that we all love you and are here for you.
My heart tightens, my stomach churns, and my face drains of all colour as I read what I didn't think I'd ever have to see. Your father will be attending. The front door unlocks and Levi stories in with two large paper bags, but before he can say anything, my throat seems to clench and my stomach pumps itself. I don't have enough time to make it to the bathroom or to warn Levi before I throw my guts up onto his pale carpet and white couch.

A hand is on each of my thighs, tears stain my face, and wandering eyes fall upon myself and Mikasa in the front rows. She'd cried and hug me when we first arrived, and didn't leave my side since. Dad sits on the other side of the lawn, but I don't have any willpower to spare him a glance.

I sit with Levi on my left and Mikasa on my right in the front row. Beside Levi is Armin, and beside Mikasa is Annie, Sasha and Connie. The row to our left has Jean, Marco and Ruth, and my jaw tightens each time I catch sight of Jean. He's fidgeting and scratching at himself, his leg tapping carelessly on the leg of his chair. What the fucks he doing? Why can't he just sit still for half a fucking hour? It's pissing me off. This is my mom's fucking funeral, if he didn't want to be here he didn't have to be. God, I probably would've been fine with just me and Mikasa.

We're outside, and the sun shines obnoxiously bright upon moms coffin. The funeral directors say their ending speeches and wish everyone a happy recovery.

Before I can even register what's happening, mom is carted off in the hearse towards Shinganshina Cemetery to be cremated.

I sit alone at the back of the crowded room as people grab sandwiches and finger food from the tables. Ruth prepared a whole meal for everyone, apparently, and I feel like shit as I watch people indulge. How can people eat when they loose someone they love? Or did they not love her at all?

"How're you holding up?" Levi asks, holding a glass of water. He takes up the couch with me, sitting as close to me as comfortable for the both of us.

I shrug. "Stupid."

"Why?" He asks.

I sigh, rubbing my face. "I don't know, Levi. I don't know. I feel like this is all my fault, that if she hadn't seen me then she would've been where she was when this happened. Everyone's taken the time out of their day to come to this when I don't even want them here," I say. "Mom doesn't even like half of her friend that are here, and I barely know anyone. They're all here because my weak ass can't stand to say goodbye to my own mom without a fucking army of support that I'm not even using. I'm just a burden."

Levi takes a sip of water and sighs, but he's clearly not annoyed. He looks almost sad. "You're not a burden, Eren. Not to me, and not to anybody else. Do you know that?" Levi asks, staring at me intently. "You're worth so much more than you tell yourself, and god knows that if I ever get my hands on the person who made you feel this way, I will send them to their grave."

I avert my eyes, choosing a spot to stare at on his floor. So what, you're going to kill me as well as
“Do you know how many people love you?” Levi questions, placing his hands on my shoulder. “Do you know that I’ve never met anyone in my life who can bring a smile to so many people’s faces within the span of half an hour? One. I’ve met one person who makes people smile like that, and it’s you. Maybe you have problems, but they aren’t who you are. Do you understand that? I need you to understand that.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, Levi! I am a problem!” I shout, gaining a few looks from people. “Problems cause problems, that’s just the way it is! Why do you have to lie to me all the time?”

He motions away from me slightly and glances at the few people paying us attention in the back corner of the Kirschtein’s second living room. "When you filled in tests and assignments, what did you put down when they asked for your name?" He asks, lowering his eyes. I stay quiet, and he sighs. "What did you write?"

I exhale through my nose, crossing my arms. "My name."

"And what's that?" He prompts.

I scoff at him. "Don't be stupid-"

"What's your name?" Levi says sternly.

"Eren."

"Exactly. You're Eren, not 'burden.' Your name isn't depressed, or fucked up, or annoying, or pushover; your name is Eren. You are not your problems. Problems have no other meaning other than to fuck you over and make you feel like shit. Given the way you make people smile, I don't think you're making them feel like shit at all."

When I don't respond, Levi tells me he's going to the bathroom and that I should socialise if I feel like I'm wasting people's time. I can't help but feel like I've just made things worse by actually telling the truth about how I'm feeling.

I'm soon overwhelmed by the number of people offering their half-hearted condolences. Some of them I don't even know, and other I'm certain mom didn't like, such as Genevieve the receptionist. Jean doesn't speak to me at all, nor does he speak to anyone else either. He sits in the corner of the room, clenching a can of soda with a tight fist and scratching at his arms through his suit. Dad and I meet each other's gazes every so often, and by the fourth time, my heart just about gives out.

I can't do this, I can't do this, I can't do this. There's so many people. They're annoying, they don't care, they're here for the food, there got no where better to be, they couldn't give a single shit about how they're making me feel by being so fucking inconsiderate - I have to get out of here.

I rush through the crowd of people to escape the remorseful and sickening atmosphere. I can't see Levi anywhere, even though he'd sat beside me from the entire ceremony, as did Mikasa. So, I leave the house and sit out on the front porch, drying my eyes with the sleeves of Levi's ill-fitting suit.

"What's happening? I don't understand anything anymore. Did I ever, though? I dreamt as a child that I would earn enough money to take my mom all around the world. I dreamt about happiness and achievement and living. Where did I go wrong?"

"Where has mom gone? I'll never see her again. She's gone from my life, like the universe took a great piss on her light and burnt her out, before she even had a chance to glow as bright as she
I don't hear the quiet footsteps stand beside me, until I catch a glimpse of their shadow. I look up, blurry eyed, to see Sasha standing idly beside me with a drink in her hand. "Sasha?" I choke.

She looks at me with the look I dread; pity. But, she sits down close to me, setting her drink down next to her. "How're you doin'?" She asks, with a small smile.

"I don't know..." I stutter, exhaling sharply.

"I just wanted to come out here and see how you are. I know these funeral things can be tough, but they're just something you've gotta get through." Sasha places a hand on my knee, giving it a firm, comforting rub. "Do you want me to get you anything?" She asks.

I shake my head. "'M fine."

She bites her lip, and leans forward to press a soft kiss to my forehead. "I know you're heard all this crap before, but it's gotta get bad before it gets better," She smiles. "Your mamma was a nice lady. She helped me with a few things myself so... I know she'll be lookin' down on you and smiling at how much you're gonna grow."

I don't believe anything she says, but I nod anyway. "Okay."

"Can I get your number?" Sasha asks, already pulling out her phone. "You're a good friend of Connie's, and I think you're a good person to know."

I tell her my number, blankly. I'm void of emotion, and Sasha seems to get the message that I don't want to talk anymore. She gives me one last pat on the shoulder before leaving me on the porch.

I subconsciously scratch at the cuts on my forearms from the glass. They're far deeper than anything I've achieved so far, and they make my mind turn to darker places. I'd managed to do this much in the state I was in- surely I could cut deeper and end it quickly? It was almost painless that night when I got lightheaded. I could do it to that point and let myself bleed out. If that doesn't work, I can just keep cutting deeper until I pierce a vein.

The funeral finishes at 2pm, and Levi just about flys my away from the house when people start to leave. I give Ruth a large hug, one that I hadn't given to many people before, and she wishes me a safe recovery. Marco hugs me just as tight, and tells me that he'll always be there if I need someone to chill out with.

I try to hug Jean, but I feel distant as I do, those feelings of annoyance still with me as I leave his scratching and fidgeting behind. What's up with him? He's got no fucking respect. Go put your fleas on someone else's mothers coffin.

Levi drives us back to his apartment, only stopping to fill the tank with gas. We get back to his place near 3pm, and I break down in his arms when we sit on the couch. He'd cleaned up my previous nights vomit in record time, and he didn't lash out like I thought he would. He seemed almost forgiving.

Once I've stopped crying, Levi showers, and I nap for a while. We'd ordered pizza when we got home as I cried into Levi's underarm, and it arrives just as Levi is dressed. He pays and brings it over to the lounge room, turning on the radio. We eat in silence, and I can't help but feel like I've caused him to be this distant. I know I've fucked something up between us. Whatever that was that was happening- or that might have happened- I've screwed it up with my big mouth.

Levi stacks the box atop the rubbish bin, before standing in front of me in the living room. "Hey,"
He says, ignoring the current song playing.

"Hi," I reply, confused by his stance. "What?" He's staring at me with a strange look in his eyes, one I've never seen before directed at me.

"You feeling a little better?" He asks. I shrug, and he seems to know that I mean 'no.' "Would you like to?"

I sigh. "I guess."

He smiles slightly. "Dansons."

"What?" I ask.

"Let's dance."

As if on cue, the song changes, and Levi takes my hands in his, pulling me to my feet. He doesn't clear anything out of the way as he pulls me with him, and motions me closer to him in the centre of the kitchen. I don't have time to argue before he starts to step, leading me along.

It's weird, and awkwardly paced, but we're dancing nonetheless; I love it.

I recognise the voice of the singer. Levi is always listening to this guy, and something about the song obviously struck something in Levi I never thought I'd see. Yet, here we are. Swaying and skip-stepping and sliding along offbeat to the song in our pyjamas during the late hours of the night.

The dimmed lights in the kitchen have created an atmosphere of something I can only describe as romantic. It's warm, comforting, and the way Levi fucking beams as he twirls me around sets something alive in me. The way I genuinely laugh when he almost slips, and the way he honest-to-god keeps smiling and laughs with me.

He takes my hips and we slow our dancing just a fraction off time with the music. We're closer than ever before now, and I can hear Levi softly singing along to the song, and I smile, a real smile, and he does too.

I haven't smiled or laughed this much in a long, long time. I've never seen him smile this much, ever, either. Something about this evening, it can only be magic. There's something in the air. There's gotta be heavy drugs coming out of that speaker.

*My mother was burned and sent away from this Earth barely a few hours ago, and I'm dancing with this person. My friend? Are we becoming more?*

*Is this the calm before another storm? Am I getting ahead of myself again, only to be completely heartbroken because of my own naivety and selfishness?*

We sway for a little before Levi spins me outwards one more time, and pulls me in close to him at the close of the song. He tentatively rubs my arms, carefully and lovingly. He's still smiling, I'm still smiling, even at the close distance.

Before I can register it, he leans up and places a soft kiss on my lips. It surprises me, but I don't pull away. I lean into it, revealing in the softness of his lips on mine, and before I know it we've broken apart at the same time, and he's staring up at me like he can't believe what he just did. I can't believe what we just did.
It's not regret, it's something like the feeling of a school-age kid getting a Valentine's Letter from a secret admirer, leaving you giddy for the rest of the day. Except, we're both giddy in this moment, right here, right now.

I don't think I could've asked for a better evening than this. Nor for a better person to share it with.

Chapter End Notes

How many times can you hint towards further events in one chapter? Many, apparently. Thank you for reading, I appreciate all the feedback from this work, I love you all! xx
It was wrong; we both knew it was wrong. But it felt so right. What cliche film had Levi appeared out of? Taking me into his own home like a member of his family, lazing the day away with me, and then slow dancing under the dull lighting of his kitchen. He kissed me, but he shouldn't have. He kissed me, and he shouldn't have, but he wanted to. *I wanted him to.*

I wanted him to keep kissing me. I wanted us to kiss until daybreak, and never let go of each other. I've never been in love with anyone before, so maybe I'm being melodramatic, but I think I'm in love with Levi. The Levi who's kept me alive far longer than a planned to be.

Was this his plan? To make me fall in love with him so that I wouldn't kill myself? He's got it all wrong, if that's the case. No matter how much I might love him, that won't change the way I hate myself.

Even if I wanted to, I'll never be able to love anyone. *I can't* love myself - I don't even know how to love.

The coffee kettle boils, and Levi snaps from his space-staring trance, walking over to the kettle. "It was wrong," He says, again, rubbing at his thin eyebrows. "And I'm sorry."

The sincerity in his voice hurts my head, because I'm just not sure what I think. *He's telling me what he did was wrong- but how? It was so right. It was perfect.* "Levi I-... I don't think it was wrong," I say, scratching nervously at the fabric of my left sleeve.

Levi, dressed in his work uniform of tight black skinny jeans and a black long-sleeve, finishes making the coffees and sets one down in front of me. He leans against the counter, trying to drink his own coffee quickly to avoid being late for work, again.

"It was. You'd just said goodbye to your mother for good; you'd been teary all day, and you're clearly not in a good state of mind. There's no way you haven't been impacted by the death of loosing a loved one... I shouldn't've taken advantage of that."

*Clearly, huh.* I shake my head. "I didn't- I don't mind. It helped, really."

Levi's obviously doesn't agree with me, but he gives a tight-lipped nod. "Well... I just want you to know, that if you're uncomfortable with what happened, I'm sorry. Please be honest with me, Eren. I don't want to hurt you."

I shake my head. "I don't think you'll ever hurt me."

*If anything, I'll be the one who hurts you...*
Levi sighs, nodding to stop the conversation before it develops further. His facial expression changes, and he looks almost pained. "Okay... Eren-" As he opens his mouth to speak, something changes again, and he bites his tongue.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Nothing. I'm going to work, the place is all yours 'till I get back," Levi swallows, walking to the front door, swinging his car keys between his fingers. "Could you also ring up and book an appointment for the cat? It's fine if you can't, but I'd like to get in early."

Levi's cat went downhill the day of the funeral, and he's been locked up in the bedroom ever since. Levi doesn't know how old he is, since he rescued him, but chances are he's not doing too well.

I nod once. "Sure. See you later, then."

As soon as Levi is out of the apartment, I lift the sleeves of my shirt to scratch at the slowly-healing wounds. My arms have been fucking itchy all day. The glass had cut deeper than anything I'd done before, and looking at the deep red marks slashed without caution down my forearm, I feel like a monster; but it feel so good. They're itchy as hell, but I can scratch the day away with Levi gone.

I check on the cat half an hour later, who's sleeping peacefully at the end of Levi's bed. "You're lucky, huh," I croon, petting it softly behind the ears. "It's all snowy outside, and you're nice and warm in here. Isn't that nice?"

Winter always arrives 364 days too early in Trost, but this Winter came back with a vicious bite. None of the clothes I have are nearly warm enough, so I have to layer everything until I can afford to get a thicker coat. Which doesn't exactly affect me negatively, it's really a blessing.

Though, Levi often lends me his own coats, which are a little too short on the arms, but they do the trick - and cover up everything they need to.

The cats motor purring is interrupted as my ringtone blares out through the empty apartment. "I'll be back, cutie." I leave the room with one last loving pet, running my fingers through the cats soft, black fur.

Incoming Call
Marco

"Hey, Marco," I say, slightly surprised to get a call from him. It's been so long - I wonder if they found out about the missing blade...

'Eren, is Jean with you?' Marco asks. He sounds exasperated, clearly in a panic.

"No, he's not. What's wrong?" I ask. The last time I saw him was five weeks ago at moms funeral, and he was pissing me the fuck off, so I ignored him the whole time. What've I done to upset him now?

'Shit...' Marco sighs. 'He hasn't been home for three days, he hasn't contacted me or Ruth, and he's not answering his phone. I really hoped he was with you.'

My eyes widen, stomach dropping to the floor in fear. "What? Jesus, Marco, he's missing?"

Marco's breath is shaky as he exhales. 'Y-Yeah... He went for a job interview at Target but- He's been off colour for a few weeks now, and I was worried, but then he got called in for an interview and he really picked up, but now- Eren... What do I do? I don't know where he is, Ruth's a mess, I
"Marco," I start, sucking in a deep breath. "Did Jean tell you about what happened a few months back?"

Marco swallows thickly. 'No? Eren, what's happened?'

_Do I tell him? Jean would kill me but... How can I abandon someone like me? How can I leave someone like Jean out there in the world, alone, without any contact?_

I suck it up and tell him of Jean's suicide attempt. I tell him about the letter, and where I found him, and just about everything after that; the kiss, the hug, the fight, the make-up. He stays speechless, and by the end of it, he's close to tears.

'Why didn't he t-tell me?' Marco whines.

"He doesn't like to share things like that," I say. I know this, because I don't like to share things like this either. "He'd tell you eventually but... Right now, he needs to be found. When you said he was off colour, what did you mean?"

'Um... Shaky, sweating, he's been really fidgety and snappy, too. I can't tell a good mood from a bad one, he's on a constant emotional rollercoaster.' Marco's slowly losing his composure, so I interrupt him before he can start to get into hysteria.

"Marco, Marco, listen to me. Meet me at The Basement in thirty minutes, okay? We're going to find him, and we're going to get him help, okay?" I wait for Marco to answer, listening to him whisper something to Ruth.

Marco lets a drawn-out breath escape him. 'Okay... Okay, okay.'

"Okay?" I ask, pressing my cheek closer to the screen.

Marco sighs. 'Yeah... I'll be there.'

"Okay-

'Eren?' Marco asks.

I swallow. "Yeah?"

'Thank you, for everything.'

-X-

Levi had answered his phone within three rings, picking up with fervour. I explained the situation to him, and he told me he would meet us at The Basement too.

'I can probably get off work early, anyway, we've got a trainee chef here with some other guy, so they can take over,' He'd said. 'It sounds like withdrawal, he's probably in a messy situation. He shouldn't be alone.'

I didn't ask how Levi knew that, but I told him where Marco and I would be waiting, and thanked him. I take the train towards the basement, figuring it will be faster then walking, and fidget the whole trip there.

_I didn't know Jean did drugs. I knew something was off with him at the funeral, but drugs? What
does he take? Heroin? Cocaine? Why didn't he say anything... How can he just suffer in his own? That can't be good for him, nor for the people around him.

I mentally slap myself. What am I saying? Keeping the hurt to yourself is the best way to deal with it; by not dealing with it at all.

When I get to The Basement, Marco's already there, sitting beside Ruth on the steps outside the bar. They feign smiles, tear-stained faces a clear sign they haven't been doing well.

"Eren..." Ruth says, reaching a hand forward to pull me into a sideways hug. "Thank you for helping us, sweetie, I know you've been doing it hard."

You have no idea, Ruth. I swallow. "It's fine, Jean's a good friend, I wouldn't want anything bad to happen to him."

Levi arrives no less than five minutes later, pulling into a carpark with a single smooth motion, and greeting us by the stairs. "This is Levi," I say, introducing him to Marco and Ruth.

Marco offers him his hand to shake and a smile, and Ruth leans in for a hug. "Thank you for taking care of Eren," She says, to which Levi rubs her back a few times.

Levi shakes his head. "It's no trouble, but right now we have to find Jean. By what Eren told me earlier, chances are Jean's going through withdrawal from some kind of drug. Have you noticed anything about his behaviour?"

Ruth clasps a hand over her mouth, drawing in a quick breath. "N-No... I should have noticed..."

Levi doesn't ask any personal questions after that, so we all set off down the road. "We shouldn't drive, it will be harder to find him. Where does he usually go when he needs to get out of the house?" Levi asks, practically leading the three of us down Trost's main stretch of housing and shops.

"We checked The Basement, and he wasn't there," Marco says. "Besides that, I've only ever seen him at the park, but Ruth and I passed it on our way here and..."

"He wasn't there," Ruth mumbles. "I don't know where he'd go... I just- God, why didn't he tell me? We could've worked things through, I wouldn't've been mad at him I-"

"Ruth, save that for when we find him. He will want to hear it from you," Levi cuts in. Ruth is slightly taken aback by his brashness, but she doesn't retort with anything else.

After asking around a few stores Jean usually shops at, whom all say they haven't seen him in a long time, we all try his phone number; it goes straight to the message bank. "He's turned it off," Marco sighs. "He can we ever find him? Trost is such a big city."

We pass a few more storefronts, and none of them have seen him. Some suggest other places, others tell us that they'll 'look out for him,' before one music store employee suggests going to the hospital. 'Last time he was here, he looked pretty down. Maybe check there?'

Ruth doesn't waste another second thanking the employee profusely and leading us towards the hospital.

The closer we get to Trost General, the more my stomach flips inside me. It's a Thursday, which means dad works there... Is he even still hired? Surely they can't let people under the influence use surgical equipment.
We enter through the front doors, and I pale. Levi notices, but he doesn't say anything, giving me a sympathetic look before linking arms with Ruth to lead her shaking figure to the front desk. "Jean Kirschtein?" Marco asks, holding back his tears.

The nurse tells us to wait in the waiting room, that she has to go up and check to see if he's still here. He'd checked himself in three days ago, having overdosed on a heroin-cocaine concoction.

Marco rests a firm hand on Ruth's shoulder, and she shakes in Levi's arms, who comforts her similarly to how he comforted me. *Maybe he's just that nice, and the comforts he dealt me were only natural...*

_Selfish. Jean's nearly dead and I'm thinking about my fucking self again._

To some, Trost is a big city, but to others, it's far too small. When Marco had said Trost was a big city, I could have laughed in his face. "Eren? What's happened?" Connie asks, rushing over to us from the coffee machines on the other side of the waiting room.

"Connie? What're you doing here?" I ask, standing to meet him halfway.

"Sasha's having an ultrasound for the baby. What're- What's happened?" Connie notices Ruth, and Marco, and his eyes widen to dinner-plate proportions. "Where's Jean?"

Before I can answer, the nurse from the front desk approaches our group, and calls us to sit down. "Jean checked himself in three days ago, and yesterday he was taken to the Jinae Rehabilitation Centre, in West Jinae," She starts, looking solemn. "Our facilities couldn't handle his violent outbursts, and when he broke into a sweat he stopped responding to us."

Levi stiffens, his face palming significantly as his grip on Ruth falters. Ruth draws in a sharp breath, closing her eyes to stop further tears. "Oh G-God..."

"He's currently under strict supervision," The nurse continues. "We can give you a contact number and address, and he'll be available to visit within the next few days, I'm sure."

Ruth nods, and as she escapes Levi's arms, she tells him she's fine to walk to the desk, we follow close behind, and I give Connie a single look, to which he nods and returns to the coffee machine. He looks sick to the stomach.

_Could there be two funerals in the span of two months?_

The nurse gives us Jinae's rehab number and address, and offers to call up to get an update, but the line doesn't get further than the front desk. 'He's not available to speak to, but we can organise an appointment with you in the next couple of days to see him,' They say. 'People like him wouldn't want to spend Christmas alone.'

_People like him, huh. They have no fucking respect, do they._

Marco and Ruth listen intently to the conversation, trying their hardest to hear what the nurse isn't relaying to us. Levi stands still, staring off into the empty space provided by the floor. He looks like he's going to be sick.

When the nurse hangs up the phone, Ruth places her shaky hands on the front desk. "How was he referred to the rehab centre without consent from a parent or guardian?" She asks. "And why wasn't I alerted to the fact that he's been here for three days, and not missing?"

The nurse is tight-lipped. "Mrs Kirschtein, Jean wasn't on our records when he checked in. We couldn't get in contact with a parent or guardian because he didn't have any."
"W-What?"

We leave soon after that, all placing hands on Ruth to comfort her. Marco's managed to keep himself together, but Ruth cracked the moment we walked into that place.

Much like I did on the inside.

We all walk Ruth back to her car, and say our goodbye's. "We'll call you guys when we get more information, okay? Thank you for event thing today," Marco says, from the drivers seat.

"It's no problem," Levi says, giving a small smile. "Let us know what we can do to help."

"And let us know how's he's doing," I say. How can I give words of reassurance when I can't even reassure myself?

Levi and I stand still as they drive off, but Levi's not even staring at them. He's completely off in his own world; by the look on his face, it's not a particularly happy one. Did he even know Jean, how can this effect him that badly? Unless that whole cleanliness thing gets worse in hospitals.

Levi and I don't talk the whole walk back to his car. Even when we're on the road, he's deafeningly silent, and it makes my throat tighten. Have I done something? Was it something I said?

"Levi..." I start, but he sighs.

"How's the cat?" He asks. Was he worrying about that the whole time? Maybe I didn't do anything. No, he's got more on his mind. He might think he's got me fooled, but he's far from it.

"He was sleeping, last I checked," I say. "Levi, is that why you're so quiet? Because you're worried about the cat? You know you can trust me, right?"

"Eren, please, can we not do this now?" Levi snaps.

My breath hitches, and the car seat feels hot. The air between us is thick and heavy, and for once in my life, I know I didn't make it that way. *What's your deal, Levi? I'm just trying to get you to talk. You're always trying to read my mind, what's a little taste of your own medicine, huh?" I bark. If he can lose his temper over something as simple as a question, then why the fuck can't I, huh?

"Just be quiet. It's been a long day."

I scoff. "Oh really, is your best friend currently in a rehab centre in Jinae after not responding to hospital staff? Is your dad still out there after fucking over your whole life? Is your mom dead, Levi? Huh? I'm sure it's been a long fucking day for you, hasn't it. Maybe even a long fucking year!"

Levi slams his foot on the break as we pull into a park, where he sharply turns to me. I instinctively move away from him, threaten by the hand that wasn't going to hit me, up but might've. Levi can probably see the fear flash though my eyes, and backs off, so he isn't looking over me.

"Don't talk when you don't understand," He says, with fire in his eyes. He gets out of the car, just as I do, in silence. As we approach the elevator, he presses the button for our floor with a mumbled, "And yes, she is."
Levi and I don't talk for the rest of the day. He spends most of it sitting in his room, probably petting the cat, and I sleep on the couch. Tears stain my face from hours of crying, whispers of, "I'm sorry, Levi," falling on deaf ears.

**Why did I lash out at him? He was hurting because he held Jean's mom in his arms, and he probably wasn't there to hold his own. Is that why? I don't know, but it's all my fault he's not talking to me.**

**He shouldn't've snapped at me, either.**

Yes, he should have. I deserve it. I run my mouth without thinking, because I'm selfish, and no matter how many times I hurt myself it'll never amount to the pain that I cause others.

Levi's bedroom door creaks open, and I wipe away the tears from my face. When we make eye contact, I can see that he's been crying.

It looks like he's cried a lot more than I have.

Levi gives me a small, fragile nod, before coming to sit beside me. He's covered in fur, and his face is puffy from tears. No... I hesitate before asking, "Did he pass away?" my voice cracking like I walked on glass when I spoke. I feel as if one wrong move on my part will shatter everything around us. I can't let that happen again. The past few hours have been hell for me, what have they been like for him?

"I feel bad for the poor thing, now," Levi says, letting out a breathless chuckle. "So many times I'd told people that it was my cat. 'My son of a bitch cat,' was the most used. Before I shut people out completely, when I'd invite friends to come over, they'd see my cat and start taunting it. I made sure to never invite them over again, and after a while, I hugged him whenever I'd done it. It was like an apology. I don't think he got what I was doing, by hugging him so tightly instead of my usual hesitant strokes, but maybe he did."

I don't understand what he's talking about. His voice cracks in and out, and tears flow freely down his face without any regard for our conversation.

He notices me confused expression, and nods slightly again. "He did. I had him since I was six years old, and I hated him. He was a bitch, really. He used to claw at my ankles, then climb up my legs with his claws out. He never let anyone touch her. But one day, he just changed. When I was about thirteen, he started letting people touch him, and by the time I was fifteen, he spent most nights in my room cuddling up to me. I kept him safe, from the people who would torment him, and he kept me safe- by providing me with something that I loved, and knew loved me."

I swallow, new tears forming in my eyes. "Levi... I'm sorry."

"Don't apologise, you didn't do it," Levi starts, swallowing thickly. "I'm sorry for lashing out at you. I'm not easily effected by things like that but... There's been a lot on my mind lately. I know that's no excuse for snapping at you back there, and I understand if you don't accept an apology, but I think I really do love you, Eren."

There's not much else I can say after that, so I remain silent. I've become good at that, over these past months; biting my tongue and keeping my business as my business. I don't want to over-speak when I don't need to. There's nothing to gain from unnecessary speaking, I've learned, only feelings of uselessness.
But, I let my mouth run again, placing an unsteady hand on Levi's shoulder. "I think I love you too."

We sit side-by-side on the couch for a few minutes, without speaking. Did I really just tell Levi that I love him? That I might love him? And... Did he really mean that he might love me too? We barely know each other. How can we love one another, if we don't know anything about the other?

I don't have time to ask, nor to answer, as Marco texts through the date and time we can come to visit Jean:

**December 25th**
**2:30pm**
**Jinae Rehabilitation Centre**
**7 Military Road, West Jinae**

**From: Marco**
**4:22pm**
He's stabilised, but only just. Apparently he overdoes pretty hard, they didn't think he would make it. Are you and Levi okay to come on Christmas Day? Ruth and I are going then, but we can organise another time for you two if you want.
- Marco

"We can go," Levi says, reading the text over my shoulder. "Unless you have plans?"

I shake my head. "We can go."

**To: Marco**
**4:23pm**
We can go, see you there

Levi avoids his bedroom for most of the evening, but I eventually convince him to call someone who can help us bury him. He calls Erwin, who arrives at the apartment with two boxes of pizza a little under a half hour later.

He greets Levi at the front door with an, "I'm sorry," and a hug. He gives me a hug too, and tells me he will see about getting me back at work sometime soon, too.

After dinner, which Levi and I barely eat, Erwin helps Levi wrap his cat, before Levi says his last goodbye's. "See you, little shit," Levi says, tearfully. "You were too good for me."

By the end of our small ceremony, even Erwin sheds a tear or two. Levi tells Erwin where he wants the cat buried - at the back of Erwin's yard, beside the roses - and gives the wrapped feline one last glance before Erwin leaves.

"Jesus," Levi sniffs, wiping his eyes. "I'm a mess now..."

I chuckle slightly. "It's okay to cry. He loved you a lot too."

As we go to bed that night, the room feels empty without Levi's nameless cat pawing at the sheets or flicking litter around the room. I make the first move to hold Levi's hand beneath the sheets, knowing full well that when we wake, there's only one day until Christmas Day; the day we'll have to see Jean's beaten figure.
"You okay?" Levi asks, gripping my hand as we walk the cracked path, conquered by weeds and moss. "I'm sure Jean won't mind if we don't go in."

"We've already driven up here, though... It'd be a waste of petrol," I say. "Unless you want to go home?"

Levi shrugs. "I do, but I want you to see your friend."

I swallow. "You can wait in the car, if you want. We shouldn't be long." Please don't wait in the car, I don't know what I'm going to see, I don't want to be alone when I see it. Him.

"It's fine."

Two days passed in the blink of an eye, and without the Christmas festivities that I'm used to, it doesn't even feel like Christmas.
Hanji had convinced Levi to put up a tree - a real one, with decorations - which did add some ambience to the apartment, but that was it. No other decorations, no carols, no sweaters. No mom.

*I used to love Christmas.*

And now, where I used to spend Christmas Day with my friends and family, I'm spending it with Jean in a rehab clinic in the Jinae mountains, and Levi, Marco, and Ruth. *Maybe we can be a small family, just for today.*

"We're here for Jean Kirschtein," Levi says, leaning against the front counter. "We're here with Ruth and Marco."

"Names?" The nurse asks, sourly.

"Eren and Levi."

The nurse directs us where to go, and we walk hand-in-hand towards the lunch room. There, we can see Ruth and Marco, sitting with a skeleton clutching onto an eggnog like it will sprout wings.

"Jean?" I choke, releasing my hand from Levi's grasp to approach him.

He looks up weakly, cheeks sunken in and eyes blearily. "Hey," He says, voice cracking.

"Eren, Levi, you made it," Ruth coos, standing to hug us both. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas," We say in unison, as does Marco. "How are you?" I ask Jean, sitting down beside him. Ruth looks as though she saw a ghost, watching me place an arm around Jean to hug him.

Jean looks as though he might cry as I do so. "F-Fine... Better now, I guess. I thought I'd be spending Christmas by myself, to be honest," He chuckles weakly.

Levi takes a seat beside Marco, pale faced and shaking, and I realise now that maybe they're afraid to sit beside Jean. Is Levi really scared of Jean? He's not that scary. He's still... Jean. He's just in a bad place right now.

"How've you been?" Jean asks, slightly leaning into my touch.

I shrug. "Good. Glad to see you standing."
Jean's smile is coy, as Ruth and Marco both agree with me. The conversation begins to pick up, and I think that maybe they were afraid of how Jean would react to questions about his feelings. I broke the ice, and now they can keep chipping away at it until someone chips too far.

We eat lunch in the dining room, surrounded by other people who have been in a similar place to Jean. Some look better, some look worse, but none of them fit the 'drug-addict' stereotype. We don't get death glares or food thrown at us. Some of them say hello to Jean, then stop to have a conversation with us. Some start to sing carols, and others complain about not being able to do drugs with their rehab family, to which the majority of the room raises their glasses to.

"Well, this is... Fun," Ruth says, looking less than happy about the environment.

"They're nice people, mom. They're just broken," Jean says, taking a sip from his glass. Marco and I both nod, then continue asking Jean about when he'll be out etcetera.

Levi doesn't say anything. And when four of the rehab patients suggest joining the tables together to make it feel like a family banquet, and the tables start coming closer, Levi's eyes widen and he stands, moving out of the way.

"Sorry, sorry- I'm gonna go. Good luck, Jean, you'll be f-fine," He stammers, his legs quivering as he tries to escape the crowd.

"Levi, where are you going?" I call to him, ignoring the people surrounding our table.

"It's fine, it's fine. You stay, it's fine- I'm fine!"

He runs out of the dining room, and from the window we can see him heading down the cracked path to the carpark. "Is he okay?" Jean asks, though a mouthful of pudding. "Bit rude to just leave like that."

"Jean!" Ruth chides.

"He seemed pretty freaked out. Has he been in rehab before, or something?" Marco asks, and that metaphorical lightbulb sparks to life.

"I don't... Jean, I'm going to have to go. Can I call you sometime?" I ask, already pushing past the rows of tables and chairs.

Jean nods hurriedly. "Yeah, just give them your name, I'll tell them who you are later. Hope your boyfriend's okay."

I don't deny it, and I hug Marco and Ruth on the way out, sprinting out of the holding towards the carpark. "Levi!" I call out, seeing him staring blankly at the steering wheel of the car. I get into the passenger's side, and Levi starts the car almost immediately. "Are you okay? What happened back there?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "It's fine, it's fine, it's fine."

I don't want to start another fight. I stay silent the entire drive home, and as it starts to get dark, I feel melancholic. Isn't there anything I can say to him?

As we walk into the apartment, I take Levi's shaking hands in mine and pull him closer to me. "Levi, it's okay," I say. His eyes dart from one part of my body to my eyes, and then he leans in.

Our lips meet, his hands tangling up into my hair. "Eren... I'm sorry," Levi says, pressing a kiss to
My jaw.

We're moving towards his bedroom, and I hit my elbow on the wall. We both chuckle briefly, and Levi apologises yet again, rubbing his palms up my arms. I chuckle lightly, revealing in the feeling of his eyelashes dancing along my skin. "It's okay... It's okay."

Our kisses become heated, and as Levi pushes me back onto his bed his eyes become predatory; hungry. He crawls between my legs and places a bold hand between them, rubbing at my swelling erection. I moan, throwing my head back and exposing my neck to him. I've never experienced pleasure like this. I'm not even sure I've got control of my responses now. He latches his lips onto my neck, nibbling and mouthing at the skin in rough kisses down to my clavicle, and his teasing ministrations on my clothed dick don't stop. He rubs harder, faster, before taking his hand away to help pull my shirt over my head.

The loss of contact is numbing, and I miss his hands placement, but I sit up to help him get my shirt off. My mind is suddenly hazy, but not from the pleasure. I see the hack marks on my arms, in hap-hazardous rows of crusty, dried blood; pale pink to white lines; scabs, bruises; pain. I don't look at Levi, only at the mistakes written all over my body. My eyes are wide and my stomach drops. I'm suddenly light headed and scared.

I can't take my pants off. He'll see those too. Fuck, I'm such a fuck up. He'll never want to see me again! Never!

He's looking at the cuts on my forearms, and the hungry look in his eyes has passed. "Eren..." He whispers. "Fuck! I've fucked everything up! For myself, for Levi, probably for Jean too. I'm a goddamn life ruiner." He leans forward and straddles me, placing the softest of kisses on my lips, only a flutter of his own touching mine. I'm shocked, and I barely kiss back. He's slower now, and careful, rubbing my bare stomach and peppering small kisses along my jawline.

"Fuck, you're gorgeous," He whispers into the crook of my neck, mouthing the sensitive skin there, his teeth grazing slightly. I let out a breathy moan, even as he starts to travel down my shoulder and my biceps, kissing lightly towards my left forearm. He stops at the crook of my arm, and lifts his eyes to stare intensely, before placing a kiss on one of the fresher cuts on my upper forearm.

I whimper, tears threatening to spill from my eyes. "Please, don't do that."

"Eren," He says, before moving across my body and ignoring the rest of my arm. "You're so beautiful." Another kiss, slightly below my nipple. He moves across my chest, midway until he starts to move down again. He moves his right hand back to my forgotten erection, staring to rub at it again.

"I want you to feel good, Eren," He whispers, his voice husky. "I want to help you feel good." He presses his lips firmly to the base of my abdomen, sliding his hands up my thighs and hooking his slim, pale fingers in the waistband of my jeans, starting to pull them down.

"W-wait!" I cry, and Levi softens his hands immediately, taking them away from my body to rest on his own thighs. He looks at me with softer, caring eyes. There's no judgement in them, or fear, like I'd thought.

Tenderly, he asks, "Do you want me to stop?"

I swallow thickly. "I'm letting these fucking marks run my life. I can't even have a nice night without thinking about those fucking scars or hurting myself again! I can't even spend time with someone who clearly needs a friend without thinking about myself! "I'm sorry...I just-..." I choke, my words
lost in a dark void clouding my mind.

"Eren," Levi begins, sitting back on his heels and rubbing my thighs softly. "You don't need to apologise. You're staying here, and I promised I would take care of you. I won't do anything you feel uncomfortable with, and that's a promise." He says with a pause, then he asks, "Do you believe me?"

"O-of course! I didn't mean it like that I- I just...I'm..."

He gets off of me, and I sit up. I've scared him off, I know it... Levi motions for me to lean against the headboard of his bed, as he places pillows for us to lean against. I follow, and lie down beside him, painfully aware of every cut, burn, bruise and flaw on my body. Levi doesn't seem to notice, though. He takes my hand in his and sighs, staring up at the ceiling. I want to cry, but Levi starts to speak, softly and carefully.

"I didn't want to make this night about me, but I want to tell you that I'm not the person I make myself out to be either, you know," He starts, and I internally nod.

"It's not something I've told many people, nor do I plan to tell anyone else but you and Hanji." He takes a deep breath, then bites his lip as if bracing himself. "I watched my mom get raped and killed by my uncle when I was nine... I couldn't escape - he was all I had left, after Uncle Kenny went missing. For three years he abused me, and injected drugs into my system when he needed to try out a new concoction. Drunk or under the influence or not, I didn't care, he hurt me and I needed a way out."

I keep my eyes in front of me, and avoid eye contact with my self-inflicted wounds or with Levi. I don't want to cry. And I don't want to fuck up whatever kind of story he's sharing with me. He doesn't talk about himself much, I can't fuck this up.

"I couldn't, though. He made sure to pick me up and drop me off to school everyday. I can't count with both hands how many days I spent locked up in a bathroom cubicle to avoid people's questions and stares about the bruises on my body and blood on the back of my uniform pants. There's only so much you can hide..." He pauses briefly, and I feel him coaxing himself on.

My eyes widen, and the tears I try to hard to conceal are getting harder and harder to keep in. "Levi, you don't have to-

Levi nods carefully. "I don't have to, I know, I want to. I don't think you trust me fully, and I want you to be able to. I've never needed anyone's approval until now. No- I don't need it, I want it. I want you to be able to rely on me," He speaks, softly. "It's just hard to speak about some things, especially when you haven't even taken a moment on your own to think about them."

I feel numb, and I know he hasn't even finished yet. How did I not notice there was something off with him? He could read and understand my thoughts too easily... I didn't even pick up on it. Am I really that dense?

"I remember it clearly, I'd written it down for safekeeping. On June 1st, three years after he'd done what he did to my mother, he left for two weeks to go on a gambling spree in Vegas with a few of his friends. I got two weeks of relief; I told myself I could heal in those weeks, that I could breath and walk freely on my own two feet. I walked to school most days, and my friend Farlan drove me home afterwards. I felt free, like a new person, almost. I showed up to classes even, and was told that it was nice to see me smiling - even by people I don't recall ever meeting. But, it didn't last. He came home a week early and found me and Farlan eating takeout in the living room. He hated people eating in the living room, he said it made too much mess. He hated mess..."
My mouth opens to shape an 'o,' realising why he'd tensed when I asked him why he was so uptight about cleaning. *Fuck, I need to think before I speak.*

"He yelled at me, and slapped me across the face, before kicking me to the ground. Farlan tried to get him away from me, but it only made him angrier. Farlan left - he didn't call the cops, he didn't even speak to me for weeks. I spent that night and the following week bruised, beaten and bleeding on the kitchen floor. He didn't let me up to my room, and even w-watched as I went to the bathroom." Levi started to stutter, and his voice, though barely noticeable, started to waver.

"I had no space, no privacy - he was perverted, and watched my every move. I can still see him playing with himself watching me do homework, or cook dinner... Being one of the youngest in my grade, everyone was getting their licences and finding work, but I had another full year to go before I could get my license, and he wouldn't let me get a job. So, I needed something to take up my time away from home, something he would approve of."

"I joined the fight club. Or so he thought. I was too weak to fight at the time, so I faked it, and spent every night at the park for as long as I could. Even in winter, I stayed out there, in nothing but the small shorts and tank top offered for fight club. After three cases of untreated pneumonia, and I nearly died, I decided to find somewhere else to find solitude. I don't know what bought me to do it, but... I went to the bar. Farlan had told me he went there and drank with his friends sometimes, but I'd never gone. A sixteen year old allowed to drink? Yeah right. Well, it was right. At this particular bar, they serve anyone with a real-enough I.D. I got drunk, and started relying on it. Uncle G didn't notice, but I did. It lessened the pain, even just a little."

*I want to say something, to tell him that it's okay now and that he doesn't need to be afraid but- I'm afraid. How could I lie to him like that? He's not okay, yet he says he is. I'm not okay, yet I say I am.

How does he not know how strong he is? I could never tell anyone this stuff if it had happened to me.*

Levi sighs, moving the pillow behind him around to rest his neck back on it. Before he starts to speak again, he grips my hand just a little tighter. "At seventeen, I was too far gone to stop. I'd dropped out of school, and began avoiding home all together. God knows why I didn't sooner, but I guess a part of me almost felt bad for leaving him alone. Call it cowardice, but I couldn't stand on my own. I spent most days, and nights, at the bar, or the liquor store, or sitting at the park. Wherever it was, you could guarantee I had a drink or a smoke or a drug with me. I shook without them; my crutches. But somehow, it wasn't enough..."

I squeeze his hand lightly, to convince him to go on. He gives me a brief and fleeting smile before continuing. "No hangover could amount to the emotional pain I suffered everyday I was alive back then. I craved the release of forgetting who and where I was for a while... I turned to heroin. It made me feel alive, even as it was slowly killing me. I became 'that guy,' the one sitting at the subway station surrounded by bottles of booze and used needles, asking people if they had a cigarette to spare. I was filthy, I was homeless, and I was wrecked. With the money my uncle had inherited, I didn't need to worry about running out of crutches, so I abused that power and bought and used whenever I felt like it. Which was always."

"One day though, my supplier, a girl named Isabel, sold me pot instead of heroin. In my drunker state, I believed her that it was 'smoke-able heroin' and I smoked it back at my little corner by the subway. That stoned adventure took me to the chemist, and-" He stops himself, and looks me in the eyes. Something has changed. Somewhere, his eyes that were softer and compassionate, look empty. It's the first time I've looked at his eyes the whole time he's been speaking. I know he's thinking about what to say, how to censor what he's about to say. I know, Levi. I know.
"You don't...have to keep going, if you can't..." I say. Please keep going, though, please tell me everything. Please know that you can trust me. I want you to be able to trust me.

"N-no, I will, I just-" He takes his hand away from mine and starts to roll up his sleeves, and when my eyes lie on the faded white and pink lines marking his forearms and the scabs and needle marks adorning his biceps, I realise why he didn't want to go on. He knows even more than I thought...

"I went to the chemist and bought everything I could that might just kill me. They didn't ask questions, even when I handed them copious amounts of over-the-counter pain killers, a bottle of detergent, and a box of blades. Maybe I didn't look as bad as I thought I did, I remember thinking. That's bullshit though, I looked like a hobo. And I pretty much was. I went home that night too, and went through my regular ordeals with my uncle, then went to bed without showering. I popped the pills, and without even thinking started my newest and final method of self-destruction. I won't go into details, but it provided the relief that I had sought for so long. I almost drank the detergent too, which probably would've killed me, but loosing so much blood in one go knocked me out."

"I'd had drugs in my system since I was nine, and started self harming when I was sixteen. All up, that's more or less ten years of slowly destroying myself one pill, pint, syringe and cut at a time.."

I had nothing to say, or to offer, as Levi's voice fades from the atmosphere. I couldn't consult him, I can't even help myself. But his choice of wording... more or less nine years. If we had gone further, would he have actually taken off all of his clothes?

I swallow. "Levi... I had no idea..."

"I know. I didn't want you to have any idea, to be honest, but it kind of feels better to have it out in the open. I'm sorry you had to listen to that - I'm sure it's made you uncomfortable."

"N-not at all, I'm glad that you told me... I hope this means you can trust me?" I whisper, shakily, thinking carefully of how to speak without crying.

Levi nods. "I do trust you."

I clear my throat. Should I ask if he's stopped? No... He's careful with his words so he doesn't hurt me, I have to be careful with mine. "C-can I ask, how did you get over it?"

Levi swallows thickly. "Unbeknownst to me, Isabel, my supplier, was Farlan's girlfriend. He mentioned me, and she told him how much I'd purchased. Through mutual friends, I met Hanji, who basically became friends with me when Farlan and Isabel invited me to lunch with them. I would've declined, but knowing Isabel would be there, I thought I might get lucky. I didn't. She and Farlan had told Hanji what they suspected, and Hanji being Hanji removed me from my home environment very quickly. I stayed with her up until late last year, and she kept me clean from everything, even when I got violent."

"Through her, I met Mike and Nanaba, and we've all become quite close. Although it gets annoying, Hanji is always quick to notice me on an off day, and she's always there when I need someone..." He slows himself, but asks in a tentative tone, "Eren... I want to be that person for you, if you'll let me."

I sigh and whisper aloud. "I knew you knew..." Then, I change position to be looking him right in the eyes, tears threatening to stain my face. "Levi, if you want to be that person for me, you need to know that I know how fucking difficult I am. I have to live with me. I'm not sure you want to take on all of this. I can't even handle it - you don't want to commit to something like this. If I became a burden to you, I'd never forgive myself."
Levi shakes his head slowly. "You won't know if you're a burden to me or not until we try anything. I don't want to pressure you, but I know exactly what a burden is, and I know now that it is possible to fix yourself. You just need to be willing to try."

"That's the thing..." I start, voice wavering slightly. "I'm not sure I want to be fixed, Levi."

There's a heavy silence between us, and Levi takes to staring at nothing in particular again, sighing lightly through his nose. I can't tell if I've offended him or not, but it had to be said. I've not once been honest about how I'm really feeling until now, and I guess if he wants honestly, I'll give it to him.

If he wants to know just how badly I want to die, I'll tell him. If he wants to know just how badly I want to slice vertically into my veins and have my last ever sight be blood spilling from my own ruptured vein, then I'll describe it to him.

What's been hard for him and what's been hard for me are nothing to compare to each other, but both situations are hard, and I don't care if he thinks I'm selfish for still wanting to hurt myself even after hearing his story. He said almost nine years, give or take, for all I know he might still get high on crack or something!

How can I know he's being honest about helping me help myself? I don't want to be lied to and beaten down again...

"There isn't a day I don't think about it, you know," Levi sighs, gazing blankly out the fogged up window and breaking the silence.

I want to pretend I don't know what he's talking about - I want him to say 'oh, don't worry,' and let the conversation move on. But I know exactly what he's talking about, and I know that once Levi starts a conversation like this, it has to be spoken about. When a closed book lets you peak at its cover, you feel special. But when a closed book gives you a taste of a chapter or two, you just can't put it down.

"Really..." I say, staring off in the same direction as him. Maybe he will stop for now. But do I really want him to? I'm so confused by everything, my thought process isn't even lining up.

Am I really going insane now?

"There'll be a song on the radio or my iPod, a particular colour or sound, even a few words in the same sentence - it's just little things, mostly, but they all bring back that same feeling."

"What is it?" I ask. "How can you describe it with just those things?"

Levi shrugs. "In times of need, I turned to that. And then, I felt even shittier afterwards, so I'd shove on my headphones or paint something. Now, when one of the songs I'd have playing back then comes on, or even when I walk into the studio, I'll be taken back to that same feeling of want."

I take a deep breath, understanding what he's feeling. That sensation that makes us want that image on our skin; that need to have something burning or slicing through our bodies so we can make up for the pain in our heads.

Closing and opening my eyes slowly, I turn to face him. "Levi... I need to know. Have you-

"Stopped?" Levi cuts in, looking only ahead of him. "Not entirely."
Like You've Never Felt

Scars; both emotionally and physically, many of them fade, but the memories stay behind. Those will never leave you. A glimpse of a single scar can take you back to a time or place when you felt utterly hopeless. Or at the very least, more hopeless than it is now.

They're also a constant reminder of who you were, and how much you've changed, which is why I don't quite mind seeing them in the right light.

But when I'm standing naked in the bedroom, looking at every mark I've ever carved into my own body, I feel sick. After everything Levi had told me last night, I couldn't sleep. I stayed up most of the night, contemplating where I was heading in life, of if I was even headed anywhere.

As I gave him a single parting kiss as he left for work, he'd asked if I was okay to stay home alone, and I told him yes. But I'd lied.

I'm not okay. I'd pretended to be, all my fucking life I've pretended to be okay, but I'm not; I never was. Why couldn't anyone else see that? I hoLe one of my blades shakily between my fingertips, willing myself to get it all over and done with; to end my life and never have to cause worry or pain to anyone else.

I curse myself aloud, shaking my head at the disgusting creature in front of me; the one I can't see in a mirror. Why should I stay alive? Levi knows everything I didn't want him to know. I know everything about him. What's the point? My only form of relief is going to be taken away from me, I know it, even though Levi hasn't stopped. Where does he keep his blades? Was he even talking about blades, or did he mean drugs? Where does he keep those? Maybe I could die that way.

Perhaps Jean has the right idea. Pretend to be okay, just as I am, and then give up once and for all. But Jean is weak. He gave up on giving up, and now he's stuck in some hospital up in the mountains. Who wants a life like that? Constant monitoring, food regulations, therapy sessions.

I shake my head, tracing faint lines along my body with the shining blade, tempting myself to puncture goose-bumped skin. We're all so fucked up. Every single one of us. There isn't a person in this world who hasn't felt alone, or lost, or absolutely fucked in the head - but why do we have to feel this way?

I don't want to feel like this. I don't like feeling broken, and useless, and worthless. I'd rather not feel anything at all.

I dare myself to take the blade away from my skin; to throw it off of the balcony and pull myself together; to go back to the way I used to feel as a child. But even still, I can't remember how I felt as a child. I can't remember what it was like, not to have a care in the world, or to have to worry about existentialist thoughts.

Who held me high above their heads and whizzed me around the room like an aeroplane? Who took me to theme parks? How many times did I clutch my stomach, or cup a hand over my mouth, to subdue uncontrollable laughter?

Have I ever truly been happy?

I give in.

I give in and drag the blade swiftly across the skin of my thigh, watching the blood rise to the surface.
of the incision. It's deep, but I know can go deeper. I know that I can reach the thicker layers of skin and sever them without caution.

The glass cuts on my forearm are wholehearted proof of that.

Falling to my knees, I slice across both of my thighs, wincing in pain as the blade drags over old scars, reopening the wounds and resurfacing blood faster. My mind goes blank, hands working of their own accord to open my flesh and revel in the stinging, soothing pain of release.

I'd missed this feeling of complete, utter control. That night at the lookout, I'd lost myself to the monster inside me, and there wasn't anything I could have done to stop it. But right now? This picture-perfect image of self-control? This is where I find solace during even the darkest of days.

Having control over at least one aspect of my life is all I want. To know that this doesn't ever have to change brings me a lulled sense of sadistic peace.

Even thinking of Levi doesn't stop me; his words, his touch, none of it. No number of kisses and comforting words can stop me from hating myself.

Love isn't a cure, it's an anaesthetic.

Broken people aren't put back together with love, it's just a temporary drug. It's like scrambling the pieces of a puzzle and expecting your neighbour to put it back together, when you're the one who took it out in the first place.

No one needs to put your puzzle together. The only person who can really do it, is yourself - but you gave up that puzzle the moment it looked too hard. And eventually, friends and lovers will see that it's too hard a puzzle to put together anyway, and they'll walk away, leaving you to put it together, or put it away.

My puzzle is too hard to complete. Whilst I thought it was in its box put together, it's been unmade for years - I was just so blinded by the packaging that I didn't bother to look inside to find out.

Staring at the fresh cuts on my skin, Levi's face is in my mind, I can't help but let out a dry chuckle, shaking my head at the image in front of me. What would he say? If he saw what I've just done to myself, after everything he spoke about last night, what would he say?

He would ask me how I am, and I'd honestly be able to tell him that I have no fucking idea anymore.

I can't explain a thing - not a single thought. I don't know what I'm feeling anymore, but I'm feeling something. There's so many something's in my mind that I'm numb. I can't bring myself to cry or to punch things, all I can do is stare off into space and hope I start to feel again.

I want to kill myself and be over with this fucking suffering, but I'm too scared to try it. I know that I will kill myself if I try, and that's what scares me. I want to kill myself, but I don't want to die.

But which part of me am I trying to kill? There's some monster inside of me that I've unleashed over these past few months, but its weakest point just happens to be my own fucked-up mind.

I stare at myself in the mirror, cowering in the bedroom; a bloody, sobbing, cut up mess. "I'm so fucking damaged," I whisper, sighing into my shaking hands.

The house phone rings as I aim to gather my composure, and once I've dressed myself in the loosest, longest clothing I can find, I walk numbly to the answering machine, pressing the flashing red button.
Levi's voice rings out in the empty apartment: 'You've called the Ackerman residence, leave your name at the tone and I'll try to get back to you.'

Beep.

'Levi! Happy Birthday for yesterday! I tried to get you on your mobile, but Christmas drinks got wild and I completely forgot to send the text!' Hanji chuckles, voice slightly muffled by the dull thud of music in the background. 'Anyways, we need to catch up sometime, I miss hanging out with you. Hope you had a great day - I left you a gift in your P.O box. Bye!'

My stomach empties. Did he miss out on Christmas drinks because of me? On a proper birthday celebration because of me? It sounds like an annual thing... And I made it so he didn't go. Me and my selfish fucking needs.

He didn't even tell me it was his birthday... Should I have known that? Has he told me that before? God... I hate myself.

-X-

I shake my head, biting my lip in a sorry attempt to keep my mouth shut. Levi's still in his work clothes, without shoes, and smells of oil and dressings. He rejoins me in the kitchen after he's been to the bathroom, leaning against the wall with a sigh.

"It's not that important," Levi repeats. "I didn't mind not going this year, I'm not too fond of the new guy at work, so it's-"

"'No big deal'? I question. "It's not like the day you were born is a big deal anyway, is it?"

With Levi standing in the kitchen, and me leaning against the back of the couch, there's an unnerving distance between us. I feel like he knows what I've done, but I also feel like I'm just being paranoid. What I do know, is that we're probably going to get into another argument. And once again, it's going to be entirely my fault.

Levi's eyes widen slightly, and before he can form words from his gaping mouth, I play the message Hanji had left for him. His stance changes immediately, as he admits defeat.

His shoulders slack, and he lets out a long breath, closing his eyes momentarily. "No, it's not that big of a deal," Levi says, as Hanji's voicemail ends. "You get a birthday every year until you die, what's missing out on one celebration to spend time with someone I like?"

I shake my head. "No. Don't use that line, please. You have plenty of other people that you like, I'm not some exception or excuse to miss out on seeing them."

Levi smiles slightly. "But you are. See, I don't like them the way I like you."

My gut plummets. Why does he do this? Why does he think it's okay to use that notion on me when we're probably about to have another argument? Through gritted teeth I whisper, "Don't say that."

It is only me trying to have an argument? To start a fight and force him to get rid of me?

Levi cocks his head, approaching me to place his firm hands on my shoulder. "Why not? It's true," He starts, but then his grip softens. His eyes search frantically through mine for something, and then he takes two steps back. "Have I overstepped my boundaries?"
My stuttered breath doesn't help the situation, as Levi cards his hands through his hair. "I'm sorry, Eren. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. I thought- I thought that night, you'd..."

"What?" I ask, uncertainty bubbling through my chest.

Levi shakes his head. "I don't know. Maybe we both meant or... or needed different things. I'm sorry, if I misinterpreted what you said."

"No! No, Levi, I did mean what I said, I promise," I say. My heart thunders against my chest, heaving itself up into my throat, threatening to catch there and choke me. "I just... I'm scared. I'm fucking scared of this."

Levi's face asks a barrage of questions. What? Why? Are you okay? How can I help? He lifts an eyebrow and thinks for a few brief moments, before taking two daring steps towards me. "Just?" He presses.

I shrug, shaking my head subconsciously. "I'm just..."

My phone rings loudly from across the room, and my fight or flight responses kick in, sending me near sprinting across the room to answer, instead of facing my internal demons yet again.

I'm scared, Levi. I'm so fucking scared and I'm sorry. "Hello?" I answer, trying to regulate my breathing.

It's Mikasa. 'Eren... Can I see you today? She sniffs, voice dry from what sounds like a night of tears and breathy sobbing. I would know.

"Mikasa? What's wrong?" I ask. Levi moves behind me, approaching the counter to sip at his glass of water. His face looks worn, almost old for his time. Have I done that to him?

She sighs. 'It's- Um... It's just, something's happened and... I could just really do with seeing you right now. Are you free today? Should I call again later? Mikasa's voice is almost pleading, and even if I didn't know she was such a strong woman who valued her composure, I probably wouldn't have disregarded it anyway.

I shake my head into the receiver, sending Levi's disheartened figure a sideways glance. "No, I'm free. Where do you wanna meet?"

She swallows. 'Could you come to the apartment? Our- Annie's apartment.'

"I'll be there as soon as I can," I say promptly. "Do you need me to get you anything on the way? Aspirin? Chocolate?"

Mikasa lets out a forced chuckle. "Chocolate would be nice."

I tell her I love her, then hang up, after making sure she's okay to wait for me to get there. She tells me Annie had gone to work, and she'd been fine for most of the morning, so a half hour or so would kill her. I'm glad she doesn't have my genes, because it probably would have.

"Everything okay?" Levi asks, lifting his head slowly from his glass.

I shrug, shaking my head slightly towards the carpet. "My sister's upset. She doesn't usually call for help unless it's urgent, so I'm going to her apartment to see her."

Levi nods, pondering for a moment. "Do you need a lift?"
I feel like he makes it sound like a task, something he doesn't want to be doing but doesn't give himself the option to say no. But, I nod anyway. "That'd be nice. Thanks, Levi."

*What do I have against him all of a sudden?* He goes to grab his car keys as I put on a pair of shoes, found against the couch. I don't bother changing out of the clothes I've worn for the past three days already, and Levi doesn't even put shoes on his feet. We leave the apartment in silence, and as I stare at the back of Levi's shoes, I begin to think - for me, this is never a good sign.

"Can we stop my the store, too?" I ask cautiously, walking a few paces behind Levi. "I'm going to bring her some chocolate."

Levi nods twice, yet continues on without another word. *Am I the one being cold, or is it Levi? The both of us, maybe? God, if he's going to take everything I say to heart then he may as well forget this - whatever this is.*

*What are we? We nearly had sex a few days ago, he tells me about his horrible past, seemingly expecting nothing in return, shows me his scars, sees my own, and yet we don't talk about any of it? He's tried, sure, but it's never insistent.*

*If he tries to talk to me about it, does he know that I'll force him to do as I do? 'Not exactly...' He'd said. What does that even mean? I've 'not exactly' stopped too, but only because the bastards got his eyes on me 24/7, and I feel like a complete and utter failure for even thinking about hurting myself let alone doing it.*

*What the fuck is wrong with me?*

*I want help, then I don't. I feel ashamed, but I need to do it again. I hate Levi for unknowingly keeping me alive... But I love him for that very reason, and so much more.*

*What am I even thinking?*

The parking lot is virtually empty, and the remnants of some sort of party are left in the corner, where half a dozen beer bottles are scattered around a wall of vomit. "Mikasa, right?" Levi asks.

My head snaps up as Levi unlocks his car, a few spaces away from it. I hadn't even realised we'd made it this far already. He asks again, "Mikasa, she's your sister, isn't she?"

I nod once. "Yeah. We've been to her apartment before." *Not that you'd remember. You don't seem to be too fond of me right now, so why would you remember a minor detail like that?*

*In fact, why am I even still with him. So what we went to have sex? So what sometimes I feel like he may actually be telling the truth when he says he likes me? Who cares. I can't keep hurting him and expecting him not to feel hurt.*

Levi hums, getting into the drivers seat. "It's near the university, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

*What's with the small talk? What have I done now? My mind races to every corner it can reach, trying to find some flaw in how we'd spoken earlier - besides the obvious, that is. I'd been a dick.*

*I'd overreacted and Levi had overreacted, and now we're both upset and mad and probably a little more than worried. Who's fault is it? Indefinitely, mine. I didn't keep my trap shut, and now Levi finally, realises what a huge mistake he made when he said he liked me.*
Who could ever like me? This? I shake my head, accidentally grabbing Levi's attention, but he doesn't say anything.

I just want to get away and never fucking come back. I want to go and leave no traces that I ever existed behind me. To just disappear off of the face of the earth would remove me from the source of other people's pain. If I could do that, maybe I'd be a little bit fucking happier.

"You know," Levi starts. "I'm not going to push you anymore than I already have. You don't have to be afraid of me." Oh, Levi. No.

"Levi, I'm not afraid of you," I say, as we pull up at the lights. "I'm just... More afraid of myself." Fuck, I didn't mean to say that. I cough, "I mean, not r-really like that, it's just that-

"Eren." Levi places a hand on my shoulder, turning my attention to him. "Why don't you just tell the truth?"

I swallow. "It's hard."

Levi shakes his head, returning his attention to the road when the lights change. "Telling the truth is hard; its accepting the truth that's the hardest thing you can do," He says, talking a smooth turn. "But if you can accept the truth, you're one of the strongest people to ever exist."

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"What truth are you talking about?" I ask him, curiously leaning towards him. This tone, this topic - whatever it is, he's speaking from the heart. It's not everyday you get people who do that.

Levi chuckles light-heartedly. "I've made a lot of mistakes in my life. Some have been subconscious, others I've known exactly what I was doing. Do I accept it? No. I don't. I understand the truth, but I refuse to accept it, because doing that would mean that I want to grow and change. But deep down, I'm not so sure that I want to grow, or change." He takes a pause, sighing through his nose. "I'm not a strong person."

I study his face from beside him, taking in the ways his features seem to stiffen as he says that. "Really?"

"I don't know," Levi says. "I'm not sure what I want. But I do know that by not accepting the truth, I'm holding myself back."

I clear my throat. "Well... You kinda just accepted some truth then." Levi raises an eyebrows, and I continue. "You said you're not a strong person. That's acceptance of something, isn't it?"

He smirks. "I suppose you're right."

See? He's already so far ahead of me towards recovery. I have to wonder, do either of us really want to recover? I'd like to not have another reason to call myself a fuckup, but at the same time, I enjoy those times where I can let my mind relax and my hands do all the work.

I like seeing my skin torn apart. I like the burn when I shower; the purple discolouration the night after I've hacked at my skin; the itch that tells me everything is healing, just so I can go straight back to re-opening the same scars.

Why can't I live the rest of my short life feeling okay, even if I'm hurting myself in the process?

We take a left at the lights, pulling into a gas station. Levi hands me a $10 note and I buy Mikasa a
large block of plain milk chocolate. Deciding I have enough for it, I also get her a white chocolate mocha. I know she likes those.

As I approach the car, mocha and block of chocolate in hand, change jingling in the pocket of my sweatpants, I catch a glimpse of a frustrated Levi sending what seems to be a very heated text message. I don't question it when I get into the car, nor does he ask about the mocha or the change.

We drive from the gas station down the main road, then take three side streets to avoid most of the traffic pile-up. Lately, according to the radio broadcast, there've been over four road accidents in the past two weeks, and traffic build ups on every main road.

"You'd think they'd just save the roadworks for non-working days," Levi complains, frustrated when someone pulls out in front of us. We turn down the main road towards Annie's apartment building, easily taking up a parking space out the front, where Levi turns to me with seemingly saddened eyes.

"Do you want to just call me when you want to get picked up, or will you catch a bus or something?" He asks, voice sounding distant.

"Oh... Um. You can probably- probably come in," I mutter. "It's not like you haven't met them before. And Annie will probably get home while we're there, so you can hang with her if Mikasa wants privacy."

Why wouldn't he come in? It's not like he'd get kicked out. "I don't want to intrude. She seemed pretty downtrodden on the phone," Levi says, eyes frantically scanning my face for something.

I swallow. I know I can't do this alone. I love Mikasa, and seeing her in pain hurts more than any blade or self-loathing curse ever will. "Please, come up with me."

Apparently, that's all he needed to hear, because he's already unclipped the buckle on his seatbelt. "Okay. But if she needs me to leave at anytime, I'll be in the car. Alright?"

I can't imagine her telling him to leave, but I wouldn't put it past her either. I nod a few times, slowly, deciding whether or not I should actually tell him to wait in the car; at least he'd avoid getting hurt by Mikasa - but then again, I'd hurt him even more by telling him to stay. "Okay," I decide. "Let's go, then."

There's tension between us as we take the elevator up to her floor, and as we find the apartment. I know twice, and hear Mikasa's trudging footsteps. She unlocks the door, cursing when she forgets the deadbolt, stands before us in the doorframe.

She's in her pyjamas; pale blue shorts and a grey tank top. Given that it's well past midday and she's not dressed, her hair remains unbrushed, and she's not wearing any makeup, I don't need to ask her if she's really okay. She's not.

If she tries to tell me otherwise, I can call bullshit immediately.

She steps aside for us to come in, gesturing to the couch with a tired, stiff motion. "Thanks for coming, Eren," She says, voice broken and scarce. "I'd usually give notice but..."

"It's okay," I say, placing an arm around her shoulders as we walk into the living room. "I like spending time with you."

Her lower lip quivers at that, and she practically falls to the couch in tears. I let her lean into me, placing her chocolate and mocha on the coffee table. Levi mouths to me that he's going to make a coffee, and I nod, giving him the a-okay.
I can take the blame, once Mikasa comes to her senses again.

"Hey now," I whisper into her hair, stroking her back with care. "It's okay. Everything's going to be okay." I hate lying to my sister, but it's all I can say. I can't say anything else, given I don't know what's happened, but it's not like I can sit here and tell her that the world is fucked up and she's just going to have to fight it or off herself.

She leans away from me slightly, patting around the couch to find her phone. She unlocks it, already open to her Facebook, and shakily puts it in the palm of my hand. "You were right all along," She whimpers. "You, Annie, fuck- Even Jean..."

It's open on a status made by Thomas Wagner, seven hours ago.

**Thomas Wagner:** cant fucking believe it. my side bitch has aids and she didn't even tell me. what a whore. @mikasa ackerman, get your shit together. I don't ever wanna see you again.

"What the fuck," I hiss. "Is this for fucking real? He broke up with you over a Facebook status?"

She nods carefully into my chest. "He said I have AIDS, Eren. And if he-... If he has them then-... Then I might-"

"No," I cut in, pulling her up to face me. "No. Don't even talk like that. Go to the doctors, get yourself checked - you can't risk this."

She breaks into sobs again, shaking in my grip. "You don't understand, if anyone sees me out there they're going to say something! I can't do this Eren I- I can't do this... He's made it up, I know he's made it up. It's all just to get back at me for-..."

"For?" I ask, seething at Thomas' severe lack of balls. Or at the very least, the lack of balls he will have once I find him.

She sighs, wiping at her eyes with the back of her hand. "I cheated on him."

Oh. I swallow, mind reeling as to who it was that tore Mikasa from Thomas - whoever it was I would have to simultaneously thank and kill. "What? With who?"

Sniffling, she takes a deep breath and places her hands on my thighs. "Eren. I'm bisexual."


She nods, sighing, and a small smile appears on her face. "I've liked her for a while and... I guess, I-I don't know why I told Thomas but... I did. I told him that I was seeing someone else, and when I told him it was Annie, he lost his mind completely. I got out of there before things could turn ugly, but I didn't really mind."

"He'd been cheating on me with some girl for a while now, so it didn't hurt to leave." She smiles, crossing her legs over. "I'm glad I could tell you," She says. "Do you feel uncomfortable? Knowing that... Annie and I are together."

I shake my head. "Not at all. I um... I don't want to steal the spotlight but, I think I might be... Well, not bi but. I don't- I'm not sure what I am but, I do like... I do like Levi."

She smiles a little more now, although it's not as genuine as it could be. "I thought so," She mutters. "Does he make you happy?"
"He does," I say. But I'm not happy.

As the front door opens and Annie announces her arrival, Levi walks into the living room with a steaming mug of hot coffee. Nevertheless, it is a little awkward when we all stare at each other from various points in the room.

"Well," Annie, starts, a little surprised. "If I'd known we were throwing a party I would've put underwear on." Immediately, I see Levi look down, a little confused, before he takes a sip of his coffee and walks into the living room, sitting across from Mikasa and I on the other couch.

Mikasa chuckles slightly, Annie crossing through the kitchen to set down her car keys and a brown paper bag. "Sorry, Annie. I would have let you know earlier but I just... I had to see Eren."

Annie nods, her features softening at Mikasa's voice. She makes her way over to the couch, sitting on the opposite side of Mikasa, leaving Levi alone on the other couch, clearly a little uncomfortable. "That's okay," Annie says. "Does he...?"

Mikasa nods. "He does," She confirms. "I showed him what that bastard put up, and I told him."

Levi says nothing the entire time we're their, and no ether does Annie, really. We all listen to Mikasa talk about Thomas; the good times, the bad, and some that made my nails dig into my thighs as a way of keeping my anger inside of me.

She ate her chocolate, drank her lukewarm mocha, and ended the emotional release with a bone-crushing hug. One for myself, and one for Levi - who seemed to accept it, but didn't seem as comfortable as he could have been.

"Thank you for coming," Mikasa says, arm snaked around Annie's waist as they say goodbye to Levi and I from their doorframe. "And I'm sorry it wasn't for long. I just... I thought I was going to do something pretty stupid."

I swallow nervously. "It's okay. We're family, I'm always available when you need me."

We say goodbye with one last hug, then Levi and I walk down the corridor to the elevator. "Will she be okay?" He asks.

I nod, smiling slightly. "She will be. She's got Annie now." He nods knowingly, smiling ever-so-slightly, and we step into the elevator without further word.

We pass people on the ground floor of varying ages; laughing, chatting, crying, whispering, shouting. All of these people, in the one room. What have they seen?

On the way back to our apartment, we stop at the Chinese shop to order takeout. I sit in the car whilst Levi goes in, after telling him what I'd prefer to eat, and stare out at the passing traffic from the carpark.

I think about all of those people, the ones in Annie's apartment building, the ones driving their cars, the ones inside the Chinese restaurant, all out living their separate lives.

Just how many people are hurting? And how many of them have someone they can confide in? I know I have Levi, whether I want him or not, and he has me.

How many people out there have a Levi? If they can't talk about their feelings, do they destroy themselves one cut or pint at a time, just as dad and I do? Or do they pierce their skin? How many inject themselves with a whitewash of release, waking up onto to forget everything they'd done the previous night, only reminded by the littering of used needles around their bedroom floor?
Levi and I sit down in the lounge room, eating Chinese take-out whilst half paying attention to a movie on the T.V. - one that neither of us had ever seen before, but weren't really interested anyway.

He's lounging in his pyjamas, and I'm covered with a thick blanket, cold after showering for the first time in three days. As much energy as it took out of me, I'm kind of happy to be clean, even if I did have to see what I'd done to myself and regret it, stinging beneath the water temperature.

I catch Levi's gaze for the fifth time that evening, who's staring at me intently, and avert my eyes once more. Is he trying to catch my attention, or is this all just some other cliche moment we're sharing?

"You don't have to cover up, you know," Levi says, staring blankly at his mostly-untouched food. "They happen to all of us."

I swallow, gut retching. "Cover w-what?" I question. He knows, he knows, he knows. Fuck. He's seen them. I shouldn't have worn shorts. Has the blanket ridden up? This is it, it's all over.

Levi sets down his cutlery and moves closer to me, putting a tentative hand around my shoulders. "The blanket is good coverup, but you do need to clean up after yourself," He says, voice void of emotion. "I did shower first today."

The tips of my fingers go numb. "You... You saw."

He nods once. "I did," He admits. "But I'm not going to lecture you. Relapses happen to everyone, not just going through what you- we are."

When I don't say anything, Levi continues, running a soft hand through my hair. "You know, I can't quite offer you anything you haven't heard before, but I can't help you heal. You have to heal for yourself, not for others," He says, as I draw my head closer to him, resting it on his shoulder. "You have to want to help yourself, before you'll even consider accepting help offered from others."

"Is that why you haven't gotten help?" I mumble, stripped of all emotions within a short span of time

He shrugs lightly. "Probably. I've never seen the point in healing if I'm going to relapse. But... I do want to heal eventually. It's just hard to suffer and heal all by yourself."

We sit in silence, the rest of our food and the movie ignored. Rain starts to fall outside of the window, and the two of us lean against each other. Caught up in the moment, my mouth starts to run, leaving my mind in the dust to catch up at a later date.

"My dad used to hurt me when I was younger," I start, feeling almost guilty for starting this conversation with that. "No matter what I did, if it wasn't done right, it get a belting for it... Maybe that's why I-...

I sigh, Levi continuing to play with my hair. "He loved Mikasa more than he did me, and he used to love my mom a lot too. He took up drinking after loosing a close friend of his under anaesthetic. It wasn't completely his fault, but he took the whole blame, and he never went back to the way he was."
"His mood was easy to handle before he drank. But once he started, he relied on it too much. He got violent, and he hit me many times. Never Mikasa, only mom and I. And then...-

I tell Levi everything that had happened after the first time he lashed out at me, in recent times. I told him of when I kissed Jean and he saw, and when I came home from the party and he beat me, and about what he did to mom.

Within twenty minutes, everything that had caused me pain in the last two to three years, Levi knew about it. More so what had happened recently with mom and dad, but other things, like falling out of a tree when I was in tenth grade, and taking a paintball to the eye.

We laughed, we cried, and by the end of it all, I'm laying comfortably in Levi's lap, consumed by darkness. The lights and the T.V are off, and I lie on top of him beneath the blanket, ignoring the feeling of my exposed scars pressed against his own patched thighs.

Levi presses a kiss to the top of my head, stroking his thumb over my knuckles as he does so. "I want you to be happy," He whispers. "Promise me, that if I try to fix myself, you'll try too?"

I nod lightly. "We can put our pieces back together, together, can't we?"

Levi smiles against my hair, only minutes before sleep takes us away, and whispers, "We can."
There are little lies that we tell everyday; whether to ourselves or to others, they're always there, sneaking their way into conversation without our conscious sparking them a second thought. One of those lies, if not one of the worst, is I don't care.

If I'd ever said that I didn't care, to anyone, it was most likely a complete lie.

Whether it's to cover my arse or to cover a friends arse, I usually don't mean that I don't care. It's just something that happens. You have an off day, and suddenly everyone's pissing you off, so you just really don't care about anyone at all. On the outside, at least.

Of course, there are things that I really don't care about. For example, the maintenance on the highway, or the kid who got the highest grade in my final year of high school, or the two ways to solve a quadratic equation. But there are other things. Other things like what people think of me; how they perceive me, what they think about my looks and personality. And definitely how I'm seen in the eyes of others, no matter how many times I tell myself that I don't care.

Another one of the biggest lies I tell is, "I'm okay."

The thing is though, I'm not. I am not okay.

I'm not okay, and I haven't been for a long, long time. Yet, I tell people that I'm fine, I'm doing well, that I'm okay. I tell them that I'm fine, because if I said anything else, they'd ask questions. And if they ask questions, they want answers - and I'm so afraid that I'll give them answers. Then, after I tell them I'm okay, after I tell them I don't care, I'm stuck in that web of lies that aren't doing too much harm then, but could end up hurting me or someone else so much more than intended.

I'm okay, and I don't care. Kinda contradictory, huh? It never occurred to me before, just how easily these lies come out once we get so used to telling them. Even knowing this, I still lie, and I probably always will. It's just that I hadn't noticed just how much these lies are told, until I wasn't the one telling them anymore.

Levi didn't come home until 3am this morning, after staying behind at work to clean up after a break-in, covered in a layer of snow. I'd asked if he was okay, noting his near-shaking figure and shockingly fearful, blank eyes, but he insisted he was fine. Just as I'd had said to me so many times before, I told him I was glad he was okay, even though I knew wholeheartedly he wasn't telling the truth.

He was also insistent on seeing me to the door of the obnoxiously lime green building in the centre of the city two weeks later; the very building I'd tried to avoid for some time now. I tried to hide my face, tried to fight him with all of my will, but in the end, it wasn't worth it. I needed help, and what Levi could offer wouldn't be enough, no matter how much I tried to convince myself that just him loving me would be enough.

He'd told me that himself, too. When I argued that we both needed help, and I didn't want to be the only one who was seeing clearer days, he told me not to worry about him.

'I'll be fine,' He said. 'I've lived with this longer than you have. Your recovery, with the right help, should come faster than anything I can offer you alone.'

In an attempt to sway him, I'd said, 'Isn't it selfish of me not to be helping you? Don't you deserve to live out the rest of your life without pain?'
And he replied, 'It's not selfish to take care of your own needs at all. You need to learn how to appreciate yourself again, because the Eren that I see and the Eren that you see are two very different people. I want you to see the real you, Eren.' After a few moments silence, he sighed, and began speaking again. 'And we will all experience bouts of pain in our lives. I'm going to get help. Focus on helping yourself, okay? I don't think that either of our mindsets will change if we're trying to heal each other before ourselves.'

I wanted to retort in anger. Going to? He said he was going to. Yeah, sure, we all know what that means. We are all 'gonna's.' Gonna do this, gonna do that, but so we ever? Of course not.

But those words still linger in the forefront of my mind as we make up our way to the fifth floor, following the signs down the corridor, until we reach the Adolescent Mental Health Centre. In words of my own making, Absolute Hell.

I stop short of the glass door, eyes scanning the various stickers stuck in the window, all so annoyingly happy-go-lucky and positive. I swallow nervously, and Levi stands beside me, taking in my appearance. "Levi... Do I really have to do this?" I ask shakily, for at least the eighth time that day. "I know I need help but... Every time I try to talk about it, and everything else, I feel like throwing up. I don't think I'll be able to say anything that will benefit getting help..."

"I know," Levi says, a hand placed firmly in the door handle. "It's not bad to feel nervous, I know the feeling, but Mike... He knows what to say, and he can help you."

Quirking an eyebrow, I ask, "Did he help you?"

Thoughtful silence, but no answer. Levi sighs nasally, then pulls the door open for me to step inside, leaving my name at the counter. The receptionist tells us to take a seat, motioning to the couches along the green wall. Levi tells me that he won't stay, and that he'll be back in an hour to pick me up.

I sigh, knowing he's unwilling to take this conversation further, and mumble a pitiful, 'see you' as he leaves the building.

Tough shit Eren, is what I feel he says, leaving me behind to erode in my seat. You're fucked up and I know just the guy to prescribe you the right drugs to keep you from kicking your own bucket - or mine.

Mike Zacharius is a friend of Levi's - an adolescent therapist, and one of the people who supposedly helped Levi during his younger, darker days. (Which, really, weren't too long ago, and may still even be in the works. Not that he'd ever tell me that).

Should I even trust some guy who couldn't even completely help Levi? He's a friend now, not a therapist, to Levi. He can't be that good if he didn't fix him, so why even bother sending me to someone just because he's convenient?

This is probably a freebie, after all. Just someone Levi knows who's willing to run cheap mind washing sessions on me before I'm pumped full of drugs and carted off to hospital in vegetable state when I give up. I wanted to argue with him when he suggested it; tell him that I don't need a therapist, that I'm fine, and that I'm healing just fine on my own. But as if he'd believe that. We're both liars, and just as I can to him, Levi can see right through me.

Yet, I still seem to be the only one actually getting help.

Do I even want it? Not really. Do I need it? Unfortunately. Would Levi ever let me get away with not, at least, attempting to see someone for help? Of course not. I mean, Jesus, if I can understand the
The receptionist hands me a clipboard with a sheet to fill in and a pen, smiling at me with the same smile I get from everyone; the smile that sees the signs of a kid who's completely fucked in the head. I don't return it, choosing to simply fill out the form in quiet, only nodding in recognition of their presence.

It's all bullshit anyway. They've already got my date of birth, nationality, gender and sexual orientation on their records anyway, so why do they need me to write it all out again? They're in cahoots with the GP's, so I shouldn't need to do this.

I hand it back to her when I'm finished, and within two minutes, Mike steps into the waiting room and calls my name. He leads me down a long stretch of corridor, complete with colourful squared carpet and mis-matching walls, all adorned with supposedly inspirational posters and quotes.

I have to wonder, why do they even bother? No teenager who feels like killing themselves will miraculously change just because some supposedly inspirational words tell them to. It's stupid, pointless even. Aesthetic photographs don't change perspectives.

"Room 04, to your left," Mike says, with an almost soothing English accent, pointing towards the open door. "I'm just getting a tea. Do you want anything? Water? Tea? Biscuits?"

"No, thanks," I say, making my way to the room and sitting on the couch furthest from where I'm guessing Mike will sit. I grunt lightly to myself, looking around the room at the various meditation-type statuettes and posters. At least I don't have to lie down.

The room smells of various scented oils and candles, like sandalwood or oak or pine or something. It's Earthy, and relaxing, as is the meditation music playing on the speakers in the corner.

Looking around the room and immersing myself in the atmosphere, I sigh, shaking my head. Of course I got the whack-job, hippie councillor. He's not going to be able to help me, this is just an excuse to get me to meditate or some shit.

Mike enters the room and shuts the door a few moments later, sighing contently as he sits cross-legged across from me, and apologises for taking up some of the session time. I bite my tongue to keep me from telling him that I really don't care - he can take the entire session if he wants.

"So," Mike starts, setting his cup of tea down beside him. "Not living the prime of your life the way the movies show it, huh?" He gives me a questioning look, and I shrug, taking in his appearance. Slightly disheveled, a stubbly chin and upper lip, and incredibly tall. It's almost comical, seeing such a tall man sitting with his legs crossed on a single seater couch, but I don't laugh. Instead, I wish I were anywhere but here.

I snort, realising he actually wants me to answer the question. "Yeah... I guess not."

Mike smirks. "I'm not gonna try and put you off with anything too fancy or full on today, Eren, so you can relax a little. Spending the day before the New Year cramped up in a councillors office isn't exactly the dream, but I think it could be beneficial to you. At least, from a professionals perspective."

Professional? Yeah, right, the zen feel to this room says otherwise. I don't say anything, and he continues. "Can you name five reasons why you're here?" He asks, taking a small sip of tea. Droplets of the honey-coloured liquid catch on his stubbly moustache, and I'm too focused on them to give him a reply straight away.
But, he waits.

And then I feel awkward, and overly exposed, and start to fidget with my hands in my lap. I'm conscious of it, but I can't stop, now overly aware of just how alone and exposed I am. I sigh, twitching my nose slightly. Using my fingers, I begin to count. "Levi forced me here, so I had no choice; I hate myself, I hate life, I've fucked up a lot of things, and I want to die."

Mike nods, taking out his notepad and a pen. "Anything else? Maybe something to do with your quality of life?"

I take a deep breath. He's been told, obviously. Can I really trust Levi, if he's going to break my confidence like this? I know Mike is a therapist, but he didn't even ask my permission to say anything, so why the fuck does Mike know?

"I-" I hurt myself, and I just can't fucking stop, because it feels so good to feel. "No, that's about it... S-Sometimes I get really anxious, I guess, or I completely block out the world so I don't have to face anything..." A lie. Not a complete lie, but enough to get me by for today.

I can't tell him why I'm actually here, even if Levi has already told him. I mean, who hurts themselves intentionally? Who actually actively participates in self injuring that they crave it? Christ... I'm so, so fucked up. I shouldn't be here, I should be in a fucking psyche ward.

Mike hums to grasp my attention, asking curiously, "What are your thoughts right now?"

I blink out of my thoughts, unaware that I'd subconsciously been picking at a scab on my arm, making it bleed. "Nothing, just... Nothing. I'm just tired today."

"Only today?" He asks.

I shrug. "Mm. Most days... I don't get enough sleep, because I'm on Tumblr or Facebook or something." My words are almost taunting, and it's glaringly obvious that I'm poking fun at the people who, perhaps like Mike, may disagree with social media.

Who gives a shit, though, really? Just because it's not entirely true doesn't mean it didn't used to be. Though nowadays I can't sleep because my mind won't shut down long enough for me to relax.

Mike nods, jotting something down on his notepad, before sitting back comfortably in his seat. "If you wouldn't mind, what's your home life like, Eren?" He asks, reaching for his mug of tea.

I hum lightly, glancing off to the side. "What is it like there now? Is it empty? Baron? Left to rot away like any other significant building in someone's life, long forgotten? I swallow. "I don't know, I don't live there anymore."

Perhaps it's being rented out to some nice people; two loving parents, an annoying younger brother and a strong, beautiful older sister, who all love each other very much and spend holidays and weekends together at the beach or playing scrabble.

Does dad still even live there? I haven't seen or heard from him for over a month now. Maybe he's left Trost? Or if not, maybe he's just reliving the memories of our pitiful child-parenthood in that dingy little house, with nothing else to do but get drunk and angry bag himself.

"Where do you live currently?" He questions, after a few moments silence. "I don't want to scare you off so early in the sessions, but it is our duty of care to know that you're staying somewhere safe."
"With Levi," I answer, without hesitation. Though, he should already know that. *Is he asking questions, already knowing the answer, just to see if I lie or not? Surely that's not the way to build trust between us. Not that I will trust him with anything other than my obvious depression.*

He doesn't *need* to know everything. No one can save you from yourself, there's really no point in him knowing what I do to make myself feel a little better, then worse, is there?

Mike nods, once again writing on the notepad. "What was your home life like then, for you to have to move in with a friend?"

I shrug. "I guess... Hard, maybe."

"What was hard about it?"

I start to feel frustrated. *Can't he just take an answer and move on? Talking about this shit isn't going to do anything to help how I feel. It's better to just forget it and pretend that any of that stuff never happened.* "I don't- I just! It just was. Dad and I didn't get along very well... Mom was usually out working or moping around because of dad, and Mikasa could never face dad so she just stayed away from us. What more is there to say? I hated it there but-..."

But I loved it, too.

He nods, in probably forced understanding. I know he can sense my frustration - if he can't, he's probably not qualified to be in this position. "Tell me about Mikasa," Mike starts again, taking another long sip of tea. "What is she like as a sister, how or why she couldn't face your father. Is she a positive figure in your life?"

I think for a few moments, sighing aloud in thought. How can I describe Mikasa? She's just... *Her*. There isn't anything that stands out. She's my sister; she does sisterly things. She's two years older than me, but we both really only hung out in our rooms when we were home, except for mealtimes, so I don't know anything much about her.

Eventually, I shrug, leaning back a little further into the couch. "I guess... She was always in her room, but so was I. Except, once she shut that door, she wouldn't come out until morning. Even then, I didn't see her that often."

Mike hums, jotting down notes. "Could you elaborate?"

I sigh through my nostrils, closing my eyes to keep my anger at bay. "I don't know... She just, wasn't there. I mean, she was, but not really," I try. "We'd eat dinner and breakfast together, and sometimes watch movies, but I really only saw her at those times or when I said goodnight to her."

Mike starts to write again, mumbling to himself. "Okay... Go on."

"She was just... I don't know. I've never really thought about her much, in that way. We did what we did - there wasn't any need to most ourselves in each others' likes and dislikes," I say. "We never fought much, she rarely had any friends over to our house, and she stayed well away from my dad in more recent times. That's it."

"Would you mind sharing a little about your mother? Is she around much?" Mike asks. I tense, and he notices. "If you'd rather leave that for another day, the is a lot more we can talk about. I don't want you to feel uncomfortable here, Eren. This isn't somewhere you should be afraid to go."

"No it's..." It's just that I don't want to cry in front of a stranger, in front of a friend of Levi's. I don't know you; I don't know enough about me to be careful about what I say. I don't want to know my
true feelings, I feel what I fell, can't that be enough? My stomach churns. "Mom was always around, but not in the way she could have been..."

Mike nods, and I stop. Those words sound so ungrateful, actually leaving my lips. Of course, there were always times that I internally doubted her existence in my life, but I'd never done it aloud. Now I see why.

It **hurts**. It hurts to admit something like that about someone you love dearly, even when you're not wrong in thinking it. I loved mom, and I always will. Even though I sometimes doubt how much she loved me, that doesn't change the fact that she definitely did.

Yet... If she really loved me, why was she never around to show it?

We finish the session after ten more minutes, where Mike tells me the date of my next session - one weeks' time - and asks more about how I am feeling today after the first session.

I tell him that I'm fine, a little tired, but fine, and give him a weak wave and a thank you as he sees me to the waiting room. Levi is already there, holding two take-away cardboard cups of hopefully something warm. As he stands to greet me, and say hello to Mike, I give the receptionist my name, replying 'you too' when they tell me to have a good day.

Levi and I say goodbye to Mike one last time, as he calls the next fucked up patient into his office, then take the elevator down to the first floor.

"I bought you a hot chocolate," Levi says, handing it to me gingerly. "It's a bit of a blizzard out there, and I figured you'd need an energy boost after that. And to get thought this."

And he's not wrong. Outside of the building, snow blankets the earth to at least my knees, therefore a little below the hips on Levi. The automatic doors stick slightly as they open from the cold, and we walk out into the storm close together, holding our clothes close to our bodies.

I have to wonder, did Levi walked out in this, just to bring me a hot chocolate? My eyes wander down his back, waking a pace behind him, memorising his figure. His hands are nearly covered by the coat he's wearing, and it makes me wonder if he didn't accidentally pick up mine instead of his.

When I start to fall behind, Levi turns around and takes my hand. "Let's not pass out in this weather, okay? I don't think I could carry you through this snow."

I smile, chuckling lightly, and accepting his hand in mine. "I thought you were strong?" I joke, and he rolls his eyes.

"I am, the strongest. But this weather is like kryptonite for me." We make it to the carpark quickly, teeth chattering. "I guess neither of us were really dressed appropriately for this, huh?" Levi chuckles dryly.

I shake my head, getting into the passengers seat of his car. "I guess not."

*Please don't ask my anything. Please don't ask me anything. I can't stand silence but God do I not want to speak. If he speaks I might have to answer a question, and I fucking hate questions. I take my hot chocolate from Levi's hands and revel in the warmth, holding it close to my chest. "Thanks, Levi."

He smiles, starting the car and fiddling with the heater. "It's no problem. Are you up for lunch? We're not eating out, I can tell you that right now, but we can pick something up on the way."
I nod, taking a long sip of the sweet chocolate beverage. "Yeah, sure. Should we get take-out?"

"If that's what you feel like," Levi says, pulling out of the carpark and driving down the main road. Christmas music plays in the background, and Levi's fingers tap along lightly on the steering wheel, making me smile. The hard exterior he tries to fool people with slowly melts away as he gets closer to people, I've noticed. It's endearing, and pretty damn sweet.

"I feel like pizza," Levi says, breaking the silence between us at the traffic lights. "Is that okay with you, or do you want something different?"

"Pizza sounds good," I decide, already tasting the flavours on my tongue. "Where from though? I heard that place on the corner of Garrison does good stuff, but the one on the opposite end had a bad health inspection report."

Levi chuckles. "Probably. That place is gross as shit."

I hum in agreement, as we turn the corner. "I was thinking Hanji's, she does great take away pizza, and it'll be cheaper for us because she's a sucker for a sob story."

I swallow. "Me? Am I the sob story? Has he told everyone about what I do to myself, and how he thinks it's the most fucked up thins in the world, even though he's done it too? "Oh yeah? How come?"

"She just is. You know, 'two poor lost men caught in a blizzard, low on cash, desperate for nutrition.'"

I laugh. "You're right. Let's go to Hanji's."

As soon as those words have left my lips, I don't regret it. Levi's hidden smile when he's with his friends makes my heart flutter - seeing him genuinely happy makes my heart flutter. Levi asks what I want, and I tell him that I'll come in. There's no way I'm missing out on seeing Hanji and him interact, it's the greatest thing, even if I do get a little jealous.

But, when we park out the front and brace the blizzard to enter the establishment, I wished that I hadn't told Levi I wanted to come in. There, at a twelve person table in the centre of the room, sit my friends; Connie, Sasha, Ymir, Christa, Annie, Marco, and Jean. My heart skips a beat, and they don't notice me, but I stand still in horror.

Jean isn't in hospital - he's out for lunch, surrounded by alcohol, in a crowded place. Connie and Sasha aren't away, they've come back. Annie isn't with Mikasa, she's here alone.

"What's up?" Levi asks, toggling lightly on my sleeve as I stand scarily still at the entrance. His eyes follow mine, until they land on the group, and he manages to put two and two together. He swallows. "C'mon, let's order and get out of here."

I follow numbly behind him, keeping my face inched away from the table so as not to be recognised, but as we near the end of the line, I know that they're far too immersed in conversation to notice me.

"It's cool you guys could all come though, I'm glad we've got everything organised," Connie says. "But Ymir, you've gotta bring something other than UDL's, because that shit gives me crazy wind."

Ymir cackles. "Oh please, Springer. It's not UDL's that do that, it's just you."
"What about Mikasa, is she still bringing snacks?" Christa asks, leaning forward excitedly.

"Yeah, she and Reiner are bringing potato chips and soft drink, and Bertholdt has a few cartons of cheap beer from his father," Annie says, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

"Great! Looks like food is covered then, if this pizza stays long enough in the fridge," Sasha says. "I hope y'all don't mind cold pizza, otherwise we're gonna have an issue."

Marco shakes his head. "It's fine, Sash. Pizza is pizza, I don't think we have any complaints." The group laugh and cheer amongst themselves, and I feel sick to my stomach. Then, Jean speaks up, and I may as well just curl up and die on the spot.

"What about Eren? What's he bringing?" Jean asks, holding tightly onto his glass of water, knuckles white. He looks too sick to be here.

"We forgot to invite him, so don't you shits go putting this on Facebook or anything, or I'll kill ya," Ymir grunts, slamming her fist on the table.

Jean sits back in his seat, almost uncomfortably. "It's not too late to invite him, is it? I mean, Mikasa's going, shouldn't he be there too? Fuck, I'm going. There's no way we can have a New Years party without him. It's the start of a new era or some shit, shouldn't he be there to celebrate with us?"

I don't hear the rest. I'm bitterly grateful for Jean's words, but I can't stand to listen any longer, out of fear that I will hear the truth about why I wasn't invited. Levi places his hand on the small of my back, knowingly searching for the hurt in my eyes, as he guides me out of Hanji's. I don't look back to see if they notice me or not, and I sure as hell don't make myself known.

They forgot about me. From the words of one of my longest ever friends, I'd been forgotten. Jean had asked why, and they told him they'd forgotten to invite me.

Am I that fucking unimportant?

Levi links his arm with mine, a large pizza tucked beneath his other arm, as we cross the street. The storm is worsening, but everything surrounding the two of us is a blur to me. As we both get into the car, and Levi hands me the pizza to place on my lap, I feel myself shut down.

I feel my mind disconnect from my brain, as a total separate entity. I'm still breathing and pumping blood around my body, but my mind stops thinking. I immerse myself in the numbing silence my head provides, and stare ahead the entire trip home.

Levi doesn't speak to me, and I'm not entirely sure if he can tell that I've shut down, but I don't care. In this moment, I no longer care, and I no longer feel.

I'm a shell of a human being that once was, now only serving as a ship to move the void inside of my head from point A to point B, without sparing a single thought o my surroundings.

As we pull into the carpark of the apartment building, and find Levi's reserved space, he turns to me. I don't have to look to see the pity in his eyes - I can hear it in his voice. "Eren-..."

I shake my head slowly. "Don't. Don't say anything."
I get out of the car, leaving the pizza on the car seat, and take the stairs up to the apartment. It's three flights, but I don't care. At the first flight, I cry, at the second, I scream, and by the third, I've wiped away enough of my tears that I just look unhealthily unfit.

It takes a few moments for the elevator to chime, and Levi steps out with the pizza in his hand, and a sunken expression. He doesn't say anything to me as he unlocks the apartment, nor as he serves the pizza and hands my a few slices. I leave them on the plate, taking only a few bites of one slice, before I give up.

It's no use. It's not like it's going towards anything useful, anyway.

I sleep for most of the day, curled up on the couch staring blankly at the empty space in front of me until I drift out of consciousness. It's a light sleep, and completely unsatisfying, yet exactly what I need.

I hear Levi moving about the house, and I catch his footsteps drawing closer every so often, but never close enough for me to realise what or who he is looking at. Once my faux sleep stops feeling good I sit up, tuning in to the sounds of the apartment; the shower running, the low hum of the heater and refrigerator, somewhere a radio.

I can also hear the storm raging outside, heavy winds threatening to shatter the glass of the windows and balcony door.

Levi appears around fifteen minutes later, half dressed. Just by the way he's walking, and only wearing dress pants, I know that the news I'm about to hear won't be good. He sits beside me, and places his hand on my thigh. "How are you feeling?" He asks, lightly rubbing his thumb in tiny circles.

"Fine," I start. "... Sorry for getting angry with you before. I was just-..."

Levi shakes his head. "You don't have to apologise for feelings, Eren. It happens to the best of us."

Silence, then I decide to jump right into the deep end, without knowing how to swim. "Why are you all dressed up?" I ask, looking down at his suit pants and bare chest.

He sighs. "I... I was invited out with Hanji and Erwin for a New Years celebration dinner," He says. I roll my eyes. Of course, another fucking one I wasn't invited to. "But," Levi continues, "I probably won't go."

I raise an eyebrow at him. "What? Why not?"

"I would rather celebrate the New Year with you," He says. "It's too crowded at those bars at this time of the year, besides, I'm sure-"

"No."

"What?"

I shake my head, slowly, then fast. "No. I'm not letting you miss out on this just because of me. Go,
be with your friends Levi. I'm fine here."

"You're going to spend New Years alone?" He questions.

*Fucking obviously.* "Yeah. It's not that special, anyway. And I can see the fireworks from here anyway, I guess. It's not like I'm missing out on anything."

Levi draws in a deep breath, then places both hands on my knees, making me face him. "Eren, don't say anything that you don't mean, or might regret in the future. Do you really want to spend New Years Eve alone, in this dingy little apartment, knowing that you didn't have to? You could even come with me, I'm sure that Hanji would love to."

"I wasn't invited," I cut in. "If she would love to have me there, I would have been invited, Levi." He stares at me, gobsmacked, but I don't let him say anything. "Go and enjoy the evening, I'll enjoy it here on my own. There's leftover pizza in the fridge, and a can of soda I saw pushed to the back. I'll be fine."

Levi stares at me, taking in whatever underlying emotions he can find behind my eyes. He's searching for nothing, though. There's nothing behind my eyes but darkness - surely he knows that.

"I don't want to leave you here alone," He says. "I don't think it's right..."

"It's fine," I exasperate, putting my hands atop his. "Levi, go to the dinner. Just...-" Humour him, go on. If you don't act so depressed maybe he'll believe you. "Just make sure you're back before midnight, and then we can share a New Years kiss, hm?"

It takes a few moments, but Levi smiles slightly. "Okay. I'll be home before midnight."

"Thank you, Cinderella," I joke. "What time do you have to be there?"

He checks the time on my phone, lying on the coffee table in front of us. "I have to leave in half an hour. But I will be back by midnight."

Levi gets ready, and emerges from his bedroom fifteen minutes later, looking both fancy and disheveled it's unbelievably sexy. And if my mind weren't caught up in my internalised storm, I may have even tried to feel him up.

"You look great," I say, standing from the couch to meet him in the hallway.

Levi smiles. "Thanks... Are you sure-"

"Levi!" I laugh, forcefully. "I'm sure!" I wrap my arms around his waist and drawn him close, skin prickling at the warmth coming off of him that engulfs my body. He smells like home, and his arms around me feel like safety, nearly enough to free me from my mental prison.

If only he really held the key to that.

When I pull away from him, Levi reaches up and places a hand on the back of my head, drawing me in for a kiss. It's soft, and just a little forceful, but it's magic. Our bodies move closer, and I feel at home, momentarily forgetting just exactly what was going through my mind not too long ago. "I like you, Eren," Levi says, running his hand down my side until it rests on my hip. "I like you a lot."

I smile, wrapping my arms around him one more time to feel his embrace. It's a feeling that I've missed; being completely immersed in the arms of someone you love, focused solely and entirely on them. It unexplainable, just being able to touch someone you love with almost all of your being. "I
like you a lot too."

Levi leaves soon after that, and I return or the couch, switching on the TV. News cast after news cast broadcasts heavy blizzards, and around three feet of snow. Levi's face flashes in my mind, caught out in that storm and kept from reaching his destination, but I push it to the back of my mind.

I watch reruns of old 90's cartoons for most of the evening, until it dawns on me that night has fallen, and I am yet to even think about the New Year ahead.

What have I accomplished this year? I've accomplished conquering my mind to the point of self-destruction. I've lost my mother, my home, my fond memories, and my life; I've gained an unofficial boyfriend, and a place to sleep.

What much more is there to say? I've lost so much more than I've gained, yet I've only scratched the surface. I've lost my self-worth, and my drive, and my ambitions. I've become so unknown to my friends that they forgot I existed, and now they are going into the New Year without seeing my face.

Levi celebrated his birthday without me, because I was so absorbed in myself that I didn't even think to ask when his birthday was. Levi has given up so much of his life for me, even giving up a portion of his own home to accommodate my purposeless, meaningless life.

And what have I done? Given him permission to go to a party, because he felt guilty for me being alone. I'm a mess, and whilst he's trying to recover, every time he sees my face is just another reminder of everything he's gone through and how much he's like to forget about it.

My attention is grabbed from the inner recesses of my mind as the TV turns to static. I scoff, standing to turn it back on, and as I do, the power cuts out in the entire apartment.

I stand still in the dark, and I want to scream. I want to throw things, and take a knife from the kitchen drawer and plummet it through my chest so that everything can just be over and done with.

My legs carry themselves to Levi's bedroom, where I find my carefully hidden blades. I take them to the balcony, and open the door, setting them down on the now frozen table outside.

It's fucking freezing, but I don't care. I can't feel it anyway.

I can barely see the streetlights, but I can see the road, dusted with snow that is said to start falling heavily. The wind blows right through me, and I ignore it, bracing myself on the balcony rail and heaving myself into it.

I throw my legs over the edge and hold on tight to the pole beside me, daring to look down at the road below. I want to jump. I'm close, so fucking close, to throwing myself off of this balcony and letting my innards splatter on the pavement.

I'm worthless; fucked up, mad, psychotic, alone, stupid, useless; I'm so fucking tired.

I reach back onto the table and pull a blade from the box, still holding tight onto the railing. I raise my sleeve, stop thinking, and carve the blade deep into the arm wrapped around the pole. I scream out in anguish, a strong wind making me loose my balance a little. The pit of my stomach empties, and I scramble off of the ledge of the balcony, cowering in the corner on solid footing.

I nearly fucking died. I nearly fucking died, and I was up there trying to die! I want to be dead, but I don't want to die. Why am I so fucking in the head?

My senses almost return, but the blood now flowing heavily from the fissure on my forearm grasps
my attention again, and I get to work. I hack mercilessly, desperately, needing to see a wound that could prove fatal if left to bleed out long enough.

_I want to die, but I'm scared to try harder. I know I can do it, but I'm not sure that I want to. I would miss the feeling of cutting up my own skin too much._

I would miss the feeling of Levi's arms around me.

My eyes widen, as blood drips onto the tiles of the balcony. Levi... I see his face in the back of my mind, but my arms work on their own. Soon, both sleeves are raised, and each forearm is adorned with a new set of around a dozen, deep cuts. I let the blood flow freely, and I let hot tears heat my face.

*If Levi could see me now... What would he think? He'd feel pity, and pain, and horror. Seeing what I've done to myself, the very second I'm alone. There's no way he's done this much damage to himself. What I saw on him that night was made worse by a trick of the light, I know it.*

There's no way he's as fucked up as this.

The blade is still in my firm grip, and as I see more and more blank space on my arms, I shake my head. I need more. I start to dig deeper, hissing at the pain this relapse provides me. Then, I hit something. The pain is worse than anything I've felt, and my eyes fall upon the large vertical cut in the middle of my wrist - something I've never done quite so desperately before.

I've always been careful with vertical cuts, but today, I haven't.

I stare down, suddenly light headed and queasy, at the river of blood that pours from an open vein, and my mind starts to haze. I feel a tingling sensation in the tips of my fingers and toes, and whatever blood remains within me runs cold. Suddenly, I'm all too aware of my surroundings, yet at the same time they are fading fast before my eyes. I hear a chorus of cheers from the road below, and then two loud popping sounds, before I gather enough energy to raise my head from my self inflicted mistakes. Fireworks fill the sky, and a chanting chorus of 'Happy New Year!' fills my mind.

A particularly brilliant firework lights up around me, and reflects shadows of all sorts around me. I start to sink further down the wall of the balcony, and as the blade falls from between my fingertips, I hear the front door open.
Inspired, I've speed written this chapter and managed to get enough sleep in the process - what a milestone!

It's shorter than most, and is mostly internal dialogue, but it gets out what needs to be said before the closing chapters of this story. I'd like to say that I am absolutely amazed at how many people have read this; the bookmarks, the kudos, and of course the lovely comments! You're all such amazing people, and I am so thankful for everything. Now, I know this sounds like something I should say at the end of a fic, but I can't hold it in any longer. I really needed to express my gratitude early, before I get all sappy at the end.

Sounds fade in and out of my hearing, like white noise and static perforating my eardrums. My body aches all over, and there's a tight feeling around my arms. If only my eyes would open to see what the hell was making everything feel so heavy on me.

I'm scared, unable to see or hear properly, and the feeling of the weight on me sends nervous shivers throughout my body. *Am I confined in a mental institution? I'm cold. Freezing, honestly. I feel like I'm out in the middle of the street, freezing my arse off on the curb like I had done that first night out of home. Well, what might have been my first night out of home. Perhaps I've actually been in some sick coma all this time, and I'm actually waking up as a child after that time I was knocked out in soccer?*

Mom will be by my side, petting my hair and holding tears back to prevent her from seeking weak in front of her son. Mikasa will be sitting beside her, one hand on hers and the other clinging to her phone, texting Thomas, her ninth grade crush. Dad will be running in and out of wards to check on his patients, and then he will leave work early in a hurry and drive down to the school. Relief will wash over him as he sees that his son is okay, and then he and mom will be right by my side, and Mikasa will ring my grandparent to tell them that I've finally woken up. My teammates will send photos to their friends of my wounds, and I will laugh along with them. Jean will be there, making sure that I'm alright, calling his mother over to help my own get over the trauma.

A series of evenly paced, monotonous beeps register in my mind, and my own question is answered; no, I'm not in a coma. I'm in a hospital bed.

Slowly, my eyes begin to flutter open, and my blurry surroundings come into focus. I lift my head, slowly, careful not to put too much pressure on my aching neck, to look around. There are three more beds in the ward, each with a patient lying still beneath the blankets.

My arms are above the blanket, and I see why I'm here. They're bandaged, but the bandages don't cover what hides beneath. Blood seeps through the coverings, and both of my arms ache. I feel a tingling sensation in my fingertips, and catch sight of the IV drip hanging from my right arm. Of course the left ones too fucked to stick anything in it...

And I'm not waking up after a soccer game, after all. I'm waking up after a nightmare that didn't even happen in my dreams.

Deep down, I think I knew that though.
A nurse walks past the room, and when she sees me attempting to sit up, rushes to my side. "Sir, you really need to stay lying down," She says, calmly lowering me back onto the bed. "If you need assistance I'd be more than happy to help you."

Instinctively, I fold my arms across my chest, trying to ignore the uncomfortable feeling of the IV needle sitting limply in a vein not yet tampered with. "N-No, I'm okay. Just-... Could I have a glass of water? Please."

She smiles warmly. "Sure. You're Eren Jaeger, correct?" And here it is with the freaking questions. You'd think she could read the name tag that I'm sure is above my head. Or the sheets of paper I can see at the end of my bed, telling everyone who walks past exactly why I'm here, if they couldn't already see that.

"Yeah," I answer, feeling my head begin to spin. "Can I... Can I get a painkiller or something? My head hurts."

She thinks briefly, ignoring an elderly patient calling for her a little ways down the room. "Well, I don't know about a painkiller, but we can up the morphine."

_Morphine. Great. Now I'm a drug addicted fuck up._ "Thanks."

She allows me to lift the bed head so that I can sit up, without injuring myself. As she brings me my water, I bring to her attention the calls of the elderly person, to which she sighs and thanks me. Reluctantly, I note. It's now that I also notice the yellow band around my wrist, displaying _Suicide Watch_ in dark bolder lettering.

Apparently, I'm not the only one, either.

Across the room from me, sitting up similarly to the way I am, and reading a magazine, is a person with the exact same abnoxiously bright accessory. I can't catch a glimpse of their face, as its hidden even as the pages turn, but they're reading Vogue, so I assume they're female. Perhaps I wrongly assume, I don't know, but they're reading an older copy, so clearly they're pretty bored.

I wonder how long they've been here.

Another nurse comes in half an hour later and checks my vitals. She asks more questions; my date of birth, my address, how to spell my full name, and so on.

Finally, after nearly two hours of nurses dropping in and out, and staring at the two covers of the magazine across the room from me, a doctor comes in. "Eren Jaeger?" He asks, walking into the room and spotting me as I raise my non-IV hand. "Ah. Here you are. I'm Dr Zackly, and I'll be checking you over now that you're awake and aware."

I'm not focused on him. I'm focused on the way the magazine across the room slowly lowers, revealing the mattered mess of dark hair and dull, hopeless grey eyes that stare directly at me; _Ymir_.

"Eren? Are you with me?" Dr Zackly asks, tapping my leg gently from above the covers.

I nod. "Okay."

He clears his throat, concern washing over his features. "Now, you have lost quite a lot of blood..." Ymir stares at me for a few moments, our eyes unable to tear away from one another. I have so many questions rushing through my mind, but none are quite as loud as _why the fuck would Ymir be on suicide watch?_"
She seems to swallow, nervous, then brings her attention back to her magazine, lifting it to cover her face once more. I can't help but notice the way her hands slightly tremble, and her presence seems to shrink. Before, she stood out in the room. Yet suddenly she seems to disappear beneath the blankets.

"Eren, are you conscious of your behaviour at the moment?"

I hum out of my daze, looking up at Dr Zackly, now joined with three nurses. "S-Sorry... I'm a bit, out of it, I guess."

The four of them exchange glances, before Dr Zackly continues. "We've brought you a wheel chair, and we're going to move you into a private room for a patient screening. You won't have to do much, just answer some questions, and we'll run some tests on you. After that, you do have a visitor who has been incredibly persistent on seeing you. Legally, he can't really be in here until 48hrs have passed, but-

"I want to see him to. I'm fine. It's fine. I'm okay," I say, though probably unconvincingly, as I'm sat with heavy duty bandages on both of my wrists in a hospital gown.

The nurses help me up, and I stagger to the wheelchair, dreaded for Ymir to see what I've done to myself. She doesn't look up though, at least not that I could see, and before I know it I'm covered in all sides by the staff. Dr Zackly walks in front of me; one nurse wheels the chair, and two stand either side of me, one wheeling the IV drip.

I feel like royalty. Like sick, fucked up, mentally unstable, suicidal royalty.

I'm led down a white corridor, with bright lights filter everything artificially. It smells like disinfectant and sterilisers - a small I haven't smelt since I came to work with dad when I was very young.

I swallow, wondering where dad could be, if he's even here at all.

Suddenly, we're in a private room, like the nurses office at a school. Except, this room doesn't smell like kids puke, and it's adorned from top to bottom shelf with first aid and syringes.

"So Eren," Dr Zackly starts. "I'm Trost General's leading mental health doctor. Not to worry though, I do have a PhD in medicine, so I'm not going to do or suggest anything unheard of." Awesome. Shove your success in my face, why don't you. "Anyway, yesterday evening, or early this morning should I say, you were brought here unconscious by Levi Ackerman. Can I assume this would be correct?"

I shrug. "I guess. I was at his house." How the fuck should I know? I was unconscious for fuck sake!

"Okay. What can you remember from last night?" He asks, typing away on his computer, annoyingly so.

Again, I shrug. "I don't know. It was New Years Eve... That's it."

"And you just happened to have a mutilated body? Mr Jaeger, you need to understand the severity of a case like this. If this was not done to and by yourself, Mr Ackerman in the waiting room can be charged under suspicion of attempted murder."

"Jesus Christ... Yes! Okay, I did it to myself!" I shout. "I can't remember how, or why, but I know that I did it to myself. Levi was out at a New Years party, and I chose to stay home. The doors were locked, and I was on the balcony. That's it. There's nothing more to it."

Of course there is, though. I tried to jump off the balcony; tried to kill myself; tried to cut deeper than
I already had, which was hard to beat. I hit a vein, and I passed out in the snow that had accumulated on the balcony. I could've died. And whilst that sounds appealing to me, I'm absolutely terrified of myself and what I'm capable of.

"There are wounds on your body that are quite old. How long have you been suffering from self-harm?" He asks.

Lie. "Only a few months." Lie. "I've thrown everything out though. This was done with a knife left out on the kitchen bench." Lie. "I didn't intend to go this far."

Dr Zackly takes off his glasses, sighing into his hands. He seems frustrated. "Would you mind waiting outside the door for a moment? I need to have a quick discussion with the nurses as to where we go from here."

Far away, preferably. "Okay."

A nurse leads me outside, shoots me a sympathetic glance, then enters the room; shutting the door right behind her. I know they're talking about me, and I can't help but feel like whatever they're saying is something that I probably could have guessed anyway. So, I use as much strength as I can muster, to wheel myself and the IV to the door, and press my ear against the cool polished wood. 'This is the fifth case in the last several weeks of a suicidal teenager, and I've just about had it!' Dr Zackly stresses. 'Why can't these kids either do a better job at offing themselves, or just get over it? We all have stresses in our lives. Hell, my wife is about to leave me because I spend too much time here, dealing with people like him, who don't value their own lives enough to give a damn!'

'Doctor."

'No. Don't start. I've had enough,' He sighs. I can hear the sound of the chair creak beneath his weight, even if white noise begins to feel my ears. 'Take him back to the room, prescribe him some anti-depressants, and recommend him to a psychiatric clinic. I want him out of here by tonight.'

I don't catch the next bit, but I sure do catch the last, just before the nurse opens the door. 'The next one better be going straight to the morgue instead of to me...'"

I pull away from the door and face the front, letting the pit of my stomach go numb and my mind go blank. I don't speak to the nurses, nor to anyone else. I keep my eyes forward, and totally, completely shut off my mind. As we round the corner to my ward, and then into my shared room, I see that Ymir is no longer in her bed, and I can't help but feel like I caused her to request another room or something.

And then I see Levi, sitting beside my bed with his head in his hands, rocking slightly backwards and forwards in an attempt to stay calm. I feel my heart shatter knowing that my stupid decision, the one that is not only a burden to the doctors and nurses but a burden to me, has caused him to be in this much pain; enough pain that it starts to show.

I take a deep breath as we stop in the doorway, the nurses telling me they'll come to assist me into bed once they return, as an emergency caller button is going off. I swallow, and Levi looks up when he hears one of the wheels click awkwardly. I can't tear my eyes away from him, as recognition crosses his expression. "Levi... I-"

"Eren!" He exclaims, jumping from his seat to kneel at my side. He takes my hands in his and presses them to his lips. He kisses my knuckles, and my palms, and drains them in close in a fragile, broken embrace. "Fuck... Eren. I thought I'd lost you."
I can't hold back the tears that stream freely from my eyes and down my face; the very same that land on Levi's back as he lies his head in my lap. I can feel his own tears seeping through my hospital gown, and that only makes me cry more.

"I'm s-so sorry Levi," I say, voice barely above a croaky whisper. "I'm so fucking sorry."

He lifts his head and shakes it, wiping away his tears with the backs of his own hands. "Don't be. Please, please don't be sorry. I'm just... S-so fucking happy that you're alive. You're fucking alive, Eren!" He lifts his hands to cup my face, kneeling up a little further to look me right in my tears eyes. "You're fucking alive; you're breathing, and your blood is pumping, and your heart is beating - you're fucking alive. I'm so proud of you."

_Proud? Of this? Of me? How can anyone be proud of seeing the scars on someone's body, put there by that person, as an intent to be dead?

How can someone as strong and beautiful as Levi, cry for and be proud of, someone as disgusting as me?

-X-

There are many things that have taken me a long time to figure out. _One_, is that I now have no control over the one and only thing I did; my pain. I can no longer stop at just one more. It's one more, again and again and _again_, until I can no longer count the old scars from the new ones, and tell apart the clean skin from healed skin.

_Two_, is that stitches in your forearm are the worst, and have become the bane of my existence - and I've only been out of hospital twenty four hours. They itch, and get caught on clothing, and they serve as a reminder that no matter how much I hurt myself, there is always someone there picking up the pieces that I am too fucked up to do myself.

Three, is that Levi is unconditionally, incomprehensibly, undeniably, the one good thing left in my life.

I've loved before. I love Mikasa; the way she is both my sister and my best friend, and knows when and how to differentiate between the two. I love Jean; the way he has stood by my side for so many years, and no matter how many times we bicker or fight, he'll always be there by my side, ready to catch me when I fall. I love Mom; the way she put up with me no matter my mood, and wasted so many years cooped up in that hellhole of a house because it was what was best for us, because she loved me too. I love Connie and Sasha and Ymir; fuck it, I even love Annie.

So yes, I've loved before. But never quite like this.

This love is different.

It's the way Levi manages to make my heart smile. I may feel suicidal and depressed and fucked up, and on the outside I look it too, but not on the inside. On the inside, my heart warms, and my stomach fills with butterflies, and I smile. It's the way that, even if only for a second, Levi manages to make me feel like I'm worth something; that I'm worth more than what I have to offer skin deep.

It's the way that I want to lie with Levi, day in and day out, letting time pass around us, and just be. Be with him, be in the moment, and have my mind wander to no other place than where we could be.

Finally, _four_, I am no longer willing to put up with myself anymore. I am not going to hold Levi back, and I am not going to hold myself back. I don't care how many trips to Mike or the hospital it
takes, I am going to be okay.

Now realising that Mike is the man who saw Mikasa after her incident, I feel a surging sensation of trust; and it begs me to give him a chance, if I really want to fix myself.

I'm not going to fix myself for Levi either, I'm fixing it for us, and for me. I want to enjoy the way Levi makes me feel without any doubt in my mind that I am giving it my all. I want him to know that, whilst he can love, I can love too. He deserves love, and I am going to fucking give it to him.

I'm going to learn to love myself, even if it kills me. And then I'm going to love him more than anything in the whole entire world.

Even if I already do.

"You have an appointment with Mike later today. Do you need me to change it?" Levi asks, coming to sit beside me on the couch. It's storming outside, again, and snow is falling hard on the balcony. I would draw the blinds and forget about what happened out there, but I don't. Levi and I both agreed that I need to see what it's like without me out there, and know that it's okay.

He it's close to me, and wraps his arm around my shoulder, drawing me into his chest. "Mm. It's okay," I mumble.

He smiles, bringing his head to rest atop mine, and presses a kiss to my hair. It's been a week since I tried to kill myself, and whilst I had that revelation during the drive home of self-acceptance and change, I don't feel any different.

Of course, I'm more than aware that I'm alive now. But, I still feel dead inside. It was in a whim that I decided that I would start to heal; that my year of depression meant nothing, and I would magically be okay.

But it isn't.

Not a moment goes by where I don't think about grabbing my blades or a knife and slicing deeper than ever before, just to end this eternal rollercoaster of suffering that I've inflicted upon myself. But not a moment goes by where Levi isn't by my side either, reminding me that he loves me, and that if I did kill myself, I would be leaving him behind as broken mess. Of course, he doesn't say that, but I know it.

I know, because he's different somehow. It's like, when I tried to kill myself, I'd accidentally managed to kill a little part of him, and now he's holding onto that last string of hope to get him through.

If he really has stopped harming himself, either with drugs or blades or fire, I don't want my death to be the cause of him starting again.

The storm gets louder, and Levi moves so that we're lying down on the couch, both wrapped in each others arms. The stitches catch on the sleeves of my shirt, and pinch, but I pay them no mind. With Levi lying nearly on top of me, my heart flutters again, and I run my hands over his back.

I like feeling him. Not in a perverted sense, though I don't think I would mind, but in a sensual
manner. The heat from his body is comfort for me, and the way his small stature fits perfectly in the slots of my own body melts my heart. He's such a complex creature, and I still don't know everything about him. And I fear that if my endeavours of killing myself do every succeed, I may never know.

I fall asleep to the sound of his heart beating, and wake when Levi kisses me tenderly on the lips and tells me that it's time to drive down. I don't bother changing, nor doing anything else remotely related to upkeep, and follow him out the door. The storm has subsided, but what's left is a real disaster; a situation I am all too familiar with.

Levi tells me, as we find a park, that he will wait in the waiting room for me to finish, and afterwards (if I'm feeling up to it) we can get a hot chocolate and stay inside someone nice and warm.

I agree that it sounds like a good idea, and hold his hand tight until I'm called though. Levi and Mike exchange a wave, and Mike throws me an almost amused, knowing glance as he directs me into his room.

"So, how have things been since we last spoke?" He asks, and I feel myself go numb.

I swallow, and I see that Mike senses something is wrong. Do it. Just fucking say it. You've hurt yourself so many times, why not use words this time? Feel guilty, and awful, and horrible. Just fucking do it, Eren.

"I-I... I hurt myself."

Nerve endings within me snap, my stomach empties, and my throat tightens. I feel nauseously light on the inside, as those bitter words leave my lips, coating my tongue with a sour flavour that brings tears to the corners of my eyes. I feel helpless, and stupid, and so fucking useless.

Mike nods, eyes wide, and I feel like a suspected criminal admitting my crime. "What do you feel, when you say those words aloud?" His eyes bore into my skull, and I feel open. Too open. I feel like I'm standing naked on a podium in the middle of the shopping mall, unable to put clothes on, and unable to cover myself; left for the wrath of the people passing by to take pictures and laugh.

I swallow. "What?"

"When you say, 'I hurt myself,' what do you feel?" He reiterates. He doesn't grab his notebook, or his pen, or even his tea. Here, in this moment, it's simply the two of us in an empty room.

I try to ignore the gnawing in my gut, the feelings that tries to snap at my remaining composure; to lash out and scream and cry and feel pain. I shrug shakily. "Gross... My stomach feels empty. I feel-... I feel kind of empty."

"Do you have an adjective for that feeling?" He asks. "Could you describe it like you were talking to a child?"

I pause to think. Why would I describe the feeling of hurting myself to a goddamn child? They don't need to know what it feels like. They don't need to know that things like that actually happen. Children are... Children are so innocent, they're untouched by the world - why take that away from them?

"Guilty," I decide. "After... The peace, and the pain and the numbness; I feel... Guilty."

"Why?" Mike questions, and I shrug. He leaves a moment for me to answer, but I can't, because I really don't know.
It's not entirely guilt. It's dread, and loss. I dread that someone will find out and that they will finally have a reason to stop believing in me; that I'll lose everyone I love (as if that hasn't already happened) and I will no longer have people to rely on. And loss, because every time I hurt myself, I lose a part of myself that I'll never, ever get back.

"If you can," Mike starts, soothingly, picking up his notepad to write something in it. "Could you tell me, why did you hurt yourself?"

"There's just no point to living anymore," I shrug, my eyes glued to a blank space on the patterned carpet. "I used to have dreams and aspirations and goals, but now... I can't even picture myself as an adult."

"I feel petty, and weak, even just saying these things to myself, let alone out loud, but... I'd rather- I'd rather commit suicide than hold these feelings any longer, and it drives me crazy knowing that. Because... I would do it." I lift my gaze, seeing that Mike has stopped writing, shut his notepad, and is instead simply listening again. "I would kill myself in a heartbeat if I was in the right time and place. I've done other, similar things on an emotional whim - what makes finishing the job any harder?"

Mike bites his lips, taking in a deep breath. "How long have you felt like this?" He asks, once again opening his notepad and grabbing his pen.

I shake my head lightly. "I don't know. Probably more than a few years, but I only really realised it at the beginning of this one."

He nods. "Eren... This is a sensitive subject, I understand, but you need to understand that I am very proud of you for admitting all of this," He smiles, bittersweetly. "You're a very brave young man."

I don't say anything, choosing simply to ignore his words. He's only saying this so I don't go home and cut myself because I fucked up the rule of 'don't let anyone know.'

"You know... Our mind's are often unhelpful," Mike says, placing his notepad and pen down beside him. "Think of it like this, ah- Sorry, do you mind if I talk for a little while? Please tell me if it isn't. I know you're probably feeling a little tender right now, and that's okay."

I shake my head. "It's fine. You usually end up talking the most anyway, so why should it matter now? And I'm not tender, I'm broken. I'm not a soft, fragile being; I'm the razor edge of a smashed mirror no one dares to look in - it's bad luck, anyway.

"Think of your mind and your brain as two separate things. Your brain is the organ, whereas the mind is like the brains brain. Does that make sense?" He asks. I nod, and he continues. "Our minds are designed to keep us from danger, and this is where those primitively fight or flight responses occur. Our minds often find danger in things that aren't actually dangerous, which causes anxiety, and can lead to certain behaviours." He's talking about hurting myself, I know it. 'Certain behaviours' my ass.

"For example, new surroundings. When you first came here, you were nervous, right?, He asks, and once again I nod. "Whether you were conscious of it or not, your mind was sending receptors to your brain telling you that there could be danger here. New surroundings means new things that may or may not be good for you."

"Now, it's completely normal for this to occur. Most people can get past the mind versus brain complex, but some can't. Depression is a neurological disorder, meaning that it affects your brain. And if your brain isn't receiving these messages as it should, your mind takes over." Mike waits a
few moments, and I nod in understanding. I hope he can't see through my facade, because I'm really only half listening.

I just want to get out of here. I've had enough talking about this. It makes me sick.

I make me sick.

"When our minds detect danger, it's to keep us safe. But it doesn't always work like that," He continues, seemingly satisfied with my response. "If there of, rather. "See, Eren, if here is a disturbance in our lives, the minds automatic response is fear; nerves, tension, anxiety. If we are fearful for too long, our brains often try to find a switch which will shut down whatever it is that is making us upset. Now, I won't go into the nitty gritty, but to sum it all up, you end up relying more on your mind than your instinctive habits."

"We stop seeing our surroundings for what they are, and start to see them for what our mind tells us they are. Do you understand what I'm saying?" He asks, pressing me for a verbal response.

I swallow. "So... What you're saying is, it's all in my head?"

Mike grins sarcastically. "Of course it's in your head. What I need you to understand is that depression often alters our perception of reality to drastic scale. There is always sadness in our life, and with sadness comes happiness; that's just how it is. However, depression picks out everything's that's ever made us feel sad, and shows that to you. It's like singular colours of a jigsaw. Something happens, and our minds try to remember how we coped with it in the first place. It finds the blue pieces of the puzzle, and you remember it. But suddenly, the entire puzzle is blue, because the other colours of happiness and joy and love aren't being shown to you."

Is this guy for real. Is he even qualified to be a councillor? If Jean was listening to this bullshit he'd probably jump out of the window right fucking now.

This is crazy. How are these mind games supposed to help me?

"Yeah, I understand that," I say, feigning a smile. "Wow... That really helps." I keep the smile, I listen, and I nod my head every so often. I avoid eye contact until it gets awkward, and I continue to listen to Mike's deep and meaningful views of life.

And then, we've run out of time, and Mike gives me a card with the date and time of my next session, wishing me all the best until we see each other again.

-X-

It's not working; the therapy, and the psychology, and the mind games and awareness - none of it is working. I feel fine afterwards, and then I'll go a day or two thinking, "Finally, this is it. I'm getting over it. I'm recovering. I really, really feel fine. Good, great even." Then, I spiral out of control again. Whether it's something someone says, something insignificant, or my own self-loathing returning, it always happens.

And there's absolutely not a fucking thing I can do about it.

I wanted to be there for Levi like he is for me, and now I'm fucking it all up. I can't fucking stop thinking about ways that I can kill myself, or ways that I can harm myself without ever being noticed by the people around me; nurses, Levi, friends. Two out of three of those options already know, and I need to nip it in the bud before it spirals out of control.

I recognise everything that I do to myself now, and I hate it. I wish I could go back to the way I was,
when I didn't know exactly what I was doing and who I was hurting, but I can't.

What was it Mike said? 'An arrow must move back to shoot forwards.' Well, I'm fucking back, so when am I ever going to be shot forwards?

I'm no longer harming myself because I can control my pain, I'm harming myself to feel it. I don't have control over this anymore; I'm just really fucking addicted. I'm addicted to the feeling of feeling.

I writhe for the stinging sensation left behind as a blade drags across my skin at any pace I choose. I long for the sight of my own blood beading across the cuts, running down my arm by their own will. I love the smell of dried blood on the bandages that I've used so many times over, that now I find myself taking them from their hiding place just to stare at and smell the remnants of my mistakes.

Even as I sit in front of Levi, at Hanji's, with a soothing hot chocolate in my hands, I with I were back on the balcony at home.

"Eren. Is everything alright?" Levi asks, clinging tightly to the warm mug. "You're spacing out a bit. Do you need to talk it out?"

"Here?" I question, briefly looking around at the crowd that has gathered.

"No. At home, or in the car, or anywhere," He says. "I need to make sure that you're okay."

"No, you don't," I tell him. "Don't worry about me, Levi. I'm seeing the councillor, I'm seeing Mike. I'm fine. Everything fine. I'm just... Cold. It's really cold out there, and what I'm wearing isn't warm enough."

"Eren-"

"Don't," I say, voice breaking into a whisper. He can see now that I'm holding back tears; tears of a person who is so beaten and broken that they can't even keep it together in a public place. "Please."

Levi immediately grabs his keys, and my hand, and leads me out the door. My tears stain my cheeks, frozen by the winter air, and we make it back to Levi's car without freezing to death.

When we get into the car, Levi takes my hands in his. "You're allowed to feel, Eren. Please, just let yourself feel sad. Cry, and scream, and stay under the covers all day. But please, please don't suffer this on your own," He says, as tears are already falling down my face once more. "I can't stand to see you suffering with yourself, so please, let me suffer with you."

We drive home with my hand entwined with Levi's. He runs his thumb over my knuckles, and glances over at me whenever he can. I feel empty and numb again, but after all of the tears I've shed, who wouldn't.

I want to do as Levi says; scream and cry and stay under the covers all day, but I don't. Instead, once we get through the door, Levi tells me he's going to run me a hot bath, and I can stay in there for as long as I please, so long as I don't catch a cold if the water cools down.

I thank him, and wait until the tub is full before I undress. Not only do I not want others to see what I look like, but I can't even stand to see it anymore. Everywhere I look it's, 'scars make you who you are,' but if that's the case, I don't want to be this person. They're not beautiful, they're tragic. It's not romantic, or something of a plot to a story - it's fucking awful.

It's hating yourself even more after you've done it, then when you first started. It's gritting your teeth as you get into the hot water of a bath, and feeling the heat travel through the stitched up veins on
your forearm, burning and pulsating beneath the surface. It's removing the choice of wearing whatever you choose, or being comfortable in your own skin, because your too afraid of what others or yourself might see.

They're not a constant reminder that you survived pain; they're a constant reminder that you were in so much pain that you selfishly removed your own privileges instead of doing what a normal person does, which is just getting over it.

When I leave the bath, I realise I've forgotten clean clothes, and convince myself that I can walk to Levi's room and get changed without overthinking it. I'm wrong, because as I open the door, Levi is standing s little ways away, and catches me before I can scurry off.

"Eren. I don't want to pry, but..." He opens his arms, almost shyly, and takes a step forward. "Can I please just hold you for a few moments?"

I feel like I'm staring down at a young child all of a sudden, and my heart flutters again. I put my own self-depreciation behind me and wrap my wounded arms around me. His fingers are gentle on my skin, and feel as though I could fall asleep.

He lets go of me, slowly, and wipes a single tear away from his eye. "Go... Get dressed. We should just sit on the couch and do nothing all day," He says.

I smile, weakly. "That was the plan."

I dress myself and meet Levi in the living room, wrapping myself immediately in his arms. He kisses my forehead again, and rubs circles on my back. "I'm so fucking proud of you. Have I told you that?"

"You have," I admit. "But... Why? How can you be proud of this?"

"How could I not? Relapses happen, and you... You've blown me away with how brave you've been. I've seen some things regarding this issue, and you have managed to restore my faith in people who have lost it."

"What do you mean?" I ask, mumbling into his chest and indulging myself in the scent of his deodorant and him.

"Self-harm is an addiction. You lose yourself in the numbing pain, and eventually, you can't ever recall who you used to be. But you... God. I never knew who you were before you needed help, but I see glimpses of who you used to be every now and then and-... I can't wait for you to see them too."

I'm silent for a moment, then I ask, "And what if this is the real me? Would you still like me?"

Levi lifts my head from his chest and places his hands on my face, my own around his waist. "I will love you for as long as I live, Eren."

"Levi, I-... I love you too," I say. Those words replace the bitter ones I'd uttered with Mike. Love is a concept I've never really spoken about, but saying and feeling it with Levi, my mind seems to erase every single ugly thought I've ever had.

I lean forward and claim his lips with my own, a surge of courage welling inside of me. He returns it deeply, and manoeuvres himself until he's sitting on top of my with his hands either side of my face. I feel the passion between us beginning to heat, but just as I rock my hips up to meet his, stifling a moan, Levi pushes me back down onto the couch with a grin. "I'm not going to do anything with
you today, Eren."

I swallow, practically feeling my growing erection cry. "What?"

He shakes his head. "I love you a lot. But, I'm not willing to express my love like this for a while yet. That doesn't mean I don't love you, I just have enough respect for you and myself to not let primal desires take away from emotional connection."

I don't know why, but those words cause something in me to feel grateful. Of course, I was ready then and there to pull down my pants and do whatever it is that Levi wanted to do to me, even if it meant seeing all of my scars at once. But hearing him decide, even with his own boner, that he didn't want to take advantage of my emotional state... I wasn't kidding when I said I loved him.

And for the first time, lying cuddled up on the couch on the evening of the first day of the New Year, I wish I'd never hurt myself in the first place.
I'm not happy with this chapter tbh, I feel like it's crammed a lot into one, but I had to so the story could go the way I want it to in future. (tl;dr - I love suffering)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Everything happened so quickly; quickly enough that I had almost forgotten that there's always calm before a storm. I'd suffered with my own demons long enough to get used to them, but the prospect that something outside of me and us could go wrong hadn't ever crossed my mind. I mean, of course it had, but never anything that could be detrimental to our lives. Which is surprising, to say the least. Living with Levi seems to have completely messed with my self-loathing thought process; that fact alone is both a worry and a blessing.

A blessing, because I finally have something to fuel my recovery, besides myself. Having someone actually believe in me gives my motivation a real kick in the ass. And a worry, because self-loathing is all I've ever known. I'm not sure I know who I am if I'm not hating myself.

These past few months, coming up a year now, I've been broken; there hasn't been a single thing in this entire world that could put me back together. Not even Mike has helped that much, but that may be due to the fact that I've cancelled two appointments so far because I'm afraid I might tell him things I can't even admit to myself.

I'm not saying I'm not broken now, though. I've made an effort nearly every day to remind myself that I deserve pain, and I deserve to feel emotionally disconnected from every other being in existence. I'd caused so many issues between myself and the people I cared about, that there wasn't any reason for why I didn't deserve what I felt (or didn't feel).

If there was even a single reason as to why I didn't deserve to be hated, then I could name one hundred reasons as to why I did. Even if that meant naming those reasons in deep, crimson cuts along my forearms and thighs, or wherever place was most convenient at the time of desperation.

But now, with Levi, I'm not so certain. It's not like he's drastically changed my life, or magically managed to make my self-hatred disappear - it's nothing even close to that. He's managed to make me feel like I deserve to be alive. His opinions of me have somehow overridden my own, even if just for a few moments, to the point where I'm questioning if I really do deserve to suffer like I think I do.

But I know that I deserve to feel pain, I just know it. I singlehandedly caused the demise of our family, the downfall of friendships, and the deterioration of my own mental health; my actions caused my own mother to get killed. I deserve to be hated by others, and certainly by myself.

At least, I thought so. I really, really did. And I still do. I tell myself I do, and then I contradict myself because Levi calls me beautiful, or says that he loves me. But no one can love a monster, no one can call a monster beautiful - so how can I be so sure that I am one?

Then I remember. Not only do I deserve to feel pain, but I enjoy what I do to myself. It's not so much a painful activity anymore; it's something that I just have to do. Most times, I'll hurt myself because my emotional capacity can't take itself anymore; whether that be dealing with family, friends, or
myself. Other times, it'll simply be because the scars are starting to fade, and I can't bare to live without seeing those bloody, puffed crimson lines adorning my flesh.

I'm crazy, aren't I? Someone who hurts themselves intentionally, whether as an outlet to suffering or as an anaesthetic must be crazy.

Yet I'm not so certain that I am anymore.

If there's anything that I'm completely certain of though, it's that I want to do everything with and for Levi - even if that means stopping hurting myself just because I haven't done it in a while. Even if it means allowing myself to feel emotionally overwhelmed or numb, rather than hurt to feel.

Never in my life have I felt so much goodness towards a person. Of course I've loved, but it's never been completely unconditional. This is so much more than that.

With Levi, I feel as though he could do nothing wrong. Everything about him screams protection and care; towards me, towards his apartment, even towards Mikasa - someone he barely knows. It's something about the way his eyes change when we get into deeper conversation, and how as a whole, he softens on the more touchy subjects.

It's the one and only thing that I know for sure, even when my mind is in a constant state of contradicting torment and hatred; I love Levi dearly. It's just as simple as that.

That's why when Levi wanders into the lounge space with his comforter draped around his shoulders at a little past eight thirty in the morning, hair strewn across his face from his sleep, I'm not afraid of the way my heart flutters. I allow myself to move over for him, to let him sit beside me for us to get close. I don't want to shut him out.

He'd worked a later shift than usual last night, forced to clean up after a trainee chef hadn't done their job right, and fell asleep half dressed as soon as his body hit the bed. He didn't even shower, and that says something.

"Morning," I say, smiling lightly to cover up my array of thoughts, as he struggles to walk towards the couch without tripping over the blanket. He seems to glare tiredly at the sunlight allowed to enter the apartment, but he doesn't comment on it. "Did you sleep well?"

His eyes and expression look tired, even with the slightest of forced smiles he puts on. "Mm. I think. You?" He asks with a yawn, crawling up beside me to lean his head against my shoulder.

I can't help but notice that he looks like absolute shit. "Yeah, I did."

Wrapping my arms around his waist, I pull him closer to me, revelling in the way he feels against my chest. It's such a nice comfort, the weight of someone else beside you; warm, strong, yet so soft; far more comforting than the stinging burn of an ice cold blade. Listening to his heart beat, I can feel mine beat in tune with his own. I smile softly at the way he not-so-discreetly starts to fall asleep on my chest, tugging lightly at the fabric of my pyjama shirt.

It's bliss, and with Levi encased in my arms, and me in his, I momentarily forget that I hate myself. I remember that I have a reason to stay alive, even if I hate myself. Of course, Levi can't love me enough for the both of us, but just knowing that he loves me is enough to keep me going.

... Does he love me?

Over six months' worth of memories with Levi floods the forefront of my mind. Has there ever been a situation where Levi displayed his affections for me, that haven't related to my torment? Has he
ever just said it without me being in need of comfort? In need of love?

I don't fall asleep. Even holding Levi in my arms, I can't. It's both intentional and beyond my control, as I want to stay awake long enough to remember this feeling for as long as I can, and as I hadn't had the will to sleep in over twenty four hours. Now with this new feeling of doubt thrown into my mental illness cocktail, I don't think I'll be sleeping anytime soon.

He stirs an hour later, goes to the bathroom, then crawls beneath his comforter once more, cuddling up to me as close as he can. It's storming outside, and even though I'm stifling wearing layers upon layers of clothing, along with Levi's body heat, I don't have the heart to move him.

I love him, regardless of his past or current situation. That's the truth.

It's whether he actually loves me for me that will remain an extensive late-night thought topic.

We spend the day lounging around, Levi falling in and out of sleep, and me trying desperately to lose consciousness for even five minutes; but to no avail. It seems that my body just doesn't need sleep. That, or my mind won't allow it to sleep, having so many thoughts running through it at any given unoccupied moment.

But the domesticity of Levi's day off makes my gut churn. I can't pinpoint exactly why, but I know that no matter how I look at it, knowing that this could be taken from me if and when Levi decides he can't deal with me anymore tears at the inner linings of my stomach. It's a sick, gripping burn in my large intestine, and a tightening in my throat.

I don't understand why I'm even thinking about this now. Maybe because I haven't experienced deep-seeds dread, loss, and grief for a few months now.

Perhaps life just hasn't fucked me over enough yet... Either way, I'm sure I'll deserve whatever I get in this life. That's why Levi will leave. He'll realise his worth and that I'm in no way deserving of his kindness and love. There'll be someone else out there who will have his heart and hold it far gentler than I ever could.

Levi raises a question to me later in the evening, after we've both had a serving of pasta he cooked for dinner, one which I hadn't ever expected to hear come from his mouth. I'd been too focused on toxic thoughts to even realise that he'd been cooking pasta, until it was set in front of me.

He wraps his arms around my chest from behind, barely tall enough to rest his head on my shoulder, as I stare out at the falling snow from the balcony window. "It's nice, isn't it," He says, our gazes both following the slowly blanketing snow.

I hum. "It is."

Levi hums against my shoulder blade, sending vibrations through my shoulders. His hair tickles my neck. "Do you want to come for a walk with me? I've been thinking we could go to The Fairgrounds."

I turn to face him. "Really? Tonight?"

He chuckles slightly. "We can, but not tonight. You were spacing out; I had to get your attention somehow."

*How did he know I wanted to go to The Fairgrounds?* I roll my eyes, frowning slightly, and he returns to his previous position. "Really though, if you'd like to go we can sometime. I haven't ever been," He says, pressing a light kiss to my shoulder. "But I was going to ask, do you want to go to
The Basement tomorrow night? It's a poetry night.

I swallow, reaching my hands up to hold Levi's arms. "The Basement?" I question. *I hadn't been there in so long... And not without Jean, either. Would the atmosphere have changed? Will I be recognised by the locals once more?*

Or will they see that I've changed in some way and choose to stay away from me, just in case.

Levi nods, rubbing lightly at my sides. I'm sure he felt me tense. "I remember I saw you there a while back. You looked like you were having fun... You were with the person we saw at the hospital." He pauses, then adds, "I think you'd enjoy it. Getting out of the house, I mean."

I contemplate for a moment. I haven't been out in a while, have I? The last time I'd left this apartment was my trip to the hospital, and that can't exactly count as an outing... And it was over two weeks ago. My mind can barely even comprehend that. It's been two weeks since I attempted suicide, over a year since I first harmed myself, and nearly eight months since I met Levi for the first time...

Isn't that just surreal? I've been stuck inside this cloudy, dark bubble, yet the world and time itself hasn't stopped to accommodate by lack of involvement with the living.

Feeling Levi start to rely on my weight to keep him standing, I guide him over to the couch so we can lie there together. I don't trust my stability after so long without sleep; I wouldn't want to cause our duel demise by not being able to keep us both upright.

"Sure. Let's go," I decide, as Levi leans into me when we sit down.

It can't be that bad, can it? I'd be with Levi, and it would be no different to any other poetry night I attended in the past. Just me, Levi, and the regular patrons... Mike. He could be there. I clear my throat a little. "I'm kinda glad you remembered Jean. That would boost his ego a lot, I think... He might be there, if he's not hospitalised still."

Levi nods, unwrapping his arms from my body. "Yeah." Moments pass, and playfully he adds, "Mike tells me you're a poet, yourself. Is that true?"

I feel my face heat up, lips going dry. "N-No. Not really. I just wrote a few things for Jean to read out. I don't read it, I mean, I just write it..."

Levi raises an eyebrow, and I sigh nasally, silently admitting my mistake. "So... Like a poet?" He asks, slightly amused.

I chuckle dryly, poorly hiding my embarrassment. "Yeah, fine. Like a poet."

Levi smiles, then leans his head on my shoulder and sighs. "You should read something out to me one day. I'd like to hear it."

Briefly, I actually consider it. I could write Levi some cheesy love poem and serenade him with one of Jean's symphony backtracks.

But would it be for naught when I find out he doesn't actually like me the way I like him? All this time I thought of him as, dare I say it, my boyfriend. My memory fails me; *has he ever called me his boyfriend?*

I decide not to say anything else. Writing brings out inner demons that aren't often given a voice, and even though so many good things have come from the bad, I don't want those demons coming out to play so close to my suicide attempt. It's already been hard enough with Levi watching over me like a
hawk, making sure I don't screw myself over again. I don't want to have to watch myself, too. It all seems like too much stress; something I don't need much more of.

"Hey, Eren," Levi starts, grabbing my attention once more. He rests a hand on my thigh, and I briefly tense at the touch. There are scars there. Does he know? They're fresher than even the ones on my forearms.

"Yeah?" I ask, almost nervously. It feels as though he can see right through the facade I put on to mask what's really going on inside my head. I have to wonder; what's he about to say? His body language makes me tense; it's one of care and compassion, which could mean he's about to tell me the hospital want me back, or I'm about to be sent to a mental institution so I don't fuck up again.

Or that he wants me to find somewhere else to live, because he can't rebuild his life when I'm dragging him down.

He scans my face briefly, lidded eyes stopping at my lips, and I feel my face heat up. "Can I kiss you?" He asks, looking up into my eyes with a fleeting gaze.

All my nerves disappear with those few words, stomach clearing of butterflies and clouds disappearing from my mind; I smile. "Why do you need to ask? Of course you can."

Levi grins and leans forward, his free hand reaching up to cup my face. He turns my head to face him, and tilts it back slightly, before pressing his soft lips to my own. It feels different to the last time; needy, almost desperate. But I don't mind it. I lean into the kiss and snake an arm around his waist, bringing him closer.

He takes that as an opportunity to get comfortable, and seats himself in my lap, bringing both hands up to run along my shoulders and chest as he keeps our lips connected. My body reacts accordingly, and as Levi's hips start to move, I can't help but let out a breathy moan.

Levi takes ahold of my bottom lip with his teeth, and grins. "That good, huh?" He chuckles, bringing his pelvis near-impossibly closer to mine.

"Sh-Shut up," I smile, keeping my hands firmly placed on his hips. I move them in time with his gentle rocking, keeping just enough pressure to feel him comfortably seated on top of me.

I must've moved him down at just the right angle, because Levi lets out a surprised gasp, to which I take the opportunity to capture his lips with my own and revel in the feeling of his loss of control. He seems to be easily playable, once in the right mood, and I use that to my advantage.

But I can't help but feel like he's not exactly aware of what he's doing; both to me and himself.

Carefully, I slide further down on the couch, giving Levi more room to move. He seems to consider his next movement briefly, before tactfully removing his sweater. He's wearing a short sleeve shirt underneath, and I try my best to pay no mind to the white scars adorning his arms.

And the scars that seem too pink to be over a year old; almost purple, raised like small blisters. They were intentionally deep. How long ago did he do this? I know he hasn't been himself but...

Did he mean to show me these? I try to push those thoughts to the back of my mind, and I succeed when Levi rocks forward with fervour, causing me to moan loudly at the contact. Or lack thereof, rather.

Trust him, trust him, trust him; I have to trust Levi. He says he's okay, that means he's okay. He'd tell me if he wasn't doing so well, wouldn't he? Of course... Of course he would.
He grunts in amusement. "Didn't think you had it in you."

"What?" I ask, running my hands firmly over his shapely ass, just to keep me from doing something other than staring at him in awe like an idiot.

He presses his body closer to mine and moans breathily in my ear, sending a shiver up my spine and emitting a loud moan from between my lips. "That," He breathes.

I whine. "Ah, Levi... Are we really doing this?"

It feels good. We're not even really doing anything; it's only a little grinding and making out. But, if this feels this good, what would the real thing with him feel like?

Maybe I really do want to be doing this. I'm not a virgin, but I've never felt this much desire for a single person before. It was good with that girl in my second year of high school, and it was good with the guy in my second year of high school. But could this feel better than good?

Would having sex with someone that I actually love, rather than two random people who just happened to be interested in me before I fucked myself over, actually feel good?

"I don't know... Are you up for it?" Levi asks, sitting back on his heels on my lap. "Well, is all of you up for it? I know one aspect that is." He winks at me and I groan, knowing all too well just how up for it I am.

Levi mouths kisses down my neck, not-so-patiently awaiting my answer. I can't help but moan at the feeling, his peppering kisses beginning to get heated. "Mm..." I fist my fingers in Levi's hair, shivering at the contact of his tongue to my neck as he marks me up.

Do I want this? Am I really ready? I moan again when Levi presses his palm flat between my legs, kneading at my erection skilfully. My fist tightens its grip on his shoulder blade, and as I open my eyes slowly, I swear I see Levi's bottom lip quiver before he smirks.

I lessen my grip and he notices, but he doesn't stop. All this time, I know I've been ready. These moments are fleeting and I've been expecting him to take charge and just do it because that's the kind of person he is- the kind of person he makes himself out to be...

I hadn't even thought of that. I was so taken up by my own needs, I hadn't once even asked. Is Levi ready?

"Ah!- Are you?" I ask, struggling to let my voice go above a pleasured whimper. He pauses his ministrations on my neck and slowly sits back once more, hand still warm on my crotch. His eyes scan my face with a deep expression; I can't exactly pinpoint what it is.

He stares at me, eyebrows twitching slightly, then swallows. "What?" His expression is once of disbelief, and his voice tentative. It's like even he hadn't thought is he was ready.

"You asked if I was ready, and you a-always do that," I say, trying to labour my breathing. "But I've never asked you before, so... Are you ready for- for this?"

It's as if every negative thought he's ever had crosses his face at once, and I'm momentarily wondering if I shouldn't have asked. He swallows, wide eyed, before his lips contort into a small, grateful smile.
Pained, but grateful.

"I..." He bites his lip, slowly tearing his eyes away from my own to look into his lap. I can't help but feel my heart break a little as his demeanour changes. Suddenly, he holds his own hands in his lap, and I almost don't recognise the person before me. He looks smaller, and broken, and shy. Levi blinks back oncoming tears and shakes his head slowly. "I don't... I don't think I am."

My mouth widens, but slowly turns into a small smile, and I raise a palm to cup his cheek. "Levi... Why would you offer if you weren't ready? You know I'll wait seventy years if I have to," I say, cupping his face completely, and he smiles. "You tell me how much you love me every day, but... I think you forget that I love you just as much."

Levi swallows, lifting his gaze to look at me once again. "Eren..."

"Really, Levi."

He brings my head forward with his hand, capturing my lips in another passionate kiss. "I love you. And I want it. I want you. And I wanted every part of you not five minutes ago, but..." He takes his face away from mine. "Half way through, I just thought of my last experience like this and... It wasn't anywhere near as passionate and loving as this could be. It was awful, and scary, and fucking painful and I just-"

He swallows, and finally, it's like I can see the walls he's built around himself fall down all at once. "I'm... I'm fucking terrified, Eren. I'm sorry for leading you on like this..."

I shake my head, smiling so large I probably look psychotic. I've never seen so much of him let out like this; so much of the real him. "Levi, Levi. Don't be sorry. I love you okay? You're allowed to be scared... You're allowed to feel, you know."

I can't help but say it, and Levi's lips turn into a grin similar to my own. "Sorry, what great guy did you hear that line from? I remember hearing that from someone pretty fantastic. Worlds best boyfriend perhaps? Was that it?"

Boyfriend. What was I doubting before? Why was I doubting before? I'm his boyfriend. He loves me. I love him.

Why did I doubt that fact at all?

His demeanour has changed, incredibly fast, like he's had tons of practice, and he runs his hands lovingly over my chest and stomach. "He was super good looking... And incredibly brilliant in every way possible."

I chuckle. "I remember him being kind of a douche, actually." Levi playfully hits my shoulder, and I laugh, and he pulls me into a kiss, and I can't help but feel so domestic it actually hurts. Did I want to kill myself two weeks ago? Not an hour ago, didn't I think about practically walking out on Levi? I can't help but let out another moan when Levi's and my own arousal come into contact again. He chuckles breathlessly, but rocks his hips slowly into mine nonetheless.

"You don't- You don't have to do this, if you're not comfortable," I try, biting my lip to stop a throaty groan escaping my throat.

"I'm not going to have sex with you, but I can't exactly leave you to take care of yourself like this," He says, almost teasingly. Then, he bites his lip and grinds down hard into my lap, causing me to shiver again. "Besides, I like to try before I buy."
I laugh aloud. "You're ridiculous- Oh! F-Fuck, Levi..."

He smiles into my neck, running his hands over my body and grinding against me at a comfortable pace. "Mm... You smell nice."

"I haven't showered for two days."

Levi removes his hands from me, face disgusted, but I chuckle and bring his hips down towards my own. "Eren, you filthy fu- Ah! Fuck-

-x-

The two of us stand side by side in the bathroom, combing our hair and attempting to look halfway presentable to be seen in public.

After falling asleep on the couch, neither of us woke up feeling refreshed. I had a major headache, after sleeping for the first time in nearly three days, and Levi didn't speak to me until an hour after he'd woken up. When we were both awake enough to function, I commented that the only time Levi ever scares me is when he's just woken up; Levi scowled and told me the only time he doesn't think I'm attractive is when I wake up.

Needless to say, playful teasing and headaches aside, we almost cancelled our plans in favour of lounging around for the rest of the night. Well, I almost cancelled - Levi actually seems excited about this outing, god knows why.

"I've been thinking..." Levi starts, cracking his knuckles before sitting on the bed to put on his shoes. I huff, sitting beside him to do the same. "Why?"

"Hush, you," He grins, before returning to his neutral expression. "If Jean is there, will we have to sit with him?"

Overthinking. I shrug. "I don't know. If he's with Marco, probably not. Then again, Marco might want him to socialise..."

Levi frowns. "Just like Mike, and you... That's unfortunate for our evening."

I shove Levi lightly. "Levi, c'mon. I don't really want to sit with anyone else either, but it's not like we can tell them to get lost."

"Well, we can..." He chides, fiddling with the sleeves of his jacket. I frown, and Levi shrugs. "Or we don't. Whichever you decide, my love."

"Let's not. We'll just wait and see; they might not even be there, you know."

We finish getting ready, and at around 6:30pm, we leave the apartment. Traffic is built up, surprisingly so for a Thursday night, but it doesn't bother us too much. Instead, we make small talk in the warmth of Levi's car, and occasionally complain about other drivers on the road.

Levi swears they're all bad drivers; I think he just suffers mild road rage, because none of them are bothering me all that much. But I don't mention it, as his colourful insults are kind of amusing.

When we find a park just outside of The Basement, I grit my teeth and stare out at the place; it's nearly full, by the looks of it. People laugh and talk with each other at the doorstep, waiting for the doors to open so they can take their seats and relax for the evening.
"You okay?" Levi asks, already half out of the car. "You've gone all pale."

I nod vigorously, quick to unbuckle my seatbelt. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just nervous; I haven't been here in a long time." I haven't been here since the last time I was clean from self injury cuts and scars. I haven't been here since before mom died. I haven't been here since I was good friends with Jean.

I haven't been here since I was nearly genuinely happy.

As I walk across the street with Levi, our arms link together, I realise that time really does fly. It doesn't stop just because you stop going places in the world. Just because your mind is in the gutter, doesn't mean that the world stops turning to accommodate for your desperation.

It's both beautiful and terrifying.

Beautiful, because others aren't being dragged down by your downfall. No matter how much you may think you're causing someone trouble, you're probably not, because the world keeps on turning and people keep changing.

Terrifying, for all of those reasons and more. People can change and move on to the point where you're no longer needed; but you don't realise that because you're no longer functioning to accommodate the changes of the world.

Levi and I take a seat on the half wall next to the outdoor area of the bar. It's a brick structure that keeps the dirt and leaves from falling onto the pavement, and holding the shrubs in place.

"Do you want a drink before we go in?" He asks, one hand placed on my leg. "I'm getting one."

"Sure, I guess. Whatever you're having."

He nods. "Can you buy food here? I'm kind of hungry."

I pout in thought. "It's expensive though... We could go to Recon."

Levi snorts. "There's no way I'm going to that place when I don't have to." My expression must have changed, or he's just incredibly self conscious, because he smiles slightly once words escape him. "But I guess if you want to, I'll make an exception."

Levi leaves me at that moment, and although I feel vulnerable and open, I don't feel bad. In fact, I almost feel good. Besides the fact that I'm making Levi do something he doesn't want to do, which could be the downfall of our entire relationship- No. I'm in a good mood. I'm not going to overthink. I'm not ruining this for the both of us with my weak, petty attitude.

I feel good. Like it was early last year again, and I was here with Jean and we were talking about the stupid chicken at Recon and the Fairgrounds; back when I wasn't harmed in any way by my own hand, nor was I effected to greatly by my dads careless actions and words.

People pass by me, laughing with each other or engaged in lighthearted conversation. I'm almost jealous. They all seem so carefree, even though there are probably a fair amount of people who are okay and people who aren't.

Why can't I be like them? Why can't I put my problems to the back of my mind, instead of letting them consume my entire being and hold me back from living my life? They say that people often go through life without actually living it; as if we're all sleep walking our way through reality, because being asleep is so much easier than coping with life when you're awake. But I don't want to be like that, like this, forever.
I can't even stand myself - I doubt anyone else can stand me, either. I'm positive that not even Levi can stand me as much as he says he does. I'm sure he gets sick of my outbursts and attempted suicides and shit, just as much if not more than I do.

I know I would.

So why doesn't he just leave me?

I bring my mind back to reality, and see a sick looking man sitting on the stairs above The Basement, just a little ways away from where I'm sat. He's frail, and old, and looks as though he's ready to keel over at any minute. He looks just about as bad as I feel.

Suddenly, I can relate to some stranger I've never met, and I wonder if that is my destiny; to be sat alone at The Basement every Thursday night with a cigarette in one hand and a beer in the other, mindlessly letting the world spin on whilst I wallow in self pity.

If that destiny presents itself to me, chances are, I'll take it.

It'll hurt less people, and I won't be as much of a burden as I am currently. I won't need anyone to watch out for me, because none of my decisions will effect anyone else once I've managed to push them all away.

Just as the doors of The Basement open, Levi approaches me with two cans of Cola and two glasses with ice. "Sorry, the line was pretty long. It's bingo night or something."

I shrug, taking my glass and can from Levi's struggling arms. "It's okay, they've only just opened the doors now, anyway."

We walk down the stairs and into The Basement, quickly scanning the room before we find a table for two on the far side of the room. We speed-walk our way over and place our drinks down just before two other people get to it. I internally sneer, but keep my outward expression apologetic to save any fights.

With the way my mood is heading, I probably wouldn't hold back.

The show stars on time, and as the first poet takes the stage, I notice that neither Jean, Marco nor Mike show up. Could they be late? Possibly. Was it likely? Not really.

I hold onto the likely prospect that Levi and I will be able to enjoy our evening without anyone or anything coming between us; even if I'm hesitant to do so.

But that fact alone makes my thoughts wander into dangerous territory once more. Could the reason Jean isn't here be that he attempted another suicide? That he succeeded? Has he been hospitalised for drug overdose?

Could Marco be keeping him from me, somehow knowing everything that went through my mind when I stayed at Jean's house?

Is Ruth okay?

I can barely concentrate on the show. My mind covers every aspect of my friendships that it can, from their problems to the fact that I wasn't invited to the New Years party at Connie's house.

In the end, searching for the answer to those questions in my mind alone doesn't get me anywhere, and I recognise that. So, I try to enjoy the evenings entertainment, and I do enjoy seeing Levi smile
every so often. Whether it be at a joke or something I don't seem to notice, I watch as the corners of his lips turn up slightly, and his eyes crease slightly at the corners.

He notices me when I look at him smiling, and immediately puts on a frown, shaking his head. It doesn't do anything to conceal his apparent happiness, though.

"Oi, what're you looking at?" He asks, finally, smirking at me from behind his glass of soda.

"You," I grin, lopsided.

"Why in the hell would you do that?"

"Because you're cute."

In that moment, I swear that any baby rabbit or squeaking sloth could take a step back, because Levi managed to make my heart melt with a single blush. It spreads slowly across his cheeks, a pink hue only a shade darker than his skin tone; his lips contort into a cheesy, genuine smile, and he looks away from me.

Under his breath he mutters, "Geez..." and I can't help but chuckle and move closer to him, now able to wrap an arm around his shoulder.

I press a light kiss to his cheek, uncaring of the people sitting around us. "You're blushing, Levi."

"It's you, you know," He huffs, finally facing me as his blush begins to dissipate. "You're mellowing me."

"And you're turning me into an even bigger asshole."

After the show, Levi and I walk to Recon, close enough to radiate warmth. He makes comments every now and then about the people who went up on stage, and other varying things that cross his mind like the lack of stars and his distaste for one of his colleagues, Aurou.

"He's an asshole. And he copies me all the time like some child," Levi huffs, hands deep in the pockets of his dark coat. "I don't even know why. I'm his finances ex, and he feels the need to do almost everything that I do, from uniform modifications to the way I style my hair."

"Maybe he feels inferior to you?" I try, amused by Levi's animated explanations. I've never hear about Aurou - he doesn't really talk about his work.

"So he should. His kid prefers me over him any day, and Petra probably regrets ever agreeing to go out with him."

"And now they're getting married and have a kid."

Levi sighs. "Now they're getting married and have a kid." He turns to face me then, stopping me in my tracks beneath the cheesy lighting of a lamppost on the deserted, snow covered street, just over from Recon. He wraps his hands around my waist and draws me closer, leaning up to press a firm kiss it my lips. "And I've got you."

I can't help but pull him back into the kiss, deepening it by opening my lips against his own, allowing him entrance. We keep our arms around each others' waists, and our bodies press together comfortably.

Even as we pull away, desperate for breath, we stay close to each other. Even walk to Recon, and find a table, we stay close. I can't tell if it's because Levi needs comfort to enter his place of work or
if he's simply more affectionate tonight, but I humour him.

Even as Levi lightly kicks my foot with his own beneath the table, earning a few varying looks from me, I can't help but smile. Something sparked within him, and suddenly, it's like I'm on a date with a child.

I wonder if maybe I am.

Levi had to be grown up from a young age, from what I can recall. Did he ever get to experience this?

We order our meals, make small talk amongst the pleasant hum of other conversations, and enjoy the jazz music played at around 9:45pm. It isn't long before we've run out of things to say, and when our meals arrive, we eat with a comfortable silence settles between us.

I can't remember the last time I'd eaten a meal when my mind wasn't plagued with unhealthy thoughts. It's nice, to be able to enjoy a meal without worrying if my self-induced anxiety would cause me to throw it up, or if my depression would enable me to take another bite. Finally, I can enjoy something I used to enjoy, without feeling like I should be punished for experiencing a nicety.

"Is it nice?" Levi asks, wiping his mouth on a napkin and folding it neatly beneath his strategically placed knife and fork. His place is almost completely clean.

I nod. "Yeah. I'd almost forgotten how nice the food is here."

"Could it taste any better?"

"Hm?"

He chuckles dryly. "Could it taste better? Could anything be improved at all?"

I raise an eyebrow. "I guess... If I had to pick something, the sauce could be a little thinner. It's kind of sticky." Levi grins at that and sits back in his seat, smirking around his teeth. "What? Why're you smiling?" I ask, setting down my own cutlery on my plate and pushing it aside.

"Oh, nothing. I just knew there was a reason I'm head chef and Aurou is only intermediate," He says smugly. "I knew as soon as your dish was brought out that the sauce was too thick. It got on the vegetables and caused them to harden a little."

My mouth widens into a small, slightly amazed smile. "You knew the sauce was thick because of the vegetables?"

"Mmhm. So far, only myself and Hanji can perfect the sauce, and she doesn't even work here."

Levi continues to uphold his smug demeanour until the waiter, Gunther, comes to collect our empty plates. Levi tells him to let Aurou know that the sauce was too thick, and Gunther laughs heartily, assuring Levi he'll let him know.

It's comforting, in some weird way, to see Levi acting so casually. When I first met him, I could have sworn he wanted nothing to do with the world outside of his own, but as we've become closer, he's slowly letting me see into his own world.

And I'm still not satisfied by what I have seen, knowing that there is so much more that I haven't.
No matter how much I hate myself, I've always been proud of the fact that I am incredibly perceptive. Naive, sometimes dumb, and a little too trustworthy, but perceptive; I can pick up on a bad mood from three weeks away.

Maybe it's because I've lived my life having to be wary of what I say and who I say it to, constantly walking on eggshells around people who may or may not decide to lash out at me for one reason or another. It's all vague, but I've always had to be careful; maybe that's why, when Levi left to cover a shift for Gunther three hours ago, I was hesitant to let him leave.

I don't know why, but my stomach hadn't been settled since I woke up this morning, and then to have Gunther ring and ask Levi to cover his shift just set off alarm bells in my mind.

It's stupid, pathetic even. Why should I be so worried about Levi taking over a shift?

Nevertheless, when Levi texted me he was leaving work fifteen minutes ago, I had to call him. I've waited long enough, I can at least call him to make sure he's okay. He's been off these last few weeks, ever since we went to Recon even. Why, I'm not sure. But maybe that's why I didn't want him to leave in such a rush.

He'd be in a kitchen full of knives and potato peelers and flames. Would he be safe? I had to trust him.

'Hey, Eren.'

"Levi! How was work?" I ask, pensively. Why am I so nervous? It's not wrong for a person to call their boyfriend.

He gives a drawn out sigh. 'It's been better. Apparently there's some strict weather warning, that's why Gunther didn't come to work. He's crazy about superstition and shit.'

"Oh," I chuckle, lightly. "And they really let him off with those reasons?"

'Apparently. I should tell the boss I'm allergic to silverware. He'll never keep me behind to clean up the cutlery ever again.' Levi's tone is laced with sarcasm, but I laugh with him anyway, relieved to hear the sound of his sweet voice. He almost sounds like himself again.

I hum. "I'm glad you're okay. I didn't think you'd gotten enough sleep to leave for work so late." It's nearly one in the morning; there's no way Levi will be taking me to The Fairgrounds anytime soon, that I can guarantee. He's an asshole when he's tired - even more so than usual.

'Yeah, me either. But it can't be help.' The phone buts out mid sentence, and I hear the blaring of a car horn through the speaker.


I hear Levi wince from the other line, but before I can say anymore, the call disconnects. My mind reels, and I shakily jump from the couch and grab my keeps from the kitchen counter.

Holy shit... What's happened? What if he was in a car accident? None of my thought patterns made sense, not even I knew what I was thinking. I couldn't even think of what to think. Why would Levi hang up? Did it cut out because of low battery? Maybe I'm just overthinking things again.

I make it to my car and speed not too far down Trost's main road, until my questions are all
answered.

Up ahead are two ambulances, lights flashing obnoxiously against the dull, dark atmosphere of the problematic side of the city. I audibly whimper, not bothering to properly park my car up on the curb and running towards the scene.
I recognise Levi's car immediately, and as two medics make their way towards me to hold me back, I shout, "That's my boyfriends car!"

Nearly in tears, my shaky hand points towards Levi's car, where the hood is dented and crushed. The passengers side is totalled, but I can't see past the shards of cracked glass into the drivers seat.

"What's your name?" One medic asks, guiding me away from the scene by the shoulder, and towards the back of one of the ambulances. I'm too weak to struggle, but my head turns back to look at the crime scene. There were two cars, Levi's, and a small red one. I don't recognise it.

"E-Eren," I stutter, desperately trying to see any sign of life from the cars. The medic says no more and I immediately fear for the worst, and as we approach the back of the ambulance I can see inside.

Levi is lying down on the bed, a medic talking quietly to him, with an IV cord sticking from his naked arm. They can see everything; I can see everything.

Levi hadn't been himself for a reason.

"We've got someone here for you," The medic says. Levi immediately looks up to see me standing teary-eyed at the base of the ambulance, and his features soften.

"Eren... Why'd you come?" He asks.

I'm permitted entrance into the ambulance, and as the medics leave to give us some space, I break down beside him. "I t-thought you were dead! O-Or dying! What the f-fuck Levi! What the- What the fuck."

"Hey, hey, shh... It's okay, I'm not dead," He says, running his fingers through my hair; I catch sight of the fresher cuts on his forearm. "I probably should've answered the phone in this weather, that's all."

"Y-You could have died, because of me," I sigh, desperately. "I should've been ringing you in this weather... I'm so sorry, Levi. I'm s-so sorry."

He shakes his head. "Don't be. You haven't done anything wrong here. But-..."

"But?" I swallow, looking up at his pale figure bleakly. He must have lost so much blood. There are fresh, bandages wounds on his bicep and head.

"In the other car. It was Armin."

Chapter End Notes

Please forgive me.
There's So Much Pain

Chapter Notes

We're on the home stretch here, folks!
As a semi-parting gift, here's some angst.

Song/s:
Photograph - Ed Sheeran

January 17th, 2016

From: Mikasa
6:37am

Annie and I are going to Barcelona, and we want you to come with us. It's going to be great fun -
you also have no choice, your ticket has been payed for.
See you in two weeks! Love, Mikasa. x

They say that the life of one makes way for the life of another. And to that, all I can say is 'they' need
to fuck right off, because that saying is completely fucked up. But there's an unfortunate truth to that
saying, one that I hadn't ever wanted to believe, and it came to light not too long before we got the
call about Armin.

Sasha had a miscarriage, simply birthing the deceased foetus at 2am that morning; the same time
Armin had woken up from his coma.

I'd never quite recognised if what little I believed in was tied to fate or destiny or karma, but
whatever it was, in that moment I hated it. Couldn't everything just go right for once? Could the
universe simply let people catch a fucking break for just one day of their lives?

I can barely breathe, walking at a timid pace into the hospital ward. Connie hadn't said much when
we'd got the call earlier, only that the two of us were invited to come down; we'd also been called
into the hospital at Armin's request, told that he spoke of us both quite fondly, which made the guilt
we both felt that much more unbearable.

Of course, we were going to visit Sasha at her and Connie's apartment; she needed all the support we
could give her. And the information from the hospital meant that Armin was alive and as well as he
was expected to be at that point in time, which helped ease my mind a little.

'He's doing as well as expected,' was what they'd told us. What does that even mean? I'm doing as
well as expected too, for someone who hacked open his thighs to the point where they still open up if
rubbed against by course fabric for too long, and I'm still completely fucked in the head. What could
that mean for Armin? That he's a self-breathing vegetable now, and no longer needs the machine?

I mentally prepare myself to speak to the nurse at the service desk, not wanting to come off as too
much of a dick. I'd woken up in a bad mood; this trip just topped the cake.

I didn't even know Armin over a year ago - why am I so worked up over him? We're barely friends,
if even acquaintances. I'd never seen his face or even heard his name before Connie's party last year; I don't think I ever would have paid someone like him any mind, if I'm being honest. But now, I'm strangely grateful that I do. I don't know too much about the guy, but I know enough to know that he's valuable to have in my life. He isn't toxic, and he cares. Isn't that all that I can ask for?

Levi silently entwines our fingers together as we approach the desk; it's some form of comfort, and although I can't read what Levi's thoughts are whispering to him, I can only think that it's not positive.

Each sparing glance towards me suggests that his mind isn't being kind to him; remembering back to the convex cuts on his forearms in the ambulance just confirms my suspicions. Levi hasn't been okay for a long time, no matter what he'd told me. And whether it's because of the heavy pain killers or the weight of his guilt, I don't think he'll ever tell me.

I guess we're both liars. Neither one worse than the other.

He stayed in hospital for seventy two hours after the accident, and once he'd had one last check up by the doctor, he was allowed to go home. I stayed by his side most of the time, either sleeping in the chair I often occupied or managing to cuddle beside him. When I wasn't with Levi, I was at Armin's side, watching tearfully as he struggled to take breaths in his comatose state. They had said he may not wake up; when I told Levi the news, he cried.

He's still feeling guilty about the accident, of course. That's why when he grips my hand tightly, I know it's just as much a comfort for me as it is for himself. Shouldn't I be the one who feels guilty? I caused the accident, there's no doubt about it. Just like I'd done with mom...

Levi doesn't even know Armin. For all he knew, he collided with some drunken bastard. But I guess the universe just likes to fuck up the most vulnerable ones first; perhaps we provide the most entertainment to whatever lies beyond.

We arrive at the front desk after what feels like a day's journey, and he tentatively lets go of my hand, mumbling that he's going to grab a coffee from the shop downstairs. I nod, he leaves, and the nurse glances up at me from above her glasses. I manage to speak first, albeit nervously.

"Um, we're here to see Armin Arlert," I announce, nervously biting my lip. "I-I mean, myself and the guy who just walked off. He's going to get a coffee." God why did I say that, why does she care, of course she doesn't care, I'm such an idiot what am I doing, Jesus Christ.

She nods sternly. "Friend or family?" She asks. I tell her we're friends and she nods again. "Of course. Continue down the hall, it's the first one on the left after the bathrooms." I thank her and follow her instructions; I didn't think she'd let friends in to see him. Maybe he doesn't have any family here?

"Of course not, he's from Australia... Do his family even know what's happened?"

Does he even have family?

He's been moved since I last visited, and as I find his room and walk in, it's clear he's been popular amongst our friends. Flowers and cards litter the cabinet and bedside table, and there's even a necklace around Armin's neck, 'Luck' written inside the bronze coin-come-medallion in Chinese. I think. It's been too long since I studied Chinese.

Family or not, Armin must know that he's loved by a lot of people, and that makes my being here a little less uncomfortable. He doesn't even know I'd rung Levi that night... Who does he blame?
I clear my throat. "Armin?" I say, announcing my presence with a small level of uncertainty.

He immediately turns his gaze away from the open window, his usually lively eyes meeting mine for the first time in three weeks. They’re duller than I remember, pupils tinted a strange translucent cloudy colour. It makes me wonder how many pain killers he’s on; that could be the only reason he’s sitting up. There’s no way someone can come out of a three day coma without feeling like absolute shit.

I wonder if he looks at himself in the mirror and curses his appearance, curses himself for an accident that could have been avoided, feeling devoid of emotion yet searing with anger.

"Eren," He breathes, a smile forming upon his lips. "Come, sit down! I'm glad you could come, it gets really lonely here. Would you believe it?"

"Yeah," I chuckle softly, moving the chair to sit beside him. "I would actually..."

Although he's perked up, and his hair is brushed and his hospital gown is clean, I can't help but feel like something is off. There's something different about him, but I'll be damned if I can figure out just what it is. Armin cuts the silence before there's too much time to think.

"So, how've you been?" His voice lacks it's enthusiasm, but it's better than coming here to find he's a vegetable. It looked as though he would be when I saw him in emergency last.

I shrug. "Good, I guess. I've mostly just been taking care of Levi."

Armin's mouth forms a slight 'o' shape, and his eyebrows raise. He's not quite looking at me, and when he tears his eyes from my general direction, even that movement seems forced. "Oh... H-How is Levi? Is he healing properly?"

I nod. "Yeah, he seems to be. He's been pretty worried about you, too. He's just getting a coffee, I'm sure he'll be up to see you... A-Anyway. What about you? When I got the call I was pretty worried."

"No, no! Don't be worried. I just wanted to... Uh." His words are lost on the tip of his tongue, and I reach out to touch his arm in a poor attempt at comforting him. They're unscarred, I'll add. God, do I wish I could have forearms like Armin.

"What's up?" I ask, awkwardly. I wonder what could possibly be up with a twenty-something year old guy who was in a major car accident a week and a half ago, who is hooked up to all sorts of fucking machines. I wonder what could possibly fucking be up.

He swallows, scratching at his head lightly. "I just wanted to see how you were, see you, that's all... But I... I guess I can't." I frown immediately at his words. I'm right beside him. Why the hell can't he see me? Is it some sort of philosophical meaning that I don't get?

"What do you mean? I'm right here, man."

Levi walks in as my mind catches up to my mouth, and stands right beside me with his hand on my shoulder. "Is that Levi?" Armin asks.

"Yeah. It's me."

Armin smiles, looking at a spot on his lap. "It's nice to hear your voices. I haven't been able to recognise the people who have come in when I haven't been alert."

Oh.
"I'm conscious, he's not. Go and be with your friend," Levi told me strictly. "I'll see you when we get there. I'm okay."

I didn't argue with him. As much as I love Levi, I had to respect his wishes and ride with Armin. I knew that Levi was in a lot of pain, and maybe he just didn't want me to be with him when he cried in pain or told the medics of his situation.

They'd surely asked about his arms, hadn't they? I didn't ask.

I rode with Armin to Trost Medical, holding his hand in my own and talking to him. Both medics in the ambulance told me that he couldn't hear me, but when I didn't stop, they didn't push any further.

I didn't care if they thought I was crazy; there's no way I wasn't going to comfort Armin if he really could hear me. He had to know someone was by his side.

It seemed to take forever to get to the hospital, and with every passing minute, I wished for nothing more than to take away both Armin and Levi's pain. Neither of them deserved this, but I knew I did, and I would have preferred to be the one hurting than to watch two people I love in many different ways suffer.

But I knew that was a waste of thought, too.

Once we reached the hospital, and both Levi and Armin were being attended to, Levi was given the good news; he was in a stable condition, and would only need to stay in to be monitored for three days or so. Although he wasn't happy about not being able to shower on his own the next day, we were both relieved.

Armin however wasn't stabilised, and fell into a comatose state. The doctors said all they could do was wait; each suggested I go home and sleep, and that they would ring me in the morning.

I wanted to stay with Levi, at least, as they wouldn't let me stay with Armin, but he disagreed with every reason and protest I gave. 'Go home and rest for tonight,' He said. 'If you still want to tomorrow, you can sleep here then. It's been too stressful for you to loose sleep over this. Promise me you'll stay safe?'

'I promise.'

So I went home. And I didn't sleep. And I broke my promise.

I fucked up again, and as if I wasn't selfish enough as it is, I took a blade to my thighs and cut deep into the already marred flesh. I loathed myself as I did it, but I couldn't stop, watching as the pale flesh beneath the first layers of skin split open pale pink, large gashes flooding dark blood within seconds. Watching as my skin tore apart by the edge of the blade reminded me of a calm I hadn't felt in so long.

Why did I ever think I could live without feeling?

I broke Levi's promise, but I fell asleep soon after. At least I'd done one thing right by Levi; they would be easier to hide there. What he didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

Two days later, Levi was permitted to come home. He couldn't bare to talk about the accident, and he hated when Armin came into the conversations. He felt completely at fault, and although I couldn't blame him for that, I blamed myself too.
If I hadn't rung him in the first place, neither of them would be hurt. But as Levi told me the day before we got the call, 'You can't change the past, but you have every hold on the future.'

Maybe that's why I decided to go and visit Armin when we were called in by the hospital, despite the call from Connie, instead of sweeping it beneath the rug and never speaking to him again.

I didn't blame him for the accident, even though Levi could have been seriously harmed and I may have lost the love of my life, but I didn't want to lash out at him in his tender state. I was beyond happy to know he was awake.

But why the hell would he want to see me?

-x-

"Armin you're- you're blind?" I ask, incredulously.

*How could this have happened? Was it the coma, or the accident as a whole? This isn't fair. Someone like Armin has so much to see in the world - and now it's been taken from him.*

*Because of me. Indirectly or not, if I hadn't been a needy fucking asshole, neither of them would be here right now.*

He swallows and hums. "Yeah... That's, yeah. It's... It's not that bad, really. Well, I mean, it is, but I'm getting used to it. I can see shadows, kind of, but I can't tell the difference between a person and a dinner tray so- so..." Armin cuts himself off with a sigh, nibbling gently at his lower lip. "S-Sorry, I didn't want to get upset in front of you guys," He chuckles, weakly.

"It's- it's okay, Armin. I'd be upset too..."

Levi sighs nasally and takes up another chair from across the room, bringing it to sit on the other side of Armin. His blue eyes follow Levi as he walks, a little delayed, and he smiles as Levi sits down.

"I'm glad you're alright, Levi," He starts. "I can't believe your insurance won't cover the damage to your car. I'll help you out in any way I can."

Levi shakes his head. "No, it's fine. I'll pay it off. You need to focus on an early recovery so they can get you started on Braille and therapy."

Armin smiles, sarcastically. "What a blast, I can't wait for lessons on Braille..."

We talked lightly for an hour and a half, before Armin's nurse came around with a dose of pills that were sure to make him drowsy and a sandwich for his lunch. Amongst the hard feelings, and the words left unsaid, we said our goodbyes and left the ward; Armin's fleeting glance directly into my eyes sent a pang of guilt through me. I can't help but feel guilty, no matter how much Armin and Levi tell me not to blame myself.

Levi drives us back to his apartment, silent the whole way there. I want to ask him what's wrong, but something within me stops the words from escaping. I believe that deep down, I feel something negative towards Levi about the accident. Anger, fear. I can't name it, but it's unfairly directed towards everyone involved.

And as far as I know it, Armin's involvement was completely innocent. It's not fair at all that he's coming out blind and Levi has come out unscathed.

A bitter taste is noticeable in my mouth. I'm such a horrible person, believing in fairness in pain.
Sasha and Connie's apartment is a lot larger than Levi's, but even with the amount of love pored into everything within its interior, the feeling if the room is bleak. Levi and I are greeted at the door by Connie, and as we walk in, it's clear that neither of them have really coped well.

There's a mattress set out in the floor of the living space, to which Connie chuckles, weakly, sheepishly. Sasha sits on their secondhand couch with her shoulders slumped, and both hands perched absently on her deflating stomach. When she hears us come in, she doesn't speak.

"Sorry for intruding," Levi says, immediately sensing the tension in the air. "If it's any trouble, I can wait outside."

"No," Connie says, petting Levi on the shoulder as we walk into the kitchen. "No way. It's real nice of you guys to be here. I'm, uh- not sure if I can say that you're invited just for Sasha."

His eyes are sunken, and there's an absence in his voice that suggests things haven't been as well as they could have, even considering the circumstances.

I needed these words, but only because I'm selfish. Connie isn't selfish, he's hurting... Then I remember he didn't invite me to his New Years party, and my words sound painfully forced. "We're here for you."

I'm such an ugly human being.

Levi and I stand in the kitchen as Connie makes coffees, both knowing its best to stay out of the way until Connie goes into the living room with us. I don't know anything about pregnancy, besides mood swings and cravings, but it doesn't take a genius to know the pain that someone who looses their child would be feeling.

I don't deserve to feel bad about myself and my situation; it's nothing compared to his, or Armin's. Why do I even think about that shit? There are people who have it so much worse than me in my own backyard, and I dare to think my problems even compare?

They don't. They do. I'm conflicted. Levi brushes his hand against mine carefully; Connie beckons us into the living room.

"Eren and Levi are here," Connie says, hesitantly, setting down the four coffees on the small wooden table. "I made you a coffee. Do you feel like anything to eat?"

"No!" Sasha shouts, flashes of ignored emotions passing over her face before she slumps into herself once more. "N-No... I don't...fucking want anything, I-... S-Sorry, you guys. I'm gonna- gonna go to my room. You don't have to stay long." She stands and nods, more so to herself, barely acknowledging us.

I know she's hiding tears. No one says anything. Connie lets out a silent sob.

"She, uh... She was fine with you guys coming over before, you know." Connie places his coffee on the table again, untouched, runs his hand over his forehead. "We're uh, not so good. At the moment. Maybe I should have given it a few days."

"It's okay," I say, sparing him a sympathetic glance. "Don't worry about it. I'm sure it's hard on both
of you."

Connie hums. "Us, her dad, my parents. No ones happy. And I fucking... God. It's my fault this is even happening. We should have waited, we should have-"

"Connie." Levis voice breaks the both of us our of our spells, and we both turn to stare at him. "It's not your fault. You can't know when you're making the wrong decision until you've made it, there's no use dwelling on what's already happened. Don't take the blame for something that could have happened to anyone at any time."

"Sasha needs to know you're there for her, but she doesn't need to be smothered. Don't be a slave to her every word, just be there by her side for when she really needs you. No one likes to feel like a charity case, especially people who take the responsibility of something into their own hands, solely." Levi seems to recall something, his eyes seeming distant for a few mere seconds, before he returns.

"Let her deal with the grief however she chooses to, while you deal with it in your own way. But don't think that either of your needs are more or less important than the others. And don't take the blame for something that you didn't do."

Levi's words are always so carefully executed, like he's rehearsed them months prior to the moment. It makes his comforting a little false, sometimes, but I know deep down that Levi always speaks the truth when it comes to others.

I wish he wouldn't lie to himself.

We stay with Connie a little while longer. He cries, I resist the urge to cry, and Levi looks just about as comfortable as a mouse in a python enclosure. It's awkward, but it has to be done.

I run away from these things, barely able to handle my own problems, let alone someone else's. Levi seems to not care about anything, when in reality, he probably cares the most. And Connie has never been anything but cheerful in front of me; it's so different to see him a mess. It makes him human.

It makes me feel human, too.

We part ways after half an hour, when Sasha re-emerges and engulfs us all in equally bone-crushing hugs. Connie accepts it gratefully, I'm less enthusiastic, and Levi mouse-snake metaphor just became a segment on the discovery channel.

Sasha by no means less of a mess as we leave, but there's a little more light in her eyes, which I recognise immediately. When you've been through hell, you know when someone's just about to get out of it.

"I might be late picking you up from Mike tomorrow," Levi admits, just before we round the corner to our apartment block.

"Why's that?" I ask. I have to curb the anxiety. It's fine. We're fine. People can be late sometimes it doesn't matter.

"I'm catching up with some old friends."

"Oh." Old friends, huh. Is this where I find out he's been so quiet because he's been cheating on me? "W-Who?"

"Isabel and Farlan."
They dealt him drugs. "Levi..."

"It's fine." Levi's voice is reassuring, almost intimidatingly so. "I've been... I've been clean for a long time now, years, so I'll be fine. As far as I'm aware, they've been clean for longer than I have. At any rate, I'd leave if things got too... You know."

"Yeah... Okay."

"You're not convinced."

My mouth opens and closes, my eyebrows raised. "W-Well, yeah! Of course I'm not convinced, Levi. You've been down for ages now, you haven't told me why, and now you're catching up with your druggie friends? Isn't that just a little too coincidental?"

Levi grits his teeth, jaw clenching, as we pull into the car park. "And you left a bloody blade on the bedroom floor the night before I came home from hospital. Anything you'd like to tell me about that, since we're being honest here?"

My eyes widen. His eyes widen. I don't let the words escape his lips as I storm up to our apartment, my own set of keys in my pocket. He doesn't call out for me as I walk away, and two parts of my scream separate cries of desperation.

Please come and apologise, make me feel better, don't shy away. We said shitty things, it happens.

I hate your guts. You're a cruel bastard, who wouldn't even be honest with me when he'd been hurting himself just days, maybe even hours before his car accident.

Say something, anything! My pace slows as I reach the elevator, but I don't hear or see Levi coming for me. I take that as a sign to get up to the apartment and go the fuck to sleep. Maybe I'll cut myself some more, hm? I'm such a shitty person, causing him that much trouble, maybe he won't mind if he sees two bloody blades on his clean carpet. Maybe a knife, too. And my dead fucking body.

Throwing open the door of our apartment, I don't bother to close it, making a beeline for the bedroom. I find my stash of blades immediately, but something inside of me bubbles with an unknown fear.

I hold all of the blades in my hand, all seven. It's a promise, a lie; a fear, an anticipation. Something that has conquered me, and something that I can conquer.

Fuck this. I sink to my knees. There's seven cuts on my left forearm, one for each blade I'd kept hidden, and one for each year of my life I'd wishes for death and never been brave enough to act on it. I want to add more, to use every single blade in my palm and just get it over with.

Am I brave enough now? Could I do it? Of course I could do it. Of course I fucking can. Who gives a shit anymore? Not Levi, and I never have. Who would I be hurting if I died? Mom's done, dad never gave a shit, and I haven't heard from Mikasa in almost a month.

Fuck... Fuck!

"I hate this! I fucking hate this!" I shout, tearing at my hair. "I'm fucked! This world is fucked! I give up! I fucking hate this, I fucking hate myself..."

"Fuck you!"

My head lifts and my eyes encounter Levi's. Tears drench his cheeks. He looks old.
"No, fuck you!" I shout, standing weakly on my feet and approaching him. "Look what you've done!"

"No, you did that! I didn't tell you to do that, you fucking moron!" He screams. Both of our faces hurt from squinting, trying to keep out tears from falling. We're tired, sore, hurting. But we don't stop.

"I'm the moron!? You tell me not to hurt yourself, when you were going to go off and fuck up without telling me!"

"I was only trying to care for you!"

"By putting yourself in danger? Who's the legal adult here, Levi? Because it certainly isn't fucking me. Fuck off and let me kill myself, you won't remember me when you're high with your fucked up friends, so it doesn't matter!"

Levi's chest heaves, and his voice cracks. "They're dead! They're fucking dead for fuck sake!"


Levi's knees buckle, and he falls to the floor, clutching his hair like the disaster he is. "They died. I was fucking... I didn't go. I was with you, I didn't want to see them, and they double suicided! Fuck! Fucking- Jesus..."

My body goes numb, my fingers nimble against the carpet I grip shaky. They... Died? And I was yelling at him for going to get high when-... What exactly was he going to visit?

Tears stream lightly down Levi's face, and he makes no effort to wipe them away. Instead, he lowers his gaze until it falls upon his arms holding his knees to his chest. I don't know what to do, nor what to say, so I sit there in silence. Maybe he just needs to think for a moment? I've never had to do this before with Levi; I'm not even sure I can form the words he needs to hear most.

I know I can't. Not when I'd yelled at him, convinced him that he was far worse off than I was in recovery, when I swore to him that I would kill myself.

When I swore to myself that I would commit suicide, and let Levi find my body... After he's found two more?

With Jean, this came easier; it was just natural. But I wasn't as fucked up back then - I could almost truly believe everything I told him was true. But now, I'm not so certain, and I know that Levi isn't stupid enough to hold onto pathetic dreams like that.

Is he?

He sniffs, then rests his chin on his knees and sighs nasally. "You know... I never thought I'd show this side of me to anyone before." He chuckles, dryly and forced, gaze unfaltering. "At the lookout, I was afraid. At school, I was suffering. But here? Now? I'm just... I'm just so, so fucking done."

I swallow. "Levi..."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry for everything I've ever said to you that h-hurt you... I'm a fucking monster. And I'm sorry... I've suppressed memories of my past for so long, knowing full well that they'd explode all at once on the nearest person..." He finally lets his eyes settle upon my own, and he sighs once more. "I'm sorry it had to be you. You don't- don't deserve this. And I don't deserve you."
His gaze is blank, almost unfeeling; desolate, and devoid of emotion. He looks as though at any minute he may just disappear completely, and I can't help but feel like he wishes that would happen.

I have to go about this carefully; I need to choose my words, and think. I was so nasty, so horrible. He's been so broken. "Why would you be sorry?" I ask, scanning his figure desperately for some kind of sign that he might just be okay.

I know what it's like to be so broken you can barely stand on your own two feet - I can't let Levi down when he needs someone most... Has he ever even had anyone at a time like this before?

"I don't know, but I am... I wish- I wish I could be the person I make myself out to be. I want to be strong, and have my life together, and be able to manage on my own but I just-... I just can't. And I'm sorry." He shakes his head, returning to his previous position and biting his lower lip.

"I'm sorry for pretending all this time. I'm sorry to you, and to myself. Who am I kidding? I'll never be who I wanted to be. I'm always going to be a drugged up whore, always going to want to get high or cut myself when I feel like shit, because that's just who I am. I'm a mess. I'm an idiot. I'm- I'm just like my fucking uncle."

It's a lot to process, and the dusty cogs in my mind find it hard to process. But out of everything that he said, the thing that stood out to me was cut myself when I feel like shit. I swallow, drawing in a tentative breathe. "Levi... Have you- Did you...?"

He shrugs. "Why does it matter. It was inevitable that I'd fuck myself over again, wasn't it? It's not like I have the willpower or... Or strength to actually stick to the promises I make... Hell, I couldn't even fucking bring myself to go and see my childhood friends, and now they're fucking dead."

The way he'd look at his arms, the way he faltered around words, the way a simple song had brought him to tears and pushed him into a black hole of despair; he's not telling me everything, and he hasn't from the start.

I grind my teeth with nerves, trying to think what Levi would do if the role was reversed. I used to be so good at comforting others, and now I can't even comfort my own boyfriend, who's done it so many times for me I can barely count.

But what can I say? You can't get to know someone wholeheartedly. That's impossible. Everyone has things they keep to themselves, and secrets and pasts that they'd rather not share. But somehow, I think that what Levi isn't sharing is tearing him apart.

And he knows it, too.

It's just how I get him out speak up that's going to be the tricky part. He never says anything unless it's beneficial to me, or if it comes on so quickly that neither of us have any time to prepare when he looses his composure, and those walls he spent so many years completing begin to crumble around him.

Think, Eren, think. "Levi... I know you want things to be better, and I can't promise you that they ever will be, but you need to know something." He doesn't lift his head, or let recognition of my words be seen in his lost eyes; he simply stays staring at the floor, waiting for me to continue. And I do, albeit a little hesitantly.

I shrug. "Just being okay... It's good. Sometimes, okay is enough, because it has to be." I reach out to put an arm around his shoulder, drawing him into my chest in the most comforting way I can manage. It's bittersweet confront; I make myself sick. His shaky breath comes out slowly, and as he
closes his eyes in my lap, I can feel his warm tears wetting my jeans.

He's been trying to keep himself together all this time, when he was too broken to do it. Was he trying to do that for my sake? Has he caused himself all of this pain, because of me?

... *Have I caused him to be in this much pain?*

I pet his hair with one hand, and entwine the fingers of my other hand with his own. He brings our hands closer to his face and nudges into the touch, sighing against the back of my hand as he comes down from his outburst.

After a few minutes, he swallows, wetting his dry throat enough to speak. "I'm sorry for all of this. You shouldn't have had to be here for this."

"You would have gone through this on your own, if I wasn't around?" I question.

"I prefer it that way," He says, numbly. "I don't like burdening others with problems I should be able to handle on my own... Huh, I'm a hypocrite, right? I tell you, all the time, that you should talk about your feelings so you don't bottle them up and end up like... Like me."

"Oh, Levi... Would you really never have told me this happened if I wasn't here?"

He nods. "It would have come and gone, and I'd move on, pretending like nothing ever happened and that I really was the person I make myself out to be."

I run my fingertips through his hair rhythmically, stroking it and twirling the ends gently, feeling him relax beneath the touch. Levi presses a light kiss to the back of my hand. "Do you remember last week, how I didn't want to have sex with you?" Levi asks, mumbling into my hand. He's hesitating; something is definitely going through his mind that isn't healthy.

"I do."

He swallows. "I didn't want you to see what I'd done to myself," He admits. "You've become so much stronger than you were when I first met you, and I knew that if you were confronted by those images, you'd fall back into the negative thinking... I know I did..."

*Because of me? Have I caused this, too?*

"And now," Levi grits his teeth, and I feel another hot tear hit my jeans. "Now I'm gonna have to wait more fucking time, because I can't even hold off for long enough to let the others heal before I go off and fuck myself over again, and again, and again."

He'd hurt himself, and he wasn't going to tell me. I shake my head, running my fingers through his hair more vigorously now, attempting to keep him calm and distract myself with a soothing task, instead of something destructive.

I thought that everything made sense. That we made sense. But I was so, so wrong.

None of this made sense. This situation, this moment, even the fucking way our minds told us that we needed to hurt ourselves to continue living, when we both wanted nothing more than to die at one stage of our meaningless lives. It was all complete bullshit.

Whilst Levi wasted his own precious time and energy on helping me, he was only causing himself more harm than before. And whilst I was so focused on my own problems, I'd never even considered that maybe my suffering was causing him suffering too.
"I'm an idiot," I whisper, the desired effect of those words not having enough meaning when said in my own mind. "I'm sorry, Levi. This is all my fault."

"What?"

"It's my fault. I've caused you to feel this way, because I've made it seem like my problems are so much worse than yours, when really, they're-"

"Don't." Levi sits up abruptly, and now I can truly take in how much of a wreck he is. His eyes are red and puffed, as are his cheeks; he looks worn out, exhausted. "Don't you dare blame my problems on you, Eren. This breakdown is my own fault, because I don't speak. I listen to you and get you to speak so I can ignore my own issues and focus solely on yours, because I value your life over my own. I'm selfish, Eren. I'm a selfish piece of shit, and if being selfish means that you can live the quality life you deserve and I loose track of my own healing, so be it."

"I couldn't care less about myself. I've given up on that. What I care about, is you. I'm selfish for believing that I could take away your pain from you, because I can't. I'm selfish because I give more shits about your day than I do about making sure I manage to see the whole day through without walking in front of a bus or some shit. I'm selfish because-" He stops, eyes wide, and I once again witness the falling of the walls.

"I'm selfish because... I believe that taking my own life would do the world a favour, and I forget that no matter how insignificant my life is to the world, it's significant to someone." He relaxes a little, sinking back into the couch with a designated sigh. "Isn't that the most selfish thing you can think? One, that you would take your own life. And two, because you think you actually matter to people..."

I have to remind myself that it isn't a fight, and that it isn't a break up. Even when Levi leaves me in the living room to make a phone call. Even when I stare blankly ahead and contemplate the notion that Levi wants to take his own life, and thinks that he doesn't matter to me at all. Even when I'm reminded by his bittersweet words that I am also insignificant, and that I'm causing him more trouble than I'm worth.

I pull out my phone and send a text to Mikasa, then make my way to Levi's bedroom and pull out my backpack. It's nauseating, having to pack minimal items into my backpack once more, leaving another place that is home to both comfort and fear. It's like reliving the first time I left home, but knowing that I won't be meeting another person like Levi out there.

I sigh, staring into the contents of my backpack. It's not a breakup. We're not breaking up, or taking a break.

We have to figure ourselves out before we really commit to this. I have to get my shit together, and Levi has to get his shit together. Sometimes, two shards of broken glass fit perfectly together; an ensemble fit for a mosaic. Other times, you have to chip around the edges for the pieces to fit together.

It's time consuming, but it's all worth it in the end.

To: Mikasa
11:53pm
hey, im gonna stay at yours and annies tonight before the flight.
hope this is okay.
From: Mikasa  
11:57pm  
OMW. Everything okay?

I don't respond. I shove my phone into the back pocket of my jeans and turn towards the doorway, backpack in hand. Levi's stood there wearing a grim expression, taking in the scene in front of him.

"You're going to Mikasa's." He doesn't even need to ask. He already knows the answer.

I nod. "I am... I have to be up early for the flight."

"I see." Levi swallows, wiping at his red eyes once more. "I guess... I'll see you sometime. I'm sorry. I've ruined your view of me forever."

Shaking my head I step forward, cupping his face in my hands. "This isn't a breakup. I'm going to Barcelona tomorrow with my sister and her girlfriend; we just happened to have shit hit the fan the night before."

He stares into my eyes blankly, but the slightest warmth returns to his eyes as he rests his own hands atop mine. "I'll still be here when you get back, if you'll have me..." Levi sniffles, and I can't help but feel a twinge of guilt about this whole situation. "G-God... I'm gonna fucking miss you... I'm making a promise to you now, Eren, and I'm not going back on it. I'm gonna wait for you."

"Levi..."

"Really," He says, swallowing. "Please... If you don't want to be with me anymore, I understand. I wouldn't want to be with me either... J-Just let me know, okay? I won't be mad."

My bottom lip quivers. "Are you...? Are you trying to break up with me?"

Levi's eyes avert from my own, and my hands fall from his face in shock. This isn't happening. This can't be happening, the night before I leave. We can't end like this. I can't handle it. I won't be able to handle it in Barcelona, they have strict rules about sharps on aeroplanes and with Mikasa around I-

"Eren." Levi looks up at me with tears pricking at his eyes, and if possible, my heart shatters to pieces. "We're not... I'm not... I don't think we're good for each other, the way that we are."

"What?" I choke, ignoring the sound of my phone vibrating in my pocket.

He takes in a sharp breath. "I wanted to protect you. I wanted you to feel safe, and loved, but I can't... I can't protect you if I can't protect myself, and I've been a shitty role model for you, Eren. You need to heal, and I need to heal, but we're just not getting anywhere if we're walking in circles around each other all the time."

Levi's voice cracks as he speaks, and my mind clouds with every memory of us that it can possibly conjure up in the moments he takes to speak.

With a final composed breath, he grinds his teeth and clasps his own hands together with nerves. "I'm sorry, Eren... H-Have fun in Barcelona. You'll enjoy it. I'll-"

"Levi-"

"I'll be here, still, probably, when you get back so... So if you don't hate me then, maybe we can try this all again. Or we can pretend it never happens, if- if that's what your prefer."
I shake my head and reach out for his hands. He tries to pull away, already walking towards his bedroom, but I pull him back and make him face me. "Levi, don't you dare. Don't you dare walk away, because I know what you're going to do. Don't you fucking dare think it's okay for me to move on and heal, and for you to get stuck in that rut you were in for so long."

His eyes widen, but they don't leave mine, even as they swell and redden. "I'm not leaving you like this. I know what it's like to want to be alone when it's the worst possible thing you can do. I know that you think that pushing people away will help you, but in the end, it's only going to make you feel even fucking worse, and I know you know that too. So don't you dare try to walk away from me now, Levi!"

"I'm not strong, I'll admit that, but you sure as hell are. You tell yourself you're not, but you fucking are, and if you think that trying to end this, us, right before I leave the fucking country is saving me grief, it's not."

"You're not doing this to save yourself, you're doing this to save me. I know you don't hate me, and I fucking know that if you leave I'll blame myself for the rest of my miserable life. Maybe not tomorrow, but today, right now. I'll blame myself for this moment. So don't you dare do this. You're stronger than you think, and I know you know that."

Levi takes a step backwards. "Goodbye, Eren... I-I hope I can see you when you get back."

"L-Levi, please." The strength in my voice disappears, as does Levi, who walks around the corner into his room, shutting the door softly behind him.

Mikasa knocks at the door. My bags are by the couch. My world has left me, perhaps eternally. My heart is empty and my mind is numb.

What more is there to say?
It's Raining Somewhere Else

Chapter Notes

Shorter, but necessary. Why? Well -insert drumroll here-
The next chapter is the last! Hooray!
They're both about the same length, and if they weren't this one would be unbearably long and I don't think I would feel comfortable averaging at about 7,000 words per chapter (bar this one and earlier ones) then ending with a 10k-er.

Anywho. Thanks for sticking with me this far you guys, I love each and every one of you. But I'll save the sappy crap for the next chapter. :) my baby is coming to an end.

EDIT: yeah aha um I decided to add an extra chapter because I'm a weenie and I felt the need for an epilogue. Rome wasn't built in a day, you know? I can't just leave the story where I was going to... Thanks for understanding. x

I loved him. Every second spent away from him since the moment I left was torture. From crying like a baby in Mikasa's arms until Annie called to see if she'd found our apartment alright, to crying between Mikasa and Annie back at their apartment. I cried, Mikasa cried. Even Annie cried. I didn't tell them the whole story, but what I had said was enough to bring two of the strongest people I know to tears; that was enough to keep me going for the rest of the night.

It was also enough of a reminder that strong people hurt too, which made the pain in my chest all the more unbearable. Just thinking about what Levi must have been going through made me sick to the stomach. He'd endured all that I had and more, yet I had the audacity to think that he was so much better than I was.

And he is- or, he was. He was strong, stronger than I'd ever be, but that didn't make him bulletproof; and it definitely didn't make what I did any more painless than it was.

I lost him. Every minute was pain, having to practically slap away my own hand as it hovered over his name in my contacts several times at the airport. My head hurt, my eyes were swollen, and I couldn't take the stares I was getting from people who didn't really care, but somehow saw something about me that made them stop and wonder. I wanted nothing more then to hold him in my arms and scream. I wanted to kiss him all over, to hold him until he could hear my heart beating for him and only him, and to tell him I loved him more than anything in the world.

I missed him. It was torture, knowing that my last image of Levi was him in tears; scared, confused, lost. He saw something in me I never thought would be seen by another human being, something that not even I had seen for so long. And yet, he took me in and fell in love with the monster I'd become, regardless of what I could or couldn't see within myself.

And finally, I left him. I left him a crying mess, left him to his own devices, left him stranded and aching for release. He walked away, sure, but I fucking flew half way across the world for crying out loud.

It was a disaster. I was a disaster.
I didn't hate him, I hated myself. But when I wasn't hating anything at all, completely emotionless and disassociate, what more was there to do? I stared off into space as we waited for our flight to be called, subconsciously aware of the people who must have been wondering how on earth a hobo like me could afford a plane ticket. I really looked like shit, probably more so than I felt like it.

Wearing my loosest pair of sweatpants and a dark green jacket, I felt like a zoo animal: constantly being watched over by my keepers, and gawked at by strangers who hadn't seen an animal quite like me before out of its usual environment.

That would be our bed, of course. Or our couch. Or On The Run, if that could ever be considered one of my environments. I hadn't heard back from Erwin in many months since I first...

Yeah. There's the hating myself again.

The plane was cold; I had every right to cover my arms and legs from their lingering stares, which was nice. I hadn't slept well; I slept through the whole flight, never needing to disturb Annie and Mikasa for a bathroom break. And the sound of Levi closing his bedroom door echoed through my mind the entire trip; it hurt, more than any blade every could, more than any self-acknowledgement ever could.

We arrived at El-Prat Airport in the early morning, and as I breathed in the unfamiliar air, I felt strange. Something I hadn't felt since I was a child bubbled within my stomach, a feeling I feared I would never feel again.

It was excitement. Pure, childish, almost uncontrollable excitement.

My stomach buzzed with an anxiety that I didn't want to go away. I felt alive, like if someone started a trend of people skinny dipping in public fountains then I would follow it, regardless of my outward appearance and my fears. I felt free. Mikasa and Annie noticed, embarrassingly so, having to pry me through the airport amongst the people, our arms linked together as we headed for the baggage claim.

After a coffee and a few pastries at a small airport cafe, and reluctantly following Mikasa through the duty-free shopping part of the airport, we took a bus to our hotel: Torre Catalunya. Our room is huge, welcoming, with a large spa in the bathroom. The view is indescribable, looking over most of Barcelona. Annie had booked us a meal in the evening at the restaurant on the top floor, with a panoramic view of the city.

"This isn't real," I say, unintentionally aloud, observing the atmosphere around me. I'm not uncomfortable. I'm not anxious. I'm bubbling, thrilled, ecstatic.

And Levi isn't here with me. What is Levi doing? I can't help but wonder about the pain he's going through, some of which I fucking caused-

Annie chuckles, snapping my attention back to the present moment. "It is. Amazing, isn't it? I'm glad my father came through."

Mikasa smiles, her arm snaking around Annie's waist. The atmosphere is bittersweet from my point of view. "Me too. I thought for sure when you said 'girlfriend' he was going to challenge you to some hand-to-hand combat duel or something."

"He probably would have if you weren't there," Annie shrugs. "But I would have beaten him anyway."

As we unpacked on our respectable sides of the room, Annie and Mikasa sharing the double bed on the left and myself on the single by the window, I get an urge. And for the first time in a long time,
it's not destructive. Though destruction doesn't stem far from thinking.

But this thought is intriguing, unfamiliar; and it doesn't leave me for an entire week.

We spend most of that week in the hotel, recovering from jet lag and emotional confrontations, with scarce trips to the gym, one trip to a small restaurant in the city, and a single trip to the pool. When we found out you had to pay to use it, I swore Annie was going to deck the poor guy, but she didn't; it was worth the money, for them at least. I sat on the chairs reading a book - I didn't need Annie and Mikasa finding out about things that didn't concern them.

And things that didn't concern them hadn't happened at all for nearly three weeks now. That doesn't sound like a lot, but it feels like an eternity. Self harm is an addiction often given in to; missing the stinging kiss of a cold razor like a drug addict misses the burning of heroin. Huh. Ironic correlation.

I still wonder how Levi is doing.

We'd been overseas for about half a month now, and I hadn't hurt myself once. I hadn't really felt the need to, either, which brought about yet another unfamiliar feeling: hope.

Of course, I thought about it. Not a day goes by where I don't think about it - but that's as far as the thoughts go. I don't act on them. I let them stay as they are and carry on, even if they dull my mood a little.

And there's that feeling again, that feeling to do something reckless. But I push it aside and follow closely behind Mikasa and Annie through the bustling city streets, almost but not quite relishing at the feeling of the sun hitting my visible skin in the most pleasant way.

The three of us choose a table for three at the back of a small restaurant, relieved to see that they have an English menu. It's cool inside, and the atmosphere is welcoming, homely in its own little way.

"Maybe we should have read up on our Spanish..." Mikasa comments, sipping an iced tea after we've placed our orders. "I feel bad having to keep asking them to repeat what they say. I'm sure it's hard to learn the languages of tourists."

Annie hums. "But think about it, Mikasa. We have all kinds of tourists in America, yet we understand them better than we do our own language." Mikasa and I snort, Annie's expression smug. "Still though, you've gotta hand it to them, they're a pretty resilient bunch. Some people are so rude."

Mikasa quirks a brow. "You make a good point." Her gaze directs itself towards me, trying to regulate my breathing in the humid room. It's a hotter day today, and I've been dying to get back to the hotel room and take a cold shower. My distress doesn't go unnoticed, and Mikasa touches my forearm lightly to grab my attention.

Her eyes are worrisome. "Eren, why don't you just take your jacket off? It's hot as hell in here. You're gotta get a stroke or something."

"Don't worry," Annie smirks. "I haven't been to training in a few weeks either, you won't be the only one with sunken muscles."

I roll my eyes, trying to ignore the weight in my stomach. "Har har, very funny. But I'm fine. It's not that hot."

"Yeah, tell that to the sweat running down your cheeks. Just take it off, people go shirtless everywhere here," Mikasa says, her questing gaze scrutinising me. "If it would make you feel better, I'll even go shirtless."
"Yes please," Annie murmurs, to which Mikasa gives her a playful shove.


"You were wearing a long-sleeve yesterday too."

"W-Well... They're comfortable!"

"Eren... I- I don't want you to feel uncomfortable, or pressured, but," Mikasa begins, chewing her bottom lip pensively. Annie seems to go tense. "But, is there any reason that you don't wear short sleeves?"

"No!" I answer quickly, too quickly, then swallow. "Um. I uh-"

"Two chicken burgers and a plate of nachos?"

Conversation dies down. We eat our food quickly, quietly, hanging onto words and thoughts left unspoken. After we've eaten, we head straight back up to the motel. I shower quickly, using up as little hot water as possible, and stare down at my bare, scarred arms for over fifteen minutes once I'm clean and dry. They're no longer cuts, but scars of varying shades of pink and white.

Sickeningly, I want them to be cuts. I want to see beneath my outer layer of skin and feel the burning of the pads of my fingers pressing onto soft and tender flesh.

I'm such an idiot. I've done this to myself, and I didn't feel a spot of remorse. I intentionally cut open my flesh with every intention of seeing blood, with every intention not to regret cutting too deep and watching blood cascade down my arms until my eyes blinked closed.

Every shirt I ever picked out for birthdays, for Christmas, to mark special occasions. I can never wear them again. I will never, ever be able to look down at my body and see my scars and feel like I've grown. They'll always be there, and I'll always regret them.

I guess you never truly appreciate the luxuries you have until they're taken away from you. But I took those luxuries away from myself.

Isn't this what I deserve? To suffer beneath the fabric of long sleeves for the rest of my miserable life, knowing exactly what torment and suffering lies beneath? To deal with the thoughts that plague my mind in every waking hour, telling me to do it again and again and again until I feel nothing at all and flatline on the cool tiles of some foreign bathroom floor?

My limbs ache. I'll never be able to wear short sleeves again. Summer will never sound appealing. No matter how many scars fade to white, there will always be a few that stay raised or pink, and those will always burn into my eyes like looking directly at the reflections of the sun on a tin roof.

My head drops in my hands once I've put on my long-sleeve pyjama shirt. What if I didn't have to hide them? I know I don't, but I need to.

But what if there was nothing to hide? At least, nothing as bad? I grit my teeth.

Maybe there can be.
Mikasa and Annie were at the spa for the day, a gift from Annie's father to celebrate their one year anniversary. I had to pinch myself at that thought; it had been a year since Annie and Mikasa first met. That meant it had been over a year since Levi and I first met, too.

With that being said, I had a whole afternoon to myself in some lovely part of Barcelona, with my minimal to naught knowledge of Spanish. So, when my eyes landed on a small store across the road, I couldn't help but let my feet guide me through the traffic unscathed.

It's not like I could start a conversation with a stranger, or go to some basement show. I probably couldn't even order a drink anywhere - what on earth am I doing?

I couldn't say where my mind was, but for the first time in a long time, I was making a reckless decision that wouldn't hurt me. Well, it would, but it wouldn't leave a nasty scar I would regret only minutes after its conception.

No. This decision would leave behind something worth looking at, something I could be proud to show; something Levi wouldn't have to look at and feel uncomfortable at the thought of what had led to it.

I sigh as I push open the heavy doors, a small bell ringing above my head. There I go again, thinking about Levi... I miss him, there's no point in denying it. Why can't I work up the courage to ring him? Or even just to send him a text message? I don't even know if he'd even answer...

Who am I kidding, of course he'd answer. We didn't break up. I left for Barcelona with an unspoken promise left to float in the air until it was confirmed to remain unbroken; the same promise I was unsure if Levi had made, too.

If I rang him now, would he even pick up? Would my contact even still be saved? Maybe he's moved on with his life, saying good riddance to my pathetic existence and reconnecting with people from his last that could probably heal how wounds better than I ever could.

...What if he had committed suicide?

No. I can't think like that. He couldn't. He... He wouldn't. Would he? God. I hadn't even asked if he was okay. I just upped and left him alone after his two friends had committed suicide themselves.

I clear my throat, making eye contact with the man at the counter who had been watching me the whole time. I wonder just how many foreigners who speak broken Spanish he has to deal with daily... I guess he'll just have to add me to the list.

"Hola, um, ¿cuánto de ...?" My voice grows distant, nervous under the watchful eyes of the man in front of me. I've got no idea if my pronunciation is right, or even if I'm saying what I need to say. I'd been trying to learn it all yesterday, ever since I first set my sights on this shop when we went out for lunch.

"Me gustaría un tatuaje... en el brazo." He stares at me, blankly, thick locks perfectly falling around his face. He could be my forbidden Spanish lover. Finally, the man chuckles, shaking his head. "You Americans sure have a funny way of learning Spanish, huh. How long did it take to memorise your translated google search?"
My face flushes and I chuckle nervously, embarrassed. "O-Oh... Y-You speak English..."

He smirks. "Most people here do, kid. What kinda tattoo you looking for? Your appointment may not be today though, depends on style and the artists we have on."

I can't help the smile that plants itself on my face; my first genuine smile in what could be months.

It was finally coming together. I was really going through with this.

-x-

"So, I was thinking we could extend our stay and travel a little more," Annie suggests, as we're seated in the top-floor restaurant. "We've got the money. I just feel like we haven't seen enough of the world."

Mikasa hums. "It's only a small part, no matter how big it seems... How do you feel about that, Eren? Would you like to travel a little more?"

It hurts. I'm uncomfortable. I need to scratch it but I can't because then they'll know. I swallow, thick. "I... Where would we go? Would we stay here?"

Annie shrugs. "I was thinking Greece, maybe Italy. It's up to you guys, but one of those countries would be nice."

We thank the waitress who brings around our iced drinks. I'd put on nearly ten kilograms here, and it's nearly been a month - I finally looked like a normal person. "Italy sounds nice. I have a friend who's from Italy."

"Marco?" Mikasa asks, and I nod. "I'm sure he said he has family somewhere over there... Maybe we could get free accommodation? If they'd let us stay, I mean."

Thoughtful silence. Annie takes a wedge from the shared bowl between us before she hums. "If we get free accommodation, we could go to Greece and Italy."

That evening sets the date for the very first calendar-marked breakthrough of the new me - the new us: I don't flinch when my sleeve falls down a little, revealing the very tips of luscious oaks.

Nobody saw, but I did. I saw everything that lies beyond the surface of scarred skin, every pain I'd ever endured, and the total lack of control that drove me off of the edge seeking relief from pain that was too strong to be physical.

I saw all of that; and I didn't do anything about it.

I could see something of a battle lost with myself beneath the ink, a small fraction of marred flesh left uncovered by the tattooists bandages, but there was no need to fear it, because it was okay.

It was okay. It was always okay, even when it wasn't. Other people could see this, and it would be okay. No, they'd never know the pain: they'd never know the suffering, the guilt, the distress; the complete, total feeling of despair when not even the brightest light in the room can bring you out of the darkness. They'd never understand, but they would know.

Knowledge does not equal understanding, and I would have been foolish to ever think that. I was foolish - I am foolish - but that doesn't change the fact that I now understand something I thought I only knew.
Maybe Mikasa and Annie notice, but I don't mind. I smile on the outside, expressing the emotions on the inside, and it feels wonderful. I'm finally getting somewhere. I'm far, far away from the place I want to be most, but I'm somewhere.

I wanted to die no less than a month ago. Why does it surprise me that I've gotten somewhere?

"So, Eren," Mike began, tapping the edge of his pen on my open file. We hadn't progressed much; I'd skipped out on three sessions. "I feel like we should try to deal with your restless nights first. That will at least restore some of your energy, and help you feel in control again."

I swallowed hard, knowing very well that I'd told him that half-truth to avoid telling him the whole truth. It had worked, but it made me sick to think about. "Okay."

"Could you give me a rundown of your regular day-to-day activities? Remember that I'm not here to judge you or to compare you to other people; I'm here to help."

I told him what I did all day without having to think about it. I didn't do anything, and that's why it was so easy. His quizzical look made my stomach knot, but I continued to tell him that I usually just stayed home and watched TV, sometimes standing out on the balcony.

"Do you ever go out?" He'd ask, seemingly I satisfied with my answer.

I shrugged. "Sometimes, depending on if Levi gets invited out or if my friends remember that I still exist."

I didn't mean to say it, but it sparked something within me that brought a hard, swollen lump to my throat. Suddenly, without thought, I'd told the truth. Mike had managed to get the truth out of me quicker than I'd thought. That scared me, made me sick to the stomach.

But it also sparked a flicker of hope through my veins. Maybe I...? No. I couldn't. I wouldn't. If I did that he'd alert my dad; if he was even still alive. He'd tell Levi, he'd have me put on meds, or sent away to some insane asylum.

Before my mind could catch up with my mouth, I was speaking. Almost.

I began with a pitiful "Um..." and he immediately put down his pad paper. My legs bounced uncharacteristically on the carpet; I gripped and fiddled with the hem of my shirt; my stomach tightened so desperately that I felt it would explode.

"I, uh... I-I don't think L-Levi told you the real reason I'm here, d-did he?" I asked, trying to find reason in my mind.

Make something up, make something up. Don't tell him the truth.

Be free. Let him know. Seek help.

Mike shook his head, attention fully on me. "No, he didn't."

"I, yeah..." I sighed, desperate for air that didn't fill my lungs enough. It was like I was held captive in a tiny, claustrophobic air-tight box, with no way out. "I-I um... I just. I w-want to tell you that I... I, uh. Wow. This is... I'm s-sorry, I just... Ugh. Um."
I couldn't even formulate the words. I anticipated what was coming, the selfish sin about to be uttered from my lips in a way they never had before. I'd never said it aloud, never admitted it to myself, as if ignoring it as a fact would change its factuality.

"It's okay, Eren," Mike said, his voice soothing and calm. "Take your time. I can see you're having a hard time finding the right words to say."

You could say that again. "Mm... Y-Yeah. Um. I'm j-just gonna say it so, so... So yeah um. I'm actually here because I... Because I... IstrugglewithselfharmandyeahI'msorry I'm sorry, I'm sorry I-"

I hadn't realised I'd been holding my breath until I choked on my own words. It was all a verbal blur, but the tightening in my stomach dissipated as soon as those words left my lips. Mike stared at me for a few moments, and I thought that he was about to tell me what a fucked up teenager I was.

But he didn't. He smiled, small and comforting.

I didn't know what to do.

"That was very brave of you to admit, Eren," He started, passing me a tissue box as tears flooded my eyes without my awareness. "I'm incredibly proud of you. It takes a lot of guts for someone to admit that... I'm glad we have some form of trust between us."

"Y-Yeah? I-... Mm."

All of my emotions left me at once, before returning with a vengeance. I'd held it all in for so long, for both the sanity of myself and of Levi. I wish I could have apologised to Mike earlier.

"I know what it feels like to suffer from an addiction like that," He began, taking out his notepad once more. "Many of my clients are in a similar situation to you. You're not alone, Eren, and I will make sure of it that you never are."

He was writing it down. What if someone saw? What if he left it on his desk and someone I knew came to see him and they saw it and found out about me? About this?

I panicked. I screwed it up and I fucking panicked.

"You'll never know what it's like!" I screamed, unable to control myself any longer. He was getting to me, thinking he could reach through to me. He couldn't.

"Eren-"

"No! Fucking no! Don't 'Eren' me. You think you know me, but you don't! You think you know how I feel, but you don't!"

My fists were balled and my eyes fumed with anger, fires lit in my veins. "You'll never know what it's like to hate yourself so much that you hurt yourself! You'll never know what it's like to draw a blade across your own skin because you're so sick of not feeling anything that you need to feel pain! You'll never know the hurt and the guilt and the overwhelming need to destroy, whenever you feel bad!"

I'd made a mistake telling him. I always made stupid decisions, never thinking them through. Why was I so impulsive? Why was I such a horrible, terrible human being? I'd made a huge fucking mistake.

I am a huge fucking mistake.
"It's a never ending cycle of self-loathing and self-harming that drives you insane! It's having to pretend that you're not affected by it when someone says the word 'cut' around you, without knowing exactly what that word means to you! It's never having the courage to look down and accept the monster you've become, when you couldn't even accept yourself before you were a monster!"

Mike sat back and said nothing. I was standing up, towering him over him with menacing intent. I could have hit him. I would have hit him. But I didn't. Instead I stormed out of his office with thundering steps, slamming the door shut behind me and taking the three flights of stairs down to the car park, where Levi was sure to be waiting for me.

We'd gone two minutes over-time anyway, it wasn't like I was missing anything important.

"The sunset is beautiful here, reflecting off of the windows and onto the pale white walls. All kinds of warm hues blend together across the skyline."

'Wow... Can you describe that to me too?'

"Well, um. It's lavender-ish close to the city skyline, with two tall buildings off to the sides and many houses. From there, it goes from pink all the way to red, orange and yellow spread out in the middle."

Armin laughs. 'You'd be a horrible storyteller.'

I scoffed, unable to contain my smile. "Hey now, that's a bit rough. This is my first time you know, have some respect."

I called him when Mikasa and Annie went out for dinner, about fifteen minutes ago. Thankfully, the hospital passed me through to him. He was getting out in a week, and was still undergoing therapy. Some of the nurses speculated that he'd be able to see again if they put him into a monitored coma or something, but he wasn't sure he wanted to go through with it. 'Too risky,' He'd said. And I agreed with him.

What if he never came out of it?

'What about the hotel room? What does that look like? ' He asks, still incredibly interested. I'd bored him with stories of Barcelona, and now that I was talking about Italy he couldn't get enough. It was one place he'd always wanted to go, but never got to see.

"Very nice... There are two large paintings on the north and south walls; one is a yellow tulip garden and the other is of several dancing ladies."

He hums. 'That sounds nice...'

"It is. Comfortable, too. The covers are so soft and fluffy, like sleeping between a cloud," I chuckle.

Armin sighs. 'I'm going to have to go now, the nurses are handing out meds. I don't want to get in trouble for overdoing my phone privileges again.'

"Phone privileges? What, did you somehow end up in prison in the time I've been gone?"
Armin laughs, musically. 'No, no. Other patients from the terminal wards can't use the phone unless other wards are offline. I was caught using the public phone the other day and they took away my dessert as punishment.'

"Wow. So nice of them."

'Oh yeah, they're really lovely... Anyway, I'll uh, I'll talk to you some other time. Take care, Eren. And take lots of pictures to describe to me when you get back!'

"I will... Take care, Armin. Good luck with everything."

I go to hang up, but Armin's voice blaring through the phone startles me. 'Wait, wait! Are you still there!?'

"Y-Yeah! What's up? Everything's okay?"

Armin snorts. 'Yes, yes. Sorry, I almost forgot. Levi's been visiting me most days since you've been away. I wasn't sure if you'd spoken to him at all, but I thought I'd pass on that he misses you a lot."

I swallow. "R-Really? Armin... How is he?"

'He's okay, I guess... N-No. He's not, actually. Honestly, he looks pretty sick, but I think he has some personal issues going on that don't involve you.'

Ouch. "Oh, right. Do you, uh, know what they are?"

'No, sorry,' Armin sighs. 'But I thought I'd let you know that he often speaks about you. I think he wants you to come home soon... Hah, I think we all want you to come home soon.'

I raise an eyebrow. "'All'? What do you mean by that?"

Armin chuckles. 'Seriously? Dude, we all miss you. Everyone's been in to see me at some point, and I can't see them, but I can hear it in their voices when your name comes up. We all love you, and it's been weird without you."

"B-But, I don't even know you that well... I practically disappeared for so long, didn't any of you realise that?"

'Of course! But having us pestering you every two minutes could have made things worse... You're always in our thoughts Eren, you're a great friend.' My heart flutters. 'Jean especially. Sure, he's no Levi, but he misses you a shitload. Not sure even Marco can compare to you in his books, which is really saying something, because they're practically married now.'

I'm silent. Armin continues, ignoring the beeping of the hospital landline. 'Connie too. He feels like shit after... Well, you know. And some other things. Sasha says she wants to squeeze the life out of you, too. Even Ymir misses you, but I only heard that from Jean... Um. I really have to go now, but I'll talk soon okay? Enjoy yourself Eren.'

I try to hide my sniffling behind a spluttered cough. "Y-Yeah, thanks Armin. I'll see you soon... B-Bye."

They miss me? Why the fuck would they miss me? I spoke to Marco only the other week to confirm us staying at his grandparents' place, and he didn't seem like he missed me all that much...

-x-
We couldn't go to Greece, but we've been in Italy for over two weeks now. With only three days left abroad, the three of us are all excited to go home, yet so desperate not to leave. There's something to be said about people you can travel with, who trust you enough to go away with you, and whom you trust enough to go away with.

Mikasa has always been someone I can rely on, even when I don't tell her everything. It was a given I'd be able to trust her. But getting to know Annie was like getting to know a part of myself I hadn't ever looked into before; like getting to know a part of someone that I haven't ever asked about.

I think of Levi, pathetically enough. I fucking miss him.

And Annie misses Bertholdt and Reiner, too, having not been able to make it to their last netball game of the season. I can see it in the way her smile gives away the pain lurking beneath; it's just the same smile I wore for so many years, one that's going further and further away.

Mikasa doesn't miss anyone. At least, not in the way myself and Annie miss the people we care about.

They still don't know about my tattoo, either.

I lift my gaze out to the skyline, taking in the picturesque view I'd described to Armin. I can't wait to see them all again. I can't wait to see Levi again, and hopefully hold him in my healing arms as tight as I possibly can.

I can't wait to roll up my left sleeve.
All That I Am

Chapter Notes

We're so close to the end I and am SQUEALING. (And by end I mean Epilogue so hold onto your time skip hats my dear readers). Please leave feedback on this chapter, as I have included everything I planned to but I am still disappointed. It doesn't feel like I'm tying up all the loose ends, you know? And it's always good to make improvements before the story comes to a close.

In saying that, however, I will be going back over the chapters and editing the every living shit out of them (especially earlier ones because hoh boy they were a train wreck), which may mean that parts are added and/or taken out.

Thanks for sticking with me guys, we've got one chapter to go and it's going to be a lot nicer than originally planned. I hope you'll thank me for that hah.
Stay safe! x

It's difficult knowing more about yourself than you show outwardly. You want others to know every little detail about you; to have them know your quirks, your thought processes, even just the way you hold your tongue when you want nothing more than to really tell someone where to shove their attitude.

But you don't. You don't want people to know all of your quirks, or all of your thought processes, because then they'd know just how fucked up you were. People smile, and laugh, and eat in public, but what they do at home could be the total opposite. Isn't that just messed up to think about?

That girl you sit with in biology, who's always laughing and telling jokes; maybe that's all just a front, simply the way she presents herself so that people don't suspect that anything is wrong. That guy you passed on the subway, the one with his headphones blaring and the creepy expression; maybe he has to take care of his autistic sibling, and this is the only way he can escape the guilt of feeling as though he doesn't deserve to be 'normal.'

That person who handed me my return flight ticket, the one with the happy-go-lucky smile and hearty laugh; they had pale white scars on their forearms. Big ones, too, as if they were deep cuts at some point. They noticed me look at them. They noticed my flickering glances back to those scars as they handed Mikasa and Annie their tickets.

They smiled. And they told us to have a good day, and responded 'I always do!' when we returned the courtesy.

Suddenly I'm reminded of the severity of this addiction, and if the illness it's accompanied by. I'm not the only one, I know what Levi's dealt with. But now, the issue is so much bigger than the two of us. It's always been bigger than the two of us.

Why have I always felt like I'm the only one who has to suffer?

We board the plane, Annie and Mikasa bickering about sleep and window seats. But I'm too focused on the image of someone who overcame their demons to care. That someone is out there living their life, knowing that they have a purpose, even if that purpose is printing off plane tickets and wearing a
smile as honest a newborns.

It's not a lot, it's actually very little, but it's enough. Those scars were noticeable, but they were on show, and that person wouldn't have looked the same without them. But they were okay, by the looks of it.

Maybe they were lying; maybe that smile was just a front, too. But maybe it wasn't. Maybe things might just be okay. Not great, not fine. At least, not yet. But okay.

I think I can handle just being okay.

Thinking always makes things so much worse. I wish that I could go through living life and not thinking about any aspect of it whatsoever. That way, everything would be breezy, because maybe I'm not okay. No amount of 'today's the day I turn my life around!' is going to change that fact. And even if Levi will still have me, that doesn't change the fact that I'm not fine, and I probably won't ever be completely fine. He helped, of course, but it's my mind that needs to be conquered. And I'm the one who needs to conquer it.

I know this. I just have to act on it; the right way.

How I do that is of course my own decision. I can't leave it up to others to heal me when I'm the one who needs to be healed. I know that, if he'll take me back, Levi's with me all the way, just as I am with him. But in the end, I'm the only one who can walk the path of my own recovery; I'm the only one with the directions, after all.

Jean did it, and I know that if he can find just a single right in this wrong, wrong world, then so can I. He has a shot, I have a shot. He has Marco, and I hope to have Levi.

You might be wondering: Why do I compare myself to Jean? We grew up together. We were, and probably still are, as close as close can be. I know many of his flaws; how his mind works, his quirks, even how he combs his hair. And he knows all of that about me.

We both fucked up, in the end. I didn't have a bad time at high school, but I wasn't exactly having the time of my life. Jean had a horrible high school experience, but he worked through it and got somewhere.

We both got somewhere, and then, just like that, we were lost.

But that didn't mean we couldn't make our way back to the right path and keeping moving forward. 'Don't look back, that's not where you're headed,' right?

Right. I have my bad days, my bad weeks; but I have my fair share of good ones too. When my body is numb and my mind is absent, I take it in my stride and try my best to keep going. While the world may not stop moving when I do, I don't have to sit back and pretend like it isn't. I have the choice to keep moving, to press on and do something. Laundry, dinner, poetry. Whatever I do is something, and I can do it.

That's something I've promised myself. As we stood in the line to board our flight home, I promised myself that I wouldn't ever stop moving. Of course, I'd allow myself some time to take a step back and relax, but I wouldn't stop functioning just because I felt down.
It's all a lot harder than it sounds, I know that. I know that it's not as easy as waking up one day and just deciding to be better. Depression doesn't work like that. It doesn't just leave one day and never return. Self-harming doesn't just stop because you decide to stop.

I know I'm going to relapse. Maybe that's not such a reassuring thing to think, but there's no point in kidding myself. I'm going to do everything within my power not to relapse, but I know that if and when I do, I need to acknowledge that and keep moving. Keep functioning. Keep living.

The first thing I do when we return to Trost is sleep. Mikasa and Annie let me crash at their place for a few days, and for most of those days I sleep. We eat together, but they still have things to do, jobs to return to, classes to attend.

I don't let that bring me down though. I enjoy the days I have just to sleep and recuperate. But on the third day, when the stench of my body wafts as I lift my arms, I decide I need to do laundry. After soaking myself in the shower for as long as I can without running the water bill through the roof.

It is the greatest thing I'd experienced in a long time, on a personal level; taking off my clothes and staring down at fading scars. Some are already white, some a pale to dark pink, some are covered by my forest, but none are red. None are bloody, or reopened, and that makes me smile.

I'm healing. I didn't have to shower, but I needed to, and so I did. I didn't have to do laundry, but I needed to, and so I decided I would.

My thought processes have changed, not a lot, but enough. They've changed enough for me to consider myself a changed person. Of course, I know I'm the same person I've always been, but I'm a fresher me.

I shower, get dressed, and gather my clothes in a laundry basket. I look up bus routes to the laundromat. I brush my hair with an actual comb. Then I leave.

Walking the streets of Trost of so foreign, yet so memorable. It's like my mind found every memory of my past and projected it only the streets in front of my. Some were memories of me taking the bus to and from school, sitting in the same spot I am now at the back, wreaking havoc amongst other students.

There's the pole I chipped my front teeth on when I was seven. The now closed-down Chinese place where I had my first bout of food poisoning. The salon where mom used to get her hair done, before she'd take the two of us out to dinner when dad worked overseas-

Time has changed so much since then; the days have become both much shorter and much longer, years pass by in moments, and seasons are measured in sales. People have changed, some have moved away - some aren't even alive anymore.

It feels like these memories aren't even my own.

As I step off of the bus and walk down the bush street, I remember Levi and I meeting here so long ago. It feels like we've lived a lifetime since then, even though it's been just over six months since we've been apart.

It's been a whole year since we first met, too... Isn't that scary. So much has changed in a year, and yet, everything is still the same. All around me things have stayed the same, and yet, I have made so much progress.

Does that leave hope for Levi? Does that mean that he's changed for the better too? I doubt it, honestly, and that makes me feel terrible. It's as if I have no faith in him, when I know that he's the
person I trust most in this cruel, beautiful world.

-x-

I get my washing done and dried in no time, basking in the sun with my left sleeve lifted ever so slightly, just enough to show off the intricate details of my Redwood forest. My tattoo finally gets to see the sun. It's a nice thought to have, knowing that one day, perhaps my other arm will be comfortable enough to show itself.

I haven't felt the sun on this much of my skin in so long. I never knew how much I would miss it until I took away the chance to sit beneath it's warm rays in comfort.

Maybe someday, I won't have to miss out.

I take the bus back to Annie and Mikasa's apartment, finding that in the time I'd been away, they'd come home and gone out again. They have lives to live, after all, but I was still out living a small fraction of mine.

It's enough. I'm doing okay.

I'm not fine, not yet. But that's okay. That's the most I can ask for.

From: Mikasa
12:04pm
Annie and I have left a pastry in the fridge for you. It's not a lot, but I figured you wouldn't want to miss out. They're Reiner's. He started a bakery business while we were away. Strange, isn't it? I hope you've been able to do something today, I hate seeing you cooped up in bed all the time.

Amazing. I'd forgotten the days I'd spent cooped up in bed dreading my existence, wishing for nothing more than to close my eyes and never, ever wake up.

From: Mikasa
12:06pm
Jean spoke to me at Uni today too - did you know he registered? You really should go out and see your friends, they miss you heaps. I'm kinda jealous! See you when we get home hopefully, but drop us a line if you're not gonna be there. x

I swallow a strange lump in my throat, far less ominous than lumps I've had to choke down before. I'm hopeful again, in a way that makes me almost dread it. I've always hated being hopeful, because it always lead to disappointment.

Why do I feel like this hope is different?

I type out a reply with my sticky fingers, enjoying the sugary food I'd missed so much since we'd been gone. My eating habits overseas consisted mainly of salt and savoury foods, and I missed the fruit and the sugars I used to indulge in so often.

It's a nice touch of home, even if it's probably not the best choice of snack after a few days of eating lightly or not eating at all.

Jet-lag, I tell you. Remind me never to travel again.

To: Mikasa
12:07pm
Sure, thanks a lot. Got some laundry done, I'll speak to them soon. I have some things to do first.
I can almost feel Mikasa seething, knowing exactly when she reads that text, because an electrifying shiver crawls down my spine as I'm half-way through a jelly-doughnut. It's as if she's smiting me; or Levi, it's hard to tell.

She's always been so perceptive. It's scary.

From: Mikasa
12:14pm
Be careful, you hear me? Remember the state you were in when we left.

It was my fault, though. I know what state I was in because it was entirely my fault. I won't place any blame for that night on Levi, because he didn't do anything wrong.

He was suffering, and I was suffering, but I didn't tell him and neither did he. We aren't born mind readers. I couldn't have known just how he was feeling and why as soon as he got home; he hides it incredibly well. Scarily so, on some occasions.

But he didn't do anything wrong that night. I wholeheartedly believe that.

-x-

I clean up whatever messes I make, trying to calm my active and over-reactive mind; I fold away my laundry in the temporary places I've been keeping it, I clean up the kitchen as best I can, and I talk to myself in the mirror like a total idiot, having to laugh at myself as I go over the words I'd said so long ago.

I think of scenarios that may occur, and only disappoint myself when I realise that this isn't some sickeningly sweet love story, and that the real world isn't how the movies portray it.

It's not all happiness and bittersweet reunions. It's not a fairytale love-scene after years of pain and suffering. It's bitter, and ugly, and so damn truthful that it hurts.

Me, of all people, should know that.

But it doesn't stop me from trying to make it possible. I remember back to darker times, when I sat outside drenched in rain, freezing cold, wishing for nothing more than for someone to take me away from everything I was; wishing for the courage and cowardice to take the pain away myself.

But everything I was has made me all that I am; that's why I have to go. I have to bring that hope back into my life, because it longs to come back, and I long for it.

I used to be so determined, so free-willed. No mountain could stand in my way, so long as I stood before it I could overcome it. I wasn't afraid of failure, knowing I could try and try again until I didn't fail.

Although it was so long ago, I vaguely remember what I felt when I overcame an obstacle. I can't recall exactly the bubbly feeling in my stomach, but I'm determined to feel it again. I want to be like that again, to feel and not be afraid of what I feel. I can't change my ways in a day, not after feeling so bad for so long, but I can certainly try.

So I grab my house key and my phone and walk an unfortunately familiar path once more.

-x-

The hospital is reasonably desolate, eerily so, but I make my way to Armin's room by memory. It
seems the nurses recognise me too, simply nodding at me as I pass; I wonder if Armin spoke about
me like Mikasa was saying he did.

Two of the people who were last sharing this ward are gone, both of their beds empty and clean, as if
someone was just waiting to clear their spots ready to be filled up. It makes me sick to the stomach,
but I push down that nauseating feeling and smile as I see Armin's seemingly happy figure, nibbling
away at half a sandwich.

"Hey, Armin."

His cloudy blue eyes find mine immediately, and he drops his sandwich, its contents falling into the
bed. "Eren! You're back!" He exclaims, motioning me towards him with large hand movements.
"How are you? Come here, I need to touch you." I choke on the implied euphemism and hug him,
trying not to laugh at the way he animatedly feels my face, humming and nodding comically. "Hm,
yes. It's just as I thought."

"What is it?" I ask, raising an eyebrow as I drag the seat forward closer to him.

He sighs, shaking his head. "You're love sick."

I punch his shoulder as kindly as I can, and he just grins, barely looking away from my eyes. "I'm
glad you're back safely. Although I will miss the phone calls - those descriptions made me laugh
more than any joke I've ever heard." I roll my eyes, but he continues without knowing. "Anyway,
why're you here? Shouldn't you be out searching for Levi?"

I rub at the back of my neck. "Yeah... That's, actually why I'm here," Armin hums. To distract
myself, I reach forward and start to pick up the fillings of his sandwich, placing them back onto the
tray. "I wanted to know if he's still around. Y'know, if he still sees you and stuff. I'm... I'm kinda
scared."

Armin's hand finds mine scarily easily, and he frowns. "Really? Don't tell me you're worried about
seeing Levi. After all he's said to me when he thought I was sleeping, there's no way he won't be
ecstatic to see you."

"Really?"

"Really. And thanks, for the sandwich stuff. And for dropping by, I guess, even if it was just to clear
your bloody delusional mind of stuff you didn't need to worry about."

*Thanks, Armin.* "You're welcome... I'm, uh, I'm gonna go now. I have something to do... But I'm
coming back, okay? When do you get out?"

Armin shrugs. "Was supposed to be two weeks ago, now it looks like they want to try some eye
laser thing. I don't know, it seems like a far fetched idea to me, but I can't argue with the
professionals. You have fun, let me know how it goes... It's good to hear your voice again, Eren.
Much nicer in person."

I can't help but feel guilty at that. He's still the same Armin, but something below the surface
resonated anxiety and longing for something he can't have.

It wasn't my fault, but I wasn't not to blame either. How will we ever find middle ground?
Trying to relive the past as if it will open some gateway to the future... It's useless. Sitting outside Recon so early in the afternoon, my mind replays moments of the past, but they're so much darker, so much more distant than the moment I'm living.

I want to give up, just as I've always done. I remember all those times I kept going, because I was determined; but I remember more clearly the times when I gave up because it was all just too hard. I really do hate myself. No amount of self-talk will ever fix that, will it?

I want to pray that the only reason he hasn't clocked off is because they're busy, not because he's not around anymore. I feel completely alone, strangely, even though I'm surrounded by people across the path and on the walkway. But then, a short figure rounds the corner of the alleyway, speaking to someone on the phone in a voice that makes my heart flutter. I try to keep myself inconspicuous, trying to figure out the words to say. Or not to say, even.

I've seen how some people react to people from their past, especially employees of big-time restaurants who want nothing more than to go home to their warm flat and settle down with a steaming hot mug of tea. I know how some of these employees want nothing more than to cuddle up on their couch, draped in their comforter in the arms of someone they love; even if their arms are scarred.

The wind around us begins to pick up, and in record time a light rain begins to fall. But the sun is still out, and the weather is kind, and the man starts towards me with a new, almost unnoticeable skip in his step. I'm trying not to stare at him when he stops just to the right of me, keeping my eyes trained on the car parked across the road: his car.

But it's not him who walks towards me; it's not even him who walks past me. A shorter figure crosses my path, but I don't know him. I know the car across the road, but it's owner doesn't appear.

I go home after three hours, wondering to myself: what good does hope do?

It gives you some silly sense of purpose that simply lets you down when nothing goes the way you want it to. I so hoped that Levi would be there, that he'd come out and we would talk about everything that happened, and kiss in the rain or something. But he didn't.

Life really isn't like the movies.

Minutes quickly turn to hours, days into weeks, but I spend every one of those afternoons sitting outside of Recon as if it will earn me some great reward. For such a long time, I thought it would, but as I near the end of my fourth week sitting outside in all kinds of weather, and Levi's car doesn't ever leave its spot, I begin to feel like it's all worthless.

Annie and Mikasa have suggested me moving out and finding somewhere to go, in roundabout ways. Just little tidbits like leaving newspaper clippings of apartments for let on the kitchen bench, and speaking loudly about their friends who have found nice affordable apartments with lots of room for junk.

It's worthless, them trying to push me out though. Mikasa wouldn't abandon me, and I haven't abandoned my mission.

I'm not worthless, though. No. I made that mistake. This situation doesn't make me worthless, it just makes me a human being who feels as though they've done something wrong. And maybe I have. Maybe I ruined it for us, and drove Levi away. Maybe I was the biggest mistake of his life, and he
realised that, taking the first place to god-knows-where just as I did.

But maybe I didn't. Maybe I haven't.

God, I hate this world's open-ended maybe's.

My feet guide me back to the apartment, feeling a little on the down side. Old habits want me to walk to the nearest store and buy blades, or even a sharp knife. Maybe break open one of the razors in the bathroom and use those. But I don't.

I won't. I want to, but I've come too far to give up just yet.

And that's why I wait two days before returning to Recon. It's a little later than normal, but after Mikasa tells me it's futile me going back and waiting for someone who isn't coming back, I have to go.

It's as if the shell of my former self isn't so empty anymore. Like that part of me from my distant past just won't back down, no matter how hard the real me tries to make it.

I buy a take-out Coke on the way to my usual spot, basking in the unusually nice weather for early autumn in Trost. It's always some form of cold, but it's pleasant this evening, and I know in my heart that Levi won't show up, but at least I've been out and about again.

Not fine, not yet. But okay.

"Nice weather today, isn't it?"

I look up, raised eyebrows, chewing on the end of my straw. My very world seems to blossom, my heart beating out of my chest in milliseconds. I'm unable to contain the smile that etches itself onto my lips; I struggle to find the words, staring up at Levi as he practically throws himself at me before I have the chance to speak, burying his face into my shoulder, laughing.

"Levi!" I cry, wrapping my arms around him to pull him close, an attempt at never letting him go at the forefront of my mind. My eyes tear up, emotion catching in my throat. "It is... It's a really nice day today."

He pulls back to give me a once over, taking in my features, my clothes, and the way I don't dare take my eyes off of him in case he disappears. "Fuck... I missed you," He says, cupping my face in his hands. I lean forward. "You're so beautiful. I missed you. I'm sorry. I really fucking missed you."

We both lean in together, our lips meeting and fitting together as if they were made to do so. I can't help but smile into the kiss, and chuckle as Levi begins to pepper kisses over my jawline and down my neck. The scarce people around us are staring, but I don't care. I lift his face to bring his lips to mine once more, deepening our kiss.

"I missed you too," I say, as we finally and begrudgingly part. "I thought I'd lost you. I'm sorry, Levi, I'm sorry for leaving you. And I'm sorry for-"

Levi brings his finger to my lips, tears brimming his eyes. "Shh. Stop. Don't be sorry. It's over now, it's in the past. We're here, not there. It's okay. I forgive you." He kisses me hastily again, words hurried and brash. "I missed you."

We end up going back to Levi's apartment, and k find out he's bought a new car. Te old one was sold to Aurou, who always parked in Levi's old spot now, and forced Levi to park around the corner.
I don't take my hands off of him, either holding his within my own or placing them anywhere they will go. It feels too good to be true, Levi dragging me by the hand into his Apartment and pulling me into the couch, but with the way Levi's looking at me like I'm the only thing in the world, I can't bring myself to look away.

It has to be true. This has to be real.

*He's so beautiful.*

I missed him. I missed this. Maybe this isn't real, and I'm dreaming? There's no way this is happening. It didn't happen for so long. It wasn't going to happen. It wasn't meant to be and yet... Yet here we are. Holding each other tightly, words left unsaid, I have an idea. A stupid, sappy idea. And I begin it with a question.

"Levi... Tell me about yourself," I say, resting my hand on his knee with my other arm snaked around his waist. His cheeks have a pink hue that makes my heart stutter.

He smiles, playfully rolling his eyes. His happiness doesn't go unnoticed though, not with the way his smile lines haven't disappeared. "I grew up just outside of Trost, and moved into the apartment I currently live in at nineteen-"

I shake my head slowly. "No, about you. Everything that makes you, you."

At least he's going to play along. "I want to know who you are, Levi. Everything that makes you, you."

Slightly startled, Levi regains his composure with another barely concealed smile, and a breathy laugh. "Well... Hozier is my favourite singer, but I'm not afraid to admit that I enjoy Nicki Minaj more than I probably should... Um, and I love Tim Burton films." He looks at me tentatively, and I nod for him to continue. "I also... I also love rainy weather."

I can tell he feels a little awkward, if his expression is anything to go by, but when I don't being to speak, he tries his best to continue. We've both come a long way in these past six months.

"Cookie dough is my favourite ice cream flavour, and I can't stand how much hatred I have for red lights when there's no one else on the road. I'm also a college dropout, not a graduate... But I'd like to go back someday." Levi's gaze falls for only a second, and I try not to let the surprise show in my eyes. Then his own meet mine and I take his hand in mine, grip tightening just a fraction. "Last year, two of my greatest friends died in a double suicide; I'm not quite over it yet, but I've come a long way from that day."

"I prefer Pepsi to Cola, and I love the feeling of grass between my toes," I begin, rubbing my fingers lightly over his knuckles as comfort. "I don't really like ice cream, but I like watermelon sorbet if that's any consolation. And I'm a sucker for chocolate, too. I listen to almost anything, but I know for certain that my favourite singers are The Maine and Panic! at The Disco."

"You dance out of time to music," Levi says, fighting back his wide smile. "All music. And sometimes I catch you tapping your toes to songs you tell me you hate."

I chuckle, fingers ghosting around his palm, unable to touch him in the way I want to. "Sometimes you only react with facial expressions, and I can't help but laugh at how you manage to pull so many in the span of only a few seconds, even though you pretend to be some hard-ass bastard."

"You don't snore, but sometimes your nose whistles if you eat too late in the evening."

I raise an eyebrow. "Really?"
He nods. "Really."

I hum. "You're short-sighted, but you hate wearing your glasses because the rims are too thick... And you're severely arachnophobic. No matter how small the spider, I catch every flinch, and I can tell the difference between you mindlessly looking around the room and you searching for spiders in every ceiling corner."

Levi grins, rolling his eyes as if trying to deny that fact. "You say you can't cook, but I hadn't liked lasagna at all until last year when you surprised me after work with a home recipe."

My gaze falls upon his lips. "You fiddle with your fingers subconsciously, and I knew there were less leftovers of that lasagna when I heated it up for lunch the next day!"

Levi somehow manages to smile wider, uncharacteristically, and the sight lights a fire inside of me that I hadn't felt for so, so long. Finally, we allow ourselves to completely let go, and I melt into Levi's touch as he wraps his arms around me and draws me close.

I really thought I'd forgotten what it felt like to be loved unconditionally by someone, who had seen me at my worst, but never at my best, yet always held onto me like his life depended on it.

Levi brings his voice down to a whisper, his chin resting on my head, and the feeling of my stomach tightening doesn't occur as strongly as it used to. "I haven't hurt myself for over six months now, and I no longer have the means to do it." Instead, my stomach swells with relief. "I threw everything out after you left... All I have left are scars. Some worse than others, but scars nonetheless."

I take a slight breath in. "I haven't hurt myself in over five months, and I don't have any means to do it again, either." He smiles, and tears form in the corner of his eyes. I don't know if he knows that I notice. "Also, I'm not sure what colour some of my scars are anymore. I can't see them."

Levi's eyes widen, and he moves to stare at me without craning his neck. "You can't?" He asks, surprised. "They're gone?"

I nod. "Not gone, but um... Do you want to see?"

I knew from the moment we first saw each other that Levi looked at my arms, covered by sleeves. Of course, it's summer, so it's a force of habit that I wore a long sleeved shirt, and probably why Levi wore his jacket and a t-shirt underneath.

I roll the sleeve of my left arm to just below the elbow, and Levi's eyes widen. He reaches out, then looks at me for approval. When I nod, he runs his fingers gingerly over the scarred skin, now covered by a forest of around seven trees, with a path running between them.

"It's amazing," Levi says, admiring the delicate work with both his fingers and his eyes. "Why big-ass trees, though?"

I smile. "Well, Redwoods, or Sequoias, mean balance... Um. Redwood forests symbolise inner strength, something I didn't know I had until recently... You, uh, helped me realise that, Levi." I pause as he continues to run his fingers over the tattoo, probably still able to feel the scars beneath it that were still raised. I clear my throat. "What do you think?"

He smiles. "It's perfect... I'm kinda jealous."

We sit in silence for a few moments, the only sounds invading our ears being each others' heartbeats and level, slightly nervous breathing. "Can I ask why you're out of work this early?" I ask, mind filled with conversations of the past that led to this moment having as much meaning as it does. I'm a
sap, it's gross, but I'm not sorry for loving him the way that I do.

He quirks an eyebrow, before smirking. "You can, but I probably won't give you a truthful answer."

I smile. He's playing dirty now - but two can play at that game. "At least you're honest... What's the untruthful answer, then?"

He leans forward, pressing a fluttering kiss to my forehead. "To run into the love of my life outside the prestigious establishment that I work at, at four o'clock in the afternoon, take him home, kiss him until he forgets his own name, and act as though we've known each other for more than thirty years."

Our kisses lead us home, in both metaphorical and literal sense. His fingers trace along my thigh, up my sides, before they wrap further around my waist and he pushes me down. He kisses every inch of my being (I kid you not - every single inch) and we lie together on the couch until the sun goes down and the city lights outside the window breach our sense of time.

It passed by so quickly, and although I know there's never enough of it, it's always time well spent when you're with someone you love.

Levi runs his hands up and down my arms, placing another fluttering kiss to my shoulder as I lie in his arms, craning my neck to look up at him. He rests his chin on my head, inhaling deeply; the rise and fall of his chest brings me home in ways that no plane ever could.

I take his hand and kiss it. "I love you. Do you know that?"

Levi smiles, nodding gently. "I do... And I love you, too. More than you could ever imagine."

I sit up a little, making myself more comfortable so we can look each other in the eyes without strain. The way Levi goes a little rigid tells me he's been anticipating questions. "What did you do while I was gone?" I ask, trying to keep my words casual, without insinuation of any kind.

He swallows. "I..." He wants to lie. I can feel it, I can see it.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"... I don't know." Levi sighs, manouevring himself so that we sit apart, our kegs still touching. "I disappeared for a while. Stopped going to work, didn't go out. I think I lived off of instant noodles, or nothing at all. It wasn't all about you- I mean, it was, but not in the way you might think."

"I thought about my past, mostly. I remembered things, and I just kind of went awol. It's okay though. It took a month at least, but I pulled myself together. Hanji helped, Erwin too, but I think I..." Levi trails off, before a single touch of my hand on his thigh brings him back. "I needed to loose myself a bit, in order to bring myself back. It was tough, probably one of the hardest things I've had to deal with on my own but- I think it's made me somewhat different."

I nod, slowly, understanding. "Are you okay?"

Levi takes a moment before he shrugs. "I'm okay. Not great, but better... It's good to have you back, Eren. I missed your smile. It made this dull apartment so much more brighter."

For the record, I don't cry straight away at that. I engulf Levi in an embrace, kissing his neck and running my hands though his hair. As we entangle our limbs together once more, Levi asks, "Are
you okay?"

And for once in my life, when I tell him, "I'm great," I mean it. I mean it with all of my heart, and the tears that spill from my eyes are the happiest tears I have ever experienced.

This moment, where we embrace each other like we never have before, tangled beneath the sheets of Levi's bed once we manage to make it there, it's for everything we missed. For all the times I wished death upon myself; for all the times I slit open my own skin as a way of compensating for the emotional pain, for the emotional numbness that I felt for so many years; for all the times I spent loathing myself for coming into Levi's life: I take it all back.

Never would I want to have gone a day knowing that this moment was just around the corner, and that the light at the end of the tunnel was always there; I just hadn't walked long enough.

Levi runs his open palm up my thigh, leaving behind a light trail of shivering skin that makes my heart beat a little faster. "How was your trip?" He asks, a little breathlessly.

I don't even try to hide my smirk as my own hands sit a little too close to Levi's crotch, teasing him intentionally. "It was great. I have a lot of photos to show you... I missed you all the time."

"All the time?"

"All the time. Everyday."

Levi brings his head down to my shoulder, smiling into my neck as he places a flurry of kisses along my jawline. "Are we okay?" He asks, voice flightless muffled by my shirt.

I manoeuvre myself to lie beneath him, placing a hand behind his head to bring his forehead to mine, our lips meeting halfway there. "More than okay."

Everything that lies beneath skin depth is a secret that we keep. But one day, someone comes along that begins to break away those protective layers of skin until every little secret you ever kept hidden is revealed.

For us, our secrets made it onto our skin, leaving scars that wouldn't ever heal completely. We can peel away those layers of one another until all our secrets are bare, but in the end, they've been in plain sight for longer than we can remember.

Maybe it's bittersweet, but our secrets are shared, and they make us who we are. That doesn't mean I'll go around telling people to bare their skin and show everyone the things that scare them about themselves, just to find someone who will love them. It means that we all have memories and scars that lie beneath the surface of our skin, but they are no different to those that are visible.

Pain became release, but in release, there was suffering.

But in suffering, there was something beautiful. Not the scars - never the scars. But the person who helped me become someone I never would have been; the person who helped me realise that all that I am is everything I've ever been and more.
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

apologies in advance for the diabetes the ending is gonna give you

Chapter Notes

It's happening guys, this is it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

March 21, 2016

Trost Daily

Local Doctor Found Guilty Of Narcotic Sales

'Leading doctor at Trost General Hospital, Dr Grisha Jaeger, was called to trial yesterday over the dealing of lethal narcotics used for sterilisation and anaesthetic, and has now been found guilty of this offence on several occasions thus far ... Although the board claims the loss of his wife and children have resulted in his lack of performance, the court has overruled the claim and sentenced him to twelve years imprisonment with a non-parole period of nine years.'

How can you possibly describe feeling an entire lifetimes worth of happiness in one single moment? How can you find the words to even comprehend how you feel? I'll tell you truthfully; you can't. That's why happiness is divided up into so many fond memories that you can't possibly describe the feeling of. Not unless you're actually feeling them.

I first felt pure happiness when I was six years old, and my mother brought Mikasa home from the orphanage. I'd heard stories about her, and what terrible things she'd endured, so the first time I met her I was ecstatic. I held her hand, and taught her how to ride a bike, and even introduced her to my closest friends before school began. We hung out all the time, and although it was me who kept her by my side, I felt like she wouldn't have left it even if I tried to make her. I wanted to protect her, and even though she was often the one who protected me, just by being beside her was protection enough.

It was when she told me this that I felt pure happiness for the second time. I was eight and a half years old, just after my team won the primary school soccer championships. Mikasa was bullied for the first and last time in this year for her race, and although I ended up with a bloody nose and lost three teeth, having her tell me she loved me after standing up for her brought me more happiness than any muddy trophy ever could.

Another time I felt pure happiness, although far in the future from that moment, was when Levi
rounded the corner outside of Recon and began talking to me about the weather. I was cold, and hurt, and so terribly broken. But he didn't speak to me to offer money or torment; he spoke to me about the weather, offered me his jacket, and drove off as if that was a regular occurrence.

Even still I can't believe that a complete stranger would ever offer to do that, especially one who met me when I was covered in mud and blood and internally wishing death upon myself.

Throughout the years, I've had my fair share of happy moments. They've always been clouded by the unhappy ones, which always seem so prominent in my mind, so much darker. But they existed. They've always existed, even when I couldn't see it. Memories of happiness are often bittersweet, but nostalgia gives way to feelings of comfortability, peace. Olfactory sensations can trigger even the most distant happy memories, and as I stand at the makeshift alter with a childish grin on my face, the warm sensation of pure happiness returns when I receive another waft of Mikasa's perfume. It was moms favourite.

Levi and I exchange glances from opposite places, both of us riding the coattails of a celebration we'd spoken about before. Unfortunately, Mikasa's wedding, not ours. But standing on opposite sides of the altar, it feels as though one day it could be ours.

Mikasa and Annie hold hands before us and the rather large crowd in the seats below, every second person with a tear in their eye or a tissue by their side. Jean, Sasha and myself stand in as Mikasa's bridesmaids, linking arms and bearing smiles large enough to rival the soon-to-be newlyweds. Levi, Bertholdt and Reiner stand in as Annie's bridesmaids, the latter both tearful and snivelling, while Levi links arms with them reluctantly. We're an odd choice of people to stand at the sides of Annie and Mikasa, yet at the same time, it wouldn't be the same if we weren't up there.

Years, even months ago, I never would have thought I would stand at my sisters side as she took her wedding vows. I didn't think I had affected her life so much that she would ask me to stand so proudly in front of so many people.

She'd taken my hands in hers as she spoke to the five of us. 'You've all impacted our lives in a positive way. Whether you've comforted us during a tough time, or stopped us from being lonely, or even just offered a helping hand with a tough assignment... You're all important to us, and to our families. And family or not, it wouldn't be the same without you.'

I'd comforted her. Bertholdt helped Annie with her final assessment in college. Jean held Mikasa's hair back in twelfth grade when she was roofied at a stupid party, and even drove her to the hospital with her vomiting in his moms car; he didn't even have his license.

I can't help the tears that I shed, not when Mikasa looks at Annie the same way that Levi and I look at each other. I know what she's feeling, I know how it feels. I haven't ever seen Mikasa so radiant before, glowing in every sense of the word; and Annie looks as though she was born to wear that wedding dress, as untraditionally patterned as it is.

Marco, their designated celebrant, concludes the ceremony; Annie and Mikasa share a sickeningly sweet kiss in front of our friends and some of our family. We whistle and clap and clear out to the after party, which was held in a large hall just down the road from the hotel many of us were staying at. It came with the package of the wedding, which was held a little ways out of Trost, in Jinae. However, the party lasted only two hours before Reiner got so drunk he broke the door to the hall off of its hinges.

I don't think I've ever seen a collection of people run so fast to catch trains or run to their hotel rooms before, let alone a group of moderately drunk people. Levi and I are included in that, but we'd had the chance to sober up a little before.
Which brings me to another moment of pure happiness. As the door to our motel room shut behind us, leaving our flustered laughter echoing through the halls, Levi pressed me up against the wall and mouthed sweet kisses down my neck. He called me ‘beautiful,’ and himself ‘lucky,’ before dragging me to the bed and showering me in heated passion.

I called a few things out that night too, but they weren't nearly as innocent as that.

We took the train home the next day alone, as Mikasa and Annie were taking a taxi to the airport to travel back to Europe for their honeymoon. Annie's father was very generous, and far more accepting of their marriage than any parent I've ever encountered.

I guess that says a lot about the parents I've encountered. Or maybe, just the fathers. Or maybe, just people.

-x-

'I understand if you would prefer to meet in person and discuss your previous suspension, but I assure you that the matter has been dealt with accordingly.'

Oh, I know it was dealt with accordingly. That asshole shouldn't have been all in my face like he was, especially intoxicated. No one in their right mind would take his side.

I shake my head, stupidly, trying to push the bitter thoughts back. He can't see me through the phone, and that guy got a fine. All is well that ends well. "No, that's okay. I'll be in on Monday, and I'll pick up a schedule on the way out. Thanks again for taking me back, I really appreciate it."

Erwin chuckles on the other end of the line. 'It's no trouble at all. And I apologise again for waiting so long, but it seems that two suspensions are quite a problem in the board. It will be great to have you back on the team. And I'm glad everything has worked out between you and Levi, I couldn't ask for any two people to be more compatible.'

My stomach flutters. "Thanks, Erwin. I'll see you Monday."

'Alright, see you then, Eren.'

We hang up. I sigh, feeling my muscles relax beneath my loose t-shirt. It had felt so much tighter when I was working myself up to answer the missed calls. Long story short: I got re-hired by Erwin eight months after my first suspension, thanks to that twat with the lightbulb, and then I got another suspension because he came back with another complaint. That was four months ago. Isn't life just shit sometimes? Levi walks into our lounge room, of sorts, and places a cutting board with cheese and crackers onto the up-turned crate in front of the lounge. It's still covered in plastic.

We only bought the place two weeks ago. It smells like paint and old refrigeration, it's cold, and it's so bare I feel as though we moved into a prison block rather than an apartment. But it's coming together nicely. I think. We have a couch, still wrapped, and most of the living room walls are painted. Levi wanted the kitchen done before anything else, but I wanted the living room finished.

We compromised, I guess: I'm working on the lounge room myself, and Levi can do whatever he wants in the kitchen. Of course, there was some miscommunication on the colour of the kitchen bench, but uh, that's been sorted out now. Hopefully. I didn't ask Connie how long it would take for the bench to come in...

"Working hard?" Levi asks, slumping down next to me and wiping sweat from his forehead, after taking a handful of crackers.
"I chuckle. "More than you. While you started half an hour ago, I've been working since I got up. Can't you smell the paint? I deserve a break."

"Uh-huh. Couldn't you hear the sander when you woke up? My- sorry, our kitchen is going to put Hell's to shame."

"Oh, it's our kitchen now, huh? Food sure does improve your mood, doesn't it darling."

We bicker playfully, munching on snack food and relishing in the comfort that the portable fan provides. Which isn't much, but with the sun coming in through the window lacking blinds, it's just what we need. "Erwin's hired me again," I say, putting my arm around Levis shoulder to draw him close. He looks sexy in a t-shirt - I always let him know. "I start on Monday."

Levi nods, humming and leaning into my touch. "I thought he would. Especially now that your bald friends got his own business - Erwin can't afford to let people go."

"Mm. I owe a lot to Connie, it seems."

"And I to Erwin... Strange how this stuff works."

I raise an eyebrow. "Stuff?"

Levi gases up and me, eyes hooded. "You know. Life, relationships. One minute you're strangers and the next you know more about someone than they do about themselves... If I didn't know Erwin, I wouldn't know you. We probably wouldn't be like this at all."

I hum. "And if I didn't know Connie, I never would have done my washing at the laundromat... I guess we both have more than each other to thank for where we are."

"Where we've been," Levi corrects. I raise an eyebrow. "We've got us to this point, we should be thankful to them for where we've been to get here." I chuckle and lean down to kiss Levis forehead. "What? Why're you so cuddly?"

I shake my head, still smiling. "I should have known that beneath your hard shell you're a sentimentalist. It's always the tough ones."

Levi glares at me. "Oi."

"Hey, it's true! You can't deny it. You said it yourself: I know more about you than you do, Mr Arachnophobe."

"You're one to talk, Mr Tone-Deaf."

Levi and I share a chaste, cheesy kiss, before Levi claims he has to get back to working on the base of the bench before Connie arrives. If he arrives, I correct, but Levi ignores me, already too caught up in perfecting his goddamn kitchen. I couldn't care less when everything is ready, really. I'm with Levi. We could be living in a cardboard box at the subway and I'd still be happy, so long as I was with him.

So, I sit back and listen to Levi work his little heart out; listen to his swearing, his proud humming, and whatever else he has to say. Who needs TV when you've got a partner who's enough entertainment on their own?

-x-
Connie comes around with our new table top on Saturday, and installs it alongside his business partner and girlfriend, Sasha Braus. I never thought I'd see someone who can handle a drill better than Connie. But then again, I'd never seen Sasha more in her element than that moment. She's clearly a Jack-Of-All-Trades kind of girl.

While we're on the topic of people in their element, people who have grown, Reiner has officially opened up his bakery, and Bertholdt made it onto a state men's netball team. Both of them are adorning commitment rings in favour of an unofficial relationship rather than an engagement. Reiner didn't mind, so long as he could spend the rest of his life with the man he loved, but Bertholdt still wanted to remain faithful to the religion he'd grown up with since he was born. He owed his hard-working parents that much, and they were ever thankful.

Jean's father got in contact with him, requesting his own bank details so he could transfer all the money that was Jean's into his own account, insistently remorseful for what he'd done to his family. Jean gave him his mother's account instead, and apparently Ruth nearly fell to the floor when she checked her balance. At least, that's what Jean told me. I think he was probably the one that fell to the floor.

Marco has landed a job as a veterinary assistant, even helping me pick out the right breed of kitten for Levi's birthday last year. He called him 'Titan,' insisting the scrawny tabby would grow up to be the 'coolest cat on the block.' He hasn't grown all that much to be honest, but I'll humour Levi if it keeps him happy. Maybe he's holding into the hope that if Titan grows, he'll grow a little more too. But that's doubtful.

Armin is now the part-time owner of small store in the city that translates children's books into Braille, and provides free tutoring of the blind aged ten to twenty one. He's gained back 15% of his vision, but insists that the glasses 'make him look triangular.' Apparently, he's trying to write his own novel on the colours of a sunset, filled with metaphors and plenty of provocation aimed at me.

You try to describe the Barcelona sunset to someone once, I tell you.

As for Levi and I, well. I don't know. He's had me sat on the unwrapped couch in the living room for ten whole minutes. I can hear him shuffling around in the bedroom somewhere (the now almost finished bedroom; it just lacks lightbulbs), occasionally speaking to himself incoherently.

"Levi? Is everything okay?" I call out, tossing my phone down next to me. Surely there's some reason I'm not allowed to leave the couch.

"Yeah, just a minute!" He calls back, sounding exasperated.

"You said that ten minutes ago though. It's nearly twelve thirty, I'm tired babe." My words don't win him over, but true to his word, Levi comes out to meet me in exactly a minute.

"Sorry. I'm tired too, but... I wanted to give you something," He says, nervously. I stand up and walk over to him, placing my hands on his shoulders and pulling him in close.

"Why'd you wait until it got so late?" I ask.

He shrugs. "I, uh. I got nervous. C-C'mon, it's in the bedroom."

"You don't have stage fright again, do you?" I tease. His face goes red, and he hurriedly denies. I follow him closely behind, my feet dragging along the ground as they grow weary. "What is it?"

"Sit down." Levi motions to the bed and I take a seat, sitting right at the edge and watching as Levi takes something from the dresser and sits beside me. A lump catches in my throat as he sits close by
me. "Um... I don't know how to do this, so I'm just going to be out with it."

My heart beats in my chest, nearly up my throat, as Levi holds out an envelope. I open it with his permission, and blink rapidly as my fingertips graze over the colourful cardboard of tickets to the Fairgrounds. "L-Levi..."

"That's not all, though."

"Huh?"

As I tear my eyes away from the tickets, already jelly-legged, I just about melt as they land on the small felt box in Levi's palm, held open to show off a shiny golden band just big enough to fit my finger.

"N-Now, I know what you're thinking-"

"Levi, I-"

"Eren, really." Levi's eyes are hesitant to meet mine, but when they do, they're glazed with anticipation, with excitement. "I know you're thinking: 'Levi our apartment isn't even finished, you quit your job, mine doesn't pay enough to keep up with the rent, we have so much more to worry about and now you want to get married!? W-Well, yes, and no. I want to get married. To you. Because I love you. And I don't care about anything else, because we could be homeless but I would still love you and hive you everything I could so, so I just didn't know when to ask or if you'd even say yes but I-"

I'd wanted to disappear and never have to feel a thing ever again. I'd wanted to be dead. Sometimes, I still wake up and wish that I were dead, but turning to see Levi by my side knowing that he loves me unconditionally, warts and scars and all, I remember that I couldn't stand to be without him. Even in death, I could be no happier. Even in sadness, I could not be more grateful. I don't like myself, but I'm learning to love myself - all thanks to Levi. Where else would I rather be?

I kiss him. I practically leap from our bed and push him to the floor, bringing his lips to mind with a hand in his hair and another on his cheek. He's started, but leans into it, and I can barely part our lips as I say 'yes, yes, yes' in between our kisses. I'm smiling, he's smiling, we're laughing; we're happy.

We're getting married.

"I'm done. It's over. You win, depression. You're getting what you want - and I'll get to rest for eternity. Maybe I don't even deserve that. But it's all over. I've had enough of being an empty vessel that moves simply because it has to. I no longer see a future, and I can barely see the present." I swallow, scanning over the scribbled notes on the torn piece of paper between my fingertips. "That's, uh. An excerpt from a thing I wrote a little while- a long, long while ago, actually."

Jean hums, reading through his own, neater copy. "Huh... You're sure you want me to read this? I think it's... I think it's too personal. I mean, I don't think I can really read this out the way you would read it, since you wrote this with raw emotion. You know?"

"Jean, you know I-"
"Can." Jean and I both turn our heads to Levi, who sets two glasses of Cola down on the table for us. "Jean, and Marco, and Hanji, and Erwin, and Mike, and me - we all know you can, Eren. So get up there. Do it."

Levi presses a hasty kiss to my knuckles before returning to his own table with Hanji, Erwin, and Mike. He said he didn't mind me going to The Basement with Jean; so long as he could return with his own friends every so often.

"See? You're gonna do fine, Eren. Just go up there and... Say what you feel."

_Say what you feel..._ So many times did I cry over those words. I couldn't every say how I felt, because that wouldn't relieve the pain. I knew how I felt, what good would saying it aloud do? Surely it wouldn't help at all.

But it did. It did, and now I can speak about my demons, even if only to Levi, and feel as though they've been surgically removed permanently. Maybe this is no different. Maybe, I too can join the lonely and the broken and the beaten; but instead of walking below or above them, I'm walking with them.

I sigh, take the paper in my hand, and ball it up into a heap. Jean raises his eyebrows, but I bite my lip and stand, walking towards the stage. A calm applause echoes throughout the theatre as I approach the microphone. I see Jean; I see Levi, Hanji, Erwin, Mike. I see myself reflected in the mirror at the other side of the room. I can see the tattoos on my left arm; and I can see the scars on my right. They're pale now, faded. But they're there. They're there, and they always will be, but having those scars doesn't make me any less of a human being deserving of life. I have scars on my heart too, on my soul, "But just because you can't see them doesn't mean they aren't there."

Chatter dies down, I clear my throat. "I take each day in my stride, knowing that. One foot in front of the other, I walk. Broken legs, I walk. I cried out and called for help; promised neglected - I fell. It was too hard. The light at the end of the tunnel dimmed, but I hadn't the strength to realise I was simply closing my eyes."

"You see..." I take a deep breathe, my eyes locking with Levi's. "I never thought it would come to this; confined to long sleeves to hide my wrists. It's the pain of lying on butchered thighs, and picturing vast, inevitable skies. They're feelings that plague so many hearts, something that destroys the people like we are. We all feel lost, scared and alone; and people don't help with the fake smiles that they show."

"We don't want to be a burden, nor do we want to be shared; all we want is to be loved, to be held, to be cared. What good is a person, so broken and sad? Who wants to spend time with a person so bad? I asked myself this as I lie on the street, unaware of the presence warming my feet."

My heart pound, my blood runs cold, but I can't help the little smile that appears in my lips as Levi brings his hands to his mouth, covering his own smile; _proud_. "So I opened my eyes and the light was steel blue, and while it bared all my secrets it bared my heart too."

Chapter End Notes

Holy heck. We did it folks, this is it. Apologies for such a short chapter, but it's an epilogue, and this is basically everything I just didn't put into the story in the past... I had some things to resolve I guess.
Anyway, thank you to every single reader, and every single person who interacted with this word in some way. You've all encouraged me to finish this, and I can't thank you enough for all the support and kind words. You really are the greatest readers ever! You're all so kind and understanding, and I hope you got something out of this fic that was helping to you in some way.

It started as an emotional outlet, and it was actually quite difficult to finish, as I don't actually know what it's like to be 'recovered' from depression/self-harm... I am getting there though, and I suppose this helped to get out those negative nasties.

Stay safe, stay hydrated, and I hope to see you all over on Levi's POV!
(HINT: it will include a little more about their life together, you know, unimportant things like weddings and kisses and maybe the smut I didn't write here I don't know ill have to see ;) )

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