Love Hurts

by pieckaboo

Summary

Eren and Mikasa are high school sweethearts set to embark on their first year at college. The only drawback? Aside from attending different schools, they're both introduced to potential love interests looking to claim them as their own. Eren becomes drawn to the stoic Annie, while Levi pursues Mikasa, convinced they were made for each other.
"Can you believe it? We're finally done with high school!"

Eren Jaeger and Mikasa Ackerman had just finished walking at their graduation ceremony, along with several other classmates, and were now celebrating beside them with the impulsive (but extremely necessary) toss of their caps in the air. Being able to physically hold their diplomas felt so rewarding; regardless if the achievement was a trivial one. After four years of being confined to the two story building that had more in common with a prison than an actual school, Eren and Mikasa were looking forward to the what future held. More importantly, they were looking forward to see what the future had in store for their relationship. They had dated all four years in high school, and as the years flew by, it seemed as though they were falling in love more and more every day.

Eren smiled and lightly grazed Mikasa's cheek with his lips. "Are you going to Sasha's grad party later tonight?" He held her firmly in his arms and fought the urge to cover her entire face with kisses, knowing there were families (and possibly their parents) around.

Mikasa nodded. "Yeah, but I might be a little late. My grandmother is visiting from out of town and my parents insist that I stay home for a bit after this."

"I could give you a ride if you want. I don't mind waiting up." Eren offered.

Mikasa shook her head. "Don't worry about me." Then with an impish wink she added, "That'll give you time to catch up with everyone without me getting in the way."

From a distance, the two lovebirds heard her parents calling. "Mikasa! Ready to head home?"

The ravenette heaved a sigh. "Coming!" She turned back to Eren and kissed him goodbye. "See you tonight."

Eren watched as she walked away, admiring the pep in her step. "See ya."

Later that evening, a small group of freshly graduated teenagers were gathered around a makeshift bonfire in Sasha's backyard. Amid the casual conversation and inappropriate jokes, they were messing around with graham crackers and marshmallows, preparing to make smores.
"Guys!" Connie cried aloud. "We graduated only to go back to school again!"

"Don't remind me," Jean groaned, face-palming himself in despair.

"Speaking of which," Sasha interjected, "Where are you guys going?" She reached into her snack bag and grabbed several Hersheys chocolate bars.

"University of Trost!" Mina Carolina replied proudly. "My mom graduated from their nursing program."

Sasha began passing around the chocolates. "Hey, that's where I'm going!" She enthused.

Sitting next to Armin, as usual, Eren loosened his shoulders and joined in on the exchange. "Mikasa is going there, too."

"What about you, Eren?" Sasha teased. "Did you lovers plan on attending the same college?"

Eren sighed, suddenly feeling despondent. "No, I'm actually going to Stohess University."

The girls in the group gasped, while Jean and Connie began chuckling.

"Could this be the end for our favorite high school sweethearts?" Jean jested.

"That's not cool, man," Marco said in a somewhat serious tone, adhering to the 'Golden Rule.'

Eren fidgeted nervously, hoping the subject would change, but he knew his friends wouldn't get off his back about it. "Well, she got a scholarship to play tennis over there. It was too good an opportunity to pass up. I wouldn't have wanted to hold her back. And the coaches at Stohess had been eyeing my pole-vaulting abilities since I was a sophomore." He finished making a sloppy rendition of smores, and took a hearty bite.

"Eren and his pole-vaulting skills, man!" Marco enthused in a nostalgic tone. "You were amazing at the State championships!" The entire group nodded in agreement, remembering back to the day when Eren killed his competition and cleared 17 feet.

"Yeah, we love the way you work that pole, Eren!" Connie cackled, howling like a hyena. The group burst into laughter as Eren rolled his eyes dismissively. He'd heard that joke way too many times already.

"You set the school record!" Armin's eyes widened. "I don't think anyone will even come close for years!"

"Thanks, Armin." Eren smiled. "But you never know I guess."

The squad had been so enthralled and invested in their chit-chat and reminiscing in the good ol' days, they didn't even notice that Mikasa had entered the backyard and was looking for a place to set aside her jacket and purse.

"Hey, guys!" She greeted them cordially and settled on placing her belongings by a couple of lawn chairs.

"Mikasa!" Sasha ran over and nearly tackled her with a giant hug. "We're making smores." She handed her some marshmallow roasting sticks and implored her to sit with them. "Come, come."

"Okay." Mikasa positioned herself in between Eren and Armin and reached for some graham crackers.
As the night went on, Eren couldn't help but think about what Jean had said earlier. Sure, he was joking, but the words stuck. It's not like he hadn't thought about it before, if anything he avoided the possibility that he and Mikasa would struggle with a long distance relationship. He felt guilty for not verbalizing his concerns with her, but figured he didn't need to dwell on it. He turned and looked at her, silently admiring her features. Beautiful raven hair. Smooth lips. Steel grey eyes.

In that moment, Eren decided he would enjoy the now, and put off worrying about the future later. The now was all that mattered.

End of summer

The first day of college was almost upon them.

Summer was nearing its end; the nights becoming cooler, the trees slowly beginning to transition to autumn with every fallen leaf.

Eren and Mikasa sat on the rooftop of his house and watched as another summer sun set before them on the horizon. Mikasa pulled out a pen and small piece of paper, arousing Eren's curiosity.

She crossed something off and appeared relieved. "We did everything on the summer bucket list." She smiled, clearly proud of the accomplishment.

"What the?" Eren laughed. "You actually kept track of that stuff?" He wouldn't say it aloud, but he had to admit her dedication was adorable. "Let me see."

Mikasa withdrew her arm and shoved the piece of paper back in her pocket. "No way," She huffed. "It's something I'd like to hold onto for memories. Just for me."

"Fine," Eren relented. "Can you at least tell me what was on the list?" He playfully nudged her shoulder.

"Nope," she replied. "But maybe one day."

"Okay, sure, yeah," Eren muttered indifferently. "I bet I know some of the things that were on that list."

"Humor me," Mikasa scoffed.

"Make out with Eren."

"HA! Nice try!"

"Make out with Eren where there's a high risk of getting caught...?"

"Close enough."

"That's what I thought." Eren nodded his head and glanced over at Mikasa, now fully sprawled on what little space they had on the roof. "Don't fall, Mika," he joked.

"Would you be there to catch me?" she asked, her attention still fixated on the sky and the many colors glowing beyond.

Well... I mean... that's easily a twenty-foot drop, Mika...

"You know it," Eren answered instead, just as the sun had finally disappeared. The opportunity for
another makeout session had presented itself, but Eren fought the urge to give in. It just seemed too easy. He wondered though…

The silence between them felt uncharacteristically uncomfortable. This was going to be their last night together for who knows how long, so it made sense that he was feeling nervous, as if the circumstances obligated them... to take things further.

Eren realized that part of living in the now meant having no regrets. Acting impulsively, sure, but if he were to look back on it, he knew he would hate himself for holding back.

"Mikasa…" His voice trailed off as she turned to look at him.

"Yeah?" She sat up and waited for him to continue.

Eren thought carefully about what he was going to say. "It's getting dark. Maybe we should… head back into my room…"

Mikasa nodded but was still clueless. "Okay." She climbed back through the window and into Eren's bedroom.

Eren nearly psyched himself out. Get a hold of yourself, man!

After taking a brief moment to calm down, he came down from the roof and was surprised to see Mikasa casually lounging on his bed.

"Eren," she began, "I've been thinking… we've been together for four years... and it's our last night together before we go our separate ways…"

Eren quickly interrupted. "But, we're going to stay together, right? I know long-distance isn't the ideal situation, but we have to at least try. We can make this relationship work!"

Mikasa noted his desperation and softly added, "Of course! Eren, I'm not breaking up with up you! Calm down."

Eren deeply exhaled and sat next to her. "You had me worried for a sec."

Mikasa quickly returned to the point she was making. "Well, anyways, I was thinking that we've been together for a while and... I just want you to know that I think I'm ready to..." She hoped he was getting the message.

Eren's eyes lit up. He was elated that he and Mikasa were on the same page. Still, he wanted to give her a hard time, just for kicks. "Well, it's not like I hadn't offered before, ya know," he mocked with a smirk she found irresistible.

"Yeah, I know." She chuckled. "But, maybe I was waiting for the right moment. You ever think of that?" she countered, leaning closer.

"Sure…” he whispered, slowly closing the tiny gap between them. Now was his chance.

Mikasa was ready. He had been ready. Now was the time. Tonight was the night.

The night they would lose their virginities.

Before they were to start school at their respective universities. On his bed, in his room, in his childhood home. It all seemed so surreal. This is finally happening.
Before he could say another word, or make sure the door to his room was locked, Mikasa had leaned in and gently pressed her lips against his. Though they had locked lips plenty of times before, this time felt different; a certain intensity driving them towards this newfound escalation. Eren briefly pulled away and gently kissed the top of her shoulder, beginning a trail leading up to her neck. He steadily moved his hands from her waist to the front of her blouse. As he slowly unbuttoned from the top down, he continued kissing her, planting sweet pecks along her neck. With her bare chest now in full view, her bra exposed with the removal of her top, she leaned up to place a tender kiss against the side of his jaw, moving them along until she was only a breath away from his lips. Having had enough of her teasing, Eren cupped her face with his hands and began kissing her in earnest. His body hummed violently with electricity amid the anticipation of making love with her for the first time. He roughly removed his shirt, as Mikasa began working on removing his trousers. Hardly any articles of clothing were separating them now, as Eren positioned himself on top of her, gently laying her down.

Eren didn't make any further advances until Mikasa had given him her approval.

"You sure you want to keep going?" he asked tentatively.

Mikasa nodded. "Yes."

That was all Eren needed.
Strange Encounters

First Day Fall Quarter – Stohess University

The alarm clock mercilessly buzzed the same horrific tune over and over again, until a lethargic Eren slumped over from his bed and slammed his palm on the snooze button.

His roommate, a taller guy by the name Reiner, was still snoring away, unbothered by the incessant noise. Thank god the guy was a heavy sleeper.

Eren stretched and yawned as he lifted himself upright. The day marked the first day of the fall quarter, and he was ready to officially begin what was supposed to be the best years of his life.

*But first…* He thought. *I should text Mika.*

He reached for his phone, unplugged it from its charger, and began composing a sweet, simple text.

**7:31am – Eren:** Good morning!

Eren waited for her response as he began dressing. The dull mirror in the room offered little solace; he wanted to make sure he looked decent for the first day of classes. Grey vans. Relaxed fit jeans. Navy blue bomber jacket. Casual and neatly styled. All he had left to do now was style his dark brown hair and he could move on to gathering his textbooks. While messing around with his locks, his phone vibrated, indicating Mikasa had replied.

**7:47am – Mikasa:** Good morning! Early start for you, huh?

**7:47am – Eren:** Yeahhh. Not sure if I'm gonna get used to this…

**7:49am – Mikasa:** What time is your first class?

**7:50am – Eren:** 9am. 8am seemed way too early! My last class gets out at noon, except for Tuesdays and Thursdays when I have lab. Do you have tennis practice today?

**7:51am – Mikasa:** Your schedule is a lot like mine. Interesting how that works... And yeah, today marks the first day of tennis practice! Hopefully the coach doesn't give me a hard time about not showing up to the summer training camp! Which would be crazy because the season doesn't start until the spring.

**7:51am – Eren:** Family vacations to Disneyland FTW! Haha!

**7:52am – Mikasa:** Technically, it was DisneyWorld but same thing, right?

**7:53am – Eren:** Sure... Well Mika, I should probably start making my way to the dining hall and get cereal or something. I can tell it's gonna be a long day. I'll text ya later! ;)

**7:55am – Mikasa:** All right! Wish me luck at practice

At the conclusion of their exchange, Eren slipped his phone into his pocket and swung his backpack over his shoulder. His roommate, Reiner, was still asleep.

*Should I… say something… or… not?* Eren contemplated, hesitantly tip-toeing out the room. He chose the latter.
As he made his way to the elevator, several guys were waiting in an awkward line for the showers. Armed with towels and shampoos in hand, each were tapping their foot and obviously stressed about time.

*Thank god I showered last night!*

Living in an all-male dorm was certainly going to be an eye-opener.

Eren stepped inside the elevator and pressed the button with a giant letter "L," for lobby. Situated on the fourth floor of a five story building might prove to be a hassle in the future, but Eren wasn't going to sweat the small stuff. His grumbling stomach reminded him there were far more important things to worry about.

The top two floors, fourth and fifth, were all-male dormitories. The second and third floors were all-female. And the first floor was co-ed, aka the "fun floor."

Eren had heard rumors back in high school about kids in college having sex like rabbits. Partying and having a good time was the point, right?

Wrong. Eren could already hear his mother lecturing him about the importance of studying hard and focusing on academics. His father would also remind him that he needed to keep up with his Pole Vault training. After all, his athletic scholarship depended on it. Although the indoor season wasn't going to start until the winter, and the outdoor season until the spring, the track and field coaches had set up regular meetings and training sessions for the athletes during the off-season at the university's gym and indoor facility.

Eren was encouraged to participate in said sessions beginning next week, something he was very much looking forward to.

Upon entering the dining hall, Eren initially thought he mistakenly entered the set for *The Walking Dead*. All around him were sleep-deprived zombies, some still in their pajamas, others downing all the caffeine they could handle. He looked around to be sure Daryl or Rick weren't going to suddenly appear and start slaying everyone.

After fixing a small cup of coffee and finishing a bowl of cheerios, Eren pulled out his class schedule and campus map. All of his classes were within walking distance; no need to take to the CyRide, or campus bus system.

His schedule for the quarter was reasonable.

9am – English 101

10am – Calculus 205

11am – Biology 210

Biology 210 Lab – Tuesdays and Thursday from 12pm to 2:30pm

Eren briefly glanced at his watch.

8:42am.

9:00am *English 101* only a ten-minute walk away.

Eren internally applauded himself for his time-management skills.
Following a steady paved path to his first class, Eren reveled in the fresh air and gentle breeze. He also couldn't help but notice the sudden plethora of females. Having been surrounded by mostly dudes the past couple days, it was refreshing to see the fairer sex strolling along, clad in skirts and floral prints in tandem with the pleasant weather.

In that moment, he was hit with irrepressible sadness; disheartened in knowing that Mikasa wouldn't be there to walk with him to his classes or meet up for lunch.

He really missed her- and it was only the first day.

Distance sucks.

With about a few minutes to spare, Eren had arrived to English 101.

Several other students were seated already, still waiting on the professor. Eren was grateful the class size was smaller; consisting of about thirty students altogether. His other classes were ranging from 100 to 200 in giant lecture halls, with the exception of his Bio Lab, of course.

The small class setting could allow for him to get to meet new people and make new friends. If only they would get off their phones and stop messing around with their laptops.

Eren studied the room and then settled on a seat near the front of the room. Not even a minute later, he was graced with the presence of a new face.

"Can't stand sitting in the back either, huh?" The voice caught him off guard. Its feminine flair had a uniquely dark and mysterious appeal to it. Eren turned to face the source of his newly admitted company and was only further intrigued.

"Not so much," he chuckled nervously, taken aback by her distinct features. "Sitting in the middle feels odd, too."

The stranger nodded and then introduced herself. "I'm Ymir, by the way. Ymir Eriksson." She extended her hand and offered a cordial greeting, to which Eren accepted almost instantly. Her eyes were golden brown, her dark brown hair was parted down the middle and then tied into a low ponytail, and there were tiny freckles scattered along her cheeks. Her laid-back style appeared a bit more casual, sporty, or even bordering on the gender-neutral vibes.

Eren was happy to make her acquaintance, realizing his social life could use a boost; attending a new school and all. "I'm Eren. Eren Jaeger." He quickly surveyed the room, and felt awkward that they were the only two in the room speaking aloud. "Seems… quiet in here…" He muttered, adjusting his collar.

"They're all probably texting or playing Pokemon Go." Ymir scoffed. She suddenly changed her tone, having remembered something out of the blue. "Wait a minute! You're Eren Jaeger? The Eren Jaeger?"

Eren was confused. Had they met before or something? "Uhhh, yeah."

Ymir slowly nodded, as if she had solved the world's greatest mystery. In actuality, she had heard of Eren before. And now she was face to face with him. "You're the pole vault state champ right? From Shiganshina High School?"

Eren nodded, slightly flattered, slightly embarrassed. "Yup. Were you, uh, in track, too?"

Ymir shook her head. "Nahhh. Volleyball is my sport! I played varsity all four years back in St.
Maria High School. Got a scholarship to play here sooooo here I am!" She smiled proudly and then continued. "I've heard about you from my cousin. He placed third in the state championship and told me that you were just… unstoppable."

Eren thought her last name sounded familiar. "So your cousin is Jason Eriksson from St. Maria, huh?" Eren remembered how big the guy's ego was. Jason liked to talk trash, and that alone was enough for Eren to want to kick his ass. He settled on beating him at the state championships, knowing it would shut him up for good. "He's uhhh… got quite the school spirit." Was all Eren could muster, wanting to be as polite as possible.

Ymir let out a hearty laugh. "You don't have to be nice. Jason's a dick! Always has been!"

Eren felt more comfortable, but decided to wait until he knew for sure Ymir wasn't sent by Jason to spy on him. "Does he go here, too?"

"No, he got a scholarship out of state. Sina University, I think."

Thank god! Eren thought, sighing in relief.

The time was 9:03am when the professor, Mr. Ian Dietrich, busted through the door in a clumsy manner.

"Sorry for being late," he stammered. He cleared his throat and made a quick announcement. "Today is the only day I'll do roll call. After that, you can show up whenever you feel like it. Attendance is not a part of your grade, but just know that we'll be learning vital information in class, and it's not my fault if you miss it. Your final grade is all up to how much effort you put into it. We're all adults here, right?" The class nodded in agreement. "Good. Now let's get started."

As Dietrich peered down the list of names, he came across a few that remained silent when he called for their response.

"Eren Jaeger."

Eren raised his hand.

"Thank you…" Mr. Dietrich put a check next to his name.

As Dietrich neared the end of the list, the door to the room opened, revealing a now twelve-minute late student with a less than enthused look on her face.

"Name?" Mr. Dietrich inquired.

"Leonhart."

"Annie Leonhart… Thank you." He put a check next to her name.

"Slacker," Ymir whispered in disdain. "Always shows up late to practice, too."

As Annie sat in an unclaimed seat in the back row, Eren caught a quick glimpse of the stoic blonde. Her golden locks were pulled back, allowing for full view of the cerulean shades in her eyes, her roman nose, and disinterested expression. There was something about her that had Eren… curious.

It was hard finding the right word to accurately describe how he felt in that moment, but for the first time in a while, Eren felt his heart skip a beat.
Ymir noticed his googly-eyed gaze and joked, "I've always had a thing for blondes, myself." Eren was still studying Annie from the distance as Ymir continued. "I can see that you do, too." With that, Eren snapped out of it and played innocent.

"What? What do you mean?" He faced forward and pretended to focus his attention on the board in front.

"Nothing, I guess." Ymir sighed and, along with the rest of the class, waited for Mr. Dietrich to hand out the class syllabus.

After class had ended, Ymir made a declaration.

"You and me. English 101 study buddies. Is that understood?" She demanded as they headed out of the room. Eren hadn't realized how tall she was until now. Her height was probably an advantage when engaging in fierce volleyball matches.

"Sounds good to me," Eren agreed, nodding his head. "What's your next class?"

"Poly Sci." She grinned. "And then, Human Sexuality! I can't wait for that class!"

Eren was a tad jealous. "I have Calculus next." He low-key wanted to shoot himself.

"Ewww." Ymir offered her condolences. "Well good luck, Eren. I'll see you in class tomorrow."

Eren waved goodbye as Ymir jetted off towards her next class. As he continued along to math, he noticed a petite figure ahead of him.

Annie Leonhart.

He wondered where she was headed. Wouldn't hurt to ask and engage in friendly conversation, right? It was the first day and everyone was just starting to get in the groove of things.

What's the worst that could happen?

Eren walked up alongside her, greeting her amicably. "Hey! Annie, right?"

She turned her head to his direction and their eyes met. All she did in response was nod, the same nonchalant look on her face.

"We have English together..." Eren drawled, hoping he didn't seem intrusive. "I'm Eren."

She nodded once more, remaining quiet as they walked along towards the mathematics building.

"Sooo..." Eren continued. "What's your next class."

Annie let out a small yawn. "Calculus."

"With Professor Hannes?"

"Yeah," she replied blankly.

Eren's interest was piqued. We have the same English and math class!

"You could... sit with me," Eren offered, hoping that she couldn't notice the slight red tint of his cheeks. "If you want. You don't have to..."
"Okay," she interjected.

Eren was relieved. "Okay... cool!"

Once they reached the room, conveniently with a few minutes to spare, Eren held the door open for the petite blonde, hoping she wouldn't chastise him for the well-meaning gesture by insisting she was capable of doing it on her own.

To his relief, she merely looked at him and said, "Thanks."

Following right behind her, Eren watched as Annie sauntered inside and sat, once again, in the back row.

Eren hated sitting in the back, but decided this time around he could tolerate it.

After all, the opportunity to make a new friend had presented itself; in the form of a mysterious, quiet blonde.
One week before Fall Quarter – University of Trost

7:53am – Eren: Sure... Well Mika, I should probably start making my way to the dining hall and get cereal or something. I can tell it's gonna be a long day. I'll text ya later! ;)

7:55am – Mikasa: All right! Wish me luck at practice

Mikasa set her phone aside on the small wooden nightstand in her dorm room.

Too early to get up… She thought.

It had been a few days since she and Eren had seen each other. She hoped his first day at Stohess U would go well.

I'll text him later. After tennis practice.

After pulling the covers over her head and readjusting her pillow, she closed her eyes and went back to sleep.

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University of Trost - East Training Facility

University of Trost had two training facilities. The East Facility, where most of the Spring and Winter sports athletes trained, and the West Facility, strictly for the use of athletes participating in Fall sports.

The time was 3:55pm. Mikasa had precisely five more minutes to get to practice.

Upon entering the girl's locker room, she was greeted by several teammates.

"Hey! Mikasa, right?" A girl with long, curly red hair instantly rose from a bench nearby and offered a genuine, wide smile. "I'm Sarah."

"Nice to meet you," Mikasa said, returning the smile.

An upperclassman with short, light blonde hair and glasses approached Mikasa from behind.

"Hi, Mikasa." She placed her hand on her shoulder. "I'm Rico Brzenska. Captain of the girl's tennis team." The two shook hands. Shortly afterward, Rico urged the team to assemble together. "All right so here's the plan for today. We'll do some basic drills outside and then run a few laps. We won't do anything too crazy for the first day, so just relax and enjoy it while you can."

The team headed outside to the tennis courts and gathered in a circular formation. They began a series of stretches and chatted among themselves. Some of them were already familiar with each other, having trained together for at least a year or more, and took the time to break the ice with the new recruits. Mikasa accepted that she would essentially be starting from the bottom, but vowed to climb through the ranks and earn a spot in the top three.

The weather proved to be unseasonably muggy, the sun scorching the earth and the UV index rather high. A light breeze flowed gently, caressing the long black tresses Mikasa had pulled back into a high ponytail.
"I should really cut my hair," she groaned.

"I think you should leave it the way it is," a teammate commented supportively. "It's gorgeous!"

Mikasa half-smiled and continued stretching. "Thanks."

Unbeknownst to the ladies, several prominent members of the men's tennis team walked out of the men's locker rooms and onto the adjacent tennis court. Separated by nothing more than a chain link fence, they were given full view of the girls, still invested in their warm ups.

"Hey, check out Rico!" One of the upperclassman jeered amid his teammates. "Finally made captain, and now she thinks she's hot shit."

"Damn! The girls are lookin' good this year!" Another remarked enthusiastically.

The squad continued gawking at the unsuspecting ladies, until the captain of the men's team showed up.

"What the hell are you guys staring at?" He asked impatiently.

"Levi!"

"Hey, Levi…"

"Levi, we were just…"

The raven-haired athlete wasn't in the mood for his teammates' bickering.

"Enough," Levi interjected, pulling out a few rackets. "Let's get started."

His doubles partner, and close friend, Furlan approached him after the nets had been set up. "You feel as bad as you look?" He joked.

Levi dismissed the remark, but finally relented after several unsuccessful attempts at evasiveness. "Petra and I are... taking a break. We had an argument last night." He shook his head, eyes filled with regret. "I think we both just need time away from each other."

Furlan let out a deep breath. After brief hesitation, he chose to voice his opinion on the matter. "You gotta move on, man." Levi didn't react the way he thought he would, so he continued. "Aren't you getting tired of the same old thing? You two fight and then make up. Fight some more and then make up again..." Just thinking about it was exhausting enough. "There's plenty other girls out there." He pointed in the direction of the girl's team. Having finished their stretches, the girls had moved on to push-ups and sit-ups. Furlan suddenly hatched an idea. "What about Rico? She's had a thing for you since we were freshman. If you asked her out, you'd practically be doing her a favor."

Levi paused and fixated his gaze on what Furlan assumed was Rico.

However, he was wrong in that assumption.

Up ahead was a girl unlike anyone Levi had ever seen. He watched as she moved about and demonstrated her athleticism alongside her teammates. For a brief moment, he was mesmerized.

Jet black hair. Steel grey eyes. Pale complexion. Tall and lean.

Her existence was enough to convince Levi that there really was a god after all. A gorgeous specimen like that could only be the product of creation; specifically designed for others to appreciate
and write beautiful music for.

Furlan was confused by Levi's sudden silence. "Uh, Levi... you don't have to make up your mind right now. It's just something to think about."

Levi snapped out of his awkward trance. "I know." He turned to address the rest of his teammates. "Guys, quit fooling around!"

Furlan, noting Levi's vexation, sought to cheer him up a bit, disregarding the flaws in his half-assed and spur-of-the-moment plan. "Let's go introduce ourselves to the ladies." He announced, the suggestion thoroughly perplexing Levi.

At that, the rest of the men's squad didn't hesitate for a second.

"Sure!"

"Hell yeah!"

"Okay!"

"It's not like we're being productive anyway," Furlan muttered to Levi, encouraging him to follow suit and head on to the adjacent court. "Besides, it's just the proper gentlemanly thing to do. Casual meet and greet with our female counterparts."

Though convinced the whole thing was pointless (mainly an excuse to slack off), Levi reluctantly agreed, too exhausted from the previous night's arguments with Petra to make any sort of attempt at resistance.

What a waste of time... He thought disdainfully.

From the girls' perspective, the sudden onslaught of testosterone walking over to their side of the court caught them completely off guard.

"Dammit!" One gal muttered in anguish. "I look awful right now!"

"Same," another lamented. "I'm all sweaty!"

Rico smirked, surprised by their unexpected arrival. "So, Levi. You and your boys finally decided to say 'hello,' huh?"

"It would be impolite otherwise," Furlan replied in his place.

As several members of both teams mingled about, Mikasa suddenly found herself face to face with the captain of the men's team. Rico was introducing them, unaware that neither raven-haired individual had expected being randomly thrust into quite the unconventional meet-and-greet.

Levi found his interest piqued anyway. The freshman before him was even more stunning up close.

"Levi, this is one of our new recruits, Mikasa. She graduated from Shiganshina High School." Rico then turned to Mikasa. "Don't let his height fool you. He's probably the best tennis player in UT history."

Levi raised an eyebrow. "Thanks for that, Rico." Turning his attention towards Mikasa, he offered a bland, but well-meaning, "Nice to meet you."

Mikasa nodded in return. "Likewise." A faint blush rose to her cheeks, unsure where the arousal of
intrigue was coming from.

There was something about him that ignited a spark within her carefully guarded demeanor.

Rico quickly picked up on whatever was brewing between them and rolled her eyes. "Okay then…" She walked away, leaving them alone in their starry-eyed gazes.

Mikasa gave him a polite smile, curiosity ridden beneath her friendly expression. Before she could open her mouth to say anything, Levi spoke.

"So you're a freshman, from Shiganshina?" He inquired casually. "What made you try out for UT's program?"

"I didn't try out," Mikasa replied. "The coaches contacted me directly my junior year in high school."

Levi held steady eye-contact and then commended her. "Impressive."

The first day of practice had concluded.

Mikasa was dying for a cold shower, wanting to rid herself of all the sweat and grime that resulted from both strenuous exercise and exposure to the intense heat.

Before heading into the women's locker room, she turned her head one last time to see if Levi was still out on the court. Sure enough, he was, and her sneak peek hadn't gone unnoticed.

Their eyes met once again, causing Mikasa to internally panic. She quickly looked away and headed for the safety of the locker room, brushing off her over-analytical contemplation.

A smirk formed at the corner of Levi's mouth.

It wasn't unusual for Levi to catch someone's eye.

But… this time was different.

For someone to catch his eye?

It was an exceptionally rare feat.

What exactly had brewed between them earlier? Something along the lines of... attraction?

Or had anything even transpired at all?

Levi momentarily thought back to Furlan's lecture on there being 'other fish in the sea;' initially unconvinced the cliche adage applied to his circumstances.

After having had the privilege of being introduced to Mikasa, however, he was finally able to make sense of it.

And so begins the chase...
Fall Quarter – Stohess University

About a month into his studies, Eren felt comfortable with his routine.

Wake up. Go to class. Go to practice. Study. Go to sleep.

Repeat.

It was a Thursday. The time was just after 2:45pm. With all of his classes out of the way, including Bio Lab, Eren had a couple hours to spare before pole vault training.

Normally he would go to the library and study, but the weather was warm and inviting. It would be tragically wasteful to spend most of the day indoors. He settled on reading his Bio lecture notes on a bench outside by the College of Liberal Arts building.

A few minutes later, he felt a buzz in his pocket.

Someone was calling him.

_Probably Mom again…_ he thought.

When he pulled out his phone, he was surprised (but glad) to see it was his girlfriend instead.

He answered after the fourth ring. "Hey, Mika. What's up?"

"Hey Eren," came Mikasa's joyful greeting. "Are you busy tomorrow night?"

Tomorrow. Friday. Friday night. Eren was never busy Friday nights. At least, not after training anyway.

"No. I don't have any plans," Eren replied.

"Okay, well Connie and Sasha were wondering if we all wanted to get together and hang out." She smiled fondly before continuing. "That and… I haven't seen you in a while."

Eren chuckled. "Yeah, I know." He put away his lecture notes and shuffled through his backpack. "Where were you guys thinking about going?"

"They want to go to the All-Star." Mikasa sighed, a tiny hint of regret in her voice.

Eren rolled his eyes and then laughed. "Seriously? That place?"

The All-Star was a sports bar in the U-District. Eren and Mikasa had snuck in a few times their senior year after getting fake IDs from a mutual friend. They invited Armin to join them on a couple occasions, but he was too paranoid about getting caught and losing his scholarship.
Mikasa found herself just as amused as Eren, and now, just as nostalgic as well. "Connie's going to use his older brother's ID, because they could basically pass for twins. And Sasha finally got a fake ID, so she's ready to go."

"Awesome." Eren leaned back into the bench. "So... are they like... together now... or...?"

"I don't know," Mikasa answered quizzically. "They should at least give it a shot. They'd be good for each other."

"Could've sworn there was something going on between them back in high school," Eren mumbled. "Maybe they're just really close."

"I guess we'll find out," Mikasa said, feigning a dramatic tone. "Well I gotta get ready for practice soon but I'll see you tomorrow, Eren."

"Okay. Bye, Mika."

"Bye."

Coach Shadis was a hard-ass.

Eren respected his coach regardless of his cold and intimidating demeanor, but the day's training had been mercilessly rigorous and intense.

There were only two other pole vaulters at the school. A fellow man, Thomas Wagnar, and a female teammate, Ilse Langnar. Nonetheless, Stohess University was known for having the best Track and Field athletes in the state, so Eren wasn't worried about the small roster.

After finishing practice, the trio took a breather and concluded with a few stretches; the occasional inappropriate joke or tasteless 'pole vault' humor weaseling their way into the conversation.

Eren felt a strain on the lower part of his left calf muscle. "Damn." He winced. *I hope it's not shin splints or some other bullshit.*

Ilse offered her input while in mid-stretch. "You know, Eren, you should probably get that checked out if it's really starting to bother you."

"The athletic trainers are just past the locker rooms," Thomas informed him, pointing towards the south end of the facility.

"You're right." Eren nodded. "I'm gonna go see what they recommend. See ya tomorrow." He waved goodbye to his teammates and walked off.

En route to his destination, he noticed other athletes were finishing up their training as well. Several football players were storming the weight room. The golf team had just returned from the green, their golf bags and clubs in tow.

Eren then passed by what appeared to be the volleyball team. He figured it had to have been them because Ymir was huddled in a group of about ten other girls. While in mid-stride, she turned around and saw him.

"Eren!" she called out, imploring him to "come hither."

Eren sauntered onto the court, unfazed by the wave of muffled giggles emitting from Ymir's teammates. "Hey, Ymir. You just get done with practice?"
"Yeah, today was killer!" She sighed, seemingly relieved it was all over. "But the good news is the coach said I would be a starter this season!"

"Congrats!" Eren smiled. After they shared a high-five, he obliged his curiosity. "Are you the only freshman starter?"

Ymir shook her head. "No, there's another." Then, as she remembered something, a devious smirk formed at the corner of her mouth. "Actually, it's funny 'cause she's in our English class. Little blondie. You remember her, right?"

Annie.

Of course he remembered, he was just... surprised.

He also remembered that Ymir had referred to her as a 'slacker'.

For being a slacker, Annie must have been doing something right, especially if she was a starter her freshman year.

For the past month, Eren and Annie sat together in Calculus, though they remained silent most of the time. They would often share notes and work on problems in class. Truthfully, he didn't know much about her, but he still found himself slightly interested in learning more.

"Yeah, she's in my math class, too," Eren finally said.

"You have two classes with this chick and you're still not making a move, huh?" Ymir quipped.

"Well, I have a girlfriend…" Eren muttered.

"Yeah but she goes to a different school," Ymir remarked casually, rolling her eyes. "Long distance is too much work. I don't think I could ever put myself through that."

"When you meet the right person, you'll understand," Eren reasoned. "Mikasa is worth it."

"Sure." Ymir chuckled. "For now, I'm enjoying my freedom. I'm too young to be tied down."

"Fair enough."

Ymir briefly glanced at her watch. It was almost 7:00pm. Before she could say anything else, the captain of the volleyball team called for her attention.

"Hey! Eriksson! Quit messing around with your boyfriend and hit the showers!"

Eren tried desperately to hold back his laughter.

"What the hell?! What part of 'I'm gay' did you not understand?!" Ymir shot back, her voice echoing in the court's now empty, airy space.

"I knew it," Eren scoffed.

Ymir turned to face Eren one last time before heading for the locker room. "She's kind of a bitch, but whatever. I'll see you in class tomorrow."

"See ya."

Eren fixated his attention back to the task at hand.
Right... he thought, peering down at his leg. *Gotta see what I can do about this strain.*

Determined, he walked back into the hallway and finally approached the athletic training room. Upon entering, he was shocked to see a rather familiar face sitting up on a massage table.

Blonde hair pulled back. Blue eyes gazing off in another direction. An astonishingly toned and well-developed frame for someone of petite stature.

Annie hadn't even noticed Eren's sudden arrival. Her attention was engrossed elsewhere.

Her knee was bandaged up, but it didn't seem as though the injury was a serious one.

"Bertolt," Eren heard her say, "I'm fine. You've done enough, really."

"Are you sure, Annie?" Bertolt was tall, brunette, and a bit awkward. He seemed warmly approachable in spite of his much taller frame. "I made you an ice pack, just in case." He handed the pack to her and watched as she applied it to the area in question.

"It should be fine in a day or two," Annie replied. Eren then immediately noticed something. A slight curve had formed at the corner of her lips. If one were to blink, they'd completely miss it, but there was no mistaking it. Annie had *smiled.*

It seemed so out of place; totally out of character for her. He'd grown used to the same bland, bored expression on her face. Eren's cheeks turned slightly pink.

She was even more beautiful when she smiled.

In an instant, Annie hopped down from her seated position, snapping Eren out of his trance.

"I'm going to head out." She pulled her blonde tresses behind her ear. "Thanks, Bertolt."

Eren, still watching from his place by the door, realized Annie would be walking his way and quickly tried to fix his hair. He was caught off guard when Annie stopped and looked him in the eye.

"Hey, Eren." She acknowledged him politely before exiting the room. Eren nodded and smiled nervously, trying to keep it cool.

He deeply exhaled after she was gone. *Dammit.*

"Hey, man." Bertolt's voice was gentle for a guy with such an impressive height. "What brings you in?"

Eren pointed towards his left calf. "I think I might have strained something down here."

Bertolt tilted his head, possibly thinking of what to do next. "Sit up here for me." He motioned towards the massage table.

"Sure." Eren sat himself on the table and stretched out both legs. He tried to remain focused on the issue at hand, but he kept replaying the last five minutes over and over.

Bertolt was the first to break the silence. "So you know Annie?" he asked while preparing some bandaging material.

Eren's face turned bright red. What a conversation starter. "Umm, yeah." He finally managed to force out more than two words of pathetic stuttering. "We have a couple classes together."
"I see," Bertolt said, now adjusting the material around Eren's calf. "Is that too tight? Too loose?"

"Neither," Eren replied, shaking his head. "Just right."

"I'm still kind of new to this," Bertolt admitted. "This is my second year in the program. The first year was mostly lecture and observing our instructor's practices and methods. Now I've finally moved on to the exciting stuff."

Eren was intent on keeping the conversation going, but in the direction of his curiosity. It helped to make the whole setting less awkward anyway. "I take it you and Annie are pretty familiar with each other."

"Oh yeah," Bertolt replied. His eyes lit up, a pleasant expression etched on his face. "We've known each other for years. Our families are really close. Her mom and my mom have been friends since before we were born. I'm only a year older, and even so, we practically grew up together."

Eren remained silent as Bertolt briefly walked away to gather the necessary supplies for an ice pack. "That's a long time," was all he could muster in response to such a heavy revelation.

Bertolt returned with the pack in hand. "Apply this to the area for a couple hours. If it's still bothering you, just keep up with the RICE routine. Rest, ice, compression, elevation."

"Thanks." Eren accepted the pack along with the advice. He got up to leave and showed his appreciation with a nod of approval.

"See ya around. Maybe," Bertolt said as Eren walked out of the room.

On his walk back to the dorms, Eren wondered if Bertolt had feelings for Annie. He contemplated the possibility that the feeling may have been mutual, and if that were the case, were they just taking things slow and working towards a relationship?

He shook his head and dismissed his thoughts entirely.

*It's none of my business.*

Outside, the sun had set. The cool air ushered in a calm breeze that felt relaxing and eased the tension in his upper shoulders. A short walk of less than a mile would take him back to his temporary home.

He thought about Mikasa and how happy they were whenever they were together. It had been too long since their last reunion. Too long since he'd seen her smile; since they'd last embraced. He missed that.

Tomorrow night couldn't come soon enough.
Another tennis practice out of the way meant Mikasa was free for the rest of the evening.

Friday nights were exclusively reserved for catching up with friends and wallowing away in pity about how much homework and studying was to be done; all the while using crappy soap operas on TV as background noise. Then again, the occasional game of Monopoly or Cards against Humanity wasn't too bad and made for some serious entertainment.

Oh yeah. Going out was always fun, too.

Mikasa was constantly bombarded with frat boys vying for her attention, practically begging for her to go out and party with them. It kind of seemed fitting that their shenanigans and pathetic pleas took place during Human Sexuality.

Mikasa was more than disdainful of their desperation.

Oh well… she thought, accepting the circumstances.

The showers had been unusually warm, and thankfully just the right amount of pressure. Streaming down her body like a fountain of radiance, it relieved the tension in her muscles.

After her hair had been dried, she quickly gathered her belongings in a small pink duffle bag and headed out of the facility.

The street lights were on and several others were still out, most likely having finished their training.

Mikasa turned around a corner and followed a narrow paved path towards the university's dormitory division.

It wasn't long until she could hear what sounded like a couple arguing; about what was a mystery. Mikasa was unable to seek out the source of the noise until she looked up and ahead to her right.

Initially, she was startled, but thought the voice had sounded familiar. It was a fellow teammate of hers; a very distinguished member, in fact.

Mikasa stiffened momentarily before resuming her trajectory, wanting to move as quickly as possible without being noticed.

"Levi…" a short woman with light auburn hair groaned. "I just feel like you've been… distant."

Levi reciprocated the annoyed tone and impatient gestures spewing his direction with similar ambiguous accusations. "What do you want from me, Petra? I always make time for you. For us. That's the difference between you and I. I'm always there for you. But when I need you, you make me feel like I'm an inconvenience or as if I'm asking too much."

"That's not fair!" Petra shot back. "My job schedules me weird hours, my internship has me running around everywhere, and school is never understanding when it comes to my social life. I try my best to spend time with you, but I rarely ever have time for myself!"

"I work, too, Petra. I'm also a full-time student. I have tennis almost every day… but I still manage to
make time for my friends.” Levi shook his head, tired of their conversation going around in circles. "This isn't about the timing and fitting things into our schedules, it's about our priorities."

They were silent for a moment. Petra appeared both puzzled and irritated, and then finally spoke. "What are you saying?"

Levi let out a deep, exhausted breath. "Petra… I have to go to work soon. I really don't have time for this." He took a step back, knowing full well Petra would accuse him of avoiding her and trying to run away from the conversation.

After her highly predictable behavior had manifested itself before him, he walked off towards his apartment. Petra marched away in the opposite direction, desperately holding back frustrated tears. The separation was both literal and symbolic. Their two-year relationship was struggling to stand the test of time.

Mikasa felt guilty for listening in, but internally vowed that she and Eren would never end up like that.

"Hey, Mikasa! What are you getting all dolled up for?"

A curious girl with light brown hair stood up from a pink bean bag chair and welcomed Mikasa's return with a questionable smile and furrowing of the brows. Hannah Diamant was her roommate, study buddy, and occasional advisor when it came to relationships and the like.

They also shared a love for ice cream and gossip; a frequent affair they indulged in after finishing long hours of studying or acing an impossible exam.

The room was an orgy of evidence that two girls resided inside. On Hannah's side were innumerable amounts of stuffed animals from her boyfriend, Franz, as well as pink bedsheets, posters of flowers and elephants, and Mikasa's personal favorite, a pet fish she somehow managed to smuggle in named 'Duke'. On Mikasa's side, everything was neat and tidy. Posters of her favorite movies were in full view above her bed, her desk housed a nifty laptop and was ornately decorated with Japanese figurines from her mother, and neatly folded above her dresser was one of her most prized possessions; a red scarf from Eren.

"Going out with old high school friends," Mikasa replied while meticulously applying one last coat of mascara. "I finally get to see Eren tonight."

Hannah shot Mikasa a daring look. "There's nothing quite like I've missed you sex."

Mikasa rolled her eyes and put away the rest of her makeup, satisfied with its results. "I doubt we'll be getting crazy tonight."

"Well if you do…" Hannah continued, reaching for a small box containing fish food. "Just let me know and I'll leave the room." She walked over to Duke and gently tossed a few flakes into his little bowl.

"Thanks for the offer." Mikasa sighed. "But that won't be necessary." Her phone suddenly began its chirpy ringtone; the incessant barking of a puppy.

That meant Eren was calling her.

"You made your boyfriend's ringtone a puppy?" Hannah quipped.
"Yep," Mikasa remarked nonchalantly. *Because he's got the most adorable puppy-dog eyes.*

"You're so matter of fact about it," Hannah muttered in amusement.

Mikasa answered the call after briefly admiring Hannah's reaction. "Hey, Eren."

"Hey, Mika!" Hearing his voice felt so reassuring. "I think I'm at the right place. The grey building, right?"

"Yeah," Mikasa replied. "I'll meet you down there in a sec."

"Woah, woah, woah," Eren quickly interjected. "That wouldn't be a very gentlemanly thing for me to do. There's no way I'm making my lady walk all the way down here by herself."

"Ha! You're too funny," Mikasa deadpanned. "Good to know chivalry isn't dead."

"Seriously," Eren continued, ignoring her sarcasm. "I'll come up. Besides, I have a present for you."


"See you soon," Eren enthused.

Mikasa turned to her dresser and admired a framed picture nestled neatly above. Inside was a candid shot of her and Eren at Jean's grad party. Slightly embarrassing, but totally adorable, the two were entwined in each other's arms, laughing at a what she remembered was a poorly executed joke by Connie.

*What a Kodak moment…*

Not much time had passed before her thoughts were interrupted by a sudden knock.

"I got it!" Mikasa lunged forward and swiftly opened the door, revealing a handsome but not-so-smooth operator.

Eren was holding a bouquet of roses in one hand, while nervously hiding the other in his pocket. He marveled at how prim and proper she looked, eyes lighting up, completely smitten. "I swear I had prepared some cheesy pick-up line before you answered the door." He let out a nervous chuckle before handing her the rogishly dark flowers. *But… I got distracted…*

"They're beautiful," Mikasa said, setting them aside on her desk. "Thank you." She tugged on his shirt and pulled him in closer for a highly anticipated and long awaited kiss. "I missed you." When their lips parted, Eren caught a glimpse of Mikasa's roommate, pretending to read some book.

"Aaaaaand your roommate is here…" Eren gutted out. "Hi, I'm Eren."

"Oh, sorry!" Mikasa muttered. "Hannah, this is Eren. Eren, this is my roommate Hannah."

"Hi," was all Hannah could manage before laughing a few hearty beats.

"Let's go." Mikasa winked, turning back to Eren. "Connie and Sasha are waiting for us."

"All right." Eren nodded. "Nice to meet you, Hannah." He waved before the two exited the room.

"Have fun, you two!" Hannah called out right before the door had been shut.
"Can I see your IDs?" The bouncer at the All-Star was easily 6'6, possibly 200lbs. Definitely not to be messed with.

"Here." Eren handed the giant figure his fake ID.

"Thank you," he said, handing Eren back the overpowered piece of plastic.

Mikasa handed hers over, smiling and making full eye contact.

After studying the card for a moment, he handed it back to her and gave them both a nod of approval. "Have a good night."

Once they were inside, Eren slung his arm over Mikasa's shoulder and leaned in. "I can't believe we actually get away with every single time," he whispered. "You look like you're still in high school."

"Careful now," Mikasa whispered back. "Someone might hear you."

On the other side of the establishment were Connie and Sasha, looking a tad buzzed with what appeared to be a couple empty shot glasses nestled atop a tall round table.

"Starting without us?" Eren huffed.

"It's five o'clock, somewhere," Connie replied.

"But it's like 9:30…?" Sasha mumbled innocently, completely unfamiliar with the expression. Failing to register Connie's unimpressed gaze, she turned to face Mikasa. "Good to see you, Mika. How long has it been?"

"Like twelve hours." Mikasa shrugged. They were fortunate to have one class together, although it was an elective and rather boring.

"Eren!" Connie rose from his seat and greeted his old pal. "How've you been?"

"Doing all right," Eren responded, still amused that Connie was already feeling a buzz. Such a lightweight. "What about you?"

"Ahh man, so much is going on." He put his cap back on and turned it backwards. "Where do I even begin?!"

"Well start by telling them about your frat," Sasha remarked encouragingly, also feeling her buzz kick in.

"Wait, before we get into that," Connie intercepted, "Eren and Mikasa have to catch up." He motioned towards the bar and pointed at their shot glasses.

"Damn. Two shots," Mikasa said, feigning excitement. "I don't know how I'll be able to keep up."

"Okay we get it. Connie's a lightweight. Now hurry up, 'cause I have a lot I need to get off my chest!" Connie demanded, now regretting his decision to take shots with Sasha before their arrival.

Before Mikasa could get up, Eren quickly intervened. "I got it." He then made his way to the bar, brushing past a few wild enthusiasts shouting like idiots in their drunken stupors.

The place was crowded and reeked of bad decisions. The dance floor on the opposing side was full of sweaty patrons dry-humping and nearly knocking each other over. There were several TVs throughout the establishment, each showing highlights from various college football games.
While trudging his way through the crowd, Eren looked up at the screen and recognized his roommate, Reiner Braun.

Stohess University Football. Second String Wide Receiver. He had to fill in the last game because several others were injured, allowing for him to show off his skills and remarkable talent. The coaches were more than impressed with his athleticism and speed, fairly certain his future on the team was a promising one.

It took Eren a couple tries to get the bartender's attention. "Can I get two Jagerbombs?"

"Sure thing." The bartender appeared apathetic, possibly exhausted by all that was going on. He returned shortly with two shot glasses. "Keeping the tab open?" he asked after setting them on the counter.

Eren shook his head, deciding it would be best to close it. "Thanks."

After paying, he sauntered back to where his friends were sitting, and settled himself next to Mikasa.

"Here ya go." He said after gently placing the shot glass in her hand.

"Of course you went with Jagerbombs," Mikasa hummed, angling the shot glass to her lips before throwing it back. "Well, down the hatch, I guess." She took it like a true champ.

After following her lead, Eren made a face of disgust and partial regret. "That burns."

And yet you still give Connie a hard time… Mikasa thought, playfully nudging his shoulder.

"Okay, Connie." Eren clasped his hands together and leaned forward. "So you're doing the fraternity thing…"

"Right." Connie nodded. "Well, I'm still trying to figure out which one I should pledge to." He rubbed his chin and continued. "I thought I was gonna be an easy target for hazing and all that, but so far I've been keeping up!"

"Is that so?" Mikasa asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah, like this one time they had me and some other dudes in my PC do a pushup contest. Of course, your boy Connie here wasted everyone else and came out on top!"

"Seems pretty tame," Sasha drawled, reaching for the small bowl of peanuts nearby. "I doubt that's the worst of it."

Connie sighed. "There's definitely been ups and downs," he said regrettably. "In fact, the other night I was 'randomly selected' to give this chick a lap dance at a party. And… it didn't go very well…"

"I can only imagine," Eren said robotically, though he didn't exactly want to imagine. "What else?"

"They took us to some old farm and I had to catch a chicken in less than 30 seconds."

"Wait… farm… like private property?" Sasha nearly choked on her handful of peanuts.

"Probably." Connie shrugged. "I swear I still have scratches from those sharp talons. I thought it was gonna kill me!"

"I've certainly heard worse stories." Eren chuckled. "Your little ordeal doesn't seem so bad."

"I had to make out with a forty-year-old chick last week!" Connie blurted out in despair. "It was
awful!"
"Gross." Mikasa shuddered.

"Was that like… your first kiss or something?" Sasha probed mercilessly.

"Is that a serious question?!" Connie face palmed himself, trying desperately to forget the whole incident.

"At least you didn't have to go any further than that," Eren said, patting Connie on the back.

"I guess. But whatever, man. It's no big deal." Connie looked up, determination in his eyes. "I can do this!"

"Your parents would be so proud," Sasha tutted sarcastically.

The foursome kept the lively conversation going, each invested in what the other had to say. Mikasa couldn't help but feel dry, yearning for another shot. After all, it had been too long since she and her friends had caught up and spent time reminiscing in the good old days.

"I'll go get the next round," she offered, slowly easing up from her seat. "Four shots of…"

"Vodka!" Sasha quickly proposed, feigning her best Russian accent.

"As long as we don't take any shots of fireball or tequila, I'm game!" Connie said while lazily stretching and readjusting his cap.

"I'll be right back." Mikasa nodded and headed for the bar.

Eren watched as she disappeared behind the crowd, and then turned to face a rather attentive Connie and Sasha.

"So, Eren…" Sasha had the biggest shit-eating grin plastered on her face. "You and Mikasa seem to be all lovey-dovey as usual."

"She's drinking, so that means she's not pregnant," Connie blurted out.

Way to put two and two together, Sherlock, Eren thought, noting how Connie never usually was all that astute.

"Good to know you guys still have the same sense of humor," the green-eyed brunet mocked impishly.

"Playing nice and making friends over at Stohess?" Sasha pestered.

"My roommate is pretty cool, but we've only hung out a couple times. Our schedules are completely different so we don't see each other a whole lot," Eren stated casually. "There's this chick in my English class who I've hung out with a few times."

"Chick, huh?" Connie jeered. "You're a ho, Eren."

"She's so gay, Connie, she makes circles look straight."

"Oh…"

"Her cousin is Jason Eriksson from St. Maria High. You remember that asshole?"
"How could I forget?!" Connie exclaimed. "He kept trying to hit on Sasha when we came to cheer you on at the state championships."

"Pfftttt." Sasha rolled her eyes. "I'm way out of his league."

"Well, I think we can all agree that you're a catch," Eren pointed out, nudging his buzz-cut companion. "Right, Connie?"

Connie fidgeted uncomfortably in his seat. "Ummm… what…" he muttered, evading the question.

Sasha sighed. "Yet here I am… still single."

In another setting, Mikasa was missing out on all the hilarity. She pushed past a few drunken idiots, too wasted to stand on their own two feet, and squeezed in between a couple random patrons seated on stools. Shoulder to shoulder with strangers, she marveled at the display.

Grey goose was calling her name.

She briefly looked down at her phone, not realizing that the bartender was heading her way, presumably to tend to her request.

When she looked up, she was utterly shocked.

"Mikasa?"

The bartender was none other than Levi Ackerman.
Mikasa felt herself go limp, completely frozen where she stood, like a deer in a headlight.

In spite of this, she managed to remain calm and keep a level head. Pretending that she had nothing to hide was key. Playing innocent and working her charm on Levi would indicate she was desperate or was trying to take the easy way out; something she refused to partake in.

Slipping her phone back into her pocket, she held her chin up and looked him directly in the eye. "Hi Levi."

Levi skipped the small talk and went straight to the point. "What are you doing here?" At this point, he wasn't sure if he should applaud her for successfully sneaking in, or if he should scold her for giving in to such primal, and quite frankly *cliché*, college antics.

Either way, he was certain a law was being broken.

Faced with such a bold, but justifiable, question, Mikasa had two options.

1) Run away with her tail between her legs, while simultaneously dragging her friends out of the place to avoid being in serious trouble.

Or…

2) Own up to her actions and be honest with Levi, but spare him the details and remain as ambiguous as possible.

Never one to back down from a challenge, she chose the latter.

"I'm out with my friends." She replied casually. Her poker face was flawless.

Levi raised an eyebrow, unable to get a feel for what she was thinking.

There have been very few moments in Levi's life where he has found himself thoroughly unable to come up with a single thing to say.

Here and now, face to face with Mikasa, a minor who had somehow snuck into the bar where he worked, was one of those exceptionally rare moments.

Before he could even begin to contemplate his next move, Levi heard someone from behind call for his attention. Much to his surprise, it was his coworker.

"Levi, the boss wants a word." Gunther Schultz was fairly new to the job, but already quite popular with the regulars. He was a quick learner; a quality Levi was grateful for because his patience was wearing thin with the other newbies. "I'll cover for you in the meantime."

"Weren't you supposed to be off half an hour ago?" Levi asked, turning away from Mikasa.

"It's no big deal." Gunther replied. "Go ahead, I got this 'til you get back."
Levi hesitated for a moment, wondering if he should just forget the whole ordeal regarding the minor in the establishment. Then again, he didn’t want to keep his boss waiting. He looked over at Mikasa one last time, confused as to why she hadn’t run off.

"See you later, Mikasa." He said before walking away. The condescending tone in his voice left her feeling slightly guilty.

Mikasa watched wordlessly as he disappeared behind the bar and towards the back, entering an area labeled employees only.

"What can I get ya?" Gunther asked, clearly tired and ready to go home.

Mikasa couldn’t stop replaying the whole exchange that had just took place less than a minute ago. "Just four shots of Vodka…” She was still trying to process it all. "Grey Goose."

"Comin’ right up." Gunther quickly settled the shot glasses on the counter in front of her. After closing her tab, figuring that would be enough for the night, Mikasa walked back to her friends.

"Thanks."

Upon returning to the group, she looked back to make sure they were out of view from the bar. It didn’t seem like Levi was going to snitch or have someone kick them out, but she wanted to be sure. The place was crowded, the music was blaring, and it seemed like the staff was shorthanded. Mikasa convinced herself she had nothing to worry about, and carried on with the conversation, now taking a turn for the weird.

"Sasha, you're still a virgin?!” Connie boisterously shouted in disbelief.

Sasha groaned and finished another handful of peanuts. "Yes! I still have my V-Card!" She finally admitted.

"Nothing wrong with that." Eren reassured her. "Besides, I thought you were, too, Connie…?"

"…” Connie nervously fiddled around with his cap once more. "Maybe…”

"That's a 'yes.'" Sasha interjected, arms folded across her chest.

"Anyway…” Eren tried to steer the conversation to something more G rated, wanting to avoid talking about sex with his girlfriend present. "What are you guys majoring in again?"

"Undeclared!" Connie announced with nary a hint of shame or regret. "I'm taking a few classes here and there; odds and ends, mostly to get my pre-reqs out of the way. Still just trying to figure out what I want to do."

"I can see you majoring in something art-related." Sasha stated thoughtfully. "Graphic design. Architecture."

"Sounds tempting." Connie said while pondering the idea, rubbing his chin. "But I think I want to get into engineering. I've already looked into aerospace engineering and electrical engineering."

"There you go!" Eren nodded his head in approval. "Job security for sure."

"Damn right!" Connie chuckled.

"What about you, Sasha?" Eren asked, slowly wrapping his arm around Mikasa's waist.
"Decided on majoring in business." Sasha sighed. "I wanted to go to Culinary school but my dad was dead set on me going to his alma mater."

"UT is a great school." Eren reminded her.

"Yeah." Sasha agreed. "And I figured with my business degree I could open up my own restaurant or café one day!"

"Always looking on the bright side." Connie remarked. "You're so optimistic."

"I try to be, anyway." Sasha leaned in closer to Connie and rested her head on his shoulder, possibly more than just buzzed now. Connie didn't recoil from her sudden movement, leading Eren to believe he was drunk, too.

Unless of course, Connie was low-key enjoying Sasha's doting and cuddly behavior.

"I'm assuming you're majoring in something medical related?" Connie inquired, sneaking his arm around Sasha, trying to be as coy as possible. His bold move was a success!

Eren shook his head. "My dad really wants me to get into the medical field, but I have absolutely no interest whatsoever."

"Let me guess." Sasha smirked. "Fashion design!" Yeah. She was definitely drunk.

"Close." Eren deadpanned. "German."

"What the?" Connie was caught off guard. "What made you choose that major?"

"Well, my dad speaks it fluently, and I grew up around it, so I've learned a decent amount through family alone."

"You're not even taking any German classes this quarter." Sasha remembered.

"Not until next quarter." Eren replied. "When I first applied to SU, I hadn't officially declared a major, only because I was hesitant and didn't want my parents to try and talk me out of it."

"Understandable." Connie nodded.

"So what do you plan on doing with German?" Sasha probed.

Eren briefly looked away. He thought back to his childhood days when he and Armin would talk about going on adventures and exploring vast new lands. Although they had to be more realistic now that they were adults, Eren still held onto his dream, figuring his major could allow his to study abroad and immerse himself in other cultures.

"I want to travel." He finally said. "Maybe I could be an interpreter, or I could go the teaching route. I haven't really decided what career path I would take. All I know for sure is that I want to learn more about the language, the culture, the history, and apply it to everyday life. It hits close to home, if nothing else."

"Are you thinking about studying abroad?" Connie asked, moving even closer to Sasha.

"I have." Eren responded. "But I haven't talked to my parents about it yet." He fixed his attention to Mikasa, nestled cozily around his arm. "You've been kind of quiet this whole time. What's on your mind?"
Mikasa quickly shifted her gaze towards the bar.

*Levi…*

Though she couldn't admit that out loud.

With all the hustle and bustle going on, visibility was extremely limited, making it impossible to tell if Levi was still gone or if he had returned to his position.

Truthfully, it didn't matter either way.

"Nothing." Mikasa replied after a long, drawn out silence.

The clock struck twelve.

Midnight.

Unfortunately, there was no pumpkin coach waiting outside the bar for a fair maiden with reddish brown hair, stumbling around and clutching her stomach to avoid puking her guts out. This Friday night escapade was one fairy godmother short of being a cliché, romantic Disney princess movie.

Princess Sasha struggled to keep herself balanced, leaning against Prince Charmi… er… Connie in an effort to find her footing.

Eren's buzz had worn off. Mikasa was completely sobered up.

Two shots weren't enough for either of them to engage in outrageously embarrassing karaoke. Nor was it enough to get them in the mood for sweaty, grinding and gyrating on the dance floor with strangers who had no idea what rhythm was in their drunken states.

On the contrary, Connie and Sasha felt obligated to serenade the entire watering hole with their most heartfelt and powerfully moving performance of Rick Astley's *Never Gonna Give You Up*. After crooning their way into the hearts of every patron in the joint, Sasha booty bumped Connie out of her way to the dance floor, instantly catching the attention of several buffoons hoping to take her home for the night.

Connie followed suit and kept a watchful eye on her; ready to defend her honor if some asshole stepped out of line.

Every time a guy came within five feet of Sasha, he'd blurt out something unintelligible, like a growl or snarl, however more often than not the threat usually went something like: "Get your hands off my girl, or I'll kick your ass!"

Eren and Mikasa exchanged looks several times throughout the evening's festivities.

"They didn't drive here… right?" Mikasa asked, slightly amused, massively worried.

"Connie said they took the bus together." Eren smirked. "We should probably give them a ride back so they don't end up taking the wrong bus or getting mugged in the middle of nowhere."

"Good idea." Mikasa nodded.

The car ride home was anything but quiet.
Connie and Sasha were gracing Eren and Mikasa's ears with more drunken singing. Pop music ranging from Justin Bieber to The Weeknd were starting to take a toll on Eren, but he was willing to sacrifice his sanity for a few minutes so long as he got to hear Connie hit all sorts of ridiculous high notes and strange pitches.

They had finally reached the UT dorms just as a Taylor Swift song was about to play, thus ending the incessant crooning; or screeching, depending on who you ask.

"Guess this is my stop!" Sasha declared, recognizing the rows of brick buildings and what appeared to be a blue banner hanging at an awkward angle above the entrance. After she stepped out of the vehicle, Connie followed closely behind, swaggering onward in what Eren could only surmise was an alcohol fueled sense of confidence and bravery.

"Mine, too!" He professed in earnest.

"Connie… your dorm is around the corner…" Eren wasn't able to finish trying to reason with the buzz cut cutie, as he was quickly cut off.

"Someone has to make sure Sasha doesn't get kidnapped!" Connie grabbed Sasha's hand, commencing the march forward for her room.

"Bye!" Eren called out after quickly rolling the passenger window down.

Mikasa tried to muffle her laughter as a stunned Eren gawked at the duo ahead, drunkenly stumbling into one of the brick buildings.

"What just happened?!"

"I think a better question would be what's going to happen once they get up there?" Mikasa corrected him.

Eren could have lived his entirely life in pure bliss without ever having thought about the answer to that, but now… it was too late.

The images of Connie and Sasha getting wild were bound to mentally scar him for life; technically by his own doing, however, Mikasa was partially to blame for bringing it up in the first place.

It wasn't long until he was jolted back to reality, and subsequently parked just outside Mikasa's dorm.

Although he couldn't quite put his finger on it, he thought Mikasa had been acting kind of strange. She didn't seem sad or anything, in fact they shared a few laughs here and there. Something just felt off, and the sudden silence looming over them seemed to further intensify his concern.

"I'll walk you up." He offered gently.

"Okay." Mikasa nodded, allowing him to accompany her to her room, hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder.

A few paces forward. A silent elevator ride. Several more footsteps.

Fifth floor. Room 502. The names "Hannah" and "Mikasa" in pink lettering and cardboard cut outs neatly arranged on the door.

"Text me when you get home, so that I know you're safe." Mikasa whispered, resting her hands above his shoulders.
"I will." Eren vowed. He looked her in the eye and nodded. He felt his lips quiver. "Mikasa…"

Before he could say anything else, Mikasa leaned in and gently pressed her lips against his. It wasn't their usual passionate or rough kiss, with the urgency of two suicidal lovers having a meltdown after not seeing each other for weeks.

Instead, it possessed a sad, almost melancholic sense of longing… and maybe even guilt.

Eren dismissed his thoughts. Maybe he was overthinking it.

"Goodnight, Mikasa." Eren hugged her once more and watched as she turned to enter her room.

"Goodnight, Eren."
I re-wrote the end of this chapter because the original was such a disaster and super cringey lol so if you're re-reading, that's why there is a change. To those of you who are reading for the first time; thank you! :) and you have been spared! lol trust me, you're one of the lucky ones.

Saturday mornings for Mikasa were pretty monotonous. The usual routine consisted of hitting the books, ensuring she would have time for herself later in the afternoon.

After allowing herself an extra hour to sleep in, partially to recover from the previous night's shenanigans, partially out of weariness, she was ready to get a move on.

Hannah was already up, slowly sipping Earl Grey tea from a giant pink mug.

"Morning." Hannah greeted, hands still planted firmly around her cup. "Wanna go to the library to study?"

Mikasa peered down at her pajamas. They were extremely comfortable and the thought of having to change was unbearable. "Yeah, sure." She reluctantly agreed.

Rummaging through the pile of books on her desk, she pulled out her math textbook, knowing Hannah would ask for help on a few problems. Her next Bio exam was scheduled for Tuesday, and while she wasn't worried, she settled on reviewing a few notes she managed to scribble down during lecture and re-reading a couple sections from her textbook.

Mikasa was just about to inform Hannah that she was ready to go when she remembered something. Her phone should have finished charging by now.

She looked down and saw there was one notification.

Eren had texted her that he made it back to his room and was going to bed. Just as he said he would.

Although her reply would be several hours late, she sent him a courteous message, wishing him well and showing her appreciation.

10:03am – Mikasa: Hope you slept okay. Thanks for letting me know you got home safely. I'll see you again soon.

She slipped her phone into her pocket and looked over at Hannah.

"Let's go."

Studying for a few hours had certainly taken a toll. Mikasa was satisfied with her understanding of
the material, thoroughly convinced she would ace her upcoming exam.

Eren had replied to her message earlier, and the two had a short conversation regarding future plans to get together with friends.

They agreed on meeting up again next week.

Upon returning to the dorms with Hannah, both were stricken with the desire to unwind and relax. There were several parties being thrown on sorority row. The mild weather outside welcomed Frisbee players and people out with their dogs. Restaurants and cafes were busy with the usual Saturday rush.

However, Hannah was content with staying indoors and watching re-runs of Gilmore Girls.

"Wanna order a pizza?" She asked, unaware that Mikasa had changed into her workout attire.

"Maybe when I get back," Mikasa replied, pulling her hair into a low ponytail. 'Pizza' sure as hell wasn't the healthiest option after working out, but she figured she could politely refuse when she returned. She was kind of in a hurry, running out of daylight and all. "I'm gonna go for a run."

Hannah slumped back into her bed, channel surfing through hordes of cringe-worthy reality shows and offbeat infomercials. "Fine then. Guess I'll be destroying one large pepperoni pizza all by myself."

"Don't forget the olives," Mikasa quipped before heading out.

It's simply impossible for Mikasa to run without music.

Unlike Eren, she wasn't picky at all when it came to her music preferences. Anything ranging from Pop to Rock to Hip Hop was fair game when it came to her workouts. Upbeat, good rhythm, and motivation were the only things that mattered.

Five miles were certainly long enough to get a good mix going.

Her usual route led her to a dirt trail within a small greenbelt behind the dorms, which eventually followed along a small apartment complex and ended up taking her just outside the tennis courts next to the university training facility. All familiar territory of course, while challenging her with several hills and slight inclines along the way.

With the music still blaring in her ear, she hit the halfway point in her run and came across the tennis courts. Several of her teammates were out leisurely volleying, taking advantage of the weather, and making good use of their day off in general.

Steadily slowing her pace, she turned once more in the direction of the courts.

She nearly came to a halt when she saw him.

On the opposing end, Levi was practicing his serves with Furlan, with a certain intensity that differed from their training during the week.

She contemplated jogging past them, curious to see if he would say anything.

She decided against it and began shuffling through her MP3 player, lowering the volume to the bare minimum in the process. Before she could put Katy Perry on full blast, she heard someone call out her name.
"Hi, Mikasa!" Her teammate, Sarah, hollered.

That had everyone in the courts attentions fixated on the raven haired beauty.

Including Levi.

Furlan looked up and waved, as did the captain of the girl's team, Rico. While others were acknowledging Mikasa's presence, some were inviting her onto the courts.

Mikasa hesitated for a moment, feeling slightly awkward being put on the spot, but reluctantly strolled towards them.

"Hey, guys." Mikasa said, joining in on the small gathering. The huddle consisted exclusively of the ladies, as Levi and Furlan were still conversing with one another in the adjacent court. "Getting some additional practice in, I see."

"Yeah." Rico replied. "I was just finishing up here, but the others should still be sticking around if you wanted to join in."

Mikasa shielded her eyes from the sun. "Thanks, but I'm just out for a run. Maybe some other time."

Rico nodded. "Some other time."

After Rico walked away, Mikasa spoke with a few of her teammates, the occasional glance sneaking over at the adjacent court.

She watched as Levi and Furlan said their goodbyes, shortly after Furlan suggested he and Rico walk back to their cars together.

Levi resumed practicing his serves, leaving Mikasa in an awkward trance. She reminded herself that she was still technically in the middle of a run, but something stopped her from moving forward.

Without a second thought, she began trudging over to the adjacent court.

*Why am I doing this?*

Slowly and tactfully approaching the upperclassmen, she still hadn't even thought of anything to say. Should she bring up Friday night? Should she pretend that didn't happen at all? All sorts of thoughts running through her mind, she watched as he executed a flawless serve; hitting the ball with incredible precision and speed.

The guy's a natural… He makes it look easy.

"Nice serve." She instantly had his attention.

Levi smirked. "Skipping the bar scene tonight, huh?"

*Shit.* She had hoped he wouldn't bring it up. Was he joking, being sarcastic… or was he being serious underneath his usual disinterested exterior? It was hard to tell.

Mikasa didn't want to misconstrue his implication with a nervous, somewhat forced laugh, so she held back and made an attempt to downplay the incident. "I had no idea you worked there."

Levi took his time responding. "Didn't take you for that type." He steadied himself and completed yet another faultless serve, blasting the ball with surprising power and control. "Maybe I misjudged you."
Mikasa raised an eyebrow. "Type?" What's that supposed to mean?

"The party type. Wild child." Levi replied nonchalantly, reaching for another ball. "At first, I thought you were a little goodie, goodie."

Mikasa was dumbfounded. "Wild child?" She shook her head, offended by his assumption. "You don't know anything about me."

Levi paused for a moment and finally let out a deep, slightly frustrated sigh. He set aside his racket and turned to face her, causing her to cheeks to burn an intense red.

He was shirtless, giving her full view of rippling abs, broad shoulders, and toned arms. Although he was of modest height, shorter than her undoubtedly, he was incredibly built. Sweat glistened over every curve, every angle, seemingly accentuating every muscle that flexed with each stride or swing.

Mikasa internally chided herself for staring too long, struggling to come to terms with the fact that she just might find him attractive.

She looked away, waiting impatiently for his response.

"I'm just messin' with ya." He replied. His tone was calm, almost sympathetic. "No need to take it personally." Mikasa watched wordlessly as he reached for his water bottle and took the time to rehydrate. He then walked over to his duffle bag and pulled out another racket. Facing her once more, he handed it to her. "Here."

"What's this for?" Mikasa asked.

"You hit tennis balls with it," Levi deadpanned.

Mikasa rolled her eyes. "I know that." She placed a hand on her hip, still waiting for an answer.

"Look, I've been practicing nothing but serves all day. I wanted to get into a couple practice matches with Furlan, but he took off. That lazy bastard." Levi studied Mikasa closely and smirked. "You weren't exactly my first choice for a substitute, but I guess you'll have to do."

"Are you challenging me?" Mikasa scoffed.

"What do you say?" Levi was bordering on flirtation, but kept his suggestion ambiguous for now.

Mikasa accepted the invitation.

What run?

"I'm in."

With the setting of the sun, the night ushered in smoky grey clouds, smeared sporadically along a charcoal canvas. Fluorescent silver beams gently peaked through shadows, intimately bound above the sky and broke the unwavering darkness.

The lights for the courts were on.

Exhausted from several rigorous matches, constant swings and shots, and dashing all over her side of the court, Mikasa rested on a small bench, next to where Levi had kept his belongings. After putting away the rackets and gathering all tennis balls, some straying just outside the fence, others strewn about the court, Levi offered his opponent some water, carefully selected from the small supply of
Mikasa accepted his offer and gulped nearly half of it in one sitting. She resented the fact that hanging out with Sasha introduced her to disorderly and generally bad habits. "Thanks." She said while wiping sweat from her forehead.

Levi nodded and settled himself next to her, pushing his bag aside to make more room on the steel bench. She was actually a lot better than he had anticipated. Her focus, her speed, and her accuracy were remarkable, especially considering the fact that she was only in her first year at the collegiate level and the season hadn't even started yet. Though he wanted to congratulate her for keeping up, thank her for sticking around, and commend her for her spectacular backhand, he wasn't going to waste his time playing coach. They were teammates, and for now, that was that.

They sat in silence for a moment, both pondering where to go from here. The realistic ending to their offbeat training session consisted of bland "goodbye" and "see you at practice on Monday" adages.

Wanting to avoid that entirely, Levi finally spoke, steering the conversation away from tennis altogether. "So tell me," he began, "when you're not sneaking into bars or training for the upcoming season, what else do you do?"

"Study," Mikasa replied regrettably, slightly amused by what she assumed was a hint of sarcasm. "Go to class."

"That's all?" Levi pried.

Mikasa tilted her head. "I make time for my friends and family, of course." She looked over at him and continued. "Most of my friends from high school go here." Except… Eren.

She was momentarily lost in her thoughts, something Levi quickly picked up on. He wondered what had her so dazed.

"Good to know that your priorities aren't completely skewed," he muttered sardonically, interrupting her thoughts.

She rolled her eyes. "You're telling me you've never done anything even remotely rebellious?" Then again, she wouldn't have been surprised if he answered "no." He seemed kind of uptight and arrogant. Maybe even a bit of a prude, strange as that sounded.

To her astonishment, that wasn't the case.

"Of course I have," he replied. "It was more of a phase than anything else. After a while, the same thing over and over again just gets really old."

"Understandable." Mikasa nodded, figuring that was all that needed to be said.

Not wanting to waste either of their time lecturing her about the afflictions of college partying and how lame it is in actuality, Levi stood up from the bench and threw on a navy blue hooded sweatshirt. "Come on." He swung his bag over his shoulder. "I'll drive you back to your dorm."

If nothing else, he supposed she was smart and mature enough to outgrow these trivial college antics without any sort of intervention.

Mikasa wearily looked up. "You don't have to --"
"It's fine," Levi interjected. "Besides it's dark out. Better to be safe than sorry."

"Okay." Mikasa wasn't going to resist. After all, she was tired, and the two mile walk back to her dorms would add on another twenty or thirty minutes before she could throw herself into a much needed shower.

While following him to his car, Mikasa remembered something completely out of the blue. After adjusting her seatbelt accordingly, she thought back to the day before when she saw him arguing with his… girlfriend. Petra Ral.

The girl had shoulder length, reddish hair. Bright hazel brown eyes. An aura of gentleness that could light up a room; cliché as that sounded.

But Mikasa also got to see a side that was wasn't so charming, and from the way Levi looked and spoke that day, he seemed all too familiar with Petra's incessant whining and frustrated accusations.

The short drive back to her dormitory left her curious. Were they taking a break? Was Petra border line obsessive, or was Levi insensitive and pushing her away?

From what Mikasa heard in their argument, (yeah she'll admit it; she was flat out eavesdropping) Petra was taking him for granted. But there's two sides to every story… right?

Levi parked directly in front of the building.

"Thanks again," Mikasa said, unbuckling her seatbelt. "Wish we could be doubles partners or something," she joked blankly.

"Before you go…" Levi reached into his pocket, fishing something out. Mikasa remained silent, partially confused as he pulled his phone out. "Here." He handed his Samsung Galaxy to her. The screen displayed 'new contact' info.

"What...?" Mikasa suddenly had deja-vu, reverting back to when he handed her the tennis racket, as if expecting her to know what he was implying.

"It's a phone," Levi deadpanned. "You text and call people with it."

"I know that." Mikasa shook her head. "But what do you want me to do with it?"

Levi underlined the 'new contact' feature on the small illuminating screen."Take a wild guess."

Mikasa smirked. "You want my number?" Why?

Levi blinked once. Then again. Then once more. "You're making this a lot more complicated than it needs to be."

Mikasa realized he was right. It wasn't unusual for teammates to exchange numbers with one another. For practical purposes, it could prove quite useful and convenient.

Still, she wanted to confirm his intentions, raising a brow at him with a questioning look on her face.

Levi was quick to pick up on her expression, explaining himself while presenting her with a proposition of sorts. "If you're up for it, we could train together on the weekends or whenever you're free." And don't forget the cherry on top. "It might even help you make the top three in the girl's squad."

Mikasa's eyes lit up. The top three. "Think I can do it?"
Levi nodded. "You're certainly capable."

The offer was too good to pass up. Feeling more than accomplished with ultimately having her own private trainer, Mikasa realized they really could make a great team.

She had everything to gain; learning from one of the best.

_All right, she thought. That settles it._

Mikasa reached for his phone and put in her number.
One week later…

Stohess University

"Holy shit, that report took me forever to write!"

Ymir's screech of a celebration came as a shock to nearly everyone in the library, with several gasps and questioning stares spewing her direction from all angles of the building. Eren, who had grown used to her foul mouthed but seriously entertaining antics, simply yawned and nodded his head.

They were sitting across from each other, both glued to the screen of their laptops while working on their respective assignments.

"Congrats." Eren had finished writing his essay three days earlier, but rather than giving her a hard time about her procrastination, he chose to be more supportive. "Just in time for the weekend, too."

"Hell yeah!" Ymir reclined back into her seat and closed her eyes, as if savoring the moment of victory. "School has been killer. I need a little R and R."

"Couldn't agree more." Eren replied as he logged off his laptop and began stuffing a thick textbook into his backpack.

Ymir followed suit, more than ready to leave the place she had been confined to for nearly three hours. "You going to the kickback at Hitch's place tonight?"

Hitch Dreyse was one of Ymir's teammates. She was the quintessential *hottie with the body*. Her short, wavy, light brown hair was always neatly styled, flowing elegantly just above her shoulders. Long eyelashes and a trademark, flirtatious smirk paired nicely with her alluring features. It wasn't uncommon for guys to practically throw themselves at her; the occasional girl making an attempt to hit on her as well. (Ymir guilty of said act on numerous occasions.)

Barely getting by with a 3.0 GPA, she was far too lax about her studies, but far from caring either way. The bare minimum was her standard, and it didn't help that her priorities were massively skewed. Volleyball and socializing were among the few things that actually mattered in her boy-crazed, hedonistic, and borderline narcissistic world.

While some people were turned off by her attitude alone, Ymir was thoroughly impressed and commended Hitch for staying true to herself and not caring about what others thought. Their philosophies and outlook on life were roughly the same; both finding similar ways to rebel against society's bullshit rules and make a mockery of what was expected of them.

Eren had met Hitch on a couple of occasions, and truthfully, he had difficulty finding something, anything, to like about her. But as usual for Friday nights, he had no other plans. He and Mikasa had agreed on meeting up Saturday anyway.

"Yeah, I'll be there." He relented.

Hitch's apartment was surprisingly spacious.
Rather than living in the dorms with her cohorts, she opted for an apartment less than a couple miles off campus - with both a roommate and her parent's blessing, of course.

Eren arrived at around 9:00pm, figuring that wouldn't be too early or too late. A short walk up a single flight of stairs led him straight to the door. Level B. Room 203. He raised his fist and knocked three times.

Hitch answered the door almost instantly. "Eren! Nice of you to join us." Her breath carried a tiny hint of alcohol, and her speech was a bit slurred. It was hard to tell if she was being flirty, as she usually greeted everyone in the same manner. Eren thought the alcohol might have had some sort of impact otherwise.

Hitch led him to the living room where several others were gathered around the couch. In the kitchenette, a few people were taking shots and mixing drinks. A couple stragglers were standing near the hallway leading to the bedrooms. Ymir was among those socializing in the living room.

"Finally showed up, huh?" Ymir called out. Eren sensed she was buzzed.

After offering a general "hello" to everyone, with a simple wave and dubious look on his face, Eren walked over to where Ymir was sitting. For now, she and Hitch were the only people he was familiar with.

Ymir stood up from her seat and handed him a shot glass. A shot of what never crossed his mind, as he didn't even bother asking.

"Here." She said. "Got some catching up to do." She chuckled.

Eren nodded and threw it back, successfully preventing any sort of contortion of disgust or regret from being etched on his face.

*It burns!*

Suddenly, the arrival of Hitch's roommate had everyone temporarily distracted.

She had strolled out of her bedroom, ascending from the end of the hallway, clad in nike shorts and a blue tank top.

"Look who finally came out of her cave!" Hitch cooed, sloppily clapping her hands in a drunken effort to welcome the petite blonde.

Eren was stunned, feeling his stomach tied up in knots.

Annie sauntered into the kitchen and began making herself some tea.

"Come on and join us, Annie!" Hitch pleaded. "Bertolt will be here soon."

At the mention of Bertolt's invitation, Annie looked up. "Is that so?"

"Mhhmmm." Hitch winked. She stood up from the couch and implored her to take a seat. "Come on. Relax."

Annie reluctantly agreed and settled herself on the plush maroon couch, a cup of freshly brewed green tea in hand. Social gatherings were never really her favorite, but Bertolt was a childhood friend. She could enjoy his company regardless of their surroundings.

Eren's face turned red. While he sat on one end of the couch, Annie had nestled herself on the other.
The only thing separating them now was a scheming Ymir, sitting in the middle, a sly grin from ear to ear.

The kickback resumed with most moving on from drinking to playing games, talking shit about professors they hoped would get hit by a truck, and/or bragging about their latest conquests. For Hitch, no topic was off limits.

Ymir briefly glanced at an unsuspecting, quiet Annie and smirked. Turning to face Eren, she was sure to be as coy as possible, hoping her words would avert Annie's ears.

"Now's your chance, Eren!" She whispered, taunting him whilst nudging his arm. "Annie's not gonna wait forever, ya know."

"What?" Eren shook his head. "Ymir… you're drunk. You're not thinking clearly."

Ymir narrowed her eyes. "Dammit, Eren! If you don't hit on her, I will!"

"Go ahead." Eren wouldn't budge.

Ymir took that as a challenge. Don't test me! "So Annie, what made you decide to crawl out of your room?" Her flirting game was weak, but "A" for effort.

Annie, having finished her tea, set her cup aside. "I live here, you know." She folded her arms across her chest. "I just needed a break from reading."

"What were you reading?" Ymir probed.

"The Tin Drum." Annie replied stoically.

Eren's eyes lit up. "By Gunter Grass?" He didn't mean to interrupt, but hearing about one of his favorite German literary works instantly caught his attention.

Annie, a bit taken aback, slowly nodded. "Yeah." She looked over at him. "Have you read it, Eren?"

"I've read the entire Danzig Trilogy." He noted the smirk on Ymir's face before continuing. "I've read them all in English, and now I'm trying to read them in German."

Annie's interest was piqued. Re-reading the series in their original language? "What for?"

"I'm majoring in German." Eren replied. "And Gunter Grass is one of my favorite German novelists." He then obliged his curiosity. "What made you want to read The Tin Drum?"

Annie tilted her head. "In my Western Civ class we're studying Postmodernism and my instructor recommended it."

"What do you think of it so far?" Eren asked enthusiastically, his face practically glowing with anticipation.

"I'm about halfway through, and it's very engaging. Grass's use of magic realism is actually quite brilliant." She replied. "But I could see how it was considered controversial when he first published it."

"Yeah, he's very political."

Ymir was struggling to follow the conversation; having never even heard of the book nor its author. "What's this book about?"
Eren and Annie exchanged looks, unsure if Ymir was capable of appreciating foreign literary works. "Every time I try to explain the plot to someone, it sounds weird..." Eren warned her.

"Can't be all that shocking." Ymir scoffed. "Trust me, nothing surprises me anymore."

"Okay," Eren sighed. "Long story short; it's about this guy born in Danzig named Oskar. He decides he never wants to grow up, so he throws himself down some stairs precisely at an angle that would permanently stunt his growth, thus retaining the stature and appearance of a child for the rest of his life."

Ymir laughed. "Seriously?!"

"It gets better." Eren continued. "He ends up having several affairs with women, he joins a group of performing dwarfs, all the while World War II is wreaking havoc in Europe and fuels many of the conflicts in the story. It gets... interesting later on, but I don't want to spoil anything for Annie."

Taking note of Ymir's shocked face, he added one last thing. "It's actually a really good read, and it's highly regarded as a classic in post World War II literature."

"Wow." Ymir facepalmed herself. "I never could understand the appeal to all this... artsy stuff. You have to analyze every single paragraph to death to really understand the author's message. And even then, it doesn't always make sense."

"You're overthinking it, Ymir." Annie remarked casually. "What other books have you read?"

Ymir pondered the question, genuinely struggling to remember anything that stuck. Back in high school, sparknotes were a lifesaver when it came to tedious piles of English assignments. She rarely ever took the time to sit down and actually read the assigned material, merely skimming over the first few lines of the first few pages and scrolling through various articles on Wikipedia. "Romeo and Juliet."

"Anything else?" Eren asked, wondering how she managed to maintain an A in their English class.

"...The Great Gatsby, Of Mice and Men..." Ymir rubbed her chin. "To be honest, I don't even remember what happened in half the books I read back in high school."

Annie tucked a loose stray of hair behind her ear. "You got to start somewhere, right?"

Ymir was quick to make an objection. "If you're trying to get me to join your little German book club with Eren, just forget it."

Eren chuckled nervously. "Well, it doesn't have to be limited to German literature." Eyeing Annie curiously, he proceeded to initiate what he hoped would be a conversation delving into their preferences. "What else have you read, Annie?"

"Too broad of a question." Annie exhaled, deep in thought. "What haven't I read?" She looked over at Eren, surveying him closely.

**His eyes...**

"Do you read for school or for pleasure?" Eren asked.

"Both." Annie's eyes were momentarily lost in his features. "Mostly for pleasure, but it coincides perfectly with my studies." It was strange. They had sat together in Calculus almost every day during the week, and she'd occasionally see him in passing after volleyball practice. Yet, it wasn't until now that she realized...
"What are you majoring in again, Annie?" Ymir's question intercepted her assessment.

Annie shifted her gaze away from Eren, feeling her cheeks turn slightly pink. "English."

"Makes sense." Ymir nodded.

Eren gently placed a hand on Ymir's shoulder, but remained focused on Annie. "Have you read any of Stephen King's novels?"

Annie nodded. "I've read several, actually. He's one of my favorite authors."

Eren's eyes lit up. "Name your top three favorite."

Annie felt as though she was being tested, but obliged Eren's inquisitiveness. "It, The Body, and The Shining." She raised an eyebrow. "You?"

Eren wasted no time responding. "Carrie, The Green Mile, and definitely, The Shining. I've read all the books and then I watched all the movies."

"I haven't seen Carrie, but I read the book."

"What did you think?"

"The abusive relationship between her and her mother didn't sit well with me, but I guess that's what makes King a genius. He puts his characters, seemingly ordinary people, in terrifying situations and makes the most absurd and improbable of situations feel so authentic and intense that you're compelled to check the locks on the doors and sleep with the light on."

"His writing evokes strange emotions, that's for sure." Eren considered. "One minute you're freaked out, a couple pages later you're desperately rooting for the main character and hoping it doesn't end in a complete mess."

"Exactly. He's got a sharp ear for dialogue and a disarmingly, laid-back style." Annie relaxed her shoulders, fully invested in their exchange. "To be honest, I'm not really a horror fiction fan, but Stephen King is an exception. His work allowed me to appreciate the genre in a whole new light, and I admire that he's a pretty versatile writer."

"What would you say is your favorite genre then?" Eren inquired, fully prepared to completely geek out with a fellow bookworm following the open ended question.

Annie's lips curved slightly.

"How much time do you have?"

After a solid ten minutes of listening in on Eren and Annie's fascination with this book, that author, and, among other things, how book to film adaptations were often frustrating to no end, Ymir felt herself losing brain cells; utterly lost in the conversation.

They may as well have been speaking Greek.

"I know it's kind of corny, and maybe even cliché, but I've always had a soft spot for coming of age novels." Annie divulged.

Eren smiled. "They're among the best books I've ever read." He paused when he found himself enthralled by deep blue pools and rosy cheeks. The look on her face told him she was eager to hear
"The Magic Mountain, or Der Zauberberg, by Thomas Mann was truly spectacular."

"My instructor mentioned that one, too." Annie stated matter-of-factly. "I think you and her would get along really well. She seems to have an obsession with German literature."

"The term 'coming of age' is actually derived from the German word Bildungsroman, which means 'novel of formation,' or 'novel of education.' It's often used interchangeably with 'coming of age.'" Eren had acquired the useful piece of information from Armin back in high school.

"You learn something new every day." Annie remarked. He knew his stuff, and his dedication alone had earned her respect.

"Nerd." Ymir scoffed.

Eren ignored the snarky comment and resumed his discussion with Annie. "I read this one novel my freshman year of high school. It gave me insight on how others perceive the world around them, it depicted loneliness and anxiety in such a brutally honest way, and it just... really stuck with me. I don't know, it... was like the catalyst that got me into reading."

"So it encouraged you to read more?" Annie asked, leaning in. "Which novel?"

"It was written by Stephen Chbosky…" Before Eren could reveal the title, Annie was quick to recognize the name.

"The Perks of Being a Wallflower." She said each word delicately, expressing her fondness for the novel.

Eren was astonished. "Yeah." He nodded. "I guess you could say... that book changed my life."

Annie was in agreement. "It's in my top five for sure."

Ymir had been in plenty of awkward situations, but none were half as amusing as the situation she currently found herself in. Stuck in the middle between two prospective lovers, casually sharing their admiration for their favorite works of literature, she was surprised Annie hadn't grabbed Eren by the arm and forced him into her room yet; where she would then seduce the brunet and commence what would presumably be hours of passionate love-making.

The way they were looking at each other now reminded her of how Marina and Jenny had gazed into one another's eyes in the pilot episode of The L Word.

She chuckled when she realized that it was highly unlikely anyone else would get that reference.

"Wow. You two should take some sort of romantic compatibility test or something." Ymir teased.

Her joke made Eren feel a tad uneasy. "I think it's cool that we have similar interests…"

"It's practically a match-made in library heaven." Ymir laughed, wondering if she should just leave the two to their own devices. "I feel like I'm intruding." She muttered in Eren's direction.

"Well then this would be my singular, ultimate compatibility question…" Annie challenged, feeling it would be worth the risk. "What is your most... influential... important... life-altering book of all time?" Just as she felt she had been tested earlier, she was curious to see how he would respond to such a heavy question.
Eren paused for a moment. His eyes wandered around the room, never really focusing his gaze on a set object. After thinking back to all the books he’d stumbled upon and devoted himself to for many sleepless nights, shuffling through fond memories of stories with illustrious adventure, morally grey situations, and attaining the ultimate goal of self-efficacy, he made his choice. But he was reluctant to share something he considered personal; intimate, even.

A bizarre silence ensued. "I don't know if I should answer that." He finally replied. "What's yours?" His eyes slowly wandered to her lips, rendering him mesmerized in his partially flustered state.

"I asked you first." Annie was set on getting an answer out of him.

Ymir, being the brilliant matchmaker she thought she was, hatched a plan. It was practically foolproof, given the set up they had with their cozy little seating arrangement on the couch.

"I have an idea." Ymir interjected. She briefly turned to Eren, pointing at her left ear. "Eren you can whisper yours in this ear." Then she turned to Annie and pointed at her right ear. "And Annie, you can whisper yours in this ear, and I'll tell you if you're compatible."

Without any hesitation, Eren nodded in agreement and promptly leaned closer to Ymir. He whispered his answer; a book Ymir had never even heard of. Surprise, surprise.

Then she motioned for Annie to follow suit, leaning in to hear the quiet murmur ease from the petite blonde's honest revelation.

After hearing their responses, a smug grin was plastered on Ymir's face. Far from feeling shocked or surprised, on the contrary, her naughty thoughts from before had just been confirmed. She was immensely satisfied. "Wow." She wheezed, standing up from the couch. "I'm just gonna leave you two alone to get married." She excused herself and joined in on a mundane, but friendly game of beer pong in the kitchen.

Eren and Annie were still nestled on the couch, eyes full of intrigue, waiting for the other to speak first.

"What did you say?" Eren inquired, heart racing; pulsating throughout his entire being.

Annie blinked, pressing her lips together in a thin line. "What did you say?" She countered.

Eren didn't even have to use the restroom.

He just needed a moment to gather his thoughts, maybe check himself out in the mirror, and perhaps reply to Mikasa's text from over an hour ago.

No vacancy. The room was being occupied; hopefully not by someone puking their guts out. Eren heard the faucet turn on, indicating an impending availability.

Annie approached him from behind. "You waiting for the washroom?"

Eren lost his train of thought. "Sort of." He mumbled, turning to face her. "I mean... yeah."

Annie continued to stare at him, not saying a word, wondering why she had waited until now to learn more about him. She figured from the moment they first met, he was smitten with her. Maybe it was nothing more than an innocent crush, a lingering curiosity in the back of his mind coupled with entertaining thoughts of what it would be like to hold her in his arms. She would often feel his eyes on her in both English and Calculus, but she ignored most of his attempts at striking up a
conversation, keeping their relationship stagnant; a plateau stuck somewhere between acquaintance and classmate. She had hardly even given him a chance at developing a friendship with her, something she came to regret.

Why had she pushed him away before? What was holding her back?

The last half hour revealed the potential for something truly special to blossom between them. She was introduced to his kindness, his honesty, his propensity to lose his cool every time she came within five feet of him. And his eyes...

His eyes were a vibrant shade of emerald green. Deep brunet tresses complemented warmly tanned skin. The way his jaw clenched, a nervous tick; it was irresistibly adorable. His passion for literature was endearing, and rather rare in their generation, with most boys expressing interests in video games, inappropriate jokes, and garbage TV shows like South Park; activities that probably didn't require a functioning brain.

It was refreshing to meet someone with similar interests and values, especially in a day and age where hookup culture reigns supreme.

The door suddenly hurled open. Hitch exited the room, her makeup looking just as flawless as it did before those five shots of tequila. Miraculous.

After she sauntered away towards the living room, leaving the blonde and brunet alone in the hallway, Eren suspended any movement, as if waiting for permission to venture inside.

He extended his arm, holding the door open in an attempted gesture of chivalry. "You can go first, if you want."

Annie didn't even bother looking over her shoulder to confirm they weren't being watched. She grabbed him by the hand and pulled him into the washroom with her. She swiftly closed the door. A slight clicking noise soon followed after she locked it.

Eren couldn't believe what was happening. "Annie…?"

Annie slowly backed away from the door, inching closer and closer towards him. Closing the distance between them, they were mere centimeters apart. Eren's stature towered over her petite frame, so she reached for his collar, tugging on it hastily, until their lips were only a breath away.

Eren barely opened his mouth to say her name once more, before he found himself locked into a deep kiss.

Her lips were soft, pliant. She tasted sweet, tender. Exactly how he imagined it.

At first, he's tense, shocked by her boldness and ferocity. Until she moves her hands up to his shoulders, and caresses him longingly in a gentle embrace. He feels himself weaken at the knees as she runs her hands through his deep brown hair, her tongue still exploring his mouth. Losing himself in her touch, he places his hands around her waist and presses her against the wall, savoring the sensation of hearing a satisfied moan escape her mouth in a light gasp. He moves his mouth briefly away from her lips, making his way down to her neck, leading a trail of kisses along her jaw. She's had enough of his teasing, and pulls him forward so their lips meet again. She's kissing him in earnest now, her hand stroking his face, his arms wrapped around her in a warmth unlike anything she's ever felt. And his scent; he smells so good.

She says his name, and then pauses like she's going to say something else.
In an instant, he's jolted back to reality.

He's reminded of Mikasa and an overwhelming combination of guilt and confusion loom over him.

*Mikasa…*

Face flushed, hair messed up, Annie watched as Eren pulled away and took a giant step back.

In sheer, total silence, he studied her once more. She was still leaning against the wall, her golden locks grazing her shoulders.

The beauty she possessed was eerie, strange, almost otherworldly; it took practically every fiber of his being to hold himself back, preventing him from hurling himself towards her and giving in to his lustful desires; finishing what they started.

What did any of this mean anyway? What was Annie thinking?

"I-I'm sorry…" The words slipped from his mouth in a despondent whisper. Annie remained motionless, still watching him wordlessly, her breathing slightly labored.

Eren turned and left the room, closing the door behind him.

He didn't bother to say goodbye or announce his departure on his way out of the apartment.

*What the hell is wrong with me?*

Eren began a brisk pace onward for his dorm, still trying to process the predicament he found himself in. The memory of Annie's lips pressed against his haunted him the entire night, all the while feeling conflicted about his relationship with Mikasa.

Eren realized he was well on his way to being completely screwed.
Mikasa was indecisive.

Marveling at the selection of knit scarves in a contemporary J. Crew store inside Trost Mall, she felt a bit overwhelmed. There were simply too many to choose from.

Her and Eren's four-year anniversary was coming up shortly; less than a month. She wanted to get him something special for the occasion. Something sentimental, something *symbolic*.

Presenting him with a scarf he could call his own had lingered in the back of her mind for days now.


Throughout her clandestine browsing, she had been eyeing the red one, but decided it would be weird if they both had the same color. She loathed couples who had matching everything.


Hannah and Franz instantly came to mind.

Just the mere thought of that sent shivers down her spine.

She settled on the dark navy one. It was smooth, intricately knitted, and felt incredibly warm. She adjusted herself in front of a mirror and wrapped it around her neck; a test run of sorts. It felt heavier than her own, but its length was perfect. As she ran her fingers through the fabric, she couldn't resist sniffing the material, inhaling its silky, alpine scent; reminding her of cedar and mahogany.

This was it. She had made up her mind.

Mikasa walked over to the cashier and purchased Eren's anniversary gift.

Later that evening

Mikasa waited patiently on a bench directly in front of the parking lot outside the training facility. Having finished another practice session with Levi, she was grateful for the opportunity and was more than willing to welcome the regiment as a routine, but extremely necessary, part of her life. She felt relieved knowing that her skills were being fine-tuned (and even challenged) by the best UT had to offer. Her muscles were a bit sore, but she accepted that the old adage "No pain, no gain," had a lot of truth in it.

Further more, she had been receiving high marks from her coach and plenty of compliments from fellow teammates.

She exhaled, content with the way things were going.

Freshly showered, makeup and hair done (not meticulously, but good enough anyway), and a casual outfit adorned with her trademark red scarf. Mikasa was ready to go.
She asked Eren to pick her up outside the training facility, saving them both a trip to her dorm. Although the request was more convenient in actuality, the main reason she wanted to avoid her room for possibly the remainder of the evening was because Hannah had served her with a warning.

Franz would be visiting, which meant freaky things were bound to happen.

No doubt about it, the whole floor would be well aware of his visitation; with the usual thumps, loud moans, possible bed creaking noises blasting from the thin-walled space.

Mikasa insisted on letting them have the room for the night, figuring she could crash at Sasha's since her roommate was out of town.

Sasha hadn't quite offered, but all Mikasa had to do was entice her with some greasy potato chips and other junky food. It was going to work out; for sure.

Her phone buzzed. A text message from Eren.

7:02pm – Eren: Sorry, running late. Be there soon.

Mikasa's mouth curved and formed a faint smile.

7:03pm – Mikasa: Don't text and drive. See you soon.

She leaned back into the bench, pondering several ideas ranging from their upcoming anniversary to whether or not she was going to cut her hair.

Soon, she wasn't alone.

"Do you need a ride back?" Levi asked in passing. He stopped to hear her response.

Mikasa shook her head, her thoughts still in a disarray. "I got one, but thanks."

Levi nodded. He was about to continue walking on, but wanted to say… something. "You kicked ass today." He remarked. "I'm pretty sure you got even Rico worried by now."

Mikasa let out a soft chuckle. "Well, I have a great training partner."

Levi's eyes were locked on hers. "Hell yeah, you do."

"Humble as always." Mikasa quipped, rolling her eyes. She looked off, her gaze settled on something behind him.

Levi knew he was stalling. Now was the perfect time to finally ask her out. Or was it?

Now was as good a time as ever. He contemplated how he would go about it, wanting to make it seem as casual as possible, not like he was rushing into anything or trying to pressure her by putting her on the spot. They were alone, which could be taken as both an advantage and a disadvantage. He chose his words carefully.

"Mikasa, I was wondering…"

Mikasa tilted her head, allowing him to continue. Before he could share what was on his mind, a white Mazda 3 pulled up into the loading zone.
It was Eren.

Mikasa got up from her seat and gathered her belongings. "My boyfriend's here." She briefly halted and turned to face Levi one last time. "I'm sorry… what were you going to say?"

Upon hearing the word *boyfriend*, Levi felt somewhat discouraged, a tad surprised even.

*Oh.*

Eren got out of the car. Mikasa's heart was racing, while Levi looked the kid up and down, deciding that he didn't like the guy already.

As Eren made his way over, Levi kept looking back and forth between him and Mikasa. He was in utter disbelief.

*How did she end up with him?*

Levi shook his head. "Nothing." He wasn't worried about possibly competing with the green eyed brunet. On the contrary, he was confident in knowing who the better man was. But Mikasa seemed… wholeheartedly invested in the relationship. "I'll see you later, Mikasa." With that, he turned and began walking off to his car.

"O-okay…" Mikasa mumbled. "Bye…" His sudden departure left her confused.

*That was weird…*

Eren approached her from the side. "Hey, Mika."

Mikasa was slightly caught off guard. "Hey!" She pulled him in for a hug.

"Ready to go?"

Mikasa paused. She took one last look over to where Levi had parked. As he drove away, she found herself in a daze.

*What was he going to say?*

"Yeah." She finally said. "Let's go."

After settling herself inside the passenger seat of Eren's car, she let her thoughts roam freely. They continued to jumble around in her head as the car drove off, past a few streets, after a few turns, a couple stoplights here and there.

She wondered why Levi had been so nice to her from the start. What had driven them towards this "working relationship/tennis buddies" gig in the first place? Could one even call it a true friendship?

As she and Eren pulled up into the parking lot of a movie theater, she dismissed her thoughts and turned to face him before unbuckling her seatbelt.

She kissed him on the cheek before getting out of the car.

______________________________________________

It was getting late.

But Eren and Mikasa were anything but tired.
Their movie date, with Armin as the third wheel, went well.

None of them had the stomach to watch *Sausage Party*, especially after hearing about the last five minutes from Connie and Sasha.

Poor Sasha had been suckered into watching the movie with him after believing it to be a harmless film about food chillin' in a grocery store and having little adventures.

She cursed herself for not watching the trailer on YouTube, and entrusting Connie with something as precious as her appetite. She barely managed to finish her soda.

Because of this debauchery, Armin suggested they go see *Star Trek Beyond* instead.

His innocence was just… too fragile.

Aside from that, it was nice to catch up and reminisce in the good old days. Turns out Armin was crushing on someone, and Eren offered to help him work on his game.

Sadly, Armin hadn't even had his first kiss yet and the idea of performing a simple task as menial as talking to a girl scared the shit out of him.

"I was thinking about writing her a poem." Armin remarked shyly. "What do you think?"

"That would be sweet." Mikasa offered her input carefully. "A little creepy if you haven't talked to her in person yet, but it's the thought that counts."

Eren nodded in agreement. He certainly had his work cut out for him.

After spending over an hour trying to convince Armin that he was capable of manning up, the trio said their goodbyes, each hoping for the best in Armin's future dating endeavors.

But the night was still young.

Eren and Mikasa soon found themselves walking out and about in a small neighborhood park. There were a few others roaming about the park's interior. A couple sitting underneath a tall oak tree; another walking along the brush, following a paved trail.

Neither spoke a single word as they leaned against each other, nestled comfortably on soft patches of grass. Both looked up, on the hunt for constellations and bright flashes of white, twinkling and sparkling above.

Star-gazing was often overlooked in their generation, as most millennials were content with staying inside and watching TV.

But this, right here, with Mikasa cozied up in his arms, was just right for Eren.

As silence continued to loom over them, he suddenly felt guilty.

Mikasa reached for his hand, holding it ever so gently.

Eren tensed up, feeling as though he was unworthy of her doting and tenderness.

Even so, he couldn't deny that he felt… *something* for Annie. Ironically, it was only the night before that he found himself in a similar setting such as this.

Less than twenty-four hours ago, he was holding another girl in his arms; Annie's lips pressed against
He hated that he was more than just attracted to the mysterious blonde, his very own thoughts betraying him.

"I found Cassiopeia." Mikasa whispered, pointing above and attempting to trace the five stars in alignment with the constellation. Eren was momentarily distracted from his thoughts.

"I see it, too."

"And if you look to the right of that, you might be able to see the Andromeda galaxy."

"You should have majored in Astronomy."

"Only if I'd be able to go into space one day, and the chances of that happening are slim to none." Mikasa sighed.

"Mankind has never been to space." Eren deadpanned. "The landing on the moon was staged. It's all a hoax."

"Totally." Mikasa smirked. She closed her eyes, reveling in the moment.

Eren looked back up at the night sky. It was harrowingly beautiful, all the mysteries it contained, all the secrets the vastness of the universe harbored; all too far to reach, forever swathed in the infinite black emptiness, nothingness.

Born with a naturally inquisitive mind, Eren wondered.

He wondered…

He wasn't expecting to find some flashing neon sign or a bright shooting star to point him in the right direction. Certainly not, but he was familiar with astrology and things like fate. Answers to the unknown were hidden among the stars. All one had to do was look up, and miraculously, constellations or other heavenly figures could give you the answers you seek.

Most of it was bullshit, and Eren felt beyond stupid for even considering it.

But in that brief moment, Eren hoped it was fate, or something of that nature, that would keep them together.
Heartbreak Warfare

Sunday

At Mid-morning, just before 11am, Levi arrived at the doorstep of Petra's apartment.

She hadn't been answering his calls, and his texts were being ignored, so he took a gamble and figured she had to have been home. They used to go out for breakfast on Sundays together, but once she landed the internship at Sina Software downtown, it completely rearranged her entire schedule.

Still, the chances of her being home were 50/50.

Levi hadn't shown up to plead with her, nor had he written some soppy, pathetic love letter.

If they were over, he wanted to make it official. He couldn't stand the thought of breaking up through text or over the phone. Something as heavy as that needed to happen in person. At the very least, he wanted to know where they stood in their relationship. Two years of being together; they owed each other that much. It was a simple courtesy, really.

He knocked a couple times, and it wasn't long until he could make out faint footsteps seemingly making their way to the door.

Sure enough, Petra was home. "Levi?" She was a bit taken aback. "What are you doing here?"

Levi noted her appearance. Her light brown eyes were glistening radiantly. Her hair was the epitome of "tousled sex hair." And the real kicker; her shirt was on backwards.

Levi wasn't stupid. He was familiar with her "morning after a night of fucking each other's brains out" look. Seeing her like this brought back fond memories. But obviously, he hadn't been the one to make her practically glow like she'd just had the best orgasm of her life; she must have taken someone else to bed.

Levi blinked. Then again. Then once more. "You weren't answering my calls."

"So the logical next step was to show up at my place unannounced?"

"I haven't heard from you in a long-" Before Levi could finish, a voice called out to Petra from her bedroom.

"Petra!" The voice was deep, husky, a bit groggy. "I gotta go to work soon. Mind if I shower?"

Levi couldn't see the bastard, but he decided that he heard enough. He wasn't going to waste his time starting a fight and kicking the guy's ass.

Right then and there, he decided it wasn't worth it. The relationship wasn't worth it. Petra wasn't worth it. He wasn't going to fight for her anymore.

He was done.

He scoffed and began walking away. "Well I guess that settles it. Nice to know you've already moved on."

Petra quickly threw on a jacket, shut her front door, and frantically chased after him. "Levi! Wait!"
Levi turned around, beyond livid that she had the audacity to follow him. "What the fuck, Petra. What do you want from me?"

"Just let me explain!" Petra shook her head, trying to find the right words. "This was a one-time thing. It happened spur of the moment…"

"Bullshit." Levi narrowed his eyes, wondering why the hell he was still standing there.

"Look, we've been done." Petra shot back. "Our relationship has been dead for a while now. I was trying to-

"When were you going to tell me?"

"Well, I'm sorry. I hadn't exactly marked the date on my calendar."

"A heads up would have been nice, because this is all news to me. What? You just expected me to get the hint? In the meantime, you thought it would be all right if you fucked other people?"

"He's the only one. And just this once."

"And that makes it okay? I haven't been with anyone else this whole time we've been taking a break, which was your idea by the way. If by 'break' you meant 'break-up,' you should have made that more clear."

They were hit with an uncomfortable silence. The engines of cars starting, people out walking and chatting amongst themselves, dogs barking; all background noise reduced to a mere afterthought.

"You just…" Petra looked away and bit her lip. "You stopped being the Levi I fell for. There were times when I would look at you, and you just… weren't there. I lost you."

Levi remained frozen where he stood.

She better not bring it up…

They had agreed to never speak of it again.

Petra slowly inched closer and closer to him. "Do you hate me?" Her tone was soothing, apologetic. Her eyes were saddened by what she saw. "You haven't forgiven me, have you?"

He knew she wasn't talking about her infidelity anymore.

"Levi, I never really had the chance to apologize… for…"

"Stop."

"You need to let me finish." She reached for his hand. It felt limp, cold. "I'm sorry that I…"

She paused, on the verge of tears.

"That what?" Levi mocked, seething with anger. "That you had the abortion?"

"No." She replied sternly. "I honestly don't regret it. But I'm sorry that I didn't hear you out, and that I was insensitive to how you felt about it all."

"It would have been my kid, too." Levi muttered under his breath.
"It was my choice." Petra let go of his hand. "What's done is done."

With that, Levi figured there was nothing else to say. For it to end like this, after everything they'd been through, it hurt more than anything else.

"Goodbye, Petra." Levi turned his back and walked away.

The Ragako Bookstore was unusually quiet for a Sunday afternoon.

Annie Leonhart was a frequent patron, preferring the calm, warm, laidback setting to the uptight, legalistic, icebox of a library at SU.

With Gunter Grass' novel in one hand, a cup of espresso in the other, she sat on a red cushioned seat in the lounging area, easing back and forth between sipping and reading. Bertolt had agreed to meet up with her in about half an hour. Though he normally stuck with reading graphic novels and the occasional western, Annie felt that she required the company of an old friend. His mere presence was enough to keep her sane. She hated to admit it, but being alone scared the hell out of her.

She refused to dwell on it.

Setting her drink aside, she internally congratulated herself for reaching the halfway point in *The Tin Drum*, and decided she would take a break from reading German literature for now. She ached for a bit of nostalgia.

*They have to have it here. This place has everything.*

She commenced the search for her favorite book.

As she got up and made her way to the adult fiction section, she remembered that she wasn't the only one who had a deep appreciation for the novel.

It was Eren's favorite as well.

*Just forget it. It didn't mean anything.*

Annie turned around the corner, honing in on the "I" section of author's last names.

She found it.

As she extended her arm in an effort to pull it from the shelf, she heard her name.

"Annie…"

Half expecting it to be Bertolt, she eagerly turned to face him. But oddly enough, it hadn't *sounded* like Bertolt.

Standing right next to her, browsing through the same collection of the same shelf, was Eren Jaeger. In his hand was a copy of the same book she had reached for. Her favorite book.

Their favorite book.

*Never Let Me Go*, by Kazuo Ishiguro.

Annie and Eren were seated next to each other in the lounging area, surprisingly comfortable with
one another.

Maybe it was just easier to forget about Friday night… for now, at least.

Both were too invested in their conversation regarding books, the fact that this bookstore was a true gem, and how the university library was ultimately the last resort when it came to reading and studying for school. Annie liked the fact that the library was convenient and in close proximity to all her classes, while Eren only went there at Ymir's behest.

Eren couldn't help but admire her sarcastic remarks, coupled with her appreciation for similar novels he found himself thoroughly engaged in. It made for an interesting discussion, that much was true.

"Be honest, did this book make you cry?" Eren quipped, holding up his copy of Ishiguro's novel.

Annie's face was blank. "No. Why? Did you?"

"What? Of course not! I haven't gotten emotional over a book since I read Old Yeller back in middle school." He blushed when he saw her expression had changed.

It wasn't forced, or all of the sudden. It happened naturally, effortlessly, easily; like the way one falls asleep.

For the second time since he had met her, he got to see her smile.

*He* made her smile, and it felt… like something he'd never felt before.

"Eren's a softie when it comes to man's best friend, huh?" She tucked a loose stray of hair behind her ear and faintly beamed once more.

Eren was about as red as a tomato. "I-I was eleven at the time. The ending of that book was just way too depressing. You'd have to be heartless to not feel for something like that."

"I guess." Annie tilted her head and looked down. "I was the same way when I was a kid. One night, my dad read Hachiko Waits to me for a bedtime story..." She paused for a moment, wondering why she shared that with him.

She rarely ever spoke about her father to anyone.

"Is that the one about the dog in Japan?" Eren asked, eyeing her curiously. His question was a much needed distraction, saving her from memories she wanted to push back to the farthest parts of her mind.

"Yeah, he waits for his master at the train station everyday..."

"Until one day, his master dies..."

"See... I'm getting goosebumps already."

Eren grinned from ear to ear. "I've got a tissue if you need one."

"How nice of you."

"I try."

Without any hesitation, Annie suddenly leaned in closer. "So tell me..."
Eren's heart was racing, pulsing so loudly in his ears he swore Annie was able to hear it, too.

Annie continued, a delicate tone easing from her lips. "What made *Never Let Me Go* your favorite novel? Why did it stand out from all the rest?"

Eren was deep in thought, pondering the answer to that question. He was instantly hit with deja vu, feeling as though they had been in that exact same position before. Rather than fighting that feeling, he chose to welcome it.

"Well..."

Before he could reply, they were interrupted.

Bertolt had arrived a few minutes later than he said he would; but somehow his arrival felt too early for Annie. It felt spontaneous and intrusive to Eren.

"Hey, Annie." Bertolt looked over at Eren and waved. "I remember you. Pole vault guy. How's your shin?"

Eren nodded. "Better. A lot better, actually. Thanks."

Bertolt had always been the quiet type, but that's also what made him a good observer; always aware of what's going on around him, in his peripheral vision, and in his blind spots.

He suddenly realized how close Eren and Annie were sitting, they both had a copy of the same book in each hand, and Annie had been... *smiling*...

She looked smitten with the green eyed brunet, and that roused both confusion and jealousy within Bertolt.

He wasn't the aggressive type, and Annie wasn't even his girlfriend, but from the looks of it, he had a competitor of sorts.

"I gotta get going." Eren said, slowly rising from the lounge chair. "I'll see you in class tomorrow, Annie." Before excusing himself entirely, he turned to address Bertolt. "It was good seeing you again, man."

"You too." Bertolt forced out, trying to remain as civil as possible.

Annie said her goodbyes and greeted her childhood friend.

"So, what are you reading today, Bert?"

In his hand was a copy of some western novel, a cowboy taming a wild stallion in an effort to impress his lady love on the front cover. He already forgot the title of the book, and it didn't help that he was in such a flustered state.

"Just something I picked up." He mumbled, massaging the back of his neck.

Annie nodded and went back to reading *The Tin Drum*.

Bertolt looked away, hoping he'd one day muster up the courage to tell her how he felt, before it was too late.

From the looks of it, he was running out of time.
After another exhausting day at school and merciless tennis practice outside in an on and off light drizzle, Mikasa wasted no time rushing into the locker room, basking in the warmth of steam drifting in the air from captivatingly hot showers. Soon, she found herself wrapped in a towel hanging from just below the shoulders, feeling clean and polished, all the while listening in on casual conversations.

Rico and a few others were discussing a hot button issue; something Mikasa wanted to avoid.

"Are you guys voting in November?" One of them shrieked.

"It’s impolite to bring up religion and politics, you know." Rico stated, voice laced with an awkward combination of sarcasm and cynicism.

"BERNIE FOR PRESIDENT!" A random passerby shouted, before stripping and sprinting for the showers.

Rico shook her head. "Wow. Those golf weirdos are just way too comfortable with themselves. If public nudity was legal, they’d be the first ones to go for it." Truth was, she herself had been a die-hard Sanders supporter, but her level of enthusiasm was nowhere near that of the golfer and all her wondrous granola glory.

Not even a minute had passed before the remaining members of the golf team followed suit, baring everything to the entire locker room, leaving absolutely nothing to the imagination.

"And on that note," one of the tennis gals muttered, "I'm out!"

"Meh, I heard it's even worse in the guy’s locker room."

"Don't even get me started on that. Men are gross!"

Mikasa smirked. She was glad her teammates had an endearing sense of humor, and she was thankful they weren't completely insane like the golf players.

Ready to go, she gathered her belongings, and threw them into her duffle bag.

Rico suddenly approached her with a proposition. "You got any plans for Halloween?"

Mikasa thought for a moment before replying. "Not officially… no." She figured she and Eren would go out and do something together, but seeing as how the creepy holiday was only a week away, she wasn't entirely sure.

Rico looked relieved. "Well, every Halloween, UT athletes get together and volunteer to hand out candy to children and their families at different venues in our community. This year, I think the volleyball players are going to the YMCA, the cross country runners are visiting an elementary school, and so on and so forth. You get the idea."
"What about us tennis players?" Mikasa asked, her interest piqued.

"This year we're going to volunteer at St. Luke's. It's a Lutheran church a few blocks from here."

Mikasa rolled her eyes. "My parents aren't going to be pleased." She joked.

"Why not?"

"I'd be setting foot in a Lutheran church. My dad's Jewish and my mom is a devout Catholic."

"How did that happen?"

"Love conquers all, I guess."

"Ha! There's a lot of truth in that!" Rico chuckled. She shut her locker and sighed. "So, what do you say? Are you in?"

"Sure." Mikasa nodded. "Do I have to wear a costume, though?"

Rico smirked. "You don't have to, but it's frowned upon if you don't."

Mikasa tilted her head. The last time she wore a costume for Halloween was freshman year of high school. Ever since then, the holiday's agenda exclusively consisted of stuffing her face with candy while watching stupid horror flicks with Eren and Armin at her house.

But things were different now. Seeing as how this was for a good cause, she felt more than obliged to have a little holiday spirit.

"All right." She relented. "Guess I'll have to make a quick run to Party City or something."

Upon leaving the university's training facility, Mikasa began walking back to her dorm, shivering with each step. There was a light, but cold breeze flowing from the east; not unusual given the time of year. She reached into her bag and pulled out her red scarf.

She treasured the gift for its sentimentality, but when it came to chilly evenings like this, it was practical and kept her nice and warm.

Just as she finished wrapping the garment around her neck, someone caught her attention.

In her peripheral vision, she saw Levi exit the building, freshly showered and clad in a Nike windbreaker.

From the looks of it, he seemed more than just tired. Like the "tired" one uses as an excuse to avoid talking about what's really bothering them. Despondent might have been more accurate, if one was really paying attention. Although his face was usually pretty blank, rarely showing any emotion, Mikasa remembered several instances in the past when she'd had the privilege of seeing him in a more light-hearted mood. (That was a good word for it, as cheery and ecstatic didn't quite fit the bill.)

Perhaps he was stressed and had a lot going on; either way, she hoped he was all right.

She briefly turned and stopped, seemingly waiting for him. Given her position and the direction he was walking, they were bound to cross paths momentarily. She figured it wouldn't hurt to say something.

"Hey, Levi." She said warmly. "Heading to work later?"
Levi stopped and stood about an arm's length from her. "I'm off tonight." He replied. "But there's a few things I have to take care of."

Mikasa was troubled by his demeanor. A glint of impassivity could be heard in his voice. He wouldn't look her in the eye. He seemed withdrawn, like his mind was somewhere else entirely.

She continued, hoping she could help take his mind off whatever was bothering him. "Are you going to volunteer at the church with the others this year for Halloween?"

Levi shook his head. "Probably not…"

Mikasa intercepted before he could come up with some sort of excuse. "You should. Especially since you're the captain of the men's squad. You're like the poster child for UT's Tennis program."

Levi wouldn't accept the compliment, simply shrugging it off. "You guys don't need me to be there. I'm sure you'll all manage."

"No way." Mikasa protested. "If you're not going, then I'm not going."

"That's ridiculous. Rico would probably freak out anyway."

"I don't care." Mikasa folded her arms across her chest. "It just wouldn't be the same without you."

Upon hearing that, Levi looked up. Hearing her say that meant a lot, but if his spirits had been lifted even a little, he wasn't showing it.

Mikasa gently placed a hand on his shoulder. "At least think about it, okay?"

Levi nodded, and watched as she walked away.

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**Stohess University**

The SU gymnasium was clamoring with volleyball players calling out to one another, practicing their formations, hustling about, and finishing up a few drills.

Annie was volleying with Hitch as their practice was coming to a close, not realizing they were being watched by several spectators.

The Athletic trainers had strolled in, clad in uniforms consisting of navy blue polos and khakis. Bertolt was among them, the occasional glance peering over in Annie's direction.

Before Hitch could return Annie's practice serve with a bump, Ymir suddenly lunged forwards and spiked the ball over the net, attacking it like a ferocious beast.

"BAM BITCHES!" She roared, adding in a little victory dance.

"Ymir, what the hell." Hitch facepalmed herself. "Do you mind? We're trying to prepare for the upcoming match this Friday."

"Did you see that spike, though?!" Ymir smirked. "I'm gonna mop the floor with those pathetic Sina U skanks."

Annie shook her head, utilizing the break to stretch for a moment. "Don't get too cocky, Ymir."

"Yeah! Remember what happened to your cousin Jason at the Track and Field state championship?"
Hitch laughed.

"Shut up." Ymir grunted. "Don't compare me to that family embarrassment."

Before she could throw a few more insults Hitch's way, and possibly spike the ball at Annie just for kicks, the gym doors had suddenly burst wide open, allowing for an onslaught of short skirts, hair tied up with bows, glitter, back flips, pyramids, sex and magic, estrogen *galore* to overrun the place.

The Stohess University Cheerleaders.

Ymir, who had only moments before been running her mouth and talking way too much, was now speechless; mesmerized by the riveting emergence of school spirit, positive energy, and cheerleader pheromones wafting in the air. Ymir had her eyes locked onto a single target.

Gliding gracefully around the court was a beauty unlike any other.

She had golden blonde hair, tied in a low ponytail, grazing the small of her back. Her eyes were a gorgeous shade of cerulean. Her cheeks were rosy, her smile practically spewing out rays of sunshine.

Standing at just under five feet, she was tiny, but so precious.

Angelic, sweet… *perfect*.

Hitch caught Ymir in a daze, completely infatuated with the cheerleader.

"Sorry, lesbo." Hitch mocked. "Krista Lenz is off limits."

Ymir held back the urge to tackle Hitch and throw her out some window. "What?!" At least she knew what her future wife's name was.

"Where do I even begin?" Hitch remarked slyly. "Let's see… She just so happens to be the mayor's daughter. She graduated from a prestigious all-girls catholic school at the top of her class. And, it's rumored that she's dating one of the football players." She giggled before adding one last note. "Anddddd I'm pretty sure she's straight."

"They're straight until they're… not." Ymir retorted, having been unsuccessful at trying to come up with something clever in response. "Besides, I went to a catholic school, too, and look where that got me."

Annie and Hitch exchanged looks before allowing Ymir to continue to drown herself in her own delusions.

"Is she seriously the mayor's daughter though?!" Ymir inquired, eyes still watching Krista from afar.

"You don't remember hearing about that whole scandal? It was all over the news a few years ago." Hitch chuckled. "Her dad, Mayor Rod Reiss, had an affair with her mom, some floozy named Alma, and together they had a secret love child; Krista! Tada!"

"Interesting…"

"Long story short, Krista's mom made a killing off of hush money disguised as 'child support,' before finally coming to light as his mistress, which simultaneously revealed that Krista was also a *Reiss*. Poor thing was forced to play nice and put on this act like she was grateful to suddenly become the perfect, cheery, little blonde addition to their fancy, upper-class family of plastic idiots."
"That's… heartwarming." Ymir sighed. "So that means her sister is Frieda Reiss?"

"Half-sister."

"I see." Ymir mumbled.

*I think I'm in love…*

Annie turned away as Hitch berated Ymir for her pervy stares and observations.

The cheerleaders weren't the only ones wandering onto the court and making their way around the gym, as other athletes began coming and going; some heading for the lockers, others heading home.

The track and field athletes were also passing through. Among the plethora of sweaty, tired people, Annie caught a glimpse of SU's pole vault trio.

"Ymir, let's hit the showers." Hitch called out.

"We gotta wait for the cheerleaders!" Ymir winked, booty bumping Annie. "Krista might need some help taking off that sexy little uniform."

"Hurry up, you slut." Hitch wheezed, dragging Ymir by the arm. "You, too, Annie. It's your turn to make dinner tonight, by the way."

"Be there in a sec." Annie replied, disappearing into the crowd.

"Where is she going?" Ymir asked dryly.

"Maybe she's going to say 'hi' to Bertolt." Hitch shrugged.

Hitch was wrong in her assumption, as Annie positioned herself next to a wide-eyed brunet by the name of Eren Jaeger.

"Hey, Annie." He smiled, somewhat surprised to see her. "I would hug you but I'm all sweaty."

"So am I." Annie quipped. "How was practice?"

"Excruciating." Eren sulked. "Shadis is the first coach I've ever had that curses like a sailor. But he's damn good at what he does. I made the right choice committing to SU." He exhaled and playfully nudged her shoulder. "What about you, troublemaker? How was volleyball?"

"It went well. We have a match this Friday so we're trying not to overexert ourselves."

"Makes sense." Eren nodded. "Home or away?"

"Home."

Eren looked down and rubbed the back of his neck. "All right." He chuckled. "I know you're too shy to ask, so yes, Annie, I'll be there to cheer you on... If you want. If not, that's cool, too. Whatever you want. I'm down. I don't have any plans on Friday. Even if I did, I guess I'd still try to go. Why not? Sounds cool. But I'd mostly be there for you. And kind of Ymir. And Hitch, I guess. But mostly you."

Annie found his idiotic rambling adorable. "You're such a dork." She deadpanned. "But I'd like that."
'Okay.' Eren smiled. 'Then I'll be there.'

After they had parted ways, both smiling and bidding the other farewell, a spectator of sorts cursed under his breath.

Bertolt wondered what Annie saw in Eren.

He was determined to put an end to whatever was going on between them.
Friendly Advice

Wednesday
7:47am.

Levi slowly rose from the full size bed in his room, running a hand through his jet black tresses. He wearily stood up and reached for the plain white shirt folded neatly above his dresser, pulling the cotton fabric up over his head. After realigning his sheets and making his bed, he briefly surveyed his room, as if to be sure everything was in its place and organized to his liking.

While his own room was pristine, of virginal quality and completely spotless, his roommate Furlan on the other hand needed constant reminders to keep up with the daily cleanup routine and chores. Nonetheless, their shared townhouse was well-taken care of; not one speck of dust anywhere.

Cleanliness is next to godliness, after all.

Levi headed downstairs and was instantly welcomed with the warm scent of freshly brewed coffee. Rich cinnamon lingered in the air, hinting at the prospect of fluffy french toast. Furlan rarely set foot in the kitchen, so the aroma of some good old fashioned cookin' indicated that they had a visitor.

"Good morning, Levi."

His bubbly childhood friend, Isabel Magnolia, stood in the kitchen by the stove, having just prepared a couple eggs sunnyside up. Her short red hair was divided into two pigtails. Bright green eyes flashed his direction. She slid off her apron and set it aside on a towel hanger. Shuffling past Furlan, she walked up to Levi and pulled him in for a hug.

"I've missed you both." She smiled.

"Isabel made breakfast." Furlan said, gripping his cup of coffee and savoring its warmth.

"It's been awhile since we've seen each other, so I thought I'd stop by before class." Isabel remarked. She grabbed a small mug and poured in some dark roast coffee before handing it to Levi. "Here. Sit and eat."

Levi accepted the gesture and sat next to Furlan on a stool underneath the kitchen countertops. Isabel finished working her patisserie magic, and paired his eggs with fruit garnered french toast. She chopped up small pieces of strawberries and blueberries, then positioned them to form a smiley-face on the hot bread.

"For you, monsieur." She winked, placing the carefully crafted dish in front of him.

"Thanks." Levi offered his gratitude with a slight smirk and impish joke. "Furlan couldn't make something as simple as toast if his life depended on it."

"Says the guy who spent two hours scrubbing the bathroom sink yesterday." Furlan retorted, turning to face Isabel. "The sink, Izzy. The sink!"

"It was filthy." Levi replied in an effort to defend his OCD. "Wouldn't want any mold or mildew wreaking havoc in there now, would we?"

Isabel rolled her eyes and sighed. She had certainly missed their heartwarming exchanges. "What
"What does your first class start?"

"9:00am." The two gentlemen replied in unison.

"Sweet! That'll give us a little time to catch up." Isabel enthused, taking a seat across from them. "What have I missed?"

"Not much." Furlan said, finishing off his coffee. "Work, school, and tennis keep me pretty busy. I recently applied for an internship at a clinic, so we'll see how that goes."

"Nice." Isabel nodded, wanting to skip the boring work and school gab. "Still seeing that one chick?"

"Who? Anka?" He chuckled.

"Yeah, her."

"…we broke up about six months ago…"

"Ohhhh…" Isabel muttered. "I feel like you mentioned that a while back."

"I probably did." Furlan sighed. "But it's not a big deal."

"What about you, Levi?" Before Furlan could resort to pretending he was choking in a desperate attempt at avoiding the topic, Isabel had already finished her question. "How are things with Petra?"

Levi set his coffee mug down and narrowed his eyes. It wasn't her fault; she had no way of knowing that he and Petra were over, seeing as how Furlan respected his privacy and hadn't mentioned it to her. "I don't know. Maybe you should ask her that." Levi finally replied. A bizarre silence ensued; the tension so think, one could cut it with a knife.

Isabel picked up on his tone, instantly putting two and two together. "I'm sorry…"

Truthfully, she wasn't surprised to hear that they were through. It was a long time coming, foreshadowed by constant arguments and ominous periods of avoiding one another.

"Don't be." Levi assured. "It wasn't your fault." By all means, he was mostly over it anyway. Mostly.

Furlan thought a distraction was necessary. He didn't want their reunion to be spoiled by the memory of Petra and her dysfunctional relationship with his best friend. "Halloween is coming up." He nodded good-naturedly. "Are you heading out with the track team to volunteer, Izzy?"

Isabel had been a talented track and field athlete since middle school. Her entire world revolved around her main event; the pole vault. Given her exceptional abilities, the coaches had encouraged her to give the high jump a try as well, an event she also happened to excel at. "Yeah." She nodded. "This year we're volunteering at Ragako Elementary with the cross country runners."

"Do you already have a costume picked out?"

"Of course!" Isabel beamed. "I'm going to be Little Red Riding Hood."

"That suits you." Levi commented.

"Are you guys volunteering?" She asked.
"Yeah, the tennis players are going to St. Lukes." Furlan responded. "I think I'm gonna go as a pirate."

"Lame! You were a pirate last year." Isabel yawned.

"I pull it off really well, though." Furlan retorted. "Besides, the only other costume I have is Jason Voorhees, and that's not very kid or church friendly."

"Then get a new one." Isabel suggested, using a somewhat serious tone.

"You're telling me a pirate is church friendly?" Levi mocked. "Sword fights, awful hygiene, raping, pillaging, shooting off canons, battling other ships. Yeah. All of that just seems so wholesome."

"Now you're just sucking the fun out of it." Furlan deadpanned. "I'll consider getting a new costume… if, and only if, you go with us."

"I'm gonna sit this one out." Levi replied.

"What?" Isabel yelped incredulously. "Levi! You really should go! It's your senior year! You don't want to disappoint the kids, do ya?"

Levi looked up upon hearing the single syllable word, kids. It spawned an uneasy feeling from within.

"Come on, man." Furlan chimed in. "I still have that Freddy Fazbear mask in my room if you need a little prop or something."


"Something is better than nothing."

"Just think about it." Isabel proposed. "We can all meet up at my place afterward and get wasted."

Furlan shot her a disapproving look, unsure if she was being serious or if she was joking. He then glanced over at Levi and was relieved to see that his spirits had been lifted, even if there was only a slight change in his expression.

Isabel, once again, had saved the day. The girl had a gift for cheering up those in her tight-knit group, as evidenced by Levi's amused smirk.

"Getting wasted after going to church." Levi remarked sarcastically. "Now that's something worth considering."

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University of Trost

9:04am.

Mikasa fiddled with her pen and notebook, ready for class to start.

Sasha hadn't shown up yet, however, it wasn't unusual for her to arrive five or so minutes late.

What was unusual was the absence of their professor, who would normally be waiting at his desk after having arrived several minutes' prior, greeting his students as they waltzed on in.
Traffic, inclement weather, an argument with the Missus; it didn't matter what the excuse was, for Mikasa hoped he would take his time.

Today's lecture would be diving into paraphiliac behaviors, a topic that no one was thrilled about and made even the most inquisitive of minds feel rather uncomfortable. Perhaps he would spare them and just skip the material altogether.

No such luck.

The professor hurried inside the lecture hall and settled his material down at his desk. As he rummaged through several notes and turned on his laptop, Sasha sauntered inside, a half-eaten poptart in hand.

The late startup allowed for her and Mikasa to briefly engage in quiet chatter.

"Hey, Mika." Sasha said after mercilessly destroying the flaky, questionable substitute for a breakfast. She pulled up a seat and took out her notebook, flipping through a few pages in search of a fresh, clean space.

Marveling at the amount of crumbs on Sasha's jacket, Mikasa leaned back into her chair. "Ready to lose your appetite after today's lecture?" She deadpanned.

Sasha tried her best to muffle her laughter. "As if!"

It wasn't long before a fellow classmate, and old high school friend, had joined them, pulling up a seat opposite Sasha.

"Sooo…" Jean grinned, slipping his phone into his pocket after hastily replying to a text. "You ladies got any plans for Halloween?"

"Connie and I are going to this frat…” Sasha was cut off by Jean before she could finish.

"Of course you are." Jean scoffed. "Anyway, I was more interested in what Mikasa had to say. I only included you for the sake of being polite."

"Rude." Sasha sneered.

Mikasa wiped a few remaining crumbs off Sasha's jacket, ridding the soft fabric of a few stragglers. "I'm volunteering that night with the other tennis players." She informed them. "We'll be handing out candy to trick or treaters at a local church."

"You're not hanging out with Eren?" Jean chuckled, partially confused.

"I called him the other night and asked him if he'd be okay with it." Mikasa replied. "If anything, he encouraged me to go. He thinks it'll be character building." She smiled, thinking fondly back to their conversation. She appreciated his support, and felt less guilty upon hearing that he and Armin planned on meeting up at his grandfather's place to hang out and carry on their tradition of watching trashy horror movies. "Besides," she continued, "Halloween isn't that big of a deal. Not like Christmas or New Year's."

Sasha nodded in agreement. "Fair point."

Before Jean could come up with some snarky comment to stir the pot, the professor had finished firing up the powerpoint and was ready to begin.
The trio looked forward, and braced themselves for what was to come.

After sitting through fifty minutes of lecture material revolving around despicable acts of sexual depravity, Sasha and Jean were exhausted, hoping none of the aforementioned subject matter would appear on the next test.

Mikasa was unfazed, figuring there were other, more significant things to worry about.

Like Eren's safety and well-being.

As she exited the lecture hall with Sasha, the poor gal still in recovery, Mikasa remembered something.

"I'm thinking about going to Party City to get a costume later tonight after tennis practice." She stated casually. "Care to join me?"

Jean happened to be right behind them, listening in. "Want me to tag along?" He joked.

"Sorry, Jean." Sasha sighed, rolling her eyes. "Girls only."

"Whatever." Jean smirked. "But don't get something lame, like a lady bug or bumble bee."

"Well, it needs to be kid-friendly." Mikasa's thoughts were overcome with a few ideas.

"So... I'm assuming that means a sexy maid costume is out of the question." Jean laughed.

Mikasa narrowed her eyes in disdain. "I think it's stupid that some people use Halloween as an excuse to oversexualize women in such a demeaning and salacious way."

"It's all in good fun, Mikasa." Jean winked.

"I can picture you in something cute!" Sasha cooed. "Like Minnie Mouse! Minnie Mouse Mikasa!"

"Think the kids would like that?" Mikasa pondered the suggestion.

"Of course!" Sasha replied enthusiastically. "You can't go wrong with Disney characters!"

"All right." Mikasa agreed, satisfied with her decision. 'Twas another thing she could cross off her to-do list. She turned to face Sasha one last time before the two parted ways. "I'll drive. Just meet me in my room at around 7:00."

"Sweet!" Sasha nodded. "I'll see you then. Good luck in Biology!"

"Thanks."

With that, Mikasa headed to her next class, a subtle pep in each step.
"Welcome, ladies and gentlemen! Tonight, the Stohess University Hawks will be taking on the Sina U Titans!"

The announcement boomed from several speakers inside the gymnasium of Stohess University's sports complex, firing up the wild crowd, who by now were more than ready for the highly anticipated match to begin.

Among the stands of clamoring enthusiasts were fans representing their schools, alumni, family members, correspondents for the school newsletter, and finally, a green-eyed brunet by the name of Eren Jaeger.

The net was set up. Refs were discussing rules and regulations with the coaches. Several athletes had hustled onto the court.

Ymir cursed as she pulled her hair back into a low ponytail.

Hitch took a seat among the other subs, stretching out both arms in an effort to relieve some anxiety.

With the conclusion of the national anthem, Annie stripped down to her jersey and volleyball shorts. The tight and overwhelmingly short shorts reminded her of several instances back in high school when classmates of the masculine persuasion would make cat-calls and say stupid shit like "Nice ass!"

Thank god those days are over.

When she looked up, she discovered someone had kept true to their word.

Eren smiled and waved. He cupped his hands above his mouth, as if trying to call out to her.

She could barely make out what he was saying, but figured it had to have been something along the lines of "Good Luck."

She returned his supportive gesture with a slight nod and subtle smirk.

He actually came.

A fellow teammate tapped her on the shoulder, motioning for her to join them in a quick team huddle. It served as a reminder that now wasn't the time to get distracted.

The ref blew his whistle. The crowd had died down a bit. Both teams readied themselves in their
respective formations.

Annie closed her eyes and let out an exhaustive breath.

It was game time.

Well into the fifth set, the Stohess lady hawks were making a comeback.

The first couple sets were close, but ultimately, it was Sina U who had come out on top. Following the unnerving losses, Stohess managed to pull through and clinch the victory for the third and fourth sets, leveling the entire match in the process.

The score was 7-7, Sina's ball.

First one to 15 wins.

It was still anybody's game.

The server on Sina U's team looked up, preparing to initiate an all-out war from here on out.

The gal had been gifted with an unfathomable amount of strength, unleashing her wrath upon the Stohess hawks with an almost unstoppable serve.

Key word: *almost.*

"Mine!" Stohess' star athlete, Ymir Eriksson, shouted.

The mighty amazon swiftly retaliated the serve with a hasty bump, hitting the ball with pinpoint accuracy after diving forward in a dramatic fashion. Although marginally better on offense, Ymir was lethal playing defensively, sending shockwaves of terror into the hearts of the opposing team.

Annie swooped in just in time to set the ball high above her head, allowing for another fellow teammate to follow through and spike it mercilessly over the net.

The risky play had proved to be a success; the satisfyingly sweet sound of the ball making contact with the floor, earning them the much needed point and opportunity to turn things in their favor.

*Thump.*

8-7.

Stohess' ball now.

Hitch was subbed in, sauntering onto the court after admiring her brows in a small vanity mirror. Annie assumed the position as server, mentally and physically preparing herself as she walked over behind the thin red line. The crowd piped down, nothing more than light chatter stemming from both sides of the stands. She managed to block everything out, steadying her hands.

Somewhere in the crowd, Eren was practically on the edge of his seat, hands clasped together, hoping for the best. For the majority of the match, the two seats to his left had been empty; up until about five minutes prior as two familiar faces settled themselves inside the unclaimed seats.

His roommate Reiner appeared seemingly from out of nowhere, nudging his shoulder and greeting him with a cool "What's up, Eren?"
Oddly enough, he was familiar with Annie, having attended the same high school as the petite blonde. However, the main reason he was in attendance at all was at Bertolt's behest, who came with the intentions of showing his support.

"I wasn't aware that you two had already met." Reiner said, looking back and forth between the shorter and the taller. "Small world, I guess."

Little did he know, the two brunets shared a common goal.

Annie.

"How's it going, Bertolt?" Eren asked, popping his head up in an effort to look over Reiner, the stocky blond positioned between them.

"Good. You?" Bertolt forced out, not wanting to engage in any sort of conversation with him. He had already been skeptical enough of Eren, but now that he was here on his own accord, further convinced him that the pole vault hot shot's intentions were anything but pure.

Before Eren could reply, Reiner shushed them both. "Annie's about to serve."

Well aware that everyone on the team was counting on her to perform her best, Annie sealed her eyes shut. It was beyond critical that they win this match; the victory would guarantee them a spot in the semi-finals.

Everything was riding on her ability to keep it together and pick up a few points to end this match once and for all.

She firmly planted her feet shoulder length apart.

Before she could raise her arms at chest level in preparation to shoot the ball into the air and blast it with the strike of her palm, her thoughts were abruptly invaded by the memory of her father. His face, his words; broken promises and empty meanings.

Mostly absent from her life, there was one short phrase that inexplicably stuck with her.

**Annie, stand your ground.**

**No. Not here.**

**Stand your ground.**

*Why... why do I have to think of you now?*

Annie almost felt dizzy, fighting back tears, her knees faintly trembling.

She looked up, back to where Eren was sitting.

He was smiling that same goofy grin; an expression that she'd grown to adore, though she wouldn't admit that out loud.

Somehow, his presence had calmed her, easing the tension flowing rampantly throughout her body. She deeply exhaled, instantly soothed by the sudden amount of control she possessed.

She felt invincible; like nothing could stand in her way.

After bending her knees and leaning slightly forward, she tossed the ball up into the air before
attacking it with all her might, sending it flying past Sina's right side hitter and middle blocker.

Both had failed to rush to the ball in time for a counter attack, thus earning Stohess another point.

9-7.

The crowd cheered, and Eren began chanting Annie's name. It wasn't long until Reiner and Bertolt followed suit.

Annie managed to pick up three more points for Stohess, bringing the score to 12-8. The final game was in full swing, with the opposing teams aggressively volleying back and forth.

Ymir struck the ball down after heeding the opportunity from Hitch's perfectly timed set, spiking it towards the outer edge of Sina's side of the court, a nearly unreachable range.

13-8.

Two more points were all they needed.

Ymir was up to serve for Stohess. A smirk formed at the corner of mouth before she blasted the ball over the net into Sina territory.

The lady Titans in the back row of their formation stood nary a chance at defending against her ferocity.

14-8.

One more point and Stohess would be in the semi-finals.

Ymir once again sent the ball Sina's way, but was surprised by what soon followed after the immaculate serve.

Sina managed to pull off a decisive and well-thought out defense tactic, refusing to go down without a fight.

The counterattack momentarily caught Stohess off guard, everything seemingly happening at an increased speed. Annie acted quickly and urgently dove forward, bumping the ball closer back to the net and allowing for a fellow teammate to set the ball in preparation for what she hoped would be the game winning hit.

Given the rotation, Hitch was next up to be the right side hitter.

Annie, still sprawled on the floor, watched in anticipation as the ball flew in Hitch's direction, beads of sweat trickling down from her forehead.

With the finesse of a graceful swan, Hitch sprung upwards to reach for the ball, spiking it past the blocks attempted by the opposing team.

The ball crashed against the floor, followed by a light thump.

15-8.

Stohess University Hawks win.

And the crowd goes wild! Aaaaaaaaaa!
After the match had ended, Eren stuck around for a little while longer, leaning back into his seat among the stands.

Reiner and Bertolt took off, saying something about "a party with some dimes on sorority row."

Bertolt seemed a bit reluctant to leave, but Reiner insisted he tag along as a wingman, taunting him with the prospect of getting laid.

Eren took a moment to reply to a couple texts after they had gone. Armin was randomly asking for tips about learning how to drive stick shift. His mother had sent him the usual "goodnight, I love you" messages.

He sure as hell was grateful for the people in life.

Eren stood up from his seat and threw on his jacket, ready to head back to his dorm.

As he ventured outside, he passed a few of the volleyball players and their families, each squealing in celebration, still clad in their uniforms.

Hitch was playing the goodie goodie, upstanding daughter; her alter ego whenever her parents were in town. They presented her with flowers and congratulatory kisses on the cheek.

Ymir's parents were taller than Eren had imagined; she hailed from a family of giants. They commended her for earning player of the match, whilst cracking awkward jokes about how athletic genes must run in their family.

Both Ymir and Hitch waved to Eren as he walked by. When he came across the main entrance to the sports complex, he suddenly realized something. Quickly turning around, he scanned the hallway in search of Annie.

The entire volleyball team was loitering and socializing outside the gymnasium with their families. The plethora of mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, even aunts and uncles made it seem like there was one big reunion going on.

Amid all the lovey-dovey familial chaos, Annie appeared. She bid her teammates farewell and walked onward, presumably back to her apartment.


Maybe they were all too busy and couldn't make it. Seeing her all alone made Eren felt guilty, and he vowed never to take his parent's presence at his pole vault competitions for granted ever again, no matter how crazy his mom would cheer and chant for him in the stands.

Annie was incidentally heading in his direction, giving him the opportunity to congratulate her. "Hey, Annie." He smiled. "Congrats on the win!"

Annie wearily tilted her head. "Thanks."

"You kicked ass out there!" He enthused. "Your serves were flawless."

"It was a team effort." She replied, shrugging off the compliment. "I'm glad that we're advancing to the semi-finals."

"Hey," Eren remarked encouragingly, "all you gotta do is say the word and I'm there."

"You don't have to."
"But I want to. I'm your number one fan." Eren paused after making the joke, attempting to correct himself in earnest. "I mean, um, unless your parents are your number one fans… you know…?" He nervously tried to laugh it off.

Annie faintly beamed, briefly looking away. "That's nice of you. My mom usually makes it to my games, but she had to work tonight. She's been putting in a lot of overtime lately and I think it's because of the upcoming holiday season." Her expression suddenly changed, a hint of sadness in her voice. "My dad said he was going to come, but as usual, he didn't show up. He called me after the game and promised he'd go to our next match."

Eren sensed she was hurt, in need of a little consolation. For the longest time, the Annie he had been given the privilege of knowing was tough as nails, reserved, and exceptionally mature; not one to sweat the small stuff or let trivial things bother her.

But the truth is, everyone has a weakness, a soft spot, an Achilles' heel.

Everyone has their breaking point and in Annie's case, it stemmed from her strained relationship with her father.

She wasn't your stereotypical girl with daddy issues, refusing to give into age-old acts like looking for love in all the wrong places and seeking the attention and approval of others in an effort to feel wanted by someone.

It all started to make sense. The pieces were coming together like a difficult puzzle.

Eren realized that Annie built up walls, sheltering her from intimacy of any kind with anyone. Her defense mechanisms protected her from foolishly getting too attached and relying on someone, only for them to inevitably disappoint her and leave her heartbroken.

Eren looked down at her, captivated by bright blue eyes, wondering what secrets they held.

Without saying another word, he pulled her closer to him, locking her in a tender embrace.

Annie took a moment to gather her thoughts, her emotions completely out of whack, her heart lurching out of her chest. Before long, she reciprocated the gesture, placing her arms around him and resting her head against his chest.

They remained silent, holding onto each other and cherishing the warmth.

With the petite blonde still in his arms, he whispered to her gently. "I'll walk you home, Annie."

Annie pulled away and looked up. "It's a bit of a walk from here…"

Eren silenced her and refused to take no for an answer. "And what if someone tries to kidnap you?" He quipped, gently placing his jacket around her, hoping it would keep her warm once they began trekking outside.

"Then I'll kick their ass." Annie smirked. "I was trained in Muay Thai for twelve years."

"What if you're rusty?" Eren pried, his interest slightly piqued. He had no idea she practiced martial arts. Maybe she could teach him a thing or two.

"It's like riding a bicycle, Eren." She deadpanned.

"Well in any event..." Eren chuckled. "I'm still going with you." He motioned for her to take the lead
after she gave in.

They walked out of the facility, past a couple blocks featuring dormitories and student housing, along a curved sidewalk following a few winding roads. Plenty of others were still out and about, given that it was a Friday night and the clock hadn't even struck 10:00pm yet.

They remained quiet for the duration of the trip, both content with the peace that befell through the rustling of leaves and occasional hum of cars driving by.

Along the way, Eren felt a hand gently reach for his, grazing his wrist before tracing along the back of his own.

Annie interlaced their fingers together as Eren marveled at how small her hand was in comparison.

He felt his face turn red, hoping she couldn't see him under the dull street lights and faint moon beams.

But having her by his side, shoulder to shoulder, hand in hand was surprisingly comforting.

All Eren wanted to do was ensure her happiness.

Unbeknownst to him, however, he was slowly beginning to fall for her.
Take On Me

Saturday

University of Trost

Mikasa leaned against a chain link fence, wiping sweat from her brow before guzzling down a bottle of Evian water.

Levi was gathering the last of the tennis balls, some strewn about the court, others jumbled in a pile by the nets.

Their third training session, for the third consecutive week in a row, proved to be yet another success, allowing for Levi to fine-tune his already well-developed skills, and for Mikasa to gain valuable insight from shadowing the best UT had to offer. To further convey the efficiency of their newfound commitment, Rico had already hinted at the prospect of being doubles partners on several occasions; an ambition Mikasa was determined to fulfill.

Her thoughts on the matter collided with blurred visions of Biology and Math homework that still needed to be done. The workload this time around was immensely overbearing. No doubt about it, she'd have to lock herself away from civilization for the entire weekend to get it all done.

Amid all the necessary brooding, her eyes became fixated on Levi as he began stowing away his belongings into a duffel bag.

Something... something she didn't quite have the words for... felt off. Mikasa thought Levi had been acting strange for the last few days, but ultimately shrugged it off as yet another bizarre part of his personality. She figured his unusual tendencies could keep things interesting; his quirks and endearing apathy in contrast with the crazy and colorful qualities of others in her small circle of friends.

By god, every single one of her friends were weird in their own way. Regardless, she loved them all, wholeheartedly embracing what some might consider flaws, because they were real. Mikasa couldn't stand people who were dishonest or disloyal; believing it to be impossible for one to stoop lower than a liar or coward.

Levi, the mystery shrouded behind his calm but quiet exterior, and the mutual respect they held for one another, reserved a special place in her heart. She felt comfortable enough to share personal things with him; topics ranging from friends and family to whether or not animals had souls had been brought up by now (even if the latter was mostly a joke).

But one thing was for sure...

They never talked about Eren.

Mikasa wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing... or if it meant anything at all.

Perhaps she was overthinking it, and when she replayed the memory of that day over again in her head, it only seemed to further saturate an already murky concept; skewing her grasp of the situation.

She remembered that she wasn't able to introduce them to each other, as Levi took off before Eren could even realize she had any company at all.
She could accept that Levi was antisocial, and generally wasn’t too fond of meeting new people. It's not like the guy was a paranoid hermit or anything.

Either way, none of that seemed to matter. Whatever had him preoccupied before must have been quelled with, what she assumed was, sheer power of will.

Or... something close to that.

Mikasa found comfort in watching him stroll along the tennis court while clad in a light hoodie. He appeared more alive and fully engaged, while embracing the court as his second home.

It relieved Mikasa of any second-guessing, deeming it unnecessary to worry about his well-being.

Levi was keenly aware he was being watched. He glanced over and briefly paused as their eyes met. Curious as to what she was thinking, he gave her a small smirk. "Penny for your thoughts?" He finally said.

Mikasa shrugged, before remembering the impending holiday only days away. "Well..." She tilted her head and swung her bag over her shoulder. "Have you thought about Monday?"

Levi rolled his eyes. He ultimately revealed that, yes, he would be going with the rest of the team to volunteer that night, but he wouldn't hesitate to put the beat-down on any kid that wandered too close.

"I knew you'd come around." Mikasa smiled, wondering if he was joking about the last part or not. It was hard to tell because the tone in his voice was so unnervingly casual. "You got a costume picked out?"

"Hell no." Levi replied, duly noting her amused expression. "I'm just wearing my uniform."

Mikasa sighed. "Why does that not surprise me?" She muttered as they began walking to the parking lot.

Levi reversed the question, avenging himself from her snarky remark. "Oh yeah? What about you?" His face wore a look of disdain, but he realized that he’d grown to admire her sarcasm and offbeat sense of humor. It often mirrored that of his own. "You are dressing up, aren't you?"

Mikasa raised an eyebrow. "Guess you'll find out soon enough."

Koharu Sushi – Sina Downtown Plaza

"What a boring night."

Ymir let out an enormous yawn, and leaned against the front desk of, what was hailed as, the best sushi venue downtown. The popular restaurant also happened to be her part-time job, a steady source of income for an otherwise broke college student.

Hitch appeared from behind, tapping her on the shoulder. "Quit slackin' off."

"Coming from you, that's just funny!" Ymir scoffed, marveling at how unusually quiet it was for a Saturday night. "Hopefully it picks up soon. I'm dying over here."

"It should, but who knows." Hitch sighed. "There was some debate going on at the city hall for the upcoming gubernatorial election and I heard there was a baseball game at Sina Stadium, soooooo I'm
assuming traffic is a mess."

"Damn." Was all Ymir had the energy to say.

The two hostesses continued to chat, until they were graced with the presence of what could have been Stohess University's hottest freshman couple.

Reiner Braun swaggered inside the fancy little sushi restaurant, the beautiful nymph Krista Lenz on his arm.

"Sweet pacific rim job!" Ymir blurted out, hoping her boss wasn't around.

"Do you kiss your mother with that mouth?!" Hitch muttered, gritting her teeth.

"Actually, no I don't." Ymir stated bluntly. "But don't worry," she whispered seductively, leaning in, "I've kissed lots of women with this mouth."

"Gross." Hitch barked. "Keep it together, Eriksson!"

Ymir… was trying.

Reiner and his leading lady stepped forward, arm and arm, looking as if it were their freaking wedding day.

"Table for two?" Hitch asked. *They're so cute, I could throw up.*

Hitch had met Reiner through their mutual friend, Annie, and she recalled meeting Krista once... possibly twice... though she *might* have been too drunk to remember the details.

"Hey there, Hitch." Reiner nodded. "Yes. Just the lovely lady and I, tonight."

Krista swooned, her entire face lighting up. "You're sweet, babe."

Ymir wanted to barf, glaring at the football tool.

"Hey, wait." Reiner remarked curiously, pointing at Ymir. "You're another one of Annie's teammates, right?"

"Yup." Ymir nodded.

"I gotta say," he continued, slightly star-struck, "you were amazing in last night's game!"

"She was player of the match." Hitch chimed in, winking in Ymir's direction.

"Right on!" Reiner grinned.

Ymir's eyes were locked on Krista, as Reiner droned on about... something. Whatever bullshit compliments he was giving her flew right over her head, as she shamelessly admired his date with lustful eyes. He promptly had her attention, however, when he formally introduced her to his lovely female companion; jolting her back to reality and interrupting the naughty little thoughts dancing around in the dark corners of her dirty mind.

"This is my girlfriend, Krista."

Girlfriend.
"Not for long, dude…"

"Nice to meet you." Krista smiled, shaking hands with a baffled Ymir. Her voice was smooth like honey, her smile oddly contagious.

Ymir despised people who were over the top formal; she equated them with ass-kissers and major suck-ups.

But this girl, Krista Lenz… was different.

Sure, Ymir was a sucker for cute little blondes, but she wouldn't allow herself to be blinded by what she thought was blatantly obvious. She wasn't buying the act, believing the goddess of perfection had something to hide.

Hitch rolled her eyes, knowing full well Ymir was checking Krista out. She hastily pulled out a couple menus and urged the blond duo to follow her. "If you'll just follow me."

"After you, miss." Reiner implored gentlemanly.

With that, Krista stepped in front and followed behind Hitch, the stocky Reiner in tow.

Ymir watched as they settled themselves inside a cozy booth, the ambiance of the upscale restaurant setting the mood for something romantic.

What? Is the guy gonna pop the question or something?!

Hitch returned shortly after, taking note of the combination of jealousy and disgust on Ymir's face. "I warned ya, Eriksson." She sighed. "Krista Lenz is off limits."

Ymir smirked slyly. "All's fair in love and war."

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The Springer Household – Ragako Neighborhood

"No scope!" Connie shouted enthusiastically, sounding like a kid who had finally learned to tie his shoe. "I'm on a roll tonight!"

Saturday nights didn't get any better than this. His parents were out of town. Old high school buddies, Marco and Mina, were visiting; the trio playing Call of Duty in the living room.

And finally, Sasha had agreed to come over.

"Ughhh!" Mina groaned, pressing random buttons on the PS4 controller. "I have no idea what I'm doing!"

"You'll get better with practice." Marco remarked encouragingly, a controller in hand as well.

A fourth voice entered the exchange.

"Connie! Your microwave is so confusing!" Sasha yelped, on the verge of a panic attack. "It has like a million buttons!" She fiddled around with a few numbers on the pad before opening the door, only to be heartbroken by such a dismal discovery. The popcorn she had been waiting on was reduced to burnt shards of shit!

A trail of smoke soon followed, hurling Sasha into a coughing fit.
"AGHHHHH!"

"Connie, I think your lover is in need of some assistance." Mina giggled, briefly looking back at a flustered Sasha. The red-headed damsel in distress rushed to grab some towels in an effort to fan out the smoke.

Connie nearly dropped his controller upon hearing that. "We're not together!" He cried out dramatically.

"Whatever you say." Mina winked, using the opportunity to steal Connie's kill. "I got one!"

"Marco, please remind your girlfriend that women should only speak when spoken to." Connie retorted.

"That's sexist!" Marco and Mina gasped in unison.

Connie began cackling maniacally, before unleashing his wrath and going full beast-mode. "I'm on fire!" He gloated, flaunting his kill streak by indulging in random insults and incessant shit-talk.

Marco mercilessly put an end to his kill streak (and trash-talking) before voicing a somewhat alarming concern. "Um, is Sasha all right?"

"Yeah, she's just chillin' in the kitchen. Where she belongs." Connie joked.

"So all women belong in the kitchen?!" Mina exclaimed.

"No! Not like that!" Connie snorted. "Because her stomach is like a bottomless pit! What I meant was that the kitchen is her natural habitat! Ya know? Cuz there's food and-"

"GUYS! I BURNT THE POPCORN!" Sasha shouted in earnest, groaning in defeat.

Unfazed by all the madness, Connie offered a consolation of sorts. "I'll be there in a sec, Sasha." He called out. "The game's almost over."

After he shot up from the couch and headed into the kitchen, Marco and Mina exchanged looks, observing the offbeat couple from the safety of the living room.

Sasha was still losing her marbles. Connie was trying to calm her down and fan out the smoke before the detector could go off.

'Twas a sight to behold, indeed.

"They'll make cute babies one day." Mina sighed.

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**Random Empty Parking Lot – Shiganshina Neighborhood**

Armin Arlert sat nervously in the driver's seat of a red Toyota Corolla, waiting for instructions.

Jean Kirstein sat in the passenger seat, bored half to death.

Why he had agreed to teach the aryan coconut how to drive stick shift was a mystery to him. Ten dollars didn't seem like hardly enough, and the fact that they had been friends for years wasn't all that notable either.

In all fairness, Jean wasn't exactly Armin's first choice. He had initially asked Eren to be his driving
instructor, however...

Eren regretfully declined because his schedule was bitch-slapped with pole vault training, homework, studying, and Mikasa.

Newly single, all out of pringles, and not in the mood to mingle, Jean figured he had nothing else to do.

He could sacrifice one measly Saturday night to help out a friend.

"So," Jean yawned, readjusting his seat belt, "you ready or what?"

Armin nodded. "Ready as I'll ever be."

"Don't chicken out, man. It's just a matter of knowing when to shift gears and when to use the clutch… there's nothing to it, really."

"R-right."

Jean collected himself and took a deep breath. "Go ahead and put the key in the ignition."

Armin did as he was told.

The engine purred like a kitten as it came to life.

"Okay, next step..." Jean said, looking over at Armin's hands. One was on the wheel, the other was on the stick. "Right foot on the brake. Left foot on the clutch."

"Okay..."

"Now you're going to shift into first gear. Let go of the brake, let go of the clutch, and gently push on the gas."

Armin obeyed his orders. He was successful in getting the car to move but not realizing the pressure he was giving the gas, the car lurched too quick. Terrified, Armin hit the brakes without even thinking of the clutch and the car stopped dead in its tracks.

"What just happened?" Armin asked innocently.

"You stalled it." Jean sighed.

"I'll try it again." Armin was determined to drive the blasted thing into submission one way or another.

"By the way," Jean chuckled, "Was your offer ten dollars by the hour orrrrr ten dollars for the whole lesson?"

"Jean!"

"I'm kidding." Kind of, anyway. "Start the engine. Remember what I told you."

"Right!"

Armin stalled the vehicle once more, jerking them both forward a bit.

"Shit." Jean muttered. "This is going to be a long night."
"Furby, I just ordered the pizza!" Isabel announced, joining him in the living room after hanging up her cell phone. "Did Levi reply to your text?"

"Again with the Furby nickname?" Furlan groaned. "Anyway, yeah, he said he'll be on his way soon."

"Sweet!" Isabel hopped on the couch and turned on the TV. "I'm glad he's off tonight."

While channel surfing through several run-of-the-mill news networks, shamelessly trashy reality shows, and corny soap operas, she stumbled upon the music stations.

Starting at channel 800, there were numerous collections of Jazz, Country, Pop and... *Christmas* music?!

She didn't hesitate for a second.

Furlan looked up; a look of pure terror etched on his face. "No! It's wayyyy too early for Christmas music! Change the channel!"

"My house, my rules." Isabel retorted, as Nat King Cole's rendition of *Deck the Halls* played in the background.

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**The Hoover Household – Marley Neighborhood**

A freshly showered young man of about six feet lay sprawled on his bed, staring up at the ceiling of his old bedroom. He hadn't been home in what felt like ages, and if he were to be completely honest, he preferred it that way. Shirtless, wearing only a pair of black slacks, he looked over at the tan colored sweater lying beside him. He swore the inanimate object was mocking him.

Bertolt was informed by his parents that guests would be joining them for dinner that night. Special guests.

Ms. Alexandra Ivanov and her daughter, Annie Leonhart.

*I have to tell her soon... just not tonight.*

He sprang forward and rushed to get dressed, taking one last look in the mirror before stepping out. As he headed downstairs, his thoughts were encumbered with incessant anxieties.

*But if not tonight, then when?*

He was greeted by his parents before offering to help with the finishing touches to the ornate decor in the dining room.

Once the table had been set, it wasn't long until the long-time friends to the Hoover family had arrived. The ringing of the doorbell was ceremoniously accompanied by the barking of two miniature dachshunds, wagging their tails as they trotted in unison to the door. After cordially welcoming the guests into their home, sharing friendly hugs and typical "long time, no see" adages, they were soon invited to gather around the dining table. Dinner was served and polite, casual conversation ensued.

Mrs. Hoover was the first to speak after saying grace. "Bertolt mentioned you had a game last night, Annie."
Annie nodded. "That's right." She paused for a moment, taking a light sip of water. "We won."

"They're heading into the semi-finals the weekend after next." Bertolt remarked encouragingly.

Annie's mother hid a guilty frown, but wanted to show she was proud of her daughter's accomplishments. She reached out and gently placed her arm around Annie in support. "Unfortunately, I was called in to work and couldn't make it." She turned to address the entire table. "But from what I heard, she certainly did not disappoint." She smiled and peered over at her blonde counterpart. "You're a starter for a reason."

"That's quite an impressive feat for someone in their first year." Mr. Hoover regarded favorably.

"Congratulations, Annie." Mrs. Hoover enthused.

"Thank you." Annie modestly accepted the praise and resumed eating. She refrained from avidly participating in any further conversations, avoiding eye contact while staring emptily at a corner between the walls.

Bertolt's eyes occasionally wandered to where she was sitting, sensing something was off.

She seemed withdrawn, as if troubled or preoccupied.

After dinner, his parents settled themselves in the den with Ms. Ivanov, continuing their discussions from before while enjoying a bottle of Merlot from the cellar.

Bertolt and Annie were alone in the kitchen, the privacy offering the perfect opportunity to pull her aside.

"Annie?" He asked, peering over the doorway to make sure no one was listening in. The laughter echoing from the den confirmed his precaution.

"Yeah?" She waited patiently for his inquiry, folding her arms across her chest.

"Are you okay?" He lowered his voice. "Is something bothering you?"

Annie looked away. Having known the guy for years, she felt comfortable confiding in him; entrusting him with things she often avoided sharing with her own mother. "I can't stop thinking about him." She finally relented.

Bertolt shoved his hands into his pockets. "Your dad?"

Annie nodded slowly. "He didn't show up last night. Not like that surprises me."

Bertolt was unsure of what to say, figuring the best thing he could do was lend her his ear and listen.

"Whatever." She muttered under her breath. "Maybe that's a good thing. It's always awkward when he and my mom both show up anyway. I'd rather neither of them show up at all."

"You don't mean that." Bertolt frowned.

Annie knew he was right, but refused to admit it in her state of resentment.

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**Jaeger Household – Shiganshina Neighborhood**

To say that Carla Jaeger was happy to have her only child back home from college for the weekend
was the understatement of the century.

She prepared his favorite dish for dinner, Spaghetti with garlic bread, and baked apple strudels for the occasion.

His father had been called into work at the last minute, but promised they would spend the next day together as a family. Eren was looking forward to going to a baseball game, while his mother wanted to go to the zoo.

Eren had to remind her that he wasn't ten years old anymore.

"But the tigers were your favorite when you were little!" She cooed, rummaging through an old family photo album. Watching her son progress from a baby to a young adolescent was what she considered one of the greatest privileges of her life.

Eren peered over her shoulder and glanced at several of the photos, some more embarrassing than others.

Carla's finger hovered over one fond Kodak moment. "Your first haircut." She smiled.

Eren cringed, his face similar to the expression he had in the photograph. "Ughhh."

"Here's us at the zoo." Carla chuckled, eyes glossing over the picture of a seven-year-old Eren gawking at a Bengal tiger, his little hands plastered on the glass.

"Good times. Good times." Eren nodded.

"There's you and Armin." She pointed at an image of the two boys on their first day at kindergarten. "How's he doing?"

"He's doing well." Eren replied. "He really likes his professors over at Ehrmich University."

"You should invite him over for dinner sometime soon." Carla proposed. "I always thought he was a nice boy."

"Will do."

Carla returned to the photo album, scanning through a few more pages. She paused on a snapshot from his high school graduation.

"There's you and Mikasa." She sighed. "You two were adorable in your little cap and gown attire."

Eren gulped. An overwhelming rush of emotions ranging from guilt to nostalgia consumed him.

"How's she been?" Carla asked curiously, with the assumption that the two were still going strong after nearly four years.

Silence waned in the air, as Eren pondered the complexities of his relationship. He had always been completely honest with his mother, but this time he was too ashamed to admit the truth…

That he felt they were drifting apart.

But even that was a lie.

Mikasa was unapologetically devoted to him. She truly loved him with every fiber of her being. He was the one having doubts; struggling with his unfaithfulness and coming to terms with the fact that
he was mysteriously drawn to Annie. He wouldn't let himself say it out loud, choosing to suffer in the silence of his own defiance.

"Good, mom." He finally replied. "She's been good."
Happy Halloween!

Halloween – Monday

St. Luke's Lutheran Church – Trost

"I'm not putting that damn thing on."

Levi narrowed his eyes and folded his arms in protest. Furlan had already suckered him into ditching the plain tennis uniform for a much friendlier and notable Disney character getup. Clad in a black shirt and red pants, he was one prop short of fulfilling his costume. Furlan ultimately ended up bribing the stubborn team captain with five dollars to complete the look and wear the Mickey Mouse ears.

"This is stupid…” Levi muttered, placing the ears gently atop his head.

"It's just for a couple hours." The attempted reassurance coming from his teammate offered little solace.

Furlan quickly pulled out his phone and snapped a photo, slipping it back into his pocket before Levi had time to react.

"Furlan… I swear to god…”

Levi was a mere hair away from tossing the ears to the side, and exchanging it for a hockey mask, bringing the horror legend Jason Voorhees to life while exacting his revenge with the swing of an ax on everybody in the room that looked at him funny. If these bastards wanted him to get into the holiday spirit, he'd show them something to be truly terrified of.

But then he remembered they were in a church.

If only the venue had been the library or some park; hell, anywhere but a church would have been fine.

"Wonder where the girls are at." A fellow teammate sighed.

The inside of the house of worship was adorned with elaborate décor. Pumpkins in all shapes and sizes were placed neatly along the hallways and on top a few tables. Cut outs and paper jack-o-lanterns hung from the ceiling, dangling above the main entrance and sanctuary. Some of the lights were tinted in orange and red hues. A crucifix could be seen positioned above the pulpit in the auditorium, erected as an exalted obelisk.

In what appeared to be the general waiting area, the perfect place to host the family-friendly gathering, Levi and Furlan joined their teammates and began preparing goodie bags, various trick-or-treating favors, and tickets for a UT Tennis sponsored raffle.

Furlan glanced over at Levi, watching as he tore open a giant bag of Hershey's kisses. Given that Levi (reluctantly) agreed to show some semblance of holiday spirit for the volunteering gig, Furlan held up his end of the bargain and swapped his raggedy and outdated pirate costume for a Kylo Ren costume instead.

_The kids oughta love this._ He thought.
Furthermore, seeing Levi in Mickey Mouse getup made the night a hundred times better already.

Before he could crack a joke with the raven-haired Halloween Grinch, the female squad had announced their arrival.

Rico was about fifteen minutes late, but with good reason. Several other members of the girl's team followed behind her after having hitched a ride via her Jeep Grand Cherokee.

Dressed as Alice in Wonderland, she strolled inside the ornate open space and greeted her fellow cohorts. A few of the others paused and took a double take, noting the absence of her rimless glasses. Without them resting above the bridge of her nose, she almost looked like a completely different person.

"Nice costume, Rico." Furlan commented as she positioned herself on one end of an oblong table, opposite him. She couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic or if that was some sort of compliment. The faint glimmer in his eye indicated the latter.

"Thanks." She replied, unaware of all the stares aimed directly her way. "You, too."

Levi hadn't realized the girls had arrived, his gaze fixated on a single wall.

The decorations of purple and orange streamers were unnervingly uneven and inconsistent, as if a toddler had been set loose and ransacked the entire arrangement. The chaotic display further attributed to his aggravation.

"We still have about half an hour to finish setting up before the families start pouring in." Levi forewarned, observing the stragglers gluing themselves to the walls as if unsure of what to do.

A small tap on the shoulder urging him to turn around interrupted his ungodly OCD thoughts.

Rico stood before him, a curious smirk on her face. "Surprised to see you in a costume, Levi."

"Laugh all you want, Rico," Levi huffed. "Nice to know one of us is enjoying this."

"Oh, believe me," Rico mused. "There's more to it than you think." The sarcasm in her tone bordered on the sadistic. She turned away from him, her eyes wandering through the mixing and mingling of their teammates.

She spotted the opposing object of her amusement and gestured for Levi to look.


Mikasa was the anthropomorphic Disney character incarnate.

The Minnie to his Mickey.

Furlan seemed to take notice of the duo's unexpected matching attire. He approached Levi and Rico from behind, muffling his laughter.

"Did you two plan this or something??" He cackled, marveling at how fitting the whole situation was.

Levi was rendered speechless, still staring at the dame from his position.

"This has to be some kind of joke…" He mumbled, his remark averting Furlan and Rico's ears.
It wasn't long until everyone else came to realize that the pair had complementary costumes. Mikasa had yet to notice, still tending to the raffle ticket booth.

"Awwh, that's cute!"

"Why are they matching? That's weird."

"I bet they feel awkward…"

"This is definitely going on Instagram."

"Mickey and Minnie Mouse, huh?"

Amid all the banter stemming from a few huddles spaced out sporadically in the airy room, Mikasa finally looked over at Levi and… what should have been his tennis uniform. She was puzzled to discover that they were inadvertently donning what most would assume to be a couple's ensemble.

She fidgeted with her mouse ears, and thrust her shoulders back slightly. On the one hand, she wanted to commend him for not being a square and ditching the uniform. On the other hand, she was curious as to what made him choose Mickey Mouse of all things.

As Levi suddenly moved to approach her, she felt her whole body stiffen.

She internally chided herself for the inexplicable tension creeping up on her like an itch one couldn't scratch.

"You know," Levi began, "There are plenty of ways to admire someone, Mikasa. A simple compliment would have been just fine."

"Oh yeah?" Mikasa scoffed. "As opposed to what?"

"Stalkery. Obsession." He replied, shifting himself so they were face to face. "But I guess imitation is the sincerest form of flattery."

Mikasa rolled her eyes. "Ass."

A line of families with kids, parents supervising their respective children from preschool age onward, quickly formed after the church doors had opened up. It was long enough to extend back outside, curving along the sidewalk marked near the building.

Levi and Mikasa stood at the same booth (at the insistence of Rico and Furlan, because "Mickey and Minnie Mouse go together like Peanut Butter and Jelly!"), passing out candy to the cheery, enthusiastic youngsters as they shuffled along the line, bursting with what Levi thought was too much energy for not having eaten any candy yet.

Boy, these foolish parents were going to be in for one gigantic shitstorm when they returned home. What with kids bouncing around, climbing atop furniture, and jumping on their beds like barbaric animals.

A little girl in a fairy princess costume sprang forward for Levi and Mikasa's booth, eyes wide with a genuinely pure and innocent curiosity only a child could possess.

"Woah!" She gasped, tugging on her mother's shirt. "Look! It's Mickey and Minnie Mouse!"

Another kid clad in a T-Rex costume, oddly enough the girl's twin sister, followed behind their
mother, seemingly shocked as well. "Are you guys married?" She asked, looking at a stunned Mikasa.

Mikasa's eyes widened, totally unprepared for the random question, although the answer was clear.

Levi on the other hand, was quick to reply. "No, we're not." The look on his face suggested the night was taking a toll on his patience.

"But Micky and Minnie are married in real life!" The fairy princess blurted out.

Mikasa gave the little girl half a smile. While she couldn't speak for Mick-, er, Levi, she was able to see the humor in all this; the silver lining to an otherwise serious contender for what was now in the running for the most awkward moment of her young life.

Except, there was a tiny part of her that didn't feel too awkward regarding the unintentional matching. On the contrary, a tiny… maybe miniscule… no… microscopic part of her… enjoyed this…?

It was that moment that forged the realization of how similar she and Levi really were. The littlest, most trivial things somehow stood out the most. Their sarcasm and shared sense of humor. Their passion and dedication to their training. Even the color of their eyes.

Wait.

Mikasa peered over at Levi, hoping her glance would go unnoticed.

They were both leaning against their stools, arms folded across their chests, issuing the same blank expression, and ultimately uniformed with a slight tilt of the right shoulder.

As if the fact that they were emulating Disney's most prized, darling couple wasn't enough to raise suspicion.

By god, they were two halves of the same person.

A couple hours later, the festivities had concluded, ushering in a small group of church staff members thanking the UT Tennis for all their support. The transition to cleaning up rogue streamers and trails of candy wrappers commenced shortly thereafter. Levi was the first to begin a much-needed sweep, a broom and duster in each hand. Furlan followed suit, as did Rico; the latter unbothered with knowing that meant the other girls, dependent on her for a ride home, were forced into staying and helping out with cleanup.

While tending to a musty stain on one of the table tops near the foyer, Levi had no qualms deflecting any winks and jokes being thrown his way by a pestering Furlan, the hub of his suggestive jokes centered on the adorable Mikasa Mouse.

He hinted at inviting her to Isabel's kickback repeatedly, to which Levi simply ignored.

Figuring his long-time friend wouldn't do anything drastic other than continue to make snide remarks and taunt him, Levi shrugged his poorly executed puns and witticisms off, calling his bluff.

Or… so he thought.

"Hey, Mikasa," Furlan queried, "Levi and I are going to a friends' after this. If you don't have any other plans, you should come along."
Levi paused, glaring at Furlan's smug face with murderous intent.

"Oh." Mikasa turned to address both of her teammates, unsure who she was really talking to. "Okay." She agreed.

Unbeknownst to her, Furlan wasn't quite done torturing his vertically challenged friend. "Cool. I'd offer you a ride and all, but I gotta make a couple stops before I head over there, sooooo I'm sure Levi would be happy to give you a ride." He finished his sadistic verbiage with a wink aimed at the Mickey Mouse fanatic. "Right, Levi?"

In the back of his mind, Levi was already plotting his revenge.

Any excuse to spend time, and by all means any time, with Mikasa was a good excuse. But under these circumstances, it felt so forced.

It was bad enough she weighed on his mind 24/7. He grappled with whether these feelings he had for her were simple lust or driven by something deeper…

He wanted it to be something deeper…

Cornered by the good intentions of his old buddy, old pal, Levi nodded. "Sure." He turned to address Mikasa. "You can ride with me."

On route to Isabel's apartment, Mikasa peered out the passenger side window, the darkness of night ushering in a montage of flashing lights. Her phone was nestled in her lap, patiently waiting for Eren to reply to her text. She figured he would respond eventually, and quickly slipped her phone into the pocket of her dress. From the corner of her eye, she swore she saw Levi briefly look over, as if he had something to say. Maybe it was nothing, but regardless, the car ride felt strangely… comforting; even if no words were being exchanged between the two. She sought to break the unwavering silence, hoping to make light of the unprecedented situation through attempted humor.

"Kids are something else, aren't they?"

Levi thought she was referring to the twins from earlier. She must have, otherwise, why bring it up all the sudden?

Kids.

His mind wandered for a moment.

Some kids were unruly, rowdy, obnoxious little shits. Others were quiet, mild-mannered, timid even. A part of him was fascinated by their antics; resembling smaller, drunk versions of adults.

He wondered what it would be like. To witness the product of one's own creation progress and mature, fulfill their dreams, and make their mark on the world.

He wondered if he would be somebody's father one day…

"Yeah." He nodded, responding to Mikasa's claim.

"I'm sure it's different when their your own." Mikasa continued, reciting the exact same phrase her mother would often remind her. To be honest, most people probably thought that way.

Levi shifted in his seat, rolling back his shoulders before exhaling sharply. He wanted nothing more than for the subject to change; reliving memories of Petra and her ultimate choice.
There was no use dwelling on it any longer, given that the entire situation was out of his hands.

Petra's last words echoed in his mind repeatedly.

"What's done is done."

"… Levi?"

He turned his head to face Mikasa, the sound of her voice jolting him back to reality. "What?"

"I was just asking if I could turn on the radio."

Levi realized he had completely missed her question, lost in the unforgiving mess of his own thoughts. "Go ahead." He replied.

As long as it's not that country crap…

Mikasa eagerly began skimming through the stations, ultimately tuning in to what Levi regarded as the second worst genre of music.

Pop. (Modern pop to make it even worse.)

Instead of voicing his contempt for the genre of music responsible for the unforgivable sin of giving life to all Beliebers and rebellious Disney stars desperately trying to shed their good-girl images, he gripped the wheel and emitted his disdain. "Tch."

Mikasa was compelled to turn up the music in defiance, but managed to hold back for the sake of her curiosity. "Not a fan, huh?"

"I hate shitty pop music with a fiery passion." Levi admitted, with nary a hint of regret. "It's nauseating."

Mikasa sighed. "Anyone who claims to hate pop music is lying to themselves." Sure, some of the songs were cliché and unoriginal, but there was something about artists like Tove Lo and The Weeknd that inexplicably drew her in; possessing qualities of an addictive drug.

After a brief commercial break, the station was back to airing the music.

Mikasa beamed, as Charlie Puth crooned away with We Don't Talk Anymore.

I just heard you found the one you've been looking
You've been looking for
I wish I would have known that wasn't me
Cause even after all this time I still wonder
Why I can't move on
Just the way you did so easily

The lyrics struck a chord instantly, as many could relate to feeling emotionally withdrawn and abandoned in a dead relationship.

"It'll grow on you." Mikasa assured him, once again pulling him from unpleasant memories.

Levi resisted the urge to show any part of him was amused. "Doubt it."

They finally reached their destination, but not before the song was nearing its end.
We don't talk anymore, we don't talk anymore
We don't talk anymore, like we used to do
We don't love anymore
What was all of it for?
Oh, we don't talk anymore, like we used to do…

Knock. Knock.

Isabel scurried across her living room, weaving in and out of the mingling guests in her apartment, clad in a Little Red Riding Hood costume.

It's probably Levi. She thought, making her way to the door. She was subsequently surprised by what she saw next, swinging the door open to reveal quite the unexpected sight.

Sure enough, Levi had shown up as planned… but with a girl?

"Heyyy."

"Hi, Isabel."

Who's she? Isabel was preparing to ask that question when Levi suddenly intercepted her attempt at trying to register his female acquaintance's presence.

With a simple nod towards Mikasa, he conveyed a simple introduction. "Isabel, this is Mikasa." Then he looked directly towards Isabel. "Mikasa, this is Isabel."

…that's it…?

Isabel offered Mikasa a warm smile. "Nice to meet ya."

"Likewise." Mikasa replied.

Isabel had no clue what this whole… whatever this was… was about. She blinked a couple times, unsure of what to say.

Holy… Wow! She's so pretty!

Not wanting to be awkward and give Mikasa a bizarre first impression, she implored them to enter her home, kick back, and relax. After all, there was still a party and other guests she had to attend to.

Still, she expected Levi to give her a full report; the lowdown on the nature of his relationship with the mysterious raven-haired beauty. Not now, obviously, but later.

Throughout the evening, Isabel socialized with several others while keeping a watchful eye on Levi and his plus one. Among them were fellow UT Track athletes, classmates, old high school friends, and finally, a fashionably late Furlan.

Furlan was in the middle of flirting with one of Isabel's teammates, when he felt her tug on his cape, pulling him aside towards the kitchen. There, the privacy would allow for them to carry out a secretive discussion regarding their mutual friend.

"Furlan…" She began. "Why are they... matching?!" She almost wanted to laugh, but held back to hear his response.

"Hilarious as it is, the whole thing was purely coincidental." He affirmed.
"Is she… interested in him?"

"Honestly, I can't tell either way." Furlan replied, rubbing his chin. "But it's obvious he's into her."

"You know that for sure?" Isabel probed. "He actually said that?"

"He doesn't have to say anything at all." Furlan motioned towards the Mickey and Minnie duo. "See that? See the way he looks at her?"

His point had been made clear. Levi and Mikasa were side by side, leaning against a wall, talking about who knows what. The look in his eyes, under scrutiny, suggested a longing intent.

"I don't know." Isabel mumbled. "I don't know if I can trust her…"

"Mikasa seems like an all-around, good-natured, genuine girl." Furlan reassured her.

"So did Petra."

Furlan frowned. "Mikasa's different. I think she'd be a good fit for him."

"What if they're just friends?" Isabel speculated.

"I don't know. Maybe it's one sided, maybe there's something going on, who knows? I don't see the harm in him asking her out. What's the worst that could happen?"

"…she could say no."

"Well at least he would have tried!"

Isabel shook her head. "He really shouldn't be jumping back into dating again so soon. I don't think he's emotionally ready."

Furlan shrugged. "Maybe, but they say the best relationships start as friendships first."

Isabel could resonate with that. "True. I just want what's best for him. Ya know?"

Furlan gently placed a hand on her shoulder, easing the tension and her worries. "He's gonna be just fine, Izzy."

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**Arlert Household**

"*Whatever you do, don't fall asleep.*"

Nancy Thompson's final words to her boyfriend, Glen Lantz (portrayed by a teenage Johnny Depp), evoked a vivid foreshadowing suspense, her warning ultimately falling on deaf ears.

The 1984 horror classic, *A Nightmare on Elm's Street*, projected on the television screen of Armin's living room; the perfect film to commemorate the holiday.

It also served as a continuation of the Shiganshina trio's tradition; watching campy horror movies while gobbling down all sorts of sugary sweetness confined in wrappers associated with the Mars candy company.

The only difference this year? Mikasa was absent, leaving Armin alone in his house with Eren for the remainder of the spooky holiday. (His grandfather had hit the hay promptly at 8:00pm.)
The slight deviation could have been viewed as both good and bad.

Mikasa's presence was genuinely missed, however, Eren sought to use the one on one time with Armin as an opportunity to make a confession of sorts.

He needed to talk to someone about the confusion surrounding his unfaithfulness. Someone he could trust. Someone who would be completely honest with him.

As Freddy Krueger appeared onscreen, pursuing the female protagonist Nancy in a horrific nightmare, Eren cleared his throat and asked Armin how his stick-shift training with Jean was faring.

Armin replied with a mere two syllables, not wanting to get into the details regarding how he nearly rammed into a fence with Jean's car. "Decent." He still had a long way to go, but Jean was surprisingly patient; so long as he was being compensated for his time anyway.

Eren thought of a way he could bring up Annie without coming off as insensitive or disloyal. He sought to take a tactful approach to discussing the complex matter with his longtime friend. Worried that he would be judged, he sighed, and figured he would only say something if Armin mentioned Mikasa.

The film was nearing the climax, and Eren was beginning to grow weary of his own stalling.

*Screw it.*

"Armin…" Eren exhaled. "I have to talk to you about something."

"Sure, Eren." Armin replied, eyes filled with intrigue. "What's on your mind?"

*There's really no easy way to say it, so I should just say it.*

"I…" Eren stopped himself from blurting it out without contemplating the consequences. He didn't want to put Armin in an awkward position, but he was desperate to let it all out. Having these conflicting feelings bottle up inside were beginning to take a toll. Eren was convinced he couldn't keep this up much longer.

"Eren, is everyth-"

"I met a girl."

The two were silent for a moment, Armin still dazed and confused, struggling to grasp the meaning of Eren's words. Was that some sort of… revelation… confession?

"A girl?" Armin innocently shrugged, a sheepish smile forming out of uncertainty. "Who?"

Eren looked away, admonishing his guilt. "Her name is Annie."

Armin blinked. Eren's efforts to move forward with the grim conversation were wasted on the innocent blond. "You've made a new friend? That's great, Eren!"

"Armin." Eren rashly settled on getting straight to the point, his tone unnervingly foreboding. "What I feel for Annie is… deeper than friendship."

Armin instantly pieced it all together. His eyes widened, he opened his mouth as if to say something, but instead it hung low, awkwardly agape. How was he supposed to respond to that? He needed Eren to explain. Maybe he just wasn't feeling well, filling his head with this nonsense as a means of coping with stress or anxiety.
"But… Mikasa…?" Armin suddenly felt an intense sadness seep in, a wave of sorrow hitting him like a truck. He harbored a million questions, but paused and waited to hear Eren's response, allowing for him to clarify.

Eren drew a blank, and then all at once, upon hearing Mikasa's name, a gratuitous rush of memories-fond memories, some of the best memories of his life- thrust him into an unending whirlpool of reminiscing in all the things he loved about her.

But that was then.

Here and now, he was consumed with thoughts about Annie, her rare, delicate smile, and the way his heart would race every time she merely turned to look at him.

Truthfully, he had yet to really get to know even the more trivial things about her. Favorite color, favorite music…

But from what he had gained so far from their complex relationship, lay the foundation for something special.

Annie was different, that much was true. There was a lot of mystery shrouding her protective exterior, but it seemed as though she was warming up to him; allowing Eren to get close to her, emotionally so.

Eren regained his composure and looked up at Armin. "Everything happens for a reason, right Armin?" The tone in his voice sounded hesitant, as if in need of reassurance.

"I'd like to think that's true." Armin replied, thrown off by the bizarre tangent.

Eren continued, this time sounding more confident. "You meet people in your life, some stay, others leave. But it all means something, right?"

"I'm not sure what you're getting at, Eren." Armin admitted softly. If Eren had a point, what was it exactly?

"There's a reason you and I met when we were kids. We look out for each other, we support each other, we're like family. I need a friend like you in my life, Armin. Without you, I don't know how I would've survived in chemistry or stats class."

Armin chuckled, nodding his head. "Yeah, I guess."

"But in all seriousness," Eren resumed, "I can't imagine life without you. I don't want to imagine my life without you in it. It wouldn't be the same."

Armin figured he knew where this was going.

"That being said, I feel the same way about Mikasa. She's a part of my life for a reason and I wouldn't have it any other way."

Armin was expecting more, believing that wasn't the end of it. "But…?"

"But," Eren lowered his voice, "now that I've met Annie, I realized… that maybe there is no real reason behind it. There doesn't have to be. Life throws curveballs at us every day, and maybe half the time we're not even aware of it."
"You're saying… some things just happen by chance. And we'll never fully understand it."

Eren's eyes lit up, a hint of somber tenderness hidden behind bright emerald orbs. "And isn't there something special about that?"

They stayed silent for what felt like an eternity, with Eren's open-ended question lingering in the back of Armin's mind. He contemplated what Eren intended to convey, his overall message seemingly ambiguous.

He hasn't said whether or not he'll stay with Mikasa. He needs to think about this rationally, and not get ahead of himself.

"Eren," Armin finally spoke up, breaking the silence, "think about what you're saying. Think about Mikasa. You guys have been together for almost four years. Don't throw something like that away on mere impulse."

Eren slowly nodded, letting his words sink in.

"And," Armin added, "you should talk to Mikasa about it. Be completely honest with her."

Eren froze, unable to come up with any sort of protest. He knew Armin was right.

He needed to have a genuine heart to heart with Mikasa regarding the matter.

But with their four-year anniversary coming up, he dreaded making things worse. He wasn't planning on breaking up with her; he still loved her and decided the right thing to do would be to… stay together. So what was he trying to accomplish then?

Eren slumped back against the couch, worried by the uncertainty of his future.

What the hell is wrong with me?
"Your midterm essay is due next week before Thanksgiving Break."

With that final reminder, Professor Dietrich promptly dismissed his 9:00am English 101 class, shuffling through a stack of papers yet to be graded.

Ymir sat blankly at her desk, contemplating her current state of existence. A brief fluttering image of short blonde hair approaching her from the right instantly lifted her spirits.

Fantasies about Krista soon followed suit, before Ymir abruptly realized it was Annie beckoning her to join her and Eren on the way to their respective classes, and not the petite goddess of perfection like she had hoped and dreamed about.

"You're gonna be late for your next class, Ymir." Eren quipped, Annie at his side near the doorway.

Ymir huffed, sluggishly forcing herself up while swinging her backpack over her shoulder. "My professor doesn't give a shit."

Annie placed a hand on her hip, her patience being tested. "What Eren meant to say was that you're going to make us late for our math class." She rolled back her shoulders and sighed. "Unlike your professor, ours actually does give a shit."

"No need to get your panties in a bunch." Ymir chuckled.

As the trio ventured out of the Liberal Arts building, Ymir pulled her hoodie over her head, shivering in the superfluous cold. Not a fan of the transition from fall to winter, Ymir internally chided herself for not committing to Mitras University when she had the chance. Although the prestigious school was about a half days' drive down south, crawling with pretentious uptight assholes, and their volleyball program only sub-par, she at least, AT LEAST, would have been much warmer. The temperature in the lovely district averaged around 70 to 75 degrees year round.

Meanwhile, Stohess district clearly exhibited the four seasons; the winters often more brutal than what she was used to after having been raised in a small coastal city.

However, she could tolerate the unforgiving cold so long as Krista Lenz strutted around campus, blonde tresses practically glowing with radiance.

The trio came to a fork in the paved walkway, where Ymir was due to turn left for her Political Science class. Eren and Annie were due to turn right, the opposite direction, for Calculus.

"See you suckers later." Ymir grinned, pointing finger guns at them like the dork she was.

Eren ceased wondering why she was still single.

"Hey," Annie called out, "when you see Hitch in class, tell her I have work after practice so I won't be able to study with her later tonight." She pulled out her phone and muttered under her breath, "I'll text her right now, but I swear she ignores half the messages I send her."
"Will do." Ymir nodded, turning away.

As Eren and Annie approached the Mathematics building, Annie suddenly brought up the upcoming volleyball match.

"So, Eren." She began, a curious disposition laden before her. "Still able to make it to the semi-finals match next Saturday?"

Saturday the 19th. 7:30pm sharp.

Eren pondered the date, fearing it felt awfully familiar. Then it suddenly came to him, like a horrific premonition.

Wait... That day... That's our four-year anniversary...

Mikasa...

Eren felt sudden hesitation creep up on him, but after studying Annie closely, her expression softening and what appeared to be a hopeful glimmer in her eye, he let his guard down.

"Of course, Annie." He smiled. "I'll be there."

He convinced himself he'd figure out a way to make it all work.

University of Trost

Coincidences are often overlooked as frivolous chance happenings, shrugged off as mere afterthoughts that have little or no meaning whatsoever. One might be performing a simple task such as reading a book, walking their dog, grabbing lunch, or hell, maybe just heading to class when they bump into somebody they know from work, church, or even from the good old days back in grade school.

Mikasa figured it had to have been coincidental that she crossed paths with Levi of all people on that fateful afternoon.

Her mind was completely blown when she discovered he was Sasha's math tutor. Strange as it was, Sasha never mentioned him before. Check that, she never divulged his name, only that he was also a part of UT's Tennis program and kind of an apathetic buzzkill; small details that flew right over Mikasa's head.

It was in Room 210 of the student union building where Sasha had texted Mikasa to meet up with her, so they could decide from there whether or not Panda Express or Subway would suffice for lunch.

After ascending to the second floor, walking down a long stretch of hallway, and turning around a corner, Mikasa came across a green door, the words Academic Success Center etched above. When she entered the room, she was keen on remaining quiet. Every table in view was occupied with a tutor and their tutee; some one on one, others in groups numbering up to five.

A couple tables away, Mikasa saw the familiar tousled red hair, bundled high into a messy ponytail, gathering her textbook and worksheets with practice problems and equations.

Right behind Sasha Braus was Levi Ackerman.
Before Sasha could say "hi" and drone on about subway's endless possibilities for sandwiches, Mikasa approached Levi to address him directly.

"You're a tutor?" She asked incredulously, fully convinced his schedule was over-encumbered to the point where a social life was not even plausible. She also found the idea that they were connected through a mutual acquaintance to be rather… alarming. *What a small world.*

"…yeah…” Unlike his teammate, Levi didn't think anything of the situation. He assumed she was there to meet up with a mentor or something.

Sasha interjected, much to both the raven haired athletes' chagrin. "Levi's been my tutor for a month now." She informed Mikasa. "I'm sure I've mentioned him before."

*You didn't mention that it was Levi.* Mikasa thought.

Levi ignored Sasha's attempted introduction. "I heard you were skipping practice today, Mikasa."

*Shit.* Mikasa remembered swearing her teammate, Sarah, to secrecy. The damn gossip must have spilled the beans to Rico. Half the team probably knew by now, but it wasn't as if Mikasa was ditching for no reason.

"I have a job interview at 4." Mikasa explained, sliding her hands into her pockets. "I'll let the coaches know after my next class."

"Ooohh!" Sasha squealed. "Where at?!"

"A café at Stohess Plaza." Mikasa replied.

Levi realized he knew which place she was referring to. "Café Charmant?" Isabel had worked there for a year before accepting an internship at a veterinary hospital.

"That's the one." Mikasa nodded. "You've been there?"

"A few times." Levi recalled. "Their tea is to die for."

"Good to know." Mikasa committed the notion to memory. "I've never actually been there, but I've seen it in passing. Their help wanted sign has been up for a couple weeks now."

"What if that's a bad thing?" Sasha remarked intuitively.

Levi appealed to reason and logic. "That just means they're selective." He shot an approving look Mikasa's way before continuing. "They'd have to be stupid to not hire you." He didn't have to elaborate, as she already knew what he was talking about. Her work ethic, her drive, her ability to multitask, and finally, although not overtly bubbly or ditzy like some waitresses or baristas, there was something alluring about her; a distinct trait that drew people in.

And on a semi-related note, she was gorgeous; something he wouldn't admit out loud.

"Thanks." Mikasa said, a bit taken aback. "If I get the job, you should visit me so I can make you a cup of tea or something."

"Will it be like the time you visited *me* at work?" Levi deadpanned.

Sasha was lost in their exchange. "Wait… what?"

Levi filled her in. "Among other things, Mikasa's skills include sneaking into bars with fake IDs. Be
sure to highlight that part on your résumé."

Sasha was about to blurt out "ooohh busted" when Mikasa informed her of the travesty.

"Levi works at The All-Star." She disclosed, much to Sasha's despair.

_Dammit! We can never go there again!_ Sasha thought.

"Ha! Is that so?" She laughed nervously, her façade easily picked apart by the studious Levi. "Never been there! Ha!" She closed her eyes and rubbed the back of her neck.

"Oh, it's great." Mikasa remarked sardonically. "One of the bartenders is kind of an ass, though. I should complain to management."

"I'll be sure to relay the message." Levi scoffed, raising a brow.

Sasha interrupted the bizarre conversation (plagued with peculiar undertones of sarcasm and clapbacks) with the urgent grumbling of her stomach. The gurgling noises were loud enough for the entire room to focus its attention on said freshman.


"I'll see you later, Levi." Mikasa said before Sasha pulled her out of the room and into oblivion.

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_Stohess Plaza_

Mikasa arrived at the Café Charmant ten minutes early, hoping it would make a good impression on her prospective employer. Wearing a casual but neatly adorned outfit, Mikasa paired a simple white blouse with a red, flowing maxi skirt. She opted not to wear her red scarf, instead holding its contents in her purse, waiting to once again wrap its length around her neck to brace for the cold outside shortly after the interview.

The girl at the front counter greeted her almost instantly, a warm smile stretched eagerly from ear to ear.

"Hi!" The girl was of similar age and eerily recognizable. "What can I get for you?"

Mikasa reciprocated the polite greeting with a courteous "hello," but was quick to get to her main objective. "I'm here to speak with Frieda."

"Ohhh!" The blonde shuffled behind the counter, as if a light bulb went off in her head. "My sister mentioned she was interviewing someone today…"

Mikasa wasn't sure if that last part of her statement was meant to be audible, or just a mere thought absent-mindedly protruding from her lips.

"I'll be right back!" As the barista disappeared into what must have been the manager's office, Mikasa caught a glimpse of another barista tending to a patron at a small corner booth. She too was blonde and short, much like the girl at the front counter. Yet another blond, this time of the masculine persuasion, was preoccupied with rearranging the pastries in the display window.

Skeptical of the blonde theme, Mikasa figured she would meet the diversity quota as the only raven haired dame employed in the establishment.
She immediately cast her assumption aside when Frieda, the presumed manager, came to welcome her highly anticipated presence.

Another ravenette, thank god.

"Hi! Mikasa, right?" Frieda was quite the sight to behold. Tall, deep blue eyes, long jet-black hair, and legs that went on for days. It was... intoxicating. "I'm Frieda." She turned behind to briefly acknowledge her younger half-sibling. "I see you've already met my sister, Krista."

Mikasa nodded, still marveling at the ornate details embellishing the extravagant premises. Serene marble floors, a crystal chandelier looking like something out of a Swarovski catalog, and furniture imported from Italy; it was all breathtaking. The Reiss family owned the place, expanding their mark on the city outside of politics and into the competitive world of fancy coffee and fine tea.

Before the two headed into Frieda's office, Mikasa addressed Krista once more.

"It was nice meeting you."

Krista smiled. "Nice to meet you, too."

Mikasa was stunned by what graced her ears following the conclusion of the interview.

"When can you start?" Frieda asked favorably. Although she couldn't quite put her finger on it, she had good faith in the ravenette girl from Shiganshina. Maybe it was the spark in her eye, ultimately deeming her trustworthy.

Mikasa replied on impulse. "As soon as possible."

"Great!" Frieda enthused, sounding as though a huge weight had been lifted. "Could you come in tomorrow to start training and fill out some paperwork?"

Mikasa nodded. "Definitely."

As they headed out to the main entrance, the other petite blonde Mikasa recognized from before was preparing to go on break.

"Before you go," Frieda mentioned, hand over Mikasa's shoulder, "I'd like you to meet another one of our gals here."

The blonde overheard the comments and positioned herself in front of her newly hired coworker. She extended her arm forward, offering Mikasa a friendly handshake.

She then offered her name, a blank expression on her face. "Annie."

"Nice to meet you, Annie." Mikasa stated warmly.

"Annie's been here for a few months now." Frieda added. "She and Krista will show you the ropes tomorrow."

"Looking forward to it."

A short wave of friendly goodbyes commenced Mikasa's brisk walk back to her car, all the while reflecting on the last hour.

*I can't believe I got the job...*
In her muted state of excitement, Mikasa hopped in her car and put the keys into the ignition. After adjusting her seat belt, she sat comfortably in silence, relishing in the moment of victory.

She wanted to share the good news with someone. Her thoughts reverted to the conversation she had earlier that day in the student union building at UT.

She quickly pulled out her phone and sent a text to Levi.

4:33pm – Mikasa: So Café Charmant just hired a new barista...
Camaraderie

Chapter Notes

Sorry if this feels like a slow burn from hell, but remember my lovelies; patience is a virtue! :) That's also why I'm trying to regularly update this story, so ya'll don't have to wait too long.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Friday, November 11th

Stohess Plaza

Mikasa was in love with her new job.

Training was practically a cake-walk, and she was able to apply previous work experience to help adapt to hectic morning rushes and the overflow of students coming in for afternoon study sessions, laptops ready to go. Then again, learning how to use a cash register, knowing the difference between a latte and a cappuccino, and making oneself look presentable in order to maintain the company's image wasn't rocket science. At least, that was one way of looking at it.

She also developed a perceptive admiration for her coworkers. Given that the café had less than ten people on its payroll, the smaller work environment allowed for Mikasa to get to know them on a more personable level.

Frieda, the eldest daughter of the Reiss family, ultimately inherited the business through nepotism.

Krista (also a member of the Reiss family) was sweet, bubbly, and popular with the customers. Mikasa learned she was a freshman at Stohess University, majoring in Psychology, and a flyer in the school's cheer squad.

Eld Gin was a senior at Stohess U, majoring in Economics, and well versed in playing the piano. At Mikasa's behest, he played a few samples of familiar classical pieces on the grand instrument, radiating a heavenly porcelain hue from its setting underneath the chandelier in a separate lounging area.

Then there was Annie. Quiet, a bit more reserved than the others, and seemingly not one to partake in small talk. Mikasa had trouble reading the mysterious blonde, unsure what to make of her entirely. But after a few shifts and working side by side, she was able to get a feel for what they had in common. Their discussions no longer felt forced, as if pressured by working in a close-knit, somewhat tight space. The culmination of topics subsequently ventured into their surprising, but unique, shared interest.

All Mikasa had to do was combine "gym" and "martial arts" into the same sentence, and she suddenly had Annie's full, unwavering attention.

"Any technique in particular?" Annie inquired curiously, in the middle of brewing another batch of drip coffee. "If you don't mind me asking."
"I was trained in Aikido for a few years, and then I took up Judo in high school." Mikasa replied nostalgically, setting aside several brand of sugar packets waiting to be restocked. "I've tried to get my friends to go with me, but they never fail to come up with convenient excuses not to go."

Annie thought for a moment, still waiting on the coffee. "I know of a few Judo places, but Aikido is pretty rare."

"Yeah." Mikasa continued. "The owners of the place I used to go to moved out of state."

"Where do you go now?"

"Just UT's recreation center, but I've been looking for a gym that offers martial arts classes and has a lap pool that isn't swarming with college kids messing around on swan floaties."

That managed to get Annie to chuckle. "You know," she began, "you should check out the place I go to. It's not too far from here actually. About a fifteen minute drive."

Mikasa eagerly expressed her sudden interest. "What's the place called?"

"Sina Health and Fitness Club." Annie responded. "But most people just call it Sina Fitness."

"I've heard of it, but I've never been there."

"It's the best around. They recently remodeled the pool, their equipment is regularly updated and maintained, and they offer Judo classes on Wednesdays and Thursdays, I think."

"Sold."

Annie wasn't sure how to react to the unexpected bond, honestly surprised to find any common ground with the girl from Shiganshina, but since hardly any of the people in her small circle of friends ever cared to join her on a quest for an adrenaline rush (usually fueled by beating the shit out of a punching bag), she was looking forward to the prospect of acquiring a workout buddy.

Buddy? Annie shuddered at the cringy word. No...

Workout... companion... associate... compatriot...

"If you haven't made any plans already, we could go tomorrow after work. We're off at the same time." Annie offered, dusting off the front of her apron. "I have guest privileges."

"Sure." Mikasa nodded, feeling hopeful. "What classes do they offer Saturdays?"

Annie pursed her lips into a satisfied grin, more than happy to answer. "Muay Thai and kickboxing."

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**Saturday, November 12th**

After finishing their respective mid-morning shifts at Café Charmant, Mikasa followed behind Annie's compact red Honda Civic on route to Sina Fitness. When they pulled up into the parking lot, Mikasa's eyes widened, fixated on a tall structure resembling a mall or multiplex shopping center. Architecturally misleading, with a more modern design in mind, the exterior was painted a bright crimson hue, splashed with a few tones of gunmetal and gold on several edges.

They parked directly across from each other and walked in unison to the main entrance.

The swoosh of the automatic doors welcomed the two inside. Just as the outside of the building...
rendered her speechless, Mikasa found the interior nothing short of amazing.

"We have some time to spare before class starts." Annie took a few steps forward, initiating a tour for the wide-eyed newcomer. "I'll show you around."

"Sounds good." Mikasa agreed, glancing from corner to corner, captivated by the spectacle like a kid in a candy store.

Annie motioned towards several corridors of the facility, informing her plus one of all the amenities encompassed within the forty thousand square foot establishment dedicated to health and wellness. "Over there is the indoor pool." She pointed out the spectacular feature, its pristine quality in full view from behind enormous clear glass windows. The body of water curled into multiple waves as swimmers gracefully glided along implementing the freestyle stroke. "The cycling studio for spin classes is up ahead on the left. Various weight equipment will be on our right hand side. Cardio equipment is upstairs on the second level. Group training classes are held in separate studios on the second level as well. Everything from yoga to kickboxing to Zumba takes place up there." Annie allowed Mikasa to take it all in before continuing. "Last but not least, the third level is the indoor running track."

"This is... wow." Mikasa was careful to control her elation, fearing her love-struck appearance mirrored that of a tantalized Sasha induced into foodgasm seizures while in mid-bite of a neatly crafted bacon cheeseburger.

Annie felt accomplished in her recruitment. "Come on." She beckoned, roaming past a few huddled circles of attendees. "The locker rooms are this way." She led Mikasa into a segregated passageway, advancing onward to the accommodation designated for women only.

Upon entering, they settled their gym bags on a bench and began towing away their work uniforms and other possessions into nearby lockers. Mikasa was in the middle of taking off her woven blouse, replacing it with a navy blue tank top, when a question arose. "So how long have you been coming here for, Annie?"

Annie finished dressing into a lightweight tee and Nike shorts, pulling her hair back into a ponytail. "A little under a year." She replied. "I used to come almost every day during the summer, but when school rolled around I had to make a few adjustments in my schedule."

"I see." Mikasa began tying her shoe laces, simultaneously using the opportunity to stretch. "I'd like to make the gym a regular activity, but I'll have to plan accordingly with school and tennis."

Annie's head perked up, her interest piqued. "Tennis player, huh? For UT?"

Mikasa nodded. "Yeah. We're still in preseason training for now. Season doesn't officially start until the spring." She briefly glanced in the mirror, quickly braiding her shoulder length locks in an effort to keep them from becoming a distraction. "What about you? You play any sports?"

Annie positioned herself next to Mikasa, facing the oblong mirror with no real intent other than to keep up with the conversation. "I play volleyball at SU. We head into the semi-finals next Saturday."

"Congrats." Mikasa was impressed, though admittedly surprised Annie's forte was volleyball of all things. "Not bad for your first year. The folks must be proud."

Annie shrugged. "I guess." Successful in creating a mental barricade to thwart any thoughts of her father, she hastily shut her locker and gestured to the doors. "Ready?"

Mikasa adjusted the straps of her sports bra before making her way over to Annie's side. Not that she
had anything to really worry about, given her... modest bust size. She could already hear the chants from boys back in middle school as they unabashedly decreed her admittance into the itty bitty titty committee.

Assholes.

"Ready." Mikasa echoed.

They hustled upstairs to the second level and came across two adjacent corridors. Annie led Mikasa into a room revealing glossy hardwood floors, punching bags, and mirrored walls. The class was set to begin in less than five minutes, with the instructor patiently waiting for his associates' arrivals.

Right away, Annie discovered two open spots, the opportunity too good to pass up. "Let's warm up over here."

Mikasa followed suit. "Just so you know, I'm not all that familiar with Muay Thai techniques." She quickly debriefed Annie of the fundamentals she was familiar with. "In Aikido, the focus is on self-defense that redirects the momentum of an opponent's attack. And In Judo, the objective is to throw and takedown the opponent."

Annie urged her newly acquired training partner not to worry. "There's no doubt in my mind that you're capable of mastering the technique." She remarked, offering her support while being mindful of her cautiousness. "Wouldn't hurt for you to learn a few things along the way."

Mikasa rolled her shoulders back, a small grin forming at the reassurance. She suddenly felt determined. "I'm glad I have you to show me the ropes here." She began pulling her arms back into a stretch, preparing to take on the challenge. "I'm sure I can handle this."

Sweat flew off her brow with every hit.

Mikasa's fists ached with soreness, grunting with each blow to the punching bag.

Annie marveled at how quickly she was able to pick up on the move-sets, all the while remaining poised and balanced.

As soon as the class had ended, Annie sought to hydrate herself, quenching her thirst with a bottle of arrowhead water while Mikasa patted her forehead with a small towel to tend to the accumulation of sweat. Both were faintly panting, letting out intermittent breaths that had more in common with sighs than gasps. Still in recovery, Mikasa felt as though she were on a natural high, a rush of bursting energy and endorphins she attained from learning new maneuvers, wielding her well-defined muscles as weapons to summon attacks and strikes.

After regaining a more calmed demeanor, Annie insisted they move on. "Time to hit the showers."

"Definitely."

As they ventured back down to the first floor, Annie forged an attempt at congratulating her workout... companion.

"You kicked ass back there."

Mikasa accepted the praise. "Thanks." She took a swig from her water bottle before continuing. "Your strikes are incredibly fast."
"Didn't happen overnight." Annie smirked. "But thanks."

They were abruptly hit with the enticing scent of strawberry, mango, and other fruits as they slowly sauntered past the juice bar. Annie realized she forgot to mention the amenity during the initial tour, a fault she internally berated herself for. Before she could suggest they at least explore their options and check the stand out, a familiar face drew near with purposeful intent.

"Hey, Annie." Bertolt arrived at the premises, having just got off work. "I take it you just got out of kickboxing."

Annie, a bit taken aback, folded her arms across her chest. "Muay Thai, actually." She turned to face Mikasa and proceeded to introduce Bertolt to her coworker/fellow martial arts enthusiast. "This is Mikasa. She's the new-hire at the café."

"I'm Bertolt." He locked eyes with the ravenette before attempting to crack a joke, nervously so. "So Annie dragged you into her class, huh?"

Mikasa smiled and shook her head. "Hardly. She invited me to check the place out." Her eyes strayed away from the tall brunet before her, ultimately landing on the blonde she credited her gym-finding luck to. "I'm thinking of becoming a member now. Especially since they offer Judo on the weekdays."

Annie added her input, hoping to keep things on an even keel. "We could go to Judo on Wednesdays and hit up Muay Thai on Saturdays." Satisfied with her assessment, she and Mikasa nodded in agreement. "It all works out."

Annie's eyes darted to the juice bar, tempted by the vast selection of smoothies and protein shakes. She suddenly hatched an idea. "I'll get a couple protein shakes. My treat." Neon green Nikes propelled the blonde forward, adding a "be right back," before walking away. Leaving the two alone momentarily, she figured this could potentially give Bertolt the opportunity to practice talking to girls; or new people in general.

Bertolt was consumed with an unshakably awkward feeling. He was unsure of what to say, having just met the girl five seconds ago. To his relief, Mikasa was the first to strike up a conversation, saving him from stuttering like an idiot.

"So do you go to school with Annie?"

"Yeah… well… I'm a sophomore at Stohess U, and our majors are completely unrelated so we don't have any classes together or anything."

That could have gone smoother. Bertolt thought, cheeks turning slightly red.

Mikasa found the nervous tone in his voice both odd and amusing. She wondered why he sounded a bit defensive, before recognizing his special feelings for the blonde. She pieced it all together; the guy didn't have to say anything at all. "Makes sense. What are you majoring in?"

"Kinesiology. I'm studying to become an athletic trainer." He replied. "I'm in my second year of the program, and it's a lot more hands-on, which is great."

"Do you get to work with SU athletes as part of the curriculum?"

"Yeah, actually I have. Mostly with the football players, but I've helped out a few athletes participating in winter and spring sports."
Mikasa obliged her curiosity, figuring it was a long shot, but pried anyway. "Have you met any track and field athletes?"

Bertolt nodded. "A few."

Mikasa smiled, thinking of Eren. "My boyfriend has a track and field scholarship to SU."

"In what event?" Bertolt asked.

"Pole vault." Mikasa answered proudly.

Bertolt felt the blood drain from his face. No way... it can't be...

Stohess University's Track and Field team only had three pole vaulters on the roster; one of which was female. By process of elimination, Bertolt determined it could only be Thomas Wagnar or Eren Jaeger.

He guessed the latter. "Eren?"

Mikasa's head swayed from side to side, unleashing an innocent, somewhat shocked, chuckle. "Yeah..." She paused for a moment. "So... you've met him?"

Unfortunately, Bertolt thought.

Before he could spew out some semblance of an intelligible reply, Annie appeared, a protein shake in each hand.

"Here." Annie handed one to Mikasa, then turned to address the friendly giant. "We gotta hit the showers, Bert. I'll text you later."

Before the two turned to walk in the direction of the locker rooms, Mikasa waved, gripping the ice cold shake in her left hand. Bertolt watched as they left him standing there in his troubled, paralyzed state. He grappled with processing the last part of his conversation with Mikasa.

Mikasa was... is... Eren's girlfriend.

He could only surmise that Annie wasn't aware of the circumstances. Eren most likely kept that secret from her.

That shady bastard...

Bertolt's anger was furthermore fueled by the thought of Eren playing the seemingly good-natured girls for fools. Neither of them deserved to be treated like that.

But what if... Annie knows?

No.

Bertolt convinced himself Annie was above being a home-wrecker. The Annie he knew, grew up with, and had fallen for certainly was not one to engage in secret affairs or hook-ups with guys already in committed relationships.

Annie doesn't know. He told himself. But she will soon enough.

Trost Neighborhood
Levi finished up another busy Saturday night shift at The All-Star, tired and ready to go home. He checked to see if he had any missed calls or texts shortly after arriving inside his shared apartment with Furlan. Sure enough, there were a few, but one immediately stood out among the rest.

Erwin Smith had left a message, imploring him to return his phone call.

The two had been friends for years, only recently going their separate ways with Erwin transferring to Ehrmich University to pursue his master's degree in civil engineering. Aside from that, work, school, girls, life; everything made it hard for them to keep in touch.

Regardless of the distance, Levi deeply valued his friendship with Erwin; one of very few people he could genuinely rely on.

Levi removed his jacket and walked towards the hallway closet. He pulled out a hanger and neatly placed the ensemble on the rack, tucking it behind a forgotten coat with feminine flair.

*Isabel has got to stop leaving her shit over here.*

Furlan was due to return from work soon, so he decided he'd put the burden of returning the coat to Isabel on him promptly after his arrival.

As Levi headed upstairs to his room, he began dialing Erwin's number on his phone. Erwin answered after the third ring.

"Hey, Erwin. I just got your message." Levi said, sitting upright on his mattress. "How have you been?"

"I've been well." Erwin sounded as if he needed to get something off his chest. His words weren't hurried or rushed, nor was his tone a dismal one, but Levi knew well enough; something must have been on his mind. "I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Go on." Levi reassured him. "Talk to me."

On the other end of the line, Levi could hear what sounded like Erwin letting out a deep breath. "You know me. I've never really been a fan of texting or calling when it comes to urgent matters." Erwin considered social media and some aspects of technology to be detrimental, strongly holding the belief that it killed the mood and opened the door for blatant miscommunication. "I was hoping we could meet up in person sometime this coming week."

Levi rose from his bed and walked over to study the calendar pinned up on the wall adjacent to the door. His eyes traced along the numbered dates, before finally landing on the upcoming week. "I could do Tuesday."

"Tuesday works." Erwin responded favorably.

"Anywhere in particular you want to meet?"

"I'll leave that up to you. I wouldn't want you to drive all the way up here on my behalf."

"Let's meet each other half way then."

"Agreed."

Levi pondered several possibilities, before finally settling on the perfect spot for them to catch up. "I know a place. You remember that café over at Stohess Plaza?"
Any guesses on what bomb Erwin's gonna drop?
Tuesday, November 15th

Café Charmant – Stohess Plaza

6:37pm – Mikasa: My shift ends in about twenty minutes. Are we still on for Judo at 8?

6:39pm – Annie: Yes. I'll meet you there.

A faint smile followed the reply, her phone emitting the brief conversation before slipping it back into the pocket of her jeans.

Mikasa finished stocking the condiment station and casually made her way back behind the counter at Krista's behest. As she approached the tiny blonde, Mikasa noted her exceptionally cheerful demeanor, the expression on her face suggesting she had a brilliant trick up her sleeve.

With a playful nod, she implored Mikasa to tend to the next customer, insisting it was in her best interest. "I think someone's here to see you."

Pondering several possibilities of who this sudden visitor could be, she automatically assumed it was her mother, come to say hello while simultaneously teasing and congratulating her on her first job since the summer before college. She turned to address the guest and quickly found herself speechless.

"Welcome to Café Char-" Was all she managed, before the partially shocked expression shifted into that of pleasantly surprised. "So, Levi. You decided to visit me after all."

"Actually, I'm meeting up with a friend." Levi informed her, adding a sarcastic quip. "But it does feel like we keep bumping into each other. Doesn't it?"

"Or that you're following me." Mikasa jested.

Levi shook his head. "Who was the one that snuck into the All Star? Asked me to be their training partner? Interrupted my tutoring session? And copied my pathetic excuse for a Halloween costume?"

Mikasa rolled her eyes. "I was out with friends that night at the All Star. You were technically the one who offered to train with me for the upcoming season. I've been friends with Sasha since high school and she texted me to meet up with her that day. And I had planned out my costume a week in advance." She shot back, in an effort to explain herself and correct his accusations.

"Someone's being defensive."
"Someone sounds butt-hurt."

The two exchanged bashful smirks as Levi's eyes wandered to the corner booth where he and his longtime friend chose to converse with one another.

Erwin looked up and smiled, patiently waiting for Levi to return with his drink of choice. Levi reminded himself to remain focused, but the raven haired beauty before him served as a rather appropriate distraction; a distraction he had no qualms losing all logic and reason for. But the time he allotted himself ran out, and he didn't want to keep Erwin waiting.

"So, can I order now?" Levi asked, raising an eyebrow.

Mikasa nodded, reaching for a sixteen-ounce cup. "I think I already know what you want, though."

"Do you?"

"You have an unhealthy fetish for tea, right?" She chuckled while rummaging through a few plausible options. "We have green, earl grey, oolong…"

"Earl Grey is fine."

"Would you prefer a porcelain mug, or..." She leveled herself against an adjacent cupboard, pulling out a disposable cup with the cafe's fancy insignia. "One of these?" She added one last sentiment before allowing him to respond. "Paper cups kill the environment... just so you know."

"Killing the environment is one of my favorite pastimes." Levi shrugged, nary a hint of regret in his voice. "I'll go with the paper cup."

"You heartless bastard." Mikasa deadpanned, now regretting even offering it in the first place. "What size?"

"What size is the one you're holding up?"

"Sixteen ounces." She replied. "This one is our most popular, so it's a force of habit for me to grab these cups without even thinking."

"Got anything smaller?"

Mikasa reached for the twelve-ounce cup. "Better?"

Levi nodded, reaching for his wallet. "What's the damage?"

Mikasa shot him a sly, somewhat disapproving look. "It's on the house." She stated casually, carefully handling fine earl grey tea leaves. "But tips are appreciated."

Levi watched in admiration as she finished brewing his tea, careful to leave room at the top for milk or sugar. She appeared keenly focused on her task, leaving him to wonder if he was receiving special treatment. He certainly wasn't going to reject the offer for free tea, but her effort deserved some semblance of appreciation.

Mikasa gently placed the drink on the counter, seemingly proud of her handiwork. "Twelve ounces of Earl Grey perfection."

Levi quickly stashed a tip for the young barista inside a small cylindrical glass jar. "Thanks." He said, gripping the paper cup. Before walking away, he acknowledged her one last time, making eye contact as if to say something. Instead, he turned and headed for the corner booth.
A small smile formed at the corner of Mikasa's lips as she sauntered away from the counter. She looked up to find Krista staring at her, her elation spewing out rays of sunshine.

"Who was that?" She asked, nudging Mikasa's shoulder.

"A friend." Mikasa responded nonchalantly, peering into the tip jar. She found herself unable to control the amused expression etched on her face when she saw the neatly folded bill at the bottom.

She was only nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine dollars away from being a millionaire.

Levi returned to the cozy booth positioned in the isolated corner of the lounging area near a brick fireplace, offering the right amount of privacy for the intimate setting. He settled himself across from Erwin, waiting for him to speak first.

"I've missed this place." Erwin commented. "The coffee's just as I remembered it."

"I remember coming here religiously our sophomore year." Levi remarked, deep in nostalgia. Nodding toward the front of the house, he added, "Isabel used to work right behind that counter."

Erwin empathized with the sentimentality. "Feels so long ago."

Though fond of the memories, he was admittedly glad those days were over; more than ready to move forward and leave school behind. He was propelled by the desire to get on with his life, start a career… and eventually start a family.

The latter subject of his thoughts was exactly what he wanted to discuss. He chose to ease into it, and not rush the conversation. "Thanks again for meeting with me. I know you're busy with school, work, and training for the upcoming season."

"Not a problem at all." Levi replied, sipping from his cup. "You sounded like you needed to get something off your chest."

Erwin nodded. "I wanted to tell you first."

"Tell me what?" Levi studied him for a moment. "You finally told Nile to shove his superiority complex up his ass?"

Erwin chuckled at the brusque question, proceeding to explain that he and Nile were both new to their jobs at Mitras Property Development and much of their rivalry had been quelled after Nile realized they were both attending Ehrreich University to further advance their careers by attaining their masters degrees. "We managed to find common ground. Anyhow, we're getting off topic." He rubbed his chin, contemplating a tactful approach.

"You knocked someone up?" Levi attempted to lighten the mood, taking note of Erwin's cautioned expression.

Erwin moved slightly forward and gazed at the small ripples in his coffee. He took another swig before finally revealing the news.

"Hange and I are getting married."

Sina Health and Fitness Club
Mikasa strolled confidently inside the women's locker rooms, looking forward to train in a martial art she was well-versed in. Annie had saved her a spot on the same bench from their first visit together earlier that week, already dressed and eagerly awaiting Mikasa's arrival.

"We still have twenty minutes." Annie remarked, in place of urging Mikasa to slow down and not force herself into such a rush.

Mikasa convinced herself she could change the entirety of her appearance from "I just got off work" to "Ready to kick ass and throw down" in a solid minute. Roughly thirty seconds into her transformation, she finally acknowledged Annie's useful piece of information. "I know, but we should warm up beforehand."

Annie simply nodded in agreement, as Mikasa stepped forward to the mirror and began braiding her hair. From the corner of her eye, Annie caught a glimpse of Mikasa's purse, nearly pushed to the edge by her gym bag. In a matter of seconds, it fell to the floor in a jumbled mess, after giving way to the heavier bag at its side.

Mikasa, still in mid-braid, turned around and muttered an expletive. She bent down and began gathering her things, to which Annie was quick to offer her assistance.

"Let me help." She said, picking up a pocket size vanity, some keychain, and a couple hair ties.

There was an overturned photograph lying a couple feet away. It must have slipped out of her wallet in the fall, because the small red case was right beside it. While Mikasa stowed away the items on her side, Annie reached for the photo and flipped it right side up. With both hands tightly gripping the opposing edges, she froze, studying the image apprehensively.

In the photograph, Mikasa was smiling, the arms cradled around her belonging to a boy with warm brown hair and bright green eyes.

Eren Jaeger.

Annie's eyes desperately widened, convinced her mind was playing tricks on her.

No. Fucking. Way.

Mikasa peered over, a grin from ear to ear as her eyes fell to the picture. "My boyfriend." She said, answering a question the blonde was too unnerved to ask. The subtle fondness in her voice only furthered Annie's guilt and confusion.

"Oh..." Annie forced out, amid her state of uncertainty.

Fuck.

"This Saturday will mark four years." Mikasa sighed. "We've been together since freshman year of high school."

Fuck.

Annie almost couldn't believe what she was hearing. "That's a long time." She mumbled, heart pounding violently against her chest. What the fuck...?

She handed it over to Mikasa and slowly stood back up, leaning against the wall in an effort to collect her thoughts. The ravenette finished putting her possessions back into her purse and, along with her gym bag, shoved them into her locker.
Staring emptily into a dirtied corner ridden with cobwebs near the ceiling, Annie almost missed Mikasa's pleas to hurry to the second floor and begin warm ups before class.

"You ready?" Mikasa asked, oblivious to Annie's appalled reaction following the revelation.

Annie was quick to snap out of her uneasiness, finding it difficult to make eye contact. "Yeah... Let's go."

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**Café Charmant – Stohess Plaza**

"So… you and Four-Eyes are going to tie the knot?"

From outward appearances, one could easily assume Levi was at ease upon hearing his longtime friend's sudden announcement of his impending nuptials. The truth was, however, he was trying desperately to disguise his unprecedented terror with his usual abrasive, and cynical, sense of humor. It was the only mechanism he could revert to in an effort to cope with the declaration.

"You two have only been dating for a year…" He quickly added.

"When you know, you know." Erwin responded calmly. There was a hopeful glimmer in his eye, and Levi realized he had never seen him this way before. He found it repulsive; his suave, smooth-talking friend sounding like a love-sick puppy.

But as long as Erwin was happy, he could tolerate it.

"So, Hange's really the one." Levi affirmed, raising an eyebrow.

"She's the one." Erwin nodded, as if finally at peace with himself.

"And you're ready for commitment?" Levi probed. "Til death do us part is a long time."

Erwin nodded once more, expecting Levi to question his sincerity. "She is the epitome of everything I have ever looked for in a woman."

Unexpected as the confession was, Levi found solace in that Erwin was absolutely certain about pursuing marriage; sounding as though he'd never been more sure of anything in his entire life.

Levi had met Hange Zoe only a few times, and in his honest opinion, he thought she was nuts. A respectable zoology professor at Sina University, the brunette was borderline obsessive when it came to her research; naming the critters she'd study with her associates and attributing human-like qualities and privileges to them in what Levi could only assume was some form of coddling or attempt at being sensitive to their feelings. Justified or not, he witnessed one instance where the cliché of a crazy scientist was talking to a Gecko (appropriately named Sonny) as if the damn creepy crawly were her own child, all the while allowing it to crawl around her back and neck and run around the room, exploring every nook and cranny.

How anyone could find her eccentric behavior wife-material was beyond him. He was tempted to ask Erwin why he even asked her out in the first place.

But one good look at the smitten blond said it all. He fell hopelessly in love with her odd personality, layered in quirks of all kinds, specifically for that reason. She certainly wasn't your average woman. Gifted with remarkable intelligence, passionate about her research, and confident in who she was, Erwin was drawn to the wild force of nature and her incredible tenacity.
And, although she preferred a lab coat and her usual pair of unframed glasses, she cleaned up nicely; a tall, slender sight to behold, inexplicably alluring with her hair down cascading her shoulders after a long day's work.

After careful consideration, Levi was willing to admit the two complemented one another.

He and Erwin continued to converse with another, covering topics from whether or not a wedding date had been set (not yet), how he proposed (an evening stroll in a park after she suggested they do some bird watching underneath a gazebo), and how hopefully one day, Levi could get to know such a feeling; when you fall head over heels for a one-of-a-kind lady (jury's still out on that one).

Levi was admittedly turned off by the romantic synergy of it all, wary of the cheesy soap opera parallels. But there was something about the idea of spending the rest of your life with someone, as if it was meant to be, that had him tethered to his monogamous tendencies. If he really saw no point, why bother dating? There had to be more to it than just casual outings, intellectual conversations, and (for the most part) great sex. Otherwise, there was a word that conveniently fit into the above category; friendship. (And although some people had no qualms becoming sexually involved with others they only considered "friends," Levi considered the whole "friends with benefits" ideology completely pointless.)

Before he could decide whether or not any of his brooding was worth the aggravation, Erwin turned the tables on his close friend. "Enough about me." He announced, shifting his elbows above the table. "Now that you're caught up on my relationship, let's talk about you. How's Petra?"

Fuck.

Levi remembered he hadn't disclosed the truth to Erwin; that he and Petra had a less than amiable breakup. Levi summarized the dissolution of their two-year relationship in a mere three syllables. "It's over."

Erwin offered his condolences, though not surprised to hear they had gone their separate ways. Petra meant well, and by all accounts she was driven, endearing, and possessed a genuine sense of compassion. She and Levi just couldn't make it work. Just another life lesson commonly endured by those who dedicated themselves to dead relationships.

Given his single status, Erwin felt that warranted a friendly word of advice. "If you need a date to the wedding…"

Levi was quick to intercept. "I'll be fine, Erwin."

Erwin nodded supportively, his lips curving upward into a coy smile. He wholeheartedly believed everything would work out favorably.

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Stohess University – Dormitory Division

"Es bewegte sich etwas zwischen den Telegrafenstangen. Meine Großmutter schloß den Mund, nahm die Lippen nach innen, verkniff die Augen und mummelte die Kartoffel. Es bewegte sich etwas zwischen den Telegrafenstangen. Es sprang da etwas. Drei Männer sprangen zwischen den Stangen, drei auf den Schornstein zu, dann vorne herum und einer kehrt, nahm neuen Anlauf, schien kurz und breit zu sein, kam auch drüber, über die Ziegelei, die beiden anderen, mehr dünn und lang,
A loud vibration, accompanied by the repeated ringing of a chirpy tune, boisterously interrupted a studious Eren in the middle of reading the German literature work, *The Tin Drum*.

The caller's identity belonged to Mikasa.

Eren answered after a brief hesitation. "Hey, Mika. What's up?"

The sounds of locker doors slamming into submission, women chatting in small huddles, and the occasional squeak spewing from sneakers yet to be broken in, flourished in the background. Eren couldn't tell if Mikasa could even hear him. She finally spoke up after leaving him in a fleeting suspense. "Eren! You're not busy right now, are you?"

Eren peered over at his copy of the German novel, laying flatly face down, the edges of its pages displaying a little wear and tear. "Not really. No." He replied indifferently.

"Well, I was wondering what time we were meeting up this Saturday." She continued, gathering a few necessities for a much needed shower. *Shampoo, conditioner, body wash, towel...*

Eren froze like a deer in a headlight. If Annie's volleyball match was at 7:30pm, he figured his best bet would be to spend the early afternoon with Mikasa.

*This is so f*ucked up.* He thought, hating the entire situation he found himself in, and hating himself for not manning up and telling Mikasa the truth. He hated that his hate wasn't amounting to any sort of solution and only further attributed to the problem.

*Shit... I promised Mom I'd stop by and help around the house in the afternoon.*

*Then... I'll just meet up with Mikasa afterward... or leave in the middle of the match.*

Fuck.

He settled on a half-assed, last minute compromise. "Let's meet at your dorm around... 8:00?"

Mikasa agreed. "Sure. Any idea where we'd go from there?"

Eren figured they could go to a nice, cozy restaurant or the fancy little bistro Connie and Sasha recommended inside Mitras Square. "It's a surprise."

Mikasa was all too familiar with his lackluster planning, constantly flying by the seat of his pants when it came to going out or organizing anything remotely related to social gatherings. Instead of jokingly calling him out on it, she replied with a calm, "How thoughtful of you."

After exchanging heartfelt goodbyes, with Mikasa looking forward to celebrating four years of love and friendship, Eren slumped back into his chair, staring at his desk with a hollow expression on his face.

"I'm sorry, Mikasa..." The words unintentionally spilled from his mouth, voice filled with regret.
Saturday, November 19th

Orvud Sports Complex

The D1 Women's College Volleyball Semi-Final's match was set to begin, with the Stohess University Hawks taking on the Ehrmich University Warriors.

Annie waited alongside her teammates in the women's locker room, calmly stretching out her limbs while Hitch paced back and forth nervously.

"Win or lose," Hitch sighed, "I'm getting incredibly wasted after this."

"Annie, I think your roommate is an alcoholic." Ymir scoffed, putting her arm around Hitch whilst yanking her forward. "Quit worrying. We got this!"

Hitch was quick to play the whole thing off. "Yeah, yeah. This is only the second most important match of the season. No big deal."

Annie hadn't really paid them any mind. Her attention was fixated on her phone and the few notifications it had received. Her mother left a voicemail, wishing her good luck but apologizing for not being able to attend the evening's match due to work.

There was nothing from her father. No call. No text. She wasn't going to hold her breath, and she doubted he would be among the stands, come to surprise her and cheer her on.

Wishful thinking…

The coach marched into the locker room, calling for the team's attention with an uproariously loud announcement.

"All right, ladies! It's time to head out onto the court!"

The girls shuffled past one another and formed a singular formation, with Ymir leading the way.

"Let's give 'em hell!" She declared.

As both teams entered the court from opposing sides, Annie looked ahead towards the stands. Sure enough, neither her mother nor her father had shown up, but she did have one fan in attendance… one who surprisingly kept their word.

Eren was waving, standing among other spectators in the third row.

Annie remembered he had promised to attend, but she also recalled Mikasa telling her it was their four-year anniversary.

What the hell is he doing here?

Annie looked away, conflicted with her emotions. She wanted to feel that same spark as before,
knowing he meant well and wanted to support her, but she quelled the sensation from arising as thoughts about Mikasa raged on.

The match was set to begin momentarily.

Now was the worst time to dwell on such matters.

Tucking a loose stray of hair behind her ear, she readied in the appropriate formation and braced for what was to come.

University of Trost – Dormitory Division

Mikasa gazed into the mirror above her dresser, meticulously applying eyeliner to the top lid of her right eye. Satisfied with the result, she moved on to her left eye, careful to be sure the proportions were even.

Most days, Mikasa was content venturing out makeup free. Mainly for convenience, foundation and mascara only got in the way and made a sweaty mess when it came to the more physical and active aspects of her life, limiting her from fully engaging in activities like tennis or kickboxing.

Tonight, however, was an exception.

I can't believe it's been four years...

Never one to feel nervous or pressured, Mikasa was wholeheartedly looking forward to celebrate the milestone. Clad in a long, blue dress with a grey anorak jacket to combat the cold outside, she was sure to wear what Hannah had dubbed the "miracle bra."

"Might come in handy later." Hannah had casually suggested a few days before.

Mikasa reluctantly agreed, wanting to maintain some semblance of modesty, but ultimately decided the black lace bra looked amazing.

If (and when) the situation called for it, hopefully Eren would also approve.

The clock struck 7:00.

With about an hour until Eren's arrival, she reached for the navy blue scarf on her desk and placed it in an oblong box. She gently wrapped a red bow on top, weaving light ribbons around its entirety in a methodically ornate manner.

Eren's gift was as ready as she.

Orvud Sports Complex

FINAL

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The Stohess Lady Hawks had lost to the Ehrmich Lady Warriors.

The match was close with both teams giving it their all, battling it out to the last game. Stohess had put up a good fight but unfortunately, it wasn't enough to secure a spot in the finals. With the dejected clanking of their cleats, hearts heavy and plagued with disappointment, the SU athletes wordlessly dragged themselves back to the locker rooms in frustration and defeat.

Despite the setback, their coach sought to use the loss as an opportunity for growth, reminding them of all they had achieved earlier in the season in an encouraging light. The congratulatory remarks served as motivation for some, while completely falling on deaf ears for others.

Annie was among the disheartened few, though her despondence stemmed from a multitude of other factors on top of the unprecedented loss.

Second best. Second rate clout.

Almost there…

Almost a win is not a win; no matter how close one may be.

Annie was certain that was how it was going to be for her; for the rest of her life.

As an athlete in Stohess Volleyball. As a daughter to her father. As a daughter to her mother.

She would always be almost as important as work to her mother.

Almost as important as Jack Daniels to her father.

Her entire life, she'd been brushed to the side, forgotten, and often overlooked. The evening further confirmed that with the absence of her parents.

Annie had no qualms hiding her true feelings, having mastered the skill at a young age. She'd always been adept at convincing people she was "just fine" or "all right," when in actuality, she'd felt as though she'd been suffocating.

But beneath her cold austere exterior was just a girl who wanted to be… normal. With a normal family, a normal life.

She hadn't noticed that amid her internal brooding, quiet footsteps rumbling from her roommate had approached her with resolve.

"Annie," Hitch was trying to get her attention, throwing a loose fitting sweater in her direction. "Ymir offered us a ride back to our place." She paused as if still waiting for a response. "Unless, you want to ride back with the van."

Annie caught the sweater and stood up, her duffel bag slung over her shoulder. "Tell Ymir I'll be there soon." She turned to face Hitch, offering no further explanation for the delay.

I just need a minute.

Hitch nodded before walking away. Annie could have sworn she seemed concerned, perhaps a bit
apologetic, but it offered little solace for their current situation.

The locker room was mostly empty as Annie eventually got around to layering the sweater over her uniform and heading outside. Enclosing the sports complex was an exceptionally spacious parking lot, bustling with cars in the loading zone and people exiting the premises. Annie circled around towards the south end, where it was eerily quiet and much of the hustle had died down. Ymir had parked somewhere in the outer edges of the south parking lot, but Annie couldn't exactly recall where. Before she could pull out her phone, with the intention of calling Hitch, someone caught up with her.

As if she wasn't a mess already. He had to show up, of course.

Eren walked towards her, offering a supportive smile, hands nervously shoved in his pockets. "Hey, Annie." He went on and on about how they put up one hell of a fight, how he thought she was amazing regardless, blah, blah, blah… all words that she ultimately deemed meaningless.

Yet again, Annie was met with another example of being pushed aside as second best.

Eren already had a girlfriend, and of course, Annie was reduced to less than. Mikasa was everything any guy would want in a girlfriend, and Annie couldn't bring herself to hate her for that.

She decisively reasoned that if she wasn't good enough for her own parents, how in the hell could she be worthy of praise or affection from anyone else?

Annie felt herself tense up, her blood boiling. She questioned why Eren was even wasting his time seeing her. Surely he had other plans.

To know that he had someone waiting for him as soon as he left, while she would certainly be left alone with nothing more than her own haunting thoughts, hurt.

That hurt more than anything else.

An unrelenting, strange force took over, as if possessing Annie in a fitful rage, and violently burst through with a clenched fist aimed directly for Eren's jaw. She unleashed the violent jab swiftly, as he was still in mid-sentence of whatever bullshit he was adding on to his pathetic verbiage.

The force of the blow left Eren stunned, his hand trailing up to heed the ache above his chin. "What the hell was that for, Annie?" He spat, surprised by the amount of strength suppressed within the petite blonde.

"You should already know." Annie shot back bitterly.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Eren was dumbfounded, still reeling from the blow. The past few days, Annie had been acting strange, as if keeping her distance and cutting their conversations short during and after class, yet he still had no clue what the issue was.

"When were you going to mention that you had a girlfriend, Eren?" Annie demanded heatedly, fed up with what she presumed was a lie the whole time.

Eren, taken sharply aback, was not prepared for the sudden confrontation. He wasn't going to exert any energy on trying to figure out how she found out, and he wasn't going to add insult to injury by asking. How she had found out no longer mattered, because the end result was still the same. She knew the truth, and although it hadn't been a heavily guarded secret, he never thought Annie would grill him on the matter with such ferocity. He figured he would've eventually garnered the courage to finally come out and reveal the truth, before things got messy.
Too late now.

Alas, Eren wasn't a complete asshole. He was more than willing to take responsibility for his own actions. He was in the wrong here, and he shouldn't have kept that slightly significant detail from her.

Eren was willing to accept that he deserved this.

"I'm sorry, Annie." He finally said, following a brief, agonizing silence. "I should have…"

"What are you even doing here?" She harshly cut him off and managed to ask the very question that had prayed on her mind mercilessly for the past couple hours. The only question that mattered at this point.

Eren was careful with his response, accepting that it was high time he fessed up. It wouldn't be right to withhold anything else from her. "I'm supposed to be with her right now. Mikasa, I mean." He looked away, running a hand through his hair. "But… I'm here with you, instead."

"Why?" Annie's patience was wearing thin.

*Just walk away. She thought. Just fucking do it.*

His eyes were the same vibrant shade of green, a twinge of blue emulating concealed bleakness.

She was lost in them... as if they were begging her to stay. Her trance was broken when he spoke again.

"Because… it's where I'd rather be." Eren lowered his voice, deciding now was as good a time as ever to lay it all out and just let go. His heart was pounding his chest with such incredible force, ready to have it completely ripped out. "I can't stop thinking about you, Annie. No matter how hard I try, I just can't get you out of my head. And I know I shouldn't be feeling this way, but whenever I'm with you, I feel like we have this... connection. I'd like to think that what we have is a mutual understanding and that we respect each other. It goes deeper than the fact that we're passionate about the same things, or that we have a couple classes together. We've bonded in meaningful ways, but I want… more than just friendship." He looked up to see her hair gently flowing in the calm breeze, her arms resting at her sides like dead weight. He continued shortly after rubbing the back of his neck uneasily. "The first time I made you smile… I remember thinking that you looked so vulnerable. Vulnerable, but... beautiful. I love it when you smile, and... I want to be the reason behind it every time." His eyes were still pleading with her, saying the words he couldn't with his own mouth.

*Stay with me, Annie.*

"I can't deny what I'm feeling." Eren cautiously inched closer towards her. "There's something deeper between us than just friendship. I know you feel it, too."

Annie was torn. A part of her wanted to sock him in the jaw again, maybe draw some blood. Another part (the pathetic, hopeless part) wanted him to just shut up and hold her. She felt stupid regardless for finding herself in this fucked up situation.

"You know… I think I already knew. In the back of my mind, I figured there must have been someone else." She admitted, splitting off into another subject altogether. "That's what was holding you back, right? That night back at my place."

Eren found it troublesome that they never spoke about what happened that night. The memory of Annie's lips pressed against his pushed him to the edge, driving him insane.
It was wrong, but it felt so right.

"Yeah." He admitted. "But the only regret I have from that night, was leaving you there, and not finishing what we started."

Annie hoped he couldn't see her face flushed in bright red.

"Annie." There was a hint of sadness in his voice, and the way he was looking at her now was enough to make her melt. "How can I make this right? Tell me, what can I do?"

Stop. She thought. The tender look in his eyes was intoxicating.

He moved closer, and reached as if to stroke her face. She quickly dejected his hand, and shoved him away. "Stop." She commanded, eyes filled with regret. "Don't…"

Eren knew this was wrong, but he wanted nothing more than to apologize, tell her he was falling for her, and hold her in his arms. "Annie…"

She had enough. "Fuck you, Eren." She forcefully exhaled, and turned to walk away.

Eren watched as she left him standing underneath the street light alone, feeling empty and downcast. He desperately held back the urge to stop her and thoroughly spell out what she meant to him.

Instead, he let her walk away, because...

...it's the right thing to do...

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University of Trost – Dormitory Division

Eren, where are you?

Four missed calls and an innumerable amount of unanswered texts had summed up the tally that crazed Mikasa with turbulent worry.

Mikasa had always considered herself to be unfathomably patient – but Eren was never this late.

They had agreed on meeting at 8pm.

The time was 9:03pm.

Something's wrong.

Her roommate, Hannah, was gone for the weekend, ensuring she and Eren would have some privacy. From the looks of it, the privacy was bound to be wasted unless the highly anticipated guest were to finally show up, preferably with a damn good explanation.

Mikasa was about to call Eren for the fifth time, when the unexpected knock on her door had her suddenly lunging forward in earnest. Preparing a lecture about executing important things (like four-year anniversary dates!) in a timely manner, she was ready to give Eren a piece of her mind until she opened the door to find him standing there, seemingly heeding an ache on his jaw. He appeared… dismayed, as if something was troubling him.

"Oh my god, Eren... Are you all right?!" Mikasa asked incredulously, unable to control her panicked tone while pulling him into the room. She shut the door in a hurry, not even bothering to lock it. "What happened? I tried calling you..."
"I'm fine, Mikasa." Eren interjected, slumping back into a cushioned desk chair at her behest. "Sorry I'm late." He avoided eye contact and his vagueness left Mikasa dissatisfied.

"Are you at least going to tell me what happened?" She pulled up beside him, examining the slightly bruised area in question.

Eren desperately wanted the subject to change, and quickly made something up. "I tried to break up a fight. Got caught in the middle of it." He hated himself for lying to her. To the girl who had been so loyal and endearing for the past four years. He didn't deserve her kindness and devotion. She needed to know the truth. He owed her that much.

Mikasa nodded her head slowly, figuring he didn't want to discuss the matter any further. She respected that he kept some things to himself, and although she wished for him to completely open up to her, she was willing to trust that he could care for himself.

She stood up and walked over to the mini fridge in the corner by Hannah's side of the room, and began assembling an ice-pack as best she could. She placed a few ice cubes into a Ziploc bag and tightly wound the bag underneath a thin cloth. Once the makeshift remedy had been crafted, she offered it to Eren (or insisted that he take it, depending on who you ask).

With the pack resting against his jaw, Eren finally managed to look her in the eye. "Thanks, Mika." He forced a weak smile, still harboring guilt-ridden emotions. In that moment, he allowed himself to study her. She had made the effort to look nice for him, and from day one he thought she was gorgeous no matter what she was wearing, with or without makeup, hair styled in any way. He was accustomed to her naturally rosy cheeks, soft lips, and exotic grey eyes.

He could kiss those soft supple lips at any time, indulge in her taste, like that of vanilla. But for the past few weeks, every time they locked lips, he hated to admit that he often found himself fantasizing about Annie; wishing it were Annie's brushing against his own.

Right then and there, in Mikasa's small quiet dorm room, Eren had finally accepted that he had fallen out of love.

He still cared deeply for her but, oddly enough, it felt more like they were... family. The love he had for her was strictly platonic.

Kissing her no longer had the same romantic appeal as it did when they were in high school, instead it felt strange; like kissing his sister.

His contemplation was interrupted when Mikasa rose from her kneeling position.

"We don't have to go anywhere tonight." She affirmed. "We'll plan for a later date."

Now. Eren thought. Just tell her now.

"Mikasa..." The words were on the tip of his tongue. He was prepared to tell her the truth all at once, completely spill his guts. Not caring if now was an ideal time or not, he couldn't stand the thought of leading her on anymore.

She shushed his attempt momentarily, with the intent of presenting him with something that was sure to lighten the mood and lift his spirits. "Hold that thought for one moment." She urged him, kissing him gently on the forehead. She stepped behind the desk chair and reached for the oblong box decorated with red ribbon. Placing it gently on his lap, she glanced his way and smiled. "Open it."

After a brief pause, Eren reluctantly put the ice pack aside and focused on the box settled before him.
Slowly unraveling the ribbon entwined with the bow, he lifted the top and ruffled through crinkle cut gift filler. Inside was a navy blue knit scarf, folded neatly above.

Eren laced his stiffened fingers around the soft material, holding it sensibly as if he were handling delicate glass.

_I can't do this..._ He thought. A sickening, gut-wrenching feeling hit him hard, sending his emotions on a relentless ride he was frantically hoping to free himself from.

Mikasa's eyes lit up, enamored with the way the scarf fell in his grasp, rendering him speechless. "Happy Anniversary." She whispered, wrapping her arms around him in a heartfelt embrace.

Eren reciprocated the gentle encirclement of the warmth radiating from her body, now pressed against his own.

Neither spoke. No words were exchanged between them as they held onto each other, only the beating of their hearts vivaciously joined together throughout the calmness of the night.

Chapter End Notes

Just one more chapter until the end of "Part One" !!!
Updates might be a little slower as we head into the holiday season, but I'll do my best to stay on schedule :)
Update 8/12/2017:
Holy meep! So I've been making revisions and dear lawd almighty the ending of this chapter needed some serious changes! The original was just... awful lol I'm not even going to sugar-coat it. It screwed with Bert and Annie's relationship/friendship and felt so OOC, that I literally lost sleep last night haha. Soooo hopefully this is an improvement!

Monday, November 28th

Café Charmant - Stohess Plaza

A quiet, monotonous evening set the scene for Mikasa's closing shift at the classy and quaint Café Charmant.

Krista had just returned from her break shortly after Mikasa clocked on, her upbeat demeanor further heightened upon glancing at the calendar.

"It's almost December!" Krista beamed, looking over towards the management office. "I'm going to ask Frieda if we can start playing Christmas music!"

Mikasa couldn't help but smile. It was a weak one at that, but a smile nonetheless. Krista had the right idea; the most wonderful time of the year was upon them. Thanksgiving had proven to be amazing as always, with aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents from both sides of her family joining together at her home to reflect on what they were grateful for. The conclusion of the holiday had her mother immediately setting up the tree in the living room, followed by decorating the house with adorable little Christmas trinkets. A nutcracker on a shelf. Stockings above the fireplace. String lights and streamers draped along the staircase. Her father had set up lights on the home's exterior, pairing them nicely with a few light-up reindeer on the front lawn. The only contribution he made to the décor for the interior of the home was a menorah, erected on a coffee table in the living room.

Mikasa was accustomed to celebrating Hanukkah and Christmas; something none of her friends could relate to. Both holidays had a strong impact on her upbringing, reminding her of her mixed heritage.

Before long, Frank Sinatra's rendition of I'll Be Home for Christmas could be heard playing in the background, indicating Krista's pleas with her sister must have been a success. (In all honesty, who could resist such a precious cinnamon roll?)

As the music sashayed throughout the establishment, gracing the ears of a few coffee snobs and enthusiasts slaving away on their laptops with essays and reports that were most likely due the next day, Sinatra's smooth and lyrical voice bestowed a much needed comfort.

For all but one, anyway. Mikasa was still troubled regarding her relationship with Eren.
Am I missing something? Why does it feel like he's pushing me away?

They ultimately resorted to celebrating their four-year anniversary the following Saturday, but it all felt so awkward… forced, even. Eren hadn't said a whole lot, and she found herself desperately trying to keep the conversation going. It was never like that before. Even if the topic was ridiculous, they'd always find something to talk about. She was comfortable completely opening up to him, no matter what the occasion or setting. It troubled her that he seemed guarded, and she convinced herself that he was hiding something.

Mikasa had never considered herself to be paranoid, neither did she have trust issues, but all the signs were there. Eren was dealing with something; something that was clearly bothering him.

She missed the old Eren, and the way things were.

A light clanking noise interrupted her thoughts. The sound of a teacup on its way to impending doom instantly shook her back to reality. She caught the porcelain cup mere seconds before it was sure to hit the floor in a chaotic crash.

That was close. She thought. Thank god…

The voice of a friendly patron suddenly had her attention fixed back to the counter.

"Nice save." It was Isabel Magnolia, longtime friend of Levi and Furlan. "Those were some cat-like reflexes."

Mikasa had only met her the one time; the Halloween party at her apartment following the volunteering gig at St. Luke's. Though she couldn't quite put her finger on it, there was something she liked about the fierce red-headed dame. Her sense of humor, maybe. Her sass, perhaps. The familiarity in the color of her eyes and trademark mischievous smile, definitely.

Mikasa likened her to be the female version of Eren, minus a few quirks here and there.

"Hey, Isabel," Mikasa greeted her after gently setting aside the teacup, thankful for the distraction from thoughts pertaining to her struggling relationship. "What brings you in?"

"Just needed a chill place to study," Isabel replied, pulling out her wallet. "The coffee is another plus."

"What can I get for you?"

"Tall mocha, please."

"Coming right up." Mikasa began crafting the specialty drink, as the jolly tune Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree had fellow coworker Krista humming along.

"Hey, Izzy!" Krista enthused, now donning a perky little Santa hat. "Long time, no see."

"It has been awhile, hasn't it?" Isabel grinned, marveling at the giant Christmas tree centered in the adjacent lounging area. Frieda and Eld were still adding a few ornaments to the lovely Pine tree when Mikasa presented the finished product on the counter.

"Isabel used to work here," Krista commented in her usual chirpy tone, attempting to fill Mikasa in on what she assumed was news to her.

"So I've heard," Mikasa responded, preparing to use the cash register.
After Isabel had paid, she took a sip of her mocha and obliged a sudden arousal of curiosity. "Is Annie working today?"

"No, but she works tomorrow." Mikasa was looking forward to working with the stoic blonde, and then heading to Sina Fitness afterward as per their usual Tuesday routine.

"Awh, I haven't seen her in so long." Isabel mused, slightly disappointed. "Be sure to tell her I said hi, will ya?"

Mikasa nodded. "Of course."

Isabel was about to walk away, when she remembered something. Lest she not forget, and she would certainly be sure to extend an invitation Annie's way later.

"Mikasa," Isabel began, clearing her throat, "I'm having a Christmas party at my place this Saturday. You should totally come if you're free."

Mikasa's eyes widened, surprised by the offer. After contemplating the gesture for a moment, she accepted. "Sure. I'll be there."

"Bring a friend, if ya want," Isabel added, gathering her belongings. Her eyes darted to an empty booth nearby the grand piano in the lounge.

"Thanks, Isabel." As she walked away, Mikasa tilted her head curiously.

She proceeded to contemplate whether or not Eren would want to go.

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**Jaeger Household – Shiganshina Neighborhood**

"Think it'll snow tonight?"

The scent of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies captivated the senses of Eren in more ways than just the arousal of hunger. The warm aroma brought back memories of his childhood, coming home after a hard day at school to find that his mother had baked heavenly batches of pure sugary sweetness.

As Carla began fanning away at a pan full of cookies waiting to be cooled down, Eren took some time peering out the kitchen window, trying to deduce whether or not snow would be likely, in response to his mother's question.

"Nah," he replied, eyes wandering up towards the clouded sky. "The newscaster said we won't get any until the weekend."

"Hmmm." Carla nodded, stowing her oven mitts into a drawer. "The temperature is supposed to drop to the mid-twenties tonight. I have a feeling we'll be waking up to a winter wonderland."

"That would be awesome." Eren chuckled. "Classes would be cancelled, and my friends and I could…"

"Study, right?" Carla quickly intercepted his enthusiasm for slacking off.

"…sure…" Eren sighed, reaching for a cookie.
Carla resumed tending to the kitchen, cleaning a few dishes after putting the flour and cookie ingredients back in their respective places. Eren, wanting to distract himself from thoughts pertaining to the rough week behind him, noticed the cheery mood his mother was in and figured it was time to reveal his plans regarding his academic career.

"So, mom." Eren cleared his throat, sitting nervously on a stool adjacent to the counter. "I've finally declared a major." He was ready to make his announcement, wanting to be as tactful as possible. Carla had finished washing the last of the dirty dishes when she turned around and began drying her hands with a towel, looking directly at him with a warm smile.

"German?" she asked, her tone sly but endearing at the same time.

Eren nearly choked on his cookie while in mid-chew. "Asdfghjkl."

Carla let out a soft laugh. Ever since he was a child, Eren had never really been good at hiding things. He was a terrible liar, and couldn't keep a secret to save his life.

Carla was also a bit of a nosy mother. "Your backpack is full of German literature. And the notes on the desk in your room were about studying abroad in Germany."

"You went through my things?!!" Eren was horrified.

"Of course."

"Why?!"

"Does a mother need a reason?"

Eren looked away, surprised by the calmness in her voice. "Wait… you're not… mad?"

Carla tilted her head to the side, raising a brow. "Why would I be mad?"

"Because… you and dad think it's a useless major."

Carla shook her head. "I can't speak for your father, but I don't think any language degree is useless."

Eren's eyes widened, unsure if she was just accepting his decision because he was an adult now, or if she truly believed his future was secure. "You're really okay with this?"

Carla walked over to where Eren was sitting and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Every degree has potential, Eren. It's not about what you're majoring in. It's about what you plan to do with it."

Her words were reassuring, and for the first time in a while, Eren felt at ease. "I honestly wasn't expecting this to be so… easy." He plopped his elbows on the counter in relief and deeply exhaled. "Does dad know?"

Carla nodded slowly. "He's known for a while."

_Damn._ Eren thought. "I'll wait to talk about it with him." He ultimately decided.

Carla pulled him in for a hug, patting him gently on the back. "We're proud of you, either way." She ruffled his hair before turning back to cleaning a few remnants from her baking escapades.

Eren smiled impishly as he stood up to pour himself a glass of milk. "And I'm quitting pole vault, by the way."
"WHAT?!" Carla's shriek caught him off guard, nearly dropping the gallon of milk as he was hurled into riotous cackling.

"I'm kidding!"

Both were joined in laughter, as Christmas music melodically carried itself throughout the entire home.

*Oh, there's no place like home for the holidays...*

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**Marley Neighborhood**

Bertolt had never been more nervous in his entire life.

Annie and her mother were over for the Hoover's annual "Friendsgiving" party. Friends from work, classmates from the good old days back in school, and people from other shared circles were mixing and mingling in both the dining room and living room.

The only thing on his mind, however, was the petite blonde standing idly in her own reserved corner. The crowded home was suffocating, and he could tell Annie was completely withdrawn, surrounded by people who may as well have been strangers.

He mustered up the courage to reach out to her, sneaking out of his parent's view.

"Annie…" he said, determined not to ramble on about something pointless. "Wanna go out for a walk?" He avoided eye contact while adding, "It's kinda crowded here."

Annie wordlessly agreed, nodding her head while reaching for her coat.

As they ventured outside, Bertolt took one last look towards the dining room. His parents and Annie's mother were engaged in a discussion with several others; about *what* he had no way of knowing, given the distance. They were all distracted, so he figured it would be harmless for him and Annie to quietly slip out for a bit.

They began heading down the sidewalk, no particular destination in mind. Both were silent until Bertolt asked how her day at school was. He was careful not to bring up anything remotely related to volleyball. Hearing about the loss consumed him with guilt for not going to the semi-finals match. If only he had requested the day off from work *earlier.*

Annie was being short with her replies, leaving Bertolt to surmise that she was still in a shitty mood. But he had known her long enough to realize that her despondence was rooted in something much deeper than losing the match.

The fact that her parents had let her down for the umpteenth time was probably the main reason.

He contemplated whether or not he should confess his feelings for her. But he suddenly realized that if he kept putting it off, he'd never get around to it. It was about damn time he just admit it already.

*Here goes nothing.*

"Um, Annie. I wanted to… talk to you about something." He had hoped for the words to come out a bit smoother than that, but his preparation for *this exact moment* was limited to staring into mirrors...
and getting stupid tips from Reiner that flew right over his head.

"Go on." Annie slowed her pace down a bit, allowing for Bertolt to catch up.

His heart was on the verge of explosion, and for a moment he thought he was going to faint.

*Man up! Just say it!*

"Have you ever…" Bertolt exhaled immensely, as if he were in pain before finishing his proposition. "Have you ever thought… about us… together?"

Annie was immediately perplexed, unsure what he meant by that or where he was going with all this. "Together? Like how?"

_Screw it._ He thought. After an excruciatingly long silence, he dumped his feelings on the table.

"I've… I've loved you since we were kids." Bertolt shut his eyes, holding his breath in anticipation.

Annie stopped in her tracks and stared incredulously at him. _Why is he bringing this up all of the sudden?_ She thought. _Where is this coming from?_

She had no idea what to say, and she wasn't quite sure if she _wanted_ to say anything at all.

Bertolt began panicking internally. _She's not saying anything. What do I do now?!_

Without even thinking of the consequences, he leaned in, his lips landing directly on Annie's with the passion and fury of a thousand suns.

Annie was taken completely by surprise, and quickly pulled away.

"Bert… What…?" she snapped, unable to articulate a coherent response.

"I'm sorry…" Bertolt hastily apologized, unsure what came over him. Years of unrequited love for the blonde had been bottling up inside him, and he could no longer quell the rise of its intensity, burning like a wildfire from within.

He wondered if it would be the death of him.

Before he could say anything else, however, Annie suddenly pulled him back in for another kiss, this time slower and deeper. It caught him wholly off guard, and he could sense the tension welling up within the blonde, like she wasn’t in the right frame of mind, pulling such a brash move to possibly compensate for something.

Annie wasn’t quite sure what exactly her intentions were either. She only knew one thing was for certain; she wanted to feel _something_. She wanted to feel some semblance of love or intimacy. She wanted to forget about the guilt that resulted from being involved with Eren.

And most of all, she wanted to forget about the pain of feeling rejected by her own father.

Kissing Bertolt helped her cope with that… even if the mechanism was a rather unconventional one.

He was so gentle with her smaller frame, his lips were impeccably soft, and there was no denying it; he was a _really good kisser._

But Annie had to stop herself… had to _reason_ with herself.
It was unfair of her to give him false hope only because she was feeling vulnerable.

Pulling herself way, she finally gathered her thoughts when a reply arose. "I can’t, Bertolt. I’m sorry… it’s just that… I think of you as a friend. A close friend." She shoved her fists into her coat pockets, offering no further elaboration.

Had she ever thought of him as anything more than that? Maybe… back when they were kids. She had ultimately decided, however, that she’d rather not ruin their strong bond by taking unnecessary risks that came with the transition into more intimate relationships.

A lot of that stemmed from the fact that she couldn’t trust herself, and the fact that she’d dealt with self-loathing on a daily basis.

Annie didn’t want to hurt Bertolt. She didn’t want to disappoint him or let him down after all these years.

She needed someone like him to stay in her life, even if that meant strictly on a platonic level.

Bertolt remained silent, all the while his confusion slowly morphing into resentment. He figured he knew exactly why Annie was rejecting him, and it made him sick to his stomach.

"Is it because of Eren?" he forced out in frustration.

Annie opened her mouth as if to rebuke his accusation, her eyes widening in disbelief. "That’s none of your business," she muttered, turning to walk back to the Hoover home.

"He has a girlfriend," Bertolt shot back, voice laced with disdain.

Unbeknownst to him, Annie was already aware of that unsightly fact. "I know." Her response sounded partially regretful, partially annoyed, leaving Bertolt perplexed.

"You don’t think what you’re doing is wrong, Annie?" Bertolt pressed on.

Annie turned to look at him, her eyes like daggers.

If looks could kill…

“What do you want me to say?” Annie snapped, her self-loathing returning. “You want me to admit that I don’t care? That I’m selfish? Okay, fine. I’m just…” she paused, feeling tears well up in her eyes. “I’m just a cold, heartless bitch… and nobody… nobody loves me.”

Memories of her father came flooding in, plaguing her mercilessly as the tears began streaming down her face.

She hadn’t meant to physically vocalize her frustrations, her anger, her pain.

But she needed to vent. It was all bound to come out sooner or later.

Although she’d always been a more private person, she had no qualms breaking down emotionally in front of Bertolt. With him, she felt safe.

Upon seeing her tears, Bertolt sought to console Annie. In the past, he had always been sure to look out for her, defend her honor when guys would disrespect her, stop other kids from bullying her back in grade school (although she was more than capable of holding her own).

He saw himself as her protector and it hurt him to see her like this. All that mattered now was
comforting her, tell her everything would be all right, and promise that he would always be there for her. Later on he could mourn his unrequited love and drown out his sorrows with a little help from Jose Cuervo.

Annie's quiet sniffles were soon muffled as he gently wrapped his arms around her. She didn't make a single move nor reject his embrace. She just let him hold her, feeling herself fade into his tender affection.

"That’s not true, Annie,” Bertolt whispered, caressing her light blonde locks. “You are loved… and just know… that I’ll always be here for you.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter marks the end of "Part One."
Part Two will continue in this fic... hopefully sometime within the next week! :)
Thanks to all who've reviewed and hit that kudos button ;)
Part Two: Catch and Release - (Chapter 21: Yesterday is History)

Chapter Notes

Ladies and Gentlemen, I present to you the first chapter of Part Two!

Here, Part Two opens with flashbacks. (Annie's POV, Levi's POV, and Mikasa's POV, in that order.)

Keep that in mind when reading. That's also part of the reason why I listed the dates above each section.

I wanted to develop some of the main characters a bit more by delving into their pasts. Hopefully it's not too short!

And as always, thanks to all who've taken the time to read and review! :)

Marley Neighborhood - April, 2015

High school sucks.

Seventeen-year-old Annie Leonhart, senior at Marley High School, refused to believe otherwise.

Girls were constantly throwing themselves into unnecessary drama, entangling themselves with petty behavior related to breakups or other bullshit.

Guys were equally obnoxious, chasing anything with a skirt or cracking overused jokes from internet memes left and right.

It was all so ridiculous. The place had more in common with a fucking circus than an educational complex.

The only thing keeping her sane was her upcoming graduation; the blue cap and gown attire seemingly mocking her from their positions on the empty desk chair in her room, waiting for the day she could throw them on and parade down some aisle to get her diploma. After that, she could simply "peace out," refusing to waste any tears on the memory of a mere building like some of her pathetic classmates.

She'd been accepted to Stohess University, in part thanks to her volleyball scholarship, and she looked forward to the prospect of moving on with her life. Although not entirely sure which career path she would take, her heart was set on majoring in English. Reading was an escape, while writing was a nice outlet, allowing for her thoughts to roam freely. She figured she could reconcile her passion with her education, so long as she planned accordingly.

Amid all the anticipation and impatient grumbling, steadily increasing as final exams forced her to shut out civilization and study for hours on end in her dark dungeon of a room, she promised herself she'd always remember all the hard work and sacrifices she had poured into her future.

As far as she was concerned, she had done it all by herself, relying on little help from others.
She had learned from a young age to look after herself. Annie was lucky enough to have at least a few others provide reassurance when times were tough. Bertolt tried his best to shelter her from the cruelty of others. But he wouldn't be around forever.

There had been a few times when Annie was forced to rely on her fists to settle things, often reducing her instincts to the basic necessity of survival. If she gained anything valuable from her father, it was essential self-defense tactics. After putting several shady characters in their place, no one dared to mess with her.

Annie took her self-sufficiency to a whole 'nother level.

She didn't need anyone to swoop in and save the day. She didn't need a hero.

She vowed to be her own hero.

---

University of Trost - March, 2014

Underclassman Levi Ackerman found his 10am History of World War II class rather comforting. There were less than thirty students enrolled for the hundred plus allotted lecture hall, allowing for him to practically have an entire row all to himself.

He could follow along and take notes in peace. The chances of some hungover classmate barging in and slumping into the chair directly adjacent to his were lower than the chances of Furlan finding a date to UT's annual athletic banquet, now less than a week away.

In other words; impossible.

Levi reached into his bag and quickly pulled out his daily planner.

*Tennis practice…*

*Work…*

*Study with Isabel at the library…*

He was just about to add a few more notes on a separate page when he was suddenly approached by a female classmate, taking a seat next to him in earnest.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but I forgot my textbook, and I was hoping we could share yours. Just for today, I promise!"

Levi was preparing to shoot the intruder a murderous glare, followed by spewing out an insult somewhere along the lines of "scram" or "guess you're shit outta luck, toots," until he was caught in the middle of staring into gorgeous honey, amber eyes and an angelic smile.

The most beautiful smile he had ever seen.

Her hair fell just below her shoulders, nearly the same golden hue as her eyes. The look on her face was patient and understanding, as if still waiting on an answer but partially expecting the stranger before her to take the chivalrous route and agree to her terms out of the goodness of his heart.

Yeah, she certainly seemed like that type. The friendly overly optimistic type, donning a sweet and genuinely endearing personality, and seasoned with nothing but good intentions. Levi had yet to even know her name, but he was thoroughly intrigued by the innocent charm in her demeanor,
seemingly too nice to turn down.

Snapping out of his trance, Levi nudge his textbook closer to the middle of their shared table, meeting her halfway in a position where they both could easily read from the assigned chapter and follow along with the lecture.

"Thanks." The girl whispered, gathering a pen and notebook.

The lecture felt like an eternity as the instructor droned on and on about the Battle of Britain. Levi hadn't taken nearly enough notes as he thought may have been necessary for the upcoming exam, and he blamed himself for being distracted.

The nameless girl next to him caught him completely off guard. What with her radiant locks, her small delicate hands, and her scent; like tiger lilies in full bloom.

_Dammit_.

The only thing that bothered Levi after class had ended was the fact that the sudden intrusion hadn't actually bothered him at all.

As he rose from his seat, readying himself for his next class, the girl spoke again, this time sounding more confident.

"My name's Petra, by the way." She smiled, slinging her backpack over her shoulder. Levi simply couldn't resist the melodic tone in her voice. He tried his best to combat the inexplicable feelings sprouting from within, but something about her had him fascinated.

Although initially reluctant to do so, he decided to give her his name in return. "Levi."

"I knew that." She replied, much to his surprise. "You're kind of a tennis legend around here."

Levi had no idea how to respond to the title. He had heard it all many times, in many ways; each more overbearing than the last.

UT's tennis prodigy, poster child, _savior_...

The unwarranted attention disgusted him, to say the least. He likened the labels to pet names, thus all the more reason to be disdainful.

But coming from Petra, it wasn't _so_ bad.

Before he could say anything to downplay the attempt at putting his athleticism on a pedestal, Petra was already making her next move. "Walk with me to my next class?"

Levi couldn't come up with an excuse to say "no," in time, so he agreed.

"Sure."

In a way, he was interestingly… tolerant towards an otherwise slight inconvenience.

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_Shigashina High School - October, 2012_

"OMG! Mikasa! Aren't you excited to be part of the Homecoming court?!

"Congrats on the nomination!"
"You're Homecoming Lady, Mikasa!"

Mikasa couldn't count how many times she'd heard those phrases over the past week. Not even halfway into her freshman year at Shiganshina High School and already she found herself well-liked and admired by many supportive classmates in her graduating year.

Clad in a blue long sleeve blouse and black jeans, Mikasa strolled onto the football field at the Shiganshina HS Stadium alongside the other nominees for the Homecoming Court.

The tradition every year for Homecoming was for each class, (freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors) to elect two representatives (one boy and one girl) for the royalty court. The lucky elected few were then requested to make special appearances at the Homecoming football game, as well as the dance the next day.

Holding the titles of Homecoming King and Queen were seniors Mike Zacharius and Nanaba Rohm.

Holding the titles of Prince and Princess were juniors Luke Siss and Traute Carven.

Holding the titles of Duke and Duchess were sophomores Boris Feulner and Nifa Rheinberger.

Last, but not least, holding the titles of Lord and Lady (titles that were albeit somewhat cringey), were freshmen Eren Jaeger and Mikasa Ackerman.

The stands were clamoring with students going into a wild craze as the King and Queen were crowned, followed by being ceremoniously paraded with the other court nominees in classic cars looking as if they'd jumped right out of a vintage magazine from the '50s.

Lord and Lady Eren and Mikasa sat in a '57 Ford Thunderbird, slowly making its way across the field, following behind the upperclassmen in their respective vehicles.

Mikasa looked over to see a slightly embarrassed Eren forcing himself to wave to the crowd. Someone in the stands was shouting for his attention, screaming like a maniac to get a good shot of him in his nice outfit and Homecoming sash draped across his chest.

"THAT'S MY BOY!" The boisterous call echoed from a slender brunette, yelling in pure elation with a camera in hand.

Eren turned to face Mikasa, cheeks burning an intense red. "My mom just loves to embarrass me."

He gulped.

"She's proud of you." Mikasa replied, letting out a faint chuckle. "Just smile and wave."

The two carefully stood up, side by side, and resumed waving to the crowd, both trying hard to make out their friends' faces in the masses, seemingly blurred in all the riotous chaos.

A mild breeze suddenly kicked in, causing Mikasa to shiver uncontrollably.

Eren was quick to take notice, initially confused by the slight shudder of her shoulders. "Are you cold?" He asked, admiring how adorable she looked with her arms clutched tightly together, her knees slightly trembling.

"M-maybe a little." She looked away, clinging to a forgotten sweater just behind the passenger's seat of the car. Before she could pull it over her head, the green eyed brunet wrapped her gently in a dark red blanket of warmth.
"Here." He said, letting go of the scarf, now providing Mikasa with cozy protection from the cold. "Keep it."

"Are you sure?" Mikasa felt her heart flutter for a moment, smitten by the boy's charm.

"Yeah." Eren nodded. "It suits you." He returned to posing for the crowd (or possibly his mother's camera) and slowly placed his arm around her, pulling her closer to him. Mikasa wasn't sure if his advancement was to help her combat the cold, just for the photo ops, or something else entirely. The warmth radiating from his body, the smile on his face, and his mesmerizing emerald eyes assured her that the reasons behind the kind gesture hardly mattered.

Right then and there, at the young and naïve age of fourteen, Mikasa wondered if this was what it was like to fall in love at first sight.
Stohess University

She was avoiding him.

Ever since that night a couple weeks ago. The night Annie's team suffered the loss at the semi-final's match. The night he confessed his feelings for her. The night she called him out on his bullshit. The night he couldn't bring himself to end his relationship with Mikasa.

Annie avoided him like the plague in between and during classes, opting to sit by herself in a corner towards the back of the room. As soon as class was over, she'd exit the premises by her lonesome, walking in solitude, her destination an unknown place.

He was tempted to follow her after Calculus, and possibly extend an apology her way in an attempt to clean up some of the mess he had made.

At the very least, he wanted to remain friends – but really, that was just a shitty, pathetic phrase people reverted to when they were out of options; a last ditch effort to keep the individual in question from leaving them behind for good.

He couldn't lie to himself anymore.

Eren was falling hard for her... and he just couldn't stay away.

After watching her walk off in the opposite direction for what felt like an eternity, he finally turned and followed his usual route onward to his next class.

He reasoned with himself that he needed to give it some time, give her some space, and hope to dear god the whole situation would blow over quickly and serve as an unconventional punchline a few years down the road.

If he truly respected and cared for her, he should at least honor that basic principle.

But taking a more honorable approach was killing him... and it only further reminded him that there were a few other things that required his attention.

He recognized that to do right by everyone involved, it was absolutely critical for him to tell Mikasa the truth.

Trost Mall

He wasn't sure why they had caught his eye, much less why he stopped to even give them a second look.

Roguishly dark red. Knitted with homespun wool. Delicately soft and warm.

The mittens possessed a strange romantic quality, infused with an overall charming appeal that could overwhelm even the most dismal of hearts.
Levi studied the pair of intricately detailed mitts, the stitch pattern carefully crafted in small spirals of scarlet ribbons.

A part of him was admittedly turned off by the whole gift-swapping aspect of the winter holiday, mainly because the holiday was commercialized and marketed to death, swarming malls and shopping districts the minute Thanksgiving was over. He compared the disrespect to that of attending a lavish, hedonistic party right after a funeral; getting wasted and laughing among friends before the dearly departed had yet to become worm food.

Realizing his analogy perfectly justified Isabel and Furlan's reasoning for comparing him to Scrooge, he reluctantly accepted that given the time of year, he could use a little help getting into the Christmas spirit.

The unapologetic smirk that formed at the corner of his mouth suggested he found that idea somewhat amusing.

What ultimately compelled him to purchase the red mittens wasn't the advice from his friends, nor was it the music carrying itself throughout the mall, nor the old holiday adage about the "true meaning of Christmas" and cheesy stuff like that.

Instead, he envisioned someone he cared for. A girl who understood the underlying meaning behind his bored expressions and quiet disposition. A girl who had befriended him through their shared passion for the same sport. It was enough to convince him the whole thing wasn't such a bad idea.

She was one of the few people that put up with his antics, and he figured the small gesture was the least he could do.

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**Saturday, December 3rd**

**Isabel's Apartment – Trost Neighborhood**

Eren's first time venturing deeper into rival school territory, (aside from Mikasa's dormitory division) was as underwhelming as he had hoped it would be.

Why he had agreed to accompany his current girlfriend to her friend's Christmas party was beyond him. He was in a room full of strangers, bored out of his mind, staring at the dwarf size tree plastered with gold ribbons and run-of-the-mill red and green ornaments. The living room was lit up with color lights and there was a single stocking hanging on the wall near the television. The floor was sparkling with a few shimmery specks, as if a glitter bomb detonated in a massive eruption all along the light grey carpet.

He convinced himself he was doing the right thing by showing up, but presenting himself to others as Mikasa's supportive boyfriend came at a rather high price to pay. In exchange for his forced do-gooder appearance, he felt his own mental stability was being sacrificed. Amid his contemplation, he wondered if the whole showboating and putting on an act was worth it anymore. At this point, he felt as though Mikasa was being taken for a fool; blinded by some sense of pride, perhaps? They paraded as the perfect couple, high school sweethearts, together for four years, so on and so forth. It was hard for him to believe that she was completely oblivious to his change in behavior over the past few weeks.

Unless of course, she was in denial.

Eren leaned against the wall, Mikasa by his side, and shrugged. He tried his best to at least pretend
like he was keeping up with the conversation between her and the hostess, Isabel, but to no avail. He simply had no interest.

"Is Levi working tonight?" Mikasa asked, raising her red solo cup and slowly bringing it to her mouth. His absence left her wondering if she'd ever find the chance to properly introduce him to Eren.

A teensy, tiny part of her thought maybe that was for the best. She had a feeling Levi wouldn't be too fond of the young pole vaulter. And vice versa.

"Yeah. He's closing at the All-Star." Isabel replied, steadily rising from the couch. "He picked up a few extra shifts this week and next week so he'd have better chances of getting Christmas off."

"Who doesn't want Christmas off?" Mikasa jested, wondering why in the hell the bar would still be open for business. "It would be lame to have to be separated from your family."

Isabel toyed with the candy bowl at the center of the living room, unwrapping a peppermint Ghirardelli. "Especially when it's also your birthday."

Mikasa's head perked up curiously. "Levi's birthday is December 25th?"

Isabel nodded. "He's a Christmas baby."

Mikasa weighed the pros and cons of sharing one's birthday with a prime holiday. The idea of being born during the most wonderful time of the year sounded cool, but she was certain that amid all the chaos and having to compete with characters like Santa Claus and Rudolph the Red-nosed reindeer, only set the poor sucker up for failure.

And the worst part? Cheapy the Cheapskates were more prone to bundling birthday and Christmas gifts into one.

"Happy birthday/Merry Christmas" presents were nightmare inducing.

She imagined as a kid, it may have crushed his little dreams. But now that he was an adult, he either one; couldn't care less, or two; accepted his fate and put up nary any resistance.

The thought of messing with him was too good to pass up either way.

As she reached for the candy bowl, she made a mental note to add him to the list of people she would go Christmas shopping for. Aside from having a little fun, she figured it was the least she could do to thank him for training with her.

The two girls continued to swap their sentiments on the matter, before Eren resumed thinking about how badly he wanted to leave. Chuckling, Isabel walked past them and disappeared into the kitchen, separated by an elongated wall. She later returned with a bottle of sparkling cider and as many glasses as she could carry.

Furlan watched as she set them on the small table just outside the kitchenette and waited patiently for her to spew out some snarky comment.

"Thanks for the help, Furlan." She muttered sardonically. "Guess chivalry's dead." Her berating tone and sassiness were all too predictable.

"Allow me." He quipped, sauntering into the kitchen whilst rolling his eyes. He opened a few cupboards as if playing a guessing game before finally discovering the rest of the wine glasses. Isabel
wasn't much of a wine drinker, and he was curious as to why she had so many.

Before Isabel could open the bottle of cider, there was a steady knock on her door. With the exception of an apathetic Eren, the piercing thuds had everyone's attention fixated on the small entryway.

The events directly following the arrival of the guest flew right over his head, ignoring Mikasa's departure from their position in the festive living room. When he finally looked over to see what convicted her to greet the visitor, he truly wished he hadn't.

Mikasa pulled the petite blonde in for a hug, as did Isabel and a few other attendees of the party. Eren thought he was going to have a heart attack then and there, struggling to balance himself from the wall.

*What. The. Hell.*

He was stunned to see Mikasa and Annie interacting as though they'd known each other for ages. Thinking back to prior conversations with Mikasa, he hadn't recalled one instance where she had mentioned the stoic blonde at all.

*They... know each other?*

*How?!*

Eren's face turned red as he heard the next words protrude from Mikasa's mouth in what seemed like slow-motion.

"I want you to meet someone." She led Annie to where Eren was standing, offering a polite introduction. Little did she know…

"Annie," Mikasa continued, "this is my boyfriend, Eren." She turned to the brunet and reversed the greeting. "Eren, this is Annie. We work together at the café."

*So that's how.* Eren thought, unable to come up with a single thing to say. As he studied Annie, her expression mirroring that of his own, he felt his jaw clench, a muscle twitched violently.

Mikasa looked back and forth between the two, confused as to why they were acting so strangely. "Normally, this is the part where you say 'how do you do,' or 'nice to meet you.'"

"We've already met." Annie informed her, her eyes sharply emitting their usual intimidating blankness, ripping into his goddamn soul.

Eren nervously expanded on Annie's statement, simultaneously wishing he could jump out of a ten-story building. "We actually have two classes together at SU."

"Oh, really?" For now, Mikasa still hadn't quite caught on, though the look on her face suggested she expected more elaborate responses. "What a small world."

Eren watched in silent devastation as Annie brushed past him and began conversing with Isabel on the other side of the room. Mikasa trailed behind and began mingling with fellow UT classmates, urging him to socialize a bit more with the slight nod of her head.

From then on, as the evening's festivities continued (at a snail's pace to make things worse), Eren couldn't keep his eyes off Annie, stealing secretive glances at the blonde from a lonely, secluded corner.
Time was considered a precious commodity to some, but for an impatient Eren, 10:00pm couldn't come any sooner. As soon as the clock struck twenty-two hundred hours, he'd split. There was nothing more torturous than seeing his current girlfriend, the girl he had devoted himself to for the past four years, be friendly with the very reason he had fallen out of love.

It was heart-wrenching. Gut-wrenching. Sickening.

And to someone with a twisted sense of humor, ironic.

His throat was constricted as he let out a faint cough. It felt uncomfortably dry, but thankfully not enough to limit his speech, as he soon found himself face to face with the red-headed hostess.

"So," Isabel pried, "Mikasa tells me you pole vault for SU." She shot him a crafty smirk, looking as though she had the world's greatest trick up her sleeve. "I thought you looked familiar. State champ from Shiganshina High, right?"

Eren nodded, looking down at his empty solo cup. "Yeah." He sighed, mentally preparing himself for yet another conversation delving into his training, stats from high school, his scholarship, why he chose to commit to SU, and possibly other topics he'd absentmindedly rolled over hundreds of times before. "I've been trained in the sport since I was in middle school."

"That makes two of us." Isabel grinned, her smile only growing wider as Eren's face morphed into that of astonishment.

"..." Eren took a moment to recollect a few scattered memories, piecing them all together until they finally came full circle. Isabel... Magnolia? "I think I remember seeing you at the Track and Field State Championships my sophomore year. You were a senior then, right?"

"Yup!" Isabel replied. "I barely managed to make it onto the podium that year. Third place. Not too shabby for someone who was injured halfway into the season."

"Wow." Eren remarked encouragingly. He was impressed that in spite of a few setbacks, she was still able to land a scholarship to UT; a D1 school with a commendable Track and Field program. "You pulled through."

"That and my performance in the high jump was something of a miracle." She sighed, lost in the nostalgia of that fateful day. "I PR'd twice in one meet."

"And you're perfectly capable of doing it again." Eren noted, expressing his appreciation for her dedicated enthusiasm. Her passion for the sport was rare at the college level. Most athletes were satisfied performing the bare minimum, while only a rare few made the effort to strive for real progress. "Exceed your own expectations."

Isabel chuckled, raising her cider-filled wine glass. "They outta put that on a bumper sticker or something." She held her glass at level with their shoulders, offering a toast of sorts. "Here's to the upcoming spring season."

Eren, remembering that his cup was empty, opted to go along with the toast anyway, not wanting to leave her hanging. "Don't forget about the indoor season." He said, raising an eyebrow. "Just a couple more weeks and it's back to the grind."

"Right." Isabel mumbled. The indoor season during the winter wasn't worth the aggravation or stress
she fell victim to her freshman year, choosing to save her energy for the spring for fear of sustaining an injury. Opting to keep that to herself, she took a hefty swig from her glass, tilting her head back in a dramatically rough fashion. Following a massive gulp, she noticed an unforgivable sin had been committed on her part; as both a hostess and fellow pole vaulter. Eren's cup was drier than the Atacama desert. "Oh, sorry about that! Did you... want some more soda or something, Eren?"

Eren weakly smiled. "That would be nice."

"What'll it be?"

"I'm good with just water." Eren briefly glanced towards Annie, now staring directly at him. He felt his whole body stiffen before turning back to Isabel and adding one quick sentiment. "But it's fine. I got it." With Isabel's approval, he ventured off into the kitchen, grateful for the small window of opportunity to have some much-needed privacy.

Although he was isolated from the others, he could hear laughter echoing from behind the thin walls. He was able to distinguish Mikasa's voice amid the mixing and mingling, the calmness in her tone having quite the opposite effect on his conscience. He turned on the faucet and positioned his cup underneath the steady stream of tap water, filling it about halfway. He raised the contents of the red plastic material to his mouth and heeded the ache in his throat, reveling in the satisfied quenching of his thirst as the water flowed into lower and lower depths. After washing it all down, he paused and became lost in his thoughts.

Could this night get any worse?

As he set his cup aside, he turned to exit the kitchenette but was quickly stopped by less than amiable company.

Aaaaaaaaaaand this night just got worse.

Annie walked right up to him, folding her arms across her chest as if on the verge of unleashing merciless commands.

Eren was paralyzed, waiting for her to insult him, curse under her breath, say anything... something to break the silence. The intensity in her glare was hair-raising.

Instead, she walked right past him and reached into one of the cupboards, pulling out an untouched glass with every intention of pouring in something stronger than just measly apple cider. The addiction that ran rampant on her father's side of the family was kicking in tonight.

Eren huffed, holding back a spiteful chuckle. "So you're just going to ignore me now?" He hadn't meant for it to come out so cruelly, but it had been too long since they regarded one another amicably. His patience had been tested far beyond its limits.

Annie was unmoved by his apprehensive demeanor. "Your girlfriend is in the other room." She responded coldly, successful in her search for Isabel's only bottle of hard liquor. "And you're being a neglectful asshole."

Eren shook his head and positioned himself in front of her. He was willing to set his pride aside and be completely straightforward, not in the mood to sugarcoat anything or mince his words. "Don't do this, Annie."

"Do what?" Annie scoffed, unfazed by how he was towering over her. She had socked him in the jaw before, and she'd be happy to do it again.
"This doesn't have to be so difficult." He exhaled in an attempt to reason with her. "I'm trying my best to give this whole thing some time and give you your space... but it's fucking killing me."

Annie shot him a repulsed look, offended by what she perceived to be pathetic pleas that were looking for some sort of scapegoat; any excuse to avoid taking responsibility for his own actions. "You think you're the only one suffering?"

Eren's shoulders tensed up, his mouth slightly agape. The question undoubtedly caught him off guard, throwing his mind into a chaotic mess. "What do you mean?" Was all he could muster in the uneasy stillness of the small kitchenette, the sounds of water dripping from the faucet in tandem with the rigid beat of his heart.

Annie clenched her fists and looked away. She found maintaining eye contact was unbearable; shades of green and blue distracting her from the message she was trying to get across. It was infuriating that he couldn't read between the lines and see what she thought had been made obvious. That she felt the same way; and had for quite some time.

In spite of the fact that he was with someone else, she found herself not caring. She had already fallen in too deep, and she decided she wouldn't fight it anymore. Annie was willing to let her guard down, open up to him, and allow him access to her heart- so long as the favor was returned.

*Actions speak louder than words.* She thought.

There was no way for Eren to accurately grasp the meaning of her words, so she settled on taking a more direct approach to illustrate her point. In an all or nothing stunt, she tugged on the collar of his shirt and brought his face down to meet hers. Her lips crashed against his own, her hands gripping his shirt before trailing up and around his shoulders. Eren was too lost in the heat of the moment to protest, knowing neither of them were in the right state of mind, but *fuck it.* He gave in and parted his lips, returning the kiss with equal passion and ferocity. He ran his hands down to her waist, earning him a slight gasp from her lips as he pulled her in closer. But the intimate contact was short-lived, as Annie brazenly broke the kiss and pulled away.

"Does that spell it out for you?" She demanded curtly. "You have no idea how hard it's been for me to stay away."

"Annie-"

She shushed him and continued. "When you told me how you felt, I wanted to believe that you meant what you said, and weren't just fucking with my emotions." She peered over his shoulder to confirm they were still alone. "But I can't have any respect for someone who can't make up their goddamn mind."

She suddenly began rethinking her decision to follow after Eren. Not even five minutes prior to this mess, she was standing idly in the living room, talking to his oblivious but well-meaning girlfriend; the girl who had been nothing but nice to her.

But she couldn't hold herself back anymore. The attraction between her and Eren was bound to give way at some point.

There wasn't a single thing he could say to console her disheartened disposition, knowing most, if not all, of it was his fault. He hated himself for putting Annie in the middle of his withering relationship, and for being dishonest with Mikasa. Annie wouldn't wait much longer for him to make up his mind, and Mikasa would undoubtedly figure it all out soon enough. Realizing time was only
working against him, he understood there was solely one thing left to do.

Eren slowly wrapped his arms around the petite blonde and held her in a tender embrace. She reluctantly linked her arms around him in return, resting her head against his chest while listening to the beat of his heart; a beautiful rhapsody benevolently soothing her ears.

"Then I'll make things right."

His attempted reassurance caused an uneasy feeling to set in. Annie's mind was flooded with memories of empty promises from her father. Time after time, after vowing to show up to her birthday parties, to pick her up from school, to cheer for her at her volleyball games, the end result was always the same.

His absence left a permanent scar; a void in her heart that was impossible to fill.

_Actions speak louder than words._

Until Eren had officially made a decision, she came to terms with the fact that she couldn't trust him. Not just yet.

It took every fiber of her being to pull away, prying his hands from her waist in frustration.

"Annie…" He whispered, holding back the urge to stop her.

She wordlessly left him standing there, emotions weighing heavy on his heart as he acknowledged what had to be done.

Unbeknownst to him, however, his interaction with Annie hadn't been concealed enough behind the wall. While they were in the middle of their dispute, _someone_ had been listening in. From what they heard, and what they had seen in scattered increments throughout the evening, they were able to piece it all together.

They knew…

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**University of Trost - Dormitory Division**

Although the drive back to Mikasa's dorm had been short, the silence brewing between them was agonizing. Eren had a lot he was dealing with internally, and Mikasa was sitting calmly in the passenger's seat, uncharacteristically quieter than usual. The tension was so thick, one could cut it with a knife.

He parked in between two SUVs, just barely able to squeeze in between the giant vehicles, and offered to walk her up to her room.

_Shit. He thought. I can't keep stalling. If I make it to her room, I won't be able to go through with it._

They were in the middle of crossing the courtyard before the main entrance when Eren abruptly stopped, his hand reaching for Mikasa's. She turned and looked at him, waiting for him to share what was on his mind.

"Mikasa…" His lips quivered, but he managed to quell the malicious emergence of hesitation hell-bent on preventing him from following through. "I need to tell you something."

Only an arms-length away, she faced him under the stifling night, in the glow of a few street lights as
a dangerous quality infused the air. Her raven black hair fell loosely past her shoulders, swaying back and forth in the mild breeze. The clouded sky above spelled certain doom, curtained by vast thick layers hovering overhead while the darkness settled in.

At first it was tender, delicate.

Tiny white snowflakes fell from a celestial dwelling, sparkling like diamonds before collecting in the masses on earth's terrain. They covered the courtyard, the grass, the streets. Before long, wintry magic had coated the land with soft sheets of crystallized mantles.

The beauty emulating from one of nature's most astounding miracles was short-lived, shattered by Eren's next words.

"I've fallen for someone else."

Snow continued to descend, some falling in specks between Mikasa's locks. Her reaction wasn't at all what he'd though it would be, the quietness waning far too long. Eren remained steadfast, whether to defend himself, accept his fate, or both, he couldn't be sure. Finally, she spoke, her breath carrying a hint of sorrow in the cold ambiance.

"It's Annie, isn't it?"

Eren shifted his weight, baffled by the conjecture as another confession perched on the tip of his tongue. He hadn't planned on revealing the other woman's identity, but consequentially, Mikasa had already found out.

Regardless, Eren was determined to see through to the end of this relationship as amicably as possible.

"Yes." He answered, eyes wandering to the red scarf settled gracefully around her neck. The tension thickened, yet Eren couldn't help but feel a deep sense of relief, finally getting it off his chest.

Mikasa's hand trailed up to her scarf, clenching the fabric between her fingers as if it were the last time she'd be able to hold it.

Four years. She thought. Did it mean anything at all?

She looked up into his eyes, emanating a deep shade of blue behind their usual emerald exterior. She could feel her own steel grey orbs fill up with tears, tears she held back. Although it seemed as if his mind had already been made, Mikasa wasn't going to let him off that easy. She needed answers.

She opened her mouth to further interrogate him, her voice the perfect balance of hurt and distraught.

"How long has it been going on for?"

Eren felt his heart sink. "It doesn't-" "How long, Eren?" Though Mikasa had cut him off, her tone hadn't sounded hostile. On the contrary, it was controlled, and rather quite calm.

Eren denied her insistence on getting an answer. "It doesn't matter."

Mikasa held back a slight wince, her throat swelling up, the air in her lungs as cold as the freezing temperature surrounding them.

"What changed, Eren?" She asked, swallowing back more tears. She reasoned that a certain stoic
blonde couldn't have been the sole answer to that question. There must have been some sort of rift in their relationship. Maybe doubts or an arousal of curiosity.

Silence loomed over them, so she pressed on.

"Did I do something?" She continued, her voice never faltering.

Eren shook his head and exhaled, distracted by his warm breath lingering in the cold night air. "I just feel like... we've been drifting apart."

When she made no effort to protest, the look on her face clearly suggesting she was either in disagreement or denial, Eren carried on with the intention of giving her some closure.

"I thought..." He paused before correcting himself. "I hoped that I could feel the way you do about me."

Mikasa sensed a "but" was sure to follow.

"But," Eren resumed, shoving his hands into his coat pockets, "I realized that I need to be honest with you. I need to be honest with myself."

His next words were as lethal as serrated blade.

"I love you, Mikasa... but I could never be in love with you." He vehemently confessed his feelings on the matter, expressing his beliefs that they were never guaranteed a happily ever after. "Tell me, Mikasa, and be honest." He appeared deathly serious, knowing he would most likely regret asking, putting her in an uncomfortable position. "Did you honestly see any sort of future with me?" He refrained from bringing up the subject of meeting other people. It was an inevitability that warranted no further explanation. "Did you think our relationship would work even with the distance?"

Mikasa took a moment to respond, before finally relenting. "I thought... we would at least try."

"I did try!" Eren quickly shot back defensively. "This didn't happen overnight. I didn't lose faith in this relationship on a whim. And I sure as hell never wanted to hurt you. I... tried hard to remind myself of all the things I loved about being with you. I tried to convince myself that us staying together was for the best." Finally, with a muffled stifle, he revealed, "I tried to fall in love with you."

Silver flakes blew down in a horizontal blur, the flurries illuminating the porcelain skin of the raven-haired girl.

Mikasa let out a deep sigh. Coils of desperation swirled around endlessly in her stomach, tying up in knots rooted in the epitomizing feeling of contempt and defeat.

It can't end like this…

"Eren..." She wanted to say so much more. She wanted to show him how much he truly meant to her, but as the snow continued to fall, all she could let out was a rhythmic pattern of repetitive "I love you..."

Tears began streaming down her face. Her will to put up any more resistance was suppressed once she realized she needed to accept the truth.

In the darkest corners of her mind, she often feared Eren would stray way, replacing his love for her with another. Her instincts had kicked in the last time they'd been intimate. She remembered
wondering if his mind was somewhere else.

Thinking about someone else…

Mikasa could only assume that was the case.

The way he would kiss her was nothing like that of their innocent youth back in high school. The intimacy had evolved into a melancholic entanglement of two people going through the motions. One was clearly more invested than the other, and that's what hurt the most.

It all made sense now. Annie's reaction to the photo of Eren in her purse. Eren's distance and impassive attitude towards nearly forgetting their four-year anniversary.

And finally, when Mikasa overheard their conversation back at Isabel's apartment, where neither had expected her to be listening in.

Right then and there, *she knew*.

Her worst fears had been confirmed, slowly manifesting in multiple ways she had been carelessly oblivious to. The warning signs were deflected by her compulsory optimism, hoping Eren could shove his infidelity aside to be reminded of all the reasons why he loved her. Surely love would keep them together.

Love conquered all.

*I love him... but it's not good enough.*

She closed her eyes as snowflakes fell to her face, kissing her skin like frosted bites before melting upon reaching the warm surface.

Eren extended his arms and enveloped her in a delicate embrace.

"I love you, too, Mikasa." The words dispelled from his mouth tenderly. "I'll always love you." He ran his hands through her hair, as if to comfort her in her grieving.

He meant every word. He would always love her. She was like family to him.

But he could never love her the way she loved him.

*I love you. I'll always be here for you.*

His words rang in her ears as she escaped from his grasp. She stared longingly into his eyes, taking a step back and out of his reach.

"Don't say things you don't mean." She whispered bitterly.

Eren placed his hands on her shoulders, imploring her to listen carefully. "Mikasa, look at me." Once she complied, he continued. "I mean it."

"You'll always be able to count on me.

*I'll always love you.*

*We're like family.*"

Mikasa couldn't abide to listen anymore.
They were over, and there was nothing she could do to change that.

Snow had built up in layers around them, its bright hue glowing radiantly in its purest form. She sought to escape the unforgiving cold and retreat to her dorm, but not before unleashing her deepest convictions.

"She'll never love you like I do." With her final words, aching from the depths of her very soul, she managed to garner the strength to leave him there and ascend to her room.

Eren watched helplessly as his first love slowly trudged away, her hand still clutching the red scarf. The miserable heartache after ending his long-term relationship was slowly seeping in. Tomorrow, he'd wake up as a single guy for the first time in years, and he wasn't sure if he would be able to handle it.

He chided himself for wallowing in self-pity. All that mattered from here on out was ensuring that Mikasa would heal and, more importantly, move on.

The chances of them reverting back to being "just friends" were slim, but he genuinely wanted her to remain a part of his life.

Eren vowed to prove to Mikasa that he meant what he said, and promised he'd always look after her. The girl he revered as a sister would never be forgotten or replaced. With time, hopefully she could find it in her heart to forgive his transgressions. Hopefully he could forgive himself.

No one really ever wins in heartbreak warfare.

Chapter End Notes

So this chapter marks the end of EreMika :(

Who knows what'll happen from here on out? (I guess I do, lol, cuz there's a lot of different elements, POVs, story arcs [if you wanna call them that], and other dynamics I plan on exploring with this fic. Alas, this fic is far from being over!

Spoiler alert: Next chapter features le other plot-centric ship, LeviMika...
Thanks of course to all who have reviewed and hit that kudos button:) I hope you all have a wonderful holiday season!
Silver Linings

Chapter Notes

A/N: Woah, I haven't updated since last year! LOL that was a joke... not a very funny one :/

I've been gone for a while, and for that I apologize. The holidays/end of the year gave me a real good ass-kickin', but thankfully 2017 has been treating me well.

This chapter was another hard one to write, but damn, I'm glad to finally post it for you lovely people.

Thanks for the wonderful reviews and kudos :)

PS) Apologies if the previous chapter was kinda depressing :( Hugs?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Friday, December 30th

University of Trost Training Facility

It wasn't the after-Christmas blues. It wasn't the fact that the year was drawing to a close. Nor was it the realization that the winter quarter was a week away.

Rather, Mikasa was deeply saddened by her breakup with Eren, its devastating impact waning on far too long.

Trudging slowly along the snow-laden terrain, she wandered towards one of the outdoor tennis courts, clinging to the chain-link fence while staring emptily at the nets.

Training for the upcoming spring season had been moved from the outside courts to the indoor facility as the weather had made the abrupt transition from clear sunny skies to icy sludge and temperatures below freezing. Mikasa was determined to keep up with her training even during the break from school to condition her muscles and improve her coordination. The intense sessions also served as a much-needed distraction from her personal life.

With every powerful swing of her racket, focusing her eyes on the ball, darting around her side of the court left and right, honing in on her target like a predator stalking their prey – nothing else mattered. For a few hours, she was free of the pain and hurt, and could exert her energy on improving herself as an athlete; using her free time constructively.

But her escape ended promptly after she finished executing various drills and exercises. Thoughts would begin to circulate as soon as she would lay her racket aside, stop to stretch for a moment, and proceed to quench her thirst as beads of sweat trickled down from her forehead. She dreaded heading into the locker room and stripping down for a shower, where the warmth and steam deriving from the water-flow would only thrust her back into remembering it all.

The worst part was being left alone with her thoughts. There was never anything new. They were always the same.
Was it my fault? Did it mean anything at all? Did he ever really love me?

With a simple turn of her wrist, twisting the shower knob to the right, the water stopped running, ending what emulated a never-ending dream.

She was quick to dry herself off and redress, only the ends of her hair a tad damp. Ignoring most of her teammates, she had left the facility feeling as empty as she had when she arrived.

As she remained stagnant in her position outside the courts, her mind raced back to Eren and the fond memories they had made together.

He was her first everything, and being single again felt so surreal. In spite of it all, her heart still belonged to him. She contemplated whether or not she should call him and ask to talk things through. One hand was fidgeting with her phone in her pocket, the other was tugging on the red scarf coiled around her neck.

She was just about ready to give him a call and shamelessly give in to her desires when a voice from behind caught her off guard.

"You're going to catch a damn cold if you keep standing out here."

Levi's usual abrasiveness was shadowed by what she could only assume was an attempt at making sure she was all right. Then again, simply asking 'are you all right?' might have been a better alternative to some.

But it was Levi. No further explanation needed.

Mikasa remained quiet and unresponsive, before finally letting out in an apathetic tone, "I'll be fine."

Levi wasn't convinced by her words in the slightest. He positioned himself next to her, slipping off his hooded jacket before wrapping it around her so she'd stay warm.

Mikasa turned to look at him in utter confusion, eyeing his long-sleeve tee, knowing full well the single layer wouldn't be enough to combat the cold. "What are you doing?"

"Making sure you don't get frostbite." He replied, as if she was the simpleton.

"And what about you?" She asked incredulously. "You're not wearing enough layers."

Levi rolled his eyes and offered no other response than a disdainful sigh. He didn't want to be forced to explain his actions, he'd rather have her just shut up and accept the lengths he was going to look out for her.

In an effort to avoid going around in circles about who was more deserving of the warmth held within the jacket, (Levi had already made up his mind anyway), he resorted to his original plan upon approaching her in the first place; ensuring all was well with the young ravenette.

For the past couple weeks, she had appeared as though her mind was somewhere else, negatively so. She was already quiet and reserved enough as it was, but her conversations with her own teammates, people she was presumably more comfortable with, were limited to singular sentences.

If asked by anyone else, Mikasa would insist that she was okay, but Levi could see right through her poised composure. He found himself wondering if she would open up to him, but then chided himself internally for even having those thoughts. He wanted to respect that there were just some aspects of people's lives they may have wanted to keep private.
But seeing Mikasa pretend to be calm and act as if nothing was bothering her troubled him to no end. His instincts told him she was hurting.

He knew she was, because he'd been in that exact position before.

The tell-tale sign?

Cliché as it may sound, it was her eyes. They were a dismal shade of dark grey, darker than usual.

It was as if the light was gone, like someone had extinguished the fire raging on inside, depriving her of the once passionate energy to press on.

Levi held off from pursuing the matter, and decided that as her friend and teammate the best thing for him to do would be to just show his support. "Come on." He said, placing a hand on her shoulder and nodding ahead toward the parking lot. "I'll give you a ride back home."

Mikasa shook her head. The idea was tempting, however. Sasha had offered to give her a ride after hearing about the devastating news. Although Mikasa had not given her the details, Sasha found out about the breakup through mutual friends, and was going out of her way in an effort to comfort Mikasa.

Mikasa appreciated it, but found it somewhat overwhelming. She knew that once she set foot in Sasha's little Volkswagen, the conversation would more likely than not steer to Eren, how sorry she felt for her, how the whole situation sucked, blah, blah, blah.

It wasn't that she was bothered by her friends, it was just that she needed a break from the norm. She wanted to get away from it all and give herself some time to mend what had been broken.

That was it. She didn't want to go back home. She didn't want to be anywhere near Shiganshina. She wanted to further herself away from the memories that haunted her many a sleepless night.

Levi's stern yet surprisingly calm voice interrupted her thoughts. "I'm not asking, Mikasa." He turned to pick up her tennis duffle bag, carrying it alongside his own. "I'm taking you home so you won't freeze to death."

"I don't want to go home." Mikasa unintentionally spilled out. She still wasn't looking at him, as her eyes absentmindedly found the dirtied terrain an interesting sight. She offered no clarification, and that left Levi with few options.

"You're not making this easy, you know." He exhaled sharply. "Can we at least go the car to warm up?"

Mikasa finally looked up. He was a few steps ahead, waiting for her with what she expected to be his usual unimpressed expression. Instead, he looked concerned, in an oddly passive way. She figured it was about time she stopped resisting his attempts at being generous, and more importantly, reasonable. It was rare that Levi extended kindness like this to anyone, and she wondered why he was offering his help.

Wordlessly, she nodded, agreeing to follow him to his car. Once they were inside, Levi started the engine and turned the heat up to high. Lowering the volume on the radio, he spoke again.

"Where do you want me to take you?" He asked, patiently waiting for her response. At this point, he felt like he was caring for a lost puppy. A sad, heart-broken puppy with a sad little red string tied around its collar.
Mikasa tugged lightly on her scarf. "Doesn't matter." She answered blankly. *Anywhere but Shiganshina.*

Levi peered over at the sad puppy once more and hatched an idea.

What do people normally do when they find lost, sad, little puppies?

They take them home and care for them.

"All right." He affirmed. "Then we're going to my place."

Mikasa made no protest, so Levi began driving.

---

Mikasa had never been to Levi's apartment before, but somehow it was exactly what she expected. The inside was spotless, unlike the stereotypical bachelor pad. In fact, the entire interior paid homage to the truism 'a place for everything, and everything in its place.' What enthralled the first time visitor most of all, however, were the array of pictures hanging on the walls.

Levi quickly insisted she make herself at home, so long as she kept it tidy, and walked into the kitchen to brew some tea. Mikasa obliged her curiosity and wandered around the living room, studying the photographs on display. Several featured Furlan and Levi during their early college years, others contained snapshots of the two in high school. Most of them were candid shots, and that made sense to Mikasa because Levi didn't seem like the type of person who'd willingly pose for the camera. She began browsing another set of pictures that centered on their tennis excursions. There was something novel about seeing pictures of Levi battling it out with an opponent. In some, he was younger, around middle school age, while the others must have been taken recently, as they highlighted his recent victories.

She came across a separate collection of photos, featuring family members of the two young men. One in particular seemed to really stand out, catching her eye instantaneously. A black and white image of a beautiful woman with long black hair, radiant eyes, and rosy cheeks. Mikasa had a guess on who she was, as her physical resemblance to Levi was unmistakable.

After admiring the photograph fondly, Mikasa turned to a few pictures settled above the fireplace. She paused when she came across one with a semi-familiar face.

*Where have I seen her before?*


The girl was leaning against Levi, arms entwined with one another. Levi's calm demeanor in the photograph suggested he was content; at peace.

Mikasa remembered the girl.

*Petra.*

Subtly reminded of Eren, Mikasa felt herself tense up. She hadn't meant to stare so long at the picture, but something kept relaying on her mind, and it only further heightened her grief.

Unbeknownst to her, Levi noticed her surveying the images presented in the living room and wondered why she was taking her time examining the one with him and Petra back when they first started dating.
He made a mental note to throw that picture out later.

To call for her attention, he cleared his throat and readily brought out a pair of small teacups. "Tea's ready." He informed her.

In that moment, Mikasa suddenly recalled the conversation she had with Isabel at the Christmas party. Though partially unsure what spawned the memory, the mentioning of tea served as a cue of sorts.

"That reminds me..." She spoke softly, turning away from the living room.

Before she joined him in the kitchen, she briefly reached for her duffle bag, neatly positioned by the doorway, and pulled out a grey rectangular box. She made the effort to dress it up with a gold bow at the corner, along with a tag hanging from the side.

The shimmery tag read, To: Levi, From: Mikasa, in fancy cursive.

She meant to give him the gift after practice earlier that day, but her thoughts kept her tethered to the dissolution of her relationship, desperate to escape the unforgiving mess, yet failing to do so in a disorderly fashion.

At least now, while her head isn't clouded with pessimism, she can finally offer her gratitude.

Levi had just finished pouring tea into their respective cups when she presented him with the decorated gift box.

"This is for you." She said.

Initially surprised, Levi took a moment to register the words that had poured from her mouth. Questioningly, he accepted the box and handled it as if its contents potentially harbored an explosive device. The removal of the wrapping paper exposed quite the delightful discovery; neatly assembled variety of tea blends in an assorted gift set.

Levi's eyes widened as he began rummaging through the collection of manna from heaven.


Mikasa admired his fascination with the gift box, clandestinely hiding an amused smirk. The best advice she could give to anyone looking for love was now simple.

Find yourself a man that looks at you the way Levi looks at an assortment of tea.

"There's this little tea shop in the mall..." She began, before Levi's head perked up.

"Teavana, right?" He interjected, a faint glimmer in his eye. "That place is like my second home."

Mikasa nodded. "Figures you've been there before." She tilted her head to the side nonchalantly and added, "Happy Birthday slash Merry Christmas, Levi." She couldn't help but smile, reveling in how she had finally gotten the chance to say those words to him. The ultimate cherry on top.

Upon announcing the well-rehearsed phrase, she was almost baffled by what she saw next.

He looked up at her, his mouth slightly curving upright in a tenderly somber, but endearing manner.

The warm, gentle expression he wore was enough to make her heart skip a beat.
"Thank you." He said, setting the gift aside on the kitchen table. Given the opportunity, he sought to use the occasion for belated gift exchanges. "I have something for you, too."

Mikasa was puzzled by his statement, watching him in suspense as he grabbed a box with silver ribbon from the hallway closet. She pulled on her scarf in anticipation, interested as to why she was receiving any gift from him whatsoever. She honestly hadn't expected anything from him, so she knew she was in for a real surprise.

Levi handed her the box and urged her to open it.

In Mikasa's experience, most of the men in her life were horrible at the trivial task of wrapping gifts. Levi, however, practically made it an art form. The folding, the precise angles and length of paper, and the real kicker, not a smidgen of tape in sight. She fawned at the idea of him mastering origami, surrounding himself with methodically crafted animals ranging from graceful swans to coy foxes. The brief intermission of her curious mind halted as the box was placed in her hands.

She swiftly unwrapped the gift and immediately froze.

Mittens.

Red Mittens.

"I thought they would match that scarf that's always hanging around your neck." Levi explained. He wasn't sure why she was so attached to the ratty thing, but he figured she held onto it for sentimental reasons. "Try not to get them dirty." He smirked, attempting to lighten the mood.

While waiting for a response, he was hit with an ephemeral perplexity by the shift in her expression. She appeared similar to the glossy-eyed girl from before, brooding outside the tennis courts in the freezing cold.

Then, after a fleeting silence, her eyes shot up towards him, a tender smile engraved as her hands eased themselves into the cozy red mittens.

Her voice was quieter than usual, a hint of sorrow laced within. "Thank you."

Levi nodded in return, unable to immediately decide where to take the conversation next- or if a direction needed to be chosen at all. Just being with Mikasa meant more than anything even the most brilliant of linguists could put into words. He wasn't an outwardly emotional person, but even he could acknowledge that what he was faced with wasn't something to be said or spoken of, rather, it was something that could only be felt.

Finally, Levi managed to reply. "You're welcome."

Mikasa slowly shook her head, standing halfway between the kitchen and the living room. "Not just for this." She carefully peeled off the mittens, enthralled by their charm. "For… everything."

Levi felt he understood what she meant, but surreptitiously hoped she would expand on the vague statement of appreciation.

As if she had read his mind, Mikasa continued, listing off examples one by one. "For training with me. For being supportive and encouraging. For always being honest and keeping true to your word. For inviting me into your home." Her emotions were instantly scattered in a disarray. She tucked a loose stray of hair behind her ear, shrugging her shoulders before concluding her appreciation. "I'm really glad I met you… and I hope one day I can return the favor."
The warmth and gentleness streaming from her words were almost poetic, strangely comforting. Levi was hit with something he hadn't felt for a very long time.

In an inexplicable wave of confusion and tension, Levi felt his heart ache for the girl standing before him.

Mikasa was still smiling, arms hanging at her sides, a fragile disposition.

Levi became even more tense when he realized they were alone together.

He quickly looked away and pretended to clear his throat. Wanting to avoid a potentially awkward mishap, he dismissed any lingering thoughts and took a sip of freshly brewed tea from his cup.

Right. He thought. Anyway…

"Tomorrow's New Year's Eve." He stated casually, annoyed by the sudden increase in his heart rate.

Mikasa huffed, unbothered by the change of subject. "I could use a fresh start." She muttered.

"You don't actually buy into all that, do you?" Levi asked.

"What do you mean?"

"The whole 'new year, new me' bullshit?" He raised a brow and set his teacup aside. "No one ever really changes."

Mikasa pondered his assertion. If that were the case, she and Eren would have stayed together. His supposed love for her would never have morphed into a strictly platonic one, as in brother and sister or familial, using that logic.

Therefore, she had to disagree with Levi. "I think people can change."

Levi leaned back against the kitchen countertop, folding his arms across his chest. "How so?"

Mikasa took the time to come up with an acceptable response, hands grazing against the countertops as she made her way to face him directly. She had to believe that people could change, in hopes that she could. Otherwise she'd be stuck; hopelessly in love with someone who would never return her feelings.

Unless she could bring herself to make changes in her life and move on from the pain of losing her first love, she'd have no one to blame but herself for being trapped in her own foolish desires to go back to the way things were; imprisoned by her own pathetic inability to let go of the past.

Before her mind could drift deeper away to the memories of Eren, she was pulled back into the here and now upon realizing Levi was still waiting for an answer.

"We all depend on being able to change to improve ourselves and strive for progress," She reasoned. "If we can't, then what's the point? What would be the purpose of trying to be 'the best we can be'? What would be the purpose of trying to develop or grow in any aspect of our lives for that matter?"

The decompression in his chest suggested he meant to suppress a disdainful sigh. Her words might have looked good on paper, like a long essay one might need to bullshit for a passing grade, but he believed her to be naïve if she genuinely thought that were true regarding humanity as a whole. "Not everyone is as dedicated to self-improvement as you are, Mikasa."

Mikasa frowned, disheartened by the ugly truth. Maybe there was no hope. "I just… I expect better
of myself." She absentmindedly spewed out. "When it comes down to it, I'm weak." She admitted after letting out an exhaustive breath.

"A bit of a cynical thing to say, don't you think?" Levi scoffed.

Mikasa slowly unraveled the scarf from her neck, loosening it from the ends. As she held it firmly in her hands, she struggled to keep her emotions in check. "I have to believe that I can change." There's no use going on like this. "I have to."

"You're wrong." Levi retorted, his tone bordering on aggression. "You shouldn't change."

Mikasa's jaw dropped, shocked by his assertiveness. "But-"

He cut in, as if to prevent her from coming up with an excuse or protest. "You're mature for your age. You're kind to others. You're driven and passionate about your goals. You're smart- maybe a bit naïve, but smart enough to figure things out on your own. You're a talented athlete, and you're not even at your peak yet." He paused, his eyes piercing into hers. "And in spite of what you say, you're not weak. You should be proud of who you are and what you've accomplished." Then in a low but well-meaning tone, he said, "You're stronger than you think, Mikasa, and I have a lot of respect for you."

The room fell silent. Mikasa felt the blood rush to her cheeks, spawning a tingling sensation beneath her porcelain skin.

"Don't ever feel like you have to change for the approval of others." Levi asserted. "Your only fault is not seeing how truly remarkable you are."

Mikasa let his words sink in. The build-up of emotions and tension between them, setting her nerves on fire in the process, forced her to contemplate the past few months. She had been so hell-bent on proving the nay-sayers wrong, all the snide comments coming from people who were certain she and Eren wouldn't last.

Given that's she not psychic and has absolutely no way of knowing what life will throw at her, Mikasa hoped she could turn things around and mend the broken pieces of her relationship in spite of all the warning signs.

But Levi was right; she wasn't weak.

Just because she was willing to try and work things out, willing to forgive Eren regardless of his momentary lapses in judgment, it didn't make her a doormat or pathetic pushover.

She was loyal and her heart was always in the right place. More importantly, she had stayed true to the person she was committed to.

Even though they were over, Mikasa realized she did have it in her to move on and heal from the pain that stemmed from Eren's absence. She didn't need anyone else but herself to put the pieces back together. With time, she could accept that didn't need to be reduced to Eren's shadow as she had for the past four years.

She was self-sufficient and she was more than capable of fulfilling her true potential.

All the tools she needed were already at her disposal; physically, mentally, emotionally.

Mikasa held back a response, figuring nothing else needed to be said. She simply nodded in agreement.
Levi knew deep down that his message had successfully been relayed, and that was good enough for him.

Amid the stillness and quiet settling peacefully in the room, his eyes fell to her lips, curiosity brewing like a storm. His innate inquisitiveness went deeper than mere attraction or lust, rather he felt a connection between them.

He wondered if she felt it, too.

"Levi?" She had his attention instantaneously.

A brief pause. "Yeah?"

"I don't want to impose," Mikasa began, "so I can go home if you have things to take care of."

Catching her gaze, Levi addressed her intently. "You're not imposing."

"Are you sure?"

Levi stifled another sigh, flustered in the moment. He hoped to dear god she wouldn't make him explain. He was close enough as it was to just admitting it, spilling out that he had feelings for her, which was something he knew wouldn't be a good idea to just jump into. He prided himself in having an unfathomable amount of patience and control; never one to act on impulse.

But she was the only girl who could make him lose his head, and for the time being, he was still debating whether that was acceptable or if that would only screw him over in the long run.

He enjoyed her company, therefore he wanted her to stay, but he didn't want to have to admit that out loud.

"Yes, I'm sure."

Mikasa lowered her sights to the floor. "I appreciate it but… I don't want to trouble you any more than I probably have."

Dammit.

Levi was convinced this girl was trying to kill him. "Mikasa." His voice was steady, strong, settled. Screw it. He thought, ready to just completely give way to the feelings he had repressed for so long.

He prepared to open his mouth and confess, but he hadn't quite found the right words to follow through.

Why couldn't he say anything more? What was holding him back? Was he reluctant to feel something more intimate for another human being because of past oversights?

He hated his hesitancy, the uncertainty shrouded behind the silence permeating the air between them. He hated that he often found himself speechless when he was around her. He hated that she was hurting and there wasn't much he could offer besides moral support.

He hated that this fresh out of high school kid had caught his eye that fateful day, back in the early fall on their first day of practice. That he thought about her in the most unconventional of places. In class, at practice, at work. Visions of her smile would flash seemingly from out of nowhere, and it began to take a toll.
Finally, he hated that he was falling for the girl, even after he'd sworn off relationships to avoid being let down.

But he ultimately decided he would not regret his next move.

In that moment, he set his sights on fulfilling what he had wanted to do for a while.

He had no words to accurately express what he was feeling, nor did he have to energy to reassure her of his hospitality, figuring he was doing them both a favor by keeping things less complicated. Instead he moved to level himself with her, noticing her tense up a bit. She remained motionless, waiting for him to say something, but half-expecting him not to.

They were less than an arm's length away, somehow managing to never break eye contact. In his peripheral vision, Levi noticed her chest rising at a quickened pace, as if waiting for him to make his move already.

Mikasa realized they were mere inches apart, and it became clear to her that her presence wasn't unwelcome. She could read his expression without having to say anything, deciphering his calm appearance with one studious gaze into his steel grey orbs.

He wanted her to stay.

The silence, smothered with deep undertones of undeniably strong tension heavily filling the air, was broken as Mikasa sought to ease the sudden suspense, as if pressured to speak.

"You're staring." She whispered, her tone somewhat chastising, somewhat teasing. She desperately hoped he wasn't close enough to hear her heart pounding radically against her chest. "Levi-"

Levi finally gave in, through with restraining himself.

He leaned in, his lips meeting hers in a gentle stroke. At first, his senses were captivated, losing himself while in awe of how soft her lips were. He pulled away, willing to accept any and all consequences, though also curious to see her reaction. Not even one second had passed before she returned the kiss, saving him from any second guessing. He parted his lips, his tongue slowly finding its way to meet hers. He indulged in her taste, reminiscent of rich vanilla in its purest essence.

Levi tentatively extended his arms around her waist, tightening them around her as she traced along his back before resting her arms around his shoulders. Her lips moved softly against his, kissing him slowly and deeply.

Levi pulled away once more, this time to place kisses along her jaw and move down to her neck, nipping at sensitive skin. As he continued to deliver sweet pecks just above her collarbone, Mikasa felt a pleasurable sensation send shivers down her spine, a small moan escaping her mouth.

Before she was certain to become lost in his touch, he moved his lips back to hers and their tongues resumed the song and dance in a beautiful, rhythmic pattern, rolling melodically over one another.

For the first time in what felt like ages, Mikasa felt safe. Being held in the arms of someone who truly cared for her was… comforting. She dispelled any thoughts of school, friends, family. Thoughts that suggested she may come to regret this later. This time, just this once, she gave in to the lingering curiosity that had wandered aimlessly in her head on several occasions before.

She allowed herself to be held, touched, caressed, kissed by someone else, in an effort to restore, to move on. The moment just felt… right.
Levi pulled away, to which Mikasa failed to suppress a look of disappointment from engraving itself on her face. He shot her a smirk, taunting her by denying her access to the one thing on her mind.

"You were saying?" He teased, his lips barely out of reach from hers.

Mikasa stole a small kiss, her arms still wrapped around him. "It can wait."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Only took 23 chapters for this to finally happen!

*sweats nervously like Bertolt*

LeviMika shippers, please don't kill me :))))
On the Outside, Looking in

Chapter Notes

A/N: I just want to say thank you to all who reviewed last chapter :) I'm so grateful to have received such positive feedback! It was a nice touch to the start of the new year :) Seriously though guys, all the kind words motivate me to keep this story going, and without your support I would've given up long ago.

I appreciate you all :) You're the best readers an amateur writer could ask for :P

Stohess University

First day of Winter Quarter – Jan. 3rd, 2017

Time flies when you're having fun.

At least, that's what Eren Jaeger forced himself to believe upon reflecting on the completion of his first quarter of college.

Strolling through familiar trails and paved walkways across campus, he contemplated the day ahead of him en route to his next class. Though he wasn't entirely ready for classes to start up again, he figured a heavy dosage of caffeine would help him endure any rough patches that threatened an easy-going start to the new quarter.

While he had thoroughly enjoyed the fall quarter and the many wonders that came along with it, such as getting back into sports training, the freedom to stay up and mess around without his parents berating him for what they deemed immature behavior, finally declaring his major, and scoring a hard-earned 3.7 GPA, there was but one event that seemingly turned his world upside down and ultimately weighed on his mind 24/7.

Meeting Annie Leonhart had utterly wrecked him.

Breaking up with high school sweetheart, Mikasa Ackerman, left him feeling conflicted.

On the one hand, he was relieved to have finally just let it all out.

Annie knew the true nature of his feelings for her, as did Mikasa.

But the consequences for said actions certainly had its repercussions, and all he could do now was wait for most of the mess to blow over, giving both girls their space and time to recover.

Time flies when you're having fun?

Not so much in this case. Eren felt like it had been too long since he'd seen or spoken to either the blonde or raven-haired girl.

He missed his conversations with Annie and all the book recommendations she would give him. He missed watching her during volleyball practice, in passing on the way to his pole vault training. He missed sitting next to her in class, sharing notes, drawing stupid doodles on her paper when she
wasn't looking. He missed taking walks with her, talking about their shared appreciation for oddities ranging from comfort food and home-cooked meals to charming dog breeds like the Affenpinscher and Schipperke.

Eren also missed spending time with Mikasa and hearing about how her days at UT. He genuinely hoped from the ruins of their old relationship, they could somehow manage to salvage a friendship of sorts; preserving the once strong bond formed from years of growing closer and closer.

He wondered if she would ever forgive him.

After rounding a corner outside the liberal arts building, Eren took a moment to recall his class schedule.

9am – Astronomy 171 (Check)

10am – German 201 (Favorite class thus far, Check)

11am – English 102 (Yet to be judged)

Thank god he didn't have to take a lab for the quarter. Fifteen credits were enough to fill in the slim cracks of what was left of his already busy schedule, especially with the first meet of the indoor track season only a week away.

Pole vault training with Coach Shadis would resume its usual rigorous schedule at the indoor facility promptly at 4pm; an engagement Eren loved and loathed simultaneously.

Glancing at his watch, he was relieved to discover he still had about five minutes before ENG 201 was set to begin.

A brief rush of wind passed over him as he opened the classroom door, introducing him to an entirely different setting that what he had expected. In comparison to his previous English class, ENG 101 with professor Dietrich, the room felt... smaller. The desks were aligned in a circular formation. A myriad of school posters and flyers were strewn about the walls; much of the content featuring work from and pieces from the school's Journalist club.

Eren's new English professor, Mr. Jarnach, served as the overseer of sorts to the Journalist club, and optional advisor to those majoring in English and Communications.

For a moment, Eren was disappointed in that there was not one familiar face…

Ah! Nevermind!

Sitting by herself opposite Jarnach's desk was Hitch Dreyse.

Eren quickly edged his way past a few other classmates and sat next to her, wondering if a certain stoic blonde would be sauntering in later.

"Hey Eren." Hitch sounded hungover, but Eren doubted the underage drinker had any regrets partying her ass off the night before. Regardless if forcing herself to attend classes evoked an immense headache that simulated a hammer beating her mercilessly on her skull in an unsteady rhythm, the tenacious force of nature would pull through!

Hitch: 1

Hangover: 0
Eren remained cordial with his little alcoholic classmate. "How was your break?"

"Christmas at the Dreyse's is always a snoozefest, but the holidays are about being with family and all that heartwarming stuff, right?" She let out a small chuckle, fiddling with a sheet of paper that resembled a syllabus. She chose not to waste her time trying to read it, as her brain hurt too much to process basic word formations and meager sentences. "New Year's Eve was amazing." She continued. "I went downtown with a couple friends from high school, and I met this guy… he was like… crazy hot, Eren, you have no idea. Anyway, I had this feeling, like I needed to start the new year off with a BANG! A literal one! So, the hottie and I- shit, what was his name?"

Eren tried to hide his terror with a nervous grin, his eyes drying up from suppressing a much-needed blink. He just couldn't stop staring in utter incredulity.

How was she Annie's roommate? They couldn't be more different…

Wait… why am I thinking about Annie? He thought. For godsake…

"Damn, can't remember his name." Hitch shrugged, droning on with her little anecdote. "Doesn't matter. So we're in his car… next thing you know, things start to get hot and heavy, and…"

"And nine months later, Hitch is a single mom."

Eren and Hitch turned to the source of the intruder; everyone's favorite tall, Swedish, volleyball beast.

The one and only Ymir.

Although he chose to keep it to himself, Eren was thankful for the interruption, as he'd been subjected to Hitch's sex tales from the deep numerous times before!

Sure, he wasn't a virgin himself, but damn… hearing about all her sexual conquests hit him with the urge to go to church.

Ladies and gentlemen, meet Eren the puritan, and Hitch the succubus.

On an unrelated note, having another class with Ymir was cool.

"Fuck you, Ymir." Hitch scoffed. "It's not like you don't sleep around either."

Ymir smirked, unleashing a snide comeback. "Of course I do, and there's nothing wrong with that. But unlike you, however, there's absolutely zero chance I'd get pregnant."

"True." Eren nodded, needing a moment to figure out the underlying meaning behind her clap-back. Oh, I get it! Ha!

Hitch simply rolled her eyes. "Whatever, lesbo. Hope you had a good winter break." As Ymir sat herself down in the seat next to Eren, Hitch quickly coughed a hasty: "Asshole."

"I did." Ymir happily replied, offering a suggestive wink. "Thank you."

It took a few more minutes for class to get settled, and right before it was about to officially start, Eren managed to squeeze in a few questions Hitch's way, ultimately giving in after trying hard not to bring it up.

"Hitch," he began nervously, "how's, uh… how's Annie been?"
Hitch sat upright in her chair in an attempt to fix her slouched posture. "Good, I guess." A curious smile crept onto her face while eyeing the puppy-eyed Eren. "Why? You been thinking about her or something?" She taunted.


Hitch had the biggest shit-eating grin on her face, finding his pensive demeanor amusing and knowing full-well it was because of his big-ass crush.

The hangover was hammering away at her head, but in that brief moment, the aches had subsided to allow her full enjoyment of finally piecing it all together.

With a huff, she unleashed a spry giggle. "Suuuuurreeee."

**University of Trost**

The UT library was bustling with students of all majors and minors, searching for particular textbooks or sources that would potentially aid in massive papers and essays. While most were in and out of the building is a matter of minutes, provided the material in question was still in circuit and available in the library's system, a few college kids confined themselves to quieter regions. The computer labs were just about full in all wings, while the designated 'study' corridors offered sanctity and a much-needed break from classes and the daily grind.

Levi was among the small few that found solace in the calm dwelling, observing a few notes from his last class, Marine Molecular Biology. Aside from studying for an upcoming exam, his mind incidentally wandered to his final research paper, or senior thesis, for his program of study. Under the supervision of a faculty member, the product (a substantive paper or written report containing significant analysis and interpretation of a previously approved topic) would not only serve as the accumulation of everything he had poured his heart and soul into during his independent research seminar, it would also serve as what he hoped would be the impetus for attaining a successful career in something he had been fascinated with as a young lad.

With only two quarters left until graduation, the realization finally sunk in. Everything was going according to plan; rest assured his unwavering dedication to fulfilling his academic career goals would without a doubt pay off. He already had a few research institutes offering him jobs after graduation, but he hadn't quite made up his mind yet. None of them were close to home; every single one of them were out of state or too far away to commute by car.

Moving away was inevitable.

It was a lot to process and think about, but Levi figured it was best to focus on the more pressing matters in front of him.

One shouldn't count their chickens before they hatch.

As he scanned more notes (or scribbles depending on who you ask), he suddenly found himself no longer alone.

Furlan sat in the seat across from him, a pharmacology textbook in hand.

"How was your last first day of winter quarter?" Furlan smiled, spreading the book to an unmarked page.

"It's barely noon." Levi peaked below at his watch, acknowledging the day wasn't even at the half-
way mark. "But so far, so good." He turned his attention from his notes to his roommate and doubles partner, instantly remembering the upcoming tennis season would also be their last. All good things must come to an end eventually. "Are you heading straight to practice after this?"

Furlan shook his head. "I have to chat with my advisor in about an hour to confirm that I'm on course for graduation with the upcoming class of 2017." Not my words, if you could tell."

Levi craned one arm around his chair, resting the other on the table surface. "Is your advisor still Dr. Sannes? I thought you requested a new one last year…?"

"I did." Furlan replied, rubbing his chin as if wondering whether or not all the effort to seek different counsel was worth it. "Dr. Pixis is the head of the Pharmacology department, so it only made sense for me to change advisors when I changed my major…"

Levi could tell Furlan was holding something back. "What? There's got to be more to it than that."

"Well I mean..." Furlan sighed. "He's just… eccentric."

"Eccentric is just a polite way of saying weird."

"Basically." Furlan wasn't going to add much more than that, exhausted with what consisted of an early morning and long lectures. The same ol' same ol' was wearing him out. "Awh man! I'm definitely looking forward to finishing school. I can't wait to finally graduate."

Levi nodded in agreement, reflecting on the past four years and all the memories encompassed within. He was sure Furlan was hit with instant nostalgia, as the look on his roommate's face was a deeply meditative one.

Right then and there was the perfect time to rain on his little parade.

"You're not quite in the clear yet." Levi deadpanned. "After this, you have four more years in the pharmacy doctoral school."

Furlan muttered what Levi assumed was a dirty word in French. But alas, Furlan had always been the more optimistic one in their circle of friends, even more so than Isabel at times. "Those four extra years will go by fast, and in the end it'll be worth it."

"Have you thought about where you'll be transferring to?" Levi asked.

"I'm still thinking about it, but I have to make my decision before March." Furlan responded, a hint of uncertainty in his voice. "Calaneth University was my first choice, but it's in a different time zone." He shrugged before digging into his backpack, in search of his notebook. "I was also accepted into Ehrmich, but everyone that I've met over there, I don't know, they all just seem so… drained. Like sleep is foreign to them, or something."

"Erwin seems to really like it." Levi informed him. "He's in a completely different program but he says transferring to EU was one of the best decisions of his life."

Furlan tilted his head to the side. "Well, EU is known for producing some of the best engineers in the state. It's practically a breeding ground for them."

"Honestly, I think he could've studied anywhere and still been just as successful." Levi suggested. "But it's a good fit for him, he's more than satisfied with it, and that's all that matters, right?"

"Yeah." Furlan chuckled. "I'm still surprised he decided to go there instead of Sina U, where Hange
teaches."

"Makes perfect sense to me." Levi reasoned. "Less distractions."

"A fiancé should never be a distraction." Furlan argued.

"He's separating his personal life from his education, as one should."

"You're looking at it the wrong way, Levi. Think about the benefits of attending the same educational complex as a loved one. If you need a break or the workload is getting too much, all you have to do is walk a few doors down and there they are. If nothing else, a lot of people meet their life-partners in school."

"They moved in together not too long ago." Levi raised a brow. "They see each other every day, and can look forward to coming home to one another. That should be enough."

"It'll have to be." Furlan digressed, convinced he was getting nowhere with his point, but partially realizing Levi was right. "Speaking of which, have they set a date for the wedding yet?"

"Sometime this summer." Levi answered, reaching for his daily planner. "I wrote the exact date down somewhere..." He browsed past a few pages before Furlan sought to address another related topic of discussion.

"By the way," he began, "I've been meaning to talk to you about something..."

Levi perked his head up, giving Furlan his full attention.

"Remember that girl I was telling you about? The waitress from that diner on Garrison Avenue?"

"Vaguely." Levi pondered.

"Her name's Nifa." Furlan continued. "I asked her out a couple days ago and she surprisingly said yes."

"Why is that a surprise?" Levi thought Furlan needed to have a little more faith in himself.

"I didn't think she was into me at first, but then..." A smile grew wide on his already cheery face. "She slipped me her number underneath my tab the last time Izzy and I met up for our usual late-night slice of cherry pie."

Levi smirked, nodding his head in approval. "Where are you planning on taking her?"

"No idea!" Furlan was still smiling like an idiot, but beneath his nervous demeanor was a small glimmer of hope. "But I know she really likes sushi."

"That's a start." Levi offered.

"I want to do things right this time." Furlan held his head high with determination. "I messed it up with Anka, and I don't want to make the same mistakes as before."

"Anka broke up with you because she couldn't get over her ex." Levi reminded him, or, corrected him rather.

Furlan shrugged it off nonchalantly. "Maybe I should have tried harder in that relationship."

"You can only do so much." Levi muttered. "Believe me, I've been there."
Wanting to avoid the touchy subject, Furlan remembered an interesting fact, believing it could potentially help out his longtime friend. "Apparently, Nifa graduated from Shigashina. Isn't that where Mikasa went to high school?"

Levi leaned back into his chair. "Yeah... and your point is?"

"Isn't that.. interesting?"

Levi was getting tired of Furlan's shit, but obliged his friend's amusement. 

"If you say so."

A smug grin was plastered along Furlan's face. "Have you thought about what I said earlier?"

"About what?" Levi carelessly chose to go around in circles, resisting Furlan's attempt at... being a wingman, or what the hell, who knows?


"You mean Mikasa?"

Furlan nodded, managing to hold back his laughter in respect of the other patrons around them. "You're never gonna live that one down, by the way."

"Thanks for that." Levi scoffed. In that moment however, he was hit with an unusual, but warm feeling. Thinking about Mikasa made him realize how much her friendship meant to him.

The last time he saw her was in passing on campus just a couple hours earlier. She was walking with a friend, her attention fixated on the girl at her side. She hadn't seen him, but he could tell it was her from the distance. On her hands were the red mittens he had gotten for her as a gift. That was enough to make his last first day of winter quarter a good one.

Before that, the last time they were face to face was during winter break- in his apartment.

He could still feel her lips on his.

He wondered if they had crossed a line, if they were somehow more than friends, what she thought of the whole ordeal. Thinking back on Furlan's suggestion, he decided maybe he should take a chance and officially ask her out.

There was no denying there was something meaningful between them. The attraction, the emotional connection, their shared passions and values.

The time to act couldn't be more fitting.

What amused Levi more than anything, however, was the fact that Furlan had not yet been informed of his intimate moment with Mikasa that fateful day.

He decided to keep that to himself... for now.

_Oh how little he knows..._

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**Stohess Neighborhood – Apartment of The Miss Hitch and Miss Annie**

"Love you, too. Bye, mom."
Annie finished the brief phone call with her mother while entering the small apartment she inhabited with teammate, Hitch Dreyse.

Hitch was cooking something on the stove, filling the air with scents ranging from rosemary to oregano. Annie assumed it was yet another experimental stew to help warm them up from the freezing temperatures outside. Sure, the girl wasn't exactly Rachel Ray or Martha Stewart, but she had improved marginally since first moving in.

Annie was never one to brag, avoiding anything that would put her on the spot or spark long overbearing conversations. But she prided herself in her cooking skills.

Some of her favorite childhood memories were made in the kitchen.

She and her father would make pancakes on Sunday mornings.

She and her mother would bake brownies after school.

Even Bertolt taught her a few tricks of the trade when they were younger; everything ranging from the proper way to prepare homemade pasta dishes to spicing up old family recipes. As kids, the only thing they would experiment with were popsicles and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, but as they grew up together, they learned to master more challenging, and more rewarding, home-cooked meals along the way.

They often joked with one another about who the real master chef was; something that was still up in the air for now.

After kicking off her shoes just outside the doorway, Annie slowly sauntered to the couch, collapsing on the plush sofa as she reached for the TV remote.

When the screen lit up, she was hardly shocked by the channel it was left on.

"Ooohhh!" Hitch called out from the kitchen. "Leave it here! I want to find out what happens in the next episode!"

Annie sunk her head and rolled her eyes. "Why is this show still on air?" She mumbled in agony.

*Keeping up with the Kardashians* was Hitch’s guilty pleasure, but to Annie it was the equivalent of a thousand headaches. Reality TV never offered anything new, just cheap moments of tension and fake televised drama. Annie never really saw the appeal to it, but the odds of her and Hitch actually agreeing on something sit down and watch together in pure harmony were simply nonexistent. It wasn't worth the incessant groans or complaints that were sure to follow fighting over the remote.

The one and only thing they could watch together with equal enthusiasm was Shark Week on the Discovery channel; a televised event that only happened once a year in July.

"Dinner's just about ready." Hitch announced, peering from behind the kitchen cabinets.

With that, Annie picked herself up from the couch and made her way to the small round dining table. "Smells good."

"I tried adding in a few different ingredients." The stew Hitch was referring to was a basic recipe with vegetables and chicken stock. Annie had a hard time imagining what changes could be made that would dramatically alter its overall taste.

Still, she was thankful Hitch was the kind of roommate that was willing to actually utilize the kitchen
they paid rent for, along with the other accommodations of course. Might as well take full advantage of the resources available at their disposal. Aside from that, it saved them money in the long run, rather than succumbing to cliché college kid eating rituals that included surviving off of top ramen and practically knowing the pizza delivery guy on a first name basis.

"You always do a good job." Annie commended her, helping herself to a bowl of the steaming broth. "Want me to get you a glass of water or something?"

"We're out of the Riesling, aren't we?" Hitch asked, craving a strong wine to pair with her freshly made entrée.

Annie wasn't sure if she was joking or not, hoping to any and all higher powers that Hitch's liver would survive another three and half years. "Yeah. We're out."

Hitch sighed. "Water's fine. Thanks."

Annie was sure the 'thanks' was more than likely a Freudian slip coming from Hitch's liver.

They sat themselves down at the table, the TV airing softly in the background. Hitch cut to the chase, wanting to indulge in some epic mealtime chat.

"How do you like your schedule for the quarter?" She settled on slowly easing into it.

"It's okay." Annie dipped her spoon into her bowl and took a hearty gulp of its contents. "This is really good, Hitch. Even better than last time."

"Mmm... Hitch smiled slyly, steering back to her previous intentions. "What classes are you taking?"

Annie reached for a napkin and began gently patting just below her lips. "Fifteen credits. Three classes. 9am Biology. 10am Eng 102. 11am Psychology of Human Relations."

"Biology, huh?"

"My major requires at least 10 credits of an elected science. Biology seemed the most reasonable."

"Depending on who the professor is." Hitch huffed, a recollection of horror stories from fellow classmates who were naïve enough to think Professor Kitz Weilman wasn't so bad.

"I have Professor Weilman." Annie yawned. "Doesn't seem so bad."

*Oh Annie. You poor little lamb.* Hitch thought, suppressing a loud dramatic face-palm.

"You should have taken ENG 102 at 11am with Mr. Jarnach." Hitch went on, after tending to her stew. "Ymir's in there."

"Cool." Annie said, more interested in the food placed in front of her. Giving her body nourishment was just a *tad* more important than Hitch's sly proposals.

Hitch faked a cough, before adding, "Eren's in there, too."

Hearing his name caused a momentary pause, stopping the blonde from forging another mouthful of stew. She managed to control the sudden tension from within and carried on with smaller helpings.

"Oh." Was all Annie let out verbally, though Hitch already had it figured out.
The girl had no filter, thus pouring out exactly what was on her mind. "There's something going on between you two, isn't there?" She asked point-blank, looking Annie directly in the eye.

Annie looked up. She blinked once. Then twice. Then once more. Turns out everyone's favorite bimbo wasn't a complete idiot. She almost felt bad for thinking her head was an empty nutshell. Almost.

"That's none of your concern." Annie chose to plead the fifth on this one.

Hitch couldn't help but laugh, admiring Annie's unimpressed gaze. The blonde roommate was a buzzkill from time to time, but discovering her fondness for the pole vaulter from Shiganshina High was pure entertainment. Of course, the good-natured side of her was also happy that Annie had found someone that could bring a genuine smile to lips.

Among other things of course.

She ceased interrogating the blonde so she could work on finishing her bowl. Hitch's blackened soul had a bit of mercy in there… somewhere.

In a matter of seconds, however, she was right back at it.

"Whatever." Hitch chuckled. "But it's obvious he likes you. He asked about you today in class."

Annie wouldn't relent. "Believe me when I say, Hitch, that you have no idea what you're talking about."

Hitch remained silent, allowing for Annie's thoughts to dwell on Eren and their complex relationship. She wouldn't admit it out loud, but she missed him.

She missed him to the point of exhaustion.

But her thoughts quickly roamed to others who were hurt in the process.

Mikasa was an unfortunate victim in the chaotic mess, and Annie only felt worse after pondering what could have been a potentially strong and wholesome friendship between them. She was drawn to the girl and treasured what most of their generation overlooked.

Like her, she enjoyed adrenaline rushes from beating a punching bag. She was committed to her training in her respective sport. And overall, Mikasa was one of the most admirable girls she had ever come to know on a more personal level.

Guilt consumed Annie, but it was too late to turn around and apologize now.

Truthfully, she wasn't sorry for having feelings for Eren. She was only sorry it had turned out this way, muddled with several consequences.

Annie reasoned that life was one massive grey area anyway.

"You know what's funny?" Hitch had finished her bowl when the rhetorical question arose. "I always thought you and Bertolt would end up together. Or at least hook-up."

Annie's face contorted into that of disbelief. "He's like an older brother to me, Hitch."

"Yeah, yeah. I get that." Hitch remarked, as if bored. She took a swig from her water glass before continuing. "But that night Eren came over for the first time was when I realized it. It was like an 'aha' moment."
"Realized what?" Annie pried.

"That you two are perfect for each other." Hitch replied, sultry flirtation oozing from her voice. "I remember seeing you guys on the couch, talking about books and shit. You both had the same lovelorn look on your faces. And even after that night, every time he'd stop by at games or after practices, you'd be eye-fucking each other for like an eternity."

Annie instantly regretted asking. It couldn't have been that obvious… right? She valued her privacy, but damn, it seemed like everyone around her was picking up on her affection for the green-eyed brunet.

"All I'm saying," Hitch resumed, this time in a more understanding light, "is that you should give the guy a chance."

Annie refrained from speaking, only nodding to indicate that Hitch's message had been received. She offered no sign that she would take her advice to heart, unsure if it was in anyone's best interest.

Hitch rose from her seat and began stowing the dishes away in the sink, preparing to wash them momentarily.

"You and Eren…" Hitch cooed. "I ship it."
A/N: I wasn’t going to upload this until the 24th, but meh, I decided why not? You’re the best readers an introverted, baking enthusiast, dog obsessed, weirdo could ask for! Early update cuz you guys deserve it! :)  

I already have the next chapter written out, so might as well upload that one early, too!  

Once again, thanks to all who've reviewed and hit dat kudos! It means I'm doing something right, I guess :3 even if I'm not always satisfied with the result.  

Anyway, on with the show! :D

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**Friday, January 6th**

**Stohess University – Indoor Track and Field Facility**

He powdered his hands, rubbing them together in anticipation before executing a few preliminary stretches. He looked up, a customary smile etched on his face as he began reaching for his red tapered pole. The cross bar suspended above ground was elevated up to fifteen feet high, overlooking a giant blue mat at the end of a Tartan runway.

Eren prepared to make his approach, readying himself for the rehearsal of his unmatched vaulting technique, a routine he knew intimately like the back of his hand.

"What the hell are you waiting for Jaeger?!!" Coach Shadis shouted, glaring at the freshman from his position at the end of the runway. "Get a move on already!"

*Just another day in paradise.* Eren thought.

With a deep breath, he lunged forward, taking long swift strides in a relaxed upright position. Aligning his head, shoulders, and hips, he lifted his torso and leaned slightly forward, picking up speed as his sights narrowed just ahead of him on the bar.

He planted the pole firmly in the trapezoidal box marked for establishing a proper liftoff, tightening his grip as he hurled his body up, and immediately extended his hips as he outstretched both legs above. Continuing to propel upward, he inverted his body's position, soaring high above the bar and pushing off from the pole, watching as it fell away in the opposite direction. The rotation concluded as he made his descent, peacefully so, in what felt like a euphoric sense of freedom and release.

The landing was graceful, a soft *thud* following as Eren's back hit the mat in flattened perfection.
He cleared fifteen feet as if it were child's play.

His own record, and what made him state champ back in his senior year of high school, was seventeen feet.

"That's it, Jaeger!" Shadis commended him, his usual commanding voice thundering throughout the facility. "Keep this up, and the outdoor season will be a piece of cake."

"Thanks, coach." Eren, still on his high, continued to lay on the mat, arms and legs both spread lazily. For a brief moment he forgot he was still at practice, ignoring Shadis' sharp glare as thoughts of blowing the competition away at the first meet of the season fluffed up his ego.

"JAEGGER!" Shadis boomed. "Who said you could lie around?! Get your candy ass up! Four laps! NOW!"

Eren inwardly panicked, but remained calm on the outside to avoid giving his coach justification in the lovely term of endearment, "candy ass." With great haste, he forced himself up and began jogging to the track to begin a moderately paced mile run with his teammates.

"Yes, sir!" He complied, scrambling away with just enough time to spare before falling victim to further harsh punishment.

He was quickly joined by Thomas Wagnar and Ilse Langnar within a matter of seconds. Seeking to thwart conversations regarding the amount of pressure they were all under to perform their best at the upcoming meet, Eren delighted in the prospect of sharing his opinion on a completely unrelated matter.

The young collegiate athlete took helm over a discussion about Star Wars; and that's when he made a fatal mistake.

"I was actually kind of disappointed in Rogue One."

Before Eren could get into any more detail and offer up a full-on movie critique, he was instantly ditched by his teammates.

"Was it something I said?" He joked, a subtle laugh escaping his mouth as he hurried to catch up to them.

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**Arlert Household – Shiganshina Neighborhood**

Later that evening, Eren stopped by the Arlert's to pay his friend, Armin, a visit.

He set out for the charming modern victorian home after practice, acknowledging that it had been awhile since he'd seen his best friend. They had a lot to catch up on, but the one subject Eren was seemingly obsessed with kept relaying over and over in his head.

The two adolescents were tinkering with a few prototypes from the early days of Armin's Robotics Club triumphs, setting him on the engineering track for college after receiving multiple scholarship offers.

There were far more engaging, and more significant, topics to address, but Eren just couldn't let it go.

"I just don't see what the appeal is." Eren sighed, shaking his head as if all faith in humanity was lost on his inability to comprehend just this one thing. "Rogue One definitely wasn't the worst Star Wars
film to date, but I still thought it was a HUGE letdown!

Armin, who had seen the movie with Eren over winter break, disagreed but respected his friend's opinion nonetheless. "I thought K-2SO was pretty cool."

Eren continued his rant, releasing pent up irritation. "Think about it, Armin! Can you name any of the dudes in Rogue One other than Jyn and Cassian? Because I can't! The movie completely glossed over their development. I have no idea what IP Man was doing in there. Sure, it was cool, but was it really necessary? Speaking of unnecessary characters, Forest Whitaker… I can't even remember his character's name… but anyway, he was irrelevant to the plot, and he died after like five minutes of screen time!"

"…" Armin figured it would be best to let Eren vent his frustrations without interrupting.

"It was obviously no more than your stereotypical cashgrab!" Eren droned on. "Except for a few fans-serving moments, the movie was rather dull. It totally lacked the charm and chills of Lucas's founding trilogy. The whole time I was sitting there I just didn't feel like I was watching a Star Wars movie."

"Sorry you feel that way, Eren." Armin shrugged, a remote control in hand. He proceeded to fiddle around with a small robotic structure he nicknamed 'Lucy.' The robot followed commands and moved about the basement floorboards. "I actually thought Rogue One was better than The Force Awakens."

Eren shot the blond an intense scowl. "Those are fighting words, Armin." He narrowed his eyes before adding one last sentiment to his film critique. "The only redeeming quality Rogue One had was its scenes with Darth Vader. That end scene where he completely wastes those poor rebellion suckers was absolutely pure gold! Seriously! That one and only scene was worth the 2 and half hour sit through."

Too bad that particular scene was only about a minute long.

Armin looked up and smiled. "See. It wasn't so bad after all. What other Star Wars movies feature Darth Vader going full-blown Sith lord?" He set his remote controller aside and reached for little 'Lucy,' studying her mechanics and appreciating his younger self's work. "The original trilogy will always be superior to the other films, but you have to admit, the light-saber battle scenes in The Empire Strikes Back and Return of the Jedi were anything but iconic. Compared to today's standards, they were poorly choreographed."

Eren realized Armin had a point. "Yeah, yeah, but those films were produced decades ago. It makes sense that the action sequences would be outdated." Although they had their disagreements on the subject, Eren was grateful he had at least one friend he could share his love for the series with, going into deep analysis on subjects ranging from why the hell Boba Fett hadn't gotten his own stand-alone film yet, to how terrible of an actor Hayden Christensen was as Anakin, to whether or not selling the rights to Disney was a smart move on George Lucas' part. They routinely argued, however, over who the bigger Star Wars babe was; Padme or Leia.

Jean once insisted that it was Rey, only to be tackled by the hot-headed Eren for even making that suggestion.

"That's it!" Eren declared, turning away from the plethora of robo-dogs and prototype assemblies that resembled bug vacuums. "Time for a Star Wars marathon!"

"Sure!" Armin enthused. "Chronological order, right?"
"Of course!" Eren couldn't have been more thrilled, even if that meant they'd have to sit through The Phantom Menace to kick things off. At least Liam Neeson was thrown in there.

"Want me to order a pizza?" Eren asked as they headed upstairs to the living room. "My treat."

"Sounds good." Armin nodded. "I'll set things up in the living room."

After Eren placed his order online via an app on his phone, a question arose, this time pertaining to his athletic endeavors.

"Your first meet is coming up, right?" Armin asked, placing The Phantom Menace into the Blu-ray player.

Eren nodded, collapsing on the couch. "Yup. It's only the indoor season, though, so I told my parents not to worry about showing up. The outdoor season in the spring is what counts."

"Someone has to show up and offer support." Armin reasoned. He was briefly saddened upon thinking about Mikasa and how they would always attend Eren's pole vault competitions during high school. After hearing of their breakup, he realized those days were over.

If he were being completely honest to himself, however, he wasn't surprised the two ended their relationship. Eren seemed infatuated with whoever 'Annie' was, and Armin had trouble believing Eren had made the right decision professing his feelings for her. Based on what Eren had told him, it didn't seem like she whole-heartedly returned his feelings. Unless she was holding back…

Either way, Armin decided to keep an open mind for the sake of their friendship, and would wait until he had met Annie in person to make a proper assessment of the already complex situation.

"I could ask Sasha and Connie if they'd want to go cheer you on as well." Armin said, shoving his thoughts aside while plopping on the couch next to Eren.

"I appreciate the offer, but you don't have to." Eren downplayed the whole thing, realizing he wouldn't be totally bothered if the stands were empty. Maybe a little, but not totally.

"Don't be ridiculous, Eren." Armin chuckled. "When is it?"

Eren couldn't have responded faster, sounding desperate with each word that followed. "Wednesday night. 5:30pm."

Armin smiled. "We'll be there."

"It'll be like a little reunion." Eren jested, eyes fixated on the TV as the opening credits flashed before them, accompanied by the familiar (and ingenious) soundtrack.

The two hummed along to the Star Wars theme, conducted brilliantly by John Williams, playing air trumpets and waving their arms around like true dorks while in the comfort and privacy of the blond's home.

Friday nights at the Arlerts were always the best.

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Sina Health and Fitness Club

"One more, Bertolt! You got this!"

Reiner Braun, the self-proclaimed fitness trainer to longtime buddy Bertolt, encouraged the taller of
the two to execute one last rep on the bench press with a loud determined battle cry.

Friday nights at the gym were usually packed, but given that there were several large city-wide events going on all at once, only a few dedicated gym rats ran amok at the classy facility.

The Mayor was holding a beneficiary event to celebrate the careers of several outstanding war veterans at the city hall. The newly elected governor was sponsoring a charity event for families living below the poverty line in their community. The regional film festival, NXNW, was in full swing, attracting a few celebrity appearances. An offbeat protest, with a surprisingly large turnout, was being held at the downtown plaza in an effort to take a stand against the legalization of marijuana. The annual Sina Beauty Pageant was preparing to host live at the convention center downtown in but a week's time.

The TVs at the gym were tuned to the local news channel, broadcasting the Reiss family at the city hall in tandem with honoring the war vets.

Reiner was distracted when the screens displayed his lovely girlfriend.

"Isn't that… Krista?" Bertolt panted, worn out from the rigorous lifting. He was certain he'd be immensely sore the next day.

Reiner beamed, embracing the love-bug jitters with the intense fluttering of his heart. "It sure is." Damn, she's absolutely stunning. "You know, she's competing in the beauty pageant this year." He sounded proud, the way one would over a prized trophy.

Bertolt furrowed his brow. Of course she is. He thought, slightly irked. "I... bet she's pretty excited for that." He sat up from the bench and reached for his bottle of water.

Reiner shrugged. "I don't know. I assumed she was, but when I asked her about it she immediately changed the subject." He turned away from the TV screens and faced Bertolt. "Come to think of it, she's been acting kinda weird lately."

"How so?"

"She's just been distant." Reiner thought back to their last date, troubled by a few 'warning signs' he may have overlooked before. "It's not like she's pushing me away or anything, but it's obvious something is bothering her. Every time I ask her if she's okay, she brushes it off as nothing, or tries to laugh it off."

Bertolt remained quiet, worried by Reiner's hard-to-read expression.

"When we first started going out, everything was great." He rubbed his chin frigidly. "Almost too great…"

What if... she only agreed to go out with me... for appearances?! He thought, suddenly horrified.

The silence was making Bertolt uncomfortable. "You all right, Reiner?"

Reiner ignored the nagging feeling, tugging away on his fragile heart strings while suggesting his relationship was nothing but a sham. It couldn't have been! He and Krista were a match made in heaven!

So why was this awful gut-feeling gnawing away into the deepest depths his soul?

Reiner was quick to snap out of it, not wanting to leave Bertolt in an undying suspense. "Yeah, man.
I'm good. I'm good." He repeated. "Just a little dizzy spell."

Bertolt sighed, offering the bench to Reiner for one last set. "Your turn."

Reiner resumed the topic once he sat down after adjusting the weights. "The Fall Sports Athletic Banquet is coming up." He breathed out in between reps. "Krista's going to be my date, of course."

Bertolt figured the blond had more to say, but allowed him time to recover after completing his set.

Reiner sat up after setting the bar back. Bertolt was quite the efficient spotter, but the blond was confident in that he didn't really need one. "I'm looking forward to it, believe me, I am, but…" He indulged in giant animalistic gulp of water, quenching the thirsty beast. "Her parents are going to be there… and my parents are going to be there."

Bertolt already knew where this was going.

"I've never met her parents and vice versa." Reiner gasped. "I have to make a good first impression, Bertolt!"

"I wouldn't worry about it." Bertolt yawned.

"I bare my soul to you and that's all you have to say?" Reiner huffed. The guy had his diva moments, that much was true.

"Have a little faith in yourself, Reiner." Bertolt said, resuming his position underneath the bar to complete his last set. "This can't be the first 'meet the parents' jitters you've been faced with, right?"

Reiner's silence perplexed the tall brunet.

"Right?" Bertolt repeated, this time with urgency.

Reiner looked around them to be sure no one was eavesdropping or listening in on their very private, very intimate conversation. "Bertolt, can you keep a secret?"

Bertolt was in the middle of his set when he mouthed, "Of course," partially offended.

It's not like they had been friends for over a decade or anything.

Reiner gulped, unsure if he was willing to admit the truth, even to someone he considered family.

"Krista… is my first… real girlfriend." The confession didn't quite come as a shock to the brunet.

"So…" Bertolt murmured, taking a moment to catch his breath after his last rep. "You're telling me, all those girls back in middle school and high school were just for show?"

Reiner nodded in shame. "Every single one of them. They would only use me to get back at their exes, or as a date so they wouldn't have to go to school dances alone."

Bertolt kind of already knew all of this, as Reiner's past "girlfriends" never went out with him for more than a week.

But he chose to play along, and pretend this was all news to him. Reiner was low-key sensitive as fuck.

"Oh, that sucks." Bertolt forced out, trying to be supportive while combating the urge to smirk.
"Krista was actually my first kiss." Reiner lamented. "I hope she doesn't think I'm a terrible kisser or something!"

Bertolt closed his eyes. The up-and-coming star QB for Stohess University's football team was a virgin! What a sight to behold!

"Think of it this way, Reiner." Bertolt just couldn't help himself. "You're like Tim Tebow."

Reiner scoffed. "But I don't believe in waiting for marriage and all that BS."

"Yeah but after every touchdown, you get down on your knee and start praying…"

"Well, mama raised me to be a man of faith!"

Bertolt had an unimpressed, but slightly amused, look etched on his face. "Don't you see the hypocrisy in that statement?"

Reiner held his hands on his hips in retaliation. "We live in different times, Bertolt!" He expressed urgently. "Everyone's having sex before marriage nowadays."

"Which explains why you still have your V-"

"Don't say it out loud!"

Bertolt raised his hands up in defense. "All I'm saying is that there's nothing wrong with waiting. Whether that's until your wedding night… or when the right person comes along."

"Thanks, dad." Reiner smirked, taking none of what his friend was trying to convey seriously.

As they continued resting nearby the bench, talking about Reiner's QB stats and what he hoped to achieve in the future, a person of familiarity made her way to the weights section, sights set on the rack of dumbbells.

The oriental beauty had earbuds in, paying no mind to a couple of gym rats eyeing her lustfully as she picked up a pair of fifteen pounders to begin bicep curls.

"She looks familiar." Reiner paused, the name of the girl on the tip of his tongue.

"Mikasa." Bertolt mumbled. "Eren's girlfriend."

"That's right!" Reiner snapped his fingers upon recollecting past chats with his roommate. "Except I'm pretty sure she's his ex now. Eren mentioned they broke up."

Bertolt only replied with a tsk.

"Pity." Reiner went on, folding his arms across his chest. "She's cute."

"Well, turns out Eren only has eyes for Annie." Bertolt spewed out bitterly. He hadn't meant for it to come out, but he was among friends. Or… just Reiner, anyway.

Reiner was baffled by the bizarre statement. "Annie?" He paused. "You mean our Annie?"

Bertolt nodded slowly. "Yeah."

"Oh, shit." Reiner was conflicted. He wasn't sure who deserved the most pity, and whether or not he could bring himself to dislike Eren for falling for Annie. He almost wanted to congratulate the kid for
pursuing what he thought was impossible. Winning Annie's stone-cold heart was an endeavor he believed to be the equivalent of finding the holy grail.

But alas, he vowed to always be on Bertolt's side. It was the bro-code. You can't dishonor the bro-code, man.

In a nervous attempt to lighten the mood, Reiner tried his hand at joking with the awkward circumstances they were presented with. "Well, if that means Mikasa is single, maybe you should ask her out."

Bertolt wasn't amused in the slightest, to which Reiner quickly picked up on.

"Just a joke, man." Reiner exhaled.

Bertolt turned away and thought deeply about Annie. They shared so many fond memories, and although she would never love him the way he loved her, he felt it was about time he take the high road and move on. He needed to reinforce his attempt at personal growth, and focus on his dedication to remaining a steadfast and mature individual.

He needed to accept reality and let his dreams of winning her over go.

If being with Eren made her happy, then so be it. Bertolt only wanted what was best for her.

She *deserved* to be happy, after dealing with so much in her past; mainly the dysfunctional relationship with her father.

It saddened him that he couldn't be the one to make her fall madly in love.

If only… things were different.

His views on their friendship remained unchanged, however. He vowed to still look out for her, and protect her from the cruelty of others. He promised he would always be there for her.

No matter what.

Reiner nudged him on the shoulder out of the blue, prompting him to look up.

"What?" Bertolt assumed Reiner was going to add something about Mikasa or Eren, or hell, maybe even revert back to some customary football talk.

Entering the weights area, skin glistening with sweat, blonde hair tied up in a ponytail, was the aforementioned Annie Leonhart.

"Woah, woah, woah." Reiner muttered, eyes widening at the sight before them. "It's about to be WWE up in here!"

Bertolt shook his head. "It doesn't seem like either of them realize they're occupying the same space. They're both focused on their workout regiments."

"Wonder what'll happen when they *accidentally* bump into each other." Reiner chuckled.

"This isn't middle school, Reiner." Bertolt face-palmed himself, but hoped for the sake of all that was good in the world, neither girl would notice the other in their midst. It would only create awkward tension.
In another setting, Mikasa was still working on a few reps, switching up her routine from curls to tricep dips. She reminded herself to focus on all muscle groups, certain to give them equal amount of attention.

Even as she advanced to set her weights back on the rack, her arms continued to feel an intense burn, a satisfying sensation she yearned for to maintain her strength. She tilted her neck from side to side, peering down at her MP3 player in search of the right song.

*That's the one.* She thought to herself, stumbling upon Three Days Grace.

Lately, her music collection consisted mostly of loud, angsty rock, making the unceremonious transition from cheery pop music after recent setbacks. One of them being her breakup. (Surprise, surprise.)

The coping mechanism was a pathetic one, she admitted.

But hard rock and screamo sure did wonders for the soul.

She looked up into the mirror, making minor adjustments in her position to be sure her form was correct. When she stood back up at full height after completing another set, her eyes wandered around the establishment.

That's when *she* caught her attention.

Mikasa was initially taken aback by the blonde in her midst; less than a few steps away coincidentally.

Annie hadn't noticed Mikasa was in the neighboring weights section, still focused on the task at hand.

In what she could only surmise was fueled by the adrenaline rush credited to her sustained workout, Mikasa made her way over to confront the blonde.

She hadn't exactly collected her thoughts, but she sought to make her presence known, and see what Annie had to say for herself.

She progressed closer and closer to where Annie had stationed herself, unsure what exactly a simple talk would solve. She convinced herself she wasn't acting on impulse, and that she had enough self-control to conduct a civil discussion.

Mikasa had little respect for girls that were quick to demonize others and declare war over the most ridiculous things.

But Eren was someone she'd lost her cool over before, common sense practically flying out the window on a couple rare occasions a bimbo ventured a little too close. The actions were always a last resort, and for the most part she was able to keep a level-head.

Mikasa was the jealous type, plain and simple; but she wasn't the psycho possessive type.

Even so, this was *Annie*. Annie was far different than other girls in general. In fact, there was no denying she had a lot in common with the stoic blonde; whether she wanted to accept that or not.

Still. Mikasa felt the issue needed to be addressed. She couldn't stop herself now, as Annie was but one measly step away, prompting the blonde to take notice.
Annie rose to her feet, directly facing the girl from Shiganshina with tactfulness in mind.

"We should talk." Mikasa insisted, her tone calm, but unnervingly cold.

Annie maintained her icy gaze, her usual expression suggesting that everything around her was more mundane than watching paint dry. Her following words further demonstrated that. "Okay. Sure."
Taming the Shrew

Chapter Notes

A/N: Didn't want to leave you all hanging, so here's the next chapter! :)  
Thanks to all my readers! :) Thanks for hitting that kudos button!  
Be sure to review :)  
We're not even at the halfway mark yet... sooooo I hope ya'll are okay with this being a  
long fic :3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Friday, January 6th

Sina Health and Fitness Club

Through the eyes of a tall brunet and his blond companion, it appeared as though a storm was brewing.

Bertolt watched from the distance as Annie was approached by the raven-haired girl, Mikasa Ackerman. Based on his own assessment, he feared the worst case scenario was sure to follow.

Both had been involved with a certain green-eyed pole vaulter from Shiganshina, but only one had captured his heart.

Icy blues momentarily clashed with the fiery gaze behind predatory steel orbs.

Few words had been exchanged between the two girls when Bertolt urgently made his way over, not even bothering to look back or think of a proper resolution to help settle things.

Reiner wasn't able to stop Bertolt from acting impetuously, and internally chided himself for his slow reaction time.

What the hell...?

"Wanna go somewhere more private?" Annie's flat tone hinted at disdain, but in actuality, she was more than willing to cooperate and hear what Mikasa had to say.

She was going to point out that they hadn't seen each other since the Christmas party at Isabel's, but figured that would've been in poor taste.

During the holiday season, shortly after Thanksgiving, Annie had taken a leave of absence from work at Café Charmant, believing it would allow for her to spend more time with her mother and father.

Neither endeavor panned out favorably, not that Annie was completely surprised.

Given that she had been gone for that extended period of time from the café, the opportunity to speak with Eren's former girlfriend and explain her recollection of events had yet to present itself.
"Here's fine." Mikasa responded in an equally stoic voice.

In that moment, she didn't feel anger or contempt. Even after learning of Eren's affection for the blonde, she couldn't bring herself to hate or even blame Annie for what most would have considered betrayal.

Mikasa reasoned with herself that she should be angry. She had every right to be.

But something was holding her back.

Maintaining the steady gaze into the blonde's eyes, she realized the situation regarding the chaotic aftermath swarming the demise of her relationship with Eren was more complex than she'd originally thought.

Under similar circumstances, an outside perspective would be quick to assume it's a story as old as time.

Guy and girl fall in love. Guy meets other girl. Other girl is a home-wrecking whore. Guy leaves first girl heartbroken. Guy and home-wrecker get together.

And they all lived happily ever after.

Mikasa insisted that was hardly the case here.

Annie wasn't the stereotypical seductress that cringey soap operas and cliché chick flicks constructed so as to warrant a negative reaction from the audience through outrageously sexist tropes.

Annie was an actual person – not a character.

Annie had been a friend.

And in all honesty, Annie hadn't been the sole reason for the end of her relationship with Eren.

With the shorter girl in front of her, she examined the outward amenities gracing the cover of her delicate frame. Her face seemed to do most of her thinking (and in some cases, talking). Her roman nose had an exceptional quality about it, shaped at an angle that evoked artistic inspiration. Large bright blue eyes illuminated from behind gentle wisps of golden blonde tresses.

Annie had always distanced herself away from most others, but Mikasa could see right-through the act, and thought it to be quite the shame. Beneath the hollowed expressions and apathy, was a gentle soul.

Maybe their little chat would turn out to be pointless. Maybe Mikasa already knew everything she needed to know.

Finding some semblance of closure was the only thing on the raven-haired girl's mind for now.

Just help me understand…

Mikasa was just about ready to cut to the chase when they were interrupted by a sweaty giant.

"Hey, Annie!" Bertolt hastily advanced to her side, forcing a smile to mask his desperation and ballsy attempt at calming the storm he thought was brewing. "Mikasa! Fancy meeting you here!"

Mikasa was perplexed by his sudden emergence, slight irritation welling up from underneath her calmed exterior.
Annie, on the other hand, knew exactly what he was trying to pull. She found it obnoxious that this was yet another one of his ways of saying: *I'm trying to look out for you, let me protect you, you can't handle basic things effectively by yourself.*

Mikasa greeted Bertolt with a simple, "Hi," and then turned her attention back to the petite blonde once more.

Annie sought to get rid of the intruder. "Something on your mind, Bert?" *Because if not, then carry on and mind your own business.*

"Uhh…. well…." Bertolt wasn't exactly prepared for a follow-up question, so he began stuttering out unintelligible murmurs, earning him looks from both girls that were equal parts annoyed and confused.

Enter Reiner, the stocky blond swooping in to save the day!

"What do we have here?" Reiner played off the whole situation with effortless cool-factor, a voice that sounded smooth enough for a national radio broadcasting gig. "How are you ladies this fine evening?" The charmer he is, indeed.

"Reiner…?" Annie internally blamed his intrusion on Bertolt, believing it to be the brunet's doing.

In reality, Reiner was acting on the same principle as his longtime pal, *but* on his own accord. He wanted to look out for Bertolt and offer support, just as Bertolt wanted to do the same for Annie.

But damn, this whole setting was undeniably nothing more than a hopeless clusterfuck.

Reiner studied all three individuals before him, noticing Annie's murderous stare, Bertolt's massive accumulation of sweat (seriously, the guy was sweating more now than he was during their workout), and Mikasa's weary disposition.

Letting his imagination briefly take over, he envisioned an actual fight breaking out between Bertolt's crush and Eren's ex. He doubted something even remotely similar to that would have happened regardless of whether or not Bertolt had interrupted their exchange, but he found himself sizing them up against each other just for kicks.

*Who would win?*

Would he gamble on Annie's victory… or would Mikasa come out on top?

He realized then and there, he would definitely pay money to see them battle it out. It would be worth every penny, no matter what the outcome.

But he was jolted back to reality when Mikasa spoke up.

*Now's probably not the time to fantasize about shit like that anyway…*

Slinging her gym bag over her shoulder, Mikasa ignored the two boys in her midst and solely addressed Annie.

"We can talk some other time." In a harsh but controlled tone, Mikasa put an end to whatever the whole bullshit charade was, turned on her heel, and headed for the locker rooms.

Annie was hit with something she hardly had the words to describe. Creeping up on her like a predator stalking their prey, a strange sense of… *guilt* consumed her. Her conscience plagued her
mercilessly, telling her to do the 'right' thing and pursue the matter by casting Bertolt and Reiner aside and catching up to Mikasa before she was to disappear out of sight. The inexplicable wave of emotion was foreign to her; hardly anyone ever gave her that simple courtesy or showed her an ounce of compassion when she was growing up. For fuck sake, her own parents disregarded her feelings and often trampled over her emotions.

Unintentionally, for the most part but either way, the damage couldn't be undone.

Annie couldn't deny it any longer.

Her modestly downcast eyes conveyed a deep sense of contrite, agonizing in the painful remorse of hurting someone she had considered a friend.

Even if her actions were initially 'unintentional,' she realized she really was no different than her parents in that aspect.

Annie took a step forward, rashly so. "Mikasa..." Wait... don't go...

Her attempt fell on deaf ears. Mikasa was already gone, and Bertolt stepped in front of the blonde once more, cutting her off in the process.

"What the hell was that about, Bertolt?" Annie snapped, fed up with being treated like a child.

"I was making sure you weren't going to end up doing something you'd regret." Bertolt shot back. "You and I both know what you're capable of."

"What did you think was going to happen?!" Annie asked incredulously. "You thought we were going to catfight like two girls in high school?"

"Pretty much." Reiner interjected unapologetically, like it was fact.

"Do you have any idea how ridiculous that sounds?" Annie almost felt violated, as though her privacy had been invaded. "For one thing, you have no idea what's going on. Whatever she was going to say is between me and her. And, I have a little something called 'self-control.' I can maintain a civil conversation with someone without having to raise my fists to prove a point. Just because two girls have a disagreement or misunderstanding doesn't mean it's always going to end up in a goddamn fight."

"You seem to be forgetting one small thing, Annie." Reiner sighed. "Her ex-boyfriend has the hots for you. So it's only natural that she might be holding a grudge."

"Then so be it." Annie let out fiercely. "I don't understand why you two felt the need to barge in."

"We're doing you a favor. You might not see that now, but you will. Believe me, you will." Reiner answered nonchalantly. Girls were so complicated.

"If anything, you guys made things worse." Annie grumbled, tucking her hair back in annoyance. "Just... stay out of my way." With that, Annie began heading upstairs to the second level.

"Come on, Annie." Reiner sighed. "Don't be like that."

"Where are you going?" Bertolt asked, a step behind her.

Annie ignored him, keeping the answer to his question restricted to the darkest corners of her mind. I'm going to beat the shit out of something before I lose my mind. She envisioned a punching bag,
her tapered fists, and the prospect of unleashing her rage on the defenseless, inanimate object with zero distractions. A few rounds with the bag would prove to be therapeutic, if nothing else.

"Annie…" Bertolt pleaded, but to no avail. Annie left him standing there, ascending up the stairs in a furious march.

It wasn't long until he felt Reiner offer his condolences with a few pats on the back.

"She'll figure it out." He affirmed. "Annie's got a good head on her shoulders."

Reiner's neutral tone offered little solace, but Bertolt figured for Annie's sake it would be best for him to leave her alone and let her deal with these issues how she saw fit.

"I guess." That's all Bertolt could hope for now, anyway.

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**Trost Neighborhood – Apartment of Gentlemen Levi and Furlan**

"So how do I look?"

Sporting a navy blue button up shirt paired consciously with black slacks and brand new oxfords, Furlan emerged from the bathroom after checking himself out in the mirror for the umpteenth time, wanting to ensure he was looking his absolute best for his highly anticipated date with Nifa. His hair was styled neatly, tousled in a few effortless twists and meticulous brushes of his hands swathed in light traces of pomade. A tiny hint of cologne shadowed behind him in a musky trail following his styling ventures in the small lavatory.

It was obvious that he wanted Levi's approval, as evidenced by the vulnerable look in his eye and slightly desperate tone in his voice.

Levi rewarded his teammate's efforts with encouragement and reassurance. "Not bad." He reached for a handy-dandy lint roller and began lightly treading the outside of Furlan's shirt. "You clean up nice."

Furlan accepted the compliment, unbothered by Levi's usual OCD antics.

"There's a few hairs and other impurities I have to get rid of." Levi explained, still using the roller on the fabric layered over Furlan's shoulders and chest. "You don't want to give her the impression that you're a slob."

The guy meant well, and he technically had a point, so what the hell. No harm, no foul.

"I appreciate it, Levi. I really do." Furlan sighed.

After Levi was through with identifying and ridding the impurities in question, he took a step back and admired his work. "Excellent. Not one questionable particle in sight."

"Uhh, that's… good. I guess." Furlan weakly smiled, then collected a few necessary items for his upcoming date.

Wallet. Check.

Breath mints. (Wink, wink.) Check.

Bouquet of flowers. (Daisies are her favorite.) Check.
Self-esteem, self-worth, self-confidence. Meh… it's getting there.

Levi applauded Furlan for taking a more traditional and old-fashioned approach to courting the girl, the itinerary being a very simple one to follow. (Furlan may or may not have put his plans for the evening into writing…)

- Pick her up promptly at 7:00pm.
- Arrive at her place with flowers in hand.
- Treat the lovely dame to dinner at a charming little restaurant.
- Later, (if the weather holds up and freezing to death poses no viable threat) accompany date on a romantic evening stroll.
- Goodnight kiss? If not… then a fist bump will do…?
- Uhm…

"What are you writing?" Levi's question caught Furlan off guard, prompting the taller of the two to toss the pen aside and stuff the piece of paper into his pocket.

"Nothing…" Furlan replied quickly, the look on his face revealing a silent despair.

Levi rolled his eyes, suppressing a sly smirk.

Amateur.

He bid his longtime friend farewell, seeing him out the door as he was hurled back into the promising, but sometimes unforgiving, world of dating. "Good luck."

"Thanks." Furlan called out as he departed. "I'm gonna need it."

After Furlan had gone, Levi was hit with an unstoppable surge of nostalgia.

It seemed like just yesterday their positions were reversed, with Furlan wishing him well for a night out on the town.

The scenario had played out almost exactly the same. Minus about half an hour's worth of lint roller practicality. (Or lack of self-esteem and prevalent self-doubting.)

Levi's first date with Petra had been the highlight of his sophomore year.

But the trip down memory lane was cut short when he envisioned their parting words to one another. Putting it lightly, their breakup was a rough one and even before they ended their two year relationship, things were rocky and spelled certain doom.

He had already moved on, and by now he stopped wondering what would have happened if… things played out differently.

The 'what ifs' were nothing more than a complete waste of time.

What's done is done.

Levi came to accept, wholeheartedly so, that he had no regrets.
Realizing the act was long overdue, he walked over to the fireplace and seized the old picture of him and Petra from the early days of their relationship. Not even glancing at it one last time, he moseyed on over to the kitchen, pulled out the trashcan, and tossed the photograph into its depths.

And that was that.

Chapter End Notes

A/N 2.0: Holy asdfghjklqپwxeyzcb, Annie is hard to write.
Just putting that out there.
Monday, January 9th

Stohess University

The walk out of English class was blissful.

Accompanied by a half-asleep Hitch and laid-back Ymir, Eren calmly listened to the melodic chirping of birds, observing their outstretched wings flutter in a ritualistic haze as they ascended into the trees.

Eren hadn't been the only one to notice the plethora of feathered friends soaring above, as Ymir offhandedly commented on their liveliness.

"Look at all those damn love birds." She scoffed. "It's not even mating season yet."

Hitch lazily yawned and then pointed out one particularly aggressive male perched on a branch loaded with several females, gutting out a frantic tune. "Get a load of that guy." She snickered. "He's desperate!"

Eren had two grievances with the scenario before him.

1) Ymir and Hitch were ruining his bird-watching experience, spoiling the innocence of his fondness for nature by cracking sex jokes.

2) The fact that he was bothered by them bothering his bird-watching experience in a rather bothersome way, bothered him even more.

Why the hell they were bird-watching of all things?!

They weren't grumpy old senior citizens with nothing else to do amid the boredom of retirement. He was a college student for shit sake! What college kid bird-watches?!

*I'm such a square.* He thought.

Before he could suggest the three of them go to the library and begin working on their next writing assignment, Ymir forged another attempt at a joke, though this time on an only slightly related matter.

"Speaking of 'love birds…" she huffed, pulling Hitch to her side to give Eren full view of the intriguing sight.
"Wha-" Eren wasn't able to finish, at a loss for words by the sudden appearance of the girl who made his heart skip a beat.

Annie was waiting for him, standing idly by a statuesque structure outside the entrance to the liberal arts building.

"Oh, oops." Hitch teased, playing dumb as she quickly produced an excuse to bolt. "I'm late for my next class. See ya, Eren!"

For the record, she was done with classes for the day.

Ymir followed suit, a mischievous smirk flashing Eren's direction. "Go get 'em, tiger." After egging him on, she ventured off to catch up with their mutual friend. "Hey, Hitch! Wait up!"

Wow. He thought. Thanks!

Eren felt his entire face turn red. He'd been handed off to Annie by his treacherous classmates like he was some kind of sacrifice meant to appease a bloodthirsty succubus.

Except, when he pictured how the scene would play out in his head, his imagination took a few liberties and only managed to get him hot and bothered.

What the actual fuck…

Realizing he was getting way ahead of himself, his mind stumbled back into the real world with a curious gaze cast her direction. Not wanting to keep her waiting any longer, he slowly made his way over to the petite blonde, his heart-rate skyrocketing with each step.

Hands shoved anxiously in his pockets, Eren tried his best to hide any indication he was nervous, knowing full well Annie could read him like an open book.

His jaw clenched. He pretended to clear his throat. "Hey, Annie."

For a moment, he feared she was going to land another violent jab aimed directly for his face. He kept his distance for his own safety, deciding he liked having a full set of teeth.

But when she shifted her feet a little closer to him and slightly tilted her head to the side, he stopped dreading the worst and found himself more than just 'pleasantly surprised.'

Her lips pressed together in a firm line, then slowly curved upward in a heartening motion.

And there it was again.

Another small, sweet smile.

And everything in Eren's world was all right.

Before long, Eren and Annie found themselves inside a coffee shop right off the main drag, situated cozily between a family-owned sandwich shop and a posh doggy spa teeming with freshly groomed pooches.

They were sitting across from each other in a booth settled near the window, overlooking a busy road flooded with cars and other commuters. Café au lait nestled on a coaster in front of Annie, while Eren heeded the call to satisfy his inner ten-year-old with a piping hot cup of hot cocoa.
Aside from the comforting ambiance provided through the coffee shop's vintage furniture, low but warm lighting, and overall rustic theme like something featured in Better Homes and Gardens magazine, Eren felt strangely relaxed sitting opposite the girl whose complexities were far more difficult to decipher than Morse code in Latin.

Seeing as how she had agreed to join him on his little quest for hot beverages and sugary pastries, he figured it was a step in the right direction toward earning her trust.

Not a day had gone by where he hadn't thought of her. He missed their talks more than anything, finding it remarkably easy to open up to a fellow bibliophile.

Turning his attention away from the hustle and bustle outside, his eyes were met with electric blue orbs, unaware they had been studying him with longing intent.

To his surprise, Annie broke the silence by sharing a recent accomplishment with him.

"So, I finished reading 'The Tin Drum.'" She indulged in another sip of her coffee, waiting for his response.

Eren's eyes lit up. There were so many questions he wanted to ask her, but he settled on starting off easy to avoid overwhelming the blonde English major. "What did you think?" He inquired passionately, a smidgen of hope emerging after noting her expression leaned towards a favorable critique.

Annie didn't leave him in suspense for too long. "It was spectacular."

Aaaaaaaaand Eren was in love.

"I thought Grass wrote his characters very well." Annie expanded. "It's fascinating that their perspectives rarely intersect. They're divided by politics, the aftermath of the war affects them in different ways..." She shrugged before continuing. "Just goes to show how the fragility of the human condition is often overlooked."

Eren smiled, rejoicing in a deep inward sense of relief. "I'm glad you were able to absorb something useful from the novel. Most people can't look past the main character, Oskar, and all his zany flaws. Or... 'attributes' if you want to call them that."

Annie nodded. "Oskar's narration didn't bother me at all."

"You didn't think it detracted from the story and what it was trying to convey?"

"Not at all. The aberrant themes of isolation, manipulation, warfare, memory, and guilt were clearly identifiable." Annie replied. "I think it's safe to say that 'The Tin Drum' will withstand the test of time, and continue to haunt readers for generations to come."

Eren couldn't agree more, as evidenced by his elated demeanor.

An hour had gone by as their exchange branched off into other topics, filling the other in on current events. The holidays had been a tumultuous time for Annie, a subject she chose not to go in depth. Eren disclosed little detail as well, wanting to avoid any thoughts pertaining to his break up with Mikasa. In an attempt to lighten the mood, he asked about her classes for the quarter, a move that proved successful on his part.

She expressed high hopes for her English professor, Mr. Peaure, though admittedly opted to take his class after hearing rumors from others that he'd written a successful series of erotic novels and had
them published under a pseudonym. The prospect of uncovering his little alter-ego was tempting, enough to convince her she was up for the challenge.

Eren let out a hearty laugh, finding her tenacity adorable. "Come on, Annie. Leave the poor guy alone." He jested. "Aside from amusement, what could you possibly gain from discovering his secret pen-name?"

"Leverage." Annie smirked. "If my grade in his class is anything but a solid A, I'd threaten to expose him."

"You've got some balls." Eren finished off his hot cocoa with one last swig. Another laugh spilled from his mouth immediately after. "Most girls joke about seducing their professors for an easy A, but you… you'd rather resort to blackmail? Seems kind of risky."

"Seduction would have been option B," Annie sardonically humored the brunet by playing along. "If all else fails, I could use his own work against him. Those books might as well be blue-prints for his kinks and dirty little fetishes. I could offer to play out a scene from one of his novels to help settle his unfulfilled desires."

"…and if he's gay?"

"Option C would be to kick his ass."

"Fair enough." Eren nodded. "But option B seems so… ill-fitting. Like it's totally inconsistent with your general behavior. Completely out of character."

Annie raised a brow. "Are you saying I'm incapable of seducing someone?"

Eren low-key wanted to shoot himself, fairly certain his entire face was beet red. If he answered 'yes,' he'd be labeled an asshole. If he answered 'no,' he might be forced to explain himself and possibly be labeled a chauvinist. There was no winning either way.

Shit was about to get awkward.

"Ha! That's not what I meant…" Eren stammered, nervously scratching the back of his head as a desperate smile struggled to stay intact.

"I get it." Annie teased, savoring the look of pure horror in his eyes. "It's because you think I'm a frail maiden, too innocent to stoop so low."

"You're anything but frail." Eren mumbled in protest. *The bruise you left on my jaw can attest to that.*

Annie shrugged. "Most guys seem to fall for it." She deadpanned. "They never expect a girl half their size to outmaneuver them."

"Looks can be deceiving." Eren rubbed his chin.

After nodding in agreement, Annie proceeded to ask how his pole vault training was faring, to which she could tell had him on edge.

She vowed to resume the topic of 'seduction and other mind games' later with the green eyed brunet-under more *fitting* circumstances.

The coffee shop was the last place she wanted to create odd sexual tension.
"The first meet of the indoor season is this week." Eren informed her, worried he was starting to psych himself out.

"Are your parents going to be there?"

"No, I told them not to worry about showing up," He responded, nary a hint of sadness in his voice. "Besides, the outdoor season is what matters most. That's when the stands get crowded with all my fans." He polished off the statement with a cocky smirk. All in good fun, of course.

"That's… touching." Annie rolled her eyes impishly. "But having even a little support makes all the difference."

Eren's brow shot up. "Oh, really?"

"I guess your little philosophy grew on me." Annie replied nonchalantly. "You showed up to my games during the fall season, so I'd like to return the favor if that's all right with you."

Her words had him smitten all over again.

The power she had over him was beyond anything science could rationally explain. One glance from the girl made his knees go weak. One word from her mouth could make his heart flutter. Just the mere thought of her could make him lose his head.

He wondered if she enjoyed making him suffer; the fragility of his love-struck emotions like putty in her hands.

"It would mean a lot." Eren finally managed to let out.

For now at least, he was just grateful to have her back.

But he swore he would kiss her again- relatively soon.

University of Trost

Mikasa could hardly contain her excitement.

At first, when her coach asked to have a word with her after practice, she fully expected to be chewed out for arriving a few minutes late. Instead, the young collegiate athlete discovered she had been selected for one of the most coveted positions the team had to offer.

Freshman recruit, Mikasa Ackerman, had earned a spot in the top three of the girl's squad.

Word of her achievement had quickly spread to her female teammates, each offering congratulatory remarks in the women's locker room.

"Congrats, Mikasa." Rico commended the enthusiastic freshman, both freshly showered and standing opposite one another in alignment with their own personal lockers. "Have you made up your mind for the spring season yet?" She was referring to whether or not Mikasa would choose to compete in the singles selection, or try her hand at competing in doubles.

Mikasa gave both propositions equal thought, and ultimately decided her first year should be devoted to perfecting her skills as an individual athlete. "I'm thinking I should just stick with competing in the singles selection for the upcoming season. I could always compete in doubles next year."

Rico accepted that as fair judgment, stuffing her duffel bag into her locker after she had finished
dressing. "Sounds reasonable." Postponing the final motion towards zipping up her jacket, she paused to entertain a few thoughts, noting eerie parallels between the top female freshman recruit and the strongest athlete on the men's squad. "Must be an 'Ackerman' thing." She sighed.

Mikasa was perplexed by the offbeat comment. "What do you mean?"

"For starters, you made the top three your freshman year, as did Levi his freshman year." Rico stated matter-of-factly. "I've also noticed a few similarities in your techniques. You both attack the ball with a certain vivacity, your serves are lightning fast, but the real kicker is that you have the same intense look on your faces when you're battling it out on the courts. Your overall dexterity is completely in harmony with his."

The mentioning of Levi had Mikasa's cheeks tinted a pale red hue, something Rico instantly picked up on and couldn't help but think was sweet. Before leaving the locker room, she added one last sentiment, serving the dual purpose of complimenting her athleticism and mentioning of her chemistry with a certain captain of the men's team. "If you two were to compete in a mixed doubles tournament, you'd be unstoppable."

"Thanks." Mikasa said quietly, tucking a stray of hair behind her ear. A smile suddenly fell to her lips at the thought of him. She was hit with the urge to find Levi and thank him for his part in helping her earn the achievement.

As she began stashing away a few personal items into her locker, an abundance of paradoxical emotions flooded her entire being. It brought to mind the memory of his lips pressed against hers, but she wouldn't allow herself to become distracted by something that could have resulted from the heat of the moment.

She looked up to Levi and respected him for the incredibly talented athlete he was. That being said, she didn't want their friendship to be compromised by mistaking him comforting her that fateful day for something else entirely.

Still, her heart was set on seeing him. It had been too long since their last encounter.

She rushed out of the women's locker room and rounded a corner to the main entrance of the facility where a few of the guys on the men's squad were conversing with one another following the conclusion of their training. She searched for the captain in earnest, fearing he may have already left. Feeling a tad disappointed, she pulled out her cell phone, whether to call or send him a text she hadn't decided. Just as she was about to make up her mind, a familiar figure exited the men's locker room with Furlan in tow.

Instant relief!

Mikasa ecstatically approached Levi, catching his gaze almost immediately.

"You're in a really good mood today." He smirked, wondering what was on her mind.

"Levi," Mikasa found her next words satisfying on an astronomical scale, "I made the top three."

Levi offered a nod of approval, though not surprised to hear she accomplished what she set out to do. Her athletic ambitions mirrored that of his own; yet another reason he found himself drawn to her. "I knew you would."

Before he could elaborate on his abridged felicitation, she pulled him in for a hug, silencing him as he contemplated the sudden, but appreciated, kindhearted embrace.
"Thank you." Mikasa whispered, the gentleness in her voice overwhelming him with a blindsiding warmth that left him in wondering awe.

After separating from one another's arms, Levi ran a hand through his jet black hair and promptly feigned a calmed disposition. "Anytime, Mikasa."

He suppressed a frown, a tad disappointed that their interaction was short-lived.

"Well, I have to get going to work soon." Mikasa announced. "You should stop by the café later if you're not busy."

"I have work to attend to as well, unfortunately." He informed her regrettably.

"Hmm." Mikasa raised a brow. "At the All-Star?"

"Actually, no." Levi shook his head, figuring he could always fill her in on the details later. "Just some research for my senior thesis."

She was eager to hear more, dissatisfied with the ambiguity, but recognized she was pressed for time. "Tell me about it sometime?"

Levi nodded, a bit taken aback by her interest. "Sure. Hopefully it won't bore you to death." He considered the underlying meaning of her words. Like they were an invitation of sorts; encouraging him to make his next move.

Mikasa let out a light huff in amusement. "I'll see you later."

"See ya."

As he watched her walk away, he set his sights on pursuing an honorable endeavor.

It was about time he officially ask her out on a date.

---

**Café Charmant – Stohess Plaza**

9:01pm.

Mikasa's five-hour shift at the café had proved to be eventful.

The volume of customers kept her busy crafting lattes and other hot beverages, tending to the confectioneries aligned decadently in a fancy array behind glass, all the while clandestinely eyeing the tip jar as its contents steadily accumulated.

After clocking off in the break room, Mikasa bundled herself up in a trim coat, adorning both hands with her red mittens after wrapping her scarf around her neck. She waved goodbye to Krista on the way out, wishing her well on what they dubbed the 'power hour,' or final hour until closing.

As usual given the time of year, night had fallen some time ago, ushering in the darkness that commenced bright lights to illuminate the family-owned café as well as surrounding shops of the plaza. The parking lot lacked the luxury of extra lighting, a few lampposts scattered about had apparently been deemed sufficient. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the stark contrast, spotting her car ahead in the section reserved for employees only.

A figure appeared from her peripheral vision. From the distance, she could make out an individual of shorter stature exiting her respective vehicle and heading for the café.
Mikasa's head snapped towards the stranger in question; a double-take.

It was Annie.

Mikasa stopped in her tracks and, without any hesitation, called for the blonde's attention.

"Annie…"

A pause.

Annie seized movement, a few steps away from the entrance to the café.

"Mikasa." She waited for the raven-haired girl to approach her, her uniform still peeking out from underneath her coat. "You off?"

Mikasa nodded, eyes falling to the material in Annie's hands. "Still on your leave of absence?"

Annie shook her head, holding the pieces of paper up she'd been eyeing to further explain. "I'm putting in my two-weeks' notice. Frieda said she'd be here tonight, and I wanted to hand this in to her in person."

Mikasa's face clearly displayed astonishment. "You're… quitting?"

"I'm refraining from using that word." Annie replied. "But yeah. I'm leaving the café."

Silence intervened, as Mikasa sought to address 'the elephant in the room.'

Neither Bertolt nor Reiner were around to barge in and play referee. Nothing would prevent her from letting it all out.

But before she could commence 'Round 2,' it was Annie who spoke first, beating her to the punch. "I'm sick of this."

"Sick of what?" Mikasa asked tonelessly.

"You obviously have something on your mind. Something that you feel you need to say." Annie responded firmly. "I'm sick of ignoring the real issue here."

Let's just get this over with.

Mikasa obliged the blonde's request. "If that's the case, then I'll just get to the point. Then again, I'm sure you already have an idea what the 'real issue' is."

Annie's eyes never averted direct contact with Mikasa's hardening stare.

Mikasa decided she wasn't going to waste her time lecturing Annie on the importance of trust, how deeply the betrayal affected her, or demand that she rectify the situation and offer a legitimate reason to justify her actions.

At least, not yet. She aimed at easing into the hotly anticipated discussion by using subtle hints.

But the question was undeniably obvious, anything but subtle. "How's Eren?" Mikasa asked derisively.

If Annie hadn't already been certain that Mikasa knew about her involvement with Eren, between the blunt question and the way the raven haired girl was watching her, she was certain now.
The blonde simply shrugged. The only thing she wasn't certain of was whether or not this little chat was going to be a civil one. "I'm sure he's fine."

Mikasa folded her arms across her chest, the red scarf tucked firmly underneath. "That's reassuring. I bet it's because he's got you, right?"

Annie could hear the challenge in her voice. The bitter accusation hadn't fazed her, instead it made her realize confirming the infidelity was unavoidable. "What are you saying, Mikasa?"

The taller of the two had no qualms putting it in the simplest of terms, further heightening the tension. "Eren and I had been together for four years. That's four more than you've had to even get to know him."

"Are you blaming me then?" Annie retorted. "It's my fault that your relationship ended?"

Mikasa sighed and then shook her head. In the past, she was willing to accept that Annie wasn't the only reason for her indefinite separation from Eren. But now, blinded by contempt, it was hard to rationalize it otherwise.

"Eren made his decision." Mikasa finally asserted. "He had a choice. No one forced him to do anything."

Annie felt it would be wrong to let Eren take the fall for what she perceived to be lapses in judgment on his part. She too had a choice. She could have backed off beforehand that night at her apartment. The night she kissed him. She could have been honest with Mikasa after discovering the photograph in her purse. But she chose not to, and in her opinion that made her the sole cause of this mess.

Annie was willing to be the scapegoat, inexplicably feeling compelled to defend Eren.

"He's not entirely at fault." Annie insisted. "I was the one who made the first move."

Mikasa slowly dropped her arms to her sides, fists forming in a triggered response. Yet somehow, she managed to keep a level head, controlling the impulses that demanded she take aim at the blonde before her.

Then and there, she realized it wasn't worth it. She couldn't bring herself to follow through.

She just couldn't hate Annie. The words that proceeded to fall from the blonde's mouth further confirmed that.

"I'm sorry that things turned out this way, Mikasa." Annie's regret broke the unwavering gaze, her eyes casting towards the neighboring street lights.

A humorless smirk crept to the corner of Mikasa's mouth. That might have been nice to hear, but it wasn't enough to make amends, much less change the outcome. "No, you're not."

Annie muffled a frustrated sigh. The conversation had panned out surprisingly better than she expected, but fate wouldn't grant her the guarantee that Mikasa would be willing to accept any form of an apology. "He still cares about you. I can tell it's something that bothers him. He hates that he's hurt you."

Mikasa regarded the statement as forced, believing it to have little value. Attempted pity, perhaps? "You don't have the slightest idea what you're talking about." She mused in disdain. You don't know Eren like I do. "Did he say that or something?"
"He doesn't have to say anything at all." Annie maintained.

The cold was starting to sting Mikasa's cheeks, prompting her to pull her scarf up a bit higher to envelop the bottom of her jaw in its warmth. Annie waited patiently to hear her response, the expression on her face morphing from monotony to empathy, a rarity scarcer than black pearls.

Following a deep exhale, her breath clouding in contrast with the freezing temperatures, Mikasa settled on accepting the inevitable. Regardless of where she and Eren stood, she acknowledged that she still loved him, and always would. She was capable of moving on from having romantic feelings for him, but nonetheless, she often worried about his well-being and still cared deeply for him.

She wanted what was best for him. She wanted him to be happy.

With a heavy heart, Mikasa prepared to offer Annie a final ultimatum. "Do you have feelings for him?" She asked, adamant in receiving a definite answer.

Annie did her best to comply, figuring she owed it to Mikasa to be completely honest. "I'm not sure how to answer that." She wasn't going to let herself be pressured into making up her mind then and there.

"Well, you need to figure it out." Mikasa remarked in a chastising tone. "It'd be heartless to give him false hope."

Annie nodded, concurring with the sentiment. Mikasa was right.

She needed to stop resisting Eren and accept her feelings for him with open arms.

Not wanting Annie to mistake her comments for acceptance, as though she were giving the blonde her blessing in pursuing Eren, Mikasa reaffirmed her main point, reminding them both why they needed to talk things through in the first place.

She admittedly was still affected by the breakup, and she wasn't sure if she and Annie could ever really patch things up and go back to the way things were, but thankfully, their little chat served its purpose, effectively so. It provided her with some closure, and relief among other things.

"If you hurt Eren," Mikasa concluded the discussion with a warning stated as calmly as she could, "you'll be sorry."

Before parting, Annie was sure to add one last thing.

"Believe me." The blonde replied confidently. "It won't come to that."
Ain't That A Kick In the Head

Chapter Notes

A/N: I'm back ;) Happy first day of February! (And happy birthday to JoTerry!) Thanks for all the feedback on the last chapter! :) Gonna try my best to stick to my little update schedule. I'm hoping to upload the next chapter on the 5th or 6th, and then upload chapter 30 (30!) on the 10th, which is Mikasa's birthday! I have something sweet planned for her :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tuesday, January 10th

Titannia Boutique - Sina Square, Downtown

"Hold still! I think the zipper's stuck!"

"Quit fuckin' around back there, Ymir! This is the last one in my size so mind your giant claws, will ya?!"

The cutesy conversation between modern day 'beauty' and 'the beast' was the first thing Annie heard when she sluggishly forced herself into the dress shop that chilly afternoon.

Hitch was trying on a sleek red gown graced with floral embellishments, its sweetheart neckline exposing a generous amount of cleavage. Ymir was trying to zip up the back, struggling immensely to do so when it was caught against the silky fabric. Both girls were under equal amounts of stress, hoping to gods above it wouldn't tear.

Annie met up with them in the dressing rooms towards the back of the shop, clad in a hoodie and black jeans, the weary expression on her a face suggesting 'playing dress up' had not been on her agenda for the day.

Or any agenda ever, for that matter.

But alas, the Fall Sports Athletic Banquet was less than a month away, and after rummaging through hordes of clothes for hours on end (slight overstatement), Hitch was horrified upon realizing she had nothing to wear.

After failing to quell Hitch's incessant pleas to aid in the rectification of her fashion emergency, Ymir agreed to tag along on two conditions.

One, Hitch had to buy lunch; and not some bull shit, cheapy the cheapskate lunch from a fast food joint like Burger King. Ymir wanted some fancy ass Italian dining fare; a four-star bistro that offered all the usual luxuries of freshly baked bread sticks and pasta cooked to perfection.

Two, she insisted that she would not be partaking in the fitting of any dresses of any kind, as the mere sight of them were often nightmare-inducing.

Hitch reluctantly agreed to her terms, accepting that the tall freckled brunette would at least offer some honest feedback, as opposed to Annie's unapologetic apathy.
Unlike her overtly prissy roommate, Annie wasn't fazed by the black tie event in the slightest. She was content in attending the banquet wearing a simple skirt and blouse ensemble; a notion Hitch was disgusted by.

In any event, she had no choice but to show up at the boutique after discovering Hitch had taken her copy of their apartment key earlier that morning before classes.

Annie was unsure if the aforementioned travesty had been on purpose or was an honest mistake, but judging from the preposterous tone in Hitch's voice (feigning surprise and sympathy) on the other end of the line when she called to ask her about it, she was leaning toward the former.

"Nice of you to finally show up, Annie." Hitch muttered under her breath, sucking in her midsection as Ymir continued to fidget with the zipper. "You almost done back there?!" She asked, turning her attention back to the tallest of the three behind her.

"Hmmmmpphhhh… it's… almost…!"

Zip.

A light sigh escaped from Ymir's mouth, relieved to have gotten the tedious job done. The dress had successfully been zipped!

"Phew! That took way longer than it needed to!" Ymir gasped. She then proceeded to welcome the petite blonde, taking a much needed rest from the exhaustion of watching Hitch try on gowns for the past hour. A task as menial as shopping came with the territory of befriending someone as girly as Miss Dreyse. "'Sup, Annie? How's it going?"

The token blonde of the group slumped into a chair overlooking the mirror Hitch was practically glued to. "I've been better." Her eyes wandered to a giant rack just outside her roommate's dressing room. It was completely full of gowns each the same size, possible rejects that failed to impress the material girl. "I'm assuming Hitch has been at this for a while."

"'Fraid so." Ymir groaned. She leaned in closer to Annie and hoped her coy whisper would avert Hitch's ears. "You're not planning on taking this long, are you?"

"I wasn't even planning on coming here to begin with." Annie replied flatly, loud enough for Hitch to catch on to their secretive exchange. But seeing as how my key is being held hostage…

"Wow. The nerve of some people." Hitch scoffed. "I'm doing you a favor by helping you find something nice for the Fall Athletic Banquet." She spun around in a circle, still admiring herself in the mirror. "My ass looks great in this dress!

"I'm sure I have something in my closet." Annie remarked, boredom nearly putting her to sleep. "Everything in your closet is just so unsexy." Hitch sneered ruthlessly, playing with wavy strands of her light brown locks. "While we're on the subject, I've been meaning to tell you…" She paused, still mussing up her hair. "Your wardrobe could use a serious update."

Annie brought her hand up to her face, cupping an enormous yawn. "This place doesn't really have anything in my style."

Hitch turned around to face the bored blonde, hands placed sassily on her hips. "Give it a try, Annie." She cooed. "Besides, don't you want to look nice for Eren?"

Annie was unfazed by the taunt, still slumped lazily against the stiff chair. "…"
Meanwhile, an inquisitive Ymir wondered if she had missed something. "Is Eren your date to the banquet?"

Annie wordlessly replied, shaking her head.

"Are you planning on going with a date at all?"

Annie sat up-right, correcting her slouchy posture. "Hadn't even crossed my mind." Not until now, at least.

She envisioned Eren in a suit, tugging on a slightly tighter-than-it-should-be tie, offering her his arm while using dorky pickup lines in tandem with calling her old school pet names like 'sugar' or 'doll face.'

The sudden thoughts of the green-eyed pole vaulter were mostly for amusement, but inadvertently caused her heart to flutter at the prospect of taking things further in their convoluted relationship.

She decided it couldn't hurt to have him accompany her for the evening's festivities. Minus all the cringy shit, of course.

"I don't have a date either." Ymir announced, interrupting her little daze. "How about doing your old pal a solid and escort me to the ball, princess?"

Annie shot Ymir down with a cold robotic voice. "Oops. Change of plans. I'm going with Eren."

She would be sure to relay the information to Eren in person later, imagining the face-to-face conversation to go something like:

-Annie : You're going with me to the Fall Athletic Banquet. It's Saturday February 11th.

-Eren : But I have plans that day.

-Annie : No you don't.

-Eren : No I don't.

Messing with the awkward brunet was too easy.

But she wasn't that cruel, so the conversation would more than likely pan out as such:

-Annie : …so there's this thing coming up…

-Eren : …

-Annie : …

-Eren : …you want me to be your date to the Fall Athletic Banquet, huh?

-Annie : *nods head*

-Eren : Say no more!

She subconsciously admitted to herself that she liked the first scenario better.

A smirk casually peeked from underneath her hood, ignoring the bitter grunts spewing from the volleyball giant.
"Bitch." Ymir mumbled, a sore loser to the rejection.

Hitch clasped her hands together in excitement. "Yay! My little Annie is growing up so fast!" She quickly dashed forward, miraculously avoiding disaster after nearly tripping over her gown, and pulled Annie to an array of dresses displayed on several mannequins. "There's a few that I want you to try on. Hmmm… let's see…"

Annie was too tired to protest, so she let Hitch take the lead and force her into trying on a few garments in the adjacent dressing room.

Well… here goes nothing.

It wasn't long until she found herself wondering what Eren would think if he saw her dolled up and adorned in sophisticated attire for a night on the town.

The feelings were completely foreign to her, but she was adjusting.

One step at a time.

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Fritz' Diner – Garrison Avenue, Trost Neighborhood

It's practically routine at this point.

Furlan meets up with Isabel at their favorite 24-hour diner just up the road a few blocks from UT.

They sit in the same booth, and study the same menu for roughly ten minutes… though they order the same thing every damn time.

Two slices of cherry pie, ala mode. Two cups of coffee.

Furlan opts for decaf, while Isabel insists extra caffeine will give her a much needed boost to finish up some last minute studying.

The diner is reminiscent of the ‘50s era, spruced up with a funky jukebox playing old favorites like "Hound Dog" and "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On." The interior is comprised of pearly white walls, checkered floors of black and white tiles, the countertops are baby blue, and red stools overlook a giant framed menu alongside old fashioned Coca-Cola ads.

To top it off, the employees don classic diner waitress attire; light pink dress that stops just above the knee, white apron, white collar, and short sleeves with peaked white trim.

With some of the best All-American eats in the entire metropolitan area, the retro joint effectively pays homage to a by-gone era while ensuring quality food and entertainment for all who happen to stumble inside.

But for a simple man by the name of Furlan Church, he could do without all the gimmicks and cheap thrills. He just had a thing for the cute little waitress with chin-length chestnut brown hair, large doe eyes, and a button nose.

The cherry pie was an added bonus, of course.

The tinkering of the bell above the door indicated a new customer had arrived.

Like a smooth drifter traveling from town to town, Levi entered the establishment to meet up with his longtime friends that late Tuesday night.
"Levi!" Isabel waved the 'rebel without a cause' over to the booth, a huge smile stretched to both corners of her face. She scooted over to make room for him on her side. "We ordered a slice of pie for ya." Sliding an empty mug his way, she poured him some coffee from the insulated pot. "Room for cream?"

Levi shook his head. "Thanks, Isabel."

"Sure thing, bro." She smiled, resting both elbows on the table.

Furlan studied Levi curiously, knowing something must have been on his mind layered underneath an expression that was a bit more strained than usual. "Long day?" He asked.

"About as long as the rest of 'em." Levi replied, shedding his coat and laying it aside. He observed their surroundings surreptitiously, surprised by the low turnout. College kids and sleep-deprived crazies usually dominated the place at this hour, but instead, it was a ghost town. "Kinda quiet tonight." He commented.

"Yeah, I noticed that, too." Furlan concurred.

"Means faster service for us!" Isabel enthused, mouth beginning to water as the scent of freshly baked pie wafted in the air from the kitchen. Soon enough, the trio was approached by their waitress, Nifa. (Surprise, surprise.)

"Three slices of cherry pie, ala mode." The petite brunette cheerfully announced, setting the sweet treats on small plates in front of her VIP guest and his plus two. "Enjoy." She bid them, winking flirtatiously Furlan's direction before heading back behind the counter.

Furlan sighed, a dreamy smile spewing out rays of sunshine. "I love this place."

"The pies here are the best." Isabel added, snowballing over his appreciation for the retro-style diner in pure obliviousness to his lovelorn demeanor. "This place gives me 'Fallout 4' vibes."

"Minus the post-apocalyptic setting." Levi deadpanned, trying not to think about his companion, Preston, informing him of another settlement that needed their help.*

"I kinda see what you mean, Izzy." Furlan rubbed his chin while in thought. "The music fits the theme..." He never finished the rest of whatever he planned on saying, as his eyes were glued to Nifa, now collecting dishes waiting to be washed.

Levi cleared his throat, unsuccessful in getting Furlan's attention. "I take it your date with Nifa went well."

Furlan only snapped out of his trance after Isabel stole a spoonful of his ice cream.

"It's gonna melt." She warned him.

Furlan chuckled, failing to suppress a blush from rising to his cheeks. "Yeah..." He drawled, turning back to his pie. "She's one of a kind." A couple bites in, a burst of confidence prompted him to make a celebratory announcement of sorts. "I'm taking her out again this weekend."

Isabel whistled. "Didn't scare her off, huh? Ata boy!"

Levi offered a single nod in approval, his faith in his doubles partner's dating life restored.

Furlan redirected the attention he was receiving their way, inwardly stepping out of the spotlight in
slight embarrassment. He didn't want to jinx his impending date by obsessing over trivial details of the first one. "Thanks, guys." He craned his arm behind his head to heed an itch, or more of a nervous tick really, then dove right back into his pie. "Mmmm..." He paused to refrain from talking while his mouth was full. "Izzy... now that Levi's here..." Another attempt at chewing. Gulp. "You should tell us about... that thing... that thing with the other pre-vet students... thing."

"Oh, right!" Isabel almost jumped out of her seat in excitement, setting her spoon aside to fill the two tennis athletes in on an upcoming event. "This Thursday the pre-vet club is hosting an event at the UT Tower Auditorium. The whole thing was my idea actually. I guess the club advisor decided my suggestion was more inspiring than the others." A playful smirk preceded another sip of coffee. "Yours truly would appreciate it if you guys could make it."

"What kind of event?" Levi pried, halfway done with his slice of pie.

"We're calling it 'Puppy Therapy.'" She answered, eyes lighting up. "Basically, the event will feature puppies from a local animal shelter for attendees to cuddle and play with! We're also setting up a photobooth and a cupcake stand. It's only 5 dollars for admission and all the proceeds go to the shelter."

"Sounds awesome!" Furlan enthused. "What better way to alleviate some stress than by hanging out with some mini versions of man's best friend?"

"Right?" Isabel was one bite away from finishing her dessert. "You know, therapy dog programs are popping up on college campuses throughout the country, and it seems to be having positive results. I think UT could totally benefit from investing in one."

Levi only smirked at that, but she had a point. Cuddling with puppies could warm even the coldest of hearts; a thought that had him feeling conflicted...

"Think I could bring a friend?" Furlan inquired, trying to maintain ambiguity by tearing his eyes away from the petite waitress.

"Any friend in particular?" All three knew exactly who he was talking about.

"Well... I was hoping... Nifa..."

"Sure, lover boy." Isabel teased, rolling her eyes. "Same goes for you, Levi." She nudged the raven-haired athlete's shoulder. "Bring a friend. The more the merrier."

Levi briefly contemplated her advice, flicking the ends of her pigtails. Third-wheeling for Furlan wasn't the ideal scenario, and Isabel would undoubtedly be far too occupied with hosting the event to really hang around with him during his visit.

Then it dawned on him.

The event would be the perfect opportunity (or excuse) to see Mikasa again, assuming that she's fond of puppies, that is. Truth be told, one would be hard pressed to find someone who wasn't a fan of puppies.

(The extremely rare but sad excuse for human beings who had the gall to dislike precious puppers were probably devil worshippers anyways.)

Levi's only grievance with the furry creatures was that they were messy...

As long as he didn't get pissed on, he'd be fully on board with showing up and extending an invite a
certain oriental beauty's way.

The puppies could be his wingmen.

"We'll see." He finally said, though his mind had already been made up.

Chapter End Notes

A/N 2.0: Filler chapter? Ehhh, kinda, but it's setting the scene for future excitement! :)))
Kudos to anyone that got the subtle Fallout references hahaha
Also, I need a Levi-centric 'Rebel Without a Cause/James Dean' AU.

...I have a weakness for bad boys... Sorry, mom!
A/N: Thanks for the reviews and kudos, my lovelies! :) Currently creating a playlist for this fic on spotify :) It's a work in progress! hehehe Next chapter will be for Mikasa's birthday (Feb. 10th)! Super excited to upload that one for you guys! :)

**Wednesday, January 11th**

**Stohess University Indoor Track and Field**

*Stay focused. You got this.*

The moment Eren looked up at the results board after clearing 14 feet with ease brought him an unfathomable amount of relief to see he was still leading the competition.

As another athlete from an opposing school prepared to jump, Eren paced towards a resting bench alongside teammate, Thomas Wagner.

"Nice, Eren." The blond offered him a high-five as he sat down. "You're rolling over them like nothing."

Eren pivoted his shoulders to alleviate a light ache in his muscles and reached for a bottle of Gatorade. He peered up at the results board once more, commending his teammate for keeping up. "You're right behind Calaneth's best vaulter. You should be able to surpass him after this next round."

"The next jump is 14 ½ feet." Thomas speculated. "I bet he'll put up a good fight."

"And so will you." Eren offered a hearty pat on the back for the blond, taking another swig of his Gatorade before wiping traces of sweat from his brow.

Amid his brief resting period, his eyes roamed about the stands of spectators, catching glimpses of the multiple event sport play out on both the indoor track and designated area for field events through peripheral vision. He was able to spot Armin, Sasha, and Connie almost instantly; an unmistakable blond bowl cut hairstyle shadowed by a familiar buzz cut companion and the girl who's love for food could almost be considered erotic. Armin stood up from his seat and began waving. Connie tried to call something out, cupping his hands above his mouth to help the call carry itself further. Sasha was devouring a bag of popcorn from the concessions stand. Small kernels flew from her mouth as she began wildly waving her arms to grab Eren's attention.

"WOOO! EREN!"

"JUST DO IT, EREN! DON'T LET YOUR DREAMS BE DREAMS!"

Eren waved back, digging the Shia LeBeouf references while simultaneously realizing it'd been a while since he'd watched the astoundingly motivational videos on YouTube.
Just as he was about to turn back to Thomas, he caught an involuntary glance of yet another blonde, this time of the feminine persuasion, sitting in the adjacent stands.

Annie was in attendance as well for the evening's collegiate sports competition. Hitch sat next to her, texting on her phone and giggling to herself over what must have been a flirty message.

Annie was quick to realize that Eren had spotted her among the small crowd of spectators, and shifted slightly in her seat. She brought her hand up at level with her shoulder in an effort to acknowledge the brunet from the distance; a small wave of sorts.

She's here...

Eren was lost in the moment, heart lurching from his chest.

Thomas suddenly pulled him from his trance, nudging his shoulder and nodding towards the track. "Dude, the women's 400-meter race is about to kick off."

Thomas had a thing for sprinters. Too bad Eren couldn't appreciate the sight of toned runners ahead of them, each stretching in their respective lanes.

He happened to prefer volleyball players.

"Check out the chick in lane 5." Thomas whistled, scoping out the tall athlete hailing from Calaneth University.

Eren recognized her instantaneously. "Nanaba?"

Woah...

"You know her?" Thomas asked, still checking out the blonde sprinter and her long lean legs.

"We went to the same high school. She was a senior when I was a freshman." Eren tilted his head from side to side, bits of fragmented memories piecing themselves together from four years back. "She did really well in the 400m, but her main event was the 200." He finished off his Gatorade after constructing the brief clarification, successful in avoiding the unnecessary deviation into unrelated subjects.

Rather than gloat about how she was the one of the top sprinters in the state, he figured Nanaba could physically demonstrate that tidbit of information herself in the upcoming race.

"Huh. Interesting." Thomas leaned forward a bit, seemingly anticipating the race more than the actual runners themselves.

One of the meet officials blew his whistle, signaling for the runners to ready themselves.

"Take your mark."

The official held up a starting gun, paused for a nonverbal countdown, and squeezed the trigger.

*POP*

As soon as the gun went off, the runners launched themselves from their starting blocks and began hauling away, taking long powerful strides that harmonized with the controlled fluidity of the alternating swing of their arms.

"Shit, Eren!" Thomas gutted out in amazement. "Banana is in the lead!"
"You mean Nanaba…"

And if one were to put aside the butchering of said athlete's name, his overhyped claim was a bit of an understatement. An accurate assessment would have been something along the lines of: _Nanaba Rohm, senior from Calaneth University, is tearing it up and leaving the competition in the dust, showing absolutely no mercy._

"Damn." Eren was more than impressed. "It's barely the first heat…"

"Kinda feel bad for the others." Thomas chuckled, as Nanaba crossed the finish line into victory.

A time of 54.07 displayed on the results board; a solid three seconds ahead of the runner finishing behind.

As the two continued to gawk in awe, Coach Shadis stomped their way, his voice powerful and intimidating as always. It had gotten to the point where Eren found it… _comforting_ of all things.

"Get ready, Eren!" He boomed. "You're set to jump next! Try not to choke out on 14 ½ feet."

"Yes, sir!" Eren shot up from his seat and reached for his pole.

He cautiously walked over to the tartan runway, setting his pole aside to powder his hands. One poor sucker had already been eliminated, failing to clear the next height after falling victim to a strained calf. Eren vowed he'd remain the top vaulter and perform his best, not only for the sake of his teammates, but for his supportive fans in the crowd as well.

A part of him wanted to show off a little for Annie, figuring his time to shine allowed for the blatant display of his unmatchable athleticism.

An official cleared him to jump, prompting a momentary silence among the stands. Holding the pole above, he leaned back and cautiously gauged the pacing required for the execution of an effective liftoff.


3… 2… 1…

In a flash, Eren surgically leapt forward and shot down the runway like a bullet. In one fluid motion, he planted the pole into the box and soared above, lifting off while remaining calm and balanced. The giant space in between his pivoted body and the bar confirmed he had surpassed the height effortlessly.

The bar could have been an entire foot higher and he still would have cleared it with room to spare.

An uproar of cheering and applauding could be heard from the section where Armin, Connie, and Sasha had stationed themselves.

"YEAH! ATTA BOY, EREN! WOOOOO!"

Pulling himself up from the mat, Eren looked up to where Annie and Hitch were sitting.

Hitch threw two thumbs up. Annie was nodding, as if expecting nothing less than the best from the brunet athlete.

When he sat himself back down on the bench with Thomas, he was glad to find Ilse had joined up with them.
"I see you have some groupies." Thomas snickered.

"Friends, I presume?" Ilse asked, eager to put on a hefty sweatshirt over her tight sleeveless uniform top. A draft had poured in from above, unsettling her nerves as goosebumps raided her skin.

Eren nodded, feeling the effects of the draft upon walking into their encirclement. "Yeah. They came out to show their support." He elected to throw on a hoodie soon after.

The next height was to be set at 15 feet; not at all high enough to even challenge the young athlete.

_Tonight's going to be a piece of cake._

The first meet of the indoor season bore witness to many triumphs and fails.

A baton had been dropped in one the men's relay races. A false start disqualified a promising freshman recruit in the women's 100m hurdles. Injury prevented one distance runner from finishing the men's 1500m.

But on the flip side, luck seemed to favor a select few...

A female jumper hit a PR in the high jump. Nanaba Rohm, Senior from Calaneth, set a nearly unattainable standard for the 200 and 400m sprint.

Eren Jaeger, Freshman from Stohess University, placed first in the men's pole vault; the only athlete to clear 16 1/2 ft, or 5.05m. While not his personal best, he was glad to have avoided over-exertion.

After speaking with Coach Shadis, who was appeased by the freshman's performance (for now), Eren caught up with his old high school buddies, jogging towards them after ascending from the lower level of the track following the conclusion of the meet.

"Hey, Eren!" Armin greeted him first thing, extending his arm up for a high-five. "That sure was something!"

Their high-five echoed in the emptied corridor, most spectators having left the facility a few minutes' prior.

"You were amazing, Eren!" Sasha squealed. "I would hug you, but you're all sweaty… No offense!"

"None taken." Eren laughed, finding the trail of popcorn kernels on her sweater quite the amusing sight.

"Ahhh." Connie sighed. "This brings back so many memories." Lost in the nostalgia, he was sure to pay homage to their old high school days using an all-too-familiar joke that served as the main running gag during those painfully awkward years. "Good thing you still know how to work that pole."

_Connie, you little shit._

Eren just rolled his eyes impishly while Connie and Sasha exploded into laughter. Armin shrugged, intending to change the subject when the pole vaulter spoke up before he could get a single word in the conversation.

"Thanks again for coming tonight, guys." Eren let out a deep breath, relieved to have lived up to everyone's expectations. He'd been on the verge of psyching himself out weeks prior, but their presence served to fuel his determination to pull through.
"No problem." Armin smiled good-naturedly. He appeared as though a question was perched on the tip of his tongue; a question he'd been meaning to ask Eren for the past couple weeks. Regardless of its significance, it would have to wait for now...

Connie and Sasha appeared ready to bounce, and given that they all carpooled together, Armin didn't want to be the one to hold them back.

Before going their separate ways, Sasha invited Eren to join them on an impromptu trip to Cold Stone, offering to treat the victor to some ice cream.

Eren accepted the gesture, but ultimately declined; on account of it being far too cold for ice cream and the showers calling his name like seductive sirens.

Bidding them farewell, Eren insisted that they all coordinate their busy schedules and 'get together soon to properly catch up,' without the intrusion of sweaty pole vaulting shenanigans.

Subsequent to their separation, he had barely taken but a few steps in the opposite direction when he was met with Hitch and her unwavering stare. It initially caught him off guard, but the sight of Annie following her footsteps calmed his nerves a bit.

While the trio were in mid-conversation, (consisting of the usual congratulatory remarks, Eren struggling to find a healthy balance of humbleness and confidence, and Hitch dropping subtle muted hints to Annie about doing the dirty deed) Sasha's head clandestinely perked over their direction, eyes fixated on the blonde in particular.

She turned to Armin curiously, tapping his shoulder. "Um, who's that?"

Connie and Armin stopped and turned around in unison, the exit doors to the parking lot just out of reach.

A girl with wavy light brown hair could be heard laughing, about what was to forever be unknown. With a playful flick of her hair and flirtatious batting of her eyelashes, she jingled around some car keys and exited through the opposing doors, leaving Eren alone with the mystery blonde.

With Eren's back to his old high school buddies, he had no way of knowing they were watching him from the distance.

So... that must be... 'Annie.' Armin thought. She certainly fit the description Eren had given him in the past. The question on his mind from before had just been answered.

Eren and Annie were slowly working on developing their friendship into something deeper.

Armin reasoned it would be best to keep the sudden realization to himself, respecting that Eren most likely preferred to keep certain aspects of his life private.

"Probably no one." Armin hurriedly answered Sasha's inquiry after a long pause. "Let's get going."

Connie rubbed his chin and narrowed his eyes. "I don't know, Armin." He drawled, suspicious of the circumstances laid out before them. "They seem pretty friendly to me."

Armin set aside any prior thoughts on the present matter to appreciate Connie's deduction. For someone who was often an oblivious idiot and the butt of every joke, he sure was quick to put two and two together this time around.

"Armin's right." Sasha groaned, cradling her abdomen with both arms after a horde of hunger pangs...
viciously attacked at once. "We shouldn't jump to any conclusions. Now can we please get some ice cream?!"

The girl was on point with her priorities!

Without looking back, Armin trailed right behind Sasha. Connie followed suit after shrugging the entire thing off. "Whatever."

The temperature that evening was 35 degrees Fahrenheit, but the low temperatures failed to discourage the reddish-brown haired dame and her buzz-cut companion from skipping arm-in-arm alongside one another to the car, all the while chanting a mellifluous:

"I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice cream!"

Eren and Annie took their time heading to the main entrance level.

Hitch had informed Annie she would be waiting for her in the car, but painstakingly insisted there was no rush.

Barely five minutes had past before Hitch began spamming her phone with exasperating (but colorful) messages.

8:49pm - Hitch: Take all the time you need, girlfriend ;)

8:49pm - Hitch: I'm sure he wants a little congratulatory kiss ;)

8:49pm - Hitch: ;)

8:49pm - Hitch: Ha! Just thought of the perfect little song for you two... *ahem*

8:50pm - Hitch: Eren and Annie sittin' in a tree...

8:50pm - Hitch: F-U-C-K-I-N-G

Annie's eye roll was wide enough to circumnavigate the globe.

Setting her phone to silent in an effort to dodge the wave of irksome messages from Hitch, she suspended any further movement to devote her unwavering attention to the accomplished athlete in her midst.

"So… What'd you think?" Eren asked, his lips curving into a half-smile. "I know it might not have been as exciting as your volleyball games, but I hoped you enjoyed it at least a little bit."

"It was all right, I guess." Annie remarked, keeping her outward level of enthusiasm to a minimum as a means of hiding the fact that her interests had unexpectedly been piqued. (Not-so-innocent interests to be specific.) "You definitely stood out from the rest of the competition, that's for sure."

"Stood out because of my awesome skills?" Eren jested. "Or were you just checking me out, Annie?"

Such a flirt. Annie heaved a sigh. "You're too much."

Eren chuckled, deciding he'd answer for her. "I'll settle for both."

A peculiar staring contest intervened, as they traded looks in both amusement and perplexity.
"In all seriousness," Annie began, gently prodding his arm, "you were great out there. I was impressed."

Eren's eyes lit up, bright emerald orbs glowing with wonder as his next words captured the intimate essence of the moment perfectly.

"Impressed enough to let me take you out on an actual date?"

Annie's mouth slowly fell agape as if about to say something, but in actuality conveyed a subdued sense of astonishment. Though she hadn't expected his proposal, she welcomed the opportunity for potential courtship on account of a few reasons; some more sentimental than others. For starters, it practically guaranteed he'd be more than willing to accept her invitation to the Fall Sports Athletic Banquet. All she had to do now was ask.

It was also nice that the feelings they were modestly expressing were mutual.

With a faint smile, she nodded her head. "Sure."

A flood of emotions overwhelmed Eren in an instant. A rush of adrenaline-fueled excitement had his head spinning, nearly causing the hot-headed pole vaulter to erupt into cartwheels and bounce off the walls like a parkour crackhead.

He managed to contain himself and feign a smidgen of a calmed demeanor. He'd allow himself to break out into song and dance once he was all alone in the locker rooms.

"Cool." He tried, but failed, to resist the blush from burning his cheeks, the intense red heat spreading to his entire face. "You free this Saturday?"

Annie wondered if he had planned this all along, as if asking her out had been his main goal for meeting up with her after the sporting event.

"Yeah." She answered nonchalantly.

"How about I pick you up at your place around… 5?"

"5pm. Saturday." Annie reciprocated. "Got it."

Eren beamed. "I have the perfect place in mind."

Annie raised a brow, a questioning look etched on her face. "You've been thinking about this for some time, haven't you?"

Eren became slightly defensive, but adorably so. "Ehhh… maybe…"

Annie looked down, adjusting to the sudden warmth enveloping an emotional side of her she wasn't even sure she had. "I think about you from time to time, too." She admitted, testing the waters she'd yet to explore.

With their conversation taking a slightly more serious turn, Eren momentarily reflected on his complex relationship with the blonde and all the complications it entailed. In the past, he had laid it all out for her, professing his true feelings in the purest form of sincerity.

He needed to know exactly where they stood with another.

"Annie, I have to know..." His eyes roamed over blonde tresses, her icy blues, and rosy complexion. "I have to know if we're really on the same page here."
It was a question Annie knew she should have been prepared for, realizing he wouldn't wait forever for a definite answer. She figured agreeing to go on a date with him would have been sufficient, but Eren struck her as the kind of guy that needed a little reassurance. Maybe he wanted the date to be less of a casual outing, and more of a serious occasion riddled with romantic inclinations. Regardless, he wanted to hear her say what she was feeling, aware of the silence looming over them, threatening to sever the ties that bound them together.

But putting her feelings into words had never been her strongest suit; a certain stubbornness she inherited from her father.

She was still a work-in-progress, tending to that aspect of her life as best she could. Little by little, Eren was helping her develop the courage to move on from those struggles, something she was beyond grateful for. Hopefully, he could be patient with her... and forgive her this time for letting her actions speak for her.

Annie moved her hand up and carefully traced along Eren's jaw, caressing his cheek as she leaned forward.

She pressed her lips firmly against his, kissing him softly before pulling away to see his face flushed and eyes peering tenderly below dark brown tendrils.

"I'll see you Saturday." She said gently, stepping back. "Goodnight, Eren."

With that, she turned on her heel and headed for the parking lot, having kept Hitch waiting a few minutes longer than she had originally intended.

Eren watched her walk away, leaving him equal parts hopeful and disappointed.

Stroking the back of his neck, he heaved a sigh and ran a hand through his hair.

Night, Annie.
Puppy Love

Chapter Notes

A/N: Happy Birthday, Mikasa!
Currently listening to: Lost Stars - Adam Levine
Thanks for the kudos and continued support! :) Hope you're all still getting a kick out of this story!
Read, review, let me know what ya think!
Can't believe we're at 30 chapters! :O

Thursday, January 12th

University of Trost – Tower Auditorium

One could have easily mistaken the bright colors and cheery pop music adorning the festive setting to be evocative of an actual party; rather than a student-run charity event.

Red banners were draped along the walls, balloons were flying everywhere, and the sweet scent of sugary baked goods filled the air with passion and merriment. Confetti was strewn about the floors; its remnants laid out alongside streamers and other party favors.

Members of the pre-vet club were clad in matching t-shirts, enthusing over how well the setup of the event had turned out. They helped lift the spirits of attendees and the occasional passerby with wide grins and genuine salutations.

But the real stars of the show were just about ready to make their grand entrances.

Some trotted into the exclusive pens, others stumbled and rolled gracelessly into the small enclosures on stubby legs that were still learning how to properly balance on all-fours.

Four legged furballs pranced around, barking and whimpering relentlessly, their cold wet noses rubbing up against unfamiliar objects that sparked their innocent curious nature.

Levi Ackerman was ambushed by a restless pack of puppies, seemingly brave enough to charge his direction and into his personal space. The tiny creatures didn't give a shit about boundaries, as evidenced by their attempts at crawling up his pant legs and the countless dizzying circles they danced around him.

There had been several times in Levi's life in which he had been provoked into knocking some asshole's teeth out for wandering too close or saying something he warned they would regret.

But he couldn't quite bring himself to shoo the little fluffballs away. Opting against retaliation, he only suspended all movement and stood completely still.

Amid the ocean of pooches vying for his attention, he caught a glimpse of one puppy segregated from the others in a corner. If anything the little guy looked bored, tired maybe. Perhaps he was missing his mother and his siblings.
Levi wasn't going to waste his time attributing human-like qualities and sentiments to an animal of a lower caliber in regards to intelligence and the like. But something was tugging on his heart strings, and he felt compelled to reach for the little one and stroke his soft, warm fur.

The fluffy feelings had Levi momentarily questioning his own sanity, but it couldn't be helped.

Meh, fuck it. Animals are better than people. People are assholes.

"Oi, you there." Levi called out to lonely little pup, whistling for its attention. "Come here."

The command fell on deaf ears, as the pup refused to even acknowledge the man beckoning for him to join the masses.

*What a shitty little brat.*

There were innumerable furballs begging and whining for his attention, but this 'lone wolf' had the balls to ignore him.

*How dare you...*

Levi carefully stepped over the crowd of puppies and marched towards the puppy that wouldn't give him the time of day. The little squirt seemed unfazed by the sudden human presence, only yawning in response to Levi's glare.

It was as if the pup was mocking him, no, *judging* him. With an acrimonious bark, the pup began shuffling away, to which Levi finally put his foot down. In one fell swoop, he picked up the little guy and stared him down. Initially, the puppy growled and squirmed a little in his grasp, before accepting the circumstances and meeting Levi's eyes with his own.

"You think you're better than me, don't you?" Levi scoffed, trading deadly glares with the rebellious pup.

The puppy merely panted in jadedness, as if it didn't give two fucks what the raven-haired man was trying to convey. He couldn't understand him anyway, given the impenetrable language barrier.

Levi resisted the urge for as long as he could. He put up one hell of a fight, trying not to give in so easily. The pup's silky coat of fur felt like pillows from heaven, and the light puffs of puppy breath were like that of milk and honey. The last nail in the coffin for him was the cliché 'puppy eyed' look glimmering in the very palm of his hands.

In an instant, Levi brought the pup to his chest, carrying him mindfully in his arms.

He was willing to take a 'loss' on this one.

The pup also seemed to stop putting up a fight, reciprocating the embrace with warm cuddles. He proceeded to lift his head up and began licking underneath Levi's chin, a gesture he was quick to respectfully recoil from.

"Take it easy there, shitty brat."

And just like that, a beautiful friendship was born; though it was hard to determine *who tamed who.*

Levi looked around the auditorium to ensure he wasn't being watched, knowing he would never be able to live this down if someone bore witness to the unprecedented event.

Isabel was tending to the cupcake stand, her attention fixated on another club member. Furlan and
Nifa were cuddling with puppies in a separate pen, lovingly bound to a pair of labradoodle pups.

Alone at last!

Still mussing up the pup's fur, Levi fell at ease and rhythmically stroked the fur atop its head and behind its floppy ears. The calmness soothed over him, settling a heartening ease within as his fingers methodically brushed over patches of velvety-smooth texture. He no longer wondered why this sort of thing was considered therapeutic.

But alas, his heavily guarded privacy was short-lived! Levi was perceptive enough to quickly realize he wasn't alone anymore…

Mikasa arrived at the scene after receiving an invitation via text from the upperclassman; something about a charity event for shelter dogs sponsored by the university's pre-vet club.

Upon approaching Levi in the secluded corner of the auditorium, she was initially shocked by the sight of him cradling one of the shelter puppies in his arms, as if the view itself was on par with a once-in-a-lifetime scientific breakthrough.

Unsure what to say, she looked back and forth between him and the pup, wishing she could burn the image into her memory forever. Her stunned expression masked the harbored arousal of deeply heartwarming emotions.

She also found the situation somewhat comical; the honest-to-god last thing she expected to see upon arrival.

"Well," she began, raising a brow, "didn't take you for a dog-person."

Still holding the pup in the support of his arms, Levi was quick to defend himself with an ambiguous statement. "They're filthy creatures for the most part, but this little shit practically jumped into my arms. There was no way I could stop him." He deadpanned.

Mikasa couldn't tell if that was sarcasm, a playful fib, or denial. All of the above, maybe?

"Right…" She nodded, voice trailing off questionably. "Anyway, when I got your text I had just gotten out of my last class for the day so, the timing couldn't have been more perfect." She continued after propping her backpack against the wall, exploring the massive eruption of fluffy bundles of joy headed her way. "In any event, there was no way I was going to turn down the opportunity to cuddle with these little guys." She scooped up a free-spirited Shih Tzu pup and melted in the plethora of lovey-dovey feels, its tail wagging furiously. "Thanks for the invite, Levi."

The conversation fell flat, as both tennis athletes were occupied with the pleasant task of tending to the amiable creatures nestled against their chests. It was during the hushed relaxation when Levi reminded himself of the main reason he wanted to meet up with her in person that lovely afternoon.

Without further ado, he extended a nod her way and pretended to clear his throat.

"Actually, Mikasa," he began tactfully, "there's something I've been meaning to ask you."

The Shih Tzu in Mikasa's embrace had fallen asleep, so she tried her best to keep her voice low. "Okay. What's on your mind?"

This was it. No more inward contemplation. No threat of being unceremoniously interrupted. Nothing was holding him back this time around.
Levi sought to get straight to the point, taking a direct approach towards potentially courting the girl. Hopefully she could still take him seriously, regardless of the pup chillin' in his arms.

Before he could get a word in, she spoke first. "Is it about the jacket you let me borrow a couple weeks ago?" Mikasa asked, unsure if she stashed it in her closet back at the dorms, or if it was still hanging in her locker inside the training facility. "I'll give it back after practice tomorrow."

Levi heaved a sigh.

"Don't worry about it." He assured her, hoping to revert back to his main point. "Anyway…"

"Is it about tutoring Sasha?" Mikasa tilted her head, her expression conveying regret. "I know she isn't the fastest learner, but she's trying her best. And… I'll tell her to stop sneaking snacks into the academic success center during her tutoring sessions."

"…" Levi's face went blank, but he remained patient. "She's… a work-in-progress, but that's not what I wanted to talk about."

"Oh." For the time being, Mikasa was out of guesses, her interest suddenly piqued. She wasn't the clueless type, nor had she been oblivious to his advances in the past, but it was hard to decipher the underlying meaning behind the circumstances she was caught up in.

The memory of him kissing her after their gift exchange in his apartment flashed before her. It was hard not to think about that moment in particular every time he came within five feet of her. Even so, she'd often reminisce on the intimate rendezvous during quiet periods of reflection; most often late at night when she couldn't fall asleep.

Coming to terms with the fact that she felt something for him seemingly kept her awake on the especially lonely nights.

"Well, anyway..." Mikasa chuckled, casually brushing off her previous thoughts after convincing herself she was over-analyzing it all. "…is it something serious?"

Levi smirked at her confused enquiry. "That depends."

"On what?"

"On whether or not you'd consider going out with me."

Mikasa loosened her grasp on the fluffball still sleeping cozily in her encirclement as an ungodly amount of apprehensive thoughts ran frivolously throughout the entirety of her mind.

Eren. The last night she saw him. The ominous prelude to their breakup. Emotional letdowns and hardships. Petra and her copper colored hair. The photo of her and Levi. Complexities swarming intimate relationships kept her tethered to her hesitation and reluctant philosophy.

The overwhelming barrage was difficult to fully comprehend, and she struggled to make sense out of even the most trivial among them.

Steadfast in her position, Mikasa responded with attempted clarification. "So, you're asking me out?" She pushed further, keeping her tone at level with the unclear expression she was portraying. "On a date?"

Levi went poker-faced, one hand hovering above the small pup's head to quell its silent pleas for
attention. "No, on a drug-run. The rent doesn't pay itself, you know."

"On the drug-run or on the date?"

"Hmmm… decisions, decisions." Mikasa hummed, duly noting the Shih Tzu puppy had woken up and squirmed for release. Upon lowering the little guy to the floor, watching as he scrambled away, she figured she owed Levi an actual answer to his original question.

Of course, the opportunity to have a little fun and mess with him had _yet again_ presented itself, and she'd be damned if she wasn't going to seize it with the urgency of a hungry pregnant woman hankering for pickles and ice cream.

"You sure you wanna go out with me?" She mused, a light huff of amusement escaping her mouth. "I don't think you really know what you're getting yourself into."

Playing along, Levi joined her in making light of the situation. "Nothing I can't handle, I'm sure."

"Do you usually go out with the wild ones? Is that your type?" Mikasa chuckled upon recalling his initial impression of her. "If I remember correctly, you thought I was some party animal who snuck into bars for the thrill of it rather than to actually order a drink." Her chuckle turned minutely bitter, becoming a tad serious. "I'd hate to disappoint you, because I'm actually pretty boring in real life."

_That's probably why Eren broke up with me…_

"I doubt that." Levi remarked dryly. "Just because you're not interested in partying every weekend, doesn't make you boring." He looked below at the pup, glossy eyed cuteness encouraging him to follow through. "And, I like that you're more down-to-earth. Never did like the loud and wild, obnoxious kind of crowds."

"You work at a bar for godsake, Levi."

"It was either that or running drugs." Levi shrugged, tone laced with sarcasm. "The bar was the lesser of two evils."

"Good call." Mikasa stated emphatically, tucking a loose stray of hair behind her ear. "My parents wouldn't approve of me seeing a drug dealer."

"Huh. Didn't realize you wanted me to meet your parents already. I think we're moving a little fast here."

_Someone's forgetting that we've already kissed…_ Mikasa thought.

"I'm only asking for one casual date. Not your hand in marriage." Levi continued.

_Yet._

Mikasa scoffed. "You and I both know that no date we'd ever go on would _just_ be casual."

Levi wasn't going to waste his time disagreeing. She was right. "True."

"Unless… that's what you want. Keep things casual, like going out for coffee or seeing a movie. No obligations or ridiculous expectations."

Levi shook his head, still clutching the pup in a relaxed position. Mikasa could see the outline of his
muscled biceps through the thin layer of his shirt and found herself briefly wondering what they felt like.

"You strike me as a 'flowers and candlelit dinner' kind of girl." The look Levi gave her was a somber one, making her ache with desire.

*Just say 'yes.'*

In a sudden twist of affliction, however, Mikasa felt the heavy bearings of past experiences come back to haunt her.

She couldn't block out the memories of when she first met Eren, their first date, their first kiss. She hated that at a time like this she still thought about him, in a somewhat forgiving light of all things.

But this was her chance to start anew and move on with her life as did many heartbroken individuals learning to cope with sudden adjustments and setbacks.

Amid her brooding, she waited for *that feeling* to come. The feeling shrouded with doubt and uncertainty, nagging her, gnawing away at the emptiness she once thought could never be fulfilled. The feeling that was certain to drag her down only to wallow in self-pity.

It didn't come.

"Flowers are nice." She shrugged, unsure of what else to say.

Flowers. Eren had always given her roses…

Red roses…

"Look," Levi was fully prepared to lay it all out for her, "I like you, Mikasa, and I was hoping you'd give me a chance to get to know you better."

Mikasa peered down at the puppy complacently nestled in his arms, its eyes pleading with her to just say 'yes' already so he could shut up and go back to massaging the fur along its back.

She paused. The feeling still wouldn't come.

And she came to accept that *this* was exactly what she needed.

Giving him half a smile, Mikasa nodded, finally agreeing to his proposal.

"Okay."
"Wow. You two should take some sort of romantic compatibility test or something." Ymir teased.

_Her joke made Eren feel a tad uneasy. "I think it's cool that we have similar interests..."_

"It's practically a match-made in library heaven." Ymir laughed, wondering if she should just leave the two to their own devices.

"Well then this would be my singular, ultimate compatibility question..." Annie challenged, feeling it would be worth the risk. "What is your most... influential... important... life-altering book of all time?" She was curious to see how he would respond to such a heavy question.

Eren paused for a moment. His eyes wandered around the room, never really focusing his gaze on a set object. After thinking back to all the books he'd stumbled upon and devoted himself to for many sleepless nights, he made his choice. But he was reluctant to share something he considered personal; intimate, even.

_A bizarre silence ensued. "I don't know if I should answer that." He finally replied. "What's yours?"

Annie was hardly the type to back down, setting her sights on the brunet before her.

"I asked you first."

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**Saturday, January 14th**

Eren hadn't been to Annie's apartment since that fateful night.

Yet here he was, waiting patiently at her doorstep with every intention of finally taking the petite blonde out on a date.

He was a bundle of nerves, completely unable to relax amid a momentary suspense after ringing the doorbell precisely at five o'clock on the dot.

Perhaps it was nothing more than just the first-date jitters.
Although he felt like he was dying on the inside, (cause of death on certificate: anticipation!) he managed to feign a composed exterior, as well as the imperative full functionality of the upper limbs of his body.

Annie’s gift depended on it! Carrying the weight of an oversized teddy bear he had purchased from a local novelty shop in more of a hug than a casual grasp, its size and grandeur required extra help from his arms.

When the door opened to heed his call, Eren found himself at a loss for words.

Annie’s hair was down, blonde tresses freed from their usual captivity tucked away in a bun. Luminous blue eyes shone directly at him. Rosy cheeks complemented pursed lips and a roman nose. Clad in a taupe swing coat and black ankle boots, she was absolutely darling.

Eren pondered the lengths she must have undergone to look nice for their little outing. Although he thought she was beautiful with her hair up and little to no makeup on, he was nothing short of amazed at how stunning she was when she was all dolled up.

The sight was almost tortuous for the flustered brunet, ultimately realizing he was going to have one hell of a time restraining himself from putting her in his pocket. He wanted her to be safe. He wanted to watch her grow healthy. He wanted to show her to his neighbors.

He wanted his friends to stop showing him stupid shit on the internet so he could stop expressing his fondness for the lovely things in his life as if he were hash-tagging something on twitter or facebook.

"Right on time, Eren." Annie remarked matter-of-factly, her eyes glued to the teddy bear. "Who's your friend?"

Eren pulled himself out of his enchantment and smiled nervously. "Oh, this little guy?" He downplayed its grand entrance, holding the stuffed bear out for her to claim rightful ownership. "He's all yours."

Annie accepted the gift after raising her gaze from the teddy bear to the adorably anxious look on his face. In tandem with the oddly tense sensation welling up inside, Eren's kind gesture spurred memories of when she was a little girl. Her father would shower her with gifts, mostly stuffed animals, as a means to apologize or make up for his repetitive absence.

She hated how nearly impossible it was for her to go but one measly day without thinking of him…

"Thank you, Eren." Was all she could muster.

_Maybe someday… it'll be easier._

The brunet smiled, offering her his arm. "Ready to go?"

Annie nodded, grateful for the distraction as she linked her arm with his, commending the walk down to his car in the chilly wintry air.

"Where are we going?" Annie asked once they were seated in his Mazda.

Eren took his time responding. "Thought you might like this little place up on Maria Hill." He winked.

As they pulled into the parking lot of the mystery location, Annie was just about to comment on the
lovely scenery when she suddenly felt her phone buzz in her pocket.

It was a message from Hitch, informing her she would be spending the rest of the weekend at her parent's place.

5:26pm – Hitch: Going home to hang with the folks. I'll be back Monday. Don't miss me too much, Annie!

Then this happened…

5:27 – Hitch: Oh yeah! Have fun on your date tonight!

5:27 – Hitch: By the way, I put some condoms in your purse before I left. Ya know, just in case the mood strikes ;) Remember, safe sex is great sex!

Annie's face contorted into confusion as she promptly snatched her purse and began digging into its contents. Sure enough, the condoms Hitch referred to were in there.

She was going to murder her roommate.

Figuring she could hash out the details to her assassination plot later, she tossed her phone into the depths of her purse, vowing to pay it no mind for the duration of the date. After unbuckling her seatbelt, she turned to Eren, who was waiting patiently in the driver's seat for her to catch up.

His reassuring smile served as their cue to step out of the vehicle; the clicking sound following suit indicated the car doors had been locked. With a pep in each step, Eren quickly strode to her side, announcing their arrival with a wild burst of energy.

"You're gonna get a kick outta this." He declared.

The moment they approached the entrance to the mystery location, Annie's jaw dropped and remained awkwardly agape when she couldn't finish letting out a harmless joke, utterly stunned by the view presented before her.

For their first official date, Eren had taken the Miss Annie to an outdoor ice-skating rink.

String lights adorned the metal railings encasing the rink and haloed above nearby trees in festive wintry elegance. Couples were joined together hand in hand, skating in unison. Families formed into their respective groups, the children expressing their joy through squeals and laughter. Sharp metal blades scarping against well-maintained ice pierced the air in distinct timbres.

But Annie's favorite part of the whole ordeal was the enormous snow globe featured as the luxurious centerpiece in the middle of the rink. Inside the life-size element was an artificial evergreen tree, dazzling with lights and powdered by false snowflakes. The picturesque evening was paired perfectly with the clear night sky; the moonlight accentuating the glossy surface of the ice.

This is amazing… She thought, enamored with the romantic setting.

After paying for their admission, Eren accompanied his date to the fitting area where all attendees were instructed to exchange their footwear for a pair of ice-skates.

Annie finished throwing on her pair in record time, while Eren was sure to make careful adjustments. He didn't want to risk falling and embarrassing himself. Then again, he was confident in his balancing abilities thanks to years of pole vault training.
Done with lacing the skates to his liking, he stood up to his full height and shot a mischievous grin Annie's way.

"Ready?" He asked, interlocking his hand with hers.

Annie nodded her head eagerly. "Let's go, Jaeger."

A smile fell to Eren's lips as they glided along, commencing an easy-going pace that relaxed the initial tension from before. The circular drift around the rink conveyed their synchronization with every orchestrated stride and swing. Their footwork matched perfectly with one another, the way a singer harmonizes a mellifluous flow of lyrics to the beat of music.

Skating along with what evoked the current of a gentle stream, it all felt like a dream to the awe-struck blonde and her brunet companion. The romantic chemistry between the two was strengthened as they continued sashaying above the icy surface, lonely hearts becoming one in the beauty of it all.

Eren led Annie to a secluded area detained within the rink, edging closer to the charming monument of a snow globe.

"I want to try something." He asserted, slowing his pace down a bit.

Annie wasn't sure what he had in mind, but obliged his thoughtfulness. "Okay."

With others skating around them, Eren willed for her to follow his lead. He pulled her in closer, one hand holding her by the waist to keep her balanced. Both were still skating atop the sturdy ice at a drastically decelerated pace, allowing for Eren to ready himself in the proper position.

"I want to spin you around." He finally said, nary a hint of shame in his voice.

Annie repressed a low laugh, his assertion nearly breaking her will to remain stone-faced her entire life.

"This isn't exactly a Disney princess movie, Eren." She deadpanned. "I hate to be the one to tell you this but we're a few fairy godmothers short of a fairytale."

Eren shrugged. "Come on, it'll be fun!"

Annie rolled her eyes, poking fun at the hopeless romantic. "You're such a dork."

"You know you like it." He expressed adamantly, extending one arm out. "Just follow my lead, Tinkerbell."

Annie huffed at the pet name, unsure which sin he had just committed was more unforgiveable.

Erroneously insinuating Tinkerbell was a Disney princess.

Or comparing her to the tiny mute fairy- as if they shared any similarities whatsoever.

Her decision was nulled when she suddenly found herself twirling effortlessly in a flawless 360 degree turn, remaining lovely and poised before returning to his arms again. Eren extended their connected hands over and above her head in a waltz-like finesse and watched as she executed another elegant twist, blonde tresses spiraling with her in yet another composed loop.

"See?" Eren remarked, catching her with flexed muscles. "That wasn't so bad."
Annie raised a brow, playfully chastising the brunet for his childish whims. "So while everyone else is skating we're out here dancing?" She wouldn't admit it out loud, but she enjoyed it more than she probably should have.

"We're not the only ones." Eren pointed out a few other couples trying their hand at twists and turns in dance-like maneuvers. Some were definitely more experienced than others, earning a few laughs from all parties involved.

Annie was amused by the interesting sights, diverting her attention away from the green-eyed brunet to appreciate the live comedy in all its glory.

"Point taken." She relented, pulling him forward to continue skating around the rink at a steady pace.

Eren followed suit, commending her abilities as soon as they were caught up with the masses. "You're actually pretty good at this."

Annie shot him a disapproving look. "You expected me to fall left and right, didn't you?"

"Not really." Eren replied. "You're half Russian, right? Aren't they really good at ice-skating?"

Annie scoffed at the stereotype, but decided to play along. "For sure. Kinda like how all Germans dress in lederhosen, chug their favorite beer, eat sauerkraut, and yodel in the mountains."

"Only during Oktoberfest." Eren quipped.

Both were too caught up in awkward chuckles and laughs to notice their skating had become chaotic, their movements choppy, and rhythm completely thrown off. To avoid falling over each other, they cautiously aimed for the railings, slumping next to one another to take a breather.

Stars twinkled above. Moonlight spilled ahead of the delicate scenery. Beyond the ridges and peaks separating Maria Hill from adjacent neighborhoods were the bright city lights in a haze above the downtown skyline. Annie was captivated by such splendor and beauty, turning to face Eren as she filled her lungs with the night air. Her cobalt gaze wandered about his face; spellbound by his eyes, enthralled by his lips, piercing into his sharp jawline.

Annie reached for his hand, prompting him to look right back at her.

It just felt so right.

"Kiss me." She hit him with the plea bluntly, aching for his touch.

Eren was more than willing to accept her request, cautiously coiling his arms around her. He toyed with a few strands of her blonde locks, pushing them aside for full view of the vulnerability hidden beneath the calm expression carved onto her face.

"You're not going to punch me again, are you?" He chuckled… only slightly serious. "I'll admit, I deserved it, but it still kinda hurt."

Annie shook her head, resisting the urge to unleash a small but cruel laugh.

"So long as you keep me in your arms like this, there's no reason to." She finally whispered.

Eren smiled. "Well then," he said softly, "your wish is my command."

Capturing her lips with his own, everything else going on around them became nothing but an afterthought.
Eren's only regret following their skating ventures was having to separate his lips from the warmth of her sweet kiss.

All the twists, turns, and long strides worked up an appetite for both, so he suggested they hit up an old-fashioned mom and pop's café to carry on with the evening's festivities.

After ordering hot beverages and classic soup and sandwich entrees, Eren sought to engage in meaningful conversation with the petite blonde, rather than mindless chatter and small-talk. There was still a lot he didn't know about her, and he aimed to rectify that.

"So you're from the Marley Neighborhood." Eren encouraged her, hoping she could expand on her background; a subject he had very limited knowledge of. "What was it like growing up on the other side of town?"

Annie finished chewing bits of her sandwich before replying. "Nothing too exciting. Just your typical American upbringing." She was aware that she hadn't given him much to go on, especially since he purposely asked an open-ended question to get her to say more than just 'yes' or 'no.' "Plus or minus a few… discrepancies."

"Huh. You mentioned your family was mainly comprised of Russian immigrants." Eren rubbed his chin, deep in thought. "There's gotta be some sort of cultural influence on your upbringing."

"On my mother's side." Annie clarified, diving into her sandwich once more. "But we don't have to waste our time discussing my family tree. I'd rather not put you to sleep."

Eren's interest was piqued. "Come on, Annie. Tell me."

"You really wanna hear all the boring details of my family history?"

"Of course! I want to hear all about it!" Eren insisted.

"Where do I even begin?" Annie was conflicted, a bit shocked even that anyone would be interested in hearing about her family's past.

"From the beginning. As far back as your secondary sources can recollect, I guess."

Annie shrugged. What the hell. Why not? "Well, my great-grandmother, Uliana, met my great-grandfather, Iosef, after serving in the war-"

"Wait..." Eren thought he misheard her, or some form of miscommunication passed over them. "You mean your great-grandfather, right? Not your great-grandmother served in the war... as in World War II?"

Annie remained stoic. "Both served in the Red Army of the Soviet Union. And yes, during World War II."

"You're great-grandmother?" Eren asked increduously.

Annie gave him a brief history lesson, though she was certain this was covered in most history seminars. "There were many female soviet soldiers. A lot of them were snipers to avoid hand-to-hand combat or fighting on the front lines. Some were pilots, mostly for the same reasons." She leaned back into her seat before continuing. "My great-grandmother served in an all-women's sniper company under the command of Lt. Nina Lobkovskaya. Great-grandfather on the other hand was a rifleman, serving in an infantry division."
Eren’s jaw dropped.

"Anyway," Annie went on, intrigued by how attentive her date was, "after the war, they met in Moscow at a memorial to commemorate fallen war heroes. They married a year later, had one son named Nikolai, my grandfather. He emigrated with his wife, babushka, to the US to pursue the 'American Dream.' Problem was that he arrived during the Cold War, so naturally everyone accused him of being a Communist spy."

"What did he hope to accomplish?" Eren asked. "What was his version of the 'American Dream?'"

Annie sighed. "He wanted to ensure a better life for his children. I think that's the universal goal for all immigrants who come to this country. They hope to seek refuge in 'the land of the free,' the pinnacle of democracy."

"Ahhh, I see."

"Grandfather Nikolai's dream came true eventually." Annie summed up, "He and babushka settled down, started their own business, and had my mom. The rest is history."

"How on earth could anyone think your family history is boring?" Eren chuckled. "It would make one hell of a book."

Annie’s faint smile hinted at relief, glad that he expressed genuine interest in something she held dear to her heart. "The Ivanov's are strong-willed, honest, hard-working people. I'm lucky to be a part of that."

Eren had never been offered the privilege of meeting the elders in her family, but he respected their resilience and ethics nonetheless; thinking of all the sacrifices his own grandparents made so he could pole vault his way into college and pursue his dreams.

Showcasing a curious grin, he moved on to inquire about the other half of her family tree. "What about your dad? What about the Leonharts?" The question was innocent and the brunet only had good intentions in asking.

Annie flinched, dropping her spoon in an uncharacteristically clumsy manner.

My father... Her mind disengaged from everything. Words weren't forming properly; her emotions were out of whack. She wasn't sure if she wanted to laugh or cry.

She wasn't sure she felt anything at all anymore.

What was there to really say about him? All her life, he came and went. Showed up unexpectedly, left unexpectedly. A true nomad in every sense of the word.

The silence looming over them convinced Eren he had unintentionally stepped on a landmine. Ambient sounds of the café became mute to their senses; the murmuring of voices from other booths, the chime of dishes and cutlery. Guilt ate away at him until he internally berated himself for crossing a line. He hadn't meant to trigger a potential trauma in her life, but he regretted asking either way.

Shit... what do I do now? What should I say?

Before the tortuous silence could escalate into further damage, the waitress jetted to their booth as if on cue.

"More tea, hun?"
Eren was forever grateful that the cheery middle-aged woman had shown up, even if she had absolutely no idea what befell the once admirable conversation.

Not all heroes wear capes.

Annie seemed to snap out of whatever had her briefly out of focus. "No, thank you."

Eren concurred, parroting the blonde. "No thanks."

For the remainder of the time spent at the café, conversation was extremely limited, as Eren hoped to play it safe and avoid risky subjects. Soft, mellow tunes soon replaced the hollow emptiness. Doris Day's *Dream a Little Dream of Me* capped the evening perfectly, her voice hauntingly beautiful, the lyrics eloquently poignant and romantic.

The radio couldn't decide if it was in a depressing 'I hate life, I hate everything' mood, or if it was feeling over-the-top and bubbly like an annoying posse of middle schoolers.

In other words, the only music that seemed to be on air was Nine Inch Nails and Radiohead, or Ariana Grande and One Direction.

The lack of diversity compelled Eren to leave the radio off the entire drive back to Annie's apartment.

Being the opportunist he was, he reasoned this would allow for them to talk and express any residual sentiments. That was kind of the point of dating anyway.

"Uhmm, Annie…" Eren mumbled, both hands practically screwed to the steering wheel in utter tension. His hurried tone and anxious demeanor lacked any semblance of class on a depressingly epic scale. "I guess… technically it's my turn to share some family history." He allowed several beats to pass, struggling to fight clumsy rambling. "If you want, that is."

Annie blinked a few times, then nodded in agreement. She was a sucker for his flustered stuttering and adorable awkwardness. "Sure."

Eren cleared his throat, the 'lump' having resulted from unwarranted stress, and began story time for the blonde with a somewhat tasteless joke. "Before we get in too deep here, I just want to say that my family emigrated from Germany to the US before the first World War broke out, so it's safe to say that the Jaegers are definitely not descendants of Nazi fascists."

The charmer he is. Annie looked out the passenger window, eyes rolling impishly. "You must be so relieved."

"It's important for me to get that across." Eren stated casually, slightly amused. "Now we don't have to waste our precious time wondering if our great-grandfather's fought one another in a World War II faceoff."

"Fair enough. It wouldn't matter either way though." Annie folded her hands in her lap, staring out the passenger window. "Spoiler alert, the Soviets win."

"The Allied forces won." Eren corrected her.

"Does the 'Battle of Berlin' ring any bells?"

"Does the 'German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact' ring any bells?" Eren taunted her, a small laugh escaping his mouth. "Hitler and Stalin played nice at first."
"Until Hitler fucked up."

"Hitler was fucked up."

"And he sure got fucked up." Annie was sure to add another snarky witticism. "Mostly by the Soviets."

"Fuck yeah!" Eren kept his eyes on the road, but extended his right hand above the center console, palm facing out.

Annie was appalled by the gesture he was insinuating. "Are we seriously going to high-five over this?" How and why did this date suddenly turn into history class?

"Annie, this is not a trivial achievement!" Eren reasoned with her. "We just summarized World War II in the most accurate way possible!"

Annie ultimately relented, giving him a hearty high five in return for his blatant over-enthusiastic hype. "Can we get back to your family now?"

"Oh yeah!" Eren momentarily forgot what subject they were truly on, visions of the Nazi Germany's demise clouding his mind. "My dad comes from a long line of medical practitioners, and he himself has been a doctor for nearly two decades. He speaks German fluently and taught me everything I know."

"Do you speak it fluently?"

"Not as well as my father, but I'm getting there." Eren paused, turning into familiar territory. "But it's one thing for someone to be fluent in a foreign language. It's another to be well-versed in their customs and culture. Having grown up in a staunchly German family, I can say that I'm bicultural as well as bilingual. 'Biculturalism' doesn't get enough recognition, and they sure as hell don't emphasize it enough in school."

Annie nodded in agreement. "I see. It all makes sense now." She pondered, setting her gaze ahead into the windshield as they neared the entrance to the apartment complex. "Your choice of major reflects an important part of who you are."

"Exactly." Eren smiled, parking the car just outside the walkway to her unit. After killing the engine, he unbuckled his seatbelt and offered to walk her up in an act of courteous chivalry.

He accompanied her up the flight of stairs, down a dimly lit hallway, ultimately setting them outside her doorstep.

Eren expected Annie to bid him goodnight and then turn in for the evening. Instead, she addressed him in a serious manner, looking up at him with uncertainty ridden behind worried eyes.

"I want to tell you about him." She exhaled. "My father, I mean."

Eren felt he understood what she was trying to say.

"I'm just… not ready." She concluded, deciding she needed to talk about the way she felt and share her internal struggles with someone at some point. Eren was the one she felt most at ease with, finding it easy to trust him.

Acting on pure instinct, Eren enclosed her within his arms, heart beating in steady rhythm with hers as she clung to him.
"I'll be here when you're ready." He gently assured her, holding her as if she were made of glass.

Annie faded into his embrace, not ready for him to leave, knowing she'd be left alone with her thoughts as soon as they separated. These moments, fleeting as they were, gave her hope. She wanted to enjoy this moment for as long as she could; a satisfying end to their first date.

"Thank you." She breathed into his shoulder, internally vowing to herself she'd always remember this night.

Chapter End Notes

A/N 2.0: Quick history lesson!
Nina Lobkovskaya was a female sniper serving in the Red Army. She's among many badass soviet women soldiers who dedicated their hearts to fighting Nazi fascists. Lyudmila Pavlichenko, Roza Shanina, and Mariya Dolina were other female soldiers who also inspired little snippets of this chapter. Genuine role models, yo.
Saturday, January 21st

The symbolism underlying one of nature's wondrous beauties thoroughly spells out hidden messages in its own language.

The language of flowers is a complex and often overlooked approach to communication between friends, family, lovers.

Carnations symbolize pride and beauty. Daffodils are equated with regard and chivalry. Daisies represent innocence and purity. Alstroemeria is the flower of friendship. Gladiolus evokes strength of character and honor.

Roses are the universal flower for 'love' and 'romance,' but even so; different colored roses can mean different things.

Levi browsed through several bouquets at the floral shop on his way to pick up Mikasa for their first official night on the town. He had never really been one to care for sappy romantic clichés. For the most part, he found them either ridiculous or boring.

He was, however, willing to admit that he could see the appeal to the floral complexities and the mysteries entangled within; typical for women to fawn over delicate details and bright colors.

Most bouquets in the shop highlighted the season's best-selling roses.

Not quite what he was looking for. Mikasa didn't strike him as a 'roses kinda gal.' Daisies seemed too childish. Tulips wouldn't send the right message.

Out of the corner of his eye, one bouquet seemed to stand out from the rest. With the stems wrapped in soft silver cloth, he decided right then and there, this one in particular suited Mikasa perfectly.

Mikasa paced back and forth in the kitchen of her parents' home in Shiganshina.

Her father was out of town on business and her mother was visiting family in her native land, leaving the house all to herself for the weekend. She promised to return home at her parents' behest, knowing full-well it was mostly for their convenience. In any event, it was nice to be back in familiar territory;
a much-needed break from the noisy dorms and hustle and bustle on campus.

She glanced up at the clock in mid-stride. Five to seven.

Levi agreed to pick her up at the lovely home promptly at 7pm for their date.

They had reservations at a restaurant in an inner-city district, its exact identity kept secret from her for now. Mikasa was inclined to dress nicely, her presumptions ultimately envisioning a formal setting. Adorned in the classic 'little black dress,' she paired the mid-length gown with black flats (heels would've been cruel, given their height difference), and a maroon peplum coat for the cold weather outside. The sleek dress was designed with a square neckline, teasing just the right amount of skin. Spaghetti straps offered full view of narrow shoulders and toned arms, topping a darted bodice that provocatively graced a hidden wall of well-developed abs. Enough was left to the imagination, as she'd never felt comfortable revealing too much.

Her hair was styled into loose waves. She took the minimalist approach 'less is more' concerning her snowy complexion, keeping her makeup light. A single coat of mascara, easy on the eye-liner, and a few dabs of tinted moisturizer.

Satisfied with the results, she moseyed around the house for a bit, pulling out her pocket-sized vanity every now and again to ensure she appeared as put-together as she had five minutes prior to the last inspection.

She was about to reply to a text from Sasha when the doorbell rang.

Sauntering over to the entryway, she was surprised to feel calm and at ease more than anything else. The prospect of going out on date for the first time in a while (with someone who bore absolutely no resemblance to Eren) should have rattled her nerves. Instead, it provided her with a sense of relief; hope, even. Either way, now wasn't the time to question her newfound feelings or brood over her conflicting emotions. Her presence was solicited via the chime of the doorbell ring.

When she opened the door, her breath had momentarily been stolen, silencing any snarky remark she had internally rehearsed beforehand.

Levi was dressed to the nines, absolutely dapper in a trim sharp-looking off-white shirt and black slacks paired with black patent leather shoes. He radiated an air of quiet confidence, but she detected no arrogance in his demeanor. His attire looked as though it had been tailored to precisely match the contours of his body, giving her small hints and glimpses of his toned physique.

In his hands rested a bouquet of flowers.

Lilies.

White lilies. Stargazer lilies.

The flower that represents passion, refined beauty, and virtue.

Levi was the first to speak, his vocabulary limited to one word after nearly rendered speechless by the sight of a glamorized Mikasa. "Wow."

"You're not so bad yourself." Mikasa smiled, greeting his arrival after eyeing the floral arrangement. "Come on in." She welcomed him into her family home, noting she had to grab a few things before heading out.

Levi followed her inside, watching as she placed the lilies in a vase centered on the island in the
"Thank you for these." Mikasa toyed with a few petals of the exotic flowers, leaning in toward the epicenter of the bouquet to revel in their captivating scent. "They're beautiful."

Levi offered a single nod, studying her intimately. In the past, he'd been faced with plenty of opportunities to shamelessly check her out and admire her assets, but none could ever be as satisfying as this. His efforts to pursue her were finally coming full-circle.

When she briefly disappeared to collect a few last-minute items (and to check herself out in the mirror one last time), Levi remained stagnant in the kitchen, eyes wandering over to the living room and into a hallway encumbered with family photographs. The interior of the home was elaborately furnished, displaying elements of two different cultures coming together as one, resulting in a wholesome family. He was intrigued, wondering what that must have been like. To have a 'happy childhood...'

It wasn't long until she returned, turning off several lights in her wake. Adorning her hands were the red mittens he had given her, the red scarf from Eren hanging in her grasp. A look of uncertainty befell her face as she had trouble deciding whether or not she wanted to wear it, its sentimentality bearing an unpleasant combination of fond memories and emotional scars.

Levi was quick to address her mindless daze. "What's the story behind that thing?" The question was blunt, but a fair one at that.

Mikasa began folding the scarf into halves, saddened eyes averting his. It was a force of habit for her to reach for it soft contents and coil it around her neck before venturing out into the cold. She was conditioned to always wear it regardless of the occasion or circumstances.

But tonight, for the first time since Eren had wrapped the red bundle around her their freshman year of high school, Mikasa decided it was… unnecessary.

"It was..." Mikasa's voice trailed off, finally looking up at Levi. "From someone I really cared about." She hadn't meant to use the past tense, as she realized she would always care for Eren. However, things had changed, her feelings changed, her priorities changed.

Slowly but surely, she was moving on.

They left her family home, travelling to the inner-city district in Levi's spotless car.

Mikasa left the scarf at home.

The Dahlia Lounge was a sophisticated restaurant nestled along the busy city streets of downtown Sina.

Hand in hand, Levi and Mikasa walked into the establishment, the sounds of her black flats clicking in a trail behind them.

Mikasa's eyes widened upon yielding them to the upscale embellishments. High ceilings were swathed in midnight blue curtains. A chandelier dangled above, bestowing a warm glow aloft the serene atmosphere of the main lobby. Live jazz music could be heard billowing from the ballroom. A large glass aquarium thriving with exotic species of fish led into a narrow hallway preceding the dining halls. Shimmering reflections from the marine vivarium illuminated the walls, flashing like bright crystals.
Awe-struck by the intricate details of the fine establishment, she couldn't help but wonder who had the audacity to sell their soul in exchange for the ownership of such a luxurious venture. Only a deal with the devil could guarantee such opulence and wealth.

As if he had read her mind, Levi turned to Mikasa after checking in for their reservation and offered some surprising news. "I know the owner of the place."

Mikasa could only hope Levi didn't have any ties to the Mafia or Triad. "Do you now?"

Maybe he wasn't kidding about the whole drug-running business…

A classy young hostess led the couple to their table, passing lavish banquettes with white trim cloth along the way, small candles adorned at the center of each.

Their table was positioned right where the action was; in close proximity to a cozy dance floor below a modest stage. An older woman dressed in a dazzling red dress seductively serenaded the ballroom with smooth velvety tones. Accompanied by a small jazz ensemble, the combination of slow beats and angelic crooning stirred up the arousal of romance and serenity.

While studying the menu enveloped in a leather padded folder, Mikasa nearly choked on herself in astonishment. The place offered an expensive variety of seafood entrees, sixty dollar steaks, appetizers worth about as much as the meals themselves. She felt a sudden pang of guilt arise in her chest, knowing full well Levi would be the one footing the bill.

Was is it too late to suggest they go to Red Robin?

Mikasa felt pressured to say something after Levi set his menu down, ready to order.

"There's… so much to choose from." She mumbled.

Levi only nodded, looking away to the stage where the singer had begun performing her rendition of *Luck be a Lady*, made famous by Frank Sinatra.

"Take your time." He assured her.

Shortly after their waiter introduced himself and delivered water, the raven-haired duo was approached by a gentleman of Levi's familiarity.

"Ah, Levi!" He was an older man, though his age hardly disqualified him from maintaining youthful spirit and vigor. Short graying hair exemplified the 'silver fox' look. Circular framed glasses perched above the bridge of his nose. His lightly bearded face was marked with faint wrinkles, set in thin lines above his forehead and below his vibrant blue eyes.

"Mr. Smith." Levi rose from his seat to acknowledge the father of his longtime friend. "It's been awhile."

The two men engaged in customary chit-chat as Mikasa hazily followed along, wondering how they came to be acquainted.

"Have you spoken to Erwin lately?" The silver fox inquired. "I haven't heard from him since the holidays."

"To my knowledge, it's more of the same with him." Levi replied. "Most of his time is devoted to either collaborating with several colleagues on an upcoming project or wedding planning with Hange."
Mikasa drew her head back towards the raised platform accommodating the musicians, wanting to give the men their privacy so as not to be intrusive. The music droned out most of their conversation, lost in the soft melody emanating from deep bass timbres and slow keystrokes on the piano. It wasn't long before Levi had initiated an introduction; the words 'I want you to meet someone' pulling her into their brief exchange.

"Mikasa," Levi began, gently placing his hand atop her shoulder, "this is Mr. Smith. He owns the place."

Mikasa showed reverence, bowing her head ever so slightly after accepting the older gentleman's handshake. "Nice to meet you."

"Likewise, Mikasa." He said her name carefully, as though it were fragile. "Forgive me. I hope I'm pronouncing that right."

Mikasa nodded. "That's right."

"An exceptionally rare name." The seasoned entrepreneur commented. "Beautiful name."

"Thank you." Mikasa smiled politely.

"I'll have my staff bring out a bottle of Chardonnay." Mr. Smith announced as soon as Levi had seated himself back down.

"Appreciate that." Levi welcomed the hospitality.

"And tell Erwin to give his old man a call sometime! It'd be nice to be kept in the-know."

"Will do." Levi nodded. "Good seeing you again, Mr. Smith."

"And it's always a pleasure seeing you, Levi." Smith turned to Mikasa one last time, flashing a charismatic smile. "Pleasure, Mikasa." With that, the older man disappeared into an adjacent hallway, presumably to tend to other matters.

In his absence, the jazz siren had moved on to Fever, made famous by Peggy Lee.

Mikasa waited until she was certain no one would be listening in to what she was about to say. "Wasn't aware you had friends in high places."

Levi smirked. "The 'Smiths' and I go way back."

Mikasa wasn't quite satisfied with the response, giving in to her curiosity on a slightly impulsive note. "They're not connected with any… unlawful activity, are they?"

Levi's brow shot up. "What do you mean by that?"

"I'm getting some serious 'Godfather,' 'Goodfellas' vibes from this." She finally revealed in a hushed voice.

Levi suppressed an amused, somewhat disdainful chuckle. "That supposed to be some kind of flattery?"

"Now you're just evading my question."

"You can't be serious."
The look on her face was only *partially* serious…

"You got me, Mikasa." Levi feigned submission, taking a swig from his water glass whilst keeping his face blank. "I'm actually a hitman for the mob."

Mikasa rolled her eyes, albeit relieved. "Now might be a good time to tell you my family has ties with the Yakuza." She played along. "Maybe luring you in was my plan all along."

"I should've known." Levi shrugged. "And here I thought you were obsessed with me."

"Hardly." Mikasa scoffed, preparing to revert back to her original objective in learning more about his connections with the intriguing Smith family. "Tell me about him." She pressed on. "Your friend, Erwin, I mean."

Levi was more than willing to clue her in. "We've known each other for years. Been friends since high school."

The waiter returned before he could get into further detail, presenting the young couple with a bottle of Chardonnay. "Compliments of the house." He said, using polished etiquette. He set the bottle aside after pouring them each a glass, proceeding to pull out a pen and notepad with the intention of taking their order. "What'll it be this evening?"

Levi motioned toward Mikasa, encouraging her to order first.

Mikasa paused for a moment, ultimately settling on a familiar dish. "I'll have the yellowfin tuna."

The waiter nodded, turning towards Levi after putting the lady's request down into writing.

"I'll have the Rib-eye." He stated. "Well-done."

"Of course." The waiter tucked his pen and notepad away and collected their menus before retreating to the kitchen.

Levi wasted no time indulging in the complimentary wine. Mikasa stared emptily at her glass.

"Am I…" Her voice trailed off, faltering in a cautious tone. "Am I allowed to…?"

Levi couldn't help but find her hesitation amusing. Adorable even. "It's cute that you're trying to play innocent and all," he began, "but you and I both know this wouldn't be your first rendezvous with alcohol."

"This is all kinds of wrong…" Mikasa muttered.

Levi nudged her glass forward, closer to where her arms were resting atop the curtained table. "I won't say anything if you won't." He drawled.

"I wonder if they just assume I'm older because I'm with you." She remarked, noting the disapproving look on his face after she'd made the observation. "No offense."

"I'm not *that* much older than you."

Mikasa shrugged, reaching for the wine glass. "I guess our age gap isn't all that uncommon." She pondered. "Not that it's a wide gap to begin with." She took a small sip, fixating her senses on the taste of the wine's rich and full-bodied flavor. "Woah." Holy hell, the thing *tasted* expensive. "Anyway, you were saying… about your friend?"
Levi summed up the details without offering a novel-length explanation. He picked up where he left off. "Erwin's the main reason I applied to UT in the first place. After introducing me to the campus and their civil engineering program, I thought it would be a good fit for me. I had scholarship offers to play tennis at Stohess and Sina, but I figured I could trust Erwin's judgment, and I'm glad I did." Levi contemplated nostalgically, taken back to his early college years. "He ended up transferring to Ehrmich University and graduated with his bachelor's there last year. He's currently working on his master's." Levi explained the mystery behind Erwin's father so as to deter any thoughts of 'mafia-relations' from invading her mind. "His dad taught history at a small private college for a while. He officially retired from teaching about ten years ago to take helm in operating this place after inheriting it from his own father." That should be enough to clear the air. The restaurant had been family owned and operated by the Smiths long enough to achieve its respectable status; rather than posing as a front for illegal activity. "As you can see, 'retirement' has served him well."

"That's an understatement." Mikasa huffed.

"The Smiths are old money." Levi expressed nonchalantly. "They've been well off for generations."

There was a pause between them, both quietly drinking from their respective glasses. Soft music continued its ascension from the stage, fusing the alluring ambiance with causal dinner conversation and the aroma of wine flourishing in abundance.

Mikasa turned to look at her date, his gaze focused on the stage and the small ensemble still playing music. The intervening silence allowed for her to study his profile closely, learning every detail of his face in the wan light of the flickering candle. Her cheeks ignited into a passionate red hue upon inadvertently startling herself, hoping desperately he wouldn't look at her in her flustered state.

Perhaps she had simply glossed over it or conditioned herself to brush her curiosity aside, solely regarding him as a mere friend and teammate to really notice. If she did indulge in even a little objectifying at all, (it's hard to forget those abs made of steel) she was quick to dismiss the thoughts when she reminded herself of her relationship with Eren. Although the latter no longer applied to these circumstances, she had been hesitant to allow herself to recognize what should have been made obvious.

And when it hit her, it hit her like a fucking bus.

Levi was actually... really hot.

Mikasa had never been one to prioritize 'looks' as the most significant factor in finding a mate, believing an emphasis on shared values and interests was necessary in strengthening relationships. She was already attracted to who Levi was as a person, feeling as though they were pretty much in sync with one another. They made a great team; there was no denying that. But, it was nice that she could appreciate him for the fine as hell man that he was.

Muscles bulged from the sleeves of his shirt. Jet-black hair contrasted with the pale complexion of his skin, giving off 'dark and mysterious' undertones to his youthful appearance. And his piercing eyes, emanating shades of light grey and blue, were now aimed directly back-

Oh. Fuck.

Aaaaaaaaand he was looking at her.

With his attention peeled away from the stage, he surprised her with an inquisitive question of his own. "Does that happen to you a lot?"
Was what Mikasa might have said had she nary a filter. With the help of some form of divine intervention, she managed to keep herself in check. "What?"

"Do people fawn over your name like it's a rare, delicate flower?" Levi clarified. "Mr. Smith seemed utterly fascinated."

Mikasa tucked her head low, the candle glowing faintly. "That was an exception." She replied. "Most people seem to find it... entertaining. Half the time I can't tell if they're making fun of it, or if they're just not used to hearing anything other than anglicized names."

"Does it bother you?"

"Not as much as it used to."

Levi could resonate with that. "Some people are just uneducated and, apparently, uncultured." He could recall taking an instant liking to her name, its uniqueness embodying the distinct qualities setting her apart from every other girl he had met. Mikasa. "Any special meaning to your name?"

Mikasa mused over how he would react to her response. "In Japan, there's a mountain. Mount Mikasa." She was eager to reveal the next part. "The Imperial Japanese Navy named a battleship after it."

"A battleship?" *Suits her, after all.*

"Mmhhmmm." She nodded. "Served as a flagship during the Russo-Japanese war."

Levi's fascination alleviated any lingering remnants of self-consciousness she harbored about her name, and soon he was prying into more of her multi-cultural heritage, to which she had no qualms diving head first into the eccentric details of it all.

"I was born in Naha, a city on the island of Okinawa. That's also where my parents met." She raised her chin, ensuring her eyes were at level with his and continued. "My mother was a young waitress at the time, working in a family-owned tea shop. My father was serving in the Marines; stationed at the US military base in Ginowan." She rolled her eyes and let out a deep breath. It was always a pleasure to share such a gem. "Apparently, this is how the story goes..." She drawled. "My dad waltzed into the tea shop with a couple of his buddies, wanting to show off how much his Japanese had improved. He ordered for them, failing to use local idioms in their proper context and, oh god," she paused and chuckled, "my mom says he just about butchered every word and his accent was atrocious. So after he was done rambling in his horrible attempt at speaking the language, she practically kicked him off his high horse and repeated everything he meant to say in fluent English." When Levi's face displayed he was nothing short of impressed, Mikasa concurred. "Yeah, I know. My mom can be kind of sassy."

"Must have been love at first sight." Levi quipped. "How'd he manage to redeem himself from that?"

"Mom thought he was cute." Mikasa jested. "Aside from that, there's that whole cliche; 'a woman loves a man in uniform.'"

"Ahhh. I see."

"After they got married the stork paid them a visit, and provided them with a new, little addition to their family." Mikasa began swirling the wine in her glass, watching as it spun around and around. "I'm talking about me, by the way."
"Stork, huh?" Levi rubbed his chin, furrowing his brows together. "I don't think that's how it works, Mikasa." He said slowly, suspiciously.

"I'm only telling you what they told me." Mikasa smirked. Her parents often sheltered her too much as a child, avoiding 'the talk' for fear of ruining her innocence. "Needless to say, we stayed there for a few years until we were relocated to Guam. It wasn't until the end of his military career that we arrived at the mainland and moved to the Shiganshina district... which pretty much brings us to now."

Levi ran a hand through his hair. His imagination was sprinkled with ideas of what she must have been like as a child. He envisioned tiny Mikasa in a summer festival dress, dirtying it by carelessly playing in the mud. The clean-freak inside of him disapproved.

Shelving the thought away for now to focus back on his date, he used the opportunity to gain more insight on the Asian half of her ancestry. "Do you speak Japanese?" It was a question he'd been meaning to ask her, just never got around to it.

Mikasa's nose crinkled, giving him a playful grin. This was usually the part where someone would ask her how to say a curse word... or something dirty. Thankfully, Levi never gave her that impression. "I do." She answered. "I can read and write hiragana and katakana. My kanji's shit, unfortunately."

The waiter suddenly returned, this time accompanied by a tray holding their dinner entrees. Yellowfin tuna. Rib-eye steak. Their empty glasses were instantly tended to. As the music took on a slower, more seductive rhythm, Levi and Mikasa moved on to discuss their academic endeavors.

"You never told me what you were studying, by the way." Levi resumed, cutting into the tenderness of his rib-eye.

"You never asked." Mikasa stated plainly, plopping a small morsel of the tuna in her mouth.

"Well, I'm all ears now."

Goddamn. The tuna was fantastic. "Political science." Came her enthusiastic response. "My goal is to get into law school."


"What about you and your area of study?" Mikasa recalled he had mentioned something about engineering earlier, but he hadn't exactly expanded on it.

"I'm majoring in civil engineering, minoring in environmental science." Levi explained. "I'm interested mostly in sustainability analysis."

Mikasa hummed. "I take it this all has to do with your senior thesis."

Levi tilted his head. "Yeah, and it's been eating up most of my time as of late."

"Sorry to bring it up." Mikasa expressed regret. "I'm sure it's the last thing you want to think about during your spare time."

"I don't mind at all." Levi said in return. "They say never take your work home with you, but I hate that feeling of leaving something unfinished."
"I hear you there." Mikasa drank from her water glass, washing the taste of her seafood fare down. She hoped he would tell her more about his career aspirations, finding herself intrigued by every new thing she came to learn about him.

Her wish was graciously granted.

"Here's something that a lot of people either choose to ignore or don't fully understand." Levi began. "About seven-hundred and eighty-three million people don't have access to clean water. About two and half billion people don't have access to adequate sanitation. Every year, an estimated six to eight million people die of water-related diseases."

Mikasa's gaze never wavered from his own, her attention consumed by the compelling sincerity in his voice.

"Clean drinking water is considered a luxury in some places, and taken for granted in others." He shook his head. "With civil engineering, I could work to design water infrastructure that meets the needs of people in underdeveloped countries; whether it be through building reservoirs or wells. I just want a career in something that can help make a difference." Levi topped his thoughts off with his usual calmed demeanor, emphasizing yet another significant aspect. "Not to mention that the horrid conditions the unfortunate are forced to live with are absolutely disgusting."

"That's honorable, Levi." Mikasa remarked supportively, wholeheartedly believing she'd been offered a tiny glimpse of his soft side. Hearing about his ambitions magnified her respect for him; finding his honesty and sense of purpose his most appealing personality traits. At the very least, it convinces her there was indeed a heart beating inside the usually stoic man. "Suits the clean-freak that you are."

"I thought so, too." Levi's smirk turned nostalgic, as if reminiscing in a fond memory.

Mikasa smiled endearingly, professing a curious thought that weighed on her mind before. "I think there's more to you than that."

"Oh?"

"You're not just some fastidious grouch." She chuckled. "You strike me as the kind of guy who just needs an occasional dose of reassurance."

Levi wondered if she was trying to stroke his ego… or trying to emasculate it. Her way of wording whatever she was trying to convey was flat out weird. "Define 'reassurance.'"

"I guess that's my job to figure out." She mused. "Assuming it's open to interpretation."

And just like that, the captain of the men's tennis squad's face turned a faint red, falling victim to her coy flirting, and god, that low cut dress. A hint of cleavage preceded the elegant lines of her collarbone, persuading his eyes to wander further down-

Tearing his gaze away from nearly succumbing to the tempting prospect of her chest, Levi grabbed the Chardonnay and pulled it out of her reach. "That's enough wine for you tonight." He chastised. "Don't need you getting liquored up on our first date."

What a gentleman.

Before they could request a dessert menu, the songstress of the jazz ensemble called for everyone's attention.
"This next song is for all the couples here tonight for the first time." She purred into the mic, inviting prospective love-birds to join them for a romantic affair on the dance floor.

Mikasa stiffened when she saw Levi had turned to face her through her peripheral vision. With her eyes still averting his, he cleared his throat. "That would be our cue, Mikasa." He said, rising out of his chair, offering her his arm.

Faced with the daunting task, she let out a terse, desperate, "I can't dance."

"Well then it's a good thing one of us can." Levi stated bluntly, taunting her all the same. "Is someone in need of a little 'dose of reassurance?'"

"Hey, you're the one asking me to be your dance partner." Mikasa shot back, pointing out who the more desperate one was.

"Come on." His voice shifted from teasing her, to sounding more understandable and uplifting. "There's nothing to it really."

Mikasa ultimately relented, linking her arm in his, and followed him to the glossy floor. The jazz singer chose the perfect song to evoke blossoming romance and newfound love; a song Mikasa also happened to be familiar with.

*Come Away with Me*, by Nora Jones.

Its slow beat invited several other couples to make their way to the floor below the stage, hand in hand, cheek to cheek.

Mikasa writhed when Levi slid one hand around her waist, instructing her to place one hand on his shoulder. Her sensitivity pleased him as another slight shudder rolled from her torso. When they were readied in the proper stance, Levi leaned in and whispered into her ear what onlookers would assume were sweet nothings. Soon, their movements harmonized with the sultry melody, the two slowly rocking back and forth, captivated by the intimate warmth. Levi held her in his tender grasp; the enchanting muse she was underneath the soft lighting.

With their bodies nearly entwined, their lips were but a breath apart. Mikasa's heart was pounding loud enough she swore he could hear it, possibly even *feel* it, in their tight embrace. She ached for him to put her out of her misery, pleading with him through the silent despair hidden beneath her eyes.

The climax of the song hit Mikasa with a sense of urgency. The room suddenly felt hot, and it didn't help that Levi occasionally moved his hand over to caress the small of her back. He seemed to know all the right moves; where exactly to touch to get her to squirm and gasp with internal screams of pleasure.

He had her right where he wanted her.

His lips hovered above her own, landing them gently at the corner of her mouth instead. Just when she thought he was finally going to kiss her for real this time, he pulled away.

The song had ended.

Mikasa wondered if her lips were still puckered up in a dejected pout.

In a remarkable gesture of chivalry, Levi treated the lovely dame to a dessert of her choosing, drove
her home in his car whilst tolerating her questionable taste in music, and offered to walk her to the doorstep of her humble abode in Shiganshina.

It was there they were sure to say their 'goodnights' and part ways.

"I had a wonderful time tonight." Mikasa thanked him, fumbling with her bag and house keys.

"We should do this again sometime." Levi affirmed, already counting on a second date.

Mikasa played with a strand of her hair. "Being wined and dined is nice."

"Is that a 'yes'?

"That's a 'yes.'"

A satisfied smirk formed along the curve of Levi's mouth, reveling in a silent moment of victory.

"Goodnight, Levi." Mikasa was about to turn and unlock the front door when he suddenly took hold of her arm.

"You forgot something."

"Wha-" Her question was answered as his lips closed in on hers, locking into a deep kiss.

Her bag and keys fell to the ground as she wrapped her arms around him, her entire body burning with passion as he encircled his muscled arms around her waist. The kiss remained docile and chaste, their tongues slowly meeting one another. His gentleness elicited an intense arousal, blossoming from all sensitive parts of her body. She moved a hand to stroke his face, encouraging him to take his time with her as he delighted in the taste of her lips.

Lost in his touch, Mikasa wondered if this was what it was like to feel as though time had stopped. Regardless, perception of time was futile.

So long as Levi kept kissing her like this, everything else would just have to wait.
Good Girls Go Bad

Chapter Notes

A/N: I'm back! I was outta town for a while and then life got hectic, blah, blah, blah... All I can say is that I'm fine and no need to worry about me! :) I just had a few things to take care of.
I appreciate you all! Thanks for the reviews and kudos! I don't deserve such patient readers, but thank you :) New characters! Conflicted emotions! Plot development! Long chapter! Enjoy le read!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Friday, February 3rd

Stohess University

Annie Leonhart was in the middle of reading an assigned chapter from The Jungle by Upton Sinclair for her English class when her vision was suddenly obstructed. A foreign pair of hands covered both of her icy blue eyes, her sight now blocked by warm palms cupping the upper half of her face ever so gently and playfully. The hands felt warm, masculine, vaguely recognizable.

"Guess who?" whispered a voice from behind. This was the dead giveaway. It sounded a lot like a certain green-eyed brunet trying to mask his identity under duller, lower tones.

The dork he is.

Annie decided to play along.

"Careful there," she said slowly. "I'm kind of seeing someone, and he's not the type to sit back and let someone mess with his girl."

Eren's eyes widened like saucers, beguilement written all over his face. Chuckling at her remark, he moved his hands down, allowing her to see again, and wrapped his arms around her shoulders, hugging her from behind. He stole a quick kiss on her rosy cheek before pulling a seat alongside her.

"Lame," he said, plopping a notebook on the wooden surface. "I doubt he's as cute as me."

Annie remain poker-faced at his wink, hoping to get a significant point across. "There's plenty of attractive guys out there," she sighed. "But this guy... he's different."

Eren hesitated, but then took the bait in hopes of a little elaboration. "'Different' is a pretty vague word."

Annie paused for a beat, timing out her response purposefully. "He's impulsive, arrogant, and doesn't always think things through. Has a habit of charging things head on without so much as a moment to consider the consequences."

Eren's expression contorted into a lovely combination of cringe and disdain. "Those aren't exactly positive qualities."
Annie finally gave in and smiled, replying in a warm tone to mend his temporarily scathed ego. "No one's perfect," she hummed. "We all have our flaws."

"But why waste your time with someone like that?"

Annie was more than eager to reply. "I have a lot of respect for him." She wanted to tell him that he was the only one who really got her. No one else could ever be capable of understanding her on a more intimate level. But she aimed to keep her explanation within the boundaries of what should have remained a harmless joke from the start. "He's... sweet, I guess," she continued. "He's also an avid reader, a bit of a mama's boy, and a crazy amazing pole-vaulter."

That managed to get him to return her smile. As the days flew by, he felt closer to finally breaching the walls fortified around her heart. He'd get there... eventually.

He cleared his throat, inwardly reminding himself that patience was a virtue, and resumed talk of this 'mystery guy.'

"I bet I could kick his ass." Typical Eren.

For a split-second, he thought Annie might chide him for the haughty and callow assertion, even if it was coated in blatant sarcasm.

"Go easy on him," she deadpanned alternatively. "I need him to look at least somewhat presentable for next weekend."

"What about any other day? "What's going on next weekend?"

Annie casually slid a bookmark into her tattered copy of *The Jungle*, meeting his gaze after tossing the book into her backpack. She wanted to ensure they had each other's full attention.

"The Fall Sports Athletic Banquet," came her nonchalant reply. The question now was whether or not Eren was following.

"It definitely rings a bell." Eren rubbed his chin, knowing full well this was her way of extending an invite as casually as possible, without making him feel obligated or make it seem like she was desperate. "Hitch has been making a big fuss over it."

"Well that's Hitch for you," Annie muttered. "But in her defense, it's kind of... important." She stopped to untie her hair, blonde tresses falling into loose waves once they'd been freed from her bun. "Hope the pole-vaulting phenom can make it."

Ah. So close. Eren liked this little game of cat-and-mouse going on between them.

She hadn't quite bestowed upon him a cheesy pet-name, but 'pole-vaulting phenom' sounded incredibly sexy. Or maybe it was just her voice. And maybe he was getting a bit carried away.

Although slightly unrelated, his mind was instantaneously flooded with possible ways to bribe Jean into letting him borrow his classy, woman-magnet of a dress shirt. Given the significance of the event, he wanted to look good, especially if he was going to be Annie's date. Another part of him wondered if anyone in her family had offered to show up. Surely others, like Ymir and Hitch, would be accompanied by their parents to such a formal occasion. Eren thought he was a poor substitute for any relative in general, let alone a mother or father, but it would beat going alone.

Or worse yet, not showing up at all.
Eren knew better than to ask, the obscurities revolving around her absent father yet another topic he'd have to wait for her to bring up first.

Regardless, he was proud of his little blonde companion and vowed to show his support, firmly intent on staying true to his word.

"Sounds like a lucky guy." Eren smiled. "He'd be stupid not to show up."

University of Trost – Dormitory division

7:42pm – Levi: I have work soon. I'll see you tomorrow at practice.

7:44pm – Mikasa: Okay. Goodnight.

To send an emoji or not to send an emoji…

That was the question.

7:45pm – Mikasa: :) 

While on the move to a neighboring dormitory division, Mikasa's finger hovered over the send button, before finally realizing it couldn't hurt. Just a couple hours earlier, Levi had offered her a ride back to her dorm after tennis practice, and as usual, they'd spent a solid ten minutes making out in his car once he had parked in front of the building.

Kissing him was like an addictive drug, and she constantly craved more.

The smiley face emoji could suggest she was warming up to the idea of taking things further in their relationship. As if their heavy petting and make-out sessions weren't already a big enough hint, this singular emoji could certainly do the trick!

She tapped the send button, not expecting him to message back at all when she heard the faint 'ping' from her phone, indicating a notification.

7:51pm – Levi: That's some smiley face. I feel like I've earned a gold star.

Mikasa laughed a single beat, failing to muffle a sound that was more in tune with a jolted squeak. Levi had such a way with words. (She really shouldn't be all that surprised.)

Apart from the budding romance, a few other changes had been made in her life to keep things interesting; a way to deal with monotony.

Her most recent venture was a fairly tame one.

A long overdue haircut.

She finally found the time to schedule an appointment, figuring it would benefit her during the upcoming spring season as well. Sporting a new look was refreshing, not to mention the shorter 'do would be easier to manage and maintain. Still, it was going to take some getting used to. Long silky jet-black strands no longer grazed past her shoulder blades, tickling her clavicles when let loose. Her hair rested just about an inch below her chin, complimenting her most delicate features.

The cool thing about hair, however, was that it always grew back.
The pep in her step came to a stop when she had arrived at her destination. One hand carrying Chinese take-out, the other carrying *Heathers* on dvd, Mikasa found herself outside Sasha's room, more than ready for a laid-back girl's night in. She barely knocked on the door once when it suddenly swung open, unearthing a monstrous emergence of the beast encased within Sasha's deepest hunger pangs.

"Mika-" Sasha stopped mid-sentence, her predatory senses ignoring the enticing scent of heavenly Chinese food to analyze Mikasa's new look.

Unsure what to say, Mikasa dangled the plastic bag in front of her the way someone would dangle a treat in front of their dog. "...I come bearing gifts." That should get her to settle down.

"Your hair..." Sasha's eyes lit up, her bright smile as wide as ever. "It looks so cute!"

"Think so?" Mikasa mused, appreciating the positive feedback. "Thanks."

"Well come on in!" Sasha declared, pulling her inside.

Once they were comfortably situated, lazily lounging on lumpy bean bag chairs, Sasha initiated customary heart-to-heart between gal pals, all the while gorging herself with chow mein and general tsao chicken.

"Your birthday's coming up." Sasha would've expanded on the friendly reminder had it not been for the noodles slipping out of her chopsticks. "Oops!"

Mikasa nodded, offering a fork as an alternative. "Will you be able to make it to my party next Friday?"

"Of course!" Sasha replied, recalling the invite had indicated it would be held at the lovely Ackerman home. "Your house is only a few blocks from mine, so I'll probably stay in Shiganshina for the whole weekend. I'm sure my dad would want me to stop by."

"That's what Jean and Armin plan on doing, too." Mikasa noted, mentioning that Connie, Marco, and Mina seemed to have similar agendas. "Everyone figured they might as well since they'll be in the neighborhood."

As their attention turned back to the movie, a question suddenly weighed on Sasha's mind. She faked a cough, then silently reached for an egg roll. Still in mid-chew, she wondered whether or not she should ask, but cast the worries aside when she remembered that she and Mikasa shared a deep trust. Loosely following up with the conversation, Sasha wiped the corners of her mouth to get rid of a few feisty crumbs then turned back to Mikasa, voice shaky but gentle. "Is... Eren going to be there?"

The same question might have bothered Mikasa a few weeks ago, but instead of grappling with the burden of dismal emotions, she felt strangely optimistic. Although complex as the circumstances were, Sasha's inquiry brought to mind several other legitimate concerns.

Was she ready to see Eren again? Let alone talk to him? Had she one hundred percent moved on?

The contemplation only exacerbated the issue, eliciting a pensive Mikasa to disguise her conflicted demeanor by pulling her arms into a stretch, sighing in neutrality.

"He's more than welcome to show up if he wants to," she answered in complete detachment. Her hard-to-read expression had Sasha wondering if she had truly accepted the way things had turned out or if she was forcing herself to get over it.
Either way, her intuitiveness told her something was different about Mikasa; something not as obvious (or trivial) as shortening the length of her hair.

"You two haven't spoken much since… then…?" Sasha asked cautiously.

Mikasa shook her head, eyes absent-mindedly returning to the small screen, only half-watching the movie now.

Sasha decided against pursuing the matter, respecting the boundaries falling outside one's personal affairs. She was tempted to whip out the ice cream stored in the mini freezer when she opted to bring up a more light-hearted subject.

"Do you plan on living in the dorms next year?" She began.

"I'd rather not." Mikasa replied. "But it depends. Why?"

Sasha shrugged. "I have an idea is all."

Mikasa tilted her head. "What's that?"

"I was thinking we could get an apartment together." Sasha enthused. "Ya know. Be roomies and such."

Mikasa was a hundred percent on board with the proposal, save for one important piece of information.

"I thought you were pledging to Kappa Delta Pi?" The ravenette asked.

Sasha let out a nervous laugh. "I decided not to," she said ambivalently. "Just didn't seem like a good fit for me."

Although it struck her as odd, Mikasa certainly wasn't going to complain.

She briefly mulled over what could have possibly held Sasha back from joining the Greek life on campus. She was social, well-liked, and accepted into one of the most sought-after chapters. What made her change her mind (at the last minute of all things)?

Contrary to what she had just been told, Mikasa believed it suited her quite fittingly.

On the bright side, she wouldn't have to worry about scourging through articles in the newspaper (and on craigslist if worse comes to worst) in search of a half-decent roommate. It was a relief to know that her living situation was, for the most part, taken care of. She trusted that Sasha would be a responsible and enjoyable roommate.

"I'd love to." With a casual grin, Mikasa wholeheartedly agreed. "So what kind of ice cream did you get?"

_____

**Round One Arcade – Shiganshina Mall**

If Eren could've spent the entire day with Annie, no doubt about it, he definitely would've. Nevertheless, he had made plans for that particular Friday evening in advance to spend time with family; or at least one family member anyway.

He was parked outside of Round One, a bowling alley and arcade, psyched up to finally hang with his only cousin.
8:17pm – Eren: I'm here. Heading inside.

As he walked to the main entrance, he received an instant reply.

8:17pm: Beat ya here!

Knowing her as well as he did, he was hardly shocked. She was early to almost every family function. He was usually fashionably late.

Loud J-Pop music welcomed him inside, hazily intermixing with the sounds of pins being knocked down by multi-colored bowling balls and shrieks from deranged nerds raving in the glorious nostalgia of old-school treasures.

It was like taking a step back into the eighties and nineties.

Haven't been here in a while.

Eren hurriedly reloaded the credits to his club card and ascended to the main floor. In light of his hectic schedule, he looked forward to letting loose.

Moseying past Guitar Hero and the wacky table flipping game, he tried his luck and figured he knew where she'd be. Stationed on high-alert at Time Crisis 4, the petite brunette was flaming in true shoot 'em up fashion.

She suffered a minor casualty in-game, causing her to revolt and let out a curse word under anger-fueled breath. When she hit the last target, finally completing the second area of stage two, she celebrated with a little happy-dance, squealing, "YES!"

Giving her a moment to revel in the small victory, Eren stood back and only watched. It took him till now to fully understand what others meant by insinuating there were multiple junctions in which their personalities intersected. Aside from the psychical similarities, they had inherited identical characteristics and traits. So much so, they were practically carbon copies of one another.

He moved forward to pat her on the shoulder right before the next level was set to begin.

"Starting without me, Gabi?" He chuckled, finding it a challenge to be heard over the noise.

Her state of jubilation only multiplied upon his arrival.

"Took you long enough!" Gabi smiled, hugging him after quickly inserting the fake plastic pistol back into its slot. She couldn't care less if her health meter had completely depleted, as it had been too long since their last reunion.

Linking her arm into his, Gabi hauled them both deeper into the vast sea of arcade games.

"Come on!" She enthused. "Let's go hit up Mario Kart!"

First, there was Mario Kart. Then there was Dance Dance Revolution. After Pacman came a slew of games ranging from Tekken Tag Tournament to Need for Speed.

They gravitated back towards Mario Kart after several heated rounds of air hockey. Her character of choice? Yoshi. Always Yoshi.

Eren could only hope the energetic teenager put as much effort into her studies and softball as she did into mercilessly destroying his will to live. Losing to the little punk made him question every decision
he had ever made in his entire life.

*Bowling*, however, was a completely different story. Eren sought to win his damaged masculinity back by showing her who was boss over the course of a few games.

When it came to competing with Gabi, this was the one and only endeavor he could proudly display his superior skills, and he'd be damned if she made so much as an attempt in dethroning him from the magnificent title: King of the Bowling Alley.

Amid the competitive fury brewing between, Eren maintained civil conversation with her, catching up on topics ranging from school to home in between hitting innumerable strikes and spares.

Gabi was only a junior in high school, star softball player at Eldia High with a solid 3.5 GPA. Fresh from celebrating her sweet sixteen and earning her driver's license, the girl had yet to be exposed to the hardships that result when transitioning into a full-fledged adult. Eren couldn't help but envy how easy she had it. But boy oh boy, reality would slap her in the face sooner rather than later.

She had been sheltered too much as a child, which in turn only served as the catalyst for releasing the rebellious streak quelled within her already strong-willed spirit. 'Good girls are just bad girls who don't get caught' perfectly summed up Gabi.

Although generally well-behaved, her naughty side came out to play when the mood struck.

Some of her little ventures included egging houses of her exes, sneaking out of the house promptly after midnight, and her all-time favorite shenanigan; running over Trump campaign signs in her brand-spanking new car.

On a conversational level, the small brunette was by no means fake or two-faced. Like her older cousin, she was blunt, hot-headed at times, and in need of a filter.

Must run in the family.

The virtual screen above their lane served as a scoreboard, keeping track of points both competitors had earned thus far. The scores were separated according to the titles the two cousins input into their respective sections. Most people would simply enter in their actual names but where's the fun in that?!

Eren was at a loss when he saw what Gabi had entered into the 'name' input. "Why did you choose such a pervy name?" He asked in disgust.

"Why do you suck at life?" Owned!

Well into the first match, 2Legit2Quit found himself carrying the lead, while OliverKlozoff was a few sandwiches shy of picnic, struggling to keep up.

After suffering the embarrassment of a near gutter ball, OliverKlozoff was the first to speak, frantic upon seeing her opponent could potentially get a deuce.*

"So you and Mikasa are dunzo, huh?"

All 2Legit2Quit could respond with was a face-palm and a tentative, "yeah."

"Finally," the teen mused, leveling herself ahead of the foul line as she prepared to make her approach, aiming the heavy ball for the freshly laden array of pins. "Never liked her."
"Ouch," came a disdainful mumble from the oldest of the two. Wow. She really went there.

They watched in tandem as the ball was propelled forward, rolling swiftly down the lane in a perfect straight line, ultimately bashing into the dead-center of the pins.

Only two pins survived the explosive impact but to her chagrin, it put her in splitsville.

"Dammit." Gabi reached for another ball, turning to face Eren. "Let me rephrase that. I never liked her with you."

2Legit2Quit was taken aback. "What? Why?"

Gabi mistook his confused expression for that of hurt feelings and resentment.

"Look," she began to explain, "don't take it personally. It's only my opinion." She turned away to face off with the challenging task at hand. Barely managing to take one pin down, she was one shy of getting the spare. Groaning in annoyance, she returned to the conversation. "It seemed like she worried about you too much. And she had no sense of individuality whatsoever. She relied too much on the relationship and was like, borderline obsessive. You looked like you were suffocating half the time."

Eren rolled his eyes. "I couldn't disagree more, Gabs."

"Whatever," she sighed, motioning for him to take his turn. "I don't know nor do I care what went on behind closed doors, but that's what it looked like to me." Once his back was to her, she muttered under her breath, "Not that I want to know what went on behind closed doors."

"I heard that," Eren grunted, the weight of the ball supported by an unsteady hand.

"Aha!" Gabi squeaked. "So there WAS stuff going on behind closed doors! The door to your room to be exact!"

Her accusation made him lose focus, throwing his aim wickedly off balance.

Shit. Gutter ball.

"Yeahhhhh," Eren drawled in contempt, "see, these are the kinds of things families DON'T talk about with each other."

Not normal ones, anyway.

"I know," Gabi smirked. "Just wanted to distract you."

The conniving… devious… little spawn of satan she was!

"I'm never buying you swisher sweets ever again." Eren huffed. "Now prepare to lose."

"Good luck," she giggled mischievously.

Eren's once perfect score was tarnished, as his second attempt left three pins untouched, only mildly pissing him off. (And by mildly, the word 'extremely' can be used interchangeably in this case.)

"Seriously?!" he boomed.

"Bummer." Gabi feigned sympathy. "Better luck next time."
"Don't get your little hopes up," Eren sneered in a voice that nightmares were forged from. "There's no way you could possibly catch up to me."

"I can always try." Deep down, Gabi knew he was right, but figured it was worth the laughs she got out of the whole ordeal.

"Well," Eren let out a deep breath, watching as the scoreboard took its sweet time updating. "What's new with you?"

"The usual," Gabi replied stoically, selecting a nine-pounder. "School sucks. Softball season's coming up. I've been blowing off youth group 'cause it's lame. Mom and dad are pressuring me to apply to college already."

**Aim. Steady. Throw.**

The aftermath was evident following an abrupt clapping noise. The ball missed a few pins on the left side.

"Sounds like I haven't missed much," Eren remarked, slightly disappointed. He was quick to recall a similar youth, however, as he played his fair share of hooky senior year. Those were the days…

Amid his nostalgic reverie, Gabi hurled a blunt question his way, on the prowl for some juicy gossip. "You gonna tell me about her or what?"

Slightly defensive, Eren narrowed his eyes. "Who?"

"Annie," Gabi taunted. "I read your texts when you took off to the bathroom. Next time, take your phone with you and don't set your password to '1234.'"

Too many questions, not enough answers ran through Eren's mind. "I thought I had it on me…?!!" Echoed his voice in despair, insisting he couldn't have been gone for more than a couple minutes. "Did you pickpocket me?!!"

Gabi shrugged, feigning innocence. "Must have slipped out of your jacket or something. You oughtta thank me. It could have been lost or stolen."

"Like hell."

Gabi smirked devilishly. "Spill the damn beans already."

Shit. She was good. A real psycho!

Eren reasoned with himself that he was under no obligation to tell her anything. It was none of her business and he wasn't exactly prepared to share personal details regarding his convoluted relationship with anyone else.

**But,** she was family, a true confidant, and remarkably trustworthy. Nosy as hell? Sure, but he had pulled similar stunts on her in the past. Maybe this was payback; karma biting him in the ass.

Eren shook his head, wary of the shit-eating grin plastered on her face. "How about I tell you after one more game?" He offered. "Snacks are on you, by the way."

Gabi gladly accepted.

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A couple sodas and slices of pizza later, Gabi and Eren commenced further chit-chat and shit-talking
in a booth by the snack bar.

"Woah!" Gabi exclaimed. "So basically, you cheated on Mikasa?! With Annie?!!"

Eren grimaced, a tad uncomfortable. "I'm not exactly proud of it." Still, he manned up, taking full responsibility for his actions. "But… yeah."

"Can't say that I'm surprised. Nor do I blame you." Gabi hummed. She attempted to lighten the mood when she saw a troubled look claim his face. "I always knew you had a thing for blondes." Her somewhat distasteful joke had the opposite effect as Eren deepened his frown.

Not completely heartless, she let out a deep breath and became serious. "You shouldn't be so hard on yourself, ya know. It's not that big a deal. Everyone's guilty of cheating at some point." She leaned back and folded her arms across her chest. "I mean, it's not like you and Mikasa were married or anything."

Technically… she had a point. He and Mikasa weren't formally committed to one another…

Wait… what am I thinking?! Am I trying to justify it?

Eren accepted that Gabi's perspective was on par with her immaturity and inexperience. Unlike her, he knew better, and he was sensible enough to realize her way of thinking was dangerous.

But what more could he really expect from a sixteen-year-old?

The dull thoughts began to subside, making way for reflective brooding as his mind wandered to Mikasa. He envisioned his former high school sweetheart on the night he gave her the red scarf. Immensely guilt-ridden, he couldn't help but miss her.

He really missed her.

"You all right there, Eren?" Gabi's words went in one ear and out the other, as if they were out of focus.

He suddenly came to his senses at the loud hoots and hollers roaring from an adjacent bowling lane. Someone must have been having a grand old time.

He turned to face Gabi, blinking emptily before speaking. His voice was solemn, his expression somber.

"Mikasa…" he said softly, a pained look beneath dual emerald greens, "is going to make some guy very happy one day."

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**All-Star Sports Bar**

Whiskey on the rocks. Coke and rum. Gin and tonic. Four shots of peach schnapps. Someone towards the back ordered a Brut Rosé.

Only half an hour into his shift, Levi already had his hands full. Full but steady. With the crowded watering hole as rowdy as ever, he was prepared for one hell of a long night. Although a part of him hated his job, mainly because it forced him to interact with obnoxious assholes, he tolerated it because his co-workers were pretty cool and the pay was decent.

He also appreciated getting a shit-ton of tips.
And by god, the drunker they were, the better they tipped.

Levi wasn't a particularly 'big spender,' only pulling out his wallet to pay at the pump (or for the occasional cup of coffee at Cafe Charmant), but the extra money would come in handy in the not-so-distant future.

Mikasa's birthday was coming up and she had invited him to her party that same weekend.

He had been to her house before, but to his astonishment it had been void of anyone else. This would mark the first introduction to her parents, as well as the seemingly colorful group of friends he had heard so much about.

Levi was hardly the type to care what others thought about him, however, for Mikasa's sake he wanted to make a decent impression and present himself as a respectable guy; mostly so her parents would approve of him courting her. He was sensible enough to respect that, prompting him to wonder…

He'd like to think his own mother would have adored Mikasa.

Someone was still waiting on their drinks, to which Levi was quick to finish up the order.

Grand Marinier. Bailey's Irish Cream. Kahlua. The concoction resulted in a neat undiluted cocktail, layered ingredients visible through the shot glasses.

He slid them across the counter to the eager patron.

"Three B-52s," Levi announced, accepting the nod from a grateful customer.

"You're a doll." The nameless girl winked, leaving a hefty tip under her coaster before walking away.

His personal philosophy on the job once again rang true.

After collecting the wad of cash, he caught a glimpse of something out of the corner of his eye. At first, he thought his mind was playing tricks on him, but a second glance confirmed what he had initially dreaded.

Petra was lounging around with friends by the pool table, smiling as the others burst into laughter. A taller guy with wavy light brown hair stepped up right behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist. Levi thought he looked familiar but shrugged it off in annoyance, believing that must have been the guy she messed around with before their acrimonious breakup.

Still, he had trouble tearing his eyes away from her. She looked… so happy.

Suddenly, her head turned his direction and their gazes briefly met. Levi was the first to look away, internally chiding himself for staring too long. Against his better judgment, he turned back to steal one last glance, but Petra had fixated her attention elsewhere.

Her new flame, boyfriend, or whoever the hell he was had leaned down and pulled her in for a kiss, prompting Levi to roll his eyes disdainfully.

Looking back on it all now, Levi's only regret was ever allowing himself to believe that they could have one day started a family together.

He dodged a bullet.
Chapter End Notes

A/N: I made Eren and Gabi cousins. So sue me.

*deuce: scoring over 200 in bowling

Also, I love it when I'm somehow able to fit all my mains (Eren, Annie, Mikasa, Levi) into one chapter! :'}
Mikasa's Birthday!

Chapter Summary

A/N: It's late and I'm awake, staring at the wall.

If I don't update now, I won't until May, and I'd rather not let that happen lol.

Thanks to all who have reviewed and given this story kudos. It means a lot and I am forever grateful!

Long chapter ahead! Enjoy!

Friday, February 10th

Ackerman Household – Shiganshina Neighborhood

Nineteen.

Mikasa was turning nineteen years old.

Her birthday party had yet to officially begin, still waiting on the arrival of her friends. For now at least, relatives from both sides of her family were mingling about the house, wishing her well on her birthday after setting aside gifts in a neat array by the living room.

The two-story suburban home was decorated with colorful streamers and adorned with balloons of all sizes, the words 'happy birthday' marked in fancy print on several of the larger and more extravagant ones. Cake was accommodated delicately in the fridge. Party favors were lined up on an adjacent kitchen counter.

Everything was in order.

Clad in a scarlet maxi skirt and a beige off the shoulder blouse, Mikasa finished readying herself for the day's festivities in her room upstairs. Tearing her eyes away from an elongated mirror next to the closet, she moseyed over to her bedroom window, sunshine peeking through the blinders and spilling onto the floorboards. She peered down below and could see her father, making his way around the backyard. Establishing himself by the patio, he quickly fired up the grill, preparing to barbeque tender meat with the help of a couple of his brothers.

Although it was an unseasonably warm day, the temperature sitting in the low sixties, a slight chill hung in the air. Spring was still about a month away but thankfully, light jackets were all that were required for a casual outing.

Mikasa turned away from the window and took one last look into the mirror, figuring she should head downstairs. Any last minute gussying up had been interrupted when she heard the doorbell ring.

"I got it," she called out to no one in particular. After hustling down the staircase, she turned the corner into the living room and headed into the hallway leading to the front door.
Upon opening, she was presented with quite the adorable sight.

Armin was the first to show up, having ridden his bike from his grandfather's house. His hair was pulled back in a half-ponytail, his eyes were twinkling the same flawless shade of sapphire blue, and in his arms was a gift box covered in pink wrapping paper, doused in bright glitter.

His button nose twitched. "Happy birthday, Mikasa!"

"Thanks, Armin." She pulled him in for a hug then welcomed him inside. "The food will be ready by the time everyone else gets here. My dad's still out there, grilling."

"Okay." The shy blond nodded, taking off his shoes before stepping any further into the home. "Where should I put this?" He lifted the gift box.

"I'll take it," Mikasa replied, carrying the gift to where all the others had been situated. "Can't wait to open it," she said with a smile.

Armin returned the smile, coyly rubbing the back of his neck. "I hope you'll like it."

"Oh Armin," Mikasa sighed, "you could get me a pile of rocks and I would still be forever grateful."

At that, Armin muffled a humorous gasp, knowing her statement wasn't hyperbolized in the least.

For the next several minutes or so, they engaged in conversation regarding his studies at Ehrmich University. Mikasa learned he'd applied for and accepted an internship for the summer at a small robotics company, something he was initially reluctant to follow through with only because his grandfather would be left alone for the entire span of three months. Of course, fitting of his character, Grandfather Arlert insisted that he go, assuring him not to worry.

When asked about the upcoming tennis season, Mikasa remembered a very special guest would also be in attendance for the anticipated get-together.

Levi promised to show up in approximately half an hour, a thought that caused her heart to flutter.

She was about to provide a more detailed response regarding the impending season when a menagerie of boisterously loud knocks tore through her ears. For a moment, she swore there was a mob outside hell-bent on smashing the door down.

Thankfully, the 'mob' turned out to be no more than a couple of harmless morons. Loveable morons, naturally.

The reveal of Tweedledee and Tweedledum was an instant heart-warmer, as well as an instant relief.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY!" Connie and Sasha shouted in unison.

Not far behind them were Marco and Mina, strolling happily along, hand in hand. A wild Jean soon appeared, keeping his distance from the couples while loosely following their trajectory with a look that suggested a small hint of jealousy.

A few amiable rounds of hugs and laughs were shared among the circle of friends. Sasha offered Mikasa a single blue balloon, birthday card attached to the end of the string. When Mikasa looked up, she let out a tragic sigh. The large-print words on the balloon proudly proclaimed; It's a Boy!

"Thanks, Sasha." She couldn't hold in the stifling laughter anymore, though it mostly disguised a
plethora of sour feelings.

Once the group of long-time friends had settled in, Mr. Ackerman made an announcement for all guests in attendance.

"Food's ready!"

"YES!" Sasha screeched in victory, her mouth viciously watering. Scrambling past Connie and Jean, she triumphantly claimed a spot towards the front of a sloppily formed line, ready to get her grub on.

Mikasa took a step back, allowing the guests to serve themselves first. She sauntered over to the stereo in the living room, shuffling through a few radio stations before tuning in to her favorite.

"You're not going to eat yet, Mikasa?" Jean asked, nearly bumping into Armin. "Watch it, blondie."

Mikasa shook her head, casually swaying her hips to the beat of Classic by The Knocks. "I'm waiting on someone."

They'll be here soon.

Levi could hear people talking and laughing inside the humble abode. Shadows were faintly visible and he could make out distinct shapes behind the curtains, eyeing the figures rear of the double-pane windows through peripheral vision. A balloon swayed idly next to him, its string tied to one of the columns outside the front porch.

He checked his watch, lifting his wrist to eye-level. Right on time. With Mikasa's gift tucked in the crook of his arm, he waited patiently after giving the bell a ring. Social gatherings weren't exactly his favorite pastime, nor were they entirely foreign to him. Luckily, however, this would be a far cry from bartending at the All-Star.

Cue the birthday girl, and Levi's mood instantly perks up.

A warm smile claimed Mikasa's face as she sprang forward to embrace him, looking as beautiful as ever on her special day.

"Happy birthday," Levi said, lips grazing over her ear. He restrained himself from kissing her, mindful of the possibility they were being watched.

"Thank you." Mikasa expressed her gratitude by placing a chaste kiss on his cheek. Reaching for his hand, she said, "I'm glad you could make it. I finally get to introduce you to everyone."

Her smile was reassuring, enough to convince Levi this would go over very well.

Surprisingly, he had high hopes for meeting the two people responsible for creating such an incredibly remarkable young woman. Treating it as though it was a once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage, he imagined this would be the equivalent of paying his respects.

To put it simply, he was merely curious to see what they were like; if they were as weird as Mikasa described over countless 'private tennis lessons' and lunch dates.

Mikasa led him to the living room, the space now occupied solely by her friends as most of her family had compartmentalized themselves outside. Levi could see the others through the back sliding door, making themselves comfortable in selective seating arrangements on the veranda. His eyes scanned the assemblage of guests, attempting to pinpoint who among them could be her parents,
when he suddenly realized all eyes were on him.

As the duo stepped into the room every head turned his way, some perplexed by his presence.

Mikasa kept her smile intact, turning to address her friends.

"Everyone," she began, "this is Levi."

Following a few polite ‘hi’ and ‘hellos’ from the group of adolescents, each nestled comfortably on the matching sofa and loveseat after having their fill of barbeque fare, Mikasa began pointing them out one by one, reversing the somewhat awkward introduction.


"He does?!!" Jean and Connie squawked in unison.

Sasha shot up from her seat and hurriedly greeted Levi, hoping to gods above he wouldn't ask how her last Calculus exam went. (She managed to earn a solid B, but the mere thought of all the torturous studying and equations Levi instilled upon her was a fate worse than death.)

Shuddering at the memory, she then explained her prior familiarity with him to everyone else. "He's my math tutor," she croaked, masking a glimmer of anxiety beneath her rigid composure.

While that may have cleared things up on Sasha's end, the others were still curious as to how he had become acquainted with Mikasa. From the looks of it, they were quite familiar and comfortable with another.

Very comfortable with one another.

As if she had read their minds (and the staggering spike of tension in the room), Mikasa clarified.

"Levi is captain of the men's tennis team at UT," she said. "We train together."

In that moment, that unexpectedly awkward moment, she tensed up, heart racing wildly.

Was that it? Should she just leave it at that? Just… teammates?

Teammates who trained together. Teammates who attended the same university.

Teammates who went out on dates, maybe kissed a few times, held hands…

Speaking of which.

Oh. Yeah.

Mikasa looked down and realized she was still holding Levi's hand, dying a little on the inside when she realized the minor display of affection had been seen by everyone in the room.

_Awkward… awkward… so fucking awkward…_

Was she supposed to introduce Levi as her… _boyfriend?_

That was a damn good question.
What exactly was the nature of their relationship? They were more than friends… right?

Worse yet, what did it look like to her friends?

Of all the times to be having this kind of internal, reflective crisis…

Fucking fuck, this was weird.

Refusing to withstand the build-up of tension and pressure any longer, Mikasa loosened her grip on Levi's hand, quietly and slowly pulling hers away, then pretended to clear her throat.

She needed to get out of that room.

Struggling to collect herself, she maintained a subdued expression as her surroundings progressed in unconventional formulated fashion. Sasha and Connie were striking up casual conversation with Levi when she finally reached some semblance of clarity. Less panicked than before, she clumsily interrupted their exchange, her forced smile a tad crooked.

"I… should…” she mumbled, "…I should introduce you to my family."

"O…kay." Levi was puzzled by the urgency in her voice.

"Nice meeting you," Mina called out as they all watched Mikasa haul Levi outside to the backyard patio.

Once the raven-haired tennis duo was gone, Jean was the first to break the silence.

"I fucking called it!" He tried to keep his voice down, but could hardly contain the raging contempt. "I knew it wouldn't be long until Mikasa found herself a new boy-toy," he scoffed, chuckling bitterly. "She didn't waste any time crying over Eren."

Sasha frowned at that. If Mikasa had cried over Eren, she hid it from others, only allowing herself to do so in the privacy of her room. She mostly kept herself distracted with school, work, and hitting up the gym to stave off the emotional pain. Mikasa just wasn't open with her feelings and she dealt with grief differently than what may have been considered the norm.

But to insist she hadn't shed a single tear, implying she didn't care either way, was harsh and untrue.

"Stop being an ass, Jean." Connie rolled his eyes.

"Who's to say they're even dating?" Mina chimed in. "They could just be friends."

"Please tell me you're not that naïve, Mina." Jean shook his head. "Isn't it obvious?"

His question seemingly directed itself to everyone in the room, lingering in the air unanswered, causing uneasiness to set in.

Armin urged them all to dismiss the subject entirely, defending Mikasa whilst respecting her private life. "What difference does it make?" He shrugged. "It's none of our concern anyway."

"Armin's right," Marco agreed, aiding in his defense. "We're here for Mikasa and that's all that matters."

Upon hearing that, Jean let the whole thing go. After all, it was her birthday. He figured he could find a better time to grill her about it later.
Meanwhile, in a different setting, a moderately flustered Mikasa was making her way over to her parents, spotting them underneath the outdoor awning. With Levi following close behind, the question of how she should introduce Levi to her parents weighed heavily on her mind, ushering in more nerve-wracking thoughts.

Suspecting there was more to her eerie behavior than birthday angst, Levi took her by the hand so as to get her attention, stopping them both in their tracks.

"Mikasa," his tone was calm, soothing, "you seem… off."

"What are you talking about?" Her expression was blank, perfecting the art of the poker-face.

Levi called her bluff anyway. "Back there with your friends," he answered. "You practically bolted us out here."

She brushed his concern off, ignoring it completely.

"Don't know what you mean," she remarked stoically. "Come on."

But he stopped her again. "Are you nervous?" he asked quietly. He didn't wait for an answer. "Don't be." He reached to stroke her cheek, then tucked a loose stray of hair behind her ear endearingly.

They were in this together, and he wanted to assure her it would all be okay.

Mikasa didn't have the heart to tell him the truth. For now, she would let him believe it was only the 'meet-the-parents jitters' She'd force herself to suffer in silence, clouded by the guilt of it all.

She merely nodded and wordlessly continued to walk to where her parents had situated themselves.

Soon, they were nearly face to face with them, and from there it seemed a little easier to handle. Mikasa very much wanted to take her time introducing them properly, but also wanted to get it over with as quickly as possible.

"Mom, dad…" Mikasa straightened her posture and lifted her shoulders so as to exude confidence. She was on the verge of finishing her announcement when her father cut in.

"There she is!" Mr. Ackerman stood up from the lawn chair, camera in hand. "Gotta get a proper pic of the birthday girl!" He brought the camera up to eye-level and peered at the viewfinder in preparation to take the shot.

"Smile wide, baby!" Mrs. Ackerman implored giddily, instructing her daughter to imitate her exemplified ear-to-ear grin.

Mikasa felt inclined to remain stone-faced, therefore only raising a brow at her parents' random request to capture what they dubbed a Kodak moment.

The camera flashed unexpectedly, the aftermath revealing an emotionless Mikasa and her yet-to-be-introduced companion emulating an equally stoic look on his face.

"Oops." Mr. Ackerman fiddled with the device, adjusting the settings to his liking before attempting to shoot again. "Let's try that again."

Mikasa exchanged looks with Levi, hers conveying bewilderment and his suggesting a microscopic inkling of amusement. Hopefully he wouldn't think her parents were too weird.

"Uh, Dad?" Mikasa quickly intervened. "There's… someone I'd like you to meet… first."
"Oh, of course!" Mr. Ackerman affirmed, as though he were correcting a mistake. "I just bought this camera the other day and I'm still trying to get a feel for it. I've always preferred Nikon myself but I wanted to give Canon a try." Before he could further drone on, losing himself over minor details of it all, he shook his head and apologized. "I'm sorry, honey. You were saying?"

"Right." Mikasa resumed the meet-and-greet, her hand gesturing toward Levi. "Mom, dad, this is Levi. He's..." She paused, voice trailing off as she strained for the right word. "He's one of my teammates."

She shut her eyes dreadfully. Still not the right word.

"Levi," she continued, in spite of it all, "this is my mom."

At that, Mrs. Ackerman beamed. "Pleasure meeting you," the matriarch regarded, shaking hands amicably with Levi.

"And the self-appointed photographer here just so happens to be my dad," Mikasa concluded, her joke earning a hearty chuckle from said man.

"I've been the 'self-appointed photographer' of this family since before you were born," Mr. Ackerman mused. "Someone had to compile family photo albums, otherwise your mother and I wouldn't have anything to embarrass you with."

*Why... Mikasa thought dejectedly. Just... why?*

What confused her even more was Levi's reaction to the off-handed remark from her father; a suppressed chuckle turned fake cough.

*Someone thinks Dad's lame jokes are funny... that's a first.*

When she briefly mulled it over, she imagined Levi would probably pull the same antics with his own kids; strict in some aspects of his parenting but low-key enjoyed embarrassing them in front of their friends.

Her father and Levi certainly shared the same dry sense of humor.

Guess it's true when they say that girls tend to date guys who remind them of their fathers, even if it's only in the smallest of ways.

"What he means to say," Mrs. Ackerman interjected, "is that you wouldn't have anything to show your own children one day."

Mikasa internally choked.

As any progressive and respectable mother should, Mrs. Ackerman regularly encouraged her daughter to finish school first and focus on attaining an honorable career. *But,* her thirst for grandchildren was unquenchable; hinting at it whenever possible.

Mr. Ackerman must have moved on from teasing her, as his attention had now been fixed on acknowledging the yet-to-be-introduced individual's presence.

"So, Levi," he began, offering a firm hand-shake with the young man, "Mikasa's mentioned you a few times before. Good to finally put a face to a name."

"Likewise," Levi replied, relieved this was going well so far, (regardless of whether or not little
Mikasa was dying of embarrassment).

He felt strangely at ease, overtaken by a profound sense of admiration for the modest suburban family of three, each bound together by unconditional love and reverence.

He took his time analyzing Mr. Ackerman, closely studying his features as he carried on with well-meaning chit-chat. Noting only a few similarities between father and daughter, a quick glimpse over at the missus confirmed what he had speculated from the start. Mikasa looked more like her mother.

The evidence Levi had gathered thus far led to several conclusions.

Pertaining to the physical makeup of the girl in question, she had inherited her steel grey eyes, a pointed nose, and sharp jawline from her father.

From her mother, Mikasa had inherited her raven-black tresses, a milky complexion, and high cheekbones. They could almost pass for sisters, especially given that Mrs. Ackerman looked younger than her actual age.

Pertaining to the traits shaping her personality, Mikasa embodied the perfect balance of both parents. Combining strength, taciturn qualities, and sense of humor from her father with that of the humility, compassion, and gracefulness of her mother, Mikasa was what Levi considered perfection in its purest form.

He in turn considered himself the luckiest guy in the world.

Levi was pulled from his contemplation when Mr. Ackerman inquired about his academic endeavors.

"What are you studying, Levi?" He asked, after offering a variety of cold beverages kept in an adjacent cooler.

Levi opted for water, expecting the conversation to provide insight on his background; therefore, giving Mikasa's parents a little peace of mind knowing more about the man possibly courting their only daughter.

"Civil engineering," Levi replied, taking a swig from a bottle of Fiji water. "This is actually my last year at UT. I'm all set to graduate in June."

That was the door-opener to a wide array of topics, thoroughly intriguing Papa Ackerman.

As they began conversing over Levi's interest in clean water projects, Mikasa excused herself to a separate table garnished with fruit salad platters and other little treats, needing a moment to mull over a few things in solitude. She watched from the distance as her father and Levi became more invested in their discussion, faintly smiling to herself.

Turns out Levi wasn't the only one feeling as though a burden had been lifted. Mikasa was glad, albeit surprised, when Levi and her father began a though-provoking discourse on several shared interests, one of them being motorcycles of all things.

For Levi it was all about the experience. For her father, it pretty much resulted from a mid-life crisis.

Carrying on with their mutual affinity for classics like Harley Davidsons and sleeker designs from Kawasaki and Ducati, it appeared as though her absence was hardly missed or even noticed.

She told herself she should be happy. So… what was holding her back?
Without making a peep, her mother pulled up alongside her, popping a strawberry into her mouth. Reading her daughter like an open book, she caught on fairly quickly as to what had Mikasa so entranced and worked up at the same time.

A mother always knows.

"He seems like a nice boy," she cooed, nudging her daughter gently on the arm. Though she wouldn't say it out loud, she was genuinely heart warmed at the idea of Mikasa finally bringing home a guy truly worthy of her affection.

Ah, young love.

Mikasa raised a brow. "Yeah. I guess."

Her mother continued to stare at her, her gaze unavering.

"What?" Mikasa asked tentatively, failing to suppress a small, stiff grin.

"Mmmm?" Mrs. Ackerman hummed. "Nothing."

She sauntered away, heading inside the house to make preparations for the cake, leaving her daughter alone to process the underlying implications of her words.

Mikasa's head was spinning.

"Happy Birthday dear Mikasa…

Happy birthday to you!♫"

The chorus of enthused chanting and what vaguely resembled singing filled the cramped kitchen with a colorful range of pitches, tones, and timbres, igniting a passionate spark in the heart of a young woman on the verge of adulthood.

Over the years, she'd watched as the number of candles steadily increased, reminding her that her fleeting childhood had an expiration date.

Yesterday, she was excited to finally turn ten. Today, she was nineteen. Tomorrow, she'd be terrified of the big 4-0.

At the conclusion of the traditional birthday song, Mikasa looked up in a combination of joy and dread, encircled by friends and family as they encouraged her to make a wish and blow out the candles glowing atop the cake.

She wished for some peace of mind.

Tiny spirals of smoke rising from the defused candle wicks followed the gush of air expelled from her mouth, hot wax visibly melting.

As Mrs. Ackerman began cutting the cake into single slices, the ringing of the doorbell echoed throughout the home, struggling to be heard above the clamoring guests. Second guessing herself, Mikasa questioned if she had forgotten about anyone. If her memory served her correct, most everyone had been accounted for, and those who were unable to attend had let her know in advance.

"I'll get it," Mr. Ackerman offered.
"It's okay. I got it," Mikasa insisted, smiling at the idea of genuinely being surprised on her birthday. That's what made birthdays even more fun, right? Surprises!

That and birthday sex, but Mikasa promised to be a good noodle for Lent.

Sure, Lent was three weeks away but she decided to get a little head start.

She figured the well-being of the guests should take precedence anyway, prioritizing hospitality above all else. Cake continued to make its way around the kitchen and dining room (much to Sasha's delight) as Mikasa strolled down the hall to the front door.

When she opened it, she almost wished she hadn't, utterly stunned.

The heavy thuds of her heartbeat pulsated throughout her entire body. The color drained from her face.

This was one birthday surprise no one could have prepared her for.

"Hey, Mika."

Her eyes roamed over familiar handsome features, features she fell in love with over the course of four years. Emerald green eyes. Tan skin. Rich, dark brown hair.

It was Eren, standing in the doorway, a card in hand.

"Happy birthday."

Mikasa can suddenly remember their fondest memories in great detail, the images crystal clear, the laughs subtle and innocent, the tender gaze in his eye as real as the one he holds now.

She thought she might burst into tears right then and there. Tears of anger, sadness, frustration. A part of her wanted to be angry, tell him to leave in fitful rage and then slam the door in his face.

Instead, she stood there, frozen, unable to move or say anything.

Eren's jaw clenched, a nervous tick she knew all too well.

She really missed him. Even with him standing right in front of her, she was still missing him.

In what might have been an irrational move, she leaned forward and hugged him in earnest, burying her head into his chest, not wanting to let him go.

She missed what this felt like.

Eren reciprocated the embrace, holding her gently, his eyes slowly shutting.

"It's..." Eren gulped. "It's been awhile."

"Yeah..." was all Mikasa could manage.

They stayed curled up in one another's arms. Mikasa couldn't have been half assed to care if the door had been left wide open. Not when she had Eren again.

Except... he's not mine. Not anymore.

Her mind still a clusterfuck from all that had happened over the span of barely an hour, Mikasa
realized she was getting ahead of herself, not thinking clearly and acting dangerously on impulse.

She needed to accept it. She and Eren were over. For good.

Recoiling from her thoughts, she hastily pulled away and took a step back.

"Did you…" She struggled to keep level-headed. "…want to come in?"

Eren regretted to inform her that he couldn't stay. He had plans to meet up with someone within the next hour.

"I have to be going soon," he answered dismally. "Just wanted to stop by." He handed her the card, sheathed within a periwinkle envelope. "This is for you."

Mikasa accepted the card, fingers almost trembling.

She wanted him to stay, unsure if she could handle watching him leave again.

But she reminded herself nothing good would result from him hanging around even for just a few more minutes.

It would only plunge the knife deeper and deeper into her heart.

"Thank you," she sighed, fraught with longing. Her eyes fell to the ground, expecting him to leave her there and be well on his way to whatever he had planned.

To her surprise, Eren leaned forward, kissing her on the forehead before saying his goodbyes.

"Bye, Mika."

With that, he turned and walked away, shoving his hands into his pockets as he disappeared into the depths of the billowy neighborhood.

Mikasa held the card to her chest, unsure if she could bring herself to open it later.

*I should head back inside,* she thought, sighing deeply.

When she remembered the door was still wide open, she wasn't fast enough to make any amends to possible irreparable actions.

She turned back to face the inside of the home, only to see Levi standing at the end of the hallway, arms folded across his chest, leaning slightly against the wall.

No words were exchanged between them, because there was nothing to be said.

They only stared blankly at one another, Mikasa being the first to look away in what could only have been shame and remorse.

When Mikasa and Levi returned to the kitchen, the guests had dispersed themselves throughout the home. Some were socializing in the dining room, others assembled outside on the patio. Mama and Papa Ackerman briefly loitered in the kitchen before joining in on some fierce debates between in-laws in the living room. Everyone seemed to be occupied with their mixing and mingling, as well as their second (or in Sasha's case, third) slice of cake.

Mikasa sought to take advantage of the opportunity to sneak away upstairs to her room, dragging
Levi upstairs with her.

Levi expressed his vexation halfway up to her room. "What are you doing?"

"I need to talk to you," she replied seriously.

Levi only grunted in aggravation, patience wearing thin with 'girls and their dramatic antics.'

Once they were in her room, Mikasa closed the door behind them and locked it.

"Is that really necessary?" Levi berated her, referring to the lock. "Someone might get the wrong idea."

"Problem?" Mikasa huffed, insistent on the measures being taken for privacy.

"Look," Levi huffed, "I'm sure plenty of guys would love to be alone with you in your bedroom, but this doesn't feel right. Your parents are downstairs."

Cute.

"Sorry to disappoint you," she remarked bluntly, rolling her eyes, "but I didn't bring you up here for sex. I actually wanted to have a serious discussion."

"I'm listening." The whole thing was clearly an inconvenience for Levi.

Mikasa on the other hand was going stir crazy, the elephant in the room practically treading over thin ice.

Without so much as a thought, Mikasa was quick to vent her frustrations.

"Are you mad?" She wanted him to say 'yes.' She wanted him to hate her. To tell her she was beyond stupid and selfish. She thought she deserved it.

Levi, unfazed by her dramatic sense of urgency, took a deep breath and carefully thought it all out, preparing a tactful approach to calm her down.

"Why would I be mad?" he asked.

Of course Levi would say that. Of course he would take the high-road, proving he was the more rational of the two. More understanding. More mature and accepting.

Mikasa couldn't hold his gaze for long, tearing her eyes away and absentmindedly peering out her window.

"You should be," she finally mumbled quietly. You have every right to be.

Levi had a guess on what she meant by that, but chose to dismiss it in favor of getting to the real issue.

"Where is this coming from?" Levi asked, half-expecting her to ignore him. "Mikasa, I know you well enough to know when something's bothering you. What's got you so on edge?"

Silence loomed over them, further heightening the unresolved tension.

Before he could suggest they forget the whole thing and return downstairs, Mikasa spoke up.
"I introduced you as my 'teammate.'" She emphasized the word scornfully, hit with a pang of guilt. "I dragged you into a room full of strangers. And then…" She paused. "Eren…"

Levi watched as her expression momentarily softened, then shifted back into despondence again.

"The guy at the door…?" Levi asked.

Mikasa nodded. "My ex…" she didn't finish. She didn't have to.

"I kinda figured," Levi answered in detachment.

They stayed silent for what felt like an eternity, only the sounds of a tree branch bristling against the window penetrating the stillness.

Then,

"Do you still have feelings for him?" She saw Levi's question coming from a mile away, but even so, it wasn't an easy one to answer.

Mikasa took too long to reply, which was enough to count as a feasible response.

"I'll always care for him," came her delayed confession. "But he and I are over." For good.

Levi exhaled sharply. He couldn't relate to people who allowed themselves to be hung up over their exes. It was always best to go your separate ways and move on.

In spite of his own personal sentiment, it killed him to see Mikasa genuinely distraught over her conflicted emotions.

"So is that it?" he asked, ready to wrap things up and suggest they head back downstairs. "Your ex shows up and that's what's got you moody all the sudden?" The asshole showing up unannounced wasn't worth the aggravation in his opinion.

Mikasa let out a bitter laugh, unsure if he was mocking her or simply calling her out on her bullshit. Either way, Eren's unexpected arrival wasn't the main reason for her uneasiness.

"No." She shook her head. "This isn't about him. It's about us."

She was more concerned about where they stood in their… relationship.

"We are… more than just teammates… aren't we?" Mikasa's heart was pounding intensely, wondering if maybe she could have picked a better time to brood over the possibility that they wanted different things from each other. "More than just friends?"

Ah, so that's it, Levi thought. Truthfully, he wasn't immune to wondering about that himself.

"I had hoped so," Levi replied. "But I put off asking you that question because you seem hesitant at times. I don't want you to feel pressured into anything."

Mikasa formulated a cautious response. "I just want to take things slow," she stammered.

Levi nodded in agreement. "Okay. We'll take things slow."

"But is that what you want?" Mikasa inquired, refusing to accept it could ever be that easy.

"You're asking me what I want?" Levi appeared slightly dumbfounded.
"Yes." Mikasa thought it was only fair that he be allowed the opportunity to share his thoughts. Levi huffed. "You want the truth?"

Mikasa nodded, eyes desperately begging him to proceed.

"What I want," he began, inching closer to her, "is for you to put yourself first, Mikasa."

She was taken aback, contemplating the meaning of his words.

Speechless. She was utterly speechless.

"You don't need to rely on anyone else for anything when everything you need is right here," Levi continued, placing his hand above her head, in reference to her uniquely extraordinary mind. "Don't lose sight of that. Regardless of what others think or what they say, it all comes down to you. You're capable of making your own decisions."

It struck a chord with her. Never had Mikasa ever known anyone to demand that she challenge herself and reflect on her own personal growth, insisting that her only fault was her hesitancy to fulfill her true potential. Levi was willing to cast aside his own desires to put her needs first, placing the emphasis on what he valued most; progress.

It was then and there that she realized he was too good to her. That he was the only one who expected more from her because he truly believed she deserved better.

It's what she loved most about him.

"I really want us to work," Mikasa said after several beats of a calm silence. "I want us to give this relationship a shot."

Levi smirked, ruffling her hair lovingly so. "You don't have to limit yourself. If you want to see other people, that's fine."

It really wasn't, but a part of him was testing the waters.

Mikasa chuckled and shook her head. "I'm a big believer in monogamy."

"Good, 'cause I don't like sharing," Levi quipped dryly, his usual sarcasm like music to her ears. "And I don't have the energy to flirt with anyone else. Too much work," Mikasa retorted playfully. Gazing into his intoxicating greyish blues, she smiled, addressing him intently with her ultimate avowal.

"I think I'm ready to be your girlfriend, Levi," she said softly.

Levi raised a brow, returning her smile faintly. "You think?"

It was one of the few times she'd been lucky enough to see such a precious visage.

Mikasa reached for his hands, interlocking her fingers with his. She was sure of herself now. This was what she wanted.

"I want to be your girlfriend," she repeated, sounding more confident. When he nodded in agreement, a look of satisfaction seared onto his face, Mikasa made one final request. "Now how about we seal the deal?"
Levi's eyes absent-mindedly wandered to her bed, but restrained himself from entertaining any naughty little thoughts.

"You don't actually mean…?" A part of him was only messing with her. "Again; Your parents. Your family. Your friends. They're all downstairs."

*Ha. Ha. Ha.*

Mikasa had already plotted how long she'd make him wait just to get to second base. She was going to enjoy making him suffer.

In the meantime…

"This is the part where you kiss me," Mikasa teased, a tad impatient amid the anticipation.


And there, in her room, on her nineteenth birthday, they sealed the deal with a kiss.

Their first kiss as an official couple.
The Fall Sports Athletic Banquet

Chapter Notes

A/N: Here it is! Finally! The Fall Sports Athletic Banquet at SU! :D

Cute ereani moments are sprinkled throughout, although the premise of this chapter
might actually surprise you :)  
As always, thanks to those who have reviewed and hit dat kudos button! You are all so
sweet and I appreciate the kind words! :D
Next chapter is already written out, just needs some editing.

Let me know what ya think!
Also, caution! Potential triggers in this chap!

Saturday, February 11th

Fritz Hall, Stohess University

Formal events at the prestigious Stohess University were a rarity, but when it came to the school's
athletics, the faculty spared no expense in ensuring their athletes received the recognition they
deserved.

Fritz Hall had undergone recent renovations in preparation to accommodate the many athletes and
their families for the highly anticipated evening of celebration. The large auditorium was a part of the
athletics division building, named after one of the university's founders.

The enormous illuminated expanse was neatly arranged with bright fixtures to complement such high
ceilings. On the walls were portraits of hall of famers from a bygone era. The names of said athletes
were positioned below each photograph, etched onto silver plating. Honored for excelling in their
respective sports, each had earned a special place in the school's history; some still holding records
and setting nearly unattainable standards.

Other photos highlighted glorious triumphs over the years. The game-winning shot. A dive for the
finish line. An all or nothing tactic.

Each frame told an awe-inspiring story; stories that were forever preserved in the memories of those
who'd been lucky enough to witness that precise moment.

Or better yet, by those who were directly involved in those precise moments.

Aside from the décor hanging on the walls, numerous round tables filled the massive expanse from
corner to corner, the white cloth laden on each paired nicely with the porcelain tile. A projection
screen across the west facing wall cycled through snapshots of athletes in action at various games,
matches, and meets, while the east wall featured several yet to be presented plaques to honor special
athletes in categories ranging from 'most valuable' to 'comeback of the season.'

A large platform had been raised towards the end of the hall, serving as a stage from which speeches
could be given and announcements were to be made.
Outside was a terrace humming with plentiful ferns, small trees, and shrubbery. The courtyard, complete with a lovely fountain, was adjacent to the auditorium and was partially visible through the glass wall separating the guests from the exterior amenities.

Extravagant details warranted the same courtesy from guests in attendance.

Dressed to impressed and ready for the long night ahead, Eren and Annie were patiently seated at a table with Hitch and her family in a section reserved for the volleyball players.

Fall sports athletes of a different forte were settled in seating arrangements of their own. Football players had the largest, in accordance with the size of their roster. Cross Country runners had a smaller section, but had no qualms mingling about the hall either way. The men's water polo team were sectioned directly in the center, as they were every year. The cheerleaders had opted to sit near the football team. Both the men's and the women's soccer teams were settled near one another, leading to a bizarre mix of flirting and disdainful staring contests.

The volleyball team was the closest to the terrace, which Annie deemed advantageous. They had the ideal setup in her opinion.

Annie's eyes scanned the crowd, a part of her wondering if her father would be arriving soon.

She internally warned herself not to get her hopes up.

Casting the dismal thoughts aside, her gaze ultimately landed on a familiar tall freckled goddess. Ymir had finally arrived, her parents following closely behind.

"And Ymir used to give me shit about being late to everything," Annie sighed, rolling her eyes.

Eren chuckled at her remark. "She only missed the boring 'greetings and salutations' speech from the athletic director." He reached for his glass of water before continuing. "I doubt she'd be disappointed to hear that."

Ymir was making her way around the soccer teams and cross country runners amid their socializing with the intention of reaching an open table near her cohorts. She and her parents settled on a table right next to where Eren and Annie had positioned themselves, allowing for friendly banter between teammates.

"Hey, Eren." Her acknowledgment to the brunet was cut short, her jaw dropping in awe. Eyes sparkling in amazement, she was baffled by the stunning blonde at his side. "Woah, Annie…"

Annie couldn't have appeared more unfazed by Ymir's extensive, concentrated stare. "Would I pass inspection?" She asked dryly.

Ymir huffed in amusement. Annie's sarcasm was like oxygen to her lungs. "It's just weird seeing you in a dress. You look…" She tilted her head, still taking in the rare sight of an elegant Annie from top to bottom. Before she could finish, Eren and Hitch quickly interjected, offering their input.

"Gorgeous?" Eren smiled.

"Feminine?" Hitch muttered. "For once."

Ymir smirked, rubbing her chin. She had planned on resorting to using simple-minded words like 'hot' or 'ifonlyyouweregayoratleastbidamngirlseriouslywhyyougottaplaymelikethat,' but with her parents right next to her and all… it just didn't seem fitting.
Of course, whatever word Ymir had planned on using, was meant to be conveyed platonically. Her compliment had intended to be taken as having a deeper connotation than just the physical aspect of Annie's appearance. She couldn't help but admire how much Annie had grown over the past few months, truly blossoming into the endearing and kind-hearted girl she already knew she was. Slowly but surely, the petite blonde had transitioned from stoic hermit to content and hopeful. Though she'd always be a bit more quiet and reserved, Annie had gradually opened up to her teammates and those in her circle of friends- and Ymir knew who the slight but significant changes could be attributed to.

Eren.

It's amazing the impact someone can have on your life. One person can make all the difference.


Krista Lenz felt a muscular arm coil around her waist, her demeanor suggesting she was unmoved by the intimate encirclement.

She felt like a pawn in someone's game. A trophy for an arrogant man's showcase. A prize to be auctioned off to the highest bidder.

She'd grown accustomed to feeling like a piece of a meat, convinced she deserved the treatment for simply existing.

The bastard daughter of a gold-digging whore and a wealthy, pompous, self-righteous asshole.

*Just goes to show that two wrongs don't make a right...*

She could recall hearing that her entire childhood.

There were times she wished she could be invisible, concealing how forebodingly dead she was on the inside. If people really knew how dreadfully hopeless she felt, one of two things would happen.

They'd either give her an Oscar for such a riveting performance.

Or they'd sue for false advertising.

Clearly, Lady Luck was on her side, as the downpour of horrible memories and thoughts had abruptly been triggered at this precise moment.

*Fuck.*

"Krista," Reiner's voice pulled her mind from its perilously negative trajectory, inwardly reminding her to watch herself. "I want you to meet my parents." The way he was looking at her now was going to make it hard for her to refuse. Reiner had always been sweet and gentlemanly, always having the best intentions.

He was the kind of guy her family would want her to marry, settle down with, and have children. It made sense for them to be together. She was a perky little cheerleader. He would make an outstanding QB in the pros one day. He genuinely respected her and cared for her.

Maybe she could learn to love him...

After all, Krista had obligations to fulfill for her family's sake.

There was no room for f*gs or d*kes in the Reiss family. Lovely choice of words from her paternal
grandparents.

Internalized homophobia was something Krista had struggled with since she was around thirteen. Going to an all girl's catholic private school didn't exactly help with that.

Years of putting on this façade as a cutesy ball of sunshine with golden blonde hair and exquisite blue eyes had taken a toll on her emotionally and mentally. She hated herself, often wishing she'd never been born.

She wanted Krista Lenz to die and revert to the name given to her at birth. Her real name.

Historia.

But she couldn't. She would never be granted permission or given a formal blessing; her punishment for merely breathing.

Reiner was still waiting on a response, the expression on his face shifting to that of uncertainty and concern. "Are you okay, Krista?"

That's not my name... She thought to herself, suffering rancorously.

She offered a curt nod before slipping away from his grasp. "Yeah, I just need some air." She looked ahead to the terrace outside, aching to surface into the coolness of night. "I'll be back before they announce the next round of awards."

Reiner frowned, relenting nonetheless. "Sure." He wanted to give his girlfriend some space, watching gloomily as she headed outside.

Krista couldn't bolt through the doors fast enough, maintaining a calm expression until she finally stepped out on the paved promenade. Out of view of the other guests, she allowed herself to brood, hugging herself while leaning surreptitiously behind a row of potted Cyprus trees.

She was alone. Alone with nothing more than her thoughts and the moonlight on her skin.

Before she could drum up some sort of excuse to skip out on the remainder of the evening's celebrations, the scent of smoke wafted in a light trail her way. Maybe it was the direction of the wind blowing, or maybe the scent was particularly strong.

It wasn't cigarette smoke. The smell was akin to a grassy burnt aroma. Whatever it was, it smelled like bad decisions and rebelliousness. The realization came to her all at once, like the flip of a switch.

Pot.

The source of the pot smoking came in the form of a tall individual, freckles sprinkled across a warmly tanned face, clad in non-gender conforming attire. Krista figured she had to have seen her somewhere before, but couldn't quite put her finger on it. The girl from her choppy memory had her dark brown hair pulled back in a low ponytail, instead of it loosely flowing chin-length as it was now.

Wait... she plays volleyball... and she works at that sushi restaurant downtown...

The name of said girl soon reached her recollection.

Ymir.

Krista felt herself tense up, thoroughly intrigued by the woman. From where she stood, her position
allowed her a vantage point where she could stay hidden from Ymir's sight. Internally berating herself for watching what could have been a moment of privacy for the brunette, Krista slowly meandered from behind the array of Cyprus trees and held her breath. She decided to chance her quick escape back inside the auditorium.

She hadn't moved fast enough, as Ymir caught her on the move, dispelling the rolled blunt from her mouth to speak.

"Huh," she mused. "I thought I was alone out here."

*So did I*, Krista thought derisively. She turned to acknowledge the volleyball athlete with a forced smile before deciding she should be on her merry way back.

Ymir frowned impishly. "Aw, I didn't scare you off, did I?"

For reasons unknown to her, Krista stopped in her tracks, turning to face the wave of what she couldn't tell were taunts or attempts at flirting.

It all had her so… confounded.

Playing the polite and innocent card, Krista addressed her intently, her tone gentle and endearing. "They're going to make the announcement in a few minutes."

*The* announcement. Ymir knew what the blonde was referring to. The top honor for all fall sport athletes. The most coveted and sought-after award, with only one male and one female being the recipients.

Yet Ymir couldn't give two fucks.

"Yeah, so?" Ymir drawled, lowering the blunt from her mouth.

Krista kept her gaze locked on the woman before her, smoke lazily spiraling in the air. Her eyes fell to the blunt in her hand, merely blinking at the sight of it, curiosity ridden beneath the silence.

Ymir picked up on the subtle hints of interest. Suppressing a mischievous chuckle, she held her hand up and offered the girl a drag.

"Wanna try?" She asked, smooth and confident.

Krista snapped out of her trance and shook her head wildly. "No," she gasped. "And you should stay away from that stuff."

Ymir laughed a single, rough beat. *Goodie fucking two-shoes.* "Why? Because I could get kicked off the team? Lose my scholarship? Piss off my parents?"

Krista narrowed her eyes, annoyed by the carelessness of someone the school's athletic division hailed as the volleyball messiah. For someone who was so naturally gifted and regarded favorably by her peers, she set a shit-poor example for others. *Especially* given that she knew better.

"You make it seem like none of that's a big deal," Krista replied, feigning a concerned tone.

Ymir scoffed at that, taking another drag. "I was kidding. Lighten up a little." Her expression momentarily softened, exhaling sharply before continuing. "I don't do this often anyway. I know it's a shitty coping mechanism and all… but fuck it. It's not the worst thing I could be doing out here."

"That's not much of an excuse." Krista scowled in disapproval. "But it's not my place to judge."
"You're damn right it's not," Ymir fired back.

Assuming that would be the end of it, Krista hastily sought to head back inside, turning her back to Ymir.

Ymir, however, was not finished. "Why did you come out here?" Her tone was bordering on accusatory, wanting to get straight to the point. "Got tired of the whole 'people-pleasing' bullshit?"

Yeah. Maybe.

Krista wouldn't give Ymir the satisfaction. If she really wanted 'Krista Uncensored,' then she'd let her have it. She had just about reached her limit, approaching the boiling point.

"You're… insufferable. There's no way you could possibly understand…" She trailed off.

"Sure I do," Ymir replied casually. *I used to be just like you…*

The answer wasn't enough to calm her nerves, as evidenced by the impetuous approach Krista implemented in a curt march. Only about an arms-length away, she folded her arms across her chest, confronting the taller woman with an impatient glare.

"How so?" She demanded irritably. "How could we possibly be alike?"

Ymir rolled her eyes. Her blonde crush was impeccably adorable when provoked. Smirking triumphantly, her delayed response was a simple question of her own. "Aren't you tired of living your life how others expect you to? Don't you want to live for yourself?"

Taken aback, Krista's arms fell to her sides like dead weight. Damn it all to hell if anyone in her family heard even the slightest bit of this conversation. Damn it all to hell that in that exact moment, staring at the woman from her shorter height, she was captivated by how beautiful she was.

Ymir had the most beautiful golden brown eyes she had ever seen.

She caught herself from staring too long. "You didn't answer my question," she muttered in indignation.

Ymir smirked provocatively, running her free hand through her chestnut brown locks. "If you really wanna know, I could tell you over dinner sometime."

Her flirtatious offer had Krista completely baffled, a tad appalled even. She was about to spit out some semblance of a rebuttal, mulling over possible ways to reject her.

'I'm not gay.'

'I don't swing that way.'

'I don't play for your team.'

Lies that kept her locked in the goddamn closet.

Instead, Krista resorted to evasion, partaking in rebellious antics she had sworn off for the sake of her 'good girl' image.

She pointed brusquely at the blunt in Ymir's hand. "Let me try."

Her command had Ymir smiling devilishly, clicking her tongue mockingly so.
"You're going to reek of this shit as soon as you step back inside," Ymir taunted, more so of a tease than a cautionary warning. "The smell's gonna get all over that nice little dress of yours."

"I don't care," Krista retorted.

At that, Ymir handed what was left of her cheap pot over, surprised when Krista inhaled and proceeded to smoke like a true champ.

The illegitimate Reiss princess had definitely done this before.

After a few long drags, the blonde tossed the remnants to the ground and stepped on it, only partially satisfied.

"That was pretty shitty," Krista scoffed. "I've smoked better stuff in high school."

Ymir closed her eyes, reveling in the small moment of victory. The seed had been planted. "I bet you have."

They stayed out there on the terrace for a few more minutes, no words exchanged between them in the short span of time.

Unbeknownst to her, Ymir hadn't realized that Krista Lenz was gone.

In that finite moment, Historia had surfaced, vulnerably revealing her true self.

This was all she really wanted.

The crowded auditorium fell instantly silent in momentary suspense.

The athletic director was about to announce the final awards for the evening.

Athlete of the Fall Season.

Two outstanding athletes, one male and one female, had been carefully selected from a small committee appointed by the board. Everyone in the jam-packed hall had been looking forward to this, though it was obvious some more than others.

The athletic director commenced a short speech before revealing the identities of the chosen individuals.

"Before I ask the remarkable recipients to join me up on this stage, I'd like to thank everyone involved in making it yet another great season for our hard-working athletes. It's imperative to remember we're all in this together, carrying on Stohess University Hawks' pride! Give yourselves a great round of applause!" He clapped his hands together, stepping away from the mic as the audience followed his cue.

Halfway into the rest of his speech, Annie peered down at the plaque nestled in her lap.

The Stohess Women's volleyball team had earned 'Team of the Fall Season,' honored for their accomplishments and making it to the NCAA semi-finals. The coach insisted that Annie be the one to take it home, as she had simultaneously earned 'Rookie of the Fall Season.'

Although neither her mother nor her father had made it, she was beyond grateful in knowing that there were people in her life she could count on.
Her coach and teammates were incredibly supportive. Ymir and Hitch might have been sadistic pains in the ass, but they were honest, loyal, and truly cared for Annie's well-being.

Then there was Eren; the boy who taught her how to smile again.

As the cheering and clapping had subsided, Annie reached for Eren's hand, holding it below the table. He looked over at her, thinking she wanted to tell him something, but turned back to the stage with a smile when he realized she only wanted to interlace their hands together.

It fit her personality, resorting to actions and small gestures rather than words.

The athletic director returned to the mic, ready to reveal the names of the recipients. Two giant plaques had been erected behind him, both hidden underneath thick cloth to keep the audience in anticipation.

"This next athlete has proven himself worthy of this honorary title. He's a true warrior on the field, he's a leader among his teammates, and he shows promise in upcoming seasons. I'm proud to announce, ladies and gentlemen, that the male Athlete of the Fall Season award goes to…"

The tension in the air was thick. The looming silence almost torturous.

The director paused, signaling to a couple of volunteers behind him to prepare to tear down the cloth covering the plaque at the snap of fingers.

Following the brief break in proceedings, he made the long awaited declaration.

"Reiner Braun."

Hoots and hollers erupted in celebration, the clamoring of his comrades deafening as he made his way to the stage.

The brawny blond shook hands with the director, smiling widely like he'd just won the lottery.

Handling the plaque bestowed upon him with care, he was hit with an adrenaline rush, suddenly fired up as the overwhelming victory came over him.

He hadn't felt this good since the first touchdown of his college career.

The director implored him to share a few words with the audience, possible thanks or regards to the important people in his life.

"I gotta give a shout-out to my coach for this season!" Reiner enthused, gripping the mic as a single bead of sweat rolled from his forehead. "Thanks to my team for having faith in me. Thanks to my parents for believing in me and taking me to practice every day when I was a kid." His eyes roamed through the crowd, searching for the special lady in his life. Bingo. She was sitting quietly by her father with the rest of the cheer squad. "And lastly, I'd like to thank my girl, Krista. For all your support and cheering for me at all the games. You're amazing."

A swarm of 'awwwwwws' and whistles indicated his heartfelt bout of thanks had been well-received; adored even.

Krista shifted uncomfortably in her seat, desperately wanting to run back outside or take an emergency break to hide in the restroom.

The cheers continued even after Reiner had sat back down, both his parents offering congratulatory
remarks and hugs.

The director was ready to announce the female recipient, signaling once again to the volunteers behind him to take their place.

"As for the female Athlete of the Fall Season, it would be an understatement for me to say she's the best at what she does. She'd led her teammates to victory against heavy-hitters like Sina and Trost. She never ceases to amaze fans and spectators every match with her unmatchable power and speed. She embodies what it means to be a heroine in her own right. Ladies and gentlemen, I am honored to present this award to…"

A long beat of silence preceded the final announcement for the evening.

The entire auditorium was straining for release.

The director smiled and at long last…

"Ymir Eriksson."

Massive cheers thundered from the volleyball team, screaming like fangirls as the tall freckled anomaly sauntered to the stage. At Reiner's behest, the football team gave her a standing ovation, and soon the Cross Country runners and men's water polo team followed suit.

Annie and Eren stood in tandem with the others, proud of Ymir as she had more than earned her moment. Hitch squealed wildly in excitement, jumping from her seat.

Ymir half-heartedly grinned (mainly because her parents had insisted on getting a good picture for the family photo album) and accepted the plaque from the director himself.

She instantly turned to leave the stage when he suddenly stopped her.

"Before you go," he beckoned, "care to share a few words? This is your moment after all."

Ymir was about to shake her head and walk off… until her eyes came across a trepid sight.

Krista was staring right at her, lips pressed firmly in a straight line, eyes pleading.

It was enough to make the impenetrable, hard-headed volleyball champion ache.

Then and there, Ymir had suddenly changed her mind.

"Actually… yeah," she said urgently. "There is something I'd like to say." She moved back to the mic stand, standing tall and exuding confidence.

Eren and Annie exchanged looks as Ymir prepared to share her thoughts with everyone in attendance.

"This is going to be interesting," Annie huffed.

Hitch whipped out her camera, ready to record the fiasco from start to finish.

Ymir cleared her throat and began. "I have to admit; it feels so surreal being up here. I can honestly say without my family and my teammates, none of this would have been possible." A small round of applause followed, before she continued, her speech taking a hard turn for the unpredictable. "There was actually a time when I thought I'd never make it this far. When I'd been told I wasn't good enough. When I let people treat me like I was less than and I thought I deserved it. I thought all the
fucked up things people would say to me were true."

The hall fell uncomfortably silent. The director's eyes widened in shock. Someone nearly choked upon hearing her curse. Her own parents looked as though they might die of heart attacks.

Ymir carried on, not holding anything back. "As a young girl, I struggled with a lot of stupid things. Overcoming adversity was a daily obstacle for me growing up in the small town where I was raised. I was looked down on for reasons beyond my own control. I felt like… like I had no hope."

A bitter laugh escaped her mouth, minutely escalating the tension. She locked her gaze onto Krista, as if she were holding a one-on-one conversation with her alone, like no one else in the auditorium existed.

"But when I look back on it… I wouldn't change a thing." The shift in narrative had everyone's interest piqued, compelled by her message. "It was so important for me to know what it was like to hit rock bottom because I found out what the most important thing is... to be true to yourself. I pay no mind to those who tried to break me. They no longer have power over me, because I won't give it to them. I don't live in fear. I'm free. I know I'll always be okay, because no matter what, I know who I am.

"Ultimately, that's what's gotten me here. That's what's kept me going. To live my life with pride."

All remained quiet. Several audience members looked over at one another in uncertainty, only murmurs escaping from a tight-lipped few.

Ymir stepped away from the mic, not caring what the outcome was going to be. She let out an elusive sigh of relief, content with her impromptu speech. She was about to hop off the stage in nonchalant fashion when an enormous wave of praise resounded from every corner of the auditorium.

Her teammates began chanting her name, her parents were wiping tears of joy (and maybe a little of despair), and many applauded her for the message and the forthright way it was delivered.

Ymir was slightly startled by the reception, knowing that her big mouth often got her into trouble. But she had no regrets.

Out of the corner of her eye she caught a glimpse of an enkindled blonde sitting upright in her seat, and their eyes met for what felt like an eternity.

Historia smiled.

The evening had nearly concluded everything according to the itinerary, only the closing speech from the director and several committee members left to go.

The final intermission for the night had Annie ready to head back to her apartment. Other athletes had opted to leave early as well, filing out the exit one by one.

"We don't have to stick around for the rest." Annie yawned, facing towards Eren. "I'm ready to go whenever you are."

Eren, who had been Annie's ride to the banquet, was willing to accept her request, looking forward to being alone with the blonde as Hitch had informed them she was heading home for the weekend.
"Okay." He nodded. "Let's go."

He fished the car keys out of his pocket as Annie bid Ymir and Hitch farewell, congratulating the 'Athlete of the Fall Season' for accomplishing such an incredible feat.

And for such a heartfelt speech.

After saying their goodbyes, Eren and Annie walked hand in hand towards the exit.

A figure following behind rapidly approached them, placing a hand on Annie's shoulder. At first she thought maybe Hitch was going to tease her about 'getting down and dirty' and what not, so she took her time turning around, preparing for her time to be wasted.

Her sudden cease in movement caused Eren to decelerate as well, both turning in unison to the source of the interference.

Annie tightened her grip on Eren's hand. Her face went blank. She looked like she had just seen a ghost.

A man stood before them, the somber smile on his face directed towards Annie.

Before the man could speak, and before Eren could ask who he was, Annie was quick to utter a single word.

"Dad…"
Chapter Notes

A/N: Super-mega angst ahead. Apologies in advance :/
As always, thanks to those who have followed, favorited, and reviewed! I'm currently working on another writing project- which I will be happy to share with you all sometime within the next couple weeks or so! (That's not to say I'm forgetting about this story, because this fic is my precious and it WILL be finished even if it's the death of me! ASDFGHJKL)

If ya have any questions, you can hit me up on tumblr!

Thanks for being sweet and supportive, everyone! :)

Saturday, February 11th

Fritz Hall – Stohess University

"Dad…"

Annie Leonhart froze, feeling her whole body go limp.

She hadn't physically seen her father in months. When she called weeks prior to ask if he was available to make it to the banquet, he told her 'maybe,' which usually meant the seat specially reserved for him would be empty.

This time however… he actually showed up.

Everything faded into a blank abyss. The chatter of others around them, the melodic tunes radiating from the grand piano, the thuds and bumps from chairs sliding against the marble tiled floor; all disparate noise that melted away into oblivion. Only the irate beating of her heart, ringing mercilessly in her ears, took precedence in the wake of her father's return.

Eren remained quiet, figuring he should give them a moment.

So… that's her dad…

He had yet to learn the details surrounding the complex relationship between father and daughter, but from the looks of it, Annie appeared as though she was about to internally combust, crack under pressure-

Succumb to her one and only weakness.

"Well," Mr. Leonhart stood there waiting anxiously, holding his arms wide open, "aren't you gonna give your dad a hug? It's been a while since I've seen my little girl."

Thoughts wildly raged on in Annie's head, keeping her subdued by Eren's side. She was taken back to the last time she saw her father. The innumerable phone calls and voicemails. Memories that ravaged her dreams. The painful void left in his absence.
When she came to her senses, it took less than a beat for Annie to respond. She abruptly let go of Eren's hand and rushed into her father's arms, crashing into his chest like it was her own personal safe haven.

She couldn't care less about the past. All the times her father had let her down, broke his promises, or abandoned her when she needed him most. All that mattered was that he was here now, he looked healthier than he had in years, and he had her in his arms again.

Annie vowed to confront him about his shortcomings, for lack of a better word, later. Right then and there, for once, she was happy that he fulfilled his promise. She felt like she was home.

When they parted from one another, Mr. Leonhart looked over at Eren, offering an ungainly but well-meaning smile.

"I see you have a friend with you," he said, looking back at Annie as if waiting for an introduction. Annie nodded, reaching for Eren's hand once more while pulling him into the exchange.

"Dad, this is Eren," she informed him, hoping Eren wouldn't feel too uncomfortable being thrown into one hell of an unconventional family reunion.

It was all happening so fast; one minute, she and Eren were leaving, the next, she'd suddenly been reunited with her father.

Is this really happening?

"Nice to meet you, Eren," came Mr. Leonhart's mild-mannered greeting. He cleared his throat and then proceeded to ask what the nature of their relationship was. "You two…?

Eren and Annie exchanged looks, both nodding their heads and smiling faintly in embarrassment.

"Yeah…"

"We're… dating."

The replies from both brunet and blonde respectively resulted in slightly awkward silence, though Annie reasoned with herself that between the way she and Eren were looking at each other and the fact that they were hand in hand should have been a convincing answer all of its own.

Eren, meanwhile, felt like something was off. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, nor would he allow himself to make judgment calls. For now, he'd reserve any and all preconceived notions until Annie gave him the full story.

That being said, he felt like he was intruding on a heartfelt father-daughter moment.

Lost in his thoughts, Eren had failed to give any attention to the last bits of their conversation, returning to the discussion when Mr. Leonhart offered Annie an opportunity of sorts to catch up; or make up for lost time, rather.

It was never too late to atone for the amassed damage over the years; one step at a time, piece by piece.

"Can I take you out to celebrate or something?" Mr. Leonhart asked his daughter. The man appeared
guilt-stricken, his tone somber. "We can get fudge sundaes like we used to when you were a little girl." He paused and stole a quick glance at Eren before continuing. "And… your friend can come with us."

Annie was stuck somewhere between a rock and a hard place. Though she and Eren hadn't really planned on anything more than just hanging out at her apartment for a bit, she felt like if she were to go along with her father's proposal, she'd essentially be ditching him in the process.

But.

This was her father. Her dear old dad. Papa Leonhart.

He wanted to spend time with her- and god knows when, or if, she'd ever get the same chance again.

If Eren wanted to tag along, that was fine with her, but the way Eren was staring emptily at the ground and hardly contributing anything to the conversation other than 'yeah' or 'oh' made it seem as though he was uneasy being caught in the middle.

From his own perspective, it was strictly a Leonhart family matter, and Eren wanted to respect that.

He smiled at Mr. Leonhart and then looked back at Annie.

"You should go," he advised, giving Annie a nod of encouragement. "I'm sure you and your dad have a lot to catch up on."

"Are you sure?" Annie asked tentatively, conflicted.

"Yeah." Eren nodded once more. "It's fine. I'm just gonna head home. My mom wanted me to stop by over the weekend anyway."

"Okay," Annie sighed, hugging him goodbye. "I'll call you tomorrow."

During their embrace, Eren's lips hovered over her ear, whispering one last sentiment.

"Congratulations, by the way. I'm proud of you, Annie."

Annie smiled softly.

You're so good to me.

Wishing she could have introduced the two most important men in her life under better circumstances, she hoped Eren could at least sympathize with the complicated state of affairs.

"Goodnight, Eren," she whispered.

After pulling away, Eren turned to address Mr. Leonhart before heading out.

"It was nice meeting you, Mr. Leonhart."

Mr. Leonhart offered a single wave. "Feeling's mutual, Eren."

Eren left them there, a wave of mixed emotions clouding over him as he made his way through the parking lot to his car.

On the one hand, he was worried Annie might get hurt, ultimately getting her hopes up for nothing.
On the other hand, he was optimistic. Looking on the bright side of it all, her father finally showed up to an important function for once. His presence alone was a bold enough statement in that he wanted to mend his broken relationship with his only daughter.

He hoped that was the case, anyway.

Although he had no insight on what the history was between them, he only wanted what was best for Annie.

Annie's happiness came first.

Eren strolled up to his Mazda, absentmindedly mulling over possible outcomes as he unlocked the driver's side. Slumping into his seat, a small part of him was pained when he looked over to the passenger side, only to find that it was empty; completely void of a particularly lovely blonde.

*She'll be fine.*

He put the key into the ignition and began navigating along the main roads to the Shiganshina neighborhood. The drive allowed for him to ponder several different things at once, mostly as an effort to distract himself from worrying about Annie.

*It's all gonna be just fine.*

When his attempts at reassurance became too exhausting, he turned on the radio and scanned through a couple stations in detachment.

"*And in other news...*"

Static.

"*Here's number six on this week's top ten...*"

Static.

"*...He might be the number one draft pick...*"

Static.

"*Back to smooth jazz, live at the Colossus Downtown...*"

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**Ackerman Household - Shiganshina Neighborhood**

Mikasa sauntered into her bedroom, skin polished and glowing from a lavish bubble bath.

After changing into her pajamas, she bid her parents goodnight and prepared to go to bed, hoping to get a well-rested start for the week ahead of her.

She hadn't yet laid herself down onto the mattress when something suddenly caught her eye.

Nestled atop her wooden desk was the unopened birthday card from Eren, still sheathed inside the periwinkle envelope.

Mikasa contemplated whether or not she should open it—whether or not she was *ready* to open it.

It was possible its contents consisted of no more than a simple birthday greeting, but the awful
sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach told her that wasn't the case.

Not after the way Eren showed up at her doorstep, his presence well-meaning but cryptic nonetheless.

_Maybe I'm overthinking it_… She thought, tapping her foot against the floor in apprehension.

She cautiously approached the desk, still eyeing the card hesitantly. Her patience simmered down with the dullness of the room. The suspense, the mystery laden within, all the unanswered questions were going to keep her up and impede any attempts at falling asleep unless she tore the card open now.

In a single brazen move, she swiped the card from the desk, driven by an inexplicable force hell-bent on getting it over with.

Her fingers remained steady, her posture perfectly straight, her overall demeanor unwaveringly congruent with the calm setting. After tearing the envelope open, she felt herself ease up upon seeing the face of the card; an elephant holding the string to a balloon with its trunk.

Eren had remembered and took into account her life-long affinity for elephants, her fascination exemplified by all the stuffed animals and other memorabilia scattered throughout her room. She couldn't help but give in to the small smile tugging at the corner of her mouth.

With her fingers tracing the edge of the thick material, she gradually opened the card, revealing the inside had been divided into two parts.

The first part consisted of a simple _'Happy Birthday'_ in black print.

The second part was a lengthy hand-written message from Eren, something she expected from the start.

Mikasa's smile slowly faded.

_Mikasa,

We both know I've never really been good with words, but I'll express my thoughts as best I can in writing this.

I'm sure you have better things to do than read this, today being your birthday and all, but I owe you something in return for all the times you've been supportive of me.

More than anything, I'm sorry, Mika.

I regret what I've done to you. What I've done to us. I was in the wrong, it was stupid and selfish of me, and you don't deserve any of the grief or pain that I've caused you. I don't blame you if you never want to see or talk to me again. I can't bear the thought of hurting you and I don't want you to be unhappy as a result of my careless actions.

I failed you, Mika. I failed both of us.

But I don't want to lose you. I can't lose you. I want to make amends because of how much you mean to me. You're too important of a person to lose and I hate myself for the damage that's been done to our relationship on my part and only my part.
I don't deserve it, but I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me.

Truth is, I miss you and how close we used to be. I never wanted any of this to happen, but I can't change what I've done.

If you ever need anything, I'll always be here for you.

Hope you have an amazing birthday.

-Eren

Finished reading, Mikasa set the card back on the desk, laying it flatly face-up.

She stared blankly at nothing in particular while night breezes rattled against her bedroom window, drawing no more than the empty circulation of thoughts whirling about her head. She was jolted back to reality when a large gust of wind violently shook the thin panes of her window, exhibiting a sharp whistle.

Still processing what she had just read, her emotional state contorted into that of uncertainty and bewilderment.

One thing was for sure, however; she had missed Eren, too.

But during their separation she had come to realize that she didn't need to rely on their relationship for comfort or solace. She was capable of moving on- and she had.

Regardless, she too thought of Eren as an important figure in her life, remembering him fondly whenever he crossed her mind. Mikasa was all for making amends and wanted nothing more than to patch their friendship up as best they could.

For now at least, she acknowledged she should give it some time. She needed her rest.

Eliciting a loud sigh, Mikasa turned off the lamp at her nightstand and collapsed onto her bed.

She didn't sleep very well that night.

The classic themed sign outside the twenty-four-hour diner flashed in a multitude of colors, its vibrant display in tune with the cheery late-night folk pouring in for good old-fashioned American fare.

Annie and her father left the diner after sharing a double fudge sundae, reminiscent of their time together when she was a child. They caught up over how school was going, how she'd been keeping up with her training, and how her friends were.

Annie knew her father's heart was in the right place. He only wanted to ensure everything in her life was going well, as any parent should.

But there were other subjects she wanted to shed light on. She was desperate to hear how he had been. Where he had been. What exactly he had been doing in the months preceding his unforeseen return.

In the end, she figured she should let him be the first one to bring it up.
It was late in the evening when he paid the tab and escorted Annie outside, though neither one of them were tired. As they made the brief trek back to his worn out truck, Annie's eyes absent-mindedly wandered to his hands. They were rough, calloused, big- exactly like she remembered.

She wanted to reach for them, hold them, feel their palms entwined.

Like when she was a little girl.

She held back, taking her seat on the passenger's side of the vehicle.

Mr. Leonhart waited until his daughter had buckled her seatbelt, then started the engine and hauled away.

Annie quickly explained directions to her shared apartment with Hitch, saddened when she realized their time together was coming to an end.

Mid-drive, she was about to say something when he spoke up first.

"I know I was a bit late to the banquet…"

Annie was quick to interject. "It's okay," she affirmed, her tone reassuring and sincere. "You were there for me." That was all that mattered.

Her father smiled, though it was obvious the gesture was compensating for his guilt.

Annie looked at him, sensing hesitation.

Finally, she managed to ask the unnerving question weighing heavily on her mind, caving in to her urgent need for answers.

"How have you been, Dad?"

Mr. Leonhart's grip on the wheel tightened. He avoided eye-contact, mouth agape as if straining for the right words.

Annie pressed on, cautiously so. "You had me worried…" Her voice trailed off, noting the dull expression on his face.

Her father was pained to hear her say that, ashamed that she was the one worrying over his whereabouts. Normally, the parents were the ones to worry about their children; not the other way around.

"I'm doing a lot better," he finally managed, eyes focused on the road. Hardly any other cars were out, leaving the roads mostly desolate and quiet. He took the next exit toward the Stohess neighborhood, the streets void of anything but lampposts and rows of small businesses, not a soul in sight.

Annie merely nodded at his reply, then peered out the window, disheartened.

Her father stole a brief glance at her, knowing she had expected more than half-assed response. He knew she would keep that to herself though.

Even as a child, Annie never lashed out or expressed her emotions outwardly. She had always been more reserved, keeping any resentment confined deep inside.

As they always had, Mr. Leonhart assumed the discussion would end there…
But then, to both his surprise and despair, Annie softly mumbled something; something lethal enough to break his heart, shattering it to pieces.

"I… missed you."

One beat.

Another.

Then-

It was more than he could bear.

*Dad?*

It happened in a flash, without warning, too immediate for Annie to react.

Mr. Leonhart slammed on the brakes, the car screeching to a stop.

When the high-pitched hiss from the brashly immobilized tires subsided, both father and daughter jolted against their seats, still reeling from the impact.

He had almost hit an animal, a filthy-looking raccoon or possum.

Mr. Leonhart cursed, eyes narrowing at the creature as it scurried away into deep foliage.

Annie could only watch in shock as her father then hastily pulled the car over to the side of the road and killed the engine.

Silence loomed over them like a dark cloud, a grave stillness setting in.

Neither turned to look at the other. Both pairs of eyes only stared straight ahead into the darkness of night, its beauty tainted by the spike in tension, the unspoken rift between them.

Mr. Leonhart let out a deep breath, like he'd been holding it in the whole time.

Tears threatened to fall, but were vehemently suppressed.

"I'm sorry, Annie."

Annie was deeply disturbed by the sudden turn of events, barely able to formulate a faint whisper.

"Dad-"

"I don't expect you to forgive me," he cut in, voice throbbing with pain, "for the things I've done." He attempted to quell his voice from breaking, but to no avail. "I've… I've been a shit father."

Damn it. Damn it all to hell…

This outburst was bound to erupt sooner or later.

The accumulation of guilt and self-loathing on his part had been bottled up for so long; masked under addictions and dependencies on harmful substances as a way to cope with the pain.

To forget how he hated himself for ultimately becoming the thing he despised most.

Even now, as a sober man, as a *free* man, he felt the need to confront the demons of his past- and
make things right with his only child.

It would be the first step in picking up the pieces and putting them back together.

The two continued to sit motionless inside the car, perception of time completely meaningless.

Annie wanted to tell him he was wrong. That he wasn't a shit father. That it was never too late to make things right.

But she chose not to resort to words.

She had learned over the years, mainly through personal experience, that actions always spoke louder than words ever could.

Warmth came over her; her unconditional love for her father filling her mind with peace.

She reached for his hand, the familiar sensation breathing life back into her damaged spirit.

At that, the tears fell silently down the broken man's face, losing his composure over the small gesture. In the past, he had been the one to promise her he would always be on her side. No matter what, he would always be there. Now, the tables had turned; with Annie welcoming him back into her life with open arms.

Though he'd never understand why, Annie wasn't angry at all. She never expressed contempt for his absence. Never cursed at him or threw fists into the air. She didn't cut ties with him or revert to her mother's maiden name.

She wore the name Leonhart with pride, and even after all these years still carried a deep admiration for her father, forgiving his faults wholeheartedly.

Because he was her hero. Her first love. Her sun and stars. Her whole world.

And she was Daddy's little girl.

____________________________

_Time to get up already?_

_Shit._

The sun peeked from the behind the shades, the morning glow of dawn hovering above the horizon. Birds pleasantly chirped in the trees, a chorus of feathered friends flocking together. The promise of a warm, fruitful spring flowed in gentle caresses, kissing the earth with warm strokes of light.

But in all his bed-head glory, Levi couldn't care less.

_I'm going back to sleep._

Before he could drift away in a hazy slumber, a voice from downstairs called out to him. "Levi! Breakfast is ready!"

Still feeling drowsy and sluggish, Levi forced himself to sit upright at the call's behest, lazily rubbing both eyes.

A delightful scent wafted in the air, hinting at waffles topped with an abundance of lush fruit.
With a yawn and quick stretch, he found comfort in knowing there would be a hot plate waiting for him as soon as walked into the kitchen. That alone would be worth waking up for.

He rose from the bed, stepped into a pair of slippers, and made his way downstairs, taking his sweet time with each menial task.

The kitchen was occupied by a mysterious figure, though Levi had a hard time confirming their identity given that his view was obstructed by an array of cabinets. The water was running in the sink, accompanied by the clanging of dishes and chime of utensils being washed in the basin.

The mystery person was humming a nursery rhyme, setting aside the last of the dishes to dry on a rack. Even with their back turned to Levi, it suddenly dawned on him…

The long black tresses, the mellifluous voice…

And this place… he'd been here before…

He lived here for a short while- when he was a kid.

But this woman… could it really be…?

Before he could speak, the woman turned to face him, greeted him benevolently.

"Good morning, Levi."

Levi blinked a few times, momentarily lost, confused… then suddenly at peace.

"Ma? What are you-"

He left the question unfinished, hanging in the air.

The woman only smiled, holding her arms out towards him.

Without so much as a smidgen of hesitation, Levi fell into her motherly embrace, closing his eyes in pure serenity as she began running her fingers through his hair.

"I've missed you…"

And just like that, she was gone.

In a hazy blur, Levi slowly blinked his eyes open, this time returning to the harsh reality of it all, forced to remember the cold truth.

He'd never get another chance to hug his mother again. She was no longer with him. No longer a part of this world.

He glanced at the alarm clock at his nightstand, expecting the worst upon realizing it was still dark outside.

3:12am.

*Shit.*

Levi swiftly pulled off the covers and got out of bed. Undecided on whether he should read or watch TV downstairs, he settled on getting some caffeine into his system first, something to keep him...
awake.

He didn't want to close his eyes. He didn't want to fall asleep.

He didn't want to dream about his mother- only to wake up and remember she was never coming back.

Levi never wanted to sleep again.
The Flowers of War

Chapter Notes

All right! Thanks for being awesome, everyone! You get a double update this time around! Two chapters! Woo!
This chapter dives into Papa Leonhart's backstory a bit more, so expect some dark subject matter. I've been so drained writing such depressing stuff that I decided I wouldn't post this chapter until I finished the next one (which is light-hearted and on the brighter side!)

Warnings for this chapter: Potential triggers, PTSD, mentions of war violence. I contemplated scratching this one entirely, but I didn't want to gloss over the horrors of war and those who have to face the harsh reality of it all every day. More importantly, I decided the narrative perfectly fits the main theme(s) of this fic; forgiveness and learning to let go.

Again, apologies in advance.

And as always, thanks for all the continued support! :) It means a lot!

Friday, February 17th

Marley Neighborhood

Annie studied her surroundings, scrutinizing every detail.

The small ranch-style home had a certain modest flare to it. The entire exterior was an off-white hue, the front door a tree-bark brown, and the porch a quaint beige. The front lawn had recently undergone much-needed renovations, small nurtured patches of green rising from the once dirt-laden yard.

The mailbox at the end of the driveway was a simple grey color, the name 'Leonhart' etched on the side of the carrier.

The interior of the home was, for the moment, empty, void of any décor or the standard amenities. Hollow corners marked by scuffs where furniture used to rest indicated the previous inhabitants had resided in the place for quite some time.

And now, the humble dwelling was under new ownership.

"That was the last of the boxes," Annie informed her father, motioning to the U-haul vehicle parked outside. "Truck's empty."

"Time to start unpacking then," Mr. Leonhart replied, surveying his belongings. His possessions were few in number, prioritizing the necessities over luxury items.

Practicality took precedence over all else, but he managed to save a few tidbits from the good old days; relics from the past.
Annie nodded at his suggestion, tearing into a smaller box consisting of fragile vases and photographs. She incidentally pulled out an old family photo, pausing to examine the picture closer.

A three-year-old Annie was smiling for the camera, arms linked between both mother and father, the setting a lovely summer day at the park.

Better days. When her family was… a normal family.

Mr. Leonhart was preparing to open a heftier cardboard box containing basic lighting fixtures when he caught a glimpse of Annie in her dreary reverie.

It saddened him to see her so disheartened, so damaged. In accordance with his commitment to heal their bruised relationship, he sought to offer her clarity.

"Let's take a break for now, Annie," he proposed, rising from his kneeling position to full-height. After dusting off the front of his pants, he walked over and placed a hand on her shoulder. "We've been at this for a couple hours. Let's relax."

Annie's gaze still hadn't left the photograph, consumed by its sentimentality.

Ah, yes. Sentimentality was an age-old weakness of hers. There were just some things she had trouble letting go. Her emotions had always been closely guarded and bottled up inside, but the peaceful setting of her father's new home allowed for calmness and ease to settle in; the closest thing to a sanctuary for her deepest darkest feelings.

She finally spoke up after her father had retrieved a bottle of water for the two of them to share.

"I didn't know you still kept some of our old pictures," she said softly, fingers tracing the edges of the frame.

Mr. Leonhart frowned. "Why wouldn't I?"

Annie shook her head on impulse, figuring it would be best to drop the subject and avoid sensitive complications. "I don't know," she shrugged, placing the photo back into the small box.

"Talk to me, honey." Her father didn't want there to be any boundaries between them. Everything needed to be laid out in the open. "Something's on your mind. What is it?"

Annie hesitated, crossing her arms over her chest. There was plenty on her mind, that much was true. School, a prospective new job, training during the off-season…

But in regards to family matters, the unshakeable feeling that everything happening as of late seemed too good to be true kept gnawing away at her.

She had her father back in her life. He was clean, sober, and healthier than he had been in years. And here she was now, helping him move into his new place on a calm Friday afternoon.

She should be happy.

But she found herself worrying instead.

What if these seemingly 'good times' had an expiration date? What if her father relapsed? What if all these attempts at mending their lives were like mere band-aids over open wounds?

She and her father had already been through enough, and Annie wasn't sure if she could handle another devastating loss.
Silence loomed over them, while Annie desperately thought of something to say.

"It's just…" A pause. A nervous clench.

I really needed you back then…

I still need you…

To stay in my life… for good.

"I guess I miss the way things used to be," she finally relented. "You and mom. The tiny house we lived in…"

Mr. Leonhart concurred. "Those were good days."

"Mostly," Annie muttered bitterly, looking away.

Mr. Leonhart tilted his head, only half-expecting an explanation.

Annie remained quiet for a few beats, rendering the ominous silence potentially catastrophic as the soft humming of distant noises filled the air like an eerie calm before the storm.

She couldn't bottle it all up inside anymore. She needed to let it out.

"Why didn't you just come home?" Annie asked, her tone dangerously bordering on the accusatory.

The question struck her father as odd, given its ambiguity. The look he was giving her suggested he was waiting for her to continue.

"After all those years… serving four tours in Iraq… even after you'd been gone for so long…"

Annie was cut off by her father, having figured out where this was going.

"Your mother told me to never come back. Hit me with divorce papers and said she was done waiting for me-"

"But I never stopped waiting for you!"

Annie's urgent revelation pierced throughout the emptiness of the small house, voice brimming with anger and resentment. It was the first time she had finally allowed herself to shout, sick and tired of tiptoeing around the issue at hand.

Mr. Leonhart had expected this to happen at some point. Maintaining a calm demeanor, he stood motionless at the center of the hollow living room, locking eyes with his daughter. He knew he owed her an explanation for his absence, though he was tentative as to whether or not she'd fully understand.

When most of the tension had subsided, Mr. Leonhart, though not much of a religious man, quoted from the 'good book.'

"When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I grew up, I put the ways of childhood behind me."

"When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I grew up, I put the ways of childhood behind me."

Annie raised a brow. "1 Corinthians 13:11." Wearing a scornful frown, she huffed. Did he get religion or something? Somehow found 'god'?
"What I'm saying is that I never expected you to understand the reasons for my actions back then because you were only a child, Annie," her father explained. "I used to be the same way, but like everyone else, we all have to grow up and move on from our immaturity."

"So you're telling me to get over it?" Annie muttered indignantly.

Mr. Leonhart shook his head. "Not at all."

"Then what do you mean by that?"

Heaving a sigh, her father took one last swig from the water bottle, preparing himself for what he was about to disclose.

Hopefully this discourse would prove to be an eye-opener.

"Your mother was pregnant with you when I first enlisted," he began. "Every man has their own reasons for joining the military. For some, it's a family trade. Others just need a job. Then you have your 'patriots,' those who are eager to serve. And that was me. Prideful, loyal to the red, white, and blue, feeling like I was invincible. I was newly married, about to start a family, things were heating up in the Middle East, and I convinced myself I should be this all-American hero and fight terrorists just like my old man.

"I was young and stupid, really, so I needed the discipline and structure that the military offered; demanded of me, rather. But even after the promotions and all the parading out and about, boasting about this and that with my comrades, I failed to realize that I was still just the same punk kid from as far back as my early days at boot camp. The only thing I managed to do was feed my own ego and brag about how good of a shot I was.

"And then the war in Iraq broke out. 9/11 really riled us all up, the entire nation was pissed, and Saddam Hussein was the devil incarnate who needed to be destroyed. For god and for country!"

Mr. Leonhart paused, giving a lazy half-assed salute to no one in particular before continuing. Stone-faced and movements rigid, he looked like a ghost, the blood draining from his face.

"First tour. Second tour. A goddamn third tour. Your mother begged me not to go on the fourth. And… I should have listened to her but… I needed to leave. I couldn't come back home after all I had seen.

"I'd still be fighting… even in my dreams. I'd be stuck in the same heavy uniform, dodging blasts and gunfire from Iraqi insurgents. I couldn't look people in the eye anymore…

"All the sudden I'd think I was seeing blood. I'd think I was hearing explosions… The war came home with me, and it was eating me alive. The bloodshed… the 'sir, yes, sirs'… all the exhausting 'mission accomplished'… the men in my squad who died right in front of me…"

His voice cracked, reliving the horrors of past experiences.

"March 12th, 2007." He shook his head, taken back to that finite moment. "That's the day everything changed."

Annie shuddered at the cryptic statement, dreading what was coming but accepting this was necessary.

"My squad and I were ambushed by a group of insurgents armed with Russian made weapons. There were hundreds of civilians around us, making it harder to determine who was an enemy. The
hostiles just kept coming and coming… I thought it might be the end for us. All I remember was constantly reloading and shooting. I couldn't hear much else other than the shouting and the gunfire. We managed to hold them off until help arrived, but even so, I kept shooting. The place became a bloodbath and smoke had filled the air…

"A young boy emerged from the smoke. We were ordered to cease fire. He was walking towards us, and he had this… sort of blank look on his face. He was probably around the same age you were at the time. Eight or nine years old."

Mr. Leonhart stopped for a moment, quelling the urge to breakdown. He tightened both fists, his heart violently drumming against his chest.

"I had to make a choice, Annie."

It was coming back to him, the hellish nightmares.

"He was holding a grenade, walking straight towards me and my squad. And then he raised his arm, preparing to throw it…"

Annie rushed over to her father, noting his pale face and darkened expression. "Dad, you don't have to tell me-"

But he interjected anyway, definitively ending the horrid anecdote.

"I aimed for his head… and then I..."

The room fell eerily silent again, no words exchanged between father and daughter with the presumption that nothing more needed to be contributed to his horrifying narrative.

The rest was history. When Mr. Leonhart's fourth and final tour had ended, he was given an honorable discharge after the military rendered him psychologically incapable of performing assigned duties. He returned to the Marley Neighborhood, hailed as a hero by some, ostracized as a shell-shocked freak by others.

It was just about impossible for him to adjust to civilian life. The horrors of war had tainted even the most beautiful things the world had to offer.

There had been times when he would look at little Annie, and all he could see was the boy he had shot and killed.

It took a heavy toll on his marriage- and consequentially on his family. When he wouldn't seek professional help, his wife left him, taking Annie with her.

Losing everything and hitting rock-bottom made him spiral out of control.

Drugs, alcohol, and random fist-fights with strangers were the only ways to cope with the harsh reality of it all. For years, that was his life; seeking new ways to numb the pain, drowning in his sorrows.

But thankfully, there's always hope. Always a way out. He had a promise to keep; obligations to fulfill for his daughter's sake.

His sole purpose for getting his life back together was to be the father he vowed to be the day Annie was born. The father she deserved.
The father she loved.

Annie wrapped her arms around the broken man, encircling him in a tender embrace.

"I'm sorry, Annie." Fighting back tears, Mr. Leonhart barely managed to sputter out, "This isn't the future that I wanted for myself, or for our family. It's too late for me to try and take back all the things I've done. But you… you got your whole life ahead of you."

Then he concluded with the intention of making an oath with her, his tone deathly serious.

"Promise me… you won't mess it all up like I did. Promise me that no matter what life throws at you, or when things get rough, you'll stand your ground."

Annie responded by gripping him tighter, clinging to him in earnest.

Although there was no way for her to relate to his days in the military, death lurking at every corner, and having been exposed to innumerable atrocities, she thought that maybe, just maybe… she understood.

Still locked in his embrace, Annie closed her eyes, a single tear falling.

In that moment, she had come to realize that it was necessary to let go. Dwelling in the past served no purpose other than to fuel any resentment towards her parents. As her father quoted, there was to come a time when she’d have to put the ways of her childhood behind her.

She'd been holding onto the past, deceiving herself into believing they could all just return to the good old days like nothing.

But she finally accepted that she needed to move on.

To look forward, and not back.

"I promise."
Saturday, February 18th

Trost Neighborhood – Apartment of Gentlemen Levi and Furlan

"Don't tell me that's how it ends…"

Nestled comfortably on the couch in the living room, Mikasa groaned in disbelief, still reeling from the ambiguous ending of Drive.

Levi's arm was draped around her shoulder, both raven-haired athletes lounging around and casually enjoying one another's company. At her dejected comment, his eyes drifted from the rolling credits on the flat screen TV to the girl leaning against him.

"Ryan Gosling hops back into the Chevelle and drives away into the night," he drawled. "And that's how it ends."

Mikasa heaved a sigh. "Aside from the open ending, it was a good movie."

"I'm satisfied with the ending," Levi remarked in opposition, reaching for the remote. "The ambiguity makes you think."

"I guess." Mikasa shrugged, stroking his arm.

After Levi had turned the TV off, Mikasa looked over at her phone on the coffee table, reaching for it with the intention of checking the time. Much to her chagrin, the battery had completely drained, and she had left her charger back in her dorm.

"What time is it?" She asked after conceding to the unfortunate discovery.

Levi glanced at his own phone and answered with a nonchalant, "9:12."

Somehow, 'movie night' at Levi's apartment had spanned over three hours. They would have watched Drive sooner had it not been for the countless heated make-out sessions after Furlan took off to meet up with Nifa.

(In retrospect, the delay was forgivable, and perhaps necessary. They'd been restraining themselves for a couple weeks, mindful of their commitment to 'taking things slow.')

But as Mikasa's hand slowly trailed up from Levi's arm to his shoulder and then to his chest, it appeared as though history was bound to repeat itself.

"What time is your roommate supposed to be back?" Mikasa asked in a low whisper.

Levi watched as she positioned herself on top, straddling him at the waist. It took him a moment to gather his thoughts, nearly succumbing to her blatantly initiated seduction.

"Around 10 or so," he recalled, eyes locked with hers.

Mikasa peeled off her light cardigan and tossed it aside, exposing a black tank top underneath while
offering full view of narrowed shoulders and toned arms. The tank top was made of thin material, and Levi contemplated whether or not he should just rip it off then and there.

Mikasa gave him the impression that she liked being in control, obliging her power trip by holding off the urge to take her on the very couch they were laid on.

"So then," Mikasa hummed, hands still wandering about Levi's torso, "we have about an hour left 'til we're not alone anymore." She continued tracing along his muscles, moving her hands over to gently massage his chest in small circles.

Levi wondered if she was aware just how torturous and sadistic her teasing was.

"There's a lot you can get done in an hour, Mikasa."

With a smirk, she huffed. "Oh really?" Lowering herself a bit, she placed a chaste kiss on the side of his jaw, then worked her way down to his neck. In between kissing him, she feigned innocence and added, "Like what?"

Having had enough of the pretense, Levi gripped her hips, still pinned under her weight.

"Take your top off," he commanded, letting out a harsh grunt.

Complying with his demand, Mikasa leisurely sat upright, taking her time relieving herself of the thin garment over and above her head.

Coming undone had revealed her black balconette bra, causing Levi to ponder if she had carefully planned this all along.

Levi traced along her defined torso, brushing against her abs as he worked his way up to cupping her breasts.

Mikasa yielded to a faint moan, shuddering at his touch. Before Levi could reach for the bra's clasp at her back, she aggressively pinned him back down to the couch and brought her face at level with his, denying him access to the viewing pleasure of her soft, humble breasts.

Not just yet…

She captured his lips with her own, kissing him deeply at first as she slowly grinded her hips against him. Levi slipped a hand down, positioning it firmly between her legs. After briefly roaming under her shorts and underneath her panties, he found the center of her heat and began rubbing in a steady circular motion, earning a sharp gasp from the girl on top.

Mikasa's breathing became hitched and slightly erratic, his name hanging on the tip of her tongue.

Levi nipped at her neck, fingers still fixated on pleasuring her.

Their lips met again, this time crashing into one another with the passion and fury of long lost lovers. Mikasa moaned into his mouth, tensing up.

"Levi…"

Before the heavy-petting session could escalate further, the couple was interrupted by the sound of a key penetrating the lock at the front door.

Shit.
Mikasa and Levi ceased further movement, still tangled up on the couch, both pairs of eyes widening in horror.

Furlan had arrived much earlier than expected, his voice on the other side of the door suggesting he had brought company.

"…and this is my humble abode, Nifa," Furlan said proudly as the door rushed open.

Nifa was about to compliment the interior of the apartment, but fell short of any words when shock came over her at the sight of two lovebirds in the middle of what was originally supposed to be a fairly innocent 'movie night.'

Furlan was worried by her reaction, thinking she found the apartment hideous or something, but upon glancing over at the living room he came to realize he had made a grave mistake.

Trying his best to cover up a partially bare Mikasa, Levi gave his roommate a murderous glare, to which Furlan quickly retreated outside, dragging Nifa along with him.

"…aaaaaaaaaaaaaand this is us leaving," he stammered, slamming the door behind him.

Once they were truly alone, silence filled the air for a brief moment.

Mikasa collapsed against Levi, letting out small intermittent laughs.

Levi let out a deep breath, hoping he hadn't scarred Nifa for life, while simultaneously plotting the details to Furlan's assassination.

Mikasa pulled him from his reverie, eyes sparkling in the purest form of gentleness.

"Let's go to IHOP and get pancakes."

"At this hour?" Levi scoffed, knowing full well she wasn't joking in the slightest.

Mikasa nodded.

Horniness had subsided, and now she was hungry.

Levi ultimately relented. "Okay."

With an ear-to-ear smile, Mikasa stole a quick kiss and shot up from the couch.

He watched as she threw her tank top back on, offering her cardigan in a chivalrous gesture.

Well…

At least one hunger would be satisfied that night…

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Marley Neighborhood

The lights above the court came on.

Dribbling the ball to a steady rhythm, Bertolt aimed for the basket ahead and gave it his best shot.

A light swoosh followed immediately after he released the ball from his hands.

Nothing but net.
Shooting hoops at the community basketball court was an efficient way to blow off some steam. School weighed heavily on his mind, Reiner was stressing himself out over his strained relationship with Krista, and (against his attempts at opposition) his parents were trying to set him up with the neighbor's daughter.

It was all too much to take on at once.

Determined to get his mind off things, he walked over to retrieve the ball when suddenly, a voice from behind startled him.

"You're a natural, you know that?" It was Annie.

She lazily strolled up to him, her footsteps treading lightly against the open court. "The head coach at Sina U practically begged you to play for them."

Surprised by her unexpected presence, Bertolt cleared his throat, hoping he didn't seem too awkward. "How long had you been standing there?"

Annie tilted her head. "Just got here actually." She folded her arms across her chest, a smile playing on her lips as a rush of nostalgia overwhelmed her. "I loved watching you play. You were electric on the court. Your aim was sharp and you moved with such finesse… I don't know, it was just… you were amazing."

Bertolt rubbed the back of his neck nervously, shrugging off the remark. "I don't really think I was all that good."

"Well Sina U, UT, and Ehrmich all thought otherwise," Annie countered, hoping to lift his spirits.

Bertolt's only response was a nervous chuckle, a part of him wanting the subject to change.

His love for the game had never died, he just accepted he was never really the competitive type.

Annie's gaze roamed over their surroundings, her eyes ultimately landing at the basketball at Bertolt's feet. She casually sauntered Bertolt's way, taking her time with each stride. She leaned down to pick up the ball, commencing a solid dribble that echoed into the emptiness of the court.

"Up for a game of horse?" She asked, challenging him with an impish attempt at an intimidating stare.

It was strange. Bertolt was quick to take notice of her uplifted demeanor. She seemed… happier. He'd been aware of her father's return to the neighborhood. Though he wasn't aware of the details, he figured that must have played a significant part in cheering her up.

The thought alone was enough to make him smile.

Accepting her challenge, he nodded, eager to get a fierce game going.

"You're on, Annie."

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**Eldia Neighborhood – Grice Household**

"Aren't we a little too old for 'Spin the Bottle'?"

A group of high schoolers gathered around in a circle in the living room, disregarding the disdainful comments made by Gabi.
Her friends, Zofia and Udo reluctantly agreed to partaking in the game, while Falco was the only one to share the exact same sentiment as the hot-headed softball player.

Falco's older brother, Colt, had taken advantage of the fact that their parents were out of town for the weekend, and took it upon himself to invite an entire brigade of friends over for the usual underage drinking fest.

Colt, being a senior, separated himself from his junior counterparts; his younger brother included.

"They're only a year ahead of us and they act like we're freshman," Gabi snickered, rolling her eyes as the juniors commenced 'Spin the Bottle,' and the seniors commenced a sloppy rendition of beer pong.

Sick of the unfair treatment, she marched over to the kitchen and confronted Colt directly.

Falco could only watch in pure terror. *Gabi?! What are you doing?!*

In the opposing setting, Colt welcomed her arrival with a smile. "Hey there, Gabi."

Ignoring his slightly slurred speech, Gabi pointed towards the array of red solo cups, each carrying various amounts of cheap beer.

"Let me have a go at it."

Furrowing his brow, Colt merely replied with, "Have you played before or something?"

Gabi refused to give a clear answer, blinking several times impatiently. "Maybe."

Colt held his hands up in defense, surrendering. "By all means…"

A fresh new set of cups was presented before her. Colt then proceeded to hand her a small ping pong ball.

Eyeing each target as if it were the most tedious task ever, Gabi focused on the cup in the center of the arrangement. The others watched in astonishment as the ball plopped directly inside, hollering boisterously like the obnoxious party animals they were.

Colt was the only one among the group to remain silent. "Beginner's luck," he muttered, seemingly unimpressed as he downed another can of Budweiser.

When Gabi managed to repeat the same action successfully, the ball landing ceremoniously into several other cups following several more tosses, Colt's jaw dropped.

*She's definitely done this before.*

With only one cup left, Gabi paused for a brief moment, relishing in the sweet victory. She glanced over at Colt, taunting him with a sly grin.

When she turned to fixate herself back to the last remaining solo cup, it wasn't long before she hit another successful sinker.

*plop*

A loud uproar of cheers followed suit, the seniors chanting her name in celebration of her decisive victory.
These assholes are entertained way too easily, Gabi thought to herself, internally mocking them for all their stupid shenanigans.

Colt raised a brow, staring at the girl incredulously. "Your cousin Eren teach you that?" He quipped sardonically.

Gabi shook her head. "There's a reason I'm pitcher for the softball team. I have killer aim."

Colt smirked. Though he'd never admit it out loud, he found her hot-headed and arrogant antics adorable. Deciding it couldn't be helped, he linked his arm over her shoulder, catching her off guard.

"Sure, Gabi."

With their bodies as close as they were, hardly any distance left between them, Gabi felt her heart beat wildly against her chest.

She tried for so long to fight the arousal of these feelings, stuck in limbo amid her abrasive denial. It was getting harder and harder every day; a constant uphill battle.

But in that moment, she realized it was no use denying it any longer.

She had a crush on her best friend's older brother.

Fuck.

Koharu Sushi – Sina Downtown Plaza

"Hitch, I expect you to train the new-hire tonight." The manager of the upscale sushi restaurant was never one to mince words, expressing his expectations of the seasoned employee vehemently and assertively. "Show him the ropes. Introduce him to the hosting staff. And be polite." At the conclusion of his instructions, he bid her 'goodnight' and exited the establishment, making haste for his fancy Mercedes-benz.

Hitch gave him a farewell salute, her face contorting into that of disgust as soon as his back was turned.

Her hot-shot employer was kind of an asshole- but he was an asshole who paid her and her fellow co-workers handsomely.

With Ymir gone, the money was the only reason she stuck around.

Only a few days prior, Hitch had been on the verge of strangling the freckled volleyball champ. Ymir informed everyone she was quitting and, amid her delusion, Hitch merely laughed at the reason for her sudden departure.

Ymir had recently been hired at a café run by the Reiss family- the same café Krista worked at.

Un-fucking-believable!

"Thanks for leaving me to die here, Ymir. You crazy, selfish bitch!" Hitch couldn't care less if someone caught her muttering indignantly to herself.

A part of her blamed Annie. If Annie hadn't left the café, then the café wouldn't have needed a replacement. Which means Ymir wouldn't have applied and ultimately, would've stayed at the sushi joint, keeping a bored Hitch company.
Ugh... whatever.

She leaned against the front desk, dreading the arrival of this mysterious new-hire. She had nary a smidgen of patience that night, already annoyed by the prospect of dealing with the typical clumsiness of an idiot lacking experience.

Just then, the main entrance swiveled open, introducing Ymir's replacement.

Hitch gawked at the sight in an ironic combination of shock and awe.

It was a guy. An attractive guy. A guy who (although was attractive enough, indeed) had the face of horse.

This night just got ten times weirder.

The tall brunet hurriedly walked up to her, a half-smile adorning his face.

It was the same dubious look all newcomers displayed when they first walked into the joint. Pretty soon, 'horseface' would be just as bitter and bored as Hitch. She was sure of it.

The glamour wears off fairly quickly, hun.

"Hey..." he greeted her amiably, peering below at the nametag on her shirt. "Hitch. Nice to meet you. I don't know if management told you or not, but I'm Jean, the new-hire."

"Jean?" Hitch let out a small cackle, composing herself when she remembered the stern voice of her boss. She cleared her throat in desperation. "*Ahem* Yes, of course. I'm aware."

Jean looked around aimlessly, wondering where to go from there. "Are you...?"

Hitch rolled her eyes when he left his question unfinished. "Yes. They put me in charge of training you tonight. Truth be told, it's really not all that necessary. This job is the easiest job in the world."

It's a slacker's dream!

"All right then!" Jean clasped his hands together, rubbing them in anticipation.

"Sooooo what do we do?"

Hitch yawned, positioning herself behind the front desk, a menu in hand.

"You stand here like this," she began, doling out the basic instruction, "and wait."

Jean's forced-smile twitched. He followed her command without question.

After a minute or so passed, no words relayed between them, Jean looked back at Hitch, tentatively awaiting the next order of business.

"Uhhhhhh," he droned, "what are we waiting for?"

"People," Hitch replied, like it was obvious. "They come in, usually two or three at a time, and ask for a table and then..." She made a quick gesture towards the dining area before continuing. "We seat them."

Jean nodded slowly, hesitantly. "Gotcha."

She's kind of... cute...
"That's all there is to it," Hitch stated bluntly. She paused before turning to face him, surprised to discover he was already looking at her. *What the?* "Any questions?"

Like a lovelorn idiot, Jean snapped out of his hazy trance and wildly shook his head.

"Nooooope," came his flustered reply as he nervously fidgeted with his collar.

"Good!" Hitch chirped, enthused *and* relieved. *Talking to new people is so much work!*

The newbie appeared capable of learning things quickly, and although no one could ever replace Ymir, Hitch had high hopes for the oddly attractive long-faced chap.

And if he proved himself worthy, they just *might* become friends.

Chapter End Notes

I can just imagine Annie trying to pull some seriously ballsy stunts during a game of horse, while poor Bertie only manages to keep up because of his height.
This chapter is slightly on the longer-ish side. Hope that makes up for the wait :) Main focus on ereani development here, with a little added bonus thrown in there! hehe...

Next chapter, ackerbabes are back in action.

As always, thanks to those who have reviewed! You're all amazing!
Got any questions? Shoot me a message on tumblr!
I'd say we're about 2/3 through with this fic, as part two is coming to an end soon. Then it's on to the final part; Part Three.

Read, review, enjoy!

Saturday, February 25th

Stoheess University – Dormitory Division

It was the first time in a while Eren had nothing explicitly planned for the weekend.

He was burnt out from all the back and forth trips to Shiganshina, his part-time job had only scheduled him for Sunday afternoon, and his morning study session with Hitch and Ymir rendered him completely exhausted.

As per their unofficial routine, he and Annie would usually go somewhere spontaneous; flying by the seat of their pants to venture out into multiple mystery locations which in turn kept things interesting.

He liked that Annie wasn't the predictable type. She always kept him in suspense.

Eren contemplated calling her to suggest they drive around for a bit and possibly hit up the new book store on Garrison Avenue.

He'd been itching to get his hands on a copy of Stephen King's *Revival*.

Unless… he thought. *She's with her dad again this weekend*…

At the very least, it wouldn't hurt to ask.

But then…

His phone began ringing before he could settle on a definitive decision.

*Huh? That's weird*…

The timing was certainly impeccable.

Having made hardly a calculated guess, he was quick to assume it was his mother, calling to ask how
his day went and pry into the details regarding his studies.

When he checked the caller ID, he felt like he'd been slapped. The word shocked couldn't even come close to describe the pale, sullen expression molded on his face.

Mikasa was calling him.

As in Mikasa Ackerman. (Right, because he knows so many Mikasas, he gets them mixed up from time to time.)

Brushing the poorly-timed sarcastic thought aside, he answered after the fourth ring, unsure what to even expect.

"Hello?" His greeting was far different from the former 'Hey, babe' and 'Hey, Mika.' He hadn't used terms of endearment for her in months, though it hardly took any adjustments if he were to be completely honest. Then again, they hadn't spoken much following their separation anyway.

"Hey, Eren," Mikasa said, her voice conservatively relaxed. "You have a moment to talk? I won't keep you long at all."

Eren felt instant relief rush over him. Mikasa sounded cordial, therefore leading him to believe whatever she wanted to tell him would go over in civil fashion. He internally chided himself for worrying in the first place.

"Of course," he replied, thinking back to the last time they saw each other. It was comforting to know she held no ill-will towards him, as indicated by the fact that she had taken him up on his offer to talk freely whenever. He felt he owed her that simple courtesy. "There's no rush. What's on your mind?"

Mikasa upheld a tentative visage on the other end of the line. "Just wanted to call and say 'thanks' for the birthday card," she said. Then with more certainty, she added, "And about what you wrote…"

Eren's lips quivered. "Yeah?"

"I…” Mikasa paused, selecting her next words carefully. "I really want us to remain friends, too."

A surge of hopefulness came over the elated fellow, unsure where he'd picked up the extra good karma points from to deserve this. "That… means a lot, Mikasa," he responded quietly, only mildly alarmed to discover that, no, he in fact was not dreaming.

A brief silence intervened, though both mute parties on either end of the line welcomed the calming consolation it brought in its wake. It carried a peaceful solemnity to their long-awaited exchange.

"Our friendship has always meant a lot to me," Mikasa said in return. "Maybe we'll never be as close as we were, but… it's just hard to imagine my life without you in it."

"I feel the same way," Eren concurred. "I don't want to imagine my life without you."

Eren had no way of knowing, but on Mikasa's end she was struggling to suppress a deeply saddened expression from being seared on her face.

"Well…” she whispered, forging a faint smile. "You don't have to."

The heartfelt sincerity in her voice was enough to lull him into pleasant nostalgic reverie. He felt at peace.
"I'm glad, Mika," he accepted warmly, reciprocating her benevolence. Maybe she hadn't fully forgiven him, maybe she never would. But at least there was hope for the future; that they could patch things up and become good friends in spite of the mess he had unintentionally made.

Mikasa bit her bottom lip and absentmindedly played with a single strand of hair.

"I have to go now," she stated, almost dejectedly so. "But we should catch up sometime."

Eren wholeheartedly agreed. "For sure. The next time you're in Shiganshina, let me know so we can meet up with Armin and hang out. For old time sake."

"I'd like that," Mikasa replied in approval. She let several beats pass before deciding nothing more needed to be said. Pure satisfaction came over her as she prepared to conclude the conversation, her finger hovering over the 'end' button. "Goodbye, Eren."

Eren blinked emptily at nothing in particular, idly setting his gaze towards his roommate's side of the dorm.

"Bye, Mika."

And with that final farewell, the call had amicably ended.

Eren retreated to his side of the room and slumped into the chair at his desk, seeking a moment to properly mull everything over. Putting his phone atop the desk to avoid any distractions, he tilted his head back and closed his eyes.

It was possible to maintain friendships with exes, right?

Hopefully, pursuing the endeavor wouldn't prove pitifully futile, as it certainly had good intentions. Most people were probably turned off by the awkward proponents of said notion; after all, he and Mikasa had gone so far as losing their virginities to one another.

Would that affect their relationships with other people? Would that distract their attempts at mending their friendship?

Guess there would only be one way to find out.

Just as he was about lift himself from the chair, the door suddenly burst wide open, revealing a flustered and somewhat hysterical Reiner Braun.

"Heyyyy," Eren sputtered in pure bafflement. "What's… up…? Are you-"

Before he could finish the speculative query, Reiner urgently blurted out the reason for his devastation.

"Krista broke up with me!" he boomed. "SHE BROKE UP WITH ME!"

Eren couldn't formulate the right words to try and console the guy. "Uhhhhhhhh…"

That's when Reiner began chuckling bitterly amid his crazed demeanor, only further increasing Eren's concern for his roommate's well-being.

"Ha! Whatever! No big deal! Her loss!" Reiner wasn't convincing anyone. Not even himself.

"I'm… uh… sorry, man. That's lame." Eren tried. He really did.
"Come on, Eren!" Reiner spewed out erratically. "Let's go out tonight. I heard about this party at Sigma Nu. I just need to get my mind off Krista!"

Eren's eyes widened in shock. "Are you sure that's the best way to go about it?"

"Yes!" Reiner bellowed. "I'm a single man now! I need to revel in this newfound freedom!"

"Is that really what this is about?" Eren asked, unconvinced. "Or are you trying to compensate for some sort of… loss?" He needed to keep it real with the blond quarterback. Someone had to!

Reiner only scoffed at that. "Hmph. What loss? I'm doing just fine without her! There's plenty other hot babes out there! And I'm gonna sleep with every single one of them!"

Sure, Eren thought, certain that Reiner still had his V-Card. Just stay away from Annie and we won't have any problems.

Reiner quickly changed into another shirt, taking a glorious moment to check himself in the mirror above Eren's dresser, all the while flexing his muscles like a hot-shot fitness model.

"Hurry up, Eren," he grunted, still checking himself out. "Or are you going like that?"

Eren waved him off casually, ignoring the disdainful comment regarding his lax attire.

"Hang on a sec," he drawled. "I'm gonna call Annie."

"Why?"

"Cause my girlfriend probably wouldn't be too thrilled to find out that I went to some frat party without her."

"Your girlfriend didn't seem to mind that you already had a girlfriend before she was your girlfriend," Reiner sassed back, indulgently admiring his own biceps.

Eren was not amused, staring at his roommate in contempt.

"Annie wouldn't care. Trust me," Reiner reassured him, disregarding Eren's unimpressed expression. "I won't say anything if you won't."

Eren shook his head, laying out the single most important ground rule. "If Annie doesn't go, I won't go."

Reiner growled at the ultimatum. "Didn't know you were so whipped, Jaeger. I'm disappointed in you." In the end, however, he had no choice but to agree to his terms. "Fine. Make it quick."

A smirk tugged at the corner of Eren's mouth, that of victory and success.

He picked up his phone and made the call.

The first try went to voicemail, prompting Eren to internally panic.

There's no way in hell I'm going to this party with just Reiner...

Then, Eren thought of something.

"Wait a minute," he began, looking over at the stocky blond, "why don't you just go with Bertolt? You guys are usually joined at the hip anyway."
Reiner moved his gaze to the floor, despondent. "He has to work tonight. Believe me when I say you weren't my first choice for my wingman."

*Thanks for that,* Eren thought, redialing Annie's number.

His second attempt, thank gods above, was successful.

Annie answered barely after the first ring. "Sorry I missed your last call," she said quickly. "What's up?"

"Annie bannanie, I have a favor to ask." Eren lowered his voice, hoping his request would avert Reiner's ears. It's not like he had anything to worry about. Reiner was still glued to the mirror, too obsessed with his appearance to notice anything else. "Are you free tonight?"

Annie responded with a favorable, "Of course. I just got back from my dad's place, so I'm free the rest of the weekend. Why?"

Eren wanted to jump for joy. *Thank god!* "Well long story short; Reiner wants to go to some party and I have a feeling I'm going to end up being more of a babysitter than a wingman soooooo…” He let out a small chuckle, though it was mostly masking his contempt for the situation. "I guess… I just want you to be there with me."

Annie sighed. "Poor guy got dumped, huh?"

Eren felt his nose twitch. "How did you know?"

"Bertolt texted me the news," Annie replied. "Warned me that Reiner might need his space. But it sounds like he was wrong." She huffed and then continued with an amused, "Makes perfect sense to me. He's always been kind of an attention whore. *Not to mention he's quite the sensitive type.*"

"Sure seems that way," Eren responded in exasperation. "This must be his first breakup or something because he's not taking it very well."

"He'll have to get over it eventually," Annie summed up. "Anyway, where's this little shindig taking place?"

"Sigma Nu," Eren replied, a cringe smeared on his face.

"Got it," Annie harmonized. "I'll meet you guys there. I have a few things to take care of first but I won't be long."

"Thank you, Annie," Eren cooed. "You're a lifesaver. And a really good kisser. Bye"

He hung up before Annie could fully register his unconventional farewell. It left her unfazed more than anything, as she'd grown used to his dorky antics and random compliments.

Eren was totally the type of boyfriend to text things like, *I hope your day is as nice as your butt.*

It wouldn't be a normal morning unless she woke to a text of similar taste.

*He's such a dork,* she thought, making her way to her bedroom. *Tonight is definitely going to be interesting.*
An eerie stillness set the scene for Bertolt's bizarre night shift at the local sporting goods store.

He didn't mind the quiet setting, however; especially since the previous weekend's massive sale had brought in customers and sports enthusiasts far and wide, resulting in the frenzied hysteria of his fellow associates frantically running back and forth between aisles and checkout stands.

The upcoming spring season for high school and college athletes drew in wild crowds, keeping the employed staff consistently busy for extended periods of time.

The temporary decrease in business may have merely been 'the calm before the storm,' but it sure was appreciated by those who had to work during the chaotic spike in attendance.

With only two hours left in his shift, Bertolt had just returned from break when Annie texted him.

**9:41pm – Annie:** Reiner. Is. Losing. It.

Bertolt stared at the text, internally muddled somewhere between concerned and unfazed.

He was glad that his longtime pal was making an attempt at moving on from Krista, but he wasn't convinced his method was a practical one.

He felt bad for Annie either way.

**9:43pm – Bertolt:** Try not to be too hard on him.

In the middle of drumming up another text, Bertolt suddenly paused when he rounded the corner towards the footwear section.

Up ahead was a young woman on crutches, casually trying to reach for a pair of lacrosse cleats atop a higher shelf.

Bertolt was quick to offer her assistance. "Here, let me help," he said upon drawing closer to the petite girl.

The shelf might have proved difficult to reach for her short stature, but for Bertolt's six foot two frame, it posed hardly a challenge.

He grabbed the pair of cleats the nameless girl had her sights set on and handed them over.

"Thanks," she said quietly, resting one crutch against the wall. With her free hand she studied the product carefully, ensuring they were the right size.

Bertolt furtively examined her with innocent curiosity. The girl had long, slightly disheveled black hair. Her dark grey eyes appeared half-lidded, but relaxed nonetheless. And she was so tiny. She couldn't have been much taller than Annie.

Obliging his piqued interest, Bertolt sought to engage in brief, harmless chit-chat.

His boss always harped on how he needed to converse more with customers anyway.

Then again, she was a girl… Talking to girls wasn't always his strongest suit, regardless of the setting.

Practice makes perfect.

"So…" he began clumsily, "you play lacrosse?"
The girl looked over at him and nodded. "Mmhmm." Then with a chuckle, she added, "well not currently." She made a small gesture at her crutches. "Doctor said I should be okay for the spring season though."

Bertolt half-smiled. "That's good," he stammered.

Oh how the poor guy needed some serious help with his game!

"What about you?" she asked, surprising him with the question reversal. "You play?"

Bertolt shook his head, rubbing the nape of his neck nervously. Slowly but surely, he was making decent progress.

"I used to play basketball," he sighed, nostalgic.

The girl flashed an all-knowing smile, as though she wasn't the least bit surprised.

"I can see why," she hummed, marveling at his height. Absentmindedly fidgeting with the box of cleats in hand, she took a moment to admire the friendly giant before her, refusing to look away even when their eyes met.

Although she acknowledged the thought as a relatively ridiculous one, she couldn't help but like his nose. The shape was similar to her own. It just so happened to be the first thing that caught her eye.

Aside from that, she found herself mysteriously drawn to his quiet and unassuming demeanor.

A strange encounter this was, indeed.

Tilting her head in interest, she finally offered the fella her name.

"My name's Pieck by the way," she stated amicably, clandestinely searching for his nametag.

She didn't have to, as he proceeded to offer his in return.

Talking to this girl in particular made him feel perfectly at ease, comfortable even.

The prospect of his newfound success caused a blush to rise to his cheeks, his heart skipping a beat when she smiled at him once more.

For the first time ever, he managed to introduce himself without sweating a magnitude of bullets.

"Bertolt."

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**Stohess University - Sigma Nu Fraternity**

"CHUG! CHUG! CHUG! CHUG! CHUG!"

"WOOOOO!"

"REINER! REINER! REINER!"

The riotous hoots and hollers from frat boy cackling like hyenas practically shattered the ear drums of an indignant Annie Leonhart and an equally irate Eren Jaeger.

The aggressive drunk bros had encircled the star quarterback, Reiner Braun, and wildly cheered him
on as he downed his umpteenth pitcher of beer.

When he had finished drowning himself away into drunk oblivion, Reiner wiped the corners of his mouth and let out a boisterously powerful roar.

"YEAHHHHHHH!"

Eren could only watch in horror, while Annie face-palmed herself in despair.

*What is it with college students and this childish fascination with alcohol?* She thought in disgust.

Annie had never understood the appeal. For as long as she could remember, she'd always found the foul stench horridly sickening, and she hated how it affected the lives of those who were addicted.

Visions of her father passed out on the couch after long nights of nearly drinking himself to death flashed from the darkest corners of her mind. Granted, Papa Leonhart was sober now, but the horrible memories would forever linger as a grim reminder of the past.

Eren, on the other hand, had indulged in his fair share of underage drinking, though he was rather conflicted on whether or not it was worth the massive headaches the next day. Seeing Reiner drown his sorrows away in desperation was definitely off-putting.

The stocky blond athlete in question was drunk off his ass, slumping onto a dirtied couch with a girl on each arm.

Face red, eyes drooping, Reiner looked at the girl on his left arm and sputtered out a sloppy, "I love youooou." Then he turned to the girl on his right arm and muttered a slurred, "I love you, Kristaaaaa."

The girl on his right must not have been all that wasted yet, as she replied with an angry snarl, "That's *not* my name."

Annie heaved a deep sigh and tugged on Eren's arm. She was about to insist they take Reiner back to the dorms when someone brusquely bumped into them.

It was a girl with short and wavy light brown hair, offering a delayed half-assed apology when Annie shot her a murderous glare.

"Hitch," Annie muttered. "What the hell?"

"Hey, Annie!" Hitch laughed, totally and utterly plastered. "Hey there, Eren! Fancy meeting you here!"

"I thought you said you were hanging with Ymir tonight?" Annie remarked coldly.

"Well," Hitch began, shrugging, "she ditched me. Again! Said she had a 'date' and blah blah blah, this and that… so here I am!"

Annie glanced down at the shot glass in Hitch's left hand and promptly snatched it away, setting it aside on an adjacent counter after dumping its contents into a potted plant.

"Wish you would've told me that," Annie mumbled in disdain. "You've had enough for the night. Let's go back-"

Before she could finish, Hitch shot her a flirtatious smirk and sauntered away, having scouted out a cute sophomore across the room.
"Bye, Annie!" She sang, ignoring the blonde's insistent pleas as she closed in on her prey. "Don't wait up!"

Annie shook her head and vowed to keep an eye on her crazy roommate.

"She's too much sometimes," she exhaled, vexed and perplexed. She turned to Eren, who was keeping his eye on his own roommate. "You were right, Eren."

Eren kept his sights locked onto Reiner but indicated he was indeed listening to his girlfriend's venting. "About what?"

"We ended up being babysitters," Annie replied in disenchantment. "I'm starting to get a real headache."

Eren miraculously managed to keep his cool, more forgiving and understanding of Reiner's sad attempts at distracting himself from the breakup.

"We'll stay for another ten minutes," he told her, deciding that would be long enough. "Then we'll leave."

Annie nodded in agreement, still watching Hitch. "And so begins the longest ten minutes of my life."

Not even thirty seconds later, Reiner was already in mid-makeout with the girl on his left arm, while Hitch was giggling and flirting with a completely different guy than before.

_This is like a horrible teen soap opera_, Annie thought. _I really gotta get out of here…_

Thoughts continued swirling around her head, when Eren swiftly utilized the opportunity to ask her opinion on something.

"Annie," he began, clearing his throat while seeking a tactful approach, "do you think it's possible to remain friends with exes?"

Annie briefly tore her eyes away from Hitch to give Eren a questioning look, finding his inquiry rather odd.

"I guess… anything's possible. I think it depends on the person," came her response. When she mulled it over, she realized she couldn't offer Eren any personal experience of her own.

Eren was her first real boyfriend.

Marcel from the sixth grade did not count; and they sure as hell weren't friendly with one another after 'breaking up.'

Still, she wondered where the question was coming from. "Why?" she asked, carrying several suspicions of her own.

Eren folded his arms across his chest, suddenly finding the tarnished red carpet an interesting sight. "Let me start off by saying that I want us to be completely open and honest with each other."

Annie nodded, allowing him to continue. "Of course."

Eren turned and looked at her, his expression serious. "How would you feel about…" A hesitant pause. And then finally, "about Mikasa and I remaining friends?"

Annie blinked a few times, falling short of any meaningful words. The question momentarily stunned
her, blindsiding her in utter bafflement.

How *would* she feel about that? How did she feel about Mikasa in general?

She couldn't answer with a simple 'yes' or 'no' this time around. This time, she had to confront her true feelings.

Opting to answer evasively, (given the hardly appropriate setting) Annie shrugged and set her gaze back to Hitch. "I'm not sure. But what I do know is this; I trust you, Eren. No matter what. I trust that you wouldn't keep anything from me."

Eren looked at her as though he was expecting her to say more. When she wouldn't add anything else, he scratched his head, unsure what to make of their abridged conversation.

"It's okay to say you're not comfortable with it, Annie," he finally mused, attempting to provide reassurance. "It means a lot to hear you say that you trust me and all, but…"

He stopped himself. Now he felt like he was trekking into dangerous territory.

Annie read him like an open book, raising a brow. "But what?"

Eren glanced down at his watch.

*Shit*, he thought. *There's still seven minutes left.*

Eren didn't want to prolong this awkward back-and-forth exchange between them, settling on just emptying his thoughts so as not to waste either of their time.

With a heavy sigh, he stated exactly what was on his mind, thinking back to the sassy remark Reiner made back in their dorm. It had been bothering him ever since, consuming him with guilt. "You know, we've never really had a discussion about the origins of our relationship. It's like we just pretend it didn't play out the way it did."

Annie scoffed at that, summing the 'origins' up as accurately as she saw fit.

"We met when you were still dating Mikasa. There was an attraction and we acted on it. Maybe we shouldn't have, and I hate that she was hurt… but what more is there to really say?"

When Eren wouldn't respond, Annie finished off with a terse, "Are you saying you regret being with me?"

Eren's eyes widened in shock and regret, wishing he could take it all back. He hadn't meant to hurt Annie, but he could tell the damage had been done.

"Of course not!" He quickly wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean for it to come out like that… I just…" His voice trailed off, his fingers began soothing over her hair. "I'm sorry… and I can honestly say that I have no regrets." *We were meant to be together.* "Being with you… makes me the happiest I've ever been."

Annie exhaled, losing herself in his embrace.

"I wish… we could have met under different circumstances though," she whispered remorsefully.

Eren only shook his head, hoping she didn't blame herself for anything. "What's done is done. I can't keep apologizing for my mistakes forever. At some point, I just gotta move on." He paused and placed a soft kiss on her forehead. "Looking back now, I don't think I would have changed a thing."
Annie appreciated the honesty, finding it a little easier to move on from the guilt that had overwhelmed her for a while. Maybe making amends with Mikasa would be part of moving on, not just on Eren's part, but on hers as well.

It would be nice to have a bit more closure… and to fully resolve the issue.

"If you're not okay with it, I understand," Eren once again reassured her. "Your perspective matters to me."

Annie pulled away and looked at him, interlocking their hands together. "Like I said before," she affirmed. "I trust you, Eren. And… I want you to be happy. If being friends with Mikasa makes you happy, I'm all for that." She loosened her grip on his hands and turned her attention back to Hitch, ensuring her responsibilities were divvied up fairly. "Besides, you knew Mikasa long before you and I first met. You two have a history together. I get it… and I totally respect that."

Eren gave her a warm, heartfelt smile. I don't deserve such an amazing girl.

"Thanks, Annie," he whispered. "I appreciate how understanding and supportive you've been."

He contemplated whether or not he should suggest they ditch the scene entirely and head outside for a calm, evening stroll- which would then presumably lead to a passionate makeout session in the cool, late wintry air.

As he prepared to make that proposal, Annie interrupted his thoughts with a despondent comment in regards to the aforementioned raven-haired girl.

"The ironic part of this whole mess," she began, "is that Mikasa and I could have been really good friends."

Eren was taken aback by the off-handed remark, but when he stopped to briefly analyze the potential in their dynamic, he realized Mikasa and Annie… had a lot in common.

Sure, they weren't exactly carbon copies of one another at first glance, but given that he'd had the opportunity to know them both on a more personal level, he could see where their personalities intercepted.

Eren wanted to offer genuine solace; essentially rooting for them to call a truce if things had gotten rough between them. He didn't like that he was the sole reason a friendship between the two girls had been compromised- therefore, he decided it was his responsibility to aid in any and all reparations.

"Well," he drawled, hoping to convey a respectable balance of reason and encouragement. "Who's to say you two can't?"

Annie merely rolled her eyes. She definitely had not taken his suggestion seriously. "Really, Eren?" She sighed. If the prospect of friendship with Mikasa didn't seem too unrealistic, she would undoubtedly consider it. But god, that low-key struck her as really… weird. "I wouldn't get your hopes up."

Eren raised his hands up in defense, chuckling at her reply. "Just a thought."

"Mmmhmm." Annie leaned against him, linking her arm in his.

Now that we've got most of that sorted…
Her eyes darted back towards Hitch. The poor thing appeared bored, having lost interest in the guy she was currently speaking with. He was trying to explain his frustration in their generation's obsession with social media, to which Hitch could only contribute a few 'yeahs' and awkwardly timed yawns disguised as 'what… no wayyyyy.'

Figuring that was a good enough cue, Annie tugged on Eren's arm, informing him of their unfortunate but inevitable separation.

"I should take Hitch home," she alerted him indignantly, like a mother watching over an irresponsible preteen. "Her parents are picking her up for their usual family brunch tomorrow morning."

Eren nodded, catching a quick glimpse of Reiner, currently making out with girl on his other arm.

He took a peak at his watch once more, realizing that time was just about up.

"Guess I should head back to the dorms with Reiner then," he declared, looking over at Annie with an expression on his face that screamed 'help me.' He kissed her gently on the cheek and bid her goodnight.

Annie gave him a small smile in return, wishing him good luck with Reiner and all his dramatic antics. Although none too thrilled, she forced herself to get a move on, slowly shifting from her position by his side and walking away in sheer dread for what was to come.

_Hitch better not puke on the way home… or… not on me, at least._

"Text me later so I know you made it home safely," Eren called after her, walking in the opposite direction toward the couch where Reiner had semi-permanently stationed himself.

Annie nodded, and then in the blink of an eye, disappeared into the crowd, following Hitch down a hallway.

_Come on, Reiner_, Eren thought, inching closer and closer to the star quarterback. _Let's get you outta here._

Boy oh boy, what a hell of a night!

Reiner put up some foolhardy resistance, claiming Krista was missing out and would probably come crawling back to him once she'd realized she'd made the biggest mistake of her life.

What resulted in the longest walk-back-to-the-dorms ever consisted of Reiner slumping against Eren's shoulder, singing sad breakup songs like _We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together_ by Taylor Swift, and shouting unintelligible pleas with a non-present Krista to take him back.

He tried to negotiate with Eren for a solid ten minutes that they take a break and sleep under an eyesore of a maple tree, only to remember that Krista liked maple syrup on her pancakes.

The trigger was enough for him to begin baying at the moon like a lovesick bloodhound.

Half an hour later (yes, half an hour), Eren assisted a lethargic Reiner into their room and ended up unintentionally shoving him on his bed- which was an instant lights out for the mighty blond.

With Reiner snoring away, Eren promptly kicked off his shoes and placed his jacket on the coat rack.

_Sweet dreams_, he thought sardonically, plotting future retribution for the slight inconvenience.
Fishing his phone out of his pocket, he discovered there were no new messages.

Although he reasoned with himself that he had nothing to worry about, he dismissed his plan for petty revenge and decided he wouldn't go to bed until Annie texted him.

He hoped Hitch wasn't giving her as much trouble as Reiner gave him.

Chapter End Notes

BeruPiku, anyone? Why not? :D lol
Chapter Notes

A/N: Wow. This is being updated. Finally! Thank you to all my readers for waiting so patiently and sticking with me thus far! I still can't believe we hit 40 freaking chapters! 40! I have a decent amount of writing left to do for this fic. There's just so much more I want to explore with this! This bad boy will be finished. I'm already in too deep lol.
To the haters: Y'all need Jesus lol That's all I got for you guys. I don't do ship-wars or ship-bashing because I'm not in middle school.

Again, I can't thank le readers enough for all the support and encouragement you've given me. It means a lot! :')

***Chapter title from song 'Gonna Fly Now' by Bill Conti***

Here's a ref for this chapter:
In tennis, it takes four points to win a game. It takes 6 games to win a set. It takes 3 sets to win a match.
No point – "Love"
First point – "15"
Second point – "30"
Third point – "40"
Fourth point – "Game"
The server's score is always called first.

Now... read, review, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Saturday, March 18th

University of Trost – Athletic Facility

"Thirty - Love."

In.

Out.

Sixth game. Third Set. All he had to do was score two more points to win.

In.

Out.

Levi looked up from his position behind the baseline, ready to serve the ball. The spectators in the stands promptly fell silent as he steadied himself, eyeing his opponent with a hardline gaze. Surely it would help to have home-court advantage, the dusty red and green colors of the court contrasting with UT's school colors of white and blue.
His coach positioned himself on the sidelines. Fellow teammates arranged themselves on the bleachers.

And then there was Mikasa.

Among others like Furlan, Isabel, and Rico, Mikasa came to cheer him on, clad in a hefty letterman jacket.

*His* letterman jacket.

Their support paired with his own outstanding performance thus far practically guaranteed a victory for this match.

Focused on his breathing, Levi waited until the match official blew his whistle. The high pitch prompted him to toss the ball up into the air and follow through with a heavy swing, blasting it to the other side of the court.

*In.*

*Out.*

His opponent had a decent groundstroke, and was capable of returning defensive lobs in an effort to combat the UT star's powerful forehand smashes. When it came to Levi's backhand, however, the strategic move proved difficult to guard.

*In.*

*Out.*

Levi saw the opportunity to slice the ball, shooting it over the net with an underspin. Successful in implementing the move, the ball followed a flat trajectory and low bounce- to which his opponent had failed to reach in time.

Another point for Levi.

"Forty – Love."

The collective UT Tennis players in attendance erupted in cheers, acquiring the raven-haired athlete's attention for a split-second.

Mikasa instantly caught his eye, her smile inciting a superfluity of determination.

Levi maintained an austere composure, collecting his thoughts to properly set up a strategic plan of attack to take home yet another win for the team. All he needed was to score one more point to put a definitive end to this particularly fierce match- and he'd *finally* have Mikasa all to himself.

Levi had never been much of a show-off, but he sure as hell found it a massive turn on to think about his girlfriend watching his athleticism like shameless eye-candy.

Fraternizing in climactic sexual tension made the sport all the more intense.

As he readied himself to serve the ball once more, he gave Mikasa one last passing glance, as though attempting to communicate through eye contact alone. And then, under a deep breath, Levi released the ball and struck it with a powerful serve, his ferocity unrelenting.

*In.*
Out.

His opponent, worn out from the previous sets, held off for as long as he could, showing no indication of giving up so easily. Yet Levi's speed and vivacious energy were hard to keep up with, his agility as perfectly composed as it had been from the start.

In.

Out.

Looking for the perfect opening to score the last point, Levi gripped his racket tighter and executed a flawless backhand, aimed precisely at his vigilant opponent. Unable to react in time, his opponent found it difficult to accurately return the powerful hit within the lines of court, unintentionally hitting it out of bounds when his last ditch effort failed.

The match official whistled one last time, signifying the end of the match.

Levi remained undefeated.

"Game. Set. Match."

---

Café Charmant – Stohess Plaza

Some conversations are difficult.

Difficult to begin. Difficult to engage in. Difficult to maintain.

Difficult to even think about.

But it was that fateful evening, after closing at the café with her sister, that Krista ultimately decided she was ready to have a very difficult conversation.

She was tired of bottling it all up inside. Tired of feeling helpless and pathetic.

Regardless of the outcome, Krista just wanted to let it out.

Frieda was one of the very few people she could open up to about anything, and maybe even the only person who genuinely cared.

If she was going to come clean to someone, it may as well be her.

With the cash tils cleared out, the floors mopped, and the lights turned off, Krista waited for Frieda near the front entrance, hands fidgeting nervously with the shop keys.

It wasn't long before the elder sister emerged from the office in the back, putting on a light jacket to withstand the chilly night air.

"Ready to head home?" she asked, signaling for the blonde to lock up.

Krista froze, fraught with indecisiveness.

Frieda became worried, confounded by the blonde's distressed appearance. "Krista, what's wrong?" she asked.

Tearing her eyes away from an absentminded gaze to the floor, Krista looked up at Frieda, still
searching for the right words. "Frieda…” she began apprehensively, "can I…?"

A pause.

No. Don’t hold back. Not this time. Just say it.

"I need to tell you something," Krista finally said, her voice echoing in the eerie emptiness of the café.

Frieda nodded, her demeanor patient and fully understanding. "All right," she said encouragingly. "You have my full attention."

Krista found herself unable to force a smile, perturbed by the erratic pounding in her chest. She wasn't going to waste her time asking Frieda to reserve any judgment until later, nor was she going to insist that she keep it a secret.

She accepted the overall unconventionality of the scenario presented before her, but in that moment she couldn't have been half-assed to care if the confession was an absurdly random one.

It was only a matter of time before it all came to light anyway.

Krista expelled a shaky sigh before admitting the long-awaited revelation.

"I'm… gay."

Blue merely bore into blue.

The darkness of the café’s interior left enough to second-guessing, as neither could accurately discern the other's expression.

Stillness settled calmly between the muted figures, allowing for thoughts to roam freely and then stop all at once.

The bizarre interlude came to pass in painstakingly slow progression.

Until a reply suddenly arose, in the form of a light-hearted chuckle.

"Krista… sweetie…” Frieda's tone was gentle and accepting. "Is that supposed to surprise me?"

Muffling deep exhalation, Krista felt as though a heavy burden had been lifted, like she was no longer suffocating under treacherous pretense. Upon fully registering Frieda's response, however, her inward ruminations shifted to that of uncertainty.

"Wait… what do you mean?" she questioned, slightly paranoid.

Frieda chuckled once more before rendering an explanation. A part of her felt an explanation was unnecessary, considering the fact that they were family and had always been close should have depicted a sufficient testament to the fairly obvious, albeit somewhat inconvenient, truth.

"You never really seemed interested in boys," Frieda expressed casually. "And your relationship with that football player appeared a bit… forced."

"Oh… you mean Reiner." Krista swallowed down an outpouring of guilt, reflecting on the aftermath of the breakup. "He was nice… but…"

Frieda intercepted with candor that was just as refreshing as it was rigidly forthright. "But your heart
wasn't in it."

Krista nodded slowly. "I just… I just didn't want to have to lie anymore."

"You shouldn't have to," Frieda affirmed.

Krista let out a bitter groan. "Yeah, right, if only. I'm a Reiss. I'm kind of expected to 'uphold the family name'… and coming out would only tarnish that."

*I'm already the illegitimate daughter with a whore for a mother. I'd be even more of a disgrace if I came out.*

At that, Frieda couldn't help but laugh; a deep, guttural laugh, that which left the small blonde at a loss for words.

"Oh really?" Frieda managed to contend once she'd regained her composure. "You really think coming out as gay would *tarnish* the Reiss family name?"

Krista couldn't formulate a response, so she waited for Frieda to continue.

"Our father is an admitted adulterer, and has been accused of bribery and extortion to seek political gain throughout the entirety of his career. His actions may have even facilitated the spike in criminal activity over the past five years. And our grandparents are unapologetic, homophobic, classist, egotistical bigots who made headlines last month for embezzlement."

Shaking her head almost admonishingly so, Frieda redirected to the main point she was trying to get across.

"The family name has already been tarnished… *to death.*"

And she hadn't even mentioned how dysfunctional they were as a family. Behind the glossy pristine doors to the seemingly heavenly Reiss family mansion, everything was dealt with in such a furtive manner, as though they were all paranoid strangers who couldn't trust one another.

*Fair enough,* Krista thought.

"And yet, people still flock to the café," she mused aloud.

"That's because we serve the best coffee in town," Frieda replied proudly.

"And because the public has always admired you."

Taken aback, Frieda peered below at the small blonde amid her state of dejection. She'd been around long enough to hear what others would often say about her younger half-sister; things that were exceptionally cruel and unfair… and untrue.

Frieda placed a hand on the petite girl's shoulder, addressing her with compassion. "Krista, what's far more important than living up to a trivial title or earning the approval of others is this; being true to yourself."

Krista shuddered, the memory of Ymir's speech plaguing her mind.

"And so what? You prefer women to men." Frieda shrugged, smiling good-naturedly. "Times are changing. People are more accepting now. I think you'd receive a tremendous amount of support from the community if you were to come out publicly."
Krista wheezed at that, only moderately horrified by the idea. "I don't think I'm ready for that," she said, suppressing a choke. "And there's no way dad would ever accept my… lifestyle choice."

His own words exactly.

Standing idly by the door, Krista felt an all-too-familiar desolation consume her, realizing her comfy corner 'in the closet' might be more of a permanent ruling rather than a temporary setback after all.

It wasn't until she felt Frieda's arms encircle around her that she was finally able to see a small ray of hope, glimmering among the dark uncertainty of her future.

"I've seen you do many great things over the years," Frieda whispered. "And I couldn't be more proud of the strong young woman you've become."

A faint smile adorned Krista's lips as she allowed herself to become absorbed into the comforting embrace.

"You don't need anyone's approval or permission to live for yourself."

---

**Hoover Household – Marley Neighborhood**

555-555-4893

-**Pieck :)**

Bertolt studied the small slip of paper in his hands, the one he somehow managed to attain the night he met her.

Was it luck? Merely being in the right place at the right time?

Who knows… and who cares.

He had her number. That was all that mattered up until this point.

The next step should have been obvious.

But he was hesitant.

A couple of weeks had passed since the amiable introduction, and Bertolt wondered if maybe he had waited too long. Had she expected him to call her the next day? Was there a legitimate time frame for these kinds of things? When was it too early to call a girl? When was it considered too late?

And what exactly were his intentions in calling her? Pieck didn't strike him as the kind of girl to engage in hookups or one-night stands, but god, their generation was so unpredictable.

Bertolt at least knew what he was looking for.


That wasn't too much to ask… was it?

Bertolt was by no means inexperienced when it came to interacting with the opposite sex. (Not technically anyway.) But that unfortunately didn't negate the fact that he was still hopelessly awkward around les femmes from time to time.
A part of him was just glad he wasn't stuck in VirginVille like Reiner, one of the few things his blond companion was self-conscious about.

Realizing he was getting side-tracked, Bertolt shook his head in dismissal, returning his gaze to the slip of paper in his hand.

Well… here goes nothing…

He reached for his phone and began dialing Pieck's number, his composure surprisingly controlled and subdued.

The action felt effortlessly natural and he was suddenly put at ease once he heard the faint ringing from the other end of the line.

It wasn't long before he was greeted with the gentle laid-back voice of the girl he met a couple weeks prior.

"Hello?"

Bertolt paused.

He honestly hadn't thought he would get this far, but now that he had, he felt a sudden surge in confidence, allowing it to surface from beneath his usual shy-guy demeanor.

"Hey, Pieck," he said, pausing to clear his throat. "It's Bertolt… from Rick's."

He then received only the sweetest of salutations. "Oh yeah! I remember you!" Pieck enthused. "I'm so happy you called!"

What a relief!

Despite her welcoming reaction to his call, he couldn't help but wonder why she sounded so excited. The thought of her smile momentarily crossed his mind, consequently shedding a more optimistic light on what would have normally been a rather daunting endeavor.

At that, Bertolt decided to skip the small-talk and get straight to the point, a gesture that surprised even himself.

"Well I was wondering if you were free next weekend?" he inquired, far more smoothly than anticipated. "There's this little place up by Liberio Lake that has the best pies and it's within walking distance to the park. So I was thinking… it's nice this time of year for something like that."

For something like that with someone who's cute.

Thankfully, Pieck was more than willing to accept his invitation. "You had me at 'pie'," came her endearing response.

A chaste smile fell to Bertolt's lips as a plethora of jubilant emotions overwhelmed every fiber of his being.

It had been an incredibly long time since he'd felt such an adrenaline rush.

Or maybe… this was the first time he'd felt this way... ever.

Still, he needed to contain the arousal of exhilaration, playing it cool on the other end of the line. "Okay, awesome. I'll text you later with the details then?"
The last bit was formulated as a question in an attempt to reiterate the proposition.

_This_ was actually happening, and Bertolt was almost too stunned to fully comprehend it.

Pieck once again agreed. "Sure thing," she replied in a voice that further emulated her nonchalant charm.

Before saying goodbye, Bertolt was sure to add one last sentiment. "I'm looking forward to seeing you again." He may have sounded a little _too_ eager, but it felt so good to unearth this newfound sense of confidence.

"I'm looking forward to seeing you, too," Pieck reciprocated casually.

The final exchange hinted at the promise of something special to brew between them.

It left Bertolt feeling recharged with impenetrable optimism.

Literally anything could've happened in that exact moment and he wouldn't have cared either way. He was utterly consumed with cheerfulness. Nothing could bring him down from his high.

After the phone call had ended, Bertolt collapsed against his bed - only to bolt back upright with resolve.

He vehemently rejected the pathetic notion of secluding himself to his room all day. He needed to get out, go for a run, shoot some hoops, _do something_ to let out all the wild array of elated emotions.

In a celebratory jump, he rose from his bed and promptly vacated his room, accelerating his pace down the stairs.

He entertained the idea of running a few victory laps around the neighborhood as though he were reenacting a scene from _Rocky_.

"I'm going out!" he called to no one in particular in mid-reach for the front door, all the while pumping his fists triumphantly.

Bertolt Fucking Hoover was on fire!

Even the smallest of conquests were not to be taken so lightly.

He'd barely made it halfway down the street, with no real destination in mind, when he got a text from Reiner.

6:51pm – Reiner: Up for a movie? Annie wants to catch the 8:30 showing of _Logan._

_Hell yeah._

The day just kept getting better and better.

---

**University of Trost - Athletic Facility**

She was waiting for him.

Mikasa folded her arms across her chest as she stood idly by the main entrance to the athletic complex. At any moment, Levi would walk through the glass doors and she wanted to ensure she'd be the first thing he'd see upon leaving the facility.
She was more than ready to finally see him again.

It had been over a week since they’d last spent time together, both burying themselves in long arduous nights of studying for finals at the end of the winter quarter. Levi had offered to take her out somewhere nice once the chaos had subsided, and with the spring quarter and the highly anticipated tennis season having officially begun in such easygoing fashion, he could finally fulfill his promise.

Mikasa could do without all the fancy dates and outings, solely focused on spending quality time as a couple. But, Levi liked spoiling his girlfriend, and he often insisted that it was 'his gentlemanly duty'.

She came to the conclusion that he truly was a softie at heart, and she was more than willing to embrace that aspect of his personality wholeheartedly- even if it remained tucked away in concealment.

As if on cue, Levi emerged from the complex, spotting her in an instant. Mikasa felt her shoulders suddenly tense up and her whole body ached with urgent desire, longing desperately to be reunited. When their eyes met, she found solace in that she didn't have to wait any longer. She commenced a brisk pace his way before ultimately finding herself in his arms again.

Foreseeing her arrival, Levi caught her gently, converging their bodies together so delicately. Chuckling a bit in surprise, he was about to crack a sarcastic joke but fell short of any words when she made her next move.

"Mika-"

She pressed her lips against his own, melting into the tender warmth of what morphed into a hotly anticipated kiss.

Finally. Fucking finally.

When she pulled away, Mikasa proceeded to engage in flirtatious flattery. "Congrats on the win," she whispered. "I almost felt sorry for your opponent."

Levi's rival for the aforementioned match certainly put up a good fight, but in the end, he was hardly any competition whatsoever.

It also might have helped that Levi had a good luck charm of sorts; in the form of a raven-haired beauty that was Mikasa Ackerman.

Levi indulged in the sight of her for a moment. He found the way her cheeks flushed every time they kissed rather intriguing. The rosiness of her face still emulated the lovely shade of pink even after they’d settled down from the heated kiss.

He really wanted to get a move on and take her back to his apartment already.

Having her all to himself was a torturous concept if left unfulfilled for too long.

But patience is a virtue.

"You look good in my jacket," Levi said, his tone suggestive but firm. He studied the garment coating her smaller frame in a comprehensive manner.

His build was inherently structured differently than hers in spite of the disparity in height, making the jacket rather large for Mikasa.
She might have been taller than him, but Mikasa simply couldn't match Levi's pound-for-pound strength. The vast amount of taut muscles layering his entire body outclassed every opponent he'd ever faced-off with on the court. Every sharp curve and angle appeared as though they'd been carved on a canvas, evoking artistic inspiration to appraise its eminence.

Though not visually noticeable at first glance, it was one of the few things that set the two raven-haired athletes apart.

Pulling Levi from his musing, Mikasa concurred with the compliment after stealing another kiss. "Maybe I'll hold onto it for a bit longer then."

Driven by the compelling desire for more of her soft lips, Levi placed his hand on the back of her neck and drew her nearer still, capturing her mouth gently.

He permitted himself to pander in the intimacy for only a brief period, knowing they'd have far better options for similar close contact once they were alone in his apartment.

Levi could hold out until then.

"Let's get out of here."

---

**Trost Neighborhood - Apartment of Gentlemen Levi and Furlan**

"It says you have to warm the olive oil in a small saucepan over medium-low heat, then add the garlic and cook for just one minute."

"Which recipe book are you looking at?"

"The one that says 'recipes'… it's kind of tattered on the edges. Actually… it's really tattered. It's like, falling apart at the seams."

"Wrong one. Use the one sitting on top of the fridge."

"Did you set this whole scenario up because you can't reach the top of the fridge and wanted to avoid embarrassing yourself?"

"You're a real riot, Mikasa. No seriously, I'm crying from all this laughter. Please, throw more height jokes my way. I can never get enough of 'em."

"Well since you asked so nicely… oohhhhh wait… is it… this one? The one with the brown binder?"

"Should be. Is there anything on the cover?"

"It says… *Kuchel's Kookbook*… in little kid handwriting."

The once lively conversation that filled the air with vibrant sarcasm and well-meaning jabs under the guise of charming banter like that of an old married couple suddenly fell eerily flat when Mikasa returned to Levi's side at the kitchen counter, *Kuchel's Kookbook* in hand.

It was for that reason alone the silence loomed over them, leaving Mikasa to wonder if she should say something as an attempt to ease the tension.

She was spared the risk when Levi spoke up.
"That's the one," he said stoically, fixating his attention to a nearby plate of vegetables waiting to be chopped and properly prepared.

That was it.

Nothing more.

Mikasa bit her tongue, resuming dinner preparations as instructed. She flipped through a few pages of the recipe book until finally coming across 'Lemon Chicken'. After committing the first few steps to memory, she set the book aside on the counter between her and Levi and got to work.

They'd cooked together once before, except in that particular setting their meal had been supplied and made possible by the food delivery service Hello Fresh.

On this evening's agenda, however, Mikasa suggested they cook using old fashioned recipe books; a surefire way to kick off the impromptu celebration for yet another one of Levi's victories on the court.

Lemon chicken with vegetables seemed totally up to par with their commendable skills.

'Commendable' for young college students anyway. Mikasa assured that as long as they stuck to what was written in the books, everything would turn out just fine.

Levi tried to explain to her that many people considered cooking an art form- and that the ability to follow instructions (no matter how impeccable the absorption of information) would only get them so far.

But they could endure the inevitable sequences of trial and error. As long as they worked together.

Mikasa set the stove top to medium-low heat and placed the saucepan directly above it.

All she could do now was wait.

Levi had just finished cutting up the vegetables and gathered the chopped bits into a large bowl.

Mikasa postponed a question until after Levi had washed his hands, ridding them of minor grime.

"So," she began, somewhat tentatively. "Who is she?"

Levi looked back at her, drying his hands off with a towel. "You're referring to…?" He lowered his eyes to the brown recipe book nestled atop the kitchen counter.

Mikasa clarified. "Kuchel."

Right, Levi thought, dreading the subject. He figured they would eventually get around to talking about her… but talking about her never got any easier.

He opted to offer only the bare minimum in his response.

"My mother," he said after a few beats of silence.

He wanted to just leave it at that. Now wasn't exactly the best time to be brooding over his mommy-issues.

But Mikasa pressed on- only a little.
"And is that baby Levi's handwriting on the cover?" she asked. Her tone conveyed benevolence, rather than schmoozy teasing. She was genuinely taken by the sentimentality of its history.

At that, Levi nodded. "It is."

He braced himself for a heavy round of questions, the usual 'what was she like?' and 'tell me about her.'

But the worst was always, 'where is she now?'

Because the answer was always 'not here.'

Not anywhere.

Nowhere.

Mikasa's next choice of words weren't anything of the sort, however.

"I think that's sweet," she said softly. "You still have your mother's recipe book."

Levi blinked a few times, his mind struggling to balance the past and the present.

Pulling out of his reverie, he opened his mouth to say something when Mikasa motioned to a specific ingredient.

"Could you hand me the garlic? The pan should be warm enough by now."

Levi complied with her request, handing the minced ingredient over.

With Mikasa tending to the stove, Levi took a moment to give the brown recipe book a thorough assessment.

His fingers traced along the edge of the binding material, eyes peering below at each and every letter his younger self had inscribed all those years ago.

To this day, he still grimaces whenever he catches so much as a mere glimpse of the spelling error, but then he remembers the look on his mother's face and how much she adored the effort he had put into making the cover look presentable for her.

The small smirk on his lips slowly descended into a frown. A part of him felt guilty for having shelved it away out of sight out of mind for a while.

But Levi liked to believe that all would be forgiven so long as he put it to good use every now and then. He internally admitted he couldn't count on himself to uphold said obligation.

Looking back over at Mikasa, he felt an uplifting surge of reassurance.

Then in that case…

He decided he would always need Mikasa around to preserve this newfound commitment.

"I have to say… I think this turned out very nicely."

A satisfied Mikasa reached for the napkin stationed next to her plate and wiped the corners of her mouth. "My compliments to the chef," she quipped, setting the napkin aside.
Seated across from her at the small table in the apartment's cozy kitchenette was an equally satiated Levi, wallowing in one last sip of some cheap red wine Furlan had practically been begging for him to finish off.

(Furlan made the mistake of buying it on impulse in an effort to impress Nifa when he invited her over for dinner one night. Turns out she actually hates alcohol. Loathes it.)

Levi hated when food of any kind went to waste.

He figured there were worse things he could be drinking to wash his meal down.

"Not bad for our first time using the recipe book," Levi remarked after setting the wine glass back down. "Think we're ready to take on something more exotic?"

"Like what?"


"How daring," Mikasa huffed. "I like it."

"Oh?" Levi couldn't help but find her cheekiness adorable.

"Mhhmmm." Mikasa nodded. "Adventurous and bold is a good look for you."

"As opposed to what exactly?" Levi obliged her attempt at humor. "Prudent and cowardly?"

Mikasa suppressed a bitter laugh. "The Levi Ackerman I know is anything but cowardly." She paused to excuse herself from the table, collecting her plate and cutlery.

Levi was quick to intercept. "I'll take care of the dishes," he told her. "You go relax in the living room."

"I can help," Mikasa contended. Then, in a tone that was equal parts sly and sassy, she added, "I'm not completely useless, you know."

"You're still a guest," Levi affirmed, unwavering.

"Mi casa es su casa. Your words, not mine."

"That was meant as a joke. A pun. A play on words. You know, since your name sounds exactly like the Spanish expression."

"They're not even pronounced the same…?"

Levi watched as Mikasa folded her arms across her chest in opposition, adamant in getting her way. The fact that she was equally as stubborn as he was only served as fuel to the fire.

Since day one, there had been plenty of instances where their personalities had complemented one another and clashed with one another.

They'd usually end up settling their differences in various ways, with makeout sessions being the most common and effective solution.

Naturally.
In that moment, however, Levi decided to take the loss on this one, if one could even really call it a true loss.

He ultimately relented after giving her one last cursory glance of approval, coupled with a sigh in defeat.

"I'll do the washing. You dry them off and put them away." His terms seemed fair enough.

And therefore, Mikasa agreed. "Got it."

The old married couple took their time gathering the dishes on route to the kitchen sink. Granted, there weren't a whole lot of items in need of a thorough rinse.

As his hands began scrubbing away at several items in the basin, Levi wondered if more of this would be in his future.

More days and more nights like this... with Mikasa.

Just the two of them, sharing meals together and arguing over who should tend to which chore while simultaneously perfecting the art of compromise.

Perhaps the concept of something as heavy as marriage seemed a bit far-fetched... for now.

But he could definitely envision them taking it one step at a time, progressively working their way there.

Even so, Levi was a perfectly reasonable guy. Mikasa was barely nineteen years old, still only a freshman in college.

He had no qualms accepting that he shouldn't have unrealistic expectations for either of them.

Past relationships had certainly refused to spare him that harsh reality.

Still... the idea of him and Mikasa... married...

*Wait a minute...*

All the turbulent thoughts involving marriage and the like reminded Levi that wedding bells would be ringing soon. Not for him, but for a long-time friend rather.

He had just finished rinsing off the last of the dishes when he sought to address the impending date.

"I've told you about my friend Erwin, right?" he began. "You met his father at the Dahlia Lounge on our first date."

"Yeah," Mikasa replied with a nod. "Mr. Smith. Liked my name a lot... for... some reason."

"You were named after a battleship," Levi remarked, as though she'd forgotten. "Who wouldn't be taken by that?"

"A Battleship *and* a mountain," she corrected him. "The mountain explanation makes it seem less pretentious."

"I couldn't disagree more," Levi jested. "Anyway, we're getting off topic."

"Right. Sorry. You were saying? About your friend Erwin?"
Levi adjusted the collar of his shirt, waiting for her to finish stowing away the last of the clean dishware.

"Erwin's getting married this summer," he finally said, resuming the topic from before. "The wedding's in June."

"Well congrats to the future Mr. and Mrs. Smith," Mikasa commended. "I've always thought summer weddings were the loveliest."

Warm weather. Sunshine. Outdoor venues.

What better time of year to wed your sweetheart than summer?

"I'd like for you to go with me," Levi stated emphatically, his expression softening a bit. "Be my date to the wedding."

Mikasa's face lit up, her eyes sparkling with intrigue at the sight of his susceptible state.

Levi was looking at her intently, a tender vulnerability sheathed beneath his intoxicating onyx eyes. They were normally so much more intense, intimidating to some, even.

But often times, when he looked at her, really looked at her, she found there were small specks of blue fluttering in his gaze.

And she found it immensely irresistible.

Mikasa stepped forward, approaching him with outstretched arms that rested above his shoulders. He in turn slid his arms around her waist and pulled her in closer, figuring he could accept her gesture as a plausible answer.

"Wouldn't miss it for the world," Mikasa replied delicately. "You'll make quite the handsome groomsman."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: *Sigh* Domestic RivaMika gives me life. This pairing needs more fluff haha

I know there's a lot going on, but I'd still love to hear your thoughts ;)
Thursday, March 23rd

Stohess University

"It's happening, Armin. I'm finally doing it."

Phone nuzzled against his ear, Eren Jaeger commenced a brisk pace to the liberal arts building, intent on meeting with his advisor. He was eager to finally make his academic career plans official, and declaring his major was the critical first step in fulfilling that.

On the other end of the line, Armin expressed encouragement as well as one minor concern.

"Have you told your parents yet?" he asked.

Eren's reply was somewhat delayed. "I've spoken to my mom about it," he replied. "We had a long talk over winter break about how I should bring it up to my dad."

So, yes and no.

"You shouldn't be so nervous," Armin chuckled, detecting the uneasy tone of Eren's voice. "Your dad has always been pretty reasonable. If you take the diplomatic approach to explaining how and why you came to your decision, he'll understand. You just have to prove you're being responsible with your future."

Eren wasn't exactly a model citizen when it came to responsibility, but he was making progress all right- one lousy lesson learned at a time.

"And who knows," Armin continued. "Maybe your mom has dropped enough subtle hints here and there to soften the blow, you know? So it won't come as a complete surprise when you finally have the talk."

"That's just it, Armin," Eren said, forehead creased. "He already knows… but he hasn't heard it from me yet."

"He already knows?" Armin said more than asked. "Must not be too distraught if he hasn't already confronted you himself then."

Eren realized Armin had a point. If his academic career plans were truly as problematic as he feared they'd be, Papa Jaeger would have made that clear by now. Loud and clear. Nevertheless, he knew better than to expect the impending discussion to go over smoothly. He'd thought long and hard about what he wanted for his future, but now he needed to put his critical thinking skills to good use-
to reason with his father, and convince him he knew what he was doing.

This was his dream.

As Eren neared the building, he slowed his pace down a bit and lingered outside the main entrance before ending the call, readying himself for his appointment.

"Maybe… but fingers crossed he won't be too upset either way," he groaned. "I'm going in to see my advisor now, but I'll text you after so we can meet up or something."

Armin felt bad for having to turn Eren down. "Can I get a rain check on that?" he asked. "I have a STEM club meeting in about an hour. Maybe we can hang over the weekend?"

"Oh, okay. Of course," Eren replied. "We should have a get-together at my house. You know, with Connie, Jean, Sasha, and the gang. It's been a while anyway."

"Sounds good to me!" Armin concurred. "I haven't talked to Jean or Sasha since break, so it'll be nice to catch up."

Eren, still idle outside the liberal arts building, suddenly stopped in his tracks, inexplicable pressure rising in his chest. "Should I…" he began, stomach tying up in knots, "You think I should invite Mikasa?"

Armin dispelled a deep sigh. "That depends on whether or not you'll be inviting Annie."

True to his oblivious nature, the thought hadn't even crossed Eren's mind.

Oh… fuck.

He really made a fucking awkward mess of everything. If he'd been a little less reckless, and little more responsible, he wouldn't have to deal with such absurdities. Truth was he had no one to blame but himself.

But that certainly begged the question of whether or not he was ready to introduce Annie to them. He worried they'd have negative feelings towards her before actually getting to meet her in person— and he despised the mere notion of that because it wasn't her fault. Granted, no one in their circle of friends (save for Armin) knew the details about his breakup with Mikasa— at least not to his knowledge. Still, the conclusion he ultimately came to was a simple one.

He really wasn't ready to introduce Annie yet.

Thanks to previous discussions with the blonde, Eren had her approval in mending his friendship with Mikasa, so he wouldn't be keeping anything from her. For now, he'd just have to think about it and ensure Annie would be okay with this clusterfuck of a situation.

"I'll talk it over with Annie," Eren finally said. "I wouldn't want to make things awkward for everyone else either."

Perhaps it was already too late for that. But it was never too late to make amends.

And so begins the long road to recovery…

Armin wanted to support his friend as best he could, but deep down even he was a little apprehensive about the possible repercussions. All he could offer was bland advice, knowing full-well Eren had to figure this out for himself.
"That's probably a good idea."

**Sina Health and Fitness Club**

Kickboxing class was set to begin in a few minutes.

Mindful of what little time she had left, Annie Leonhart positioned herself at the front, allowing for direct access to the mirror encompassing the entire length of the wall. She hastily conducted a series of stretches, all the while struggling to shake the precarious feeling that something was missing.

For as long as she could remember, she had always preferred to work out alone. Preferred the solitude and silence. Sometimes Bertolt and Reiner would insist on keeping her company, but they never made it a priority to exercise together. (Often times, she felt like no more than a third wheel to their bromantic workouts, and Reiner didn't incorporate enough cardio, in her opinion.)

Flying solo was her ideal method of training and that was that.

Until the day she met Mikasa Ackerman.

When she and Mikasa would train together, something she couldn't quite put her finger on just seemed to click. Like it was... meant to be. Like their mutual affinity for physical challenges was one of the few things that made sense to her. As bizarre as that sounded. She couldn't resist the insufferable sense of admiration she felt for Mikasa's fierce approach to embracing new things. She respected her tenacious qualities and the fearless outlook she had on her greatest passions. And most importantly, she was genuine. People seemed naturally drawn to her, and Annie completely understood why.

Well that's just great, Annie thought, lost in her inner musings. It almost sounds like I had a crush on her.

Why had the raven-haired girl crossed her mind? It had been god knows how long since they'd last spoken, and with tennis season in full swing it seemed as though Mikasa had disappeared completely, having only crossed paths at the gym a handful of times. (And it was usually only in passing, therefore hardly qualifying as encounters.) But what seemed to trouble Annie the most after her incessant brooding were a horde of unanswered questions riling her thoughts.

Why in the hell would Eren throw something away like that for her?

What was it about Annie that caused the fateful rift in his seemingly perfect relationship?

The perturbed blonde rose from a deep stretch and exhaled a sharp breath, noting she only had about a minute until class. The questions swirling about her head were undoubtedly too late to address, but it only affirmed one thing. Guilt still tore away at her. Maybe it always would.

As a final act in preparation for the class, Annie was quick to slip off her hoodie and take one last lingering sip from her water bottle, still struggling to focus her energy on the physical challenges awaiting her.

Right on time, the fitness instructor for the evening headed to his position at the front and turned to address the entire studio.

"For tonight's class," he announced, voice bouncing off the walls. "I want each of you to partner up with somebody. I'd like for you all to engage in a few friendly sparring drills."
Of course the one night Bertolt is unable to attend class with Annie just so happens to be the same night the instructor calls for partner drills.

Despite her cynicism, Annie scanned the crowded room's interior for a worthy opponent; preferably one who could keep up with her. When her search turned up nothing, she sauntered through the sporadic groups of people in hopes of improving her odds.

And then… in what she couldn't discern was irony or fate, she found the only person she wanted for a partner. She stopped rather abruptly, her knees straining to move onward. Something just clicked-and she welcomed that familiar feeling in earnest.

Standing on the opposing side of the room was Mikasa, appearing as though her search for a partner had also been fruitless- that is until a certain blonde approached her.

Annie was the first to speak, cutting right to the chase. "We should partner up." She refrained from asking. There was no point in tiptoeing around it.

Mikasa couldn't find any rhyme or reason to the relief she felt in that moment.

And truthfully, she didn't need to.

"Okay," was all she said before following Annie's lead.

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Koharu Sushi – Sina Downtown Plaza

Jean Kirstein was a star employee at the workplace, much to the ire of a disdainful Hitch Dreyse.

She'd worked there long enough to have been soured by her boss's apathy towards her, though she knew it was partly because of her own lax attitude. Still, one would think all the time and half-assed effort she'd poured into her job would merit the occasional 'good work, Hitch' or 'Thank you, Hitch, for not leaving like that traitorous Ymir' at least. Loyalty had to be worth something, right?

Not in this case. The boss was constantly praising Jean Kirstein for his work ethic and positive outlook on the job, as though he were in love with his new subordinate. And if Hitch was being honest with herself, who could blame him? Jean was by far the friendliest co-worker she'd had in a while and his keen sense of resolve seemed to be contagious. Whenever he was scheduled in to work, his presence alone seemed to boost morale. The waiting staff were exceptionally cheerful, the kitchen staff's efficiency increased by whopping percentages Hitch was certain could not be accurately calculated, and even the patrons' moods appeared to feed off his gregarious energy; tipping numbers that outclassed the tab itself.

Jean Kirstein was, as management would say, the restaurant's lucky charm.

Regardless, Hitch was embittered by the growing popularity of the horse-faced bastard. But what made her even more salty was the fact that Jean was always so nice to her. In fact, he would go out of his way to say 'hello' every time she'd drag herself inside the sushi joint, rushing over to open the door for her. He'd always offer to walk her to her car at the end of an evening shift.

And sometimes he'd stutter awkwardly around her… which was weird because he never seemed to stumble over his words with anyone else. There were a few times she'd caught him staring- only to see a blush rise to his cheeks as he immediately turned away.

What's his deal? she'd think to herself in dismissal.
She discovered the answer to that question on a particularly chilly evening, when Jean once again offered to walk her to her car after their shifts had ended.

And damn, she'd never been so caught off guard in her entire life.

"Hitch, I'd like to take you out on a date!" he blurted a little random for her liking. He could have yelled about having a bomb strapped to his chest and her reaction wouldn't have been nearly as shocked- nor frightened.

Hitch prided herself in being crafty and clever, having honed her witty skills by way of countless jabs exchanged with Ymir and Annie.

But all she could think to reply with consisted of a stupefied sputter. "You… what?"

Jean must have realized how brash his proposition was and internally shamed himself. He'd always managed to maintain a cool demeanor, polishing it off with rehearsed etiquette and a casual sense of humor. There were only two people in the whole world who really brought out the idiocy in him.

Eren Jaeger brought out the hot-headed 'fight me' idiot, and Hitch Dreyse apparently brought out the lovelorn, stuttering idiot.

Humiliated, Jean shook his head and hoped she would be merciful enough to disregard what had just transpired.

"Sorry," he muttered. "Just… forget I said anything." Awkward, awkward, awkward…

Hitch scoffed at his reluctance.

"Jean. Wait," she implored, heaving a deep sigh. She reached for his arm, pulling him back to face her. Shelving away any resentment she had previously harbored, she was quick to make an adamant request. "Your phone," she demanded, waiting on him to hand it over.

Jean took a moment to process what he'd just heard, and (when he realized that no, he had not in fact died and gone to heaven) he pulled his phone out of his pocket.

As soon as it was placed in her hands Hitch completed the easy task of putting in her number and returned the device to its rightful, smitten owner.

"Call me… whenever," she told him before getting into her car.

It had to be left at that, Hitch reasoned. Problem was, she wasn't really all that interested in 'dates.' (Simply put, she didn't do relationships.)

But Jean was practically an enigma. He treated her differently than other guys; respectful yet sincere. While most had ulterior motives and expected favors for simple gestures, the only thing Jean asked her for was an actual, proper date.

Maybe he'd show his true colors after a couple nights out- or maybe, just maybe, his good-natured and somewhat dorky personality were his true colors.

Either way, Hitch Dreyse decided she should give the poor sap a chance. He was kinda cute, after all. Maybe even her type?

*What's the worst that could happen?*

She wanted to stab herself when her heart fluttered.
Sina Health and Fitness Club

Annie kept her fists up, bracing for the series of strikes showering from her opponent.

Mikasa had always been more offense-minded, whereas Annie had always aligned herself with a defensive mindset. Mikasa's jabs were swift and steady, her kicks equally effective and powerful. The piercing gaze of the raven-haired girl never seemed to stop analyzing her, as though calculating a meticulous strategy to take her down.

Annie was only able to maintain a half-decent defensive position by the narrowest of margins, thoughts still cluttered in an erratic mess. It was awful. She thought she had moved on from these conflicted feelings; thought the conversation she had with Eren at the frat party a month prior solidified that.

But one more look into Mikasa's dark grey eyes caused her to regress back to square one.

The distraction resulted in damaging consequences - both mentally and physically.

Losing focus, Annie misjudged Mikasa's right hook and suddenly found herself being pinned to the mat, her limbs locked and immobile. For some, this position would've proven difficult to get out of, but Annie had been trained to know exactly what to do if ever caught in such a predicament.

Annie let out a gruff grunt. "Not bad," she muttered curtly.

Commencing her escape, she implemented a quick but heavy side roll, reaching for Mikasa's wrist. Still sprawling to escape her tight-gripped hold, Annie pulled Mikasa's wrist across her waist, forcing it with a hard twist. As soon as she found her opening, Annie's palm shot out and struck Mikasa's midsection, finally eluding her grasp. Annie shuffled away, distancing herself as Mikasa rose to her feet, ready to go again.

Another stalemate.

They'd repeated this cat and mouse game over and over, each time more aggressive and lethal than the previous set. Mikasa would attack, toss Annie to the ground, and pin her down. Annie would then strategize an escape and break free, evading her hold every time. The routine was an endless and infuriating cycle of falling and standing back up, starting and re-starting, winning and losing.

Frustrated, Mikasa finally had enough. "We've been at this for a while," she said, her fists falling at her side. "I think we should stop."

"Why?" Annie asked. "Tired already?"

"I'm not talking about our sparring session," Mikasa retorted. "I meant that we should stop with whatever bullshit this is."

Annie felt as though the ground had been swept right from under her. "And what exactly do you think this is?"

"I don't know," Mikasa said, shaking her head. "You tell me, Annie." After a brief pause she added, "You're the one who came up to me, anyway."

Annie couldn't fathom an answer to that. Not without sounding pathetic or overtly sentimental, she thought. All she could think of to say was something she'd been wanting to say for a long time - even after their last chat outside the Café months prior.
Her breathing hitched, Annie placed her hands on her hips, looking defeated. It was now or never, as it was possible she might not get another chance to do this.

"I'm sorry, Mikasa." Annie's voice was raised above the ambient sounds of others sparring and the aloof music streaming from the speakers. Her tone desperately conveyed guilt- a strained tension. "I just... wanted to say that I was sorry."

Mikasa's eyes widened, unsure what to make of the unexpected turn of events. As was the case before, she couldn't decipher the meaning of the warmth rising in her chest, her adrenaline rush seemingly resurfacing.

She still had yet to respond to the blonde when the instructor suddenly announced that class was over.

"Hope to see you all next week," he said, commending all participants for their efforts before turning to gather his belongings into a gym bag.

But Mikasa and Annie remained right where they were, eyes fixated on one another intently.

Mikasa studied the blonde's shift in expression. Annie went from stone-faced and cold, to troubled. It's not that she'd been convinced that Annie was incapable of expressing her emotions, rather, it struck her as odd that she felt the need to address the issue further than they already had. Mikasa believed they'd moved on and were done with one another, as shitty as that felt. Didn't it make sense to just leave everything at that?

In spite of herself, she remembered her eagerness in exploring this newfound friendship. How strange it was that they had so much in common. How hard it was to truly resent the blonde- and how awful it felt when they were forced to sever ties.

But what were they supposed to do now?

Fuck, their situation was so complicated. The convoluted details made her head hurt.

Mikasa failed to procure any kind of reaction, prompting Annie to move forward with what she assumed was an attempted peace offering.

"Can we talk sometime?" Annie asked quietly, taking one step in Mikasa's direction.

Mikasa rolled her shoulders, exuding her disinclinations with a narrowed gaze. "Talk about what?"

Annie frowned, taking yet another step closer before testing some hazardous waters. "Maybe I just want to know how you've been."

Mikasa traced the words in her mind, as though the dots were supposed to connect. If she didn't know any better, she might have thought Annie had missed her in some incomprehensible way. Taking Annie up on her offer might be a good way to find out.

In all honesty, she doubted that was the case, but she'd be lying if she said she wasn't looking forward to seeing her again. Even if she wasn't outwardly showing it.

And even if the whole scenario presented before her seemed utterly fucked up.

Mikasa couldn't simply chalk it up to mere curiosity. It had to have been deeper than that.

Having lost the will to forge any semblance of resistance, she gave in. Mirroring Annie's previous
movements, she made a few steps to narrow the distance between them, all the while remaining equally cautious.

"Sure," Mikasa agreed. "We can talk."

Chapter End Notes

Don't worry, Eren. The road to recovery is happening sooner than you think!

(Did ya really think the mikasa and annie subplot was over?) :P

Thanks again for the reviews and kudos! If you want to bother me about updates or check out some of my other works that aren't featured on this site, you can always swing by my tumblr! :) username is pieck-aboo

Stay tuned!
Amends were made, hugs were shared, and the healing began...

Chapter Summary

Welcome aboard the Road to Recovery

Chapter Notes

hi :)
*sweats nervously*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Saturday March 25th

Sina Square, Downtown

Levi walked out of the dressing room with far too many misgivings than he cared to admit.

He’d often been told he looked good in a tux, though he only needed one hand to recount the few occasions he’d dressed in elaborate formalwear. Such a rare sight must have been for good reason. He gave his reflection in the mirror a brief once over, unsure what to make of the result. The tux fit just right, perfectly framed his chest, and complemented his muscular stature without exaggerating proportions.

But a part of him felt slightly out of his element.

Levi considered himself to be more modest, and perhaps casual, when it came to his style; assuming he had a specific style to begin with. But by all means, if a certain setting were to call for an upgrade in attire, he’d oblige. (Within reason.)

Case in point: his first date with Mikasa. The upscale restaurant and overall circumstances behooved him to present himself in a sophisticated manner. His efforts had worked in his favor, as Mikasa commented oh-so endearingly about how he cleaned up nicely.

And now, having dragged himself inside this particular tailor shop, Levi’s reason for the ensemble adorning his sculpted build was another perfectly valid one. Except in this case, it would hang undisturbed in his closet until June.

A low whistle grazed his hear, pulling him from his thoughts.

“Impressive.” His longtime friend, Erwin Smith, approached him from his own respective dressing room, donning a tux of similar style. “Been a while, hasn’t it?”

Levi met his eyes and smirked. “I haven’t worn a tux since my high school prom,” he said. This brings back a shit ton of weird memories. Since then, he’d opt for a nice dress shirt, maybe a blazer,
and nice slacks for formal events.

Erwin adjusted his collar and bowtie, shifting his sights to the mirror before them. “I remember my high school prom like it was yesterday,” he said, reminiscing. “But those days are long gone, and soon-” He paused, smiling softly. “I’ll be a married man.”

Levi didn’t say anything in response at first, as his thoughts were instantly consumed with the weight of such a commitment. He fixed the cuffs of his jacket to his liking before stepping back from the mirror, appreciative of how little time the fitting process took. Seemed simple enough.

“By the way,” Levi began, after a fleeting wave of silence had passed, “did you ever get around to giving your old man a call?”

Erwin nodded. “Called him the other night,” he replied. “We’re having lunch on Monday.”

“ Took you long enough,” Levi said.

“Between work, finishing my thesis, and wedding planning, I have little time on my hands these days,” Erwin explained. “He understands.”

“Of course.” Levi could definitely relate. Sans the wedding planning aspect, obviously.

“He mentioned seeing you at the Dahlia Lounge a couple months ago,” Erwin drawled. “Said you were with a lady friend.”

“My girlfriend, Mikasa,” Levi clarified. Damn, sharing that particular revelation was immensely satisfying. Ever since they’d made their relationship official, he reveled in the fact that he’d be able to introduce her as such from then on.

Erwin shot him a knowing look. “And will Mikasa be your plus one for the wedding?”

Levi was quick to offer yet another satisfying response. “Absolutely.”

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**Jaeger Household – Shiganshina Neighborhood**

“I’m getting pretty good at this!”

Sasha Braus had visited the Jaeger home numerous times, but never had she utilized their kitchen to prepare a meal. With help from Eren, she gathered the necessary ingredients for a simple pasta dish, while Armin and Connie prepared a salad and then set the table accordingly.

“This was a good idea, Sash,” Eren said, after draining the water from the cooked pasta noodles through a steel colander. “Ordering pizza loses its novelty after a while.”

Sasha nodded eagerly in agreement. All food was good food in her opinion, but cooking with friends seemed so much more wholesome. *And* productive. So long as everyone does their part, that is. From the looks of it, pasta noodles taken care of, the meat almost done cooking, and the sauce ready to go-they made a good team.

“The food should all be ready by the time Jean gets here,” she said, carefully observing the status of the ground meat sizzling in the pan on the stove. “M’kay! Let’s add the sauce and noodles!”

Eren heeded her instruction and watched as the ingredients were brought together, finalizing the simple recipe. “It smells so good!”
She’s going to make a great wife one day, Connie thought to himself, still setting the table.

“Didn’t Jean say he was bringing someone with him?” Armin asked aloud, finished tossing the salad. (Which spawned plenty of tasteless jokes between Sasha and Connie varying from ‘Armin, are you tossing the salad?’ to ‘I just looooove tossing your salad!’ and so forth…)

“Oh yeah!” Eren recalled that bit of information instantly. “He mentioned he invited some girl.”

Then, under his breath, he added, “Probably some girl he’s tryna smash.”

Connie took the initiative. “I’ll grab another plate and set of utensils then, if that’s the case.”

“Thanks, Connie.” Eren fished his phone out of his pocket, intent on texting Jean to verify he and his plus one were indeed showing up.

“It’s a shame Mika couldn’t join us,” Sasha sighed, rubbing her hands on the apron tied across her midsection. “Pasta’s her favorite.”

Armin peered over at Eren, who was still fixated on his phone. At the very least, things weren’t nearly as awkward as before; when the wound was still fresh. No one in their small circle of friends had to tiptoe around the subject, seeing as how they all knew about the breakup and the fact that he and Mikasa had (for the most part) patched things up. Or… they were starting to, anyway.

Armin was just glad it was no longer considered taboo to bring up her name whenever Eren was around, and vice versa.

“She said she had other plans,” Eren finally revealed. “Meeting up with someone… or something like that.”

“Soooo… she didn’t like… blow you off or anything?” Connie looked back and forth between Armin and Sasha, as though looking to them for any indication as to whether or not he was crossing a line.

“No,” Eren answered without delay. When he looked back up from his phone again, he suddenly realized all eyes were on him, waiting for him to expand on that. “Guys… Mikasa and I are fine. Really. There’s no bad blood between us.” Hopefully that would clear the air.

“Even though you’re seeing someone else?” Connie blurted.

Eren didn’t have much to offer besides a plain, “I guess.” He didn’t exactly want to extoll all the details right then and there.

“Pretty sure she’s seeing someone else, too,” Sasha interjected. She placed the pan of the piping hot pasta dish on the kitchen island, waving her oven mitts above it in an effort to cool it down.

The news hit Eren hard. Harder than he let on. He failed to fully register the revelation at first, eyes blinking in utter emptiness and misunderstanding.

“She is?” he asked no one in particular.

Before anyone could reply, the doorbell rang, indicating Jean and his plus one had finally made it.

“I’ll get that.” Eren ambled towards the front door, shaking his head to rid any prior thoughts of his ex-girlfriend.

When he opened the door he was met with the young Kirstein, as expected. But what Eren wasn’t
expecting was the girl by his side. At least, he wasn’t expecting Jean’s new flame to be Hitch Dreyse of all people, that is. Jean couldn’t even manage to extend a quick greeting before Hitch yelped in surprise.

“Eren?!”

“Hitch?!”

Jean immediately deflated at their reaction to meeting one another. If it turned out that Eren had fucked his date, he was going to murder him.

“Do you two know each other?” Jean pried, inexplicably appalled.

“My roommate’s boyfriend,” Hitch quickly replied, smirking. “I told you about my roommate, Annie, right?”

Jean nodded - then froze. So the homewrecker who came between Eren and Mikasa is Hitch’s roommate?!

“We also have English together,” Eren explained, attempting to diffuse the sudden tension. “Did you not mention this was my house?” He asked, turning to Jean.

“He said ‘my friend Eren,’ but come on. What are the odds that he meant ‘Eren Jaeger’?” Hitch answered in his place.

Pretty good, Jean thought in pure cynicism. Apparently.

Eren’s brain momentarily short-circuited. This was… an experience. “How did you two meet?!”

“Work,” Jean replied curtly. “Look, it’s a little chilly outside so can we come in? We can fill you in on the details when we meet up with the others.” A part of him was eager to introduce Hitch to the squad, while another part of him just wanted to end this awkward conversation.

“Sure, yeah, sorry,” Eren stammered, welcoming them inside. He promptly locked the door and then trailed behind them into the kitchen and dining room.

“Jean!” Sasha pounced on him with a hug, initially catching him off guard. He let out a low chuckle. “Hey, Sasha.” He smiled and then greeted Armin and Connie with a wave. “Yo.”

“Jean! Get over here!” Connie pulled him in for a very platonic bro hug, to which Jean ultimately gave in.

Hitch stood by, watching in amusement as the others fawned over her tall co-worker. Who didn’t love Jean Kirstein? Was the guy just universally loved by everyone?

“Guys, I want you to meet someone,” Jean announced, inducting her into the conversation. “This is Hitch. We work together at the sushi place I told you about.”

“Hi!” Sasha, of course, was the first to acquaint herself.

Eren merely stood back and observed as introductions were exchanged with Armin and then Connie, his mind absentmindedly wandering to Annie.
He wasn’t sure where the sentiment had originated from, but he felt the urge to call her. Maybe as comfort? Reassurance? But comfort for what? He was expecting the night to be a long one, and while he was excited to catch up with his friends, perhaps he just needed to assure all was well with her.

Perhaps it didn’t matter either way. Excuse or no excuse, he just wanted to hear her voice.

“I’m gonna make a quick phone call,” Eren informed them. “You guys can get dinner started. I’ll be back in a sec.”

His guests nodded collectively.

“We’ll wait at the table,” Connie said.

As the others settled themselves in the dining room, Eren meandered over to the living room, ensuring he was out of earshot. When all was clear, he pulled out his phone and made the call.

Fritz’ Diner – Garrison Avenue, Trost Neighborhood

Annie felt the vibration of her phone in her jacket. When she extracted it from her pocket, she glanced at the caller ID and smiled. She shifted a bit in her seat, nestled comfortably in a booth, and thumbed the answer button. Her head tilted from side to side, figuring she had some time to kill before her company was due to arrive.

She brought the phone to her ear. “Hey, Eren. What’s up?”

“Phew!” He sounded relieved, as though he’d been kept in suspense a little longer than he would’ve liked. “I was afraid my call would go to voicemail.”

“Mmmm?” Annie hummed. “Is everything all right?”


“Eren, I saw you last night.” They’d hung out at her place and watched *Black Mirror* while stuffing themselves with popcorn. They made the mistake of watching *Arkangel*—the only episode that made Annie Leonhart of all people squirm. Fucking squirm! “By the way, next time you come over, I’m choosing what we watch.”

“To be fair, Hitch had already seen that episode and didn’t give us a heads up,” Eren replied, half-amused, half-disturbed. “Speaking of which, she’s here. At my house.”

Annie raised a brow, slightly perplexed. “Hitch is at your house? For your little get-together with your friends?”

He’d told her about his plans for a casual hang-out at his family home in Shiganshina the previous night, even mentioned he’d invited Mikasa. Although she could tell he was hesitant, he asked if it would be weird if he were to introduce her to his friends—maybe because he felt obligated, she supposed. Annie simply explained it was obvious he wasn’t ready to do so just yet, to which he ultimately agreed.

She in turn realized she wasn’t quite ready to reveal she and Mikasa had made plans to meet up and talk the same night. In essence, neither Mikasa nor Annie would be able to attend for that very
But she didn’t have the time nor the energy to divulge such complicated details over the phone. They’d have to discuss it later. Both she and Eren were due elsewhere.

Her inner musings ceased when Eren spoke again. “Yeah, turns out, Hitch is dating a friend of mine. At least… it looks that way.”

“Must be her co-worker she was telling me about,” Annie deduced. “John something.”

“Actually it’s pronounced ‘Jean,’” Eren said, feigning his best French accent. “I don’t even think his family’s French but he has a French name.”

“Hmm. Interesting,” Annie said. “It’s weird that our friends are dating each other.”

“Most definitely.”

“Shit… Hitch is gonna use this as an excuse to go on double-dates…”

“Shit, indeed.” Eren mulled it over. Going on double dates with Horse Face?! Yikes…

“We’re screwed, Jaeger,” Annie groaned in defeat. “This is all your fault.”

“My fault? How?”

Without bothering to disclose her reasoning for pinning the blame on him she continued with, “Hitch doesn’t date. She tends to have a fling here and there but that’s it. You know… different guy every weekend sorta thing.”

“Okay? So…?”

“So she’s going to fall in love with John and he’s going to break her heart. And then I’m going to have to clean up the mess.”

“First of all,” Eren began, huffing, “Jean not John. Second of all, he’s not the type to hit it and quit it. He’s an asshole when he’s messing with me, but he treats women with respect. He’s like weirdly old-fashioned and awkward around girls. Third, if something dramatic were to happen, why would you have to clean up the mess?”

“Because I live with her. It’s an unspoken rule between us.”

“Well… whatever. But I’m telling you, Annie. Jean’s cool. He’s a decent guy for the most part. Trust me.” Then with a scoff, he added, “If anything, Hitch will be the heartbreaker.”

Annie wasn’t even going to bother defending her roommate. Because it was true. “That’s fair. Maybe you should warn him.”

Eren chuckled. “Geez. I was only joking, Annie. You really don’t have much faith in Hitch, do you?”

“On the contrary, I care for her- and I know her very well. But she has her flaws.”

“We all do,” Eren mumbled. “I know I certainly do.”

“I’m right there with you,” Annie replied, guilt consuming her for treading over thin ice. “At least you have the decency to own up to it.”
Own up to it. The phrase hit where it hurt; behooved her to honor that basic principle.

She expelled a deep breath. “Eren… I should tell you something.” She closed her eyes. “The reason I couldn’t make it tonight was becau—”

“Hey.”

Annie looked up from her sullen gaze at the table, and momentarily froze when her eyes connected with the familiar smile of her company.

Mikasa slipped into the booth and sat herself across from the blonde, relieving herself of her jacket before casually explaining, “Sorry I’m a little late. I got a ride from a friend.”

Annie merely nodded, suddenly feeling rushed.

“Annie?” she heard Eren ask on the other end of the line. “Hello?”

“I gotta go,” Annie relayed back. “I’ll call you later tonight.” She hung up without missing a beat, focusing her attention to raven-haired girl sitting across from her.

“Oh, sorry.” Mikasa paused awkwardly. “I didn’t interrupt anything, did I?”

Annie shook her head. “Not at all.” She smiled softly. “I’m glad you made it, Mikasa.”

Jaeger Household – Shiganshina Neighborhood

Eren’s lips twitched into a frown. He peered down at his phone, disheartened that his call with Annie had ended so abruptly, but it served as a reminder that he too had others waiting on him as well. Whatever Annie was about to tell him could be postponed until later.

He allowed himself a moment to collect his thoughts before heading into the dining room, heavy footsteps following his trajectory. Upon reaching the table, he was welcomed with various reactions to his brief disappearance.

“You good, Eren?” Connie asked.

“Food’s getting cold!” came Sasha’s urgent warning.

“You guys could’ve started without me,” Eren chuckled, seating himself next to Armin. “Well… let’s eat.”

Fritz’ Diner – Garrison Avenue, Trost Neighborhood

With every passing moment, every shared laugh, every awkward bit of their exchange, Annie’s apprehensive state slowly and eventually dissipated.

She and Mikasa had no trouble finding things to talk about, catching up with one another over school, work, friends and family. Gone were the soups and sandwiches they’d ordered, nestled pleasantly deep in the confines of their stomachs. The next order of business entailed an enormous banana split, a treat they agreed to share.

Annie held off from taking another bite, intent on finally addressing the elephant in the room. She was ready to talk about the events that had transpired mere months earlier, as that was also the main reason for their meetup.
She set her spoon down and took on a serious tone. “Mikasa.”

The girl in question maintained eye contact, detecting Annie’s shift in demeanor. The only response she gave was a nod.

“I just feel like I need to get something off my chest,” Annie admitted. “I asked you to meet me here because I felt I owed you an explanation for everything that happened between me and Eren.”

Mikasa broke eye contact then, and her smile faded. “I figured just as much,” she muttered. “Look, Annie…” She shook her head, still looking away. “We really don’t have to talk about it. What’s done is done.” Some things are better left in the past, and Mikasa was fine with leaving this particular subject untouched. They’d already buried it in the hatch. No need to revisit such treacherous territory.

Annie thought otherwise. “I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself if we just swept it under the rug and pretend nothing happened.”

Mikasa tucked a loose stray of hair behind her ear. “You already apologized. As did Eren.” She sank back into the booth. “And I’m assuming you two are together now. Officially.”

The apathy in Mikasa’s voice puzzled Annie at first. “You seem…”


“I’m over it, Annie.” As the words left her mouth, Mikasa couldn’t help but question whether or not they were actually true. She’d moved on in a sense that she was seeing someone else. She’d accepted that Eren only saw her as a friend. She was more than willing to mend her friendship with Annie, realizing she’d missed having a pretty kick-ass workout buddy. Among other things. At the very least: “I just want Eren to be happy.” That much was true.

Annie frowned, lips quivering. Before she could reason with herself, she leaned forward, both hands planted firmly on the table, and let out a persistent, “Doesn’t negate the fact that what I did was really shitty.”

“Takes two to tango,” Mikasa said with a shrug. “Why do we have to do this, Annie?”

“Why do I have to apologize? Is that a real question?”

“No, I mean, why do we have to dwell on this?” Mikasa failed to suppress a bitter chuckle. “You some kind of masochist? There’s no need for either of us to put ourselves through all the drama anymore.” There was a brief pause until… “I just… want to be friends. I really do.”

Annie was baffled. It couldn’t be that easy. No fucking way. “I want to be friends, too,” she said. And she meant it. But… “I’m not sure it’s possible, though…”

“If you honestly believed that,” Mikasa began, lips curling upward into a grin, “then we wouldn’t be here now.”

The firmness in her tone had Annie on edge, still unconvinced she was deserving of Mikasa’s merciful qualities. Evasive words were on the tip of her tongue, but before they could be released, Mikasa suddenly extended a hand her way, as though intent on initiating a handshake.

No, that’s exactly what she was doing. She was offering to shake on it.

“Mikasa, wha-” Annie mustered out.

Alas, she wasn’t kept in suspense for too long. “It’ll take some time for me,” Mikasa said quietly. “But… we’re cool.” All water under the bridge.
A warm feeling surged in Annie’s chest, a feeling of solace and relief. For days, possibly even weeks, her thoughts were consumed with guilt; her mind no more than a convoluted mess of chaotic emotions. But the moment Mikasa offered her hand, smiled that genuine, sweet smile, Annie felt the burdening weight of her shame lift with ease, and disappear into the unknown. She wouldn’t question why she felt this way around her, nor would she deny the gesture directed towards her.

Annie had prepared an entire speech for the occasion, hoping an explanation could exonerate her actions and mend their friendship. Turns out, Mikasa wouldn’t demand such trivial attempts at an apology. She only wanted to start anew and move on from the past.

The outcome, though far different than what Annie had expected, restored her in a way, like a part of her was healed.

Strange as the sentiment was, Annie was glad.

Still waiting for her to accept, Mikasa’s smile turned a bit lopsided, and she let out a small laugh. “You’re not gonna leave me hanging, are you?”

Annie reciprocated her softened expression and lifted her hand, setting her palm firmly in Mikasa’s. “Thank you...”

Their hands were still connected when Mikasa cast a sneaky glance at the seemingly forgotten banana split, roughly half of the dessert yet to be consumed.

“We should probably finish this,” Mikasa suggested. Annie followed her line of sight and concurred. “Before it melts.”

With a nod, the blonde picked up her spoon. “Point taken. You can have my maraschino cherry, by the way.”

“Oh, Annie,” Mikasa hummed in delight. “Now you’ve officially redeemed yourself.”

Annie’s laughter echoed throughout the confines of the entire establishment, seemingly bouncing off the walls, not a single pair of ears left unscathed.

It was a sight that was equal parts scary and endearing; something only she could pull off without rousing too much concern.

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**Jaeger Household – Shiganshina Neighborhood**

“Wait… I’m confused… So, Eren and Hitch know each other from SU and Jean knows her from the sushi restaurant… right?”

Sasha’s mind stirred wildly, thoughts buzzing from one disjointed location to another. She was still munching away on her pasta when she’d somehow managed to piece everything together. Granted, everything had been explained twice by now.

Eren took a swig from his water glass and nodded. “Yup.”

“And Hitch’s roommate is…” Connie paused to swallow down a mouthful of pasta, directing his pointer finger at the host. “Your girlfriend?”
Eren nodded again. “Yup.”

Sasha giggled, internally computing a simple formula. “No matter how hard you try, Eren, you’ll never get rid of Jean.”

Jean groaned at that. “Please. Jaeger follows me around like a bad habit.”

“Well, technically…” Hitch interjected, fluffing her wavy hair. “He and Annie were together before we even met.”

Eren merely hummed in agreement, while Jean rolled his eyes and steered the conversation to far more pressing matters.

Changing the subject was probably the best course of action to avoid some seriously awkward mishaps. Jean figured he could bother Eren about this elusive girlfriend of his in a more private setting, as he didn’t want to make things weird with Hitch around.

“Right,” Jean began, clearing his throat. “Anyway, so what classes did you guys get stuck with this quarter?”

In spite of his best efforts, Jean’s attempt to reroute their little chit-chat was frivolously ignored.

“When can we meet her?” It took a moment for Eren to realize that Sasha’s inquiry had been directed towards him.

Even Connie was quick to chime in. “Yeah. You should’ve invited her over tonight, Eren.”

“What? Annie?” Eren looked up to see a pair of chirpy grins hurled his way. “You… want me to introduce her…?” Still deep in his flabbergasted state, Eren struggled to articulate a rational response to what his friends were insinuating. He’d already assumed his friends would be entirely put off by the mere notion of meeting Annie; especially because of the events that had unfolded before and after his breakup with Mikasa.

Contrary to that belief, however, his friends all seemed rather lax about the circumstances. Sure, maybe they had their reservations regarding how it all went down, but from what he could tell, they were still supportive and just as encouraging as always.

But of course. That’s the whole point of friendship, after all. Eren wanted to bury his head in shame. His friends had never been the judgmental kind! They were honest when the need called for it- but they’d never allow such juvenile antics to jeopardize a relationship that had been cultivated through years and years of bonding and getting carelessly wasted with one another.

Armin, who had been mostly silent for the duration of the evening, offered his input. “It would be nice to officially meet her,” he concurred. “Whenever you’re ready, that is.”

Eren half-smiled at the sentiment, his expression turning pensive. He was willing to appeal to their request, hoping Annie would be on board with acquainting herself with his group of friends- and perhaps even becoming an integral part of it as well.

“Oh, okay,” Eren said with a chuckle. “I’ll invite her to our next get-together so you all can meet her.”

Hitch was the first to express her approval, clasping her hands together. “Annie’s a sweetheart,” she enthused. “Maybe not as expressive as others, but a sweetheart nonetheless. You’ll like her.”
For the first time since meeting her, Eren was grateful for the existence of Hitch Dreyse.

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**Trost Grocer - Trost Neighborhood**

Levi still had about an hour to kill before he was due to pick up Mikasa from the diner.

Given the fractioned time frame, he decided to make a quick run to the grocery store. He was out of eggs for one thing, and Furlan had mentioned something about their limited supply of Clorox, so he took it upon himself to fulfill the tedious errand.

He was examining a few potential candidates among an array of egg cartons when he felt a hand on his shoulder. The soft voice of an older gentleman beckoned him to turn around, breaking his concentration and shattering it into pieces instantly.

“Levi?” the man said, a smile etched on his face. “Haven’t see you in a while! How have you been? How are things?”

Levi reciprocated the warm greeting. “Mr. Ral,” he began. “It’s good to see you. And it’s more of the same with me. Graduation is about three months away, and I’m still working on my senior thesis. How have you been?”

“Good, good,” Mr. Ral replied with a nod. “I’m coming up on my retirement.” When Levi’s eyes widened in surprise, he rendered a brief explanation. “I know, I know. I can’t believe it either. But I’d invested almost four decades in my teaching career. Petra tried to talk me out of it. Said I could stick it out for a few more years, but I’m ready to hang my hat.”

Levi lowered his gaze at the mention of her. “How is Petra?”

Mr. Ral was already well aware that his daughter was no longer being courted by the young man before him, but by all accounts, there were no hard feelings between them. Mr. Ral still regarded Levi in a positive manner, and Levi still respected him in return.

The same could not be said for Levi and Petra, unfortunately. They weren’t even on speaking terms.

“She’s good,” Mr. Ral replied. “She visits every now and then. Still juggles school and her internship.”

“Good,” was all Levi could manage.

Mr. Ral could detect the tension in Levi’s voice, like it was strained and holding back from something. It saddened him more than anything that the two couldn’t work through all the trials and tribulations that tested their relationship.

Some things just weren’t meant to be. And that’s okay.

But he’d kick himself if he didn’t at least make some sort of effort in the damage control department.

“Look, I don’t mean to impose my will on either of you,” Mr. Ral began, chuckling nervously. “But maybe you could give her a call sometime? Just to check up on her.”

Levi’s jaw clenched. Inexplicable concern washed over him. “Is she okay?”

Mr. Ral offered a meek smile. “Oh, yes, she’s fine! It’s just that you were always one of the few
people she’d genuinely open up to, and with all that’s going on with school and work stress, she could really use a friend.”

Levi frowned. “With all due respect, Mr. Ral,” he began, hesitantly, “I’m not sure it’s my place to pry.”

If Mr. Ral was even a little disheartened, he wasn’t showing it. “Nonsense! I’m sure she’d love to hear from you.”

Levi didn’t have to heart to tell the man the ugly truth, nor did he have the heart to turn his request down. Petra was still a contact in his phone- and it was hard to tell whether he’d simply forgotten to delete it or if he couldn’t quite bring himself to commit to the act for the sake of sentimentality.

Either way, he promised to comply with Mr. Ral’s proposition, figuring he was capable of honoring one measly courtesy.


Fritz’ Diner – Garrison Avenue, Trost Neighborhood

“Sure you don’t need a ride?”

Before Annie turned away to walk back to her car, she made Mikasa one last offer.

“No thanks,” Mikasa replied. “My ride’s on their way.”

Annie nodded, fishing her car keys out of her pocket. “All right. I’ll see ya later, Ackerman.”

“We’ll meet up soon,” Mikasa assured her.

She watched as Annie entered her small vehicle and drove away, disappearing into the busy street. Night had beckoned the stars, and the clear skies were completely devoid of any clouds. It was chilly, and Mikasa steeled herself in the jacket she’d borrowed from Levi, a slight shiver running down her spine.

A few short moments later, the man of the hour pulled up curbside, right on time just like he promised. His presence brought an instant smile to her lips as she rushed to the car, hopping inside eagerly.

“Hey,” she greeted. After adjusting her seatbelt, she leaned over and planted a small kiss on his cheek. “How’d your errands go?”

Levi’s stoicism didn’t faze her at first. Not until he spoke. “Fine,” was all his apathy would permit.

He began driving, still not looking her in the eye.

Mikasa waited until they’d reached the main road to inquire. “You all right?” Even for Levi, he was rather… quiet.

Levi slumped his shoulders a bit. “Yeah,” he replied, detached. “Just got a lot on my mind.”

When they came to the next stoplight, he finally turned to look at her. That’s when he realized her gaze had never left him, as though bothered by the distance he was keeping between them in the lopsided conversation.

He wasn’t too keen on worrying the number one lady in his life- and the silence was definitely
unnerving, so he caved in to the tender expression of concern wrinkled on her face and engaged.

“So who were you meeting up with back there?” he asked, hoping to put his busied thoughts to rest. “Your old gym buddy, right?”

Mikasa bit her lip. Ah, yes. She hadn’t exactly divulged every detail regarding her complex relationship and history with the blonde. It was a convoluted mess that included her ex, Eren, and a few other various parties inadvertently involved. All Levi knew was that they’d worked together at the café for a short while and were gym buddies for a short while.

He had yet to learn that the blonde was dating her ex, they’d had an awkward falling out, awkwardly made up (?) and were now working on being friends.

“Oh, Annie,” she finally answered. “Yeah… she’s… something like that.”

Levi quirked a brow. “Sounds like there’s more to this story.”

Mikasa nodded, a docile sigh easing from her lips. “It’s… complicated,” she maintained.

“Care to share?”

“Do you really wanna know?”

“Of course.”

“I’m not sure I can sum everything up properly in this short car ride back to your place.”

“Then tell me everything when we get home.”

Mikasa was one hundred percent on board, but huffed in amusement when she caught on to his scheme. “So… does this mean I’m spending the night again?”

He shrugged. “If you want.”

“When have I ever turned down the opportunity for a sleepover?” she teased.

“Well… you’ve only slept over… twice?”

“That’s sweet. You’re keeping count.”

“I’m a gentleman.”

“And I appreciate that about you,” Mikasa commended. “And just so you know… you don’t have to retreat to the couch. We can share the bed this time.”

Levi shot her a wide-eyed look- the most emotion he’d conveyed since she’d first entered the car.

“Levi, two people can sleep in the same bed without having sex.”

That earned a snort from him. “Like I said, I’m a gentleman.”

“Thought you meant that semi-ironically.”

“Come on, Mikasa. Doesn’t it seem… indecent?”

“Not really…?” Mikasa suppressed a small laugh. “Do you… not want to share the bed with me?”
“… depends on what the context is here…”

“Dear god, Levi.” A blush rose to her cheeks. They were bound to talk about this sooner rather than later anyway, right? Bed-sharing? Sex? It wasn’t really that big a deal. And did he forget they’d reached second base (almost third base by technicality) on the very couch he would retreat to? “This doesn’t need to be so hard.”

“Fine,” Levi grunted, totally not sexually frustrated at all. “But all we’re gonna do is sleep.”

“Wait,” Mikasa deadpanned. “There’s other things you can do in bed?”

Levi gave her a look of disapproval, not bothering to answer.

“I’m curious, Levi. Tell me more.”

“No.”

“Too hard to explain?”

“Uh-huh. Sure. Whatever you say.”

“If that’s the case, maybe you can show me instead. I’m a quick learner.”

“I’m sleeping on the couch.”

Mikasa’s soft laughter accompanied the quiet, cozy drive back to his apartment, the mellifluous timber of her voice lifting his spirits once again.

He could always count on her for that; to make his head feel dizzy with thoughts of what it would be like to always have her by his side.

She didn’t have to keep him falling like this, but he secretly hoped she would anyway.

Chapter End Notes

I totally used a sappy country love song lyric at the end there :’D hahahahaha

This was brought to you in part by my fic updating spree! So if you read my other ongoing fics, they’ve been updated as well!
Here’s to the upcoming new season and for all the support I’ve received over the past couple years in writing this!! (That’s right, this fic turns 2 years old on the fourth of julyyyyy!)

Sorry for the hella late update, but just know that I’m not abandoning this work! Please have a little more faith in me!! lol
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!