Curb Check

by snowshroom

Summary

Erwin and Levi could not have met Eren and Armin in a more vulnerable moment, but the two teenagers might be able to provide exactly the type of strength they need.
Chapter 1

Levi hadn't spoken once in the past two hours except to say, "Fuck you" when Erwin offered him a bottle of water. At least he was sobering up a little now. Hannes had him clobbered on Maple Ryes and Bend Over Shirleys that might've reacted lethally with his prescriptions. For the first time in his life, Erwin was thankful that the stubborn bastard refused to take his medication. Tomorrow there'd be another intervention with Hange and emergency psychiatry and probably some more out-patient rehab, but tonight, Levi was alive. That was enough for now. It was more than Erwin had dared to hope for.

This September had been a special kind of hell. Levi was still suspended without pay and refused to accept any help from Erwin—money, lodging, food, even company. Erwin had exhausted himself trying to get back in touch. Last Tuesday he'd nodded off on his couch and let the kettle melt right into a hunk of metal on the stovetop. It was still there, and Erwin had been coffeeless for a record six days. His fingers jittered on the steering wheel. He turned on the radio. Some Liszt concerto filled the cabin of his Audi, soothing in its vigor.

Levi pushed the 'off' button.

Too angry to care that he was being childish, Erwin clicked it right back on, jaw clenched.

This time, Levi kicked it off with the heel of one scuffed combat boot and left his foot propped up there on the dashboard. If his shoes hadn't been immaculate, Erwin would've pulled out the laces and strangled him with them. Instead, he adjusted his rearview mirror for the fortieth time. It was either that or physically hurl Levi out of the car.

"You're on clomipramine," said Erwin, unable to hold back anymore. "You could've died."

"Shame," said Levi.

Responding like a selfish piece of shit was better than not responding at all, Erwin supposed. He pursued that relentlessly, nerves prickling at his already thin patience. "You can't keep doing this. I can't keep—right, no, of course I can. What am I saying? I would've washed my hands of you in February if it were that simple."

"Damn. You could've hung in until February?"

It wasn't a sincere question, so Erwin didn't bother to reiterate that he loved Levi, would die for Levi, would kill for Levi. If he didn't understand that by now, he never would. "I'm the only friend you haven't pushed away."

"Johnnie Walker disagrees with you."

"Johnnie Walker disagrees with you, too." Erwin took a deep breath, rephrased: "I'm the only friend who doesn't get you wasted."

Levi smacked Erwin's chest companionably with the back of one hand, making a soft sound that was as close to laughter as he ever got. "Right, you're Smith, as in 'and Wesson.' That's better, actually. That's half of a firearm. You're essentially giving me the choice between shots and shots. Think about what kind of friend that makes you, asshole."
And here he'd thought Levi was sobering up.

Erwin pulled over. Levi's weird, drunken mirth evaporated immediately. "The fuck?" he said. "Are we going home or not?"

"Home being my place," said Erwin. It wasn't a question. It seemed to shrivel Levi, somehow, first with anger, then with fatigue. Erwin spoke into that tired silence, keeping his voice level and inarguable. "Levi, I can take care of you."

"Don't need you."

"You're right. You don't need me. You've been pointedly demonstrating that for the better part of six months. But you do need a place to shower, and a bed to sleep in, and an actual meal. And—though I hate myself for it—I need you."

Levi stiffened.

"Not for sex. Just to know you're okay, even for one night." Fuck, he'd spooked him. Levi had finally been listening. Erwin crossed his arms over the steering wheel and let himself slump down in his seat, fighting the absurd urge to go to sleep. "Fine. Once we get back to the city, you can lose my number. You'll never have to speak to me again. Just let me drive you—"

"Am I seeing shit?" Levi interrupted, in a completely different tone. "What the fuck is that?"

Erwin lifted his head and refocused on the road. For one disoriented moment, he thought Levi was talking about the windshield wipers. Then he saw it too—a strange, pale shape, close to the ground, but moving with a distinctly human intent. Frowning, Erwin flicked on his high beams.

An instant later, he and Levi were both bursting from their respective doors, feet pounding in unison down the ill-maintained asphalt.

It was a kid. No older than seventeen, if the smooth, young lines of his body were any indication, stripped bare but for one filthy sock. As soon as he saw that he'd successfully flagged them down, he cringed in the headlights, curled back in on himself to hide his nakedness. He was trembling. It couldn't have been more than forty-five degrees out, and the rain was starting up again.

Even trashed and high on God knew what, Levi got there first. He was already yanking his jacket on around the boy's shoulders by the time Erwin skidded to a halt beside them. "Shit," Levi hissed over and over, fumbling with the buttons. "Shit. Kid, can you hear me?"

The boy leaned forward and dry-heaved. Erwin swiped his dark hair back from his face, scooting out of range to let the boy vomit, but he didn't bring anything up with his coughing except a few watery sobs. Dried blood caked his nose and chin. He tried to stand, fell, then let Erwin and Levi ease him back to his knees.

"We've got you. It's going to be fine," said Erwin, mouth running on automatic. To Levi: "We need to warm him up. There're blankets in the trunk. Call 911, tell them to—"

"County hospital's ten minutes away," said Levi. "Let me drive and we'll get there in three."

"You're drunk."

"And you're a pompous dick. Good talk."

Erwin didn't know how Levi knew where the hospital was out here in the middle of Assfuck, Egypt
—how the fuck often did he end up here, anyway, and with whom?—but he let that go in lieu of the boy shivering at his feet. He moved to gather him into his arms, but he flailed away, seizing a handful of Erwin's shirt.

"Wait, please," the kid gasped. "My friend's still back there, I had to leave him to get help, they fucked him up so bad—"

This would've reeked of an ambush if Erwin hadn't stopped hanging with Levi's shady crowd decades ago, and if the kid hadn't been battered black and blue. More than anything, his young voice drove the reality of it home. As he threw desperate gestures toward the tree line, Erwin saw the bruises ringing his slender forearm, the trickle of blood spilling down his left temple.

"Fuck," Levi whispered, noticing it too.

"I'll find him," said Erwin, and tore into the forest without another word. The single time he looked back to memorize the way back to the car, Levi was already hoisting the boy off the ground, showing no signs of strain. He was even keeping his stride steady.

Sometimes Erwin forgot just how strong Levi was. He had a feeling that Levi himself had forgotten it first.

Erwin fumbled his way through the trees. Twigs and dry leaves crunched beneath his shoes; branches grabbed at his clothes. He pulled his phone from his pocket—no service, of fucking course there'd be no service on this horror movie of a night—and used the light to pick his way deeper into the woods. He had no idea where to even begin looking. It was quiet out here, preternaturally still, the air crackling with not one sign of detectable life. Erwin's stomach gave a sick, helpless lurch.

"Hello," he shouted. It didn't even echo. The night swallowed his voice completely. "Hello! We're here to help!"

This was futile. The boy back at the car needed to get to the hospital. He was an actual, tangible throb of urgency here, more savable than a hypothetical friend, and Erwin wasn't equipped to find anyone in the dark like this. He and Levi could call the police from the hospital. Right now, they had a hysterical, likely concussed teenager in hand. There wasn't time to comb the forest inch by inch.

He was just turning back when he spotted the lump of clothing curled up against the far side of a log.

Erwin staggered in his haste to reach it. Once close, he could make out fingertips peeking out from the sleeve of a jacket, a pale swatch of hair streaked dark with blood. Erwin hefted the whole cold bundle into his arms. This boy was smaller, and his breathing was shallow. Even doubled up in what Erwin assumed was his friend's remaining clothing, he was freezing, and Erwin folded him up into his own coat to carry him to the car.

Who the fuck would do this to children? They still had a couple inches on Levi—who didn't—but they were light with youthful muscle tone, probably not old enough to be college students. Eleventh, twelfth grade tops, Erwin guessed. The boy in his arms looked even younger unconscious, long eyelashes resting on cheeks that were drained of all color. Even his lips were white. Erwin arranged the boy's hands against his chest as he ran, holding them tight to warm them.

Back on the road, Levi was already wrenching the driver's seat up and forward, keys between his
teeth. Sweat trickled down his temples. The heat was on full blast. He startled badly when Erwin opened the back passenger door, carefully maneuvering the boy into the seat. His friend seized him before Erwin had even let him go, hauling him closer.

"Armin!" he yelled, peering into his face. "Don't fuck with me, Armin, open your fucking eyes!"

"Eren, shut up," said Levi—apparently he'd gotten the kid's name, which meant he was also fluent in Jackass. "Fasten his seatbelt."

"Fuck off! I—I c-can't—"

Erwin reached past Eren's cold, clumsy fingers, buckled the seatbelt himself, and pulled the door shut behind him. "Levi, drive."

"Seatbelt."

"Drive!" Eren screamed, kicking Levi's seat. To his credit, Levi actually jammed the key into the ignition and took off, accidentally bumping the car radio in the process. Schubert's 'An die Musik' blared on at full volume. Erwin barely contained a slightly hysterical bark of laughter.

"What happened to you two out there?" Levi demanded.

Eren had pulled his unmoving friend, Armin, into his lap, and was feverishly stroking his hair. "It's actually none of your fucking business," Eren replied, practically sobbing. His cheeks were red with panic and humiliation.

"We want to help you," Levi snapped. "You could try some fucking manners."

"Hell, Levi," Erwin muttered, but Eren was already yelling back, "We did try some fucking manners, and look where it got us! Either you're a decent human being or not!"

The car roared in response as Levi bore down harder on the gas pedal, driving dangerously fast on the slick road, not that Eren seemed to care. He had his fingers pressed to the inside of Armin's wrist. When Armin shivered, Eren immediately began to tug off one of his own blankets, but Erwin stopped him and began to unbutton his dress shirt with quick, efficient motions. Eren watched him suspiciously until he was down to undershirt, then nodded and helped Erwin cover Armin's bare legs. His eyes were vivid in the dark. There was a wild, resolute strength in them, not unlike Levi's were before everything went to shit.

"Thank you," he said, voice cracking. "Really."

"Don't thank us," said Erwin. He raised two fingers, guiding them back and forth before Eren's face. He followed them with his whole head, clearly disoriented. "Do you remember where you are, Eren? Did you lose consciousness?"

"Y-yeah. I think I lost some time after—what time is it now?"

"Three forty-seven," said Levi.

"Fuck. Fuck." Then, bizarrely, furiously: "It's not his fault for trusting them! Don't you dare blame him; he's not wrong to have a little faith in people. It was raining. I said 'yes,' too."

"No one is blaming anyone here," said Erwin. "We're just getting you to a hospital."

"Almost there." Levi took another fast turn down a road that actually had streetlamps, slowing to a
less frenzied speed. He caught Erwin's gaze in the rearview, then Eren's. "I think it goes without saying that I've never had a drink in my life, if someone asks, and my hands are only shaking because I'm concerned."

"Whatever," said Eren.

They pulled into the parking lot. The hospital was too small to have an ER, so Levi ground the car to a halt diagonally across two spaces and turned off the engine. He immediately opened Eren's door and drew one of his arms around his shoulders, holding his coat shut to preserve his modesty. Erwin was a little slower collecting Armin, supporting his neck so his head wouldn't loll. It didn't turn out to matter much: at the sound of Erwin nudging the door shut, Armin finally stirred, face turned into the crook of Erwin's neck.

"Eren?" he mumbled.

"I'm here," Eren said, trying to jerk away from Levi, who held tight. "I'm here, Armin."

"It's cold," said Armin.

Erwin shook his head at Levi in—general disbelief, maybe, or exhaustion, or just to see his face. After squeezing his eyes shut for a few seconds, Levi stared back steadily. He looked more sober than he'd been for months. Carefully, they made their way to the hospital doors, where a wide-eyed nurse was already hastening to meet them.

An instant before they were in earshot, Eren grabbed Levi's far arm and held on, making Levi stagger. "Please stay here," he said desperately. "Please, please don't leave us."

Levi hesitated for a long moment, then nodded, rain dripping from his hair.

"We're not going anywhere, kid."

Chapter End Notes

I've never posted a fic here before, or in the SNK fandom. Please alert me if I fuck anything up in terms of formatting, writing, or etiquette. Thanks for reading!
Eren and Armin haven't quite cracked yet, and all of Levi's friends come in bottle-form.

Some fucking hospital. It was no more impressive the third time as it'd been the first or second. Once the cops left, there were only six people in the whole wing: Levi and Erwin, of course, the brats, a security guard, and the candy striper. Not even an actual nurse, as it turned out—just a tentative volunteer named Marco who handed out balloons and walked the therapy dogs. "They're out right now, though," Marco apologized, as if Levi actually gave a shit. "Sonny needed some downtime."

"Is Sonny a dog or a doctor?" Levi had asked.

"Oh, he's the yappy one," said Marco, which, amusingly, clarified nothing.

Erwin Smith the Boy Scout had taken it upon himself to sit with the kids whenever permitted, so Levi tipped the contents of his flask into a Styrofoam cup of orange juice and slept off the rest of the X in the car. He woke up a couple of hours later needing a sip of water and a piss. Hazarding a guess that the hospital bathroom was marginally more sanitary than the parking lot (you never knew) he tried to sneak back in—and ran right into the little one, Armin. Blond, unexpectedly. Last night he'd been too filthy and covered in coats for Levi to make much of him.

"Hi," said Armin, all soft-like. He was wearing a hideous yellow Sina Health Center sweatshirt that Marco had probably dug out of a closet somewhere. The hospital gown he'd just changed out of was dappled with blood. He self-consciously folded a clean side over the stains.

Levi paused in the process of picking his nails clean over the sink. He met Armin's eyes in the mirror briefly, then dropped his gaze. Kid looked like hell. "Hi."

"You helped us," said Armin, getting right to the point. "Thank you. You could've just left us there."

Levi nudged off the tap with his elbow and reached for a paper towel. "No, we couldn't have. Don't ever thank someone for meeting the lowest possible standard of human decency."

Armin's throat bobbed once in reply, and his eyes filled. Fuck. Levi grimaced and kind of patted the air near Armin's shoulder, mindful of his sore, cautious deportment.

"Um. That was ungracious of me."

"No, you're right," said Armin. "Nothing about last night should've happened."

For real, and that observation covered more ground than Armin was even aware of. Went all the way back to Levi’s first cocktail, if you wanted to get technical, and was in the irrevocable 'oh shit'
territory by the time Levi got loose enough to answer Erwin's biweekly phone call. He didn't remember telling Erwin he was at Eld Gin's, but there he was an hour and a half later, peeling Levi off a couch to tuck him into his company car. There was this running joke that Levi only had friends who shared names with alcoholic beverages. It pissed him off that this irony presented itself frequently enough to make him *predictable*. The universe fucking hated him. It'd be like being able to catch Erwin at board meetings hosted by some man named Paperwork.

Of course, comparatively, life was looking pretty peachy. The left side of Armin's face was one continuous bruise, and he had this numb, vague expression. Even without having known him for half a day, Levi knew that Armin's posture had changed, his eyes had changed. It hadn't even hit home yet. Levi was still furious with himself for drunkenly asking Eren what had happened. He'd had no right. More than that last drink or the blowjob in the bathroom or the things he'd said to Erwin, Levi wished he could take that back.

"You're not mouthy like your friend," Levi said at last, deflecting.

Armin smiled, winced, and cupped a hand to his jaw. "Ha. No one is." He hesitated, then shrugged and eased the bathroom door open with one shoulder. At his questioning look, Levi relented and followed him into the corridor. This one was all right, he decided. Need to learn to speak the hell up, but at least that was because he actually had shit to contribute to a conversation.

In one of the cramped hospital rooms, Eren Whatever was gingerly lowering one of the same ugly volunteer shirts over his head. His ribs looked fucked up; breathing clearly pained him. His cursing was florid and inventive.

"Nice battle wounds," said Levi.

Eren jerked in surprise, then hissed through his teeth and folded up like a dying bug. While Armin rushed to support him, Erwin raised an eyebrow at Levi from the opposite side of the room. No one had expected him to put in an appearance, including Levi.

"Scale from one to ten?" said Erwin.

"Seven," Eren groaned.

"How about you, Armin?"

"Two," said Armin, after a moment of deliberation.

"Four, then," translated Eren.

"Using that math, I was a twelve last night."

"That seems about right." With Armin's help, Eren finished smoothing the sweatshirt down over his abdomen. His bruises presented differently than Armin's, bluer undertones in his darker skin. He lowered himself back onto the cot to catch his breath. Only then did he seem to register Levi's presence, and cycled through a dozen complicated expressions before settling on a guarded smile. "You stayed."

"I told you I would," said Levi.

"Yeah, but we haven't seen you. I figured you bailed."

"I said I'd stay. I didn't say that I was going to sit here all night and hold your hand."
Eren's smile disappeared. "Yeah, well. We'll be out of your hair by noon."

"Noon?" Levi was itching to drop off the kids and get a shower, but twelve seemed appallingly early. Did the cops really cut loose a couple of high school students with nothing to their names? "Don't you need to stay here for observation or legal purposes or something?"

"Reports are filed, concussion's minor, nothing's broken. We got a few stitches and a prescription for Percocet. No hypothermia, no need to stick around." Eren's voice was at once clinical, bitter, and terrified. "Getting raped and stranded's pretty expensive, wouldn't you know it? An overnight stay here would be, like, five thousand dollars. I guess they're gonna bill us. We intend to not have a permanent address for a very, very long time."

Levi stared at the far wall, shoulders tense. He could tell that this was the first time anyone had actually applied that specific term to the situation, and he wasn't sure that Eren had benefitted much from saying it. Armin sure hadn't. His expression blurred, then crumpled. He tugged at the bottom hem of the too-large sweatshirt and pinched his knees together unconsciously.

"You two at least have a place to go?" asked Levi. It suddenly occurred to him that no one had come to pick them up, neither peer nor parent. Someone should've arrived by now. "You live nearby, know anyone?"

"Yeah," said Eren. "Marco said we could crash with him tonight."

Levi's eyes narrowed. "Marco the balloon guy."

"Wait. Marco is the volunteer?" said Erwin—and firmed his lips. "Levi. I'd like to speak to you alone."

"No," said Levi, but Eren had leapt at the opportunity and was already hauling Armin out of the room by one sleeve. Whether a product of dignity or painkillers, he was doing a decent job of concealing his limp.

"Please don't leave the hospital," Erwin called after them.

"Just gonna find the cafeteria."

When their soft footsteps had faded down the hallway, Erwin turned to Levi. His eyes were already hard with resolution, but Levi shook his head anyway. "No," he repeated.

"They have nowhere to go."

"Not our problem."

"They've been hitchhiking since Shiganshina. The men who assaulted them took their phones, bank cards, cash, and shoes."

"So buy them some fucking Nikes."

"Eren is seventeen and Armin is sixteen, Levi."

And, fuck it, Levi hesitated. Erwin looked surprised—apparently that hadn't even been his trump card—but Levi was abruptly afraid to hear any more details. Sixteen, shit. He'd hoped they were maybe young-looking eighteens or nineteens, though on some subconscious level, that'd gone out the window once he'd gotten a good look at Armin's eyes and Eren's skinny, battered ribs. Not that it would've made any real difference anyway. It was the kind of thing you couldn't think too long
about without breaking.

"Well, it's your call," said Levi finally. "You're the only one here with any money, or, you know. Compassion."

"You're half right." Erwin didn't make that sentimental or anything, just drummed his fingers on his knee, thinking. "They were trying to get to Dauper to stay with some friends, but Armin said he wasn't sure if he could face them anymore, and Eren didn't push it. He said he called his sister in Japan. She's catching the first flight over; it might be a few days before she gets here. Until then, we could put them up in a hotel or invite them to stay at home with us. If they're amenable to that, of course."

"Yeah, okay." An instant later, Levi realized that he had just obliquely agreed to move back in with Erwin. "Wait. Fuck."

"It's settled, then," said Erwin, climbing to his feet. He was smiling a little. Sneaky bastard.

"All part of your master plan to get me friends who aren't named after drinks?"

Abruptly, Erwin laughed.

"What?" Levi snapped. "What now?"

"It's nothing." He swept out his arm in a gentlemanly 'after you' gesture, taking up most of the room's limited space so that Levi was forced to exit ahead of him. "Let's go discuss it."

*

They weren't in the cafeteria. They weren't in the restrooms. They weren't in the lobby, or the dispensary, or even the shitty chapel—there were only so many places they could be in this rectal polyp of a hospital. While Erwin tracked down Marco the Volunteer for information, Levi went to the security desk and snapped his fingers at the kid watching the monitors. Jesus Christ, were they in the children's ward or something? "Hey. You see two boys sneak out of here?"

'J. Kirstein' looked mightily offended by the snapping. "If by 'sneak out' you mean 'go through all the proper discharge procedures and exchange contact information with Marco,' then yeah. They took off about ten minutes ago."

"Are you shitting me?"

"Yes. I am shitting you. Tiny, angry shits."

Kirstein yelped and went scrambling as Levi braced his hands on the countertop and made as if to hoist himself over the desk, but Erwin rounded the corner and caught his elbow just in time. "They went out the south exit," he said. "Thanks, Jean."


They hadn't been driving for more than forty seconds when they found Eren standing by the main road with his thumb extended. Armin, perched on a bench behind him with his knees to his chest, noticed them first. He pointed them out, and Eren stiffened. With absolutely nothing on their persons but a paper map and a single Pop Tart, they looked ridiculously small, exposed. They didn't even have coats. They were standing on Levi's side of the street, so he stuck his head out the
window once Erwin had pulled up beside them.

"Do you two have a fucking death wish?" he yelled.

Erwin hit the child locks and rolled up Levi's window without warning, nearly taking his face off, and opened his own door to smile at them over the roof of his car. "We thought you were going to stick around for a while."

"Yeah, um, we thought we'd go ahead and get moving," said Eren.

"How?" Levi demanded. He was clambering over to Erwin's side, despite Erwin's best efforts to shoulder him back into the passenger seat. "Were you waiting for your chauffer, or were you just going to take the Hummer?"


Erwin's expression was careful, calculating. "It's supposed to get very cold tonight. I'm hesitant to leave you without knowing that you have lodging or bus fare. Can I loan you some money?"

"No," Eren and Armin said at the same time, too fast. After a quick look, Armin was the one who continued: "Thank you, truly, but you've done more than enough. We've caught your name, Mr. Smith. We planned on reimbursing you for your troubles as soon as we had the means."

"Like with a fruit basket or something?" asked Levi.

"We know that there's no real way to pay you back," said Armin quietly, "but yes, we were going to make some sort of gesture. We're just—we're so grateful. But we're also—mortified."

They both had very different and very effective ways of shutting Levi up. Erwin too, apparently, because the slick motherfucker actually floundered, mouth tightening so minutely that Levi almost missed it. He pushed his way out of the car. He was a little too short to meet their gazes properly over the roof, god damn it, so he leaned across the hood. It was filthy, but he was going to burn these clothes anyway. Too much bad history in them now.

"We get that, but it's not your shame," said Levi. "I mean, it shouldn't be; you two didn't do anything to be ashamed of. And if you're worried about us seeing you in the buff—we've seen bodies before. And we weren't looking at you like that." He considered. Not enough, admittedly. "If you want to see us naked to make it even—"

"Oh my god," said Eren, but he was smiling sincerely for the first time since they'd met. Looked good on him, even with the swollen face and the puffy, exhausted eyes. "You really are a fuck up, aren't you?"

"Eren!" Armin gasped.

Levi frowned. He'd said it with a measure of familiarity, as if referencing a conversation that'd already taken place—and it might have, who the fuck knew. He didn't remember much of last night between scraping Eren off the street and walking him through the hospital parking lot. All the adrenaline and alcohol and shit. But apparently something had made him comfortable enough to unload on the kid, unfair as it was. Looking at him in broad daylight, it made sense. There was a weird softness in Eren exactly where you didn't expect to see it.

"Well, I'm a starving fuck up," said Levi after a moment. "You coming? Breakfast's on Erwin."

"Fine by me," said Erwin.
Miracle of miracles. Eren and Armin exchanged glances again, and at Armin's barely perceptible nod, Eren offered his friend a hand to help him off the bench. "Thanks again," Eren said. "Mister —"

"Levi. No mister."


"Wh—Eren Jäger," said Levi, fucking flabbergasted. He whirled on Erwin, mouth working soundlessly, and Erwin smirked and quirked a meaningful eyebrow at him. That was all it took for Levi to burst out laughing, loud and open-throated, the way he used to as a kid. "Jesus Christ. Get in the car, Eren Jaeger and, I don't know, Armin fucking Absolut. I could use a bigass Bloody Mary."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for all the kind words and kudos! Is it frowned upon to reply to comments? Like, does it cushion my review count and make me look like an asshole? Chapters are going to get longer later as I (hopefully) improve my pacing, but I think this story is going to move fairly slow. I'll tag more main characters as they appear. Most of the SnK cast should get some airtime.

I haven't even scratched the surface of all the fantastic fanfiction out there. I hope I'm not regurgitating too many tired jokes or phrases.
"I still don't get it," Eren confessed again, incredulous. "You record, like, actual novels? Like you do all the different voices and shit?"

Levi had ordered three cups of hot tea and was currently using their contents to scrub his silverware clean, so Erwin answered in his stead, knowing he'd be awhile: "Not novels, no. He does mostly legal and medical texts. You know, works that probably wouldn't benefit from the use of inflections anyway. One of his CDs on gadolinium contrast agents cured my insomnia."

"Paramagnetic ions are kind of fascinating, though," said Armin timidly, almost whispering.

Erwin didn't bother to hide his surprise. He blinked and smiled at Armin over the rim of his coffee mug. "Agreed, but Levi does the subject a tragic disservice."

"Yeah, well, I quit that shit job months ago," said Levi, not looking up from the sticky tabletop.

"No, you were suspended for turning in a two-hour tape comprised entirely of dirty limericks," Erwin reminded him.

"Oh. Right." The corners of Levi's mouth twitched upwards. "So there once was a cobbler from Venus, who stored shoe polish under his—"

"How are the pancakes?" Erwin interrupted.

"Delicious," said Eren, laughing. "Thanks."

It was surreal sitting here in a cheerful diner like this. Levi's company alone was disorienting enough, but to have Eren and Armin here too—young men smiling with their bruised lips, gratefully eating the cheapest brunches on the menu—Erwin felt tugged along by pure, instinctual politesse. They were keeping the conversation steady and light so they didn't have to really talk. Erwin watched Eren saw his pancakes into smaller and smaller bites, swollen knuckles making his hands clumsy.

"So what do you do?" Eren asked him, mouth full. "You look like you sit in a private office in a skyscraper somewhere."

"Only about half the time."

"What are you doing the rest of the time?"

"Sitting in a communal office in a skyscraper." He knew he was avoiding the question, but discussing his work seemed an absurdly banal thing to do after such a harrowing evening. "And what are your professional aspirations?"

Brief silence. Eren stopped massacring his breakfast. "Well, Armin's double-majoring in statistics
and actuarial science, and I'm testing for my GED in the spring." There was simple pride in his voice, both on behalf of himself and his friend. Erwin smiled.

"You're in college?" Levi asked Armin.

"Community college," Armin said to his plate. "Nothing impressive."

"At sixteen, a fucking puppetry major would be impressive." Levi gingerly lifted the top slice of bread from his sandwich with his fork, prodded at the limp lettuce, and let it drop again. He finally looked up. "So if you two averaged your years of formal education, you'd be about a fourth grader?"

"Right," said Eren cheerfully. "Just like if you averaged your height and Erwin's, you'd be around four foot eight."

Levi flashed him a look so dirty that Erwin thought he'd have to mop the table down again, but he couldn't help laughing. It'd been years since he'd seen Levi so animated. That laugh by the car, god. The pit of Erwin's stomach was still warm with the memory of it. "Well, I can tell you'll both do the world good in some capacity," said Erwin, topping off Armin's coffee. "You are sharp young men."

Both of them lit up with genuine gratitude at the compliment. "That's kind of you," said Armin.

"Considering," said Eren.

He faltered, and everyone let it pass. By unspoken agreement, the heavier topics were not open for discussion. You had to do this, really. Had to find the things you could be okay with, and keep doing them. Immediately following their exams at the hospital, Eren and Armin had made a game of flicking tongue depressors at each other, their strained laughter growing more and more genuine. Erwin did his best to facilitate these small distractions. They had to get through this day, no matter what happened afterward. Their eyes were brittle and frightened and aware, promising eventual breaks, and Erwin wanted to get them in the safest possible position for when they were ready to let themselves feel it.

Armin had declined Erwin's company for the better part of the morning, but Eren had let him sit in on a perfunctory physical and one brisk, abridged account of the evening. "Yeah, we'd been riding with them for a couple of hours before they got handsy," Eren told the officer, fighting to sound unaffected. "No, didn't catch their names. One of them smoked Camels." He didn't speak often to Erwin directly, and when he did, it was in short, empty observations: "I like your shoes. Ugh, the air conditioning is on. My hair feels disgusting." Erwin admired his composure even as he feared for him. The boy was stubborn. If Erwin's instincts were correct—and they usually were—Eren was the fighter to Armin's gentle efficiency, but both of them were dreamers. It was alarming, and it was beautiful.

It was hard to get a read on their relationship. Childhood friends, certainly, but the little touches threw him: Eren resting a comforting hand on Armin's knee, Armin adjusting the ties on Eren's hospital gown as casually as if they were his own. Sometimes their gazes seemed to stick an instant too long. Erwin wondered if this trauma had ruined something growing between them. He prayed not. And he wondered, privately, if he looked at Levi that same way.

Having failed to procure any hard liquor, Levi was struggling through his half a sandwich with an obvious headache. Erwin couldn't remember the last time he'd seen him eat solid food. He looked too pained and nauseated to chew.
"Hey," said Eren, thinking along the same lines. "You want one of my Percocets?"

"No, he does not," Erwin answered, when Levi's head shot up hopefully.

"I think maybe you drink too much," Eren said with a teenager's easy, uninvolved impudence.

"I think your haircut is shitty," Levi replied.

"I think it's better than yours."

"I think the next time you leave this table, I'm going to spit on everything you love, including your friend."

"I will kill you," said Eren, abruptly serious, and half-stood before Armin, smiling, dragged him back down.

"He's not going to spit on me," said Armin.

"He might if he didn't have hella dry mouth from excessive alcohol consumption."

Erwin snorted behind his napkin. He was getting an eager, mean amusement from Eren's backtalk. He loved that he was saying so many of the things that Erwin himself couldn't, and that Levi was getting seriously worked up. But Eren also had this sudden, firm ability to diffuse situations, and he employed it now, reaching across Armin to grab one of the menus.

"Maybe you should get a milkshake. That's my go-to hangover beverage because it tastes good and it doesn't burn when you barf it all up."

Disarmed, Levi stared at him for a long moment, eyebrows knit together. He looked like he was debating whether or not to snap at him. He said at last, "You're seventeen, kid. You're not supposed to be drinking."

"Aww, you do care," said Eren, reaching out to pinch his cheek. Levi slapped his hand away so hard that Eren smacked Armin soundly on the rebound.

"You think so, do you."

"Ow," said Armin and Eren.

Levi didn't look inclined to take the milkshake advice, so Erwin stood up to pay at the register while they finished their meals. He'd been trying to devise a way to invite Eren and Armin back to his apartment without sounding like a fucking creep, and was coming up empty. It'd be much more appropriate to get them their own hotel room. But—dropping them off would be such a final, decisive move. The action would formally excuse Erwin and Levi from their lives, and they'd no doubt be thumbing their way back into a stranger's car the following morning. It was their risk to take, yes—but that didn't mean that it sat well with Erwin, and that he wouldn't do everything within his power to keep them safe and warm for every minute he could.

By the time he returned, Armin was presumably in the restroom, and Eren was picking the tomatoes out of Levi's sandwich and eating them as unselfconsciously as if they'd known each other for years. Levi looked only mildly revolted, which was impressive.

"Really," Levi was saying, "Erwin's got money falling out his ass. A couple of shirts aren't going to break him."
"Shirts?" asked Erwin, tucking his admittedly fat wallet away.

"Yeah, those things you wear on your back? Maybe you could take the kids to a store and get them something a little warmer than those fuck-ugly sweaters."

"I would be glad to," said Erwin. "Coats and shoes, too."

Eren continued to shake his head. "No. Thanks, but no way. That'd make us really uncomfortable."

"Doesn't have to be anywhere fancy," said Levi. "Just a thrift store or some shit. I wanted to look for a few things anyway."

As if Levi would ever be caught dead wearing clothes from a thrift store. Even the time Erwin bought him a nine-hundred-dollar cardigan for his birthday, Levi had it dry-cleaned twice before he handled it without suspicion. Looked incredible in it, too. That'd been—damn, nearly five years ago, and Erwin still remembered it vividly; the great pleasure he had taken in stripping the cashmere off of him. He'd kept all of Levi's old clothes hanging in the back of his closet. Maybe he could talk him back into wearing some of them instead of the shabby coats and gloves he favored now.

"I don't know," Eren said after a long, reluctant moment, but he sounded like he was thinking about it. The pants he'd borrowed from Marco were rolled up at the bottom hems, and Armin looked even more ridiculous in Jean Kirstein's spare uniform trousers. Erwin was appalled that the doctor and police hadn't at least found them something to wear before they dismissed them.

Armin reappeared then, smiling but pale. The circles under his eyes were the same color as his bruises. "Sorry to keep you," he said. "Are we leaving now?"

His voice sounded normal, but Eren must've sensed something that Erwin and Levi didn't, because he suddenly reached out to cup the uninjured side of Armin's face in one palm. Checking his temperature, maybe. It was a private, pensive gesture, unromantic, but not precisely platonic, either. "Are you okay?"

"What? I'm fine."

"Armin."

"Well, yeah, I just, um," said Armin. He shrugged. "I threw up. Isn't that strange? Sorry, that seems ungrateful after such a nice breakfast. I think I'm just really tired."

Erwin's own stomach lurched unhappily. He opened his mouth to stumble through the invitation, awkwardness be damned, but Levi spoke up first with the kind of oh-fuck-it ineptitude that actually sort of worked for him: "Sleep at Erwin's. He's got a huge bed—not in the skeevy way. It's a guest bed. His place is like ten minutes away."

Eren and Armin didn't even have to look at each other. They were already shaking their heads.

"Jesus Christ, can we skip the song and dance this time?" Levi demanded. "I'm dead on my fucking feet. All I want is a place to take off my shoes and sleep for eighteen hours."

"There's a hotel about a block from my apartment," Erwin began, doing a fantastic job of not sounding like a dirty old man. Levi cut him off immediately.

"It'd take longer for him to check you in there than it would be to just crash with him. And it'd be
more expensive."

"Shit," Armin muttered, startling all of them, including Eren. He didn't look like he was aware he'd said it aloud; he was too busy chewing the inside of his cheek with obvious frustration. Even drained and injured, there was an unmistakable intelligence in his eyes, proud and calculating. It made Erwin blink. He hadn't managed to form many solid conclusions about the boy yet, likely because—Erwin understood suddenly—his guilelessness had been strategic. While Eren was chatting them up, Armin was hoarding information, turning it over and over behind that calm, bland smile. There was a reason for their shared looks. Whatever thinking they were doing, they were doing it as a unit, and Armin was not pleased with their current standing.

"Remind me never to meet you over a reciprocal nondisclosure agreement, Arlert," said Erwin.

Armin looked up at him, this time with none of his wariness or acuity masked. It changed his demeanor entirely. Erwin felt a strange, counterintuitive relief. This was a language they both spoke.

"You are not trapped," Erwin said firmly. "We will respect any decisions you make."

"As long as they aren't shitty ones," said Levi.

Erwin couldn't repress a smile. "Any decisions," he repeated.

Long beat of silence. Eren waited, regarding his friend with trustful, patient eyes, and it was his gaze that seemed to cement Armin's decision: "Just to sleep," he said at last. He stared at Erwin again, softer now. "Thank you, Mr. Smith."

"Splendid," said Levi. "Now if we could leave before the dinner rush—?"

"Shotgun," Eren shouted, bursting ahead of them out the door and nearly bowling Levi over. Levi glanced back over his shoulder to fix Erwin with a deadly glare, but Erwin ignored him, focusing instead on Armin. Armin smiled back at him, frank and careful, nothing hidden. He held the door open, and for the first time in ages, Erwin allowed himself to be ushered along.

He offered the whole ring of keys to Eren at the door after he'd unlocked it. "So you know you're not bolted in," he explained, and raised them just an inch higher as Levi grabbed for them instead.

"Bullshit," said Levi. "He gets a car key, too?"

"You have lost your driving privileges."

"I'll just beat the kid shitless and steal it anyway," said Levi, but he let it drop, stalking into the apartment and kicking off his shoes as he walked. Eren and Armin lingered nervously in the corridor. Erwin was pleased enough with his place—two baths, two bedrooms, a full kitchen and a patio with a decent view—but he'd never gotten around to remodeling. The walls and carpets were the same sterile white as they'd been when he'd moved in, and his furniture was sparse, underused. It didn't look much like a home. The boys oohed and ahhed anyway. Erwin had to remind himself that they'd been on the road for almost a month, and their hometown of Shiganshina was small and scanty. He'd only heard of it because of its crime rate.

"What if this is all part of our master plan to rob and murder you?" asked Eren, passing the key
ring to Armin, who looked appalled.

"Eren, don't say things like that!"

"Well, I suppose you've earned it by now," said Erwin. "Make yourself at home. Help yourselves
to anything in the refrigerator, though I don't know if there's much in there but ketchup and bottled
coffee."

"I call the ketchup," said Eren.

Eren did not, in fact, drink the ketchup. He and Armin took turns using the bathroom, exited with
freshly scrubbed faces, and waited quietly to be shown to the bedroom. Erwin had just finished
changing the sheets. He'd laid out a few pairs of pajamas that they'd no doubt be swimming in, but
he figured anything would be better than those stiff sweatshirts. They looked like they were barely
awake. "Feel free to lock the door if it'd make you more comfortable," he said, dismissing himself
quickly. "I'm going to be working and running errands, but I'm sure Levi will be home if you need
anything."

With profuse yawns and thank yous, they did close the door, but there was no telltale click of the
lock. Erwin was pleased by this show of trust. When he was reasonably sure they'd fallen asleep,
he caught up on his e-mails, showered, and got dressed in clean clothes. Levi caught him as he was
pulling his coat on in the foyer.

"Where the hell are you going?"

"Shopping. Going to buy them some clothes and cell phones."

"They barely accepted a pancake breakfast. You think they're going to want to handle your
Apples?"

Erwin ignored his phrasing. "If they don't want them, I'll just cancel the service."

"I'm Erwin," said Levi in a deep voice, and, for some reason, a British accent. "I pick up underage
boys and shit money."

"Go to sleep, Levi. You're getting slap-happy. You can use my bed."

"Not falling for that one again," he said, and disappeared down the hallway without another word.

Erwin couldn't bring himself to gift the boys items from a thrift store. If they were going to receive
clothing, it might as well be new. He passed up the luxury labels in favor of department store
brands that they'd be more likely to accept, selecting warm, handsome shirts, sturdy jeans, winter
jackets with hoods and zippers. A few nondescript packages of underwear and socks. Two pairs of
sneakers that looked like they could handle a lot of walking. On his way to the checkout counter,
he spotted some mittens and tossed those in as well. The purchases amounted to four large bags,
and Erwin carried them to the car, feeling strangely accomplished. He couldn't remember the last
time he'd gone shopping for more than a birthday present or a new tie. He even had his groceries
delivered, though he supposed Levi might want to take over that duty himself now—that'd be a
welcome departure from his usual frozen meals and canned soups. Erwin's throat gave a small,
hopeful twinge at the idea of sharing meals with Levi again. The bastard couldn't fry spam, but
everything tasted a little better around him.

After picking up and activating a few modest cell phones, he returned with Greek takeout to a dark,
silent apartment. Despite its stillness, Erwin could sense the presences of his three guests. He'd
had enough practice coming home to no one to know how that felt. He checked in on Eren and
Armin. They were sleeping with the exhausted heaviness of infants, legs tangled together. He closed the door again and went to put the food in the fridge.

On his way back, he paused at the threshold of his small study. Levi had fallen asleep on the couch in one of Erwin's shirts. His hair, still damp from the shower, had slipped down across his forehead. Erwin crossed the room in three soft steps and knelt beside him. He stroked Levi's hair back behind his ear with the barest tips of his fingers, managing not to touch his face at all. Levi was too pale, too skinny. His small shoulder blades looked painfully sharp even through the loose cotton of Erwin's work shirt.

Levi was going to stay. Erwin had been so intent on talking him into it that he hadn't really thought about what it would mean. He was suddenly afraid. Every aspect of this thrummed with a hollow, last-chance pressure. If Erwin fucked this up again, that would be it.

"I miss you," Erwin said quietly. "Please tell me what happened to you."

Of course, Levi didn't stir. He exhaled shortly through his parted lips, and his breath was hot and sweet, unmistakably laced with alcohol. Erwin drew back, eyes closed. He did touch Levi's cheek then, tenderly, knowing that he wouldn't feel it. His skin was smooth and white and warm. Erwin draped his coat over him and left the room, closing the door behind him. Already the night was very, very cold.

* 

The hours bled away whenever Erwin worked. Minute after minute slid by, brisk and painless, and there was always something to show for it: a report, a tricky correspondence, a new plan of corporate attack. He produced for the world this way. The silence died beneath the clack of his keyboard and the low, steady gurgle of the backup coffeemaker. He emerged from his home office after three hours of continuous typing. He was finally tired. It'd been a day and a half since he'd last slept.

After depositing his empty mugs in the sink, he lingered in the living room. Sitting near the full-length windows, he could just make out the shape of Eren in the armchair, hunched over with his face in his hands. He'd put the sweater back on, but he was still wearing Erwin's pajama bottoms. His feet weren't showing. Erwin tried to approach with a heavier tread than normal, so as not to startle him, but Eren jumped anyway, eyes already narrowed with hostility.

"I'm sorry," said Erwin, stopping a respectable distance away.

Eren's shoulders relaxed. "No, no. I'm sorry. Armin and I should've taken off by now, but he was sleeping so hard that I didn't have the heart to wake him."

"Stay as long as you like."

He hesitated. His gaze dropped; he rubbed at a seam on the armchair. "If my sister managed to get a flight, she'll probably be here tomorrow night or the morning after. I'll give Marco a call to see if she's been in touch. Do you think—like, if it's okay, do you mind if we—"

"Not at all. Eren, I wish you would stop asking."

"Sorry. Aah, it's just—we're too proud, I think. I'm sure you haven't noticed that by now or
anything. I'm a little better about it than Armin is; he would let himself die before he put anyone out, but—I wouldn't. Let him die, I mean. You ever meet someone and it's, like, the world is a better place just 'cause they're in it?"

Erwin smiled a little. The bitterness of it surprised him. "Yes."

"You understand," said Eren. "Thank you. For that, and for everything else."

Turned sideways in the chair, Eren's face caught the light at just the right angle to frame his lashes, to silver the tiny lines of tears at the bottom edges of his eyes. His lips were still swollen, and there was a long, thin cut beneath the shelf of his jaw. It was too deliberate to have been sustained in a fall or from a tree branch. Maybe a knife. Erwin felt a surge of dull, impotent anger and had to clench his fists in his pockets to stave it off. Eren closed in on himself again, knees up.

"I miss my mom," said Eren suddenly.

Erwin sat down on the loveseat opposite him. "Did she pass?"

"Yeah, when I was eleven. You'd think I'd be over it by now, huh? Armin's parents are dead, too, and his grandpa died in the spring, so we just—grabbed all our shit and took off. I don't know what we were thinking. I still don't."

"No one is looking for you?"

Eren shook his head, not opening his eyes. "No one cares about poor kids."

That was something Erwin knew nothing about, and he wouldn't insult Levi or Eren or Armin by claiming to. He was fortunate in a great many ways. He was healthy, well-off. He'd been able to afford an impressive education. His hardships, he believed—in a distant, self-loathing way—were born of his own errors: his need for approval, his selfishness, his refusal to let go of the people he loved. Nothing had caused him more anguish than Levi Ackerman, and very little of it was actually Levi's fault.

Maybe he thought he could make amends through Armin and Eren. He didn't want to flatter himself by believing he and Armin had anything in common, but Eren's candor, his clarity, his emotional potency—he was so much like Levi that Erwin felt numb with grief. He had failed Levi somewhere during his life. Failed him actively, missing some sort of sign or plea for help, and failed him passively every day with his inability to make it right. Eren, at least, was reachable. Tentatively, Erwin moved to place an arm around him, and Eren melted right into him with a terrible, full-bodied desperation.

"Is this how these things happen?" Eren said, voice hitching. "You get beat up and fucked and thrown out like garbage, and you just keep walking because there's nothing else to do? What's supposed to happen now? How am I going to look my sister in the eyes?"

He cried in earnest then, burying his face against Erwin's chest, and Erwin couldn't hold him tightly enough to stop his shaking. He stroked the boy's hair, rubbed the part of his back that didn't tense when he touched it. He couldn't imagine feeling more helpless, and he knew that his distress equaled only the smallest fraction of Eren's. The boy's pain was unfathomable. I'm going to take care of you, Erwin thought, rocking him back and forth. I'm going to protect you. Nothing like this will ever happen to you again.

At some point in the night, he became aware of Levi and Armin standing in the opening of the hallway wearing identical, unreadable expressions. They just watched. They stood motionless,
and they waited, and they watched.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Armin has an upsetting injury, Eren is an enabler, Erwin is the world's most incompetent competent man, and Levi finds something about Eren's sister really, really familiar.

Chapter Notes

I actually wrote this chapter four times from different perspectives--Levi's, Mikasa's, Eren's, and Marco's--and I'm not sure I settled for the right version. I'm worried that deviating from the Erwin, Levi, Erwin, Levi pattern would be jarring at this point. Will you let me know what you'd think about switching up the narrators? Thank you for reading, and for all the kind words and kudos!

"Levi?"

He startled awake before the second syllable had even left Eren's mouth, instinctively trying to pretend that he hadn't been sleeping. He must've dozed off on the sofa after Erwin had tucked the brats in last night. God, that sobfest had been exhausting just to watch; he had no idea how Eren was leaning over him looking so fucking awake. "What?" said Levi, more curtly than he'd intended. "What do you want?"

"Sorry," said Eren. "Erwin went to work an hour ago, and I was wondering if he had any Neosporin or something—"

"Do I look like a medicine cabinet to you?"

"There's none in the hall bathroom. We didn't want to go snooping around."

Levi rolled over, dragged a throw pillow over his head, and forced himself to process the request. It'd be something else if they were whining for Diet Pepsi or chocolate milk or some shit, but, of all things, antibiotic ointment—Levi groaned and swung himself upright, grabbing the back of the couch when the world tilted sideways. Eren offered him an elbow that he pointedly refused. "I don't know how waking me up is any more polite than checking a few drawers in Erwin's bathroom," he grumbled.

"Oh, it's not, I just like pissing you off," said Eren.

Levi stopped and glared.

"Also, Erwin asked us to wake you up at three."

"Three?" Levi glanced at the digital readout on the DVD player and raked a hand through his hair in disbelief. "Well, shit. Time flies when you're having Fuzzy Navels." He made his way across
the living room, stabilizing himself on various pieces of furniture as he went. "So what's wrong?"

"Armin's got some scratches that might be getting infected."

"Surprise, surprise. That doctor of yours couldn't tell a scraped elbow from a shit stain." His irritation was authentic. Fuck that hospital. Incompetence, pure and simple. Who the hell threw opiates at two homeless, naked teenagers without even asking them where their mommies were? Levi opened Erwin's bedroom door and trudged into the bathroom. He paused briefly. Erwin had switched up his cologne since he'd last been here—it was woodsier, crisper, with some deep, velvety note that made Levi's throat tighten. He swallowed, squared his shoulders, and began digging through the cabinet drawers with a little more force than was necessary. He found an unopened tube of lubricant and tossed it in the trash bin, smirking. Dream on, Erwin. "Neosporin, you said?"

"Or whatever. Any disinfectant," said Eren from the hallway.

"You can come in, you know."

"I don't live here."

"Neither do I, asshole."

He found a bottle of hydrogen peroxide under the sink. It was hiding behind a bag of cotton balls, so he grabbed that too, then hunted down some gauze and medical tape. It would probably be a good time for them to change their bandages anyway. As an afterthought, he grabbed a handful of clean towels from the closet in case they needed to shower. By the time he'd kicked all the cabinet doors shut again, Eren's ears were bright pink, and Levi had forgotten the cause for his embarrassment.

"What?"

"Uh, well, sorry for implying—I assumed you and Erwin were, like—involved? Together."

The kid looked so nervous that Levi was tempted to make him sweat it out, feign anger, but he relented when he saw the way he was nervously flexing and unflexing his swollen fists. "Involved, yes," said Levi, sighing. "Together, no." He tossed him the roll of gauze. Eren twisted reflexively and caught it with a fancy backhand, already beginning to grin again, and Levi gave him an unimpressed look. "I take it your ribs are feeling better."

"Much! I can't feel anything, not even my face. I took one of those heavy-duty painkillers. Armin's kind of crashing, though—he's trying to save his to sell. He says they'll go for a lot because they're so additive." His tone became playful. "You want to be my first customer?"

Even through the double entendre, Levi considered it for about half a second before he remembered that Erwin would kill him, fucking kill him if he used any drugs here, and that he wasn't all that interested in buying from a kid he knew personally. Especially not when he was going to be around to see how much pain said kid was in.

"Shut the fuck up, Eren. Ethics, legality, etcetera, and, by the way, your friend is the very last person on earth I'd trust as a drug dealer."

"He's not a drug dealer," said Eren, suddenly defensive. "He's a pragmatist. He sells what we don't need."

"Then you have a shit-poor grasp on what you do and do not need. Give me the gauze. I'll take
care of him so I know you won't try to trade him for heroin or something."

"How would that even—hey! Hey, wait!"

"My house, my rules."

"You just said it's Erwin's house!"

He ignored that and shoved past Eren into the other bathroom, where Armin Arlert was holding a handheld mirror so he could examine his back in the stupid fucking vanity that Erwin had never replaced. He didn't look surprised by Levi's appearance—had been listening in, then—but he wasn't precisely relaxed, either. He was clutching his shirt to his bare chest with his free hand, biting his lower lip. "I would appreciate your help, actually," he said, keeping his eyes down. "I can't reach. Could you please shut the door?"

Levi slammed the door in Eren's face.

"Ow!" Eren yelped. Then, congested-sounding: "Armin, I'll do it, what the hell!"

"You have to call Marco, remember?" Armin called, and winced as Eren bitched all the way to the living room, stomping his feet like a four-year-old. Only after he was loudly engaged in his phone conversation ("Hi, is this Mar—Horseface? What the fuck?") did Armin meet Levi's gaze. "Thank you," said Armin, cheeks red. "I know this is weird, but can you just—check to see if it looks bad?"

Very, very lightly, Levi touched the center of his spine, just below the bandage."Right here?"

"Yeah. It's hurting a lot."

"This better not get me arrested." Levi took a deep breath and gingerly pinched a corner of the medical tape with his fingertips. Armin shivered a little. Levi felt like a fucking pervert. "You want me to go fast or slow?" he asked, then paled and half-turned to smack his head against the wall.

"Slow," said Armin, graciously casual.

"All right."

Moving just a millimeter at a time, Levi peeled back the top piece of tape. The gauze pad itself was sticking. Not a good sign. He gently tugged the bandage out of the way—and had to close his eyes, swallowing back a sharp breath. This—wasn't a scratch. It was four deep, slender incisions, a crude S and the beginning of some other letter, all stitched up. Initials, maybe, or some sort of slur. 'Slag,' 'slut,' Probably not 'standup young fella.' Levi swapped the cotton ball for a swab, soaking the tip in the hydrogen peroxide so he could trace the cuts with more precision. Armin hissed at the contact. Levi stopped, hand poised in the air.

"Fuck."

"No, it's fine. Please continue." Armin's voice, mild and matter-of-fact, broke a little, though he steadied it quickly with a cough. "I just didn't want Eren to see this. He'd flip."

"I believe it," said Levi. "This is some uninspired shit right here. Very—1970s exploitation film."

Armin actually chuckled, but didn't pursue that line of conversation. Thank god, because Levi felt like an enormous asshat the instant it left his mouth. He usually didn't give two shits about hurting
people's feelings, but something about this kid made him want to curtsey. "Did you see the phones Mr. Smith got us?" asked Armin, as if Levi weren't disinfecting the fucking carving between his shoulder blades. "I tried to give them back, but apparently Eren's already on the Fruit Ninja leaderboard and doesn't want to part with his."

"Yeah, that's how Erwin got me to keep a cell phone too, except it was one of those games where you pop the bubbles. Trippy as fuck when you're high."

"Mr. Smith put your number in our contact lists. Is that all right?"

"I don't care. God, all this 'Mr. Smith' business. Can't you just call him Erwin?"

"Y-yeah, sure. Um, Er—Mr. Erwi—no, apparently I can't."

"He doesn't mind, you know."

"I know. I just—I guess it's less personal this way? A 'Mr. Smith' could be anyone. I mean, I'm not going to forget his kindness, or yours, but all the bad things—I need them gone as soon as possible. I can't keep them. I won't keep them."

Encouraging outright denial wasn't helpful, but neither was offering support that he knew he couldn't provide. Besides, what was Armin supposed to learn from this, anyway? Don't trust people? Don't get into cars without a chastity belt and a loaded fucking gun? Levi gave the cuts one last wipe-down with the peroxide, pressed a fresh gauze pad over them, and began tearing strips of tape off the roll with his teeth. "Yeah," said Levi, when he'd gotten the new bandage secure. "Yeah, I get that."

He helped Armin redress without injuring himself, and they walked together to the living room, not speaking. Eren was standing at the kitchen counter with a pen, scribbling something on his palm.

"Okay. Okay, thank you so much. You are a saint." Pause. "Ha, no, but there is a Marcellin, Patron Saint of education." Another pause, during which he bristled. "Yeah, Jean, the patron saint of dicks!" Eren hung up by way of smacking his phone against the fridge, then gasped and cradled it to his chest. "Reflex! I'm sorry, Patron Cellular of Samsung!"

"Idiot," said Armin and Levi in unison, except that Levi threw a "fucking" in there, and Armin's voice was fond.

"That asswad Kirstein lives with Marco," said Eren, scowling.

"I figured that one out," Armin said.

"How did you manage to make a mortal enemy in less than a day?" asked Levi.

"I could ask you the same thing. He didn't have many nice things to say about 'the constipated gremlin,' either." Eren studied Levi, then Armin, and surprised Levi by addressing them both with equal trust: "So are things okay? Do you think we need to see a doctor?"

"He'll be fine if he keeps it clean," said Levi. "He finally sucked it up and requested a painkiller."

"Oh! Good!" Eren jumped on the opportunity, pouring Armin a glass of water and shaking about two dozen pills into his hand. He offered the whole pile to Armin, grinning, and Levi boxed Armin in from behind with the firmest expression he could muster up. Armin flashed Levi an impressively dark look, then turned to Eren and picked a tablet out of his hand.
"It really doesn't hurt that bad."

"Humor me," said Eren.

"I've been humoring you for sixteen years," said Armin, but he placed the pill on his tongue and sipped from the glass, looking defeated. "What did Marco say?"

"He said she called early this morning before she boarded. She got a nonstop to Denver, then a connecting flight. She'll be here around nine."

"Can he drive us to the airport?"

"No, he's working."

"How about Jean?"

"You really think I'd lower myself to ask that piece of crap?" Eren snapped, then laughed nervously at Armin's unwavering stare. "Just kidding, yeah, I asked. He's working too. Taxi it is, then. Or, um—"

Levi had brushed past them to stick his head in the refrigerator and was staring bleakly at a green block of mold in the vegetable crisper that looked like it might've once been a bell pepper. When he realized he was being stared at, he twitched. He let the refrigerator door swing shut. Armin was whistling Schubert, determinedly examining the floor, but Eren was beaming at him, leaning one elbow companionably on the countertop. His smile was lopsided because of his swollen jaw. Pity was the only reason Levi listened to him.


"Not that it matters, but are you angling for cab fare or for a ride?"

"Ride."

"I can't drive you. I'm grounded."

"Cab fare, then?"

"Fuck you very much." Levi was broke, and the little bugger knew it.

"This is the last favor, I promise," said Eren, walking backwards to maintain eye contact with Levi as he headed toward the liquor cabinet. "My sister can give you gas money when we meet up with her. More than gas money! She can, like, give you an allowance so you can buy food instead of drinking all of Erwin's tequila! Unless you prefer tequila? Then you can buy more tequila!"

"What the fuck," said Levi. "Don't be an enabler."

"He's right," Armin pointed out.

"And you, don't be a suck-up," Levi told Armin. Armin snickered in response, and Eren looked crushed. Why these these two actually seemed to like him was beyond Levi, but it did feel kind of validating. He rerouted himself away from the liquor cabinet and back toward the stove to make the fuckers some tea. "Two conditions: first, don't tell Erwin I'm driving. I will kill you. Second, if I wreck his car, you have to say that you did it. What the hell—?"

There was a big lump of metal stuck to one of the elements on the electric cooktop. Levi poked it.
"I think that's his tea kettle," said Armin.

"Incredible." Meet Erwin Smith, the world's most incompetent competent human being. Levi, by contrast, was the world's most competent incompetent human being, so he filled some mugs with teabags and water and jammed them in the microwave. "I hope you like Earl Grey. I don't think he has anything else."

"Thanks, Levi," said Eren, so emphatically that it was clear he speaking in general—the tea and the car ride and the hospitality and all. He hoisted himself onto the counter and began gnawing at a cuticle. Whenever Eren was stationary, Levi noticed, everything around him seemed to slow, as if he alone set some sort of social tempo. "I almost didn't want to be able to pick up my sister," he admitted. "Part of me wishes I hadn't called her. She's essentially hauling ass back to the States just to hug me and pat me on the head."

"But you need her right now, don't you?" asked Armin.

Eren was quiet for a moment. "Yeah. I think so."

"So do I."

Levi couldn't imagine being close enough to anyone to ask them for comfort. His damages would go with him to the grave, not out of distrust of Erwin or Hange or Isabel, but because of his own stubborn pride. It'd be different, he supposed, if he hadn't unambiguously told every precious person in his life to fuck off. He used to think needing help was a sign of weakness. Now, too late, he understood that it would've been a sign of strength: Hange was still staying away because they cared about him—the same reason why Erwin was intervening.

He was quietly grateful to be playing a part in Eren and Armin's receiving support. In some hazy, insufficient way, it was like endorsing an option that he himself had refused. The microwave beeped, and Levi snatched out two of the mugs and sort of shoved them at the boys, flushing.

"Tea. Drink it."

They smiled at him and drank without protest.

*

He actually ended up watching two shitty made-for-TV movies with Eren and Armin while they waited for the flight to come in. Who knew the Hallmark channel could be so emotionally exhausting? Armin had nodded off after they picked through the Greek takeout, so Levi and Eren had driven to the local airport alone, both languid after all that sitting around.

With no imminent holidays, the airport was almost completely deserted. Three of the five people at security were employees, and one of the desk attendants waved Levi and Eren along to the gates because there was no one else she needed to keep an eye on. Levi stood a few awkward steps behind Eren, hands in his pockets. He'd grabbed another one of Erwin's coats since he couldn't trust anything else to be clean. Eren had gone ahead and dressed in new jeans and one of the gray pullovers Erwin got him. Turned out he was an okay-looking kid when he wore clothes that actually fit him: slim waist, long legs, lightly-toned arms that he'd probably hold more gracefully if he weren't so banged up. Levi scrutinized him from behind without letting his gaze drop below mid-back level. No checking out seventeen-year-olds today, thanks. He shifted his weight from foot to foot, suppressing a yawn.

"That's probably it right there," said Eren, pointing through one of the plate-glass windows at a
plane taxiing down the runway. "The small one. I'm still surprised there's actually an airport here. How many people do you think want to visit this crap town anyway?"

"Careful," said Levi.

"Oh—you actually—? Sorry. For some reason I thought you were just visiting."

"I am." Levi stared straight ahead, watching the jet bridge extend. He felt a soft pang for no reason at all. "I was born here."

"Seriously?"

"Problem?"

"No, no. Sometimes I just forget—I don't know. That really good people can come from rough places. It reminds me that I can't excuse away my fuckups because of my circumstances. I mean, look at Armin. He didn't let anything stop him."

That was just esoteric enough that Levi missed the implicit compliment until it was a moment too late to acknowledge it. He eyed Eren sidelong, seeing a familiar ruefulness in his smile—a brand of honest love for his friend that was growing more and more complicated by a quiet self-hatred. Levi could dig that. He nodded once, curtly. "I feel the same way about Erwin."

"Those two are something else, aren't they?" Eren's voice was distant.

"They are."

Brief lull in conversation.

"Thank you for driving me," said Eren for the sixtieth time.

"You're welcome. Again. Though we both know I did it more to piss off Erwin than as a favor to you."

"Sure." Eren grinned and nudged him with one shoulder. "Also because he's got such a nice ride, right?"

Levi turned his head away, smiling a bit. Couldn't argue with that. Erwin's personal car was a lot more exciting than his business car; he and Eren had spent about ten minutes fucking around with the bass settings and the heated seats. "I've never had the chance to total a Cadillac before."

"Well, don't start now. At least not until you've safely seen me off."

His smirk slipped. "You're leaving, then?"

"Yeah. My sister has some money, and we've imposed on you and Erwin for long enough, so..."

"You aren't an imposition."

"You're sweet," said Eren softly, without sarcasm, "but I'm not going to keep holding up your life like this."

Something in Levi's stomach turned over. 'Sweet' wasn't one he heard very often, except in terms of his ass, and that was feeling less and less like a compliment every time some grabby bastard said it. Armin was a distraction, and Eren was an outright pain in the patella, but—Levi didn't want them to go. Didn't like the idea of being without them. They were like new life in soil that'd been
salted centuries ago; he wasn't imagining that. He could see it in Erwin's eyes, too.

The jetway was secure now, and an attendant moved to open the doors in preparation of the passengers' disembarkment. Eren jumped at the sound—he'd gravitated closer to Levi without either of them noticing. "Shit," he said thickly, grabbing Levi's sleeve. "She'll be here any second. She's going to be emotional. I'm think going to puke."

"It's just your sister," Levi pointed out, though if it'd been him, he would've been hiding in another country by now.

"Yeah, but wow. Wow, I'm going to puke," said Eren again.

"Wait, you're serious?" Levi turned, and sure enough, Eren's face was the color of chalk beneath all the bruise coverage. "Well—find a fucking bathroom! Let go of me! Why are you still standing here?"

As if excused from class, Eren was scurrying off in an instant, one hand closed over his mouth. Levi did not sign up to wipe vomit off a kid's face—but he hesitated after him anyway. Maybe he could stand by the door and tell him to feel better and rinse his fucking mouth.

He'd only made it a few steps before the passengers started trickling into the terminal, tired-eyed and carrying ugly overnight bags. The small aircraft had seated no more than twenty; it wouldn't be too hard to track down a young woman who resembled Eren, even having never met her before. Levi waited, fingers itching for hand wipes. Airports were disgusting. Everyone coming off the plane looked harried, uncomfortable.

One such passenger, dark-haired and obscured by a red scarf, paused when she saw Levi.

Since she was already staring openly, Levi stared back. He couldn't see much more than her eyes—attractive, intelligent ones, a little swollen from crying or lack of sleep—but something about her was intensely familiar. She walked toward him cautiously, pushing her scarf down under her chin.

"Mikasa Ackerman," she said, once she was in earshot.

"Levi Ackerman," said Levi. He still couldn't quite place her, and, judging by her expression, she couldn't either. "Do I know your parents?"

"You don't," she said simply. "Would I know yours?"

"No."

They weren't making a lot of progress here. Levi had to smile, and Mikasa smiled back. "Just one of those things," she said. She was opening her mouth to add something when Eren reemerged from the restroom, looking pale, but significantly less ill. Her expression changed immediately. She dropped her carry-on and threw her arms around Eren, burying her face in his neck.

"Mikasa," said Eren, laughing. "Don't get too close. I have barf breath."

"Eren," said Mikasa, "leprosy would not keep me away from you right now. Are you sick, are you in pain?" When she withdrew, she got one look at the contusions layering his cheeks, and her voice dropped to a low, deadly timbre: "I'll kill them. I'll kill every one of them, Eren, I swear to you."

She spoke with absolutely no overstatement. She was making him a promise.

"Wow, you sound just like Levi," Eren teased.
Mikasa looked at Levi again, and Levi looked back. They squinted at each other.

Catching the weight of the gaze, Eren glanced between them, confused. "Have you two met?"

Levi refocused so he could study both of them, Eren's eyes with their surreptitious glimmer of tears, and Mikasa's expression, fierce and fragile and loving all at the same time. He'd call it fate if he believed in those sorts of things. But he didn't. Instead, he shrugged.

"Just one of those things," said Levi.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

WARNING for semi-romantic interactions between pairs of characters, one of them including a minor. PoV change to Eren next chapter. Thank you all so, so much for reading, and for the support.

The liquor cabinet had not been opened.

Erwin smiled as he surveyed the array of bottles. All the spirits—bright ambers, plums, roses, burgundies—rested at the exact levels where Erwin had catalogued them the night before. Not a swig was missing. He had almost talked himself into believing that Eren and Armin might sneak sips, but now, faced with the relief of the untouched shelves, he could admit that he had been worried Levi was a full-fledged alcoholic. If he could go an entire day without a drink, perhaps he wasn't as far gone as Erwin feared he was.

A day. One day. Erwin sighed and closed the cabinet. That was how low his expectations had fallen.

He had arrived home early to find Armin standing in the center of the living room, belatedly trying to activate his new phone. "They left without me," he'd told Erwin, with thinly concealed panic. He'd clearly just woken up; his hair and clothes were rumpled, and he wasn't quite rational yet. "Maybe they took a flight to Japan. Eren has always wanted to go. Maybe they thought this was as good a time as any, they could've just—"

"Breathe, Armin. Eren called to tell me that they were going to go ahead and check into a hotel since it was on the way. I'll take you there when Levi comes back with my car. I wanted to pay for your rooms."

Armin stared at him, desperately hopeful. It was the first open sign of distress he'd displayed since Erwin had met him, including the night on the road. Erwin's heart seized.

"Eren would never abandon you, Armin. He loves you."

It seemed simultaneously the first and last thing Armin wanted to hear. It'd hit upon something. His face clouded with a dull, bleak confusion—his tired eyes grew damp—then he managed a small smile that grew steadily more genuine. "You're right. He—he does love me. Mikasa does, too. Thank you, Mr. Smith."

Erwin had smiled back at him. "Freshen up if you'd like. I'll get your belongings together."

While Armin was in the bathroom, Erwin folded all of the new clothes into a suitcase—a moderately expensive one, honestly, so as not to preclude the possibility of their meeting up again to return it. After a moment of hesitation, he also removed his wallet and tucked ten crisp twenties into one of the jean pockets. He had just finished inventorizing the liquor cabinet and changing out of his dress shoes when someone thumped against the front door, cursed colorfully, and began fumbling with a handful of keys. Erwin opened the door. Levi's hand was still hovering at doorknob level. He looked up at Erwin, blinked, and schooled his expression into one of
"You took my car," said Erwin.

"I also changed all of your preset radio stations," said Levi.

"To what?"

"Static."

Erwin rubbed his temples. "Thank you for driving Eren to the airport. I'll take Armin to the hotel. It's the one near the cinema, right?"

"Yeah, the good one. Not the one that rents rooms by the hour." Levi looked wary. He flinched minutely when Erwin extended his hand to reclaim the keys. "That's it? No lectures about respecting your property, how that Cadillac is worth more than my life?"

"Nothing is worth more than your life."

It wasn't supposed to come across so heavy, but Eren and Armin's situation had them feeling a little raw, and the two of them still hadn't had a chance to talk to each other civilly since their reunion. Maybe that'd been for the best. It had given them both time to calm down. Levi grumbled and moved toward the bedroom, but Erwin intercepted him, catching the lapels of his coat and turning him around just a little rougher than he'd meant to. Levi gazed up at him, startled but unalarmed.

Erwin pushed the coat off of Levi's shoulders and threaded his own arms through the sleeves.

"This is my favorite," he explained, not sure how to break the silence.


Armin emerged from the bathroom, analyzed their proximity, and began backing out of sight. Erwin called out to him before he could sneak away: "Ready, Armin?"


"Take care of yourself," said Levi after a moment, and damned if there wasn't a gruff note of fondness in it.

Against his protests, Erwin carried Armin's suitcase for him, and they took the elevator down to the garage level. The Cadillac wasn't in its assigned spot. He hit the key fob, and the car blinked twice from the opposite side of the lot, lodged into the single No Parking zone of the entire complex. Erwin sighed. Leaving the car this far away would've made extra work for Levi, too, and—Erwin thought, torn somewhere between affection and irritation—Levi had to take two steps for every one of Erwin's.

"We have a love-hate relationship," Erwin explained. "I love him, he hates me."

Armin laughed. "He loves you," he added a beat later, echoing Erwin's earlier words.

They reached the hotel quickly. Everything was close to everything else here, all of it backcountry and parochial—gas stations and bowling alleys and mom and pop diners as far as the eye could see. Erwin's commute to work every day took an hour and a half, and it was a time he cherished. He liked to imagine he wasn't coming back. He liked to forget that he did.
At the front desk of the inn, Erwin attempted to pay for the accommodations, and was informed that Eren's sister had already booked a single room to share among the three of them. Of their two week stay, only one night had been left unpaid for—undoubtedly just to placate Erwin. Seemed that determinedly refusing financial assistance ran in the family. Erwin had the receptionist refund Mikasa's card and paid for the room himself, not bothering to upgrade them to a nicer suite, because they would surely refuse it. Proud kids. You had to admire that about them, even when you wanted to grab their shoulders and shake them in frustration.

"The room is on the other end of the complex," said Erwin as he climbed back behind the wheel. "I'll drive you."

Armin sighed. "I don't suppose it'd do any good to point out that it'd take me maybe thirty seconds to walk there?"

"None." Erwin didn't want Armin walking alone behind a dark building at night. Irrational, maybe—but no more irrational than wanting him to travel with a taser and a shotgun from now on. He braced one arm behind Armin's seat, backed out of the parking space, and drove around the hotel. It took an embarrassing five seconds, if that, and left them sitting together in an awkward almost-silence. Erwin realized belatedly that Chopin was playing softly over the radio. He smiled.

"You found my favorite station."

"Did I? I'd hoped it was okay to change it. I didn't think that mildly demonic-sounding static was actually your style." Armin hesitated. "Did you have the radio on that night? It's all hazy, but I've been humming in D major for days now."

"Yes," said Erwin, astonished. "You enjoy classical?"

"Yeah. Eren makes fun of me for it, but he listens to, like, freak folk and thrash cabaret."

"Those are genres?"

"Not ones that I personally acknowledge."

"I know the feeling," said Erwin. He did. Levi favored danger music, experimental rock, and Babymetal. Sarcastic lounge covers, too, though Erwin understood that, in some small part. It was about nostalgia. He and Levi had been introduced at a cocktail bar. Lounge also had the added bonus of severely irritating Erwin, so Levi listened to it often, and loudly, pretending that he actually liked it.

"Chopin wrote the best ballades, don't you think?" said Armin.

"He did." Erwin smiled. "You keep startling me. You are a remarkable young man."

He'd barely gotten the sentence out when Armin suddenly half-turned, swallowed audibly, and pressed his mouth against Erwin's.

Caught completely off-guard, Erwin let the kiss hold on too long—long enough for Armin to ease his soft, unskilled tongue a fraction of an inch into Erwin's mouth before Erwin jerked away. He pressed the back of his own hand to his lips and stared out his dark window, resolutely refusing to make eye contact. He felt ill with discomfiture. After a moment, Armin leaned back into his seat. They sat in silence, heads angled away from one another, the air between them charged and heavy.

"I'm sorry," said Armin finally.
It took Erwin a few seconds to find his voice. "I didn't mean to give you the wrong impression."

"You didn't. I knew what you meant. I just—I feel really messed up right now."

"That's—understandable. But please don't do that again."

"I won't."

Erwin's mouth felt painfully dry. Chopin glided on without them, beautiful and melancholy. The worst part was that Erwin didn't precisely want Armin to get out of the car—he knew something else needed to be said between them, to clear the air of its unspoken hurt—but he didn't know where to begin. Even now, he didn't want to lose Armin's acquaintanceship. He'd meant it when he said that he believed Eren and Armin would change the world.

"Mr. Smith?" said Armin finally, in a small voice.

Erwin didn't look at him. "Yes?"

"Am I—a tease?"

Now Erwin whirled toward him, suddenly and deeply angry. He had to clench his teeth to keep his voice steady, so Armin wouldn't think Erwin's resentment was meant for him. "You're a child, Armin."

"But am I a tease?"

"No."

Armin nibbled at his thumbnail, still gazing across the unlit parking lot. He wasn't crying. It almost would've been better if he were. "I just—" he began, then shook his head. Slowly, he gathered his blond hair in one hand and lifted it to show Erwin the side of his throat, mottled with bruises. Erwin couldn't stop a low, furious hiss of breath. Armin let his hair fall again, neatly concealing the damage. His eyes looked pale and lost. "This is going to go away, right? It's not permanent?"

"It'll go away," said Erwin quietly.

"Good, okay. Good." Armin gave a quick, shuddery sigh of relief, then smiled. He opened his door and paused with one foot on the pavement. "I'm sorry for kissing you. I know I shouldn't have put you in that position. You just—made me feel safe."

"I'm glad." Erwin reached into the backseat, passed Armin the suitcase. "Call anytime, Armin."

"Thank you." He seemed ready to say something else, but nodded instead. "Be well, Erwin."

"And you."

Watching him leave was somehow heartrending and anticlimactic at the same time. Erwin waited until the hotel door had clicked shut behind him before pulling out of the parking lot, surprised by the scope of his own wistfulness. There was discomfort in it, too—but most of it was a soft, platonic sadness.

He was nearly home when he realized that that'd been the first time Armin had used his first name.

*
Back at the apartment, Levi was standing just inside the dark entryway in Erwin's blue pinstriped nightshirt. His lit cigarette made his pale face glow. Erwin dropped his keys in surprise.

"Jesus, Levi."

"Welcome home, honey," said Levi, sounding pleased with himself. He held out a sarcastic hand to hang up Erwin's coat, and Erwin, playing along with the false domesticity, leaned in for a cheek kiss before snagging the cigarette from between Levi's lips. He ground it out on an end table. He fucking hated that end table.

"Don't smoke in here."

"These are yours, you know. I found three cartons in the linen closet. Cartons, not packs."

"Well, I kicked the habit," said Erwin, trying not to sound defensive. He headed for his bedroom, unbuttoning his shirt as he walked. "What were you doing in my linen closet?"

"Looking for linens," said Levi, speaking to him as if he were an infant.

Erwin ignored that. "You changed the sheets in the guest room?"

"Hell no. It's freezing in there. I'm going to sleep with you."

Erwin paused halfway through unfastening his cuffs, then nodded and continued undressing. Since Levi had been stealing his pajama tops, he had an abundance of bottoms. He pulled on the blue pair that matched Levi's and kicked his dirty clothes in the direction of the laundry hamper. Levi made a disgusted noise and immediately stooped to retrieve them from the floor.

He wasn't wearing any underwear. Erwin admired the view as he slipped into the bathroom to brush his teeth. "Did you find the spare toothbrushes?"

"Didn't look. Just used yours."

"That's progress."

"Hardly. You've always felt—I don't know. Safe."

That was the second time in half an hour that someone had called him that. After a moment of contemplation, he decided to feel flattered instead of insulted. "Have you been taking your medication, then?"

"I didn't bring it. I've resolved to self-medicate."

"With what?"

"Oh, the usual. Hooch, drugs, cock."

Erwin spat and rinsed without speaking, grateful that Levi couldn't see his red face. Being around him was doing nothing good for his libido. He rushed to change the subject. "I'm going to miss Eren and Armin," he said—admittedly not the most appropriate segue, but Levi didn't call him on it.

"Yeah, there was something about them." The covers rustled as Levi climbed into bed. "They were both fucking gorgeous."
His stomach lurched. "Levi."

"Not like that. Just as a fact."

Briefly, Erwin considered telling him about Armin, and quickly decided against it. That'd been a private, stinging moment that no one else had any business knowing about. He wished he'd handled that a little differently, encouraged Armin to talk more about whatever he'd been feeling—the boy hadn't really let any of it out yet. Eren's small crying session, however insufficient, had probably waylaid a complete nervous breakdown.

"I hope Eren's sister will be able to give them some of the support they need," said Erwin.

"His sister," said Levi, sitting up suddenly. "That's right. I meant to tell you, I know her from somewhere. She's an Ackerman. Mikasa Ackerman."

"Mikasa."

Erwin combed through his memories, trying to remember all the names that'd been thrown at him during that one disastrous Thanksgiving dinner he'd attended with Levi's estranged family. "Was she the toddler who kept saying the eff-word?"

Levi snorted. "I'd forgotten about that. No, Mikasa is more or less Eren's age. Beautiful as hell."

"The name doesn't ring a bell for me."

"Me neither, but she recognized me, too." He rolled over onto his stomach, regarding Erwin with sober, unaggressive eyes as Erwin settled into the bed beside him. "These last few days have been really fucking strange."

"They certainly have."

Without asking for permission, Levi leaned across Erwin to turn off the bedside lamp. Instead of pulling back, though, he lingered there, hand resting against the bare muscles of Erwin's abdomen. Erwin met his eyes. His lust for Levi was a hot, constant ache—his mouth, his ass, his small, tight body. A man in every way that Armin was a boy. Moving carefully, Erwin kissed Levi, keeping his fingers tender against his smooth cheek. Levi kissed back. When they separated, Levi licked his lips, tugging at the waistband of Erwin's pajamas.

"I can suck your dick if you want," said Levi.

Even if Erwin had been properly aroused, that would have been a turnoff. The casual nature of the offer, the implication of Levi's being indebted to Erwin somehow. Why did everything think Erwin was keeping score that way? He rolled onto his side. "No thank you. Go to sleep."

"Suit yourself." Then, a few seconds later, venomous from the rejection: "I can smell that kid on you anyway."

Erwin squeezed his eyes shut, trying to force his thoughts calm again. He refused to let anyone's name cross his exhausted mind. He prayed he wouldn't dream about Chopin.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Trying to cope, and the most unromantic marriage proposal in history.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for panic attacks, violence, references to sexual assault, and language. As of this chapter, I have used the word "fuck" 113 times. 114. I'm so fucking sorry. 115. Thank you for reading.

Eren was on his way to the vending machines when Armin opened the hotel door at the opposite end of the hallway. Before Armin could spot him, Eren turned around and fled.

Fled from Armin Arlert, one of the only two people in the world he truly loved.

It'd been so much easier to meet Armin's gaze with Levi and Erwin around to split their focus. Etiquette and hero worship had kept them quieter around the men, more polite, less talkative. They could blame their discomfiture on Erwin's jawline or the way Levi's pants tightened around his ass as he walked. And that wasn't a lie, really, but it wasn't all of it, either. The thought of facing Armin one-on-one was terrifying now. Eren wasn't ready for Armin to see him again. He wasn't ready to find out how much had changed between them.

On the other side of the hotel, Eren finally forced himself to slow, leaning against the doorframe of a short stairwell to catch his breath. The smell of chlorine filled the air, heavy and nostalgic. He followed it to a small indoor pool, its surface unbroken but for a few tiny ripples from the AC—yep, AC in late September, nice. Eren shivered. The cold felt somehow right. He let himself into the atrium, gingerly pacing the perimeter a few times before sitting down to remove his shoes and socks. The soles of his feet were still achy from his stroll through the forest. He scooted forward and let them graze the water, reveling in its cathartic sting.

Fuck, he would never forgive himself for getting into that car. He would never forgive himself for allowing the driver to crank up the radio loud enough to drown out Armin's gasps. By the time Eren had turned around, one of the fuckers had already pinched Armin's mouth open, lapping greedily at the moist air between his teeth. Pull over, Eren had screamed—another fucking mistake. He'd been dragged out of the car and flung face down against the hood before the parking brake was even engaged. Don't touch him! I'll fucking kill you! How young he must've sounded. How utterly pathetic, Eren thought bitterly, kicking at the pool water until it churned around his shins.

He didn't have the right to look Armin in the eyes. Probably never did, and now Armin had seen him whimpering ass-naked in the dirt with a knife to his throat. More than anything else, he was ashamed of that moment: with what he'd thought were his last breaths, Eren had said selfish, terrifying, overexposed things. And it was ultimately an act of cowardice, too, because he wasn't supposed to have lived to see Armin's face afterward.
The door opened. Eren jerked upright, scraping his heels against the pool wall—Armin, oh fuck—but it was Mikasa who inched her way in instead, her old gray night shorts worn and baggy around her thighs. She dropped her gaze from Eren's briefly, paused, then looked back. Her bare feet made quiet sticky sounds on the concrete as she approached.

"He's here," she said.

"I saw him, I just didn't know if I should—how did you find me, anyway?"

"Just knew."

Their attunement to each other was a simple fact by now, but it still kind of sucked when one of them—okay, when Eren—was trying to be alone. Mikasa settled down beside him and let her feet dangle in the deep end, offering him a shoulder to rest his head on. He obliged. It was calming. They sat still for so long that the water stopped rippling. Eren began to feel something close to okay.

"I'm going to move back here," said Mikasa, after a moment of contemplation. "I'll have my landlord send over my belongings. The three of us can get an apartment together."

"What? No way!" said Eren, squirming to face her. "We've talked about this before, Mikasa. You can't just put your life on hold every time I get a booboo."

She gave him a sharp look, pulling him into an embrace that he sort of tried to resist. "You don't have a 'booboo—' she ignored his snort at hearing her say it, "—and there's nothing for me in Tokyo right now. I've done what I set out to accomplish there."

"Of course you did. You're a badass."

He felt her smile against his hair. "So are you. The battle wounds suit you."

"You and Levi both, man, using such heroic terms. I feel like I just got knighted instead of mugged."

"Levi," repeated Mikasa, pensive again. "I know I've seen him before."

"Maybe he's your long lost twin?"

"My poor birthmother and her fifteen-year labor," said Mikasa with a straight face, but she blushed a little when Eren burst out laughing. "You and Armin are the only two people in the world who find me funny."

"Oh, plenty of people find you funny. They're just afraid to laugh."

"That doesn't make me feel any better, Eren."

Grinning, Eren pulled back to study her. She was so fucking beautiful. Too beautiful to be approachable, even; people had always circled her like flies, completely lost for words. Eren felt stumpy and dull in comparison, and he kind of liked that. Her strength could power a whole planet. Being her brother was a privilege.

"Please forgive me for not protecting you," she said abruptly, bowing her head.

Eren's smile evaporated. He tugged the hair away from her face so that she was forced to look up. The shimmer in her eyes terrified him. "Don't start that, Mikasa. I'll lose my shit. I mean it."
"But—"

"Don't. Seriously, don't."

She nodded shortly. He let go of her hair, and she brushed it back again, blinking fast to clear her tears. For the second time that night, she refocused somewhere near his chin. It was a chilling thing, being close enough to see the grief in her expression harden into fury. Eren pulled away, self-conscious.

"What?"

"You didn't tell me they were armed."

Eren's hand flew to his neck. He kept forgetting about the cut; it was such a small, superficial wound compared to his ribs or shoulder or hips. "It was nothing. Pocketknives. It wasn't like either of us got shanked; I don't think they even got close to Armin with them."

"That's not the point."

"So? So what? What the fuck would telling you have changed, Mikasa?"

"It changes the way you'll have to cope."

Water splashed Mikasa's legs as yanked his feet up and stood. "I don't have to do anything. I don't have to talk to you. I don't even care anymore. I'm tired."

"I'm sorry, Eren."

"Stop being sorry for things that aren't your fault!" Damn it, he was yelling at her. He hated that he did this; he wasn't angry with Mikasa and he wasn't unaware, for fuck's sake, he understood that things were bad. He wasn't in denial. The scratch on his neck stung a little as he picked at it, the gesture nervous and unconscious, and that made him madder. "Fuck it. I'm going to bed. Sorry, Mikasa. I'm just—bed. Yeah."

His feet itched to move. He ran past the No Running sign, laughed, and ran a little faster, suddenly desperate to be under the covers with the lights off before Mikasa could see his face. She had to stop to gather his shoes and socks, so he pressed his advantage, letting his instincts carry him back to their hotel room without checking the door numbers.

The bastards didn't even need to take their clothes, Eren realized suddenly. They just did it to be pricks. Took their shoes and phones and cash and left them naked in the middle of fucking nowhere, and it'd been raining, and Eren had almost cried with relief when he saw that they'd forgotten one of the coats because it'd given him something to toss around Armin's shoulders. And Armin kept apologizing. Kept saying that it was his fault while his lips were kissed to bleeding, and his hair was matted to his cheeks—and Mikasa cared about pocketknives? Mikasa was sorry, too?

She caught up to Eren when he fumbled the keycard. He kept trying to open the door before it had finished unlocking. "Aah, fuck," said Eren, jamming it back into the slot. "Come on—fuck! Fucking—"

"You have to wait for the light to—"

"I know!" He did this every time he got into cars, too, tugging at unmoving handles, yanking at seatbelts until they seized up. It wasn't even about impatience—it was that trapped feeling, that
moment of *holy shit I'm stuck here*. He forced himself to take a deep breath, then reinserted the card until it had time to register. Green light. "See, Mikasa?" He shoved at the door as hard as he could—and got stopped three inches in by the chain. "Fuck!" he screamed.

Dimly, he realized that a locked door was not a huge fucking crisis, but the dread wouldn't stop rolling over him in fat, hot waves. He sat down hard. Tiny black dots swarmed his vision. There was a distant rattle of metal, and the door opened abruptly with him leaning against it, and he wouldn't have fallen if Mikasa hadn't reached down to grab his shoulder. He didn't feel any pain from the pressure on the sprained joint. Didn't feel anything at all.

"Eren?" A familiar voice; Eren strained toward it. "Eren, lie down. I'm going to get you some water. Mikasa—"

"I've got it."

Mikasa scooped him up into her arms and carried him to the closest bed. He curled in on himself, whimpering. What the fuck was even wrong? He—he felt ugly. He felt scared, he felt small, he felt powerless. "I don't feel good," is what he said instead, surprised by the thick, shaky quality of his own voice. "I'm so sleepy. Armin?"

"Right here." The mattress dipped, and Armin burrowed against him, close enough that their foreheads touched. Without thinking about it, Eren kissed him hard on the mouth. Armin flinched away, flushing, then slowly lifted one hand to touch Eren's cheek. "You're all right, see. I'm here, Mikasa's here. We're all together again, like we're supposed to be."

"Yeah. Yeah." Eren still felt that foreign, scattered fear, but it was growing a little more manageable now. He gulped in a deep breath that shuddered a little near the end. "I don't know what this is."

"You're having a panic attack," said Mikasa. "I think the worst is over. May I hold you?"

He nodded so vigorously that his nose brushed against Armin's. This time, Armin didn't pull away. Mikasa settled down behind him and wrapped her arms around his chest. Eren relaxed into the embrace one muscle at a time, staring at Armin's lips, crowding back against Mikasa's steady, familiar warmth.

"Sleep in this bed tonight," he said to both of them. He was very, very tired. "Remember our old clubhouse? Under the stairs? We used to pretend that we were..."

"Soldiers," said Mikasa.

"Ha, yeah."

They'd had a duty roster hanging on the wall. They'd kept the concrete floor clean and shiny. Their attendance sheet declared week after week that Captain Mikasa and Major Eren and Lieutenant Armin were dedicated warriors, and the medals they pinned on each other were chocolate coins, and they always ate them together, laughing—

Eren didn't remember falling asleep.

Armin woke him a few minutes after two by sitting bolt upright, both arms pinwheeling. His complete silence was unnerving. Even when Eren seized him around the waist to still him, Armin remained dead quiet, legs moving around in sloppy pseudo-walking motions. "Hey," Eren whispered. He felt hungover, his mouth was tacky and sour-tasting, and he was still wearing
yesterday's clothes. "Hey. Armin?"

"I didn't," said Armin suddenly in a weird, growling voice, then nestled back into his pillow and rolled over. His breathing grew instantly calm again.

Eren just continued staring at him, badly shaken. Armin had dragged Eren down with him; he had to extricate his arms.

"That was fucking scary," said Mikasa from behind him, making Eren jump again. "Sorry."

"God," said Eren. "Whoa." His hands were trembling. He ran them through his hair. "The hell do you think that was about? Should we wake him up?"

"Let him sleep. He needs it. Are you feeling any better?"

"Oh. I'm—fine. Thanks."

He'd half-forgotten about his little freak out until he heard the concerned notes in Mikasa's voice. Even now, it was fuzzy. There was probably a lot he needed to apologize for, but he supposed that he should wait to do it when Armin was awake and not, you know, acting like he needed a fucking exorcist. Eren tried to wiggle out of the bed without further disturbing either of his friends, which was tricky, since he'd been sandwiched between them. Mikasa grabbed his wrist, her grip like steel.

"Where are you going?"

"No way I can sleep right now. I'm going to stretch my legs."

"No."

"Just inside the hotel, Mikasa. That all right with you? Mother may I?" It came out light and teasing, just as he'd intended it, and after a few tense seconds, she released him.

"Take your phone and a keycard."

"I will."

"Remember, you have to wait for the green light."

"Shut the hell up," he said, and she chuckled softly.

He jammed one of the cards into his pocket, but his phone wouldn't fit, so he carried it in one hand as he slipped out the door and headed back toward the vending machines. He never did end up getting his soda after running away from Armin. His dollar-fifty credit was still flashing on the digital display, so he pressed the buttons at random, ending up with some off-brand diet cola. He wished he had a milkshake or something. Nothing like a hundred grams of sugar to soothe an upset stomach.

Propping himself up against the wall, he sipped from the can, thinking about that lunch with Levi and Erwin in the diner. What a weird day. He thought he'd never stop burning with humiliation at being carried naked to a hospital—his ridiculous, child's body; his tears and his snot and his open desperation—but the men had been comfortable. Casual, but careful, and never inappropriate despite their growing familiarity. Their meeting Eren in the worst moment of his life had bled out the pressure to impress them, in a sad way. He wondered if he would ever see them again.
He hoped he would. They were awfully—well. They were kind. And they sure as fuck weren't ugly.

A little spike of arousal flared in the pit of Eren's stomach. He bit his lip. What the hell was up between those two? He'd assumed they were longtime lovers, complicated ones, but Levi vacillated so rapidly between reluctant affection and outright resentment that Eren had no idea what to make of their emotional relationship. He'd said he didn't live with Erwin. That had confused Eren—and excited him. Because apparently the situation wasn't fucked up enough as it was.

Suddenly curious, Eren unlocked his phone and went to the contacts list. It'd filled out nicely, considering how new it was: Armin, Mikasa, Erwin, Hospital, Marco, Horseface—and yes. Levi. Eren clicked on his name, studying the digits as if they'd provide any new insights into his caustic, unknowable rescuer.

He was so intent on mouthing the letters of his name that he didn't realize he was calling him until Levi himself picked up.

"What?"

"What?" yelped Eren, sloshing soda all over himself. "What, shit, did I butt call you? I'm fucking sorry! I—I was just—"

"Eren?" said Levi, with a mixture of uncertainty and irritation. In the background, Erwin murmured something—were they sharing a bed? Eren's heart clenched—and Levi didn't bother to cover the receiver to reply, "Yeah, I have no fucking idea. God. Eren, it's two-fucking-thirty. Go to sleep."

"I can't. I'm—scared."

There was a shuffle and a curse. The line went dead. Eren smacked himself on the forehead and sank to the carpet, groaning mightily. And since the groaning helped, he did it over and over until the glossy notes of a default ringtone interrupted him. He spilled the rest of his soda into his lap and answered the phone, confused. "Hello?"

"I fucking walked straight into the door," said Levi in greeting, "so you had better make this conversation worth a stubbed toe."

Eren thumped his head against the wall. "I didn't mean to call you."

"I'm up now. Say something interesting."

"Uhhh," said Eren.

"Jesus Christ, kid." It was so quiet at (presumably) the apartment that Eren could hear the plunk sound of a light switch being flipped, then a rustle as Levi flopped down against a cushion. "So why are you scared? You have a nightmare?"

"Uh—no. Armin did."

"You called me because your boyfriend had a nightmare."

"I didn't call you on purpose, and he's not my fucking boyfriend!"

"Whoa. Hit on something there, didn't I?"
God. *This* was the only reason Eren was thinking about Levi so much: the asshole got under his skin like no one else. Except maybe Kirstein. And he certainly wasn't attracted to *that* waste of space. Eren scowled, picking at his sodden jeans. "It was really creepy, okay? He just sat up in bed and said something in a Pazuzu voice, then went back to sleep. Fuck, I've got goose bumps." He did, and it had nothing to do with being soaked in cold soda.

Levi yawned, then grumbled. A few seconds after Eren had assumed he wasn't going to reply, he said, "Erwin used to sleepwalk. One time he got up and ate half a box of uncooked spaghetti. The crunching sound woke me up."

Eren laughed. "Is that how he messed up his kettle?"

"No, I assume that was pure idiocy. He hasn't sleepwalked—sleptwalked?—since he was twenty-three."

"You two have known each other for a long time."

"Yeah, because we're ancient fucking ninety-four-year-olds. We met back when dirt was invented." Levi didn't actually sound any more pissed off than usual, so Eren didn't rush to apologize. "Armin said he'd been humoring you for sixteen years. You two must've shared a crib or some shit."

"We did, actually. Our moms were best friends."

"That's darling."

"I guess." Eren stared at the carpet. It was one of those cheap nylon ones with that grainy, new house look, which was a big step up from some of the places he and Armin had stayed at over the last year. Armin was pretty sure that the rug runner from their last hotel had once been used to hide a dead body. Eren dropped his head onto his arms. Without realizing he was going to speak, it came tumbling out of him in a fast, shaky mess: "When I thought I was going to die, I told him."

"Now we're getting somewhere. Elaborate."

He was already blubbering. He couldn't help it. He was never supposed to talk about this. "The guy had a knife, and—I mean, I realize now that he was just fucking with me, but I didn't know that *then*. I thought he was going to slit my throat. I figured it was my last chance to tell Armin that I loved him, so I did."

"And—what did he say?"

"He said, 'Please don't kill him, I'll do anything.'"

"Ah. Well. Fuck."

It made Eren laugh, because there was nothing else to do. Tears streamed down his cheeks, and he swiped them away with his forearm, trying not to sob directly into the phone. His life hadn't flashed before his eyes. The ground had been cold and soggy beneath his palms, and his ears were ringing, and one of the other bastards kept jamming Armin back down with his foot every time he tried to get up.

"Levi, how are we supposed to live with this?"

Levi was quiet for a long moment. There was a click of a lighter, and Levi dragged deep and exhaled. Eren could imagine him lounging on the couch with his cigarette, feet propped up on the
coffee table, hair tousled from sleep.

"You just do," said Levi finally. "You eat and you brush your teeth and you make your bed and you go about your day, and when it's over, you get back in bed and you sleep. Then you do it again."

Eren nodded, though he knew Levi couldn't see it. He swallowed a hiccup.

"Speaking of sleep," Levi continued.

"Oh—y-yeah! Sorry. I'll let you go. Thanks for listening, and—I honestly d-didn't mean to—"

"And don't let it get to that point."

"What?"

"Don't let a fucking knife at your throat be the only thing that inspires you to spill your sappy little kid guts," said Levi. "That wasn't fair to you, or to Armin. Tell him. Yeah, you'll have to live with his answer, but that's better than dying without it. Good fucking night, now. Next time call me at a reasonable hour."

He hung up.

'Next time.' Eren sat in the hallway for another fifteen minutes, almost smiling.

When he tiptoed back into the hotel room, the lights were still off and Mikasa was up, unpacking the contents of their suitcase and getting the clothes settled neatly in one of the dresser drawers. She nodded at him as he eased the door shut. It was probably obvious that he'd been crying, but she didn't ask. Eren kicked off his damp pants and crawled into the bed beside Armin, laying his palm gently on his shoulder.

Nestled like that under the sheets, Eren silently catalogued the parts of his body that weren't aching, because that was a shorter list: his shins, his ears, his left big toe—he'd sprained the right one on his way to the road—his chin, his left wrist, his left inner elbow. Everything else was throbbing. He'd been in enough fistfights to know that shit always hurt worse after the fact, but this—this was Pain 9.0. This was pain's bigger, uglier stepbrother. Eren tried to moan, but all that came out was a crackly little whimper. The only thing that hurt worse than his throat was his pride. Or maybe his pelvis.

Armin lay on his side, face toward the wall. Eren studied the dip of his waist, its soft, perfect swell into hip and thigh. He could tell from the tension in his neck that he'd woken him up.

"I meant it when I said I'm in love with you, Armin," he said softly.

Mikasa dropped the shirt she was holding. Armin drew in a quiet breath and held it, but he didn't speak, didn't even move. And that was okay. Eren rolled over and spread out into Mikasa's unused third of the mattress. He didn't get back to sleep, and neither did Armin. When the sun rose, Eren decided, he would eat, and brush his teeth, and make the bed, and go about his day. Then would go to sleep and do it again.

*

"Thanks again for the lift," said Reiner.
"Yeah," said the driver. "It's no problem. You mind loud music?"
"Crank it up, man. It's your car."

The guy took it to heart and turned the radio up to a deafening volume. The cabin thrummed with the sounds of pissy guitars, growling vocals, pounding bass like the onset of a killer migraine. Reiner grimaced a little and turned, and Bertolt smiled, shrugging minutely. He was crammed into the backseat with the two other passengers, middle-aged men in big coats and gloves. He said something that Reiner didn't hear, but Reiner rarely heard him anyway, and read his lips with no problem: just until Dauper. Reiner nodded his agreement. They still weren't used to bumming rides from strangers.

It'd been Reiner's idea, of course, to leave their hometown. Too much shit had happened, too much there that reminded them of Marcel. Fifty miles out, they were already feeling lighter, and at some four hundred now, they were fucking invincible. Reiner was going to get a job at the next pretty town they passed, and he was going to do it as a newlywed—if Bertolt would have him.

For about the hundredth time that evening, Reiner patted his pocket to make sure the ring was still there. It was a simple thing, pure platinum with beveled edges, no engraving, no rock. As clean as natural as Bert himself. His love for the tall, adorable motherfucker had always been the most uncomplicated thing in his life.

He kept smiling at Bertolt in the rearview. Couldn't help it. And Bert kept smiling back, small and shy and kind, staring straight ahead to hold his gaze.

Which was why Reiner saw the knife first.

"Hey, what the fuck!"

Adrenaline hit him like a shock of cold water. He was out of his seat in an instant, one hand curled around the man's fist, twisting the blade from his grip. The man's wrist snapped. He howled. The other fuck-ugly rose halfway off the seat, so Reiner hit him too, a good, solid cross that buffeted him into the window.

"Pull the fuck over," Reiner told the driver, even though they were already swerving to a stop on the dirt shoulder near the road. "Unlock the fucking doors before I break your fucking face."

The tiny sound of the locks disengaging was actually hilarious in its understatement. Reiner would've laughed if he weren't already out of the car, wrenching the still-moving back door open and bodily hauling Bert over the dumbass with the broken wrist. When Bertolt was safe on the ground, Reiner grabbed their assailant, too. The man tumbled out, wailing. Turned out he wasn't so fucking tough without his little Boy Scout knife. Reiner yanked him up by the collar.

"So what was the plan?" Reiner asked him calmly. "Fucking rob us and kill us? This how you finance this shitty ass Buick?"

"Reiner," said Bertolt, all quiet and shivery, but Reiner shook him off.

"You get out of the car too," said Reiner, pointing at the driver and the other passenger, bleeding profusely from both nostrils. "Get the fuck out of the car or I'll snap this creep's neck."

They didn't exit, they fucking scrambled. How cute. Broken Nose bolted toward the tree line, whining and tripping over himself, and Reiner let him go, because they were parked in the middle of fucking nowhere. And whose fault was that? Reiner did laugh, then, feeling more than a little hysterical. He didn't know what to do now. He pinched the bridge of his nose, squeezing his eyes
shut to concentrate.

"Get their IDs," said Bert.

"Yes. Yeah." God bless Bert. Reiner held out one hand palm up. "Fork 'em over."

"Look, man, it's not what you think," the driver began. He was too far away to punch, so Reiner grabbed his friend by the hair and slammed his head against the metal doorframe so hard it left a dent.

"Reiner, don't!" Bert pleaded, grabbing his elbow. His eyes were more hurt than scared now. Reiner's anger redoubled.

"You've upset my boyfriend," said Reiner. "I should fucking eviscerate you."

With shaking hands, the driver handed over his license. Bertolt moved to tentatively accept it over the hood of the car, and Reiner watched him carefully, making sure the shitheap didn't try anything. After Bert had the card in hand, Reiner liberated the other guy's wallet from his back pocket and flipped it open. He had a couple of tens, so Reiner took those as his fairly reasonable you-just-tried-to-murder-us fee. When he tugged the driver's license out of its slot, two other ID cards slipped free. Bert stooped to retrieve them. His expression seemed to freeze over.

"What?" said Reiner.

Bert held the cards up for Reiner to see.

_Eren Jaeger. Armin Arlert_. Reiner studied the glossy pictures—Arlert's was only a learning permit—and felt a dull heat spread through his stomach. They were teenagers. Their weights and heights said shit like 139 lbs, 5'4". Pretty fucking ballsy to make the leap to Reiner and Bertolt, wasn't it? They'd probably thought having weapons would give them an edge. So to speak.

"You hurt these kids?" Reiner said quietly. "You do to them what you just tried with us?"

"No," the driver insisted. "They're our friends, they accidentally left those when—"

"Sixteen and seventeen years old," said Reiner, eyeing their birth years, doing the math. "Fucking sixteen and seventeen. You must be kidding me."

The man beside Reiner hit the ground suddenly, knocked clean off his feet, and Reiner whipped around to find Bert's fist still bloody and trembling. Bertolt met his eyes with a watery, furious gaze. "Sorry," he mumbled. "Sorry, I just—"

"You're beautiful," said Reiner. "Fucking marry me."

Bertolt kicked the man in the ribs, and nodded.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Marco and Jean canoodle, then shit hits the fan. Armin is going off the rails.

Chapter Notes

Warnings: references to sexual assault, STDs, frustrating interpersonal drama and miscommunications. Long one because there won’t be many Armin chapters, and I felt like he needed a lot of exposition. Thank you very, very much for the kind words and kudos! I am sorry I am getting behind on review replies! I feel shy.

"All I'm saying is that being injured and being an asshole aren't mutually exclusive," said Jean, gesturing emphatically with a post-coital spoonful of peanut butter. "It's possible to be, like, a crap human being who also has a busted kneecap."

"No one is arguing with you, Jean," said Marco.

"Well, you keep sighing at me."

"Because you keep talking. Shut up and eat your Skippy."

Jean slouched down against the headboard, subsiding. They'd both been on edge lately, though Marco was finally beginning to realize that Jean's outwardly antagonistic preoccupation with Eren was actually a product of concern. Stubborn fool would die before admitting it, but there it was. When Marco's cell had rung, Jean had even called a momentary timeout—a not inconsiderable feat for a man who had once insisted on continuing intercourse all the way through a building-wide fire drill. Marco located his phone under a sock and peered at the display. He didn't recognize the number.

"Was it them?" asked Jean.

"It wasn't Eren. Might've been Armin or Mikasa. Whoever it was left a message, but I think I'll just go ahead and call back."

"What, you don't feel like listening through all the steamy voicemails I left you this morning?"

"Not really, considering we just had a live reenactment. And, um, I like to save those for rainy days. Shut up! It's ringing!" The call was going through. He pitched a shirt at Jean's face to quiet him, and Jean flinched back and tumbled off the mattress, peanut butter and all. Marco laughed into the phone just as a man with a sharp, brisk voice picked up.

"Trost District Police Station."

"Oh! Hello," said Marco. "Sorry, this is—I think you called me about ten minutes ago—"
"More like two," said Jean pointedly.

"I see," the man said. "This is Deputy Sheriff Nile Dok. Am I speaking to Eren Jaeger or Armin Arlert?"

"No, I'm Marco Bodt. I offered to let them use me as an intermediary because their phones were stolen. I'm an intern at Sina Health with light patient-care permissions." Marco paused. "What did you say their last names were? I know them as Eren Ackerman and Armin Springer."

A beat of silence. "Yes. They were using false names."

"Ah," said Marco, wincing. Crap. Had he just blown their cover somehow? "Maybe they were middle names, actually. Things were happening fast. It's likely I misheard."

"They're not in trouble, Mr. Bodt. I just want to make sure they're okay and ask some follow-up questions. My subordinates handled this incident poorly."

"Extremely," Marco agreed without thinking. Oops. He blushed, but couldn't quite bring himself to recant it: the responding officers' behavior had been almost as horrendous as the on-shift doctor's bedside manner. Terrible conduct all around. Apparently they couldn't even be arsed to acquire Eren and Armin's real names. Marco felt a stab of irritation. No way he felt comfortable providing the police with Eren's new number without getting his permission first. "I can take a message, should they choose to get back in touch with me."

"Yes, thank you. Please tell them that their assailants have been detained, and that we have recovered their IDs and some of their property."

"Really? Actual competence? How did you catch them?"

"They caught themselves, actually. They attempted to rob another party in a neighboring county —"

"Oh, god—"

"—but failed. The only injuries sustained in the altercation were their own."

Marco sighed with relief. "Thank goodness for that," he said, smiling across the room at Jean, who was openly straining to hear Dok's half of the conversation. They were unprofessionally overinvested at this point, but Eren and Armin had made for a pretty unsettling sight that evening. Marco didn't think he'd ever stop having nightmares about their bruised wrists.

"The intended victims expressed an interest in speaking to Mr. Jaeger and Mr. Arlert directly," said Dok.

Marco frowned. "Why?"

"Didn't say. Obviously this is not standard procedure, but I didn't see any harm in relaying the message. The two gentlemen left a number with me."

"Well, I'll let Eren and Armin know," said Marco cautiously. Could just be a couple of creeps wanting to get their rocks off on cute teenagers' sob stories, but it was also possible that they were genuinely concerned or shaken up. They'd had a run-in with the same men, after all. Maybe they were in need of some closure? He'd leave that decision to Eren. "Anything else, deputy sheriff?"

"Yes, if you could please give them my sincerest apologies. Let them know that when they contact
the Trost Police Department, they will be treated with the respect, attention, and humanity they deserve. Thank you, Mr. Bodt."

"Y-you too. Bye."

Marco waited for Dok to hang up before he lowered his own phone. If Dok was halfway decent at his job, he could tell that Marco did indeed have contact with Eren and Armin, but he hadn't pushed it. That was a good sign. It meant that he wanted to respect their wish for anonymity, and that they weren't in any real trouble with the law. Marco himself would tell Dok to sod off if he'd intended to prosecute Eren and Armin for providing false information.

"So they caught the motherfuckers?" Jean asked, scooting down the bed to sit beside him. His eyes were fiercely hopeful.

"Yeah," said Marco. "I guess they messed with some people who messed back."

"You know, you can use the word 'fuck,' Marco."

"Yes, but I choose not to."

"Mmm, you're so hot when you act morally superior to me."

"Morality has nothing to do with—" Marco managed before Jean leaned in and kissed him, deep and lingering. The sentence floated away from him. He smiled without opening his eyes again. "You taste like peanut butter."

"There's a good reason for that." Jean withdrew, then planted a hand on Marco's chest when Marco continued tilting into his space. "Hey, slow your roll. Don't you need to call them now?"

"Oh. I suppose I should." He slowly picked his phone back up out of his lap. Good news or not, this was not a conversation he was looking forward to. It had never stopped feeling wrong; his knowing so much about what these guys had gone through without having earned his place as their confidant. Eren and Armin were so guarded, so proud. So—good in an instinctive way that Marco already trusted with his life. He knew he could best honor them by quietly removing himself from the situation, but their circumstances still necessitated his arbitration. The least he could do was try to handle it with a little grace.

"You're doing fine, you know," said Jean, apparently reading this all in his posture. "They trust you."

"Yeah, why is that?"

"Same reason I trusted you so fast, I think. Because you don't make them feel like they should be ashamed of themselves."

Marco's heart surged. "Jean."

"Maaarco," Jean replied, with the sarcastic sweetness that he always adopted when they were dissolving into one of their tenderly-saying-each-other's-names interludes. He plucked his shirt off the carpet and beganshrugging it on. Marco shamelessly watched the muscles in his abdomen flex. "Call them," he repeated, without having to look at him.

"I was getting there."

He counted to three, dialed, and waited. Eren picked up after a few rings, barely audible over a roar
of running water. "Hello?"

"Hi. Eren?"

"Saint Marco!" The noise dwindled down to a trickle. "Sorry if it's loud; Armin and I are doing laundry in the bathtub. We've got you on speakerphone."

"Okay. Jean's in the room with me. Is that all right?"

"Sure, if you don't mind translating into Buttfarm for him."

"Fuck off, Jaeger, your native tongue is Asshole," said Jean, just close enough to overhear.

"There you go talking about tongues and assholes again." Fighting words, but his inflections were off; he sounded exhausted. Jean must've heard it too, because he didn't reply. Eren drew in a few even breaths. Marco could practically hear him pasting on a fake smile. "So what's up?" he said, just a beat too late to pass as natural.

"You said Armin's there?" asked Marco. "This concerns him as well."

"Hi, Marco," said Armin from somewhere nearby.

"Hi." Marco felt uneasy. His direct contact with Armin had been minimal; this felt like an awfully intimate opening conversation. "I just got off the phone with Nile Dok from the Trost Police Department. He said they caught the guys who attacked you."

He hadn't expected them to cheer or anything, but their blank, tired silence still hurt. "That's great!" said Eren after a moment, vying for enthusiasm. "I didn't think they were going to."

"Yeah, me either, frankly. They tried to mug some other group and botched it, I guess. The police, uh—they know your real names now."

"Do they? Shit."

Marco bit his lip, trying not to listen as Eren and Armin whispered to each other in low, distressed voices. When they'd fallen silent again, Marco said, "You don't have to answer this, but why the secrecy? Are you in some sort of trouble?"

"Maybe. Kind of. It's more that—we just wanted to disappear."

"Yeah," said Jean quietly from beside him, with a subdued simplicity that made Marco glance at him. He himself couldn't quite relate to that, to the desire to be so unequivocally anonymous, but it was obvious from Jean's tone that he felt some of that same discontent. Marco had had no idea. He brushed Jean's cheek with the backs of his fingers, and Jean leaned into the touch to kiss them, shrugging.

"How'd they find out?" asked Eren.

"They found your IDs and some other stuff."

"What?" Armin said, suddenly very close to the receiver. "What other stuff?"

"They didn't say. Is something wrong?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Could you ask what they found, if it comes up again? Like specifically?"
"I'm not sure they'll give me that information, but I'll try."

"Armin?" Eren persisted, before Marco had a chance to press the issue himself. He sounded confused.

"Forget it," said Armin. "It's probably nothing. Let's drop it, please."

There was a charged, uncomfortable lull. Marco began picking at a loose thread on the bedspread; Eren cleared his throat about four times. Jean, master of unselfconscious word vomit, finally took pity on them all and leaned toward the phone. "You weren't moving meth or something, were you?"

Armin let out a surprised laugh. It was a warm, ice-breaking sound. "Tarsiers, actually. I run an illegal exotic pet operation. I don't suppose you'd like a fox?"

"Already got one." Jean pecked Marco loudly on the cheek.

"Gross, interspecies romance," said Eren, but he sounded like he was grinning.

Marco had noticed how careful Eren had been about not making assumptions about the nature of his and Jean's relationship, and he was trying to respect Eren and Armin the same way. This was nice. It felt like their first exchange as actual friends. Marco let the affable moment pan out naturally before he got back to business, and it was easier now to keep his voice calm and efficient.

"Dok wanted to apologize for the way you were treated at the hospital. He also said that he had a contact number for you—the guys that were almost robbed wanted to get in touch with you for some reason."

"That's—strange. Isn't it? It's strange?"

"It's strange."

"They weren't—like, they weren't hurt or anything, were they?"

"Not a scratch on 'em. Dok says they roughed up the other guys, actually."

"Oh my god, that's excellent," said Eren, and his laughter was only mildly unhinged, much more controlled than Marco would've been under the same circumstances. "Well, I don't know if I can resist hearing the gory details. Maybe we should give them a call."

"You think you'll go back to the police, then?" asked Marco.

"Considering it. We'll be in the area anyway when we return the clothes we borrowed from you. You're in Trost, right?"

"Yeah, kind of north-ish."

"Okay. We'll try to swing by sometime soon and—"

"Eren?" said Jean.

Eren paused. "What?"

"It's, like, not really worth it for you to come all the way over here just to drop off some pants." Jean paused, and Eren waited in awkward, injured silence, but Jean suddenly plunged ahead and took it in exactly the opposite direction that Marco had anticipated: "The four of us could maybe
chill. Or five, I mean, with your sister. We could see a movie or get some grub or whatever to just, I don't know, make it worth the trip up."

Marco felt his chest swell with surprise and affection. Unable to help it, he beamed brilliantly at Jean, who flushed and shoved his face away with the palm of his hand.

"Oh. Yeah, sure, whatever," said Eren nonchalantly after a moment. "Not like we have anything to do around here anyway."

"Same," said Jean breezily.

What a pair of idiots. "Awesome," said Marco, unable to keep the laughter out of his voice. "We can pick you up. Let us know when you want to visit, all right?"

"Yeah. Uh—thanks, seriously. Both of you."

"It's not a problem. Take care, you guys."

"You too, Marco. Gene."

"Eat my ass, Karen," said Jean, and rushed to hang up Marco's phone himself so he'd get the last word in. This apparently involved heaving it into the closet. It hit the wall with a thunk. Too charmed to be angry, Marco just continued grinning at him, bright enough to make his ears redden again. "What?"

"You're a good guy, Jean."

"Am not," Jean snapped, like it was an insult.

They'd been living together for almost half a year now, but Marco still had to pause and marvel whenever Jean walked by him in his old red sweatpants, yawning or sipping coffee or texting, because how had Marco ended up this lucky? To be able to see Jean daily, share a life with him? Jean was his home. He liked their battered yellow bungalow fine; it reminded him of his parents, but Marco could content himself with living in a gas station bathroom as long as Jean Kirstein was by his side. He'd never told Jean that, come to think of it. He'd just assumed he knew.

"You grew up in this town," Marco said. Bingo: Jean stiffened, then overcompensated by swinging himself up off the bed to start collecting their laundry.

"Born and raised," he said. "I'm gonna do a load of darks. You got anything for me?"

"You know, we don't have to live here, Jean. We can go anywhere."

Jean stilled. "Like where?"

"Stohess? Dauper. I don't know. Maybe that little town where Eren and Armin are staying. Las Vegas? We could go to freaking Las Vegas, Jean."

"Oh, god. We both know we'd be fucking miserable there." His eyes were shining, though, in a place where Marco had never seen any light before. "I just figured that—I mean, this house belonged to your parents, didn't it?"

"It's just that: a house. They wouldn't want someone I love to feel—vulnerable, trapped? Is that what this is?"

Jean scratched his neck. He had the quiet look on his face that used to directly precede a clumsy,
ultra-masculine escape of some sort, usually involving aggressive yard work. But he'd gotten better about that, about not fronting, and Marco had gotten better at reading him. He gave Jean's hand a squeeze, and Jean squeezed back after a moment. "I'm guess I'm tired of everyone knowing my name, knowing who I used to be," he said eventually. "Everyone here thinks I'm still the same weak, scared kid I was when I was thirteen. Because no one has bothered to look again." He laughed a little. "I like that Eren thinks I'm a prick. That's a step up from being a coward."

"That's a matter of opinion," said Marco, "and if it makes you feel any better, I've never thought you were a coward, and I've always thought you were a prick."

"Enough with the pillow talk, Bodt." Jean kissed him, Marco's favorite kind of kiss, the clumsy one where they didn't fit together because neither of them could stop smiling. By the time Jean pulled back, he was a little more subdued. "Eren and Armin were brave to just take off the way they did," he said.

"Yeah. They didn't deserve to get so fucked over."

"Marco!"

"Hm?"

"Potty mouth!"

"I told you, just because the f-word isn't my go-to noun slash adjective slash verb slash preposition —" Marco thought for a moment. "And really, that's the only word to describe how bad it was, what happened to them. Thank you for reaching out to them, Jean. I don't think it would've been appropriate for me to do it, and they deserve a support system while they're here."

"Yeah. And maybe when they leave," said Jean, very quietly, "we can, too."

"Maybe we can," said Marco, smiling. He brushed their mouths together. "We'll get there, Jean. We'll get there together."

*  

Eren groaned and flung himself backwards onto the bed, landing parallel to Armin, who'd been lying face down without moving since they'd hung up with Marco and Jean. Armin pried his eyes open and half-turned toward Eren. "Crap," he mumbled into the blankets.

"Crap," Eren agreed. "So—what's the plan?"

They'd needed to regroup privately for days now, and Mikasa, sensing this on some level, had excused herself to find an internet café. She was trying to coordinate the return of her belongings from Japan. Looked like she was really moving back, and though the prospect thrilled Armin, he couldn't help feeling like he was dragging her away from the life she wanted. Again. It'd been the theme of their relationship since elementary school. If Armin didn't need her so badly, he'd be packing her bags himself, negotiating a new lease for her in Tachikawa.

Someday he was going to pay her back. Someday he was going to pay everyone back, was going to be square with the universe for the first time in his entire life.

Now, Armin had to settle for lifting his head and sighing. "Well, we definitely have to pick up our phones so we can recover Sasha's number. She and Connie are probably freaking out. And the police are going to ask questions, so we'd better get our stories straight right now, starting with why we're out here in the first place and why we lied." He hesitated. If things weren't so screwed up
these days, he'd be holding Eren's hands or stroking his back to soften the blow of what he had to say next. As it was, he could barely meet Eren's gaze: "I, um, don't seem to be in any trouble. That—means that your father probably hasn't filed a report."

"Yeah." Eren rolled over and swallowed audibly, resting one arm briefly across his eyes. His shoulders hitched. Then he forced a laugh. "I can tell you're trying to spare my feelings, and I appreciate it, but you really shouldn't bother. I've known for a long time that he doesn't give a shit about me."

"Huh? He does, though. That's not the issue here. He just—"

"Guess I can stop worrying that I'm on the lam with a potential felon. I'm actually kinda disappointed. That was pretty hot."

The change of subject could not have been more obvious. "Eren," said Armin, but at Eren's silent, even look, Armin shrugged and smiled instead. "I could set an orphanage on fire if you'd like. Just to keep up the excitement."

"What a fuckin' pal."

Armin's grin stopped feeling fake. He shook his hair out of his face and sat up all the way. "We really should hang out with Jean and Marco. They're great, aren't they? Jean's fond of you."

"Yeah, right."

"He is. What the hell happened between you two, anyway?"

"Oh god," said Eren, outright whining, and Armin had the terrible feeling that he'd just opened the floodgates. "When I was trying to sneak us out of the hospital, he was like, 'Wait, you have to sign out.' And I was like, 'Can't you sign us out yourself? We're like the only people here' and he was all, 'I can't impersonate you!' and I was like, 'It's not that big a deal. It's not like you're Double-Oh-fucking-Seven' and he said, 'Fuck you!' And I was all, 'Right back at you, buddy' and he's like, 'I'm not your buddy, Auric fucking Goldfinger' and I was like 'Here's a finger for you, fucknuts. Sit on it and spin' and then he threw a box of Kleenex at me. The corner hit my arm. It fucking hurt."

Armin had started laughing somewhere around the word 'impersonate' and still hadn't gotten a hold of himself. "Eren, this sounds like your fault. Why didn't you just sign out?"

"Because we were clearly in a hurry! He could've cut us some slack! It wasn't like he was the fucking assault victim there!"

"He was just doing his job."

"Jesus Christ, Armin, he's a rent-a-cop in a hospital in the boonies. He's not gonna get canned for writing 'Eren Ackerman' on a clipboard."

"Ugh," said Armin, remembering. "They know our real names. Ugh."

"Yeah, but like you said, we're not in trouble. Deputy Tick Tock or whatever sounds like a good guy. The best thing about this situation is that we're weeding out all the crapbags. I think we actually have a posse now, Armin. The guys who beat up the bastard muggers, Mikasa, Saint Marco, Jean, Levi—"

"Erwin."
Maybe he said it strange, too fond or wistful or something, because Eren paused and stared at him. A series of emotions flickered across his face, none of them precisely positive. "You really like him, don't you?"

"Of course I do. He's a kind man," said Armin.

"I mean—you're physically attracted to him."

It was exactly the wrong thing to do, but Armin deflected, some real bite in it: "Yeah, and you're physically attracted to Levi."

Eren blinked. He looked like he'd been slapped.

"Wait." Armin touched Eren's shoulder, the motion too reflexive to be self-conscious. "I'm sorry. That was unfair. You and I are both allowed to feel whatever we want about whoever we want, right?"

"It's not like anything will ever happen with Levi," said Eren. "That's why it feels safe to me. He's so powerful and—and beautiful, and I'm just a kid and—anyway, it's shallow compared to what I feel for you. Not that it's nothing; I feel something strong for him, but—Armin, it's you. It'll always be you. And I hate that I only admitted it when I thought I was about to have my throat slashed."

"I—Eren." Armin withdrew his hand and swallowed. "I—"

Eren waited, not pushing him. When it was clear he wasn't going to continue, he said, quietly, "If you want to pursue Erwin, I'll support you. I'm not sure how well it'd work out for you, to be perfectly honest, but if you truly love him—"

"I don't love him, Eren. There's nothing between us. There never will be."

"I just want you to be happy."

Without thinking, Armin tilted forward and brushed their lips together. There was no real pressure in it, but it felt crushingly weighted anyway, and when he pulled back, Eren's beautiful eyes were desperately hopeful. Armin's heart was pounding. He felt like he was about to open a door he could never close again.

"May I kiss you?" Eren asked.

After a moment, Armin nodded. He held still as Eren leaned in.

Eren's warm, wet mouth was already open when it reached Armin's. Armin let Eren's tongue sweep along his lips a few imploring times before slowly parting his teeth, and Eren deepened the kiss immediately, urging him onto his back with his legs parted. Armin closed his eyes and let Eren pin him. His weight was comfortable and solid, muscled exactly right. Armin sighed. He stroked the top edge of Eren's jeans, marveling at the soft skin there along his spine. He'd never felt anything so smooth, so welcome. He'd—never—

A week ago, he'd never been kissed. A week ago, he'd never had hands beneath his shirt. No one had ever mumbled, "Love you, love you so much" against his neck, or smeared hot tears against his cheeks—his own? No, Eren's. Eren's eyes were watering, and he scowled and dragged his forearm over them, trying to hide how badly he was shaking.

"Shit," Eren said. "I don't know why I'm—I don't know what this is. Fuck."
And when he pressed in again, Armin remembered that Eren's experience had been almost as limited as his was. He'd kissed a girl once on a dare, and then a boy on an awkward date in eighth grade, but certainly not how he was kissing Armin now, their teeth clicking together, sucking each other free of breath. Eren's tongue was bold and knowing. He'd only recently learned how to kiss—and Armin had only recently learned how to lie as still as a stone and take it.

"Stop," Armin whispered. The sound was swallowed by another kiss. "Stop!" he said, louder, and Eren was off of him instantly, eyes wide.

"Armin? I'm sorry! Fuck, I'm so sorry."

"It's fine," said Armin. "I just don't feel good."

He pushed Eren aside as he sat up, then realized his legs were still indecently spread. He snapped them shut again, flushing. He felt like throwing up.

Tease, the man had said, hands tangled in Armin's hair. You can't even tell me you don't want it.

And he was right. If Armin had spoken up the first time the man had tried to jam a hand between his thighs, Eren would've had enough time to react, enough time to save himself, at the very least. But Armin had just sat there, quivering. Paralyzed. Fucking useless. Boys like you only hitchhike when they want to get fucked. It'd been Armin's turn to thumb a ride. He had personally invited three evil men into his best friend's life.

"I'm going to go to bed," said Armin, before remembering he was already there, and clarifying: "It's been a long day. I think I'll crash. Don't worry about waking me up for meals or anything."

"It's barely noon, Armin."

"Goodnight," said Armin with finality, crawling under the covers.

"Goodnight," said Eren, after a long, helpless moment. "I'm sorry." He turned off the lights, which had zero effect on the level of brightness in the room, so he stood up and pulled the curtains shut over the daylight. "I—I love you. Sorry I can't stop saying that. I just want you to know that I've always meant it."

"I won't forget." Armin's voice came out sharper than he'd meant it to. He actually heard Eren flinch.

"Good, I guess. All right. Mikasa and I will hang out at a bookstore or something so we don't bug you. Call us if you need anything, okay? Sweet dreams."

You're too good for me, Armin thought. He wanted to say it aloud, but his throat had closed up. He rolled over into his pillow, trying to stop the stinging in his eyes. Don't go. Don't leave me here. But Eren slipped out of the room and shut the door gently behind him, because he wasn't a fucking mind reader; because listening to Armin's words was the best way he could honor him.

Armin thought he was going to cry himself to sleep, but after he blinked his eyes clear, they didn't grow damp again. Instead, he stared at the wall. The cream-colored paint was chipped in two places. Tiny cracks spidered out from a round, shallow dent near the corner, as if someone had hit their head.

* 

On Monday, Armin woke up ill, and was grateful for it.
"You don't need to talk," Eren kept saying, fussing over him with orange juice, tea, tiny lemon candies he'd stolen from the dish in the hotel lobby. "Get under the blankets. Do you have a fever? Stay in bed; I'll go pick up some cough medicine."

His only symptoms were a sore throat and a faint burning in his lower abdomen, almost acidic, but if a minor cold could excuse him from speaking and got Eren out of the room—well, who was Armin to complain? He milked the tiny affliction the way he used to when he was a child, trying to get out of class, because he knew bullies were lying in wait for him in homeroom. This situation was so symbolically comparable that Armin had to roll his eyes. He let himself sleep on and off for some blur of days, showering when he was alone, talking infrequently.

It was nice.

Then, one cold afternoon, Mikasa woke him up by pressing her hands beneath his shirt. "Mikasa, what the hell!" he gasped, voice cracking pathetically. He tried to yank his shirt out of her grip, but she held on, scooting after him as he tried to scramble away.

"I'm sorry for touching you without your permission, Armin, but something is wrong," she said. "You're hurt. Your back is—"

"I have an injury. I am aware. Fucking let go of me!"

"Armin, please," Mikasa said, almost begging, and Armin subsided out of sheer surprise at her tone. He couldn't remember ever having sworn at her before. Maybe that had something to do with it. Slowly, she drew his sleeping shirt up to his armpits, fingertips prying at an edge of the bandage that was peeling away. Despite her caution, it hurt. Armin buried his face in his pillow and mewled, shoulders tensing, and Mikasa's breath hitched with emotion. "Oh, Armin—"

He didn't know what to say, didn't know what she was seeing, so he kept his mouth shut, biting down hard on his lower lip so the excuses didn't start pouring out of him. He felt disgustingly exposed. A soft, nasty chill tickled down his spine.

Mikasa stood up and walked toward the bathroom. There was a rustle of plastic, then a running tap, and she returned with a handful of tissue paper and a cup full of warm, soapy water.

"I have to clean it," she said shortly. "It's inflamed. Do you feel feverish?"

"No, it's just my throat."

"You need to see a doctor."

"Let me check my health insurance plan to see if that's covered."

She dampened the tissue and pressed it to his wound, really bearing down, with none of her earlier tenderness. Armin yelped in protest, but she didn't apologize. He could tell without seeing her face that she was angry with him.

"Don't be mad at me, Mikasa. That's not fair."

"Would it have been fair for you to end up hospitalized with an infection? Does Eren know about this?"

"No, and you can't tell him! He wasn't—he was outside the car for most of it. Please let me keep this to myself. I'm running out of dignity." He knew logically that Mikasa and Eren would never let something like this lower their opinions of him, but god—what he'd done. What had been done
to him. His only comfort was the measure of control in knowing it was only as bad as he admitted it was. "It's fine," Armin insisted. "I'll take better care of it from now on. Things are fine."

"He's going to be able to tell that things aren't—" Mikasa began, furious now, but the rattle of the door interrupted her. She yanked Armin's shirt back down and deposited the soapy tissue into the nearest drawer, right on top of the Bible, and attempted to look casual. Half a second later, Eren stepped into the room, laden down with grocery sacks. He frowned.

"Mikasa, are you okay? You look constipated."

She sighed. Armin snickered. He caught her gaze as she stood to move back to her own bed. *Thanks*, he mouthed. She glared in reply.

Eren had his phone propped against his shoulder as he emptied the groceries onto the dresser. "No, *hummus*, Levi," he was saying. "It's, like, delicious sand. What? No! That's 'hummer!' Like a blowie!"

"I know you are not talking to a grown man about oral sex," said Mikasa.

"I'm talking, and he is judiciously ignoring me," said Eren, grinning. He turned toward Armin in midsentence—and the color drained from his face. He dropped his phone and the half-dozen cans of soup he was holding. "Armin, what the fuck? Are you okay?"

"Yes? What?" The look Eren was giving him made him feel hideously naked. Armin scrambled back against the headboard and searched himself for gaping wounds. "Am I freaking hemorrhaging? Why are you staring at me like that?"

"Your eyes," said Eren, voice breaking. "God. What's wrong?"

From the other side of the room, Mikasa gave Armin a pointed stare. Armin turned away from her and threw the covers over his head, wrenching them away when Eren tried to hold them back.

"Will both of you just fuck off?"

The following silence held on way longer than it should've. Armin squeezed his eyes shut, determined that he wasn't going to be the one to break it. After an eternity, Eren slid off of the bed and began slowly picking the groceries back up. "I got the cereal you like," he said nonsensically. Then: "Oh, shit. Levi? You still there?"

He fled the room to continue the conversation. Armin would've been offended by that if he hadn't heard Eren's breath begin to shudder right before the door clicked shut. Well, good. He should be crying. He should learn to leave Armin the fuck alone.

"That was shitty," said Mikasa. "He's worried about you. He loves you."

"Why does everyone keep insisting that that counts for something?" Armin demanded.

"You're scaring me, Armin."

She said it softly enough that he could pretend he didn’t hear it. He drowsed, mouth set in a hard line, and opened his eyes a few minutes later to find Eren's face a foot away from his, jaw clenched with equal resolve.

"Levi and Erwin have a friend," said Eren. "A doctor. Don't say 'no—'"

}
"No."

"This is not negotiable. If you haven't noticed, you need some fucking help. We haven't even told you what you've been doing in your sleep."

"What? What have I been doing?"

"If you don't see this doctor," Eren continued, ignoring him, "I am going to take you back to the hospital. Then we are going to go back to Shiganshina."

Which is how they ended up busing back to Erwin's apartment that same afternoon. Mikasa stayed at the hotel, whether out of anger or respect, but Eren insisted on accompanying him, going so far as to fucking hold Armin in place on the ride there. Armin's fury slowly bled away into exhaustion, then anxiety. He didn't realize he was physically shaking until Eren had to grab his hands to still them.

"Don't worry," he said in a clipped voice. "Erwin is at work."

_Fuck you, Eren_, Armin thought, but he didn't say it out loud.

Doctor Hange Zoe turned out to be kind, eager, and beautiful. Armin's working theory was that they'd all met in a modeling agency as teenagers, because the only thing that Hange, Erwin, and Levi seemed to have in common was unbelievable good looks. Hange bustled around the kitchen, warm in the ways that Levi was cold and relaxed in the ways that Erwin was formal. It was somehow unifying. By the time they sat down with their stethoscope, Armin had finally summoned up enough courage to speak: "I'm sorry to bother you on your day off."

"It's not a bother at all," Hange insisted, beaming at Levi. "Actually, I should be thanking you. I've been trying to pin down this self-destructive jackass for months now."

"And you still haven't pinned shit," said Levi from his place in the doorway. He was wearing a black shirt, simple jeans that looked somehow thrilling on him. "You're not here for me, Hange. Get on with it."

"Aw, I missed you too." They focused properly on Armin then, cupping his right hand palm up in one of theirs. Their fingers were firm and practiced as they pressed the bell of the stethoscope against his wrist. "Have to admit, Erwin's getting even better at this whole 'housing cute runaways' bit," said Hange. "You and Eren must've left a trail of broken hearts a thousand miles long."

"Exactly how often does Erwin house cute runaways?" said Eren, eyes narrowed. For all of his insistence upon this consultation, his movements were quick and wary, and he hadn't let Armin out of arm's reach once since they'd arrived at the apartment.

"That sounded sinister, didn't it? Don't worry. The three of you are his only charges."

The three of—? Oh. Armin glanced up at Levi, who looked appalled.

"I am not cute and I am not a runaway!"

"One of those statements is unambiguously false, and the other depends on your definition. Guess which is which. Cutie." Hange reached over to stroke Levi's hair, and he actually tried to bite their hand. Hange just pulled away, laughing. They were already setting out a handful of tiny bottles and long cotton swabs. "Armin, I'd like to do a rapid strep test. It'll only take about fifteen minutes to process."
"Okay," said Armin. "Is that what this is? Strep?"

"Possibly. I'd like to knock it off the list first, if I can." Hange paused. "In the interest of full disclosure, Levi briefly summarized your situation. I hope that's okay."

"Um, it's fine." It was unavoidable, he supposed. Levi, seemingly put at ease by Armin's verbal consent, finally sat down on the arm of Hange's chair. Armin opened his mouth, and Hange leaned forward to give the back of Armin's throat a gentle stroke with the cotton swab. They began to fuss with the little containers again. If Armin weren't so fatigued, he'd be asking how the kit worked. As it was, fascinating or not, he didn't think he'd be able to follow the science.

"Levi also mentioned a knife wound—?" Hange began.

Armin managed two frantic head shakes before Eren glanced at him, alarmed, and Levi cuffed Hange upside the head while his back was turned, knocking their glasses askew. Hange whined and righted them, but they caught on and finished the sentence smoothly, without a change in tone.

"In the future, boys, don't let Levi anywhere near sharp objects. He nearly lost a finger chopping carrots once. You healing all right, cuddle bunny?"

"Fine," said Levi gruffly, after a moment.

"What happened?" asked Eren, concerned. God, Eren was so good. So genuinely worried for everyone. Armin felt a guilty surge of warmth, prickled with a dark undertone of envy.

Levi was making vague noises and hand gestures. "Slipped. Bread. Slicing?"

It was such a badly delivered lie that it actually sounded authentic. Armin gave Levi a grateful look, and Eren's shoulders relaxed. "Bread. Dumbass," Eren said to Levi.

"Shitloaf."

"Huh? P-poopcake!"

"So how did you two meet?" asked Armin, before the repartee could deteriorate into more inventive recipes of the fecal variety.

"Through Erwin," said Hange. "He introduced us at a birthday party—Mike's, wasn't it, Levi? We ran with the same crowd until Levi and Eld ditched us for a life of crime and debauchery." They sounded like they weren't kidding. "How is Gin these days, anyway?"

"As of last week, still alive."

"You two still hitting the bottle twelve times a day?"

"We've cut it down to six," said Levi, irritated.

"You look like you've aged ten years since I last saw you."

"And you are still as timelessly hideous as ever."

As they exchanged insults, Armin evaluated their body language. Hange's posture was open and energetic, fond despite everything, but Levi had closed himself off even more than usual, elbows drawn flush against his sides. It didn't look like actual dislike. It was more discomfiture than anything, as if he knew he deserved a reaming out, but didn't want to admit it. A weird mess of pride and self-hatred. Armin knew a little something about that. He looked up at Eren and smiled.
tentatively. Eren's eyes narrowed, then he smiled back, reluctant and helpless.

"Okay," said Hange presently. "Negative for strep. We'll repeat the test if we can't figure what this is; it's not one hundred percent accurate. As for other possibilities—" They made a face. Not the most comforting gesture to see from a doctor, though they quickly adjusted their expression to one of pleasant authority. "Levi, Eren, I'm going to need you two to bug off for a minute."

Levi stood up without argument, but Eren remained seated, drawing protectively closer to Armin. "Why?" he asked.

"I'd like to ask some personal questions."

"You can talk to Armin in front of me. Right? Armin?"

If Eren weren't so upset, he wouldn't be putting Armin on the spot like this. Armin felt like that was his own fault, really, being such an insufferable ass to someone who cared for him. His only defense was how strange he was feeling lately. His stomach couldn't seem to decide between anger, indifference, or debility.

"Sorry," he told Eren, not looking at him.

"Oh. No, I—I shouldn't have assumed. My bad." Goddamn him, Eren didn't even sound hurt, just apprehensive. "Call me if you need me."

"Of course."

Eren climbed to his feet and followed Levi down the hallway. Just before he was out of earshot, he said, "Love you."

Armin turned away, wincing. This was becoming ritualistic. He wasn't sure if he wanted Eren to say it over and over until Armin could say it back, or if he'd just as soon die so he never had to hear it again.

"So," said Hange, after giving him a respectful moment.

"So," said Armin. "Th-thank you for—"

"Ha, Levi warned me that you were going to apologize for breathing every two seconds. It's not necessary. We're all happy to help in any way we can." Hange's no-nonsense tone was professional, genuinely warm. They were unmistakably brilliant. It comforted Armin knowing that he was in the hands of someone so bright and direct. "Have you been running a fever, Armin?"

"No."

"Good, good. Any swelling? Discomfort in the pelvic area?"

"A—a mild burning, I guess?" Armin shrugged. "I figured it was psychosomatic. There's been a lot going on lately."

"Noooo kidding."

Hange wasn't writing anything down. Probably didn't need to. It did, however, mean that they were able to meet Armin's gaze unwaveringly. When their eyes shifted almost immeasurably, Armin saw it.

"Armin," said Hange, "were you forced to perform oral sex?"
Oh.

That blindsided Armin so badly that he let out the weirdest sound, a kind of wet gasp-laugh, and he almost snapped at Hange for prying before remembering who they were, why they were asking. Armin stared up at the ceiling, blinking fast. Of fucking course. That possibility should've occurred to him. He was smiling for some reason. He nodded shortly.

"I see," said Hange. "Maybe gonorrhea or chlamydia, then. They're usually asymptomatic, but if that's what's presenting in you, we can start you on antibiotics, nip it in the bud. Have you had sexual contact with anyone else since you were assaulted?"

Armin shook his head.

"Did this particular assailant have sexual contact with Eren?"

Armin shook his head again.

"Okay." Hange pulled out a prescription pad and began to scribble. After they'd torn off that sheet, they patted around for another piece of scrap paper, and ended up grabbing one of Erwin's business cards from the stack on the coffee table. "I'm going to give you this script and a list of sites you can visit for pharmacy coupons that'll significantly knock down the cost. If it's still too expensive, call me. Better yet, call Erwin. No! Even better yet, don't call Erwin; just slip a few Benjies out of his wallet and get yourself some Chardonnay to go with your antibiotics."

"I'm underage," said Armin distantly.

"Yeah, I'm kidding. Don't mix drugs and alcohol." Hange wagged a teasing finger and handed Armin the card and the prescription. Armin accepted it, but just sat there. He didn't even think to put his arm down until Hange said, "Let's see your back now, if that's okay."

He turned just a few degrees and halted, so Hange met him more than halfway by standing up and walking to the side of the couch to get a better view. Their hands were broad and gentle as they drew Armin's sweater up the curve of his back, and Armin hunched over, biting his lip until it throbbed with pain. Hange made a disapproving sound.

"These are the worst sutures I've ever seen. You say you went to Sina Health Center? I think I'll give them a ring. I have a few choice words for their staff."

Armin wanted to tell Hange not to bother, not to get involved, but he didn't trust his voice for anything longer than a few words. "Is it—?" he asked, and even then, it trembled.

"No infection yet, but you're pushing it, kiddo. Clean it twice a day with a washcloth. Damp, not soaked. Distilled water and peroxide if you can. I'm going to guess that the reason this hasn't been healing well is because you can't reach it yourself, so if you really aren't comfortable trusting Eren to help you with this, call me. I'll hoof it down here thrice daily if I have to. You need to take care of yourself, Armin."

If he could just scrap this body now, he would. Just step out of it and leave it somewhere behind him, lying in its disgusting, scarred heap, maybe find a nice tree or cloud or sunbeam to inhabit instead. He considered just leaning forward onto the couch and trying to disappear into it. When he listed forward, Hange lowered his sweater for him, gently tugging him back upright.

"Hey. You're going to be all right," Hange said with easy conviction.
Armin nodded, then, on impulse, turned around and threw his arms around Hange. Hange returned the hug, careful to avoid his injuries. They smiled. "Do you have any questions for me?"

"One, maybe," said Armin.

"Yes?"

"Can any of—this—be transmitted through kissing?"

"Very, very, very rarely." Hange held two fingertips about a millimeter apart to illustrate. "Infinitesimal chance. But might as well not risk it, right?"

"Y-yeah. Thank you, doctor."

"Hange."

"Thank you, Doctor Hange."

Hange laughed. "Cheeky little fucker. Want me to call Levi back in here?"

"Yes, please."

"Watch this. Watch how fast he moves. Like the Little Engine That Could." Hange leaned back, cupped their hands around their mouth, and shouted, "Hey, footstool!"

A door burst open, and Levi's voice preceded him; a long, creative stream of insults that still hadn't petered out by the time he had returned to the living room. "—whiny-ass dickmunch," he finished, hands crossed over his chest. He eyed them both. "Everything all right?"

"Not stellar, but hey," said Hange, shrugging.

Eren joined them a few moments later, looking weird and flushed and subdued, and Armin realized with a start that they'd both emerged from the guest bedroom. Armin's throat tightened. Didn't Erwin have a study? Why the hell had it been necessary to find a room with a lock? It was pure absurdity, this hurt and defensiveness, but Armin was tired, scared, and apparently riddled with sexually transmitted diseases. He stood up so fast that Hange jumped. He felt hot and chilly at the same time.

"Need a ride back?" asked Levi.

"Thanks," said Eren, right as Armin said, "No." They glanced at each other.

"Bus," said Armin.

"Don't be ridiculous," said Levi. "I'm here and I have a car."

"Erwin's car," said Armin frostily.

Levi's eyebrows knitted together, and he spread his hands in a gesture like 'holy shit, backing off' that Eren completely missed. "It's quicker," Eren said. "Come on, Armin. You look exhausted."

"I'll drive you," Hange offered, openly grimacing at the tension.

"You leave this apartment, and I'm locking you out," said Levi to Hange. "Look, Armin, this isn't a big deal. I'll drop you two off at the hotel. It'll just take a minute. You don't have to talk."
So Armin didn’t. He jammed the prescription into his pocket and strolled out the door, already waiting in the elevator by the time Levi and Eren caught up. 'Appalled' was too mild a word for the expression on Eren's face. He'd barely flinched when Armin told him to fuck off, but say one hard word to precious Levi—Levi, who could certainly take it, for fuck's sake—and Eren was suddenly up in arms. Armin had been vacillating between anger and numbness for so long that this full, focused rage was a relief.

When the elevator reached the garage level, Eren tried to linger to chew Armin out while Levi moved ahead to find the car. Armin beat him to it out of sheer spite: "I might have an STD," he told Eren. "It's extremely unlikely to transmit it through kissing, but I think you and Erwin should get checked out anyway."

Eren went perfectly still. "Erwin?"

Oh, fuck. Fuck. Armin clenched his jaw and slapped a hand over his eyes. This wasn't the fucking plan. It was pure thoughtlessness, no malicious intent in it, but no courtesy, either. "Eren," he began, but Eren suddenly spun on his heel and left him there. No 'I love you' this time. Armin took a few steps after him and stopped in the threshold.

Levi had overheard. He didn't bother to pretend that he hadn't. He'd lingered to hold the security door for them, and his eyes had gone—not even cold, but vacant somehow, despite the confused set of his mouth. When he realized Armin was looking at him, he cleared his throat and turned.

"Levi, it was all me; Erwin had nothing to do with it," said Armin desperately.

"Didn't ask," said Levi.

They drove home in silence.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry this is so late and underwhelming! I hit a major roadblock, but I think I've got my groove back, and this was the only place I could make a neat cut before what I consider the second arc of this story. If you're still with me, thank you for your patience and your support!

Warning this chapter for implied past sexual assault.

As Erwin prepared to exit the interstate on his way home, Hange passed him in an opposite lane. The two of them—driving with the same tired, preoccupied slowness—had just enough time to exchange surprised waves before Erwin reached the off-ramp. He blinked, suddenly awake. Had Levi actually been in touch? Only a few days ago, he'd made it abundantly clear that he'd sooner gargle thumbtacks than reconnect with any of their old friends. Maybe Hange had ambushed him. The thought made Erwin smile. It'd be nice to know that some things never changed—

—though damned if he didn't regret that sentiment the instant he stepped back into his apartment. Levi was lying on the sofa with a highball glass and a lit cigarette, shirt riding up to reveal a toned slip of abdomen. Erwin paused in mid-step, equal halves aroused and apprehensive. "Hello," he said cautiously, setting down his briefcase.

Levi glanced up, eyes lazy with a familiar, boozed-up apathy. He crooked his pinkie finger in greeting. Still beautiful, despite everything. Erwin sighed.

"Please tell me Hange attempted to stop you from falling off the wagon."

"Gave it the ol' college try," said Levi, sipping his drink. "Not that I've ever been."

"On the wagon?"

"To college. Well, either. How was your day?"

"Long."

"And hard?"

"Just long." Erwin leaned over to kiss him lightly on the mouth, hoping to ballpark his level of inebriation, but Levi realized what he was doing and gave his tie a vicious yank in retaliation. Erwin had to grab the back of the couch to avoid falling on him. Levi followed him upright to continue kissing him, deep and needy, curling one hand around the nape of his neck.

"Are you hungry?" asked Erwin against his mouth once Levi had disengaged, not acknowledging their proximity.

"Not for food," said Levi. His voice was husky.

"I'll make you some rice."
"I said I'm not fucking hungry." Notes of annoyance permeating the seductive tone, now. Good.

Erwin extricated himself from Levi's grip, folded up his sleeves, and crossed the kitchen to run water into one of the small pots he used for noodles and boiled eggs. His throat felt tight. Levi wasn't a messy drunk, exactly—wasn't really a messy anything—but he was intense and desperate and hot as all hell. Erwin was partially hard from that kiss alone. He distracted himself with the rice, rinsing it under the tap, resisting the urge to turn around as Levi got up from the couch and settled down on one of the barstools at the counter.

"I called Hange because Armin Arlert needed to see a doctor," said Levi. There was a tinkle of ice cubes as he drained his glass, poured another drink from the decanter to his left.

Without comment, Erwin navigated the liquor out of reach in a practiced, casual gesture, then tensed as Levi's words actually caught up to him. "Is he okay?"

"No. Hange thinks he has chlamydia."

"Shit."

"Yeah. He said he thought you should get tested too. Owing to your alleged lip-lock."

Erwin fumbled the pot a bit. He hadn't transferred the rice yet, but the top inch of water splashed onto the floor, soaking his shirt and socks. Instead of going for the mop, he found himself standing there tiredly with his hands on his hips, the bottom hems of his trousers sucking up the spill.

Smirking, Levi passed him his cigarette. Without hesitation, Erwin jammed it between his lips and pulled deep, lungs stinging at his first taste of tobacco in years.

Armin Arlert. Brilliant, ballad-savvy, love-bitten Armin; Armin the sixteen-year-old, for fuck's sake. All day, Erwin had been running through his mind for ways that he could've prevented that inappropriate moment between them, not quite able to absolve himself of guilt. Had been too familiar, too aggressive? He'd compromised Armin's fragile sense of privacy, perhaps, made him think that he owed Erwin something in return.

In a way, Levi's revulsion was going to be relieving. Erwin waited for castigation, smoke leaking from between his teeth.

But Levi's voice was mild. "It can't be spread through kissing, can it? Even I know that. Why would Hange tell him that it can?"

"I—I'm not sure."

"I think it was pure shit-stirring. I think Hange wanted him to start facing what happened to him before he fucking destroys himself. You should've seen him today. It's—it's bad, Erwin. You're probably the only one he'll listen to right now. Call him tomorrow."

"That wouldn't be right."

"I don't recall prefacing that with 'if it pleases and sparkles.'"

"Levi, I kissed him," Erwin reiterated, speaking clearly and firmly, so there was no room for misinterpretation.

"He kissed you, more like. Just a guess. Fuck, why are you so eager to blame yourself for this? Maybe you really do have something to hide. Just masturbate furiously to thoughts of him bent over your lap and then verbally deny it like any normal human being."
Erwin balked, thrown completely off-balance. He'd been expecting anger and accusations, not this bland, unconcerned benefit of the doubt—then that malicious twist. It brought him sharp, ruined pain. "That's cruel. That's so fucking cruel, Levi."

Levi licked his lips and took another drag from his cigarette. Something about his posture was unnatural, disconcerting. "I'm sorry," he said.

"You are?"

"Yeah."

"Of course you are," said Erwin, and was it fucked up that he was actually relieved now? This Levi, at least, he knew how to handle. It was the same Levi he used to haul out of bar fights; the same Levi he used to kiss furiously against his front door back when they were young and fevered and almost intact. Damn, it'd been so good those last lucid months. In the instants before they'd hit the fucking ground, they'd been flying.

Too fast, Erwin knew now. They'd been going too fast.

Levi rocked upright, pulled open the pantry door, and grabbed the mop. "I'll clean," he grumbled, dropping it in the center of the spill. He ran the sponge right over Erwin's shoes, sopping up the water. "Yeah, I'm so sorry that I'll clean it up. I'll clean up your fucking mess."

Erwin let him work until he slipped a little, one of his feet squeaking on the linoleum, then he pried the mop from his hands and scooped him briskly into his own arms. Levi yelped.

"Wh—put me down, fucker!"

"You are extremely drunk."

"This is nothing. Fucking let go of me."

He carried Levi to his bedroom and settled him on the side of the mattress that he'd slept on the night before. Levi made a low, angry noise, but he didn't try to stand, instead rolling over and curling himself up in one of the blankets.

"It's always freezing in here."

"The thermostat is in the hall. Feel free to adjust it." Erwin began digging through his dresser drawers for comfortable nightclothes. He was really going to have to go shopping soon; he was running out of clean shirts. Eventually he turned up with an ancient university hoodie and a pair of sweatpants that had always been too tight on him. When he tossed them to Levi, Levi missed the catch by two full seconds, hand closing around empty air. This seemed to mollify him.

"Maybe I'm a little drunk," he conceded.

"Yeah, maybe." Erwin paused to fish some nightclothes out of the full hamper, smell them experimentally, and change into them. He did not sit when he was finished. "I hope you're lucid enough to go over a few ground rules."

"Yes, daddy."

Erwin's lips thinned. He knew what Levi was trying to do. "Number one," he said, keeping his voice pointedly neutral, "cut back on the drinking. This is not unreasonable; I'm not asking you to
go cold turkey. I just want you to find a better way to pass the time."

"I'll take up needlepoint. Or..." Lying on his back, head turned slightly, Levi held his gaze and touched Erwin's shin with the tips of his toes.

He folded Levi's leg back onto the bed with gentle, firm hands. "Second: no more of these sexual overtures when you're inebriated."

"When I'm inebriated?" Levi repeated with a small, suggestive smile.

"When you are inebriated." A prideful part of him hoped that that still served as some sort of incentive. He stared past Levi toward the wall, not quite able to maintain eye contact. "I want you. You know I want you. But we are not going to make love if you aren't one hundred percent clear-headed."

Levi rolled his eyes at 'make love.' Then he said, "C'mon. No one cares about shit like sobriety anymore."

Derailed, Erwin's heart contracted. He sat down gingerly beside Levi, holding his breath, and lifted him upright against the headboard. It took all of his self-control not to crush his mouth against Levi's, furious and territorial and heartsick. Levi began to turn away reflexively; Erwin seized his chin and tilted his face up. "Who?" he asked, dangerously calm. "Give me their names. I'll kill them."

It was obvious that Levi didn't realize the implications of that disclosure, because he looked first confused, then scornful. Frightened, beneath all of that. Always frightened. "You're getting really carried away with this white knight bullshit," he said. His fingers closed around Erwin's wrists, but he didn't remove his hands from his waist. "I wasn't raped, okay? I'm not a child."

"That's not how it works and you know it."

"I misspoke. It wasn't like what happened to—I wasn't hurt, Erwin. It wasn't traumatic."

"You were traumatized," said Erwin, voice leaving no room for argument. "You were hurt."

The beat of hesitation was all Erwin needed to confirm that, but Levi balked anyway after a loaded moment, fumbling to get back under the covers with drunken inelegance. Erwin couldn't imagine taking advantage of him in this state—he'd be helpless. He'd have already convinced himself that he wanted it. The hoodie rode up a little, revealing a smooth curl of his spine. Erwin pulled the hem back down and helped him untangle the mess of sheets, tucking him in like—well—Like a child, okay. Like a child, because Levi was young and terrified and he didn't even have the words to admit it; because Levi could drape his coat around a naked sixteen-year-old boy in the rain, but he couldn't face himself without trying to self-destruct. Erwin pulled an extra blanket around him. Levi was laying stubbornly stiff, shoulders high. When Erwin made no move to turn off the lights or end their conversation, he thrashed around to face him, eyes hard and overbright.

"Never tell me how I feel, Erwin," he said, cold as ice. "You don't get to decide what hurts me and what doesn't. You got it?"

Erwin licked his lips. "If that's what you need to believe—"

"You don't get to decide what I need, either. You can go fuck yourself, for all I can care. Fuck yourself, fuck Armin Arlert, fuck whoever you like. Just stop fucking with me."
If Erwin paused to dissect any one grain of that, he would never stop aching, so after three deep, steadying breaths, he let all of it wash over him. The jab at Armin, the dismissal, the causal invitation out of Levi's life. Slowly, Erwin slipped into bed himself. His hand hesitated on the lamp for a moment, but he let it drop without turning off the light, electing instead to roll over and scoop Levi's small body against his chest. Levi went rigid, but he didn't move away. Muscle by muscle, he relaxed into Erwin's hold. It was the closest Erwin had felt to Levi since their breakup. As if Levi were letting Erwin feel him, the real him, not all the barbs and films he'd grown to keep everyone's touch off of his skin.

"Remember that thing I'm still allowed to be?" said Levi after maybe fifteen seconds.

"Sorry."

"Yeah, that."

"No. I mean—I'm sorry. It's not my place to tell you how you feel, but it'd be easier if you—if you could—you never—"

"Spit it out, Erwin."

"I—I just—I want you to say something you mean," Erwin managed. It was like a weight leaving his chest. Emboldened, he added, firmer, "One thing, Levi. Anything. I need to hear your voice again." He paused. "That's my third and final rule: one true thing every night."

He wished he could see Levi's face right now. He wished he had one clue as to what Levi could possibly be feeling in this tight, overexposed moment. Levi didn't roll over, but he did grip Erwin's arms, still folded around his chest. His shoulders hitched just once.

"I'm tired," he said at last. "I am so, so tired."

* 

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!