Summary

Eren, Mikasa, and Armin arrive at boarding school fresh from tragedy. Determined to figure out who killed his parents, Eren finds himself distracted by the peculiar behavior of three classmates, as well as his germophobic math teacher. With the clock ticking, Armin and Mikasa work to protect their friend and uncover several long-held secrets.
"Oh what we could be
if we stopped
carrying the remains
of who we were."

-Tyler Knott Gregson

"Time to go."

Eren's jaw drops as he glares up at the stupid janitor who thinks he has the right to boss them around. Well, he doesn't. "I'm not—" Eren starts.

"Carla would want you kids to head to school now," Hannes tells him, but he doesn't so much as glance in Mom's direction. She lies pale and small under a blanket. For all Eren knows she could be cold and want another blanket, or too hot and want the one she has removed. But his mother's unconscious, unmoving and surrounded by machines. Wires sprout out of her like tentacles, keeping her alive and keeping him from her, and now Hannes wants him to leave her.

"You can't make me," Eren informs Hannes. He clenches his fists and glances to Mikasa. Ghosts haunt and shadows hang from her eyes. Again, Eren knows she's thinking. A second time, she may be orphaned.

But they won't be. Mom will wake up. Eren is certain and goddammit, he's going to be here when it happens. Screw Hannes, screw this freaking boarding school. Even if his father wanted them to go to it. Father's dead now, and if he were here and saw Mom's condition, surely he wouldn't want Eren and Mikasa to leave.

"You don't have a choice, kiddo. I'm your legal guardian."

"Not my dad," Eren retorts. Mikasa scowls.

"Eren, really, Armin's waiting in the car."

"I can't leave my mom!"

"You're leaving!"

Mikasa stands, her eyes narrowed.

"Eren, your mother would want you to take care of yourself. Go to school. Make friends."

"But I won't leave her!" Eren screams.

"Is there a problem?" asks a tall security guard, pushing his way into the room.

Every muscle in Eren's body tenses. "He's trying to make me—"
"I'm his legal guardian—" Hannes insists.

"Well if that's the case, then God help you." The security guard folds his arms. "You do need to leave. All of you. You're upsetting other patients and their families on the floor."

"But that's my mom!" Eren cries out. He can't leave her—if she wakes up when he's not there—if she dies when he's not—

"Do you want me to haul your ass to jail? Because you're definitely pushing me," threatens the security guard. The machines beep mercilessly in the background. "Go with your guardian to school or go to jail. But you aren't staying here, kid."

"We're going with Hannes," Mikasa says, stepping closer. Her hand closes around Eren's arm.

Shame and rage churn in Eren's stomach. *Mom.* It's only been two weeks since the accident, and he can't fathom how Hannes can be so cruel. He's always known him to be a bloated arrogant jerk, but this is—this is—

"Come on, Eren," Mikasa says, tilting her head towards the door. A nurse laughs out by the desk and Eren could punch her. *People are dying, and you're laughing?*

But he lets Mikasa pull him along, because at least she cares about Mom. He knows she does.

All of his belongings are packed up, stuffed into suitcases by strangers' hands, strangers who feel pity for a boy who lost his father and might lose his mother. Eren hates their pity, especially when none of them care enough to take him and Mikasa in so they can stay near the hospital. Now, they'll be four hours away, up a mountain at Kyojin High School.

"Eren!" Armin leaps out of the car and throws his arms around his friend, and then around Mikasa too. "Are you—" He swallows.

"It's not fair they're making us leave her," Eren mutters.

"I'm sure the doctors will—"

"If they're as incompetent as the blasted police, who are all 'we'll look into it' and then looking is all they do—"

"What could you even do though?" Mikasa asks. "You know nothing about medicine."

Eren scowls. It just—it makes him feel better to be closer.

"They'll let you visit her," Armin assures Eren as they slide into the back of the car. "I'm sure they will."

Mikasa leans her face against the glass window, closing her eyes. She must be tired. Eren is, too. His bones feel heavy, but when he closes his eyes at night in that strange hotel room, he just hears the screeching of brakes, the snap and the thud and the high-pitched shattering of glass. And then he sees the car leaving, hears his father speaking for the last time...

Eren never thought his father was at risk. Not like Mom. He was at least *talking* when the ambulance came.

And Mikasa, calling 911. Mikasa, holding him back to let the EMTs do their job.

The doctors apologized in the hospital, and Eren didn't believe them. They wouldn't even let him see
his father's body for hours, but when he saw it-reality crashed hard, tore him up on the inside.

*Try to stop thinking about it*, the psychologist encouraged him. Not that he could. And if he could, wouldn't that be a betrayal of his parents?

Eren opens his eyes to find Armin offering him a Snapple. Rain pours outside the car, and Hannes is listening to some terrible music filled with whining and popping instruments. Jazz, Eren thinks.

Eren's head leans against Mikasa's shoulder, and her head against his. Eren accepts the drink, prying himself back up. Mikasa jolts awake.

"We're almost there," Hannes announces.

"Excited to get back to cleaning toilets?" Eren snips.

"Shut it, Jaeger."

Mikasa bites her lip and leans forward. She winces and rubs her neck, as if there's a crick in it. "We'll be in separate dorms, won't we?"

"You will be," Hannes says, oblivious to the fact that Mikasa winces. "But Eren and Armin will be together. I think."

"Fantastic," Armin says cheerfully. He leans across Eren. "Don't worry, Mikasa," he whispers. "If you need us, we'll figure out a way."

Mikasa almost smiles.

Hannes turns and drives in through stone gate. He parks under an archway and motions for the kids to get out. "I'll take care of your bags."

"Where are we supposed to go?" Eren demands.

"See that guy?" Hannes points to a tall, blond man wearing a solemn face and perfectly ironed clothes despite the rain. "That's the dean. Erwin Smith. He'll take care of you."

They tumble out of the car into the sticky air. Erwin Smith nods at them. "Names?"

"Eren Jaegar. This is Mikasa Ackerman, and Armin Arlert."

Erwin's eyes widen at Mikasa's name. Eren frowns as Erwin glances over his shoulder, towards a pathetically short dark-haired man wearing a scowl. But Eren's heard of this short man—his father praised him as a pioneer in mathematics. Levi. Eren just can't remember his last name. Did Dad ever even mention it?

"We're happy to have you," Erwin says, folding his hands. "I'm sorry for your loss."

Eren nods. Mikasa stares at her shoes.

Mom... how is she? Eren checks his phone. No texts, not that he expects the doctors to notify him. No, they'd probably notify Hannes, and knowing that idiot, it could take days before Hannes finally got up the nerve to tell them anything.

"Ackerman, you're in the Rose dorm," Erwin tells her, studying a list of papers he has sprawled out on the desk in front of him. "Levi, would you show her where that is?"
The dark-haired man nods. Mikasa turns to them with her face pale.

"We'll see you at dinner?" Armin asks.

"See you," Mikasa agrees.

"Jaeger and Arlert, you're in the Maria dorm. And you're roommates."

"Fantastic!" Armin exclaims, and maybe for the first time since the accident, Eren allows himself to feel some relief.

"You're right in here," Nanaba, the dorm parent, tells Mikasa as she ushers her into a small room with red-tiled floors and blank, cream-colored walls.

"Hi! Are you my roommate?" chirps a brown-haired girl, leaping to her feet. She clutches a bag of Skittles in one hand and stuffs several in her mouth. "I'm Sasha, Sasha Braus. It's nice to meet you. Do you want some Skittles?"

"No thanks," Mikasa manages as Sasha grins at her.

"I've been here all day and let me tell you, it's been boring. Tomorrow won't be so boring, I don't think—the cafeteria and the snack bar will be open at least, plus classes start so of course we'll be busy."

A small door in the side of the room swings open, and a blond girl who's so small she looks like an elf appears. "Did you say you had Skittles?"

"Yes!" Sasha exclaims. "Do you want some?"

The girl nods and heads over, holding out her palm for some of the candy. She smiles at Mikasa. "I'm Christa Lenz. I'm your suitemate. Ymir!" she hollers.

"I'm Mikasa Ackerman."

"Sasha Braus," sings Sasha. "Skittles?"

Ymir snorts. "No thanks. Candy isn't really my thing." She smiles at Christa, who shrugs and pops a lemon one in her mouth.

"I think we're all new this year, aren't we?" asks Sasha.

"I am," Mikasa confirms.

"Like, practically the only people who aren't are those two," Sasha continues, nodding out the door. Mikasa follows her gaze to see two blond girls leaving their room across the dorm. One heads for the center courtyard, and the other heads for the gate. "Annie Leonhardt is the one leaving, and she's, like, really strong. I saw her doing push-ups in her room."

"What, are you a lesbian?" asks Ymir.

"Nope, but it wouldn't matter if I was," Sasha retorts.
"Agreed," Ymir says, shoving her hands into her pockets.

"Hitch is the other one. She seems to like makeup. A lot," Sasha comments. "And she has a boyfriend in the Maria dorm."

Mikasa peers outside. Even at the distance, she can tell that Hitch overdid it with garish lips.

"Are there a lot of sports here?" asks Christa cheerfully.

"There's a soccer team, and basketball, and like track too I think," Sasha answers, dropping onto her bedspread, which looks like a Starburst exploded. Speaking of Starbursts, Mikasa can see an entire bag stuffed into a red mug on Sasha's desk. Mikasa smiles.

"I'd join track," Mikasa says. "I like sports."

"You look like you'd be good at them," Christa offers with a smile. "Oh, I didn't mean—did I offend you? I just meant that you look, like, like you'd be strong and all."

Mikasa shakes her head. "You didn't offend me." She pulls out her phone and checks it.

"Friends?" asks Sasha.

"My two best friends are also here," Mikasa confirms. Technically Eren's her foster brother, of course, but she doesn't like using that term. She's never thought of Eren like a brother.

Not that he's thought of her as anything but a sister and a friend. And Mikasa's okay with that. At the very least, she gets to be close to him, and that's all she needs. His presence calms her, reminds her that she's alive and it's good to be alive.

Because Eren is the first person, besides her parents, who thought she was worth something. Eren reminded her that she was a person, not a thing, when she had forgotten.

And she knows what he's going through right now. Carla and Grisha—they were so kind to Mikasa. Neither of them deserved this.

Random accident, the police said. It happens. Intoxicated driving's on the rise lately. They probably panicked and drove off. Unless someone talks, we don't know how likely it is that we'll find them.

I'll find them if you won't! Eren raged.

Except now he cares more about his mother than revenge. If Carla dies, Mikasa's genuinely afraid for Eren.

"I saw you on the news," Christa ventures, keeping her eyes downcast. "I'm sorry."

"What happened?" Ymir asks.

"Tell you later," Christa promises.

"Thanks," Mikasa says. She knows they mean well.

After her parents died, only the Jaegers' laughter, their smiles and kindness and embraces, drowned out her memories of her parents' screams, of knives and threats and lying there, wondering why she would want to live. This school—it's not the same as a family, but if it can give Eren a sense of purpose, keep him grounded…
He should give it a chance. He will.

Sorry Mikasa, Armin texts as Eren scowls.

"This place is awful. It's like a prison."

"They're just making us get dinner as a dorm, Eren. Only for the first night, according to Moblit." Their dorm parent, who seems tolerable. Armin pulls out his trigonometry textbook and peruses the pages. "Tomorrow we can eat with Mikasa."

Don't worry about it, Mikasa texts back. The people in my dorm seem nice. I'll eat with them.

A bell rings—well, sort of a bell. It sounds like a rusted metal stick banging on a sheet of more rusted metal, which is exactly what it is. Armin grabs his umbrella and heads outside, Eren behind him.

A group assembles in the courtyard. A tall, skinny boy with freckles sticks out his hand. "Hi, I'm Marco, Marco Bott."

"Armin Arlert," Armin stammers. Marco's smile appears genuine and friendly. Eren?


No luck.

"This is—" Marco begins, motioning to the boy next to him, a boy with hair too gelled and styled for such rainy weather.

"Jean Kirchstein," the boy says proudly, as if that name should mean something, but as much as Armin wracks his brain, he can't say he's ever heard of the name before.

"I'm Connie Springer," says a short boy with his head shaved as if he's going into the military. "Nice to meet you all."

"You're all new, aren't you?" Jean asks.

Marco laughs, a hearty sound. "So are you, Jean."

Armin smiles. He likes Marco. Eren, on the other hand, rolls his eyes the moment Jean opens his mouth.

"Yeah, true, but like… this is the best boarding school in the country. You could look a little happier, Jaeger."

"I could—what?" Eren's jaw drops. His fists clench and even in the dimming evening light, Armin sees a familiar tomato-hued flush storming his friend's face. It's the same defensive anger that always protected Armin from bullies at their old school.

On second thought, Eren may have rightly assessed him, Armin decides.

"Hey, leave him alone," hisses Marco.

"Yeah, don't you watch the news? This is Grisha Jaeger's kid. The scientist. Like, my mom wants me to be Grisha Jaeger 2.0," Connie says, glancing at Armin and Eren.

Eren nods as if Connie gets points for that. Although Armin guesses he had no idea his father was so
well known. Grisha wasn't the type to play anything up.

"Who's your roommate, Connie?" Armin asks, changing the subject.

"His name's Marlowe. He's in the restroom right now, and he's not new, so I'm not sure if he's joining us." Connie shrugs. "Seems nice enough. He's got a girlfriend down in the Rose dorm that he's been texting all day."

"Hey!" Marco calls at two boys sitting off by themselves on a stone wall. "Who're you guys?"

The one with lighter hair, who looks like a rugby player or a hulk minus the green skin, rises. "Reiner Braun."

"Bertolt Hoover," whispers the other boy next to him, who is freakishly tall. Still, Bertolt wraps his arms around himself as if trying to fold up his giant limbs will help him shrink. It won't.

"Do you all have gym first period tomorrow?" asks Connie. "Like, what a way to start the day." He grins as if he's actually pumped.

Well, I guess it's good to get blood flowing, Armin decides.

"And it's co-ed. My old school, it was all boys, and it was boring," Connie adds with a wink.

Marco stares at his shoes as Jean laughs.

"Let's go!" Moblit yells, reappearing from his apartment, which is attached to the dorm.

The meal itself—lemon and thyme chicken with rice—is pretty good, at least better than the microwave dinners Armin makes for himself most nights. And way better than the hospital food Eren and Mikasa have been surviving on. But Eren still barely talks, his brow knotted and his phone next to his tray. He does wave at Mikasa when she passes by.

"Who is that?" Jean asks, jaw hanging open as his eye glue themselves to her.

"Our friend," Armin says quickly. The last thing he needs is for Eren to overhear and literally kill Jean.

"Does she have a name?"

"Ask her yourself," Armin replies, taking another bite of the cookies they served for dessert. They have chocolate in them. Armin likes chocolate.

Jean nods.

When they get back to their room, Armin yawns. "I'm going to sleep early."

"I'm not." Eren grabs his backpack and his suitcase. "I'm getting out of here."

What? The food Armin just ate solidifies into a rock in his stomach, a rock that rolls around and scrapes at his insides. "You can't run away!"

"I'm not the best climber, but I'm pretty sure I can scale these walls," Eren replies as he stuffs clothes into his bag.

Armin clutches his skull. "I'm pretty sure you shouldn't try, Eren."
"I have to. No one's texted me. I need—my mom needs me." Eren shakes his head.

*Mikasa, help,* Armin texts.

"You should come with me," Eren insists, rising and dropping his phone onto his bed. "You're my best friend."

"I'll help you get out," Armin says. "But, Eren, we can't leave. We're safe here. We're—"

"How is the hospital not safe?" Eren shakes his head.

*Really, Eren?* Armin wants to ask, but he bites his tongue. *It hasn't occurred to you that what happened to your parents might not be an accident?*

*Where are you?* Mikasa's text lights up Armin's phone.

*Meet outside of the dorm. Eren's trying to run away."

*I know. He just texted me.*

*He really can't, Mikasa.*

No response. Armin's chest tightens. If Mikasa agrees with Eren, they're screwed. And Armin has to come, because he's not letting his friends endure this alone. Not when they might need him.

Eren slings his bag over his shoulder. "Are you coming?"

Armin swallows.

"You shouldn't, you know," Eren says, biting his lip. "Not if you don't want to. I know school's important to you, and—"

"Neither of us should go," Armin says. "Your mom would want—"

"Me to be there for her," Eren finishes, stalking out of the room.

Armin rolls his eyes as he follows. "But Eren—"

"Just stay here, if you want to." Eren keeps his voice low. Cicadas hum and frogs chirp. Armin hopes he doesn't step on any of them. Above them, the stars dot the sky.

Armin snorts. "The three of us have done everything together, for years. You really think I'll let that end now?"

Eren pauses and turns.

"Didn't you want to be a scientist, like your father?" Armin presses. "This school—it'll help you get there, you know it will—you so wanted to join, even just a few weeks ago—"

"A few weeks ago my parents were—" Eren stops.

Armin lowers his head in shame. He shouldn't have said that.

"I can't think about my future beyond Mom waking up, or—" Eren balls his fists. "Or—" He gulps air. "Dad would want me to look after her."

"Eren—"
Eren shakes his head and hoists himself up one of the columns. From there, he climbs over the roof. Armin bites the insides of his cheeks to keep from cursing as he hauls himself up.

When Armin drops to the ground outside the dorm, he finds Mikasa waiting for them with a scowl, her ever-present scarf tied around her neck.

"Where are you going?"

Eren swallows. Tall pine trees rise all around them, branches and needles rustling in the breeze. Even though it's stopped raining, water still flings off, splattering against Armin's arms. "Back to the hospital."

Mikasa crosses her arms. "How are you going to get there?"

"I'll hire a taxi."

"You think security won't recognize you? Us? We're fifteen, Eren. We—"

"She's my mom; I can't leave her!" Eren shouts.

"Eren!" hisses Armin, glancing around nervously. An owl hoots.

"I—"

Mikasa decks Eren.

Holy shit. Armin's jaw drops. He's never seen Mikasa—

"She wants you to live, and you know she does! Waiting at that hospital—what are you going to accomplish?" Mikasa snaps. "Don't you remember?"

Silence. Armin drags the toe of his shoe through the dirt. He knows what Mikasa's referring to, even though neither of his friends likes to bring it up. Eren clutches his face, gaping at his friend.

"Please, Eren," Mikasa says, her voice catching. "Study here. Learn how to—be a scientist, if you want to be like your father, or a cop if you want to take down people like the one who hurt your parents."

Mikasa never pleads. Armin's heart surges up his throat as Eren hesitates.

"You're putting yourself at risk," Mikasa says. "You know you are. We both know something's isn't right about what the police say happened."

So they have realized. Armin's shoulders relax. At least, Mikasa has.

Crunch.

Pine needles.

Boots.

Armin lunges towards the trees just as a tiny blond girl, her hair tied up in a ponytail, emerges from between two of them. Her heart-shaped face is more interesting than pretty.

"Who are you?" Armin stammers.
She looks at him as if he's a louse she'd like to squash. Her lips curve as she takes in Eren and his bag, and Mikasa. "What do you have in there?"

Eren's eyes widen.

"It's none of your business why we're out here," Mikasa snaps.

"Fine. You don't ask me, I won't ask you." She brushes past Armin, her shoulder bumping against his. Wet pine needles cover the backs of her jeans, as if she's been sitting on the ground. Why?

"Are you heading back to the dorm, Annie?" Mikasa asks.

Annie nods. Mikasa glances to Eren.

"I'll see you tomorrow at breakfast," Eren offers her. His tone's more of a grumble, but Armin will take it.

Thank God. Armin wilts in relief as Mikasa waves goodnight. He glances back over his shoulder, towards the trees.

What on earth was she doing?

"Come on, Armin," Eren grumbles. "Er… will you help me get my bag over?" He looks almost sheepish.

Armin grins and shakes off his questions. "What are friends for?"

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! Obviously, since this story is set in a modern high school/boarding school, I've decided to change a few background details around, so it's not exactly a retelling (although you can expect a few similar plot beats, and I hope to stay as true to the characters as possible). Also, like the manga/anime it's based on, this story will deal with themes like trauma, abusive dynamics, and mental illness, and it will also deal with sexuality and some teenage substance use going forward, so please be forewarned if that could be triggering.
"Line up!" barks Mr. Shadis, their phys ed teacher who clearly has a military past. Mikasa stands next to Eren and Armin, shivering in her t-shirt and shorts. Autumn's on the way with its cool mornings, although it's supposed to be sweltering later in the day. Circles still haunt Eren's eyes, but he at least hasn't mention running away again.

Armin fights a yawn as Mr. Shadis yells at them to line up. Mikasa spots Annie shuffling over, her head down.

"Attendance!" bellows Shadis. "Ackerman, Mikasa!"

"Present," she shouts, fighting the urge to salute.

"Arlert, Armin!"

Armin gives a small shrug as if to say that even he's confused by the intensity of their teacher. Eren, on the other hand, looks impressed.

When Shadis gets to "Springer, Connie," he finds his first victim. Mikasa watches their teacher's face flood purple and swell like an overripe tomato. "What the blast are you wearing? You can't wear sandals to physical education!"


Something crunches. Mikasa follows Shadis's gaze behind her, to the source of the noise.

Sasha. Shit.

Her roommate happily munches on a baked potato from the cafeteria. How she got a whole one, Mikasa doesn't know, and why Sasha still needs food after the two bacon and cheese omelets she ate, Mikasa doesn't understand.

Eren's eyes bulge. Armin's mouth forms a small 'o.'

"You," seethes Shadis. "What the hell are you doing?"

Sasha seems oblivious and Shadis erupts like a volcano. "You! I'm talking to you!" He pauses, checking the attendance sheet. "Who are you again?"

"Sasha Braus," Sasha says simply.

"Sasha Braus," growls Shadis. "What are you holding in your right hand?"

"It's a baked potato, sir! From the kitchen." Sasha takes another bite.

"Why?" Shadis demands. "Why are you eating a potato right now?"

"It's best when eaten warm, sir," Sasha replies. Mikasa can't tell if her roommate is cool or stupid. "So I thought that eating it now was the best course of action."
Shadis blinks. "That reasoning is beyond me—why are you eating a potato?"

*Lord help us*, Mikasa decides. A crow caws. It might be more fitting if Mikasa imagines it a raven.

"Are you asking me why people eat potatoes in general, sir?" Sasha questions.

Connie Springer's jaw hangs open. A tall kid from Eren and Armin's dorm looks like he's expecting a bomb to drop and huddles in on himself. Ymir smirks. Armin looks like he can't decide whether to cry or laugh Even Shadis has no response.

Sasha hesitates and reaches down, breaking off a piece of the potato. "Take half of it if you like, sir."

"Half?" stammers Shadis. He shakes his head. "Are you that much of a special snowflake that you can't eat breakfast at the correct time? You'll be running laps after school today, Braus! No snacks for you!"

Sasha shrugs as if it makes no difference.

"I can't decide whether I love her or am afraid of her," mutters Connie to Eren.

"Run! Three laps! All of you!" And Mikasa forgets about the potato as she jogs around the school's premises. A boy with immaculately styled hair watches her. She ignores him and flies past him, focused only on running. Her feet pound the pavement, the gravel, and Mikasa feels like an outsider to her own body, able to look in on her life and see something other than two sets of parents dead. She can run, she can accomplish; she'll be okay.

"Impressive timing," Shadis grumbles when Mikasa finishes her laps. "Not bad. I think that's a new record, actually."

"Good job, Mikasa," pants Eren when he finally finishes a few minutes later. He high-fives her.

"Don't worry," Christa tells Sasha as they change in the locker room. "I'll bring you snacks. I promise."

Christa is too nice, Mikasa thinks. Ymir rolls her eyes. Annie stays in the far-off corner, ignoring the rest of them. Besides Mikasa, Annie definitely had the best running time of any girl in their class.

"Are you really going to do track, Mikasa?" asks Eren as they head to their lockers to grab their trigonometry books.

She nods. "You should, too. If you want to."

"Maybe." He smiles at her as he pulls out his notebook. "But won't your hair get in the way?"

"She can tie it back," says Ymir in a bored voice as she passes.

"I'll cut it," Mikasa decides. Armin frowns. "I've been thinking about it anyways, Armin." And she has.

"Oh." Armin shrugs.

"Will this teacher be as whacked as Shadis?" asks Sasha as she slips into their group.

Yes, Mikasa decides the moment they enter the classroom and find a diminutive man, the same one who took her to her dorm yesterday without speaking a single word to her.
"My name is Levi Ackerman," the teacher announces.

Ackerman? Mikasa blinks. She's never met anyone else with that name. Eren and Armin both turn to glance at her. She shakes her head. No idea.

"It is my firm belief that there is no point in sitting down to learn unless we're in a clean environment." Levi clears his throat. "Did you come from gym or biology?"

Please tell me bio isn't going to be weird too.

"Gym," squeaks out Armin.

"Indeed. You all have to shower before you come to this class after gym. And biology." Levi's nose wrinkles as if suggesting they don't smell pleasant. "But for today, we'll settle on getting rid of all the dust that's accumulated over the summer."

The room looks immaculate to Mikasa, windows sparkling and every book lined up in a perfect row, but she won't protest.

"Brooms and rags are in the back closet," Levi orders. "Go. And don't think that if you clean half-heartedly it won't affect your grade."

Sure enough, Levi inspects every last inch of the windows and desks as they work. "Do it again," he tells Eren after Eren finishes dusting a bookshelf in the corner.

Mikasa scowls. Eren's putting in no less effort than she is.

"We have bio next," a boy named Marco tells the boy who was staring at her.


"Help," Armin whispers as they leave. "Eren, you may have been right after all."

"No. My father wanted me in this place for a reason." Eren straightens his back. "We'll get through it." He pulls out his phone. Mikasa's heart lifts. He's going to be okay, too.

"Anything?" asks Mikasa.

He shakes his head.

Bio proves to be a nonstop energy explosion, with Hange Zoe as their enthusiastic teacher. She waxes poetic about the fetal pigs they'll be dissecting—Eren turns green—and even after Oruo's boring civics class, Mikasa has little appetite for lunch.

"Eren," says Hannes as he passes them. "I called the hospital. Nothing's changed, I'm afraid."

"Oh." Eren bites his lip. Armin slips an arm around him.

The afternoon starts off well enough, with Petra's art class, Eld's literature, and Mike Zacharias's history. Health class, taught by Gunthur, proves more awkward than watching Sasha eat a potato in phys ed, mostly because Gunthur decides to launch right in to the lesson. Despite claiming that he's open to any questions, his scowl and lowered eyes suggest he's anything but.

"Partner up, groups of two," Gunthur barks.

Mikasa glances to Eren and Armin, who shrugs and looks next to him, to Annie who sits with a
scowl on her face and, as has been the case all day, no sign that she ran into any of them in the woods the night before.

"Want to work together?" Armin invites her.

"I guess," Annie mutters. Her chair squeals as she drags it across the floor.

"Why on earth is he passing out bananas?" Eren hisses to Mikasa.

"Uh, that's not the only thing he's passing out," Mikasa mumbles.

"Oh." This time Eren flushes. "Are you—okay?"

"Of course." Mikasa takes the banana and the small plastic package. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"No reason," Eren says quickly. But she knows what memories pulsate in his mind: he's remembering the situation he found her in, what those men were talking about doing to her, even if it never happened.

But Mikasa doesn't want to think about that, and she wasn't thinking of it, not until Eren brought it up.

No, she's embarrassed because she's in love with the boy sitting next to her, even if he's still too oblivious, too stuck-in-middle-school, to notice.

"Are you for real?" Connie groans from the seats in front of them.

Sasha chomps down on the banana. "I don't get a snack today, remember? Detention."

"If you're going to eat the banana, at least make sure it's covered first," Ymir says sarcastically. Sasha throws the peel at her as Gunthur glares and Connie stifles his laughter.

"This school sucks," Jean complains as he walks next to Marco, ahead of Eren, Armin, and Mikasa. "Like seriously. It's supposed to be so good, but if today is any indication, I don't know how they could have gotten their reputation. I need to get into an Ivy League, and if top colleges find out—"

"What'll you go to school for?" questions Marco as they lope down a staircase.

"Business maybe. Politics. Whatever can land me on Wall Street and/or make me rich."

Armin grimaces.

"Oh, shut up," Eren can't help saying.

Both Marco and Jean whirl around, Marco confused and Jean annoyed. "What?"

"You really want nothing more out of life than to get rich?" Eren scoffs.

"What other kind of life is there?" Jean asks, straightening his spine as he glances to Mikasa. "It's impressive, esteemed, and comfortable—"

Oh, no you don't. "Throwing big words in there doesn't make you sound smart," Eren says. Armin's eyes dart nervously between Eren and Jean. "My father used to say that money doesn't make life more fun or anything."
"And your father's that crazy scientist, right? " Jean rolls his eyes as Reiner and Bertolt pause on the stairs above them. "His life was short, right?"

Something cold grabs Eren's windpipe. Heat surges. You selfish—you don't know, you don't care, you don't care! All those nights his dad would work late, trying to cure so many illnesses, driving his family into tiny homes and never being able to afford luxuries, all to help people—he's way better of a person than you'll ever be!

Eren lunges at Jean, fist colliding with his chin.

"Eren!" Armin screams.

They both tumble down the stairs. A foot lands in Eren's stomach, a stone stairway slams above his eye. Pain shoots down to his jaw. A fist grabs at his hair.

"Stop it!" Armin yells.

Someone hauls Jean off Eren, and then yanks him to his feet. Levi, the trig teacher, glares at him. "You two are already fighting?"

"He attacked me," Jean wheezes.

"He insulted my father's memory!" Eren shouts. "I don't care! He's a—"

"Shut up!" Levi grabs Eren by the shoulder and drags him back.

"Let him go!" shouts Mikasa. Danger throbs in her tone.

"I'm taking him to my office to settle down, before Dean Erwin no doubts summons both of them," Levi snaps. "Hange?"

"I'll take this one," their biology teacher agrees cheerfully, reaching down to pull Jean up. "Are you hurt?"

"No," snaps Jean.

"I wish you were!" Eren snarls.

"I wish you were!" Eren snarls.

"Did you not hear me when I told you to shut up?" Levi hisses, pushing him into a small office and slamming the door. Windows open to the soccer field behind him, and beyond that, the tennis courts and the forest that sprawls throughout the campus.

Shit. Eren blinks. His forehead aches and stings. "Can I get an ice pack?"

"Can you think calmly for a minute?" Levi retorts, gesturing to a fraying orange chair. "Take a seat. And if you get dirt on it, you're cleaning it up."

"He said my father—"

"And attacking him is what your father would've wanted you to do?" Levi snaps, lowering himself into his own chair, across the immaculately organized desk. A pine tree bristles in the wind outside.

"He's dead," Eren says, hating himself for saying the words. "Does it matter what he would have wanted?"

Levi frowns, cocking his head to the side. "That's for you to decide. And you should choose"
whatever you'll regret the least."

Eren bites his lip. He's not used to adults not giving straight answers.

"Listen," Levi says. "We know you tried to run away last night."


"Moblit told us." Levi leans back. "You need to decide whether you want to stay here or not."

"And if I don't you'll just let me leave?" Eren snorts.

Levi shrugs. "I hear juvie's an option."

"I'm not a criminal."

Levi hesitates. "Yet."

*You know, Eren realizes. Of course they would know.* He gulps and clenches his fists. "Are you going to expel me?"

"Not for this, but Erwin will probably consider it your first strike." Levi picks up a pen and fiddles with it. "Your grades and records from your old school are show that you're smart, and hard-working. You have a lot of potential, like your father did. It's up to you whether you want to be like him and live up to it."

*If I go to juvie, where does that leave Mikasa? Or Armin? I do. I will."

"Good." Levi stands. "Hange will get you an ice pack for that head. And Erwin will probably ground you to your dorm for whatever amount of days he sees fit."

*I won't let my father down, Eren vows. Or my mother. Er, Levi?"

"Yeah?" Levi pauses by the door.

"Will I be able to visit my mother soon? This weekend?"

Levi sighs. "Ask your dorm parent about that." He ducks out, and Eren follows.

"Only one week of being grounded to the dorm?" Armin takes his headphones out of his ears. "That's not so bad, Eren."

"Except freaking Jean is grounded to his dorm too, and his dorm is my dorm, so we have to see each other." Eren groans.

"I'll hole up in here with you," Armin suggests, waving around their small room with its two desk, dressers, and beds. "We'll Facetime with Mikasa and study."

"What if they don't let me see my mom?" Eren asks, face twisted in anguish as he paces. Armin shoves his laptop off his lap. "I didn't get the chance to ask the dean about it."

"I'll ask for you," Armin suggests.

Eren's jaw drops. "Would you really?"

"If you promise not to strangle Jean while I'm gone." Armin and Marco agreed to keep their
roommates apart as much as possible. Eren might be too quick to get angry, but Armin doesn't want his friend to deal with any more taunts. And Jean might be an arrogant prick, but he's their classmate and they have to tolerate him. Marco seems nice and at least promised to try and reason with Jean.

"I don't see why he had to say that. It was so mean," Marco said sadly. "Tell Eren I'm sorry."

"I promise," Eren says with a small smile.

"Do your homework," Armin calls as he heads for the door.

"Mikasa's called me three times!"

"Call her first, then," Armin acquiesces. He doesn't see why Mikasa doesn't just tell Eren what she feels. But she won't because Mikasa will never make herself that vulnerable, and Eren won't realize it because he's oblivious even to his own feelings.

Armin waves at Reiner and Bertolt, who look to be having a heated discussion by the dorm door. They wave back, Bertolt looking strangely intimidated. Armin's got to be almost a foot shorter than Bertolt, so he doesn't quite understand his classmate's apprehension.

As Armin makes his way up towards the main buildings, climbing on stairs caved out of split logs and the sun bleeding orange and scarlet, he remembers his own parents' deaths. Well, he doesn't remember them dying. He only remembers the days when he realized he would never know them, when Grandfather told him he didn't need them to feel valued.

Find your value in your own doing, in your knowledge.

Of course, with that came the taunts and bitter accusations from his peers. But Eren came, and Eren became his friend. And then Mikasa came too, and they've been together ever since.

Slipping into the hallways, Armin peers at the small cream-colored names painted on the cherry wood doorframes.

Dean's Office.

"I can't believe he taught them that! On the first goddamn day."

Armin freezes. Levi. Their sour math teacher, shorter than Armin himself.

"What's the point in teaching high schoolers about condoms?"

"Keep your head in the sand and only focus on your math, it's all right," teases a woman's voice. Hange.

That lesson was super awkward, though, Armin thinks. Sex is the last thing on his mind. He needs to focus on getting into a good college, on helping Eren and Mikasa get through this.

"Levi's got other things to think about, Hange," comes Erwin's voice.

"Like keeping that kid safe? He seems like a wild one. Getting in fights on his first day!"

Armin presses himself back against the wall. What?

"I said I'd protect him from them. Protecting him from himself is not my job."

Who is them? Armin wonders.
"If anyone could succeed at that," comes a sweet voice Armin recognizes as Petra, their art teacher's. "You could."

Levi snorts. "No. That kid is going to do what he wants to do. He's not the type to learn discipline."

"You did," Erwin tells him.

Armin cringes. He should not be listening to this. At the same time, if people are really after Eren—

"Oh!" Someone bumps into him. Armin jumps. Oh, no—he's sure guilt's written all over his face—I am so screwed—

The voices inside the office muffle. Footsteps march towards the door. Oruo clutches his mouth. When he moves his hand away, blood flecks his lips.

"Are you okay?" Armin gasps.

"Just bit my tongue," Oruo manages as the door flies open.

"Oruo! Again?" scolds Petra.

Levi's eyes narrow as he focuses on Armin. "What do you want, Arlert?"

"I was—I was just coming to ask—the dean a question," Armin stammers.


"It's about Eren and Mikasa," Armin says, refusing to blink as he stares at Levi.

"Hm." Levi shrugs and steps back. He knows Armin was listening. Heat floods Armin's cheeks, creeping down his neck.

"What question did you have?" asks Erwin, peering down at Armin.

"Um—Eren was scared—because of his punishment—he wants to see his mother this weekend, and —"

"We'll arrange for that," Erwin cuts in. "If need be, we'll send Hannes with you."

"Hannes can't keep them in line," Levi snorts.

"Then you can go with them, Levi," Hange suggests brightly, pushing up her glasses.

Levi scowls.

Who assigned you to look after Eren? Armin wonders as he nods and scuttles away. And why?

The dinner bell clangs. Armin hesitates and pulls out his phone, texting Eren. Meet you there.

A figure sits on the edge of a stone wall, kicking her legs. Annie Leonhart. She was no more friendly to him in class than she was last night, but now she raises her hand in acknowledgement.

"You just don't like being inside?" Armin calls to her.

"What?" She frowns as she rises.

"I mean—I keep running into you—outside," Armin squeaks.
"I don't like the inside," she confirms. "Too confining. And too close when you want to have a private conversation."

"With whom?" Armin questions. Her eyes glint red—was she crying?

"My dad."

"Do you miss him?" he asks softly as Annie begins heading up the wooden stairs towards the cafeteria.

"I don't know," she answers as Mikasa rounds the corner and waves at Armin. "See you later." And she marches off, leaving Armin with two conversations to analyze later.

Chapter End Notes

Not a lot of plot in this chapter, I know. More to come! And I will be updating at least once a week.
"Sorry, Eren," Hannes tells him, clutching a wooden map handle. "No change."

How long can she stay in a coma and it still be reasonable to hope? Eren wonders, the thought rupturing something inside him.

She's gone. Armin puts his hand on Eren's shoulder.

No! "She will wake up!" Eren insists, grappling for his locker's handle. "She has to!"

"Of course," Hannes says, dipping his head and moving past.

"Eren—" starts Armin.

"It's fine," Eren snaps as he shoves his textbooks inside. Around him, students chatter, thrilled that the day is over and with their parents the furthest things from their minds. Sasha crows about the fact that she's recruited all the girls in her dorm to help her cook that evening, including Mikasa. Which means Eren doesn't get to eat with her. He scowls. "What are—"

"Jaeger," comes a stern voice.

Levi. Eren freezes. Mikasa approaches, her eyes narrowed and her fists clenched.

"Time for a talk," Levi says. "Come to my office, please."

"Why? I haven't said anything to Jean or—"

"This has nothing to do with your classmates and everything to do with your classwork."

"Excuse me?"

"Get into my office, Jaeger." Levi turns and stalks off. Eren rolls his eyes, shrugging at Mikasa and Armin as he jogs after the grumpy teacher.

"What?" he asks crankily as he slams the door behind him.

"Don't slam my door," Levi snaps.

Eren crosses his arms. He's acting like a child, and he knows it. Still… my mom won't wake up, and you want to yell at me?

"Eren, you're failing three of your classes."

"What?" Eren's jaw drops. "It's only been—"

"And you've already failed two quizzes in math, got a D on a civics paper—I suppose that's not technically failing though—and failed an exam in biology, which has distressed Hange, which has distressed me because she came into my office to complain about it. You're lucky I'm talking to you about this instead of her; she's quite disappointed."

"Oh," Eren bites his lip. "I'm doing fine in literature and—"

Levi snorts. "Yeah, but are you even trying in math? In biology?"
"Of course I am!" Eren shouts, balling up his fists. "I'm trying hard!"

"Try harder." Levi shoves his latest quiz at him. 48%, bright red and scalding. "If you fail the entire semester, you won't be able to stay here. Of course, maybe that's what you want."

"It's not," Eren manages, shame piling up like rough rocks in his stomach. He doesn't want to go to juvie. And he doesn't want to leave this place on their terms, because of his failure. "I'm not a great student."

"Well, that's true, given your records, but you've never outright failed anything." Levi cringes. "If you need to talk to a counselor, I'm told Petra can—"

"I don't need a counselor," Eren retorts. "I'm fine. I'll figure it out."

"Please do. And if you need math help—" Levi seems like he's actually concerned, despite the harshness of his words. Panic flaps its wings in Eren's stomach. Am I really that bad? He can't be. He knows his IQ score is high.

"I'll figure it out," he manages.

"I know you can do it, brat," Levi says. "Work hard. And you're dorm-grounded again for a week."

"Because of my grades?"

"I don't make the rules."

Eren turns and stalks out, failure drumming in his temples.

_They can't make you leave_, Mikasa texts. _If you have to, we'll run away together._

That sounds almost… romantic. Eren smirks. He can tease Mikasa about it later. Armin can help him in math, and civics. Except Armin's busy tonight helping Connie with some stupid project that Connie won't talk about.

_Reiner_, Eren thinks. _He and Bertolt are both excellent students_. He marches over to their dorm room and knocks.

"What do you want?" Reiner greets him.

"I wanted to ask you for—" Eren bites his lip. "Help. With biology. I'm failing it and I don't want to flunk out."

"Oh." Reiner's eyes widen. Bertolt huddles over his laptop, as if making eye contact with Eren might burn him.

"Please," Eren says. "I can't flunk out. Otherwise Mikasa says she'll leave school too, and with my mom in a coma and my dad—gone—I really don't have anywhere else to go."

"I'll help you," Reiner says. Bertolt squirms away as Eren follows Reiner over to his desk. "What's really the problem?"

"I don't understand all these cycles and such. Reading the textbook isn't helping and I'm super distracted in class, so—"

"I can help with that," Bertolt offers quietly.
"You can?" Eren glances over to him. *So you're not allergic to me?*

Bertolt nods. "I used to help Reiner with stuff." He pauses. "Sorry about your mom. And your dad."

Eren shrugs. "Thanks."

"We have to meet with the VP after dinner," Reiner says as he flips through his notebook.

"Zeke?" Eren asks. He's only noticed the guy because he looks like Grisha, Eren's dad, and Eren's intrigued. He wishes he could talk to him.

"Yeah." Reiner rolls his eyes. "Interning."

"We're not in trouble," Bertolt adds quickly.

"I didn't think you would be," Eren replies as he settles down on the floor. This had better work. Or else, he's screwed.

Is there even a point to trying? Eren feels like he's swimming against a torrent of mud, and sooner or later, it'll suffocate him.

*What else is there to do but try?*

"I can't stay long. I have to meet with the VP," mutters Annie as Christa drags her out to help Sasha cook some sort of meat dish. "After dinner."

"Well, as long as you stay long enough to eat it," Sasha declares. "If you can't, that would be a tragedy."

_Ba._ As if someone as happy as Sasha even knows what tragedy is. Annie drops onto one of the long red couches, overstuffed and fraying. She'd rather be reading _Oedipus Rex_ for lit class, but Hitch wanted her to leave so she could sneak Marlowe in.

Mikasa, the other quiet girl, tugs at her scarf as Sasha gives orders. "Annie, can you help?" Something hisses as it hits the pan.

"I don't like touching raw meat." But Annie rises and heads over anyways.

"No problem," Sasha chirps. "You can just turn it over, then, make sure it doesn't burn."

Ymir meets Annie's eyes and shrugs. Neither of them want to acknowledge the fact that they've seen each other before.

"Is it really her?" Bertolt demanded in a hushed voice.

"It has to be," Reiner responded as Annie sat, silent and thinking.

_You don't rat me out; I won't rat you out_, Annie thinks now. Christa whispers something to Ymir and Ymir grins. Her cheeks flush behind her freckles.

_You like her_, Annie realizes. She wonders how Reiner would react. The guy had been saying just last night how pretty Christa was while Bertolt curled up and refused to admit he found anyone here even tolerable. Except he does, at least as friends, and Annie's not certain whether Reiner's gushing about Christa is actually romantic.
And the people here are nice. A lot nicer than Annie was expecting. "They'll be snobs. Don't let them distract you," her father sneered.

But aside from maybe Hitch, they don't seem snobby. The first week of school, it almost seemed like Armin cared when he found her crying.

Coriander and cumin waft through the air, stinging Annie's nose. She turns away to sneeze.

"Bless you," chirps Christa.

Sasha's phone buzzes, and she checks it.

"Is it from Connie?" asks Christa.

Mikasa's eyebrows rise. Annie almost smiles.

"He's almost done with his art project and asked if I could save him some. Apparently it's that horrible soggy pasta in the cafeteria for dinner tonight."

"Will you?" Christa teases.

"If we don't eat all of it, I might sneak it out," Sasha allows.

"You can get out through the left corner across from Annie and Hitch's room," Mikasa says quietly, fingering with that red scarf she always wears. Why? Annie wonders. She's literally never seen Mikasa take it off.

"Ooh," jokes Sasha. "Someone's got experience. Who've you been meeting?"

"No one. I just heard about it."

Liar, Annie thinks, meeting Mikasa's eyes. But in truth, Mikasa probably only snuck out that one time on that first night. Otherwise Annie would have noticed.

"Sure, sure," Sasha says with a wink.

"Hitch told me earlier to tell you all that there's a party on Friday night," Christa announces, keeping her voice low so Nanaba won't hear.

"Where? In Marlowe's dorm room?" snorts Ymir as she slices more meat. Blood, red and sticky, smears her palms.

"No… down by the tennis courts. It's just an informal thing. Just people in our year."

"If you'd want to go, I'd go, Ymir."

Ymir's eyes widen. "Yeah. Okay. We can go."

Annie does smile, now.

"I'll ask Eren and Armin," Mikasa says.

"I'm sure Connie will be going," Sasha declares. "I'll ask him now." She grabs her phone and her eyes widen. "Annie!"

"Yeah?"
"Don't let it burn!"

Shit. Annie yanks the pan off the burner. "It's fine. A few pieces are well done. I'll eat them. I like it that way."

"Will you come?" Christa asks cheerfully. "To the party?"

"Parties aren't really my thing." Besides, Zeke might need her and Bertolt and Reiner to make a run that night.

"Make sure you help him," Dad told her before he sent her off, his fingers pinching her clavicle. Her eyes smarted, but she wouldn't cry.

And then he hugged her, for the first time she can remember.

Annie wraps her arms around herself as she trudges across campus, chicken and beef in her stomach and the cool autumn wind lapping at her face.

"Hey," says Reiner as he approaches her, Bertolt trailing behind him. He gives Annie a shy smile.

"How's it going?" Annie asks.

"Fine. I was helping Eren with his bio homework."

"Do you think that's smart?" Annie asks.

"He needed help." Reiner shrugs.

"I feel sorry for him." Bertolt's voice is a whisper.

"What good does it do to feel sorry?" snaps Annie, even as guilt scratches at her ribs, her spine.

Bertolt stares at his feet. Annie's known him and Reiner for years: they practically grew up together, even though she's never been particularly close to them. Or anybody. Her father worked for Zeke, doing his dirty work, and so did Reiner's family. Bertolt's parents have been in prison since he was five, and he moved in with their other friend Marcel and his parents, until Marcel died and Zeke offered to get Bertolt a scholarship to this freaking school in exchange for helping him. Just like he offered to help Reiner, and Annie. A charitable man, the rest of the staff no doubt believes. And he sort of is. Without him, none of them would have these opportunities.

His charity just comes with a different sort of cost.

"They were stupid," Zeke always tells Bertolt about his parents, but he doesn't have anything to say about Marcel. Annie shudders. No one says anything about Marcel, except Reiner, and even he doesn't actually speak. Bertolt says he doesn't act right sometimes, though.

It's not like we're actually doing anything wrong, Annie tells herself. She's just stepping into her father's place, and Reiner wants to earn money for college—or so he says—and Bertolt wants to be involved in whatever Reiner's involved in.

"Reiner?" Bertolt asks, his voice timid.

Annie spins around to find Reiner staring at the notebook in his hand. "Where did this come from?"

Annie snorts.
"You were just helping Eren Jaeger with biology, remember?" prompts Bertolt, reaching for Reiner's arm.

"Why would I help Eren Jaeger?" Reiner demands.

"Are you effing serious?" Annie demands. Reiner turns to her, and the look on his face chills her to the bone.

Oh shit.

"Sometimes you want to help him," Bertolt offers.

"But why can't I remember?" Reiner asks, anguish in his voice.

This is way beyond what Annie's being paid to deal with. She steps back, her hands clutching her scalp, knotting her hair.

Reiner gulps. "I don't mean to—"

"It's fine," Bertolt encourages him as a cloud rolls past the moon, silver streaming down on them. "You're fine."

He most definitely is not fine! Annie wants to scream. And judging by Bertolt's reaction, by his darting eyes, this is not the first time this has happened.

She can't deal with this. So she won't. She'll just—help Zeke make the stuff and deliver it and collect her money and go home.

Home to where? To your father? Home here?

Neither feels like home.


Bertolt looks grateful, but Reiner shakes his head. "What's wrong with me?"

"You didn't sleep well last night," Bertolt points out. "You told me that I was sleeping in weird positions and that you were having dreams about—" He stops himself.

Marcel, Annie knows. She remembers him dying, Marcel pushing Reiner out of the way, the bullet shredding his chest instead.

And the face of the killer, horrified and in shock. An accident, completely. And in the circles they run, an accident could easily lead to a dead body.

Reiner shakes his head. "We've got to get to Zeke, or he'll be pissed that we're late."

"Maybe you could ask if the school can recommend a counselor?" Bertolt suggests.

"Do you have any idea what kind of risk that would be?" Reiner rolls his eyes.

"It's a stupid idea," Bertolt agrees quickly. "Sorry."

"It's not stupid. It's just risky. I'll be fine." Reiner squares his shoulders. "Let's go."
What if none of us are ever fine? Annie wonders, thinking of Christa, Ymir, Sasha, and Mikasa all giggling over dinner tonight. She joined them. She laughed with them.

Ignore the fools, her father had told her.

They're not worth it. Keeping her father afloat through the money they earn—that's worth it. She needs to obey.

They're not worth it. They're not.
"Does anyone even play tennis?" gripes Eren as he follows Mikasa down the stone stairs to the tennis courts.

"I would," Mikasa says. Dying leaves giggle in the soft breeze. "But track is draining enough."

Eren snorts and claps her on the shoulder. "Not that you're ever drained. You have more energy than anyone I've ever met."

Compliment? Mikasa thinks so. Goosebumps rise on her bare arms. Christa insisted she had to wear something nicer than usual—a flowy black sleeveless top over her black jeans.

"I'm not taking my scarf off," Mikasa insisted.

Christa shrugged. "It looks good anyways, the red with the black." She winked. "You'll impress him."

"Hey." Armin peers at her. "You cut your hair!"

"Christa helped," Mikasa admits. "I think it's easier for track."

"It looks great," Eren offers her.

"Thanks." Mikasa studies Eren. "How did the bio test go for you?"

Eren bites his lip and stuffs his fists into his pockets. "I don't want to talk about it."

Dammit. Mikasa's heart sinks. She needs Eren to succeed, to stay here, because against all odds, she kind of likes it. So does Eren, even if he wouldn't admit it.

"I do think Reiner and Bertolt have helped, a bit," Eren adds. "And Armin, of course."

Armin gives him a smile.

"Hey, you made it," Christa greets them. Across the courts, Mikasa sees Sasha taking a sip out of a plastic cup.

"What's in there?" she asks.

"Rum and juice, apparently." Christa giggles. "I've never had a drink before. I wonder what it tastes like."

"You should only have one drink," Ymir warns her, appearing from the shadows. Trees hover over the stone walls surrounding three sides of the court. "You're not used to it, and you're small."

"And you have more experience with drinking?" Eren asks her.

Ymir shrugs. Not for the first time, Mikasa wonders about Ymir. Compared to all the others, Mikasa knows next to nothing about her—not where she comes from, not any family, nothing. Even Annie's mentioned a father. But Ymir... nothing.

"No drinking for me," announces Marco as he strolls over.
"A teetotaler?" Ymir teases.

He makes a face. "I don't like the taste." He offers the cup in his hand to Christa. "Rum and pineapple juice for you. I made it kind of weak."

"Thanks," Christa says as she takes it and sips. "I like it," she proclaims.

"Eren, Mikasa, Armin? Do you want anything?" Marco asks.


"Hey, Reiner!" calls Eren, turning away from her. "I didn't think you were coming!"

"Changed my mind," Reiner says brightly, drinking from what looks like a beer. Bertolt follows him. How Marlowe got his hands on all this alcohol, Mikasa doesn't know and isn't sure she wants to.

"Have one!" Sasha cheers, shoving a cup at her.

Mikasa frowns. "Are you okay?"

"Hey, Sasha, how about we dance?" asks Connie. Music flows from Marlowe's phone, although it's not loud enough to be heard even across the courts. "And you put the drink down."

"Okay." She stumbles, but Connie catches her arm. Mikasa can't help but grin.

"It's actually not bad," Armin says as he swirls the liquid around in his cup.

Eren shrugs at Mikasa and holds his cup up. "Cheers?"

"Cheers," Mikasa answers, tapping her cup against his and taking a drink. It's pungent and she definitely swallowed too much, but not bad. She coughs.

"Bertolt's already on his second one," Armin comments with a frown.

"He's big enough to handle it, isn't he?" Eren asks, watching as Bertolt laughs with Reiner and Marlowe about something. He leans back against the stone wall.

"Probably." Armin sighs. "I wish Annie had come."

"Me too. She's cool," Eren comments. His shoes scuff the ground.

_Is Annie?_ She seems too much like Mikasa herself, only angrier, without any friends to rely on. _Maybe I should talk to her more._ Or not. Anxiety swims and Mikasa chugs more of her drink. _Ew._ She's not a fan after all.

"Hi, Mikasa," says a smooth voice behind her. Jean stands there, wearing an awkward smile.

"Hi," Mikasa responds.

"Um, Eren," Jean stammers. "I wanted to—apologize. For being a jerk in the beginning. Marco really read me the riot act, but I was too dumb to say I was sorry. So I'm saying it now. That I'm sorry. Being made fun of sucks and I shouldn't have done it."

_Wow._

Armin's jaw drops. Eren's eyes widen as he gives a small nod. Jean holds out his hand, and Eren
shakes it, albeit somewhat limply.

"Thanks," Mikasa tells Jean. He's arrogant, sure, but not a terrible person by any means. Hope rises inside of her.

"Do you want to dance with me?" Jean blurts out.

What?

Eren's eyes narrow, but out of the corner of her eye, Mikasa sees Armin mouthing at her. Do it. He darts his eyes towards Eren as if to communicate some master plan.

Mikasa doesn't like playing games, though. But she sees the hope in Jean's eyes and nods.

"I'll hold your drink," Armin says quickly, snatching it from Mikasa's hand.

Jean's not a bad dancer, although Mikasa knows she's better. He looks at her like she's a goddess and still, Mikasa can't help but wish that it were Eren looking at her like this, holding her elbow, dancing with her. *I'm sorry, Jean,* she thinks. Surely he can tell she's not that into him. Unless he can't

"What the hell?" Jean suddenly asks, stopping. Mikasa spins around to see Sasha crumpled on the ground.

"Sasha!" Mikasa dashes over to her roommate, who moans. She's okay. She's okay.

Other figures lying on the ground invade her mind. *There's no blood here,* Mikasa reminds herself. Her palms are dry. *She's not dying. She's okay.*

"How many drinks did you give her, Marlowe?" Ymir demands.

"Five."

"That's way too much for her! And you let her drink it all?" Ymir glares at Connie, whose face collapses.

"I'm fine," snickers Sasha as she sits up and wobbles. "Whoops."

*Oh, hell.*

"He trusted her to make her own decisions," snarls Reiner, stepping up besides Connie.

"Like you trusted your roommate?" Ymir retorts.

Mikasa peers past Marlowe and Hitch to see Bertolt slumped against a wall, a glazed look in his eyes.

"Hey!" Armin suddenly shouts as he clutches his phone. "Annie just texted me."

"Why?" snaps Reiner as he marches over to Bertolt, who smiles stupidly and sings along with the music. "Come on, Bertl."

"Because Erwin and Levi and Hange are on their way!"

"Fucking hell!" yelps Hitch, snatching the bottles.

"We need to get out of here," Jean hisses. Mikasa remembers the guidelines she signed at the
beginning of the year—any substance use, alcohol or drugs, is grounds for suspension or expulsion. And for her and Eren, getting caught could be especially dangerous.

"Mikasa, can you help?" Christa cries as she races over to Sasha. Connie slings Sasha's arm over his shoulders, even though she's taller than he is and is mumbling that she's okay.

"You are not okay," Mikasa tells her as she grabs Sasha's other arm. "But you will be when we get you back to the dorm."

A hand lands on her shoulder. Mikasa jumps. "Lie her down on her side, in case she throws up," Armin tells her in a low voice.

"How do you know that?"

"I paid attention in health class." He shrugs. Reiner grabs Bertolt and Eren grabs a pack of cups.

"Leave them!" orders Marlowe. "It's no big deal."

A flashlight's beam pierces the night, coming from above the stairs. We need to move! Mikasa and Connie take off through the woods, staggering with Sasha leaning against them.

"Text me!" Eren calls before he and Armin charge in the other direction.

It's dark, and Mikasa keeps stumbling over twigs and roots. One scratches right above her eye and she gasps.

"Need help?" comes a flat voice. Ymir and Christa emerge from behind a tree, Ymir with her phone and its flashlight in hand.

"I told Ymir we had to go back for you guys. It's too dangerous in the dark and none of you could use your phones with Sasha," whispers Christa.

"Thanks," grunts Connie.

Sasha moans. "I'm going to—"

"Oh, shit." Mikasa shrugs out from under Sasha and holds her upright as the girl retches.

"Who's there?" bellows Erwin's voice.

Ymir covers her light. Mikasa can't make out the tree in front of her. Please hold it in, Sasha, hold it in!

"No one!" calls another voice, from the opposite direction. Mikasa almost laughs. Marco?

"Little shits," comes Levi's disgruntled voice. Twigs snap, heading away from them.

"What the hell is Marco doing?" gasps Connie.

"Trying to keep us from getting caught. He's like that," Ymir says, voice bored.

Mikasa's heart softens. Thanks, Marco.

Sasha gags again, tears streaming down her face. "I'm so sorry," she pants. Her voice catches.

"Hey, it's all right. It's happened to me before, too," Connie tells her, hoisting her back up. He rubs
her shoulders. "It'll be all right. Don't be too hard on yourself."

Mikasa's phone lights up. Armin.

*I think Eren sprained his ankle.*

"Shit," Mikasa says, relaying the news. "Ymir, Christa, can you help Sasha? I need to find Eren."

"You'll get caught!" Ymir insists.

"I don't care." Her heart pounds and her scarf is warm around her neck. *If they expel Eren, they're expelling me too. We'll both go to juvie together.* She couldn't live with herself if Eren was punished for something she did, too, for something he did to save her years ago.

Where are you guys? she texts, hurrying through the woods. She rounds a tree and a flashlight shines in her eyes, blinding her. Mikasa freezes, her hands over her face.

"Ackerman?" Footsteps crunch towards her. *Levi.* She scowls, lowering her hands.

"What are you doing out here?"

Mikasa says nothing, so it won't be used against her. Besides, he already knows. And if she can distract him from Eren—

"Where are Jaeger and Arlert?"

"In their dorms," Mikasa answers. The wind rustles through the trees, creating an almost moaning sound. She shivers.

"Bull." Levi rolls his eyes. "And your dorm is that way—" He points to her right. "And you're running left."

Mikasa lowers her head.

"I could call Erwin and Hange and head in that direction," Levi tells her. "Or you could just tell me whether Jaeger's passed out drunk or something, because we both know Arlert isn't dumb enough to drink more than one cup."

Mikasa narrows her eyes. *What are you implying about Eren?*

"You don't like me, do you?" Levi asks, cocking his head to the side.

Her heart pounds. "Eren's very smart."

"Sure he is, when he actually stops to think." Levi steps back, heaving a sigh. "Just tell me if he's okay."

*Why do you care?* Mikasa wonders. She remembers what Armin told her, about what he overheard. "He sprained his ankle. Armin thinks."

"If Arlert thinks that, it's probably true." Levi shakes his head. "Get him to his dorm, ice it, and take him to the nurse tomorrow, okay?"

"What?" Mikasa's jaw drops. *Are you for real?*

"Go." Levi waves his hand and turns away from her, heading back towards the tennis courts. "I
"Again, Levi?" comes Erwin's voice. "I'll just assume they're all alive and well." Levi scowls and switches off speaker, beckoning for her to get moving.

They're helping us out? But why? Mikasa doesn't understand. Erwin has to know, too. They're here to get them in trouble, to set rules and punish those who break them. That's what adults do.

She'll ask Armin later. For now, she heads towards Armin and Eren.

"I will never touch another drop of alcohol as long as I live," moans Bertolt, squeezing his skull as he leans over. "Why does it have to be sunny?"

"You're welcome for warning you," Annie snaps as she hands over a can of Coke and a bottle of Gatorade. She puts her phone down on the glass table Bertolt slumps over.

Armin leans against one of the brick pillars in their dorm, studying civics.

"I can't believe I was so irresponsible," Bertolt mumbles.

"It's fine," grumbles Reiner, who looks no better off than his roommate. Bags hang under reddened eyes, and he seems to be in a particularly foul humor.

"It's okay, Bertolt," Armin volunteers. "You learned your lesson; now you'll never repeat it."

"Uh—thanks," Bertolt replies. He covers his eyes from the sun's glare.

"How's Eren?" asks Connie as he emerges from his room, stretching.

"Fine. Mild sprain. He just needs a brace and can't run for a few weeks," Armin reports. Eren wanted to take a nap—actually, he didn't want to, but the nurse recommended it and Armin begged Eren.

"Is Sasha okay?" asks Marco as he stumbles out.

"Fine," Annie snorts. "If you count puking her guts out as fine."

"Where did you find those things? From the snack canteen?" asks Connie, nodding towards the Coke and Gatorade that Annie bought.

"Yeah," she says, shoving her fists deeper into her hoodie. Armin cocks his head. She's lying. Annie got them from outside campus, because he definitely saw her throwing away a plastic bag with a local pharmacy label on it as she entered the dorm.

Why the hell would she lie about that? Not having permission to leave? None of them would care. And why would she be outside in the first place, when the snack canteen does have the same products?

Maybe she just wanted to get out for a bit.

The school walls can be confining. Although something niggles at Armin—the suspicion that something's not quite right.

Annie scowls at Bertolt and Reiner as she waves goodbye. Reiner shrugs and leans back. Bertolt twists open the Gatorade.
"Are you okay?" Armin asks Annie. Good grief, she looks exhausted, too. Her shoulder slump and she rubs her wrist like it's bothering her.

"I'm fine." She rolls her eyes. "Off to work on that dumbass art project."

"Why is it dumb?" Armin asks.

Annie's eyes widen. "It's not. I mean, it's just that—my father thinks art and literature and all of that stuff is dumb, compared to science or math."

She studies her shoes. Armin rises and leans his head against the pillar. "What do you think?"

Annie hesitates, and her lips twitch almost as if she wants to smile. "I like the book we're reading in lit." *King Lear*, about the tragic king who loses his mind and is betrayed by his daughters.

"It's good," Armin agrees. "Lots of interesting themes." He's had to beg Eren to use Sparknotes, even though Eren insists he's fine without it. Armin's worried about his friend.

"I like that it portrays the world as cruel and terrible," Annie continues, crossing her arms. "Like it really is."

*Yikes.* "Parts of it are," he muses. "But not all of it."

"What part isn't?" Annie snorts. "Your parents are dead, aren't they? Look at what happened to your friends Eren and Mikasa. My mom's dead. Nature is cruel and people are sadistic."

*Those aren't your words,* Armin thinks, his heart pounding. *Your father's? Someone else's?* "Sometimes. But... Mikasa says the world is cruel, but the world is also beautiful, and I think she's right."

"What's beautiful about it?" Annie peers at him, as if she wants a genuine answer.

"Well... people can be cruel, but people can also be nice. Like people here—you have friends, don't you?"

"Not good enough." Annie shakes her head. "Sorry. I don't mean to be mean."

"You're not. You're saying what you think. Although I wouldn't say that in front of Eren," Armin warns. His heart aches for her. *To see the world as only cruel... what kind of life is that?*

Annie smirks, twisting a ring around her finger. "See you later."

*Aren't Bertolt and Reiner your friends?* Armin wants to ask. But he stays quiet, watching her go. He tries to push her from his mind and focus on their upcoming civics exam.

About an hour later, Jean emerges. "Who wants to go off campus for lunch?"

"Me," Marco says, raising his hand. "I bet Connie does, too. He can bring something back for Sasha."

"Will she ever want to eat again?" moans Reiner.

"This is Sasha we're talking about," Marco points out. A leaf, scarlet and golden, drifts through the courtyard and falls to the dying grass.

"I'm going to nap," Bertolt announces, grimacing at the thought of food. Armin nods at him.
"Sounds like a good plan, bro," murmurs Reiner, half-asleep himself as he staggers up.

"Whose phone is that?" asks Jean, pointing to the now-vacated table in the courtyard.


"It's got to be Annie's," Armin says quickly. "I'll bring it to her."

"You sure?" Reiner asks, blinking slowly.

"Sleep it off," Armin tells him as he snatches the phone. He heads across campus, weaving in-between the quad, which the lockers and most classroom are situated around, and the stone office buildings that look like something out of medieval Europe, with an almost Gothic flair. Moving down one of the hills and cross a small stone bridge near the Rose Dorm, he comes to the lab buildings, built for sciences and, amusingly, Petra's art classroom.

"You're actually not bad," Armin hears Petra saying as he gets closer. "You've got a lot more talent than you think you do."

"It doesn't matter." Annie's voice sounds tight, strangled.

Armin knocks on the door and enters. Annie narrows her eyes.

"You left your phone," Armin offers, holding it out.

"Oh, that's so kind of you to bring it to her," Petra exclaims. Yellow, pink, and green paint splatter her smock. A painting of the forest—at least Armin thinks it's the school's forest, with it's pine trees and towering oaks alike—sits half-finished. The smell of paint stings Armin's nostrils.

"Thanks," Annie mutters, taking it. A painting of a horse sits in front of her, but the horse's neck is peeled away to reveal a skeleton.

"Interesting," Armin comments. "Hange would be impressed with the biological accuracy."

Annie's eyes widen in surprise, as if she can't believe someone's complimenting her.

"See?" Petra asks. "I told you you're better than you think. If you want to fix the legs, I can—"

"Maybe later," Annie says quickly.

"People do like you." Petra offers her a huge smile and Annie's face grows red. She laughs, a musical sound ringed with bitterness. Armin frowns.

"Thanks," Annie says as she gathered her bottles of paint. "I'm done for today." She heads over to the cabinet.

A bottle of red paint slips from her hands and crashes to the ground. The splash slaps into Petra's painting.

"I'm sorry!" Annie exclaims as Armin's heart drops. That was no accident.

*Why do you want to hurt people who like you? Are you really that angry at everyone and everything?*

"It's fine," Petra assures her. "It'll just have a taste of fall. Fitting."
Annie's jaw drops. She grips the ring on her finger. "Thanks," Annie mumbles as she pushes her way out of the classroom, her head hanging in shame. Petra watches her with concern.

"Annie?" Armin calls.

She turns to look at him, uncertain.

He meets her eyes so that she knows that he knows it wasn't an accident. And then: "Your painting really is good."

"Thanks," she tells him, her voice wobbling. A tear runs down her cheek.

"Annie?" Armin ventures again.

"Go away," she snaps.
Having a bum ankle sucks. Eren hates his crutches and the way everyone looks at him like they pity him—or, in the case of Levi, like he got what he deserved. Eren still can't understand why he helped them out, but he doesn't want to bring it up.

*Screw you, crutches.* It's been two weeks. Eren leaves them leaned against the wall and limps outside, where the cold air jolts him awake. The first frost coats the grass, and the last of the chrysanthemums wilt. He tries to put his full weight down and sucks in his breath. *Heal faster, ankle.*

Bertolt rushes out of his room, still stuffing books in his bag. "I'll be right out!" Armin calls to Eren.

"Uh, Eren?" ventures a voice.

Eren spins around to see Marco standing there, his hands clasped. "Morning, Marco."

"Morning." Marco bites his lip. "I don't think you—did you—did you check your email yet this morning?"

"Nope," Eren answers. "Did Hange email us more crazy stories about bio research?" Their teacher appears to be overly enthusiastic about pretty much everything in life. Including the fetal pigs they have to dissect, and stories about research gone wrong that Eren finds intriguing but also horrifying.

"No… Eren, someone from some bogus account emailed what looks like our class. About you. And Mikasa."

"Huh?" Eren frowns.

Marco bites his lip, his face flushing. "An article."

"About what happened this summer?" There's still been no change for Eren's mother, and privately, he's told Armin he doesn't think there will ever be a change even if he can't bear to say that to anyone else yet.

*Your mom is gone.* The thought burns, and nausea cuts at Eren's stomach. *Mom…*

"No, about something that happened six years ago."

*Six—nine.* When they were nine.

*Oh, hell.* This is territory Eren does not want to retread. Not ever. And as much as he doesn't want to think about it, Mikasa—

"The article doesn't name you but whoever emailed it says—"

Forget his ankle. *Mikasa!* Eren grabs Marco by the collar of his shirt. *Everyone got this email?* he yells.

"In our grade," Marco squeaks, face blanching. "I didn't—I saw it when I woke up and I wanted to warn you—"

"Jean did it, didn't he?" It would have to be him, that slimy—

"No!" Marco insists as Eren lets him go. He grabs Eren's shoulder this time, the sun cruelly grinning
down on them. "He didn't, Eren, he really didn't. He's disturbed about it, too. We all are."

_He really doesn't think Jean did it_, Eren realizes. And Marco's usually right. _You're disturbed... by us or what happened or is happening to us?_ Eren stumbles back, cursing. He doesn't want them to think of him as a monster. He's not, not at all. _You all would have done the exact same thing!_ he wants to scream.

Armin appears, his face white, the foil in his plan. Because Armin might not have.

"Well then, who did?" Armin ekes out."Do you have any ideas, Marco?"

Eren catches Bertolt and Reiner both watching from across the courtyard, Reiner's forehead creased as if he's concerned, or as if he's seeing someone less than human.

"I have no idea," Marco insists, shaking his head. "Jean would never—he's not mean. And he wouldn't hurt Mikasa." His voice catches.

Eren clenches his fists. That might be true, but he needs someone to blame, and no one's around, and things feel like they're spinning and it's all falling back on him. And he sees Mikasa's parents and red and knives, and the guilt and the lack thereof and—I'm not a monster! Don't look at me that way! I'm a human! Look at those beasts who made us do it that way!

"Eren," Armin says quietly. "We should talk to Erwin about this."

"About what?" Eren yells. "There's nothing he can do to fix it!" Everyone knows, and in this messed up pretentious school everyone will think Mikasa's a murderer just like him. And Mikasa's been excelling her, unlike him. She doesn't deserve this, not at all.

Marlowe emerges from his room, shrugging into his jacket. He grimaces when he sees Eren, as if he sees a criminal instead of a classmate. Or not, because he now looks sad. Connie trudges out of the room, locking the door. He offers Eren a small smile, and Eren's heart leaps.

"Hey," Reiner says, approaching. "If anyone tries to mess with you, Eren, I swear I'll—"

_Not everyone hates me._

"Come on, Eren," Armin says, offering him his crutches. Eren scowls but takes them. Blast it. He's got to get to Mikasa fast.

"I'm sorry," Marco whispers, eyes cast down.

"You would have done the same thing," Eren says, voice shaking. "If you had been there."

"Eren, you're not helping," Armin hisses, but everything blurs around Eren. He shakes his head.

"It's okay to be upset," Armin says as they trek up the path from the dorm. Most of the leaves lie on the ground, brown and crumpling into dust. "And you're right. If anyone's being judgmental about it, they haven't really considered what it was like for you or Mikasa. You're both _good_ people."

_I am good_, Eren thinks.

_I want to be. Maybe. Depending on what that means._ "Thanks, Armin."

Leaves crunch as they reach the top of the hill, where the cafeteria sits. The sky's still tinged orange where the treetops poke it. Mikasa marches towards him, her arms wrapped around herself and her red scarf standing out against her black shirt.
"You're okay?" Mikasa blurs out.

He shrugs. "As okay as I can be." And even for him—his memories aren't nearly as tortured as Mikasa's, Eren's sure. He still got to go home to his house, curl up next to his father that night and realize that his father still loved him, drink his mother's hot chocolate when he had a nightmare. No one threatened to do to him what they threatened to do to Mikasa.

*She never deserved any of this.*

She grabs him in an embrace, and Eren almost drops his crutches. Armin steadies him.

"Sorry," Mikasa stammers, her face still buried in his neck. "I just—I was worried the boys might be bullying—"

"And you were going to offer to kill them?" Eren jokes, and then winces. *Poor timing.*

Mikasa shrugs as she pulls away.

"Eren can take care of bullies pretty well," Armin comments. "Based on my experiences, at least."

Armin knows how this feels, Eren reminds himself. Although Armin has the assurance of never once having anyone assume he'd been in the wrong.

Mikasa almost smiles. Her hair brushes her cheek like liquid onyx. Eren's heart rate picks up.

"We need to talk to the dean," Armin prompts.

"Right." Eren steadies himself on his crutches again.

Nifa, Erwin's assistant, tells them to take a seat on one of the threadbare blue benches. Atrocious modern art lines the wall, garish and frightening. Armin brings both of them cinnamon raisin bagels as they wait in silence, Mikasa's head leaning against Eren's like when they were forced through all those hearings six years ago.

"They murdered three people!"

"Who wanted to rape her!" Eren screamed back as his father grasped his arms, demanded he be silent.

"Nine-year-olds shouldn't murder," insisted the man Eren hated, the one in the pristine black suit and blue tie.

"Nine-year-olds shouldn't have to see their parents hacked apart. Nine-year-olds shouldn't know what rape is," responded the judge, and Eren realized someone else was on their side.

Erwin finally burst through the door with the principal, Pixis, on his heels. And behind them, Zeke, the vice principal, enters. The man almost reminds Eren of his father in some ways, albeit younger and creepier. Supposedly he's a chemist, a scientist as well, inspired to work on vaccines from his work with the dying across the world.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Erwin apologizes as Eren puts down the last few bites of his bagel. "Arlert, you should be in class."

"I didn't want to leave them alone," Armin says quickly.

"Nifa's here. They wouldn't be alone," points out Pixis as Erwin nods thoughtfully. Zeke studies
Eren, and Eren feels like his ants are crawling all over his skin.

"They'll be fine now," Erwin assures Armin. "Nifa, please write him a pass."

"He should get a tardy," interjects Zeke.

"No," Erwin insists. Armin raises his eyebrows at Mikasa and Eren. No love lost here, apparently. Sighing, Erwin turns back to them. "We'd like to talk to you one at a time. Mikasa, will you come in first?"

She nods, rising. Eren offers her a weak smile. The door to Erwin's office swallows her.

"Ack! Sorry, sir," stammers Armin as he slips out of the office. Levi storms in, turning to Eren.

"Heard what happened?" Nifa asks.

"Obviously. Nifa, I need to borrow your vacuum. Mine's not performing up to standard."

Eren raises his eyebrows. Why is he such a clean freak?

"Be my guest." Nifa waves her arm. "You could have just asked Petra, though. I'm sure she'd be happy to help. Or Hange."

"Hange doesn't own a vacuum and wouldn't know bleach from ammonia," Levi retorts.

"She does," Eren pipes up. "She had us—"

Levi scowls. "Of course she does. Hange's smart. It's called being facetious. But she wouldn't ever use either of them, because Hange doesn't clean."

Eren's jaw drops.

"Anyways." Levi heaves a sigh. "How are you doing, brat?"

Eren shrugs, focusing on the swirling pattern of the artwork being Nifa's desk. It looks like rainbow water.

"Look, I'm pretty sure the dean's going to ask you whether you want to stay or go somewhere else."

Eren gulps. "Juvie?"

"No." Levi scowls. "None of this is your fault. But maybe another school."

"I want to stay," Eren says quickly. This place was his father's, and if he can't go back to Mom... at least he knows he's doing what Dad wanted. You can't take that from me!

"Really?" Levi crosses his arms.

Eren nods, biting his lip so hard he draws blood. Shit. He wipes his lip.

"Oh for heaven's sake." Levi drops down on the bench next to him. "Don't hurt yourself."

"You know there are still some moments where I don't regret it?" Eren asks, glaring because he wants to see this man's reaction. "Killing them. I saw her parent's bodies. They were hacked apart with an axe. They were going to rape Mikasa and I went into some kind of rage, and then—I thought—I wish I hadn't killed them but I still think they deserved to die."
"I'm not a shrink," Levi counters, a scowl on his face. "Relax," Levi says. "I'm not mad at you. I'm mad this happened."

"Really?" Eren frowns. Even though he never spent a moment in jail, he made psychologists uncomfortable and police officers twitch at the child who tried to rescue his friend and stabbed three men in self-defense. Levi just watches him.

"The psychologist's reports say you said you didn't try to kill them."

"I don't even know," Eren admits, shame crawling inside of him. "I maybe wanted to, in the moment. I know I shouldn't have, but I did."

Levi sighs. "Don't say that in front of Pixis."

"Everyone probably thinks I'm a monster." Bitterness stings the back of Eren's throat.

"Maybe you were." Levi shrugs. "Lots of people would say I used to be a kind of monster, too."

"You?" Eren gapes at Levi. He can't imagine the man who can't stand to see the slightest scrap of paper on his classroom floor engaging in any sort of similar activity.

"The streets were the better part of my childhood." Levi presses his lips together in a flat line. "And that's all I'm saying about that. That, and that Erwin is the one who convinced me I had more to give, if I just learned to take responsibility and stop focusing only on myself."

Eren blinks. He knew Erwin and Levi seemed close, almost like an older, more somber version of him and Armin.

"If you study harder, that'd be a good step."

Eren deflates. "I failed the latest trig quiz, didn't I."

"No, you got a D+. Improvement, but not enough." Levi gets to his feet. "Good luck, brat."

_It'll be okay_, Eren tells himself as Mikasa exits the dean's room and nods at him.

"Are you sure it's wise for him to stay?" Pixis starts almost immediately.

"I want to," Eren snaps. Besides, given what Armin overheard the first week of school…

"Jaeger." Erwin glares at him as if to say _shut up._

"I know my grades are low, but I'm getting help, and—"

"Eren, this isn't entirely about you. What happened isn't your fault, but other parents might feel differently," Zeke puts in. "Although I agree that it's unfair to send you away on the basis of someone else's actions."

"This school is the only place I know as something like a home right now," Eren blurts out. "Otherwise—Mikasa and I—where could we even go?"

"You're not getting kicked out, Eren. Parents are an issue Zeke and Pixis and I will deal with, and frankly, it's one that shouldn't have been brought up." Erwin scowls at Zeke. "We're going to do our best to try and find out who leaked this information, and we'll let you know if we find anything."

_It's going to be okay._ Eren relaxes back in his chair, hard and wooden.
Well, maybe not.

Who knows what kind of foul bullshit Jean will spew now?

"I'm still wondering how someone knew the exact names of everyone in our specific class, considering it's not exactly publically available information," Armin says that evening at dinner, stirring chocolate power into his milk.

"So it was someone in our class." Mikasa sets her jaw, glancing around the cafeteria. Hannes waves. He came rushing up to her the moment she left the dean's office in the morning, but she told him to leave Eren alone. Neither of them have time for his antics.

The entire day, her classmates stare at her and whisper. Mikasa doesn't like thinking about what happened, can't stand hearing her mother's screams and the way those men talked about her. Her fingers trace her scarf, the scarf Eren gave her when he rescued her, when he reminded her that she still mattered, that she had a chance to live a good life, that she was worth something other than money and her body.

But to her classmates, now, she's just a murderer, self-defense be damned.

"Who would do that?" Eren demands. "And how would another student even know about—what happened to us?"

"It might be a staff member," Armin says in a low voice.

Eren drops his fork with a clatter. "Who would—and why?"

"No one hates Eren," Mikasa says, stabbing a cherry tomato with her fork. "Not even Shadis."

"No one hates you either. I actually think they all kind of love you," Eren adds.

"I don't know why," Armin presses his lips together. "Maybe it has something to do with—you know. What I overheard, about Levi protecting you in a sense."

"Why wouldn't they just fire the other staff member?" Mikasa demands.

"Maybe they don't know it's a staff member. Although this was a pretty sloppy move, so they might wonder." Armin grasps his forehead. "And it's so sloppy, it seems unlikely to be a staff member—"

"Hey," says a voice above them. Marco smiles down at them, Jean beside him. "Can we join you guys?"

He is literally a saint, Mikasa thinks.

"Sure!" Armin exclaims as Eren gulps and nods.

"So what do you think of Hange naming the pigs today?" Jean asks. "Since we're going to be dissecting them, I don't understand why we have to name them as part of the assignment!"

"Jean, we're eating," Marco puts in.

"Oh right." Jean scowls, but Eren smiles.

You don't think badly of us, Mikasa realizes, hope sparking.
After dinner, she heads back to her dorm, where she's intercepted at the gate.

"Mikasa!" shrieks Sasha, rushing over to her and grabbing her arm. "Come into the lounge!"

Mikasa blinks. "Why?"

"You'll see; you'll see." Sasha cackles as she pulls Mikasa into the lounge, where Christa, Ymir, and Annie wait. A brown cardboard tub sits on the table. "We bought you rainbow sherbet."

What? Mikasa hasn't had that since she was maybe six years old. She almost laughs.

"We want you to know we appreciate you," Christa says, coming over and throwing her arms around Mikasa. Hugs aren't Mikasa's thing, but she caves to Christa's enthusiasm.

"How did you afford this?" Mikasa asks.

"Annie," Sasha chirps.

Really? Mikasa's surprised. Aside from Armin, Annie doesn't seem to really like anyone.

"Eren okay?" asks Annie as she hands Mikasa a bowl of sherbet. Her face reddens as if she doesn't want to discuss the fact that she splurged on something nice for someone.

Mikasa shrugs. "He's as okay as I am."

"At least there were no fights," Christa says, taking a bowl. "When you left this morning…"

"I understand. If I were in your shoes, I'd want to kick their ass." Annie hands Ymir a bowl and scoops one for herself. Sasha lunges for the spoon afterwards and piles a mountain of sherbet into her bowl. The sherbet's sour and reminds Mikasa of summers spent on the playground, her dad pretending to be some kind of titan monster and chasing her.

Instead of shoving the bowl away from her, she keeps eating. It's a good memory.

"Plus you like him," Christa adds.

Mikasa's jaw drops.

"She can dress up really nice," Ymir agrees, flicking Christa's hair. "As you know."

I'm not the only one who isn't subtle. Mikasa spoons more sherbet into her mouth.

"Will you do mine too?" Sasha asks eagerly. Her bowl's almost gone already.

"Connie already drools over you," Ymir tells her.

"Sure," Christa agrees.

"Annie?" Sasha asks. "Anyone you'd want to impress?"
"No," Annie sets her bowl down, empty.

"Liar," Sasha tells her, but with a grin as she hops up for seconds.

Annie shrugs, but she almost smiles.

"I know it was one of you," Annie says, crossing her arms. An owl hoots. "Zeke's only told us, and he's too smart to pull that move himself."

Bertolt lowers his head.

"Why, Bertolt?" Reiner demands. "There's no need—they're struggling enough—"

Bertolt's jaw drops, and he glances at Annie in a panic.

Shit. Annie sighs as the truth dawns. "You did it, Reiner."

"I wouldn't!" Reiner insists. A leaf falls and brushes against Annie's back. She jumps.

"It's okay," Bertolt says quietly. "You were—not yourself."

"You mean I had another episode." Reiner covers his face, and it's a sight Annie will never get used to: this big, hulking boy terrified and confused. "What am I going to do?"

"You'll be fine," Bertolt insists, grabbing Reiner's shoulders. "You will. I promise."

"You can't keep that promise, Bertl," Reiner's shoulders slump. "I'm screwed. Don't—you can't let me do that stuff when I'm like that, okay?"

"It's hard to tell when you're in that sort of state," Annie says. Bertolt glares at her as if what she said is insensitive. But it's true.

"Well, if I'm being an asshole—don't let me hurt anyone else!" Reiner balls up his fists and punches a tree. Bark flies through the air.

"Stop it!" Bertolt grabs Reiner, unfolding his hand. Blood trickles down from his knuckles. "Don't hurt yourself. Please."

"I don't even know why we're bothering with this," Reiner says, sinking to the ground. Annie cringes. She doesn't like hearing her own thoughts echoed.

Bertolt casts Annie a desperate look.

"Don't look to me," Annie chokes out. "I'm here because my father and Zeke are friends. I didn't choose the same way you both did."

"Please tell me exactly how much of a choice I had," Reiner snaps. "My parents are—irrelevant. Without this money I wouldn't be here—I probably wouldn't be able go to school at all. I'd be on the goddamn streets, and Bertl would be too. Zeke's paying for me, you know. And he's doing this to help people."

"And for me," Bertolt says glumly.

"He's paying for all of us," Annie says sharply. "Because he needs people to help him make and deliver meth, not because he cares about cornered teenagers. I'd rather be on the streets." But her
father insists she doesn't deserve it—really, it's just that he doesn't deserve it.

"He cares about—"

"Keep telling yourself what you need to tell yourself." Annie waves her hand.

"Well, not all of us are like you," Bertolt shoots back. He wraps his arms around himself and lowers his head. Annie's stomach churns.

"By friends," she confesses, dropping to the ground next to them. Dampness seeps through the pine needles and into her jeans. "I mean Zeke's bailed my father out of so many things. Losing our house, after my mom died. Getting food for us. As long as my dad could help him, he kept us going, even after he took the position at this school four years ago."

"So, not really friends," Reiner says, offering Annie a sad smile.

"I don't even know what would count as friends." Anne picks up an orange pine needle and twirls it between her fingertips. She remembers having one in kindergarten, maybe, before Mom died. And then she remembers her father screaming at her every time she asked to go over her friend's house, and slapping Annie when she suggested they invite her friend over. So she gave up on her and sat alone at school, barely passing until Zeke told her father Annie was intelligent and should attend a better high school, work for a better future, and Annie had to start trying again, because she was her father's latest project.

"We're your friends," Reiner says. "We like you."

You really are two people, Annie thinks. "Thanks. You're mine, too. I guess." And maybe Armin, too.

"I don't want to lose my mind," Reiner whispers.

"You won't," Bertolt insists again, kneeling down and peering into Reiner's eyes. "We'll make sure of it. We'll try to keep you in check, help you—"

"If you're feeling too stressed to go on a delivery, Bertolt or I will take over for you," Annie promises. Is this what friends do?

"Speaking of runs," Bertolt says. "Isn't it strange to see Ymir here?"

"It's bizarre," confirms Reiner. "I never thought we'd see her again, after she killed Marcel."

Did Ymir want to be part of another drug gang? Annie wondered. Or is she like us, with no choice and no point in debating it? Is she even still a part of it?

Zeke hasn't heard of any other activity, at least not that he's mentioned to them. And none of them want to bring up Ymir with Zeke. He'd make her life hell, or he wouldn't care, and Annie isn't sure which would be worse.

She cranes her neck back and looks up through the tangled tree branches. Teachers like Petra tell her to go for her dreams, and Hange tells her to find something she's passionate about.

She has no idea where to even start, or if she even can.
"Hange!" Levi storms into the biology classroom after the bell rings. Armin stuffs his books in his bag. Connie knocks a container of pens to the ground and he and Sasha squat to pick it up. Eren shrugs at around him, the rest of the class busies themselves with packing up far more slowly than usual.

"Levi! Meet Sawney, and Bean," Hange proclaims, pointing to the dead fetal pigs.

Levi rolls his eyes. "Why did you sign me up to chaperon this stupid dance?" he demands.

"Oh, you signed up?" Hange cries, clasping her hands together.

"No, Hange. You signed me up."

Hange puts her hands on her hips. Armin pretends to check his phone. "I did not."

"Yes, you did."

"Let me see the list," Hange snaps, snatching the paper out of Levi's hands. "Levi, that's Mike's handwriting. Imitating mine, and badly." She squints at it. "Actually not that badly."

"What?" Levi scowls and peers at the sheet.

"Erwin asked him to volunteer last night and he didn't want to… I assume he signed you up instead. It'll be fun, Levi!" Hange cries, grabbing Levi's shoulder. Levi cringes as if she's smearing mud on him. Pig guts.

Eren smirks at Armin. Mikasa covers her mouth, her shoulders shaking. Connie glares at Sasha as if to say keep quiet.

"It will not. I have better things to do that break apart snogging teenagers. Like cleaning the Sina Apartments."

That's where the staff live, or so Armin's been told.

"You're right. You're no fun," Hange proclaims.

"I can be fun! For example, it's going to be a lot of fun to watch me kick Mike's ass," Levi snaps.

Bertolt's jaw drops and his eyes shine in admiration. Reiner coughs frantically.

"Don't spread your germs," Levi grouses as he stalks out.

"It'll be interesting to see if Mike's sporting a black eye come history," muses Reiner as they all scurry out of the classroom.

"They're like Beatrice and Benedick," Christa says with a sigh.

"What?" Everyone turns to look at her. Christa's face flushes.
"Well, they're always sniping at each other, so maybe they actually have feelings for each other," Christa states.

"That's not quite how *Much Ado* works," Armin says. "It's more like—"

"Hero and Claudio and the rest plant the idea in their mind, and it grows into true love," Annie finishes, adjusting her backpack.

"Exactly," Armin confirms, giving Annie a smile. She returns it.

"So we can plant the idea in their mind," declares Christa.

"You can't be serious," Ymir groans. Mikasa's eyes bulge.

"Well, I'm pretty sure the idea is already there, but we can try to get them to dance or something—" Christa starts.

"I love it," gushes Sasha. "*We need* to make this happen." She grins at Connie, who shrugs and nods. *No surprise*, Armin thinks. If there's mischief, Connie's there.

"Eren, you meet with Levi fairly regularly," Christa adds. "Can you try and, I don't know, say something to him? Plant the idea in his mind?"

"This is stupid," Jean hisses. "It'll never work. Levi wouldn't know an emotion if it slapped him in the face."

"No, Jean, that's you," Eren retorts. He makes a fist. "I'm in. Let's do it."

"What are all you kids talking about?" demands a voice that sends terror through Armin. He whips around to see Erwin watching them all, his arms crossed.

*How much did you hear?*

"The dance. We're planning our makeup," Annie says dryly.

Erwin raises his eyebrows. "*You're all* planning your makeup?" He gestures pointedly at Eren, Jean, Marco, and the rest of the boys.

"We're making sure our outfits… match," Armin comes up with. Jean gives him a subtle thumbs-up.

"Exactly," Marco chimes in.

"Interesting." Erwin cocks his head as the bell rings. "But you're all going to be late for class."

The bell screeches above them. Armin lunges for his locker.

"He totally overheard," Bertolt whispers as they rush to civics.

"Yup," confirms Annie.

*If Erwin overhead…* Eren tries to calculate his chances of Levi exploding on him as he contemplates what trig questions he has to bother the teacher with after school.


"Thanks." Eren grabs a pencil, butterflies in his stomach. "So, Mikasa… I know we're not going to
the dance together or anything, but you'll—you'll dance with me there, won't you?"

Mikasa's eyebrows fly towards her forehead. "Of course."

Relief, warm and light, floods through Eren. He grins. "That's great! I mean—"

"Reiner, give me your phone," a firm voice interrupts. Both Eren and Mikasa whirl around to see Bertolt prying Reiner's phone from his hand.

"Why the hell are you being such a killjoy? Have you forgotten Marcel?" Reiner snarls, kicking his locker shut with a clang. Eren jumps and grabs Mikasa's arm.

Who's Marcel?

"Reiner, we don't have to talk about this here. Want to take a walk?" Bertolt cajoles.

"No, I freaking don't." Reiner turns and stalks off, his boots clomping against the tiled floors. Bertolt's shoulders slump.

"Everything okay?" Jean asks, appearing from the restroom.

"Fine," Bertolt manages. He claps his hand against his forehead, sweat beading his temples even though it's chilly out.

"Do you want to go to the snack shop for chips or something?" Armin asks. "If you want to talk, or just hang out, or—"

"Um. Yeah." Bertolt nods, his fingers twitching. "Sure."

"We're coming too," declares Jean, throwing his arms around Connie and Marco. "Mikasa?"

"Can't." She turns away. "Christa really does want to practice makeup on me," she adds in a low tone to Eren, who snickers. Although he wonders what she'll look like...

And now, for his descent into hell. Eren trudges up the stone stairs and through the deserted hallways. The windows open up to one of those late fall days that teases with unseasonably warm weather. Eren knocks on the door.

"One moment!" Levi yells.

He pauses and hears another voice talking in a hushed tone.

"Levi, Reiss is not letting up."

Erwin, Eren realizes.

"If they fire you, I go too. And so does Hange and Mike and Petra and Oruo and pretty much everyone. Except maybe Zeke because he is likewise an asshole," Levi states.

Fire Erwin? Who is this Reiss person? Eren wonders.

"That'd be foolish of you," Erwin counters. The sun shines through the window, but Eren stays in the shadows. "Just because the board is… difficult—"

"They're stuck-up assholes," Levi comments. "I took this job because of you, Erwin. Because I know that you're fair and determined to improve education. If you leave, I'd leave. You're the whole
reason I'm a teacher today."

Erwin sighs. "We'll see how this goes. I'll let you meet with Jaeger now."

Eren yanks out his phone as the footsteps echo closer. Erwin gives him a nod as he strides off.

"What part of trig do you need help with now?" Levi asks him as Eren stumbles through the door.

"Um—" Eren swallows, his mind drawing a blank.

Levi frowns. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah…" I was just eavesdropping. Noting, Eren thinks wryly. Something else punches up from his stomach. "Reiner was acting oddly. I'm just worried about him."

"Oh." Levi rises from his swivel chair, heading to a side desk with a small water heater on it. "Do you want tea?"

"Sure."

"Worrying about your friends is admirable," Levi tells him, back turned.

Am I worried about Reiner? Or worried about his ability to tutor me? Eren gulps. "You and the dean are friends, right?"

Levi's eyes narrow as he spins around, two mugs in hand. "We are."

"And you and Hange?"

"When Hange isn't blabbering on and on about strange experiments," Levi acknowledges.

Victory. Eren wraps his hands around the mug. Dammit, what to say? Be subtle, be subtle… "Since you're both chaperoning, will you ask Hange to dance?" he blurts out.

Epic. Fail.

Levi almost spits out his tea. "What is that supposed to mean?"


I'm not getting off easy today, Eren thinks.

"Could have been worse," Armin opines several days later.

"Maybe, but we haven't exactly made any headway," Eren replies as he buttons up his green shirt. A forlorn expression crosses his face as he studies his reflection. "I wish I could send a photo to Mom."

Armin wraps an arm around Eren and says nothing. Eren heaves a sigh. "You should leave your hair tied back."

"Why?" Armin asks, touching his strands.

"Because then you and Annie will have the same hairstyle. Unless of course Christa changes it up for her."
Armin rolls his eyes and turns away to shove his feet inside some stiff, shiny shoes. Annie would never like me. She excels in phys ed and is super smart. Armin has the latter going for him and none of the former. He's short and unlike Connie, not gregarious enough to make up for it.

"I know you like her! Don't make us plot another set-up!" Eren teases, leaning against their closet.

Armin's face burns. "You wouldn't do that." Besides, Armin thinks Bertolt might like Annie too. And Bertolt's definitely more her type. Or so Armin imagines.

Eren shrugs. "I might."

Armin shoves him.

Reiner bursts through their door, grinning and with no trace of whatever the heck was bothering him earlier this week. Bertolt seemed to like talking with Armin and the other guys, but he offered no information as to what their argument might have been about.

"Ready to go?" Reiner booms.

"I heard Gunthur might be chaperoning too," Jean tells them.

"He'll probably chase us all around with condoms," jokes Connie.

"I don't think Erwin or Levi is going to let anyone slip away," Armin says.

"There are ways. And places to go where they won't think to look," Marlowe puts in. Everyone turns to stare at him. "What?"

"So, have you and Hitch actually—" Eren starts.

Armin cringes. "It's not really our place to ask."

"Wow," Jean whispers, almost reverently.

Marlowe ducks his head. "I don't like breaking the rules—it's not exactly—it doesn't explicitly say we can't."

"Of dear God." Jean rolls his eyes.

"Let's go?" Marlowe stammers.

They troop out towards the assembly hall, which has been cleared of all chairs and strung with white Christmas lights and silver streamers. To Armin, it looks almost as if they're underwater.

Mikasa hurries over to them, clad in a tight black dress and with her eyes done in some sort of smoky design. Eren grins. Jean looks like he's about to faint.

"So, there they are," Christa announces as she slips into their group, wearing a baby pink dress that makes her look like a princess. Ymir, her hair styled in a fishtail braid and wearing dark green, drapes her arm over Christa's shoulder.

Hanji, Erwin, and Levi lean against a wall, chatting with each other. Erwin and Hange look rather nice. Levi looks the same as always, only sourer.

"Hey," says a voice to Armin's right. Annie wears a deep violet dress with a black belt cinched around her waist. Her blond hair is down for the first time since Armin's met her.
"We switched hairstyles," he jokes as Christa continues to plot to get Hange and Levi to dance.

Annie snorts. "I guess."

"You look pretty," Armin blurts out.

Annie blinks. "Thanks." She tugs at her dress. "It's Christa's, so it's a little short on me."

"It looks perfect," Armin insists. Dammit, Armin, stop being so obvious.

"Well, they're having fun," Jean announces, nodding at Connie and Sasha, who make it onto the dance floor. Hitch and Marlowe join them. Talk about opposites attracting. But both Marlowe and Hitch have big hearts.

"Well, why not?" Reiner laughs. He grabs Bertolt's hand.

"Oh my god, Reiner," Bertolt squeaks out as he laughs.

Eren grabs a pale Mikasa, and Ymir takes Christa. Armin looks to Annie.

"I don't know what to do," she admits.

"Neither do I," Armin says, cringing. He offers a sly smile. "We could try anyways."

Marco bites his lip and stares at the floor as Jean watches Eren and Mikasa.

"Let's try," Annie agrees, her smile softer than normal. Her eyes are blue and gray, like stormclouds, Armin thinks, and there's always some sort of sadness to them. Her father?

"Marco, Jean!" Reiner grabs them both. Armin snorts as he watches the four of them try to dance as a group.

"I'm not sure how this is going to work for Hange and Levi," Annie says.

"Me neither," Armin confesses. "But I kind of want it to."

Annie laughs. Her skin feels warm as her shoulder brushes his. "Me too."

"Screw this," Armin hears from behind him. Annie frowns as they both spin around to see Jean trotting over to the adults.

"So, are you guys going to dance?" Jean shouts to be heard over the pulsating music.

"Oh no," Armin moans.

"We are your teachers," Levi responds. "We are not 'you guys.'"

Erwin raises his eyebrows. Annie covers her face.

"S-sorry," Jean stammers. "I meant no disrespect."

Erwin scans the room, taking in all the kids subtly trying to watch Jean. He coughs into his hand as if he's suppressing a laugh.

"Hey Jean, guess what I just saw?" Connie shouts, racing through the crowd with Sasha.

"Everything's about to fall apart," Armin whispers.
Connie throws his arm around Jean and lowers his voice. The music steals the words from Armin’s ears.

"What? For real?" Jean yelps.

"Excuse me?" demands Erwin as Levi glowers.

"What the hell did he say?" Annie wonders. Eren and Mikasa approach them.

"Sorry, sir," Sasha squeaks.

"Students aren’t supposed to leave the hall without permission—" Erwin starts as Levi marches towards the door, Hange beside him.

"Sometimes, you have to be a terrible person to accomplish anything," Armin muses out loud. His heart pounds.

"What?" Eren and Annie both stare at him, but Armin steps forward. Hange’s leg smacks into his. Armin tumbles to the ground. His chin smacks the floor.

"Watch where you put your feet, Arlert!" snaps Levi, his hands gripping Hange’s shoulder and waist. *At least she didn't fall.*

"Are you okay?" Annie kneels, grasping his shoulder to pull him up.

Armin blinks. "Yeah. Thanks. Sorry, Hange."

"It’s fine." Hange waves her hand and laughs. Levi removes his hands and glowers, his face blooming like a tomato.

Armin’s one of the best students, but he might need to work extra hard now, because he’s pretty sure he signed away any chance for Levi to ever show him mercy for the rest of the year.

"Let’s go get them?" Hange asks Levi. He nods, and they hurry out of the hall.

"Get who?" Eren wonders.

"That was a nasty fall, Armin. Are you sure you’re—" Mikasa starts.

"I’m fine," Armin assures them. Annie smirks.

"Armin, you are amazing!" cheers Sasha as she rushes over. "I never thought of that!"

"What did you tell Jean to make them freak out?" Eren exclaims. Erwin’s still pacing back and forth.

"Well—" Sasha bites her lip. "Connie and I went outside to, you know, make out, and so we went to that stairwell behind the hall—the one that goes down towards the Rose Dorm? And we saw Mike and Nanaba making out instead."

"Oh my God," breathes Eren.

Well, that’s something Armin wasn’t expecting. And clearly it wasn’t something Erwin was expecting either, based on how he’s gripping his skull like he cannot deal with this. And, judging by what Eren overheard the other day, maybe he can’t.

"Maybe we should keep it more or less quiet," Armin says quietly.
"Well, I think our class already knows," Sasha admits. "But otherwise, yeah."

"As for Levi and Hange…" Eren nods towards the door as they reenter. Hange calls something out and Levi nods. Heading over to the punch table, Hange smiles.

"It's planted," Armin declares. "We'll see what takes hold." He looks to Annie. "Do you want to dance more?"

She blinks, and then shakes her head. "I'm done. Thanks though."

"Killjoy," taunts Reiner as he saunters up to them. Annie narrows her eyes.

"It's fine," Armin insists, but Annie's already storming away.

"I didn't mean to upset her that much," Reiner says, scratching the back of his head.

"Reiner's just sad he couldn't dance with her," Ymir puts in as she approaches, punch in hand. "So now he's stuck with the likes of me and you, Mikasa."

"I didn't think I looked like the type of guy who's into girls, and I don't think you look like the type of girl who's into guys," Reiner retorts. Ymir shrugs.

Wait, what? Armin shakes his head. Ymir is obviously a lesbian, but Reiner? He searches for Bertolt on the dance floor, but can't see him. *He must have snuck out.*

*Are they dating, or does Bertolt even know?*

Judging from the way Reiner glares at his punch as if it's blood, Armin's guessing Bertolt does not know.

"I don't think it's you Annie's upset about, Reiner," Mikasa says, looking at Armin.

*Me? Why would I upset her?*

"Annie?" Armin calls, jogging after her through the crowds of people. She slumps into one of the metal folding chairs set up on the sideline. "Are—"

"Go have fun," she tells him.

Why are you like this? Armin doesn't understand. "I want you to have fun too."

She leans over, covering her face so that Armin can't see her eyes. "I want you to leave me alone."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry to end on such a sad note! Up next week, more Jeanmarco and Yumikuri. Also up next week: plot. It actually starts to happen.
"Good!" Reiner snaps his book shut and slaps Eren's back. "You're going to do great on the midterm."

Armin hopes Reiner's right. With Annie barely speaking to him, he can't fathom the idea of Eren having to leave school. He and Mikasa are Armin's closest friends—the only friends who really know him and somehow like him, too.

"I wish I could make the honor roll," Eren says with a scowl.

What? "Um, Eren? Don't you think just passing is a more realistic goal?" Armin ventures. At the same time, having a goal could be beneficial...

"Yeah, but I want to. By the end of the year." Eren leans back. "My father would want me to."

Armin's not sure it's possible, but he won't say that. Besides, when Eren sets his mind to something, he can usually accomplish it, Armin reminds himself. There's hope.

Hannes still gives them weekly updates on Carla Jaeger, except there are really no updates to give. No change. Eren's even stopped checking his phone three times every class, although Armin still hears him tossing and turning at night. Armin wishes he knew what to say. All he can do is listen, which he knows is enough... in theory. It doesn't always feel like it.

"You'll make it," Reiner assures Eren, looking as if he actually believes it. Bertolt nods, and Armin smiles.

Bertolt's phone lights up, and Armin catches a glimpse of it. Zeke, the name reads, even if he can't read the text before Bertolt turns his phone over.

The VP?

Why would he be texting you?

Oh right. Scholarships. Although Bertolt and Reiner shouldn't have to do anything more for it now that they have the scholarship. Maybe they need to write thank you notes or something.

"Guess what I heard," Reiner adds, leaning forward.

"Do I want to know?" Eren jokes, stretching his legs out.

"Connie told me Marlowe has two bottles of wine. If we want to blow off steam before midterms on Monday, tonight's the night," Reiner declares.

Armin cringes. How is this a good idea?

"He wants to keep it in our dorm through. We can get some of the girls to visit, but it might be after hours, so—"

"We shouldn't risk it," Armin stammers. "Not when—"
"Yeah, but Christa's been depressed since the dance and could use some cheering up," Reiner counters.

"I don't think alcohol counts as cheering her up," Armin shoots back. "It's a temporary solution. Ymir can help, I'm sure."

"I don't know," Bertolt says quietly. "Christa's kind of locked away in herself sometimes. She might not respond to anyone, even Ymir."

Are we talking about Christa or you? Armin wonders. Reiner leans forward, his brow creased in concern for his friend.

Are you in love with him? Armin's pretty sure the answer is yes.

"Well, I'll have a drink," Eren says with a shrug. "Only one, though. I don't need to sprain my ankle again."

Not to mention Armin's pretty sure Levi wouldn't be quite so merciful if he caught them this time around. Their trig teacher's been dour ever since their set-up attempt at the dance. Well, dour or love-struck.

As Armin opens the door, he hears yelling in the courtyard.

"Just go, Mom!"

"Whose mom is here?" Eren wonders.

Jean stands outside his door, crossing his arms.

"Jean-Boy, I came all this way to visit you!" protests a short, squat woman with a gray bun.

"I'm busy studying! If I don't study, I'll fail. I can't take time to go gallivanting around town doing nothing important anyways." Jean scowls.

Eren's face grows red, and Armin knows what he's thinking. I'd give anything to have a mother to bother me.

Judging from Bertolt's hanging jaw, he agrees with Eren. Reiner steps back, putting his hand on Bertolt's shoulder.

What are their families even like? Armin wonders. He can't recall either of them sharing any information on their background.

"Well… if you change your mind, Jean-Boy, I'll come back," Ms. Kirchstein promises, her shoulders slumped. "Will you at least take this? I bought you some snacks and—"

"No. I'm fine here." Jean stalks away from her.

"I'll give them to him, Ms. Kirschstein," says a quiet voice. Marco stands behind her, his eyes downcast.

"What a prick," Eren seethes as the woman trudges out of their dorm.

"We don't know everything that's gone on between them, Eren," Armin points out.

"Don't need to. She's his mother. Jean-Boy should at least respect her." Eren's voice rises.
wraps an arm around his friend, who stiffens for a moment before caving in.

Jean stops in front of his door, glaring at Eren, who flips him off. Jean's door slams.

"Jean's not coming," Marco announces later that night, as Eren, Armin, Reiner, and Bertolt all gather in Connie and Marlowe's room. "He did ask if I could bring him a wine cooler though."

"You have soda too?" Connie asks.

"Of course." Marlowe shrugs. "And please, drink it all. Like please. I can't stand having it in here any more."

"Can I have some of that to dilute this?" Armin asks. He's not a fan of the strong, musky taste.

"Sure." Marlowe hands it over.

"What's the problem with having booze here?" Eren asks.

"Because he bought it all for Hitch, because he lost a bet to Hitch, and he's been panicking about getting caught all semester," Connie reports. "Well, not about getting caught. About that fact that he let Hitch convince him to break the rules. You're clearly a terrible person, Marlowe."

"Just get rid of it for me, please," Marlowe requests with a grimace.

_Do you actually believe that?_ Armin wonders.

"You know he asked Jean to horde it?" Connie continues. A banner with a football team hangs above his bed. "But Marco said no."

"Not that Jean hasn't kept some," Marco comments, rolling his eyes as he gets back to his feet. "I'll just bring this back to Jean."

"Can I go with you?" Armin questions. He has less of a chance of getting caught in Marco and Jean's room. And he's concerned about Jean. He's seemed awfully stressed about excelling in his classes, making the honor roll, and getting into a good university next year. And by stressed, Armin means Jean's acting like an asshole to everyone again.

"Sure." Marco grins at him. Eren waves as he debates with Reiner over whether Oruo likes Petra or not.

"It's snowing!" Armin gasps as they step outside. The cold presses intoxicating hands against his cheeks. Large white flakes float through the air, swirling towards the ground.

"I heard it won't stick, sadly," Marco remarks. "Soon."

"Is the school still holding that annual ski trip after Christmas break?" Armin questions, shivering. A flake splashes against his cheek.

"I heard we're going someplace warm instead. Courtesy of Mike's insistence," Marco responds. "Maybe to the beach." He grins as he pushes open the door. "I hope."

"I've always wanted to see the ocean," Armin muses.

"You've never seen it?" Marco asks as Armin ducks inside the heated room.

"Nope." Armin spots Jean lying on his bed, surrounded by textbooks, notebooks, his graphic
calculator and a protractor. The rest of the room is neat and organized, books lined up perfectly on both Marco and Jean's bookshelves, no lonely shoes or socks lying around like in Armin and Eren's room, no books left open and out.

"I brought you some wine!" Marco sings.

"Thanks," grumbles Jean, pulling himself up. "But I can't drink it now. I've got to study."

"You can give yourself a break, you know," Marco says as he settles on the floor. "You don't have to work so hard all the time. Plus, it hasn't stopped you from drinking before."

_Is it your mom?_ Armin wonders. _Maybe that incident is bothering Jean._

"Why are you even staying here?" Jean snaps. "Go have fun."

Armin freezes, halfway to the floor. _Sink lower? Leave?_

"You seem upset and both of us are worried," Marco responds. "I know you love your mom. Why did you treat her that way?"

Jean scowls and reaches out, snatching the wine cooler. He chugs it. "Because I'm stressed?"

"Jean, you're so smart," Armin puts in. "You shouldn't be so anxious about these midterms."

"Easy for you to say," Jean retorts. "You're like a... blond Einstein."

Armin smiles. He'll take that as a compliment. Even if he's nowhere near that smart. For Pete's sake, he can't even figure out why Annie suddenly hates him.

_Isn't it obvious? You're pathetic. You're weak, you're short, you're useless. She can do way better than you._

"I need to do well," Jean mumbles. "I just want to be—good enough to get into a good school. I need to do that. All the kids at my elementary school used to make fun of me, you know? They said I wasn't smart, when I was really smarter than all of them. They called me fat and beat me up."

Armin squirms. "They beat me up at my old school too," he admits. "And Eren, when he intervened. Mikasa could usually get them to stop. But it was always because they know I was right about something, and they were angry about it."

"I'm so sorry," Marco says, wide-eyed as he looks at the both of them. "Neither of you deserved that. You're both good people."

Jean snorts. Armin drinks some more of the bitter liquid in his cup. It'd be better with sugar in it.

"It's not just wanting to show them up, even," Jean admits as he tosses the protractor in the air. "My parents, they—they settled for half the life they could have had, you know? My father was a certified genius, but my mom got pregnant with me, so they dropped out of school." Jean drinks more. "I need to live up to that."

"Live his dreams?" Armin asks.

"No, my own dreams. My father's long dead."

"Dreams or insecurities?" Marco asks, setting his cup down. Armin's stomach tightens.
"Huh?" Jean blinks.

"It's like... you don't think you're good enough. Or you think you are, which is good because you are, but you don't think other people think you're good enough. And so you're obsessed with proving them wrong, and maybe there are people you need to prove wrong, but no one here thinks that of you. You are good enough." Marco reaches out and grabs Jean's arms. "You are."

Jean swallows and looks at the ground. "Thanks." He looks back up at Marco, peering at his face.

Are those tears in his eyes? Armin wonders.

"Maybe I should call my mom and apologize."

"Maybe tomorrow when you haven't been drinking," Armin interjects.

Jean rolls his eyes. "I only had half a cup." But he frowns. "What if she's mad at me?"

"She'll always forgive you," Marco assures him, hand lingering on Jean's shoulder. He catches Armin watching and lowers it, swallowing.

You like Jean, Armin realizes. Marco's eyes dart to Armin, and he smiles to reassure him. I won't tell.

Marco should tell Jean, though. But Armin knows he won't.

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"Ready to ace your exam, Mikasa?" Jean asks her on Monday morning.

She shrugs, filling her coffee cup. "As long as I pass."

"That's not really even a question," Eren comments as he grabs an apple. "Not for you."

Trooping down the hall towards their biology lab exam, Mikasa thinks that she's not so much worried about herself as she's worried about Eren. He needs to pass, and even with all the help he's been getting, and the work he's been putting in, she's not sure it'll be enough.

Hange greets them outside the class, her face white.

"Hange?" Armin questions.

"You're all supposed to go to the assembly hall," she orders.

"Will our exam be in there?" Eren asks. "But then how will we do the lab part—"

"The lab part's been canceled," she snaps, her eyes tearing up.

Mikasa frowns.

"Hange!" Levi shouts from down the hall, jogging up to her. Christa's eyes light up. "I heard about the break-in."

"Break-in?" Armin whispers as Reiner and Bertolt join the group gathered outside the classroom.

"Who would want to steal equipment covered in pig guts?" Jean wonders.

"Out of here," Levi orders them, his glare honing in on Jean.

"I don't think it's equipment, Jean," Mikasa whispers as they turn to shuffle off, and by shuffle off,
she means loiter five feet away. Armin nods as if he agrees. *It's got to be chemicals.*

But why? And for what purpose?

"We're already over budget, Levi. We can't replace these!" Hange cries. "Not until the next year, and by then the kids could be behind—"

"Which wouldn't be your fault," Levi snaps, peering into Hange's eyes as he grabs her shoulders. "And you'll think of something. Has there ever been a problem you can't solve?"

Christa gasps.

"Get to the assembly hall, or you will all fail your midterm!" Hange barks. "And then no honor roll for any of you!"

Christa ducks her head. Ymir pinches her shoulder. "You'll make it," she assures her roommate.

Mikasa and Eren exchange a grin as they scuttle off. The written exam goes well for Mikasa, although after she finishes fifteen minutes early, she watches Eren bite his pencil into a chewed-up mess. Damn it.

The day drags on, and by the end of it, Mikasa's hand aches from writing so much. Eld gave them three essays for literature, and Mike's history exam gave them two.

As Mikasa hands in her trigonometry exam and students turn to each other, stretching and blabbering, Erwin marches in. Eren's face falls from anxiety to confusion.

"Everyone, take a seat," he orders.

"Why?" groans Connie.

"I'll explain in a minute, Springer."

"There is no escape for us," Jean intones.

Mikasa lowers herself down, her heart rate speeding up.

"As for right now, and as has been going on throughout the day, staff are searching all of your belongings. As I'm sure most of you—" Erwin rolls his eyes as if to say *who am I kidding?* —probably all of you—are aware, someone broke in to the biology lab and stole some expensive chemicals. There's reason to believe it was an inside job, likely from a student."

"What?" Eren whispers. Armin shakes his head, and Mikasa remembers Armin's suspicions about a staff member outing her and Eren's history.

"If the guilty party is found, he or she will be expelled immediately." Erwin crosses his arms. "I realize this may feel like an invasion of privacy, and so I will add that staff rooms have been searched as well. The search is expected to conclude in an hour, and until then, you will all need to stay here."

"What about our afternoon snack?" Sasha calls.

"We'll deliver it shortly," Erwin answers, before nodding and striding out of the assembly hall. Petra and Oruo cringe as if to lament that they have to watch over the entire junior class one more hour.

"For real?" Eren demands as he leaps up from his seat. "Why would someone steal chemicals?"
"Probably to make drugs," Armin says softly.

Eren cringes. Connie sits nearby and leans over, clutching his head.

"Are you okay, Connie?" Sasha asks, deterred even from rushing the snacks, which have just arrived. It smells like sugar today. Éclairs, Mikasa's favorite.

"Yeah… I just—like, my mom's in rehab right now so I really don't want to talk about drugs," Connie mutters.

"Oh. I'm sorry," Eren says as Sasha takes Connie's hand. Mikasa thinks of her own parents, taken from her too early, and tugs her scarf up over her mouth.

"You shouldn't have done that," Christa says as she approaches, a blue plastic bowl with an éclair inside clutched in her hands. Ymir shrugs as they drop onto the floor by Connie's desk.

"What did you do?" Mikasa asks Ymir.

"Stole everything," Ymir replies, face serious, and then she erupts in laughter. "No, I'm kidding." Armin frowns.

"She slacked off in classes the past few weeks and in studying because she thinks it will help me make the top ten," Christa reveals.

"Eh, you want it way more than I do. I doubt I'm even going to college," Ymir says, leaning back. Her éclair sits untouched.

"Huh? "Why not?" Mikasa asks. "You're smart—"

"How am I going to pay for it?" Ymir snorts. Sasha and Connie rise and dart over to the snack table.

"How are you paying for this?" Eren asks.

"Eren, that's not polite," Armin hisses.

"Academic scholarship," Ymir replies, sitting back up and grabbing her éclair.

"Which you could and should get for college too," Christa insists.

"You need one too, and you want it more than I do," Ymir retorts around a mouthful of pastry. Christa frowns and pulls her knees up to her chest. "What's the matter?"

"I don't like you thinking you're less important," Christa tells her. "Because you are—"

"I'm not the one who doesn't believe I don't deserve to be alive," Ymir responds, swallowing. Yikes. Mikasa glances at Eren, who appears fascinated.

"But you do believe that," Christa insists.

"But I don't act like it," Ymir retorts, tearing off another bite. "You, Christa—you think you don't have any value unless people like you, unless you help people, and guess what, you do. You're a good person and you should own that label, not bury it in your insecurities. I, on the other hand, am not a good person." She shrugs.
What have you done? Mikasa wonders. There's a darkness in Ymir's eyes that she recognizes, a regret and a lack of remorse, the same look that Mikasa sees every time she looks in the mirror.

"You are to me," Christa says quietly, leaning against Ymir's shoulder.

Ymir looks at her with her eyes wide. She hesitates, and then leans down to kiss Christa on the lips.

"Oh my god," says Jean as he approaches. Reiner nods in approval. Christa's face flushes red.

Mikasa glances to Eren, who grins and crosses his arms. Armin's eyes skip through the crowd, over to Annie, sitting alone at her desk.

Mikasa's never been kissed. She remembers those men, how they talked about doing far more than kissing to her, and shudders.

But with someone she trusts… Her heart picks up pace as her fingers trace her own lips. Chapped.

"Attention!" shouts Oruo from the front of the room. "You are all allowed to leave!"

"Did they catch anyone?" Eren wonders.

"I'm guessing not," Mikasa answers, standing closer to Eren. She wonders if he'll grab her hand.

He doesn't. It's okay. Eren's got too much on his mind right now. He doesn't need a girlfriend.

Mikasa grabs a bowl and piles two éclairs in it as she files out of the assembly hall. Levi and Erwin stand by the doors.

"You know, as your friend, I think you should maybe take a risk," Erwin tells Levi.

"What are you talking about?" Levi demands.

Armin drops his pencils. Mikasa kneels to help him.

"You know what I'm talking about," Erwin responds. "You don't take many chances with people."

"People suck," Levi responds. "Not you, though."

Mikasa almost laughs. People are like the world. Cruel, in her experience. But also beautiful. She watches Eren hand Armin the last of his pencils.

There's always hope, because of people. What else is there to hope in, besides people, as imperfect and cruel as they can be? Even Eren can be nasty sometimes, and yet Mikasa trusts him more than anyone else, save Armin.

"Thanks for taking a risk with me," Levi says quietly.

Maybe I should take more risks, Mikasa thinks, remembering the look in Ymir's eyes, remembering Annie sitting alone.

"Eh, it was a calculated risk. I knew you'd be fine," Erwin says, clapping Levi on the shoulder.

Chapter End Notes
Thanks so much for reading! Up next week: firecrackers. Also Eren visits Carla and Annie decides to play nice.
"Break is going to be a disaster," Reiner complains as he tromps through the snow. "Being trapped in that town where all I can think about is Marcel."

"If you can't stop thinking about him, why don't you just ask Ymir?" Annie snaps, pulling her hat down. She glares at Bertolt. Stop staring at me.

"Classy comment," Reiner remarks.

"Why don't you fucking ask Ymir?" Annie amends.

"Shut up." Reiner squints against the sun. "At least you get something of a break to spend with your dad."

"You'll be staying with your parents, too," Annie points out. The dampness seeps through her boots. Her breath forms puffs in the air. He shrugs. "Yeah, where my dad will beat the shit out of me for not… conforming to his standards."

You mean liking guys? Annie wonders. Her heart softens. "Bertolt's with Zeke, right?"

"Who will be gone," Bertolt confirms, rolling his eyes. "Whatever. I'm used to being alone."

"You are going to visit me," Reiner tells him. "If, you know. My dad drinks enough to pass out." He clenches his fists.

"Will you be all right?" Annie asks. "You know. If you switch into Reiner 2.0."

He hunches his shoulders. "I don't know which Reiner they would rather see. I'll figure it out, though. I'll live."

You're not making much sense. As far as Annie knows, Reiner can't control himself.

You're scared, Annie realizes, watching him chew on his lip. You're scaring yourself, and you're scared of ending up like Marcel, and you're scared of what you're doing and you're scared because you think it's the best thing to do and because you don't want to, all at the same time. She remembers what Connie said about his mother, and her stomach sours. She didn't sleep that night.

"You can always text me," Bertolt insists, looking down at Reiner's face with enough gentleness to make Annie want to scream. "Or visit too, if your dad will let you."

Reiner snorts. "You're one to talk."

"What do you mean?" Bertolt asks, seemingly stung.

"I didn't mean anything by it, Bertl. I meant that it's ironic you care to help me."

"Why wouldn't I?" Bertolt cries after them as they tromp ahead. "You're my best friend!"

Reiner swallows. "You're the one who's happy being a martyr. You think you have to do everything
alone. And you don't."

Bertolt's lips curve in a smile.

"You call him a martyr, I call him a spineless dog," Annie says, ripping the arrows out of her own skin and plunging them into Bertolt, whose face crumples.

"Is it that time of the month or are you just feeling particularly bitchy?" Reiner demands. "Leave Bertolt alone."

"Both," Annie says as they pause outside the library. Both of the boys' faces turn red and she relishes it.

"Zeke said thirty minutes until we leave," Reiner warns.

"I'll be fast." She needs new library books to read over break. There won't be much else to do.

"You realize you don't have to do everything alone," Reiner tells Bertolt as Annie heads up the icy stairs.

"Depending on who you are," Bertolt tells him, voice small.

"I'm sorry," Reiner mutters, shame searing from his voice. "I should be there for you like you are for me."

Annie can't listen to them anymore. It burns too hot, too close.

"Oh hey," she hears a voice say to her right. She spins to see Armin standing in front of the shelves. Towers of books stretch up towards the ceiling, and small stepladders stay nearby to help students reach the top shelves. Although given Annie's small stature, she doubts she'd be able to reach it even with a ladder's aid.

"Hi," Annie greets him.

"Looking forward to break?"

"No." She peers through the fiction shelves. *Not romance novels, not now.* Although she does have a soft spot for them.

"Me neither," Armin confesses.

Really? Annie looks up at him, her hand closing around *Anna Karenina*.

"Eren will see his mom again. And get depressed." Armin shrugs. "Not that I blame him. And Hannes, for all his trying, isn't much of a dad for Eren or Mikasa. And of course, Eren's on probation because of his grades. And my grandfather's been sick, so." He wraps his arms around himself, as if he's said too much.

"I'm sorry," Annie says, rising and heading towards nonfiction, past the huge velour red chairs that Hannah and Franz like to snuggle in. "I didn't know about your grandfather." Eren, she did know about. The kid works so hard. She can't stand to see him fail.

"It's okay. I shouldn't have said anything."

He's not following. Annie stops. "Do you have any recommendations?"
Armin's eyes light up. "Yeah." He selects two memoirs for her, babbling about how intriguing one is and how the other's really tragic but still beautiful.

Something squirms in Annie's stomach, and she finally can't hold it back. "I'm sorry I've been—distant—the past month or so."

Armin blinks. "It's okay."

She rolls her eyes. "It's really not."

"Honestly, Annie, don't worry about it. You probably have a lot going on, too," Armin says, and she has to turn away. "You don't need to apologize."

"I kind of do, because I kind of feel like a bad person," she mumbles. Damn you, period. Tears sting her eyes.

"I don't think you're a bad person," Armin insists.

What? "You don't?" The little shit isn't lying either. She twists her ring.

"Well..." Armin frowns as they approach the textbooks. "I don't really like those terms. Because to me it just seems to mean someone who's good for you. And I don't think there's any one person who's good for everyone."

"I haven't been good to you, though." But she wants to be. Dammit, she wants to be a good person to him.

"Well... you're being good to me now." He laughs.

Annie smiles. She thinks of her words to Bertolt and Reiner. To them, I've been a bad person.

Her eyes scour the stacks of books until they find one that she thinks will do, about learning disabilities that aren't otherwise specified. "Here." She hands it to Armin. "I have to get going, but you might enjoy reading this."

Armin's eyes widen.

"If your break gets too sucky," she says, almost hoping it will and hating herself for it. "Text me."

"Same," Armin agrees, peering at the textbook and then back at her. "Thanks, Annie."

Everyone might hate you there, her father told her before she left. But I'll always love you.

I'm the only one who will always love you, no matter what.

She remembers him breaking her rib when she was eleven.

Armin seems to care, and he doesn't seem to want anything from her other than kindness. He doesn't hate her.

Annie pinches the skin on her finger as she heads back out into the cold.

"Eren, having a learning disability would not make you dumb," Mikasa insists. "It just means you learn differently."
Eren drags his knees to his chest. In Hannes's little house, he and Mikasa have to share a room with two cots and one tiny, drafty window. Rain lashes at the panes, and Eren can't help but think of his old house, small too, but where Mom would be baking cookies while tomato sauce bubbled on the stove and Dad read the newspaper, papers rattling, and Eren felt safe, hopeful.

"Exactly," Armin, who's visiting today, confirms. "It can really help you, if you do this evaluation. You'll be able to excel and make the honor roll, like you want."

Eren scowls. "I can only imagine what Jean and the like will say about any special treatment I get."

"Jean wouldn't say anything, Eren. He's actually more than just a prick," Armin says. "And besides, there's nothing wrong with needing to do something a different way. It's ridiculous that people try to insist everyone learns the same way in the first place. And if you're ashamed about it, you shouldn't be. You try so hard, and everyone's got different gifts. I can't run a mile without wheezing and you and Mikasa could run five without stopping for water."

"Eh, I'd need water," Eren amends with a small grin. Mikasa shrugs. "We can't all be superhumans, Mikasa."

She snorts, tugging her scarf up over her face. *Is she blushing?*

"How many records did you set again this track season?" Eren prods.

"Three."

"It was four," Armin corrects. "But then she broke the same record twice, so I guess technically three."

Mikasa shrugs. "But, Eren, you're going to be fine. Levi seems to think they can work out accommodations for you."

*Why do you have to bring the subject back to this?* Eren thinks irritably.

"Your father would be supportive," Armin adds.

Eren's breath catches in his throat. *Would he be?* he wonders, watching the rain.

He doesn't even know what his father would think. The only thing he even knows his father wanted for him was to attend the academy. Otherwise, he doesn't know anything, and it's too late to ask.

*What would Mom think?*

"Existing on its own is special," she said to Shadis once, when he visited. "You don't have to be better than anyone, to excel in sports or school. You exist, so you're amazing just because of that."

*Even if I'm different in that way, it's not good different or bad different,* Eren thinks. *And I'll be able to graduate from school, like my father wanted."

"You kids ready to go?" Hannes asks, knocking on the door.

The drive to the hospital is quick and silent. Eren hasn't been in over a month, and guilt builds like building blocks in his spine. His shoes scuff the too-shiny floor, and the scent of Purell stings his nostrils.

Mom lies just as still as ever, the machines providing a pathetic symphony, keeping her alive for—for what?
She's so thin, Eren realizes. So pale. She looks like a corpse already.

"Eren?" Hannes asks softly. Armin sniffs.

He steps closer, taking her hand. "Mom…" He doesn't know what to say. The usual pleas for her to wake up fall away.

Mikasa steps forwards and grabs several limp strands of dark hair from Mom's forehead. She braids it. "I know you like braids."

"I have a learning disability, Mom," Eren tells her. "I've been working hard, but it's not really enough. I'm getting help, though. Levi—the teacher who sometimes comes with us—he says it'll all work out, and I can stay at school like Dad wanted." Everything flows from him this time, and he tells her about Jean and Marco, Connie and Reiner and Bertolt, Sasha and the potato, Annie at the dance, Christa and Ymir's sweet relationship.

You've missed so much, Eren thinks as the words dry up. "Mom—" His voice cracks.

Do I say it? I shouldn't say it.

Why not?

"You can go," Eren chokes out. "You don't have to stay around because of me. I'll make it. I promise." He claps his hand over his mouth to stifle his sobs, and Armin leans his head against Eren's shoulder.

He's not sure what he expected. A flatline, immediately? At least it would be a sign she heard him.

But there's no change, only incessant, static beeping.

Eren stands and shuffles out of the room. Mikasa wraps her arms around him. "You're being brave. She's proud of you."

"She would," Hannes agrees.

If she even heard me, Eren thinks in despair, stumbling towards the elevator. Once they're inside, he snorts. "I should have—should have told her you're always taking care of me anyways."

Mikasa smiles.

"Why even is that?" Eren demands. I'm not a child.

Mikasa shrugs. "Maybe if I'd fought, I could have kept my parents alive. Maybe it's better to be proactive than stand by and watch someone suffer."

Proactive or anxiety? Eren wonders.

"Hey. Both of you. Listen to me," Hannes says, turning to face them as the elevator dings. "What happened to both your parents—and to yours, too, Armin—is not and has never been and will never be because of anything you did, or didn't do."

It's a sweet sentiment, but Mikasa doesn't look like she believes it. Eren cringes as he remembers what he said to her that day, when the murderer's hands closed around his neck: Fight! You have to fight to live!

Did I give her that idea?
Eren's phone vibrates in his pocket, and he snatches it. "Oh."

"What?" Armin asks.


Because Reiner sent a photo of what look like unexploded firecrackers and the words: next semester's going to be a blast.

By the time they leave to return back to school, there's still no change in Carla Jaeger's condition, and Eren doesn't know what to do.

_Let her go._

Somehow. He needs a distraction to fill his mind.

"How did you even get firecrackers?" Armin gasps when Reiner proudly displays them in their dorm room.

"I splurged." Reiner grins. A hint of a bruise peeks out from under his sweater, and he adjusts his collar to cover it. Bertolt frowns.

"We should definitely use them before we leave for that field trip in two weeks," Eren says. To the beach, apparently… a plane ride away, warm and sunny. Armin's eyes light up every time it's mentioned, and every one of their teachers exchanges a look of terror as if they're not certain how they'll corral the entire junior class for a week. Petra seems relieved she isn't going.

"Agreed," Jean says.

"Christa's birthday is on the 15th," suggests Connie.

"We'll be traveling on her birthday," Eren points out.

"No, we leave the next day," Jean corrects.

"I can't do this," Armin whispers. "Eren… if you get caught…"

"None of us will," Reiner proclaims, slapping his hands down on Eren and Jean's shoulders.

"Sasha will want to be involved," Connie declares.

"I'm with Armin," Marco says, running his hand over his hair. "I don't think it's a very smart idea."

Eren bites his lip so hard he tastes blood. "We'll be fine."

"It's our protest to school starting," Jean adds with a laugh.

*Some of us are thrilled school's starting again,* Eren thinks. Like himself, and Armin. And probably everybody except Jean.


"Eren, what if they think you're the same people who broke in Hange's lab?" Armin asks.

"They won't make that correlation," Reiner assures them. "Whoever did it was… clearly after something far more serious than just some fun."
Eren remembers the staff member who leaked his and Mikasa's pasts. His fists ball up. *Who are you, bastard?*

*If you get expelled, I'm killing you myself, Mikasa texts him.*

*I won't,* he promises her.

It's not until they've all crept out of the dorm, coats and scarves thrown on to protect from the blistering cold, that Eren remembers the conversation he overheard between Erwin and Levi, about his job.

*We're hardly the first kids to pull a prank,* Eren insists to himself. *This won't have consequences for Erwin.* He hopes. Because he likes the man. He and Levi are helping Eren get accommodations for tests, and Erwin seems a caring, respectful person. How he and Levi wound up as best friends, Eren's still not quite sure. But it's amusing to see.

Bertolt keeps glancing over his shoulder, as if expecting to see Levi pounce from the shadows. Sasha meets them near the apartments, at the edge of the woods. She hands out mini chocolates. Eren pops one in his mouth.

"When they go off," Jean muses. "We all need to run."

"Agreed," Reiner says, flicking a lighter.

Eren sees a small, shadowy figure slip through the trees. His heart surges to his throat.

But whoever it was, they're gone, even though they clearly must have seen the group. *Annie? Whatever.* Maybe she likes nighttime walks.

"Come on," mutters Reiner.

"Be careful," Bertolt warns him, voice shaking.

The fuses hiss. Reiner scrambles away. "Let's go!"

Eren takes off, and the sound of firecrackers pops through the night. He pulls out his phone. No way is he spraining an ankle again. Not tonight.

"What the hell?" he can hear Oruo shriek.

"Calm down!" Petra's voice filters through the air.

*Were they spending the night together?*

As they scramble back over the roof and into their dorm, Jean covers his mouth to keep from laughing. Even Bertolt's smiling.

"Congratulations on not dying," Marco opines, crossing his arms as he waits for them.

The next morning, however, when there's a wind chill under freezing and Levi makes every single student clean the forest, Eren thinks they very well might. But the smirks on all of his friends' faces make it worth it.

He's never had so many friends before, and he likes it.
Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! Up next: Armin sees the ocean, Annie reaches a breaking point, and Sasha battles seagulls.
"Levi has asked me to inform all of you that if any of you behave foolishly and get taken by security in the airport," Erwin begins, his eyes narrowing at Reiner in particular. "In case, say, any of you make sarcastic comments, or roughhouse, or packed prohibited items such as, say, firecrackers…"

Mikasa smirks, eying Eren.

"He will not be rescuing you," Erwin concludes.

Levi crosses his arms and scowls at them all as if to reinforce Erwin's words. Hange cackles.

Eren shrugs as if the words have no effect on him. "You're in an awfully good mood," Mikasa whispers.

"Didn't I tell you?" Eren grins. "I got an 81 on that bio quiz Hange gave us yesterday." He scowls. "Although I don't like being given extra time."

"I'm so happy, Eren!" And she is. But Mikasa can't help but wonder why Eren didn't tell her beforehand.

_He doesn't need you anymore._

Mikasa swallows. Her throat aches.

"You'll each be assigned to one of the chaperones," Erwin continues. "And, if we catch any of you with alcohol, sneaking into each others' rooms, running off at hours when you shouldn't be—we won't hesitate to send you home."

Annie traipses over to them, her fists stuffed into the pocket on her hoodie. Armin gives her a smile, and she returns it.

_Just kiss already, _Mikasa thinks. Although she's not sure how Eren would react to Armin and Annie dating. _If they ever do._

Not that she can blame them. She'll never bother Eren with her feelings. Mikasa lowers her head as Erwin assigns her and Annie, plus Sasha, Christa, Ymir, Hitch, Mina Carolina and Hannah, to Hange, who gushes about all the wildlife they'll get to observe when they examine tidal pools and reefs.

"Typical," Ymir drawls, nodding at the boys, who stand on the opposite side of the parking lot. "Are boys and girls on different floors of the hotel, too?"

"More or less," Hange agrees cheerfully. "But, Ymir, I'm nonbinary. So you shouldn't assume gender."

Ymir's jaw drops. "I'm sorry," she stammers.

"It's fine." Hange laughs. "Now you know."

Christa loops her arm through Ymir's. It's not as if separating the boys from the girls is going to do
anything for them, since Mikasa's pretty certain Christa and Ymir will still wind up sharing a room.

"Have fun, kids!" Hannes calls as he walks by dragging a mop. He waves at them, and Mikasa nods back.

At the airport, all of the students march through security like soldiers, with nary an incident until Hange leaves her sunscreen in her bag.

"It would be you," grouses Levi.

"Good thing I can rescue myself," Hange retorts as she tosses her sunscreen in the garbage and makes it through. Levi almost smiles.

Mikasa falls asleep on the plane and wakes up to find her head on Eren's shoulder and her skull pounding. Her throat's scratchy, too. Blinking, she raises her head to see Eren asleep, his face plastered against the window. Armin leans across the aisle, playing backgammon on his phone with Annie.

"Who's won more games?" Mikasa asks hoarsely.

"We're tied, six to six," Annie answers.

"Seven to six!" Armin cheers as he wins. Annie smiles, brushing her blond bangs back from her face.

The announcement system bings. "We are beginning our descent. Please switch off your mobile phones…"

Armin obeys, leaning back in his chair. "I can't wait to see the ocean."

Mikasa nods. Eren groans as he wakes up.

After shuffling off the plane and into the glaring sun, they all head over to the hotel. "We won't be having any classes or experiments today," Erwin informs them. "But meet at three in the lobby to go to the beach."

"If we drown, Levi, will you rescue us?" calls Connie.

Levi shakes his head. "Not you, brat."

Mikasa's rooming with Sasha just like at school, and she's grateful for that. They'll have the best snacks, at least.

"Do you have a bathing suit?" Sasha asks as she emerges in a green one-piece, taking in Mikasa's shorts and a tank top.

Mikasa shakes her head.

"Well, I have three. One of which I've never worn before, and we're similar sizes." Sasha whips out what looks like a red bikini. "You'll impress Eren in this."

Mikasa laughs, but the sound scrapes her throat. Still, she changes into it. Will Eren like it?

"Let's go!" Sasha grabs Mikasa's hand and pulls her out of the hotel room, which is fairly nice even if small: long curtains cover a floor-to-ceiling window, and two twin beds sit covered in aqua comforters. Seashells decorate the beige walls. "I packed two bags of potato chips and some
chocolates. Do you think that's enough?"

"For two hours, probably," Mikasa replies wryly, adjusting her black tank top over her suit. She hopes Eren doesn't laugh at her for wearing a bikini.

Jean and Marco greet them in the elevator, Jean babbling about how much he likes the hotel and how he wishes they could order room service. Marco shrugs and focuses on Mikasa. "Are you okay? You look pale."

"I'm fine," Mikasa insists.

"Ready?" Hange asks the students. Armin's eyes widen to the size of saucers when they cross the street and arrive at a strip of sand, overlooking blue-green water that stretches into the horizon. Waves roll and hum, and kids laugh as they throw sand at each other. Two seagulls scream overhead, swooping and diving to pick up crumbs people have left behind.

"You won't win, birds," Sasha declares, tightening her grip on her bag.

"Repulsive," Levi says, staring at the sand. "Imagine all of the bacteria. I'm sure you love it, Hange."

"Oh, I do! And the different kinds of seaweed…"

"You're not allowed to go in over your waist," Erwin tells them. "Or else you won't be allowed back on the beach the entire rest of our trip, and if you think I don't mean it, I invite you to try me."

"Will you come in with me?" Christa asks Ymir.

Bertolt wipes sweat off his forehead. Mikasa shivers.

"Armin?" Eren prompts.

"It's amazing," Armin murmurs, dropping to the sand and feeling it with his fingers.

"Then you should swim in it," Annie tells him.

"It's so vast…"

"Oh, for God's sake," Reiner complains. He reaches down and grabs Armin, charging for the ocean.

"Reiner, wait! Put him down!" yells Annie, and then she takes off after him.

Eren grins at Mikasa as she pulls off her tank top. "I like your swimsuit."

"It's Sasha's," she tells him, her face flushing. A salty breeze wipes her face.

"Doesn't it look better on her though, Eren?" Sasha asks, pulling out a bag of chips. Connie settles down next to her.

"No," Connie states, taking Sasha's hand. Sasha hits him. "Ouch!"


"It's cold!" yelps Christa, waves folding over her feet.

"I can carry you in," offers Ymir. Armin, completely drenched, crouches in knee-deep water, examining a golden seashell while Annie pulls out a perfectly round one. Jean, Marco, Reiner, and
Bertolt dabble awfully close to Erwin's waist-deep limit, although Bertolt can advance farther than any of them.

A wave licks Mikasa's toe. She yelps and laughs. *What am I doing?*

"Come in!" Jean hollers to them, his hair plastered to his forehead. "It's not that cold if you just dunk under."

*Why not?* Mikasa dives in. She surfaces shivering, but Jean's right—it warms up quickly.

Eren still hesitates, and Mikasa rolls her eyes. She reaches out and grabs Eren's hands, pulling him in. The salt burns her eyes as she surfaces, spluttering.

"Hey!" He gasps. "Look, fish!" Little minnows swim around them. Mikasa pauses to study them, and Eren pushes her under. She gags on the saltwater and splashes Eren.

*He hasn't looked this happy since the accident.*

If her headache would just vanish, everything would be perfect. Eren's smiling, her friend are laughing, Armin's squealing with every shell he finds, and Hange dumps slimy seaweed on Levi's head and he chases her across the beach.

"Success," Christa declares, watching them.

Mikasa's teeth chatter.

"Um, are you okay?" Marco asks, splashing his way towards her.

"Just cold," Mikasa manages.

"Cold or a cold?" demands Eren, putting his hands to her forehead. "Mikasa, you have a fever!"

*Dammit.*

"Come on." Eren grabs her and hauls her out of the water. "You need to lie down."

"I'm not that sick," Mikasa snaps. "Hange might have some ibuprofen."

"I'll fucking kill you, you pieces of shit!" Sasha screams at the seagulls swarming her potato chips. Connie claps his hand over his face as Erwin marches over to them.

"Still." Eren grabs his towel and wraps it around her shoulders.

"You don't have to take care of me," Mikasa says as they watch Hange and Levi approach.

Eren snorts. "Now you know how I feel, when you're always taking care of me and it's completely unnecessary."

The words land like rocks in Mikasa's stomach. Her head throbs.

"And now I know how you feel, trying to take care of someone who doesn't want it," Eren adds, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. "But who maybe—sometimes—needs it."

With Mikasa sick and having received permission to order room service, Eren and Armin eat dinner with Jean and Marco. Annie's supposed to join them, but she never shows.
Are you okay? Armin texts, but she doesn't respond.

"You should take her some food," Marco suggests.

"I'm not allowed to the girls' floor," Armin points out.

"Well, Hitch sure won't do it," Jean says. "She's meeting Marlowe in his room. Connie's coming to our room to watch TV. He was supposed to meet Sasha in her room, but since Mikasa's sick, that's not happening."

Armin's face flushes. "How will I get it to her?"

"Leave it to me," Marco says, winking. He heads back towards the kitchen, returning with a Tupperware container full of jambalaya. "I just asked!"

"I'll be back," Armin promises Eren. It shouldn't be too hard to sneak past Hange and Levi…

"I'm going to check on Mikasa," Eren says. "Meet you back in the room?"

Armin nods. They take the stairwells, which are not air-conditioned. Humidity wraps itself around Armin's face.

"Maybe Annie's sick too," Eren suggests.

"Maybe." Armin doubts it, although he assumes that's what she told Hange to avoid having to come down.

"See you." Eren jogs down the hall towards Sasha and Mikasa's room.

Annie's in 307, Mikasa texts Armin. He knocks on the door, and it swings open almost immediately.

"Hitch?" Her eyes widen. "Armin!"

"Let me in," he hisses, sliding inside. "I don't want to get caught."

"I don't want you to either," Annie says, sniffling. Her eyes, red-rimmed, avoid his.

"I brought you food," Armin tells her, holding out the Tupperware.

Annie's eyes water. "Thanks."

"What's wrong, Annie?" Armin asks.

"It doesn't matter." She takes the container and marches over to one of the beds, dropping on it. The lights are off, and the room's shrouded in dusk.

It does if you're upset. "Is it your dad?"

She shrugs. "He's not happy with me."

"Is he ever happy with you?" Armin can't help ask. Annie stiffens. "I didn't mean it like that—I mean—Annie, if he's so angry all the time, it can't be your fault."

"Who said he was angry?" Annie opens the Tupperware. "Don't judge if I eat with my hands."

"Not judging," Armin promises, sitting down across from her. He leans over to flick the light on.
"He's mad I'm not… applying myself enough. He thinks I'm distracted," Annie says finally, between bites. Her breath catches.

"Annie, you're one of the best in our class," Armin says quietly. "I don't understand how—"

"But it's not enough for him." Annie wipes at her eyes, a grain of rice sticking to her cheek. "It's never enough."

Armin reaches over and brushes the rice off. Annie recoils.

"I'm sorry—"

"Don't be," she spits out. "It's not you. It's him, it's me—he's right, I should be more—focused—" Her chest starts to heave. Sobs break through. "I should—concentrate more on—on getting a scholarship—on helping him—and less on—less on friends—on people like you—"

Armin's chest throbs. A lump grows in his throat. "I understand."

"What?" Annie lifts her eyes, tears streaming, and meets his.

"If you want to focus more, I won't hold it against you—I won't consider you a bad person—don't distract yourself if it's not what you want—"

"Not what I want?" Annie laughs, a broken sound that's still musical, somehow. "I don't—I want—" She shakes her head and doubles over. "I don't want—to be—a bad person."

What did I say? Armin cringes. "That wouldn't make you a bad—"

"I am a bad person, Armin," Annie insists, slamming her fist into the bed. "I don't—I—I hate myself."

"Why?" Armin shakes his head, tears stinging his own eyes because he knows that sticky dark feeling, the one that's impossible to escape from. "You shouldn't, Annie—no one hates you—"

"Because I can't make myself do what I'm supposed to do. I can't listen to my father, and he's all I've ever had—because he's not all I have anymore. People here are nice, and you—"

Did he tell you people wouldn't be nice at this school? Armin wonders.

"I hate that I'm in love with you," Annie ekes out.

What? Armin's arms freeze. His head feels like it's spinning. What the—what—Annie—

"You're the only one who hasn't judged me so far, who doesn't seem to think I'm some distant-on-purpose bitch—you're kind, and you're really a good person, and I can't listen to my father because I don't want to not be in love with you." Annie covers her eyes. "You don't have to—I'm sorry; it sounds like I'm blaming you but I'm not—you're good—"

I'm weak. I'm useless. All those adjectives, all those names that bullies always threw at Armin strike him again, and Annie—

Does she really love me?

Armin grabs her hands. "Annie—"

She throws her arms around him and cries into his shoulder. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."
"For what?" Armin demands. What kind of person is her father, to make her feel like she has to apologize for having friends? For loving someone?

"I feel like I'm not being fair to you."

Her forehead's warm against his neck, and her hair soft against his hands. "How not?"

"Because you're not—I mean, I know you don't feel the same way, and it's okay—"

Armin doesn't know what love feels like. He does know that Annie's important to him, so important—she's good, and she's smart and funny and she helped him figure out how to help Eren—she's brave, because he wouldn't have lasted this long if his parents or grandfather bullied him at home, she's strong, she's amazing—she's gorgeous and... oh my God.

"But why would you like me, of all people?" he blurts out. "I'm not determined like Eren or strong like Bertolt—I'm short and weak."

"You're smart. You see through things, and you're kind," Annie whispers. "You have principles. Physical weakness has nothing on mental strength, and even though you're insecure—you're strong."

She's pleading with him. She wants him to believe her.

_I want to, too._

Armin pulls Annie's head up and kisses her. Or, tries to kiss her—his lips almost miss hers. "Sorry—I'm not really sure what I'm doing," he stammers.

"Why?" she asks, nose swollen and eyes scarlet and still everything he hopes for.

"Because," Armin tells her, cupping the back of her head with his hand. "You're a wonderful person, and I—" _Maybe I love you._

Her eyes widen, and that look—_she believes me._

She takes his face in her hands and slowly melts her lips over his. _So this is what kissing is like._ She tastes like jambalaya and the ocean, and Armin holds her close. He's not sure how long they spend kissing, but when Hitch opens the door to find them making out, she laughs so hard Armin's terrified Hange will overhear.

"Skedaddle, then!" Hitch tells him.

Annie peers out the door first, checking for teachers. "You're safe."

Armin darts down the stairs. _I just kissed Annie. A lot._

And he liked it.

Armin pushes the door to his room open and finds Eren, Connie, Jean, and Marco all gathered.

"Marlowe said it was fine to come back, but I wanted to hear from you," Connie offers in explanation.

"Hear what?" Armin demands. He doesn't want to embarrass Annie. Of course, if Hitch knows they were snogging... _everyone's going to know._

"What took you two hours?" Jean asks, stretching his arms out.
"Jean, you're on Armin's bed," Marco reprimands him.

"We were talking," Armin replies, dropping onto the spot Jean vacates. "It was fun."

"Did you kiss her though?" Eren yelps. "Because if you didn't—"

"You'd be an idiot," Connie agrees.

Armin pulls the pillow over his face, keeping his mouth shut.

But under the pillow, he smiles.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! Up next: an attempted kidnapping, Annie tries to disentangle herself from the web she's stuck in, and Marco's kindness becomes his undoing.
"I'm feeling better," Mikasa insists. "Really." The clinks and clacks of silverware against china breakfast plates echo around them. Levi chugs black coffee at a nearby table as Hange plows through a waffle.


"I'm trying to take care of my health."

Bullshit.

"We won't be outside much today anyways," Marco puts in. "Just touring the courthouse. If she's tired, they should be able to get her some rest."

Armin raises his eyebrows as Annie bites back a smile. "No one can make Mikasa rest," Eren points out.

"Mikasa is fine," she snaps. The sun glares from the windows. Eren rolls his eyes. She isn't fine, but he can't do anything about it now.

"Except Mikasa's now referring to herself in third person," Reiner calls.

"Shut up, Reiner," Jean groans.

"Well, look who just got here," Connie teases as Ymir and Christa rush in. "Late night?"

"We're leaving in three minutes," Erwin tells them tersely, getting up from his table. "I'll go check on the buses."

"I'll bash your skull in," Ymir threatens Connie as she grabs a croissant and hands Christa a strawberry danish. "I'll get us coffee."

"I can help—"

"Nah, I got it." Ymir grins.

Christa shrugs and bites into her pastry. Eren finishes his omelet and troops out to the bus. The tour's more or less boring, with everyone's eyes glazing over and visions of the beach or the pool or something, anything other than this—like the trip they took the day before to analyze tide pools with Hange. Even Erwin tries to cover a yawn.

Mikasa drags, her shoulders slumped and her face listless. Why won't you take care of yourself? Eren wants to scream.

"Okay," Levi says as they all emerge from the dull gray building and back into the sunlight. Tourists stream all around them, chatting incessantly. Stalls selling slushes, jewelry, seashells and shirts line the streets. Two little kids lick ice cream cones. One toddles into Berolt.

"Careful there," Berolt says with a grin.
"You're tall," the little girl proclaims.

Bertolt's face turns beet red. "Yup."

"We have twenty minutes before the buses arrive," Levi shouts. "Stroll the streets, waste your money, I don't care. Just be back in front of the courthouse in twenty, or you won't be going to the beach tonight."

"Also stay on the main street!" Erwin adds. "No ducking down side-streets."

"Want ice cream?" Reiner asks Bertolt. He nods, and Eren grabs Mikasa's arm.

"What?" she protests. Annie and Armin follow, but Annie pauses to look at some old books, fancy ones with gold lining and embossed covers, and Armin stays with her.

"Ice cream will feel good on your throat. My treat," Eren proclaims.

She flushes. "You don't have to."

"Why not?" Eren loops his arm around her. She smiles, and oh God—she's really beautiful.

Stop! He can't think about Mikasa in that way. It's not fair to her.

"Cookie dough," Mikasa requests, and Eren orders her a large. She scowls at him, but she's happy within minutes.

"Hey," says an older man, sauntering over to them. "You all from Wall Academy?"

"Yeah," Eren affirms, taking his own chocolate cone.

"Of course they are. Don't you recognize Grisha Jaeger's son?" asks another man as he joins his buddy. His bald head gleams, and Eren's stomach tightens.

"You knew my father?" The mention is like a bullet wound to Eren's heart. He didn't expect it to hurt so much, so many months later.

"You look nothing like your father," one of the men states.

What? Eren's always known he looks more like Mom, but how do they know? Eren's fingers trace his face.

"Eren." Mikasa steps closer, her jaw set.

"And you've got to be the foster kid. Ackerman, right?" says the first guy, stepping closer. "We used to work for your father, Eren."

"You did?" The man's word is like a fish hook, reeling Eren in even as a little voice in his head screams at him that something isn't right. The people around them fade. The sunlight dims. Eren steps closer.

"Yeah. He was a pioneer in his research." The second man, the bald one, steps towards one of the side alleys, lined with a newspaper stand and a man selling drums. "I still carry a picture of our days back in college. That's how we met, you know."

It's weird to think of his father having any sort of life when he wasn't Eren's father, but it's intoxicating, too. "Can I see it?"
"Of course."

"Eren, wait," Mikasa protests. "We're not supposed to—"

"You don't have to leave the main street," the first guy says.

"It's so interesting that two men who know Grisha Jaeger happen to be visiting the exact same town Wall Academy's visiting at the exact same time, and they happen to run into him on the street," Mikasa states. Her ice cream drips down her hand.

Gooseflesh rises on Eren's arms, his neck. "Mikasa?"

The first man lunges at Eren, and Mikasa throws her ice cream in his face. "Run, Eren!" she screams, voice cracking.

He's not leaving her, no way. Eren grabs Mikasa's hand and flies up the street. A hand lands on his shoulder. Eren kicks out his leg, and Mikasa grunts—a flash of blond—Armin? Annie?

The man throws Eren to the pavement. His chin slams into it, and his teeth smack each other. "Mikasa—"

Levi charges at them, his face furious. "Get out of here! Back to the courthouse! Now!"

"Come on!" Jean, of all people, reaches down to help Eren up. Marco grabs Mikasa, and Armin and Annie run with them.

"What the hell just happened?" Ymir yells as they stagger up to the courthouse, where Sasha's clutching a large slush and Christa's crying. Connie's jaw hangs open.

His chin stings. Blood trickles down his neck. Eren shakes his head. "I don't know."

"Two men tried to kidnap Eren," Mikasa states. "They couldn't have been more obvious if they had a white van."

*Why wasn't it obvious to me?* Shame floods Eren.

*Because they knew you would miss your father.*

Reiner and Bertolt jog up, their faces white. "Eren—we heard—" Bertolt stammers, sweat shining on his face.

"Are you okay?" demands Reiner.

"Get on the bus," Erwin orders as Levi jogs back up to them, shaking his head. Police rush out of the courthouse.

"They'll want to talk to us, won't they?" Eren asks Levi.

"Yeah, but they can do that from the hotel, brat," Levi responds. "You're sticking close to me for the next few hours."

Eren nods. With Mikasa on his left and Levi on his right, he should feel safe. But he can't escape the feeling that everything's tilting, that nothing makes sense. *Why?*

"How long do you think we're stuck in the hotel for?" Jean gripes as he kicks at the pool water.
"Um, probably awhile," Armin answers. Annie drums her fingers on the lounge chair they share. A pool's a cheap substitute for the ocean, especially when they're close enough Armin can smell the salt air.

"I'm pretty sure that after an attempted kidnapping, we're all going to be sent home," Marco puts in, hauling himself to the side of the pool. Hange watches them all with her arms crossed over her chest. Erwin and Levi are still talking to the police, apparently.

"I don't want everyone to have to go home on account of me," Eren complains. "Except for Mikasa, but that's because she's sick, not because of me."

"I'm fine," Mikasa snarls, her face pale and sweaty.

"Sick and still able to save your ass," teases Jean.

"Aren't you scared, Eren?" Marco asks. "I mean—I can't believe that happened. In broad daylight."

"I'm not scared." Eren balls up his fists. "I'm pissed."

_Oh for goodness's sake._ "I'm scared," Armin snaps. "For you. Care about your life, Eren." "Hey, Marco," calls Ymir as she swims over. "Want to play Marco Polo?"

"Ha, ha. Never heard that one before," Marco responds.

"I like the game!" Christa calls, clinging to a purple pool noodle. "It'll be fun."

"He does have to be Marco, though," Connie announces as he finishes spreading more sunscreen on Sasha's back.

Marco's face turns red. "Why?"

Ymir splashes him. "Because it's your destiny."


Mikasa rises, because she's stubborn, but even in her sick state Armin trusts her not to drown even if he doesn't trust Eren or Jean to save her.

"I'm going to head in," Annie says, adjusting her sunglasses. "You should stay, Armin."

"I'd rather head in too," Armin says quickly. She shakes her head as he follows her into the hotel.

"Your dad called, didn't he?" Armin asks as they get in the elevator. There's one advantage to all the chaperones being at the pool or at the police station, and that's that he has no worries about getting caught in Annie's room.

"Yep." Annie groans. "I don't want to answer. I mean, I texted him that I'm okay."

"Did they notify parents?"

"Apparently." Annie shakes her head as they get off on the fifth floor. She unlocks her room with the card. "That's enough, isn't it? The text? Do I have to call him back?"

"Not if you don't want to. If he's just going to yell at you..." Armin scowls as he follows her inside. The heavy curtain covers the window, shrouding the room.
Annie throws her phone onto Hitch's bed with force. "I'm not calling him back. Screw it."

"Good for you," Armin tells her.

She whips off her sunglasses and pokes his shoulder. "You're burned."

"Oh." Armin frowns.

"I don't know why I still feel obligated to—he's my father, so like—but he just—every time we talk, he just is one-minded. He loves me, but I don't know how—it's like it's not his priority, loving me."

Annie covers her face as she drops onto her bed. "And I wish it would be."

But you feel like you don't deserve it, Armin thinks. Why? What happened? He wraps his arm around her, and she leans her head against his shoulder.

"Are you doing okay?"

"What do you mean?"

"It was your friends who almost got kidnapped."

"They're your friends, too," Armin says quietly.

She lifts her head to meet his eyes, her own tearing up. "But are you okay?"

No. Armin shakes his head. "I'm scared for them—Eren, Mikasa. Eren's so—he doesn't realize it but I think he's in greater danger than anyone knows—" Levi and Erwin's conversation reverberates in his mind. "And I couldn't stand it if anything happened to him. He's my best friend. He was my only friend, until Mikasa came along, and then they were my only friends until this year."

We've both been so, so lonely. Even if we told ourselves we weren't.

"He helped me so much," Armin chokes out. "I used to always get—beaten up, and he would try and help me even though it'd usually end with him getting beaten up too. He still thought protecting me—that it was worth it. I can't let anything happen to him, but there's nothing I can do and I hate feeling useless—"

"You're not useless," Annie insists, taking Armin's chin in her hand. She's kneeling now, and she lifts his face to hers. "Nothing's going to happen to Eren. We'll both—we'll both—we'll figure something out. I'll help. But you've got to generate the ideas, because you're the Einstein. And don't think you can't. Just because you can't right now doesn't mean you won't. I know you will." And the way she looks at him—she believes in him, she finds hope in him—we can work together—

Armin kisses her then, all the worries that he's not good enough at kissing, at loving Annie, at being a good friend melting away, at least temporarily, for a moment, and that's all he needs right now. Her hands rove through his hand, and his hands grip her arms, her shoulders.

I love you. He says it out loud, too, and Annie's eyes tear up again like she wants to ask him why, but she'll cling to it no matter what. His hands rove down her back, and hers press against his chest, and then his hands move up to Annie's chest.

Annie pulls away. "Do you want to do this?"

Do I? He's nervous. And shit, they don't have any protection. But… "Yeah," he says. "Do—you?"

"Yeah." She leans her forehead against his. "We can go slow, okay?"
"Have you ever done this before?"

She shakes her head, her lips against his neck.

"Slow," Armin pants, her skin warm against his, both of their hearts beating too fast, but she looks at him like she trusts him, and he trusts her, and they might be bumbling but they can figure it out, together. Annie leans back, pulling him on top of her.

Armin leaves before dinner, so they don't get caught. Annie makes her bed before showering and changing into jeans and her favorite hoodie.

Opening the door to the bathroom, Annie finds Hitch humming as she rests on the bed, texting. "Dinner's at seven. It's mandatory. I think they're going to make an announcement then," Hitch tells her. "About what we're doing. They haven't caught anyone."

Annie nods. She so wanted to find out that they'd caught someone, that it wasn't what she already knows it is.

Call me back, her father's written.

No. She might be a terrible person still, but she's not doing that. Not right now, when she feels like she might be a good person. Armin looks at her like she is. He believes she is, and he inspires her. He's so smart... maybe, maybe there's some hope that he's right, and she can be good.

Are you free? she texts Bertolt and Reiner.


On my way. Annie slips out of the room.

"Are you going to snog Armin again?" Hitch teases.

She doesn't respond. Who knows how Hitch would react if she knew they'd slept together. Armin probably doesn't want people gossiping about it, and neither does Annie.

I can't believe we actually did that. And it didn't hurt, or feel invasive like she'd thought. He loves me. He tried to stammer away that he knew he wasn't as attractive as she might be expecting, but Annie didn't care, because the whole reason she likes him is because he's Armin, and to her, he's everything she wants.

Levi is supposedly down the hall from Reiner and Bertolt, so Annie doesn't bother knocking at their door. Knock, knock, she texts Bertolt instead.

He yanks the door open and sweeps her inside. "Are you okay?" he demands. The shower runs in the background, and then it switches off.

Annie remembers Armin's fear, and rage sizzles. At them. At herself. "Are you?" she retorts, her heart pounding as she crosses her arms. I have to do this. She promised Armin to help protect Eren, and so help her God, she'll keep that promise.

"What do you mean?" Bertolt steps back, fiddling with the fraying ends of his t-shirt.

"You know damn well what I mean. What the hell is your problem?" Tears spring to her eyes.

Bertolt blinks, as if genuinely hurt. "Annie—"
"What's going on?" Reiner demands, stepping out of the bathroom, his short hair wet and plastered to his forehead.

Rage shoots through Annie. At Reiner, at Bertolt, because they're her and she doesn't want to be like them, and yet—her phone buzzes again. No doubt her father.

You have to be.

I just want a choice!

"You sick bastards," Annie chokes out. "You almost got Eren kidnapped—you put him at risk—Zeke can't even be happy about that—"

"Actually, Zeke suggested it," Bertolt says quietly. "It's a good distraction, making it seem like someone's after the entire family."

"A good distraction?" Annie cries out. "He's our friend!"

"We knew Mikasa wouldn't let anything happen—and neither would Levi—and if need be, we'd help," Reiner says. "Just—chaos. To help. Zeke's been feeling pressure."

"So… he paid two thugs to try to kidnap Eren just to throw the scent off himself?"

Reiner shrugs. "He's afraid Erwin might find out his link to Dr. Jaeger. Besides, it gave us the time to deliver a package this afternoon." He narrows his eyes, and Annie takes a step back.

Who are you?

Not the Reiner she actually likes sometimes.

"The package you were to distracted to help with. You know, if we tell Zeke and he tells your father, you'll be dropped from the scholarship program—have to go back to working at that horrible coffee shop and—"

"Reiner, cut it out!" Bertolt shouts. "We're not ratting on Annie."

Reiner grunts. "We all owe Zeke."

Bertolt closes his trembling jaw, sweat glistening on his forehead in spite of the blasting air conditioning. "Of course we do."

Screw all of you. Annie marches for the door. At least Eren isn't in any more immediate danger—when Reiner returns to his normal self, she can talk to him, get him and Bertolt to agree never to pull any of that crap again—

Reiner's 'normal self'.

What even is his normal self?

What is mine?

It's almost seven, and she heads down to dinner, where Armin's already waiting. He grins at her, flushing slightly. She smiles and takes his hand.

"Ooh," teases Connie.
Sasha and Mikasa enter the room, Sasha making a beeline towards the food and Mikasa trudging, as if she's exhausted. "She needs to see a doctor," grumbles Eren as he hauls himself over to her.

Annie loads her plate up with a hamburger, avocado, and fries. Why not? It tastes delicious.

Reiner and Bertolt enter, Bertolt looking like he's just run up six flights of stairs. What happened? Annie wonders.

"Attention!" Erwin shouts, rising from the table. Annie puts her hamburger down, the grilled taste evaporating from her mouth as bile surges up her throat.

"We've had several conversations today, with Principal Pixis, as well as Zackley, the head of the board, and we've agreed that the safest thing to do is to return home tomorrow afternoon," Erwin informs them. Groans erupt, but Annie's not surprised.

"No beach again," Armin says sadly. "But it's smart."

Eren scowls. "I hate feeling like this."

"Not your fault," Marco assures him as Sasha steals some of Annie's fries.

"In addition, after dinner, we'd like you to stay put," Erwin continues. "In light of—other incidents—the police feel it's necessary to search all of your rooms. I assure you the greatest respect will be taken with your belongings."

"Again?" complains Jean.

"Seems to be a habitual thing," Ymir comments as she sips her soda.

"I think they just want to make sure we're safe," Christa says softly.

"Of course," Ymir agrees.

Now, Annie's relieved Hitch kept the condoms in Marlowe's room. Even if it would have been good to have one. Oh well. Neither she nor Armin ever did anything before, so they're fine.

Will Reiner and Bertolt be okay? Do they still have some of the drugs? Annie shoves her plate away from her.

If they get caught, will they rat me out too?

Armin squeezes her hand and smiles. Hers wobbles. I don't know what to do!

Levi and Hange reappear, Hange tapping Marco on the shoulder. He follows her out of the room as Levi talks to Erwin. Mike looks bored.

Erwin's phone rings, and he scowls.

His job's in danger, Zeke told her before the trip. Good.

This isn't going to help anything, Annie realizes as Armin hands her a chocolate cupcake. It tastes like sawdust.

"Everyone!" hollers Erwin, stepping up again. "Go find your assigned chaperone. They'll escort you to your room."
"Text?" Armin asks Annie. She nods and scurries over to Hange, whose face appears gray.

They exit the restaurant, heading into the lobby where a fountain bubbles, and uniformed cops stand stiff like statues.

And someone's crying.

"Marco!" Jean shrieks.

No, no, no! Annie doesn't understand. How could—why—


"No! That's my roommate! That's my best friend!" Jean screams. "Why are you arresting him?" His voice catches.

"It's none of your business," one of the cops says, his hand clenched around Marco's shoulder. Tears stream down Marco's face, and his arms are behind his back, handcuffed. His head's lowered as if he's ashamed.

Christa sobs into Ymir's shoulder. Sasha covers her mouth in shock.

"No!" Eren shouts. "We deserve an explanation! Someone tell us what the hell is going on! Marco wouldn't have anything to do with—he doesn't have a mean bone in his body!"

"This can't have to do with the kidnapping," Armin protests. "Marco—"

"They found illegal substances in his room," Hange says, her voice disbeliefing. "Serious illegal substances." She shakes her head, and Levi bites his lip.

"It can't be," Mikasa cries out, voice hoarse.

No.

Oh, God, no.

Tears strangling her, Annie turns to gape at Bertolt and Reiner. Bertolt cries into his hands.

"Well, if it was in our room, why aren't they arresting me too?" Jean demands. "Marco doesn't use drugs!"

"And Bertolt and I were in just in their room!" Reiner adds. "Lots of us have been in and out—why him—"

"It was found in his suitcase," Levi snaps, scowling deeply.

They're going to drug test all of us, Annie realizes. Not that she or Reiner or Bertolt will be positive. Or that Marco will be—but his suitcase…

"You can't!" Reiner begs. "He's a saint! He wouldn't—"

You're not faking it. He really doesn't remember. Because if anyone planted it, it would have to be Reiner—they must have found out rooms were being searched—or Zeke texted to warn them. You're letting the monster control you, Reiner, and you're making us all like you!

Oh no. You made yourself a monster. She stares at her hands as if expecting to see claws sprouting,
bloodstains, anything.

"You can't arrest him!" Jean insists, sobs wracking his body. "He—"

Marco lifts his gaze and looks directly at Annie. Tears pour down her face. Sobs burst from her mouth.

*He knows.*

*Oh, shit, he knows.*

He looks to Reiner and Bertolt next, but he doesn't say a word. He just cries, and the shame—it grabs Annie's ankles like hot tar, burning her and petrifying her.

*I'm sorry. I'm sorry.*

She can't speak.

*It's not him; it's us!*

She can't speak.

*Please…*

When Hange gently pulls Annie away from the lobby, hatred surges.

Towards herself.

*It's too late.*

Chapter End Notes

Alas, poor Marco. Fear not, for freckled Jesus shall rise again... eventually. Up next week: Jean has an epiphany, Levi and Mikasa discuss Eren, and Ymir faces an impossible choice as her past comes back to haunt her.
"What's going to happen to Marco?" Eren asks the next morning as he shoves his clothes into his suitcase. His eyes are swollen from crying so much. He can't even see straight.

"His parents must have been called," Armin says sadly. "He won't do jail time for that—just probation, I guess." He bites his lip and clenches his fist. "It's so unfair."

"He wouldn't do that," Eren insists. "I know he wouldn't. Drugs, kidnapping—none of it. He's like Jesus, but if Jesus had freckles."

Armin nods, staring out their window, lost in his thoughts.

Everyone's silent as they traipse onto the bus for the flight home. Jean slumps in the seat across from Eren and Mikasa.

"How are you doing?" Armin asks Jean sympathetically, from across the aisle. Annie leans her head against the window.

"They've confiscated his phone, so I can't even text him," Jean mutters, shaking his device as if that'll somehow magically make a text from Marco appear. "He's innocent. Someone set him up."

"They must have," Mikasa agrees, rubbing her throat as if it's still killing her. "But who?" Her voice sounds hoarse.

Armin frowns.

"If I find them, I'll send my fist through their face," Eren vows. What kind of asshole would do something so horrible to Marco?

"I'll help you," Jean mutters. "I can't believe I'm saying that, but I will." He slumps lower in his seat. "I can't believe this. They're going to expel him, aren't they?"

"Yeah," Mikasa says, studying her shoes.

Eren doesn't want to imagine Wall Academy without Marco's encouragements or his chirpy attitude in the morning. As annoying as Eren's always pretended he found it, he'll miss it.

"He'll probably have to repeat a grade," Armin whispers. "Unless his parents homeschool him. And no academy is going to want a student who was kicked out for possessing a hard drug."

"Not helping, Armin," Jean snaps, covering his eyes with his arm. He sniffs, as if he's crying, and dammit, Eren actually feels for Jean too. Losing someone you care about—even if they're still alive—it sucks. Especially when it's not fair.

"I've been such an idiot," Jean mutters, leaning forward.

"How so?" Eren asks.

Jean snorts. "You should be the one saying 'yeah, I know,' Jaeger. I've been an arrogant, selfish ass."
Don’t know if I can disagree. Although Eren remembers how it feels to be kicked when you’re already down, the bruises it leaves that never quite heal. "What happened wasn't because of you. Unless you planted the drugs, which we know you didn't."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence." Jean still shudders. "I feel like I—failed somehow. Like I should have see that someone snuck something into his suitcase—"

"Do you have any idea who?" Eren demands. He will find this person.

"No. Literally everyone from our class has been in and out of our room, plus chaperones, plus staff."

The implication hits Eren. No. It wasn't someone from our class. They're his friends—and even the ones he doesn't know as well, like Samuel or Thomas Wagner—they're nice. They would never do this.

But Mikasa's eyes narrow as if she agrees. Stop it! he wants to shout at her. Not everyone's hiding an evil side!

Aren't they?

Eren bites his lip. Blood fills his mouth. Shit. He has to stop doing that.

Don't you deserve it? You couldn't save your father. You couldn't free your mother—she's still lingering. And you can't help your friends.

The bus hits a pothole, jostling them, but the thoughts leave burns in Eren's mind.

"I should have been smarter," Jean says again.

"M-Marco wouldn't hold that against you," Eren stammers. "He wouldn't want you thinking in that way—"

"It doesn't matter." Jean punches the seat. A sob rips from his mouth. "He's a far better person than I am. It should have happened to me instead."

That, I can't disagree with. But Eren says nothing.

"I think I'm in love with him," Jean mumbles.

"What?" Eren's jaw drops.

Mikasa scowls at Eren. Was that not the right response?

"And now I feel like it's too late—and I can't stand it." Jean covers his face again.

"He'll get his phone back eventually," Mikasa manages. "You should text him then."

"Wait what?" Eren asks again as a light rain begins to fall. "Does—"

"Eren, everyone knows that Marco is gay, except you." Jean snorts. Armin shrugs as if to agree.

"I didn't mean that," Eren retorts, heart pounding. "I meant—you're actually trusting me with this? You're telling me?"

"Of course you're making this all about you," Jean snaps. "Unless you're warning me—"
"No, that's not it at all!" Eren cries out. He leans forward, stretching out his hand. "I'm going to prove that Marco's innocent."

Jean scoffs.

"For real," Eren insists. "I'm not letting them get away with it. Kidnappers be damned." His life has been a series of unhappy endings. If he can secure one for someone else—even Jean—he will.

"I thought you liked Mikasa," Armin puts in.

Jean swallows, running his hand through his hand. "I did, and no offense, Mikasa—"

She rolls her eyes as if to say none taken.

"—but like… I just—Marco—I never felt that way for anyone, not a guy, not a girl. Maybe I'm bi. Maybe it doesn't matter. But I do like him as more than just a friend and I want him to know that, but not over the phone like a piece of shit deadbeat." Jean meets Armin's eyes. "How did you tell Annie that you liked her?"

"I told him," Annie says listlessly.

"In person," Armin confirms.

"Jean, Marco wouldn't reject you," Eren says. "No matter what."

"In fact, he'll probably be thrilled," Mikasa comments.

"Guys," hisses Christa, appearing behind them. "Look." She points ahead of them, and Eren peers ahead to see Hange asleep on Levi's head.

The plane ride home feels agonizingly long, and the cold weather slaps them as soon as they disembark. Erwin does about seven head counts before they board another bus to Wall Academy.

"You're not going back to your dorm," Hange tells Mikasa.

"Why not?" Mikasa yelps, pulling out her scarf and wrapping it around her face. The scarf Eren gave her, the one his mom gave him.

Hange's hand lands on Mikasa's forehead. "You need to go to the nurse's clinic. You're burning up, sweetheart."

Mikasa's face falls. Eren's heart leaps. "Can I go with her? I won't stay long—but—"

"You can stay until normal quiet hours, at which point you better be back in your dorm," Hange allows. "And, Eren, we'll have extra security at the academy. Don't worry."

I'm more worried about proving Marco's innocence, Eren thinks, surveying the dejected faces of his classmates. One of you. One of you.

Can he put aside his feelings for them? Would he even want to?

And shouldn't you be more concerned about the fact that whoever killed your family might be after you?

Eren watches Levi drag a suitcase. Let them come, he thinks, curling his fist. *I'll take them down, too.*
Hange walks them to the clinic, the sky indigo and streaked with orange. Gray snow lies crumpled on the ground, melting and seeping between the cobblestone cracks.

Eren waits while the nurse takes Mikasa's temperature and feels her tonsils. "Sore throat?"

"Uh-huh," Mikasa gargles from behind a thermometer.

"We'll do a blood test."

Mikasa cringes.

"Do I need to hold your hand?" Eren jokes.

The nurse pulls the thermometer out of her mouth and Mikasa tugs her scarf over her face. She nods.

"You'll be spending the night here, not in the dorm," the nurse tells her. Mikasa's eyes fill with tears.

"Hey, Mikasa, you get an extra-long vacation," Eren says, trying to cheer her up as the nurse leads them to a room lined with beds with rainbow covers. "Don't be sad. Any of us would want to sleep in or—"

"I don't like doing nothing," Mikasa snaps as she lowers herself down.

"You're not. You're sick and your body's trying to get better."

"Yeah, but—" Mikasa's voice catches. "I did nothing when those men came to kill my parents. I froze. I promised I'd never do nothing again, that I'd always keep going—"

"Mikasa!" Eren grabs her in a hug, her head warm, too warm, against his. He never meant to imply that when he told Mikasa to fight. "You need to rest, too, okay?" he says into her hair. It smells like vanilla. "You're too—too hard on yourself. I'd give anything to be half as action-oriented as you."

She shakes her head.

_I'd give anything to be as brave as you_, Eren thinks. Losing her parents—twice. And still—still she hasn't given up on anyone, on the world, on having a family, loving people. He can't quite force the words out, so he holds her close. _So what if I get sick? She's worth it._

The nurse arrives back to tell Eren it's time for him to leave. "Text me," he tells Mikasa. "I'll send you funny gifs."

She nods, yawning. "Thanks."

He's barely back at his dorm before Mikasa texts him. _I have mono._

"How is Mikasa?" Armin demands the moment he steps inside.

"Sick. She has mono," Eren repeats, texting back. _Get some sleep!_

"Poor Mikasa," says Bertolt with a frown. _Mono's no fun._

"Sasha will smuggle her ice cream," Connie promises, grabbing his phone to text his girlfriend.

"Don't you get that from kissing?" asks Reiner, tossing a baseball up and catching it.

"You can also get it from sharing food and drinks. It's spread through saliva," Armin reports.
Connie laughs. "Besides, we know she wasn't kissing anyone. There's only one person Mikasa wants to kiss and he's oblivious." He glares pointedly at Eren.

Eren flushes. *Mikasa wants to kiss me?* He pictures her in his mind, her small mouth and her sweet smile. "Really?" he hisses to Armin.

Armin looks at him like he's an idiot.

*I'm a fool. He wants to kiss her, too. But—she deserves better.*

"How are you feeling, brat?"

Mikasa cracks her eyes open, light burning them. Her throat feels like someone dumped scalding water down it, and her head pounds. "I'm—okay," she croaks out as she sits up.

Levi raises his eyebrows. "You don't look it." He gestures to the math sheets he's left on the foot of her bed. "I'll give you an extension. Get to those when you're feeling better."

Mikasa rubs her eyes. "I thought you didn't give extensions."

"I'm making an exception."

"Did they catch whoever tried to kidnap Eren?" Mikasa fumbles for her water glass.

Levi shakes his head. "Not yet."

Water scratches her tonsils. Mikasa cringes.

"Drink up, or you'll end up in the hospital, and Jaeger won't be able to visit you," Levi warns.

She glares at him. "Why do you care whether or not I wind up in the hospital?" Her face feels like it's burning. She'd rather dump the water over her head.

"You haven't wondered about the fact that we have the same last name?" Levi asks, cocking his head.

Mikasa sets the cup down. Thoughts whirl—*is he really—how—why*—and she leans forward. "Are you saying we're related?"

Levi shrugs. "Distantly."

"Distantly," Mikasa repeats.

*Your family's dead.* She remembers her father's laughter, his smile as he read to her every night, but she can never remember it before another image, the one with blood streaming down his chest, eclipses it. Her mother—the axe—

*I still have family beside the Jaegers?* "Why didn't you tell me sooner?" she rasps.

Levi flinches. "Like I said. We're… second cousins, third cousins, maybe add a removed in there somewhere—I don't know how that sh-stuff works."

"Do you have—are there more relatives out there?" Mikasa demands.

Levi's gaze softens. He shakes his head. "Just me."
"Oh." Mikasa leans back. *No wonder no one ever came.* Not that she wanted them to. With Eren and Carla and Grisha, she had a family.

"My mother died when I was young. I was raised by my uncle… until things happened. He's gone now, too." Levi's eyes take on a faraway look.

She can't help it. So what if she's rude? She's curious. "Where did you go then?"

Levi clears his throat. "I was more like your bratty friend. I ran away and lived on the streets, and that's not a topic I'm going to discuss further with you."

That's why you're so protective of Eren… well, that, and whatever you're assigned to protect him from. "Are orphaned kids an Ackerman trait?" Mikasa asks.

Levi smirks. "Hannes seems like he's good to you, even if he's kind of an airhead, right? And the Jaegers were—"

"Wonderful," Mikasa cuts in. Tears fill her eyes. *Carla… still alive?* She has to be, or Eren would tell her.

"Sorry," Levi says with a grimace. *Drink.* He gestures to the water glass.

Mikasa scowls, but she obeys. It feels like needles stabbing her throat as it goes down.

"Do you need ibuprofen?" Levi asks.

Mikasa nods.

He darts out of the room and comes back with two round orange pills. *Here.*

Mikasa gulps the pills. *Please work.* "Eren—you're protecting him, aren't you? Because you're not really a teacher."

"Yes, I am a teacher, and I have been for years, thank you," Levi snaps. "Erwin recruited me from—a bad place I was in."

"But you're protecting Eren."

"And you know that how?" Levi rolls his eyes. "Never mind. I shouldn't be surprised."

His dismissive attitude rankles her. "But you are."

"Give it a rest, Ackerman."

"I want to make sure Eren will be safe," Mikasa shoots back. "He's the—he's my family, he's my friend, he saved me from those men who killed my parents, he told me I deserved to live, he's all I've had for so, so long. Him and Armin." Tears well in her eyes.

"Eren will be safe. I promise you that," Levi vows. "Look, I will tell you that I have some… experience… with protection and law enforcement and that stuff. I did that for awhile before returning to teach with Erwin. But never repeat that."

Mikasa nods. For some reason, she believes him, and it rifles her beliefs on what should be—she shouldn't trust easily, she should be wary of this relative who didn't even bother to tell her they were related. "Is Erwin okay? With the abduction attempt—is the board—"
Levi stiffens. "That, I won't be discussing. And it seems like you're feeling better, which means you can do trigonometry homework. And I need to wash my hands." He nods at her.

*I'll take that as a no. Erwin isn't okay.*

Annie steps out of the shower and changes into her clothes. She met Armin in his dorm room earlier.

*I shouldn't be doing this. Poor Armin. He deserves so much better than her.*

She can't change what happened with Marco. None of them can. But when she's with Armin, when he looks at her and she can see he believes she's a good person, she can almost believe it herself.

And she needs that elixir to keep going. He's keeping her alive.

She steps out of her room, hair wet. The cold strikes her. She sucks in her breath.

"So," says Ymir, leaning against the wall.

Annie stiffens. *She knows, too.*

She can't say anything. She'd be under just as much suspicion.

But Annie doesn't want to threaten Ymir.

Please, don't make me.

Make you? Don't you have any control over yourself?

She could laugh. *I wonder what that would be like.* She's her father's puppet doll, even when she refuses to talk to him. She can't cut the strings after all. And she'll have to apologize to him soon, or Zeke will rant at her. Probably tonight.

"Which one of you ratted me out?" Ymir asks.

"Huh?" Annie blinks. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't play dumb." Ymir crosses her arms, towering over Annie. "One of you contacted my old group, and—"

"I didn't!" Annie insists. "And I don't know—"

"What I'm talking about?" Ymir mocks. "Poor Marco, really, Annie. That was cruel."

Annie twists her ring over and over again. She yanks out her phone, texting Bertolt. *Did you or your lover-boy tell Zeke about Ymir?*

*Of course not,* Bertolt replies.

*Not even in his other mind?* she asks. Ymir waits silently.

*No. Honest.*

The texts keep coming: *Also why did you call him my lover-boy?*

*That's not fair, Annie.*

*Don't joke about stuff like that.*

*He likes Christa.*

*Sure he does,* Annie thinks. She won't respond. Let him stew about it for a while. Reiner couldn't be
more obvious if he tried, but Bertolt rivals Eren in obliviousness.

"They didn't," Annie reports. Although Zeke still could have figured it out on his own… she wouldn't put it past him.

"You're all liars," Ymir shoots back, her voice cracking.

"What do they want?" Annie asks.

"Oh, so you're admitting it now?" Ymir smirks. "I could be recording this. I could take this all straight to your lover-boy and tell him exactly what you are."

Annie flinches. Bile surges up her throat. I don't want to be a what.

I want to be a human. A person.

So do you, don't you, Ymir?

"But I'm not." Ymir shows Annie her blank phone. She sniffs. "They want me to come back. Or they'll go to the police."

"Huh?" Annie gapes. If Ymir gets caught—

"For killing your friend." Even in the night, Annie sees that Ymir's face is ashen.

*Marcel*. "He wasn't my friend. He was Reiner's. And Bertolt's. Mostly Reiner's." *His first love? Annie's often wondered.

"Guys?" calls a soft voice from across the courtyard. Christa shivers outside her room. "Can I talk to you, and Sasha?"

Ymir shrugs and storms across the courtyard. Annie follows. She could vomit.

"What's wrong, Christa?" Ymir asks instantly, as Christa shuts the door behind them. The room is warm, and Annie melts onto the floor. She touches her hair. Stiff, some strands almost frozen.

Sasha offers Pringles to everyone. Annie takes two.

"I'm worried about Erwin. I heard Petra and Oruo talking—they think he'll be fired!" Christa cries, biting her nails.

"Not surprising. Heads do tend to roll when one of your students almost gets abducted and another gets arrested for possessing/smuggling methamphetamine," Ymir responds. She drops onto her bed, covered with a threadbare gray-blue coverlet. Her entire side of the room is sparse, with hardly any decorations, in sharp contrast to Christa's.

"It's still not his fault," Sasha retorts.

"But I don't think that's the main reason," Christa says. "I think... the board wants to fire him. Because he knows there's some shady work going on."

Annie stiffens. Fear prickles in her fingertips.

"Shady?" Sasha questions. "Like what?"

"Like some embezzlement... well, mishandling funds?" Christa offers.
"How would you know that?" Annie demands. *Not drugs, not Zeke, not her.*

"Because…" Christa lowers her head. "Christa Lenz isn't my real name."

*What?* Annie gapes at her.

"It's Historia Reiss," Christa says, meeting Ymir's eyes.

"As in *Rod* Reiss?" Sasha gasps. "The co-chair of the board?"

Christa nods, burying her face in her knees.

"I thought he lost all his family in a fire a few years ago," Annie says carefully.

"He did… all his legitimate family. My mother was his secretary. I'm his illegitimate love child."

Christa's shoulders shudder, and there's a bitter tinge to her last three words.

*Historia's.*

"So?" Ymir asks. "You're still his kid."

"He won't acknowledge me. Before he sent me here he told me to change my name. I chose Christa Lenz because it was a character I read about in a book, long ago." Christa shakes her head. "But I really think he's embezzling. The Reisses—they're not as rich as they used to be. I heard him talking on the phone. But suddenly over winter break he had more again, and—"

*Or he's working with Zeke.*

*Nah,* Annie decides. *Zeke hates Rod Reiss.*

"And I know he hates Erwin, and he was drunk and saying how Erwin's onto him and he needs to get rid of him."

"What?" Sasha yelps. "And you're just telling us this *now?*

*I want him to love me!* Christa shouts.

Annie's blood congeals. *Me, too, Christa. Historia.*

*No matter what, your father will always be on your side,* he told her.

*What if I'm not sure I'm on your side anymore, Dad?*

"What can we do?" Ymir asks.

"I can't let him just—he's not—he already pushed to expel Eren and Mikasa earlier, especially Eren. He hated Grisha Jaeger, too."

"Are you suggesting he had something to do with that car accident?" demands Ymir. "Because I know it was suspicious—"

*He didn't,* Annie thinks. *If only he did.*

"I don't know." Christa looks miserable. Tears stream down her face. "But after seeing Marco arrested—when we all know he didn't do anything—I can't—can't let that happen to Erwin. I mean, I know he wouldn't be arrested, but if he's fired—he'll lose his reputation—and—it's not right."
"And you want to be a good person," Ymir mocks.

"Yes, I do!" Christa cries. "Is that so wrong?"

Ymir swallows. She shakes her head.

You and me—we'll never be good people, will we? Annie thinks. But oh, how she wants to be.

"So…" Sasha says around a mouthful of Pringles. "What can we do?"

"We have to turn him in," Christa says. "I have to get evidence." She sets her jaw.

"Do we call you Historia now?" asks Sasha, munching away.

"If you want to."

"I do," declares Ymir, getting up and putting her arm around Christa. "I like your real name."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! Up next week: Ymir gives Annie, Reiner, and Bertolt an ultimatum, and Historia decides to take action.
I know it's been a rough week for a lot of us, so I hope you are all doing well.
"Call your father," Zeke ordered her the night before. Annie curls up under her covers, remembering his hand on her arm, squeezing tight. "Why are you acting so difficult?"

"He's useless," Annie retorted.

"You're the one who's a useless skank," Zeke told her.

In that moment, Annie was terrified Zeke knew about her and Armin, but no. She saw only empty insults in his eyes.

"Wake up, sleepyhead, or you'll be late for class!" Hitch titters as she emerges from the bathroom, a mascara wand clutched in her hand.

_Ugh_. Annie drags herself out of bed, sucking in her breath as her feet land on the cold floor. She checks her phone.

_Saving you pancakes and coffee_, Armin texted.

In spite of herself, she smiles. _Be right there._

Everyone seems tense, with all of the teachers whispering, Erwin looking grim, and Christa, or Historia, trying to set up a meeting with her father, much to Ymir's displeasure. Annie sneaks into Armin's dorm room or sneaks him into hers, because she can't stand feeling as if everything is going to cave in on her. At least she feels like she can be a good person to him.

Mikasa continues to recover in the nurse's hall, or so Annie hears from Armin. She visits too as the weeks pass, and Mikasa seems to actually warm up to her. And as far as she can tell, Eren and Jean are getting nowhere with their investigation into who framed Marco, who finally wrote to Jean to tell him he's okay and he misses him.

Sooner or later, though, a shoe will drop. Annie knows it. And it will crush her like the insect she is.

One night at dinner, about three weeks after they returned, Ymir grabs Annie by the shoulder.

"Hey, Ymir," Eren says as he takes a spoonful of soup.

"Hey yourself," Ymir says. "Annie, can we talk?"

She nods, palms beginning to sweat. _What about?_ "I'll text," she tells Armin, who nods.

Ymir leads her out of the dining hall, down the linoleum floors to a stairwell, where Annie finds Bertolt and Reiner waiting. Sweat beads Bertolt's forehead. Reiner looks grim.

"What's going on?" Annie demands, freezing in the doorway. _Is this it?_

"Christa's meeting with her dad right now," Ymir tells her, leaning back against the railing, gripping it so hard her knuckles turn white. "She wouldn't let me go with her." She nods at Bertolt and Reiner. "I told them."
"Oh…" Her dad doesn't know about Zeke, does he?

"I hate feeling like I can't protect her." Ymir leans over, her face twisting as if she's in physical pain.

"Are you okay?" Bertolt yelps.

"What does this have to do with us?" Reiner demands.

Ymir glares at them. "Don't ask me if I'm okay, Bertolt—or is it Bertl? Or is that just Reiner's pet name for you, since you act like a dog?"

Bertolt blanches. Annie feels strangely vindicated.

"Shut up," Reiner snaps, grabbing Bertolt's arm and pushing himself in front of his friend. Bertolt lowers his head, shame pinching his features. He can't even fight that accusation anymore, Annie realizes.

"I want you to protect Christa. Historia. I need you to," Ymir says, her eyes flashing. "Please."

"Protect her from us?" Annie can't help saying. She clenches her fists.

"No, from—her father, from herself, from anything and everything. I have to leave here soon."

"Why?" Annie exclaims, shock coursing through her. "Ymir—"

"Don't worry. I'm not turning you in." Ymir wipes at her eyes.

Is she crying?

Stone girls don't cry.

_Ymir's not made of stone, and neither am I._

"I have to go back with the—group I hung around with," Ymir says, running her palms along the rusted railing. "Or else."

"You mean a gang?" Reiner scoffs. Bertolt huddles on the stair, shoulders slumped.

_Fight back, Annie wants to shout at him. Stop acting like a beaten dog!_

"No," Ymir says. "Not exactly. They just—protected me when I ran away from foster care. She snorts. "I was twelve."

Annie swallows.

"But they're not nice people," Ymir adds. "Not like Christa… like the people here." She scowls and scuffs her shoe on the floor. "I'm sorry about what happened to your friend."

"Marcel," Reiner snarls. "That's his name."

"Marcel," Ymir repeats, voice thick. "I panicked. They told me to hold the gun, keep watch—I never meant to fire it. They said you were gone, and then when you ran back into the alley—ran at me—I thought—I didn't mean to." She meets Reiner's eyes.

Reiner drops his head into his hands. Bertolt gets to his feet, putting a hand on his shoulder. "It's not your fault," Reiner chokes out.
Annie frowns.

"It's not," Reiner insists. "I should have—I mean, I did—we were told that you swindled—you cheated us—you, meaning your group—and we were told to get it back, and—" He swallows.

_We couldn't_, Annie remembers. _Screaming. Blood._

"But they have the gun," Ymir says. "With my prints on it. All they need to do is turn it in to the police and tell them I did it." She laughs. "I'd go to jail."

"So you're going back with them?" Reiner demands. "Just because of that?"

"I would rather be a criminal than locked up forever," Ymir shoots back. "And rather—Christa. If they find out about her… they're afraid I'll rat them out too. The easiest way to control me is to get me back." She meets Annie's eyes, Bertolt's. "I'm _really_ sorry about Marcel." It's a plea, not a statement.

"I don't hate you for it," Bertolt whispers.

_Maybe you're not a dog after all._

"But you three have to keep Christa safe after this. No matter what happens with her and her dad—don't let anything happen to her." Ymir blinks rapidly. "I love her, and I can't—she's more important than anything."

_Is Armin more important than anything to you?_

_Yes, but I'm a dog too, Annie thinks. I'm a coward, and you're not, Ymir._

"You're back!" shrieks Sasha, throwing her arms around Mikasa and hugging her for what feels like several minutes straight. "I missed my roomie!"

"Missed you too," Mikasa ekes out. _You really missed me that much? My return makes you that happy?_

"Oh, my God," Sasha continues. "So much has happened. Historia went to meet with her father—"

"What?" Mikasa exclaims. Eren and Armin have been keeping her informed about Christa and her true identity, and her suspicion of her father. "Is she—"

"I'm fine," Christa—Historia—says as she pushes open the door. Ymir's behind her, relief glistening on her face. "Let's get Annie, and talk."

Annie jogs over, dressed in sweatpants and a hoodie. She nods at Mikasa. "Glad you're better." She drops onto Sasha's desk chair.

_Hmph._ Mikasa knows she and Armin are dating, but something doesn't seem quite right to her.

"Anything?" Sasha demands, pulling out a bag of chocolates. Ymir and Christa settle onto the floor.

"No. I didn't—I chickened out. I mean, I tried to talk to him about funding, about where he got the money for a new car and—but it wasn't going anywhere." Christa swallows. "They're holding a hearing for Erwin on Friday."

"Shit, that's not much time," Sasha breathes.
"What if I can't get him to confess?" Christa asks. "I don't think I can do it."

"Do you want to do it?" Ymir asks.

Christa blinks. "Yes."

"You want to protect Erwin, our dean, over your own father?" Ymir peers at her girlfriend.

"I want to do the right thing!" Christa yells. "And that's—that's—" She cries into her hands. "I'm meeting with him Thursday, and Ymir—if you come with me—"

"Your father is not going to speak in front of his daughter's roommate, whom he doesn't even like," Ymir says. "You told me he called me a dyke."

"But if you're just nearby—"

*Like Eren's presence calms me.* Mikasa pulls her scarf up over her nose.

"You don't need me," Ymir insists.

"You're a good person who gives her courage," Mikasa says. "Why wouldn't you?"

Christa blinks.

"Because… I'm not a good person," Ymir mutters, yanking at a loose thread on her ripped jeans.

"Yes, you are," Christa insists.

Ymir throws her head back and laughs. Annie flinches while Sasha drops her chocolates. "I'm a murderer, Historia."

Mikasa freezes. This is not the restful evening she was looking forward to.

"What are you talking about?" Historia—*Historia*, not Christa—cries.

"After my parents died in a fire when I was seven, I was sent to foster homes. They had—they had a—my parents set up a fund for me to access when I turned sixteen, but I didn't have time to wait because everyone hated me. I ran away when I was twelve and lived on the streets. I worked for people who sold drugs, okay? It kept me alive. They gave me protection and I helped them because I wanted to live," Ymir blinks back tears. "But I killed someone once—he ran at me, and I was so scared—I thought he was going to kill me, and I shot him He looked like he was my age." She looks to Annie, who's pale. "I got caught on the streets soon after, and the police used my fund to pay for my education here. But I didn't tell them I killed a boy."

Ymir's story wriggles too close to home. "I killed someone, too," Mikasa bursts out. "You know that, don't you? You all know it. I—you're not—if you thought he was going to kill you—" *You were trying to survive. Like me.*

*Do I believe what I'm saying? Or do I just want to exonerate myself?* She gulps. Sasha covers her mouth.

"I aimed for his leg, but he ducked, and—" Ymir clenches her fists. "I'm a murderer, Historia, not a good person. I'm a coward. I can't even turn myself in to give his family peace, if he even has any family."

"I don't care!" Historia shouts.
"You should care! Someone's dead!"

"I mean—I do care about that, Ymir, I do, but you're not a monster, you're not a terrible—you're—I'm on your side, Ymir, no matter what!" Historia grabs Ymir by the shoulders. "I love you!"

Ymir shakes her head. "You don't love me. You love the idea of me loving you."

Mikasa sucks in her breath. Historia blinks, and then her gaze hardens. "I love you, Ymir. I'm on your side."

"You don't. You can't. You shouldn't."

"But I do." Historia grabs Ymir, holding her head against her chest.

*That's a change*, Mikasa thinks. *Usually Ymir's the one comforting Christa.*

"I just wanted a second chance," Ymir whispers.

"You have one," Historia insists.

"You do," Mikasa agrees. *Please. Take it, so I can take it and live.*

Annie leans her head back, twisting her ring.

"I don't. They found me. The people I used to—the ones who used to protect me. And they want me to join them again." Ymir smirks, although she clearly sees no humor in the situation.

"How did they find you?" demands Sasha.

Historia shakes her head. "Well, they can't have you."

"It's them or jail, Historia."

"It's not—I think Hange might help. Petra would definitely try to help you—maybe even Erwin—"

"He can't take another risk on a kid like me," Ymir interrupts.

"How did they find you?" Mikasa asks again, louder. "Did you contact them?"

"No. They just—called. They got my number, even though it's new, apparently." Ymir shrugs. "Fate's against me. I settled that fight long ago."

"Bullshit," Mikasa says sharply. "Did the school know?"

"Of course. Not the murder part, but that I worked with a group of drug dealers, yeah, they knew. The cops knew." Ymir shrugs.

Mikasa grits her teeth. "Someone in the staff leaked your information. Just like with me and Eren. Someone who actually knew about you."

Ymir frowns.

"Why?" Annie asks, twisting her ring even faster. "Why would someone leak Ymir's information? It doesn't make any sense—she's not being pursued by anyone. Unlike Eren."

"I wonder whose morals are already in question and who we've already said hates Ymir," Mikasa says.
"Oh." Sasha's jaw drops.

Historia's brow knots together. "He—wouldn't—"

"Is it really that hard to believe?" Mikasa asks.

"You don't have proof," Annie reminds her.

"What would he gain from leaking news about Eren?" Sasha questions.

"Maybe to discredit Erwin, too?" Mikasa shakes her head. "I don't know." It really doesn't make sense. He can't behind all of this insanity.

"I'll meet with him tomorrow or the day after," Historia says quietly. "Tomorrow. And then—then we'll see where it goes. I'll keep my phone on me, recording." She gulps. "In the meantime, Ymir… you need to talk to Hange, or Petra."

Ymir shakes her head. "It's too risky."

"Try," Historia pleads, pressing her forehead against Ymir's. Tears trickle down her cheeks. "Please, Ymir. Try. Take that risk. Try to trust them."

"Aren't we a messed up bunch," Annie comments.

_You, or all of us?_ Mikasa wonders.

"Not me," Sasha says cheerfully, tossing chocolate in the air and catching it in her mouth. "I think we should go to Nanaba right now, though."

"Why?" Ymir demands, shrinking.

"Because she's our dorm parent, and she's friends with Hange. She'll help." Sasha rolls her eyes. "She's helped me before."

"With what?" Mikasa asks.

Sasha winces. "I needed Plan B."

"Gunthur would be disappointed," Ymir comments as Historia tries not to laugh. "Not enough banana lessons?"

"Plenty," Sasha retorts. "But it broke."

_Am I the only one of us who hasn't had sex?_ Mikasa wonders. _Well, maybe me and Annie haven't._

"And she didn't punish you?" Historia asks.

"Nope. I got a lecture, though. And she contacted my parents, and my dad was not pleased." Sasha rises. "Ymir, I think we should go now." Her voice trembles. "Please."

"You're just afraid I'll sneak away in the night," Ymir grumbles.

"I've seen animals that act like you before," Sasha tells her. She claps her hand over her mouth. "Oh, shit, that came out wrong. But—like you're trapped, and you'll do anything to escape because you're certain they're going to come down on you, hurt you."
"Didn't you slaughter the animals?" Ymir snaps.

"Not all of them. I kept some as pets." Sasha shrugs.

It's so ridiculous Mikasa could almost laugh.

"You don't all have to come," Ymir grumbles as they head across the courtyard.

"We all care about you," Historia tells her, squeezing Ymir's hand.

Mikasa nods, pulling her scarf up again.

Nanaba opens the door, eyes widening in shock. "Is everything all right?" She steps back to let them in a quaint little apartment, with several overstuffed chairs and a sofa crowded around a fireplace. Mike Zacarius waves at them from the kitchen, shoving two teacups into the sink. He sniffs the air.

Well then.

"What's going on?" Nanaba asks, waving for them to sit down.

Silence. Mikasa's heart pounds.

Historia swallows. Ymir peers at her shoes. Annie crosses her arms, and Sasha plays with her hair.

"Ymir has something to tell you," Mikasa finally blurts out. Ymir glares at her, but Mikasa doesn't care. You have to do this, Ymir. You have to do this to live.

Ymir draws in a deep breath, and then launches into the story. Nanaba's face drains. Mike strolls into the room, planting his hands behind Nanaba's shoulders.

"If you tell me you're going to send me to jail, I'll run right now," Ymir warns them as she finishes.

"I don't think that's likely," Mike says.

"Really?" Historia's eyes light up.

"Really. I have—connections. If you'll let me, I can call Erwin and get things moving," Mike adds. "He used to be a lawyer, in another life."

"You're letting me choose?" Ymir asks.


Ymir scowls. "Fine. Call him." She doubles over, putting her head between her knees.

"You're being brave, coming forward," Nanaba tells her.

Brave. Mikasa watches Ymir, who snorts as if she doesn't believe that at all.

But you are, Mikasa thinks. She closes her eyes and remembers all of the psychologist sessions she and Eren went through, the ones where they were afraid of her and treated her like a monster in training, and the one kind one, who gave her sweets and told her she would be okay as long as she made the right choices, and she always had the power to make good choices. "It's a human trait," the psychologist told her. "You'll never lose it, not completely, no matter what." The nightmares followed, and Carla Jaeger would hold her, stroke her hair until they faded.
People always believed in her, even when she didn't have any hope for herself.

We have hope for you, Ymir, Mikasa thinks. We do.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! Up next: Historia confronts her father, Erwin comes up with a plan to help Ymir, and Zeke sets his sights on Eren.

Quick note: I will actually be updating on Wednesday instead of Thursday just for next week, due to it being Thanksgiving in the United States.
"Where is Ymir?" Armin asks the next morning. Annie sent him seven marathon texts last night, which he and Eren puzzled over.

"Nanaba took her to talk to Erwin," Mikasa reports settling her yogurt down one the plain, white table.

"Even if she doesn't go to jail, she'll be expelled, won't she?" Reiner asks, drumming his fingers on the table.

"Maybe not," Mikasa says. "She didn't—it doesn't seem fair to expel someone for what they did before they came here."

"Before? Mikasa, doesn't it seem obvious she framed Marco?" Eren demands. Jean scowls.

"No," Mikasa retorts. "It doesn't, Eren. She's really distraught. I don't think she's lying." She tugs her scarf over her mouth.

Armin's more inclined to agree with Mikasa. Ymir really has nothing to lose.

Eren bites into his apple as if that'll punctuate his point. "We'll see."

"To be fair," Armin begins carefully. "You aren't really in any position to judge Ymir."

"What?" Eren drops the apple. "I've never—"

"She confessed to doing what she felt she needed to do to survive," Armin says. "As a runaway. And she killed someone, because she was scared and though he was going to hurt you. You would have done the same thing." You have done the same thing. Except the running away part, because Mikasa and I stopped you.

Eren leans over his cereal, shoveling the food into his mouth. His eyes tear up. Annie shoves her own bowl away from her.

"Are you okay?" Armin asks.

She shrugs. "Food's not sitting well. Too much stress and too little sleep."

"I guess Erwin's definitely getting fired regardless of what happens to Ymir," Jean comments.

"He is not," snaps Reiner. "Christa—Historia—" He swallows and looks to Annie.

"She's trying to get her father to confess," Annie says bluntly. "Today."

Reiner nods. "Bertolt, Annie, and I promised Ymir that we'd make sure she's okay, so we'll be—lurking nearby."

"If you're lurking," Armin says, taking in Annie's pale face. "I'm going with you."

"Well, sure thing, Einstein," Reiner says. "Can't hurt."
His phone lights up. A text, from Mikasa. *I think Rod Reiss is the one who leaked Ymir's information.*

*Mikasa, I'm right across the table,* Armin thinks. But she could be right.

Annie yawns into her hand.

"Don't have mono, please," Reiner requests. Annie glares at him. Mikasa rolls her eyes.

All of their teachers appear to be grouchy during the day, and distracted. Levi gives them a surprise quiz and then three pages of homework, but when he hands their quizzes back, Armin sees a 92% written in red ink on Eren's. He shoots his friend a thumbs-up.

Eren rolls his eyes at Armin's 100%.

"Good job," Mikasa tells Eren quietly. His face flushes.

"If Mikasa likes me," Eren said carefully to Armin last weekend. "Why doesn't she just say it? I mean, I get that she's sick now, but why wouldn't she say it before?"

"Because she respects that you're her family, too," Armin told him. "Maybe she's afraid."

*He shook his head. "Mikasa's never afraid."*

"I think she is. Of driving you away, or—or weirding you out, or anything like that. She loves you, and she wants you to be happy with or without her."

Christa repeatedly checks her phone during class, but Petra and Gunthur give her a pass and don't call her out on it. "Nothing," she reports as the last bell rings, her shoulders slumped.

"I saw Erwin leaving with Ymir when I went to the bathroom," Jean reports.

"Leaving where?" Christa exclaims.

"No idea." Jean holds up his hands. "But there weren't any police."

"Where are you meeting your father?" Armin asks Christa, who wrings her hands.

"He said in the café across the street," Christa says.

"We'll be there too," Reiner assures her, flexing his muscles as if to reassure her. Annie rolls her eyes and leans her head on Armin's shoulder.

With permission secured to go to the café, Bertolt, Reiner, Annie, and Armin jog across the street to the small café with its kitschy decorations dangling from the ceiling and plastered against the walls, every last inch of which are covered with magazine cut outs of seemingly random articles and images of sunsets, tigers, and waterfalls.

The door chimes as Christa and her father enter. Bertolt wipes his forehead while Annie picks at a pastry.

*Here we go.*

"So," Jean says, slumping against the wall. It's unseasonably warm, like one of those days that makes Eren believe spring is on the way, when they've still got at least another month of winter, and they're
huddling on a bench outside of the lab building. "Do you really think Ymir is behind what happened to Marco?"

Armin's words still echo in Eren's ears. He bites his lip. Blood, salty and bitter, stings his tongue. "I don't know."

"Excuse me," says a voice. Eren peers up to see the VP, Zeke, carrying two heavy boxes. Eren drags his feet under him, clearing the way for Zeke to pass. The man strangely reminds Eren of his father, but maybe it's just the glasses.

"Zeke," Jean says eagerly. "Do you know what's happening with Ymir?"

"I don't," Zeke responds, pausing. "Be careful with your speculation, Eren, Jean."

"But it's logical, isn't it?" Jean bursts out, getting to his feet. "Marco has no—he's not involved in drugs. The whole idea is laughable. Ymir's admitted she used to deal them, and she killed someone, so—"

"Just because she did it in the past, doesn't mean she did it now," Eren points out. Now I sound too much like Armin.

Zeke cocks his head. "You're nothing like your father, Eren."

What? Alarm shoots through Eren.

"He liked jumping to conclusions," Zeke continues. "I used to work under him. And he got away with it too, because his instincts were usually right. He was a brilliant scientist. Your biology scores may indicate that you're more like him than you think, in ways that matter."

"Oh," Eren says in a small voice.

"It's good that you're less hasty," Zeke adds. "And now, I've got to get these boxes put away so you can all work on your lab next week."

It's good... Eren swallows. He knows his father wasn't perfect, but he likes to remember him that way. He doesn't like remembering the man lying on the street, glass shards covering him, stuck in him, while Eren screamed at him to wake up. "Can you tell me more about my father?"

"Sure. Later." Zeke shrugs, shifting the boxes.

"Will Ymir be expelled?" Jean calls after him.

"That decision is not up to me!"

"That's a yes, or at least, a hopefully, from him," Jean mutters.

"You really want her expelled?" Eren chokes out.

"Only if she did that to Marco. Otherwise... but like, Eren, she killed someone. She probably would think nothing of planting evidence, destroying another life—"

"Annie did make it sound like it was accidental, though. Manslaughter," Eren says, drawing up the term he's heard in civics.

"True." Jean covers his face. "I just want to help Marco, Eren. But he doesn't even want me doing this, us doing this, did I tell you that?"
"No?" Eren glances up at the blue sky.

"He said to just let it go, but he appreciates it. They're homeschooling him for now. It's not fair, though." Jean curls up his fists.

"Do you think I'm a monster?" Eren can't help asking.

"No? You mean because of… oh." Jean frowns. "You and Mikasa."

"I can't ever bring that life back, the three people we killed," Eren says, trying not to see their faces. "Ever. And it's complicated, because I don't regret saving Mikasa."

"You better not," jokes Jean. And he frowns. "But… you're people too. I mean, you annoy me, Eren, all the time, as you know. But you and Mikasa… you're people too." He groans. "And Ymir is a person, too."

"I don't know that we should—"

"Ruin her life without hard proof," Jean finishes. He nods. "It's just—I feel for Marco. And I hate not achieving anything I set my mind to."

"Me, too, regarding Marco." Eren frowns. "Wait. Not in the same way."

Jean smirks. "Want to go help Christa—er, Historia?"

"Sounds like a plan."

"I'm really concerned about—" Christa tries again, but her father cuts her off, jabbering about his own woes.

*What a selfish man*, Armin thinks.

Christa glances over her shoulder at them, her face pallid. She taps on her phone.

*Need help?* Armin texts her. Reiner, Bertolt, and Annie all crowd around it.

*I'm scared that if I go harder on him, he'll yell at me.*

*If this works, he won't be pleased with you,* Armin points out.

*If I turn him in and Ymir's gone too, I'll have no one!*

"Give me that," snaps Reiner, snatching the phone. *You'll have us, Historia.*

Armin watches as her shoulders shudder. Annie cringes.

"Why are you crying?" demands Mr. Reiss.

"I'm worried about Ymir!" *Historia—*Armin needs to remember to call her that—bursts out.

"She'll be fine."

"Really?" Historia breathes.

Armin's stomach sinks. Annie covers her face.
"Well, she'll probably go to jail, but not for long. Juvie system and all."

"But that's not fine to me. I want her here."

Mr. Reiss scoffs. "Why? You have other friends. You have me."

"Yeah, but—Ymir—we're dating. You know that. It's different."

"You think I would want my daughter dating a murderer? How would that look at my company? At my interest in the school? Her presence is a smear on wall Academy's reputation, and on mine as a board member!"

Reiner glowers. Bertolt shrinks in his chair.

You're almost there, Chris—Historia, Armin thinks. Keep going.

"How long have you known about her?" Historia asks.

"Since last summer. She, much like the Jaeger boy and the Ackerman girl, were special admissions cases. I was against admitting her, for the record." He shrugs.

"Has your company gotten back on its feet?" Historia asks. "Because if I remember, you were struggling—"

Mr. Reiss squirms. "We're trying, Historia, but if my association with a school that freely allows murderers to attend gets out, it'll hurt my business. We're limping along as it is."

"I want to know how you could afford that new car, then," Historia says. "And my tuition, and your mortgage, and all of it—"

"You shouldn't have to worry about it—"

"You never contact me all of my life, and you contact me right after my mother dies to send me to this place? Did you want to or did Social Services make you?" Historia's voice trembles.

"I wanted to, Historia, I love you—"

"Then why did you spill the beans on Ymir? It was you, wasn't it? You contacted her old gang."

"How would I even know how to contact them?"

"I don't know. Maybe they have something on you," Historia says bitterly. "Please tell me you didn't."

Mr. Reiss leans across the table, taking Historia's hand. "I didn't."

Liar, Armin thinks.

"As for the rest of the money, don't worry about it," he adds. "Erwin Smith will be gone soon, and the school will start to improve—investments will go up—"

The door chimes again. Eren and Jean enter. Armin waves Eren over to them. For once please listen to me!

He does. But as he passes by Historia and her father, Mr. Reiss scowls. "Another kid who wouldn't be here if it weren't for his famous father and Erwin's soft heart."
"A soft heart is the last description Armin would ever apply to Erwin. Maybe fair?"

"It's weird," Historia says. "That all three of the kids who have—that in their past—get their information leaked."

"Well, whoever leaked the stuff on Jaeger and Ackerman is a hero," Mr. Reiss proclaims. "Those kids are dangerous."

Reiner narrows his eyes. Eren's face flushes and Jean shrugs.

"You don't think it was the same person?" Historia asks.

"No. Because—I just don't." Mr. Reiss shoves his coffee away from him. "I'm concerned, Historia. It sounds like you're accusing me here. What are you even getting at?"

"I think you're embezzling funds from your business, and maybe from the school, and I think you ratted on Ymir." Historia's voice trembles. "I just want you to be honest with me."

"Shit." Armin clutches the edge of the table.

Mr. Reiss leans closer. "And if I was? It'd all be for you, Historia. I didn't count on having to take care of another kid."

"Me?" Historia squeaks.

"Yes. Because I love you, and I want you to have the best—in life, in a girlfriend or a boyfriend—not a murderer, not a stupid two-bedroom apartment in the middle of the hood—"

"So you did." Historia gulps.

"For you," Mr. Reiss confirms.


"You okay?" Armin hisses.

She shrugs.

"Time to go," Historia chokes out, getting to her feet. "I don't want to hear any more."

"Historia!" He charges after her, and Armin leaps up from the table, Annie and Eren behind him.

"Here!" Bertolt throws down cash. "That'll cover it!"

They charge outside to find Mr. Reiss grabbing Historia's arm. "You ungrateful—"

"What?" Historia sobs. "I'm not—they matter, too! Ymir and Eren and Erwin—they're all people, too! They matter! And you're treating them like we matter more, and we don't—they're important, too…"

"I should have made your mother abort you," Mr. Reiss says.

"Hey, asshole!" Eren shouts. Mr. Reiss's face drains. "Leave her alone!"

Armin steps closer, his friends crowding around him.

"Fine. You don't love me, and you don't have to," Historia chokes out.
"We love her, though," Armin cuts in, his heart pounding. "We're her friends."

Historia's face crumples. Reiner steps in, taking Historia's arm. "Good-bye."

"We have to get this to Levi," Historia manages between sobs. Eren slings his arm over her shoulder.

**How do you deal with that kind of betrayal?** Armin wonders. He can't even imagine. **If someone you love, whom you're desperate to have love you, hurt you like that?**

"He—doesn't—love me," Historia ekes out, sobs wracking her small frame and there's nothing anyone can say to comfort her. "He loves *himself*."

"You deserve better," Bertolt says quietly. Annie clings to Armin's hand.

"Oh God no," says Levi when they arrive at his office door. Hange sits there, bright-eyed and smiling as per usual.

"What happened?" she exclaims.

Historia looks to Armin, who launches into an explanation about how Mr. Reiss has been possibly embezzling and sold Ymir out to thugs. "That's child endangerment, isn't it?"

"Probably," Levi admits. "Can I have your phone, Christa?"

"It's Historia," she mumbles, handing it over.

"Historia, then," Hange says, putting her hand on the girl's shoulder. "Well, Erwin's suspicions were correct after all, Levi."

"That'll look good before the board, won't it?" asks Eren. "So he'll get to stay?"

Levi turns to them, eyes narrowed. "You did this to help Erwin?"

"Partially," admits Armin. "Yes."

"Well." Levi's phone rings, and he answers it and swears.


"Ymir and Erwin are at the hospital," Levi tells Hange.

"I can't stand this!" Historia cries, clutching her hair. Mikasa, Sasha, and Connie join them.

"You don't have to," Jean responds. "I called a taxi to take you to the hospital to see Ymir."


"Are you coming with me?" Historia asks Jean.

He shakes his head. "I've got to call Marco." Dejection spreads across his face. Armin frowns.

"Yes, I'm well aware no one gave us permission to leave, Armin," Jean snaps.

Armin holds up his hands as Annie scowls and steps forward, clearly preparing to pummel Jean with her words. "I agree that Historia should go."
"Sasha, Mikasa?" Historia asks. "Will you come? Eren? Ymir might… you two. It might be good if she can see you." She looks back and forth between them.

_The worst thing I ever did might help someone._ Eren nods.

"But, Eren—you're kind of a risk, with everything that happened on the trip—" Armin objects.

"I'll be fine, Armin," Eren insists. Armin deflates.

"I'll bring snacks," Sasha says cheerfully. She pecks Connie on the cheek.

Annie stuffs her hands in the pocket of her hoodie. Eren waves as they scurry down the hill towards the main gate. _I will be fine, he repeats. I will be._

"Right there," Jean says, pointing to a blue sedan parked there. "Good luck, and if you don't text, I'll go to Moblit."

"We'll text," Eren promises, sliding in. Sasha takes the front seat, turning around to smile at Historia.

_Not Christa._ Eren always thought Christa seemed sweet, but too sweet. Everyone liked her, so he didn't. _Now… she's a saint,_ he realizes. _No, she's not: she's a human being, just a better one than me. To confront her father like that…_

_You're braver than I ever gave you credit for, Historia._

_At the hospital,_ Eren texts Jean as they pull up. They scramble out of the car, Mikasa tugging her scarf away from her chin. The late afternoon sun kisses her hair. _Stop!_ Eren yells at himself. _Not now._

Historia leads them, bursting through the glass doors and scanning the emergency room. Couples huddle; a woman rocks a baby, and nurses rush by in scrubs. A TV in a corner blares the news, and Eren searches for a familiar face.

"Ymir!" Historia screeches, taking off. Eren rushes after her.

Ymir rises from one of the uncomfortable chairs, her face pale and blood staining her clothes. Historia throws her arms around her, and Ymir crumples, clinging to her girlfriend.

"My father—confessed," Historia sobs as Mike rounds the corner, Hange behind him. Hange shakes her head to see all of them gathered, and Eren's stomach prickles. "I was so scared for you."

"Confessed?" Ymir stammers. "To what?"

"Okay, kids," Hange says. "I don't know how you got here—"

"Uber's free," Mikasa explains.

Hange shakes her head. "Christa—Historia—Ymir's been through some pretty heavy things. You might need to give her some space."

"No," Ymir insists, gripping Historia's hand. "I want her here."

"Okay then." Hange shrugs.

"What happened?" Eren demands, his hands shaking. "Where's Erwin?"
"He worked it out—" Ymir swallows. "He worked it out that I could give information to the police in exchange for immunity."

"Seriously? That's awesome!" Eren cries out. Mikasa shakes her head.

"It's not, because that involved me having to agree to meet up with certain people, and even with Erwin around… they shot at us," Ymir says, leaning forward and gripping her skull as if she could tear it in two. "The police tried to get us away from them, but Erwin got shot in the arm. Three times. I thought he was going to bleed out on me."

"He's in surgery now," Hange says quietly. Mike chugs coffee.

"It's not your fault, Ymir," Historia tells her.

"Yes, it is."

"Not all of it," Sasha says, her eyes bright with tears. "I'll—I'll go buy snacks. My treat. I saw a vending machine nearby. What do you want?"

"Is your answer to all of life's problems to eat more?" Ymir demands.

Sasha shrugs. "Can it ever hurt?"

"If I have the stomach flu," Ymir snips, but she almost smiles.

Mikasa drops into the chair next to Ymir. "I'm glad you're okay."

Levi appears around the corner, rolling his eyes at the sight of them all. "I should have known. You brats."

"I'll call Nanaba," Mike says. "Let her know where they all are."

Eren sits next to Mikasa. He doesn't know what to say to Ymir. Historia thinks he can help her, and he can't. I'm no good at this. He should be, but he can't—he feels paralyzed, trapped by something he can't understand—everything crushes around him: Marco, Ymir, Zeke's strange words, promises he can't keep and his mother, whom he only gets weekly updates on now.

What are you still even hanging on for, Mom? He wipes at his eyes, remembering those night in the ER with Mikasa, the interviews with police, the nurse who told him his father wasn't coming back and how a scream tore out of him.

Think of someone beside yourself? He's pathetic. Eren grips the arms of the chair. Stop being such a whiny—

"Hey," Levi says from next to him. "Are you okay, brat?"

Eren nods.

"You are not a very good liar," Levi tells him.

"I'm just—thinking of—last summer," Eren manages. "I shouldn't be—I need to help Ymir; that's why Historia asked me to come in the first place—"

"You need to stop biting your lip until you bleed," Levi interjects. "It's disgusting and unsanitary."

Mikasa watches Eren closely. Sasha returns, offering pretzels to Ymir and Historia.
"You have something you want to say?" Levi asks Mikasa.

She shakes her head. "I don't think there are words. Just… it's okay for Ymir to be in pain. And for you, too."

"Brilliant," Levi says.

Eren wipes his eyes, but the tears aren't stopping. Dammit.

Levi cringes, and then leans in to give him a brief hug. "Ymir's okay, Erwin will be okay, and you will be okay, okay?"

"Erwin's out of surgery!" Hange shouts, interrupting them. Eren turns to stare at her.

"And his arm?" Levi asks.

Hange winces. "They had to take it."

"He lost an arm?" Eren bursts out. "What the hell is your definition of okay?"


Ymir groans.

"Erwin will want you blaming yourself," Hange says sharply. "Believe it or not, he thinks you kids are worth it."

Are we? Eren wonders. How?

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! Up next week: Armin starts to put two and two together regarding Reiner, Bertolt, and Annie, Jean gets his life threatened, and Annie takes a test. (Also, next week we will go back to our regularly scheduled Thursday updates.)
"Hange said she'll fight Zackley to keep Ymir in school," Mikasa reports as she drinks her orange juice.

"Who is he again?" Eren asks.

"The head of the board," Armin reminds him. "Pixis wants her to stay, and so do all of the teachers, so it should be fine. Besides, they need to focus on covering for Erwin while he's out."

"Will he be able to come back?" Mikasa asks, swirling the juice and making a face. "Too sour," she explains.

It's been a week since the injury, and Ymir's supposed to start classes again today. She's been staying with Petra the past week, and Armin's sure Ymir has lots of stories from her time in the Sina apartments.

"Levi said Erwin's out of the hospital and back in the Sina apartments," Eren says. "Just… he might not be back at work for another week."

"That's it?" Annie demands, her eyes wide. "Good grief. If I lost a limb, I wouldn't ever come back."

"I guess he's really dedicated," Armin says, taking a bite of the cheese omelet on his tray. "I admire him. He really does seem like he cares about his students—he's always placing us first. It's amazing, really."

Annie smiles. "He reminds me of you."

"What?" Armin's face reddens.

"It's true," Eren confirms. "You're kind of like that. Just don't ever lose an arm, okay, because I don't want to have to spend my later years spoon-feeding you."

"Hey," Mikasa says quietly, nodding. Ymir walks into the cafeteria, dressed in her normal fraying jeans and a t-shirt, even though it's still way too cold for that. Historia walks beside her, practically skipping.

"Hey," Ymir says after she gets her tray. "Can I sit here?"

"Of course," Armin agrees, sliding over. Connie and Sasha get up from the table across from them.

"Do you hate me, Connie?" Ymir asks.

"What?" Connie's eyes widen. "Yes, Ymir, I hate you. That's why we're coming over to join you."

"That, and you got more bacon and I'm out and the workers look at me funny when I take fourths," Sasha chimes in, grabbing a piece from Ymir's tray.

"But you should hate me," Ymir presses.

"Why?" Connie scoffs. The omelet turns to a rock in Armin's stomach.
"Stop hating yourself, Ymir! Stop sabotaging—"

"Ymir, this is not what I meant when I suggested you just talk to Connie," Historia reprimands her. She takes Ymir's hand.

"About what?" Connie throws his hands in the air. Mikasa's eyes grow somber.

"Your mother," Ymir states. "You know I sold… don't you have a grudge against people like me?"

Annie leans forward, twisting her ring rapidly. Armin watches the silver turn and turn and turn. What's making you anxious?

"No," Connie says. "I don't hate you. I don't blame you at all, because—because it's like you're a victim too, right? You were trying to survive, most of the time. Why would I hate you for that? You're a bitch, but you're somehow likable anyways. Maybe it's the influence of your better half." He nods at Historia, who blushes.

"She is my better half," Ymir confirms, kissing Historia's forehead.

"Thank you, Connie," Historia says quietly.

"None of us blame Historia for her dad being cray," Sasha points out. Historia winces.

"You know what's weird?" she says, looking at Eren and Mikasa. "He still claims he had nothing to do with leaking your past."

_Dammit._ Armin sets his fork down.

_It's definitely connected to whatever else has been going on, then, Armin realizes. The kidnapping attempt… Dr. Jaeger's murder._

Weeks plod by and Erwin returns, albeit for shorter days. Talk of firing him appears to be temporarily suspended on account of headlines reading "Heroic Dean Save Student and Loses Arm!"

As for what will happen over the summer, Armin's not sure. Zackley might agree to keep Ymir around, but he doesn't seem any fonder of Erwin than Rod Reiss was.

Spring tries desperately to claw through, with a few warmer days followed by a snowstorm, and then more warm weather which melts the snow and turns the ground into mud. Jean mopes and Armin catches Bertolt crying hysterically one night.

"Do you want me to get Reiner?" Armin asks, shivering because the nights are still cold. But Bertolt huddles on the damp courtyard ground, crying into his knees.

"No," Bertolt snaps.

"Sorry," Armin stammers. _Is this related to Reiner? Are the two of you just best friends?_

"I can't sleep," Bertolt mumbles. "Not tonight."

"So Reiner won't take photos of you in a bizarre position tonight?" Armin tries to joke. It falls flat.

"I can't do anything I want to do," Bertolt mumbles. "Not sleep… not do well in school—"

"Bertolt, you're like third in the class," Armin interrupts.
"It doesn't matter. It's not—enough."

"What are you talking about?" Armin sits down next to him, sneezing. Stupid allergies.

"I can't—I'm worried about Reiner and I can't—help him," Bertolt whispers. "Don't tell anyone I said that."

"Worried how?" Armin asks. He's noticed that the friendly boy seems more withdrawn lately, more serious.

"He's got family problems," Bertolt says quickly. "Don't we all. But—he's—they take a toll on him, and he won't admit it, and I feel like if I'm a good friend I should be able to help him, because he's helped me so many times, but I can't. I'm weak and—and not a good friend at all. I'm completely unreliable and—" He clutches his skull. "I just want someone to help us, please."

"Bertolt!" Armin grabs his shoulder. They might be sitting down, but Bertolt still towers over him. The other boy's agony churns in Armin's stomach. "You're not weak. You're not a bad friend."

"Yes, I am," he insists, looking at Armin with his face twisted in loathing.

_You really hate yourself_, Armin realizes. _This isn't even about Reiner, not really._ "Have you—would you talk to Petra?"

He shakes his head.

_You don't trust anyone._

"I'll try to sleep now," Bertolt says, wrenching away. "Sorry—for bothering you, Armin. Thanks."

"Anytime." Armin watches Bertolt plod back to his room. "I mean it!" Bertolt doesn't turn around. Armin pulls out his phone and texts Annie.

_Want me to come over?_ she responds right away.

_It's midnight. Why are you awake?_ Armin responds.

_Can't sleep. I'm near your dorm anyways._

_Pacing?_

_Yup._

_Okay then. But not for long. If Moblit catches us..._

_He's oblivious._ Annie drops down from the corner of the roof moments later, and embraces Armin.

"I'm really worried about him," Armin says to her. "I've never seen Bertolt like that. He's usually so calm—but quiet." _I should have been paying more attention._

"He does seem sad a lot," Annie comments.

"You think so?"

She nods. Something crinkles in her hoodie pocket, and Armin splices a plastic bag. _Were you outside the gates?_
Why? At this hour?

Armin does not like where his brain is trying to take him.

The next morning, Annie doesn't show up to breakfast. "She's got that stomach bug that's going around," Hitch explains.

"The one you had?" Marlowe gripes. "Because we all know that was just a hangover."

"The one Sasha had," Mikasa points out. "And hasn't recovered from." She nods to Sasha, sitting silently and poking at her food, which remains largely untouched.

"Hasn't it been two days?" Eren asks. "Wow."

Yikes. Armin hopes he doesn't get it. Although judging from all the kissing they did last night, he's probably already infected. *Feel better!* he texts.

At the very least, it gives him a chance to tear his mind away from the possibilities he doesn't want to consider.

Bertolt slouches through all their classes, and Armin can't keep himself focused. His heart pounds when he looks to a scowling, mopey Jean.

Annie...

*You have no evidence,* he reminds himself. *Don't jump to conclusions.*

But with the amount of times he caught her wandering around, sneaking off campus… suspicion embeds itself to Armin's spine, a rock he can't massage away.

"Armin?" Eren asks when the final bell rings. "Are you all right?"

"He's worried about his girlfriend," teases Reiner as he passes by, tossing a baseball in the air and catching it. He seems or less happy today. Armin wonders what Reiner would do if he knew about Bertolt's meltdown the night before.

"You don't have to worry long," Mikasa says. "I think she's feeling better." She nods at Annie, dressed in jeans and a hoodie and strolling towards them.

She looks pale, but okay. Armin leaps up. "How are you—"

"Better." Annie takes a seat. "Nanaba thought I should get some fresh air."

"We'll leave you two to talk," Eren says quickly. "Take care of her, Armin."

Mikasa nods in approval of Eren's words. They scurry away.

He can't do this now. Not when she's sick.

But the image of Marco sobbing that night in the hotel fills Armin's mind. "Want to go somewhere quiet?" he blurts out.

She looks bemused. "I don't have energy today."

"No, to talk."
"Oh." Annie frowns, twisting her ring. "Sure."

He leads her over to the tennis courts. Rainclouds form overhead, blocking the sun and the warmth. Armin shivers. Annie leans back against the stone wall lining the staircase down to the courts. She doesn't say anything.

*She's nervous,* Armin realizes.

*Does she know that I think—suspect—no, dammit, I know?*

*It's not a lie,* Armin realizes. *It's not me being irrational.*

And another part of him claws its way up—*no!* He won't believe it. She makes him feel useful, loved—she loves him. She can't—she's kind, she's a good person underneath it all—*this can't be real.*

*Is it a situation like Ymir's?*

"Annie, why were you outside the gates late night? In town?" Armin asks.

She frowns, seemingly caught off guard. *Maybe that means she doesn't—and I am a fool.* "Who says I was?"

"I saw the bag in your pocket."

"Oh. I wanted chocolate." Annie smirks. "And I like walking, when I can't sleep."

*That's all?* Armin blows out his breath. *Just ask her. Be honest with her—she might hate you but you'll know, and if you're wrong, you can grovel for her forgiveness.* "Annie—about Marco—"

"What about him?" Annie asks, flicking a pebble off the top of the wall. "Have Eren and Jean found anything?"

"No." Armin swallows. "I have a suspicion, though."

Annie turns to face him, her blond bangs swinging in front of her eyes. "And what's that?"

He can't speak. It's as if his jaw's wired shut. "I—"

"When did you start looking at me that way?" Annie asks, her voice catching. "You think I—"

"I—no! Not exactly—it's just—you have to admit it looks weird when you're leaving campus and lying about it—" And there was her reaction to Marco—crying hysterically like they all were, and then refusing to talk about it. *"I should help Eren and Jean," Armin told her on the plane.*

*"Why bother?" she responded.*

*"Is it like Ymir?"* Armin asks. *"Are you being forced to—"*

Annie throws her head back, a girlish laugh ripping from her lips. Nausea surges, and it's not from any potential stomach bug. *"What would make you happier, Armin, to think I'm a useless, weak girl tricked into helping, or that I make my own choices?"

*No no no no—please!*

"How long have you been thinking this of me?" Tears glitter in her eyes.
"I—" The suspicion's always been there. "I couldn't believe it. I still don't. Annie—"

Annie twists and twists her ring. "You were the only person who ever said you thought I was a good person. Was that all some kind of—"

"No! Annie, please listen to me! I want to—"

"I'm glad you let me love you," Annie tells him, voice bitter. "I'm glad I could help you with that. Armin. Because you're smart and capable and you don't think you are, but you are. But I hope you're happy where it's gotten you. Congratulations on finally proving to yourself that you're useful." The words stream out of her, her eyes widening until she looks almost deranged.

"Annie," Armin croaks.

"You have no proof. Tell anyone and they'll laugh at you."

"Are you threatening me?" Armin demands.

She pushes past him, running towards her dorm.

Is it really you?

It is.

She didn't say the words, but she didn't have to. Who do I tell? Moblit? Levi?

I have no proof.

He isn't even certain he wants to find any.

Armin covers his face and curls up on the stairs, crying.

"Get up, sleepyhead!" Hitch sings.

Annie's eyes burn from crying so much, and her vision blurs. She pries the pillow away from her face.

Why haven't they come for me?

He just needs more time to come to terms with it, Annie thinks. She has no reason to think he suspects Bertolt or Reiner or Zeke, not yet, no reason to think he suspects she has anything to do with the kidnapping or what happened to the Jaegers. But he'll figure it out. He's smart.

Why do you have to be so smart, Armin?

She should go to Zeke, Reiner, Bertolt, warn them. But she can't. Zeke doesn't even know she and Armin are dating, unless one of the other teachers told him, but he seems pretty removed from their camaraderie.

Say they forced you. Like Ymir.

Ymir didn't do half the things we've done.

And for Ymir, it was her past. This is Annie's reality.

Her stomach surges and panic hits her, driving through her hands and fingers, feet and toes, like
needles. What am I going to do?

She needs Armin, and he ruined it. She ruined it.

Annie drags herself to the cafeteria. The sun shines.

"Nice day!" Sasha says cheerfully.

"A huge storm's coming later in the week," Nanaba warns.

She has to be out of here by then. Annie can't stay.

The smell of coffee sours her stomach, and Annie can barely pick at the yogurt she gets. She sits in the corner, by herself. Armin sits with Eren and Mikasa, and he glances over at her, his eyes sad.

You haven't told yet.

But you will. Soon.

Stop trying to protect me, Armin! I don't deserve it. Annie leans over, tears clogging her throat. She pushes her yogurt away.

"Hey," says Sasha from above her. Annie cranes her neck.

Sasha and Connie slide across from her. "We're the stomach bug survival crew. Might as well stick together."

"I'm a supporter of the stomach bug survival crew," Connie says with a grin, shoveling oatmeal into his mouth. Annie can't stand the sight of the bland, mushy stuff, not right now.

Please don't puke. She pinches her hands, trying for an acupressure point. Not that she even believes in that, but it's worth a shot. Anything's worth a shot.

You're just denying reality again. What else is new?

"So," Sasha says timidly. "I assume you and Armin had a fight?"

Annie shrugs. "We broke up." Did we?

Yes. The words didn't need to be said.

"What?" Connie's jaw drops. "Geez. I mean, Armin pretty much refused to talk to anyone last night, but I didn't think—" He grimaces. "Yeah, Mikasa's glaring at you like you broke his heart."

I hate that I'm in love with you, she told him that night at the beach.

Because she knew she'd break his heart.

And it's way worse than you think, Connie.

Did he tell Mikasa? Annie jerks her head up. No, she doesn't think so. Not yet. But soon.

"I'm sorry," Sasha says sympathetically. "We won't say anything."

"We won't?" Connie asks.

"It's going to get out anyways," Annie says, voice clipped.
He looked at me like I was a bad person.

But no. The way he's looking back at her now—it's sad. Like he pities her.

Did you ever think you could be a good person? You have a fantasy self. You're deluded, as deluded as Reiner.

This is who you are.

She's scared it doesn't matter that she doesn't want to be her. She's more scared of that than anything else right now.

Armin, I need you. And she can't ask him to be there for her.

You deserve this, you stupid skank.

Annie dumps her yogurt and drags herself to class, lagging behind everyone. She throws up in the bushes as the late bell rings, dirt and mulch clinging to her palms. Levi is going to kill her for being tardy.

It doesn't even matter. Why do you still care?

She deliberately avoids Armin all day, spending lunchtime hiding outside by herself with plain rice. She gets it down, and it sits fine.

Stop pretending.

Face reality.

I'll do it, Annie decides, as she sits in the back of literature class with Ymir and Historia. I just need to know.

"Are you okay, Annie?" Petra inquires during art class, the last of the day. Annie's been staring at a mostly blank page for the hour.

She shrugs.

"If you ever want to talk…" Petra begins, but Annie shakes her head.

The moment the last bell rings, Annie dashes out of Hange's class and to her dorm. Nanaba signs a pass for her to leave, and she carries the pink slip of paper in her hand. See, Armin? I have permission.

Tears sting. If this situation turns out exactly like she thinks it will… fuck.

I'm more of a screw-up than I thought.

Her hands shake as she crosses the street. She digs her fingertips into her ring as she grinds it around her finger. When she reaches the pharmacy, she wraps her arms around herself, face burning. It's as if everyone knows why she's here, what she's after.

Annie hurries down the aisles, glancing up at the hanging signs to find the right one. When she finds what she's looking for, she grabs the cheapest option and darts towards the self-checkout registers.

Dammit. A line. Only three people long, but Annie clutches the box to her chest. Her heart thuds, pulse reverberating in her ears. Her head swims.
"Annie!"

Fuck.

Her limbs petrify, as if they're encased. She stars at the ugly carpet under her feet, gray and wannabe green and fake blue.

"Those anti-nausea medicines the nurse gave you aren't working well enough, huh?" Jean holds out one hand, the other clutching a bag of candy. "Stay back. I don't want to get it."

"Mm." One person finishes. The line shortens to two.

"I never thought I'd see Sasha turn down food, you know—oh my God."

Oh my God why can't I have any luck? She could cry.

His eyes bug, and his mouth hangs open. "Annie—"

Forget this. Annie steps out of line, grabbing Jean's elbow and dragging him back towards the groceries aisle, which mostly consists of preservatives masquerading as ramen. "If you tell anyone, and I mean a single soul, I will murder you, and I will make it hurt."

Jean's face pales, eyes darting towards the test in her hands and to her face. "For real?"

She pushes him away, blinking back tears.

"You should tell Armin—"

"Oh, and you know what I should do?" Annie snaps. "Stay out of my business."

"I won't tell anyone," Jean promises gravely. "But, Annie—can I do anything? Do you need help?"

She shakes her head, unable to speak. What am I going to do?

If it's positive, it's really over. Everything.

"Armin would help you… I mean, I know you've been fighting lately, but I also know you definitely haven't told him, because he would be obsessively by your side if he knew." Jeans' face melts into a kind of shock.

"Why do you care what happens to me or what I do, Jean?" Annie manages.

Jean shrugs. "I don't—know. I don't know. But—Annie—"

"I'm checking out now," she says. "I mean it. Don't tell anyone."

"I won't."

She hopes she can trust him. Of all people, why him? She supposes it's better than Armin. Because he would obsessively hover at her side, and she wants that so badly. She wants his hand in hers, wants him to cry with her, tell her the names she's been calling herself the past month as she waited and waited aren't true, that she's not stupid, she's not a screw-up, she's not hopeless.

But it's not fair to him. He's finally free of her, her and her bad influence, and she doesn't want him to be sucked back in. He wouldn't turn her in, if he knew. Not that he can anyways, without proof. Annie reminds herself of that.
She doesn't care. He deserves to follow the truth, like he always does. *It's your choice, Armin.*

Jean accompanies her on the walk back to Wall Academy without her permission, but at least he doesn't speak. Annie's lost in her own panic.

"Good luck," Jean tells her when they split at the gate, Jean to head back to his dorm, Annie to hers.

"Thanks," she says, voice wobbling.

Thankfully Hitch isn't here, and neither are Mina or Hannah. Annie locks herself in the bathroom. As she waits, she cries into her hands. *I miss you, Armin.*

*I need you.*

*I'm so scared.*

When her timer goes off after three minutes, Annie peeks out through her fingers.

Two pink stripes.

*Positive.*

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! Up next: Annie's attempts to keep things a secret don't go as planned.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

She can't even tell her father. He won't be on her side. Not about this one.

She can't tell Armin. She won't guilt him.

Zeke will kill her, take away her scholarship for sure.

What am I going to do?

Is this karma for what I did to Marco? I didn't tell anyone then, and now I can't tell anyone about this.

I'm all alone.

And it's her own goddamn fault. Annie sobs, the sound echoing through the bathroom. She's so cold.

"Everything okay in there?" Sasha calls from outside.

Annie leaps to her feet. "It's just me, Sasha." Her voice trembles. But at least Sasha will assume it's about Armin, and leave her alone. She grabs the test and stuffs it back in the box. She needs to ditch it in the dumpster. One of the janitors will find it elsewise.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm just sad!" Annie yells. "I'll be fine. I just—need to be alone."

"Okay…"

Phew. Annie unlocks the bathroom door and steps into her dorm room.

To find Sasha sitting cross-legged on Hitch's bed, blowing bubblegum.

"What are you doing here?" Annie demands, the test still in her hands. "I said to leave me alone!"

"You left your door open, and you're sad," Sasha says, popping the bubble. "Friends help friends when they're sad."

Annie shuffles the box behind her back, but Sasha's eyes latch onto it. "Annie?"

"That's sweet of you, but I really do want to be alone," Annie chokes out.

"Annie." Sasha's eyes, huge normally, grow even larger. "Do you need help?"

Annie doesn't even know what she could say.

"I'll leave, if you want me to," Sasha promises, rising and inching towards the door. "But—Annie—if you need help—"

Annie gulps. This is what you wanted, didn't you?

Someone who cares.
"Help me," she whispers, and Sasha throws her arms around her. Annie doesn't know what to do. "It's positive," she finally ekes out as Sasha lets her go. Tears start to stream again, hot against her raw cheek. "I don't know what I'm going to do."

"I'm so sorry," Sasha says, choking up.

"Why are you crying?" Annie demands.

"Because you're in a tough spot, and you're upset."

_You're crying for me? That's stupid._

"Does Armin know?" Sasha drops onto Annie's bed, pulling Annie with her.

"No." Annie swallows. "He really doesn't." The last thing she wants is for Sasha to think they broke up over this. "And I don't think it's fair to tell him."

"Are you sure?" Sasha inquires, tugging at her brown ponytail. She digs through her pocket and offers Annie a piece of strawberry bubblegum.

Annie takes it. She nods. "It's not fair to him." The flavor explodes in her mouth, sweet and tasting like days she used to play outside with her mother, though she can't quite remember them.

Sasha frowns, but she doesn't protest.

"I can't believe we were so stupid," Annie admits. "I'm such an—"

"Mistakes happen," Sasha interrupts. "Trust me. When I went to Nanaba that time after Connie and I had that—well, you know—I was terrified. Crying."

"I don't know what to do."

"You mean—whether you want to have it or get a termination?" Sasha ventures.

Annie nods. Logically, she knows an abortion is the best option. Armin would never know, her father and Zeke would never find out, and she could continue life until Armin gathered enough proof to take her down. Or left her alone. Whatever he chooses. And if he tries to turn her in, she can run away. If she has a kid… she can't do any of that.

But she can't explain any of that to Sasha.

_I'm not fit to be a mother. _"I'm only sixteen," she says out loud.

Sasha nods.

"What would you do?" Annie asks her. Surely Sasha thought about it, in those moments before she and Connie went to Nanaba. "I can't go to Nanaba," she adds. "My dad—he's not like your parents. He'll be furious, and there are other factors—I'm on a scholarship—"

Sasha blows out her breath. "Okay then. Talking to Nanaba is crossed out on the list."

Annie snorts. "But what would you do?"

"I'd probably ask Connie what he thought," Sasha answers. "And… we'd see. I know it's stupid to have a kid at our age. But it's not exactly uncommon where I'm from."
Annie peers at Sasha. It occurs to her that she never really asked about Sasha’s hometown.

"And of course, adoption’s another option," Sasha says.

Annie swallows. She really doesn’t have an option. *It's a fantasy, and you need to stop indulging in it.* She knows what she has to do, or else Armin will find out, and she’ll have ruined his life even more than she has now, and Zeke and her father will hate her. She pictures Zeke and her father screaming at her, and chains fall over her hands.

*I don't have a choice.*

She closes her eyes and lets more tears fall. Sasha wraps her arms around her.

"You know," Sasha says. "It can't hurt to make an appointment."

"Huh?"

"An appointment at the clinic in town. I can hire a taxi—or guilt Connie into it, since I don't really have much extra money because I spent it all on snacks. But we can go—I mean, you can go alone, or I can go with you, if you want moral support—and talk to them about your options. They don't pressure you, at least they're not supposed to. I know people who've gone to similar places. They'll have more information about—everything."

Annie swallows. "Okay."

"Okay?" Sasha grins. "I'll call and see what they have this week."

"As soon as possible," Annie requests.

Sasha nods. "Will do. In the meantime—" She gestures towards the test.

"I'll take it to the dumpster," Annie says, rising. "Thanks, Sasha." It's a strange thing to say.

"Anytime," Sasha tells her, fiddling with her phone.

Annie dumps the test and checks her own phone, half hoping to see a text from Armin telling her he changed his mind, he doesn’t think she did that to Marco, erase everything that happened yesterday so she can tell him and they can decide together, so he can convince her she has a choice.

Instead, she finds one from Jean.

*Is everything okay?*

*No,* she fires back. *And you better keep your word.*

He responds almost instantly. *I will.*

"I got you an appointment for tomorrow after school," Sasha tells her. "Connie will order us a taxi."

"Did you tell him?" Annie demands.

"He won't say a word, or I won't let him have the chocolate cupcakes I bought," Sasha says.

Annie rolls her eyes. *If it works... "Okay."*

"Erwin, you really ought to slow down," Armin hears Hange saying as she jogs behind their
commander.

Armin's still not quite used to seeing Erwin with an empty sleeve instead of his right arm. Judging from the dark circles under Erwin's eyes, he's not used to it either.

"Arlert," Erwin greets him. Armin rises from the bench he's been sitting on. "Waiting for Jaeger?"


"How are you feeling?" Mikasa inquires, crossing her legs under her.

"I'm fine. Thank you for asking." Erwin smiles.

Should I tell you? About Annie?

He'd listen, even if he couldn't act without proof.

But Armin still misses her.

The door opens, and Eren and Levi exit, Eren smiling and Levi scowling, so Armin presumes it went well. His chest tightens as he remembers how Annie pointed him to solve Eren's school dilemmas.

"Did you wash your clothes? Because those still have mud stains on them from last weekend," Levi says to Hange.

She grins. "Didn't have the time."

Levi throws his hands in the air as if to say why do I bother.

"Skedaddle," Erwin tells the kids.

"So," Eren says as they round the corner. "What do you think they were doing last weekend?"

"Mountain biking," Mikasa answers. "I saw them coming back."

"Was it just the two of them?" Eren asks.

Mikasa nods, pulling up her scarf. Her cheeks turn pink.

"Jaeger," says Zeke, passing them on the stairs. "How are you three?"

Do you even know our names? Armin wonders.

"We're fine," Eren says. Mikasa squeezes Armin's shoulder.

"You'll be happy to know that the board officially agreed to allow Ymir to continue over the next year," Zeke tells them.

Mikasa smiles. Eren claps his hands, and Armin just wonders about Annie.

What would happen to you?

Are they forcing you?

Why won't you let me help you? Or save yourself? Because you are strong enough to save yourself, Annie, really, you are!
"Have a good day," Zeke tells them, hurrying past.

"He really does look like your dad, Eren," Mikasa comments.

_He does._ Armin never thought of that before.

"Maybe I should get to know him better," Eren says, longing in his voice. He clears his throat. "Hannes says there's still no change. I wish she would just give up. I'm a horrible son."

"You are not," Mikasa snaps, grabbing Eren's chin. "Look at me, Eren. You are not. Don't ever say that again. You let her know—as much as she can know—that it's up to her, and she's still fighting." She smirks. "Isn't that what you kept encouraging me to do, anyways? Fight?"

_Maybe I should leave?_ Armin wonders.

"I just don't want her in pain anymore," Eren whispers. He clenches his fists. "I am proud of her, though."

"You're definitely her son," Armin says quietly.

"Armin?" calls a voice. Jean strolls over to them, hands in his pockets. "Can I talk to you?"

"What about?" Eren asks.

"Look, Eren, we're getting along now, but I did say Armin, not Eren." Jean blows out his breath. "It's about Annie."

_Do you know about her?_ Armin's first instinct is to gather ideas on how he'll deflect any suspicions Jean has. But he shouldn't. He should—

"Alone?" Jean requests, and Armin follows. The late afternoon sunlight warms them, though a storm is supposed to come tomorrow night. The wind already picks up place, tossing Armin's hair.

"I heard you broke up."

"Kind of. Not exactly." The term still burns Armin's heart.

"Well, you might want to know something that she'll kill me for telling you, since I promised her I wouldn't, but I still think you need to know."

"What?" Armin's mind races. _Jean—you weren't—with Marco—no, that doesn't make any sense—_

"She's pregnant," Jean says bluntly. "Which is almost funny, because of all people not to use condoms, I wouldn't have pegged you."

"What?" Armin stares at Jean, at his stupid hair and his troubled eyes. "What are you saying?"

_Annie?_

_What the—_

_We didn't use… not at first, and not regularly thereafter._ Armin moans, covering his face. His knees grow weak. His heart pounds and he feels like he's going to throw up. _No, no—what have I done?_

_Talking won't get you out of this one._
And Annie… his heart seizes. He can only imagine how she feels. It's not fair, that she's the one who has to suffer while he doesn't.

_I have to be there for her._ "Is she in her dorm?"

Jean shakes his head. "I think Sasha and Connie took her to that clinic in town. At least, I saw the three of them leaving together, and I can't think of where else they'd be going."

Armin remembers Marco crying. _What is the right thing to do?_ 

_Isn't she worth it?_

Forget turning her in. Armin can't do it. Not now. He loves Annie, and she matters more to him. _We'll figure it out—we won't leave Marco stranded, but we'll figure it out together._

Armin grabs his phone and texts Annie. _Jean told me and I'm coming to see you._

"I'm locking my door tonight," Jean proclaims, scowling. "Do you need a cab, Armin?"

He nods.

"Calling uber for you. Go help your girlfriend. And I won't tell anyone, so rest assured."

"Didn't you tell me after promising Annie?" Armin demands.

"Well, yeah, but also Annie was crying when she left and she seems so sad and alone." Jean shrugs.

_You're way more compassionate than you come across,_ Armin thinks. Jean would probably be irritated if he said it out loud. He texts Mikasa and Eren that he'll see them at dinner.

_Everything okay? _Mikasa asks.

_We'll talk later, _Armin promises as he gets in the uber.

Annie hasn't responded.

:"Annie Leonhart?" calls the nurse, a woman with dark hair clipped back on her head.

"Good luck," Sasha tells her. Connie gives Annie a thumbs-up.

Annie rises and follows the woman down the hallway, her shoes squealing against the linoleum floor. The woman ushers Annie into a small room with three white walls and one in lavender. After taking her height and weight, the nurse tells her they'll do another pregnancy test, just to be sure, and Annie's stuck waiting again. She wraps her arms around herself and doubles over, swinging her legs.

Her phone lights up. Armin?

_Oh no._

Jean, _I will fucking stab you._

No, she won't. Because she's terrified, but she's also relieved. A part of her brain paints Armin showing up with her father's words ready to spew at her, and yet she knows that won't happen.

_Because he's a good person._
I'm not.

She cries again.

The nurse opens the door, and Annie's not surprised at all when she tells her the test was positive. "When was your last period?"

"Late January."

"So... you're probably about two and a half months, ten weeks," the woman calculates.

Annie nods, wiping her eyes.

"Oh, hon." The nurse puts her hand on Annie's shoulder. "You're not the first teenager this has happened to, and you won't be the last. I know it's scary, though."

Annie muffles a sob.

"Do you want to talk about your options?" ventures the nurse.

Annie nods again. "I don't have—a choice though."

"What do you mean?" the nurse asks, putting her hands on her hips. "You can choose a termination, or you can choose to carry the baby, raise it or give it up for adoption—it's all your choice, and you're capable of making it. It's your body."

"But I'm sixteen, and I've got another year of school, so—"

The woman's face softens. "It's up to you, hon. You can do it, whatever you decide."

"Um—" Annie swallows, grabbing her phone. "My boyfriend's—coming. He just texted me." Does he still want to be her boyfriend? "Can we—talk—before I make a decision?"

"Of course, and you also don't have to decide today. If you do want a termination, you need to decide soon, though," the woman says, pulling up a stool. "Let's talk."

"You okay, kid?" asks the driver.

Armin gives him the name of the clinic and the driver smirks. "Clearly not."

Did you have to say that? Armin wonders, wrapping his arms around himself. There is no amount of apologies he can give to Annie—he shouldn't have been so irresponsible—

I'm so sorry, Annie. And then him confronting her—I have the worst timing in the world!

The car pulls up, and Armin darts out and into the clinic. Green chairs line the walls, and magazine spill out from a rack.

"Can I help you?" asks the lady at the front desk.

"Armin!" yelps Sasha, getting to her feet. Connie's eyes bug.

"How did you—"

"Jean told me," Armin manages. Tears fill his eyes, but neither Sasha nor Connie are looking at him with any sort of judgment. "Can I—"
"You must be Miss Leonhart's boyfriend," says a tall woman behind him. She smiles at him. "She wants to talk to you."

Armin keeps his head down as the woman leads him to a wooden door, where she knocks. Annie's voice comes. "Come in."

The woman leads Armin inside, and Annie's eyes, already red, start to stream. Armin throws his arms around her.

"I'll leave you two to talk," says the woman. "Be back soon."

"You don't hate me?" Annie asks.

"No. I'm sorry, Annie—I—" Does she blame him? He wouldn't blame her if she did. "I was so irresponsible—I should have thought—and it isn't fair to you—"

"It did take two of us," Annie points out dryly.

Armin almost smiles.

"And you shouldn't be. I've done some really terrible things." Annie wipes her eyes, her nose. The sunlight filters in around her, golden as the evening settles in.

"I'm sorry I made you feel like you couldn't trust me with this," Armin says, clapping his fist against his forehead. "I never meant—"

"You didn't. I just—I didn't think it was fair to bother you when you were already rid of me. Which is good, Armin."

He scowls. "I don't want to be rid of you."

"You should," she tells him, voice cracking. "There's a lot more you don't know."

Armin's stomach drops. "Okay." What could it be?

"I don't know what to do." Annie spreads her hands. "If I—tell—they won't believe me. And if I do, I definitely need to—I know either way—I'm sixteen, Armin, we're juniors, we still have school, my father will probably kick me until it dies unless I have this abortion."

Armin's head swims. Will Annie definitely go to jail?

Maybe not. Someone else has to be manipulating—she's no mastermind. Erwin will help her, Armin's sure of it. "Annie—whatever you want to do, whatever your choice is, I want to—I'll be here for you. I'm not going to abandon you." He grips her hands. Please believe me.

Annie shakes her head. "Why?"

"Because I love you. And loving you is important to me. You're important to me, Annie." Armin's voice catches. I want to help you.

"Will you help me?" she asks. "If I tell you everything—and it's going to be bad. I didn't want to do it. You're right about that."

He nods.

"Not here," Annie clarifies. "We aren't discussing that here." She bites her lip. "I'm supposed to
make an appointment."

Armin nods again. His head spins.

"I don't want to," Annie confesses. "I really don't want to, Armin. Because I'm an idiot—stupid—" She twists her ring around again and again. "But I want to try to bring something good in this world—but I don't want to ruin your life, especially if I'm—I've already ruined mine."

"You haven't ruined yours," Armin insists. He can't let that happen.

*She wants to have the baby.*

*And if they do… "I said I'd support you no matter what you decide, remember?" I meant it.*

"You aren't scared?" she asks.

"I'm scared," Armin says, feeling as if his insides have been lit on fire. "But I still—"

"Armin, if I have the baby, you'll be in trouble too."

"I don't care," he says, and a strange cool relief spreads through him.

Annie leans closer to him, pressing her forehead against his. He can see tears still tracking down her cheeks. She kisses him, pulling away as the door opens.

"I'm going to keep it," Annie says.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! Up next: Armin tells Eren and Mikasa, and Annie tells Reiner and Bertolt. Which pair will handle the news better?
"Armin didn't come. Neither did Sasha or Connie," Mikasa says, watching the cafeteria workers take away the trays of dinner food. The cutlery clangs against the metal trays.

"I never thought I'd see Sasha miss dinner," Eren says, gaping.

"I hope they're okay," Historia says, biting her fingernail.

Jean gulps the last of his milk, his face red. Mikasa pinches her scarf. Armin's fine. She doesn't need to worry.

But she's worried anyways. Her anxieties storm her mind, conjuring up the worst possible scenarios. Because that's what life's given you. The thought cuts at her life a knife.

"So," Reiner says with a smirk to Jean. "Is Marco really visiting this weekend?"

"Wait, really?" Eren bursts out as Jean nods. "Marco's coming?"

Life's also given me Eren.

"Keep it quiet, dipshit!" Jean snaps. "He's not supposed to be in town. Or near the school, based on the rules of expulsion."

"What did you do to convince him to come?" Mikasa asks, breathing normally again. "Marco likes rules."

"Marco likes people," Ymir corrects.

"So... did you tell him?" Eren asks.

Jean shakes his head. Mikasa relates. Eren, do you even know, or are you still so dense?

"I just... said the truth. I miss him and life sucks right now."

"Why does life suck for you, Jean Boy?" Eren teases.

"Eren," Mikasa warns, rolling her eyes.

"Goodbye." Jean gets to his feet and marches away. The clanks from the cafeteria workers echo as Mikasa gets to her feet.

"I didn't mean to offend him," Eren says to Mikasa as they dump their trays. His brow furrows, as if he's actually feeling badly.

She shrugs as they exit the cafeteria, into the dusk. A hand lands on her back. Eren yelps, and Mikasa whirls around, elbow poised to jam in someone's face.

Oh. It's Hannes.

"What the blast are you doing?" Eren barks. "You almost gave me a heart attack!"
"Your mother, Eren."

"What?" Eren's face pales, and Mikasa realizes that Eren's not prepared for her to die, not in this moment, not so many months after he gave her permission and she didn't take it. He reaches out and clutches Mikasa's hand, his own shaking. "Is she—"

Mikasa squeezes his hand. **I'm here for you, Eren.** At the same time, rage stirs inside her. **This isn't fair—isn't right—**

"The doctors think she's showing some signs of emerging from the coma," Hannes blurts out.

"What?" Eren croaks. Mikasa's jaw drops.

**There's—hope? Are you sure?**

Because if this turns out to be false hope, she's terrified Eren will die. And she herself—she's afraid to hope. Life's taught her that hope will either kill her or resurrect her, and she's so afraid of it going wrong.

"She's started responding to certain stimuli," Hannes reports. "Moving her arms, her legs, keeping her eyes open for periods of time. I wanted to tell you in person."

*It's real.* Mikasa almost doubles over. Tears burn her eyes. It won't be perfect—she's read probably hundreds of articles on people waking up from comas over the past few months—but this hope is **real.**

"I have to see her!" Eren cries.

"Not yet," Hannes says sharply. "Not until the weekend, and depending on how this go with this storm we're supposed to get, maybe not until the weekend after that."

"You can't keep me here!" Eren shouts. Mikasa grabs his shoulder and he looks at her, his green eyes raw and agonized.

"Eren," she says. "I know you want to see her—I do too, but listen to Hannes."

"Why?" he pleads.

"Because waking up from a coma doesn't mean she'll be able to recognize you, or anyone. And she is not fully awake yet." Mikasa looks to Hannes to confirm, and he nods.

"She can't track sights or sounds, Eren, or respond to commands. It's a sign that she's progressing, but we don't know how much further it'll go," Hannes says.

Eren crumples, and Mikasa catches him. His chest heaves as he tries to rein in his sobs. "I can't stand this! I can't stand all this waiting, all the stop and start—"

"She's improving," Mikasa tells him, pulling back to look into his eyes. She somehow knows what to say without even rehearsing it. "She is, Eren. And you're making her proud by just doing what you're doing, right here."

Eren presses his forehead against Mikasa's shoulder. Her heart lurches.

"Hey, you two!" calls Sasha, stuffing French fries from the local fast food place in her mouth. She and Connie stroll past.
"Call me anytime," Hannes tells Eren before darting off.

*Oh, good. She got dinner. "Is Armin—"* Mikasa starts.

"He wants to talk to both of you. He's waiting in the dorm. He said for you to sneak in, Mikasa," Connie adds.

*Something's wrong.* Mikasa glances at Eren in shock. She takes off towards the dorm, Eren on her heels. *Of course the rug will be ripped out from under her...* She drops down the pillar, hoping against hope that Moblit isn't around.

He isn't, but Jean is, wearing a very guilty face and nothing but a towel. He runs by her and slams his door.

Mikasa can scrub her eyes out with soap later. Connie waves from across the dorm. She races to Eren's room, where Eren grabs her wrist and pulls her in, shutting the door.

Armin and Annie both sit on Armin's bed, noses swollen and eyes red.

"Oh God," Mikasa breathes. "Armin—are you okay?"

Armin shrugs. "It's complicated."

*But you're back with Annie,* she notes, taking in their entwined hands.

"You might want to sit down," Armin adds. Mikasa stays standing while Eren obeys.

Annie digs into her hoodie pocket and produces a small photo that Armin hands over.

"Oh my—Armin—what the hell?" Eren bursts out. He's never looked so shocked. Mikasa's stomach flip-flops.

"How?" Eren exclaims.

"Do you really want an explanation?" Annie asks dryly.

"How did I not know this?" Eren continues, gripping his hair. *"Armin—"*

"I'm a private person, okay, Eren?" Armin's face is blood red. He looks to Mikasa, who drops to the floor.

"What are you going to do?" she asks. *Poor Armin.* She studies Annie, who looks ashen. *We're just kids.*

"Uh—right now we're thinking of keeping the baby," Armin admits, pulling back the sonogram photo and looking at it again. "He or she's the size of a prune right now."

"How are you going to raise a kid?" Mikasa demands.

"I don't know, Mikasa!" Armin shouts back. He clutches his face. "But I—want to."

"I do too," Annie says quietly.

"We both know it's stupid," Armin continues. "But we can't—we want to have this child, give it a chance. We know it'll be really, really hard, Eren, Mikasa, but—"
"I'm with you," Eren says, clenching his fists.

"Huh?" Mikasa stares at him.

"I'll support you. Both of you. In whatever way you need." Because this is Eren—loyal, dedicated to his friends no matter what, inspiring Mikasa.

"I will too," she chokes out. She doubts she would make the same choice if she were in Annie's shoes, but it is her decision, and not Mikasa's.

Would you really?

If the father was Eren?

She doesn't know. All she knows right now is that her friends are scared but determined, and she'll help them. She meets Annie's eyes and manages a smile.

"There's more," Armin says, voice tight. Mikasa rises to switch the light on in the dim room. "Annie—she works with—a group. A gang. Like Ymir used to."

Mikasa's blood pressure spikes. "Used to or currently works?" she asks.

"Currently," Annie whispers, her head drooping.

"Marco—was you?" Eren demands, clenching his fists.

"No—I didn't—yes, kind of." Annie throws her hands in the air. "I didn't do it, but I didn't say anything when I knew who did." Her voice catches.

This is bad. Mikasa's chest tightens. Especially now that Annie's pregnant. She can't go to jail.

"Who?" Eren cries out. "Annie, if they forced you—"

"Reiner and Bertolt did it," Annie says. "We're being forced to—none of us want to do it! The town we're from—it's a shithole. Zeke helped my father out of so many predicaments. I'd probably be dead if it wasn't for him, and yet he's used that to—to make me do whatever he wants. Me, and Reiner, and Bertolt—all three of us. Bertolt's parents are in fucking prison. Reiner's dad is a drunk who tries to beat the gay out of him every day he's home. Our school system sucks and the only way out was—Zeke offered us—in exchange for helping make and deliver drugs—" She doubles over, shoulders shaking. "Marco was never supposed to—it wasn't right, it wasn't right!"

"Zeke?" Eren explodes. "Armin—"

"Yes, that Zeke, the vice principal," Armin cuts in. "He's not what he seems. He's a—he's a—"

What? Mikasa clutches her scarf.

"He needs the money to support his research," Annie says. "Or—at least that's part of it. That's what it started out as. Now I think he just wants to support his lifestyle and get esteem and prove that he's better than our shithole town."

"So what are you going to do about it now?" Mikasa asks. Because you better be planning on being brave like Ymir.

"Talk to Reiner and Bertolt," Annie says, sniffling. "Ask them—if they'll—give them a choice."
"We're coming with you," Eren declares, leaping to his feet. You're in such a mess, Mikasa thinks as Annie blanches, and then acquiesces with a nod. What else are you hiding? And are you really going to let us help you?

"What the hell?" gasps Reiner as Eren marches in, followed by Mikasa, Armin, and Annie. Reiner is Eren's friend, the one who helped him, both of them—why? "Why are you and Mikasa here, Annie? If we get caught—"

"We've just—" Eren starts, but Annie cuts him off. "I'm pregnant."

Bertolt jumps to his feet, laptop sliding off his bed, which is already covered in sweaters, jackets, and shoes as if he never puts anything away. His jaw hovers. "Annie?"

Do you actually care about her? Eren wonders. Did you ever care about any of us? Was it all fake—are you monsters—

Annie folds her arms. "I said, I'm pregnant. Almost ten weeks along."

"You can't be!" Reiner shouts. Bertolt's skin looks almost as if it's covered in a sheen of sweat.

"Well, I am, Reiner!" Her voice shatters, and Annie bursts into tears. Reiner and Bertolt stand still, both pale.

"How did this happen?" Reiner demands, clutching his skull.

"Why is that everyone's first question?" Annie cries out. "Ask Gunthur; he'll be thrilled to explain the mechanics if you need a refresher!"

Bertolt isn't moving. Reiner paces back and forth, gulping. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure!" Annie holds out the sonogram image. Mikasa tenses by Eren's side.

Reiner clenches his fists and turns to Armin, who pales. "I assume you did it?"

"Don't be sexist," Annie snaps.

"You—you—devil's child!" Bertolt erupts, spluttering. "I'll kill you! I'll—I'll burn you alive and drop you off a cliff!" He grabs Armin by the collar.

Oh, no you don't! "Hey!" Eren jumps at him, but Annie roundhouse kicks Bertolt back. He tumbles back, his head smacking the foot of the bed. Reiner rushes over, grabbing his roommate, who looks distraught, mouth open and breaths heaving out of his chest.

"Leave Armin alone," Annie hisses. "I can kick your ass even if I'm knocked up." Mikasa steps forward to back Annie up, her fists clenched.

Bertolt raises his hands. "But, Annie—"

"I'm not getting an abortion," Annie says, voice trembling. "Because I don't want one."
"What are you going to do, then?" Reiner cries out. "Annie, think about—about your own life—"

"I'm tired of thinking only about my own life—or someone else's version of what my life should be." Annie examines the sonogram image again, her fingers tracing the edge of the baby's head, even if the baby looks more like a fish right now. "I want to be with Armin, and I want to give my baby a chance at living a better life than I have."

"What chance do you even have at that?" Reiner demands. Bertolt covers his face, moaning into his hands.

What are you really worried about? Eren wonders. Will Zeke hurt Annie?

"I'm not trying to be rude, Annie, I'm just—" Reiner tries.

"Worried about Zeke?" Armin cuts in.

Reiner freezes. Bertolt flinches.

Eren can't stand this, this innocent act. "We know!" he finally shouts at the two of them. "We all know!"

Reiner's jaw hangs open. "Annie—"

"You have two choices," Annie says as Armin grasps her arm. "Either you help me find evidence to take Zeke down, or I'll take you down with him." Her voice cracks.

Bertolt's eyes skitter towards Eren, his face as gray as his sheets. "We—"

"You were our friends," Eren chokes out. "We would have helped you. Unless you wanted to do it—"

"Who do you think wants to do this kind of thing?" Bertolt cries, clutching his face. "No one does! I had—I didn't—we didn't have other options!"

"Bullshit! Then why didn't you say something before?" Eren demands. "When Ymir—"

"We saw Ymir," Bertolt says, wiping his eyes. "The boy she killed? He was Reiner's friend. Our friend, I guess. His name was Marcel. And Zeke—he could kill me, or any of us. He would do it."

"What makes you so sure?" Mikasa asks.

Bertolt cringes, huddling in on himself and rocking back and forth. He says nothing.

"Well?" Mikasa demands, and Eren realizes that she's just as pissed off as he is.

When Bertolt speaks, it's a whisper. "Reiner told me—we think Zeke killed Dr. Jaeger."

He keeps talking, but Eren can't hear. His heart pounds. Bile boils in his throat, singing his tonsils. He killed Dr. Jaeger.

Dad...

"...he made it look like some kind of organized hit, but it wasn't," Annie chokes out.

"Why didn't you say this earlier?" Armin shouts. Annie can't answer, wracked with sobs.
You—murderers—

Mikasa steps forward and punches Reiner in the face. He stumbles back and she turns to Bertolt, who yelps.

"You're sickening," Mikasa hisses, her fist hovering. "Do you have any idea—how much suffering—do you—"

"We didn't know until after!" Annie cries. "He just—it's like Rod Reiss and Erwin. He said Dr. Jaeger was onto him, and when he was in that accident, we all wondered but we were too scared to ask!"

"You leaked our past," Mikasa snarls.

"You were my friends!" Eren erupts. "What are you saying? You know who killed my father? And my mother—she may never be the same! She's starting to wake up; is she in danger?"

"I don't think so," Reiner says in a low voice. Annie leans over and grabs Reiner's trash can, heaving into it.

"Shit," Armin gasps, grabbing Annie's bangs and smoothing them back. The room goes silent. Stress can't be good for Annie, or the baby, Eren knows. He hates this—he should hate her—

"Sorry," Annie croaks out, grabbing the trash can and taking it towards the bathroom. Armin follows, and they all stand in silence, Eren grappling with his thoughts.

"We know you'll never forgive us!" Bertolt sobs. "We can't be forgiven—we're too far gone." He clutches his knees. "I just—I hoped—someone would notice. Someone would help us, anyone."

"You fucking had a shit ton of chances!" Eren bellows. "How many others?"

"None that we know of," Bertolt whispers. Reiner covers his eyes, his shoulders shaking.

"We're here," Armin says, his voice trembling and enraged as he and Annie emerge. "We're here now. Help us, and we'll help you get free of Zeke."

"Do you hate me?" Annie whispers, shrinking against Bertolt's empty wardrobe.

Eren glares at Armin. Say…

What?

Should he hate her? What good comes from hating Annie? She's pregnant, and scared, and in love with Eren's best friend. And you at least—you have a conscience—unlike—

*Is it accurate to say that they don't?*

Eren remembers a scream once, the scream of an animal that haunts his dreams, except it's a human's scream, and it's one he caused by plunging a knife into that human trafficker. His stomach churns. *It's not the same. Dad didn't even get to scream before that car…*

"No," Armin manages. "I love you."

Annie crumples, and Armin catches her. Mikasa's eyes widen like she doesn't understand, and Armin looks to Eren with a pained expression, like he expects Eren to explode.
Instead, Eren focuses on Annie. "You want to take Zeke down?"

She nods.

"Then you better let me help." He shudders as he remembers how friendly Zeke was to him. *You monster—less than human!*

"Eren, how can you help?" Mikasa demands.

"He must have files in his office," says Reiner.

"And he's got to have a lab," Armin says. "To make the meth."

"He does," Reiner whispers. "We're supposed to meet him there tomorrow night. If we can get the keys—"

"Reiner, are you nuts?" Bertolt yelps. "He'll kill us! And we'll—wind up just like my parents—"

"No, you won't," Armin pleads. "Erwin might be willing to try and help you, once we go to him. If you help the law, like Ymir did. And besides, wouldn't you rather try to strike back at this monster who's treated you like you're nothing? Who uses you? Don't you want to be able to make your own choices, do what you want to do in life for a change?" His voice rises.

*I don't want them to be helped,* Eren thinks bitterly.

Mikasa still glares. Bertolt drops his head. "I'm weak, though. I'm—pathetic."

"You're scared," Annie says. "I am, too. But Eren's our friend, isn't he? We should help our friend. And if you can't do it for Eren, do it for me. I have a baby to worry about."

Bertolt gulps and looks at Eren. *Friends? What a laugh.* But he can't bring himself to say it out loud.

"I'll help," Bertolt says, tears streaming down his face. "I'm so—so sorry, Eren. I'm so sorry." His chest heaves as he sobs.

*Words are cheap.*

"I'm sorry too," Reiner manages. "I—I don't know why I did—I was so—I really thought of you as my friend, Eren, I really wanted to help you—it wasn't just out of guilt—I know you hate us, and you should, but I—I wouldn't do it again if I could. I'd rather die."

Eren remembers that morning in the dean's office with Mikasa, how the loneliness chafed at him because he knew everyone would judge him unfairly for what they did when they were nine. His stomach churns again, and he presses his fists against his eyes.

"What's going on in there?" yells Moblit's voice.

*Fuck.*

Mikasa grabs Annie and zips into the bathroom. Reiner charges after them.

Moblit opens the door as Eren hears the shower turn on.

"Well?" Moblit asks. "I heard yelling—Bertolt!"
Bertolt winces, his nose and eyes swollen.

"Trigonometry homework's really hard this week," Armin says instantly.

"Oh… well, I can talk to Levi," Moblit says, his eyes darting back and forth between the three of them. "Where's Reiner?"

"Shower," Armin says as Moblit steps closer to the bathroom.

"Reiner?" he calls, opening the door.

"Is something wrong?" Reiner yells, presumably behind the shower curtain.

"No—no, just checking to see that you're okay." Moblit hesitates. "Well, if any of you need to talk…"

"We're going to help Bertolt," Armin says. "Don't worry about him."

Bertolt nods.

The door shuts, and the shower switches off. Reiner, Mikasa, and Annie stagger out, drenched.

"That was cold water," Annie complains.

"Well, there wasn't exactly time to wait for it to warm up," Reiner snaps.

Mikasa shivers, her white shirt clinging to her chest. Eren looks away, heat rising to his cheeks.

"You should get some rest," Armin tells Annie as he hands over his jacket. She nods.

"I'll get her back safely," Mikasa says. It's as close to a truce as Mikasa will give, at least tonight.

"We'll talk in the morning," Reiner promises. "Eren—your mom's really waking up?"

He nods.

"I'm glad."

Why? Eren can't answer him.

Armin wraps an arm around Eren as they leave, and he feels like a little boy, only instead of defending Armin from bullies, Armin's saving him.

"I still can't believe you're going to have a kid," Eren mutters as they enter their dorm room.

Armin winces. "I know." A small smile plays with his lips, as if he's not entirely displeased.

"Or that you had sex and didn't tell me." Eren freezes. "Oh, my God. Did you do it in this room?"

"You know, if you want to know what sex is like so badly, ask Mikasa and maybe you'll find out," Armin tells him.

Eren throws his pillow at him. Armin catches it and almost grins, but it fails. "Are you going to be okay?"

"No," Eren chokes out. He wants to be angry, to rage, to break something and smash glass and bleed.
My friends.

Why?

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! Up next: Levi gets suspicious, Ymir decides to help, and the kids come up with a plan to take Zeke down... but Reiner's dissociation poses a problem.
"Quiet!" shouts Levi as he marches into class the next morning. Annie fights the urge to vomit battering her stomach and focuses on their teacher. Everyone shuts up, Bertolt still looking gray and terrified and Reiner with a solemn face. Eren keeps glancing at the two of them.

"When you're all quiet today the moment I ask for silence, I get suspicious," Levi says with a scowl. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," Eren says.

Levi rolls his eyes. "When Jaeger says nothing, I know it's something."

"We're all just making fun of Sasha, sir," Mikasa pipes up. Sasha glares at her. Annie catches Ymir and Historia watching with raised eyebrows.

Armin sent a group text earlier to Eren, Mikasa, Annie, Bertolt, and Reiner, asking to meet after school and discuss their plan. The thought sends butterflies flapping in Annie's stomach. *We're actually doing this.*

*Provided Reiner doesn't screw it up.* She glances at him. Bertolt texted her last night to panic about whether Reiner can stay in one personality while they're working to trap Zeke.

*He's worried too,* Bertolt told her. *But he doesn't want us to say anything.*

*He wants to pretend he's a whole person,* Annie thinks. Like she wants to pretend she's a good person.

She looks to Armin, taking copious notes. *Maybe I can be.* She's not right now, but that doesn't have to mean she won't ever be. Her fingers drop to brush her stomach. *I will be. For you.*

Reiner's going to need to acknowledge his issue if he ever wants to recover.

The bell rings just as Annie's nausea surges. She scrambles out of the classroom and into the bathroom, barely making it in time to vomit.

The door opens behind her, and Annie forgot to close the stall door. *Oh, hell.*

"Annie!" cries Historia. "You're not better! You should rest—"

"I don't think she has the stomach flu," Ymir comments. Annie grabs a wad of toilet paper and wipes her mouth.

"What do you mean?" Historia questions.

"I mean, if she's puking every morning, I'm guessing she's knocked up," Ymir says.

Annie's face feels hot and cold all at once. She flushes the toilet and walks past them to the sink. *Don't react. Don't react.*

"I am kind of impressed," Ymir continues.
That's too far. "Really?" Annie demands, grabbing paper towels.

"Are you actually, Annie?" gasps Historia, her eyes wide.

Why is she even bothering to hide it? Everyone's going to know eventually anyways. Annie crosses her arms.

"At least Historia and I don't run that risk," Ymir says.

"Ymir!" Historia looks horrified.

"Would you stop?" Annie snaps, her face red.

"Why didn't you use condoms?" Ymir demands.

_Are you actually upset? For me? "Because we were stupid?"

"Oh, Annie." Historia grabs her in a hug. Annie stiffens. "If you need anything—"

_It can't hurt._

"Actually," Annie says. "We might need some help."

"With what?" Ymir's eyes light up. Outside the windows, a light drizzle starts to fall.

_She wants us to confess, Annie realizes. She wants this mess to end. And she'd be damn good at helping._

"Are both of you free after school?" Annie asks. "Ymir—you can catch Historia up on everything."

"Everything everything?" Ymir questions, her eyebrows rising.

"Everything everything," Annie confirms.

Historia's eyebrows swoop together. Ymir shrugs and nods.

"What's everything?" Historia asks as Annie heads out.

"Did you get sick?" Armin asks, scaring her as he pries himself off of the wall. "Sorry!"

"It's fine. Yeah." Annie shrugs.

"I should be nauseated too," Armin grumbles. "It's not fair that you're the one who has to deal with all of it."

Annie kisses his cheek. "There, I smell like vomit."

He puts his arm around her as Reiner scowls at them. "Hurt her in any way, Arlert…"

"You're not really in any position to threaten," Annie points out.

"Still." Reiner's expression doesn't soften. Armin actually smiles, and then Reiner follows suit, albeit with guilt still screaming in his eyes.

"So," Hange says as their class begins. Annie notices a teacup that looks suspiciously like the ones Levi keeps in his classroom on her desk. "Erwin has asked me to inform you that, even though today's a Friday, you're to have your weekday curfew hours—all of you need to be in your dorms by
8:00 pm.

"Why?" demands Jean.

"Because this storm is supposed to have some ferocious winds!" Hange laughs, clapping her hands together. "If we're lucky, it might knock some trees down!"

"Lucky? Poor trees!" bursts out Jean. What is going on with you? Annie wonders.

Bertolt kicks Annie's chair. Asshole. Annie takes the hint though, and grabs her phone.

What about meeting with Zeke????

Annie decides to one-up him on quotation marks. We sneak out as per usual????

We can't postpone it.

Because if we do, you're afraid you'll never do it, Annie realizes. We won't, she texts.

What if he cancels tonight?

We'll cross that bridge when we come to it.

"Are you all right, Bertolt?" Hange sings, coming over. "You're sweating up a storm! Do you need to visit the nurse—"

"I'm fine," Bertolt squeaks.

They all crowd into Eren and Armin's dorm room, Mikasa sitting next to Eren in his bed. Hannes told him earlier than there's been no further changes in his mother's condition.

When you wake up, Eren thinks. I'll have caught Dad's murderer.

"It looks like we're all here," Armin begins, studying his notepad. Annie sits next to him, and Bertolt and Reiner huddle on the floor.

"Well, actually—" Annie starts.

"Mind if we crash?" asks Ymir as she flings open Eren's door. Historia, Sasha, and Connie trail behind her.

"Ymir!" Eren gasps.

"I have expertise in this area," Ymir says dryly, dropping onto the bed next to Mikasa. Historia sits on her lap. "And Sasha already knows about the baby, right, Annie?"

Annie's face is white.

"Is it true?" Connie demands, pushing past Sasha to tower over Bertolt and Reiner, for the first time he's probably ever towered over anybody. "You two—you—"

"I'm sorry, Connie!" Bertolt bursts out, his face agonized. "I—"

"Why?" Connie shouts, and Eren feels vindicated.

"Connie—" Sasha starts.
"We don't have excuses," Reiner says, dropping his head back. "We're—just—we can try to make things right."

"Fine." Connie settles next to Sasha, across from Bertolt and Reiner. "But I really thought—"

Bertolt's crying again. _Dammit._ Eren squirms.

"Why didn't you trust us?" Connie asks brokenly. "We'd have helped you. Even on our field trip. You didn't have to hurt Marco."

"We know!" Bertolt sobs. "I just—we thought—"

"Zeke was our best option," Annie says.

Eren scowls. They should have told Zeke where to stuff it.

_Not everyone is as brave as you._ It's something his mother once said, when Eren was yelling about two girls who saw Armin being beaten up and cried but did nothing.

"Well, they're wrong!" _Eren insisted then as Mom dabbed at his eye with a wet towel._

"Maybe," _she answered. "But they're understandable."

This isn't, though, Eren tells himself. He watches as Reiner hesitates, and then grabs Bertolt in a hug, resting his chin on Bertolt's head.

"You can stand to be here? Eren?" Connie asks. "I'd have thought you'd have punched—"

"He still might," Mikasa mutters.

_Will I?_ His fists curl. "I just want to focus on getting Zeke," Eren says shortly. "The rest can wait."

"We didn't want to do it," Reiner tells Connie. "We—"

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Jean slams the door open, marching in.

"Why him?" Eren cries out. As if his day could get any worse.

"I texted?" Ymir says with a shrug. "Look, more help isn't going to hurt anyone."

"He's already proven to have loose lips," Annie retorts.

"Calm down, Annie," Historia says, holding up her hands. "It's going to be fine."

"You two! You—three!" Jean glares at Reiner, Bertolt, and Annie.

"You can't yell at her. She's pregnant," Reiner protests. "Yell at _us._"

"Yeah, I'm aware," Jean snaps, face growing red and brow furrowing as if he's trying to think of which accusation to let loose with.


_Everything's falling apart._

Jean clutches his head, turning back to Reiner and Bertolt. "But holy shit! You two—"
"Are we expecting Marlowe and Hitch or can we get on with this?" Armin shouts.

"Isn't Marco arriving today?" Eren asks, leaning forwards. How will he feel about all this?

"Yes, but he's stuck in traffic, because apparently driving while raining up a mountain road can be dangerous," Jean answers. "And I might not be able to see him anyways." He glares at the two boys. "You—you did that to him?"


Eren curls his fist. The other things—he may not be directly responsible for, but this? This is definitely on Reiner.

Bertolt gulps.

"Why?" Jean demands again. "Why would you? What did he ever do to you? Can you just tell me why? Did Zeke tell you to do it? Did he—"

"It was all me," Reiner says, his face stoic, but his voice cracking. Annie cringes.

"I will never forgive you," Jean tells him, voice broken as he drops into Eren's chair. Maybe Jean's not so bad, Eren thinks again.

"We're going to fix it, Jean," Armin says. "If Zeke gets caught—we can clear Marco's name."

"I will confess," Reiner agrees. "I won't—it's not right, I know it, and I did it anyways and there's no excuse. I'll make it right. I promise."

"You can't fix humiliation and shame," Jean retorts. Reiner swallows.

"Everyone," Armin interrupts. "I have—" But they all keep babbling.

"Listen to Armin!" Eren bellows. Everyone quiets. "Thank you."

"Right," Armin says, blinking slowly. "Well, the plan is that we need all the evidence we can find to bring to Erwin and Levi. Annie, Bertolt, and Reiner are meeting with Zeke tonight—hopefully briefly, because of the storm—and will swipe the keys from him."

"Keys?" asks Historia.

"To his lab, his apartment, etc.," Annie answers. "He keeps extras in the lab. I've seen them before."

"Right," Armin confirms. "So we'll split into three groups—four, actually. Annie also says Zeke is planning to make a run tonight—"

"Which means?" Sasha asks.

"Delivering drugs," Ymir says.

"Yeah. And so if he's still on for that, and Annie seems to think he will be, we split into four groups. Ymir, Historia, Sasha, you check his lab. Reiner, Bertolt, and Annie will check his office. Eren, you and me and Mikasa will search the apartment. Jean and Connie—watch the parking lot. If you see him returning, let us know. Immediately."

"And if he cancels all these things?" Mikasa asks. "What do we do then?"
"Then we still look through his lab and his office, and keep watch on his apartment to make sure he isn't leaving." Armin answers.

It's risky, but it's all they've got.

_I won't let him get away, Mom_, Eren vows. He won't fail her. He can't.

"Levi's overreacting," Zeke says as Annie arrives in the basement of the science laboratory building. "It's not that bad out."

_It's really not_, Annie thinks. It may be raining hard, but the wind isn't nearly as strong as they predicted it to be.

"You." Zeke points at her. "Your dad called me again. Call him back, or else."

"I will," Annie promises. But she might not, she realizes.

_I'm really doing this?_

Her hands shake. Everything she's ever known, ever worked for and believed in—shattered. Humpty-dumpty had a great fall, and she doesn't want to put him back together again.

Armin shattered that illusion, Armin with his kindness and earnest optimism, Eren with his determination to keep struggling, Sasha with her love for everyone and everything, Ymir and Historia with the bravery Annie will never possess.

"Feeling better?" Zeke asks her. Bertolt turns pale behind Zeke.

"Much," Annie answers. Tonight they're just packaging.

"With this sale, I'll have enough to finally test that vaccination," Zeke says excitedly, and Annie's heart drops. Sometimes, she forgets why Zeke deals in this. Because he wants to help people, and Grisha Jaeger wouldn't help him help people. "How's Eren doing?"

Bertolt looks as if he's about to have a conniption. Annie kicks him in the calf.

"He's fine," Reiner says. "Heard his mom might be waking up."

"Really?" Zeke adjusts his glasses. "Interesting."

_You won't do anything to her, would you?_ Annie sucks in her breath. _There'd be no need, she reassures herself. And besides, he'll be in jail."

"Kid's lost a lot in his life," Zeke continues.

_Haven't we all_, Annie thinks. _Haven't you stolen so much from us? Reiner's sanity, Bertolt's self-esteem, my goodness? Or did we give it to you?_

_Well, I want it back. All of it._

Reiner heads over to the sink and stumbles.

"Careful!" Zeke barks.

"Sorry," he gasps, and Annie sees him slide something into his pocket. Hope sparks. Even Bertolt
almost smiles.

*I'll make a better life for you,* Annie vows to her child. *Even if we're poor and can't give you the world, I'll make sure you get to choose your own path.*

"All right," Zeke says. "Finish up."

"You sure you'll be safe driving?" Bertolt asks. Annie twists her ring to keep from kicking him again.

"I'm sure," Zeke says dryly. It's been one of his kinder nights, and Annie's grateful for it. She's supposed to avoid stress.

They all grab their umbrellas and head off, Annie texting Armin. Zeke waves and heads through the forest, towards the parking lot. Her shoes sink in the mud, and the rain sprays under her umbrella thanks to the wind, which is picking up.

"Thanks, Reiner," breathes Bertolt.

"For what?" Reiner asks.

*Oh, shit shit shit—not now.* "Bertolt!" Annie yelps.

"Reiner, give me the keys," Bertolt requests, stopping in front of Reiner.

"What keys?"

"You took Zeke's spare keys," Bertolt tells him.

"Why?"

"Because we're helping Eren, you idiot!"

"Not helpful," Annie snarls.

"What are you—" Reiner starts to back up, but Bertolt grabs him by his face and Reiner freezes. His umbrella hits the ground. It looks almost as if Bertolt's about to kiss Reiner, but he doesn't. Instead, he grips Reiner's skull and pleads.

"Listen to me! You're—I don't care if you're acting like the other Reiner right now; we can win that one over too!"

"What are you—" Reiner shouts.

*I need your help, Reiner!* Bertolt yells. "Please. Zeke's been—torturing us, making us into people we never wanted to be. We can't be forgiven, you and I agree on that, but we can try, can't we? We can try to help—you like Eren. I know you do. You *like* Eren, you like Jean, you like Marco and Mikasa and Sasha and Connie and Ymir and Historia. And they know and they're still giving you a chance. Don't you want to take that chance?" Bertolt's voice comes strangled.

*Where are you?* Armin texts.

*Slight complication. Be there in 5,* Annie responds.

Reiner manages to nod.
"Good." Bertolt lets go of him, gasping for breath. "I—"

"Oh, my God," Reiner says, voice terrified. "I snapped again, didn't I?"

Climbing over the roof in the rain is harder than Armin anticipated. His shoes slide against the ridges, and he almost tumbles off. He lands on his knees, mud soaking through his pants.

"You okay?" gasps a familiar voice.

"Yeah," Armin ekes out, staggering to his feet. "Marco!"

"Jean told me what's going on," Marco says, Eren and Connie standing around him. "I thought—"

"But with you being expelled, isn't it dangerous?" Armin asks, teeth chattering as he opens his umbrella. Not that it'll do much good. The wind threatens to flip it inside out as Mikasa, Sasha, Ymir, and Historia arrive.

Jean leaps down behind Armin. "You made it!"

"This is worth it," Marco says as Jean hesitates, like he'd like to give Marco a hug, but stops himself.

"We're trying to clear your name, though!" Armin objects.

"I want to help, though—it sounds like Annie and Bertolt and Reiner are in danger—"

"Did you know about them?" Mikasa asks.

"Not exactly…" Marco looks down at his shoes. "I mean, I knew it had to be Reiner and Bertolt, because they were in our room while you were in the shower, Jean, and Reiner was near my suitcase. And they were always together, and I knew they were sneaking out at odd hours with Annie, so—"

Kudos to him for figuring it out far earlier than I did, Armin thinks.

"Why didn't you say anything, then?" Jean demands.

Marco presses his lips together. "I just—I didn't want—I didn't want to take a risk that I was wrong—and I just wanted to talk it out with them, but Reiner and Bertolt never answered my texts after that. They—I figured they had a story too, but—"

"Jean hasn't stopped moping since you left," Connie says.

Jean glares at Connie, but Armin crosses his arms. With all the teasing Jean's given him for getting Annie pregnant…

Marco laughs, and with the dark sky, Armin can't even make out whether or not he's blushing.

"Jean-Boy, don't you have something to say to Marco?" asks Eren. "That you've been waiting to say in person?"

"Eren," warns Mikasa.

"No, but I think he does," Eren counters.

"We don't have to—" Marco starts.
"I hate you," Jean says to Eren.

"Jean, you're a liar," Mikasa tells him as the wind tries to steal Historia's umbrella. She yelps, and Ymir snaps it back into place.

"I mean—I just—" Jean stutters. "Oh, forget it."

Nervous much? Armin relates. The rain soaks through his pants, and his teeth chatter. "Jean—"

Marco looks bewildered.

"Oh, fuck it!" Jean snarls, stepping forward. "Marco—I mean—I really—like you."

"Not good enough," Eren opines.

"Lame," Ymir agrees.

"Stop it," scolds Historia.

Where are you, Annie? Armin worries. What is this complication?

"Oh," says Marco. "Oh."

"Yeah, oh," Eren chimes in.

Marco steps forward and presses his lips against Jean's. In spite of his mounting anxiety, Armin grins as Connie hoots.

"I didn't think—" Marco starts, but Jean pulls him in again for another kiss.

"I love you," Jean blurts out.

"Shit just got real," Connie declares.

"I know I'm kind of a dick sometimes—" Jean starts.

"Please, someone record this," Eren begs.

"But I—" Marco cuts Jean off with another kiss, because, as Armin knows, Marco doesn't care. He loves Jean's prickliness, his brash attitude, his bold take on the world and on life, and the compassion stirring underneath.

"Are we interrupting something?" comes Annie's voice. Armin's heart leaps. She freezes, Reiner and Bertolt both beside her. All three of them look at Marco's, Annie's face crumbling and Bertolt's filled with shame, Reiner's devastated and horrified.

"Hi," Marco says. "I, uh, wanted to help out."

Still nobody moves. Armin shivers. They need to get going—

"And Annie, I heard about—you and Armin—from Jean—and so I, uh, bought you this. It's wrapped in plastic so it won't get wet." He pulls out a purple teddy bear from his backpack. "For your baby."

Annie takes it, looking to Armin in shock.

"Thank you," Armin chokes out, stepping closer to Annie.
"Marco—" Reiner starts.

"I forgive you," Marco tells him, voice wobbling.

"How?" whispers Bertolt.

"Because we're friends. Still. I mean, if you want to be."

Bertolt's jaw hangs open. Marco hugs him, and Bertolt wilts over him, embracing Marco.

"That's my boyfriend," Jean says gruffly.

"I—" Reiner begins, but he can't continue. "You should know it wasn't Bertl, Marco, it was me. Me more than anyone."

Bertolt hesitates, as if he wants to say something, but can't.

Marco grips Reiner's shoulder. "Let's make it right."

Reiner nods. Thunder grumbles overhead and shadows cast by tree branches waving in the wind cross their faces.

"Marco, join Jean and Connie," Armin shouts. "We need to get moving." He looks to Annie. The office won't be dangerous. It better not be. "Stay safe."

"You too," Annie says, kissing him quickly. She passes him a small brass key. "Sasha." She hands over a larger, golden key.

"Let's catch this bastard," Eren proclaims as he, Armin, and Mikasa march towards the forest, headed for the Sina apartments.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! Up next: The adults are not the least bit pleased to discover twelve students missing from their dorms.

And Happy Holidays to all! Also of note: as of next week, this story will be posting on Tuesdays as well as Thursdays, the reasons being a) it's complete, and has been for awhile, and b) I'm going back to visit friends in India mid-January. I'll be gone a few weeks, and I'd like the story to be completed by then because the chances of me being able to update from where I'll be staying are slim.
Horror Movie or Reality?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The sound of a horror movie playing echoes in the halls of the Sina apartments. Eren's skin crawls. *Really?*

"Oh my God, Petra, I can't watch!" shrieks Oruo as they pass the door labeled *Rai.*

Mikasa covers her mouth, but Eren sees her smiling. He focuses on the small number emblazoned on the key. **355.**

"Third floor," Armin directs, stepping into a stairwell. Eren creeps up it, trying to muffle his footsteps. Maniacal laughter filters from the second floor.

"Hange," Mikasa says. Eren nods. He pauses at the third floor, peering through the long, narrow window.

That hallway's deserted. *Pixis,* reads the first door.

"Quick." Eren shoves the door open and darts down the hall. **355.** He jams the key in the lock.

It won't go in.

"Oh, come on!" He jiggles it. *I can't fail; I can't fail!*

"Eren, stop, you're being too loud!" Armin hisses.

Mikasa reaches out and grasps Eren's hand, stilling it. She pulls the key from his grasp and turns it upside-down. Or right-side up. It slides in, and the door unlatches.

*Oh.* "Thanks." Eren slips inside, and Armin slams the door as they hear the door from the stairway creaking open.

All three of them freeze. Another door down the hallway groans as it opens. Eren sighs in relief.

The VP doesn't exactly live in luxury, Eren notes. No pictures line the walls, and the furniture is all given from the school, blue and matching the carpet. A plain coffee table with a glass top is the most elaborate piece in the entire room. Drab yellowing drapes cover the windows, rain lashing against them.

"I'll take the bedroom. Armin, you take the living room, Mikasa—"

"Kitchen and bathroom. Got it." Mikasa heads towards the kitchen, yanking open the cabinets.

"Don't turn on the lights!" Armin reminds them.

Eren steps into Zeke's room. A plain twin bed covered in an almost furry, brick-red blanket presses against the wall. The shades are drawn over the windows, and one dresser and one wardrobe, plain oak wood, stand against the walls.

Eren drops to his knees, peering under the bed. He pulls out his phone to use as a flashlight. Nothing but dust bunnies. Zeke's wardrobe is lined with dull, drab suits, and as Eren rifles through his
drawers, the most disturbing thing he finds is his underwear. *Gross.*

His hand closes around something hard. *What's this?*

Eren pulls out a small black case. He pops it open.

Crisp dollar bills. Hundred dollar bills, plus some twenties.

*Maybe?* Eren takes a photo of it. "Anything?" he calls as he rejoins them in the living room.

"Some lab-related things in the bathroom. Goggles, etc. Nothing incriminating," Mikasa reports. "I took a picture anyways."

Armin kneels in front of a small nightstand, shaped like an octagon. A drawer spills open, and Armin's combing through the papers while wearing gloves.

"Armin?" Eren inquires.

"Um—" Armin gulps. "I don't know if you want to see this, Eren."

"What?" Eren rushes over.

"They're paternity papers," Armin says, yanking them away from Eren. "The last thing we need is for everyone's fingerprints all over this!"

*Why didn't we think of that?* Eren could smack himself.

"What do they say, Armin?" Mikasa demands.

"Eren—" Armin looks at him, gulping. "Zeke's your father's son. He's your brother."

That can't be. Everything blurs around him, and all Eren sees are the white papers he can't even read, and all he can hear are Armin's words reverberating inside him like a heartbeat. "That's not true," he snarls.

"It is," Armin whispers.

*No—Dad—how could I not know? Why wouldn't you tell me? How—*

Mikasa grabs Eren by his shoulders. "Eren—"

"This can't be true!" Eren screams.

Armin yelps and covers his face.

*Oh, shit.*

Thumps echo on the stairs.

"Um, Erwin, I think we have a—a bit of a problem," Nanaba says over the phone.

"Does it involve Mike?" Erwin asks groggily. All he wanted to do was go to bed early. He had almost dozed off when his phone rang. "Or the dozen texts I have from Moblit?"

"The latter," Nanaba answers. "See, I have two students here—or, I have a student, and Moblit has a student—Marlowe Freudenberg and Hitch Dreyse—who told us that a bunch of students are out of
their dorm rooms. Including Eren Jaeger, and Ymir. And so Moblit checked and found six of his boys missing, and I'm missing five of my girls."

"A party? Tonight?" Somehow Erwin knows he's grasping at straws. Where would they go in this kind of weather?

His arm hurts—phantom pain, from a limb that isn't even there.

"I don't know. There's more—Hitch apparently told Marlowe, who told Moblit, who told me—that Annie Leonhart, one of the missing girls, is pregnant."

"What?" Erwin cringes. Poor girl.

"I found a sonogram image under her pillow."


"Well, I already did. They haven't seen anything."

"Do they ever?" Erwin groans. "Who else is missing?"

"From my dorm, Ymir, Annie, Historia Reiss, Sasha Braus, and Mikasa Ackerman. From Moblit's, Connie Springer, Jean Kirchstein, Reiner Braun, Bertolt Hoover, Armin Arlert, and Eren Jaeger." This year's junior class is determined to kill him, Erwin's certain. "See if you can get any information out of Miss Dreyse. And I'm sending Shadis to Moblit's and Nifa to yours. Walk those two students over here." He hesitates. "Who is Annie Leonhart dating?"

"I'm not even sure."

Erwin hangs up and bursts out of his room, pounding up the stairs to bang on Levi's door. No answer. Why do you have to be missing too, now?

Someone shouts something. Probably Oruo from the first floor, screaming at that horror movie Petra insisted he had to see.

"What?" Levi pants as he answers his phone.

"Where the hell are you?"

"Are you okay?" Levi demands.

"We have eleven students out of their dorms. Probably getting drunk somewhere, but with everything going on tonight, plus a few outside circumstances—"

Levi growls. "It's Jaeger, isn't it."

"Well, of course it is!" Hange says in the background.

You were with Hange? Of course. "Get up here. We three and Mike are going searching."

"I'll call Petra and Oruo, plus Eld and Gunthur," Levi answers.

"I don't know if it's that serious—"

"Erwin, it's probably not, but I deliberately told them not to go out tonight and now that it's almost
midnight and they're traipsing about during a storm that's supposed to get worse over the next few hours, so yes, I'd like to find every last one of them and send them home to mommy and daddy for a week."

*You mean, after you make sure they're all okay, which is really what you're worried about. Because otherwise Levi wouldn't have been so talkative.*

Erwin heads to the lobby in the first floor. Petra and Oruo meet him there. Petra's eyes wide. "I hope they don't get hurt."

"We're not that lucky," grouses Oruo. She punches him on the shoulder.

Nanaba and Mike arrive together, with a sullen Hitch Dreyse in tow. Moblit arrives with Marlowe Freudenberg, who looks slightly panicky.

"You idiot!" Hitch lashes out at him.

Marlowe's jaw drops. "Hitch—"

"You weren't supposed to tell anyone!"

"What was I going to do, when they're all missing and none of us heard anything about any sort of get-together all week? It's not normal, Hitch!"

"Annie's fine. She's always fine," Hitch groused.

"Are you sure about that?" Marlowe asks. Hitch's face grows red and tears shine in her eyes. *No, Erwin realizes.*

"What weren't you supposed to tell?" Levi asks as he and Hange appear, both wrapped in green raincoats. Eld appears next, and Gunthur follows, still in his pajamas, feet stuffed in galoshes.

"Hitch found a sonogram in one of my students’ rooms," Nanaba answers.

Gunthur's face grows red. "But I told them!"

"They're teenagers. They do what they want," Levi observes.

"Poor girl," Hange says sympathetically.

"Hange, Levi, you two take the northern woods, the tennis courts, the track field, all those common party places. Mike and I will circle around towards the south exit and the parking lot. Eld, Gunther, you take the quad area and central campus. Petra, Oruo, you search the lab area and the little strip of woods there. Meet back here in twenty minutes," Erwin orders. "And text if you find them. Nanaba, Moblit—stay here with Hitch and Marlowe." Erwin pities the kids in Moblit's dorm who will wake up to Shadis in the morning.

"I can keep trying to text them," Marlowe offers.

"Only if Nanaba can read those texts first. Yes, Marlowe, we're aware of all the alcohol you had in your room."

Moblit nods.

Marlowe's face crumples and turns purple. "I—"
"That was mine!" Hitch interjects. "He lost a bet—so I made him—it's not his fault!"

"I'm really sorry," Marlowe croaks out. "It was wrong, and I'll take whatever punishment you see fit."

_Maybe he actually is._ Erwin nods as thunder crackles. "Let's go."

"You know, somehow I imagined this would all be more exciting," Connie remarks as he huddles under a giant oak tree, peering around it towards the parking lot.

Jean's teeth chatter. Marco still holds the umbrella over him, but there's really no point. All three of them are soaked to the bone, their phones protected in plastic baggies. Rain pounds against the cars, strikes their faces like needles. The wind howls.

"I hope Sasha's okay," Connie adds.

"I'm sure she is," Jean says. She better be. _They all better be._

"How's your mom doing?" Marco asks. He reaches out, and his fingers brush Jean's hand. Heart picking up pace, Jean clutches him.

"She's okay," Connie answers, kneeling to pick up a muddy rock. He etches the wet bark with the sharp edge. "She's actually doing better, but you know, it's hard to tell. I've been disappointed so many times I don't really want to get my hopes up."

"I'm sorry," Marco says quietly.

"I can't believe you two," Connie says, changing the subject. He snickers. "I mean, it was obvious from day one that Marco has a huge crush on you, Jean, but I didn't really think you thought that way about guys."

He didn't, either. Well, Jean truthfully didn't really think about it at all—he was so focused on Mikasa this year, and other girls at his old school—but those crushes, saved for Mikasa, were all about him wanting to achieve a certain status, and they never liked him anyways. _I've been really shallow._

Marco smiles.

"Did you really?" Jean asks.

"Um—yeah," Marco says. "When you walked into the room, yelling at your mom, I was annoyed—and then I saw you and—" He shrugs.

Jean remembers that day. He left his sketchpad out on his bed and came back after registering to find Marco looking at it. _The other boy jumped up in alarm when he saw Jean._ "It's really good," he told him.

_Thanks," Jean stammered. _. And in the ensuing months, Jean found himself focusing less on Mikasa and more on his roommate, who's sensitive in ways Jean isn't, who treated everyone like gold, whose freckles became way more noticeable whenever he was out in the sun, and cursing himself for developing a crush on his roommate.

Marco inspires him. Jean leans forward and kisses him. "I think I was kind of obtuse, for awhile." He runs his hand through his sopping hair. "Why didn't you tell me, though?"
"I didn't want to make you uncomfortable. And—really I just wanted you to be happy," Marco confesses. "Because you deserve it."

"Questionable," Connie remarks.

Jean kicks mud at Connie.

"No, but actually," Marco presses. "You're a strong leader, Jean. You're—"

Connie screams as a hand lands on his shoulder. Jean screams too.

"Not so fast," says Erwin as Jean turns around to see their one-armed dean glaring down at them.

"Oops," Jean ekes out.

"Bott?" demands Erwin. "What are you doing here?"

"Um—" Marco's horror-struck. His mouth moves, but no sounds come out.

"Helping," Jean puts in.

"With what exactly?" Erwin has to yell to be heard over the wind. "Never mind. You're coming back to the Sina apartments with us, and you can tell us there."

Mike squishes through the downed pine needles and mud. "I don't see anyone else, Erwin."

"No one else is here," Jean puts in. "Really."

"Huh." Erwin gestures for them to march alone. Jean's fingers itch to grab his phone, tap out a message.

Connie glances over his shoulder, towards the parking lot. No Zeke.

Not yet.

"Well, this part of his lab isn't anything other than normal chemistry experiments," Historia reports.

"This part is," Ymir says darkly. "Really, all we need to do is get a cop in here. It smells like cat pee."

Sasha shines her phone flashlight around the room. This whole place has a creepy vibe. And for this man to pretend to be so upstanding, and bribe three desperate kids with a scholarship to help him manufacture and deal meth—Sasha could punch him in the face. Poor Annie. Poor Reiner. Poor Bertolt.

"It is strange no one noticed," Historia observes.

"I think people did," Ymir says.

"What?" Sasha exclaims.

"Look, his BFF appears to be the head of the board. Zackley." Ymir's lips pucker as if the name's repulsive to her.

"What?" Historia demands.
"He really pushed to keep me out of the school," Ymir says. "So yes, I know this sounds like a personal grudge. But he's also chummy with Zeke—as chummy as those two can be, at any rate."

"But why?" Sasha cries out. "None of it makes any sense! I mean—"

"Doesn't it? Zeke's super into research. Some of the labs he runs make vaccines that could keep people alive—you know, if they actually worked. But he doesn't exactly get a lot of funding."

"Can't Zackley provide that funding, though?" Historia stammers.

"Can he?" Ymir retorts. "I know he was wealthy, but wasn't he in league with your father? And hasn't his business gone to shit?"

Historia bites her lip.

"How is your father?" Sasha asks.

"He won't talk to me. It's okay, because I don't want to talk to him." Historia straightens.

"You are staying next year, right?" Sasha asks anxiously.

"Erwin's paying my tuition," Historia admits. "But I'm not supposed to tell. I'll spend the summer working in a children's home with Ymir."

"Sounds fun," Sasha says, and Historia nods.

Ymir cringes. "Sure. Until you get six colds in a row."

"C'mon, Ymir, we're going to have to have lots of kids," Historia teases.

Ymir grins. "Sure. When we're married."

"Connie's visiting me over the summer," Sasha says. "Meeting my father…" She hopes he's not too surprised by how poor the place is. Not that she expects him to be. She's told him that her parents are basically working themselves into the ground to get her to school.

"One room or two?" teases Ymir.

Sasha pulls out her phone and checks. Anything? she texts Connie as Historia takes a picture of a scale.

"We really should get out of here," Ymir says. "Go to Erwin. Or someone."

Answer me, Sasha texts.

Nothing.

CONNIE.

Connie.

Connie im starting to freak out!

"What is it?" Historia asks anxiously.

"Connie won't answer!"
"Answer your girlfriend, dipshit," Ymir says aloud as she types.

"We're going to the parking lot," Historia interrupts, grabbing both of their arms. "Right now."

Sasha's heart pounds as they take off into the rain. They rush for the forest. Historia yelps as she trips and falls.

"Historia!" Ymir reaches down to grab her, Historia's jeans and jacket caked with mud, and flecks splatter her face.

"Sasha!" Historia shrieks, and Sasha turns around to see a tree branch as thick as her leg cracking over her head. She dives out of the way, straight into another, far smaller branch, which slaps her above the eye.

"Ow!" She pushes down to get up, and her hand lands in a thicket of thorns. "Why me?"

"Who's there?" bellows a male voice.

Sasha screams. Ymir shoves Historia behind her.

"Where are your friends?" Eld shouts, holding up a flashlight.

"It's just you!" Sasha gasps. "I thought—we thought—"

"We have no idea," Ymir says, shivering.

"Connie?" Sasha cries out, as if hoping he'll hear her. The parking lot's too far away.

"We caught him, and Kirchstein and Bott," Eld tells her. Relief floors Sasha, and she wilts.

A second light marches towards them. Gunthur. He shakes his head at Ymir.

This does not look good, Sasha realizes as Historia shakes her head, as if to warn them not to say anything just yet. Not at all.

"How do you have his password anyways?" Annie demands as they huddle in Zeke's office. The square room, with its sparse walls and shelves, gives her the creeps. Lightning flashes outside, and she jumps.

"I pay attention," Reiner grouses.

Bertolt covers his mouth, breathing into his hands. "We're all going to jail, aren't we?"

"We don't know that," Annie says. "Ymir didn't." And maybe they'll have mercy on a pregnant teenager. Armin says they might.

"But—we deserve to," Bertolt says. "We knew about Dr. Jaeger…"

"Stop it, Bertl," Reiner snaps.

"You know it, too," Bertolt says.

"You two will be fine," Reiner tells them. "I promise. I'm the one who actually framed Marco. I'm the one who had more of a choice than either of you—"

"Bullshit," Bertolt says. "You can't—"
"It's true that I'm more culpable than either of you," Reiner retorts. "And that I have less of a conscience."

"Only when you're not in your right mind," Bertolt counters, stepping past Zeke's trash bin, overflowing with papers. "You've told me you love it here. You love our friends. You told me."

"I can't think about that now," Reiner manages. Annie wraps her arms around her stomach.

"I need you. You can't take the blame," Bertolt says, wringing his hands.

"You don't need me, Bertl." Reiner looks up from the computer. "You're capable. You just don't believe it yet." He pauses. "There are emails from Dr. Jaeger in here."

"Really?" Annie darts over to the desk.

"Yeah," Reiner confirms. "Looks like Zeke was angry with him… for not supporting his research, and for…" His voice trails off.

"Did he call him a deadbeat father?" Annie asks, aghast, reading the screen.

Bertolt shakes his head. "What—why—"

"And we all thought we had daddy issues," Reiner says, dumbfounded.

"Did you now?" The door swings open, and panic slices through Annie. She lunges at whoever it is, colliding with the figure, who shoves her back. "Ouch!" the man groans.

"Oruo!" She gapes at her civics teacher, wiping blood from his chin. Did he bite his tongue? "I—I'm sorry—"

"He'll be all right." Petra appears, flicking on the light. The lights immediately turns back off, and the computer goes off, too. Power outage.

Petra shrugs as if to say no matter. She glares at the three of them, Bertolt who holds his hands up like a criminal, and Reiner, who looks crushed. "I hope the three of you have a real good reason for being in the vice principal's office."

"Um," Annie says, licking her lips as she tries to think. Tell them? Now? What if they don't believe us?

"Come with us," Oruo orders. Bertolt shuffles forward, panic on his face. Reiner shakes his head—clearly, he didn't download anything before the power went off.

We need help.

"You are all in huge—" Petra starts, but Annie cuts her off.

"Does trying to solve a murder count? As a good enough reason?" Annie's shaking, but she can't hold it in. We need help, we need help, someone help us!

"What?" demands Petra.

"Zeke killed Dr. Jaeger. That car crash wasn't—it wasn't just a hit and run," Reiner blurs out. "We were trying to—"
"You better have some damn solid evidence to make that accusation," Oruo snarls.

"It's on his computer," Annie says. "Some of it—and there's more—"

Petra's phone rings, and she answers it. Annie can't make out the garbled voice on the other end.

"Are you sure? Ymir…" Petra hangs up and looks at Oruo, who shakes his head in disbelief.

"Ymir told someone about the drug lab, didn't she?" Reiner asks.

Yes, Annie realizes.

Petra clutches her hair. "How did you all—"

"It's a long story," Annie cuts in. Not now. "Are they all okay, though? Armin, and—"

"Erwin texted me that all your friends, plus Marco Bott, are with him in the Sina apartments," Oruo cuts in. "Except for Eren, Mikasa, and Armin."

If they're all there—that's why Ymir caved. No one's watching the parking lot. "They're in Zeke's apartment," Annie says. "Call them and tell them now, please!"

Oruo grabs his phone, typing a text. Good enough, I guess?

Bertolt looks gray as he slumps against the wall.

"Stick close," Petra instructs them as they dart back into the rain, the wind slapping Annie's face. They head down the steps made of cut tree logs, towards the Sina Apartments. The wind almost bowls Annie over, and Petra grabs her to keep her upright. Nausea surges, and Annie trips, vomiting.

Why now?

"Oh, Annie!" cries Petra, grabbing her bangs and holding her hair back. "Keep going, Oruo!"

He nods, dragging the two boys with him.

"Come on," Petra encourages her, lifting Annie back to her feet. "You'll be okay."

You know, Annie realizes. How?

She remembers all the times Petra told her to go for her dreams. Well, she's finally making choices based on what she wants to do. But she's also trapped herself.

Annie cries in shame, the rain stripping away her tears as they stagger into the apartments, where Petra leads her up the stairs and into Erwin's apartment. A dozen huge taper candles sit around the room, and her friends crowd the couches, the floors, all wrapped in towels and blankets. Hitch and Marlowe are there too, guilt written all across Hitch's face. She leaps to her feet when she sees Annie.

"You're safe!"

You really care?

"Nine down, three to go," observes Eld, leaning against the windows next to Gunthur and Oruo. A tree branch crashes against the side of the apartments, and Sasha shrieks.
"Armin—"

"They're not looking into the lab just yet," Ymir says. "Too dangerous." Historia buries her face in Ymir's shoulder.

"This doesn't look good for you, Ymir," Erwin tells her gravely. Moblit clucks his tongue.

Annie's pulse quickens. *She had nothing to do with—*

The door opens behind her. Nanaba and Mike enter. "They're not there."

"What?" Reiner demands.

"Eren, Mikasa, and Armin," Nanaba repeats. "They're not in Zeke's apartment."

Terror streaks through Annie. *Armin, where are you?*

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! On Thursday: Zeke returns, and the warnings about the storm turn out not to be exaggerated.
"Eren, don't be an idiot!" Armin screams as Eren charges off into the storm.

Mikasa plows after him. "Eren!" she yells, but the wind tears the name away from her throat. "Eren, listen!"

Eren keeps running. Mikasa chases, her sneakers sinking in mud. The wind trying to stymie her and failing. "Eren!"

Eren halts near the parking lot, gasping. "He's my brother and he killed our father! I'm going to—"

"No!" Mikasa shouts, grabbing his arm. "Eren, don't! You're—"

She thinks Eren's crying, though it's hard to tell. "He's a monster! He—why didn't he tell me?"

Which he? Mikasa wonders. "Eren, we should go to Erwin, and Levi. Tell them."

"You want to trust them?" Eren gapes at her.

Zeke, Grisha—they're all more examples of how you can't trust anyone. Because Grisha knew, he must have known. Mikasa's chest throbs as she remembers the man who comforted her when she was covered in blood, still trying to accept that she wasn't going back home, not ever, her father wouldn't hug her, her mother wouldn't read to her. Dr. Jaeger treated her like a daughter, adored his son, encouraged Eren's never-ending questions.

But you lied the whole time.

No. Dr. Jaeger lied for some of it. Not all of it. That affection—it was real, wasn't it? She has to believe it.

You were a complicated person, Mikasa allows. "Yes. I do."

"Eren—" Armin pants as he reaches them. "We need to—"

"I want him to pay!" Eren shrieks. "My dad—my dad wasn't—" He gasps, snot and tears and rain and mud staining his face.

For what he did to your father, and for your father not being perfect?

Mikasa lifts the edges of her scarf, wiping his face. "He was a good man."

"He was!" Eren insists.

"Don't we all have secrets?" Mikasa asks. I'm just not good at keeping mine. I love you, Eren.

"I definitely do," Armin says, clutching both of their arms.

Eren coughs. "No shit."

I wish the world were a better place, but I'll take what we have. "He's good, but he's flawed. And we
don’t know the full story yet,” Mikasa reminds Eren.

A car door slams. Mikasa jumps, pushing Eren behind her. She didn’t see any headlights—see anyone driving in—

"You kids shouldn’t be out here," Zeke calls as he staggers towards them, wrapped in a raincoat. Armin scowls.

What about him?

Maybe he's good, too, in some ways, but he's hurt so many people. Grisha. Carla. Annie. Mikasa’s fists curl. And he can’t be allowed to keep doing that.

"Eren?" Zeke almost sounds concerned. "What's—"

"You're my brother! Aren't you?" Eren's voice cracks. Lightning flashes, and Mikasa grabs Eren's hand.

"Yes," Zeke answers. "Yes, I am."

"And you killed him!" It's a desperate screech.

"Why would you say—"

"Annie told me!" Eren yells. Armin gasps in terror. "Why—why—"

"Your friend is delusional," Zeke tells Eren. Mikasa opens her mouth, but Eren squeezes her hand and beats her to it.

"Really," he states. "So you weren't just on a drug delivery. So you haven't given Reiner and Bertolt and Annie scholarships in exchange for helping you."

"Eren, I'm a respected scientist working to cure—"

"You can't save people when you're sacrificing other people for them!" Eren shouts. "It doesn't work that way! My dad knew, didn’t he? He was going to turn you in, and you—"

"Your father and I have a complicated history, Eren—"

"He abandoned you, didn’t he?" Armin asks. Eren flinches. "For Carla."

"No—he was injured when I was young. A head injury. He didn't remember my mother, or me, not at first. And he chose to leave us when he couldn't be happy with us." Zeke curls his fists, looking like Dr. Jaeger, like Eren, when he's angry. Mikasa’s heart pounds. "And my mother told me he died, until—until I found out he was alive all this time."

"No! You're lying!"

"Eren," Mikasa says. "He's not. Grisha was good, but he messed up too—"

"At least he didn’t murder anyone!" Eren screams.

"Like you?" Zeke asks. A crack echoes in the woods behind them, and the ground rumbles under Mikasa's feet. A tree must have fallen.

Eren gapes at him. "I—didn't—"
But we did.

We're good. Flawed, but good. Mikasa looks at her muddy hand, clutching Eren's. We're going to be okay.

Zeke steps towards Eren, and Mikasa jumps forward. "Stay away from him!"

"Zeke?" asks a voice from behind him. A grainy one Mikasa's never heard before, although she recognizes his face.

Zackley.

Annie calls Armin repeatedly. No answer. She's crying, and the way the staff looks at her—they definitely know she's pregnant. Hitch. Or Jean. But Jean looks too terrified to have said anything.

"There's no need to call him," says Mike, towering above her. "We found Eren and Armin's phones still in the apartment."

You left your phone? Armin, I will kill you!

Jean moans, covering his face.

"If it's because we—" Marco starts, guilt lining his words.

Everyone's phones erupt at the same time, screaming.

Tornado warning.

What? Annie blinks. Tornadoes are rare here.

Armin!

"Everyone, get to the basement," Erwin orders.

"Levi and Hange!" cries Moblit. Petra rushes towards the window.

"Get back from the window!" shouts Oruo, lunging for her.

"They'll be fine," Erwin says, voice tight.

"Armin—" Annie whispers. Don't die! You can't die!

"Come on." Nanaba gestures from all of them to get up. Sasha's caked in mud, and band-aids cover her forehead and hand. Connie wraps an arm around her shoulders.

Annie cries. Bertolt squeezes her hand.

"He'll be okay, Annie," Reiner vows.

"You can't know that."

"I know that if he's not, I will kill him," Reiner says. "He's not allowed to leave you now."

The wind screams outside. Annie covers her mouth, sobbing as she slumps against the wall, covered in crumbling paint. I'm so scared. She wraps her arms around her abdomen. I'm so sorry, baby. You deserve better. You need your father,
Erwin paces back and forth. Eld looks like he's going to be sick. Petra sits across from Annie, giving her a small smile.

*It's not enough.*

*Please, God, universe, anyone or anything that's listening,* Annie begs. *Let them all be okay.*

Mikasa's phone screams at the same moment Zeke and Zackley's start screaming, before anyone can open their mouths.

"Inside! Now!" Zeke barks. Zackley takes off, but Zeke skids to a halt. "Get moving!"

"I'm not going anywhere with you!" Eren yells.

"You want to die in a tornado, kid?" Zeke screams at him. "I know that's not what Dad would have wanted!"

The wind wails around them. Fear grips Mikasa.

*Die out here or die in there?*

*Which are we more likely to survive?*

"Let's go," Armin shouts, but the wind's too loud for Mikasa to even hear his voice. She grabs Eren by the waist and plunges ahead.

*I can take him,* she tells herself. *I'm not a little girl in a nightdress this time. If he tries anything—*

They clamber down the stone stairs to the main office buildings. *Annie, Reiner, Bertolt—are you still here?*

No. She doesn't see a light.

Zackley yanks the old wooden door open, and Mikasa plunges inside the basement.

"They know, don't they, Zeke?" Zackley asks. Mikasa fumbles to turn her phone's flashlight on.

"It's fine, Darius," Zeke answers, stepping towards them. Mikasa's eyes dart around the shelves, all metal and covered in random, useless shit. *Except...* Armin gestures to an object leaning against the wall behind him.

Armin steps back, behind Mikasa. Eren grips her hand, but she yanks it away. *Trust me. Please.*

"It most certainly is not fine!" bellow Zackley. "These kids—"

"Eren's my little brother!"

"I don't know you from a hole in the wall!" Eren yells.

*Great. Zeke narrows his eyes.*

"They're not going to cause any problems," Zeke says carefully. "They have no proof, besides."

*Are you actually trying to protect us? In some sick sense?*

"Zeke, I saw that girl—Ymir—and Reiss's daughter leaving your lab."
Zeke wipes his forehead.

"There's no way they could get inside," Armin blurts out. "Unless you leave your lab unlocked. They were probably just looking for a place to drink or—you know."

Zeke side-eyes him. Mikasa swallows.

"They were leaving. As in, had been inside," Zackley growls. "They've been nothing but trouble—"

"If you want to expel us, expel us," Armin blurts out.

"And the next thing we know you'll be saying that you promise you won't tell anybody," Zackley mocks. "I'm not falling for your bullshit."

"Armin, enough," Mikasa says. She's not the little girl in a nightdress. But she can still act like it. And besides, Armin will understand. Now.

Armin nods. Eren's eyes dart between them.

She switches the flashlight off as Armin thrusts a wooden baseball bat into her hand.

Eren hears a scream, and someone shoves him back. He slams into the shelves, tumbling back, something wet falling on his head, a cloth covering his face. "Mikasa!"

A crack, like something wooden splintering.

The baseball bat… "Mikasa, don't!" Eren screeches, flailing. They'll charge you this time! Not for me, not for me! "Armin!"

A crash—more shelves—a man grunts—and then another crack, and the door caves in and light floods the room from another flashlight.

"Get the hell away from them, Zeke!" Levi aims an honest-to-goodness gun at the Zackley, who has Mikasa by the throat. Zeke lies on the floor, grasping his skull. Armin cowers behind Eren.

"And Zackley," pants Hange.

"I swear I will shoot you. You know where I come from," Levi threatens, advancing.

Did you kick the door down? Eren gapes.

Zackley lets go of Mikasa. She gags, stepping back.

"Drop it," Levi orders her. The bat hits the cement floor. Hange advances behind him, rain dripping from her hair. "Get on your knees."

Hange peruses the shelves. "Ah! It's still here, Levi!"

Rope, Eren realizes. The walls shudder.

Zackley hesitates, and then obeys. Zeke struggles to sit up.

Hange advances, and Zackley grabs the bat, swinging it at her face.

"Oh, no you don't!" Levi lunges, and Zeke smashes Levi into the shelves.
"Stop!" Eren throws himself at Zackley, who shoves him to the ground. He and Zeke rush out the open door, into the screaming wind.

"Are you insane?" Armin screams.

"Well, we don't exactly want them coming back, Armin, do we?" bellows Eren.

Levi pulls himself up, blood dripping from a gash in his temple. He surges towards the door.

"No!" Hange grabs him, her arms looping over his chest. "You're not going out—"

Levi strains. "He'll get away!"

"He'll get thrown to kingdom come! And even if he does, at least you'll be alive! For God's sake, let someone save you for a change!" Hange's voice rings with anger, and Levi stops struggling. He leans his head back against Hange's shoulder, peering up into her eyes.

*My God.*

*Historia is going to be so happy when she hears this.*

"You kids all right?" Levi asks, turning to them.

Armin and Eren nod. Mikasa gives a quiet "yes."

"He's my brother," Eren blurts out as Hange struggles to her feet.

"Get away from the door!" Levi orders, grabbing them and shoving them into the furthest corner. "Zeke is?" Hange questions.

Eren nods, biting his lip. Blood stings his mouth. *He killed my father.*

"Stop doing that, brat," Levi snaps as they huddle. "And you're not the only one to be related to murderers."

"Really?" asks Mikasa. "Does that mean—"

"I suppose. My uncle was a serial killer. He raised me—or he tried for a few months after my mother died." Levi's voice comes clipped, and Eren realizes how hard it is for him to speak about this.

The wind continues to howl. Mikasa presses her face against Eren's shoulder. "I wasn't trying to kill them."

"Really?" Eren questions as Armin answers, "I know."

*I'm sorry,* Eren thinks, feeling as if he's failed Mikasa in some way. But did he? She's always been willing to do whatever it takes to protect, to—

*You've changed,* Eren realizes as her wet hair tickles his cheek. *And I like it.*

*But Zeke… Dad… Zackley…*

"When we're out of here, we want a full explanation!" Hange vows.

"We'll give one," Armin promises. "When we're with everyone else."
Eren covers his mouth and tries to stifle a sob. It rips from his lips anyways, and tears run hot down his face. *I have a brother.*

*He killed my father.*

*And he doesn't regret it.*

*But he didn't want Zackley to hurt me.*

Mikasa rubs his shoulder, and Armin wraps an arm around him. A hand ruffles his hair, and Eren looks up to see Levi giving him a sad smile.

Eren buries his face in his knees and sobs.

"The wind's quieted down," Hange interrupts after—God knows how long, but Eren suspects it hasn't been nearly as much time as it's felt. "My phone says the tornado threat's moved south of us."

"Okay then." Levi struggles to his feet, reaching down to help Eren up. He's still sniffling. *Pull it together!* he yells at himself.

*Why? Why do you need to?*

"Let's get to Erwin's," Levi says, brandishing his weapon as he and Hange usher them through the campus.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! Up next: Erwin attempts to untangle the knot and figure out what the hell actually happened, and Reiner breaks down.
The first face Armin sees when Levi opens the door to Erwin's apartment is Annie's, blotched and swollen, and still the face he wants to see more than anything.

"Armin!" shrieks Jean. "You all lived!"

Annie runs to him, throwing her arms around him. He holds her close, her hips pressed against his as her shoulder shake. "I'm sorry," he ekes out. "We didn't—"

"Zeke and Zackley fled," Levi tells Erwin. Armin lifts his face to see all of his friends, still wet and muddy and wrapped in blankets, huddled on Erwin's couches and floor while so many of their teachers—their dorm parents—mull around.

"The tornado—" Connie bursts. "You made it?"

"Barely," Eren grumbles.

"The tornado wasn't the issue," Mikasa admits. Annie tenses, her fingers interlocking with Armin's.

Candles burn around the room. His teeth chatter as he remembers.

"Zeke—" Marco covers his face. "I'm so sorry; we were—"

"You couldn't have done anything," Eren says. "It was my choice to confront him." He wipes at his eyes.

"You did what?" Reiner shouts. "Eren, you could have been—"

"Wait, you said Zackley?" cries Gunthur. "How's he involved?"

"Great question!" Erwin bellows above the ruckus. "Everyone, be quiet!"

Silence.

Erwin sighs. "Everyone, take a seat. Students, that is. Adults, do what you want."

Armin lowers himself to the floor, next to Annie. Hitch and Marlowe? What are you doing here?

"We want answers," Erwin tells them, putting his one hand on his hip. "And we'd like them now. We know Ymir claims you all were trying to find evidence that Zeke was running a meth lab, and we want to know how you found out about it, and more importantly, why the hell you didn't come to us instead of running around almost getting yourselves killed."

Even in the dim light, Armin can see Annie's face draining. Ymir wraps her arms around herself. She's really at risk here, Armin realizes. But she tried to help us.

"Also why you're here, Bott," adds Levi. "Because I remember you being expelled."

"Wrongly," Jean snaps.

"I still remember it."
"I came to see Jean," Marco whispers. "I didn't—I didn't—"

"He didn't mean to get caught up in all of this," Jean puts in. "I asked him to help—well, he kind of volunteered when I told him what was going on—but it wasn't his idea, and he had nothing to do with Zeke and his business."

"Well, that makes sense," Hange says gravely. She removes her glasses, and as the candlelight glints against them, Armin sees that one eye is broken. "But, kids, the police will be coming as soon as it's safe to call them. We really do need answers. Pronto."

Historia wraps an arm around Ymir. "She's not at fault either."

"We are," comes a small voice, barely a squeak.

Eren's jaw drops. Armin turns to see Bertolt huddling into himself, unable to look the teachers in the eyes. "We were working for him—in exchange for a scholarship—"

Eld swears. Petra's jaw drops. _Are those tears in her eyes?_

"You... and Reiner, and Annie," Erwin says. Annie cringes.

"It's okay," Armin murmurs to her, tightening his arm around her. But it's not, and there's little he can do to make it so.

Bertolt nods, turning his face away. Sasha sniffles.

"We wanted to stop it," Annie blurts out. "Take Zeke down... get free from him." She's crying, sobbing ripping from her throat. "We didn't have a choice—it was my chance to get out of my town; my dad wanted me to do it—Bertolt's family's in jail; he doesn't have anywhere else to go—Reiner, too—"

Armin wishes he could comfort her, tear this away and do it himself. But he can't do anything but hold her.

Petra grabs a tissue and hands it to Annie. Nanaba groans, her head sinking to her knees.

"And he killed Dr. Jaeger," she adds.

"What did you say?" demands Mike. Erwin turns sharply.

"He killed my father. He admitted to it. Practically," Eren says. He curls his fists. "He's my _brother._"


"He said he hated him," Reiner bursts out. "He said—said he was going to make sure—he said Dr. Jaeger was a complication, that he might have caught on to what—what Zeke was doing, and then when he turned up dead, we joked about him doing it and he just smiled."

"So you don't have any proof."

"I'm sure there's some if you look for it," Mikasa says. "He admitted it to Eren, Armin, and I. At least, he didn't deny it."

"There are a lot of angry emails," Reiner adds. "Accusations—of Dr. Jaeger being a terrible father, owing him or else, that kind of thing."

"Circumstantial." Erwin clears his throat. "But we'll bring it up with the police."
"Could he actually get away with it? No, there has to be proof in the emails. Armin's sure of it.

"We didn't have anything to do with that," Annie insists. "We were—just—scared…"

"Why did you change your mind, so many months into the year?" asks Nanaba.

"Because if Zeke or my father find out I'm pregnant, they'll kill me." Annie meets her eyes. Eld covers his face and Levi winces. "And I don't want—my baby to have this life."

Armin realizes that the adults are looking at him. His face flushes. "I found out a few days ago—I—"

"I don't want to go to jail," Annie cries.

"She can't," Armin insists, panic rising. "Her father beats her—what kind of choice did she really have?"

"We'll help you," Petra vows, kneeling down in front of Annie and Armin. "Both of you."

Annie sobs, and with his heart breaking, Armin realizes this is probably the first day she's ever had adults promise to help her and not try to use her for something.

"Annie's had far less to do with it than Reiner or I," Bertolt insists. "Far less. We—we've done so much more—she's only done what she had to; we—it's more our fault than hers, I swear."

"So, you wanted to do it?" Levi asks, heading past the couch and over to them. He may be short, but with Bertolt and Reiner huddled together on the floor, he towers over them.

"No! I never wanted to!" Bertolt cries out, his hands clutching his face. "But I didn't want my other options either! I didn't want to wind up like my parents, but—but—now I have!" He slams his fist into his thigh, again and again.

"Cut it out!" screams Historia as Hitch yelps.

"Stop it!" Erwin lunges past Levi and grabs Bertolt's hand with his one arm. The boy cranes his neck back, looking up into Erwin's face with tears streaming down his, shaking his head as his lips try to form words and can't. "Bertolt—" Erwin says with a sigh as he watches the boy sob and sob. "Calm down. Just take a deep breath."

Nanaba gets to her feet and heads to the kitchen. Armin hears the sound of water running. Bertolt tries to inhale and it shatters into more hysteria.

"Here." Nanaba hands Bertolt a glass of water.

"Drink," Erwin orders, and Bertolt obeys. Mike hands one to Annie, and Eld gives one to Reiner. Armin nudges Annie to make sure she's drinking. Reiner shakes his head.

"I think we need a psychological evaluation," Levi says. Armin flinches.

"Levi, you're not supposed to say that out loud," Hange snaps. Lightning flashes outside.

"I'm sorry," Bertolt ekes out. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm really—"

Erwin hesitates, and then wraps his one arm around Bertolt. He collapses into Erwin's shoulder, sobbing. Erwin shrugs as if to say what can I do? It's a peculiar sight, the tallest boy in their class bawling into the dean's shoulder.
"The—only time I ever felt safe was here," Bertolt admits, his voice muffled. "And now I've ruined everything."

Hange sighs. "Are we to assume the drugs found on Marco were planted by you three?"

"No," Reiner interjects.

"What?" Jean glares at them. Armin looks to Annie. What is he talking about?

"It wasn't Annie, and it wasn't Bertolt. I mean, they knew, but it was me, not them. And the kidnapping of Eren—that was me, trying to impress Zeke or something. It wasn't them." Reiner looks up into the faces of all the adults gathered around. "Please don't punish them for it. I'm the one who deserves to—to—"

"So now we've got kidnapping," Levi says. "Great."

"It was not Reiner," Bertolt snaps. "Not exactly."

"Yes, it was!" Reiner shouts.

"Stop trying to throw yourself under the bus to protect me!" Bertolt shouts back.

"But it was me!" Reiner yells. "Just… not exactly." He grimaces.

Annie stiffens, glancing at Armin with her eyes wide.

What's going on?

"I wasn't exactly in my right mind," Reiner confesses, rubbing the top of his head.

"What do you mean?" asks Oruo.

"I mean, sometimes I—I lose—parts of my memories, and then I'll find out I've done things I don't remember doing, and it's usually related to Zeke. I can't—can't always control myself—it's like I'm two people, instead of one, and I stay in one mind and one side of me's really ugly and cruel." Reiner stares at the carpet. A tear leaks, dribbling down his face.

Levi sighs, looking to Erwin, who's still holding Bertolt. Erwin's face is gray, Armin notes.

"It's true," Annie says. "He leaked Eren and Mikasa's history in that mind."

Mikasa glares at her. Eren stiffens. "Reiner!"

Armin's mind gallops back, tracing all those times he saw Reiner fighting with Bertolt, the night he found Bertolt crying, the times Reiner seemed more like an angry kid than the big brother he knew him to be. Oh hell.

"Can you blame it all on me?" Reiner asks, turning to Erwin, to Levi. "Bertolt and Annie shouldn't have their lives ruined—they're good people, just got pulled into this. I'm the one who can't even keep who he is straight."

"Um, no, I think we'll be blaming all of this on Zeke," Eld objects.

"And the things you have done on you, and the things Bertolt has done on Bertolt, and the things Annie has done on Annie," Erwin adds. "With the knowledge that you three are still teenagers and were coerced, of sorts."
"Having a dissociative state might actually help you, Reiner," Hange offers.

"Huh?" He looks up.

"It proves you've been through some sort of trauma."

Reiner shudders. He looks at them all now, their big brother, the one they all went to for help. Armin's never seen such shame on anyone's face.

"I don't hate you," Historia says softly.

"And I already told you," Marco says earnestly. "I forgive you. I don't want any of you to go to prison."

"Oh really?" asks Hange. Petra smiles.

"Can't you help them?" Ymir asks bluntly. "Like you helped me?"

Erwin blinks. "I can try. Especially if Zeke is found to have murdered Dr. Jaeger—"

"Then Zeke's the one I want to rot in jail," Eren says. "If he's even still in one piece."

"Yes, thanks Eren," Erwin says. "I imagine the three of you will be key witnesses."

Confusion melts Reiner's face, as if he really can't believe they aren't all lobbing stones. He catches Armin's eyes, and Armin nods at him. "I don't hate you either. I feel sorry for you, because you're better than this, and you know it."

"You can't mean that."

"Reiner, you're actually a pretty great person when you want to be," Jean says. "I think you can work and learn to handle this mind thing, if you want to."

Reiner gulps and clenches his fists, looking as if he's trying to keep himself from flying into pieces. Tears leak from his eyes, and he shrinks as if he wants to be smaller, to disappear so he doesn't have to face this reality. Levi sighs and crouches, picking up the water glass and shoving it at Reiner's face. "Drink."

*It's real. Drink it,* Armin wants to plead.

"Reiner," Bertolt says softly.

Reiner nods and gulps some of it down wrong. He coughs.


"Then where will we go?" Annie asks, still clinging to Armin. "No one's going to want to take in a pregnant teenager."

Armin's heart pounds. "I'll talk to my grandfather," he tells her. *I can't lose Annie.* He doesn't care how it reflects on him. He loves her, and he wants her, and their baby.

"Okay," Erwin says, standing up. "All of you. We need to take turns interviewing you all, one at a time."
"Even us?" asks Hitch.

"No, you and Marlowe are fine." Erwin sighs. "It's going to be a long day. Who wants coffee?"

"Me," sings Sasha.

"Are students included, Erwin?" asks Eld.

Erwin shrugs. "Why not?"

"Well," Levi says as he finishes listening to Eren's story. "You're going to have to repeat this to the cops, you know. And to a court, probably."

Eren nods, coffee stinging his stomach. He clutches the now-cool mug.

"What's going through your mind?"

"I can't believe I'm related to him," Eren whispers.

Levi nods. "I know you turned it down before, but Hange told me to strongly recommend, which means force, you into counseling."

"I'll go."

"Not even a protest." Levi raises his eyebrows. "I'm impressed."

Eren shrugs.

"Hannes wants to see you," Levi says. "He's quite concerned."

He lifts his head. "Has the storm stopped?"

" Mostly. The tornado didn't cause any significant damage. They're not even sure one actually touched down." Levi rubs at his head, pressing against the bandages. He winces.

"Is your head okay?" Eren asks meekly.

"I've had worse." Levi drums his fingers on the table. They're in Levi's apartment, which is almost as sparsely furnished as Zeke's. A photograph of what looks like a teenage Levi between a light-haired boy and a grinning girl with red pigtails hangs above a plaid couch. Levi's not smiling in it, but he doesn't have to be for Eren to be able to tell he's enjoying their company.

What happened to them? Eren wonders. He shifts in his seat. Instead, he asks: "Will we all be suspended?"

"Possibly." Levi shrugs. "The decision's not mine to make."

"My mom's waking up," Eren says in a low voice. "Maybe."

"And would you want to quit school, then?"

Eren shakes his head. "No." Why do people still hold that against me? For God's sake! "I'm worried about Armin and Annie, though. And Reiner and Bertolt."

"Hm." Levi cocks his head. "That's the one thing I admire about kids."
"What—"

"You're able to pardon people so much more easily," Levi tells him. "That's a good ability. Don't lose it."

"They were forced," Eren snaps. "Mostly."

"Mostly" being the key phrase there. They had some choices. Just like Ymir." Levi pushes his chair back and dumps his mug in the sink with a clank. "Which isn't to say their positions aren't understandable. Hopefully, they'll make better choices from here on out, ones they'll regret less."

*People are complicated.* Eren closes his eyes. It hurts to think of just how broken Reiner is—Reiner, the boy he wanted to be, the one he thought had everything all together.

*You were a mess the whole time, and I never realized.*

"With Zackley gone, Erwin's job isn't in danger any more, is it?" Eren asks.

Levi's face softens. "We'll see."

When the winds settle and dawn pricks the sky, Moblit and Nanaba escort them all back to their dorms. Erwin's promised to call the police, but in the meantime, they're all supposed to get some sleep. Marco head back to his old dorm room.

"Are you scared for Annie?" Eren asks Armin when they get back to their room.

He nods, and Eren slings an arm around him.

"I always thought I'd do the right thing, no matter what," Armin says. "And I'm almost wishing we'd kept quiet."

"What?" Eren demands.

"I don't, not really, but I hate—I hate that this has opened Annie up to the danger of, you know, prison." Armin leans over. "And I feel like it's my fault."

"I really don't believe that will happen," Eren says. "And it's not—I mean, Armin, have you seen how much you've helped Annie?"

His friend looks back at him, blue eyes confused.

"You have. She was so withdrawn and kinda bitchy, which she still is, but now it's more like, lovable bitchy," Eren clarifies as Armin's eyes narrow. "But she seems happier. More hopeful. Hell, you were like the first choice she made in awhile, right? To do something she wanted to do?"

"Eren, stop with the puns," Armin groans.

*Huh? Oh.* "I didn't mean it like that!" he protests. "I meant—she wanted you, because you're good for her and she's good for you. You've been happier lately. You've been more confident. I mean, you know Mikasa and I believe in you. And now Annie does, too."

Armin wraps Eren in a hug. "Thank you."

"It's true." Eren scowls. "I still can't believe you had sex and didn't tell me, though."

"*Eren!*" Armin shoves him.
"Do I get to babysit?"

"Maybe." Armin flops over on his bed. "I'm really—I mean, I'm nervous, but I'm excited, Eren. I feel like we can do this and it'll be really hard, but we can do it."

"You've got friends willing to help you," Eren points out.

Armin smiles. "Yeah... it's like, I always was so afraid of being useless. And now that college is—well, Annie and I both want to go still, but it won't be what we hoped for, and I'm still—"

"What?" Eren gapes. "You were never useless!"

"I felt that way."

"When?"

"All the time?"

"You never were," Eren insisted, angry. How can Armin, of all people, think he's useless? "You cared about me when no one else did."

"Thanks. I mean, like I'm saying, I don't feel that way anymore. Well, I do, but I'm trying not to—trying to learn. Annie, and our baby, and you and Mikasa—you're important, and caring isn't useless."

Eren nods.

Armin throws a pillow at him. "So when are you going to ask Mikasa out?"

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! One more chapter, and then possibly an epilogue (we'll see). Up next: Eren makes a decision and Reiner and Bertolt finally figure things out (with some help from Annie).
"You're being released into the custody of a guardian," the officer tells Annie.

She hasn't been booked, so that's good. Her hand resting over her stomach, Annie rises from her chair and stumbles out. It's dark out again, and she assumes the others have all gone home. There's still no trace of Zeke, or Zackley.

Annie rounds the corner to find Petra, Erwin, Hange, and Levi leaning against a wall.

"Oh good. They really weren't lying when they said five minutes!" Hange exclaims.

"We're still waiting on two," grouses Levi.

"I'm your temporary guardian," Petra tells her. "Although you'll be staying in the dorm."

"Did they call my dad?" Annie asks.

Petra nods. Annie's stomach flips. "Is there a bathroom?"

"Right through there." Hange points, and Annie dashes to it, making it just in time to vomit.

A hand grasps her shoulders, and her hair. Petra. She doesn't say anything until Annie finishes, wiping her mouth on toilet paper.

"How far along are you?" Petra inquires.

"Ten weeks." Annie frowns. *Soon to be eleven.* The nausea has to end soon then, right?

"Have you thought about seeing a doctor?"

"I went to the clinic in town." Annie pries herself up to wash her hands. "I want to keep the baby."

"Okay," Petra agrees.

"You're not going to try to convince me that's a stupid idea?" Annie asks.

"No," Petra shrugs.

Annie starts to cry. "I want to finish school, too. I want to have it all, and I know I can't—especially now—"

"We'll help you," Petra says. "I know—I know Armin's grandfather's aware, now, Annie, and he's not exactly thrilled, but he's not angry either. He's willing to help the two of you out. I'm sure Pixis will be willing to help you graduate."

"I can't pay to keep going here."

"Your scholarship is still valid."

"It is?" Annie blinks.
"Armin looked into the rules." Petra smiles. "Even if Zeke gave it to you under guise of working for him, you haven't violated any terms. Besides the school rules, but with Ymir's case already as an example, you should be fine."

Annie gapes. She needs to tell Armin—idiot, he already knows—it feels too good to be true. And his grandfather doesn't hate me?

Anything good has felt unreal to Annie, for so long, but this—this is real. Armin's real, their baby is real, Petra's looking at her with mercy instead of hatred, and her friends—even Eren—still care about her. It's all real, a living dream.

She remembers something Mikasa said once, that Annie scorned at the time. The world is cruel, but the world is also beautiful.

Annie always thought the world was cruel. She didn't know it was beautiful, too. But maybe now...

Annie emerges to find Reiner and Bertolt standing with their shoulders slumped. Her heart catches in her throat. But what about them? "Are they—"

"They're coming back to school," Erwin interrupts. "For the time being, Reiner will be staying at Moblit's place, and Bertolt at mine."

Bertolt shakes his head, as if amazed. Reiner wipes at his eyes.

"You okay?" Erwin asks.

Reiner shakes his head. "Why are you being so generous? We don't deserve it. I especially don't. I'm insane."

"Don't call yourself that," Hange snaps. "You may have a mental illness. You are not a bad person because of that."

Bertolt hesitates, and Annie narrows her eyes at him. Do it.

Bertolt puts his hand on Reiner's shoulder. "We'll be okay?" he offers, more a guess than a certainty.

Reiner almost smiles. "We'll try."

The three of them climb into the very back of a van, and Annie can still see Bertolt wondering, worrying. She sits in between them, crushed basically. Oh, for goodness sake. "What do you have to lose?" she mutters to Bertolt.

"What?" He turns to her. Annie slides her eyes in Reiner's direction.

Bertolt's face flushes.

"What?" Reiner turns to them.

"Are you really doubting that Reiner's in love with you?" Annie asks point blank, albeit in a lowered voice as the adults get in. Levi insists on driving, pushing Hange out of the driver's seat.

Reiner looks stricken, more terrified than when he confessed. Sweat dampens Bertolt's forehead. "Annie—"

Reiner squeezes his eyes shut, and there's an admission if Annie ever saw one.
Bertolt's jaw drops. He glances at the front seats, where Petra and Hange sit chatting. Levi starts to drive, and Bertolt reaches out to take Reiner's hand.

The way Reiner looks at Bertolt—his eyes shining, his mouth slightly open and his cheeks beaming—it's the way Armin looks at her.

Good thing we're in the car with adults right now, Annie decides. Or they'd be making out even with her sitting in-between. "Remember Gunthur's lessons, guys," she says, her voice barely audible. "Or you'll end up like me."

"Um, no, Annie, we won't," Reiner points out.

"Get your hands off my lap," Annie grumbles.

"Zeke and Zackley have both been apprehended," Erwin announces.

Relief washes through Armin. It's been two weeks, and maybe now all the extra security can finally die down. Annie wilts.

"They've both been indicted on drug related charges, and Zeke's been additionally charged with first-degree murder."

Eren lowers his face. Mikasa watches him carefully, scarf covering her mouth.

"You okay?" Armin asks when Erwin dismisses their group into the hallway. The three of them linger behind the others.

"I thought I'd feel happier," Eren grumbles. "But…" His voice trails off.

Armin puts his hand on Eren's shoulder. "He'll have to answer for what he did to your father."

"Yeah, but where are Dad's answers?" Eren demands. "Those are the ones I want—maybe more than I want answers from Zeke."

"Maybe your mom will have some?"

"I'm not going to bother her with that. If she ever fully wakes up."

What will our child think of us? Armin wonders. Annie's already expressed anxiety about telling him or her about making and dealing drugs for Zeke. Will they think we're bad people? Use it against us someday?

Probably to the latter, at some point. They won't lie, though. And Annie loves their baby already. She'll be a wonderful mother, even if not perfect. But Annie will get to decide when and how to tell them, because she matters more than any stupid timeline Armin might try to come up with.

"Armin?" calls Reiner, appearing at the end of the hallway. He nods at Eren, at Mikasa. "Annie's dad tried to call her."

Armin swears.

"Why can't he just leave her alone?" Eren complains. "I'd like to take my fist to his face. And your dad's, too, Reiner."

Armin bites back a groan. I guess it's supportive? For Eren anyways?
Reiner nods, shrinking back against the wall again.

_No one's afraid of you, Reiner_, Armin thinks. He wants the boy to know that.

"Hey, I'm really happy for you and Bertl, though," Eren adds, his fist grazing Reiner's shoulder. "It's about time."

Reiner's eyebrows surge up to his hairline as his eyes run back and forth between Eren and Mikasa. "Hm."

"See you," Armin says quickly, darting down the hall. They all follow.

He finds Annie standing outside. It's sunny today, and warm. Sasha and Connie sit cross-legged on the grass, tossing almonds into their mouths. Ymir laughs as Historia braids her hair on a green bench, and Jean and Marco—now reinstated—sit near them, fervently discussing the arrests. Hitch and Marlowe lie on their stomachs under the oak tree to the left of the bench, watching something on Marlowe's tablet. Reiner heads over to Bertolt to lie down next to him on the grass, in dangerous proximity to the tossing almonds but in the sunshine. Mikasa pulls out _Jane Eyre_ and drags Eren over to sit and read near the two boys, although Eren draws out his phone.

"Hey."

Annie holds out her phone. "He's out on bail. Petra told me."

Armin scowls. "He won't bother you. Levi promised, and my grandfather might be old, but he'll keep you safe over the summer."

"Armin, I'm disappointed, but that doesn't extend to Annie or your child," Grandpa told him.

"I can't believe he's so supportive," Annie muses. "I thought he'd call me a skank who seduced you or something."

"You kind of did." Armin winks. "But I was willing."

She shoves him as they stroll over to the rock wall. They settle on the grass, backs pressed against it. Armin's hand rests on Annie's stomach. In a few more weeks, a month or so, they'll be able to feel their baby move.

"I almost want to talk to him, you know."

"Your dad?"

"Yeah. But… with boundaries in place. Where he can't yell at me," Annie sniffs. "It's confusing."

Armin thinks of Eren and the revelation about his father. "It is. He's… complicated."

"If I call him back," Annie says. "Will you stay with me?"

Armin meets her eyes, still ice blue and yet without that cold sheen he saw at the beginning of the year. She looks free. He kisses her nose. "Yes."


"Connie!" yells Jean as Connie pelts almonds at Jean and Marco.

"Catch, catch!" Sasha chants.
"It's me," Annie says into her phone, gulping. Armin presses his cheek against hers. *I'm here.*

His mind can help people. So can his heart.

*I never was useless.*

"Twelve weeks… fine. The nausea's gotten better… Yeah, he's good to me." Annie's voice cracks. "No, Dad, I don't hate you."

"Look at that!" shrieks Historia.

"What?" Eren tosses his backpack down in art class. Petra's making them all draw self-portraits.

"Your hand, Petra!" Historia exclaims, rushing up to her. "Ooh, can I see? Ymir, come look!"

"Can we all see?" calls Sasha.

Petra holds up her hand, a flush in her cheeks and her eyes bright. A diamond shines from her left ring finger, set in silver. Or platinum. Eren can't tell them apart.

"Congratulations!" Marco cries.

"You and Oruo?" asks Jean.

"He bit his tongue, didn't he," mutters Reiner. Eren snorts.

Mikasa even grins. Eren glances over at her. He needs to ask her to prom. Armin's asked Annie, Reiner asked Bertolt, Jean and Marco, Sasha and Connie, Ymir and Historia, Marlowe and Hitch, Hannah and Franz, and Mina and Thomas Wager—"just as friends" Mina clarified.

But how to phrase it? Eren wonders.

"Next year, Levi and Hange should get engaged," Historia sighs.

"Eh, what?" Levi's voice cuts through.

Historia blanches. Ymir grabs her hand.

"Never mind," Levi groans. "Congratulations, Petra. I'm afraid I'm going to have to steal Jaeger and Ackerman from your class, though."

"What's going on?" Eren demands, stuffing his notepad back into his bag. Armin mouths at him to text. He hurries into the hallway, Mikasa on his heels. *Zeke? Zackley?*

"Your mom's really waking up," Levi informs him. "Hannes is already there."

*What?* Eren doesn't know what to say. "How awake?"

"Awake, awake," Levi says. "I said at the beginning of the year that we'd make sure you'd get there if she woke up. So we're going." He pulls out his car keys—er, Hange's car keys.

"Eren," breathes Mikasa. Her eyes glow.

"We'll see. Maybe it's another false alarm," Eren says. His heart thumps. Blood surges to his skull. *I can't, I won't believe it until I see it*—hope's cruel, too cruel.
"Yeah, because I would pull you out of class for a false alarm." Levi shakes his head. "C'mon."

This isn't happening. Eren watches Mikasa pull out her phone, text Armin, Annie, all of their friends, but he can't.

"This is why you only have one friend," Dad once scolded him, when he said he would be nice to Mikasa if she were nice to him.

I have a lot of friends now. Some of who haven't been very nice to me.

There's so much Mom missed. So much to tell her—and what if she's not fully there? What if she's never fully there? Lingering in the possibility that she might wake up and be fine, or having it crushed forever if she passed, might be more merciful for him.

Because he wants his mom back, and it scares him how much he wants her.

Eren beckons for Mikasa to take the front seat. He curls up in the back, and both Levi and Mikasa stay quiet.

Please, he thinks, prays. Please. He doesn't want his only living family to be Zeke.

What about Mikasa?

Eren cringes. Zeke's never been your only family.

She's his family. But not his sister.

He loves her.

His sneakers squeak on the floor when they arrive at the hospital. Levi's face is solemn. Eren hesitates, and then reaches out to grasp Mikasa's hand. She looks to him, her lips hovering open, that red scarf he gave her hanging from her neck.

I love you so much. And he's sucked at showing it.

The door is open, as per usual. Eren draws to a halt.

"Eren?" Levi asks.

He feels like he could vomit. His face burns. What if—what if—

A voice. Drier, weaker, but familiar.

"Mom!"

Eren barges through the room, Mikasa right behind him. Hannes leaps to his feet and there she is—her hair thin, limp, and with a weak smile on her face but no breathing tube, and her eyes—they focus on him. So many faces—Zeke's, Armin's, Annie's—swarm Eren's mind—the pathetic kidnapping attempt, Jean, the fact that he loves Mikasa—it's all there, but so is she. Painfully thin, bruised and struggling, but still with her heart beating and with the kindness she always, always showed gleaming in the twitch of her mouth.

"Eren," she rasps, and he collapses.

"Don't knock the IV line!" shouts Hannes, and Eren tries to straighten himself out, but he's clinging to her and she's whispering his name and she's here, awake.
"I love you," he sobs to her. "Mom."

So much to tell her, Eren thinks as he withdraws. Her shaking fingers trace his face. She doesn't need to know everything yet, though.

Because they have time.

Right now, we have time.

All she needs to focus on is getting well.

"Mikasa," Mom ekes out, and Mikasa leans over, kissing her cheek. Tears run down her face. Even Levi blinks rapidly.

"I missed you," Eren chokes out. "How—how are you feeling?"

"Better," she whispers. "Glad that—you're okay."

"I'm good," Eren assures her. "Really."

She manages a smile, and Eren remembers how his mother always told him he was special, that he was amazing, simply for existing, for being him, for being Eren.

She would have thought Zeke was amazing too.

But for now, she just sees Eren and Mikasa, and she loves them both, and Eren can only cry because, right now, he feels whole.

"Don't worry," Levi says when they leave the hospital to find pouring rain. "No tornado warnings this time." He heads off to talk to the valet about getting the car.

"Are you okay?" Mikasa inquires, worried that Eren might want to stay.

He nods. "She's going to get better." The hope in his tone—it's what attracts Mikasa to Eren. His hope, his refusal to ever give up, and finally it's actually working out, it's being fulfilled, and she's so relieved. Carla is a saint, and Mikasa wants her back. She's got a long way to go through rehabilitation, but there's hope.

They haven't told her much yet, only that Grisha died and they caught the culprit. Zeke's identity, as well as the whole debacle at Wall Academy, isn't relevant yet.

"And she wants us to go back to school," Eren says. "And I want to."

"Good," Mikasa nods.

"After all, I don't want to miss prom," he adds.

Mikasa glances at him, studying his jawline, his green eyes. Rain pours down in front of them as they stay under the awning. "Are you going?"

"So are you," he says. "With me. I mean, if you want to. I mean—"

Her hope's alive, too. Mikasa can't squelch the grin on her face. "I'll go with you."

Eren nods. "Eh, Mikasa?"
"Hm?" She tugs her scarf over her mouth.

"You could have told me, you know."

_Told you what?_ Her face burns, because she knows exactly what. _And what are you trying to tell me?_ Now, _she's_ afraid to hope.

"I just—I mean, I thought, and I still think—you have a lot of opportunities. I mean, Jean's happily taken now, but I would have beaten him up anyways, so."

Mikasa adjusts her scarf, the wool scratching her fingertips. "I don't want anyone else." Her pulse quickens, and sweat pricks her forehead. It's really too warm for the scarf. "I love you."

Eren's eyes widen, but he's not angry, or sad. His lips art in a grin. "Well, good, 'cause I love you."

_Is this really happening?!_ Eren steps closer, his gaze steady in meeting hers. He reaches out and tugs her scarf down.

He parts her lips with his own, and Mikasa kisses him back, opening her mouth, tasting him. His hands grip her waist, the back of her head. His fingers stroke her hair, and she holds him, too, her arms wrapped around his shoulders.

_I've always loved you._

She pulls back and knows she doesn't have to say it.

"Ahem," Levi says, clearing his throat. "Car's here. Also, Eren, has Mikasa told you we're related?"

His eyes widen.

"Distantly," Mikasa retorts.

"It counts." Levi points at Eren. "Don't mess with her."

"I won't,″ he insists.

Mikasa's phone buzzes. A snapchat from Sasha, with her, Connie, Ymir, Historia, Jean, Marco, Reiner, Bertolt, Armin, Annie, Marlowe and Hitch all grinning and holding up spoons. _Ice cream party when y'all get back! To celebrate._

Mikasa laughs softly, showing the text to Eren.

He smiles.

Levi turns the key in the ignition, and the car accelerates heading for the hills and for Wall Academy, and for the place Mikasa finally wants to call home.

**Chapter End Notes**

Thank you for reading! I had a ton of fun writing this story. There may be an epilogue next Tuesday, but it'll come across as a bit crack, so consider yourself forewarned.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

Yes, I know this is kind of crack/humor, which is kind of a shift in tone, so feel free to ignore it if that's not what you like. However... it's actually very closely based on something that happened to a friend of mine. So it's not as crack as it seems (because reality can be, at times, truly stranger than fiction).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Six months later

"Still studying hard?" Jean teases. Geese squawk as they fly overhead, heading south for winter.

Not that they can tell it's coming. It's still blessedly warm. Eren looks up from his textbook. He lies with Mikasa in the dorm courtyard, reading *The Brothers Karamazov*. With some help from Sparknotes on Mikasa's tablet, the one Levi bought her.

"He wants to make sure he's always on the honor roll from here on out," Armin says, leaning back in the chairs. Annie sits across the glass table from him, her stomach protruding.

Annie cringes. "Ouch."

"Are you okay?" Armin yelps.

"I'm fine," Annie hisses. "She's just kicking me."

"Really?" gasps Reiner. "Can I feel?"

Annie scowls. "Can I feel your rock-solid abs in that case?"

Eren snickers. Mikasa grins.

"Nope. Reserved for Bertolt," Reiner declares, rubbing the top of his head.

"Yes, Reiner, you can feel her kicking." Annie gasps. "Stop, please, kid." She presses Reiner's hand against her belly. "Damn, of course she stops now. Never mind, there she goes."

Petra took Annie shopping for maternity clothes over the summer, and Mikasa went with her. But Annie still mostly sticks to her hoodies.

Eren tries to refocus on the story. *Concentrate*. He wants to make Mom proud. And Dad, even if he's not here.

Mikasa leans her head on his shoulder, her scarf still wrapped around her neck. Eren plays with the edges as Annie announces that she's tired and wants to take a nap back at her dorm.

Eren's phone buzzes. Erwin.

"What's up?" Mikasa asks, sitting up and peering at the screen.
"He wants to meet with me," Eren says quickly. "It must be about Zeke's court date."

"Want me to go with you?" Mikasa asks as she stuffs the book and tablet into her backpack. An orange leaf falls onto her head, sitting pretty against her black hair. Eren doesn't want to brush it away.

"Yeah," he says, reaching for her hand.

They tramp across campus, towards Erwin's office. The new VP, Rico, nods at them as they pass. Annie, Reiner, and Bertolt all took plea deals that left them uncharged with crimes in exchange for testimony and psychological help, and from what Eren can tell, Reiner's doing better, although Bertolt's still shy around Eren.

But he doesn't hate them. He really doesn't. *If only I could show them that.*

"Welcome," Erwin says, waving his hand as they enter. There are times Ymir's expressed that she worries Erwin resents her for losing his arm, but Eren doubts that's the case.

"What happened?" Eren blurts out.

"Calm down, brat," Levi says, swinging his legs as he sits on Erwin's desk. Hange peruses Erwin's bookshelves. "Something good, I assure you."

"Really?" asks Mikasa. "Did they set a date for the trial?"

"For Zackley, yes," Erwin answers. "January." He swallows. "But Zeke decided to change his plea to guilty."

"What?" Eren blurts out. "*Guilty?*" He can hardly breathe—he has to tell Mom—"Wait—what does that mean?"

"It means, he isn't getting a plea deal, but he's still admitting he did it," Hange says.

"Even—my father?" *He murdered our father.*

"Yes," Erwin confirms. "He won't be testifying against Zackley, however."

"That's okay." Eren curls his fists. He'd still like to punch the man who is his brother. And talk to him, ask him... *I don't know how to feel!*

"I'll call Carla," Mikasa says, squeezing Eren's hand.

*It's okay,* Eren tries to assure himself, taking several deep breaths. "Thanks."

"Well... that's good. At least he's acknowledging what he did," Armin says that night. "So you won't have to go through a trial."

"So they won't, either," Eren says, nodding to Bertolt and Reiner. Bertolt blinks, surprised.

"Are you guys doing okay?" Marco asks.

Bertolt nods. "I'm relieved."

"Me too," Reiner admits.

"How long has it been since you had an episode, Reiner?" Connie questions, holding out a bag of
Reiner takes several. "A few weeks. But it wasn't a very long one." He looks down, still ashamed.

"You're strong for admitting that you're weak," Armin says.

"Huh?" Reiner glares at him.

"It's something Petra told Annie," Armin insists, holding up his hands. "It's okay that you've got an—issue. We all do."

"Some more than others," Jean grumbles.

Marco crumples a handful of chips up and dumps them into Jean's hair.

"Marco!"

He laughs. Jean frantically swipes at his head, finally stopping. "Really?"

Marco shrugs, and Jean leans over to kiss him.

"To bed!" roars Moblit. "It's late, and it may be Sunday tomorrow, but you are not staying up!"

"Sounds fine to me," Jean mutters, taking Marco's hand.

The next morning, Ymir pounds on Mikasa's door. "Wake up!"

"What?" Sasha moans. "Ymir, it's only nine!"

Mikasa's already awake, stuffing her feet into her shoes to head to breakfast.

"Guys!" Ymir barks. "Annie's in labor!"

"What?" Mikasa flies out of the dorm room, skidding past Ymir and racing to Annie and Hitch's room. Hitch looks terrified as Annie curls up on a bed, her fists wringing. "Annie!"

"I sent Historia to get Nanaba," Ymir reports. Sasha rushes up in her pajamas, hair askew. "Did you text Armin?"

Annie nods, biting her lip and looking as if she's swallowing demons to keep from screaming.

"How far apart are the contractions?" Sasha asks.

"Three minutes?" Annie offers. "Maybe less now…"

"Now?" Mikasa yells. "Annie, how long have you been—"

"I thought it was false labor!"

"How long?"

"Since I left the Maria dorm yesterday!" Annie yells back, and a scream finally rips through her lips. Hitch covers her mouth, trembling.

"Hey." Sasha rushes over to her, stroking her hair. "It'll be okay."
"Nanaba's calling Petra!" Historia announces as she bursts into the room. "Your water hasn't broken, has it?"

"Not that I know of," Annie wheezes.

"Then you'll be fine. Petra's your labor coach; she'll be here soon. Can you walk?" Historia brushes her hair back from her eyes.

Annie nods, but Mikasa's taking no chances. She pulls Annie's arm across her shoulders.

"Armin will meet us by the van," Annie pants. "That's what he texted me." Her face relaxes a bit, and Mikasa assumes she's between contractions. Get to the car, now. "Are you coming?"

"Me?" Mikasa asks, surprised.

"I know Eren said he wanted to wait in the waiting room," Annie says.

"Yeah." Mikasa nods. "If you don't mind."

"I don't." Annie inhales shakily. "I'm scared."

"You're going to be fine," Mikasa insists. Historia, say something! She's no good at this.

Nanaba emerges from her apartment, taking Annie's other arm and helping her towards the parking lot, down the stairs. They make it near the van—Mikasa can see Armin's blond head—when Annie doubles over, screaming.

"Holy hell," whispers Jean.

Why is everyone here?

Levi blanches, the keys in his hand. "Get in."

Armin races over to Annie, helping her inside the van even as she keeps screaming. Petra jumps in behind her, taking a seat in the back with the two of them. She rubs Annie's back as Armin reminds Annie to breathe. "Like this." He pants.

Mikasa and Hange leap into the middle seats. Eren gets shotgun.

"See you," Levi says, slamming the door.

"Do they seriously all want to come?" Mikasa demands.

"I don't care. I just want a fucking epidural!" Annie yells.

"Of course they do," Eren says. "Armin and Annie are their friends. Will you drive already?"

"I'm the one with an actual license, brat! I can still suspend you!" Levi snarls.

"But Annie's in pain!"

"Eren, calm down," Mikasa orders as the car starts moving.

"Mikasa, I can't calm down! My best friend is having a baby!" Eren yells.

"He's not the one doing the work!" Annie bellows. Armin cringes.
"How far away is the hospital?" Mikasa asks Hange.

"The one we're going to is down the hill," Hange answers.

*So, over an hour?* Mikasa bites the insides of her cheeks. Granted, she doesn't trust the one in town to do anything more than give a band-aid, but—

Annie cries out again. "Why—Armin, I'm going to throw up—"

"Here." Hange grabs a plastic bag from her purse and shoves it over. Petra snatches it and holds it out for Annie to retch into.

Mikasa covers her mouth and watches Levi grip the steering wheel.

"Can't you go any faster?" Eren pleads.

Petra examines her watch. "Hange, they're not very much apart at all—like less than—"

Annie screams. Armin whispers into her ear, and she clutches him.

"I'm going as fast as I can while still being safe, brat."

"Levi, look out!" Hange yells.

Levi swerves to avoid a cat. Eren shrieks, and the next thing Mikasa knows, something crunches and leather smacks into her face, and she tastes blood.

"Fucking cat," Levi grouses. "Is everyone okay?"

"No!" Annie yells.

"Besides you!"

"I was—talking about—Armin!" Annie pants.

Armin feels his forehead. Blood, wet and sticking drips down. He must have hit the seat in front of him.

Petra winces. "Just bruises for me." She reaches for Armin.

"First aid kit right here," Hange says, half of her face reddened. She'll have a black eye for sure.

*We're in a car accident. Is the baby okay?* His head can wait. Armin turns to Annie, who twists her ring again and again and again. "It hurts!"

"I just bit my lip. I'll be okay," Mikasa says. "Your nose is bleeding, Eren! It's broken."

"I'll live!" Eren snarls.

"I don't think I can drive," Levi says weakly.

"What?" Hange turns to see—*oh shit*, Armin thinks.

Levi's arm is at an odd angle, and the driver's side door crunches in around him.

"What do we do?" Petra demands.
"Get out of the car," Hange orders. "Nanaba and Mike were coming with some of your friends—they can't be that much behind us."

Armin grabs Annie, supporting her as she stumbles out, unable to stand. "Sit," he encourages. She drops onto the grass. Trees rise around them, leaves the colors of flames striking the cerulean sky.

I'm about to meet my daughter. He doesn't know if he's ready. Feeling the baby kick—looking at ultrasound pictures—it all seemed real, but not it all seems murky, like looking through a glass dimly.

This is real. This is happening.

Petra wraps a bandage around his head, but Armin focuses on Annie. "Just breathe."

"Easier—said—than—done," Annie ekes out.

Tires roll in the distance. Armin's heart lifts. "They're almost here. We'll be okay."

"I love you Armin, but right now I hate you," she wheezes, face gray.

Armin laughs.

"What have I done?" laments Eren.

"Shut up!" Annie screeches.

"Everyone's going to be okay," Hange says sharply. "Nothing's life threatening. Not even having a baby."

"Yes, it is!" Annie shouts.

"Not for you. You're healthy. You'll be fine."

"I don't want to die." She clutches Armin's arm, eyes terrified.

"You won't," Armin promises her. "It hurts, but you won't die. I won't let you."

"What the hell?" shrieks Ymir as the other van pulls to the side of the road. She leaps out, followed by Historia, Bertolt, Reiner, Mike, Erwin, and Nanaba. "What did you do, Eren?"

"Why are you blaming him?" Mikasa demands.

"Can it really be anyone else?"

Mikasa shrugs, still holding blood-soaked tissues to Eren's nose.

"How can we help?" Reiner asks anxiously.

"You can fuck off," Annie snarls.

"She'll be okay," Bertolt insists.

"Damn right," Nanaba agrees.

Erwin begins counting the injured—"We'll get some of you to wait with the car, but if you're hurt, you need to get to the hospital—"

Another van pulls up. Oruo, Sasha, Connie, a horrified Jean and a concerned Marco, plus Marlowe and Hitch.
"I thought you said you hated babies," Annie squeaks.

"I'm worried about you," Hitch returns.

"Okay," Erwin says. "Mike, Nanaba, take Levi, Hange, Annie, Armin, and Petra in that car. Oruo, take Mikasa and Eren, and anyone else who wants to come. The rest of us will stay by the van."

Annie screams again, her fingers digging into Armin's arm.

"Oh, shit," Petra gasps. "Shit, shit, shit!"

There's a word Armin never thought he'd hear Petra say.

"What is it?" Oruo yelps, biting his tongue.

Hange lets go of Levi and darts over. "Her water just broke."

Annie throws her head back. Her free hand digs into the dirt.

"I don't know that there's time for that," Hange says.

"What?" Armin yells, panic digging its ugly claws into him. "What are you—"

"We're still a half hour away!" Hange says. "I—Reiner, Bertolt, Oruo, Erwin—help Eren and Levi with first aid. Marco, call an ambulance right now."

"I fucked everything up," Eren whispers.

"No, you didn't," Erwin assures him.

"No, he actually kind of did," Levi hisses.

"If you are a man, get over on the other side of the car, unless you're Armin!" Hange yells, getting to her feet. Armin's never seen her so enraged.

"Now!"

"Wouldn't it be better to try to make it?" Petra gasps.

"She's got whiplash and I'm hesitant to move her," Hange responds. Armin looks down and sees water and blood soaking Annie's sweatpants.

Oh my God.

This can't be happening. This is unreal.

"Here!" Historia runs up. "I found these blankets in the trunk."

"Thank you," Hange says. Ymir appears, face white. "Armin, help me."

"Oh my God oh my God oh my God!" Armin can hear Hitch yelling.

"Hitch, calm down!" Marlowe insists. But his voice sounds weak, almost like he's in shock.

"What if something goes wrong?" Annie screams. "If the baby's—"

"I can't guarantee that nothing will go wrong," Hange says. "But, Annie, I am trained in—"

"Have you ever delivered a baby before?" Armin demands. The dampness of the soil seeps into his
"I helped with a cousin once," Sasha says from above them.

"Great. You're helping," Hange says. "Please, trust me, Annie."

Annie gapes at her, but nods. *What other choice do we have?*

Armin squeezes her hand. Petra grabs the other hand. Historia and Ymir hover nearby with blankets ready. Hange arranges one under Annie.

"We really need help, please!" Armin hears Marco begging into the phone. "She's seventeen—yes, it's her first child—I don't know exactly where! On the road to Eldia. We go to Wall Academy."

"Give that to me," Jean growls. "*Listen up!*" he shouts, presumably into the phone. "Our friend is having a baby, and she's terrified and in pain, or teacher broke his arm, and another idiot kid broke his nose. *Hurry up!*"

"Ymir, get me the phone," Hange orders. "The operators can help."

"Got it," Ymir darts back around the vans.

Annie's gasping now. Sweat pours down her forehead, her neck. The sun's blinding, and her face is red as she screams.

*Why does this have to be so painful?* Armin wishes he could take some of it away, feel it himself. It's not fair for Annie.

"Push, Annie," Hange orders. "I can see the head."

"You're doing great," Petra tells Annie.

"What would doing bad look like?" Annie rasps.

"You wouldn't be joking," Armin responds.

"Wait," Hange orders, the cell phone clutched against her ear. "Now, push again. Again. You're almost there…"

Armin's heart is in his throat. He clutches Annie's hand, strokes her hair back, helps her bear down.

"It's out!" Hange cries.

*Then why isn't it crying?* Horror seeps through Armin. Annie gasps, trying to sit up. *What's wrong?*

"Hold on; I've seen this before." Sasha reaches down, grabbing the infant—gray-skinned, blue—*no—please*—Sasha yanks at a rubbery cord, slipping it over the baby's head. She rubs the baby's sides.

A wail splits the air.

"You have baby girl," Historia coos, wrapping her up in a blanket.

Something wet rolls down Armin's face. He looks to Annie and sees that she's crying, ugly tears now as Hange hands the baby over. She's covered in blood and other things, but she's looking at Annie, at Armin, and Armin bawls.
Hange tosses a blanket over Annie as a siren sounds in the distance. Petra's jaw hangs open in amazement.

"Shh, shh, it's okay, it's okay," Annie whispers.

*Keep crying,* Armin thinks. *You're alive—I have a daughter.* She has thin wisps of blond hair on her head, tiny eyes, blue like all babies, but also like his and Annie's. And she's so small.

"Can we come over?" hollers Connie.

"Yes!" Annie yells, pressing her daughter against her chest.

They all come, and God, even Jean's crying slightly. Armin grins at Eren, at Mikasa.

"Are you sure you want me to let them all in?" the nurse asks. It's late afternoon by now, and Annie and their daughter have been cleaned up and are able to rest in the hospital.

"Yes," Annie answers. Armin holds the baby to his chest. She's finally asleep, after crying for hours. Not that Annie minds. Those seconds when she wasn't certain she would ever meet here were the worst of her life.

She's already texted a picture to her father. He'll visit, maybe tomorrow.

"She's so tiny!" coos Eren as he approaches, his nose taped up and his eyes black and swollen. "Armin, Annie, congratulations!"

Mikasa peers over Armin's shoulder. "She looks like you."

"I think she looks like Annie," Armin says.

"No, she looks like you," Annie agrees. "She has your nose. And a softer face."

"I heard what Sasha did," Connie says, his arm around his girlfriend. "Hero." He kisses her, and Annie nods.

"Thank you."

Sasha grins. "No problem."

"Can I hold her?" Historia asks eagerly.

"Um—" Armin hesitates.

"Sure," Annie says. Of all people, she trusts Historia not to drop her.

"Do we have a name?" Erwin asks, appearing with Levi, whose arm is in a sling. Hange appears behind him, a coffee cup in her hand.

"Thank you," Annie chokes out again, to Hange this time. "You saved us."

Levi looks at Hange almost with pride. "You were pretty amazing."

"Best compliment I've ever heard from him," Nanaba says, leaning back against Mike. "I might need you, Hange, when Mike and I have our kids."

"Are you trying to tell me something?" Erwin demands.
"Not yet," Mike responds.

"She's beautiful," Historia gushes. Even Ymir smiles as she reaches out. The baby grabs her fingertips, and Ymir giggles.

"What's her name?" Mikasa inquires.

Armin looks to Annie. "Ocean Grace," she answers.

For Armin's dream. For the place she told him she loved him.

Historia passes Ocean to Marco, who rocks her gently as she whimpers. The purple teddy bear Marco gave Annie lies on the bed. Ocean's first friend.

Marco holds Ocean out to Bertolt, who gingerly takes the baby. She's only five pounds, and in Bertolt's huge hands, she looks especially little. "She's beautiful," Bertolt tells Annie.

"We're going to be the fun uncles," Reiner declares. "I mean—if—"

"Of course," Annie says. I forgive you. Everyone has.

And Reiner finally—finally—looks to dare to hope that he can believe it.

"Who sent the lilies?" asks Jean, studying the flowers.

"Your mom, Eren," Armin answers, as Reiner hands Ocean back to Annie. Her daughter snuggles against her chest, and Annie squeezes her close. Her skin is so new, so soft.

"Really?" Eren grins. "I called her and told her—"

"He left out his crashing the car," Mikasa interjects. "I will not in future conversations."

"Hush," Eren tells her. Mikasa rolls her eyes. "She did add that I better not even think about it until after college. She wants to visit, though, and since she's kind of walking again, albeit with a cane, the rehab place might let her."

Annie wonders what it'd be like to meet Carla Jaeger, the woman whose husband was murdered by Zeke.

Somehow, she expects nothing less than love.

And maybe that means something's changing. Annie leans her head back against Armin. Ocean stirs.

I love you, little baby, she thinks. I promise I'll keep you safe. I'll show you that I love you, every day, and when I mess up I'll work on getting better. I promise.

We will, she adds, looking to Armin, who leans over and kisses Ocean's head, soft with blond strands.

She doesn't have to do it alone.
Thank you to everyone who read this!

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