Sharp Instrument

by Commissioner

Summary

modern AU: Fleeing from PTSD-inducing trouble and a mediocre yet satisfying life, Erna finds herself a fresh start and meets punky tattoo artist Levi. As their 'not-really-friends' friendship develops will other things become a part of their routine?
Morning Routines

Chapter Summary

This is my "modern and everything is nice and normal except everyone is still ultra-fucked because I like to make people miserable au." It features my OC along with pretty much every other AoT character I can squeeze in here. My OC, Erna, first appeared in my first fic ever "Strange Girl But Effective" which is still a WiP, but the two fics pretty much stand alone. I don't think you need to read the first one to enjoy this one. I do, however, recommend reading the first one just because. Some people seem to like it, but it's whatevs. You do you.

I think the birth of this fic only came about because I had the head canon: What if the Shiganshina trio were just like really shitty stereotypical hipsters who owned a café? This fic exists because I wanted a dumb, hipster Eren who is a barista and has to Instagram all of his latte art. So that happens. You're welcome.

Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

As Erna bolts upright in bed, she isn't sure if she screamed just before. She knows she isn't screaming now, and what she thought was a scream before could have been only imaginary, within the confines of her nightmare that she is now waking from. Ultimately it isn't important. She knows what demons she has and she knows that screaming in nightmares is a thing that might happen to her from now on, she's made peace with this, it's unremarkable. The only concern is neighbors. Her new residence is a small apartment in a tight, thin-walled building, a relic of old New York City tenements. It isn't a sympathetic concern she feels for waking people up at – she checks her phone – almost six in the morning. It's that she values her privacy. She doesn't want anyone to hear and know that this is how she wakes up. She doesn't want anyone to know anything at all about her. Ideally she would like to come and go without being noticed at all, like an invisible girl.

As she lies back down, twisting her head to look out the window, which is there only because building code requires one and definitely not for the view of the alleyway and the brick walls on the other side, she doesn't even know if she has neighbors. She would guess so. Empty apartments in New York are rare, bordering on mythical. She doesn't really care what dark, seedy events had to happen to free up this one, which is now hers conditionally if she continues to pay rent on time, doesn't keep any pets, and doesn't smoke inside. Fucking bullshit, she thinks. Her last apartment at least had a walk-out terrace where she could smoke. Her last apartment had a lot of amenities. The building had a doorman, a functioning elevator, floor to ceiling windows, and thick walls. She broke the lease on it to pack up all of her shit and move here in the middle of the night, last night.

"Move in" feels inaccurate with all of her shit still in boxes on the floor. She reaches for the lamp next to her bed, pushes the switch, and closes her eyes until they're ready to adjust. Feet on the floor,
she feels claustrophobic in a good way. The less space there is, the better she can know all of the space, and the harder it is for anything to surprise her. The selling point of this place was, for her, that it is essentially only one room. There is kitchen space, a vague suggestion of a living area, and a twin bed in the far corner, but there are no walls except for those that separate the bathroom. She can't deal with entering and exiting rooms anymore. Every corner and every doorway triggers panic in her brain no matter how illogical it might be. And so, this dingy, falling apart, one-room apartment with bars on the window in a shitty neighborhood feels safer to her fucked up brain than the three bedroom, three bath apartment on the tenth floor of the white glove building in Manhattan that she just left.

But there's no terrace, she thinks, as she looks around and wonders how long she can delay her first cigarette of the day. She looks in the oval mirror hanging next to the clothing rack against the "bedroom" wall. Her palm goes up to smooth out her bangs. She attempts to fix up and de-frizz her almost chin-length black curls with just her fingers. It's not working. Frustrated, she holds back the sudden urge to punch the mirror, tamps that impulse down into the rising bile in her stomach. She turns to go to the bathroom and stubs her toe on a box of books and she can't help her immediate, violent reaction. She has to blame the inanimate object for being there and kick it four or five times, again and again, even though it only hurts her.

Tears make her eyes itch. She refuses to let them happen. The skin of her nose itches too and she wants to scratch her face off. Still wants to punch that fucking mirror. She pushes past the anger and the powerless, hopeless feelings, refusing to acknowledge that they're there rather than to even try to deal with them. She walks to the front of the apartment where the front door leading out to the hallway and the bathroom door are perpendicular. First the bathroom door gets shoved open, just to prove to her suspicious mind that there is nothing in there. Then she checks the locks on the front door. She touches them. Even though her eyes can see that the door is locked, she needs to feel it. She needs to pull at the knob and prove to herself that it can't open unless she unlocks it. She does this a few times. Once isn't good enough to be sure.

Fifteen minutes later, when she is standing in front of the oval mirror again, this time with hair damp and setting in curlers, she is centered again. Reset until the next minor frustrating, difficult thing sets her off in an explosion of futile rage and shame.

"Fantastic," she can't help being sarcastic even with her own reflection.

While showering takes only minutes, getting dressed takes more than an hour, because she wants it that way. She makes it take a long time. It's a ritual, the motions of which are almost religious for her. She rolls on black, thigh-high stockings, clips them with a plain black garter belt, ties herself into a black and white corset, and pulls a puffy crinoline up around her waist just to start. She makes that take thirty minutes at least, picking at and adjusting every little thing as she goes so that every piece is what passes as perfect for her; everything lays the way it should, tight enough, but not so tight that it dents or rolls her skin, every bow as symmetrical as her fingers can manage. She reaches for any dress from the rack, it doesn't matter, there are no favorites. They are all essentially the same to her, aside from different fabrics being better for warmer or cooler weather. They are probably essentially the same to any outside observer as well, all of them either completely black or black with white accents, and in the same Victorian-esque gothic lolita style. She pulls one carefully over her head, avoiding snagging any curlers. She picks and pulls and arranges the a-line skirt over her crinoline, smooths out the sleeves down to the bell of ruffles that fall midway down her hands, buttons together the white pintucked chest panel with plain, polished round black buttons all the way up to her neck. She folds the rounded collar over a black ribbon that she ties in a bow, unties, and ties again until she is satisfied with it. When all of that is done she can finally take the curlers out and tie a black, ruffled cotton headband with white ribbon sewn through into her hair.
She steps back until she can see more of herself in that little mirror. She looks fake. She looks like a
doll, a mechanical simulacrum of a girl in black ruffles and bows and white cotton lace trim. The day
can officially begin now with this protective veneer in place. She casts a sidelong glance over at the
black carton of cigarettes next to her small, coffin-shaped purse. She is an addict for sure, but she is
torn between the need to smoke and the fear of going outside.

Levi wakes suddenly with that vague feeling of having heard something that broke him out of sleep,
but is gone just as soon as he wakes up. Too dreamy to care about it, but now too awake to fall back
to sleep. Once he wakes up that's it for him. It's hard enough to get to sleep at the end of a long day
when he actually needs it, but to get back to sleep after waking up whether it's in the middle of the
night or – he checks the time on his phone – at 5:53am, is impossible. This happens a lot. He likes
his building because it's quiet, but he can't say the same for the outside world. Screaming sidewalk
fights happen, usually between couples, at the worst times. He can also count on being woken up by
the screeching, crashing sound of a shitty car riding on the rims down the street at least once a week.
How anyone can find a way to get high enough that they don't notice that one or more of their tires
are flat and their car is sounding like a WWII tank on its last leg is beyond him.

Humanity is fucking amazing.

He gets out of bed and as he crosses the apartment to the light switch on the wall, he cracks the
bones in his neck and shoulders. When he flips the switch he covers his eyes with a hand, protecting
them from the intense light of the 100 watt pure white light bulbs in the ceiling fixtures. He rolls his
ankles and cracks his toes while he waits for his eyes to adjust.

His apartment is stark white and bright, even without the lights on. Furniture is sparse and is all of the
same aesthetic: white, cold, industrial. A friend once called it "hospital chic." There's a white drafting
table, white and clear plastic drawer organizers on each side of it, full of art supplies, tattoo inks, and
piercing needles all meticulously organized. The tattoo and piercing supplies don't get used often. He
isn't some douchebag scratcher who got a tattooing kit off of ebay and thought he could be an artist.
He did his apprenticeship and got a job in a real shop. But he likes having stuff at home when he
feels like a new tattoo or piercing, or if there's a client he likes well enough to let them into his
apartment he can give them a discount on a tattoo if he doesn't have to worry about the shop's cut
and overhead. That rarely happens. He doesn't like most clients. In fact he kind of hates a large
percentage of them for a myriad of reasons, each special snowflake being annoying in their own
unique way.

When he wakes up off schedule, he draws. If he's not in the mood to draw, he cleans. Those are the
only activities that take up his free time. He lives like a monk. He follows a strict routine, takes care
of himself, has no indulgences or vices… unless cigarettes and black tea count, but compared to what
his life used to be, those still make him feel like an ascetic. And he likes it this way. This strict routine
and sense of responsibility is how he expresses himself, how he enjoys his freedom to do whatever.

Nothing needs to be cleaned, so he pulls on some sweatpants, grabs a sketch pad, and sits at the
drafting table. His fingers drag a black pen in precise lines, producing some radially symmetrical
designs. He switches hands, duplicates the line work again with the other hand. Being ambidextrous
is an incredibly useful trait, but if he doesn't practice with it, his right hand will lose its coordination
and ability to do finely detailed work without fucking up. A lot of the work he does is like this,
difficult exercises in symmetry just for the sake of keeping his hands busy. He probably only
sketches two or three creative drawings a week if it's only for himself and he's not working on a
consultation for a client.
His eyes blur as he finishes off the design. He puts the pen back into the organizer caddy on the side of the table and leans back in the chair, lifting his arms up over his head in a long stretch, lacing his fingers together and cracking them. He's really not in the mood. He spins around once in his chair, then stands up.

He cleaned everything to death when he got home yesterday. Anything more would be a waste of cleaning supplies. He checks his phone again, revealing that he has successfully killed only fifteen minutes. He opens the drawers of organizer bins, thinking he can busy himself with an attempt at reorganizing all of his shit, but as he scrutinizes the contents of each drawer, he decides he likes the way his shit is organized. It took a long fucking time to get it this way and he's not going to fuck with it. So what to do?

He sighs and rakes his fingers through his hair, looking upward and thinking.

"Fuck it."

He takes out a sheet of transfer paper, cuts out about a five inch diameter circle, and draws the outline of a simplistic design. He draws it upside down because that's how he's going to have to do it when he puts it on himself with the gun.

It's the smallest, simplest thing – five small, flying bird silhouettes – but it's still going to take him more than ninety minutes altogether with all of the steps he takes to prep everything and then clean afterward. With one easy movement he pulls a small work table with a power source hookup for his gun over to the white rectangular table in his kitchen. He would throw a shit fit if he heard about any other artist working in their kitchen, but his is cleaner than a hospital and his tools are cleaned and maintained better than a brain surgeon's. He goes through all of the steps automatically, cleans every surface again with hospital grade cleaner for good measure. He washes his hands, snaps on a pair of white nitrile gloves, picks his favorite gun for black work, and gets everything he'll need out and puts it within reach.

He cleans the swath of his skin that he's going to work on and picks up a razor blade to run it over the skin even though there's no visible hair. He wipes the spot with some alcohol and lets it burn for a few seconds before rubbing some ultrasound gel on and waiting for it to tack up a little. It holds the stencil better than cheap petroleum jelly would. He pours out a little ink and opens up a sterile package with a new tube of needles while he gives the transferred stencil some more time to dry.

He doesn't practice on himself a lot. He has a small amount of tattoos for someone who does this for a living. The biggest one he didn't even do himself. Mike (pronounced mee-kay like a drunk Russian), his boss and the owner of the shop he works out of now did the giant tattoo of two stylized, abstract wings on his back, one black and one white. Levi had drawn the design, but he wasn't flexible enough to turn his head around Linda Blair-style and put it on his back himself. The rest of the art on his body was self-inflicted, but he's conservative with it. After this one is finished, he'll have four tattoos. There's the tree on his right calf, lots of lines and highly detailed like an old storybook illustration, each tiny leaf drawn deliberately and individually. There's a little grey striped tabby cat laying on one of the upper limbs, but with so much fine detail in the tattoo it's easy to miss. Starting on his left shoulder and going down his bicep to his elbow is an epic scene of a warrior angel free-falling out of the clouds, two swords raised above his head, about to battle a big, hideous Japanese-inspired demon creature rising out of a rocky landscape of waterfalls, hot springs, and zen Buddhist sculptures. That one took the longest. He wanted to do it in a more realistic style than the tree, so it was a lot of shading along with all of the line work. The small tattoo on his inner right forearm is the first one he did. It's an igloo set in a snowy landscape. For a minute he thought about coloring it in with white ink because that was trendy, but his skin was so pale it wouldn't make a difference. The igloo is some of the best, most clean line work he's ever done. Probably because it
was his first and he was paranoid and extremely careful.

A lot of tattoo artists tat themselves up relentlessly like it's nothing. They treat their skin like it's sketch paper. Levi is a perfectionist and too critical of most of his artwork to live with it on him forever.

He's much less conservative about piercings. There is enough surgical steel in his body to upset even the least sensitive metal detector. He has posts and rings going all the way up both ears, black 3/4" gauges in both earlobes. Stainless steel ring snakebites, a barbell through the bridge of his nose, a curved barbell through his tongue web instead of the tip of his tongue (he wanted a tongue piercing, but not one that would clack around against his teeth). He only did two barbells in his right eyebrow and none in the left because he wanted some asymmetry. He pierced the nape of his neck with a curved barbell capped by flat stainless steel circles and with the help of a couple of well-placed mirrors. The nipples were the most painful. After piercing one and finding out how sensitive it was, he almost couldn't get the balls up to do the other. Definitely gave him a newfound respect for women who got them done. The surface barbells he put through his clavicle were difficult only because the first three months were a constant battle to keep his body from rejecting them. The easiest was the ladder of six frenum piercings that went up the underside of his cock and the apadravya through the head. People always assumed genital piercings were the worst, but his didn't hurt at all. It was only psychologically difficult to stick a needle through your own dick the first few times, but if he thought about it, it wasn't half as dangerous as all those times he stuck his dick in someone he just met.

He holds down the foot pedal and the needles punch into the skin over his ribcage. It hurts like a bitch, but he doesn't move a muscle. He has a good handle on his pain reactions by now. Anything close to the bone like this is enough to knock most people on their ass, but this is small and simple and over quickly. In less than five minutes he has the silhouetted birds done. He sits very still for a minute and contemplates them. He feels like they should be flying towards or away from something, like he should do more. In his head a sprawling landscape forms far below them, dotted with trees and cut through with a river. He wants to sketch it out and get it on while it's fresh in his head, but there's the time restriction. It'll take about an hour for him to clean everything up and he still needs to eat something, take a shower, make some tea, get dressed, and go to work. So the birds will have to stand alone for right now.

When he finally finishes cleaning himself and his equipment and getting everything back where it belongs he feels very justified in taking a break. It's about 9am, the time when he should have been just waking up and going downstairs for his first cigarette. So he grabs a pair of skin-tight, ripped up, tattered jeans from the dresser under his only window and changes out of his sweatpants. He takes a white wifebeater tank with a red anarchy symbol painted on it out of another drawer and slips that on carefully. He's got A&D ointment and some plastic wrap protecting the swollen skin on his ribcage, but it still hurts like hell. He goes to the door and laces up his boots, grabs his smokes and lighter off the shelf there along with his keys and hurries down the three flights of stairs to the stoop of the building.

He has his first cigarette of many at 9am every day. There's no chain smoking schedule for the rest of the day, just fitting in breaks when he can at work and smoking one out on the stoop again when he gets home. But it's important to him to start off with that first one at 9am. It's a morning ritual. And 9am is the perfect time because he's extremely unlikely to run into any of his neighbors at that time. People with 9 to 5 jobs are already gone by 8am and people who work part time aren't usually leaving until 10am or 2pm. Not that he doesn't like the other people in his building. They're alright for the most part. He just likes to be alone and not talk to anyone before he has to go to work and deal with people all day.
He has the cigarette between his lips before he opens the heavy door to the outside, flicks the lighter to life as he steps out. He pauses with the flame cupped in his hand just inches away from the tip of the cigarette as this exercise in routine muscle memory is thrown off by the presence of a girl sitting at the top of the steps. She doesn't turn around to look at him, though she must have heard the heavy as fuck door open and shut. There's a steady stream of smoke around her, spiraling from a black cigarette she's taking long, slow drags from. It reminds him of what he came down for and he touches the flame to the tip of the cigarette hanging from his lips.

He knows she doesn't live there. He knows everyone who lives in the building and it's not the kind of place where people come and go. People move in and stay forever because this is what they can afford or because this is where their rehab program set them up. And it's not like anyone has a lot of visitors. This isn't his first time seeing a random girl smoking a cigarette on his stoop, but usually they smell like vodka, and are sporting dark, rubbed off eye makeup all around their eyes and the wrinkled club clothes that they rolled in with the night before. He always feels sympathetic towards them. He hates when guys don't even have the decency to walk a one night stand to the bus stop or donate a t-shirt so they can at least be comfortably covered on their walk of shame.

This girl doesn't look like that though. She's dressed too nicely, not even for a one night stand, but just for this whole setting in general. Her inky black hair lies in perfect corkscrew curls, her face is free of any makeup, and she smells like cloves and vanilla cupcakes with caramel icing – not vodka.

Her very presence there is bizarre and unsettling. The only explanation for it is that she's lost or he is in the middle of a stroke. Would his brain be able to come up with this hallucination even in a stroke? Not like he hasn't seen gothic chicks smoking clove cigarettes before, but she isn't dressed like any gothic chick he's ever seen. She's too well put together and her dress is more like a doll's than like a slutty polyester vampire prom dress. Is there such a thing as high class goths? Or gothic chicks who don't wear a shit ton of pancaked on makeup?

He watches as she stands up, holding her cigarette in her lips, freeing both of her hands to smooth out the skirt of her dress. She then picks up the black, leather, coffin-shaped purse she has sitting next to her, plucks the cigarette from her lips after one long last drag and she tosses the butt onto the sidewalk. And Levi sees red. He doesn't fucking tolerate anyone littering around his stoop whether they're shithead drug addicts who are high past giving a fuck, or cute, weird gothic chick hallucinations.

She's walking away down the steps and he calls out, "Oi!" which makes her turn around. Her face is expressionless, deadpan, unsurprised and unworried about the pierced and tattooed punk yelling at her, and he's still not sure she isn't a figment of his imagination. He points at the butt she's left burning out on the sidewalk and tells her, "You can't just fucking leave that there."

She looks down at the butt, looks up at him, raises an eyebrow as if he's doing something curious or strange, and that's it. She turns away and walks off without a word or a gesture. Levi is in slight shock for a moment at her lack of reaction. Still he yells after her, "Asshole!" She had to have heard him, but still no reaction, not even a flinch.

He goes down the steps and, disgusted, he stamps out the cherry on her discarded butt with the toe of his boot. The clove on the ground at least is very real.

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Erna rolls her eyes as she walks down the sidewalk and across the street. She's pretty sure no one's ever called her an asshole. That's a new one. "Bitch," she's gotten a lot. That seems to be most peoples' favorite descriptor for her. "Asshole" though? That's original. It's curious even. Why wouldn't he go with "bitch?"
Her face doesn't show it, but adrenaline is flooding her senses. She feels rapid pin pricks in her wrists, a reaction she can't explain. The pricking feeling in her wrists happens now whenever her brain thinks danger. But instead of screaming or running, she can only affect calmness and walk away. That's the next stage of panic that most people don't ever experience. Where there is so much adrenaline and your reaction time is so sped up that everything slows down so that you can act calmly and rationally. It's the brain's self-preservation mechanism for when everything is going to shit. Soldiers in active combat zones can get addicted to this feeling and it's a thing they struggle with when they come home and there are no more adrenaline fueled situations to trigger it. Erna's never been a soldier, but she has the post-traumatic stress of one.

She opens the bulletproof glass door to the bank across the street and stops in front of the ATM in the entryway. Automatically and with unshaking hands she swipes her card, punches buttons, puts a stack of bills into her purse, and takes her receipt. Her fingers unconsciously rip the receipt into smaller and smaller pieces as her legs take her to the brownstone turned café on the corner, conveniently situated right next to her new apartment building. Those were her two requirements when she was looking at apartments. She needed a bank and coffee on the same block. A place that sold clove cigarettes was desirable, but optional. She could order those online.

Any place that sold coffee would have been fine, even a gas station. An actual café was beyond her hopes and expectations. She walks up to the door and the roasted coffee smell emanating from inside is heavenly. It's enough to motivate her to take a deep breath and steel herself for the unpleasantness of human interaction. She is very quickly reaching her threshold for stress.

There's no bell on the door, for which she is grateful. She hates those. The whole place is quiet, not uncomfortably so, it's just peaceful. There are no customers that she can see.

The café is beautiful. More than it has a right to be. The floors are reclaimed wood, the ceiling looks like real tin panels with intricate details, lovingly restored. Every table and chair is different, but they all fit the same restored antique aesthetic. There are glass ball terrariums of different sizes hanging in the windows. It's all very interesting, but Erna won't be distracted from her very important mission. She goes straight to the barista behind the long bar at the side of the café.

"Hi. Do you know what you want?" He asks cheerfully.

"Large latte, to go. Thanks."

As he disappears behind an espresso machine, he asks, "Whole milk okay?"

Erna hums. When the machine is done hissing, she asks, "How much is that?"

"It's gonna be, um, three-fifty," he answers. He's concentrating on swirling the steamed milk while Erna pulls out her phone and pulls up the calculator. She runs some numbers and finishes her calculations by the time he sets the latte on the bar.

"Can I talk to the owner? Or your manager?"

"Oh, um," he scratches his head, "I'm one of the owners. You could talk to me." He sounds unsure and a little worried, like he's not sure if he did something wrong, which is exactly how people usually sound when you ask to speak to someone above them.

Erna raises her eyebrow and looks him up and down. He's a cute guy, tan and tall, with messy chocolate colored hair sticking out from under a beanie. Attractive New York hipster. He has striking green eyes, but he can't be more than twenty years old and he doesn't look very bright to her. She tells him very bluntly, "You don't look like you handle the financial side of the business."
His jaw drops a fraction of an inch momentarily. Erna would like to go home with her latte two minutes ago, so she doesn't wait for his response. She takes the thick stack of bills out of her purse and counts out four hundred and twenty dollars while explaining to the wide-eyed barista, "I'm going to be here for a large latte three times a day, every day, at 9am, 1pm, and 5pm, and I value very highly any chance to not speak with people. This is nothing against you, I'm sure you're a very special and unique gem of a human being, but I'd rather not go through the socially contractual obligation of ordering and paying for my coffee three times a day every day for the rest of my life, so if I give you this now to cover the cost for that many lattes for the month plus a 25% tip, can you manage to not acknowledge my existence every time I come in beyond making my coffee and setting it on the bar?"

His lower jaw hangs open. He doesn't look like he understood any of that. She gets this sometimes. It's the way she talks. She cringes and is about to try and explain a bit more slowly, but seemingly out of nowhere a pale girl in a red and black flannel shirt over a white tank top and frayed jean shorts swoops in behind the bar. She gently nudges the barista out of her way, reaches for the money and without a word she counts it out onto the counter, twice. A stray piece of black hair falling over her eyes as she does so. She, too, doesn't look more than twenty years old, but her expression is serious and stoic. She has dark, grey eyes and short straight black hair. Erna thinks she must be the decorator, because this place looks like her. Peaceful and beautiful, but not whimsical or capricious in any way.

When she's satisfied, she puts the money into the register and says simply, "No one will bother you."

This is the first time Erna has smiled all week. She takes her latte and leaves. In the short walk back to her building, the rare smile disappears again. The short, angry man is still on the stoop. She sips her latte and ignores him after he notices her and continues to yell about her littering in front of his building.

It's worse because she would agree with him. She would normally dispose of her cigarettes without throwing them on the sidewalk, but she didn't see an ash can or a dumpster around, so fuck it. The fact that he is being such a dick about it makes her want to litter the whole sidewalk with used up cigarette butts and whatever other trash she can find. She fishes her keys out of her pocket with her free hand and opens the door. She lets it slam in his face.

"Asshole," she mutters under her breath as she climbs the three flights of stairs.

When she is safely locked back inside her apartment, she sits down in the chair at the desk – one of the few pieces of furniture that came with this place – and she sips her latte, taking no time to admire the cute little swan design the barista had made with the steamed milk.

"Fucking hipsters make the best coffee," she says to herself, because it is astonishingly good. Unfortunately she can only enjoy it for two seconds before her phone buzzes and startles her, making her jump out of her chair a little. She set it to vibrate because loud noises like ringers set her off, but when she is stressed out, even the buzz of the vibration is too sudden and loud. She recognizes the number on the display. It's the only number she put in her contacts when she got this burner phone.

She has just enough patience left to answer with "What?" instead of 'fuck off.'

The voice on the other end is sing-songy. "Hey, little sister, just wanna see how you're doing."

"I'm fine." Erna deadpans. "You only just left seven hours ago. I've had time to sleep and get coffee," her tone is in direct contrast with her older sister's bright, lyrical tone.

"Did you eat breakfast?"
"Yes."

"Liar."

Deidra always knew when she was lying, but that didn't stop Erna from doing it. She sighs. "I'll get something later."

"Did you call the therapist I told you about?"

Erna's eyes itch. "Deidra, it's 9:30 in the morning and –"

"Erna, you promised."

"You know I'd say anything to get you to leave." Erna's voice is resigned, not spiteful. She knows her sister cares, and it would make her feel better if she would just try, but the truth is she's never going to seek any help, because she's addicted to her misery.

"That's no way to talk to your sister who just helped you move thirteen heavy boxes of books into a third floor walk-up and got you as off the grid as a person can be without moving to a cabin in upstate New York."

She has a point. "I'll think about calling the therapist." Erna sips her latte and then asks, "He's not some crystal healing asshole, is he?"

"No, but I wish you'd be more open to crystal energy. They're really good for getting your chakras opened up and –"

"You know how I feel about this stuff," Erna says tiredly. She doesn't fucking believe in chakras and it'll be a cold day in hell if she ever deludes herself into thinking that rocks can heal people.

Deidra lowers her voice and quickens her cadence in her best Erna impression, "New age hippie bullshit. If Jack London never wrote a short story about it, I'm not interested."

"I don't think I ever said that exactly." Erna smiles to herself. She pretends to hate it when her sister does impressions of her, but honestly they are funny. She changes the subject. "Where are you? How far have you gotten on your road trip?"

"Oh I'm already through Ohio and I'm nearing Indiana."

Erna nearly spills her coffee all over herself. "Jesus fucking christ, how fast are you driving?! That shouldn't even be possible, Deidra!"

"I'm on the highway. Don't worry about it."

Erna shakes her head. "Don't fucking die in a fiery wreck before you can sell the car." The car is an Aston Martin Vanquish and Erna knows it can do 200mph, but that doesn't mean that it should.

"Oh, on that note, I already have a friend who wants to buy it when I get back to Portland."

"A friend?" Erna is highly dubious about Deidra's friends. "How much?"

"Well he can give me five thousand dollars…"

"Fucking…" Erna is at a complete loss for curse words appropriate to this situation. "Even with the miles I've put on it, that car is worth…" she has to pause to do the math, "It's worth thirty times that, Deidra! And that's not me being sentimental. You don't sell an Aston Martin for five thousand. You
"just don't."

"You sold it to me for a dollar."

"That was just to transfer the title."

"And you told me to sell it and keep the money. So it's out of your hands now. I'll take that under advisement though."

"God!" Erna's hands closed into fists. "I hope one of those tiny goats contracts rabies and gores you to death with pointy little horns."

"They're vaccinated, thank you very much."

"Fantastic." Erna rubs her temples.

"And after I sell this, they're going to get a new barn."

"I'm so happy for them."

"Sarcasm aside, if I do take your advice and sell it for 150k, you're sure you don't want any of that?"

"No. Fuck it." The car was a graduation gift from their parents when Erna had finished grad school with a doctorate in English Literature from NYU. They weren't proud of her. They were quite embarrassed about it really. The extravagant gift was more for them than for her. It made them look even wealthier within their social circle. She had accepted it begrudgingly. She had an undeniable thing for fast cars. But she'd always felt weird about it. She is simultaneously happy and sad about finally being rid of it.

Erna sighs. "Just send me more hippie soap or whatever."

"Did you try the vanilla caramel body wash? I left it on your bathroom sink."

Deidra owns and runs a somewhat successful – in Oregon anyway – business that makes and sells organic fair trade all natural skin care and cosmetic products. Mostly soap, scrubs, and lotions. All of which Erna receives in monthly care packages of free samples. Deidra calls her their best critic and product tester. By now it's a pretty big operation, but a lot of the ingredients still come from Deidra's own farm in Portland where she keeps a few cows and goats, probably in the lap of luxury, knowing how she is about animals. She also keeps bees for wax and honey, and she recently constructed rows and rows of raised beds for her plants. Erna's hope was that after she sold the car she could buy up a few more acres around her and build some kind of green ecologically sound greenhouse or whatever hippies like her were into.

Their parents weren't especially proud of her either, but Deidra wasn't one to give a fuck about what they thought. They still were a little more proud of her than they were of Erna, because Deidra had at least graduated with an MBA from Harvard Business School. She's a greenie, new age hippie, but she is also incredibly smart and business savvy. Their parents simply tell everyone that she owns her own business and they leave it at that.

In the early stages, when Deidra was still in business school and Erna was just starting college, Deidra would visit and bring her little tins of lip gloss or tiny bars of organic soap that she was just experimenting with and having fun making. Erna would always turn her nose up at them and call it all some variation of 'hippie bullshit,' but secretly she loved the little gifts and would subtly ask Deidra what she was up to and if she would be stopping by with anything new whenever she was down to her last sliver of soap. So the tradition persisted of Deidra gifting to Erna anything she made.
and Erna pretending she was unimpressed with it.

She loves the vanilla caramel body wash, but she only says, "It smells like food. Can I eat it?"

There is a beat of silence on the other end, but then she hears Deidra sigh. "Don't eat the body wash, Erna."

"I didn't see anything in the ingredients that wasn't edible," she teases.

"Please just eat real food. Don't eat any of the soaps."

"Fine." Erna sighed as if she was very much put out by this.

"So it's good?"

"Yes. Send more of it when you get home." She thinks for a second and then adds, "and more honey vanilla lip gloss."

"Alright. I'm letting you go. Don't forget you have that interview in an hour."

"I don't need a personal assistant, but thanks," Erna couldn't forget the skype interview she was going to have to do in an hour. She was dreading it.

"Get real food." Deidra reminded her in true big sister fashion.

"Don't fuck up and roll that car." It was hard for Erna to keep herself from saying 'my car.'

"Love you too." Deidra hangs up with that last word.

Erna downs the rest of her latte which is on the cold side of lukewarm by now. Annoying. Sisters are the worst and she knows because she is the youngest of five. She and her four older sisters are named in alphabetical order – Ava, Barbara, Cynthia, Deidra, and Erna – and Erna isn't sure if that was intentional, or coincidence, or if her parents have such a thing for order that they did it unconsciously. Deidra is the only sister Erna has ever cared to talk to. The rest are distant and cold, maybe because they just are that way and maybe because Erna is distant and cold towards them. It's hard to tell who started the detachment first. She shared this mutual apathy with all of her sisters, even Deidra, until she and Deidra reached the 'teenage rebellion' stage at the same time, Deidra being a late bloomer and converting to Buddhism and smoking a lot of weed around the age of sixteen and Erna being a bit early to even technically call it 'teenage rebellion' at the age of twelve when she began listening to a lot of feminist grunge bands and dressing in the babydoll-esque fashion of a typical 90's riot grrrl. Her parents could have easily overlooked the music and the fashion choices, but it was around this time that Erna's tongue kept her consistently out of her parents' good graces. She was never a screamer or one for tantrums, but she was born with a talent for quiet, sardonic wit, which was fine only until she started applying that sardonic wit at dinner parties for the purpose of casually insulting people. Deidra appreciated it though. And Erna appreciated Deidra, because at that time she liked just about anything that pissed their parents off.

Erna gets up to throw her coffee cup in the garbage can in the kitchen and it's that small, seemingly insignificant gesture that gives her nerves a twinge and drives a spike through her brain that this is real, she lives here now. As far as she's planned, this is her apartment until death and her spent coffee cup lying alone in the bottom of the garbage can makes it seem very final. She shakes her head and ignores that feeling, writes it off as existential angst. She goes back to the desk and opens her laptop to see if she can jack someone's wifi, but it becomes quickly evident that everyone is password protected. At least her neighbors aren't dumb.
"Shit."

She moves herself to the floor and starts digging through boxes looking for her tablet. She can skype with that without wifi. She dreads this job interview because she has reached her limit for talking to people for the day, but she wants the job too badly to let her preference for antisocial behavior get in the way. She's incredibly overqualified for it, so if she can just be pleasant for a 20 minute long skype interview, she can be as antisocial as she wants for maybe the rest of her life. The job isn't lucrative or prestigious in any way, but it's in editing and she'll get to work from home and no one but her boss will have her contact information and no one will ever bother her. It's perfect. She doesn't even care how much it pays as long as it protects her anonymity and keeps her set for cigarettes and lattes. Her needs are extremely simple and she has adequate savings to cover the gap.

She just needs to find that tablet.

When she packed, it was in a hurry. Not that she would have been much more organized if she'd given herself more time. She is very good at keeping other people organized, not so much herself. She unloads stacks and stacks of books from boxes. She needs to order some kind of actual bookshelf from Ikea or whatever eventually, but until then their home will just have to be the floor. It finally turns up, appropriately wedged between a hardcover of The Brothers Karamazov and stacks of old issues of Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine. "Sure. Why not?" she says in response to whatever her logic was in placing all of those things in the same box. Next she just has to find the charger, which of course couldn't just be in the same box as the tablet. That would be silly. It wouldn't be self-sabotage-y enough for her. She spends another fifteen minutes tearing open boxes, throwing their contents onto the floor, and getting very frustrated with herself and the world and life. Her wrists start to prickle and her eyes and nose get unbearably itchy and she gets angry at her brain and body for having this stupid reaction to something so relatively benign. The anger makes her feel more out of control and quickly sets off an unstoppable death spiral of feelings, mostly hopelessness, depression, and rage at the inability to control any of it. When it gets like this she is usually only seconds away from breaking something or crying or both and she knows this. She hates it. But just as she's ready to kick the shit out of the next box and rip it the fuck apart, she's distracted by an abrupt cacophony of noise coming from the other side of the wall.

Apparently, her new neighbor has an obnoxiously good set of speakers and a taste for very loud punk music. Fantastic. She is still irrationally angry, but at least now she has an object to project that anger onto rather than aiming it inwards and destroying herself with it. She goes over and pounds her fist against the adjoining wall hard enough to hurt herself.

The volume of the music stays the same. She is just starting to recognize it. She's pretty sure it's The Casualties. This reminds her of high school. Not in a great way. She hits the wall with her other fist and she swears the music gets slightly louder.

She doesn't pause to think about it, she doesn't hesitate, she angrily and aggressively unlocks the three locks on her door and covers the twelve feet down the hall to the door of the apartment next to hers in five seconds. It's just a terrible coincidence of momentum. The inertia of her feelings dictated that she was headed fast towards blowing the fuck up and breaking something and then this circumstance jumped in the way. All of her anger at herself is now channeled towards something else and it feels a little better to have something besides herself to be angry at.

She doesn't say anything she'll regret yet. She just pounds on the door. When nothing happens she kicks it. When that produces no results, then she starts yelling things she might regret.

"Hey fuckwit! I'm sure this atonal garbage is full of very complex political metaphor or insight into the human condition, and probably provides sentimental nostalgia for the good old days when you
were just an unemployed shithead playing first person shooters and masturbating in your parents
basement," she pauses slightly to take a breath, "and I don't begrudge you the right to relive the past
and contemplate why your parents never fucking hugged you enough!" She starts pounding on the
door with her fist to punctuate every word, "But. pound Turn it. pound The fuck. pound Down!
Finally she hears some kind of movement behind the door. She hears a man's voice muttering in
surprise and disbelief as if he's only just realized that she has been trying to beat the shit out of his
apartment from the other side of walls and doors. As he is unlocking the door he says "Fucking
Christ. Can't even take a shower." As the door opens, he is already angrily asking, "What?!" before
he sees her.
"Oh you've got to be fucking kidding me." Erna cannot believe her luck. She's not good with faces,
but the piercings in his would make him recognizable even to someone with actual neurological
damage resulting in face blindness. She hates him. She hates this day. She especially hates realizing
that the music didn't get turned down because he didn't hear any of her pounding on the wall because
he was in the shower, evidence being that he is still wet and holding a towel around his waist. It
makes her feel a bit guilty about whatever vitriolic things she just said.
"The fuck is your problem?" he asks her.
She remembers that he's still an asshole who listens to The Casualties at full volume in an apartment
building with thin walls and yells at her for one stupid cigarette butt on the sidewalk and she doesn't
feel so guilty. "Have some basic fucking decency and turn that shit down."
He doesn't match her anger. He doesn't raise his voice like he did outside. He asks her in a cold
deadpan, "You live here?"
"You're unfortunate enough to have me as a new neighbor as of last fucking night." She leans on a
hip and crosses her arms. She should have figured it would be him, because that was her fucking
luck, and because of course the punky tatted up, pierced dickhead with black hair styled in an
undercut listened to the fucking Casualties.
He is silent for a second. She tries to keep her eyes up. She focuses on the piercing in the bridge of
his nose, so that it will look like she's making eye contact. In her peripheral vision she's checking out
his torso because his skin is like flawless marble and he's toned as fuck and she doesn't care about
shit like that, she is way too smart to be attracted to someone with such a disgusting personality, but it
is distracting like on a biological level. She has always considered herself to be sapiosexual, which
means she is attracted to brains, not bodies. Bodies are irrelevant to her. But his body is very
commanding of her attention somehow, even with those stupid fucking tattoos and piercings, and
that makes her angrier and more frustrated.
He says, "Invest in some noise canceling headphones," and he starts to close the door.
She kicks the door again and jams her black leather boot in the doorway, beyond the point of caring
if he slams the door on her foot and breaks all of the bones. He doesn't though. She tells him with
quiet rage in her lowered voice, "Listen, dipshit, I have a job interview via skype in less than an hour
and if your violently loud, puerile expression of teenage angst fucks this up for me, I'm going to have
all of the free time in the world to make your life a living hell on an Apocalypse Now sort of level, so
I hope you like the smell of napalm in the morning, motherfucker."
He narrows his already perpetually half-lidded eyes at her. "Fuck off," is all he has to say in response
as he slams the door in her face. She jumps back, moving her foot just in time to barely miss being
crushed.
She is out of things to say that would adequately express how much she fucking hates him. She stands there in front of the door, mouth open in amazement at how rude some people can be. The irony of this is lost on her. And the music gets turned up louder. So loud that she wonders who is getting punished more right now, her or his eardrums?

She knows you catch more flies with honey, and she's not incapable of putting on a sweet face to get what she wants. It's not like she ever thought that screams and threats would work. It just felt better to get them out, to be justifiably angry at someone, but that comes along with feeling shitty about having made the situation much worse for herself. She makes a noise halfway between a growl and a scream and she uselessly kicks the door one more time.

There's nothing left to do but fume at the world. She's back in her apartment for only a moment, kneeling down, flipping open the top of her coffin purse, grabbing the lighter and box of cigarettes. They get crushed in her fists as she flies down the stairs.

Smoking is a self-destructive thing. Anyone who thinks otherwise is kidding themselves. Erna has no illusions about it. She knows that when she reaches the stoop outside, lights up her cigarette, and inhales fast and hard it's because she is punishing herself. She's angry often about a lot of things all at once, but whatever she is angry at, it's easiest to rage against herself. It's a comforting and long held habit.

There is half a minute where she is just escaping and not thinking about anything in any clear terms. She is too angry to think clearly. But the very real need to find a way to do this interview forces her to be present and deal with her shit. She has about half an hour now. She could take her laptop to the café. Cafes always have free wifi. But that would mean being around people for more than two minutes and that is the least desirable thing in the world to her. It's nice and warm outside, maybe she could take her tablet out here and act like it is a totally normal thing to interview for a job while sitting on the stoop of one's apartment building. The woman who would be her boss could just add that to the list of Erna's eccentricities along with being agoraphobic and requiring strict protection of her anonymity, which would mean no interaction with clients. Sure. That would go over well.

There's also the tiny thought, steadily growing to a more real possibility, that she could say 'fuck it,' scrap the interview, go lay in bed, masturbate, sleep, do whatever she could to keep her brain shut off until the next day and just feel really shitty about everything. She could just avoid all of this difficult stuff and slowly self-destruct in a slow blaze of anger, depression, and self-loathing. Which obviously is not a great option either, but it is more appealing to her than forcing herself to deal with people.

Her cigarette is down to the filter in five minutes, half the time it should usually take. Normally she takes her time with the slow-burning black clove cigarettes, taking a long time between drags. Not today. She stubs out the cherry on the railing she's leaning against and puts the butt back in the box to be disposed of later. She immediately plucks out a new cigarette and puts it between her lips.

Levi tosses the towel into his laundry basket the second the door is slammed shut. He never should have opened it in the first place. Where the fuck did she get off screaming at him like that? Like he was supposed to know some psychotic gothic doll moved into the apartment next to his in the middle of the fucking night. He isn't a total dick, he only ever listened to his music loudly because he knew he didn't have any neighbors on either side of his apartment. If she'd been halfway civil, he would have even turned it down, again because he's not a dick. Instead, he crosses the apartment, naked, back to the bed where his laptop is sitting and he turns the volume up some more. The wireless speakers mounted high up on the opposite wall blare "Get Off My Back" by The Casualties.
Appropriate.

He hears the door shake, it sounds like she's kicking it with those little platform boots. He's about to go tell her to fuck off again in case she somehow missed the memo, but the banging stops. She must have given up.

The volume of the music doesn't bother him as he gets dressed. He's been to so many ridiculously loud punk shows in his life it's a wonder he can still hear at all. But if he has to do this every morning, he's probably going to be getting some wicked headaches.

He checks the time on his phone before he shoves it in his back pocket. He's running behind thanks to her. He's never been late to work and he's not about to start now, so instead of eating a real breakfast, he bolts a bowl of cereal. He fills the electric tea kettle halfway and gets a thermos out because he's not going to have time to drink his tea here, but he can't just go without it. His addiction to caffeine isn't something to be taken lightly. The withdrawal headaches are terrible if he skips his daily black tea. A couple of tea bags get thrown in the thermos and he pours the barely hot enough water over them and twists on the lid, muttering and cursing to himself. The song playing over the speakers changes, giving him an idea of how much time has passed. He can keep getting ready for one more song if he still wants to be his customary ten minutes early for work.

Every motion he goes through is more abrupt and angrier than it would normally be. He isn't a tense person normally. He just can't stand his routine being broken. It throws everything off and ruins his carefully constructed order and sense of discipline. He loads a backpack with his sketch pad and his tea, his wallet, cigarettes, and lighter. He shuts the laptop down and the blaring music stops. On the way out he grabs his keys and helmet.

He's surprised to see his new neighbor out on the stoop when he bursts through the door at the bottom of the last flight of stairs. She looks calm and collected when she is smoking and not yelling. If he had more time and more fucks to give, he would take a shot at repairing this extremely terrible first impression, because life is hard enough without hating your neighbors on top of it. But he doesn't have the time and he's still righteously pissed off.

He doesn't even pause before rushing down the steps to the sidewalk. As he goes over to where his motorcycle is parked on the street, he informs her, "Music is off. If I see any more of your butts on the ground, you're going to get punched in the tit."

He would probably never really hit her, but who knows, she is already incredibly annoying and he's only known of her existence for about an hour and a half.

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Erna keeps her middle finger raised in the air as the punk asshole walks away towards his motorcycle. Of course he has a motorcycle. How perfect.

The threat to punch her in the tit is creative. She admires that to some extent. She still wonders why he doesn't just call her a bitch like a normal person.

She licks her fingers and squeezes the cherry of her half-finished cigarette out. She'll finish the cigarette after her interview. She has fifteen minutes to run upstairs, find that charger, and compose herself.

Chapter End Notes
Commissionerfiction on Tumblr
Blue Eyes and Feline Grace

Chapter Summary

There is probably going to be some kind of flashback revealing some backstory for Levi or Erna at the beginning of every chapter for a few chapters until I get all of their backgrounds out there without any unnecessary exposition. I hate unnecessary exposition. Rather than denote a flashback by putting it all in italics, because that is visually irritating to me, there will just be a date in parentheses at the top of anything not happening in the present, and then a break when the flashback ends.

Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

(May 2005)

Levi is and always has been a perpetually angry kid. He has good reasons for being pissed off at the world. He never knew his parents, started life out in an orphanage before getting rolled through the foster system. That was a pretty good reason in his estimation. Some foster families were shitty and abusive, some weren't, but even when the families were nice, there was that feeling of not belonging anywhere, of being just in between places and not knowing what could happen next. Living without a safety net could make a guy feel like he had nothing to lose all the time, which could result in some pretty reckless behavior.

So towards the end of his senior year of high school, as he sits in the guidance counselor's office, he thinks he's doing pretty fucking good if the only shit on his record is a long line of fights with other students, a handful of suspensions (maybe two handfuls), a reputation amongst the faculty for giving teachers lip, and a reputation amongst the students for being dangerous in a fight or for being kind of a slut, depending on who you asked. He thinks adults give him more shit than is justifiable because of his hair and fashion choices, but he's not about to give in and dress like some fucking GAP model in an argyle sweater vest just to make life slightly easier.

That's the gist of what he tells the guidance counselor who has just finished explaining to him that he has no hope of going to college. He doesn't bother going on about how she's an apathetic, overpaid hack who doesn't put an ounce of effort into her job because she's a lazy slob. He thinks that knocking her laptop off the desk as he storms out says all of that without the words.

No one stops him as he leaves the office. It's May and too close to the end of the year for anyone to care that much.

Later, he sits on a brick half wall at the edge of the driveway of some house in the burbs of north Jersey. Farlan and Isabel dragged him there for a basement show. Five or six different punk bands were going to be playing, all local. He hasn't heard of any of them because he is not local. He and Farlan and Isabel had driven over an hour and a half from New York for this show, which he wasn't
all that thrilled about, but when you aren’t the one with the car, you don’t have much of a say in Friday night plans.

The first band is inside playing now. Levi had stuck around for three songs. He didn't think much of them, but a mosh pit had started up really quickly and Levi always liked to watch the expressions on the faces of these punk guys, who thought they were so tough and hardcore, turn to shock as Isabel, this pigtailed little punk pixie, got in there and started beating the shit out of everybody. That's always entertaining for a minute, but if the music isn't any good it gets old really quickly. So he and Farlan go outside for a smoke while tiny, redhead Isabel continues to hand out black eyes free of charge.

After they pass a minute in silence, Farlan asks him, "Why do you look like someone pissed in your lemonade?" He pauses and then adds, "Like, more than usual?"

"Shitty music." Levi lies. He doesn't like talking about school and life and shit when he's at a show. This is his time to forget.

"You could do better," Farlan replies sarcastically.

Levi loves music, but never learned to play anything. Music is an expensive hobby if you don't have a family or two pennies to rub together. But pencils and paper have always been easy enough to get for free. He gets straight A's in his art electives, but is barely passing any of his other classes. The other shit doesn't matter, he has a good portfolio that he's hoping will get him a free ride with any of the art schools he's applied to, because god knows he can't afford tuition.

"You can't play either, fuckstick," Levi reminds him and punches him hard on the shoulder.

Farlan hisses in pain and rubs his shoulder. "Whatever. Don't tell me what's up your ass. I don't care."

"I'll tell you guys on the long-ass drive back," Levi says.

"I'm sure the suspense will kill me. I don't know if I'll make it until then." Farlan pretends to swoon and then he returns to his straight face. He takes a drag from his cigarette and looks around. More people are starting to show up and mill around the driveway before going inside.

If Levi had to guess he would say that this whole thing was Isabel's idea. She likes getting out and seeing new people and trying new things. Farlan does not. She probably nagged him all day to get him to agree to drive them down here, and then, to save his pride, Farlan had to act like this was mostly his idea. But you could see how much he hated it even if he didn't say anything. He isn't as confident as usual. His shoulders stay slumped and he toes the ground with his boot. To anyone who didn't know him it would look like your average antisocial punk behavior, but Farlan was normally the outgoing sociable one of their circle. That confident, affable demeanor disappeared when you took him outside of his comfort zone. Which, to be honest, his was a pretty fucking small comfort zone. Try to take him anywhere new and he turned into a fretting mother hen.

Levi could never relate. He's never had a stable enough life to be able to establish a comfort zone. Everything is pretty equally comfortable and uncomfortable at the same time to him. There are a few things he finds solace in, but he tries not to get too comfortable with anything because he isn't sure when it will be taken away. Like his friends. He loves them, but he tries not to show it too much or to depend on them for emotional support, so he keeps his problems to himself. He isn't going to tell them about his shitty meeting with the guidance counselor or his anxiety about not being able to go to art school. If Farlan asks him what's wrong again, he'll make something up.
Maybe because of his untethered existence, he only lets himself enjoy activities that he could do literally anywhere. Drawing, cleaning, and fucking. That's pretty much all he is good at, but at least he is very, very good at those three things.

Maybe it's his untethered existence that attracts him to the whole punk scene, because it is ever-changing and a lot of people in it are also untethered. Most people he meets are always between places, sleeping on a friend's couch after their family kicked them out, struggling for money, generally pissed off at the world like he is.

Farlan finishes his cigarette and taps the pack on his knee, something he does automatically when he's trying to decide whether he should light up another or not.

Levi is people watching. Most interesting thing about these basement shows out in the suburbs is looking at the way people carry themselves and deciding whether they're authentic or not, whether they're drawn to this for deep, ideological and emotional reasons they don't even fully understand or they're simply drawn to the idea of being "different" while still having the safety of not being so different that they can't surround themselves with other people like them. The people in the latter category don't last. They buy khakis and oxford shirts once they can't live on their parents' money anymore and need to find a job. Levi isn't bitter about it. He thinks everybody should just do whatever they have to do. But that's not for him. There aren't any jobs he would want to do that wouldn't accept him the way he is. He doesn't mind delivering pizzas until the day he dies or whatever, as long as he can keep his piercings and his spiky mohawk. But he's hoping he'll get into art school somehow. If he had an MFA, he could work for himself as an artist and do well enough to support himself.

He's watching a van pull up and a bunch of guys begin to unload their instruments when he's interrupted by a girl wearing a cut up Misfits t-shirt and a short tartan skirt over battered fishnet stockings. She comes over and stands in front of him and Farlan. She ignores Farlan and only looks at Levi when she asks if she can bum a cigarette. Levi's only answer is to tap out a cigarette and hand it to her.

Farlan puts his pack back in his pocket, the internal debate of whether or not he should stay out and smoke another cigarette is over. He hops off the wall, says, "I'm gonna go check on Isabel." He knows the drill.

"See ya," Levi answers as Farlan, still looking uncomfortable and morose, slinks away. The girl takes his place up on the half wall next to Levi and asks him for a light.

Levi hands her his lighter. He doesn't light girls' cigarettes for them. He thinks it's patronizing and that the practice should have gone out with black and white movies.

"Thanks." She lights it herself and takes a long drag. The satisfaction and relief she seems to take in that deep inhalation means she smokes often. She probably has her own pack in the small backpack covered in band patches she carries on her shoulder. Levi loses a lot of cigarettes unnecessarily to girls who want to fuck him and don't know any other way to start a conversation than by bumming one. She turns to look at him and tells him, "I'm Jen."

"Levi." He takes out another cigarette and puts it in his lips. Instead of asking for his lighter back, he takes her hand in his, opens her fingers, and takes it. She squirms a little to inch closer to him as he lights up.

Levi doesn't care what they look like, he's very much an equal opportunity slut, having no preference for gender or a particular look or style or level of conventional attractiveness. He can find beauty in pretty much anyone's body. Maybe that's the artistic side of him. Attitude is more important to him.
than appearance. He likes other sex positive people who don't need monogamy to feel safe and secure.

"Do you want a beer?" she ventures. "I live next door." She points at the idyllic, perfectly middle class, white sided house about fifty feet away and separated from them by a short hedgerow. "I could get some from inside."

"Nah. Thanks though." He has nothing against drinking, but he won't fuck people who are drunk. He's a stickler for consent. He's also diligent about making sure his partners know he won't be around, he won't be emotionally available, and he'll never be a boyfriend. He wants everything to be fair. So he tells her, "I'm not from around here. We're only here for tonight."

She smirks. "That's cool. I won't ask for your number or anything."

With that out of the way, he relaxes and opens up more with her. They talk about school, about friends, about bands they like, they talk philosophy in that unguarded way that teenagers can, and they flirt shamelessly. Levi can only open up this way with people who he knows for sure will only be in his life very temporarily.

They're out there long enough that she starts to get cold as the sun goes down. He asks if she wants to go inside. The show is probably halfway to being finished and he'll feel bad if she's missing it for him.

"Nah. I'm only here for the very last band. The other ones suck," she answers. She rubs her arms for warmth.

He takes his hoodie off to give it to her. He doesn't put it around her shoulders himself because he thinks chivalry is for douchebags who need to act like women can't do shit for themselves. The guys who do that shit are usually trying to make themselves feel bigger, or they are hoping that it will get them laid like if you hold doors open for them and shit then girls are obligated to put out. Levi doesn't have to worry about either of those things. But it's not like he's gonna let a person freeze their ass off when he has a hoodie they could wear. It's not chivalry, it's humanitarianism.

She doesn't take it at first, but he insists. She protests, "But then you'll be cold."

"After you put it on, you can keep me warm."

And that's apparently the blatant permission that she was waiting for, the assurance that she wouldn't be rejected. She slips his black hoodie with the Dead Kennedys back patch on as fast as she can and she wiggles onto his lap, puts her arms over his shoulders and kisses him. His hands reach for her waist and he pulls her even closer, returning her kiss fervently. They make out for a while, tongues exploring each other's mouths, hands groping and pulling. He breaks away, moving a hand to her hair, tilting her head back and kissing down her jaw line and neck. She moans and he gives her a playful little bite at her collarbone to see how she likes that. She grinds her hips against him and arches her back. He loves this aspect of sex, trying things and seeing what pushes buttons, what gets the best moans and sudden jolts of movement out of people. He might not have any musical talent, but he can play a body like an instrument.

He stops for a second to ask, "Are your parents home?" because he's fucked plenty of people against walls in out of the way secluded closets or hallways or even bathrooms at shows, but a bed is always nice.

In between deep, hurried breaths, she shakes her head and says "Nuh uh." She doesn't wait for him to make any further move, she gets up, taking his hand and nearly dragging him with her over to her
house, but as they step over the hedgerow, he stops. She turns and looks at him, worried that she misread his intent.

He's looking at her backyard. "Is that your treehouse?"

She giggles, "Yeah."

He's never fucked anyone in a treehouse. He starts to ask, "Can we --" but she already knows the question and he doesn't need to finish it. She runs through the lush grass and starts climbing up the makeshift ladder rungs on the side of the tree and he chases her. When he catches up and pulls himself up into the treehouse, his hoodie is lying rumpled in a corner. She already has her shoes and her shirt off and is working to unclasp her black bra, but he interrupts her effort. He licks and sucks at her neck again as he pulls her red tartan skirt up and grabs her ass through her ripped up fishnets. Her hands tug at his t-shirt and he lifts his arms for a second to let her pull it off.

"Fuck," she whispers quietly in admiration. He smirks. He lets her press her hand against his defined abs. He's more ripped than people assume and he's used to his partners being surprised when his clothes come off. He lets her look for a couple seconds before he's leaning over her again. She spreads her legs around his as he unclasps her bra and discards it. He worships her tits with his tongue and his hands and she makes the sweetest noises as he grazes her peaked nipples just barely with his teeth. He pays close attention to her reactions to everything he does and he goes slow and methodical. He likes to take his time. This is the only thing in his life that he has patience for.

She does not match his patience. Her hands find his shoulders and give a slight push downward. He doesn't need a stronger hint than that. He moves down, repositions his mouth between her legs, and teases her, pressing his tongue through the fishnets and against the wet fabric of her black thong with the words "hell's kitten" printed on it in pink, glittery cursive. He waits until she's bucking her hips, moaning, and begging before he goes further. He likes when they beg, he's a hedonist with a fetish for enthusiastic consent.

He lifts her hips and pulls off her thong and fishnets. He leaves the skirt, he likes it. He breathes over her wet lips until she begs one more time and then he gets to work with his fingers and tongue. He tries everything. He isn't shy or insecure in any way and he has no hang-ups, so he doesn't hold anything back. In less than two minutes she's arching her back off of the floor and moaning his name. Her thighs close a little around his head and she shakes, so he slows down, tries not to make her come yet. She comes down from her high and as she backs off of the edge of orgasm, she gets frustrated. She pushes herself up on her elbows, bucks her hips a couple of times, trying to get his tongue to press into her again, but he holds back and smirks against her.

She laughs breathlessly. "You jerk. Don't tease."

He lifts his head and gives her a wicked grin. "You want to come right now?"

She scurries up onto her knees. She blushes a little when she admits, "I want you inside me."

Levi smiles and gets up on his knees too, making himself easy for her to maneuver any way she wants. She pushes him slightly to get him on his back and she works at his buckle, pulling his belt free and tugging his jeans and underwear down and off together. Before she can toss them to the side, he grabs her hand. She looks at him, confused, until he pulls a condom out of the back pocket of his jeans.

She pouts. "You don't have to. I'm on the pill."

This gets him sometimes. It happens more often than not that people complain about him using a
condom. Why would anyone give him shit about using a condom? This girl barely knows him. He could be riddled with std's for all she knows. He doesn't give her a hard time about it, he just says, "I'd feel better if we did."

She just shrugs. She tosses his pants away, takes the foil packet from his hand, and she kneels down between his legs, taking his length in her hand and licking him from the base of his shaft to the tip. She doesn't give him as much attention with her mouth as he just gave her. Either she doesn't like giving head or she's too impatient, he doesn't mind. She holds him at the base and pumps him slowly a few times as she rips the packet open with her teeth and then rolls the condom over his cock. He's grateful for the initiative. This is normally the part where he would pause and ask if this is okay, just to be sure, but he doesn't feel the need to when she straddles his hips and reaches her hand back to position his cock in line with her entrance before bearing down and fucking herself onto him. He holds still until she finds a rhythm and when she does he puts a hand on her waist and starts thrusting his hips to meet her. He wants to fuck harder, faster, but she stubbornly controls the pace and keeps it slow, probably punishing him for not letting her come earlier.

She splays her fingers over his chest and his abs, murmurs to him about how fucking hot he is. He knows this already. He's been told too many times. His hand curves around the small of her back and pulls her down. She's taller than him, so he can get his mouth on her tits without contorting her back. He snakes the tip of his tongue up the under-curve of one breast before teasing her nipple. Both of his hands reach for her ass, he digs his fingers into her smooth skin and pulls her hips down as he thrusts up into her deep. She cries out in ecstasy and shudders, and she loses interest in holding back. She rocks her hips and starts fucking herself faster.

Levi keeps sucking at her breasts until she's grinding against him, desperately trying to reach her own orgasm. He gives her a break, to be nice, he pulls her flat against him, reaches down to rub her clit with the tips of his fingers and he takes control of the pace. He drives his cock into her fast and hard as he whispers in her ear about how good she feels, how warm and tight and wet she is. He switches hands and keeps rubbing her clit with his right hand as he brings his fingers up to her mouth. She greedily sucks on them, tasting herself and moaning, getting off on how dirty it is.

He groans, "Fuck... oh my god..." Nothing gets him harder than seeing how dirty people are willing to get, how depraved they can be with a little encouragement. He presses his fingers hard against her tongue and drives himself into her as hard as he can until she suddenly tenses up and screams through her orgasm. He comes just as she's melting bonelessly into her lazy post orgasmic haze, her pussy still contracting and pulsing around him.

He takes his fingers out of her mouth and wipes them on her skirt. When she rolls off of him to lie next to him on the floor, pressing her face against his chest and cuddling with him, he very carefully removes the condom and ties it off, tossing it into a corner. They lay there and catch their breath for a while. He doesn't mind cuddling afterwards, he just feels like he's not very good at it, never knows where to put his hands or whatever. She doesn't seem to notice or mind it.

She mumbles against his chest, "That was really good. Like, transcendental."

He pats her hair. She's cute. He's grateful. But he doesn't say anything back, because honestly it was just pretty good for him. He's got a lot of experiences to compare it against.

When they get dressed and go back down to the show, he hangs around with her until it's over, keeping his arms around her as much as possible, kissing her, and sharing cigarettes with her between bands. He's always considerate about hanging out for the night, acting like they're the only one for a short time. It's easy to act like a boyfriend for a few hours, and he likes it. He just could never enjoy it if he knew it was for real. But if he knows it will be over soon, he can enjoy being
loving and attentive as fuck. She walks with him back to Farlan's car and kisses him before he gets in. She stays true to her word and doesn't ask for his number.

Erna sits on the stoop, holding her Note in the air, cursing at it under her breath in between drags of her cigarette.

"Download, you fucker." She narrows her eyes at the bar indicating the progress on the attachment she is trying to download.

She groans deeply in frustration and wonders why nothing will ever just be easy. With perfectly unfortunate timing, her short, punky neighbor with the undercut and piercings that she hates, comes out the door to stand on the stoop and light up a cigarette. Erna glances at the time on her screen. 9 am, exactly.

Erna's lived there for a few days now. She's had enough time to notice his schedule. It would be easy enough for her to avoid him, but she is too stubborn to change her habits. So they continue to end up out on the stoop for smoke breaks at the same times, but they refuse to acknowledge each other's existence. It is awkward.

Her download bar stops moving and Erna makes a "Tch" noise between her teeth.

To make things worse, her stupid neighbor speaks up for once, "Do you listen to anything but classical music?"

She plays dumb, in a very obvious way so that he can be sure she is one hundred percent being a total bitch. "How did you guess that I like classical music?"

"Because you started playing it really fucking loudly at 6am and it's still playing now while you're not even inside, you fucking psychopath." His sentence starts off slow and quiet and ends quick, loud, and pissed off.

"Must have forgotten to turn it off. My mistake." Erna replies carelessly.

"Dick."

Again, she is curious about his neglect to apply the word 'bitch' to her. She very purposefully turned the local classical station up to the highest volume she could on her radio as soon as she woke up just to piss him off, so it seems appropriate. It's what anyone else would say. He's very strange.

She holds her Note up towards the direction of the café and asks him, "Could you not stand there?"

He doesn't move or even look at her. "Why?"

"I can just barely connect to the café's wifi from here and you're in the way of my signal."

He sighs and looks at her like she's an idiot. "That's not how wifi signals work."

"Excuse me, but you have enough metal in your body to disrupt even the strongest electromagnetic waves."

He ignores that and asks, "Why don't you just go to the café?"

She turns back to her screen and grumbles. "I can't stay in there for more than 90 seconds. The hipsters try to make small talk with me even though I've told them not to."
"Hipsters?" He takes a second to figure what she's talking about. "Eren, Armin, and Mikasa? They're good kids."

"Don't tell me their names, I don't care. I've already given them my own names anyway. Bright-eyed hipster and Androgynous hipster. They both talk too much. I like Red Flannel Girl. She doesn't talk to me and she tries to keep the other two from doing so."

"Here's a crazy idea: Get your own fucking wifi."

She goes back to pretending that she can't hear or see him.

Levi feels like he can still hear a symphony in his head. It's been like this off and on since she moved in. One of them would start playing their music too loudly and the other would retaliate with louder music. She only ever plays classical music and he can't stand it.

Of course she only listens to classical music. She looks like something out of the Victorian era. He thought at first that she would only dress like that occasionally, because it looks like a lot of work, but no. The black and white, ruffled Victorian babydoll dresses are an everyday thing. He wonders how much money she's spent on clothes and thinks maybe that's why she can't afford an internet connection.

He can't stand the way she's fucked up his whole routine. He lived here first, he should have a right to smoke out here alone and maybe not get woken up at the ass crack of dawn by fucking Mozart. And just to top off all of the ways a person can be annoying, she always smells good. Not like the way that women always smell good with whatever chemically body spray they use – he likes the chemically body spray – but she smells like sugar or caramel or strawberry shortcake. She smells like food, and like something different every day. It drives him fucking crazy. Every morning it makes him want to go to the café and get one of those pastries that Armin makes. He's never liked sweets, but it's intoxicating and makes him crave for the taste of a cookie all day.

He had such a carefully constructed and strict routine and his zen was in following it every day without changing. Her fucking that up basically fucked up his whole life. He can't relax anymore, he can't get any work done, and in his opinion, everything is shit.

So he stares at her sitting there and he wishes she would catch fire or have a sudden heart attack or something. He concentrates so intently on it that he doesn't notice the black BMW pull up or its owner getting out of it. He's only broken out of his violent daydreams when Erwin stops at the bottom of the stoop and with his smooth, deep, eternally calm voice, says, "Good morning, Levi."

Levi nods at Erwin and hears a slight, quiet scoff come from the gothic chick who is the bane of his existence. "Levi?" she asks.

"What of it?" He rolls his shoulders back. He is ready to fight her.

"Your name is weird," she says, like they are eight years old and she's a stuck up little bully. He wants to strangle her.

Erwin either recognizes that Levi is in a violent mood and is trying to diffuse the situation or he is just being the smooth, charming as fuck idiot that he is – Levi can't tell – when he steps forward, extends his hand to her and introduces himself. Levi rolls his eyes. The gothic chick stares at Erwin for a second, making him stand there awkwardly with his hand outstretched.

Her reaction is mildly entertaining to Levi. Women usually fall all over themselves swooning when Erwin is around, but this one only stares at him with contempt and deep suspicion, like an overly-
independent cat. Erwin won’t be put off though. Levi thinks for all of the patience he exudes, the man is actually incredibly stubborn. He pretends not to notice when people are rude and he acts with grace no matter what the situation is. It's either incredibly dumb or very smart. Levi's known him for a couple of years and he still can't decide which.

Finally, unable to ignore him, she begrudgingly shakes his hand and simply says, "Erna. Pleased to meet you." Levi has never heard anyone say 'pleased to meet you' with so much actual unpleasantness.

"Fuck you," Levi interjects. "My name is weird?!"

She huffs and is about to say something to him, but Erwin interrupts, "It's a lovely name. Is that german?"

She is distracted and she turns back to him, narrowing her eyes and asking, "Why? Are you making a list? Are you here to distribute gold star patches?"

Levi couldn't help laughing. He tries to help it, but his shoulders shake and the laugh comes through his nose anyway. Ridiculously attractive, blonde-haired, blue-eyed, smooth as fuck Erwin Smith, who had probably never gotten any real shit from anyone in his life, was being called out for looking like a Nazi. Erwin actually looks shocked for a moment. Levi has never seen him speechless in all the time he's known him.

She holds her hands up to Erwin in mock fear and begins speaking in what sounds like German. Levi can't understand what she's saying, but it comes out so easily and naturally he can tell she must be fluent. At some point in her rapid speech, she gestures towards him, and suddenly he wants to know what the fuck she is saying.

When she finishes, Erwin just smiles warmly, but he would do that whether she just said something homicidal or something sweet, so it doesn't tell Levi anything. He just asks outright, "Did you understand that?"

"Not a word," Erwin answers with a smile.

"Lies," Erna snaps.

Erwin ignores her vitriol and addresses her politely. "I don't think I've seen you around here before, did you move here recently?"

Levi rolls his eyes and groans. "Stop being polite to her. She's just some basic gothic chick who thinks she's a unique fucking snowflake because she carries a coffin purse and smokes black cigarettes. She probably loves Twilight and thinks that collecting Alice in Wonderland shit makes her quirky and different." And that feels so good for him to get off his chest.

Erna stands up and turns to face him, she speaks quickly with her voice full of quiet rage. "First of all, Twilight is an insult to the art of writing and the English language while also being a disgusting romantic portrayal of toxic, abusive relationships and a fetishization of female helplessness, and Lewis Carroll was a fucking pedophile who wrote a rambling and nonsensical story to woo his ten year old love interest." She was stepping closer to him, getting angrier with every word, "And secondly, I would think that someone who dresses like they believe in anti-establishmentarianism and social anarchism would be hesitant to apply such strict labels to people based on stereotypes imposed by an authoritarian society."

Levi stands there, mouth half open, speechless.
She pokes him in the chest hard with her pointer finger. "I would think that, if I assumed that you had any kind of idea of the political statement inherent to your style, and didn't allow for the possibility that you only dress the way you do because you have an adolescent need to be contrary and designate yourself as individual and different without actually expressing enough individuality to deviate from your chosen subculture." She pokes him in the chest again. "You may as well be wearing a fucking uniform for how much you look like every other punk I've ever seen, but it would be very rude of me to assume anything about you based on your style of clothing."

He stares back at her with pure hatred. "If you poke me one more time, I am going to break that finger off your dainty little hand," he warns.

She removes her finger from his chest, a little surprised, not at his threat, but almost as if she is surprised at herself. Like she was acting without being aware of it at all until he pointed it out. She mutters, "Sorry," and sits back down on the top step, she goes back to smoking her cigarette and looking at her Note as if nothing just happened. He does not get her.

And Erwin just stands there smiling at him, waiting for Levi to invite him inside. He needs to finish this cigarette first. And after getting his ass verbally handed to him like that, he feels like he could follow it up with another one. He nods at Erwin and tells him, "Give me a few minutes. Or are you in a rush?"

Erwin pulls up the sleeve of his overcoat a little to check his watch. Who even wears a watch anymore? But he says, "I have some time. I can stop in the café and come back."

As Erwin walks away towards the corner, Levi says, "Oi, get me a large black tea."

Levi takes the last long drag and stubs out his cigarette on the railing of the stoop. He quickly puts it in the pack and takes out another, putting it in his lips and flicking the lighter again and again. It doesn't want to work. It's been sputtering on him for a couple of days, probably running low on fluid. He flicks it a few more times and then rubs it between his hands, sometimes that can coax out one more light even when there's only vapor left in there. He tries again and still gets only a spark. Just as he loses his temper and is in the beginning motions of throwing the thing on the ground and stomping on it with his boot, a flame appears in front of his face. It surprises him and he almost doesn't register what is happening, but after a moment he realizes that the hand with the dainty little fingers he was going to break off is holding a matte black lighter up and lighting his cigarette for him. He inhales and puffs, and she puts the lighter back in her coffin purse, muttering, "I was out of line. I get emotional about how much I hate Twilight," and she sits back down.

He smiles once her back is turned and she's concentrating on glaring at her Note again. She's still on her first cigarette. Cloves take longer to burn than a regular cigarette and on top of that, over the past few days, ending up out here with her at the same times every day, he's noticed that she smokes slowly.

He inhales and fills his lungs, then exhales slowly. "Do you always read people like a Harvard-educated drag queen when you're emotional?"

"Watch it. Maybe I am a drag queen. You don't know what I'm packing under this dress." She narrows her eyes at her download bar again and holds her Note up, trying to get a better signal.

Levi smirks. "You're not feminine enough to be a drag queen."

"Probably right," she mumbles, distracted by her mission to get her file downloaded. She stands up and goes over to the side of the stoop he is standing on, leaning over the railing as if being four feet closer to the source of the wifi signal will make a difference to her download speed.
She smells like cloves and honey and caramel. He was too angry to notice before. He should have told Erwin to grab him a pastry.

Still watching the progress on her download, she asks casually, "How do you know that guy anyway?"

"Erwin?" He doesn't want to tell her the truth. "He's a friend."

Without looking at him, she responds, "Bullshit. You don't look like you run in the same circles. Final solution-looking motherfucker carries himself like a cop."

How she can sound so intelligent and use words like anti-establishmentarianism in one breath and then sound like a fifteen year old boy in another is almost charming.

"Believe what you want." He doesn't care. He doesn't need to tell her shit.

"Is he a john?"

Levi almost chokes on his cigarette. "What?!"

"Are you a prostitute? That's the only way this makes sense to me." She isn't smiling. She's serious.

"I'm a tattoo artist."

"Whatever dude, it's your body."

"Oh my god." Levi rubs his temples.

Erwin is back with his tea and a coffee for himself. Levi could not be happier to be interrupted. He takes his tea, and takes a long drag off his cigarette, trying to finish it quick. Erwin holds a small, white, paper bag out to Erna and says, "I didn't know if you like coffee, so I got you a lemon square. Armin just took them out of the oven," with that Adonis smile on his face.

As annoying and infuriating as she is, Levi likes that Erna is not taken in by Erwin's prince charming schtick at all. She doesn't take the bag at first, she just stares at him suspiciously. When she does finally snatch the dessert from him, she makes sure to say, "Don't think that I'm going to feel obligated to be nice to you now."

"Of course not."

She opens the bag and takes a deep breath of the sugary lemon goodness. She almost smiles, but she holds back the reflex and scowls at him instead and she speaks at him in German again, "Kommen mit kaffee beim nächsten mal. Ich werde mein Ariernachweis."

Erwin just smiles and tilts his head at her. She doesn't translate into English.

Levi finishes his cigarette, motions for Erwin to follow him and he unlocks the door, wrenching it open. Erna doesn't follow them in, much to Levi's relief.

As Erwin follows him up the dark stairwell, he asks him, bemused, "Did you know your name has Hebrew origins?"

He didn't. He never really cared. He didn't even know if he was named by his parents or the orphanage. "Where the fuck is that coming from?"

"Something she said," Erwin explained.
The straight-faced lying bastard, "So you do speak German."

"I'm not as fluent as she is, but yes. She said that she's not jewish, told me not to bring her to the gas chambers, then pointed out that your name is Hebrew and that I should probably take you away." He doesn't even sound the slightest bit angry. He sounds like he thinks it's amusing. "Then she said to bring coffee next time, and something else I didn't quite understand. She's very interesting, does she live here?"

"She's my new neighbor," Levi groans.

They reach the hallway and Erwin notices the music. "Is that Wagner?"

"Do I look like I would know?" Levi opens the door to his apartment. "She's been torturing me with it since 6am."

Erwin follows him in and listens for a moment. "It's The Ring Cycle. Really a lovely piece." He lays his coffee and briefcase down on the kitchen table, but he doesn't sit down. He's not staying long.

Erwin is Levi's parole officer and Levi is exceedingly grateful for it, though he would never show it. A lot of parole officers don't do shit to actually help anyone assimilate and get on their feet after they get out of prison and those people always end up back inside. Erwin helped set him up with this apartment, used his connections to get him his apprenticeship with the shop he works at now, and early on acted as a sort of therapist, coming around and talking things through with Levi when he was trying to make sense of himself and how to live. He didn't need much help anymore, but Erwin still has to come around randomly and administer random drug tests and check that he doesn't have any weapons or illicit substances as per the conditions of Levi's parole. So when Erwin opens his briefcase, pulls on a pair of latex gloves, and hands Levi a sealed, empty, plastic jar, he knows the drill. He takes a big sip of his tea and goes to the bathroom.

"Keep the door open, please," Erwin reminds him.

"You just want to check out my dick." Levi flips him off, but he doesn't close the door behind him.

"Standard procedure. People are always coming up with more and more creative ways to cheat." Erwin doesn't watch him piss though. After about a year and a half, he is pretty trusting of Levi. He is usually just going through the motions on these visits, doing what he is supposed to do, but not being very thorough about it. They're not even very random, considering he only ever shows up in the morning around 9am when he knows Levi will be there and won't be busy. Levi hears him moving around the apartment, opening cupboards. He calls out from the kitchen, loud enough to still be heard over the music coming through the wall from Erna's apartment, "So you don't know anything about your new neighbor?"

"It's a lot harder to piss when you're talking to me," Levi yells back.

Erwin is unperturbed. "I have time."

"No, I don't know shit about her except that she's a pain in my ass."

Erwin talks as if he's only thinking to himself. "She has a very slight accent. It's New England-ish. And judging from her tirade at you, she must be very educated."

Levi comes out and puts the jar on the table. "What's your fucking point?"

"It's just interesting. I wonder how she came to be here." Erwin is finishing his inspection, indifferently going through the dresser under the window now.
"I don't fucking care," Levi snaps back at him. Erwin is unbothered, or if he is he doesn't show it. He just is that way. Unreadable.

"Fair enough, don't mind my curiosity." After checking a few more places, like under the bed, behind the radiator, etc., Erwin comes back to the kitchen area and puts the sealed jar back in his briefcase carefully. He puts a sticker on it and writes something in sharpie and takes his gloves off. "Everything going well?"

"Yeah. Work is good. Everything is fucking peachy except that psycho little doll next door ruining my fucking life."

Erwin just smiles and reassures him, "I'm sure you'll work it out." He snaps the briefcase closed. "I have to see a few more clients, so I have to keep this short."

"It kills me that you call them clients."

"What would you like me to call you?" Erwin asks as he crosses to the door.

Levi would call himself a lot of things. A felon, an ex-con, a no-good punk. He shakes his head. "Nevermind. Fuck off."

"Until next time," Erwin replies as though Levi has just politely said goodbye to him, and he's out the door with his briefcase and coffee.

He hums along with The Ring Cycle until he is down the flight of stairs and too far to hear it anymore. He smirks to himself, knowing that the few comments he made are going to stick with Levi and gnaw at him. He might not be curious about Erna now, but he will be, and Erwin thinks that it will be good for him. Levi is too closed off, doesn't let himself get close to anyone, and that's no way to live.

Some would call him manipulative. He wouldn't disagree. He doesn't feel bad about it because he only uses his powers of manipulation for good. He wasn't lying when he expressed a curiosity over how Erna ended up here though. He is genuinely very curious about that, because he has seen her before. He remembers exactly the encounter he had with her even if it was some time ago. Probably three or four years ago he thinks. She isn't easy to forget with the unusual way she dresses and speaks.

When he opens the door to the outside, she is still on the stoop. Now she is sipping a cup of coffee instead of smoking a cigarette. Without looking up from her cup, she comments, "You finish quick."

"I'm sorry?" Erwin cocks his head to the side, confused about her meaning.

"It's nothing."

He waits for her to glance up and when she does he tries to make eye contact with her, "Pardon me if I'm wrong, but have we met before? You seem very familiar."

She looks him up and down. "No. I'd remember meeting someone who looked like the end result of Hitler's eugenics program."

He smiles. "My mistake then." He can tell that she genuinely doesn't remember. He is trained to know when people are lying. "Have a lovely day," he says as he walks back to his car.

Erna tucks her Note under her arm. The last leg of her download had finished quickly when she carried it with her to pick up her latte. She runs upstairs to print it out so she can get to work on
editing yet another manuscript by some idiot wannabe author. She gets paid per job, so it's in her best interest to turn over the abominations she's sent quickly, which suits her fine because she needs to keep busy.

Once inside, she sends her document to the printer from the cloud. She hates that word. She is not impressed by technology in general though she can't deny that it is useful and convenient. She prefers to edit on paper still. It is more satisfying. Sometimes, when she reads an exceptionally stupid sentence, she can stab her pen through the paper. She can't do that on a laptop.

She taps her fingers on the desk impatiently. She feels worked up. She's been feeling restless even though she's been keeping herself very busy, editing up to two or three full manuscripts per day. She is missing something. Evidence being that she has fallen into her habit of relentlessly finding and pushing peoples' buttons until threatened with violence. That's her adrenaline seeking behavior coming through. Getting Levi to threaten to break her finger was nice for a quick thrill, but it's not anywhere near enough.

She goes to the other side of the room and looks in the mirror. She mutters to herself, "Stupid face." She doesn't like her eyes or her lips. Her eyes are too grey, her lips aren't as full and pouty as she would like. There's always something to hate. She can at least like her skin for being pale and smooth and easily marked. She runs her fingers over a cheekbone. The shape of her face isn't so bad. She shakes her head. This is stupid. It's because her job has her editing shitty romance novels and she's constantly reading descriptions of women with huge, heart-shaped lips, sparkling green eyes, and huge tits. Fuck them.

The latest drivel she's going to have to read is still printing out. From the author's chosen title, she can already assume that there will be the typical mind-numbing tropes; some kind of alpha hero, maybe a cowboy, a female protagonist in peril, blah blah blah, badly written softcore porn. She groans to herself. Romance is so boring and the whole idea of love is a fucking joke to her. Her favorite authors never touched on romantic love.

She goes over to the windowsill that her small radio sits on and turns it down so that she can think. She can hear Levi yell "Thank fuck!" loudly through the wall.

After probably not enough thought, Erna goes and opens up her coffin purse. She takes out a well-worn business card and her phone and she punches the numbers automatically, without thinking about her actions. She bites her lip as she waits for the call to be picked up. When it is, the velvety voice of the woman on the other end is hesitant, suspicious, and aloof. She doesn't recognize this number, Erna hasn't called her with her new phone yet.

She is uncharacteristically nervous and shy when she speaks. She hurries through her words. "Mistress, it's Erna. I know it's terribly short notice, but can you come over for a quick session?"

The woman on the other end changes her tone. Now her voice is dripping with sweet, drawling evil. "Erna," she draws out the last syllable. "You know I don't like to accommodate last minute requests. Have some patience, dear. Let's schedule something for a few days from now."

"It's really important." She digs her fingernails into her hand.

"I think waiting will be good for you. As much as I love your beautiful apartment, I don't like to indulge your impulsiveness."

"Well, see, the thing is," Erna slowly shuffles around, looking at different things around her room as she talks, trying to calm herself down, "I've moved recently, and I understand that patience is a virtue, but I'm very stressed and –"
"What's your new address?"

Erna gives her the cross streets of her new building and bites her thumb as she waits for a response.

"Erna, I don't venture out of Manhattan. You know that."

Erna can't say anything. She sighs and whimpers.

Her Mistress offers a compromise, "If it's so important, why don't you meet me at the club? Or better yet, just come to the dungeon?"

And Erna's shoulders hunch over as she gets a wrenching feeling in her chest. That impulse to scream and cry in anger at herself rises up from her stomach and her face feels hot. She holds it together well enough to not cry. "Thing is, I can't." That's a lie. She literally could leave her new home. She just has a crippling fear that prevents her from doing so and she hates herself for it.

"Let me give you a referral."

Erna whines, "You know I hate change."

"None of that," the woman scolds. "She's very good. Probably better than me. You'll love her style, she's incredibly professional and cold."

"I do like those two traits in a person."

"I'll text you her contact information, tell her you're a client of mine. She'll be quicker about getting back to you that way."

That doesn't really help Erna out right fucking now. But she returns to the desk and scribbles down the name, number, and email address she is given. When she hangs up, she tosses the phone back into her purse on the floor. If she couldn't get immediate satisfaction, what was the point of calling right away? She'd do it later. Her manuscript finished printing while she was on the phone. Maybe working on it would be enough distraction from the tease of adrenaline in her veins and the need for some pain.

She picks up the pages and reads the first paragraph aloud. "Catherine Taylor was cleaning his usual table when he walked in the door of the bar. Something about the muscular, rough rancher urged her to reach out to him. Maybe it was the way that he never smiled or the loneliness in those bright blue eyes. Either way, she made sure to always have his table ready when he arrived at the same time every night. His tall, muscular frame swaying across the room with feline grace..." She stopped. She couldn't go on. She covers her face with her hand and groans. "Of all the... Fucking..." There are no words she can find to properly express how she feels about this. She grabs a red pen off the desk. She mutters her oath for when she is pissed off by terrible writing, "Melville give me strength," and she stabs the pen through the parts about bright blue eyes and feline grace. There is nothing grammatically or stylistically wrong with them, so she can't edit them out, but at least she can stab them into oblivion.

Chapter End Notes

Commissionerfiction on Tumblr
Friendship is Magic

Chapter Notes

Commissionerfiction on Tumblr

(October 2012)

Her water glass sweats onto the bar and Erna swirls the ring of condensation around it with a cocktail straw. She draws some flames with the tip of her little red straw in homage to the name of the club she is currently in, Hellfire. She wants a whiskey neat, but BDSM clubs in New York don't have liquor licenses. The bar she is sitting at is a relic of a more fun and perhaps less safe bygone era. The "bartenders" are only allowed to serve non-alcoholic drinks, tea, and coffee. Who really wants coffee at 12:30pm on a Saturday though? She might, but... She'd really like to be able to get to sleep and forget all of this night when she gets home. Before going, the BDSM club always seems like a good idea and she's optimistic about the outcome, but when she gets there, she is quickly reminded that it's only a good idea in theory, never in practice. The problem isn't any shame about her interests or squeamishness about seeing people flog naked subs. She's not some trembling, doe-eyed newb. She's imagined and longed for things much more violent and twisted than this. The problem is other people and finding someone she doesn't hate so much to maybe flog her.

Erna has been drawn to power exchange and bondage since before she even knew what those words meant. Fantasies about being tied up or whipped were in her repertoire before even puberty. Never one to shy away from dark things and not being very well supervised, she put a lot of research into the subject when she was younger. She's researched it to death. She knows and loves BDSM, but her love for BDSM is outweighed by the disgust she feels for most people. It's not that they're physically repugnant and unattractive. She's not that shallow. It's just that they can be so goddamn dumb. Idiocy is beyond unattractive to her. She's in her last year of graduate school and she's stressed out and sexually frustrated. She's still a virgin at 25, not that she cares... much. She's never dated or had a boyfriend. She just doesn't do emotional connections. She's had some disappointing physical experiences with men at school who she tried to be interested in, but she would always end her encounters suddenly when they got far enough and she was still bored. Her male peers at school are smart, but they're not kinky. The people at the club are kinky, but they're not smart. She needs both.

She tries when she's at the club, she really does. She is more forgiving of and gracious with people here than she is out in the world, it's just that out in the world she is a sardonic, cold, heartless bitch and while at the club she can only dial that back a couple of notches and downgrade herself to a sardonic bitch. She keeps the DM's pretty busy at least. They're like BDSM dungeon bouncers and they've learned to keep her in their peripheral vision because she has nasty luck with provoking non-desirable behavior, like yelling and profanity, from the men who approach her.

"Can I get you anything else?" the bartender asks.

She's caught his attention with her violent twisting and bending of the cocktail straw in her hands.
She doesn't answer at first, she's finishing tying it off. She tosses the red straw onto the bar, now bent into a twisted little heart and she answers, "I'll trade you my heart for a black coffee."

The bartender smiles. He slides the straw back towards her with the tip of his finger. "Keep your heart and your money, this is on me."

She smiles, "Thanks." She is an on again off again regular, if that's a thing. This bartender knows her and will sometimes give her free drinks like this if she's having a shitty night and looks like she's about to leave.

She has had a pretty shitty night so far. Nothing out of the ordinary. Just getting approached by a different guy about every fifteen minutes because she is a woman who is here alone and that is somewhat rare. It would be flattering if they didn't make so many goddamn assumptions before even speaking to her.

First, there is the assumption that she is a sub. Which she is, but she hates for that to be assumed right off the bat. People in this community have a shitty habit of starting off with the assumption that all women are subs and all men are doms, and it's sexist as fuck and she hates it. She would think that people who proclaim themselves to being so sexually open would be more socially progressive, but no. So when strange men who don't know anything about her ask her to sub for them in a scene, without even having asked if she is a sub, she automatically rejects them.

Then there's this assumption that she is a "babygirl." She gets that a lot. She can almost see that because of the way she dresses. Gothic lolita style dresses are doll-ish, but even so it seems a bit of a stretch. "Babygirls" dress colorfully, they usually wear pigtails, and they more often than not carry some kind of prop to denote what age their "little" side identifies as, like a stuffed toy or a pacifier. So it seemed to her that the "Daddy doms" who approached her were making a pretty big leap in logic and seeing only what they wanted to see. Then they get all pissed off when she tells them she's not an ageplayer. Like she's bait and switched them. If they ragequit and walk away, that's fine. If they stick around and try to convince her to try it or some other kind of play, she explains that she's so disgusted with the sexualization of infantile traits that she must excuse herself because she needs to go vomit. Then they ragequit and walk away. They always storm off in an angry huff either way, though.

Her overall experience with men in the kink community was that they were sexist, entitled fucks who thought that they deserved to be able to stick their dicks in any sub woman they wanted simply because they identified themselves as doms. Some of them were obvious about it and some of them were just hiding sexist attitudes underneath an extensive vocabulary and a guise of old world chivalry. The ones who were genuinely intelligent and progressive and equally respectful of all genders, were, of course, taken. It was a tragedy.

Only once, about six months ago, had she met a man at this club with whom she could have a genuinely stimulating conversation. They talked for hours. He was intelligent and humble, more intelligent and humble than she would ever be, and she developed a hopeless crush almost immediately. He was two years older than her, and he'd already finished his masters in Russian Literature and was in his first year as a professor. They talked about Chekhov and Nabokov after Erna made sure that he didn't teach at her college.

He flirted with her in Russian, which was one of the languages she wasn't fluent in, so she couldn't understand what he said and that made it sexier to her. She got forward and asked him what fetishes he was into. He answered with pegging, forced feminization, and cock and ball torture. He was a sub. Of course he was a sub. Because the universe was out to fuck with her. She told him that she was a sub too and they both laughed until they cried at their terrible fucking luck. He asked if she could consider switching, but she couldn't. She only wanted to receive pain, not cause it. He couldn't switch either. Then she had to admit that she felt like shit because she had assumed that he was a
dom, which made her just as sexist as all the men who assumed that she was a sub. He exchanged numbers with her anyway and they texted somewhat often. They nerded out about Russian and American literature and he told her stories about dumb papers that his students handed in or about idiotic courses his colleagues came up with and taught, like "Feminism in the Writings of Jane Austen." That was a real thing that someone was teaching at his college. He delighted in how much that one pissed Erna off. She'd ranted for seven whole minutes about how Jane Austen novels were not only too stupid to read, but were also antithetical to feminism.

He occasionally texted her dirty talk in Russian that she had to put through Google translate. She would retaliate in French. They teased each other like that. They each played around with the idea of switching so that they could be sexually compatible, but it just wasn't possible. They could only ever be platonic, but to Erna that was okay. She'd never had a real friend before, much less one who was smart and sexy and could make her laugh.

She was surprised and then not surprised when she found out about his suicide a couple weeks ago. He'd occasionally mentioned being depressed, but she was depressed too. She thought all intelligent people were usually functioning on at least a low level of depression.

Apparently some more than others.

There had been no warning. She even looked back through her text messages just to be sure. He'd never given her any indication that he had suicidal thoughts in any of his messages even if she read between the lines and looked for the subtext, it just wasn't there. She didn't cry about it. She figured that if she didn't know he was that troubled then she probably didn't know him well at all and this was just as superficial as any of her other friendships, the only difference being that she actually liked him. That's her way of rationalizing that this is okay – that she is okay.

Her coffee is slow in coming; the bartender's gotten distracted by people who are paying for their drinks. It gets more crowded after midnight. Erna kind of likes it better when it's crowded. She can watch scenes without being noticed and bothered. She spins around on her bar stool and scans her surroundings. A woman in a black, leather catsuit who has a nude man bent over and tied down to a spanking bench catches her eye. He flinches and cries out around a red ball gag as the woman brings her studded paddle down and hits his ass hard. He squirms beautifully and she leans over him to whisper something in his ear. Erna wants to cry.

She won't let herself think that if she could have been that sadistic, then Stephan would still be around to joke with her about Jane Austen's bad writing, because that's a stupid thought and just because it feels true doesn't make it so.

And now she wants to leave, but not without that free coffee. She spins back around on her stool and crosses her arms on the bar. She trails her fingertip over the beads of condensation on her water glass. To her side, she hears a deep, smooth voice ask "Is this seat taken?"

Has it been fifteen minutes already since the last idiot tried to talk to her? She turns and looks in the direction of the voice. The man attached to it is a little over six feet tall, middle aged, in good shape, neatly parted blonde hair, icy blue eyes, with the cheekbones and jaw line of a male model. He's hovering next to the seat in question. It's not taken, but that's probably not what he's really asking, so Erna responds with, "Fuck off, Captain America, I'm not interested."

He doesn't sneer at her or say something rude. He just smiles warmly and apologizes, "I'm sorry, it was my intention to bother you. I'm trying to get a drink, I apologize if it sounded like I was hitting on you."

She looks him up and down. His behavior is suspicious to her because she isn't used to this kind of politeness. Even the doms who pretend to be well-mannered would answer back with some passive
aggressive obnoxious response, so she wonders just where this guy fucking came from. She tells him, "It's not taken. Knock yourself out," and turns back to the bar.

He sits down to wait for the bartender to make his way over and he says, "Forgive me if this is presumptuous and unwelcome, but you seem to be having a rough time."

Erna doesn't answer right away. She takes a sip of her water, then she says tiredly, "Look dude, I don't really like small talk. Just say whatever rude or disgusting thing you are ultimately going to say to me so that I can tell you to fuck off and we can be done here."

His voice sounds full of compassion. "I'm sorry your experiences have been so negative that you have to assume that I'm trying to treat you like an object. It's really a shame and reflects badly on the dominant side of this community." He catches the attention of the bartender and waves him over. "I promise you, you're not my type. I'm just very involved in the kink community here and I try to help people where I can." When the bartender comes over, he asks the man for a coffee. The bartender tells him it will be a minute and while he's there he tells Erna that hers is coming before he gets distracted and he's off again.

Erna looks at Captain America, as she's nicknamed him in her head, doubtfully, "And how would you help me?"

There is a barely detectable glint in his eye. "Well we'd talk things through, figure out where the trouble seems to be, and see if a solution can be found." When she gives him a skeptical look, he says, "You have a bit of a reputation here."

"I know," she says, "I'm either a bad sub or I'm not a real sub, because I don't want to play with every mouth-breathing, monosyllabic asshole who points his sad little dick in my direction."

"Something like that," he laughs, "and I can't blame you."

Interestingly, Erna doesn't feel like this guy is trying to fuck with her. Something about him puts her at ease and makes her feel that he's being genuine. Her guard isn't completely down, but she's willing to see where this goes. She says just loudly enough to be heard over the din of more people coming in, "I'm willing to talk."

"Excellent," he beams. The bartender comes back with perfect timing, placing two mugs of coffee on the bar. After paying him, Captain America stands up and motions for Erna to follow him. She does so hesitantly, staying a few feet behind, making sure he isn't trying to lead her to a private room.

He goes straight over to where there are some tables and booths. They're all obviously taken, but he doesn't change course. He walks straight up to the people in the first booth in front of him and he politely interrupts their conversation to ask if they wouldn't mind giving up their seats for a little while. They happily agree and he thanks them very graciously. Erna is stunned. When he sits down and slides into the U-shaped booth, she narrows her eyes at him.

"Do people always just give you whatever you want?"

"Not always, but being attractive and polite certainly helps."

She rolls her eyes at him as she sits down and asks, "So where do we start?"

He pulls a steel flask out of the inside pocket of his suit jacket. "Well how about we start with what you're looking for?" He pours a shot into his coffee and puts the flask back into his pocket, as smoothly and naturally as breathing.

Erna arches an eyebrow. "How did you get that in here?"
For a second it's as if he doesn't know what she's talking about. Then, "Oh this?" he pats his pocket. "Rules can be relaxed when you have a long record of good behavior." He sips his coffee with smug satisfaction.

"Is that whiskey?" She knows that it is. It's all she drinks. Sometimes she fills a thermos with whiskey and ice and brings it to her literature classes in her bag, sipping from it during smoke breaks outside. She could smell it from a mile away when she's craving like this.

He nods and takes another sip. She slides her coffee across the table towards him and asks, "Do you mind?"

He raises an eyebrow at her. He asks, "How are you getting home?"

"Cab. I don't have a car."

The next question should be 'do you plan on taking part in a scene?' because that is one of the main reasons that clubs like this don't serve alcohol anymore. People overestimate their capacity for pain when they are drunk. Subs take more damage than they can handle and doms don't check their impulse to inflict pain as much as they should. But he doesn't ask that. If he is as much a fixture around here as he says, he knows that she has never participated in a scene.

Just as smoothly as before, the flask comes out, he pours her a shot, and places it back in his pocket. She would normally sip her coffee, but she downs the whole mug in four large gulps just to get that shot of whiskey into her veins all at once. It warms her stomach and makes her feel a shade more relaxed. It's not enough for her to get drunk, just enough for her to feel pleasant. She places her empty mug back on the table and asks him to remind her, "What was the question?"

He looks mildly surprised, but then that warm smile reappears and he says, "What you're looking for. Do you have a good idea of what you want?"

She does. She's thought about it extensively. "I want a terribly intelligent man with a little culture who is completely sadistic, but who also appreciates women and would describe himself as a feminist, to just really fuck me up. I don't want a master, I don't want a daddy dom, I don't want to be anyone's pet, I don't want affection of any sort. I just want to get hurt and then be left alone."

He nods as she speaks and when she's done, he seems to think. Then he says, "I'm going to ask you a lot of questions now, if that's okay with you."

"And I'm going to ask you for another shot." She slides her mug back over to him.

The corners of his mouth tick upwards a little, but he doesn't pour her another shot, unfortunately. Erna is disappointed, but she can acknowledge that it's probably for the best. First, he asks, "So you identify as heterosexual?"

That is sort of a tough, yes-and-no answer. She explains that she finds women beautiful, but is not sexually attracted to them. She finds men sexually attractive, but she finds their attitudes and personalities to be repulsive 99% of the time, which negates the sexual attraction.

He takes her answer with a completely straight face, not acting surprised or judgmental. "And what BDSM role do you see yourself fitting into?"

She feels like he should have a pad to write this shit down like a therapist. "I love pain," she says bluntly. "I'm a masochist. The submission I'm not so sure about."

He nods. "You're very independent and intelligent. Sometimes independent, intelligent women are
wary of submission. It doesn't fit with the way you see yourself."

Erna grimaces uncomfortably. "If you're going to be telling me truths about my deep insecurities, I'm going to have to ask for that second shot again."

He laughs, but still she's not getting that shot of whiskey that she craves. He asks her more questions about her day to day life, about her past, about how she sees herself – nothing requiring terribly personal answers, but each answer still telling him a lot about her. She lets her guard down a little more. It can't hurt her just to talk, and it's cathartic. She doesn't necessarily trust this guy to be able to help her, but she can at least tell that he has absolutely no interest in fucking her, and that's a nice change of pace. It's like talking to a wall that can smile and nod reassuringly at you.

He seems to run out of questions. That flask comes out again and he pours himself another shot. Erna clears her throat loudly and he smirks at her. "Alright, I suppose," he relents and pours a tiny bit of whiskey into her empty mug.

She doesn't complain that it's only a sip, she gratefully drinks it down without a word. Then she teases, "So what are you? Some kind of D/s matchmaking fairy godfather?"

"I simply like to be helpful. I'm not a matchmaker. Most problems aren't solved by bringing in a sexual partner or love interest." He pauses and then adds, "and I don't think you want a sexual or loving relationship."

"Very astute."

"You want pain, you want it inflicted by a man because it is sexual for you and you're attracted to men, but you're disgusted by the thought of doing a scene with a man who doesn't measure up to your standard of intelligence, and you want it to be non-emotional – no strings attached."

She compliments him. "You listen well."

"Thank you," he smiles. "Have you heard of sapiosexuality?"

"Yeah. I know. I'm that too." She combines the words. "Hetero-sapiosexual."

"Sapiosexuality is multi-varied, like any other kind of sexuality. You might not be turned on by someone who is an astrophysicist, but only by someone who is well-versed in the kind of knowledge you find attractive." Erna nods. Astrophysics is not very sexy. She's never cared for math or science. "And you're a literature student with a minor in women's studies. You appreciate someone with a left-leaning view who is sympathetic to the human condition and understands the hierarchies of privilege and oppression in a patriarchal society."

Her eyelids lower a little and she can feel her pupils dilate. She does want that. Just the idea of someone like that makes her wet. She unconsciously bites her lip.

He pretends not to notice her reaction and he keeps talking. "Have you ever given thought to seeing a professional?"

"What, like a therapist?" That is what the euphemism 'professional' is usually used for where she's from.

"No," he laughs a little, a deep smoky baritone. "Like a professional sadist."

She frowns. She knows that is a thing, and it's not that she looks down on it. She thinks the professionalization of BDSM is a wonderful thing. It does appeal to her because it takes the emotional side out of it. It's just, "I've never met a male professional."
"Oh, there aren't any that I know of," he readily confirms. He takes another sip of his spiked coffee.

"So you're suggesting a dominatrix."

He nods and adds, "An intelligent and very sadistic dominatrix."

Erna doesn't respond for a very long time. It's an intriguing idea. She isn't interested in women sexually, but she doesn't necessarily need sex. She needs sadism and pain inflicted on her by someone she can respect. And she does need it soon. Ever since learning of Stephan's suicide, she's been afraid she will do something reckless if she doesn't experience some kind of release. Her frustration has been distracting and unbearable. Self-inflicted pain doesn't work anymore. "I hadn't thought of that, but I would be open to it."

"I can give you some recommendations if you'd like." He takes out his phone and checks it. It looks like he's scrolling through some text messages. "I think the first person I would recommend is here tonight actually. Do you want me to check?"

Erna gets a nervous butterfly feeling in her stomach, but impulsively, instinctually, she says, "Yes," with conviction. If she doesn't do this now, she might not ever, and in her gut she feels this is a good idea.

He begins to slide out of the booth and stand. "If you can wait here, I'll send her over to you." When Erna nods that she is okay with that, he says, "It was truly a pleasure speaking with you. I hope this works out well. If not, you can always find me here and we can figure something else out."

As he walks away and leaves her alone she wonders if he knew Stephan. Being alone in the big booth with so many people around her makes her feel very self-conscious and nervous, and it gives her a lot of time to second guess herself and think about running outside. But she stays, and soon she is distracted from her nervousness anyway by a large, bearded man wearing black jeans and a band t-shirt. His wavy brown hair falls somewhere just past his cheekbones, he has a prominent brow, and a look to his eyes that gives Erna a feeling that he's too dumb for her. He slides into the booth without asking if it's okay and he proceeds to throw his best line at her, "Hey babygirl, what's an innocent little thing like you doing in a place like this?"

If it weren't bolted to the floor, she would flip the table. Her fingernails dig into the surface of it. "I'm not an ageplayer," she says through her gritted teeth.

Like most men, he ignores her visible discomfort and proceeds to talk to her as if just continuing the conversation, no matter how unpleasant her responses, will eventually lead to sex. "That's okay." Then he introduces himself, "I'm Dave. DomDave on fetlife if you want to friend me," because he wants to get her name. They always do. That way they can use it at the beginning or end of every sentence as a way of getting overly personal. It's a shitty, ineffective attempt at mind fuckary.

She wants him to go away, but she doesn't want to create a scene. She dances the line between being just cold and being outright rude. "I don't give people my name, but you can call me S.I. if you need to call me anything." The abbreviation is short for her own fetlife screenname, sharp instrument. She looks around and tries to see if there's a DM nearby.
He smiles. Anything other than flat out rejection probably means that he's getting somewhere in his mind. "And what are you into, S.I.?" He doesn't wait for her answer, because she's not a real person to him. She's an object to project his fantasies onto, a fetish delivery system. "I love bending a slutty playtoy over my knee and spanking her, the rougher the better."

Erna feels slightly nauseous. She wonders how many women he's said that to and if he thinks that jumping immediately to dirty talk actually gets anyone wet ever. She wonders if there are women who don't find this creepy – if she's the weird one. She pulls out her phone and opens her browser to fetlife, searches for the name he gave her, finds his profile and makes sure to block him.

And he just keeps talking. "And anyone will tell you I'm great at aftercare. I'm a big cuddler. I love having a babygirl in my arms and making her feel safe." He mimes the cuddling as he says this.

And she can't stand this. Her fist rises off of the table and comes back down on it hard, making a loud staccato thud, which gets his attention off of his fantasies and hopefully focuses him on the reality of what is in front of him. "Listen to me, you bleeding cock sore, I'm not an ageplayer and I'm not fucking interested in you. I don't know how to make that more clear. Fuck. Off." She doesn't yell, but she isn't quiet either.

He looks so surprised. Like all of her frowning and curt responses gave him no indication that she was not interested in him, as if her outburst was sudden and not forewarned at all. He is indignant, not apologetic. They always are. "Hey, lighten up, all I was trying to do was talk to you."

Erna's jaw clenches and her teeth grind together painfully. "You've been disrespectful and rude to me. You assumed that I'm a sub, you ignored me when I already told you I don't do ageplay, and you spewed your fucking fantasies at me without asking me if I wanted to hear about them." She doesn't know why she bothers correcting people like this. They don't change. They only try the same shit over and over and wonder why it doesn't work.

He doesn't seem to actually think about anything she's just said. He goes on the defensive. "I'm a nice guy. There's no reason to be a bitch."

She stands up, she can't help it. "Listen, shithead, how the fuck would you feel if I came over to you and ignored your obvious discomfort while I told you about how much I love pegging a guy while verbally humiliating him. What if I ignored all of your preferences and gave you a detailed description of how good I am at getting large sounding rods to fit into tiny urethras?" His indignant expression doesn't change, he's probably only thinking of how he can turn this around and get her to accept his advances. "I don't need to be nice to you and I'm not leaving this fucking table, so you can fuck right in the direction of off with your male entitlement and your pathetic little cock."

That works. He gets up, calls her some names as he walks away to probably bitch about her to someone else. Just as he steps away, Erna hears a woman's sultry voice cut through the noise, "Oh I'm going to like you."

Erna was focusing so much on her anger that she didn't notice the woman coming over to her table. She is stunned, speechless. The woman is tall with an hourglass shape to her body that she's adorned in business casual clothes; a grey pencil skirt, maroon silk blouse, nude nylons, and black pumps. She has long, unnaturally red hair tied in a tight, high ponytail, hiding none of her perfect facial structure. Her skin is flawless. She could be a model. She has an imperious look about her as if she is a goddess among mere mortals, and there is a slight smile in her eyes as if to say that she finds Erna amusing. She introduces herself as Victoria.

If this isn't the woman that Captain America was talking about, Erna doesn't care. Anyone else can fuck right off.
"May I sit down?"

All of her vocabulary and eloquence gone, Erna simply says, "Yeah."

She slides into the booth across from Erna and rests her elbows on the table and once settled, she stares into her eyes, beautiful and intimidating. "Erwin says you might be in need of my services."

"Erwin?" Erna is still dazed, but it comes together after a second, "Oh, Captain America."

She smiles at the nickname and her perfect nose crinkles a little. There's a glimmer in her eyes. She simply says, "Fabulous," and Erna feels delighted to have amused her.

"He also tattled on you and told me you're not sober and not safe to play, so we won't be able to do a scene tonight." She forms her full, glossy lips into a playful pout for a moment and then switches gears to a more business-like tone. "But we can get started on a consultation if you'd like, so that we can proceed quickly with setting up a future appointment here – if you feel safer in a public setting – or in my dungeon."

Erna is overwhelmed with excitement and relief. She doesn't care about doing the safer thing, she never wants to come back here again if she doesn't have to. "How does a consultation work?" her voice is small as she asks. Victoria makes her feel meek. Her very presence brings out the submissive side of Erna with none of the conflicted feelings she is troubled by when she thinks about what submitting to a man would mean to her perception of herself and her feminist ideology.

Victoria never breaks eye contact with her. She focuses on her like a cat with a mouse. "Well, first I would ask you about any medical conditions, mental or physical. I need to know every little detail down to allergies and addictions. I need you to tell me if you've experienced any past abuse or if you are prone to episodes of depression or anxiety."

Erna looks downward and frowns. She would rather not talk about any of those things.

Victoria reassures her, "I know it seems invasive, but it's all confidential and it's indispensable information for me to make sure you never experience anything too harmful or traumatic. I have a detailed questionnaire that you can fill out if you'd be more comfortable putting it in writing than speaking about it."

"I would."

Victoria takes her cellphone out and slides it across the table to her. "Put your phone number and email address in there, my darling, and I'll send it to you now along with a non-disclosure agreement and personal liability release. You can print them, fill them out, sign them, and bring them to your first session." Erna swipes her finger to unlock the phone, but then she hesitates to put her information there. There's no specific logical reason. She just doesn't generally like giving anyone her information. Victoria sees her hesitation and assures her, "This is the only time I will contact you in any way. After this, you will only ever contact me."

There's a sinking feeling in her stomach as she puts her number and email into Victoria's contacts along with her real name. It feels like she's falling too fast. But then it's over and she feels a bit of a rush, like she's just accomplished something big. Victoria takes her phone back and calls Erna so that she can store her number, and then she is right back to business. "Now, before we go to the trouble to talk about fun things, I should tell you that I have a strict 24 hour cancellation policy. I require a 50% deposit for every appointment that I will keep if you're a no show or you show up more than 15 minutes late. Is that clear?"
Erna nods. This is fun stuff to her. She likes the way Victoria is professional and unemotional. She projects a high level of competence and Erna finds it very alluring. She could probably talk about taxes and Erna would still find it enthralling and sexy.

"An hour long session is normally $250, but you get a discount for being referred by Erwin, and another discount because you're a cute little firecracker and I think I'm going to have a lot of fun with you."

Erna blushes and looks down at her hands.

"So let's say $100 per hour. Can you afford that?"

Erna's lips form a straight line. She can afford that if she smokes fewer cigarettes and stops drinking a handle of whiskey every week. That seems a daunting exercise in self-control to her, but she's willing to try, so she nods her head.

"Fabulous." Victoria smiles and reveals her perfect, white teeth. "Now, tell me about what you like."

Erna can always tell as soon as she opens the door to the café whether or not Bright-Eyed Hipster Barista is going to try to talk to her. The predicting factors are simple. If Red Flannel Girl is there, he keeps his mouth shut because she will scold him if he doesn't. If she's not there it's like he forgets all of the rules.

The beautiful black-haired girl with the red flannel shirt is absent today, so Erna braces herself and groans inwardly. When he hears the door shut behind her, the cute brunette barista with the big blue-green eyes looks up from his smartphone and says, "Hey Erna, do you want to try my new special? It's a maple almond honey chai latte with two shots of espresso."

Every muscle in Erna's body tenses. Time slows down for her as panic sets in. When she crosses the room to stand in front of the bar separating them, the laptop she was carrying under her arm gets set down on the counter. With her hands and arms now free, she grabs the barista by his apron and pulls him down over the bar to her level and he makes a small sound of surprise. She says lowly and threateningly, "I'm going to ignore the hipster nonsense that just came out of your mouth and we're going to focus on how the fuck you know my name."

He gulps and stammers. He looks around, but it's early and there's no one in there but the two of them. She twists his apron in her left fist and with her right hand she grabs his chin and forces him to look directly at her. "You're going to tell me this fucking instant or I'm going to make sure that very bad things happen to you." She can't promise anything specific right now, because she has a lot going through her mind. She knows too many ways to torture a person.

He blurts out, "Levi told me!"

On cue, she hears the door open and that deadpan, bored voice, "Oi, what's going on?"

Erna lets go of the barista, who jumps back and fixes his apron. She turns to Levi who is throwing his hoodie onto the antique coat rack near the door and she bursts out loudly with, "You told this fucker my name?!!"

He shrugs, unimpressed by her volume. He answers nonchalantly, "It came up. What's the big deal?"

"Don't fucking do that," she says more quietly. It's hard to yell at him when he doesn't respond by yelling back. She turns back to the barista, "Just make me a plain latte, kid."

He is a little shaken, but apparently not enough to just shut it because he asks, "Are you sure? I make
awesome specialty drinks. Do you want to try something different? I can make this really good spiced peach Tahitian white mocha with cinnamon."

Erna narrows her eyes at him. "No. Hipster nonsense."

"But –"

"Eren." Red Flannel Girl has come out of the back with a cardboard box in her arms. She doesn't even have to say anything else. Eren stops talking to Erna lest he get scolded further.

Erna takes her laptop off of the counter and goes to sit at her favorite table. Each table and chair along the walls of the long and thin single room of the café is different as if they were all picked up from different flea markets or estate sales. Her favorite one is a small, circular, white and grey marble top table. She sits in a chair with her back to the wall, angled towards the doorway.

"Levi, do you want to try a frosted mint and blueberry chai?"

The kid is so earnest. He sounds so painfully eager to please. He reminds Erna of a puppy.

Levi takes some cash out of his jeans and puts it on the counter and Erna watches from over the edge of her laptop screen and wonders how he could even fit money in his pockets his jeans were always so fucking tight and she couldn't put her finger on why but it was really annoying. Fuck him and his stupid tight jeans.

"Just tea."

Also, Erna thinks to herself, what kind of punk drinks fucking tea every day? Tea is not punk rock.

Eren sighs and slides the money over the counter. "Fiiiine," he groans.

She watches Levi take a table not far from the counter. He sits with one knee up and balances his sketch pad on it, pulls a pen out of the metal spiral holding the pages together and starts drawing.

Erna drank her coffee and worked inside the café sporadically whenever it was quiet and she felt she would go crazy if she sat in her apartment for one more minute. Even being terribly paranoid and agoraphobic, she did need a change of scenery every now and then. But she was doing more or less okay. She just kept working and that kept her mind off of things and she was mostly free of episodes of anger and depression.

But Levi never hangs around here as far as she's seen. He annoys her with his presence on the stoop in the morning, goes back upstairs for about an hour and a half, then leaves for work on his motorcycle. She is outside often to see him come and go, not that she smokes a ton, but her cigarette breaks last from twenty to thirty minutes. He comes back and bothers her on the stoop again at different times. She's asked about it and he said that he leaves work earlier or later depending on when his appointments are. She's still not sure she believes that he's a tattoo artist and not a prostitute, because she honestly can't come up with any other logical explanation for that blonde guy showing up and disappearing into his apartment for ten minutes and then leaving. She isn't usually curious about people like this, but he bugs her. The mystery of it eats away at her. Maybe she just doesn't have enough to occupy her mind. God knows her work isn't intellectually stimulating.

She opens the manuscript she fell asleep reading last night. She tries to just scan it and find any grammatical or stylistic errors without actually reading it and letting it get into her brain, but that's near impossible for her. She gets through a paragraph, looks up, and lets herself get distracted.

Androgynous Hipster has come out of the kitchen in back with a tray of something new that smells like peaches and sugar. The kid is baking constantly. He has his shoulder-length blonde hair tied
back in a ponytail and he's wearing short jean shorts and a 70's-ish floral print thrift store blouse. There's something about him, too, that needles at Erna. He grabs her attention more than his two coworkers. He looks inherently intelligent, a little more alert and aware of his surroundings. She would almost be attracted, except that he looked too kind and was too young for her and would occasionally do things that were so painfully hipster-ish that he would make Erna groan in her head, like asking the Bright-Eyed Hipster or Red Flannel Girl to help him pick the best Instagram filter for his picture of the blackberry coffee cake he just finished making.

She goes back to her manuscript, catches a misspelling of "vain" and then goes back over the whole paragraph to make sure there aren't any other stupid mistakes like that. It is almost physically painful. She hates the whole romance genre with a passion, but that seems to be most of what her boss publishes and all of what she sends her to edit. And this one… she couldn't even tell if it was supposed to be romantic Sci Fi western or fantasy or what. The setting of it wasn't very clear or maybe Erna wasn't paying a lot of attention. There had been a scene in which the protagonist witnessed his mother being raped "again" on literally the second page of the story and after reading it last night, Erna spent ten minutes on the floor in front of the toilet vomiting. Even worse, it was written in the first person. She hated that.

She got through one paragraph and started the next. It was a wall of text. A long, rambling run on sentence of dialogue from a character she couldn't even remember the name of. Was it Kari? Didn't matter. She plowed through the clumsy typos, fixed one long run-on sentence, and thought about fixing some clunky, incorrect word usage, but she decided to leave it. If the author wants to use the word "avarice" incorrectly, then it's whatever to her. She had to remember the audience she was editing for. The people who read this shit aren't going to notice a misuse of the word "avarice."

The barista brings her latte over. Before setting it down he looks around and checks that Red Flannel Girl has gone into the back again and, hopefully, trying to be nice and find some approval, he says, "If you're sticking around I could put it in a porcelain mug instead of the to-go cup, if you want."

Erna looks up at him and says in a calm, measured voice, "Do you think it would be wise to give me anything heavy that could be used as a projectile?"

His eyes widen at the possibilities and he puts the cardboard cup down on her table. He goes back behind the counter without another word. Erna hears Levi quietly laugh to himself.

She ignores him and picks up where she left off, but what she reads makes her close her eyes, put her forehead down on the table and sigh. The marble is cool against her face. This is why it's her favorite table.

Levi lets her know, "If you're dead I'm knocking the wall down and taking over your apartment."

She doesn't lift her head from the table for her response. "Don't you have to go to work or something?"

"I have Sundays and Mondays off," he explains and then he asks snidely, "Don't you ever have to go to work?"

"I'm working right now," Erna mumbles into the table. He responds sarcastically, "Obviously. My mistake."

She lifts her head and explains, "I'm an editor for a publisher of terrible books. I get to work from home."

"Must be nice." There's a tinge of bitterness there. He thinks she has it too easy.
"Listen to this," she says, to prove herself, she reads aloud the paragraph she is on. "I knew all his words were true even as I felt a strength within that was not my own, so even though my human weakness said no I knew that the opposite was true, because I was a woman ruled by my flesh."

Levi raises an eyebrow in skeptical disbelief. He says, "That can't be real."

"This is so very real." Erna assures him. "Someone put those words on paper and they're going to get published and people are going to pay money to read them."

He is speechless. Erna reads another paragraph to him. "I nodded and Kuri spoke, 'When the time is right I need you to go and collect my bride and bring her to me. She rejected me of old and yet the prophecies will be fulfilled. Although she has done evil she will yet be flawless in my sight, when she turns from her fallen ways and believes in me, for I am the King!'"

There is a long pause, then, "What the fuck?"

"What the fuck indeed," Erna confirms.

After he gets over the initial shock, Levi counters with, "That's nothing." He gets up from his table and goes to stand next to hers. He lays his sketchpad down and shows her the design he's been working on. It's simple. It just looks like a pretty cluster of stars to Erna. He asks, "Do you know what that is?"

"Stars?"

"No. That is a 'cutie mark'," he does exaggerated air quotations with his fingers as he corrects her. He pulls out his smartphone and brings up the google image search he had to do for references and he shows her rows of images of a purple unicorn. "Specifically, it's the cutie mark of a cartoon character named Twilight Sparkle," he sounds like he might gag on the name. "And I had to sit through a consultation on Saturday with a woman who spent an hour talking to me about a show called My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic and how she identifies with Twilight Sparkle more than Fluttershy, but it's hard for her to decide because she and Fluttershy are both so good with animals, but Twilight Sparkle loves books and has a tiny dragon named Spike as a best friend, so you can see how she had a tough time deciding which of the two best represented her."

Erna breathes very deeply and does not let herself smile. She keeps her face perfectly straight and says very solemnly, "I can see how that would be a difficult decision."

Levi puts his phone back in his pocket and he stabs at the sketch with his finger to emphasize his words as he tells her, "And I am tattooing that on some girl's ass tomorrow afternoon."

Erna stares at him. She thinks about it for a good minute. Then she gives up. "Okay, you win. Your job is worse."

"Thank you." He picks his sketch pad back up, but he doesn't go back to his table. He takes one of the empty seats at hers and props the pad up against his knee again. Erna thinks about it for a moment, but she decides not to tell him to fuck off and sit somewhere else.

She mutters, "At least I don't have to talk to or touch the stupid people I deal with."

"Exactly."

"Okay, but wait," Erna needs to share this with someone, "Let me read you the summary of the next thing I have to work on."
"No."

She clicks out of the abomination she is currently reading and opens the file waiting for when she's finished and ignores Levi's protest, "Pete's life changed overnight when an ambush killed his twin and left him wounded beyond repair. His heart aches to be with his buddies at war, and nothing seems to soothe the hole inside him. Until he meets Claudia, a local waitress with a dark secret that threatens their chances at love."

"Please stop."

"But Levi," she teases, "she has a dark secret and it's soooo important." She skips through it to somewhere around the middle and scans a bit. "Turns out the secret is some kind of jealous ex-boyfriend who doesn't respect restraining orders." She hums and scans some more. "Apparently soldier boy wins waitress over by being stalker-ish and ignoring her surly attitude and persistently disrespecting clear boundaries, so I don't think she learned anything from the abusive ex." That's about as far as she can stand to wade into the pool of this shit, so she closes the file and sips her coffee before sighing wistfully, "and that's literally the best thing I've read all week."

Levi doesn't even look up from his sketch pad. "Last week I had to tattoo a dolphin onto a woman's lower back, so I don't want to hear it. You're not going to win this."

Erna lowers her eyelids and she tells him in a deadpan, "There is an entire genre of fiction called Vampire Romance."

"Oh come on," Levi puts his sketchpad down on the table and rubs his temples in frustration and disbelief. "That can't be real."

Erna holds up a finger for him to wait while she pulls up something she already finished editing last week. "No. Hold on. This is good. This is from the part where the hedonistic philandering vampire first meets his soulmate." She opens to page 7 of chapter 7, which she will remember forever because it was so astonishingly bad that she laughed for minutes after reading it. She clears her throat and fakes sincerity as she recites, "Jackson felt a jolt go straight through to his core, leaving him breathless. She had the most beautiful eyes. They were a soft, sable brown with specks of black that seemed to swirl in motion around her pupils like two tiny solar systems."

Erna looks at Levi to see him staring at her, eyelids lowered in an 'I am so done with humanity' kind of way. He only says "No." He doesn't elaborate, he leaves it open; a 'No' to everything.

"There's also a paragraph about her hair. It's chestnut brown and has fiery red highlights that are totally natural and shiny or what-the-fuck-ever. When she turns into a wolf, as she does every full moon, her hair turns a bronze color."

"Jesus fucking Christ," Levi groaned.

"Bad writers always substitute depth in personality with depth of hair and eye color." Out of the corner of her eye, Erna sees the barista walking towards the table and she nods toward him and says under her breath, "Like this motherfucker right here. What the fuck color even are his eyes?"

"Aquamarine," Levi says matter of factly because he's an artist and he knows this shit.

Eren is smiling and bright-eyed as he comes over and says quickly and eagerly, "Hey Levi, I have an idea for a tattoo."

Levi rubs the bridge of his nose just under his piercing. Eren is a good kid and he doesn't hate him, but he does this about once a month and Levi's patience for it wore thin a long time ago. Before Eren
can start, he tells him, "Consultations are fifty bucks."

Eren's jaw drops a little, but he recovers. "I thought consultations were free."

"They're free if you come into the shop while I am actually working, shitty brat. If you want to talk to me on my fucking day off then it's fifty bucks."

Eren tells him to hold on and he goes back behind the bar. Levi turns to Erna, who has a sour look on her face and is glaring at the back of Eren's head, and for a second he wonders if she's jealous that Eren took his attention away from her, but he writes that thought off as narcissistic and reminds himself that she just really dislikes Eren. Getting back to their little contest, he tells her, "This is why my job will always be worse. People are never going to come up to you, shove their smartphones in your face, and ask you to edit their latest blog post. I get this shit all the time. Even if people don't know what I do for a living, they see my tattoos or my piercings and want to talk to me about them and what they mean, like my body is an open invitation to conversation."

Erna smirks at him a little and she nods graciously, silently confirming that he's won. She goes back to reading.

Eren comes back with fifty dollars he got out of the register and puts it on the table in front of Levi. Erna chides, "I'm telling Red Flannel Girl when she comes back."

"Mikasa? It's okay. I'll make it up in tips."

Levi has seen how Mikasa is. It's won't be okay with her, but, "Whatever. Your funeral, kid." He shoves the cash in his pocket and flips to a new page in his sketch book. "What do you want?"

Eren's eyes widen a little in excitement as he starts to describe his latest idea, "I was thinking like an hourglass, but with a rose growing out of the sand at the bottom and –"

"Hey nerds." Eren was interrupted by a tall guy with a shit-eating grin and two-toned hair loudly announcing his arrival.

"Fuck off, Jean!" Eren answers.

Levi leans back in his chair and flips back to the sketch he was working on before Eren came over to waste his time.

"No. Make me a coffee, barista bitch." Jean leans against the counter and sneers at Eren. While he waits, Armin holds out one of his new pastry creations out over the counter to him and asks him to try it. Jean takes it and sweetly kisses Armin on the cheek. Eren makes a disgusted face. He can't stand the way Armin dotes on Jean even when he's such an asshole.

Eren stays seated. "Get it yourself, you know where everything is."

Jean goes behind the counter and starts making himself an espresso. As he does, he calls over to Eren, "Did you make this playlist? Your taste in music sucks."

That makes Eren stand up. Levi is relieved. Eren always has these great ideas for tattoos. He's told Levi about a hundred of them by now. But he still doesn't have a speck of ink on his body. He is always all ideas and no follow through and it's a pain in Levi's ass.

Eren's voice is rising and edged with anger, "Don't act like you know shit about music, Jean."

Jean takes the iPad from behind the counter and pulls up the playlist that's been playing over the
café's speakers. "I know The Moldy Peaches are mainstream."
Eren's hands form into fists and he yells, "How are The Moldy Peaches mainstream!?"

Jean doesn't match Eren's anger, simply waving him off and saying, "Maybe they're not mainstream, but you only started listening to them after you heard them on the Juno soundtrack. I knew about them before they were cool."

Levi tries to ignore them. This happens anytime Jean comes around. Eren's anger escalates quickly, he starts yelling obscenities at Jean, and the smug fucker sneers like the little prick he is and goads him on like it's funny to him. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Erna lean and reach for a used mug on the next table over that Eren hadn't gotten around to clearing yet.

As they yell back and forth and things get more and more heated, Jean busies himself behind the counter, helping himself to anything he wants. Eren is full on raging at him now and Jean pulls the lever on the espresso machine to pour the liquid out when suddenly there is a high, sharp sound as a porcelain mug hits the white subway tile backsplash right next to him, exploding and shattering into little pieces. He yelps, jumps back, and spills the hot liquid on his shirt. He curses and pulls the fabric away from his skin, tries to wave the steam off, but it's too burning hot, so he quickly rips the shirt off over his head and grabs a wet rag from the sink to hold against the reddened, burned skin on his torso.

Eren starts laughing. When Jean looks up, Erna locks eyes with him in a cold stare and says blankly without any emotion, "Hipster Trash, don't upset my barista, he makes good lattes."

"What the fuck?!!" Jean cries out in disbelief, finding it difficult to process the whole situation quickly enough.

Mikasa comes out from the back and everyone pauses. She doesn't say anything until she is done with a visual assessment. Then she calmly gives out orders. "Eren, get back behind the counter. Jean, clean that up. Armin, when he's done, take him upstairs."

No one argues, but they might move slowly about doing as she says. Eren glares at Jean as he moves back behind the counter and Armin helps Jean sweep up the shattered porcelain pieces. Erna reaches into the pocket of her dress and pulls out a twenty dollar bill, holding it out to Mikasa, "For the mug."

Mikasa goes over and takes it from her wordlessly. She hands it off to Eren to put into the register and tells him in a flat, expressionless tone, "I'm going out."

Presumably because she can't with this shit.

Levi turns to Erna who is back to tapping at her keyboard angrily correcting some grammar or spelling. He is rather impressed and in a little bit of awe, but he doesn't let on. He just says, "Nice throw."

Erna hums. "Not really. I was aiming for his head."

Chapter End Notes

Commissionerfiction on Tumblr
Erna rests her elbows on the cool granite countertop of the island in her family's kitchen that is composed of lots of counter space, expensive appliances, and plenty of cupboards reaching to the ceiling. She doesn't use this room of the house, barely ever steps inside it. Her ballet instructor tells her that if she eats too much she'll get fat and ugly. She never comes in here for snacks and she only eats half of anything put in front of her at meal times. It's open to her just like most of the other 36 rooms of the 17 thousand square foot mansion.

But now she sits very still and watches with rapt attention as her honey-blond and milky-skinned, graceful French au pair Colette makes her coffee for the last time.

She didn't dare ask Erna if she wanted her to show her how to make it herself, knowing that Erna hates for people to teach her things. She finds it patronizing and would rather teach herself even if it might take longer to learn that way. But Colette flashes Erna a knowing smile when she catches her staring intently at the French press as she pours the heated water over the finely ground coffee beans. Erna frowns and looks away, but then watches out of her peripheral vision until Colette looks back down at the carafe and stirs the water to steep. Her slender fingers wipe the long spoon off with a dishtowel and she tosses it into the sink.

She tells Erna casually, careful of not talking down to her as if she's a child, "You need to let the coffee steep for a minute or two or it will come out too watery."

Erna pouts and her eyebrows knit together slightly, she only acknowledges her with a "humph" sound.

Colette smiles a little. "Êtes-vous fâché avec moi pour laisser?" (Are you angry with me for leaving?)

"Non," Erna crosses her arms and refuses to look at her.

Colette's nose wrinkles a little as she smiles wider. She leans across the granite island countertop, tapping the tip of Erna's nose lightly with a finger she teases, "Et vais-je te manquer?" (And will you miss me?)

"Non."

She switches back to English. "I didn't think so." She knows it isn't true, but she's not going to try to get her to admit it. She forms her lips into a little 'o' as if she's just remembered something important, "Ah, but who will make your coffee in the morning?"

"I will."
Colette smirks at her. "And who's going to curl that pretty hair?" She reaches over and musses Erna's black doll-like curls. The precocious eleven-year-old girl crinkles her nose and shakes her head in annoyance.

"I'll do it."

"That's right. So you don't need me anymore." Colette presses down the filter screen on the French press and turns around to get a cup. She reaches up high, and gets one from a set that she knows is Erna's favorite, even though she would never say so out loud. It's all in the way she reacts and looks at things. She's too prideful a child to admit when she covets anything, but she doesn't have enough guile yet to be able to hide it from her face. She turns it in her hand as she brings the cup down from the cupboard. She never understood why this set would appeal to a child. There is no pattern on it, no flowers, no flourishes of any kind, just a plain white, bone china coffee cup.

Erna is the strangest child she's ever cared for. It took a lot of adjusting for Colette, who thought she knew children pretty well; when she replaced the Raban family's older German au pair, Sandra, five years ago, she had to break a lot of her own habits and assumptions for Erna. The girl didn't play, didn't socialize with other children, wasn't fond of toys or dolls. She was at least very quiet and not so difficult. She didn't throw tantrums like other children. She didn't resist when her parents signed her up for whatever extracurricular they thought she should be learning – right now they were sticking with ballet, horseback riding, and violin lessons – but she didn't get enthused about anything. The only things she seemed to be at all interested in were books. The only place she ever asked Colette to take her to was the library. So as the other sisters grew too old for her and she was left with only Erna to care for, it had become a rather peaceful job. But Erna is almost twelve now and precocious to boot, so Colette must move on to another family.

She doesn't set the cup down on the counter yet. She can feel Erna staring at her as she goes to another cupboard, taking out a tin of rich, Dutch cocoa powder and adding a spoonful to the bottom of the cup. Erna speaks up from her seat at the island and pleads, "No. No chocolate, Colette."

"You're too skinny. Indulge me. This is the last time I'm going to be able to force sweets on you."

Erna sounds anxious. "But –"

"Erna, a tiny bit of chocolate isn't going to hurt you." She pours the coffee over top of it and mixes it together with some milk. She hates Erna's Russian ballet instructor for putting these stupid ideas in her head. She slides the cup of coffee over to Erna and she leans forward, stage whispering conspiratorially, "Miss Markova's head is full of worms and rotten thoughts, and if you start thinking like her, your brain will get eaten by worms and you'll forget how to read."

Erna is too old for an au pair, but still just young enough to look at her with a little inkling of fear that she might be telling the truth. She obediently takes the cup and sips her mocha. "Good girl."

Colette cleans up around the kitchen under Erna's steady gaze. She watches from under her long, black eyelashes and probably thinks that Colette doesn't notice because the au pair rarely lets on that she does. When she finishes, she tells Erna, "I have a present for you." She comes around the side of the island. "I didn't wrap it," she explains as she pulls out the little cloth-bound book from the pocket of her knee length A-line skirt. She knows Erna thinks wrapping gifts in paper is silly and unnecessary. Colette holds out the old copy of selected poems by Edna St. Vincent Millay and has to wait a bit for Erna to finally take it in her little hands.

Though her eyes show a kaleidoscope of emotions, she doesn't say thank you. Her fingers rub the worm edges of the cover. Erna loves used books much better than new ones, especially if they have some signs of use like dog eared pages and handwritten notes inside, but her parents will only ever
buy her new things.

Her little chest heaves and she breathes deeply through her nose and tries to hold the sobs back. She stays very still, staring down unblinking at the cover of her gift.

Colette's instinct is to hug her, but she fights that impulse. Erna does not appreciate affection.

With shaking fingers, Erna opens to the title page where Colette has written in scrawling cursive a quote from one of Erna's favorite poets translated into French, "Vous êtes effrayant et étrange et belle, quelqu'un tout le monde ne peut aimer." (You are terrifying and strange and beautiful, someone not everyone knows how to love.)

Erna jumps off of the stool at the island counter and Colette is thrown back a little by the unchecked force with which the little girl flies into her, wrapping her arms around her tightly and burying her face in her apron, shaking and sobbing silently.

She is shocked for a split second, but then she composes herself and murmurs, "There, there..." as she pats Erna's mop of black curls.

And just as suddenly, Erna runs off in the direction of her bedroom, without any words of parting. No goodbyes, no 'I love you's. Colette expected that.

Erna slams the door of the dryer in the building's basement shut and takes a roll of quarters out of her pocket, counting out two dollars and placing them in the coin slot. She pushes the metal slider and it takes her coins, but gets stuck coming back out. She pulls at it, but it doesn't budge. She presses the start button to see if the dryer will work anyway, but nothing happens.

"Shit."

She pushes the coin slot again, seeing if that will dislodge it, but it gets stuck in the same place. She pulls at it, hard. That doesn't work either.

She breathes deeply through her nose. She feels herself beginning to get unreasonably frustrated, too angry too quickly. She wishes she could be calm and patient, but her eyes begin to itch and her nose feels dry, almost like an allergic reaction. This happens when she can't cope. It's like she is physically allergic to stress.

She punches the slider with the heel of her hand and pain shoots up her arm. She shakes her hand in the air as if to wave the pain out of it and then she cradles it. She kicks the dryer and yells at it.

"Motherfucker!"

"You okay?" a sweet, light voice asks from the basement entrance.

Erna is startled out of her tantrum, and the shame of being caught in an episode of irrational anger sets in. She nods and sighs shakily, " Fucking dryer won't work."

The petite blonde girl has a laundry basket balanced on her hip. She flashes Erna a big smile and sways over to her, setting her basket down next to the washing machine. She coos, "I know. Sometimes it just needs some coaxing." She reaches down to grab something from the top of the clothes in her basket and says, "Here, I'll show you."

Erna steps back, now more relieved for the help than ashamed at being caught, but her relief turns to apprehension as the small, sweet-looking blonde girl lifts a hammer from her laundry basket.
Erna can think to say anything, the girl squares off in front of the dryer, feet shoulder-width apart, and swings the hammer to hit the coin slot slider with a loud metallic clang. She hits it a few more times until it becomes unstuck and slides out the way it should. She lets the hammer fall to her side and pushes the start button. The dryer hums to life.

Erna is lost for words for a moment. The girl puts the hammer down on the floor, leaning it against the washing machine.

"Um… Shouldn't someone fix that?" Erna asks.

"It still works," the girl replies cheerfully, "it just works with the hammer now."

"Fair enough…"

The girl opens the door of the washing machine and starts loading it with her clothes. "I'll leave the hammer here in case you need it again. I've been meaning to leave it in here anyway. It's heavy to carry up and down the stairs."

"Thanks..?"

The trepidation in Erna's voice does not seem to register with the manic little pixie dream girl who nods and says, "No problem!" She shuts the washing machine and turns suddenly, extending her hand. "I'm Krista, I live up in 3C."

If Erna was taken aback before, she is even more so now. 3C is next to her. She thought Levi was her only immediate neighbor. She's never heard a sound coming through the wall on the other side of her place.

"Um, I'm Erna," she shakes Krista's hand. "Nice to meet you." She avoids saying where she lives. She doesn't want to start a conversation.

Once Krista frees her hand, Erna steps around her and begins to go back upstairs, noncommittally humming in response when Krista calls after her, "See ya around!"

(August, 2006)

Before he opens his eyes, Levi thinks he's in his own bed at home, but a slight disoriented feeling creeps up on him as his brain registers that the sunlight hitting his eyelids is coming from the wrong direction for it to be filtering through the bedroom window of his own apartment. He opens his eyes with a start, but just as suddenly as the panic comes on it disappears as he remembers where he is. He hates that feeling. That's why he usually leaves in the middle of the night to go and sleep in his own bed.

This is the fourth time he's woken up here. The girl sleeping next to him always convinces him to stay over somehow even though he'd rather not. She's not crazy persuasive, he's just easy to convince after smoking a bowl and drinking a couple free beers.

He sits up in bed, and looks down at the sleeping body next to him. He can only see her strawberry blond, messy bed head hair peeking out from under the sheet. She's turned away from him to face the wall that the mattress is up against. He gives her shoulder a little push.

"Hey, I'm leaving."
Petra moans, long and contentedly, and she lazily stretches out and rolls over, putting her arm around his legs and pulling herself closer to him, nuzzling her face against his thigh and murmuring, "No, hang out with me. We can order pizza and watch Netflix."

Levi sighs. He hates this. Doesn't know why he does it to himself.

Before they started this shit months ago, he made sure she knew the score. She said that she understood about not doing relationships, but he'd had a gut feeling from the beginning that she would be emotional and needy. He needed to trust his instincts more.

He removes her arm and gets out of bed to start the search for his clothes. He tries to do it without looking at the finished and half-finished paintings scattered around her loft apartment that he's sure her parents pay the rent on.

He met Petra in his oil painting class at Columbia University last year. They were both first years, but he was there on a full scholarship and her tuition was paid in full by her parents. No student loans to worry about or anything. When she told him, he tried not to judge her and be a dick about it, but it was hard at the time. Now it was impossible.

He'd made it through a year, just barely. The scholarship covered tuition and on-campus housing, but not books, supplies, or food. For that stuff, he had to work two part time jobs, almost never sleeping, struggling to turn in assignments on time, and just barely scraping by financially. At the end of his second semester he did the math and found out it would be impossible to afford another year. He would need to work more hours than there were in a day. Over the summer he kept the two part time jobs to pay rent on an off-campus apartment and started selling weed and ecstasy on the side, hoping to get enough money together to re-matriculate for his second year, but the new fall semester is less than two weeks away now and he doesn't have enough. He'd made his peace with it; enough to renew his lease on the apartment, but not enough to give any thought about where he went from here.

Mostly he was trying to avoid thinking about it by hopping from partner to partner, having lots of sex, smoking lots of weed, and drinking a lot of beer.

It was stupid to come over to Petra's, though, because she reminded him of how fucking unfair it was. He always left her place depressed and with a storm cloud of self-pity hanging over him.

He looked around the foot of the bed, found his boxer briefs and pulled them on. She sat up and tried to be cute, pouting and whining like a kid, "Let's have morning sex."

He hates that shit. It turns him off when grown-ass women put on that childish baby-voice like it's supposed to be hot. "No."

He leans over the railing of the loft to see if his jeans got left down on the floor below. He sees his boots and shirt down there. Still can't find the one piece of clothing he can't leave without unless he wants to get arrested for indecent exposure.

"Shit," he mutters under his breath. His hands go up to his scalp, raking through his hair that is no longer in a Mohawk since he started college last year. It was too much to maintain. He still kept most of his head shaved, but let the longer hair fall in a side part.

He spots his jeans across the room and stalks over to retrieve them. They're lying crumpled in front of a 3’ x 5’ canvas. He narrows his eyes and stares at the painting as he tugs them on.

It's a mess. She has no sense of balance or composition. It's abstract and purposeless, a yellow
triangle dead in the center over a split background of cyan and magenta. There is no interest to it, no feeling, no point whatsoever.

With his jeans hanging just halfway off his hips, he moves the painting around to check for the sticker she puts on the wooden frame of the canvas if she's sold something and needs to mark it for delivery.

He doesn't need to look. She tells him, "I sold that one for five thousand yesterday, but you can take something else if you want."

He feels a bitterness rise in his throat. This is what made him jaded and skeptical about the art world. He was learning quickly that talent and merit didn't matter half as much as your skill in being charming and convincing ignorant rich people to part with their money. Petra sucks at art, but she's a pro at getting rich assholes to buy her paintings for thousands of dollars.

The worst part is that she doesn't even know how bad she is. She actually thinks Levi would want one of her paintings to take home and put on his fucking wall. She genuinely thinks that her pieces are worth thousands of dollars.

"No thanks." He zips up his jeans. "I gotta go."

"Wait," her voice halts him as he turns for the stairs. "Can you give me a ride to the store?" She gets out of bed and starts getting dressed like he's already said yes.

"Get one of your friends to do it."

"You are one of my friends." She slips on a pair of Uggs and grabs a shirt from her dresser.

"I'm not," he's not trying to be mean. She knows he makes this distinction. He keeps friends and sex partners separate, compartmentalized. He loves his friends and he confides in them and goes to them for support. People he has sex with… are just that. He doesn't combine the two. He thinks it would get messy.

"Fuck buddies are a thing, ya know?" she says cheerfully, as if he's just kidding about not being her friend.

"Not for me they're not. You know that."

She stops getting dressed. "So you're not taking me to the store?"

He sighs. He never wanted to get into this with her. "Look. We can be friends and I can hang around here and watch Netflix and do you favors and give you rides when you need them, or we can have sex. We can't do both. You have to pick one."

And he waits.

She takes a long time answering.

But ultimately she gives him the answer he was expecting. And he hurries down the stairs, pulling on his boots and grabbing his shirt. He doesn't bother to tie the laces and he doesn't pull the shirt over his head until he is fully out the door.

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"How long does it even take you to get all of that shit on every morning?" Levi asks Erna as he
stands over her on the stoop smoking his morning cigarette before going back up to get ready for work.

She doesn't look up from the latest piece of shit writing she's printed out to mark up with her favorite red pen, but she answers, "I presume you're referring to my clothing."

"Yeah."

"Probably not half as long as it takes you to paint those jeans on."

He smirks. He thinks he's going to need some aloe for that burn.

Things between them have been peaceful. They don't assault each other with loud music anymore. If he feels like listening to something he uses his headphones. She keeps the classical station on her radio all day, but the volume stays low. He can only hear it through the wall if he listens for it.

They weren't "friendly" though. Or rather, he can't tell if they are, because most of their interactions are like this. Snarky, sarcastic, short. Does that pass for "friendly?" She isn't "nice" to him by any stretch of the imagination, but she hasn't gotten angry with him for at least a week or two, and that's not nothing, because he's seen how callous and unpleasant she is with other people. She seems to like pushing buttons and making people rage or cry or both. She doesn't try any of that shit with him, though.

He likes to think it's because he can give as good as he gets from her. He can be just as sarcastic and mean as she can. Even so, he avoids provoking her too much. He prefers for things to be peaceful. Without all of the flaring tempers and bitterness between them, he's been able to accept her as being part of his routine and he can feel calm again. As long as everything is predictable, he's fine.

And she is nothing if not predictable.

She is always there. She's on the stoop smoking in the morning. If she's not there she's in the café or inside her apartment. And she's always working on something: either tapping at the keyboard of her laptop or marking up some printed out pages. He would probably be in shock if he caught her doing something different.

And she never leaves.

He would ask what that's about, because it's strange and, deep down, a little disconcerting, but he knows he'll get a bitingly sarcastic answer, so he doesn't bother.

She groans, apparently at something she's just read. She tells him, "Listen to this," and she clears her throat for a mock reading. "My tongue sweeps out, just barely touching his skin, and he groans, a low, hungry sound. He tastes like salt and air, as if the ocean wrapped around him when he was small and never let go."

"Gross."

"It's not just me, right? She's talking about literally licking his sweat?"

Levi thought licking sweat wasn't so bad. Sex is sweaty and it happens. It's just the way the author described it that makes it sound disgusting. "Where is she licking?"

"The author doesn't specify, so I'm going to choose to believe that she's licking his taint."

It was wildly incongruous with her image when she said shit like that. This elegant, delicate, and
proper-looking girl who only wore black and white dresses with ruffles and ribbons, who probably had the most extensive vocabulary of anyone he knew, occasionally uttered sentences that he swore only adolescent boys in high school would even think of, and he tried to deny it, but truthfully it was hilarious.

"Great," Levi deadpans sarcastically.

"Well, when you leave things open to interpretation like that…" she said softly and absently as she went back to crossing out words and adding punctuation to the page in front of her.

She always sits on the first step facing out to the sidewalk. He prefers to stand close to the door and is always looking down at her. They have whole exchanges where they never look at each other's faces and Levi thinks about sitting next to her, but he never sits when he smokes. He likes to be ready to keep moving. He wonders how she can be such an apparent workaholic and at the same time appear to be so calm and still.

There's a buzz. Levi knows it isn't his phone because his is in his back pocket. He swears he sees Erna jump and flinch at the sound before she stills herself again and with quick little deft fingers unlocks the clasp on her coffin purse and with a flick of the wrist takes out a phone, gives a glance at the caller ID, and flips it open to answer it with an irritated, "What?" rather than a hello.

Come to think of it, he's never seen her looking at a phone, which he should have noticed because it had become so normal for people to constantly stare at their smartphone screens. She has a flip phone. He didn't even know you could get those anymore.

He tries to tune out Erna's side of the conversation because he doesn't want to be rude, but it's impossible and if she doesn't want him to hear her she could easily fucking walk away.

"I'm fine… No, I didn't. I'm not going to… I'm fine… Yeah, I got it… No, I know… I'm fucking fine though… No… No… Look, Deidra, I'm busy, I'll call you back… Yeah, whatever," and she flips her phone closed and throws it back into the little velvet-lined leather coffin, slamming the lid shut after taking out another cigarette and tucking it behind her ear to have it ready for when the one in her lips gets down to the filter.

She looks back to the pages in her other hand, taking a long drag on the last bit of her cigarette that's left. She lets out an exasperated sigh and slaps the packet of pages face down onto the cement steps, holding her hand over them as if she were suffocating them against the ground.

One more long drag and she takes the cigarette between her fingers, turning it and pinching the end between her thumb and index finger, she presses the cherry maliciously into the paper, grinding it out, turning the centers of a few of the pages to blackened ash and smearing soot over them until her cigarette is out and no longer usable as a tool of destruction.

There is an awkward tension in the air.

He breaks it with, "That bad?"

With a swift, abrupt motion, she snatches the pages back up and holds them in front of her again. She reads what he assumes was the line she was on when she decided these words needed to be burned. It's a piece of dialogue. "I'm gonna tie you up and kiss that sweet pussy for a while. I want to hear you say my name when you come on my lips."

"That's not as bad as the first thing."

"I just hate that word. Who really says 'pussy'?"
Levi thinks about it. "Frat boys?"

"Touché."

And with that he's about to go back inside, but just as he goes to unlock the door, Erwin pulls up to the curb and steps out of his car.

"Good morning, Levi. Erna."

Levi says "Morning," back to him. Erna says something in German that sounds bitter and dark.

He walks up to the stoop smiling at the two of them and saying, "You seem to be getting on better."

Erna lets loose a stream of defensive German as if Erwin just accused her of something. "Ich bin nicht zu brechen Nürnbergh Recht. Diese Gesetze nur auf die Ehe und intime Interaktionen gelten."

Erwin tilts his head like a dog does when it's trying to understand and says, "I'm sorry?"

"Do your fellow Schutzstaffel know about your illicit activities here?" Erna points at Erwin with her cigarette, narrowing her eyes at him.

He simply smiles and reassures her, holding a palm up as if swearing an oath, "I am not now nor have I ever been a member of the SS."

Erna spits back at him, "Well you carry yourself like a fucking cop or ex-military and I don't buy your charismatic bullshit." She pauses to take a drag of her cigarette and then she points at him with it, "Know who else was charming and charismatic?"

Erwin sighs. "Are you going to say Hitler?"

"No, you narcissistic fuck. I was going to say Goebbels. You wish you were Hitler."

Levi can tell why she dislikes Erwin so much. It's because he doesn't react the way she wants. He never gets angry or upset no matter what horrible things she says to him. The man is unflappable.

Levi unlocks the door and lets Erwin inside. As he steps through the doorway Erwin apologizes to Erna for having offended her, which only makes her more irate and she shouts some more things in German. She wants him to get pissed off, not apologize. How many different ways can she call him a Nazi before he finally gets angry about it?

Erna has so many questions regarding Erwin. Like what the fuck are they doing up there anyway? Who the fuck is that guy? What in the world would make a clean cut, wholesome as fuck, professional-looking middle aged man come to hang out with a punk like Levi... in the mornings... for short periods of time. Sex is still the only thing that makes sense to her. But what kind of sugar daddy visits his boyfriend in the morning? Maybe a married man with a family does, but maybe also her mind is in the gutter because she's sexually frustrated and reading really bad softcore porn scenes in romance novels all the time.

She brings her thumb to her lips and bites down on the nail, not chewing it, but holding it between her teeth. She wonders how big Erwin's cock is and who tops. No she doesn't.

The fact that the thought even appeared in her head startles her. She groans in disgust at herself.

She should just ask Levi what the fuck is up with this. But then it would look like she cares. Which she does not. She doesn't care about people. She likes the idea of humanity in general, from a
distance. She can empathize with fictional characters in books; ideas of people are fine, but real people can fuck right off.

Back to work. She finds her spot in the pages of the manuscript again and reads where she'd left off. "She was soft and moist."

Nope.

She can't even.

She is pretty sure that moist is universally known as the most unpalatable word in the whole fucking English language. How anyone could think that was a good word choice there is beyond her. Who gave these people access to computers? She's never written a goddamn thing aside from assignments for school, but she's pretty sure she could do better than that even without having a single creative bone in her body.

She pulls the cigarette from behind her ear and lights it, holding the flame to the tip longer than necessary because she likes watching it burn.

She wants to change it to "wet," but she won't. She is stubbornly respectful of the works that people create. She will fix grammar and spelling, but not word choices. If they want to write badly, then that was their business.

She doesn't pick the stapled pages back up. She needs a break. Her mind wanders and she thinks about what words she would use to convey dirty, kinky, mind-blowing sex. Quickly that turns into less an exercise in hypothetical writing, and more just fantasizing about dirty, kinky, mind-blowing sex. For minutes her eyes glaze over as she lets herself get carried away imagining the frenzied jolting motion of someone pounding into her from behind and how good it feels to have her hair pulled.

Her breathing slows down. She holds her cigarette between her fingers, elbow resting on her knees, and the thumb of her other hand goes to her lips again. She likes feeling skin against her lips, wants something invading her mouth.

The door behind her opens and startles the hell out of her. Erwin goes briskly down the steps and cheerfully wishes her a good day.

Her heart is racing. She yells "Fuck off, Nazi shithead!" at him as he gets into his car. Her chest heaves, taking deep breaths as she tries to calm herself down.

"Fuck me," she sighs in exasperation at how worked up she let herself get. She smokes her cigarette down halfway and puts it out. She mutters a varied selection of profanity at intervals as she goes up the stairs to her apartment. Being human and having needs is annoying. She'd rather be a machine or a doll or some other kind of inanimate object.

First thing, she unties her black, knee-high boots and kicks them off. She steps around her piles of books, tosses the papers onto the desk against the wall she shares with Levi, drops her purse, and sweeps her laptop off of the desk, cradling it in one arm as she steps over to the bed in the corner on the other side of the single room apartment. She isn't going to bother undressing. She's going to make this as quick as possible so that she can move the fuck on.

Once she lays down, she rests her laptop on her stomach, opens it, and connects to the only wifi her laptop can find that isn't password protected. The signal is weak as shit, but she only needs it for a minute. She opens a bookmarks folder in her browser innocuously named "liter" and doesn't even
read any of the descriptions of any of the fifty-plus links she's bookmarked there. She scrolls down and clicks on one randomly.

"Tch." The page comes up, but in place of the video player is block text that says This video removed for violence issues.

Fucking morality police. She scrolls down to the bottom of the list. Whatever she's bookmarked recently probably hasn't had time to get shut down yet. A video comes up and she gives it time to buffer.

Erna does a lot of bookmarking. It's such a difficult thing to find porn that works for her, so if she finds anything that makes her come, she bookmarks it right away because it can take over an hour of searching to find things that turn her on without squicking her out. BDSM porn doesn't do it. It's too fake, the acting is too over the top, and the people aren't even doing it right. So instead she needs to go for violent stuff, but not too violent, not too rapey, not too fake, but just enough of all of those things. If it's too fake it takes her out of it. If it's too real she worries that she might be watching an actual assault and not just actors. But if it's not violent or there isn't any implied force, it isn't taboo enough for her.

Once she hits play, she remembers which video this is. Two guys chloroform a woman and have their way with her. The actress does a really good job of pretending to be passed out, enough that Erna would be concerned if there weren't so many flags that marked it as being fake. This is the kind of shit that greatly disturbs her rational feminist-y side, but right now that part of her brain isn't on.

She reaches down, rustling the crinoline under her dress out of the way. The rough lace of it scratches her wrist as she rubs her fingers over the wet fabric of her panties. She doesn't need to reach inside. Her clit is too sensitive for direct contact and she doesn't get off on penetration. She pushes and rubs at her clit through the fabric for less than thirty seconds. Coming for her is so much more mental than physical, she could probably get there without even that stimulation, but it certainly wouldn't happen as quickly.

As she feels herself tipping over the edge of orgasm, she stops herself and removes her hand. Her original goal was to do this quickly as possible and get it over with, but as the endorphins flood her brain, she lets go of that plan, and wants instead to make this last. Her hips buck automatically, but she concentrates on her breathing and keeps herself back from the edge enough to avoid coming for a few seconds, but she has so little self-control and willpower; no ability to deny immediate gratification. She reaches down again and with a few more slight touches, she's sighing into the hand she uses to cover her parted lips while her thighs are shaking. Her whole body tenses and her breath leaves her in a shuddering exhale. She comes in waves of clenching muscles and gasps of shock. The second it's over, and she is able to, Erna hurries to close out of the video, her eyes widening in all too sudden clarity.

The first feeling is horror at herself and the evidence that she has against herself: she gets sick sexual pleasure at the thought of people doing horrible, cruel things. She closes the laptop, sets it on the floor, stares at the ceiling. She lays her palm over her face, fingers resting caged over her forehead. She wonders what the fuck is wrong with her, and feels guilty and disgusted with herself. She always does after. But that's forced to the back of her head quickly. She has a lot of practice with pushing away thoughts and concerns that she doesn't want to deal with.

Very carefully she lifts her hips and pulls her panties down over her thigh-high stockings and off. She tosses them into a laundry basket not far from the foot of the bed. Her weak legs take her to the bathroom to get a tissue. She makes a small sound of disgust. The human body is repulsive to her. Her own brain is pretty disgusting and terrifying as well. She sighs deeply as she tosses the tissue in
She goes back out and pulls on a new pair of panties. She's been going through a lot of pairs lately. Masturbating to distract herself and avoid feeling depressed for a minute, turn her brain off for about five blessed minutes of being free of anxiety. It's worth the shame and horror she feels afterwards.

The soft strains of classical music coming from the small radio in her window no longer feel appropriate. She keeps it on almost constantly, trying to artificially calm herself without doing anything to deal with her problems in a healthy way.

Ema takes her rarely used iPod out of her purse. It is protected by a black case adorned with white ribbons and lace. She puts her earbuds in her ears and scrolls through the long alphabetical list of song titles in her library. She wants something to match the way she feels.

She flips through to "Moaning Lisa Smile." She sits on her bed and closes her eyes, not screaming. Only in her head. She'll save the screaming she wants for when she's sure Levi's left for work.

You wait for something to undo these feelings
Waiting and waiting, but it's out of control
Scrap the blues, if the blues don't work
Flash your teeth, though the inside hurts.

(June, 2013)

Levi is escorted down the cement block hallways of the correctional facility that has been his home for about six years, give or take; he's not one to keep careful track of days and months like some people. He has no familiarity with this part of the prison – never had a visitor, and therefore never had any reason to be in the room that the guard is taking him to now.

The visiting facility is colorless but for the blue plastic chairs stacked in a corner. Right now isn't normal visiting hours, so they aren't set out around the tables, except for one in the center of the room; one chair for him, and, across the table from it, another chair already occupied by his newly appointed parole officer who is hunched over reading some papers in front of him. His grey blazer is hung over the back of the chair, and the sleeves of his white button down shirt are rolled up as far as they'll go over his thick biceps.

It has to be close to eighty degrees in there, the excuse being that the air conditioning is broken, but that's bullshit. They just don't turn it on. Levi isn't too uncomfortable in his prison jumpsuit, which is roomy, because it's probably about two sizes too big for him. He had to roll up the cuffs of his pants at least six inches before he got the legs to a length that wouldn't drag on the ground and trip him when he walked. But the man sitting at the table can't be comfortable in his form-fitting slacks and shirt.

He's dressed like a man who gives a fuck, and knows how to dress to show it. Black socks and black, leather dress shoes that aren't scuffed to shit. He has the top button of his shirt undone and he's loosened his simple black tie, but, all the while, still presents the picture of a man who is somehow competent and self-assured, even as he's beginning to sweat through his undershirt. From the way he's built – big barrel chest, powerful looking legs and arms – Levi figures he used to be a cop or, with the way he dresses, maybe a detective. He wonders how long ago he made the change in career and for what reasons.

When he notices Levi walking in, the man stands and Levi notices just how tall he is. He smiles, and
extends his hand as he introduces himself. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Ackerman. Congratulations on your parole. I'm Erwin Smith, I'll be your case worker."

Levi hesitates, and looks back at the doorway to the guard who had escorted him here while listing the rules to visits their whole walk down the long hallway. The first rule, among many others, was no touching, but the guard nods to him that it's okay.

Levi lets Erwin crush his hand in a firm handshake. His own grip is weak, this is an unfamiliar gesture for him. People don't shake hands in prison. Not like this. And he's sure he was never in a situation where he had to shake anyone's hand when he was an aimless, pissed off punk.

"Just Levi," he corrects Erwin as he takes his hand back and sits down.

Those blue eyes twinkle and his lips form a subtle grin. "Alright, Just Levi, do you have any questions for me before we get started?"

Did this tall, built, blonde motherfucker just make a dad joke with him? Jesus fucking Christ, he thinks. It does make him relax a little, which hopefully was intentional and not an indication that his parole officer is a goofy, incompetent fucker. He thinks on it. He has a lot of questions, but none that this guy can probably answer. Erwin clasps his hands together on the table in front of him and waits patiently for Levi to break his silence.

Levi asks, "Why am I being let out?" though he isn't sure he wants, or can handle, the answer.

"You've served at least two thirds of your sentence and the board deemed you as not an immediate threat to the public," Erwin says automatically and matter of factly, as if he's gotten this question hundreds of times before.

It isn't what Levi wanted to hear. He doesn't know what he wanted as an answer. He doesn't know what answer would make his heart sink less.

He doesn't say anything for a long time. He expects Erwin to just get on with it and start slogging through the required paperwork, but he doesn't. Instead, he asks, "Do you think that you don't deserve to be released?"

He gives him a moment to answer, but when Levi's lips don't move, Erwin looks down and flips through some of the papers on the table in front of him until he finds the one he's looking for, angling it up and reading silently for a few seconds. When he finishes he lets the paper fall flat on the table again, and simply says, "I see."

Levi avoids eye contact, looking towards the door, wishing this would just be over. He'd prefer to be in his cell.

"How many more years do you think you'd like? Ten? Twenty?" Erwin's tone is serious and sincere, not mocking. As if he can actually arrange to keep Levi here longer if he wants to.

Levi answers quietly, bitterly, "They were worth more than that."

Killing his two best friends, even if it was accidental, deserves more than six years. If it had been someone else who had killed them, Levi would want that person to rot in prison for the rest of their miserable life.

"Levi," Erwin says sympathetically, then pauses and switches to a pragmatic tone, "the fact that you got paroled means nothing about the value of those lives. It means that it costs about one hundred dollars a day to keep someone in prison, and about four dollars and sixty two cents a day to supervise
them on parole. It means that you're deemed unlikely to commit another crime. It means that the prison bureaucracy wants you out, that the cost of keeping you here outweighs the risk of freeing you."

Levi doesn't say anything. Erwin gives him some time to process that as he goes through his forms and organizes the relevant ones that he wants to get out of the way first. He clicks his pen, poises it ready over a blank space on the first form in front of him, and asks, "Who are you going to stay with until you find your own place?"

"I don't have anyone I can stay with."

Erwin looks up and raises one thick eyebrow at Levi. "No one at all? Family, friends, boyfriend, girlfriend?"

Levi narrows his eyes. "The only real friends I had, you just read about right there," he points his finger down at the set aside paper Erwin had read earlier with the charge that Levi was convicted of. It simply said, "1st offense; manufacturing, distributing, or possessing with intent to distribute – any Schedule I or II drug – and death or serious bodily injury result from the use." It was clinical legalese. To Erwin, all that said was that Levi was caught selling someone drugs that resulted in their death or injury. What those words translated to for Levi, was that he'd gone to a concert with Isabel and Farlan where he planned to, as usual, post up near the bathrooms to sell ecstasy and weed to anyone who wanted it, but before the concert started, his friends had begged him to let them have a couple of handfuls of pills to sell so that they could make some money and buy band t-shirts, and Levi indulged them. Instead of selling anything, they took the pills themselves and overdosed, which Levi didn't find out about until after he was face down on the ground with a cop's knee in his back getting soaked with rain water.

And all Erwin had to say after a pause was "I'll see what I can do about setting up housing for you."

"Tch."

"Have you looked into job placement?"

"No."

Erwin puts his pen down and folds his hands. "What would you like to do?"

"The fuck do you mean what would I like to do? You can't just get me any job. I'm a felon. No one's going to fucking hire me."

Erwin sighs. "Levi, my entire job is to help you with things like this. Trust me. I'm good at what I do."

Levi crosses his arms. He'll believe it when he sees it.

"What kind of job would you be happy with?" Levi refuses to take his eyes off of the table. He hasn't thought about housing or a job or anything, because he's spent six years telling himself that he's a piece of shit who killed his friends with an error in judgment, and he doesn't deserve to be free and have a normal life; that's his identity now. He doesn't know who he is if not that and he doesn't know how to change his thinking so suddenly.

"Do you have any hobbies? Anything you're good at?" Erwin tries to coax anything helpful out of him.

"I had a full-ride at Columbia on an art scholarship."
Erwin sounds appreciative that Levi opened up. "That's very impressive." He doesn't ask him what happened. Instead he asks, "Do you have a fear of needles, by any chance?"

They say that if you go through the motions of a person who does not suffer from depression, then you will find yourself feeling less depressed. So Erna tries to force herself to do things like clean her apartment, do her work, wake up early, stay awake until at least 9pm. If she were to let herself do anything she wanted, she would sleep all day and all night, only waking up very occasionally to eat something or drink coffee.

Today she hasn't been greatly successful at going through the motions. After masturbating, she listened to sad, angry music for about an hour. Instead of getting back to work editing, she reread some of her collections of short stories by classic authors. That took up a good chunk of time and made her feel okay for as long as she was reading. As soon as she stopped though, the anxiety came on worse, aggravated by her unproductivity. Logically she knows that if she does something healthy and productive, she will feel a little better, but that is hard and wallowing in sad, self-hating feels is easy.

Why should she have to work so hard to feel okay anyway when it's not her fault that she feels this way. Why is she the one who has to do all the things to fix herself?

It's not fair, it's not fucking fair. That's her mantra at times like this. She paces around the apartment a little bit, looking around at things she could do, like organize her piles of books, fold her basket of clean laundry, or finally finish unpacking and finding places for everything.

But those are all things that a well-adjusted, happy, normal person would do. That's not her. For today she's exhausted with fighting the tide.

And she's so angry. Angry at the whole fucking world.

She's been turning the classical music down lower and lower. Not because she doesn't enjoy it. She enjoys classical music immensely. It's just that sounds are getting difficult. Every one that can't be immediately identified triggers panic. She twitches at anything that at first sounds like it might be close, in the hallway, outside her door, anything that isn't just a clunky car or sirens or screeching tires on the street outside. The more her brain tricks her into interpreting every odd sound as possible imminent danger, the more she wants to hear everything clearly, the more she can't stand to have any kind of white noise or music blocking or blurring possible warning sounds, footsteps or scratches at the door.

She is like a skittish deer most of the time.

She was alright for a little bit upon first moving in, feeling that the change in location made her safer. Steadily she's grown more and more suspicious that she might not be safe here or anywhere, but she doesn't know. The not knowing is the thing that really shakes her. She wants to be certain of something at least, even if it's certainty that horrible things will happen.

The self-loathing comes in when she tells herself that this is stupid, that of course she is probably safe. She hates that she lets it get to her and she acts like a fucking victim like this.

Then the nagging thought somewhere far back, whispering quietly, and pricking at her imperceptibly like the smallest acupuncture needle: you're afraid because you're weak, because you're not strong like you thought, and you will never be able to protect yourself, and no one will do it for you because you've never given anyone any reason to give a fuck, never had any emotional connections
or built any friendships. You have no support network whatsoever because you're fucking broken.

That track runs on a loop, quietly, in her head almost constantly. Sometimes she can play other things louder, but it's still there as soon as there is nothing to drown it out.

So she looks in the mirror, with "fucking broken" skipping and repeating. She takes her phone out. It's only 6pm. She hates that Levi doesn't always come back from work at the same time. She hates that she can't sleep anymore without knowing that he's on the other side of that wall, and that she can't feel okay without knowing that someone would hear her if she were screaming. Every morning when he leaves she wants to ask when exactly he'll be back and she holds it in because she doesn't want to look like she cares. She doesn't care about him. She just wants to know when she'll be able to get to sleep.

Her fingers touch the locks on the door for the eighth time that day, because she doesn't trust her eyes. She's starting to trust her sense of touch less as well. And then there's her memory – that she isn't very certain of either. So it becomes necessary to check often.

She glances at the open bathroom door to her side and she frowns. Her fingers stop harassing the locks to touch and test her hair. It's getting icky. Washing it would be a constructive thing to do to eat up some time.

Five minutes, as fast as possible, she tells herself as she starts the water running. She stands tense for a minute, trying to decide if she should keep the bathroom door open so that she can see the front door to the apartment if she sticks her head out the shower curtain, or if she should close the bathroom door so that there is one more barrier between herself and any possible intruder. She brings her index finger to her mouth and bites down on the knuckle as she pushes the door closed.

Sometimes being able to see is worse than just not knowing.

Usually she takes baths. A bath is quiet. She can hear everything around her without the interference of the white noise of running water. But it's a difficult thing to wash her hair well without the shower running.

She strips all of her layers quickly with practiced fingers, with the muscle memory to untie ribbons and unlace corsets blindly. She kicks everything into a pile on the floor that she'll deal with later.

The water isn't even warm yet, but she steps in and pulls the shower curtain shut. The longer she stays in there with the door closed, not being able to hear everything behind the running water, the more her nerves are fraying. She moves under the spray of the shower head to get her hair wet just enough to lather with the jasmine shampoo bar Deidra sent her. Jasmine is supposed to be calming or something. It doesn't matter, her brain is still coming up with all kinds of possible monsters and catastrophes that it insists are imminent behind that door.

Her eyes are squeezed shut tight to keep out the stinging soap as she rinses out her curls. Then there's a noise, behind the running water, something she can't identify that might be nothing at first, but then there's a bang and her brain and body explode with fear-induced adrenaline. Her eyes open wide and automatically the water gets shut off without a stutter, without shaking hands. Quickly and without thinking, her hands move back the shower curtain, rip a towel off the rack, wrapping it around her body as her eyes dart around and her ears strain to pick up and find out what the noise is. Her eyes see it first and her brain takes a few seconds to catch up and believe the sensory information being relayed to it.

Her phone is on the bathroom floor, vibrating. The hard plastic making a racket against the tile. She'd had it set on the edge of the bathroom sink and it vibrated itself off, hitting the floor with a bang. She just stares at it, adjusting to that information as her chest rises and falls in deep breaths that transition
to broken, choked back sobs.

She falls to her knees and picks the phone up off of the floor. She huddles with her back to the tub and draws her knees up, pulling them into her chest, she flips the phone open and shakily answers, "Hey."

Deidra sounds alarmed and immediately asks her what's wrong, what happened, so Erna gathers that it is obvious that she's crying. She's not able to hide it. A dam inside her breaks down and everything flows, too much all at once, and she's sobbing and cursing, and at the same time trying to say that it's okay and that she's fine.

Deidra just keeps saying her name, "Erna, Erna, Erna…" with a mix of pity and worry.

She takes three deep breaths and on the third one her shoulders stop shaking. She tries out her words and tells her sister, "My fucking phone fell off the sink…" like that will make sense. A beat of silence and she explains, "I can't take showers anymore because I can't hear what's out there when I'm in the water and it's fucking stupid. It's not fair. I don't want to be like this."

She thinks she can hear Deidra exhale a sigh of relief, and then, "Did you call the therapist?"

The question is the last thing Erna wants to hear right now. All of her rage and sadness rises to the surface and explodes out of her mouth in between anguished sobs, "I didn't... And I'm not fucking going to… I can't!" She emphasizes the last word in a drawn out miserable whine. "What do you not understand about that?! I fucking can't go anywhere, I would love to be able to, but I'm too goddamn scared. Okay?"

As Deidra sighs, "Oh Erna…" she wipes her nose with the towel. She sniffs a few times and wipes the tears from her face. She balls it up and grips the end of the towel in her fist tightly, taking a few more deep breaths.

"It's fine. I don't want to talk about it. I'm alright."

It is an unspoken and tightly enforced rule in their family that if someone doesn't want to talk about something, then it doesn't get talked about. Erna and Deidra were raised by the masters of not talking about things. So Deidra drops it, though her better instincts would tell her not to.

"I was calling to see if you got the bath bombs I sent you."

Erna looks at the cardboard box, still unopened next to the bathroom sink. "I got a box yesterday. Didn't open it yet. Is that what's in there?"

"Yeah…" Deidra pauses as if she's trying to say something else and Erna's stomachtightens up in anticipation of more things she doesn't want to hear, but Deidra thinks better of it and says, "Just let me know if they're okay. I sent you some new ones to try and some old ones that I know you like."

"As long as none of them have glitter in them and turn my bath water into a fucking rainbow of unicorn piss."

"That's already on the market and I named it Karma Bomb, not Rainbow of Unicorn Piss, though I appreciate the suggestion and your interest in research and development. No glitter ever again. I already pinky swore to that."

Erna smiles a little, "I'm still traumatized. It will be a while before I trust you and your bath bombs again."
"Try the lavender one. It has chamomile too. The scents will calm you down. And dab that jasmine oil I sent you on your pulse points. Aromatherapy does wonders for people."

"Hippie nonsense," Erna says, but Deidra can hear her smile in her voice.

Chapter End Notes

The poem is by Warsan Shire. The translation to French may not be accurate. I do my translations with google, sooo... they're not good.

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Please consider supporting me with A Cup of Coffee
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Erna sits at her large oak desk, larger and more ornate than she needs, but not half as large and ornate as her boss' desk in the office adjacent to her. She inherited the desk two years ago along with the office when she took the job of playing secretary to the president of Sina Publishing, one of the top five publishers in the world.

She calls it "playing secretary" in her head, and out loud whenever anyone outside of work wants to talk about what she does for a living. Her job is too easy and too boring for words. It is like a game to her. It is a joke that she gets paid as highly as she does.

She sets up appointments, organizes things, and acts as a middle man for the president and the many people he needs to work with. When she isn't busy with any of those things, which is rather often, she is there for people to consult with if needed or to keep the president on task. She is very good at that. He learned quickly that he ought to only need to be reminded of anything once or else she would make things very unpleasant for him.

The other part of her job that she is very good at is telling people 'no.' It's also the part she happens to enjoy the most. Her boss Mr. Zackly took a liking to her quickly because she has no hesitation about telling people 'no' and she didn't need to be trained in how to decide who was or wasn't worthy of his time. She has a good sense of who is of actual importance and who is just bullshitting or lying to themselves when they claim to her that they are very important people who she will regret turning away.

She might spend about thirty or forty minutes doing real work in the course of a day. When she isn't doing any of that she practices her good posture at her desk and reads books.

She had gone to school and finished with a Ph.D. in literature because she wanted to be closely and directly involved with words all the time, for as long as she could breathe. It didn't quite work out that way because she was practical and not romantic or idealistic. She had been applying for jobs as an editor when her parents swooped in and pulled various strings to install her here with an easy and appropriately feminine job and a ridiculously high salary. They were still hoping to get her married to any member of whatever family they felt would be most advantageous that week, and they felt she would look like a better prospect if they could just keep her here until they could find a vapid, rich man to shackle her to.

That had always been their main goal with each of their daughters; marrying them into one of the families they hadn't already successfully inserted any of their other daughters into. She quietly resisted every step of the way, but when they waved a six figure salary in front of her plus a lovely car that she'd always wanted, she decided that it couldn't hurt to placate them in this one instance. She could take the dangling carrot without ever marrying any of their business associates idiot
offspring, so she didn't see the harm. So she didn't get the perfect job. She did get a job that allowed her to read all day, be short and mean with people, and save up enough money to finally be truly independent of her family.

What were dream jobs anyway? This could qualify as a dream job if it gave her the freedom to do what she wanted and all she'd ever wanted was to be left alone to read to her heart's content. She is able to do that now, so she is happy enough, if not excited or self-fulfilled. There's no sense of self-esteem or accomplishment, but that's only a minor drawback in her opinion. Those things are overrated.

Mr. Zackly hadn't been thrilled about the arrangement in the beginning. Erna was not what he pictured as his ideal secretary. He'd had to let go a tall, blonde woman with an infectious laugh and a C-cup at the behest of Erna's parents and he was certainly disappointed that Erna was not leggy or vivacious. He grew to appreciate her for what she was fairly quickly. She was competent and feared within the company and outside of it; it took her only a week to earn a reputation as unforgiving, efficient, and icy.

Her first move had been to "fix" her office. The comfortable chairs that were meant for associates waiting to go in and see the president were donated to Goodwill immediately. Erna had no use for people sitting around in her office. They could stand. The framed art that was there, she shuffled to different hallways in the building. They were replaced with paintings of snowy landscapes that were so evocative one couldn't help but feel cold and uncomfortable looking at them. On the left wall on a pedestal she'd put a cast bronze bust of Nathaniel Hawthorne on a marble base.

Mr. Zackly had asked her if she admired Hawthorne, trying to bond with the terse girl whom he was stuck with, but she responded that she couldn't stand the man. Of course, then, Zackly asked why she would put a bust of him in her office. She answered that he had been the best friend of Herman Melville, who she greatly admired, so there must have been something good about him. Her tone did not encourage further conversation, so he didn't press further about why she would keep a bust of an author that she disliked.

He came to understand her reasoning the first time he heard their head of human resources enter her office and gush about how much they loved Hawthorne in an obsequious attempt to ingratiate himself with her. She'd let the man go on for minutes, not offering any feedback until he seemed nearly winded, and when he'd finally shut up she dressed him down with what, if anyone bothered to transcribe it, could have amounted to a full doctoral thesis on why Hawthorne was a morally obtuse, misogynistic jackass whose writing possessed the subtlety of a hammer to the forebrain.

The bust was a trap. And there was a sadistic cleverness to the trap that Zackly appreciated. Ever since, he stayed out of Erna's way and let her do her job however she liked. He didn't care if she spent most of her time reading at her desk.

The offices of Sina Publishing are quiet as she nears the end of a dog-eared, messily annotated and highlighted copy of Heart of Darkness. She's read it before, but not this particular copy that she picked up at a used bookstore for fifty cents. She is lucky that her taste runs cheap, the more used and worn the books are the more she loves them. They make her feel connected in a safe and distant way to the people who owned them before her. Humanity as an idea she is comfortable with, even sentimental towards. Humanity on a real and individual level she is generally disgusted by.

She is close to finishing the book. Everything is falling apart into madness. She reads a highlighted quote from Kurtz, 'I am lying here in the dark waiting for death,' several times over and she tries to imagine why the previous owner of the book chose to highlight that in particular. So many possibilities and she'll never really know the reason, but she likes that. Every underlined paragraph,
highlighted quote, and dog-eared page is a little piece of evidence in an unsolvable mystery and it's comforting to her that she'll never be able to truly know for what reasons this book is marked the way it is. She could spend hours coming up with dozens of reasons for the selection of that quote and every conclusion she came up with would be just as valid as any other. It's a fun exercise because it doesn't matter and she can't be wrong. In other aspects of her life, she is a perfectionist and hates to be wrong. In this she can suspend those traits.

She closes the book and drops it into a drawer as she hears footsteps in the hallway. She doesn't like to get caught reading, not because she wants to look busy to validate herself and her position – her position is very secure – but because she doesn't want anyone to catch on that she takes enjoyment in something other than being strict and unrelenting in her cold efficiency. She doesn't want to humanize herself to anyone beneath her, and nearly everyone is beneath her even though her title is not overly impressive. As his secretary, she controls access to the most important man in publishing, which effectively makes her, in subtle and non-obvious ways, the most important woman in publishing.

The set of heels that clack their way into her office belong to a girl who is dressed professionally, but looks only about nineteen. She looks like an intern that someone in the marketing division sent up to be flayed in their place. Cowards.

She is carrying a crystal vase of flowers. That's new; what a novel approach. Even more novel are the actual black roses adorning the vase. Before the girl makes it all the way to her desk, Erna remarks, "That's unique. Is the color meant to match my heart?"

The girl stops for a moment and blushes. She doesn't venture all the way to Erna's desk but hovers a few feet away, perhaps out of fear of displeasing her. Someone must have warned her. Erna loses patience quickly and tells the girl, "Out with it, quickly. I'm busy."

"Sorry, I work downstairs. These were sent for you. Someone just delivered them." She holds the roses up a little.

Erna is suspicious. No one who knows her well enough to know where she works would be stupid enough to send her flowers. If they were close enough to her to know where she worked they would also know that romantic or warm gestures are lost on her.

"Is there a card?"

The intern turns the vase in her hands a little. She supports it clumsily on a raised knee as she plucks the tiny envelope from its holder. She reaches and sets it down gently on Erna's desk.

Erna tosses the white envelope addressed to her in the wastebasket. She stares at a blank card.

After a long moment of silence the intern who is still holding the heavy vase asks, "Can I put them on your desk or…?"

Erna hates when people trail off like that. If they can't finish a thought there's no point of her finishing it for them, but if she must…

"You can put them in the trash."

The girl stammers again, nervously half-protesting. Mr. Zackly comes out, reading something on his smartphone and about to dictate something to Erna but he stops when he notices another presence. He takes in the scene and observes very astutely for such a stupid old man, "Someone sent you flowers."
"That seems to be the case, Sir." There is a slight tone of mockery when she uses the honorific.

The intern asks her, "You don't even want the vase? It looks very expensive."

"If you like it, keep it."

"You're not taking them?" Zackly reaches over her desk intrusively to slide the card over with a single finger. He hums at its blankness. "Secret admirer then? Ah, to be young and in love."

"No one's in love." Erna grits out between clenched teeth. "What's the point of such a gesture if I don't even know who it's from? Pure stupidity." She looks the intern in the eyes and says very slowly and with much certainty, "Throw them out."

"Shame," Zackly mutters as the intern turns on her heels and nearly runs out of there.

"Shit," Erna suddenly remembers something. "I should have told her to get me coffee."

Mr. Zackly cracks a faint smile. "Now that it's just the two of us, admit that you feel at least a little flattered."

Erna scoffs. "I do not."

He refuses to stop hovering around her desk. "Any suitors who might have sent them?"

Erna smirks a little and lets out a tiny laugh through her nose. "Suitors. You sound like a character in an historical romance novel."

"Then you're not dating anyone."

"All of my capacity for patience is used up on you, Sir. There's none left for me to waste on any other stupid men who might want to be a part of my life."

Zackly smiles at her good naturedly as she opens up a desk drawer and pulls out her book again. "Well don't let this stupid man take up too much of that patience. You're approaching what we would have referred to in the prehistoric ages of my youth as 'spinsterhood,'" he teases.

She mutters under her breath, narrowing her eyes at the pages of her open book. "Ridiculous. Did my parents pay you to say that?" It's a possibility. They more or less bribed him to set her up with this job, maybe they would also bribe him to encourage her to be sociable.

"Yes. Handsomely." He is the only man in the entire company who would dare try sarcasm with her. She hums and turns the page of her book. With a wink he adds, "And they told me that dinner they invited you to Friday evening is going to be a veiled attempt to set you up with the younger son of the Chambers family."

That makes her look up from her book. "Is he the alcoholic one who wrapped his car around a tree in front of an elementary school and walked away without a DUI?"

"No, that's the older son. This is the other alcoholic one who was arrested for attempted sexual assault and had the charges expunged from his record." His nose wrinkles a little in disgust. "Your parents would be very upset if I told you that and gave you ample time to come up with an excuse for standing them up."

Erna smiles. "They would be."

Zackly slides the blank card that came with the bouquet of black roses off of the top of her desk and
into the trash. "Better not tell them that I said anything then."

As he is turning around, walking back to his own office, having apparently forgotten whatever he came in there for in the first place, she goes back to her book, then stops him hesitantly, "Sir…" she asks uncertainly as if something were nagging at her, "They weren't from you were they?"

"I'm an important man, Erna. I have no time to be gaslighting you."

"Of course not."

It's small, but there's a hint of humility in her voice that Zackly has never heard before and he realizes that she only asked because she wasn't being coy when she said that she couldn't think of anyone who would attempt such a gesture as sending her roses. She wasn't just being sarcastic when she'd said he was the only man in her life.

He pauses in the door frame of his office. Without turning around he can tell that she's already eyes down lost in her book again. He chides, "Erna, books aren't going to keep you warm at night."

The cold, icily demure quality to her voice is returned alive and well when she quips back, "I'll take that under advisement, Sir, and buy a thicker comforter."

It's a humid, cool, dark, and cloudy spring morning outside. Levi immediately feels like the moisture in the air is clinging to his exposed arms, face, and neck when he opens the door of the building. He should have brought a hoodie out, but it was something like ninety degrees yesterday and he didn't think the temperature could drop that much overnight. Yesterday he could barely stand to keep his shirt on. Today he needs a hat and a jacket. Fucking weather. His shoulders hunch a little and he rubs his arms as the heavy grey door swings closed behind him.

For once, he sits next to Erna on the top step rather than standing, huddling into himself for extra warmth, cupping his cigarette from a chilled breeze as he tries to light it. She looks comfortable in her long-sleeved black and white Victorian doll dress with a high collar buttoned up over her neck, though she wore the same kind of thing yesterday and she'd looked comfortable then too. He didn't understand how she could stand to dress like that in the heat.

He mumbles a good morning to her. He's been saying it every morning out of courtesy and because he feels awkward if he doesn't say anything, but she never says it back. She only hums back in confirmation that she heard him. Maybe she can dress like that in the hot weather because she's so cold inside.

She smells like oranges and pine needles, fresh and sweet and wintery.

She doesn't turn to look at him when he first comes out or when they smoke together or when they talk. He swears she carries her work everywhere with her so that she won't have to look at people. No one can really be as absorbed in anything as she pretends to be. He knows because he carries his sketchbook with him and pretends to be busy with it when he doesn't want to talk to people. So he leaves her alone and doesn't try to start conversations, assuming that's what she's going for.

But she always ends up talking to him without looking up.

"Do you know what the vagus nerve is?"

In fact, he does. "I see vasovagal responses at work. I know a little about it."

A vasovagal response is fancy medical talk for fainting when you see a fucking needle and he wishes
people would warn him about that before they get in his chair. First time it ever happened it scared the shit out of him. He's seen enough that by now it was more annoying than startling. In any case, that's a strange question.

"Why do you ask?"

"I'm reading this really terrible sex scene that I won't even bother repeating to you —"

"I'm so disappointed."

"I know. Anyway, the author is describing a heightened orgasm that the protagonist reaches when her love interest fuckboy presses his fingers hard against this spot near her tailbone, which he later explains was a way of stimulating her vagus nerve, which is obviously factually and anatomically incorrect. I think the author is thinking of a bundle of spinal nerves at the base of the spine called the cauda equina that can be stimulated to make people reach orgasm, and I'm wondering if I should change it for accuracy or if I shouldn't even bother because no one who reads this shit is going to be smart enough to notice and I'm already getting a reputation with the authors of being hypercritical."

She emphasizes that like she would put air-quotes around it, like it's a ridiculous accusation.

Levi grabs the pages from her because he needs to see what the fuck she is talking about. He skims a little. He's never heard of anything like this and he's pretty sure he knows literally everything about sex and especially everything about orgasms. "Okay.. Wait.. You're saying this is right, that you can make someone come by pressing their spine in the right place?"

"Or pinching, or electrically stimulating, yeah. As long as you pinpoint those nerves and the person is sensitive enough. You should try it sometime." She snatches the rough draft back from him.

His eyelids lower and he deadpans, "I'm celibate."

She doesn't miss a beat. "What? With your endless charm and your uniquely metallic face? With those alternative, screaming desperately for someone to look at you, good looks? I'm shocked."

"It's by choice."

"That is what they usually say," she sighs in an aloof way as she crosses out a selection of text and writes something.

"I can get laid easily." His irritation is starting to show through his voice.

And she loves that. She gets excited when people lose their composure. "I know you can. I'm sure you appeal to some kinds of people, like retired Suicide Girls whose daddies never hugged them enough. Is Suicide Girls still a thing?"

"I appeal to all kinds of people. I'm fucking hot." As he's saying it, he doesn't know why he's even getting defensive, this is fucking stupid. And Suicide Girls are still a thing, but he's not going to admit that he knows that.

She hums dismissively. "Eye of the beholder or whatever."

He turns to look at her and his voice rises with his anger, "And what about you?"

She rests her papers on her knees, turns slowly, raising an eyebrow. "What about me?" Her voice is full of, I dare you to fucking say it, and Levi isn't one to step down from a dare.

"With the way you dress anyone feels attracted to you should be put on a sex offender list for being a
"pedophilic piece of shit."

He doesn't know how that just came out of his mouth, because it's a hurtful and fucked up thing to say and that's not him. He feels manipulated. At first he thinks that she's going to slap him, because that would be a justifiable response, but then she smirks and he knows that she dragged this monster out of him on purpose. That's what she does.

Erna can see it all on his face. The confusion, the anger, the hollow sad feeling that comes with the loss of control and the revelation that there's a monster inside, and she's sick and she loves it. She feels disgusted with herself and simultaneously satisfied that she could make someone's feelings match her own for just a few seconds. It's a rush. But if she lets it go on it will be too much, the horror at herself and the self-loathing that follows will outweigh the satisfaction. So she moves past it.

"That's the whole point. My style is meant to prevent sexualization. I don't want anyone to be attracted to me."

"Then you're doing an awesome job."

"I don't want people fucking looking at me. It's gross."

"God forbid anyone should sully the princess with their filthy eyes," he mocks her.

Her eyes are back on him, narrowed to dangerous slits again. "Not everyone makes themselves look different because they need attention…" Her voice is full of malice and she is losing her calm.

"That's bullshit. You'd get fewer people looking at you if you dressed like a normal fucking person."

She stands up, slapping the papers in her hand against her puffy skirt. "I'm not fucking normal and I'm not attractive. I'm dark and fucked up and I'm not trying to get laid. So no, I'm not going to dress in a way that will give anyone the wrong fucking impression."

He stands up with her. He doesn't even know why they're both so angry, but he can't help it. "I'm not trying to get laid either and I don't know why you're being such a prick!"

"Bitch!" she yells, "Just say it! Why won't you ever just call me a bitch? I've given you a thousand reasons to and you never say it!"

He is very much taken aback because no one has ever been angry at him for not calling them something awful. He's not sure what is going on here. He's a little speechless for a moment. His thin eyebrows knit together and he tilts his head. He asks, "Do you… want me to?"

She relaxes her shoulders. Her fingers curl out of the little fists they've made and she sounds a little perplexed herself. "No… It's just weird. Any normal person would've jumped straight from 'bitch' to 'cunt' by now."

"Horrible fucking things to say to a person." He moves to the side and behind her, leaning his elbows against the railing and bringing his cigarette back to his lips now that she's giving him a second to catch his breath.

"But it's okay to call me a dick or an asshole or anything else you've called me so far?" She swivels on her heel to continue watching him under her skeptical, shrewd gaze.

She has to wait for him to exhale the long drag he just took before he says, "Yeah. Those words aren't loaded with oppression."
He confirms for her that he isn't as stupid as she suspected, and that maybe he is a little socially conscious and not just a poser in a ripped up Sex Pistols t-shirt.

"You're weird."

"Yeah. I'm the weird one." His cigarette burned out almost completely while they were arguing and he is annoyed that this fourth drag off of it is the last before he's smoking the filter. It was the last one in his pack. He nods to the pack of cloves in her little open coffin on the steps. "Let me bum one of those."

She looks away like she doesn't care. "Knock yourself out." As he bends down to pick up the pack, she says, "Grab me one too."

He doesn't know what to do around her, isn't sure what is safe. Instead of taking out a cigarette and handing it to her, he extends his hand and offers her the whole pack to let her take her own. She does and she gives it back, taking a white lighter from a pocket of her ruffled dress and lighting it for herself. He takes one of the black cigarettes and tucks it behind his ear to smoke later and hold him over until he buys a pack of his own brand.

He drops the pack back into the open coffin-shaped purse. He stands there. It feels awkward to stay without smoking, but it also feels awkward to just leave like this. Pensively he checks the time on his phone. He does need to go up and shower and get ready for work, regardless of awkwardness.

She doesn't comment when he turns and opens the door. But he thinks of something just before he steps inside. One last thing.

"Suicide Girls are still a thing, but now they're just young, conventionally attractive models that they slap some clip-on piercings and fake tattoos onto."

She tries not to, but she can't help smiling.

When he adds, "Just so you know," she genuinely laughs in front of him for the first time.

(June, 2014)

Erna sips the coffee that she'd sent an intern to fetch earlier that morning. She'd asked for a latte. What she got was regular coffee with milk. What the intern got was her ripping into him for three solid minutes about the fucking difference, but she didn't make him go and try again to get it right. That would be vindictive. She isn't nice, but she's not cruel and petty either… well maybe she is, only she isn't terribly picky and plain coffee with milk isn't too bad.

She's reading a beaten up biography of Tallulah Bankhead that she picked up for ninety-five cents after work yesterday. It goes in the desk drawer when she hears footsteps outside her office.

When the hapless intern enters her office and she sees what they're carrying, she says, "No. Fuck no. Get them out of here." It's a different intern today, carrying the same kind of black roses that she received yesterday and the day before.

"But –"

"Give me the card."

The freckled male intern takes the little envelope from its holder within the bouquet and places it in
Erna's outstretched fingers. She rips open the envelope to reveal a blank card. Again. "Get them the fuck out of here."

She is angrier than she was yesterday. She is more confused and more anxious. Who the fuck would do this? As he's leaving her office with the offending roses she stops him, clearly agitated, "Who's delivering these?"

The intern stops. "I'm sorry?"

"Where the fuck are they coming from? What florist?"

"Oh… um… I don't…"

She makes a frustrated sound. Of course he wouldn't even know. There are hundreds of people in this building and the only person who might have noticed the actual delivery person would be at the front desk in the lobby on the first floor, but more likely they wouldn't have cared to notice before they grabbed this intern to take the flowers up to Erna's office. Honestly, is it even worth checking, she wonders. If she finds out the florist they're being delivered through what does she do? Tell them to stop it? Ask for the name of the person sending them? Would they even be allowed to divulge that information? Does this qualify as harassment?

"Tch. Just get them out of here."

It's a Thursday. She considers not coming in to work tomorrow. Maybe she could even use up some vacation days and stay away for a week. Would that discourage the sender? Would they even know whether she was in her office or not? If they knew she took vacation time would it please them to know they'd gotten under her skin enough to scare her away from work? Who even is this person and how do they know her name and office number? And what's their motivation?

She shakes her head and pulls her book back out of the desk drawer. It's silly to get worked up about it. Not something worthy of missing work.

The man who would be a mess without her walks through her office on his way to his own. Zackly can't get into his office without passing through hers. No one can. She's the gatekeeper.

He gives her a smile and a nod that she sees over the edge of her book, but she pretends that she doesn't see. She doesn't acknowledge him. He's used to that. His office door closes behind him and Erna tries to concentrate on her book.

It's impossible. She can't concentrate on anything for very long; her work, reading, even just brushing her teeth she's bothered by the nagging question. Who is doing this and why? The book goes back in the drawer again. Her fingertips slide over the smooth surface of her desk as she stands and walks around it, going to her door and quietly closing and locking it. She leans back against the closed door, shutting her eyes and tilting her head back.

Is it that silly to think that it might be a well-meaning and romantic gesture on the part of someone shy and sweet? She thinks for a while about whether this is her own neuroses showing through, tainting her perception to think that this must be a sinister and aggressive move. She wishes she had someone she could talk to about it. There's Deidra, but she trusts her perception to be about as balanced as her own, just on the opposite side of the scale. She'll think it's all sunshine and unicorn shit.

Maybe it will stop tomorrow. No flowers will come and she'll just be left to wonder what the hell it was about.
Erna can't stop fidgeting at her favorite table in the café and she hopes like hell that none of the hipster brats notice. She is picking at things nervously in as subtle a manner as she possibly can, taking great effort to not bite her nails or tap her feet but instead she bends, flattens, and re-bends the corner of a manuscript page while she hooks her ankles around her chair as tightly as possible.

She finally took her former dominatrix's advice a few days ago and emailed the woman she recommended because things were getting too twisted up and tight inside. She'd been wrong to think that she could get by without fulfilling her body's need for the kind of endorphin rush she only got from pain or her brain's need for the emotional highs of humiliation. It's almost like trying to go without sex, but different, she supposes.

She isn't sure what people get out of sex but for an orgasm, which she can easily achieve with her hand. She can't hurt herself and get the same feeling that comes from being hurt by someone else; there is no equivalent for it. She is pretty sure that abstaining from sex didn't cause the same reckless, adrenaline seeking behavior in people that abstaining from pain causes in her.

Admittedly she doesn't know a lot about vanilla sex or even what the appeal of it is. What she knows is that when she goes a long time without a BDSM scene she gets anxious and twitchy and has less control over her actions. Impulsively she says horrible things to push people, either to achieve that emotional high of feeling like a monster or to actually provoke her targets to hurt her, physically or emotionally or whatever. It's risky.

It's probably just about as risky as inviting someone into your home to inflict pain upon you, but that's why initial meetings in a public place are standard with this sort of thing. Erna has been through this whole process a few times. She doesn't like to. She sticks with one dominatrix for as long as she can because finding one she clicks with who is also okay with home sessions is very difficult. The majority of dominatrixes work in their own dungeon or in clubs where they are safe. It's a good policy, but Erna has convinced a few to bend it to do scenes in her apartment in the past. It's not hard to convince women that she isn't any kind of real threat or danger. She's just a frail little gothic lolita girl with a penchant for pain.

She doesn't know for sure what this new woman is going to think of that. They didn't discuss details in their email exchange, just traded some information, some references, and set a time for a meeting.

She looks down at the manuscript she brought to make it look like any other day that she hangs out in the café, but she has no intentions of working on it. She couldn't concentrate on it even if she wanted to. It serves a dual purpose in making everything look normal and also hiding the printed out sheet that she needs to give this new woman if they happen to click, which she is skeptical about because she's always skeptical about clicking with anyone. It's a list – another standard thing. It details her kinks, her limits, and her preferred safe words.

Every previous dominatrix requested a list like this and one or two admitted that they kept them on file because they had enough clients that sometimes they honestly forgot which set of kinks went with which person. Erna preferred doing it this way. It's much easier to type her kinks and limits, keep them in a file on her computer, and print them out when necessary, than to talk about them.

Her control over her nerves wanes and she starts biting a nail. She's never been on anything very closely resembling a first date, but from what she's gathered she thinks the nervous anticipation she feels when meeting a new dominatrix rivals that.

She tries not to look like she is watching the door. She keeps it in her peripheral vision. Her heart's pace quickens when she sees it start to open, but excitement quickly turns to disappointment as the
obnoxious hipster with the two-toned hair emerges into the café from the sidewalk. She hasn't given this one a cute nickname in her head, hoping that if she doesn't name it, it will disappear. But the others call him Jean with a French pronunciation which annoys her because French is a pretty language and shouldn't be wasted on smarmy little cretins.

After he spends a minute annoying Bright-Eyed Hipster Barista and being cute with Androgynous Hipster, whose real names she damn well knows but refuses to actually use even in her head, he notices her and goes over to stand at her table. The rare times when he makes an appearance at the café, he tries to antagonize her. Possibly because of the incident where she tried to hit him in the head with a coffee mug, but who can really tell?

When he asks her, "Are you always here?" it's with a derogatory, bullying kind of tone.

She needs him to not be talking to her when her "date" shows up. She looks past him and out the large window looking out to the corner next to the door, and asks, "Is that your bike out there?"

He looks in the same direction and nods proudly, leering, actually thinking she's interested, he mentions something about how it's a fixed gear. He asks if she knows anything about bikes.

She doesn't answer his question. She says, "It's a nice bike."

He doesn't thank her for the compliment, instead he agrees, "Yeah it's pretty sweet."

"It would be a shame if something happened to it."

And his whole cocky façade shatters. She has always had a way with words. The trick is to be economical with them. Let people use their imaginations. What they can imagine is usually worse than what she could say.

His face contorts in confusion and anger. "What the fuck does that mean?"

She answers calmly. "It means what it means. It's a nice bike and it would be a shame if something happened to it."

He looks at her and then out the window, then at her again. He can't be sure if she's threatening anything or if she knows anything he doesn't or if it's a simple, innocuous statement. But it's in his head now. She watches him go outside quickly to check on his precious bike and she smirks to herself. He's so fucking easy.

When her potential domme walks in, Erna knows, even though she only has her name and no preconceived notion of what she should look like. She carries herself in a certain way. It's not just confidence. Lots of people are merely confident with themselves, but Erna can spot a dominatrix by the way they seem to view others. They take in the scenery and the people that are a part of it as if everyone could be a potential plaything. They are aloof, sadistic.

Erna had sent her a picture so she could easily identify her, though she probably could have just told her to look for the short gothic doll-looking girl. When she spots Erna, her icy blue eyes narrow and focus on her for a second before she goes to the counter and asks Eren for something. Erna uses all of her will to force herself to stop fidgeting and picking at her nails.

She is dressed in a matching navy blue blazer and pencil skirt, nude pantyhose, and a white silk blouse. Her hair is pulled up in a bun and she looks like any normal, professional woman. Erna appreciates that greatly. She hates when dommes dress in anything even resembling fetish clothing for public meetings, it makes her feel outed.
After receiving her coffee from Eren, she comes straight to Erna's table and takes the seat across from her, holding eye contact with her and not smiling. Erna looks down. She has trouble with eye contact.

"Erna," she says, without that upward inflection that would indicate a question.

"Yes." She glances at her eyes, then back down. She doesn't want to be rude, but she feels very vulnerable and scrutinized and finds it difficult to hold eye contact. She focuses on her nose instead; a trick that she uses often when talking to people. She finds that she likes this woman's nose because it's unusual, not a button. She likes people who look different; they're more attractive to her than conventionally pretty people.

"What should I call you?"

"Just Annie." There's no slight hint of amusement in her voice and no attempt at an easy tone that most people use to ease the awkward tension of first meeting someone.

Erna wonders if she's always this serious or if it's an act for her sake. She always wonders at first which parts of a domme's personality and appearance are just performance art for her benefit and which parts are actually genuine.

Annie swirls her coffee with a red stirrer and tells her very matter-of-factly, "Your references are good, you know how this works. I'm not going to waste time explaining anything to you," and she waits for Erna to nod that she understands. "You can ask me questions now."

It's not easy for Erna to be made to feel inferior by another person. It's a rush when it happens. She's pretty sure Annie isn't even really trying. It's just that her voice is emotionless and almost robotic. The monotone speech makes Erna feel like a mess of contradictions and histrionic uncontrollable emotions in comparison.

She starts with potential deal breakers. "Do you do home visits?"

"At a greater cost, yes."

"That's fai-," Erna begins to say, but she stops. Holds up a finger, asks Annie to wait, "just a second," turns to her right where Eren has very conveniently found a table close by that could stand to be a bit cleaner.

"Eren..." He freezes. He knows he's in deep shit. She only uses his actual name when she is exceptionally pissed.

He squints and smiles, stops wiping down the table, and brings a hand to the back of his neck. "Yeah?"

"Can I fucking help you?" She says it slowly, annunciating every syllable clearly.

He stammers and blushes at being caught trying to eavesdrop. "Um, nope, sorry, was I bothering you? I can go back to the counter," and he backs away slowly.

"You come here often?" Annie asks.

"It's the only place I come." Erna answers while keeping her eye on Eren, making sure he is staying back behind the fucking counter.

"Focus," Annie demands, and Erna's eyes snap back to her. She straightens her posture, blushes, and
apologizes to her. Annie doesn't say anything that would indicate she forgives her moment of distraction. "Do you have more questions?"

Erna's heart races a little, her stomach sinks in humiliation, because her next question is difficult. She shyly prefaces, "This isn't a deal breaker or anything but," and she pauses, not sure if she can actually say it before she finally gets it out.

"Is penetration negotiable?" and she back pedals a little, "Not that I would need or want that, but just out of curiosity…"

For the first time, Annie smirks. "Off the record, it is negotiable, using your own toys, for safety reasons. Whether or not I'll do it depends on my mood and whether there's an attraction."

Erna is relieved. That's a tricky subject. She's had dominatrixes walk out on her for even daring to inquire about it, because that takes their service out of the realm of strictly professional sadism and brings it into the grey area of sex work, which is illegal.

"Am I potentially attractive?" she cringes at how desperate that sounds.

"Yes."

She contains her sigh of relief. She wasn't hoping to get fucked or choked with a strap-on immediately, but she felt better knowing that the option was on the table if she did feel so inclined. She is so relieved she can only articulate her next question as a sentence fragment. "Edge play?"

"If you want," Annie answers without hesitation and without sounding horrified. Good signs.

"What about electricity and asphyxiation?"

"I can do both at the same time if that's what you want." Annie answers with that slight, imperceptible smirk again.

Erna had never even contemplated that possibility. But that was good. Those are all her most extreme kinks and Annie doesn't even sound the least bit shocked. This is a first for Erna, who usually gets a resounding no thank you to at least one of those three things.

"I specialize in more extreme things. You'd be in good hands," she explains.

Erna folds her hands in her lap. "That's it for me." She fidgets, folding the fabric of her skirt and scrunching it between her fingers. "Can I answer any questions, or…?"

Annie hums, leaning back in her chair a little while she thinks. She leans forward again when she asks, "Did you check the references I gave you?" Her eyes are searching; she's too perceptive, seeing a lot more than Erna wants her to.

"No."

Annie hums. "No concern for personal safety," as if she's checking off a box, the last symptom that, along with her preference for edge play, pushes Erna over the edge in her eyes into the territory of 'fucked up.'

She drinks in the anxiety clouding up Erna's eyes and reassures her, "It's fine. Just interesting."

Well, Erna thinks, at least she's interesting. "Anything else?"

"Do you always dress like that?"
"Yes."

Annie's expression is completely neutral when she simply says, "Cute."

Erna can't tell if that is supposed to be complimentary or derogatory. It doesn't matter, she would be equally pleased to be seen as cute as she would be to be looked at with disgust.

"Can I make an appointment then?"

Annie opens the briefcase she'd brought with her and takes out a plain manila folder and a pen. She clicks the pen, writes Erna's name on the tab of the folder, and pushes it across the small table to her. "You can get started on that while I check my availability."

Erna opens it. She expected paperwork. But this was a lot. Ten pages at least. She flipped through. Not all of it was essential medical information or liability releases, some of it looked almost like a Myers Briggs test. "Are all of these fields mandatory?"

"Yes." Annie doesn't look up from scrolling through the appointments in her phone.

Erna starts filling out the first page, then stops. "Do I have to do all of this now? Can I finish it at home and email it to you?"

"No." She taps on her phone. "People like you procrastinate. I don't like reading things last minute."

Erna is a little shocked at her bluntness, but she is absolutely spot on. Erna is a notorious procrastinator. It's like she gets a rush out of doing things under pressure at the very last minute. At this point in her life that is the only way she gets things done. So she doesn't argue. She looks back down and tries to fill it out as quickly as possible. The first couple of pages are easy, things she's used to writing down, medical information, birth date, history of abuse, signatures, dates, and initials on a non-disclosure agreement, and a personal liability release form.

Then there are items she's never seen before. Like a section that says "circle the first color or word that catches your attention," with multiple choice lists like "1) A. Red. B. Green. C. Orange. D. Yellow." Erna gets caught up wondering what any of this tells Annie. What is the difference if she chooses Yellow versus Red?

Annie looks up from her phone and sees where Erna is with her paperwork. She clicks her tongue at her. "Don't think too long."

Of the seven little multiple choice lists, Erna circles Red, White, Indoors, Suite, Criminal, Below Ground, and Thud. After that there is a section of short answer questions, which she answers as shortly as possible.

'Any phobias to fetishes?' No. She doesn't think so. She thinks her fear of being abducted, raped, and killed is too normal to be considered a "phobia," even though she knows there are people who fetishize those things.

'What are your hard limits? If you have them typed somewhere a printed copy will do.' And she remembers the list she had hidden under her decoy manuscript. She takes it from under the stack of paper and hands it to Annie, who looks away from her phone and slides a finger down the list. Her only comment is, "These terms are vague."

"I like to talk things out," Erna explains.

"Hm. Not that reckless then," she says it as if taking mental notes on a sociological experiment as she
goes back to her phone.

"What's with the word association multiple choice questions?"

For a moment Annie doesn't answer and Erna wonders if she's being ignored, but then she says, "I like to have a good understanding of my clients."

Erna wants to ask what the fuck her answers tell Annie, but she holds herself back. She looks at the next question. 'What are your long and short term life goals?' She bites her lip hard. Goals are not a thing for her anymore. She only exists now. Like an insect. She has no ambitions. Even surviving day to day is not a 'goal' for her, it's just something she does automatically and with no joy. She puts down, "Short term: avoid having a panic attack for the next few hours. Long term: maintain equilibrium."

Annie asks, "What days and times in general are good?"

"Earlier in the day. No Sundays or Mondays." Those are Levi's days off and the walls are too thin. If Erna can hear him coming home and kicking off his boots through the wall, then he would sure as hell be able to hear the smack of a paddle and a muffled scream.

"Earlier in the day is easier. Is eleven too early?"

Levi normally leaves for work around ten. "Noon is better." It gives her more wiggle room. "Does Friday work?"

"That's tomorrow."

"I need a session yesterday."

Annie nods. "Friday at noon."

"Can you hold that for me every week?"

Her neutral expression breaks and Annie finally has some sort of reaction, a slight head tilt. "That's going to get expensive for you."

"I know, but weekly is how often I need it for right now."

"As long as you can afford it. I'll keep Fridays at noon clear for you." She puts the note in her phone.

Erna looks at the next question. 'Describe what you were afraid of as a child.' She wonders if she's being reckless right now. Wonders, but doesn't really care or feel concern for herself. She answers, 'rejection, abandonment, love,' because she was never afraid of the dark.

As Erna quickly jots down numbers on a scale of one to five to indicate the desirableness of a list of certain kinds of play, Annie tells her that she has a strict seventy-two hour cancellation policy. If she tries to cancel after that period she keeps the deposit, which must be paid in order to make an appointment. That's Erna's cue to take the cash out of the pocket of her dress and count out how much she needs. She slides it across the table to Annie.

She gets to another short answer question. 'Has sensory deprivation or sensory overload ever been an issue during scenes? Yes or no, if yes describe,' and she has to think about it before answering, because she's been doing this for a few years. As she tries to remember, she asks Annie, trying to sound casual like she just wants to fill the silence, "Am I your only female client?"
Normally, it's one of the first things they say. Before discussing terms, before paperwork comes out, they usually make that comment about her being the only woman to solicit their services and they are a little delighted and very curious, like she's a fucking unicorn.

"Yes," is all Annie says.

Erna wants to ask if that's strange, but doesn't want to betray the fact that she is insecure about it, even though just asking the question probably let Annie know about her insecurity already if she is as perceptive as she seems. She feels compelled to at least explain, but she tries hard not to sound defensive. She doesn't need to defend anything.

"I don't do relationships."

Annie doesn't respond in any way.

"And I don't trust people." She scribbles down hasty yes and no answers to the next page of questions. "And I am a little reckless, but not enough for play with random people."

"Makes sense," is all Annie offers her.

"Does it?" She's done with the questionnaire and gives it back to Annie along with her pen.

"Need my approval?"

Erna is a little taken aback, but she recovers. "No. Not outside of a scene."

As Annie takes the papers from her and scans them, Erna asks her, "Not that I have any other choices, but what's your style?"

Annie pushes the pen back to Erna along with the papers after tapping a blank space with one finger. She neglected to answer the question about whether or not she smokes and how many cigarettes per day.

"More extreme physical and emotional sadism and less roleplaying. That's my style."

No roleplay is perfect, Erna thinks. As much as she wants to, she can't ever be anyone but herself.

(July, 2014)

The barista at the chain café near her office repeats herself and looks curiously at Erna who missed what she said because she was preoccupied, lost in her own head. She tilts her head and says, "Sorry?"

"Do you want a pastry with your coffee?"

The answer isn't easy. She tries to remember the last time she ate and whether or not she is hungry and if it is worth the trouble, because if she hasn't eaten in a while the first few bites of anything always make her feel nauseous.

"Just a croissant. Thanks."

She had finally called Deidra yesterday and made sure the roses weren't coming from her, which was stupid, because of course they weren't. Her sister wasn't abstruse like that. She would have written something nice and bubbly on the card, not left it blank every time. Besides she probably had some...
reason to boycott florists for not using fair trade flowers or something. She was always boycotting something.

But Erna needed to talk about it and that was her way of bringing it up. Deidra didn't have any helpful ideas about who was sending her black roses at work every day or why. She did have ideas, but they weren't sensible to Erna. Secret admirer bullshit. If someone wants to win her heart, this isn't the way to do it because it's creepy as fuck and it's stressing her out, hence the loss of appetite.

It's been almost a full month. The roses don't come every day anymore. They don't even come in any sequence of days. It's random; often, but still random. That way Erna is kept on edge, always wondering, unable to get much work done. It's almost a relief when they are delivered because she can stop wondering whether or not she'll get a bouquet that day. The waiting and the not knowing drives her crazy.

She didn't let on about any of that to Deidra. She didn't want her to worry. It was probably nothing worthy of worrying about anyway. She often vacillated between feeling nervous or afraid and feeling silly for maybe blowing the whole thing out of proportion.

Deidra was fucking happy about it and thought it was cute. She pointed out that black was Erna's favorite color and the whole thing was probably meant to be sweet. It didn't feel that way.

Deidra asked her a lot of questions about the roses that Erna couldn't answer for her. She had asked whether the roses were dyed black or root dyed, then she'd had to explain what that meant.

She said that black roses just didn't happen, they were almost always dyed either by coating the petals in dye or by dying the water they were watered with. There was one type of rose that grew dark enough to be considered black but it is bordering on extinction, only growing in a very specific and small region of Turkey, and it is extremely rare to see them outside of there.

Erna had gotten snippy and said she didn't care and wouldn't know how to tell the difference anyway, she just wanted it to stop.

Later when she's in her office and a messenger comes with a bouquet around the time she's come to expect between noon and one o'clock, she exhales a defeated sigh. She doesn't tell the young woman who was charged with taking them up to her to fuck off or throw them out or anything. For the first time she lets them be placed on her desk. She stares at them for a couple of minutes.

They've taken on so much more importance now than a bunch of flowers should. They feel symbolic. She touches the crystal vase lightly, reverently. There's a calmness she feels at having finally given in.

She just looks at them for a long time, before hesitantly reaching out, gripping a velvety petal between her fingers and gently rubbing it. They come back unstained. Deidra had said that if they're dyed, the dye would rub off easily. If they were root dyed the stems would be black as well, but these stems are green.

She looks at her fingertips for a long time, looking for a hint of dye. She desperately wants it to be there, but there's nothing. She rubs the petals of another rose between her fingers. Nothing.

She tells herself that they are probably just dyed well with a dye that doesn't rub off easily. That feels better than thinking that someone was spending untold amounts of money to send her bouquets of nearly extinct roses. It feels far better than thinking that someone is going to the trouble to grow these in some kind of greenhouse just to send them to her anonymously.
She looks away and pushes any thoughts of them to the back of her mind. She's tired and she's been tired for a week or so. She's been doing a shitty job at work; not keeping appointments straight and forgetting to return phone calls. Mr. Zackly doesn't care, but she doesn't like it. This job isn't even hard. She has no right to be fucking it up.

She tries not to look at them as she gets herself organized, but the roses are hard to ignore. They are beautiful. She doesn't feel that she deserves anything so beautiful.

One of the main advantages of having a motorcycle, instead of a car, in the city, is parking. Levi can park directly in front of the tattoo shop and walk right in to be accosted by his overly energetic coworker, Hanji, who squeals at him, "Did you get my text?!"

He shrugs off his bag and sets his helmet down on the front desk in the large, white-tiled, clean waiting room. He pulls out his phone. There's one new text, sent while he was on his way here.

Hanji: can u cover my shift at the desk until 1?!

The question is followed by a bunch of emojis, mostly hearts. That alone would make him refuse, but also he fucking hates working the desk. Hanji looks at him hopefully, flashing a big smile.

"No."

"Pleeeaaasssee," they whine. "You don't have any appointments."

"Get the apprentice to do it."

"Not here today."

It's a small shop. It's only Levi, Hanji, one apprentice who they call Hitch, and Mike who owns the place. When Levi was taken on as an apprentice it was only Mike and Hanji. Mike did all of the tattooing, Hanji did all of the piercing, and when you looked at either of them, their professions were very apparent. Mike is covered in colorful tattoos from his neck to his feet, no piercings but for a couple of earrings. Hanji is a walking body piercer's guidebook come to life with thirteen pieces of jewelry just in their face, not including the ears. The two of them had taught Levi to do both tattooing and piercing in one year of apprenticeship because he was a quick learner, he was willing, and if he could do both, then they could use him to cover for either of their days off. He'd had to work the desk a lot when he was still apprenticing and he was glad that was over. It involved answering the phone, answering a lot of stupid questions, and making appointments for idiots who only actually showed up about half the time.

He scowls at Hanji. They put their hands up and gesture for him to relax. "It will only be two hours and no one ever calls this early. It'll be fine."

He doesn't even need to ask why they need him to do it. He knows Hanji fucked up and scheduled some appointments while they were supposed to be working the desk. He pushes them out of the way of the desk chair and sits his ass down, pulling his sketch book out of his bag, opening it and taking out a pen as Hanji offers him a thanks and goes into the back to get things ready for their first appointment.

Levi does some quick anatomy sketches. He doesn't have any tattoos to work on, he finished all of them, so for now he can draw for himself, for fun, even though it isn't ever really 'fun,' because he's an incredibly self-critical piece of shit who tortures himself over every tiny perceived flaw in his work. There are about twenty minutes of peace and quiet before he's forced to look up and
acknowledge a slightly nervous twenty-something year old guy who's walked in. He stands awkwardly just inside the doorway, looks around, and starts to move towards one of the two long black couches, but Levi stops him.

"Do you have an appointment?"

The guy looks shocked, like he didn't figure he needed one or he thought it was okay to just sit there and wait for someone to hold his hand and lead him into the back. Fucking idiot. Obviously his first time.

He says, "Oh, um, I think I have one with Hanji? Is she here?"

Levi corrects him. "Are they here?"

"Huh?"

He pinches the bridge of his nose. "Hanji is genderfluid. Use 'they' or 'them.'"

"I don't get it."

Levi sighs. "I know you don't." He checks the computer. "Did you have an appointment for eleven?"

"Um, yeah, I think so."

Levi raises one thin eyebrow at the guy. "And what time do you think it is now?"

He looks up at the clock on the wall behind Levi. "Uh eleven twenty?"

"Holy shit, he can tell time," Levi says sarcastically. He opens the bottom desk drawer and flips open the folder for releases and his fingers grab at nothing. It's empty.

"Tch. Hold on."

He sets the printer to print out at least twenty-five of them and he grabs the first one from the tray, sets it on the desk facing the guy and nods toward a cup full of pens.

"Sign this."

The guy bends over the desk and signs the damn thing without reading it and Levi rolls his eyes. He's going to be pretty surprised when Levi informs him that part of what he just consented to was the loss of his deposit and his appointment for showing up more than fifteen minutes late. Levi takes the signed release, drops it into another folder in the desk, and is about to tell the guy to go fuck off when Hanji comes out and grabs him by the arm, pulling him towards one of the back rooms.

Levi yells after them, "He's late past the cut off period."

"It's okay, we're just doing a labret! Be done in five minutes!"

And they're gone.

This is the kind of shit that makes Hanji run late on their appointments all the time. They can never turn anyone away, trying to do all the walk-ins as they come and never punishing anyone for being late. He doesn't even think it's out of kindness, Hanji is just that enthusiastic about their job, never wanting to turn down a chance to put some jewelry on someone.

He checks the computer. Hanji has another appointment in about five minutes. Mike has one at noon with a regular. Levi's schedule is clear, which means he is free to do walk-ins. He hates those.
They're not hard or especially annoying in and of themselves or anything, but he thinks people should at least treat their tattoos and piercings as if they're important enough to warrant an appointment and a consultation and not just randomly walk into a place when you have a free hour to let someone who might not even be good at their job poke a needle into you.

Hanji is back out in less than five minutes. They may be a crazy pain in the ass, but they're also the best piercer Levi has ever met. He can pierce anything and he can do it well, but he can't do it as quickly as Hanji does. They are like an old, expert surgeon whose seen and done everything thousands of times. They give their dazed-looking victim a gentle shove towards the desk.

"Can you tell him about aftercare, Levi? I'm going to clean up and get ready for the next one."

Levi drops his pen. "What? No. He's yours. You have the talk with him." But Hanji is already gone.

"Goddamnit."

The guy stands there dumbly and his hand moves towards his face. Levi stops him before he can touch the barbell sticking out through his lower lip. "First rule of aftercare is wash your hands before you touch your face if you don't want a pussy, infected, black hole in your lip."

The guy's hands fall back down to his sides.

"And don't play with it with your tongue. Rinse with a mouthwash that has alcohol at least twice a day, which you should be doing already unless you like your breath smelling like shit." Oral hygiene does not look like it's high on this kid's priority list.

"That's it. Keep it fucking clean and don't take the jewelry out. You have a hole in your skin, treat it like a flesh wound and don't poke your filthy fucking fingers around it."

Levi isn't normally this short and mean about explaining aftercare, but this isn't even his client and he's been nothing but a pain in the ass since he walked in. He nods that he understands and Levi tells him, "It's sixty-five dollars."

The guy reaches into his back pocket and offers sheepishly, "I only have my card, is that okay?"

Levi crosses his arms. "Are you coming back here in the future?"

The kid mistakes the intent of his question and takes it conversationally, thinking about his answer as if Levi actually cares. He says, "Yeah, I think I want to get more done after this heals." He points at the bridge of Levi's nose. "That one you have looks pretty cool."

Levi wants to snap his fucking finger off because his face is not an advertisement or a reference sheet for dumbfuck kids to see samples of shit they might want to get done. He grinds his teeth a little and restrains himself from tearing the guy a new one. "We can take cards, but you're supposed to tip, so bring cash next time."

He takes the card from the guy's aforementioned filthy fucking fingers and swipes it as he apologizes and pleads ignorance. Levi is not sympathetic. What to expect when getting a piercing or a tattoo is easily found out from a quick Google search. If people would use their fucking smartphones for more than tinder hookups he wouldn't have to explain tipping etiquette or aftercare. He rips off the receipt, gives the guy his card back, and watches him touch and swirl the barbell around as he walks out the door. It'll be infected by tomorrow.

Alone again, he lets out a frustrated sigh, lowers himself back into the swivel chair and gets back to concentrating on the curve to the cheek bone of the face taking form on his sketch paper. He grunts at Mike when he walks in.
"Hanji texted me at ten thirty and told me you're covering her desk shift."

Mike uses feminine pronouns for Hanji, and sometimes he'll use masculine ones, but he can't get used to they/them and Levi doesn't correct him because Hanji actually couldn't care less about pronouns. It's just something Levi likes to give people shit about.

Mike sets a cardboard cup on the desk next to Levi's elbow. He brings him things like tea or cigarettes if he knows ahead of time that Levi will be stressed and annoyed. It benefits both Mike and the customers if Levi's bitterness is lessened.

"They must be psychic. That's thirty minutes before I agreed to do it." He takes the top off of the cup, and blows the steam away.

Levi looks up at the tall, huge, heavily tattooed man who probably looks terrifying to most people but is actually a big fucking softie who cries at movies with almost no provocation. He heard Mike's girlfriend Nanaba teasing him about it once when she brought him lunch at work and thought she caught him trying to look tough. She doesn't like to let him get away with putting on the tough guy act. She thinks that a man who is six foot five with nearly every inch of skin covered in colorful tattoos of angels, demons, flames, birds, skulls, and just about a whole artist's reference book of other things, does not need to do anything to make himself look tough, and most of the time he doesn't. Levi thinks that if spirit animals are a thing then Mike's is a kitten or something else equally sweet and cuddly.

Mike sniffs, his nostrils flaring a little. He leans over Levi and does it again. Levi waves him away like an annoying dog and keeps drawing.

"You smell… sweet."

Levi shoots him a look. He knows Mike's sense of smell is highly sensitive, but there is no fucking way that he smells sweet. If anything, he smells like antibacterial soap, hand sanitizer, and cigarettes.

"It's hard to describe… you smell like Christmas…"

Levi rolls his eyes. "Are you sure you aren't finally having a stroke? Do you smell burnt toast too?" Then he remembers. "Ah, shit," he mutters as he pulls the clove cigarette from behind his ear. Holding it out to Mike, he asks, "Is this it?"

Another quick sniff and Mike nods.

"I ran out of cigarettes. Borrowed this to smoke when I got here, but Hanji fucked up that plan." He tucks it back behind his ear for when he can get a fucking moment.

"Borrowed it? So you're giving it back?" Mike smirks and then looks at the computer's monitor, doing a quick check of his appointments for the day.

"Get the fuck out of here with your semantics, old man." Levi turns back to his sketch book, muttering, "You know what I mean."

Mike takes a usb drive out of his pocket, plugs it into the computer, and starts printing out finished drawings he needs for his next few appointments. He does a lot of his drawing at home on a Wacom tablet lately. Levi still likes the sketchbook. Shading digitally isn't enough like shading with a needle. The drag of pen against paper doesn't come close to the feel of a tattoo gun against skin either, but it's slightly closer. He doesn't feel like he's past the point of needing practice like that. Mike's been doing this for at least twenty years longer than he has and can probably literally sleepwalk through a full
sleeve tattoo and still have it come out perfectly.

He is technically Levi and Hanji's boss, because he owns The Basement, which is what he named the shop ten years ago when it was actually in a basement level space underneath a head shop. The name made less sense when he changed location to this bigger, street level space in a new area a few years ago, but he kept it because he'd built up a good reputation.

He doesn't act like a boss very often. He's a good mentor, but he gives Hanji and Levi a lot more autonomy than most bosses would. Most of the time he acts more like a friend or coworker, inviting Levi and Hanji over for pizza and movie nights or rooftop barbecues at his place, or just inviting either of them out for drinks and encouraging them to talk to him whenever he senses there's something on their minds. He says he doesn't like turnover. He's only had three other artists or piercers come and go in the ten years he's owned his business. He keeps the shop small and only works with people he likes. When Levi asked him about it, he explained that it keeps up morale and cuts down on drama, as if there is a lot of drama in this business. Levi wouldn't know. He's only ever worked here and it's been pleasant. Hanji and Mike are like his family; his quirky, eccentric, weird as fuck family that he enjoys but tries not to get overly close to.

Hanji's next appointment comes in, only five minutes late, and Levi points them to one of the four rooms in back. He doesn't give them a hard time. Despite Mike's friendly, relaxed demeanor, Levi is still a lot more careful about how he talks to customers when he's looking over his shoulder, otherwise he will get a lecture about how this is a customer-based service industry.

Shortly after that the door opens again and kitten heels click on the tiles, but the staccato noise is quickly drowned out by the high-pitched, sing-songy greeting of their wearer, a regular customer named Ashlynn. Her black capri pants show off a butterfly tattoo on her calf that she bragged about getting done at a place down in Long Island when she was underage. When she'd told him the story, Levi used all of his self-control to keep himself from cringing.

Mike smiles and waves. Levi automatically tells her that Hanji is booked until one. Nine out of her past ten visits Ashlynn has asked for a piercing and Levi has deferred to Hanji. Levi did one piercing for her once, a simple monroe piercing, and she'd barely stopped talking long enough for him to get the jewelry in. He is okay with nervous talkers, which are common, but she isn't a nervous talker. She only gets chatty with Levi. She's quiet when Hanji pierces her.

Ashlynn bends at the waist, leaning down to rest her elbows on the desk, almost on top of Levi's sketch book, forcing him to look up at her. "I have some free time and I was thinking about finally getting a VCH. I thought I could do a walk-in with you real quick."

She is very pretty. She has a punky, scene girl look that Levi doesn't hate. When he was younger he probably would have given her his number and let her invite him over for no strings attached sex whenever she wanted, but aside from that, as a person, she kind of sucks. She isn't considerate enough to recognize when she makes him or anyone else uncomfortable, and the possibility that someone might tell her 'no' never seems to occur to her.

Even if Levi wanted to do it, he wouldn't do a vertical clit hood piercing as a walk-in. He'd need to do an anatomy consult to make sure it was even possible, some women just didn't have enough skin there to work with. But he doesn't want to do it. He's not squeamish about genital piercings, he's done plenty of them, including his own. He just doesn't trust Ashlynn's motives.

"I'm working the desk," he tells her with an expressionless deadpan, bordering on hostility and hoping she'll finally take a hint.

She twirls a piece of her unnaturally red, chunky blonde highlighted hair around a finger and gives
him her biggest, best bedroom eyes. "That's okay. I can wait for you."

He stares at her painted ruby red lips as they pout at him, the shiny, silver ball of a barbell dotting the middle of her lower lip. He thinks about what he would have done with them eight years ago, before he decided to abstain from sex until he felt like he could have more control over the way he treated it, until he was ready to stop using it as a kind of crutch or coping mechanism that always made him feel more depressed and shitty the more he used it to avoid the real world. Images of her lips panting and parting to let out a moan flash through his brain, but he shakes his head. He looks back down at the drawing he's been working on. "If you can wait, then let Hanji do it. They'd do a better job. Go get lunch or whatever and come back in an hour."

She sighs. "At least do an anatomy consult for me and tell me if I should get one or not."

"You should do the consult with whoever is going to pierce you. Hanji is more comfortable with difficult piercings than me." If Mike weren't standing there, he would tell her no outright, but with his boss looking over his shoulder he tries to be as polite as he can manage.

Ashlynn pouts again, tilts her head and tries to catch his eye, but he stubbornly keeps his eyes down and doesn't stop drawing. Then she shrugs, looks at the clock, and says, "I guess put me down for Hanji then. I'll go get some lunch. Can I get ya anything?"

"No."

As soon as she's wiggled her hips out the door, Mike tells Levi, "She's flirting with you."

"Tch. What makes you think that I'm fucking blind?"

"It's not against the rules to date clients," he reminds him.
That was how Mike and Nanaba met. Though she only came in for one tattoo because she'd wanted one, not because she thought Mike was hot. She didn't need to schedule appointment after appointment to make excuses to keep talking to him, annoying him at work, leaning against the desk, and telling him that people tell her she looks like a younger, edgier Megan Fox. That is one of Ashlynn's favorite lines of conversation, though the actress or model or porn star she says people think she looks like changes each time she comes in. What she wants pierced is also ever-fluctuating, when she comes in and talks to Levi, she wants her nipples or her labia pierced. When she gets in the back with Hanji, she changes her mind and goes for something simple like an eyebrow ring. Nanaba didn't resort to any manipulative bullshit. She thought Mike was cute, so she asked him on a date. Simple. She was confident and practical like that. She didn't come in repeatedly asking him to tattoo her ass or anything.

"I didn't think it was. That's not the reason I'm not doing it."

"Not your type?"

"Jesus." Levi drops his pen in frustration, "Fuck, Mike, fuck off."
Mike smirks a little. He thinks Levi getting flustered about it is cute. He holds his hands up in surrender and laughs. "Easy. Just thought you'd be cute together."

"Cute like a hole in the head," Levi mutters.

When Hanji escorts their last victim out, Levi lets them know, "You have a VCH with Ashlynn at one, but she'll probably change her mind and get something else, and as soon as you're done you're taking the desk back."
"You can call her and tell her to come earlier."

Levi looks at the appointment schedule. "Why? You're supposed to have an appointment until one."

"This one keeps canceling at the last minute. Will probably be a no call, no show again." Hanji sounds disappointed and wistful. They lean against the desk and sigh.

"I'm not fucking calling her. Take a break or something."

"Levi, have you thought about getting another labret? Like maybe one right in between your snakebites?" Hanji has a one-track mind when it comes to their work and gets something like blue balls for piercing if an appointment cancels, so their eyes glaze over a little hypnotically as they examine Levi's face and think about where they would put some jewelry if he would just let them.

"If I want one, I'll do it myself."

"What about venom bites? Those are hard to do on yourself."

"Hard, but not impossible," Levi points out as he seriously considers giving himself a couple of tongue piercings when he gets home, just to show Hanji that he can. "I'm not letting you stab me. Try Mike."

"Nah, I gave up on him a long time ago," Hanji says. Then they switch gears. "Want to go get a beer after work? I'll buy."

He doesn't lift his eyes from his drawing. "Can't. Poker night."

"Then let me give you a quick surface piercing and we'll call it even."

Levi stops his pen to look up and blink at them. "That doesn't make any fucking sense."

"I know." Hanji leans over the desk, bored and restless. "I was hoping I could trick you into letting me poke a needle through you. I hate when appointments don't show up." They wiggle their fingers in Levi's direction. "It's a crime to deny these hands the chance to create beautiful works of art."

Levi hums and tries to ignore them. They lean closer, looking over his shoulder as he shades the hair of the girl he's drawing. He moves his elbow quickly, just missing Hanji's ribs, on purpose, and he snipes at them, "Move outta my light, piquerist."

Hanji ignores his annoyance and looks closer at his sketch book. "That's pretty. You should tattoo it on me."

This is how Hanji has chosen all of the nine tattoos they have. Randomly looking over peoples sketch books, seeing something they liked, and impulsively asking for a tattoo. Levi's done three of their tattoos like this, a koi fish jumping out of the water, a black mandala design, and a sinister, realistic looking skull with splashes of aqua, pink, and yellow watercolor, all straight from random sketches he was doing in between appointments.

He looks at the drawing he's finishing of a girl looking back over her shoulder, holding a fur stole from falling down her back, a puff of breath visible in the cold air around her. Then he looks at Hanji, thinking about where it would fit best.

"Can you add some color to it?"

He starts to answer without thinking.
"Nah, she doesn't wear col –" He stops. His mouth shuts. He looks back down at the drawing.
"Shit!"

"What?"

He stares at the drawing in disbelief. He doesn't know how it happened. The clothing is different, the hair isn't curled, but the face is Erna's. It's her grey almond-shaped eyes, her pale lips, her high cheekbones and sharp jawline, her inky black hair, all expertly rendered so that there's no mistaking that it's definitely her.

"Shit!"

It's one of the best drawings he's done all month.

"Are you being overly critical again? Because I like it. I'm thinking it could go on my shoulder." Hanji reaches for the sketchbook and Levi smacks their hand away.

"I'm not fucking tattooing this on you," he growls.

Taken aback Hanji's mouth forms a little o in surprise. Their forehead wrinkles in confusion. "Why not?"

"I'm just not."

"Then can I at least make it an Instagram post for the shop? I need to do one today anyway." They pull their phone out of their back pocket.

He can't think of a way that it would get back to Erna if Hanji did post it, but better safe than sorry.

"No," he tells them very seriously as he puts the sketchbook back in his bag and curses to himself some more. The impulse to go smoke a cigarette is stronger now and at the same time he reaches for the clove behind his ear the realization hits him that it was probably the scent that made him unconsciously think of her. Scent is the sense with the strongest ties to memory. It's just science. It doesn't mean anything.

"Smoke break," he says perfunctorily, taking the black cigarette between his lips. "Take the desk for fifteen minutes."

"Okay," Hanji says, shoulders slumping in disappointment.

Levi doesn't go far. Just out the door and to the side. He leans against the large window, picking his knee up and placing a foot against the wall.

He lights the tip of it almost aggressively, making sure the cherry is big, even, and blazing. Then, on his first drag he inhales too much and puts himself into a coughing fit like an idiot. He was a teenager the last time he smoked a clove cigarette and he'd forgotten how heavy and suffocating they were. He can't believe Erna smokes these all the time, like they're nothing.

He smokes it as fast as he can manage without fainting; wanting to destroy it, erase it from existence for forcing her image into his brain and onto his sketchbook. He shakes his head as he realizes that now he's going to smell like cloves until he takes a shower. He would have been better off just throwing it out. He smirks at his own stupidity. It probably isn't even that unusual to unconsciously draw people you know. Maybe he's even done it before without noticing.

Hanji watches the pantomime out the large plate glass windows from the surrendered desk chair.
First it's just Levi, smoking a cigarette with more agitation than his normal baseline bitchiness. Ashlynn comes back sucking a smoothie through a straw and she bats her long, jet black eyelashes at him. Levi's shoulders slump and close inward as if he would fold himself into nothing if he could. She leans towards him, he looks away from her. They talk a little bit and Hanji tries to read their lips with no success. Then Levi says something that changes Ashlynn's face completely. All of a sudden she looks like she just found out Santa isn't real after suspecting the truth for a while now. Disappointed, sure, but not shocked. The pair stands without speaking for a moment before Ashlynn turns and opens the door, walking towards the desk with quiet dignity. Hanji gets up and tries to look busy like they were not just staring out the window attempting to eavesdrop.

"I'm ready if you are." Ashlynn's voice tinkles like a bell, upbeat as usual.

Hanji's eyes dart around the computer screen checking fake appointments and they tell Ashlynn to go wait in the back. Heels click away. Hanji waits for Levi's cigarette to get crushed to the sidewalk underneath his boot and gives him what feels like an appropriate amount of time after he walks back in so as to not sound overeager when asking, "What did you say to her?"

They take great pains to not sound accusatory. If it sounds like an attack Hanji knows Levi will get defensive and there's a chance he won't tell. That would be very aggravating to Hanji's natural curiosity.

Levi sighs and swings himself back into the desk chair, slumping in it and looking up towards the ceiling.

"I told her that I'm gayer than a rainbow thong at a pride parade," he says in a straight deadpan.

Hanji continues to try to look busy and is silent for the moments it takes to find the right tone of voice that won't make Levi get irreverent and snarky.

"I... did not know that about you."

"It's a lie. But I got her to leave me alone without pissing her off."

He puts his boots up on the desk and tilts himself back in the leather desk chair. Hanji smirks and makes a few more pointless motions and gestures to keep up the charade of being busy with desk things. Before they rush off into the back to get on with the needle poking aspect of the job, they pick up a manila folder and lightly bat the back of Levi's head with it, teasing.

"And Mike thinks you're no good with customers."

(September, 2014)

The not knowing is what gets to her the most. She feels that she doesn't know anything anymore.

Erna stares at her vague, shadowy reflection in the black computer screen on her desk at work. She's wearing an emerald green silk blouse with puff sleeves. She wears colors at work, but never out in her everyday life, and right now she is wondering if the person sending her roses knows that. She wonders a lot of things that she will never know no matter how much she thinks on them.

Does he know that she wears colors at work?

She's taken to gendering the sender as 'he' in her head even though she can't know that either. It becomes 'he' for many reasons; because of the possible romantic aspect, because it feels malicious. She has always associated men with malice more than women.
Has he seen her at work? Does he know that outside of work she only wears black? Has he ever seen her at all? Or is this all the result of some bizarre mistake on the sender's part? Maybe the crystal vases are actually supposed to be going to a different person in a different office. Every possible answer that she comes up with is just as likely as any other. There is no way to make informed guesses. She knows nothing and she doubts everything.

The doubt isn't only surrounding the roses and her possible stalker or secret admirer or computer glitch or whatever. The doubt seeps from there into everything. When she leaves her apartment she locks the door, takes five steps away, then turns back because somewhere between the door and those five steps she lost the confidence in her memory of turning the key in the lock. All of her perceptions are called into question because how can she be sure of anything anymore?

Things are supposed to make sense. There is supposed to be a most logical conclusion that one can come to. In everything there should be a way to make educated guesses, to categorize, to simplify.

She used to be good at that. But then she was never presented with anything so nonsensical and open to interpretation as a nameless, faceless entity besieging her with flowers at completely random intervals. Her first impulse was to find out at least what florist the flowers were coming from, but it turned out they weren't being delivered by any florist. They were delivered by independent couriers, not even the same ones every time, and when brought up to her office for interrogation they swore they couldn't tell her the name of the sender even if they wanted to. They don't require return addresses and their clients are able to remain anonymous.

She keeps attempting to apply some logic to the situation, but nothing she comes up with makes more or less sense than anything else. Nothing jumps out at her. So she took to marking her calendar on days that the roses come.

She accepts them every time now. She doesn't even throw evil looks at the person tasked with bringing them up to her. It had crossed her mind only briefly that she could just leave a note with the people at the door to throw the roses in the trash rather than actually bringing them to her office. Obviously, if they did that she wouldn't know when they were coming at all, and maybe that would mean blissful ignorance, maybe it would calm her nerves and put her in a position of having power over the situation. But she would rather know. It's the way the roses feel to her. If she thought they were in fact a signal of good intentions – like the girls who brought them up sometimes did, looking at her like she was so lucky – then she would be fine with ignoring them… but they didn't feel full of good intentions. They felt like a signal of something evil and dangerous and if a firestorm is coming then she would rather watch all the signs of it and at least try to judge when it would consume her.

She looks down at the calendar on her desk again, at the little Sharpie tip-sized dots sitting in the bottom right corner of each day that a hapless intern materialized in her doorway with a crystal vase of black roses, with a blank card. She applied every system she knew to try and find a pattern, even morse code, even keying roses as dots and no roses as dashes and vice versa. There is no recognizable pattern. It's as random as pure chance could ever hope to be.

The randomness makes her think of B.F. Skinner's research on operant conditioning. Psychologists believe that the fastest way to alter a person's behavior and create persistent habits is with something called a variable reward system where rewards for a certain action are intermittent rather than consistent. In practice, in the real world, it can work with negatives as well as positive rewards. If a negative consequence is intermittent it will fill the subject with dread and paranoia much more quickly and effectively than if they could be sure of exactly when it would happen.

She gets lost in thought about it and almost flinches when the door separating her and Zackly's office opens.
"Erna, by any chance, do you have the minutes from last week's meeting with the shareholders?"

She folds her hands over her desk and looks at the wall. "We have an intercom, Sir. You don't need to walk in here every time you need something."

"No use for it. I'd rather speak to you face to face, and the eight meter walk over here is good for me."

"Yes, I'm sure these conversations will be the difference between a long, healthy life and early onset dementia."

"So you have them?"

Her voice gets far away and tired. "Somewhere. I'll email them to you."

The witty back and forth cadence to their conversations is paused. That happens a lot lately. They start off quippy as ever and at some point Erna will slam the brakes on as if somehow her mind just left her body behind. It throws Zackly off and makes him progressively more worried each time.

"So… When do you think I can get them?"

She makes a breathy growling noise that he is used to hearing, somewhere between a sigh and a snarl, and she reaches for the power button of her computer. "However long it takes for this to boot up."

"You haven't even turned on your computer?"

"No."

He checks his watch. "It's almost noon."

Her nostrils flare a little, but the rest of her remains still. Her eyes go dark and her voice fills with bitterness and sarcasm. "Is it?"

As the experienced father of several teenage girls, Zackly knows that at this point it is safest to back away slowly without another word. That tone of quiet disdain is like the warning rattle of a snake, step away if you don't fancy being bit with cutting and highly emotional passive aggression. When he has the thick wooden door closed between them again he rubs his temples. He thought he was done with suffering through unpredictable mood swings a long time ago when his youngest went away to college, he never thought he'd be going through this pseudo-adolescent stuff with Erna who until recently had behaved like a twenty-seven year old going on fifty.

Erna's shoulders slump a little once the door is closed. While her computer starts up she tries to remember if she saved the meeting minutes to the appropriate folder or if she slipped and forgot about it. It's a struggle to focus and remember, to get the gears of her head turning in the right direction after hours of pulling towards unverifiable answers to Who and Why?

She opens a desk drawer and like lightning her fingers take up a plastic pint of Wild Turkey, twist off the cap, and tip the burning liquid past her lips. She takes down two generous shots in a short moment, replaces the cap and hides the bottle in the drawer again. It slows her breathing and makes her arms and legs feel heavier. She would never have thought about drinking at work before, saying to herself that it would ruin all the fun of drinking after work, but it was becoming necessary. It made her relax. It put her in a place where she could trust her memories and her perception and if she was wrong it didn't become an existential crisis. It was akin to taking a Xanax, which she was sure more than enough people did to get through the work day, so what was the difference? Why was one so
much more socially acceptable than the other?

As the relaxation of a good buzz sets in her focus returns and it only takes a second to find the file right where it should be. She is still good at her job. Fuck Zackly. Fuck everyone. Fuck her.

Levi gets home late and sits on the concrete steps outside the building. Tiredly he takes his helmet off and sets it down next to him. He bends his neck right and left, cracking the bones. His head tilts as far back as he can stand, strained from looking down at his art all day.

Erna’s absence from the stoop is disconcerting. Since she moved in, she’s been there pretty much every evening he’s come home from work, halfway through a cigarette, glancing at him dismissively as he parks his motorcycle, ignoring him but not being openly hostile – like a cat. He tells himself he doesn't care about why she isn't there, isn't worried about whether he offended her this morning or anything. He just feels fucked up and disoriented at the change. He doesn't do change well.

His thumb reaches for each of his other four fingers, pressing outstretched knuckles down until he feels the pop. He needs to stop holding his machines in a death grip or he’s going to have arthritis before he turns 30 next year.

*A text vibrates in his back pocket. It's Krista.*

Krista: ymir says the door is unlocked so come up whenever you're ready ;)

Cigarette in one hand he types with his other.

Levi: doesn't sound like something she'd say

Krista: not exactly. she said to tell that short shit to quit smoking and get his ass up here so she can start taking paychecks.

Levi: nice.

That sounded more like her. Ymir has a lot of bravado and can generally be an ass most of the time. That was his first impression of her when he moved in and he decided he would avoid her, but she and Krista just kept inviting him to shit. They hosted everything. Parties, get-togethers, movie nights, pot lucks, at least once a week there was something going on in Ymir and Krista's apartment that everyone they met was invited to and no one was ever disappointed that they went. Ymir and Krista are natural hosts, their parties are creative and original, and they have a way of making everyone who comes in their home feel comfortable.

At first he thought that all of the hospitality and kindness came from Krista. They make it look that way. Ymir gets Krista to invite everyone and acts like every event was her idea. But when he got to know them better it became very obvious that Krista couldn't give a shit about other people and would be perfectly content to be isolated on a faraway island with Ymir forever, and Ymir, as much as she tries to act like she doesn't give a shit, needs to have people around and feel like she's doing something good, like she's needed. All of her bravado and jackassery is a mask to cover a lot of insecurity. She grew up in the foster system like him. This is how she creates a family for herself.

Levi doesn't feel the same impulse towards family. He had a sort of family, his decisions killed them, he doesn't feel a desire to put together a new family and fuck them up too. So he doesn't embrace community and socialization the way Ymir does. He'll go to her parties and keep everyone at about an arm's length.

He goes to their poker night once a month religiously, though. He has a small thing for gambling.
The buzzing won't stop since Erna's meeting with Annie. The reality set in about five minutes after Annie left. She has a scene. Tomorrow. Finally. She is all nerves and excitement and optimism. She tried to work, but she kept getting distracted, wishing it would be tomorrow already.

Cleaning her apartment was both completely necessary and a good way to keep herself busy. She doesn't want Annie to come over and see that in addition to being a complete mess inside her head, she also keeps her living space in a state of disarray. It took two hours to actually finish unpacking the boxes she hadn't even bothered to open yet. Longer than that to find space for everything and try to reach some kind of level of organization. Now she's onto surface cleaning, dusting, sweeping, vacuuming, trying to reach Martha Stewart levels of presentation. She's almost exhausted, but not enough to extinguish all of her nervous energy and sleep yet, so she keeps going.

She thinks she feels kind of happy. If she thinks about it too much she'll come to all kinds of logical conclusions about how this doesn't perfectly match actual, real happiness. So she focuses on her cleaning and doesn't let herself think too much.

She is so optimistic and excited and bordering on happy that she doesn't panic too much when she hears a knock at her door. The pins don't prick at her wrists and her heart only races a little. She doesn't stand stock still for too long before going to stand on tiptoe and look out the peephole to see the little, blonde manic pixie dream girl who she met in the laundry room.

Ymir shoves a beer in Levi's hand as soon as he walks in the door, telling him to hurry up, she doesn't want to drink alone. Far be it for him to object.

He follows her to the kitchen. As she opens a drawer to get him a bottle opener he pops the cap of the beer bottle off on the edge of her granite countertop. She narrows her eyes at him. "Show-off."

He flips the cap and tosses it to her. "Thought you were in a hurry."

She shoots him a hard look, pitches his cap into recycling, and uses the bottle opener on her own beer, going through the action with a little more emphasis as if to demonstrate to him how a civilized person opens a bottle.

"Where are the kids?" he asks.

By which he means Eren, Mikasa, and Armin. He always refers to them as the kids. He thinks Ymir and Krista are the same age as them, but he doesn't think of them as kids. There's something more mature and world-weary about them.

"They flaked to go to a concert. I could give a fuck." By which she means she really does give a fuck. "And Connie and Sasha are late, but it's not like that's new."

Connie and Sasha live together in an apartment on the floor below them and Levi thinks of them as kids, too. He doesn't know how old they are. They could be forty and still be kids in his eyes since all they seem to do is smoke weed, play video games, and dabble in indie music.

"Krista is inviting our new neighbor."

Levi nearly does a spit take and chokes on his beer. Ymir gives him a puzzled look.

"You're inviting Erna?" He asks in disbelief when he's finished coughing.
"Yeah. Why not? She crazy or something?"

"Or something," Levi mutters under his breath.

"Well it's not like anyone here is sane..."

Touche, Levi thinks to himself. He hopes that Erna is out somewhere, which would explain why she wasn't outside when he got home and would save him the awkward feeling of seeing her outside of their normal setting. He's only just gotten used to her being his weird, angry, sarcastic smoking buddy. He enjoys that relationship the way it is. He doesn't want to ruin it by seeing her hanging out like a semi-normal person.

Relief washes over him when he hears Krista open the door and sing-song to Ymir on her way down the hallway, "She's not co-ming."

"Why the fuck not?" Ymir shouts back.

Krista stops in the doorway of the kitchen, waves at Levi, then skips over to Ymir, happily stealing her beer from her hands and taking a long sip before answering. "She said she's busy."

"That's it?"

"What?" Krista looks at Ymir with big blue eyes.

"You didn't even ask what she's doing instead?"

Levi busies himself with looking at the floor tiles. He's seen this scene play out before. Ymir uses Krista to invite people to her events, because she needs to act like she's too cool to care. Krista is the one who is actually too cool to care, so she isn't very aggressive about inviting the people Ymir's asked her to. Then Ymir gets personally offended by rejection of the invite and by Krista's approach. They're a piece of work.

"Oh Ymir. I didn't want to pry." Krista gives Ymir her beer back so that she can wrap her arms around her waist and nuzzle her side. With their height difference, Krista only comes up to just above Ymir's waist and she's not shy about climbing all over her girlfriend. "Why don't you go ask her if it's so important?"

Ymir is momentarily flustered, but instead of making an excuse she deflects. "What about Connie and Sasha?"

"Not coming either."

Ymir grits her teeth. "Why not?"

"They're naked and eating bacon." Krista says that like it's totally normal, boring even. Levi suppresses a laugh, a slight huff coming out his nose that makes Ymir glare at him.

"What do you mean they're naked and eating bacon?"

As if it is very obvious, Krista explains, "I texted Sasha to see if they're coming and she said they were going to stay home because they're naked and eating bacon."

"Makes sense," Levi offers. For Sasha and Connie at least, it does make sense. He isn't surprised at all.

"Fucking potheads." She shakes her head and then thinks.
"We could just Netflix and chill," Krista murmurs, nuzzling into Ymir's ribcage.

Ymir lets out a defeated "Fuck." She lets her guard down enough to actually look disappointed, which makes it look like she cares, which Levi's never seen her do. It makes him feel pretty goddamn bad.

"If you don't mind new people I can text a friend from work. They were looking for something to do tonight anyway."

"Still only three people. Krista doesn't play."

"I'm sorry," Krista tightens her arms around Ymir's waist. "I just don't like gambling."

Levi sighs. He's going to hate himself for this later. "And I'll get Erna to come."

Ymir smiles a little at that. "Thanks."

"Don't fucking thank me," he warns.

Erna finally has the floor clear enough that she can vacuum. For once she doesn't even think about not being able to hear other sounds possibly warning of danger over the sound of the loud machine. That is until more pounding on her door shocks her out of her cleaning trance. She jabs at the power button of her vacuum and rolls it with her to the door. It could be useful as a large blunt object to beat intruders with.

She looks out the peephole and sighs. She moves to the side and only opens the door about a quarter of the way. "What's going on?"

It's less a greeting and more an irritated 'What the hell is making you people dare to come to my apartment?' and Levi would snarl a 'Fuck you' back, but this is for Ymir.

So instead he says, "Stop being a fucking hermit and come play poker," because that's better.

"No."

She starts to close the door on him and without thinking he reaches out and pushes it open. Immediately he realizes he's crossed a more serious boundary than he would have thought. Erna goes stiff like he's never seen even in her most hateful moments, her knuckles white around a vacuum handle, and…

"Holy shit, is that a Dyson?" he exclaims, completely forgetting himself in the moment.

She's shocked out of the murderous thoughts she was just directing at him and her mouth forms a little o. She looks down as if she's not sure what she has in her hand. Confused, she answers, "Um, yeah?"

There are few things in life that Levi gets excited about. Vacuums and other cleaning tools are one of them. "Is it the new Cinetic Ball Upright model?"

She shrugs. "I guess?"

Her reaction is infuriating to him. "Do you even know what you have?"

"A vacuum?"
Levi is livid. That vacuum fucking filters the air that gets sucked through it. The head self-adjusts to whatever surface you're vacuuming. That bin is made out of the same polycarbonate that they make riot shields out of. You could drop a fifty pound weight on that thing and it would still run. He dreams about that vacuum, but it costs about seven hundred dollars, so it's only ever going to be just a dream.

"It's the best fucking vacuum money can buy and you don't deserve it. Come over so I can win it from you in poker."

Erna tilts her head at him. Of all things she wouldn't figure the pierced and tattooed guy who listens to Suicidal Tendencies loud enough to wake the dead at 8am to get all worked up about a vacuum cleaner. "If I just give it to you will you leave me alone?"

Levi's mouth opens, then closes. He can tell that she is absolutely serious. He feels like this is a moment that is going to decide a lot about what kind of person he is. Take the vacuum, disappoint Ymir, feel shitty, but have the vacuum that you'll never be able to afford. He swallows and his mouth goes dry.

"No. Stop being antisocial and let's go."

She squares up her stance a little as if she's bracing herself against being physically pulled out of there. "I won't. Besides, I don't know how to play poker."

"It's easy. We'll teach you."

"Also it's against my religious beliefs."

Levi raises an eyebrow skeptically. "What religion is that?"

She pauses and crosses her arms. Her eyes narrow at him. "Mennonite?"

"I don't buy that. Let's go."

"Also I have to finish cleaning."

Levi rakes his hands through his hair. "Look. Nobody respects that more than me. But you can finish cleaning anytime."

She holds her stubborn stance. "I have a guest coming over."

"Yeah? When?"

Her eyes lose only some small measure of their defiance and they look down. She mutters, "Tomorrow afternoon."

"Then finish tomorrow. If you're vacuuming you're pretty much done anyway."

"I just don't want to."

Levi is taken aback by the change in her voice. It's the only time he's ever heard her sound vulnerable, like a child who doesn't have a choice about something they're being forced to do. It's such a 180° that he's rendered speechless as he tries to rally and decide how to approach this. The usual sarcasm and profanity doesn't feel right here. He softens. His shoulders relax. His voice approaches something like friendliness. "Just try it. Ymir and Krista are fun."

Erna looks away. She doesn't move to slam the door in his face, so he keeps going.
"They've both got thick enough skin that you can probably say whatever fucked up things you want and they won't mind."

That gets her to smirk and look at him again. She says, "Well that's no fun."

He sneers a little at her, remembering the way she played him like a fiddle this morning. "Yeah, I forgot you actually like bringing out the worst in people."

She lets go of the vacuum and he moves out of her way as she finally crosses the threshold. While she locks the door he hears her say half to herself. "Your worst isn't even that bad. Can't even make you call me a cunt."

Levi is so used to it that he forgot what a shock it can be to see Ymir and Krista's apartment for the first time. He didn't warn Erna at all and now he's watching her stare wide-eyed at her surroundings while still trying so hard to look unimpressed.

Ymir and Krista's "apartment" is three or four apartments that they bought up and renovated to create one large apartment with a living room, kitchen, bedroom, and one and a half bathrooms. Not only is it comparatively huge, but also it looks like something out of an interior decorating magazine with real hardwood floors, modern furniture, art pieces, and expensive appliances and electronics. He's always been kind of curious about why a couple with so much apparent money would choose to live in such a shitty neighborhood. He doesn't know how they afford all this and he doesn't bother to ask. They are cagey about it and he figures it's none of his business. He could care less anyway. He just knows he doesn't feel bad about taking all of Ymir's money in poker every month.

"You came!" Krista runs past Levi, sliding to a stop in front of Erna and wrapping her arms around her in a big, suffocating hug.

Erna tries to squirm out of it, but Krista has her arms trapped. She gives up. Levi abandons her to take a seat at the poker table in the living room. Behind him he hears Erna pleading with Krista. "I'm not accustomed to physical affection… or any affection… this is very uncomfortable… please stop…" and he smirks to himself.

He checks his phone and tells Ymir when she comes out of the kitchen, "Hanji should be here in ten."

"What kind of a name is Hanji?" she asks derisively as she slides another beer across the table to him and flops her tall, freckled body carelessly into a chair.

"What kind of a name is Ymir?" This time, instead of popping the top off on the edge of the table he takes his lighter out of his pocket and uses that as a bottle opener, raising an eyebrow at her, daring her to say something. She rolls her eyes and looks away, but there's a hint of a smile as she does.

She turns when Krista bounces into the room, smiling and dragging Erna by the hand behind her. When she looks Erna up and down, Ymir comments simply, "Whoa."

"Isn't she cute!?" Krista squeals and pulls Erna up beside her, maneuvering her at whim like she thinks she is some kind of life-size doll.

Levi doesn't turn to look, but he swears he can feel her staring daggers at him, wishing him a slow and painful death for making her come here. He doesn't feel any guilt about it. He's sure it wasn't a good idea, but it wasn't his idea, it was Ymir's.
Erna mutters to Krista calmly, but strained, "Please don't call me cute."

Ymir gestures to a chair as she gets up from her own. "Let her sit down, Krista."

Erna doesn't try to hide her relief when Krista lets go of her. She takes the chair next to Ymir's, across from Levi. The strangeness of it hits him like a tsunami. He's never really noticed the way she sits in a chair before. When she's sitting on the stoop, smoking a cigarette, she looks like a classic slacker, knees together, feet spread out in an upside down v, elbow resting on a knee, chin resting on her hand, like a marionette that was dropped on the floor. In an actual chair she sits up straight. Like, alarmingly straight. Like she's balancing a book on her head and someone is going to smack her knuckles with a ruler if it falls. Instead of resting her elbows on the table she folds her hands in her lap. Not for the first time Levi thinks she's weird and suspiciously wonders what the fuck her deal is.

Ymir walks to the mini-bar and asks, "What's your poison?"

Without a trace of irony, Erna answers, "Cyanide would be lovely, thank you."

"Fresh out. Can I interest you in old-fashioned booze? I have beer, but you don't look like a beer-drinker."

"I'm not an anything drinker. Only coffee."

Levi asks, "You in AA?" He doesn't think it's a rude question. It's just that the only people he knows of who turn down a drink and ask for coffee instead are in the program.

Erna's nose crinkles like he's just said something disgusting. Her voice goes down a little deeper, almost perfectly matching how she's looking down her nose at him. "No."

Jumping in before they get too snarky with each other, Ymir interjects, "Then you can have a drink."

Erna ignores the comment for a moment to continue staring at Levi as if he's just accused her of some horrible perversion or amorality. Ymir is insistent. "C'mon, don't make me feel like a bad host."

Finally Erna looks away from Levi, seems to think for a moment, and sighs. "Whiskey, two fingers, and don't give me more no matter how I ask for it."

Levi doesn't care what she says, those are the words of an alcoholic.

Ymir starts to run down for Erna the list of whiskeys they have and Erna cuts her off. "Whatever's the cheapest you have. I have a taste for bad shit that tastes horrible and burns a lot."

"Well the cheapest we have is Laphroaig, so you're out of luck." She pours a little more than two fingers into a glass and sets it in front of Erna. "Chaser?"

"No. Thanks." Without ceremony Erna drinks it down like it's water and she just emerged from a trek across a burning desert. Ymir smiles approvingly and sits down finally satisfied.

Levi thinks definite alcoholic, which makes her living there make a little more sense to him. She probably has a few DUI's. That would explain why someone who looks and sounds like they should be enjoying a higher income bracket instead lives in a shitty apartment and never goes anywhere.

Krista starts to ask Erna a question, but Levi cuts her off. "No small talk." He grabs the deck of cards from the middle of the table, cuts, and riffles them. "She has to learn to play poker in ten minutes."

Ymir smiles, leans her elbow onto the table as she turns to look at Erna again and rests her head on
her hand. "You're kidding," she says, looking like an alligator with a fish swimming around its open jaws. She reaches for Erna's empty glass and asks almost sweetly, "Another?" the same way she does to Eren when he plays, because he's an easy target, terrible at poker and even more terrible with enough drinks in him.

Erna watches Levi deal cards and answers absently, "Yeah," then shakes her head, "I mean no."

"Oh come on, one more won't hurt you."

Levi shoots Ymir a look. She sneers at him a fraction of a second, barely breaking focus on Erna.

Erna picks up her cards with curious delicacy, like she's never held playing cards before. She stares at them as she answers Ymir. "I'd be fine. It's for you guys. I get mean when I'm drunk."

Levi scoffs at that. "Get mean? You are mean."

"Well..." she sighs, "Meaner..."

Ymir says "I kind of want to see that," and starts to get up to get Erna a refill.

Levi almost leaps across the table, grabbing and pushing the empty glass back down and warning, "No." Under no circumstances is he ready to see what "meaner" Erna looks like. Ymir rolls her eyes at him, but she doesn't insist.

He gets through about an eighth of an explanation of the rules with Erna watching and listening to him patiently for once before he gets a text from Hanji letting him know they're outside. He drops his cards on the table and moans, "Shit. I gotta go let Hanji in."

"What kind of name is Hanji?" Erna asks.

Ymir slams her beer down on the table and slaps her knee, delighted. "Right?!"

Krista breaks her long watchful silence. "You all have weird names." There's a two second long pause before she notices everyone staring at her and she defends herself, "Well you do!"

When Levi comes back up with Hanji in tow, Ymir is leaning back in her chair with a shit-eating grin, Erna is laughing, out loud, not snickering sarcastically, not smiling evilly, but actually laughing like a normal person. And Krista is glaring at both of them with intense, bright blue eyes.

When she catches her breath, Erna says, "Historia sounds like the name of a video game character."

Krista slumps down in her chair and crosses her arms over her chest. "That's why I changed it to Krista. Thanks, Ymir."

"Don't be mad. That's what you get for calling my name weird."

"I didn't call your name weird!" Krista wails.

Levi clears his throat loudly. Hanji doesn't wait to be introduced, they step forward and wave with both hands at everyone, grinning from ear to ear and cheering, "I'm so excited to meet Levi's friends!"

"They're not my friends. They're neighbors."

Hanji ignores him and sits down. He follows and falls into his chair, relieved. He did his part, he got enough people here to make Ymir happy, his obligation ends here and now he can finally relax.
Ymir asks Hanji, "So do you have any weird things about drinking?"

Erna rolls her eyes. Hanji doesn't trouble about the meaning, they smile and simply answer, "Nope."

"Beer?"

"Sounds good," Hanji smiles. "What are my choices?"

"Like 10 different kinds. Follow me." Ymir takes Hanji to the kitchen as she rattles off a list of different IPA’s, lagers, and fruity summer beers.

Levi leans back in his chair, sucking on the end of his bottle and trying to let go of all of the built up tension from this long-ass day.

Until Erna asks, "Does she work with you?"

Automatically he tells her, "Hanji is genderfluid. Use they/them," like he's told about a hundred people before her.

Erna pushes her cards around with a fingertip, looking very bored. "Genderfluid isn't the same as nonbinary."

He puts his beer down and cocks his head at her. "Huh?"

"Genderfluid people vacillate between a binary system of two genders, feeling more male or more female at times. Nonbinary people don't identify as either and don't use male or female pronouns. That's what you're thinking of." When she's finished, she lets the cards alone and switches to fidgeting with her empty glass, looking at it a little mournfully, like she wishes more whiskey would materialize.

"I've been working with Hanji for a year. I think I would know."

"Uh huh," Erna answers back dismissively like he's a child who she is going to let win in order to prevent a tantrum from him.

As soon as they come back in, Levi shouts, "Hanji, what are your pronouns?"

Hanji takes in the tension in the room and giggles a little nervously. "You can use whatever you want, I really don't care."

Erna rolls her eyes. "Can you explain the difference between genderfluid and nonbinary to him? He doesn't believe the girl with a minor in gender studies."

Hanji attempts to deflect the conversation and asks, "Oh, where did you study?!"

"You don't use third person pronouns?" Levi's ego is quickly turning to microscopic dust as his error becomes clear.

Hanji tries to soothe him, "I told you, it doesn't matter. I really don't care."

Erna finds that she enjoys Levi's distress over the matter and she feels very smug about being right. Her first thought is that she deserves a celebratory drink, her second thought tells her that she knows that isn't a good idea and that it will lead to saying or doing things that she'll regret, and her third thought says, yes but it will feel good. She pushes her glass towards Ymir. "Can I get another?"

"I fucking care, Hanji." Levi tilts his head back and sighs.
There is awkward silence. Erna downs a double shot of whiskey and after taking the time to absorb it, she rips into Levi. "If you cared so much you could have googled the difference between nonbinary and genderfluid, or just fucking asked her which pronouns to use, or, you know, done anything to acknowledge that this isn't your issue and you aren't going to be an authority on it, but I'll give you the benefit of the doubt and concede that it's hard to shed the deeply ingrained habit of believing that you know best about everything after growing up in a patriarchal society that coddles you and encourages you to be an egotistical mansplaining douchebag who never needs to look for answers from anywhere but within your own ignorant self."

There is dead silence. Levi's knuckles grip his beer bottle tighter than a tattoo machine.

Suddenly Ymir lets out a deep belly laugh and slaps the table. "Holy shit! You weren't kidding!" She takes the empty glass away from Erna. "That's enough for you."

"Was I mean?" she asks so innocently. "I thought that was nice. I was saying it's not his fault."

"Oh thanks. I'm so glad it's not my fault, it's just my dick that makes me subhuman."

"Yeah, kind of," Erna answers pityingly.

Hanji reaches over and rubs his shoulder, "It's okay, Levi. You're the most feministy guy I know."

Erna huffs. "Men can't be feminists."

"Oh fuck you," Levi crosses his arms, feeling more attacked every second.

"I'm sorry, but you can't."

Ymir gets up from the table and moves towards the kitchen again, hands going up in the air. "I'm staying out of this!"

Levi yells after her, "This is your fucking fault! I told you not to give her more whiskey!"

Erna loses interest in him and leans forward, staring at Hanji instead. "So, you're genderfluid?"

"Um, yep," Hanji fidgets nervously, fearing they're going to be the next to get ripped to shreds.

"Right now how do you identify?"

Hanji looks upwards and thinks about that. "Right now probably eighty-nine percent male and eleven percent female."

Erna's eyelids lower and her voice gets husky. "That's hot."

Levi loses it. "Wait! How the fuck does Hanji get to be a man and it's hot, but when I'm a man I'm an asshole?!"

"Are we still on this?" Ymir returns with another beer for herself. "Can we start playing now?"

Krista chimes in, "Erna still doesn't know the rules."

Erna pushes her practice cards back towards the middle of the table. "It's fine. I can pick it up as we go."

The gender war gets put on hold and Levi is able to calm down. The shit Erna says doesn't
particularly get to him if he's given time to think about it, it's just the way she says it that gets him so worked up about stupid shit.

Before the end of the night they are shouting at each other again, but about something completely new. Levi loudly demands that Erna return his and everyone's money, accusing her of being a hustler. She keeps her cool for the most part. It's easy to be smug when you're in possession of a pile of cash. She stubbornly sticks to the story that she must have just gotten lucky. It's a game of chance, isn't it?

On the inside she's laughing her ass off. She spent the first hour of the game acting like she didn't know the difference between a good and bad hand, when to bet or how much. Once, she even "accidentally" showed her hand to the entire table after it was dealt.

Of course she fucking knows how to play poker, she's not an idiot. Not only does she know how the game works, but she knows how to manipulate people into betting big so that she can clean a table quickly before anyone catches on that she knows what she is doing. She's good at claiming innocence while she counts her winnings. The lolita looks helps with that.

But Levi really isn't convinced. She tries to dismiss his outrage and insists that he's only upset because she accused him of being a misogynist prick earlier.

She tells herself that she could walk away with everything. Not that she needs the money. Just that it would be a shitty thing to do that would confirm her intrinsic belief that there is something deeply wrong with her. She would feel satisfied getting away with it. She would be a little disgusted with herself. She would be a little depressed. And she would love every second of self-loathing.

But Levi won't let it go. Erna isn't used to that. Normally people either believe that she got really lucky, or they are too ashamed at having been duped to argue the point. Levi is different. She watches him across the table more than listens to what he's saying. His face is different than she's used to. She always sees him looking bored and apathetic and if she looks really closely sometimes she can see mild annoyance. But now he looks genuinely pissed and sure of his conviction. He looks at her like he sees right through her bullshit because he knows her. He knows how fucked up she can be. He would never put something this low past her, so the innocent act isn't going to work.

So she surrenders. She puts the money back on the table. She admits that he's right, but that hustling is technically not cheating and she would be totally within her rights to punish them for being suckers by taking all of their money.

As Levi grumbles about technically not cheating being goddamn close to technically cheating, Erna thinks about a quote from her favorite Terry Pratchett book. "When an innocent sits down to a card game and says 'How do you play this?' someone is about to get shaken down until their teeth fall out."

Ymir thinks the whole thing is hilarious and says Erna's welcome back anytime.

(December, 2014)

The midday sun blurs the detailing of the windows of Zackly's office. It's the sun blurring her vision or her low key drunkenness or both.

Her work is slipping every day and it's funny. On days where the black roses aren't delivered she gets nothing done, unless consuming a fifth of whiskey is an accomplishment. On days when they
arrive she is more able to focus. It's like she's becoming dependent on them.

Zackly is worriedly wringing his hands on his desk, waiting for her to settle into one of the antique armchairs across from him. She is less and less patient with him lately. She hates him for being so nice. Despises him for not picking up on her shit and reprimanding her.

"Erna, I think you should take a vacation."

She laughs. His eyes widen. She's never laughed before. It sounds a little mad. She wipes the corners of her eyes when she's finished and she ridicules him, "You couldn't work if I took a vacation. You're lost without me."

"Then I'll take a vacation, too. We have two weeks coming up for the holidays." He hums as if he's considering. "Let's make it four."

Erna stretches out her legs carelessly. "I'm not taking a month off."

"Erna…"

"What?!" she snaps. She wants him to get angry. She wants him to tell her to cut the shit and get it together.

Instead he frowns sympathetically. He is full of compassion for her. "What is all this about?"

She remembers that this man is like a father to her. Better than that. She loathes herself for being so cruel to him. She is a monster and she doesn't want to stop. "I don't fucking know, sir."

He waits patiently for her to come up with anything. As the silence stretches on she starts to feel the tension. She wonders if this means she is about to be fired. That would be miserable. She feels a little excited at the prospect of so much feeling and suffering.

He says with finality. "I'm going to tell the employees in the lobby to stop those flower deliveries at the door and throw them out. Out of sight out of mind."

"You can't!"

"Erna, the whole business is making you…” he stops. He doesn't want to say crazy. "It's ridiculous. I don't think they're anything to get so worked up over, but if you can't focus at work anymore –"

"I need to know when they're coming!"

"For god's sake, why?"

"I don't know. That's the thing."

"Erna…"

"I'm still good at my job. I won't accept forced vacation time." She crosses her arms over her chest.

He is finally starting to get frustrated. "I'm not trying to force anything on you! I'm worried about your wellbeing!"

"I never asked you to be. Don't you already have a family to worry about? How is Aubrey doing, by the way?" Zackly winces at the mention of his family's struggle with their daughter's painkiller addiction. She thinks he might even cry.
She goes back to her office and sits at her desk as if nothing happened. She warms her hands on the cup of coffee she abandoned there when Zackly called her in.

She gets drunk faster when she mixes her whisky into hot coffee. Something about it getting into her bloodstream more quickly, she thinks.

She keys her password into the login screen of her computer and opens her browser. It's set to save and open any tabs she was looking at when she last closed it. It opens to the page she was looking at before she went home yesterday. It's a list of meanings that were assigned to different flowers in the 19th century when the language of flowers was popular. There are only two meanings assigned to black roses. Death and deep devotion.

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Erna sits in the cold morning light, watching her ashes fall, playing with the end of a ribbon on her dress. She woke up instinctually knowing she had something to regret before she even went over the events of the night in her memory. She's fucked up so many relationships and said so many monstrous things while drunk that the sandpaper texture in her mouth and the slight pain in her stomach the morning after is inextricably tied to a feeling that she's done something she will feel shitty about.

She remembers everything she said. She wasn't that drunk. She was merely buzzed enough to lose the small amount of inhibition that makes the difference between angering the people around her and actually hurting them.

"Hey, so, look…" she says as soon as she hears the steely sound of the building door opening behind her and sees Levi's shadow looming.

He is still justifiably livid after last night. He lights his cigarette and keeps his mouth shut because all he wants to do is tell her to fuck off, but he swears he doesn't have the energy.

"I'm sorry." She says her apology simply and honestly, no sarcasm.

An apology is not what he was expecting. It throws him off guard, but doesn't disarm him completely. She doesn't turn around to see his reaction or make sure he heard her. He's sick of that shit, but he doesn't let it show in his voice. He sounds tired and bored when he tells her, "At least look at me when you say that."

She turns around and looks up, narrow angry eyes glaring at him. "Look, I'm sorry, and I'm quite sure I've never been sorry in all my years on this earth, so forgive me if my way of apologizing is inelegant and unpracticed."

He holds the cigarette in his lips and crosses his arms.

Erna sighs frustrated. It's not clear if the frustration is at him or herself. "Just fucking sit down. Let's talk."

He stands his ground. Of course he could tell her he doesn't have shit to say to her and go back inside, but something keeps him there and after a quick internal struggle he sits on the step next to her, ready to at least listen even if he doesn't have shit to say to her.

She goes back to looking straight ahead while she talks to him. "So I don't drink because I say horrible, regrettable things when I do. There's that."

"Yeah," is all he has to say to that. He would say more, but he's been thinking a lot since last night,
about how he feels about it. Initially he was particularly pissed off because he felt betrayed. Then he thought about that feeling and wasn't so sure he was right to feel that way. It's not like they were friends. They were friend-ish, but really it was just that they were around each other a lot because of a shared chain-smoking habit. When he thought about it, he really didn't know shit about Erna and there was no reason to expect anything of her.

"What I said was fucked up."

"No shit."

"I have a thing about men. That's not your fault. I just…" She pauses, looking for the right words. "I have issues and I fucking hate your gender."

"I got that." If she's looking for forgiveness she caught him at a bad time. He's not in the mood.

"I know it's not fair and you don't deserve my misandrist bullshit." She takes a long drag on her cigarette and doesn't say anything further.

He thinks she's done. He flicks the ash of his cigarette away. He isn't sure what he wants to say. He was angry and feeling sorry for himself, but he's starting to feel like he should feel sorry for her instead.

"And I know it annoys you the way I always carry on conversations without looking at you." She lets go of the bow she had been straightening out on her dress. "I don't like looking at people. It's not even avoiding the eye contact, but I get unnerved looking at faces at all. I'm more comfortable talking like this."

He decides to feel sorry for her instead. If she did turn to look at him, she'd see the 'Who hurt you?' in his eyes. Internally he curses himself for being shitty at being supportive or comforting. The closest he can do is diffusing a charged situation with sarcasm. So he says, "You didn't have any trouble staring at Hanji like she was Ruby fucking Rose."

Erna twists her cigarette into the cement, scattering embers and painting a black ashy smear. "That was actually to distract them from the game. I couldn't have been less interested. The whole alternative look isn't my thing." Her hand almost brushes Levi when she reaches back for her coffin purse. She takes out another cigarette. "I was counting piercings. That's one of the ways I can make it look like I'm making eye contact without actually doing it."

"Yeah?" A breeze is making it hard for Erna to light her cigarette. After her fourth try, he reaches over and cups his hands around her lighter to block the wind, being careful to not get too close. As the flame flickers behind his hands he asks, "How many do I have?"

Without a thought, Erna answers, "Seventeen."

He takes his hands away and watches her puff at her cigarette to get a good, even cherry. "What do you do with people who aren't pierced?"

The black cigarette is such a contrast to her pale lips. She takes two long drags before she answers. "Look at necks. Nobody can notice the difference. They assume you're making eye contact because that's what you should be doing."

They're quiet for a while. The crackling of Erna's clove the only sound between them. It's a peaceful silence that Levi doesn't feel awkward about. He's not pissed at her anymore and he's comfortable with the quiet.
But he breaks the silence. "I have twenty-seven piercings."

And she looks at him. "Nah-uh."

He opens his mouth and curls his tongue up to show her the hoop through his tongue web and the barbell that sticks out through the tip of his tongue.

"So that's nineteen," she says, like he's wrong. Like he doesn't know how much jewelry he put in his body.

"There are eight more that you can't see."

She nods skeptically and sucks on her clove. She exhales when she asks, "Where?" smoke curling around the word.

Levi lowers his head as if for an executioner's ax, bowing low so that she can see the two microdermals at the nape of his neck. When she hums a little he straightens back up.

"And?"

He smirks at her when she winces and curses under her breath after he pulls up his shirt to show off the barbells placed through his nipples.

"Fuck that. What else?"

He lets his shirt fall. "You don't want to see the rest."

"Why not?"

"Trust me."

"Try me," she dares.

Levi shrugs. He stands up and gives her one last chance to back down. "You sure?"

"Go ahead."

Levi sighs and unzips his jeans. He goes to pull out the second most-pierced part of his body. He stops when Erna turns away, puts her hands up, and says, "Nope. You win."

He closes his zipper. "Knew you were bluffing."

When he sits down again she says smugly, "You didn't know last night."
"Now look," Erna sighs heavily, "This doesn't mean that I love any of you any less than the others." She pauses to look around the room before she continues, "It's just gotten too damn crowded around here and some of you have to go."

She nods solemnly. Satisfied with her explanation, she picks up a stack of six books and sets them in an empty cardboard box. Her fingers hesitate before reaching for more and she bites her lip. She takes a copy of Cannery Row by Steinbeck back out of the box and rubs the worn corners of the cover lovingly with her thumbs, she caresses the spine, riffles through the pages marked up with some stranger's penciled in notes. She sighs and sets it back out on the floor, her hand only leaving it for a second before she rolls her eyes at herself, feeling like a little girl getting emotional over stuffed animals. Without looking at it and before she can second guess her decision again, she picks it up and tosses it back into the cardboard box.

"This is going to take a while," she says quietly to herself as she scans the stacks of books littering the floor.

There are far too many books for the size of her apartment. She was okay with that until now, not minding stepping around the stacks, telling herself she'd get a bookshelf someday and knowing that it was just a wishful lie. But with Annie coming over for the first time in less than four hours she thinks that her cramped apartment with only fractions of floor space free of books might make a bad impression.

And she very much wants to make a good impression.

She's decided to limit herself to forty. Forty seems like a reasonable number. She doesn't know how many she has right now. It looks like more than a hundred, maybe two hundred. But she also packed up and moved out of her old place in such a rush that she doesn't even know what books she has. She remembers the panic. There was no thinking. There was just her sweeping rows of books off the ornate, built-in shelves, letting them fall into boxes, Deirdre needing to stop her from taking more than would be able to fit in her car.

She prioritizes. First she gets rid of duplicates, then biographies, then nonfiction, textbooks, and reference books – except the Oxford English Dictionary, because she's not a monster. After making those cuts it becomes difficult and emotional, and there is a lot of groaning and whimpering. She starts taking stock of where she can put stacks of books so that they don't look so out of order. Under the desk, on the desk; two stacks of twenty next to the desk don't look so bad. She consolidates space under the bed, which had already been utilized as storage space for a box of BDSM toys and whatever thigh-highs, gloves, and corsets wouldn't fit in her small dresser.

Finally, after almost an hour, Erna has the cardboard box filled with as much as she can carry and
she hurries down the stairs of the crumbling walk-up before she can change her mind. Surprisingly, Levi is still out on the stoop, smoking a second cigarette before work. It makes her wonder for a second what is different, because normally it's one cup of tea and one smoke and then he leaves. She doesn't ask. She just sets her box on the curb and takes the opportunity to smoke with him because she still feels shitty about the night before. The only way she knows how to make amends is to be present and not say anything horrible, which she hopes he appreciates.

She sits next to him and tries to ascertain whether he still plans on leaving for work without actually asking him, because her entire day is fucked if he doesn't. She can't think of a way to make a BDSM session quiet enough that he wouldn't hear it through the wall. Even with a gag. Maybe electrical play, that's more or less silent… or knives… She shakes her head. Anything quiet she can think of is too extreme for a first time with someone new or it's too soft to make her feel okay again. Impact play is the safest way to go and that gets fucking loud. She decides to just ask, "Are you still going to work?" and she braces herself in case he gets snarky and asks her what it matters to her.

He hums after he finishes exhaling a large cloud of smoke and looking at his phone. "Yeah." He tilts his chin at the cardboard box on the curb. "Still house cleaning?"

She sighs heavily burdened with the pain of letting them go. "I need to get a book shelf."

He nods. There's a quiet warmth about him that makes it seem like her apology about the night before was good enough. She's relieved. She doesn't need the angst of one more bridge burned. She has very few bridges left, maybe two – him and Deirdre – still connecting her to the world outside herself and her apartment.

She wants to stay out there with him for a while, but it feels weird not doing anything with her hands. If it's too obvious when she asks him for a cigarette, he doesn't show it. He picks one out of the pack and hands it to her like it's a completely normal thing and hands her the lighter before she even asks. She likes the way he never tries to light her cigarette for her. She would find it an uncomfortable invasion of personal space, and obnoxiously patronizing.

She lights it and inhales, then makes a face. She forgot how disgusting normal cigarettes taste. Not sweet and heavy like her cloves rolled in their black paper. She doesn't say anything about it as she holds the lighter out to him, not wanting to seem ungrateful. Just as well as she knows when to push harder to make people feel horrible, she knows when to pull back and be gracious if she's in the rare mood where she wants to repair things.

They sit in silence for a minute and she leans back on her hands, holding the cigarette with loose lips. She suddenly feels very tired as if this moment of rest has allowed all of the nervous energy she's built up in anticipation of Annie's visit to finally exhaust her. It's not bad. She hasn't felt tired in a long time. Her paranoia makes her feel constantly too alert.

Out of habit she checks her surroundings in her peripheral vision. When she recognizes Erwin's black BMW parked down the block near the café she groans silently to herself and tries to smoke her acrid borrowed cigarette faster so that she can go inside.

She can't put her finger on what it is she hates about the man. Maybe it's just everything – his entire way of being. His good looks, his relaxed demeanor, his clothes, his eyes, the way that literally nothing she says bothers him, and if it does he never shows it. Everything.

Or maybe it's just that he's unreadable. Nobody is as blank a slate as Erwin Smith. She's never met anyone so confounding. Give her three minutes with anyone and Erna can tell you almost everything that makes them tick just from the way they carry their shoulders and inflect the pitch of their voice.
It's what makes her so good at saying especially hurtful things. She's good at pinpointing insecurities. For example, she can tell that Levi tries painfully hard to act like he doesn't give a shit about anything because he's very sensitive. Underneath the hard exterior he's actually very respectful and fair and probably has a strong sense of justice. He's always working and puts a lot of focus and heart into his work, which speaks to a certain level of humility and pride that he needs to earn rather than feeling entitled to it; there's more than a hint of imposter complex there. He's addicted to routine, which is a coping mechanism either for past trauma or obsessive compulsion. The way he reacted to her vacuum cleaner makes her think obsessive compulsion that also extends to cleaning as a way to exert control over his environment and his life, which tells her that most of his childhood was unpredictable and out of his control. He probably didn't get enough hugs, which would be the reason for all the piercings and tattoos that scream 'please pay attention to me' no matter how much he tries to deny it.

But she can't tell a goddamn thing about Erwin. She couldn't even make any educated guesses. She would almost think he's some kind of cunning sociopath and is truly empty inside, except a sociopath, no matter how good they are at acting, wouldn't be able to mimic that warm smile he flashes them as he comes down the sidewalk with black tea for Levi and a latte for her. And, most infuriating of all, she can't figure out what the fuck he's doing with Levi. First she'd thought he was a boyfriend or sugar daddy or something, but the amount of personal space they give each other is too much for that. Erwin maintains about two and a half to three feet distance from Levi when he walks up and says good morning. He sets the cardboard cup of tea on the step near him, but he doesn't lean over him in an overly familiar way – they never touch. So there isn't a romantic relationship there.

He asks Erna how she's doing as he extends the latte to her. She scowls and silently snatches it from his hands. Free coffee is free coffee, she doesn't give a shit about who it's coming from. It doesn't bother him. If anything, the way his eyes twinkle make it look like he finds her coldness amusing. The motherfucker.

Levi and Erwin are not friends. They can't be friends. They're too different. Complete polar opposites. She can't imagine how they even would have met. So she goes back to the john theory. Maybe Levi is a pro and Erwin comes over random mornings for a quick, impersonal fuck.

She shakes her head. What kind of prostitute only has one client? Besides, Levi doesn't seem like the type. It goes against everything else she knows about him.

So what the fuck is it, she wonders. She's too proud to ask. Asking would mean that she cares, and she certainly doesn't care. And she doesn't realize she's glaring at Erwin until he turns from his small talk with Levi to smile at her. She scowls at him for catching her and looks away to discourage any attempt at conversation.

The hair on the back of her neck stands up when he turns his head and his eyes fall on her box of discarded books. Her fingers grip the filter of her cigarette too tightly as he bends down, picks one off the top, and hums appreciatively. She feels protective. She wanted to get rid of them, but she wanted some nameless, faceless stranger to take them. Not him.

When he looks back to her on the stoop and asks, "Are you giving these away?" Erna feels overexposed. She doesn't like that he accurately assumed they were hers. It feels like he can see through her which is that much more uncomfortable because she can't see anything about him at all.

But she acts like she doesn't care. She doesn't want to give him the satisfaction of getting under her skin – and she thinks it would satisfy him, the creepy, smug prick – so she hums and waves her
cigarette dismissively even though her skin crawls when he picks out more books and looks them over with curiosity. She can't help herself cringing when he holds up one of her duplicate copies of The Compass Rose by Ursula K. LeGuin.

"You have a lot of good stuff in here. Have you read them all?" he asks unassumingly.

"No. They're purely decorative," she answers, sarcasm being the best defense. Levi snorts next to her, and again she wonders what their relationship is that he always seems so amused when she verbally abuses the chiseled blond ubermensch.

Erwin smirks at her comment and puts back the small hardcover of Victory by Joseph Conrad that he'd been looking at. He stands back up and Erna is relieved until he says, "Then you don't mind if I take them?"

A shrill, distressed, almost childish voice shouts, "You can't have them!" and she's shocked that it erupted from her. Quickly, before she has a chance to feel embarrassed about it, she drops the cigarette and snuffs it out with her boot, then she runs over and picks the box up, offering a confused Erwin no explanation as she holds it protectively against her hip.

"I'm sorry, I thought you were giving them away," he says graciously.

She narrows her eyes and shouts at him, "Meine Bücher sind nicht zum verbrennen da, sie scheidt Nazi! Ich weiß was sie mit literarischen Werken machen die ihrer Volksideologie widerspricht. Nehmen Sie ihre staatliche zensierung und schieben sie in ihren arsch."

He tilts his head to the side as Levi snickers from the stoop. "I'm sorry, I don't understand."

"Sicherlich. Sie können mich nicht täuschen, Herr Smith." She begins walking away with the box, stalking towards the café on the corner and shouting over her shoulder, "Sie werden heute eh nur Leichen verbrennen müssen also werde ich ihre blutigen Hände nicht an meine Bücher lassen."

After she disappears, Levi asks Erwin, "What'd she say that time?"

Erwin's hand goes to the back of his neck sheepishly. "Something about me being a Nazi again...and bloody hands, I think?" He reaches inside his blazer and pulls a small book out of his shirt pocket underneath. He flips through the pages and squints at it, running his finger down a page and mouthing a word silently.

Levi scoffs. "Don't tell me you got a German to English dictionary to translate her insults."

"Something about kindling or burning," Erwin murmurs to himself, too absorbed to hear Levi.

"Oi, shithead." Levi catches his attention because he hates being ignored.

"Oh," Erwin looks up, distracted from his translation, "Sorry," but then, unable to resist, he looks down at the tiny book again and mutters to himself, "She makes a lot of oddly specific historical references."

Levi rolls his eyes and blows a cloud of smoke out the side of his mouth. "You're obsessed and creepy."

Erwin puts the dictionary back into his pocket and smiles. "I'm naturally curious. Aren't you?"

"About what?" Levi says bitterly, feeling protective of Erna's privacy for some reason.
"She seems very out of place here. It's strange. So, naturally, I'm curious."

Levi can't deny that Erna does seem out of place in their old, abused, rusting building and this shitty neighborhood, but he chalks it up to being one of those things in life that just doesn't make sense and it doesn't have to. That's why he doesn't ask her questions. He doesn't ask why she's so fluent in German, he doesn't ask why she can afford a Dyson vacuum but not a smartphone, and he doesn't ask what her whole fucking deal is. He doesn't need to force her into a neat box that will make her make sense. He shrugs. "I figure she's an alcoholic with a record or something and leave it at that."

Erwin hums thoughtfully, more interested than Levi is comfortable with, and he says, "I'll look into it."

"You can do that?" Levi is sure he can, otherwise he wouldn't have said it, but aren't there rules about that or something?

"Easily," Erwin answers dismissively, either not registering Levi's concerned tone or not caring. "As long as she didn't give me a fake name."

"… Ethically?" Levi asks.

"Oh, it's completely non-ethical." Erwin admits flippantly.

As Levi screws his cigarette into the concrete he comments sarcastically, "Why do I feel like that's never stopped you before?"

Eren leans over the bar, enjoying the ambient noise of the espresso machine behind him and taking pictures of his work with his smartphone. He's been working on his latte art and can do a really beautiful swan with the steamed milk after weeks of practice. He uploads everything that comes out well to Instagram. When he goes to caption the picture of his latest latte swan he asks Armin who's plating some apple hand pies at the other end of the bar, "What should our hashtag be? 'One Shot'? or 'One Shot Café'?"

Armin doesn't decide for him. He makes it a rule to give Eren the tools to solve problems or come up with his own answers rather than just offering him the best solution. He doesn't want Eren to get intellectually lazy. It hasn't yet fostered the habits he hopes for. Eren still asks him first about any subject, before trying to figure it out himself, but Armin keeps at it anyway.

"Maybe you should search variations of those hashtags and see which one gets the least use." One Shot is the name of their café, but might be too simple for Instagram branding.

"Good idea," he hums and begins to close out of the picture he was about to post when Erna kicks the door open. Eren slams his phone down on the bar like he's been caught doing something he shouldn't. Mikasa had talked with him yesterday – well, scolded him really – about not pissing Erna off since she is a good customer. Eren had gotten very defensive about it, because he doesn't try to piss Erna off. It seems like she just doesn't like him no matter what he does. His voice cracks like a teenager as he rushes to give her his full attention and tells her, "I gave Erwin your latte, he said he'd give it to you. Did you get it? Do you want another one?"

She doesn't comment – doesn't even really look at him. She walks up to the bar and unceremoniously drops a large cardboard box on the wooden floor and says, "Here, nerds, have some books." Then she turns on her heel and stalks out, acting very angry for someone who just gave them a gift.

Eren is terribly confused and watches the door close behind her, stunned. Armin cheerfully thanks
"I've been wanting to put a library corner over there anyway," Eren jumps a little when he hears Mikasa's voice because he'd thought she was still in the office. She's standing next to Armin now, looking towards the back corner of their café space where there are a couple of soft purple couches and armchairs. He slowly nods that a library corner would be good over there, still struggling with the confusion of what the hell just happened.

Mikasa walks over to the counter and silently takes Eren's tip jar, emptying it and pocketing the money.

"Hey –!"

She ignores whatever he was about to shout and interrupts him, "I'm going to go get some reclaimed barn wood from Sawkill and make shelves."

"O-okay..?" Eren says. "What about my tips?"

"Keep working," she says evenly. "You'll make more."

Eren groans as he watches her leave. He was saving his tips up to get a PS4. He'd probably need to make four hundred more cups of coffee to get enough saved up again. "She treats me like a kid," he complains to no one in particular.

"She loves you," Armin says. A piece of his long blond bangs comes untucked from behind his ear while he keeps going through the different books that Erna all but threw at them.

"She loves you too and she doesn't treat you like a child," Eren points out.

Armin hums, only half paying attention. Eren gives up, knowing he'll never have much luck in distracting Armin from books. He could be bleeding out on the counter and Armin would probably nod and say 'That's nice.'

He picks his phone back up and decides to just tag his picture with every variation of 'One Shot' and 'Café' that he can think of. After posting it he starts to make another espresso so that he can practice his latte roses, but as soon as he starts, Armin scolds, "Eren, don't waste coffee."

Eren winces, his nostrils flare and his teal eyes wrinkle at the corners as he whines in frustration, "Now you're treating me like a kid too!"

Armin calmly unfolds himself from his kneeling position and stands up, walking back around the counter to come up behind Eren and wrap his arms around him. He rests his forehead on Eren's shoulder and squeezes him tightly, "We don't treat you like a kid, Eren."

It's hard for Eren to be upset when Armin holds him. The blond is like a human tranquilizer with how calm and self-assured he always is. Even just watching him bake seems to slow time down for Eren. Still, he knows when he's being handled and it takes away some of the calming effect. "We're supposed to be equal partners, but you and Mikasa are always bossing me around."

"Aw, Eren," Armin coos. He puts his arms around his tan shoulders and tugs him down a tiny bit to plant a kiss on his forehead. "We all just have different strengths. We boss you around about stuff like this because you're not great with money." Eren grunts stubbornly, but Armin goes on, "We never tell you how to make coffee, do we?"
"I guess not."

"And you're great with the customers... and you're the most creative... and you make the best mochas...," Armin kisses him in a different spot with each item on his list, slowly turning Eren's stubborn, frustrated grunts into little contented, needy whining noises with each one.

Eren is about to ask Armin to close the café and go upstairs with him when they're interrupted by his arch nemesis, Jean 'Horseface' Kirschtein, strutting through the door like he owns the place as usual. Upon catching them in an intimate moment, he smirks and teases, "Gay."

Armin doesn't turn around. He keeps clinging, unbothered by Jean, hands wrapped behind Eren's neck as the tan barista shouts past his head angrily, "You are!"

Jean swings his legs over a stool at the end of the counter and corrects Eren, "I'm poly."

Even Armin can't soothe Eren anymore. He releases Eren from his embrace as he loses his temper and stomps over, to lean over the counter so that he can point in Jean's face and yell, "You can be gay and poly, fuckwad. Besides, you're not even, you just say that because you think it's cool. We're poly," he says, referring to himself, Mikasa, and Armin, who have been making their polyamorous trio work long before they moved here and opened this café. "You're a basic, monogamous bitch."

"Suck my dick, Yeager."

"You fucking wish."

Jean sneers. The most infuriating thing about him, for Eren, is that nothing he says gets to him. He always treats Eren like a fucking joke, the angrier he makes him the funnier he thinks it is. But before he can say something new to provoke Eren, Armin goes back around the counter towards the box of books again and interrupts them, his voice all syrupy sweet, "Jean, can you help me with these books?"

At which Jean jumps off his stool because Armin is the sexiest, most irresistible, androgynous pastry chef in probably all of New York and also a manipulative little shit. Eren is pissed and jealous and shouts, "Fuck off, Jean. I can help him."

"Actually you can't, Yeager," he says as he picks up the box easily. "You have to make me a white chocolate mocha."

"Like hell I do!"

"Eren," Armin chides.

He grits his teeth and has to accept that Jean is a customer even if he's also the biggest dick on earth. Eren turns around to the counter behind him and starts making the mocha as Armin shows Jean where to put the books and he shouts after both of them, "You're not getting whipped cream, you fucking horse!"

Erna growls to herself on the way back to the building. She should have stayed in the café a little longer, maybe then she could have missed them. Levi just disappears through the door as she walks up. Erwin pauses and holds the door for her with a smile so gentle and warm it could have been practiced in a mirror.

At the top step she pauses defiantly. She wants to go in and finish straightening up for Annie, but she
doesn't want to accept Erwin's kind gesture, so she crosses her arms and stands out of the doorway staring at him. Erwin does nothing to back down from the stalemate and he remains poised as Erna takes the time to scrutinize him like she's done so many times before, trying to neatly categorize him. All she can really guess at is his socioeconomic bracket, because she's seen enough rich people in her life to have an innate sense of who is and isn't.

Erwin is well off, as she can see from the BMW and his neat clothes and polished shoes, but he isn't high-society well off. He doesn't have any of the aura of pettiness, narcissism, or avarice. He looks like someone who knows what hard work is, even if his profession (whatever it is) isn't blue collar. She's been able to ascertain that he doesn't have what she calls a "suit and tie job," which means the kind of job where, if one didn't show up in a nice suit and tie at the bare minimum, they would be fired on the spot. His clothes aren't expensive enough for that. He is usually wearing a tie, but not a full suit, sometimes not even a blazer. So he does something middle of the road, probably in an office, maybe something techy or something in accounting, except those jobs don't explain the way he carries himself like a cop or ex-military. The mystery frustrates her. She should just ask him what the fuck he does for a living, but that would fall under the realm of polite conversation, which she would never grace him with.

Erwin takes the awkward moment in stride and with grace, like he does everything, making Erna that much angrier. She crosses her arms and turns her back on him, signaling that she won't be following them inside. He lets the door fall closed.

Erna picks up the latte she'd left on the stoop in her hurry to get her discarded books to safety. The coffee is on the cold side of lukewarm now, but she doesn't care.

"What the fuck is that clean-cut, Captain America-looking motherfucker doing with Punk of the Month?" she wonders aloud to herself.

"She hates you," Levi observes wryly as Erwin follows him up the stairs.

"It's okay," Erwin says as he matches Levi's quick pace. "I get a lot of that."

Levi can imagine that most of Erwin's "clients" aren't as amenable to his services as he is. When he was in prison he learned quickly that most prisoners have issues with authority for authority's sake, not distinguishing between well-meaning, helpful people in positions of authority and people that are venal shitholes running amok on a power trip. Erwin is one of the helpful ones. His job is to help Levi cope with the world and make sure that he doesn't end up incarcerated again and he takes it seriously. Levi doesn't want to go back to prison, so he listens to Erwin. It's pretty fucking simple. But he knows most people who end up being Erwin's clients probably have a lot of problems with anyone telling them what they should do, helpful or not.

Levi prides himself on being smart enough to weigh the costs and benefits of submitting to authority and following dumb rules, like the drug tests and the random searches and needing to check in at Erwin's office once a month. It's all bullshit and he knows it, but if he can grit his teeth and conquer the urge to tell him to fuck off and mind his own business while Erwin goes through his dresser and checks under his mattress for drugs, then in less than one more year he'll be entirely free with no one to answer to but himself.

Besides, he deserves this.

As usual, Erwin makes small talk while he opens and closes drawers of art supplies, content to glance rather than rifle through. He used to be more thorough, Levi thinks.
"What does Erna do?"

And his small talk used to revolve more around Levi and how he was doing. "You should ask her," he answers.

"I'm asking you."

Levi stays standing, arms crossed, "She edits shitty books."

"Ah," Erwin finishes quickly opening and shutting all of the organizer drawers of supplies around Levi's drafting table and he runs his latex gloved hand under the surface, swiping for anything that could be taped underneath it. "I would have guessed translator."

"Does she know any other languages?" he asks as he crosses the one-room apartment to the fridge.

Levi thinks for a moment, then deadpans, "I think she cursed at me in Russian the other day."

"What did she say?"

Levi doesn't respond. He gives Erwin a second to comprehend the silence as 'how the fuck would I know?' After a moment Erwin realizes his mistake and smirks. Levi offers, "Given the context, I think she told me to fuck off. Is that helpful?"

"You're sure it was Russian?" Erwin turns back to the fridge and moves some things out of the way.

"It sure as hell wasn't German." When she's pissed off, Erna curses and mutters in enough German that Levi thinks he's going to be fluent soon just from listening.

"That's interesting," Erwin says noncommittally as he goes through the contents of the top shelf, so that Levi isn't sure if he does really find it interesting or not.

"Do you think she's an international spy?" Levi finally sits down at the kitchen table, sick of standing and waiting for Erwin to give him a plastic cup to pee in.

"Maybe a double agent," Erwin responds without a trace of snark, even though the comment must be sarcastic. "You know you can't have this," he points at the three beers Levi stashed in the crisper drawer, between the spinach and carrots. Ymir had insisted he take them last night and Levi didn't want to snub her generosity.

"I guess you'll have to take me back in," Levi extends his hands as if surrendering them for the handcuffs.

Erwin pushes the drawer closed with the toe of his shoe and closes the fridge again. "Just don't go to any bars. That's harder to ignore."

Levi wants to ask what the point of that is. His crime wasn't even alcohol-related. But he keeps his mouth shut and nods.

As if he can read his mind, Erwin tells him, "It's to keep you out of trouble. Some people get violent when they drink."

Levi doesn't bother defending his drinking habits. Rules are rules. He changes the subject. "Are you going to piss test me?"

"Would you pass?" Erwin asks.

Levi feels insulted. He hasn't touched any illicit substances in at least six years – unless alcohol
counts, which it shouldn't. It's not that impressive an accomplishment since he was never a huge fan of drugs in the first place. When he first learned the conditions of his parole and the random drug tests he'd protested that he only ever sold the pills, he didn't take them. That was a lie. He'd occasionally taken them. It was fun to fuck on ecstasy once in a while. But he never got into any of the hard shit he was sure they were testing his piss for. "Of course I'd fucking pass. Have I ever failed?"

"That's good enough for me."

Levi fakes a pout. "I'm going to start thinking you don't care, Smith."

Erwin sits at the table and relaxes a little into his chair. "I deal with a lot of terrible things every day, Levi. Do you know how many clients I have that actually make it through their parole without relapsing?"

"No." Levi swiftly gets up from his chair and starts getting his shit together for work, not wanting to think about it.

"About one out of every ten," Erwin states matter of factly while he watches Levi gather his things. "So no, out of all the people I'm going to see today, I don't feel like I need to test you and I don't feel like I need to write you up for a few IPA's in your fridge. I'm just grateful that you've kept your job and have never tried to punch me in the face."

"Does that happen a lot?" Levi asks, tossing his bag onto the table, followed by his sketch book and a couple of pens.

"I get shot at four or five times a year."

Levi pauses at the closet, mid-reach for his favorite hoodie. He's filled with respect for the man, and also a trace of contempt. Erwin seems to be intelligent, but Levi thinks it takes an exceptionally stupid person to do what he does with the amount of faith that he has. Erwin's problem is that he truly wants to help people and believes that everyone deserves a chance. Levi knows that people like him either can't or won't be helped and don't deserve second chances. He comes back to the table and starts stuffing his things into the bag, minus the sketchbook which Erwin has turned towards him to examine the page it fell open to when Levi tossed it onto hard, white table.

"Your job sucks," Levi tells him as he waits for him to relinquish the book.

"This looks like her," Erwin says, pointing to a pencil sketch that takes up a third of the page.

It's three seconds before Levi takes in what Erwin means. Three seconds of staring at the drawing he's pointing at. In that time he finally sees what he didn't see while he was in the process of sketching it early this morning. He drew Erna again. This time he put her face on a demon girl with little horns poking out of her forehead. It's very fitting.

In his head he is screaming and cursing at himself, but he puts on a cool demeanor and plays dumb. "Like who?"

Erwin turns and locks eyes with him. "You don't see it?"

"See what?" Deep down, Levi knows that Erwin can spot a lie from miles away. He knows he isn't fooling anyone. But his pride won't let him make the admission.

Erwin smirks. Levi knows he's caught, but Erwin lets him keep his dignity. "Must just be me then. Maybe I am obsessed." He surrenders the sketchbook to Levi so that he can angrily shove it in his
Erna gets the text from Annie exactly one minute before noon and she runs down the stairs, the stiff leather soles of her kitten heel boots clicking a fast rhythm, ending in abrupt silence when she reaches the door on the first floor. She takes a breath and smooths out her dress one last time. Her heart picks up the beat her heels left off as she opens the door.

Annie is dressed a little like the people Erna used to work with – a step above business casual, her hair in a bun. Again, Erna is relieved that she doesn't look like a dominatrix.

Erna forgets to step aside and let Annie in until the short, severe blonde takes a step forward forcing Erna to maneuver back and pivot out of the way. Once inside Annie looks her up and down, raising an eyebrow a little at how quick Erna is on her feet – and in heels no less.

"Your buzzer doesn't work?" Annie says as Erna leads the way up the stairs.

"I guess not. Sorry, I didn't know." She nervously reaches into the pocket of her dress, fumbling with her keys even though she won't need them for two more flights of stairs.

"You never have guests?" Every question Annie asks is more of a statement, a barely perceptible upward inflection tacked onto the end for form's sake. She doesn't seem like the type to ever have any questions that she doesn't already have the answer to.

"You're the first," Erna confirms.

That's the end of the conversation until the apartment door is safely locked against the outside world. Normally Erna very much owns her space, moving freely and aggressively no matter whom she's sharing it with, but in Annie's presence she becomes meek. She waits to be told what to do, approved of, given permission. She lowers her defense, which for her is the chilling, cruel offense she puts up around people. Unconsciously, her shoulders lower and her chin tilts downward, making her seem slightly smaller than she is. She only follows a few feet into the small apartment and stops there to await further instruction and watch Annie's icy blue eyes casually survey the interior.

Annie doesn't touch anything. Erna notices because she's become so used to that subtle tactic many pro-dommes use of disinterestedly picking things up and putting them down as a display of authority and power that the absence of the practice stands out, and in its absence Erna is aware of the silliness of the farce.

It doesn't take long for Annie to look around, the single room apartment being only around four hundred square feet at most. When finished she turns and looks over at her shoulder at Erna and says, "You can sit."

She doesn't give any indication as to where she should sit, not even a nod or a glance, so Erna steps lightly over to Annie and straightens her skirt as she defaults to the floor. Before she can properly kneel, Annie stops her and says, "Sit on the bed." As Erna changes course, the quietly intimidating blonde reaches for the simple wooden chair at the desk against the wall behind her, the only actual chair in the apartment. She lifts it and brings it over to the bed in the opposite corner, setting it across from Erna and sitting down, crossing her ankles under her. "I want you at eye level for now."

Erna blushed a little at her mistake and casts her eyes downward to avoid Annie's intense stare. She fidgets with her dress, unable to resist showing the obvious sign of nervousness.

Annie gets right down to business. "Your scene is going to be shortened today, and maybe the next
one too." Before Erna can ask why, she says, "I'm a perfectionist. I don't like to do anything if I'm not going to be the best at it."

Erna nods. She could have guessed that.

"So we're going to talk first," Annie lets that hang in the air and waits in silence until Erna's eyes finally meet hers. When she gains eye contact she continues, "and you need to be honest."

It's the addition of that condition that pushes Erna's submissive buttons, because it's tacitly disapproving and implies that she's likely to be dishonest. She hasn't known her for more than a cumulative hour, but after this and their first meeting where Annie accurately accused her of being a procrastinator, she feels like Annie already knows all of her manipulative bullshit and isn't going to let her get away with any of it…and she likes that, so she nods that she understands.

Annie reaches down to the case that she'd set next to her and opens it with a click. She pulls out a yellow legal pad and a pen. "So before we do anything I want to know what tone and communication style you prefer, and what your goals are for our sessions."

Erna almost feels like they've already begun a scene – a therapist/patient roleplay. She almost wants to say, 'My goals are to be left a sobbing wreck, all of the ugly emotions and fears temporarily ripped out of me and replaced with adrenaline and endorphins…' but she holds her tongue. She doesn't know what to say about tone and communication style, not sure where Annie is looking for her to begin. She waits to see if she'll elaborate, but Annie is quietly focused on her, waiting to see what she'll say.

"I hate clichés."

"Which ones?" Annie doesn't write anything yet.

"Counting cane strokes, slave protocol, leather and latex…" Erna can't think of any others at the moment, but she adds, "I like the way you dress."

"Thank you," Annie responds while looking at her pad and writing.

Erna relaxes a little now that Annie isn't watching her so closely and she feels bold enough to ask, "Can I call you Annie?"

"Because 'Mistress' is a cliché?"

It is. It's always bothered Erna. She thinks that it lacks imagination, but her pro-dommes have always insisted on it.

Annie looks up from her pad and seems to consider it for a second before saying, "Try it."

And it should be such an easy thing, but Erna hesitates and her heart beats faster like she's about to do something dangerous. She's never been allowed to use a Domme's real name before. It feels taboo. It teeters precariously on the tip of her tongue before tumbling past her lips, "… Annie."

Annie is not as impressed by it as Erna is. She simply nods and consents, "Sounds alright to me."

"Here's your gross healthy food."

Hanji drops the plastic bowl-shaped container of salad on the desk with a look of disgust. Levi is, at
this point, done with even trying to talk about food with either of his coworkers. He doesn't understand how they eat the way they do and he doesn't want to. Sure, he likes bacon and all. He's not a monster. But the amount of meat and cheese and salt that Mike and Hanji consume would kill him. He's tried to convince them to integrate a vegetable into their diet once in a while, but they act like he's suggesting they drink kerosene.

He lets them give him shit about being healthy. It's a small concession made out of moral superiority and his regret that they're both going to keel over from clogged arteries in the middle of work someday. Though, when he mentions this, Hanji counters that at least one of his lungs is probably going to attempt to escape the blackened, tar-soaked prison that is his chain smoker's chest much sooner than her arteries are going to harden with cholesterol. He can only be disciplined about so many things: work, food, sleep, cleanliness...but not smoking.

There was a half-assed proverb that a semi-lucid wannabe wise man told him when he was in prison. Something about a god of death coming down to earth and finding a man with no vices. Death ran down the list – drugs, sex, overeating, laziness, greed, gambling, etc. The man didn't indulge in any sins at all. Rather than being in awe of the man, Death decided that he was morally worse than anyone he'd met. Death thought that a man with no vices must hate humanity and want to separate himself from the rest of society.

He thinks about that sometimes when Hanji and Mike accuse him of living like a monk. He doesn't want to get so disciplined that he separates himself completely from humanity, so he makes sure to gamble and drink once in a while. Once a month he'll let Hanji order lunch for him and he'll feel sick for a couple of days from all the fat and salt.

Mike comes over to the desk and takes his burger and fries from the paper bag Hanji placed on the edge of the desk. He stops before taking his lunch into the back and lifts his chin at Levi and says, "Let's see it."

"See what?"

"If you want to hide your work, wear looser clothes," Mike answers, pointing at Levi's midsection where, just barely, he could see the puffy rectangular outline of a taped-on patch of cotton gauze under Levi's tight Black Flag tank top.

Hanji's 'ooh's at Mike's keen observance and echoes, "Yeah, let's see it," taking a break from inhaling fries right over the desk and inching closer to get a good look.

"Fuck off," Levi says and turns to look at the computer as if there's anything he needs to check. Hanji reaches toward him and threatens, "If you don't show us, I'm going to poke it."

Levi is quick to swat Hanji's long fingers out of the way and he stands up, sighing in resignation, knowing they won't leave it alone. He lifts his shirt, then automatically reaches for the container on the desk and pumps hand sanitizer onto his palm. He rubs it over his hands before peeling the tape and the gauze away to reveal a still slightly red and puffy landscape he outlined that morning. The perspective is angled as if looking down from a hillside over sprawling fields and woods, small villages dotting the countryside. The detailing is meticulous and the tiny, almost scratchy black lines give it the look of something out of an old story book. The landscape is sprawling away from the viewer and over Levi's abdomen from his ribcage down and over, fading out and ending in an incredibly tall stone wall that dwarfs any of the houses or even the tallest cypress trees, putting an abrupt end to the depth of the whole composition. Above that, in the sky, are the small birds he started out with weeks ago when he'd woken up too early and was itching to do something with his hands. The rest of it came to him in a grey, vague early morning dream and he'd been compelled to
make it real. He didn't sketch it out first. He didn't need to. It feels like the image only gets clearer in his head as he gets further away from the dream. He still has more detail to add, but he needs to let the skin heal.

Mike doesn't say anything but, "Nice." He knows better than to offer Levi too much feedback. Even if it's positive, Levi gets too distracted by it. The praise eats away at him as much as if Mike told him that his work was shit. Maybe even it would be better if Mike did tell him his work is shit. That seems to be what he wants to hear most of the time.

Hanji isn't so reserved. Levi flinches away and yells, "Don't get your airborne germs near my skin, shithead," when they ooh and ah and bring their face in for a closer look. He slaps the gauze and tape back down to cover his healing skin, a little too fast and a little too hard, and he tries, unsuccessfully, to not wince at the stinging pain he just caused himself.

Hitch, the intern, rolls her eyes and takes a copy of a drawing for Mike's next client out of the printer tray. She narrows her amber eyes at all of them and tosses the print towards Mike, but it goes flying off the edge of the desk and to the floor. "How come you're allowed to do work outside the shop, but when I do it, I'm a 'shitty scratcher'?

"Because you are a shitty scratcher," Levi answers. He looks the nineteen year old community college student over and crinkles his nose in disgust at the messy tattoos she's already done on herself with a low-quality machine and no style or technique. Her lines are a blurred mess and her colors are oversaturated and bleeding all over the place. Thankfully she's only done small pieces that he'll be happy to mask and cover over with better tattoos when she finally swallows her pride and asks him to.

"If you want to work at home I can get a different intern," Mike says. He doesn't pick the paper off of the floor, but points at the printer behind Hitch, motioning for her to print off a new one.

She grumbles about it, pouting and hissing her gripes about not being allowed to do real tattoos yet, whining that Levi was allowed to work on people while he was still apprenticing and accusing them all of being unfair. Mike doesn't get into it with her. He doesn't justify anything. He just tells her, "Levi is allowed to. You're not."

Levi's knee-jerk reaction is to tell Mike that he'll do whatever he goddamn pleases, permission or not, but all of his long-practiced self-restraint keeps the words tucked deep down. Hanji comments, "Levi started tattooing in prison, so he's earned the right," their words only slightly muffled by a mouthful of french fries.

Levi narrows his eyes angrily. "I love when you tell people that."

Hanji shrugs. "What?" They look around the shop. "There's no one in here. What do you care if Hitch knows? She's your family now too."

Levi turns and glares at the back of Hitch's mop of ash-blonde wavy curls as she waits for the printer to finish. "I never asked you two to adopt her."

Mike tells them, "You don't get to choose your family," and he takes his lunch into the back before they start giving him a headache.

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Annie is extremely thorough, if nothing else. Erna was impatient when she'd been asked to first give the pro-domme a list of trigger words and phrases along with reasons that they were triggering for
her. She tried to get out of it, but Annie insisted on it before starting anything. She’d had to write
them down on a sheet of the legal pad, some words being triggering enough that even just saying
them aloud herself could make Erna feel depressed and anxious. Writing them was not much better.

But it was worth it. Annie talked to her the whole time she was working, gracing Erna with stern
orders and sharp admonitions as she bent her into position over the mattress and spanked her through
tears and sobbing moans.

Words are important to Erna – tone is important – in a way that she is more conscious of than most
other people. Annie gets all the words and the tone right somehow. None of it feels cliché or
contrived. Annie makes Erna believe that she would sincerely rather be here, torturing her, than
doing anything else, that it's not an act that she's being paid to pull off.

It's easy to cause someone pain, Erna thinks. Hell, she could do it to herself if that was all that was
required. Doms will insist that there's more to it than she knows, but Erna knows more than they
think. It would be easy to just cause someone the right amount of pain. The hard part is making a sub
feel the way they want to feel emotionally. Erna can't do that for herself. If she were her own domme
she would make herself feel fucking horrible. She would tell herself that she's ugly, that she's
disgusting, that she'll never be as intelligent as she wants to be, because she's mean to herself and she
knows how to use all of right words to make herself feel as hideous and dreadful as possible.

Annie makes her feel the way she wants to feel. In between vicious slaps to her bare ass she caresses
reverently and makes Erna feel like her body is beautiful instead of disgusting. In between the lines
of her words she confirms for Erna that she may be broken and useless, and that there is something
intrinsically wrong with her that sets her apart from normal people, but she also assuages any fear
that it might not be okay. She makes her feel like she's good like this, like it's perfectly fine to be
broken – better, even. She makes Erna feel like she's very good at being broken and like that is worth
a lot.

The pain is really just icing on the cake.

It's very good icing that has Erna clutching her comforter, wringing it into her balled up fists and
smearing her tears all over it. Every slap reverberates up her spine, sets her skin on fire, and makes
her squirm at how wet her thighs are getting. She can't make words like Annie, but she makes a
whole array of unintelligible, needy, desperate noises.

She becomes suddenly very conscious of her own whimpering when it becomes the only noise in the
room, the sharp sound of spanking and the soothing honey of Annie's voice ending at the same time.
It's easy for Erna to switch out of sub space. She's an old hand at it. Her last noise fades out in a
whine and she pushes herself up onto her elbows, protesting, "That can't have been half an hour."

"Fifteen minutes," Annie tells her, running a placating hand over her back and gently smoothing her
dress back down over her legs. "Another fifteen for aftercare."

Erna's muscles go rigid. She brushes Annie's hand away and stands up to face her. "No aftercare."

Annie doesn't react at all to the sudden change in Erna from wrecked and in tears to stiff and
assertive. She simply says, "Aftercare is free," with the same nonplussed expression she takes
everything with.

"I don't give a shit. I don't do aftercare. I don't need it."

Annie silently challenges Erna, staring back at the short girl who she could have been swearing and
begging for anything only a moment ago, but Erna doesn't back down, holding her glare with angry,
grey stormy eyes. Annie shrugs. She offers one last time. "The ones who say that are usually the ones who need it the most."

"I'm an exception." Erna sets her jaw, clenching her teeth.

The corner of Annie's lip twitches in half a grimace, uncomfortable with the danger of leaving someone alone after a session without making sure they're okay. "I should really make you sign a waiver."

"I'll sign whatever." She almost wants to tell Annie that it isn't what she thinks, that she's not just trying to prolong the spanking session. She doesn't get into it though, because then she would have to explain that aftercare makes her feel small and weak and that she doesn't like for anyone to take care of her ever. She figures Annie's picked up on that already, the way she picks up on a lot of things as if Erna is an open book.

Annie looks at her briefcase out of the corner of her eye, considering something. She turns her left wrist and glances at her watch, then makes her decision. "We'll keep going for another fifteen minutes, but tell me if you change your mind about the aftercare. I have time for it."

"Okay," Erna says, but she almost wishes Annie would just leave instead. Needing to get assertive about the aftercare has taken her completely out of subspace and out of the mood. Nonetheless she turns back around and goes to bend over the bed again.

"No you don't." Annie catches her with an arm around her waist and forces her back up easily like a rag doll, twisting her around to face her. Her lips curl slowly into a sadistic smile at Erna's wide eyed expression. She didn't know how strong Annie was. "We're done with that," she says, her voice now much deeper and so much more threatening than it was earlier.

Annie's thumb presses sharply against Erna's waist as she shifts her to the side and walks her back until she smacks the wall hard enough to knock the breath out of her. Erna's pulse races as she's pinned still with enough force that it's becoming quite clear to her that Annie could break her in half if she wanted to. She likes that. She allows herself to suspend disbelief and indulge in the fantasy that she might actually be in danger. She doesn't whimper or whine like before, but she breathes fast and swallows hard. Her feet get pushed apart and there's a dull pressure between her legs where Annie has forced her knee between them. The moan that Erna makes gets cut off, choked back down when Annie's hand encircles her neck, cutting off her air. With her noises quieted, Annie only needs to whisper to Erna as she keeps steady pressure on her throat. She tells her that she's a desperate, needy little submissive toy. She smirks a little when Erna responds by rocking her hips and rutting against her thigh.

Annie stabs her fingers deeper into Erna's waist, and plays her like an instrument. She presses her thigh harder into her, giving Erna better friction as she suffocates and tries to come. Annie coaxes her with humiliating and cruel words for minutes as she alternates between applying pressure to her throat and easing off, timing it just right to keep Erna in an adrenaline-filled, euphoric state without making her lose consciousness. It's when she says, "I love how you dress like a doll… So everyone will know that you're just a thing… Nothing but a pretty object to be played with and put away…" that makes Erna finally come with a strangled sob and an all too relieved shuddering sigh.

Annie lets her be still for a second afterwards. She allows Erna to breathe and loosens her grip around the girl's waist, stepping back a little and giving her more air. When Erna is done gasping, Annie leads her back to the bed and makes her sit down.

Once her mind clears, Erna's first thought is to check Annie's pencil skirt where she'd been frantically trying to rub her clit against the pro-domme's thigh. It's clean. The layered skirt of Erna's dress was a
sufficient barrier. Annie smirks at her and says, "I almost never let clients come. You can feel special."

Erna sighs and rubs at her sore throat.

"Still no aftercare?" Annie questions, raising an eyebrow at her.

Erna shakes her head and pulls her legs up onto the bed.

"No sub drop?" Annie checks.

"It would take a lot more than that," Erna answers. "No offense."

"What do you do now?"

"Read a book, take a nap…" Erna starts pushing the comforter around as if she is getting ready to do just that.

Annie seems satisfied. "Don't forget to eat and drink something." She picks up her things, smooths her clothes a little, and begins to show herself out. "I'll see you next week."

Erna tries to act relaxed, like she's not going to spring up from the bed, lock the door, and check it at least five times as soon as she hears Annie's footsteps fade away. It's only after she jiggles the handle, pushes at it, and tests it a few times that she can actually relax with a book and a nap like she told Annie she would.

The room is deathly silent now. Erna loves it that way. Ribbons swish and cloth-covered buttons whisper as she pulls and pushes with fingers that are careful but fast. She lets the dress fall to the floor and steps out of it. She carefully unhooks the first few clasps in the front of her corset, but then she goes ahead and rips the rest apart, knowing by now how much force she can use without breaking any of the threads or clasps.

The corset doesn't have much to work with for its intended use. Her body isn't emaciated, but it's slender and there isn't any spare flesh or fat to push around and turn into curves. That's okay because she doesn't wear it for curves. She likes corsets because tying her body up, compressing it, and pushing it around makes her feel a little more she can make it something separate from her.

There's no love lost between Erna and her body. She would extricate herself from it if she could. She finds the whole thing kind of gross with its sweat and blood and all. She can't find any beauty in its natural state. For most of her life she's found it to be a hateful, ugly canvas of imperfections. It was a problem at the age where that kind of thing is a problem for most girls. She flirted with anorexia and bulimia off and on, and eventually coped in the healthiest way possible -- without actually getting healthy -- by deciding that her body was at least a good dressmaker's mannequin. If it was so ugly to her she could cover it up with clothes that she found pretty and that covered the flaws.

She tosses the corset to the foot of the bed and pushes at the dress on the floor with her toe. On the floor it's just a black pile of fabric and ribbons. It's not pretty. It needs her to give it a suitable frame and make it pretty. Her body is at least good for that.

It's just turning to dusk when Levi slows to a stop at the curb and kills the engine of his motorcycle. He doesn't even have it propped up with the kickstand when Erna is already getting into it with him from her smoker's perch on the top step of the stoop.
"Could you please be more of a walking cliché?"

If anyone overheard her and he told them that this was her being friendly, they wouldn't believe him.

"I could. Do you want me to grow my mohawk back out?" He rights his bike and reaches inside his bag as he crosses the sidewalk. He taps out a cigarette and leans on the stoop railing.

"Please do. I've dubbed you 'Punk-of-the-Month' in my head, but without the mohawk it doesn't feel quite right."

"Tch." Levi raises an eyebrow at her. "Yeah? What month am I?"

"Well right now you're December, but grow the mohawk, squeeze into some tighter jeans with more holes in them, put on a leather jacket, and we'll talk about moving you to July."

Levi only notices her accent when she talks at him in longer sentences like this. Usually she's very short with her words. When she says more than a few at a time he can hear that slight New Englandish lilt to her syntax that Erwin pointed out. It makes her speech sound a little like the way people used to talk in black and white movies. He lights a cigarette and considers her proposition. "I'll stick with December."

Erna nods her approval of the deal. "They always use the shittiest models for November and December."

Levi hops up to the top step of the stoop and leans to get a look at the middle of Erna's back, which makes her twist around and narrow her eyes at him balefully, holding her cigarette up almost as a defensive weapon. "What are you doing?"

Levi straightens up again nonchalantly as if everything looks in order. "Just checking. You're more lively than usual. I thought someone might have wound the key in your back extra tight."

Erna scowls at him for a half-second before she thinks of something clever to say. "No, but my mechanical parts got recalibrated."

"Oh yeah?"

"And I had all the dirty grease cleaned out and replaced."

Before she can think of any more mechanical doll references she gets interrupted by a shout of "Yoo Levi!" from the direction of the café. A tall girl with a messy brown ponytail and a short guy with a shaved head come bounding up cheerfully like a couple of golden retrievers. The girl looks like she's trying to pull off boho chic without the chic part, with her long skirt and stained peasant top. The guy is wearing a green and white baja hoodie, which Erna will refer to as a 'drug rug' after they leave.

Levi doesn't return their greeting. Instead he looks down at Erna and asks, "Have you met Springles?"

"What in the hell is a springles?" she wonders.

"He means us," the short guy says with a big, good natured smile. "I'm actually Connie. This is Sasha."

"I've never seen you two apart, so I don't see the point in giving you two different names." Levi grumbles.
"I like it," Erna's eyes are smiling. She does like this side of Levi. She finds it refreshing when he gets irritated with people. She feels reenergized by negativity and snark, and he recharges her batteries often.

"Do you live here too, or…?" Sasha asks her, in between bites of one of Armin's signature strawberry lemon squares.

Erna almost wants to wait and see what would come after the "or…" but Levi answers for her. "New neighbor. She lives next to me." He ashes his cigarette disinterestedly as if he's hoping that not engaging too much in the conversation will make them go away.

Erna introduces herself by giving them her name, but she doesn't extend her hand. They look like their fingers would be sticky and gross. The pair redirects their attention to Levi anyway, obsequiously trying to make small talk. Connie says, "How was poker last night?"

"Great." Levi's voice is dripping with so much sarcasm and irritation Erna could drink it up. Her eyes widen a little with rapt attention and a small part of glee. After causing a good number of them herself, Erna has become an expert at spotting a train wreck from miles away and Levi's clenched jaw seems to be a good indication that this one is only less than a quarter mile from exploding in flames.

"Sorry we missed it," Sasha responds lamely, clearly feeling no remorse at all.

"What do you want?" Levi's accusatory question is abrupt and sharp and the pair is taken aback. "You only come out of that filthy hole of an apartment and get social when you need something, so what is it?"

"Whoa," Connie says.

"Uncalled for," Sasha drawls and takes another bite of her pastry and Erna notices that she has two more in her other hand, a s'more blondie and a cherry turnover.

Levi ignores their protests and tries to get to the point. "So what do you want?"

"We just wanted to see how you're doing," Sasha says, maintaining an insulted and hurt expression. "We were going to ask you if you had any –"

"No." Levi abruptly cuts Connie off, seeming to know what he's asking already.

"Or if you knew of anyone –" Connie tries again.

"No."

Connie, despite Levi's obstinace, tries to finish his sentence, "who has any –"

"No," Levi cuts him off again. "You can't ask any of what you're trying to ask me."

Now Sasha tries. "But we know you –"

"No," Levi repeats, louder this time, and clearly at the very limit of his patience.

Erna's curiosity is also at its limit and she can't simply sit and watch anymore. She asks the Springles duo, "What are you trying to ask him?" unable to hide her curiosity and excitement.

Sasha's shoulders slump and she makes a huffy little exasperated sigh and says, at not quite a hushed
enough volume to keep Levi from wincing uncomfortably, "We're just trying to score some molly."
Levi throws his hands up and steps to the back corner of the landing in front of the door. "I'm not a part of this conversation."
Erna smirks and wonders if Levi is a closeted straight-edge punk, because there's no reason she can see to get so huffy about something so relatively innocent. The corners of her mouth turn up in a slightly conspiratorial smile and she tells Sasha, "I can help you with that."
"Really?!"
The girl's brown eyes light up and Erna nods her assurance. Behind her she can almost feel Levi inhale sharply and exhale his annoyance. Erna crosses her arms and gets down to business. "But I don't like giving out my contacts to strangers."
"Okaaay…" Sasha gives Erna an oblivious look, clearly not understanding what she's getting at, so Erna kindly spells it out for her.
"So what would I get out of this?"
Connie lets out a long, drawn out 'Oh' as he gets her meaning. Sasha crosses her arms, getting impatient and annoyed that this isn't turning out to be easier. She asks, "What do you want?"
Erna leans forward, resting her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands. Her voice filled with mischief as she asks, "What do you have?"
"Umm…" the pair both shift around a little uncomfortably, not knowing what to offer.
Levi pipes up again, "They're fucking stoners. All they have is weed and an XBox."
Sasha rolls her eyes at him and Connie brings a hand to the back of his head bashfully and blushes a little, but he doesn't deny the accusation. He just says, "We can't give you the XBox."
"Well that's a shame," Erna says with enough irony to make Levi laugh in the only way he ever does, just a breath out through his nose. "I'll settle for a gram."
"Done," Connie says eagerly. He goes to the door and pulls out his key.
Erna gets up to follow the couple up to their apartment, but before they can hurry her upstairs Levi says spitefully, "You better get more than a gram. That's nothing to them. They have at least a pound up there." He drops his cigarette and puts it out. After he has it crushed beneath his boot he adds, "But I don't know anything about that."
Erna feigns irritation at the two for trying to get off easy. She crosses her arms and creases her brow, holding them up in the doorway she demands, "I want a quarter then."
Connie's shoulders slump and he and Sasha groan. "Okay. Come on up."
"I never heard any of this," Levi warns them as they go inside. Connie and Sasha know about his parole and they know he could get in some serious shit if it came out that he knew about their entrepreneurial business selling weed to the large clientele they've cultivated for themselves. That's why he gets so pissed when they're stupid enough to try to talk to him about it. They do this about once every few months. They get high, remember that he got convicted for selling ecstasy, and get the idea that he'd be a good person to ask for a molly hookup. Then they catch him on a cigarette break and annoy the shit out of him. He tells them every time not to come to him with this shit, but
they always forget or they just don't listen.

He thanks whatever gods that when Erna comes back down she's alone, looking smugly satisfied, somehow mischievous like a little kid who just got away with something, and smoothing her hands over the skirt of her dress like she's trying to wipe off the invisible grime that one comes away with after spending five minutes in Connie and Sasha's apartment. She mutters half to herself, maybe half to him, "Like a fucking dorm room in there…"

"It may as well be. All they do is eat, smoke weed, and fuck."

Erna raises a questioning eyebrow at him. "Is that how you remember college?"

"Yeah," he deadpans. "Why? What was your college experience like?"

The question hangs in the air. He realizes he's flustered her because she doesn't say anything clever or sarcastic right away. She just crosses her arms and stares him down, eventually saying, "… Not like that," and quickly her fingers unlatch the coffin-shaped purse that is always hanging heavily off of her slender wrist. With the precision of an assassin she flips open a box of cloves, removes one, and brings it to her lips, lighting it before Levi can fully blink.

He lights up with her, though he goes about the motions of it with much less speed and aggression than she does. "Anyway, I'm surprised."

"Well, I was more of a drinker than a smoker during college," she quips.

"Not about that. You don't look like the type to take molly," Levi says, a little impressed and a little curious about what else she could surprise him with.

"Oh, that…" Erna takes a long drag and exhales long and slow before saying, "I don't. Never tried it. Pills make me anxious."

Levi is understandably confused. "Then what was that?"

"I gave them a fake number… Well, not a fake number. I gave them the number of a neighbor from my old building. This really awful old lady who always gave me shit. She acted like it was still the 1800's and tried to shame me for living alone and having a job." She pauses to sit on the top step and take another drag off her clove, then she sighs in reminiscence. "I hated that bitch."

"So what happens when they find out you ripped them off?"

Erna leans back on her hands nonchalantly. "Nothing, I figure. I told them not to mention my name and not to ask outright for drugs because she's paranoid about her phone being tapped." She takes another casual, self-satisfied drag off her clove and says, "They might get all the way down there before they realize they've been fucked over." The fingers of her free hand rub at the leather handle on her purse.

"Where's your old building?" he asks.

There's a heavy silence that has Levi uncomfortably shifting his weight apprehensively, wondering what she's thinking or whether she heard him, but finally she answers, "Pretty goddamn far from here," as she sits down on the top step again.

The faraway sound to her voice suggests that he should drop it, and he does because he doesn't want to fuck up the peaceful atmosphere. When she's being nice it feels like a gift. He wonders if he's developing Stockholm Syndrome, wonders if that's why he feels so fucking grateful when she
doesn't use her mouth to rip him to shreds. He doesn't say anything else until he hears the creaky metal latch on her coffin and looks down to see her taking out a bag of weed and some rolling papers.

"The fuck are you doing?"

"Rolling a joint. What's it look like?" Her response is muffled because she's holding her cigarette with her lips while her hands are busy.

"Don't fucking do that out here."

She mumbles again, "Why so fucking paranoid?" Then she frees up a hand to take the cigarette from between her lips and gesture with it, pointing at the corner at the far end of the block, "I literally saw a homeless person nodding off against a wall over there yesterday, so don't tell me that – if by some miracle the pigs were to actually show up here – they aren't going to have better shit to do than bust a tiny goth girl smoking a joint."

Levi sighs and rubs his temples. She does have a very good point. But he can't risk getting caught near the stuff. He does a half-turn towards the door, but something stops him. He doesn't want to leave. All he has to go back to is his empty apartment and all he is going to do in there is work, clean, and listen to music. Those three things used to be enough to make his life feel fulfilling, but now that whole routine seems empty.

"Come on," he says as he opens the door and holds it for her.

She turns around and eyes him suspiciously. "Why?"

He rolls his eyes and wonders why she always has to be so fucking guarded. "Just come on."

She looks at him like she isn't sure whether he might be trying to lead her into a dark alley and murder her or not, narrowing her eyes at him and trying to see his ulterior motives, but he doesn't budge. He keeps holding the door until she finally stashes everything back in her coffin and clasps it shut. She watches him so carefully as she approaches and then she stops in front of the door frame.

Levi waits, but inexplicably she just stands there, making him feel confused and a little irritated, until she says, "You go first."

"Oh my god." He sighs and grumbles to himself, "should never hold the door for you," thinking that she's punishing him for what she probably mistakenly saw as an old-fashioned, shit-headed act of chivalry when he was just trying to be fucking polite. But he crosses the threshold and starts up the first flight of stairs. He's surprised when she even deigns to follow him.

"I don't like people walking behind me," she explains, and it sounds like an apology.

Levi pushes down the rising curiosity that Erwin planted in him. He doesn't want to wonder what happened with her or how she got here. He just wants to let her be without requiring explanation. He wants to salt the earth and raze all the growing questions with fire and let her exist in a vacuum where past experiences aren't a thing. So he keeps his mouth shut until they get to his apartment and he tells her, "Wait here a second."

As he raises his key to the lock, she teases darkly, "Not going to invite me in?"

The stubborn, worn lock pops after a couple of forceful turns and he says very seriously, "No," before turning the knob.
"Suits me fine," she says, turning her nose up and looking away. "Probably worse than Connie and Sasha's anyway."

It almost works. He almost invites her in just to show her how much of a punk cliché he is not, how surgically clean his apartment is. But before the impulse can overtake him he realizes that's exactly what she's going for. He tells her, "Not gonna work," but he leaves the door slightly ajar as he goes inside and straight to the fridge to grab the beer Ymir gave him the night before.

"Look at you gettin' smart."
She is kind of impressed that he saw right through her, but she doesn't give him too much credit. Instead she makes a mental note to treat him less like an idiot in the future and to be more subtle the next time she tries to manipulate him, not kidding herself about whether or not there will be a next time. Her lips form a slight smile as she keeps the door in her peripheral vision and tries to see inside without it being obvious.

All she can really get a look at through the opening is some of the kitchen, which is bright, white, and cleaner than any room in this shitty building has a right to be. It's not what she expected to say the least. She wants to take in more of it and ascertain whether he's some kind of serial killer as the overly obsessive cleanliness of his apartment would suggest, but her eyes get distracted by his movement as he closes the fridge cradling three bottles between the fingers of one hand. She's glad he didn't invite her in. She likes looking at him better when he might not be aware of it and won't say anything snarky about it. She'd watch him more when he's around, but she's afraid of him noticing, because she's worried that maybe she stares. She can't help it. Something in her is drawn to the way he moves and the shadowy lines that sharply define the muscles in his arms. She tries to remember that laughably terrible line in the first book she was given to edit. Something about 'feline grace.' That's Levi, cheesy and stupid as it is.

He moves across the room and the door blocks her view of him. She hears a door open and she figures it's the front closet if his apartment's layout is a mirror of her own.

"Do you want a hoodie?"
She stiffens a bit. Her heart beats annoyingly fast and hard as she remembers that she doesn't know him that well and doesn't know where the fuck she's following him to. "Why?"

He comes back to the door with a black hoodie over his shoulder. "It gets windy."
She thinks that asking where they're going will make her look worried, which makes her look vulnerable, which isn't okay, so she sets her face like stone and says, "I like the cold."

He shrugs his shoulders and comes out into the hallway, locking the door behind him. As she starts to follow him, he says smugly, "Caught you peeking."

She smirks at the back of his head and says very accusatorily, "Are you a serial killer?"

"Why? Because I don't like living in shit?"

"No, because anyone who keeps their place that clean has to be trying to cleanse the world of some perceived spiritual filth." She keeps pace, staying behind him and thinking, "You probably keep your kitchen 'hospital clean' to keep infection from setting into the cuts on your victims to keep them alive just a little longer so that you can keep fucking their wounds and sewing them back up."

"Holy shit," Levi laughs out loud because he's never heard anything so imaginatively fucked up. He opens the fire door at the far end of the hall. "Are you sure you're not a serial killer?"
She doesn't answer the question, instead she asks, "Shouldn't that set off an alarm?" referring to the fire exit.

"Should," he confirms, "but doesn't."

He uses his phone to light up the stairwell and they climb a couple more flights to get to a door on the top landing. He knows it sticks, hard, so he puts his phone back in his pocket, leaving them both with no light source for a moment, and doesn't hold back throwing his shoulder into the weathered metal door as hard as he can. When it opens on the first try he thanks his luck that he won't have to find out how Erna would have teased him if it didn't. He remembers not to hold the door for her. She steps into the open air of the flat roof and walks out a little, looking around at the new view. Meanwhile, Levi picks up a piece of two by four next to the door. He wedges it into the handle so no one will be able to open it from the other side.

She turns around at the noise and once she sees what he's done she deadpans, "Shit. You are a serial killer."

She sounds completely unimpressed. As if she would be fine with it if he were about to cut her open. He plays along. First he tests the door, giving it a firm tug to make sure it's secure and then he turns to her and sighs, carding a hand through his hair as if this has turned out to be more troublesome than he planned. "Well, I was going to let you smoke a joint before I drained your blood, but now that you've figured me out…"

Erna extends her arm and turns her hand palm up to offer her wrist to him. "You're forgetting, I don't have blood. You can drain my oil though."

Levi snaps his fingers like he should have remembered. "Shit. I guess there's no point in trying to kill you then."

"Nope." Her arm falls back to her side as she watches him walk around the corner of the walls enclosing the stairwell. Losing sight of him makes her lose her nerve a little. She doesn't move from where she's standing, but she calls over, "Seriously though, are you going to rape-stab me or stab-rape me or both?"

He comes back around the corner laughing softly and holding a couple of folded lawn chairs in his free hand, beer bottles clinking in the other. He comes over to her and offers her a chair, which she takes carefully, and he asks, "How do you come up with this shit?"

"That's not an answer," she scolds him for making light of her concern and she stares pointedly at the barred door.

He explains as he kicks open his chair, "I'm not the only one who comes up here." He bends down and, setting all but one of his bottles on the ground, he pulls a bottle opener from his back pocket. "Do you want any of those brats to come and join us?"

"Heavens no." Satisfied by the explanation, Erna places her chair next to his and sets her coffin on her lap, quickly busying her hands with rolling a joint on the lid.

Levi pops the top off his beer and settles in. He watches her fingers move fast with aggressive precision, which, he's noticed, is kind of the way she does everything. The way she types on her laptop when she's working, the way she lights a cigarette, even the way she drinks her coffee; every movement she makes is efficient, wasting no time on flourishes or style. He nods at her craft and says, "You're good at that."

"My sister taught me," she says, and she's already done, bringing the rolled paper to her mouth,
licking it, and rolling it tight. "She's better at it... has more practice than I do..."

He wants to ask her about her sister and her family and whether she has more siblings, and just make small talk like normal people, but his questions are cut off when she reaches over and offers him the perfect joint she just rolled. He frowns and has to tell her, "No thanks."

"Why not?" She doesn't retract her offer, still holding it in her hand, extended toward him like she wants to hear his answer and then be the judge of whether he will take it or not.

He takes a long swig off his beer, gulping down at least a third of it, stalling. When he has to come up for air, he says, "I can't."

She brings her hand back and puts it gently between her lips. She takes a black lighter out of one of the pockets of her dress and brings it up but pauses before sparking it to ask him, "Are you allergic?"

"Nope." He nearly finishes his beer in an attempt to drown the envy, because he really wants to smoke with her. He misses the freedom to be able to make the decision about whether he wants to smoke a joint or not.

She goes ahead and lights it, satisfied with his answer, and takes a quick drag. She holds it in her lungs for at least five seconds. When she finally has to exhale she nags him, "Then why not?"

Levi realizes that he's never going to escape her relentless curiosity and he gives up. It's not like he ever tried to run from his past anyway. "Random drug tests."

She hums curiously, but she decides to give him a break. She says, "Fair enough," and goes back to smoking her joint before it burns down to nothing without her.

He gets to enjoy the quiet for a minute. He stops guzzling the beer and takes shorter sips, savoring the way it tastes and the slight buzz it gives him. He looks up at the sky and tries to spot the brightest stars that don't get hidden in the bright haze of New York's light pollution.

But it isn't long before she asks, "What did you do?"

And he knew that was inevitable, but he doesn't have a better answer prepared for her. He tells her the same answer everyone else has gotten, which is honest enough but lacking in detail. "I used to sell ecstasy for a living. A couple of people overdosed and died. I got caught."

She makes no sounds of judgment. Her fingers roll the joint around and she looks at it contemplatively for a while. The silence gives him opportunity to imagine all kinds of things that she might be thinking about him, all of them negative, but she interrupts his imagination by asking, "Why ecstasy? Why not just sell weed like Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum down there?"

He takes a breath. Nobody's ever asked him that. He has to think about how to form his answer. "It's the business model. With most drugs, you're dealing with someone who is going to give you your shit and then you pay them back within the amount of time they give you. And if you don't, they kick the shit out of you." His beer is almost gone. He kills it and opens a new one. "I knew a guy who would sell me pills at less than half the cost of what I would sell them for, as long as I bought a few hundred of them from him at a time."

"Wholesale," Erna says quietly in between attempts at smoke rings.

"Yeah," he says. "And then they were just mine. I didn't have to answer to anyone or meet any deadlines."
"That's actually," she pauses there and admires a half-successful, wobbly smoke ring before continuing, "a wonderful reason."

"I thought so."

"So you got PTI? Or convicted?"

He's impressed that she knows about this stuff enough to know about pretrial intervention and he has to tamp down his curiosity again. "Convicted. I did six years. Got out early on parole."

She only hums as she thinks and Levi wishes like crazy she would make some kind of judgment or say anything that would give him an indication of what she thinks of his criminal past, but for once she stays quiet. He can't ask what she thinks because that will make it look like he gives a shit about what she thinks, so he keeps sucking on the end of a beer, trying not to turn his head to look at her out of the corner of his eye.

She seems deep in thought, or maybe just high, he thinks. She's probably already lost somewhere in her head and forgetting everything they just talked about. He decides to see what she'll do if he changes the subject. "So where's your sister live?"

She answers very shortly, rushing the word out, "Oregon," and she keeps looking off at a middle distance and follows it up with, "Quiet. I'm thinking."

"Excuse the shit out of me," he snarls.

She waves her hand at him, motioning for him to be quiet. "It's right on the edge of my brain. Like I know it, but I can't get it."

He doesn't say anything else, if only to see what she finally comes up with. Now he doesn't mind looking right at her. She's too absorbed in her thought to notice. He smirks when she curses at herself under her breath and he thinks that if she's going to be this entertaining he'll come up here and watch her smoke anytime.

Finally she says, "You're not fucking Erwin."

Levi's smirk vanishes. Of all the things he could have guessed she was thinking about, that was nowhere on the list. "He's your parole officer?" she say uncertainly.

He tilts his head, curiously amused by her amount of interest and he tells her, "Yeah."

"Shit. I can't believe it took me that long to figure out."

"Did you think about me and Erwin fucking that much?"

She laughs. "All the time."

"Sorry to disappoint you."

"It was annoying because it didn't make sense." She finishes the last smokeable centimeter of her joint and drops it.

Watching her open the coffin purse and take out a cigarette is like watching a hitman put their gun together. He can count the movements by now, she always does them in the same order at the same
speed, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. Open the lid, take the box, remove a clove, hold it, close the box, light up, all in less than 1.5 seconds. Except this time the wind fucks up her sequence and she gets stuck on repeat flicking the lighter. After her fifth failed attempt, he reaches over and cups his hands around it for her. It makes her pause for a second and she focuses on his hands like they don't make sense and they shouldn't be there, but finally she lights her cigarette anyway.

"Do you have any siblings?" she asks, circling back to the conversation she'd been too busy for when she was trying to figure out what Erwin's relationship to Levi was.

"I don't know."

"So mysterious," she teases. "What's that mean?"

"I don't know my parents. Grew up in foster homes." He takes a drink and decides it's okay to elaborate further, since she seems to be in a listening mood. "I've lived in at least a dozen different houses around New York. Most foster families are just scumbags who take in kids as a career, spending the government checks on shit for themselves instead of food and clothes. When they get caught at it you get bounced to another home for the same shit all over again."

"Well aren't you just a depressing little match girl?"

He huffs a laugh out his nose and smiles at her. "Does that bump me to a better month on your calendar?"

"Oh, the prison time alone puts you closer to August. You'll still have to grow that mohawk if you want to get July and at least ten more tattoos for January."

"Yeah?" he counters, "Well you're the December of the gothic chick calendar. You don't wear makeup and I bet you don't even own a pair of fishnets."

"Bitch," she says, "I'm Miss January in Japan."

He's on his last beer and getting braver, so he makes an observation. "You're a lot nicer when you smoke than when you drink."

She hums. "Yeah. I mellow out a bit."

He thinks that 'a bit' is the understatement of the year. She's a thousand percent nicer and less scary than usual. "I'm surprised you don't get paranoid," he tells her.

"And why's that?" she asks, her voice low and good-humored, slow and deep and teasing.

"You just always seem on edge," he says carefully, hoping that doesn't insult her.

She turns to look at him and she smirks. "Honey," she says ironically, "This is about the only time in my life that I'm not paranoid."

(December 19, 2014)

Despite her outward demeanor and what people would assume, Erna actually loves Christmas. Not in the way people typically do. She hates the familial togetherness and the tacky red and green shit everywhere, but she's built up a positive association since childhood that Christmas means at least two weeks off where she can sequester herself inside alone to read books and drink hot chocolate.
She loves that part of it. To her, Christmas means peace and quiet and people leaving her the fuck alone.

She gets an extra week off this year for being so unsettling around the office. Her paranoia and her creepy black roses were bringing down the mood of the whole place, so Zackly mandated one extra week of vacation for himself and therefore for his secretary since she wouldn't have much to do without him there. Erna is past giving a shit about it. At first she was insulted, but now that she is home from her last day of work for at least three weeks she is starting to enjoy the prospect of being completely alone and only interacting with delivery people and her pro-domme.

She scheduled a session for herself tonight; at the last minute because she knows her Mistress hates that and will take a little extra frustration out on her for it. She's only been using Mistress Elizabeth for a couple of months, after dropping her previous domme for being too much of a pussy to just electrocute her a little, and she learned about her level of annoyance for last second appointments early on. The first time Erna insisted on making an appointment for the day of, she got an ass so red that she swore she'd never be able to sit down again. Even the water from the shower head hurt. Even laying still on her front for hours hurt. It was great.

She is optimistic for the first time in a long time. She got herself new Christmas toys to try out; a flogger with little metal tips on the end of each strip of leather and a bit gag that she might break her teeth on. She set them on the coffee table in the living room as soon as she got home, before even shedding her pencil skirt and perfectly tailored red silk blouse with long fine mesh sleeves and putting on one of her gothic lolita dresses to feel like herself again. The clothes that make her "pass" as a normal person out in the world are another thing she won't have to put up with during Christmas break, which is a relief, but if given the chance she wouldn't wear the style of dress she prefers to work. That would feel like taking off a much-needed mask.

That's another thing that bothers her about the mysterious black roses. The color alone. Why are they black? Because she wears colors to work and not just the black and white she wears when she's visiting her family or going to a BDSM club, so there would be no reason for anyone who saw her at work to think that she would prefer black over red or white or pink or whatever? It bothers her that whoever is sending her the flowers didn't choose a normal color to go with how she presents herself at the office. It plants a seed of doubt against her assumption that the person must only know her from work since that is where they keep sending the roses, and that doubt makes her feel unsafe. If they only know her professional persona then they don't really know her and it's okay. If they've seen her without that professional mask on, then they know too much for her to be able feel comfortable with not knowing who the fuck they are. If that's the case then there's a power imbalance that keeps her on edge and unsure of what could happen.

Erna hasn't gotten any closer to figuring out what the whole deal with the flowers is and she's only been getting more and more paranoid and depressed and angry. The alcohol doesn't help except to keep her loose enough to be able to function at work without curling into a ball and crying. She doesn't stop drinking when she gets home and sometimes she throws things, sometimes she screams at the top of her lungs because she doesn't know what else to do, and sometimes, best case scenario, she just passes out and wakes up later with a headache, a dry mouth, and a dark mood.

Tonight is different, because Elizabeth won't play if Erna is obviously drunk. Which doesn't mean that she won't drink, but does mean that she'll keep it to a minimum and only mix tiny amounts of whiskey into her peppermint hot chocolate.

She feels okay. Much more okay than she has in the past couple of months where her control has been slipping along with her concentration. She hadn't been graced with the honor of another rose delivery for this entire week and now that she is banned from the office for the holiday she knows
she won't be bothered by them until at least January. Maybe by then the sender will have gotten bored with the whole endeavor. Maybe they'll forget about her and it will stop. If they stop she'll never know what the whole point is or who it was, and that would be annoying, but she'd at least feel safe again.

She paces around the living room, unable to sit down and relax. She picks up the remote and starts up the gas fireplace, sets it down, sips her spiked cocoa, closes the blinds on the floor-to-ceiling windows, and continually straightens her dress trying to make it appear perfect. She nearly spills her cocoa when she finally hears Elizabeth's steady, measured knocking at her door.

She quickly sets her white mug with little raised snowflakes on the mantle and rushes to her front door, which opens to a small foyer between her apartment and the elevator. The separation is not strictly necessary since each floor of the building is a single apartment, but elevator doors opening directly into a living space is so industrial and more appropriate for converted warehouse lofts than the old world sophisticated white glove building that Erna lives in.

Elizabeth wears a long red coat covering something probably black and tight and slinky. The way she dresses isn't Erna's preference, but she can't be picky. Her hair is a bright shiny red, obviously unnatural, but at least not an almost fluorescent shade that wouldn't even occur in nature. She's holding her purse over one shoulder and a bouquet of black roses wrapped in white paper in her hand and Erna's heart sinks.

Her mind starts racing, trying to figure out if it's been Elizabeth all along somehow and if she should slam the door in her face and lock it, but the tallish redhead holds the bouquet up and says, "The doorman asked me to bring these up. Apparently they were delivered earlier and he never got a chance to bring it to your attention."

For the first time, Erna's brain stops trying to put the pieces together. She has one piece of solid information now: the sender knows where she lives. That fact makes her vision blur in and out of focus as she sinks into hopelessness. Getting upset about it seems pointless now and suddenly the energy drains out of her and there isn't enough left to get emotional.

She takes the roses with a shaking hand. Elizabeth follows her into the living room. Silently, Erna throws the bouquet into the fire. Without even pausing to watch them burn she plucks her mug off the mantle and drinks down the rest of her hot chocolate only to get the whiskey into her blood. She sadly promises herself that it will be the last drink she takes.

Elizabeth smirks slyly and asks, "Were they from an ex?"

Erna doesn't want to explain why the bouquet went into the fire and not into a vase, but she doesn't want to just let the question hang there awkwardly, so she answers honestly, "I don't have any exes," and leaves it at that.

Elizabeth picks up that something is wrong and before she takes her coat off, she asks, "Are you alright? Do you want to reschedule?"

"I still want this," Erna says with her eyes down, looking at the bottom of the empty mug.

Elizabeth doesn't ask again. She sets her coat down on an antique Chippendale riband-back chair with ornate detailing and soft, light blue upholstery. Erna is still in too much shock to wrinkle her nose at the woman's fake leather skirt and corset top. Right now she could care less about fashion. The woman could wear a sparkly rainbow onesie as long as she was okay with nearly beating the life out of her.
Elizabeth extends a hand for Erna to take and says, "Then come here and tell me what a naughty girl you've been," her voice all velvet smooth and dark.

Erna puts the mug back down gently. She takes Elizabeth's hand and it all feels unreal like she's in a dream.

Not very long into the session with the new flogger, Elizabeth wants to stop. The pro-domme has seen tears before, but not sobbing of the same depth and ferocity coming from Erna, but the pale, petite twenty-seven year old holds it together enough to say "Green" clearly and repeatedly, so Elizabeth keeps flogging regardless of her apprehension.

Erna wants to be cut open and torn apart. She wants to be able to reach inside and feel the edges of her ribcage. She wants to strip everything away and see if there's anything that's whole and good and pure inside her. If there is, she hasn't found it yet.

Elizabeth finally stops when the metal tips on the tails of the flogger draw blood. Erna keeps insisting on "Green," but the liquid beading over her back says "Red" loud and clear. If blood play were on the table she would have kept going, but one thing Erna had made clear when they'd first met was that she absolutely detests scars. Elizabeth calmly tells her sub why they're stopping.

Erna groans at the news that she got literally cut open, not just figuratively, and she whimpers to herself. "It's not enough."

Elizabeth takes a small first aid kit from her expensive Birkin bag and tells Erna to stay still and breathe.

Erna hisses and arches her back in pleasure when the alcohol touches her cut and stings like fire.

"I know you don't like aftercare, but it would be hard for you to reach this on your own," Elizabeth says as she puts some neosporin on a piece of cotton and applies it to Erna's naked back after the alcohol evaporates.

"Actually," Erna says quietly, "Could you stay this time?"

Elizabeth pauses in her ministrations and Erna rushes to explain. "I still don't want aftercare. You can do whatever you want, soak in the tub, take a nap, I don't care. I just don't want to be alone for a while."

"Of course," Elizabeth offers. She finishes tending the tiny cuts she made and puts the first aid kit away.

Erna doesn't move from where she was standing near the windows, holding a curtain wrapped in her fists while Elizabeth flogged her. The pro-domme watches her breathe deeply for a little bit and then takes her hands, unraveling them from the curtain. Her fingers are stiff, but moveable, like a ball-jointed doll.

Once her fingers are unraveled, Erna can move on her own. She takes a soft cashmere knit throw off the edge of the couch and her slight body disappears in it.

"I'm going to get you a glass of water," Elizabeth says hesitantly.

Erna's mind is a blank, unable to come up with the words for her fears and feeling that much more terrified at not being able to name them and hold them with language. She can feel the bile rising up and getting trapped at her painfully tight, raw throat. She doesn't bother to wipe the tears away on the blanket she's wrapped herself in, letting them dry on her face as she sits on the floor.
There is a dread inside her that something is coming. Something dark and evil that wants her and is only waiting until it's run her so ragged that she'll be completely unable to fight and defend herself. She wonders what the point even is to that since she's so weak in the first place. How much more defenseless could she get?

When Elizabeth returns from the kitchen with water, Erna is staring at the fire and refuses to drink.

Chapter End Notes

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"Wait," Erna says, "explain it one more time."

"Oh my god." Levi tilts his head back, looking upward and pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration. He rubs the titanium barbell there as he explains one more time. "Scissors beats paper." He makes the corresponding signs with his free hand. "Paper beats rock." He sighs and looks to where Erna is sitting on the stoop. "And rock beats scissors." He lets his hands fall as she watches him closely, her eyes narrowed suspiciously.

After a pause, she says, "How the hell does a piece of paper beat a rock? It's nonsense."

Levi throws his hands in the air and stomps the sole of his boot against the step he's standing on. "Because paper covers ro—," he stops himself before he loses his temper at something so stupid. "You know what's nonsense? Any person over the age of five not knowing how to play rock paper scissors."

Erna presses her lips into a thin line, tilts her chin up haughtily and looks away. "Well it sounds stupid."

"Good," Levi says. "Then go grab my tea and you don't have to play."

Erna's aloof composure breaks suddenly and she shouts, "Get your own goddamn tea, you dirty punk!"

Levi smirks. "You have to get your coffee anyway."

"And you have to get your stupid, weak-ass, dry leaf water anyway, so take your other hand with you if you're not too busy jacking off with it and use it to grab my fucking latte while you're at it," she spits out.

"So this is where rock paper scissors comes in," he says in a calm, even voice.

"Ugh." Erna makes a disgusted face. "Can't we just flip a coin?"

"No," he deadpans seriously and emphatically.

"Why not?" she whines.

"Because the last time we gambled you cheated," he reminds her.

"How is this not gambling?" She asks as she stands up, smoothing her skirts and rolling her shoulders back when satisfied.
"It just isn't." Levi smiles confidently.

She narrows her glacial eyes at him. "Sounds like a game of chance to me."

"If that's what you think." He puts his cigarette out on the stoop railing and tosses the butt into a nearby trashcan. "Best two out of three, loser has to go pick up drinks." He moves his right hand behind the small of his back and when she takes the cue and does the same he says, 'I'm going to say 'rock, paper, scissors, shoot' and on 'shoot' you throw your choice.'

"This is dumb."

"What's dumb is that you've never done this before. You're the only person I've ever met who didn't play this when they were a kid."

"Well, my childhood was…a little unorthodox," she concedes in that rich, haughty, whiskey-soaked voice that reminds him of black and white movie stars like Lauren Bacall.

She focuses on his arm like she's trying to see his hand through his midsection. He focuses on her eyes.

"Rock, paper, scissors, shoot."

"Bullshit," she mutters to herself as she stares angrily at his fist. She retracts her scissors and puts her hand behind her back again.

On the next round she throws paper and he throws scissors. She stomps her foot at him. "How do you do that?"

"Just go get my tea."

"No," she says. "Again."

Without argument he lets her say "Rock, paper, scissors, shoot," and he wins again, this time with paper. She makes an angry little scream and is about to challenge him again, but he calmly tells her, "It gets easier to read you the angrier you get."

Her face is turning red. He can tell that she's absolutely livid. It doesn't surprise him that she's a sore loser.

He smirks to himself as she picks up her purse and walks away muttering, "You infuriating…of all the dirty, rotten…no good, cheating…"

"I take it black," he casually calls after her.

She yells back, "Motherfucker!"

Levi laughs quietly to himself as he sits down on the stoop to wait.

Eren hums to himself over the hiss of the espresso machine, pouring out an especially dark, strong shot of espresso. He reaches for a bottle of lavender syrup that Armin set aside for him while he was making lavender rosemary sugar cookies last night. He's uncapping it when suddenly a loud bang makes him flinch, spinning to face the door and ducking almost completely beneath the bar. The bottle slips from his hands and he fumbles to catch it before it falls to the floor. When he gets a grip on it he pops back up above the bar only to see his new worst nightmare glaring at him from the
other side of it, staring him down with steely grey eyes veiled by a thick fringe of black bangs.

"You flinch an awful lot around me," Erna notes.

Eren sighs and asks dejectedly, "Do you have to kick the door in every time you come in here?"

"It's hardly every time. Honestly, you're so dramatic."

Eren isn't so sure about that. It seems that lately every day she kicks the door to the café open hard enough to make it seem like a shotgun and stalks in fuming about something or other, acting ready to literally rip the intestines out of anyone who would dare to try and talk to her. "Yeah. I'm the dramatic one," he grumbles under his breath as he turns away and sets the syrup bottle on the counter behind him.

"What was that, emerald eyes?"

"I said, 'here's your latte.'" He spins around with the to-go cup he prepared only two minutes before, knowing that she would be there to get it at almost exactly 9am. He flashes a fake smile and slides it across the bar.

She glares balefully at the cardboard cup with a nearly perfect rosette poured into the top with steamed milk and then at him.

A bead of sweat forms over Eren's left eyebrow as he stares back at her, holding his smile, determined that today is the day he's going to prove that she doesn't scare him.

Awkward tension sets in as she focuses on him with her ice-cold eyes. They stay frozen for seconds in a silent stand off.

Eren isn't going to let her get to him. No matter how disapproving she looks or how vitriolic her words get. He waits for her to say whatever cruel, cutting thing she's going to say, prepared to let it slip right off of him like water.

Her hand moves quickly and there's another loud noise. Eren flinches again, thinking she's throwing something or going to hit him. When nothing crashes or connects with his face, he opens his eyes. She's wearing a very satisfied smile. Her fingers are half-covering a five dollar bill that she just slapped onto the counter.

She doesn't gloat about making him wince. She doesn't need to. Instead she says, "Large tea, please."

Eren wasn't ready for this. He stammers, "I…um… Does that mean you don't want this?" he gestures to the latte. "Or… I'm confused…"

She says, "I can see that." She slowly retracts her fingers from the five-dollar bill and leaves it lying there on the counter.

"Sooo…” Eren draws the word out, hoping that she'll give him some guidance.

"So get me the fucking thing I asked for? This is a café, right? You still work here?"

"Umm…” Eren's hand reaches for the back of his head nervously. "Okay. What kind of tea do you want?"

Erna thinks for a second. "What does Levi usually get?"
Eren blinks at her, still confused, but he can answer easily since Levi gets the same thing every morning. "Organic Garam Masala."

Erna's eyebrows crease at what sounds like nonsense words to her. "What even… No, I don't care. What is the exact opposite of that?"

"Umm…" Eren thinks. He doesn't normally consider tea blends and their opposites. "I guess Jasmine Ginger Peach? It's light and fruity, whereas Garam Masala is really dark."

"Then I want that."

"Do you want a dirty chai blended latte? I can make one that tastes like maple syrup and vanilla," Eren asks a little eagerly, thinking that if she wants both the tea and the coffee then she might finally be willing to try one of his special drinks.

He is mistaken. "I want you to shut your hipster mouth and get to work on my order."

Eren's shoulders slump like she's just deflated him. He frowns as he turns around to get the tea and another to-go cup. Satisfied finally that she's broken his high spirits, Erna explains to him while he works, "It's for Levi, not me."

"Oh," Eren says. Before he takes the jasmine tea blend from its drawer, he tries to be helpful. "Um, I think Levi actually hates white teas."

"Pretend for right now that you don't know that and never said it, and I'll let you keep the change."

Eren still doesn't understand, but he goes ahead and puts her tea together without further comment. He puts it on the bar next to her latte very tentatively as if he's offering a cup of tea to a rattlesnake.

"That wasn't so hard now, was it?" She says it smugly, adding with a wink, "I'm sorry that I overestimated you. I'd thought throwing a tea bag into some hot water would have been no trouble. I'll remember from now going forward that your talents are restricted to squiggling milk into elaborate designs on the surface of my coffee."

Eren's mouth drops open a little. He raises a finger to make his counterpoint to her insult, but no words come out. Erna gives it no notice and reaches for a little wooden stirrer at the end of the bar. She nonchalantly swirls it through her latte and obliterate the perfect white and brown rosette pattern that Eren had been so proud of until there is no contrast, no definition between the white of the milk and the deep brown coffee. All of the delicacy and precision that went into the art of it, the culmination of days and hours of practice, is reduced to a muddy light brown in two seconds.

Before Eren can shriek at the loss and bemoan the ephemeral quality of his art, Armin comes out of the back, both arms balancing large white porcelain plates filled with rows and stacks of cookies that look like they belong in a baking magazine photo spread. He perks up when he sees the two, paying no mind to the silent contest going on between them, he says, "Good Morning, Erna. Want a cookie on the house?"

Erna is never quick to answer these kinds of questions, regardless of her feelings about sweets or her hunger. She treats Armin's generosity as if it is loaded and her eyes narrow as she regards him with careful suspicion.

Before Erna is finished weighing the pros and cons of accepting the favor, the melancholy monotone girl sweeps in from the back office. She's busy with a clipboard, marking down inventory, but she is able to multitask, keeping track of numbers with her pen and scolding the cheery blonde with her somehow soft and severe voice. "Armin. No freebies."
He is unfazed, same way he would be if Erna treated him with the same malice she abuses Eren with daily. He smiles at the red-flannel clad girl and says, "But Mikasa…" She doesn't glance up from her clipboard. There is no sign that she's listening, but he persists anyway. "Not even for Erna?"

Erna had been grasping the cup of tea in her left hand, about to pivot on her heel and leave. The utterance of her name stops her and she stands stock still, half-turned away from the counter. It leaves her cold. She doesn't like anyone using her name. Logically, she knows that the brats know her name, but hearing it out loud is over familiar and too personal. She wants anonymity. She wants to be more invisible.

Mikasa hums distractedly and looks up. "Oh," she says, "Yeah, that's fine."

Erna rolls her eyes. Her shoulders slump, as she feels forced to turn back around and accept the gift. Armin puts six petite cookies in a bag and winks as he extends it to her saying, "She likes you."

Erna scoffs as she sets her drinks back down. She slams her coffin purse on the counter, opens the latch with a flick of her wrist, flips the lid open, snatches the bag of cookies, and buries it. She hisses, "She likes my money, and that's what I like about her. Practical and efficient and none of this sunny, small talk bullshit."

Mikasa lifts her eyes from her clipboard again to ask Erna, "Are they bothering you?"

Erna slams the lid of her coffin closed and hooks it onto her wrist. "Every goddamn day." She snatches up the two cardboard cups and is swiftly out the door.

"What the fuck is this?" Levi asks darkly before he even brings the lid of the cup to his lips. He must have smelled the difference. Erna was hoping she would at least get to see a good spit take before he realized that she fucked him over.

"It's tea."

"Bullshit this is tea," he says, taking the plastic top off the cup and pouring its contents out onto the sidewalk in disgust.

His reaction isn't going the way she had anticipated. She hadn't thought about just how disappointed and sullen he would turn out to be without his morning tea. Inexplicably, this makes Erna feel bad. Guilty, almost. She doesn't like the feeling, so she lashes out. "Should have gotten your own fucking tea."

He sulks. "You did that on purpose."

"Like hell I did."

"You did because you're a sore loser and an immature, vindictive little—"

"Say it," she dares him.

He doesn't say it. He won't call her a bitch. He'll never get down and wallow in the dirt with her, and she hates it. Something inside her rages against the goodness in him, with all his self-discipline and sense of honor and morality.

The air is filled with uncomfortable silence. That is until Levi spits. A perfect globe of sputum hits the sidewalk, right in the center of the puddle of jasmine tea. Then he says, "Large latte with skim
"Hm?" Erna hums confusedly.

"That's what you get every morning," he says. "And I couldn't give a fuck about your coffee order, but I know it anyway, so don't try to act like you don't know what kind of tea I like."

This is one of those rare moments where they tacitly admit that they are friends. They dance around it, because neither of them knows exactly what to do with that fact except be sarcastic and cynical about it and push each other's buttons, saying semi-awful things and then smirking. That's how they are friends – through insults and thrown elbows. Not through admission that they give a shit.

Erna is in a tough spot, because she really didn't know what kind of tea he liked. She never cared to notice. She's not in the habit of caring about anything about anyone. The fact that she didn't know makes her feel even worse.

"I'm sorry." She annunciates clearly and then clenches her jaw.

Levi is in the middle of placing a cigarette between his lips and he mumbles, "Don't want your apology. Want my fucking tea."

He lights it, and he puffs. He won't look at her.

"Fine!" she yells, loudly and abruptly. She seems to stamp her boots all the way up the sidewalk, pausing once midway to turn back and shout at him, "You're such a bitch!"

He smirks to himself.

When Erna tears into the café again, Eren is resting his chin in his hand, leaning on the counter on his elbows. As she stalks up to the bar, he pushes a large to-go cup toward her with a single finger and says, "Here."

After glaring at him for a moment, she tears the lid off to reveal the dark, black, bitter tea that Eren made up right after she left.

Erna rifles through her pocket for a five-dollar bill. As she does, she asks, "How did you know?"

"I'm good at more than latte art," he answers smugly. His face softens for a moment and he looks like he's going to tell her it's on the house, but when she puts the cash on the counter, he thinks better of it and keeps his mouth shut.

She leaves without any further sarcasm or snark. Eren looks around and checks that Mikasa isn't nearby before he puts the five dollars in his tip jar.

"Did you spit in this?" Levi asks after he takes the lid off the cup and checks that it's the right kind of tea.

"No," she says grimly. She watches him take a sip, then she says, "but I did come in it."

She finally gets that spit take that she'd wanted. Not because Levi believes her, but just because of how unexpected that was.

He looks at her with about a half and half mix of disbelief and wonder. "Did you grow up with brothers or something?"

She's sitting down on the stoop again now, picking up her abandoned latte and holding it to her lips
even though it's gone cold. "Nope. Four sisters. Why?"

"Trying to figure out where you learned to talk the way you do."

"Women can be vulgar and disgusting too," she says. "It's equal rights or whatever."

Levi hums in acceptance. That's fair enough. Still, she's the only woman he's ever met who talks more like a teenage boy playing Call of Duty.

Erna's coffin buzzes and she opens the lid with one hand while still sipping her latte. She pulls out her cell and looks at the caller id disdainfully. Levi can't see what it says, but he can see how annoyed Erna looks when she says under her breath, "Fuck off, slut," and smashes a button to ignore the call.

"Problem?" he asks.

"My sister."

Levi waits a second to see if she'll explain more than that, but she doesn't, so he asks, "You don't get along?"

"I get along with this one better than the others, but even so I don't like being called all the fucking time. I talked to her yesterday and let her annoy the shit out of me, and then she called twice while I was sleeping and she has the fucking gall to call now during my consistently scheduled and guarded coffee break. Bitch needs to learn her time zones."

The phone buzzes in her hand again. This time she presses the ignore button with a vengeance. She tosses it carelessly back into the open coffin. They're quiet for a moment. Then she tells him, "You're lucky you don't have a family."

Levi responds sarcastically, "Never thought of it that way." Then something out of the corner of his eye catches his attention. A nice, shiny black car that, at first, he assumes is Erwin's because it's the only car that ever comes down this street that isn't beat to shit, dying on its last legs. But he turns his head to look and it's not Erwin's BMW, it's an actual Bentley. Levi can't remember the name of the model, but he knows it runs around 300k. Even drug lords around this neighborhood wouldn't be able to afford that. He is taken aback for a second.

"That's fucking weird," he points out to Erna who is still only looking at her latte and hasn't noticed anything yet.

She looks up at him, then turns to see what he's looking at. She focuses in on the car, narrows her eyes and squints at it slowly trolling up the street, then her eyes blow wide open, she drops her latte and says in a panic, "Oh shit." The coffee spills all over the stoop. "Shit!"

"What..." Levi looks at her and something is evidently very wrong. He's never seen her actually looking scared and the unfamiliarity of it makes even him feel a little panicky himself.

"No, no, no, no," she repeats to herself as she closes the lid on her coffin purse and stands up.

Levi stands there in confusion, not knowing if he should try to help or ask what the fuck is going on or what. He doesn't have time to anyway. As Erna spins around and reaches for the door, the Bentley pulls to the curb. The rear window rolls down and Erna freezes in place, still reaching for the door, as a voice from inside bellows, "Erna Bronwyn Raban!"

"Bronwyn?" Levi looks over his shoulder at Erna and raises an eyebrow.
She hangs her head and her shoulders go limp. Her arms hang in defeated at her sides as she turns around and mutters, "Fuck me."

Levi stares, wide-eyed in confusion and wonder as a driver in uniform gets out of the car and walks to the side to open the rear door, and out steps a couple that he swears materialized out of one of those TV dramas about the rich and powerful. The man wears a suit that probably cost more than the sum total of every apartment that Levi has ever lived in. The woman is, in classic New York fashion, dressed all in unembellished black aside from the huge diamond earrings and a white mini Givenchy bag. She takes off her large, round sunglasses and wrinkles her nose at her surroundings. She brushes her deeply dyed, perfectly styled brunette bangs to the side and mutters something in complete disbelief to her husband.

He looks like a volcano of rage about to erupt. His face already red and his nostrils flared, staring at Erna as if he'd like to shoot her. Just as it looks like he's about to say something, his wife pushes past him and takes three heel-clicking steps toward the stoop, nearly shrieking, "What in the hell are you doing here, young lady?"

Levi looks to Erna. He feels like he just got caught in the middle of a shoot-out. It doesn't feel safe to run, but it doesn't feel safe to stand there in the middle of it either. She opens her mouth to answer something, but the woman interrupts her.

"Have you lost your mind? Breaking the lease on your apartment, quitting your job without notice, and moving to…? John, where the hell even are we?"

The redness in the man's face is dying down now that his wife is doing all of his shrieking for him, and he looks a little more stately, turning his nose and chin up a bit, he answers, "Does it matter? It's all the same cesspool once you're below Prospect Park."

Again, Erna begins to open her mouth, but is stopped by the woman holding a palm up, telling her, "I don't even want to hear it." She points angrily at the Bentley behind her and says, "Get in the car this very instant." She doesn't even wait for an answer, taking it as a foregone conclusion that Erna will do as she says, she turns around and starts to walk back to the car, placing her sunglasses back on her face and saying, "Honestly, what are we supposed to tell people? If anybody finds out about this I swear I'll die of embarrassment."

Finally, Erna speaks.

"I'm staying here."

By this point the husband has taken a polished wooden pipe out of his breast pocket, filled it with tobacco, and is in the middle of lighting it with urgency, but he stops at this task and looks up at Erna on top of the stoop in disbelief, like maybe he didn't hear her correctly. "You're what?"

The wife turns from the car, balls up her fists in rage, and leans forward into the big intimidating strides she takes toward the stoop. Levi instinctively backs up. He's not a part of this. He tries to blend into the brick walls behind him. He is so confused and taken aback that it doesn't occur to him to just go back inside. He wonders what the fuck all this is. Who are these people? Why isn't Erna destroying them verbally the way she does everyone else?

"This is where I live now. You can't just put me in your car and take me away. That's called kidnapping and it's illegal." That New England accent that is usually only a suggestion in her voice, something one has to listen for, is now fully present.

"Don't get smart with us, young lady," the man says before raising his lighter again to start his pipe.
"Erna, we are your parents and you will obey us," the woman says. "Honestly, are you mentally ill? What would possess someone to leave Manhattan for…whatever this is?"

Levi sputters and almost spits out the sip of tea he'd been taking. Parents. He just assumed that Erna was hatched fully formed with a clove cigarette in her hand. He regrets drawing attention to himself, because it makes Erna remember that he's there behind her. She grabs his wrist and pulls him forward with a lot more strength than he would have thought she could muster. She makes him stumble forward even though he's trying to stay firmly against the wall.

"Mom, Dad, this is Levi. We're dating."

Levi chokes. He tries to pull his wrist out of her bony hand, but she holds him in a death grip and says, "Actually we're engaged. I live with him now. I'm not going anywhere."

Both of her parents' jaws drop. The mother pinches her sunglasses daintily and tilts them down to look over them. "You can't," she says in quiet disbelief as if Erna just decided to tell them that she's going to marry an actual cockroach.

"Completely out of the question. What would people say?" Her father mutters around his pipe.

Her mother is becoming more desperate as she realizes how serious her daughter is. "Erna, we let you have your little rebellions to a much more forgiving extent than any other family would tolerate, but this is too far. Think about how this makes us look. People are already talking about you walking out on Sina Publishing and disappearing. Don't make this more of a scandal than it already is."

"Everything is secondary to your precious reputation, isn't it?" Erna whispers darkly. Then she says more loudly, "I don't give two fucks about what you tell people. Tell them I did go mad. That's what you think anyway. Tell them that you had to have me lobotomized like Rosemary Kennedy. That will probably give you some social cachet."

"Oh you'd love that, wouldn't you, you morbid little—" Erna's father takes his wife by the arm and distracts her from finishing that thought. She composes herself again and puts on a sickeningly fake smile. "Erna, honey, if you won't come home, can we at least compromise? We'll just tell people that you've moved to SoHo and you can make at least a few appearances in the Hamptons and at some charity functions, and we'll just keep this whole…thing…quiet."

Erna scowls at both of them and she wraps both of her hands around Levi's arm, clinging to him like ivy. She looks up at his face, gives him the fakest look of adoration and says, "Only if my fiancé can come."

Levi quietly struggles to get out her grip again, but she digs her nails into his skin.

"Are you trying to kill your mother Erna?" her father asks. "You know that's impossible."

"Okay, bye then," Erna says flippantly, giving them a cheery smile.

Her mother gasps and staggers backward to the car. Her father points at her and says, "You have two months to get yourself together or you can consider yourself disowned."

The driver opens the rear door. The couple disappears into their three hundred thousand dollar car shaking their heads, and their driver, probably the only one with the good sense to realize that they are only about a mayfly's lifespan away from getting mugged, squeals the tires as he speeds away.

Erna finally lets Levi go and she crumbles to the top step of the stoop, her hands shaking a little as they open her coffin purse. She fumbles for her cigarettes, her precision gone.
"You're an asshole, you know that?"

She turns around and looks up at Levi.

He puts his tea down on the railing. He's lost his taste for it. "I'm a fucking person, not some prop you can use to piss off mommy and daddy."

Erna opens her mouth, but doesn't know what to say.

"Fuck you."

He turns around and rips the door open, letting it slam behind him as he disappears back into the building.

Erna tilts her head back and groans to herself. She takes a cigarette out of the pack, holds it up, pauses to regard it carefully, then says, "Fuck me," and takes out a second one. She puts both of them in her mouth and lights them together.

She takes two deep drags before her phone buzzes again. She answers it this time.

Instead of 'Hello,' she says, "Fuck you Deirdre! You're fucking dead to me!"

"Wait, Erna," her sister pleads, "I tried to tell you. Mom and Dad were asking about you and you wouldn't get help and I'm worried about you. I supported you leaving when I thought you were going to get help, but you just keep getting worse and maybe it is best if you go home. I love you and I'm so afraid you're going to…"

"You're so fucking dramatic. Fuck off to your farm or whatever because I'm done."

Erna claps her phone closed and then says to no one, "Dumb fucking cunt. Selling me out." She inhales more from her two cigarettes and burns her throat. She sighs. Deep down she knows she's justifiably angry with Deirdre, but also she's angry at herself for fucking up with Levi. She sighs and says, "God dammit."

Her phone buzzes again. This time she drops it on the stoop, lifts her boot, and stomps the shit out of it until it's broken into pieces.

She sighs again and looks up at the building behind her. Her conscience is nagging at her to go fix things with Levi, preferably before he leaves for work…if they even can be fixed, she thinks. She wonders how much time she has before he leaves. The reflex to reach for her phone and check the time hits her and she smacks her palm against her forehead.

"What a day," she says as she opens the door and starts up the steps.

Chapter End Notes

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Erna faces the door to Levi's apartment and gulps as she swallows down her pride. She can hear him stomping around even over the music. She recognizes the song from a long time ago. It's called Bring Out Your Dead. She can't remember the name of the band for the life of her.

This reminds her of the first time they really spoke. Well, more like the first time she yelled at him from the other side of this door and he later threatened her in a monotone deadpan. Same thing.

"Hey Levi," she says somewhat loudly so that he might hear her over the music.

Nothing.

Erna looks up and down the hallway. She groans to herself. If anyone hears this she'll slit her fucking wrists in the bathtub later.

"Levi, I'm really sorry," she says to the door, being careful about her volume. Loud enough to carry over the music inside, hopefully not loud enough for Ymir and Krista to hear down the hall.

Still nothing.

The song finishes and rolls into the next one. Now it's "Disconnected" by Face to Face.

You don't know a thing about me… Is there something that you should know?... I can tell you what you want to hear…

"Well that's a little spot on," Erna mutters to herself. Then she shouts a little louder, "Levi please! I fucked up! I really am sorry!"

She knows he had to have heard that. Still no signs that he's going to do anything but ignore her.

Erna crosses her arms and stands her ground. "I'm not going anywhere, Levi," she shouts. "You have to come out of there eventually."

She waits. When it feels like she's been standing there for a few minutes she begins to wonder if he really would miss work just to avoid her. No, she thinks, he's probably literally never missed a day of work in his life. She considers whether it would be worth faking sobbing and tears to get him to come out. She could do that. Crying on cue is easy, kind of like vomiting. You just start with some forced deep coughs to get your abdomen going. For crying she just starts with some gasps and sniffles.

Before she has to resort to that, the door flies open. Levi stands in the frame in his Black Flag hoodie, thin white wife beater, skinny jeans, and well-worn, beat up work boots, his messenger bag slung
over his shoulder. He narrows his eyes at her, tells her, "Fuck off," and goes to move past her. He can't get by easily, because she isn't moving. He stays in the doorway and stares her down.

Erna is a complete stranger to actual regret. It's a kind of twisting, nauseous feeling. She doesn't know what to say, because there are any amount of ways to grovel for forgiveness, but there are none that she know of that would allow her to hold onto her dignity and that's her most closely guarded treasure.

"Move," he growls.

"Levi…" the tenor of her voice is pitiful. That's new to her too. She doesn't know what's happening to her. "Can I explain?"

He narrows his eyes angrily. "Explain what?" he deadpans. "Explain how I tell you everything about me while you've made me fight for every scrap of anything personal about you." He crosses his arms over his chest. "And I let you do that because I figure we all have our own shit and maybe your life is hard for you to talk about… And this is how I find out that you're not being guarded about anything difficult, but you're actually a waspy, over-privileged little princess who decided she'd go slum it in East New York to piss off her parents?"

"I'm not—" she stops herself there. She doesn't want to do this in the hallway.

Before she can go on, he interjects, "And you have the balls to tell me that I'm lucky to not have a family."

Erna winces as her words bite her in the ass.

"Get the fuck out of my way, so that I can go to work, because I'm lucky enough to not have a family that can bail me out if I get into financial trouble."

"Okay, I deserve all of that," she says contritely, but she doesn't back down. "Let me at least explain everything. Literally everything," she emphasizes. "And after that you don't ever have to talk to me again. Promise."

"Go ahead," he says coldly, not moving.

Erna worries the handle of her coffin between her fingers. "It's a little awkward out here."

Levi doesn't budge, but then, since she won't talk in the hallway, he rolls his eyes and moves to the side. Erna slips past him into the apartment carefully as if he's going to punch her if she makes contact with him or anything inside.

After closing the door, Levi goes and leans on the kitchen table, his arms crossed and shoulders slung forward like a pouting child.

Now that he's giving her the chance, Erna realizes how hard it is to explain everything. Not that she doesn't know what to say; more that she doesn't want to say it. But she fucked up and she does owe him an explanation. She wants to sit down for this, but she thinks that would make him angrier, so she stays standing, shifting her weight back and forth on her feet nervously.

"Okay," she begins, "you're right… about a lot of things."

She brings her thumb to her mouth and chews at her nail for a second before realizing that she's even doing it. It's a nervous habit. She forgot that she had those. Can't remember the last time she was
nervous.

"I've had everything I've ever needed. And I'm not going to get defensive and give you some sob story about how my childhood was hard too. I'm not going to say that money isn't everything and I had it just as hard as anyone because my parents were cold. That's bullshit. Money is great and love is overrated."

She pauses to think about what else to say. Then, "It was fucked up of me to let you spill your guts to me and not reciprocate. It's not because I was trying to hide any of this from you. I'm not ashamed of growing up with a wealthy family. I couldn't have done shit about that and I'm not going to apologize for it. The real reason I didn't tell you any of those personal things is because I've never really had friends."

He interrupts her to say, "I'm shocked."

"Shut up and let me do this," she scolds. "I'm not good at the friendship thing, okay? I've never figured out how it works. Sometimes you need to help me out and remind me of what I'm supposed to do, like tell me when it's appropriate to open up and talk like a human being."

Levi's shoulders soften from their tense, guarded stance. His lip quirks only in begrudging acknowledgment. He still looks pissed, but he pulls a chair out from the kitchen table and sits down, signaling that he's no longer pissed enough to rush her so that he can tell her to fuck off forever and run out the door.

He leans back, swinging an arm over the back of the chair, relaxing and spreading his legs, and settling in. "Go ahead," he says.

Erna's thumbnail rubs and scratches at the leather of her purse.

"Claiming that you were my boyfriend just to upset my parents was a fucked up thing to do. You don't deserve that."

"But, to be clear," she says carefully. "I'm not here to piss off my parents or to get back at them for not hugging me enough or whatever. And I'm not here because I think it's fucking cute to live among the common people or any of that bullshit that makes rich hipster girls move to the half-gentrified parts of Brooklyn."

Erna sighs tiredly. "I don't want to fucking be here, Levi. I left a white-glove co-op building in Midtown Manhattan with a beautiful view and a heated bathroom floor. I'd much rather be there."

Levi crosses his arms again. She's not exactly making him feel sympathetic. "Then why leave?" he says.

Erna finally puts down the coffin. She's tired of worrying it with her fingers. She goes over, putting her palms flat on the kitchen table and leaning on it. She sighs. "What I'm going to tell you is really hard, not because it's traumatic, but because whether it is or not, I don't want you to pity me. Knowing that someone feels sorry for you is the worst fucking feeling. You know that, right?"

Levi nods sincerely.

"Okay," Erna says slowly. "So don't do it."

"I won't," he promises.

She rocks more of her weight forward onto her palms on the table and then eases off as she takes a
deep breath. "I had a really good life. I had an easy as fuck job that paid me almost 90k a year, and it wasn't the most fulfilling thing in the world, but I think I was pretty happy. I don't know how most people measure happiness. It wasn't like sunshine and rainbows and unicorn puke, but I had the freedom to do what I wanted and people respected me...or just feared me...whatever."

She thinks for a moment and says wistfully, "I even liked my boss if you can believe that."

Levi can't believe that. It's hard to imagine her taking orders from anyone.

"Then somebody started stalking me. Not in a cute, quirky way... more in an intense, creepy, serial killer-y kind of way. And it was like they were gas lighting me, because I couldn't prove it. I never saw them. Half the time I thought I was losing my mind. It made me crazy paranoid. I started drinking, not that I wasn't already a low key alcoholic, but it got a lot worse."

"That went on for months. Then one night I was walking home, alone, because I was only going to and from the fucking news stand two blocks away to get more cigarettes, and this is East Midtown where the crime rate is nonexistent."

Her fingernails dig into the white tabletop. She hasn't looked Levi in the eye this whole time, because she knows how he must be looking at her and she can't stand it.

"And one second I'm lighting up, and the next second, before I even get a decent cherry, some big fucker grabs me and drags me into an alley."

"And..." she taps her fingers against the table, trying to self-soothe. "I couldn't stay there after that. I don't know who he was, I don't know what he knew about me, I was constantly afraid that he'd come back."

She takes a deep breath.

"I quit my job, left my apartment in the middle of the night, cancelled my phone, and I ended up here because the landlord would let me move in right away and there's coffee and a bank on this block. I did everything I could think of to erase the fact that I exist and I think I did a pretty good job, but he still might be able to find me if he wants to."

Her hands release the table and she looks down at them while picking at her fingernails. Fuck it; she'll indulge in the nervous habit. She can't get more pathetic anyway.

"And I'm scared all of the time. I imagine horrible things. I jump at noises. I take four minute showers and my heart is beating out of my chest the whole time because I'm afraid that I wouldn't hear somebody breaking in over the sound of the water."

She hates that she's telling him this. This is the part of her that she wanted to stay hidden, because this is the part that she hates about herself more than anything else.

She pauses, but not long enough to make him think that he should say something. She just needs to collect herself.

"And I have a pretty good case of PTSD. Like the 'get frustrated about not being able to find my keys and react by throwing a fucking plate across the room and then crying' kind of PTSD." She starts picking at the skin around a different fingernail so that her thumb won't start bleeding. "And a bit of agoraphobia, I guess. I get anxiety attacks if I even think about leaving this street."

"But I'm fine," she says with determination. "This is just how I am now. And I get by."
She risks a glance to finally check his reaction. He is unreadable as ever. He's so good at keeping his face expressionless. She adores that about him right now.

"So, you know, you don't have to think of me differently." She looks down at the table again. "That's it. You can go to work now."

She turns around and picks her coffin up off the floor. Her heart is racing with anxiety and she just wants to go hide.

"Oi, hold on," he says casually.

She turns around and sees him texting on his phone. He says, "I haven't called out for anything in over a year. I can afford a sick day." He hits send and puts his phone in his pocket.

"You don't have to."

"Yeah, I know. It's not for you, it's for me." He opens the fridge and he asks her, "Do you still have that weed you scammed Springles out of?" as he pulls a six-pack out of the vegetable crisper.

"It's in the coffin," which she holds up.

"Let's hang out and get day-drunk," he deadpans.

She takes a black hoodie from his closet this time. It feels weird. It feels like a new level of intimacy, but at the same time it's such a small thing.

When they get up to the roof, they set up chairs closer to the edge of it. A better view for looking down on the world.

Erna knows this is for her. She's okay as long as he denies it. She could have protested harder and told him to go to work, but she can picture how that would go. She would stay in her apartment all day, regretting telling him everything she did, and she would feel sad and awkward every time she saw him afterward.

The skyline stretches out before them, drenched in morning sunlight.

"So," Levi says as he cracks open a can of PBR, "Bronwyn, huh?"

Erna groans. She hates her middle name. "It means fair beast."

"No, it means preppy rich girl who's going to end up at an Ivy League school," he teases.

She smiles. This is what she needs. "I didn't go ivy. I went to NYU, thank you very much."

Levi puts the tab from his can in his pocket and rubs it with his fingers as he takes a few sips of beer. "I went to Columbia for a year."

She's next to him and he's looking straight ahead, so he can't see the incredulous look she gives him, but he can feel it.

"Not to be a dick," she says, "but…how?"

"They gave me a full scholarship."

"…For art?"
"No, for fucking astrophysics."

She stifles a giggle. Her fingers go to work, automatically rolling a joint without her eyes even looking down. She licks it when she's done, to make sure it will hold. When she turns her head their eyes meet. He was watching her. His eyes shift down to his beer again. Erna asks, "You want a hit?"

"Not worth the risk." He looks up again, looking out over the city.

"Just feels polite to offer," she says before lighting it. After she takes a long drag, holds it for a few seconds, and exhales, she has to ask, "So what happened with Columbia? Why'd you stop?"

"I couldn't afford the free scholarship."

She hums.

They're just quiet for a while. Levi crushes his can when it's empty. Erna smokes her joint down until it's nothing but a tiny nub of black paper that's burning her lips and fingertips.

"So," Levi breaks the silence, "Did you have a pony when you were a kid?"

And she laughs.

"Bitch, I had a thirty-six room mansion with a fountain and a topiary garden."

"Did you have maids and shit?"

"Maids, gardeners, valets, chauffeurs, and a fucking concierge… but no pony. I guess I could have had one if I wanted. I never asked."

Levi clucks his tongue. "Being one of the super-rich was wasted on you if you didn't even ask for a pony." He opens another beer. "Did you have a nanny too?"

"When you import them from Europe, they're called 'au pairs.'"

"Fancy," he says.

The edge from her anxiety is ebbing away, possibly to be credited to the weed she just smoked, but she thinks it's actually that he's making her feel better about this… distracting her from feeling self-conscious, and giving her shit as usual. Like nothing happened.

"Well," she says, "Not as fancy as Columbia, Mr. Ivy League."

(March 20, 2015)

Erna leans on the breakfast bar in her kitchen on her elbows, her neck dipping to lower her face more level to the little black box of clove cigarettes in her hands.

She flips open the lid and closes it again, for the eighth time.

It was a box of clove cigarettes. Now it's just an empty box.

She knew this was going to happen at some point. She'd tried to delay it for as long as possible. Every cigarette she finished, she put out carefully and placed the filter back in the box. She smoked the charred remains of the stubbed out tobacco as a last resort… like a starving man sucking on
bleached bones.

She groans at how pathetic this situation is – at the fact that she keeps opening the empty box, looking at the ashes and stray shreds of loose tobacco in the bottom, and she’s actually considering carefully tapping all of that out into a pipe and smoking it.

That would be truly sad.

Especially when there's a little news and tobacco stand less than a quarter mile away and it's open until 1am.

Erna checks the time on the display on the stove. It is very close to 1am. If she doesn't leave in the next minute she'll have no chance at getting cigarettes unless she goes to the liquor store which is open longer, but that guarantees that she'll be leaving with a bottle.

She hasn't had a drink in three months.

Then there's the option where she doesn't do anything. She throws the empty box away, finishes watching a documentary she started when she got home, and goes to bed. That's something she could do. That would be a nice, normal, healthy thing.

She nearly rips the little brass fleur de lis-embellished coat hanger hook out of the plaster wall she pulls her coat off of there so fast.

In the elevator, Erna pulls the black, fur-trimmed riding hood style coat over her arms. It's springtime and probably fifty degrees outside even in the middle of the night, but she feels cold all the time – a side effect of not eating enough.

She checks that she has her keys in her pocket by feeling them, holding them, shaking them once every few seconds. She checks for her lighter too. And she keeps checking, because in her uncertain mind, just because they were there a minute ago doesn't mean they'll still be there a minute later.

She still feels anxious when she hits the sidewalk, but it's the better kind of anxiety – the active kind; the kind of anxiety where she feels a little more okay than she would feel sitting in her apartment doing nothing. Doing nothing is interminable. This, at least, will be over soon.

She gets to the stand at 12:51am. The old man is just about to close up for the night when she places a ten dollar bill on the counter and says quietly, "Pack of Djarum Blacks, please."

He smiles, probably because she's a cute girl and she said please. She doesn't mean to be nice, it's just that her please's and thank you's were drilled into her as a child and there's not enough time in the world that would dull the habit. He gives her the cigarettes, takes the ten, and opens the register. She tells him to keep the change. Not because she wants to be nice. She only wants to whittle away at the amount of human interaction she has to suffer through. Letting him keep the change allows her to walk away more quickly.

She takes the plastic off of the pack and shoves it in her pocket. Even without opening the box she can smell them. Clove cigarettes have an incredibly strong smell, overwhelmingly sweet when they're not burning. She takes a deep breath in and out. When she gets back to her block, she takes one out, places it between her lips and covers the end with a cupped palm while she tries to keep walking and light it at the same time.

She has trouble getting the flame to stay while she moves. She thinks maybe she should give up and just light it up when she's back home, safely on her terrace, alone. Even if she does get it lit now, she'll have to stand out on the stoop of her building until she finishes smoking it. Little things like that
make a difference to her lately. She is always trying to be as alone as possible, as hidden away as something forgotten.

She doesn't see the hands come out of the shadows. She isn't given time to flinch before one big hand is around her nose and mouth and the other is around her waist, pulling her into the darkness of an alley no more than four feet wide.

Her cigarette falls to the sidewalk, still unlit, alongside her lighter.

She can't breathe.

She can't turn her head and see who's behind her, dragging her backwards.

She doesn't scream. She doesn't have the energy to. After all of the anxiety and paranoia about when something horrible might finally happen, she's almost relieved.

She doesn't have to wonder anymore.

Erna goes limp and doesn't resist as her attacker drags her deeper into the alley.

He turns her and pushes her back against the wall. The back of her head hits the brick building before the rest of her and a nauseating dull ache reverberates through her skull.

The man holding her still is tall and muscular, she can tell, even through the thick hooded sweatshirt and jeans that he's wearing. If she does fight, it won't make a difference. It would be like a mouse trying to fight an ox.

He holds her there roughly, desperately, like he's trying to secure a wild animal. But when he realizes that she isn't fighting back, he relaxes. Under his breath, he says, "Smart girl..."

He keeps her pinned against the wall by pressing one of his forearms across her chest while he adjusts the placement of his hand so that she can breathe through her nose at least, but he keeps her mouth covered. Her chest heaves as she inhales deeply and exhales in stuttering, choked sobs.

She doesn't want this to happen, but she can't move and can't do anything about it. She's helpless.

She hears the thu-thud...thu-thud of a car pulling up onto the sidewalk. There's hope that maybe somebody saw. And that hope blooms inside her until the man holding her nonchalantly says, "That's our ride, darlin'."

He holds her there with just his hand over her mouth and reaches into the pocket of his hoodie to pull out a rag that smells strongly of chemicals. The smell of it tickles her nose. It's ether or something. Something that's going to knock her out.

Erna stops breathing and starts struggling. She might not have if he'd just dragged her to the car... but something about the prospect of being unconscious for whatever was going to happen to her didn't sit well. She was listless and broken enough to endure whatever kind of assault was in store for her, but she was damn well going to be awake and lucid for it.

"Fucking—hold still..."

The man manages to switch hands so that now the rag is covering her nose and mouth, but Erna is still holding her breath. The man's hand goes to her shoulder to hold her upper body still, expecting the drug to take effect if he can just keep it in place over her mouth and nose for some amount of seconds.
He's so focused on making sure the damn rag stays over her nose that he doesn't think to defend himself from getting kicked.

She drives her knee into his groin as hard as she can, but he only barely gasps and flinches. Not enough to let go. So she starts kicking at his kneecaps.

"God damnit, stop it," he says as if he's dealing with a small child throwing a tantrum. He leans into her harder with the rag and lets go of her shoulder to try and fend off her kicks.

Erna makes herself dead weight. He can't hold her up with only the hand over her mouth if she goes limp. She slides down the wall, only a little before his hands go to her waist to grab her. With her mouth finally uncovered, she sucks in a deep breath and screams.

"Shit!" The man grapples with her and scrambles to keep her from running and to get the ether back over her mouth.

She hears another man's voice yelling something from the car on the sidewalk. She can only make out pieces. "Ry-… ge- er in-…. the car!"

"Alright little lady," the man says as he hooks his arms around her waist and lifts her, turning her around so that she can't kick and scratch at him, holding her up against his chest, her feet off the ground.

Erna keeps screaming like a banshee, but the man doesn't try to cover her mouth again. All he needs to do is get her into the car quickly enough that nobody will come out to investigate the noise.

Then there's a racket behind them, like something's been knocked over. Erna thinks he must have accidentally kicked a trashcan or something. He ignores it and keeps moving toward the car on the curb. Then there's a growl, a shout of surprise, and some snarling noises. The man falls to one knee. Erna feels him struggling as he holds her, like he's trying to fight something off without letting her go. Her feet are on the ground again. She plants her boot against his thigh and makes a desperate push. She's pushing and fighting so hard that when his fingers finally slip and let her go, she goes flying forward with more momentum than she was ready for. She hits the concrete on her knees, pushes herself back up and runs.

She isn't wasting breath on screaming anymore, but her lungs ache anyway. The sound of squealing tires makes her run faster. She's so close to her building.

She doesn't stop until she's up the steps and inside the large glass doors that separate the entrance of her building from the street. She spins around to look out. There's no car there. It wasn't coming after her; it was driving away.

The night-duty doorman comes out of his glass-walled office, having seen her tear inside like hell was behind her. "Miss Raban?" he says inquisitively, his eyes widening as he takes in her disheveled appearance and her tear-stained face.

The police dispatcher told her to stay exactly where she was. Which, she clarified for Erna, meant to not go back up to her apartment and make a cup of tea and curl up on her couch.

So Erna is in the doorman's office chair, playing with a frayed ribbon on her coat, when a pair of NYPD cops finally shows up.

Why the NYPD would send two male officers to interview a female assault victim is baffling to her.

The one with the rounder, older face does most of the talking and introductions for both of them. He
sends his partner out to the alley to check for any useful evidence after asking Erna where it happened three times in three different ways. She wonders if she's not making sense or if it's just that he's thick.

The one who stays behind pulls another chair up to the doorman's desk and takes out a notepad. He begins writing, in the bored, irritated fashion that a middle-school student would write an assigned essay. While Erna waits for him to ask her...anything, she looks to the night-duty doorman whose name she never bothered to learn and asks him, "Do you have any matches in here?"

He has to. Doormen have everything. Always prepared, like boy scouts.

He nods sympathetically and slides a drawer of the desk out. He has to fumble around for a second before he produces a matchbook. While he does that, Erna takes a clove out of the box in her coat pocket and asks, "Do you mind if I smoke?"

She knows there's a rule against smoking inside the building, but the doorman is willing to let that slide in this situation. He doesn't say 'yes,' but he picks up a half-empty coffee mug and sets it down near her as he hands her the matchbook. "You can ash in this."

"Thank you."

The cop finally sighs as if he's very put out. "Alright. Name, date of birth, and address."

After writing down her answers, he simply asks her to tell him what happened. She does try to do that, but he keeps interrupting her to ask more questions. She wishes he would just ask all the questions at once if he has so many.

"I was walking back from getting cigarettes—"

"What time?"

"...Around 1am?"

He grunts and scribbles on his pad. Erna tries to see what he's writing, but even though she can see, it looks like chicken scratch to her. "Someone grabbed me and pulled me into the alley."

"What did he look like?"

"...It was dark..."

"Height? Hair color?" He sounds annoyed, like she's being no help at all.

Erna takes a big, long drag of her cigarette and blows the smoke towards him, because fuck him. He's supposed to be helping her. "Around six feet. And he was wearing a hoodie. I couldn't see his hair."

"Race?"

"White guy," she says. "I think he was blond."

The cop pauses his writing and looks up at her. "You sure?" he asks incredulously.

Erna is taken aback. "Yeah, I'm sure."

He doesn't write it down. He asks her if she's sure again, and then one more time, as if her answer will change.
She swears he rolls his eyes before he moves on, like he's pissed at her for insisting that she got attacked by a white guy. "And then what happened?"

Erna pauses and fills her lungs with smoke while she tries to put the order of events straight in her head. "A car pulled up onto the sidewalk, then he held a rag soaked in some chemical over my nose and tried to drag me to the car. Something happened and he let go. Then I ran here."

"Model and color of the car?"

"Was kind of busy running for my life, so I didn't notice." Erna's jaw clenches and her teeth grind together. "I think it was black."

"You think?" He leans back in his chair and taps his pen on the desk. "Did you get a look at the driver?"

"No."

"Why did he let you go?"

"I don't know," Erna says quietly. "It seemed like something made him fall."

"Okay." He writes one more thing in his notes, punctuating it hard with a period. "Do you have any recent ex-boyfriends?"

"It wasn't someone I know." Erna has lost all of her patience for this bullshit. She wants to go upstairs and be left alone.

"How do you know?"

"Because I don't know anyone," she says glibly.

The asshole's partner comes back. He taps the other cop on the shoulder and gestures him to come talk outside. They step outside the office, where Erna can still see them, but with their backs to the glass. She can't guess as to what they're saying.

When they come back in, the older, round-faced one says, "Well, we can tell you why the assailant probably let you go. It looks like the struggle attracted the attention of a stray dog and your attacker got bitten."

Erna remembers the growling sound and the garbage can being knocked over.

"Now don't get excited, because even though there's some blood, the odds that it'll make a good sample are about zero and the odds that it'll match anyone in our database are even worse."

Erna wonders how odds can get worse than zero.

She asks, "Is the dog okay?"

"No, it looks like its neck got broken, but don't worry, it doesn't look like it belonged to anyone."

Erna tries to hide her lip quiver by putting her cigarette back in her mouth and sucking. She can feel her eyes getting wet though. She always liked dogs.

The cop moves on with the pre-planned speech that he probably gives every assault victim. "Now in most cases this kind of thing is just a prank that gets blown out of proportion. Probably an ex-boyfriend or something. I wouldn't worry about it. We'll try to run the blood sample, but don't expect
anything to come of it."

No, of course not, Erna thinks. Far be it for her to expect anything of the NYPD.

Chapter End Notes

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"Hey, nerd, do me a favor."

"Good morning?" Levi answers his neighbor dressed in her black and white frilly Gothic Lolita attire, solid black thigh-highs covering her legs and a white, lacy hair band embellished with a black velvet ribbon keeping her jaw-length curls out of her face, as she looks down at the manuscript she's editing...because it's morning and he's only just barely stepped out the door to join her for a cigarette.

"Yeah, whatever," she assents. "Morning."

Levi crosses his arms, not liking her curt tone. When she finally finishes with her red pen and looks up at him for a response, he narrows his eyebrows at her.

"Oh my god," she mutters, rolling her eyes. She puts her papers and pen down and she clasps her hands together in a dramatic, pleading pose. From her sitting position on the first step of their stoop, she looks up at him with big eyes. "Levi, please, pretty please do one tiny little thing for me and I will be forever filled with gratitude for your utter greatness and selfless generosity."

"Fuck you," he answers, fighting the smirk that wants to appear on his face. "What is it?" he asks as he lights a cigarette.

Erna returns to normal and picks up her work again. "Get me a new burner phone. I'll give you cash."

He wants to make a joke about only drug dealers using burner phones, but his sympathy for her stops him. Ever since she told him what happened to her, he's been thinking about how he'd feel if he were in her situation. However, she made it very clear, several times, that she doesn't want this to change how he acts around her and he wants to honor that. He'd want her to do the same for him. So even though he knows already that he'll do her the favor, he shrugs and asks, "What's in it for me?"

Erna pauses and thinks. Levi assumes that she's only trying to come up with something sardonic enough to really burn him, but instead she says, "Well, if you get me the phone, you'll have my number."

"Tch," he says, "If I wanted your phone number I would have just asked for it."

"And I wouldn't have given it to you."

"Bullshit."

He can't see if she's slightly smiling like she does when she's busting his balls or if she's serious. She's below him on the step and looking down at her manuscript. All he can see is the perfect black
curls, the ruffles of her dress, and her heavy boots that lace up her calf and end just below her knees.

"I don't give my number to strange men," she says demurely.

She has to be fucking with him. "You've known me for, like, four months."

"Doesn't make you any less strange."

Levi smirks to himself and ashes his cigarette over the railing. "Wouldn't want your number anyway. I see you – what? Eight times a day?"

Erna hums. "More than some married couples."

That makes him shift uncomfortably. He picks his bag and helmet up tersely and hurries down the steps, telling her, "See ya," as he heads for his bike.

"Hold the fuck up there, Short Pale and Metallic."

He stops and turns around, giving her a death glare for the new nickname. She's shorter than he is by half an inch, so what right does she have anyway?

She opens her coffin-shaped purse without looking away from her editing, pulls out a fifty-dollar bill and holds it out to him between two fingers.

He steps toward her and reaches for it, half expecting her to pull it away at the last second like an annoying teenager. He snatches it from her and shoves it into the pocket of his leather jacket.

"Thanks," she says quietly.

He realizes that, despite her snark, she's actually pretty embarrassed about needing to ask him for a favor at all. He should have thought of that. Of course she'd be uncomfortable with asking for help. Before he goes to work, he wants to diffuse the tension. He asks with mild derision, "Is that how much cash you keep on you?"

"Oh, you know," she replies, snapping back into her sarcastic singsong, "whatever I think will do for bribe money or ransom."

He smirks. "You're not getting change." He turns away and walks to his bike parked on the curb.

"Keep it!" she shouts after him. "Get yourself a new piercing if you can find a place it will fit on your small dick."

He finishes swinging his leg over his bike and raises an eyebrow at her.

When a second's passed and she realizes he hasn't left yet, she looks up from her manuscript at the look he's giving her. "What?" she says. "Low blow?"

He can't even answer back. He'll break out laughing if he tries. He puts his helmet on, mostly so that she won't see him smile, and he turns the key in the ignition.

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Without a phone, Erna judges the time according to how goddamn hot it is getting outside. Summer is at its full ferocity lately. When she thinks the fabric of her dress is about to melt and graft onto her skin, it means it's around 1pm, and time to go get more coffee.
Her apartment isn't air conditioned, so she has been spending a lot of time out on the stoop with her parasol for shade. Inside or outside, it's too hot, but at least outside the air isn't so close and suffocating.

She uncurls her legs from underneath her, stretches lazily like a little black cat, puts her pen back into her purse, and pinches her manuscript. Frilly, black parasol in one hand and coffin in the other, she walks to the café. She cringes before she even gets very close. There are people there. She can hear them and see them through the windows.

On one hand, it's good. She would be fucked if the brats' café went out of business. She'd have to make coffee for herself and she hasn't done that once in the past decade. But, on the other hand, she hates people. The lunchtime rush at One Shot has been very real lately. Erna can only chalk it up to college students being on break.

She hangs her parasol on the coat-rack just inside the door and goes up to the corner of the long counter, resting her elbows on it and putting her chin in her hands. There's a line, but she doesn't have to wait in it since she's perpetually prepaid and pre-ordered. Nobody has to ask her what she wants. She just has to wait for the barista to notice that she's there and then scurry to get her latte. Then she can sit down and try like hell to ignore the human activity until she's soaked up enough air conditioning to brace her for going back out into the sun in a long-sleeved black dress.

It's so busy that Red-Flannel-Shirt Girl is actually working behind the counter taking orders so that Green-Eyed Barista can work faster. Erna has refused to use their real names for so long that she's not sure she even remembers them. She'll have to ask Levi again.

Red Flannel Shirt notices her as soon as she touches the bar and as Barista squeezes behind her with some steamed milk, she lightly nudges him and tilts her chin in Erna's direction. He looks, and if he wasn't already stressed out, he certainly seems so now. He's so busy he doesn't have time to say anything to piss Erna off, thankfully. He just squeaks, "Okay, um, one second…" as he hurries to fill two white porcelain mugs at the same time.

Erna looks past them to survey the café. Every table is taken. There are scattered seats available. It's become customary for strangers to share tables here. It's disgustingly sociable. Erna won't do it. She'd rather stand in the corner until she cools down. So she tells the barista, "Take your time," which seems to take a huge weight off of his shoulders.

She wonders what came first. This café? Or gentrification? The chicken or the egg? She hates the college-aged hipsters that seem to flock to the place, especially on weekends, but she can't deny that they might be a slight improvement over the dead-eyed heroin addicts that populate a large section of their street right now. But it's only a slight improvement, she thinks, as she gets a look at the next bearded, leather suspenders-wearing, wool beanie adorned customer who makes it up to the counter to stare at Red Flannel Girl dumbly because in the fifteen minutes he's been waiting he still hasn't decided on what he wants to fucking order.

One Shot Café's clientele lately consists of bad artists, dog walkers, bike couriers – she bets Jean's a bike courier, the fucking douche bag – hip nannies, yoga instructors, and blue-tooth wearing hedge fund managers who have to wear suits for work, but get lunch here because they want to think that they are still cool and free-spirited while they make something like ten grand a week. They're the ones who buy the bad art from the artists who are "making a living off their art" while their parents pay their rent.

These are all just Erna's assumptions, but she thinks they're fairly accurate. She doesn't know where these people are popping up from, but she can guess that they're attracted to the fair trade organic pastries, the latte art, and the décor that looks like a historic antique rehab addict's wet dream.
She's torn between feeling glad that the kids are doing well and will be able to keep the café in business for a long time, and wanting to burn the place to the ground. She could go either way.

If a table doesn't clear before that tan, green-eyed brat gets her latte, she's going to burn the place to the ground.

"Do you have kombucha?" a girl with fake glasses asks when she gets to the front of the line.

If Erna had to wait in that line, this place would already be smoldering ashes.

This is the only time that she misses having a smart phone, because maybe the customers at every café she's ever been inside were this annoying, but she didn't need to notice because she could distract herself by checking her fetlife account or looking at pretty dresses on Polyvore.

She hears someone say, "Can I buy you a drink?" and turns her head to get some sardonic pleasure out of seeing what the douche bag who tries to use that line in a café looks like, and make inferences about how fucking awful he and the girl he's hitting on are. But when she turns to look, there's the douche bag with his combed and gelled blond hair and crazily blue eyes looking right at her.

Erna looks around in bewilderment, checking behind the counter and scanning the tables. She does this until the man, who would fall into her category of bluetooth wearing hedge fund manager trying to hang onto his cool, asks her if everything's okay.

She says, "I was just checking that this is still a café and I didn't walk into a bar."

He laughs as if she were making a joke with him and not at his expense. So, sarcasm isn't going to work.

"My drink's already paid for," she says bluntly over his laughter.

He leans on the counter with her, getting slightly closer, just barely edging into her personal space. "Then do you want to get it and sit with me?"

She narrows her eyes at him suspiciously. "...Why?" she says, her voice dipping deeper than usual.

He obviously mistakes her deeper tone as sexy and interested, when really it's her 'I'm exceedingly better than you so much so that I need to look down my nose at you,' tone. She isn't sure if her mannerisms don't send as clear a message as she thought, or if he is shit at social cues, or if he's very good at denial.

"I like your look," he says, looking her up and down. "It's really different. What's your name?"

This is not new to Erna. It hasn't happened in a while, but it's not new. She gives him the shortest appraising glance, which seems to flatter him greatly, but then, as severely as she can, she tells him, "You think I'm exotic because my outward presentation is different from the norm and you think this means I'm going to be fun and weird in bed. You also think that I'm going to jump at the chance to hang out with you because you look like you have a high income and you assume that I, looking the way I do, make minimum wage working at Hot Topic or something." Erna doesn't even deign to look at the guy anymore, instead burning holes into the back of Barista Bitch's head as he hurries to multitask several drinks at once, but she can feel his eyes widening and his jaw going slack with disbelief that she is so casually rejecting him.

"You think," she continues, "that I'm going to be impressed with your collection of imported scotch that you only pretend to enjoy the taste of, and you think that you'll be able to text me in the middle of the night and I'll scurry to take a cab over to your place because it's so much nicer than mine, and
you think that I'll put more effort into my appearance and I'll wear kinky gothic lingerie to fulfill your fantasies and I'll work desperately hard to keep you interested in me, because naturally I will recognize that you are better than me both financially and socially."

If Green-Eyed Barista takes an extra five seconds to pour the milk into her latte so that it will look like a swan or a rose or some shit, she is going to gouge out his stupid, beautifully colored eyes with one of those long stirring spoons and save them in a jar.

"I…"

Erna looks back at her victim. She'll wait for him to come up with something to say, because she's pretty much out of ammunition until he gives her some more bullshit to go off of.

Finally the barista drops her latte on the counter. Even though he's in a rush, he takes a second to take in the scene and get apprehensive about the stranger talking to her, though Erna isn't sure if he's apprehensive for her or for the guy. Before hurrying back he nudges the latte toward her and says, "Here ya go, Erna." Then he pauses to find the right words. What he comes up with is: "You good?"

"Yeah, Bambi," she says, "I'm good." Because as distasteful as talking to people is, she can fucking handle it. Her pulse is racing and her nose is getting itchy and she's feeling significantly overwhelmed by the crowd and the noise and this pretentious little prick who wants to get her a coffee, but she's good.

"Erna's a beautiful name," he says, in hopes of completely changing the subject and disarming her with a compliment as the barista walks away again, then he introduces himself. "I'm Daniel."

She turns and looks at him again. She tilts her head at him. He maybe looks like a douche-y Ryan Gosling. She's not sure, because all blond-haired, blue-eyed white guys of a certain age look exactly the same to her, like she has face-blindness for conventionally attractive people. And she doesn't get what his game is, because she is not attractive. She knows that. So she rationalizes that it's an ego/power thing. She reaches across the counter, past his arm, and points discretely. "See that girl over there?"

That gets him to turn around. He looks. Erna isn't sure which person he's looking at, because honestly she wasn't pointing at anyone in particular. She tells him, "I'm not interested, but you should try the one with the fake glasses. She looks desperate and might be into the gothic lingerie thing. Good luck."

This is where she would like to get away. Sadly, there aren't any open spaces at the counter. As the guy scans the room and tries to figure out which girl with fake glasses she was talking about, Erna picks up her latte and moves to sneak out the door. The blistering heat isn't desirable, but she'll take it over this.

"Erna," she hears a soft voice say from behind the bar.

She needs to tell these kids to stop being so familiar. She turns around and Red Flannel Girl is already rounding the bar, coming toward her as she wipes her hands on a kitchen towel. "Come with me."

Her red flannel shirt weaves through customers as she makes her way toward the back of the café, not even turning around to see if Erna will follow or not. Erna shrugs. She'll see where this is going.

She follows the girl through the back hallway, past the small kitchen and she watches as a door gets unlocked and pushed open.
Red Flannel Girl pushes a piece of perfectly straight black hair behind her ear. "You can hang out in the office if you want. Nobody will bother you."

Of the trio, Red Flannel Girl is the one she distrusts the least. So Erna's not openly hostile, just a little suspicious and maybe confused. When she says "Thanks," it comes out in a questioning tone.

"I don't use it when we're busy. I'll leave it unlocked and you can drink your coffee in here during the lunch rush."

Erna looks inside. The office is all wood, reclaimed and rustic and natural looking with dark stain on a lot of it. There are some green, non-flowering plants on shelves and on the floor, and little terrariums in glass globes. It feels very Zen. Most importantly, there's an air conditioning unit in the window.

She steps inside and puts her manuscript down on the desk. She doesn't know what to do or say. This is a very warm gesture and it's not bad, it's just Erna doesn't know how to make herself sound sincerely grateful. She is worried that whatever she says it will come out sounding like snark because that is the permanent tone to her voice.

So she says, "Um…"

And the girl who's always wearing the same red flannel shirt unbuttoned over top of different t-shirts and tank tops or tied around her waist or wrapped around her shoulders, so that it's all Erna knows her by, simply nods and says, "It's alright." She takes a step back, out of the doorframe, and closes the door for Erna.

"Oi, Mike, I need an actual lunch break today," Levi says off-handedly as he is lying on his back on the couch in the large white tiled waiting room of The Basement.

He is technically working the desk. He just doesn't think that means he needs to be sitting at the desk. He can see the phone and computer from the couch, so he's on top of it. If he lies on the couch and sketches some tattoo designs in his book, then technically he is multitasking and getting twice as much work done.

He doesn't get a response from Mike, who's across the room in one of the half-walled cubicles, doing line work on somebody's forearm while Hitch watches.

Levi thinks maybe Mike didn't hear him over the buzz of his tattoo machine, until he says simply, "Yeah."

He's not the most verbal when he's working.

A lot of other tattoo artists are like Mike. When they're drawing, the verbal side of their brain shuts down, more or less. Levi doesn't have that problem. He keeps sketching while he elaborates on the lunch break thing to make sure Mike fucking gets it and isn't going to screw him out of it. "Like I need to actually leave. Not eat a salad at the desk while still answering the phone every time it rings."

"Uh-huh," is all he gets from Mike.

Levi checks the clock. It's 1pm. He has thirty minutes blocked off for a consultation at 3pm, and two hours for part of a sleeve from 4pm to 6pm. So Mike needs to let Hitch fucking take the desk back in at least the next thirty minutes if Levi is going to have any hope of getting enough time to grab something for lunch and get Erna's phone.
He doesn't know why Mike bothers trying to teach the intern anything anyway. She's unteachable. It's not that she isn't smart, just that she thinks she knows everything already, so she doesn't watch or listen. If Levi has to tell her to put her phone away one more goddamn time while she's working, he's going to lose his shit.

He tries to breathe evenly and not think about it. He draws better when he's not pissed off.

Then he hears a door open in the back. Hanji comes out with their last customer who is sniffling and hissing with sharp, pained inhaling breaths. Levi subtly turns his eyes away from his sketchbook to watch.

Hanji swings behind the desk while assuring the girl, "I know it hurts, but you're okay," like they're talking to a toddler that just skinned its knee. "Here," they say as they hold out a hand mirror, "Do you want to look at it again?"

The girl takes the hand mirror and holds it up to check out her septum piercing and she says with a shaky voice, "It's pretty."

"Right?" Hanji says. "So can you breathe deep for me and be brave? No more sniffles, you'll get it infected."

"Yeah," the girl says with a tremor in her voice. She had been a walk-in. Levi is glad he let Hanji take her.

Hanji loads up a little plastic bag with antiseptic wipes and aftercare instructions as a kind of consolation prize for the poor girl and sends her on her way while making sure to mention that if she wants the jewelry changed, they'll do it for free.

When the girl is gone, Hanji sighs deeply.

Levi goes back to looking at his sketchbook and asks, "Did you hit a nerve or something?"

Hanji is highly insulted. "I've never hit a nerve. Some people just have no tolerance for pain."


"Yep," Hanji agrees.

Mike shoots them both a look. They're not allowed to complain about customers while there is an actual customer in the shop, i.e. the guy currently holding it together while Mike finishes up the outline for the flaming skull that's going on his bicep. He was not a walk-in, so Levi doesn't see why what they're saying would be insulting, but he shuts up and goes back to sketching.

While giving Hanji and Levi their warning glance, Mike also caught Hitch staring at the clock. He gets her attention with a gruff, "Hitch."

She gets startled and jumps a little when she realizes she's been caught. Mike gives her a stern look and says, "Pay attention or go take inventory."

Levi tries to tune out Hitch's defensive whining and Hanji's I-don't-have-any-appointments-so-I'll-do-literally-the-most-annoying-thing-possible whistling. If he didn't have to be minding the desk, he would hole up in one of the back rooms to sketch in peace.

He tries to radiate waves of 'fuck off' energy as Hanji meanders over towards him. He knows what they're going to ask.
"Can I look?"

"No."

"Why nooot?" they whine.

Levi groans, because he doesn't have an actual good reason for not wanting Hanji to look at his sketchbook. He just doesn't like people looking at his art unless they have to decide whether or not they want it permanently inked on their body. It is the most uncomfortable feeling he can think of. Maybe because after the five-thousandth time he heard, 'oh my god that's so amazing,' it stopped sounding believable. Maybe because he truly doesn't give a shit about Hanji's feedback and doesn't want to hear it. Maybe just because.

But 'just because' isn't a very good reason. So he turns the sketchbook around and lets them look.

"Oooohh," they coo in admiration.

It makes Levi feel fucking hollow.

"Is this for a client?"

Levi turns the sketchbook back around. Hanji reaches for it and grabs it from him, holding it up to get another look.

Levi sighs at them, "Yeah."

It's one of four sketches Levi's working on for a guy who wants a sexy little red riding hood surrounded by red roses. For this one he went with black and white for the red riding hood portrait and the leaves to balance out the red roses. He thinks otherwise it's going to be too much color with the big red roses and a fully colored portrait, but if the guy wants a whole mess of red all over his arm, then who is Levi to argue.

"It looks like your girlfriend," Hanji says innocuously, tilting the book back and forth.

Levi's knee-jerk reaction is to say that he doesn't have a fucking girlfriend, but he already knows what Hanji is talking about, and he makes a panicked grab for the sketchbook. They let him take it back while correcting themselves, "I mean, you know, that girl who you're friends with. Your neighbor."

"Levi has a girlfriend," Hitch singsongs like she's in fourth grade.

"Fucking Erna," Levi hisses as if she has personally fucked him over, like he's saying it directly to her face dressed up in a hood with pouting, slightly parted lips.

"That's definitely her jaw line and cheekbones," Hanji helpfully points out.

"Yeah, okay, I see it," Levi says, just so they'll stop elaborating on how accurately he drew exactly Erna's face with long, wavy blonde curls instead of her shorter, tighter black ones. "Shit." He lays the book down in his lap and looks up at Hanji. "Is it unethical to tattoo her face on someone?"

"I mean…" Hanji begins uncertainly,..."artists need references right?"

"Tch." He picks the sketchbook back up, as if this time when he looks at it won't be Erna's face anymore. "I don't want to have to re-draw this."

"You shouldn't. It's really good," Hanji says.
Levi only answers with a heavy groan as he tilts his head back and looks up at the ceiling.

"I'm sure Mike's tattooed Nanaba on a ton of people," Hanji says, trying to be helpful.

Mike doesn't say anything. He's too absorbed in his work to be listening to them.

"This isn't like that," Levi warns.

Hanji doesn't say anything, but Levi can see that they want to. They successfully fight the impulse and end up just shrugging after a few seconds, saying skeptically, "Okay…"

Levi is about to erupt with a slew of defensive objections. He sees this girl all the time, they're neighbors, they're kind of friends, they're on the same chain-smoking schedule, her face is just good for tattoos, she has a good bone structure, her face lends itself to being cute and innocent or mature and sexy or anything in between, etcetera, etcetera. He doesn't get the chance to say any of that. The chime of the bell over the door interrupts his whole train of thought.

Framed and backlit by the midday sun in the doorway is an apparition from Levi's past wearing a big, loose-fitting and thin grey cotton t-shirt, screen-printed with the word 'Brooklyn' and a skyline silhouette in black, with the shoulders and neck scissor-cut into a deep V. She's carrying a big white leather bag with a long fringe at the bottom that matches her white skinny jeans that are distressed and were cut with a razor horizontally across the thighs and knees. Her cork wedge sandals make her about three inches taller, and her hair is longer than he remembers, but still she's instantly recognizable.

He nearly dives and tries to hide underneath the couch. Realizing that he can't do that, he instead covers his face with his sketchbook.

"Hi! Can I help you?" Hanji says cheerfully.

"OMG. Levi, is that you?" the strawberry blonde girl squeals.

'Fuck this day,' Levi thinks as he drops the sketchbook on the coffee table. "Hey, Petra." He gets up off the couch and lamely holds up a hand in greeting.

She dramatically drops her purse on the floor and runs over to him, embracing him in a big hug. He's caught completely off guard and doesn't even decide whether he should hug her back or not before she's stepped away again, holding him at arm's length and looking him up and down while talking rapidly.

"How are you?! This is so cosmic! I was totally just randomly thinking about you the other day, so I searched you on IG to see if you were still up to anything artistically and your name came up on this place's account!"

Levi looks past her to glare at Hanji, who shrugs apologetically and says, "I put your stuff on our Instagram."

"And it's so good," Petra squeals. "So where have you been hiding? I feel like it's been forever!"

"Seven years," Levi points out. It's easy to remember because he chose to stop seeing Petra almost a year before he went to prison.

"OMG." She says, "Like a lifetime, I know."

He raises an eyebrow. Did she really just say 'omg' out loud…again?
"So, what have you been up to?"

This is almost physically painful for Levi. Petra brings up all the feelings and memories from one of the lowest points in his life. That's not her fault, but still. Like a sense memory, Petra's face brings back all of the hopelessness and depression he was feeling when he'd had to drop out of Columbia, all of the self-hating feelings and victim complexes he tried to quiet with more sex, more weed, more beer, and more being a shitty mooching asshole who was barely a functional adult human being and hated every second of it.

He doesn't know what to tell her. He just wants her to leave so that she won't remind him of the person he was when he was with her.

"Levi," Mike says, and Levi hopes that for once he's going to sound like a real boss and tell him not to socialize at work, but instead he says, "You can take that lunch break if you want."

Of all the bad choices in timing.

"Actually, I'm behind on this." He picks his sketchbook back up. It's a total lie. He doesn't need to have the sample sketches ready for another three days. "I better not."

Mike shrugs and shifts his focus back to the arm of the guy he's tattooing. Hitch visibly relaxes, relieved that she won't have to take the desk back from Levi.

"So where have you been?" Petra asks as she gives him a playful hit on the arm.

He realizes that he isn't going to be able to get her to let this go by just not answering her. Not because she's genuinely interested in him. She's never been that. She just really, really wants to tell him what she's been up to. She's always been one of those people who can have a whole conversation where they're never listening; they're only waiting for their turn to talk.

Since she doesn't give a shit about his answer, he just tells her, "Prison."

"What?!" she cries excitedly. "That is so cool!"

He's a little taken aback by what he thinks is a completely inappropriate reaction.

"I mean," she explains, "It gives you such an edge, so much more interest. It might be really good for my gallery. Do you do any multimedia pieces? People love multimedia lately."

Hanji, whose excitement over seeing one of Levi's friends was starting to wane, has their interest piqued again. "You own a gallery?"

"Yeah," Petra sighs. "It's just a little thing in SoHo. I thought about expanding, but I like the smallness of it – makes it feel more exclusive and underground, which is the kind of art I try to pull in. I feel like bigger galleries are just so mainstream now and I'm trying to hit on things before they become too mainstream, you know?"

"SoHo?" Hanji says in awe.

"Yeah, it's NBD," Petra dismisses with a wave of her hand. "My parents bought it for me as a graduation present."

Levi feels nauseous. The way she admits to taking things from her parents completely freely and without any self-consciousness always made him uncomfortable.
"Are you an artist?" Hanji asks, completely oblivious to how much Levi wants this to be over.

"I am," Petra's eyes light up and she pulls out her phone. She pulls up some pictures and hands it to Hanji to look at. "That's some of my stuff. I don't show it in my gallery, I'm actually only doing private commissions now. It makes the work more personal," she says with an upward inflection like it's a question, even though it isn't.

"I like the feeling of being really connected to my clients on an emotional level, so I'm only making pieces that are really making a statement for them. It's so much more meaningful and, um," she pauses as she tries to find the perfect word, "fulfilling than just making art for myself." She ends again on an upward inflection and Levi catches Hitch cringing over in the cubicle on the other side of the room.

It's the first time he's ever felt sympathy with the intern.

"So I'm staying away from showings for now and just trying to speak more and more authentically through my work, and to be as, like, transparent as possible about my feelings and findings about the world around me." The more she speaks, the more the ends of her thoughts trail off into dreamy upward inflections. "And I'm just, like, learning more about humanity and myself, you know?"

Hanji grins and nods more and more uncomfortably as they look at a painting of an outline of a heart with some red lines and x's and o's in the middle of it. "That's..." they hand the phone back to Petra, "...really good..." Petra smiles as she takes the phone back and starts pulling up more pictures.

Levi turns around and checks the clock on the wall behind the desk. It's too early for him to claim that he needs to get ready for his consultation. He tries to think of another way to excuse himself, or to make Petra leave without being rude.

"So how do you know Levi?" Hanji asks.

"Oh, we met at Columbia," she says casually. Then she hands her phone to Levi to look at and she tells him, "Here, that's my gallery. If you have anything to show, I'd love to help you expand your career."

It takes every ounce of self-control that Levi has cultivated in himself to not throw her phone on the ground and crush it.

Hanji's jaw drops and Hitch yells across the room, "You went to Columbia?!"

Levi only grunts and pretends to look at the pictures of Petra's fucking gallery.

"Mike, did you know this?!" Hanji asks.

Mike also opts to only grunt in affirmation, because he's getting pretty fed up with the racket going on in his shop while he tries to concentrate on his work.

"It was on my resume," Levi mutters. He gives Petra her phone back and says as non-committally as possible, "I'll let you know."

"Well, until then," she says as she picks up her purse and drops her phone in it, "we should hang out." She tilts her head slightly and Levi knows exactly what she's thinking when she says 'hang out.' She holds out her hand and says, "Here, give me your phone."
And he doesn't know why he does it. Because it's the path of least resistance? Because he's too much of a pussy to tell her to fuck off and that he doesn't want to lounge around whatever expensive, artsy warehouse loft she's living in right now and fuck her brains out every two to three hours so that she can feel hip and edgy about having an artistically talented and punky fuck toy?

She saves her number in his phone as "Petra" with a heart and a kissy face emoji. Then she holds it up at an angle to take a selfie to save along with the contact. After all that she gives him his phone back.

"You can text me anytime," she says, completely oblivious to the disgust and discomfort with which he retrieves the phone from her. "I'd love to get together soon."

"Yeah…" is all he has to say to that.

"Nice meeting you all," she says to the others, even though she was so self-absorbed that she didn't ever get their names. The definition of 'meeting' is different in Petra's world. What it really means is, 'it was nice to make you aware of my artistic presence.'

She finally leaves. Levi falls back onto the couch. Hitch shudders and says, "That was uncomfortable."

"Thank you!" Levi shouts across the room. Then he glares at Hanji. "Why did you have to keep talking to her?"

Hanji gives him a big smile and says conspiratorially with a lot of intrigue, "Were you two a thing?"

"Ew!" Hitch cries.

"No," Levi lies, feeling about as disgusted about the idea as Hitch does right now.

"When did you go to Columbia?" Hanji asks him.

"Before the whole prison thing," Levi says, absolutely tired of this shit. "Now Hanji, please, fuck off," he begs.

"Moody…" Hanji chides.

Levi picks his sketchbook back up and there's sexy-red-riding-hood-Erna staring back at him. "Shit," he hisses. How pissed off would she be if he tattooed her likeness onto a guy's arm? "Shit!" he says it again, louder, when he remembers that he was supposed to get her a phone. He checks the time again. There's no way he's going to make it. "Fuck me!"

"Hey, are you going to Ymir and Krista's party tonight?" Hanji asks as if Levi isn't in the middle of a fucking panic attack on the couch.

When he gets home around 7pm, Levi is surprised to see Erna still sitting out on the stoop, pretty much the same as he left her that morning – editing a manuscript with a cardboard cup of cold coffee next to her and her parasol propped against the railing, shading her from the horror of the sun threatening her pale complexion.

He shuts off his bike and takes his helmet off, resting it on his hip as he walks up. "Did you go inside at all today?"
She doesn't look up from her work or stop chewing on the pen cap in her mouth. She mutters around it, "Too hot inside."

"It's hot out here," Levi says in complete awe of the fact that she spent an entire day out in the sun with a long-sleeved black dress with a collar that buttons about halfway up her neck.

Erna shoots him a look and makes a frustrated sigh. She takes the pen cap out of her mouth and puts it down with her papers. "Look," she says seriously, "I like it better out here. I get all...paranoid inside. Not enough escape routes. Out here I can see everything from further away and I have more options."

Levi pushes the fingers of his right hand into his hair and rakes them through. He sighs. He doesn't know what he can do about that or if he should want to do anything to help her. She always insists that she's fine and she's happy enough like this and maybe he should respect that...but he wants her to be able to hang out in her apartment without feeling trapped and afraid.

"Do you want iced tea?" That's all he's got as far as 'helpful' goes.

"With sugar if you have it," she says.

Going upstairs to get them both iced tea gives him a few minutes to stuff his fucking sympathy that she doesn't want. Every time he catches himself feeling sorry for her, he has to try to fight that feeling, because he knows he couldn't stand to be around anyone who felt sorry for him. It's the worst feeling knowing that someone pities you.

Besides, she's right. It is fucking hot inside.

He puts his helmet in the closet, drops his bag on the bed, and opens the window. Hopefully it'll cool off when the sun goes down. He fills two glasses with iced tea he made yesterday and goes back downstairs.

She takes one sip and makes a disgusted face and says, "Gross. No sugar?"

"I don't have any."

"I forgot how much I hate tea." She holds the cold glass against her forehead to cool down instead of drinking the liquid inside it.

After half a minute of quiet, he remembers to tell her, "I couldn't get your phone," and he gives her back her money.

She shrugs apathetically. "It's okay. I don't talk to anyone. Just need it to call 911. But if you call 911 for me when you hear screaming through the wall, then I'm all set."

"I can probably do that."

"How do you not have sugar?"

Levi's shoulders slump already, because he knows exactly how she's going to react when he says, "I try not to eat refined sugar."

"Fuck you," she says. "That's not a thing. Sugar is fucking wonderful, you hippie."

He deadpans at her very seriously, "You better be nice to me if you want me to call 911 when you're getting murdered."
"Dick."

Is this when he should tell her that he's probably going to tattoo her face on someone this upcoming Tuesday? Probably not. He pulls his phone out of his back pocket after drinking half of his iced tea. He has two more messages from Ymir. He doesn't bother opening them. He can pretty well guess that they both say something about him being lame and/or demanding that he get his ass over to her party right away.

They stay on the stoop for an hour. She pretends to get work done. He smokes three cigarettes. People dressed up in bathing suits and light linen shirts keep walking up the steps past them and going inside.

"So, what the fuck is all that?" Erna eventually asks him, after the sixth or seventh unfamiliar person goes through the propped-open door.

"Ymir is having a party. It's a beach theme," he answers. "She loves theme parties." Right on cue, his phone buzzes again with another text from her.

"Gross," is all Erna as to say to that.

"Do you want to go? She asked me to invite you, since you don't have a phone."

"Asked you?" Erna says skeptically.

"Well, if you have to know exactly what she said..." he takes his phone out of his back pocket, and scrolls through his messages until he hits the one Ymir sent him at 5pm. He reads it verbatim. "Beach party, 7pm, wear a bathing suit, bring the mean girl you smoke with. No excuses. If you don't come then you're a lame, worthless piece of shit."

Erna smiles. "I'm honored that she thinks I'm mean."

"Yeah, I'd take that as a compliment," Levi says. "Do you want to go?"

Predictably, she tells him that she hates parties. Levi kind of hates parties too, but he's torn. He wants to hang out with her, because he has more fun with her around than without her, but it would be weird to invite her over to his place, and with her agoraphobia he can't really invite her to do anything else. So he can either hang out on the stoop with her, smoking and talking all night like they do almost every night, or he can convince her to go to this party so that he can delay the inevitable moment when he's going to have to lie in bed and dwell on his shitty day and question all of his life decisions that led to him being a tattoo artist and piercer in a small shop instead of a legit artist with a career like Petra, even if her art and her career are both bullshit.

"Ymir really wants you to go," he says.

"That's nice," she says carelessly.

"You won't have to stay long."

"I know, especially since I don't plan on going."

Levi stops and thinks about what he can say that might actually change her mind. "We can stand in a corner not talking to anyone and drink a lot and make fun of people?"

"Hmm..." she says, "That is my favorite thing to do on a Saturday night." She sets her glass down on the concrete steps and rolls her shoulders before standing up. "Can you promise that I won't have
to talk to anyone?"

Levi is going to be very careful about his answer. He stays silent for a good long moment. He'll be lying if he promises that nobody will try to talk to her and then he'll be in trouble, but if he doesn't promise that nobody's going to talk to her, she'll decide not to go.

"...I can promise that if anyone does talk to you, I will go get all of your lattes on my days off so that you won't have to talk to Eren."

Erna snaps her fingers. "That's his name!"

"You forgot again?"

She gives him a shrug. "He responds to pretty much anything. I called him Bambi today."

Levi thinks about that for a second and decides, "That's pretty accurate."

"Right? With those big eyes."

Levi smirks. "His eyes are always big around you because you scare the shit out of him."

Again she shrugs, this time with an evil little smirk. "Anyway, good deal."

Levi has to stop at his place to toss the glasses in the sink while Erna stands in the doorway and warns him that if he follows the obsessive compulsion to wash them right away then she is going back to her apartment and cuddling up with a book for the night. He has to dig his fingernails into his palms as he walks away from the dirty glasses in the sink.

She tells him that he's fucking weird as they walk down the hallway to Ymir's and he argues that he's not even half as weird as she is, which she thinks is debatable, because while she might have her own issues, he doesn't eat sugar and has OCD.

Levi is about to open the door to Ymir and Krista's apartment, but as he touches the handle it swings open violently to reveal Ymir already on the other side, like she was just about to leave. She's startled momentarily, but then she flashes a wolfish grin at them and says, "I knew you'd show up."

Levi goes to walk past her, but she blocks the doorway with her arm and leans on the frame.

"There's a dress code," she sneers.

Ymir doesn't seem to buy it at all. She leans down and brings her face closer to Erna's. "I know you have a bikini in your closet and you're not getting in here without it."

There's a long, tense silence that makes Levi incredibly uncomfortable. This was a bad idea. Just before he's about to call it and go smoke on the stoop all night instead, Erna says, "How do you
Ymir crosses her arms, but widens her stance to still block the doorway and she says with pride, "Super lesbian senses."

Erna's facial expression remains stone still as she and Ymir stare each other down for another few seconds before finally Erna balls up her little fists and stamps her boot against the hallway carpet. She makes a disgusted sound and says, "Fine!"

She goes back down the hallway, and violently opens and closes the door to her apartment, presumably to change.

Ymir smiles at Levi and tells him "You're welcome," like she just did him a favor.

He rolls his eyes at her and tries to push past, but she blocks him with her arm again and says, "Where do you think you're going?"

"To the party you fucking invited me to? Via text message? About eighteen times?"

"You're not getting in here without a half-naked girl. That's the cost of admission."

Levi closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose. "Oh, my god, Ymir…"

"I don't want my beach party to turn into a sausage fest. I already had to let in two gay couples. What's the point of throwing a theme party if I don't get to see a lot of skin?"

Levi looks at her with a straight-faced stare as she stands there, blocking the doorway in her red one-piece lifeguard swimsuit and picking at the skin around her fingernails with the thumb on one hand. He tells her in a deadpan, "Your honesty about your motives almost makes it seem pure and innocent."

"I'm just saying what we're all thinking," she says out the side of her mouth as she chews away a piece of skin around her middle finger.

Levi wonders if Erna is actually coming back. It's weird to try to picture her in anything but one of her gothic Lolita dresses with black stockings and boots. He'd be surprised if she didn't just lock herself in her apartment. He wonders if Ymir is going to actually make him leave if he can't produce a girl in a bikini for her to stare at.

He figures he better try to get something out of this if he ends up getting screwed out of the party by both Erna and Ymir's similar sense of stubbornness.

"Can I at least get a beer while I wait?"

Ymir narrows her eyes at him skeptically. She's probably wondering about whether or not she's going to let him in if Erna doesn't come back too. But finally she turns to yell over her shoulder, "Krista! Can you bring me a PBR and a bottle of whiskey?"

"Tch." Levi raises an eyebrow at her when she turns back around. "PBR? Upscale."

Ymir smirks at his sarcasm and shrugs. "I know. But half of our friends are hipsters and love that shit. And you," she drawls while poking a finger into his sternum, "don't get any of the good shit until you bring me more cleavage to look at."

Levi tells her with all of the seriousness in the world, "You're a creep. You know that, right?" Even
though they're good friends and he wouldn't want her any other way.

Krista comes over with the typical bounce in her step and big smile. She gives Ymir a can of beer and a big unopened bottle of whiskey and skips away, telling her girlfriend offhandedly, "Here ya go! I'm going to call for a sand delivery."

Ymir tosses the cold, sweaty can to Levi and as he cracks it open, she registers what Krista just said and she quirks her eyebrows and tilts her head as she says, "Wait. What?"

Levi tips his beer to gesture at the party going on behind Ymir and says, "Should you go take care of that?"

Ymir snarls at him, "You're not getting off that easy." Then she calls Krista back over with a little shaky apprehension in her voice. When the blonde little pixie comes back, looking as innocent as anyone could in a pink bikini with white polka dots and ruffles, Ymir asks her, "What was that about sand?"

Krista explains, "It isn't beachy enough in here."

Levi raises his eyebrows, because he can see a huge saltwater aquarium set up in the entryway behind Ymir with at least one little shark in it. These parties do tend to get out of hand, not because of rowdy guests, but more in an over-the-top kind of way where Krista spends a lot of money getting things normal people would not even think of. Krista would be a great event planner for a Saudi princess's sweet sixteen party… especially if they had a ridiculous theme.

Krista says, "If we just put a tarp down in the living room, I can have my sand guy come and it'll look way better in here."

Ymir looks progressively more and more horrified with every word and when Krista's finished, she explodes. "We're not putting actual sand in the living room! I don't care if there's a tarp under it, it'll get everywhere and we'll be vacuuming sand out of our assholes for months! Years! And what is a 'sand guy'?! What does that even mean?!"

Levi is thoroughly enjoying this.

"But Ymirrrr," she pouts and whines, making her eyes big like she's going to cry.

Ymir groans, seemingly tortured, because with how much she adores Krista it is almost impossible for her to say no to the little blonde nymph. "Krista, please, no sand?" she begs, closer to actual, real tears than her girlfriend who is only faking.

Krista's mouth makes a crooked little downturn and she crosses her arms. Her head tilts with annoyance and dissatisfaction at not getting her way without question. "I'll think about it," she says.

Levi sips his beer. It's a good show. Pretty much worth it even if he doesn't get to go into the party.

As fun as it is watching them go back and forth and seeing Ymir get more and more desperate under the whimsy of her manic girlfriend, Levi is nearly done with his beer and would like to know what the score is. So he interrupts them. "So, seriously, if Erna doesn't come back are you going to be a dick and not let me in?"

Ymir snaps her attention back to him swiftly, holding the whiskey bottle in her one hand up and extending a pointer finger, opening her mouth, he assumes, to say something sarcastic and rude because she's in a mood now. Before she says anything, something in her periphery catches her attention and makes her jaw drop a little before her mouth morphs into a grin. Her shoulders tick as
she lets a slight laugh out her nose and says, "I guess we're not going to find out."

Levi turns to look at what Ymir is seeing and is immediately stunned.

Walking toward them, about one inch away from the most pissed off he's ever seen her, is Erna in a black bikini. Seeing her so completely bare is about as shocking as he imagines it would be to see him in an expensive three-piece suit with his hair slicked back and all of his piercings removed. So that's why his jaw drops. And it's definitely not because her skin is flawlessly white and smooth, or because her shoulders and collarbone are as perfect and regal as a classic sculpture, or because she has a tiny, wasp-y waist that accentuates the curve of an ass and legs that an actual swimsuit model would kill for. It's only because it's so different.

Yeah.

Her face, at least, is exactly the same as he usually sees it – glaring at him like she's about to murder him and everyone in her field of vision.

When she reaches them, the first thing she says is, "Don't fucking look at me." Then she says, "Give me that," as she snatches the bottle of whiskey out of Ymir's hand.

Ymir smiles knowingly and shoots Levi a look that silently says her super lesbian senses told her that this is exactly what would happen. That's why she had Krista bring her that bottle.

Levi does actually try not to look at Erna as she unscrews the cap from the bottle at record speed with her sharp, deft little fingers and takes a huge swig while Ymir asks her what took her so long. Erna holds a finger up until she's finished swallowing, then she says, "I had to shave."

Ymir smirks lasciviously and raises an eyebrow while looking down to stare directly at the bottom half of Erna's bikini. She asks, "Ooh? What'd you shave?"

Levi covers his face with his palm. Krista clucks her tongue and hisses "Ymir…"

Erna lifts an arm and says, "My armpits, you actual cartoon of a perverted old man."

Ymir mumbles disappointedly, "If I were a cartoon pervert I'd be way more interested in your armpits…"

Krista pushes Ymir out of the way and pulls Erna into a big hug, ignoring how uncomfortable it makes her or how close she's jarring her into spilling her whiskey. Krista begins talking excitedly while still embracing Erna. "Ignore her, she won't even let me get sand for the living room. I'm so glad you came, you look SO cute!" She loosens her hold on Erna only to drag her inside by her wrist while still talking at a mile a minute. "Have you met everyone? Oh! Did you see my fish tank? You can take a seahorse home later if you want!"

Ymir turns and watches them as Krista pulls Erna further and further into the apartment. She's still keeping her arm braced across the frame to keep Levi out when she says half to him and half just to herself, "Know that fairytale with Snow White and Rose Red? They look like that…except you just want to fuck both of them instead of feed them to a bear or whatever…"

Levi isn't too familiar with fairytales, but he thinks he knows enough to tell Ymir, "I don't think that's how that one goes. You going to let me in now?"

"Yeah, I guess." She lets her arm fall to her side finally and Levi steps into the entryway.

He thinks she's kind of right. Krista and Erna are like similar but inverse opposites. Dark and light,
bubbly and angry, but they're almost the same height and they're both fucking crazy.

Just as he has that thought, he hears Erna yell from somewhere in the living room, "Don't look at me, Bambi. Look at the floor." And following that, he hears Eren's stammering apology.

"Technically," Ymir tells him, "You didn't bring me cleavage, because she's only an A-cup, but I could stare at that ass all day."

Levi shoots Ymir a look. He's fine when she talks like this about characters on Orange is the New Black, but it's weird when she's saying it about his friend.

"What?" she asks defensively when she notices the look he's giving her.

Levi simply turns his empty can of beer horizontally, holding each end on the heel of a palm, and he crushes it. He gives the crushed aluminum to Ymir and deadpans, "I'm going to raid your fridge for the good shit."

The apartment is as close to looking like a beach as any New York apartment is ever going to get, even without the sand. A recording of oceanic white noise is playing over the wall-mounted speakers, while a separate boom box is set to play classic surf music.

There are several beach balls being tossed around carelessly, actual tiki torches in the corners of each room, surfboards propped up and leaning against the walls, lounge chairs with towels set over them, and coolers left open and filled with ice and bottles of water, soda, and beer. So it turns out that Levi doesn't have to go all the way to the kitchen. He digs through the closest cooler and pulls out an Ommegang. Wiping the moisture off of it with the nearest beach towel he ducks and weaves through a few groups of people to get around the side of a tiki bar and closer to the couch where Erna is sitting, looking incredibly uncomfortable, which could either be because of her unease at being so uncovered, or it could be because Krista is still talking at her excitedly about trivial nonsense.

He pops the top off of his beer bottle with his lighter and tosses the cap into a beach bucket that's already half full with them. Then he notices Eren.

He sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose. "Eren, you don't actually have to look at the floor."

"Yes he fucking does." Erna shouts from the couch. Then she defensively picks up one of the many large beach animal plushies – a stuffed sea lion, to be exact – that share the leather sectional with her and Krista, and she hugs it tightly to cover as much of her torso as possible and even though she's scowling, it looks cute as fuck.

Levi can't.

Even though it was his idea to come here, he needs to just not be around her for a minute, because the vulnerability of her sitting on the couch holding a big plush stuffed animal and looking shy and uncomfortable and pouty is making this weird, possessive feeling twist in his gut. He needs to not, because she is definitely her own person and she's fiercely independent and it feels wrong to think of her as something he should want to protect. It's like feeling protective of a scorpion.

And as he pushes through to the kitchen, he thinks that maybe also he just needs to not look at her right now even though he's kind of to blame for how uncomfortable she is, because she has the kind of body that makes his cock twitch. In a stupid way, he feels kind of betrayed. Like he deserved to know sooner that underneath all those ruffles and ribbons she has the kind of body that would make him want to seduce her into letting him pin her against a dirty hallway wall while he explores with his fingers until he finds that g-spot and has her shaking like a demon is being exorcised from her
body. And that's not him anymore. And even if that were still him, it wouldn't be him to feel possessive of someone he's attracted to. So he's having an identity crisis while feeling like a really shitty human being for looking at his friend in any of these ways.

Fate, would of course, have to have it so that when he escapes into the kitchen where he thinks he's going to be alone, Ymir has already beaten him there and the second she sees him, she says, "How have you not hit that yet?"

"Oh my god, Ymir," he groans.

"You're basically a couple," she says as she pours some margarita mix and tequila on top of a batch of ice cubes in the blender on the counter, "Except you're like this really lame couple that doesn't have sex."

"That's because we're friends, Ymir. You just described friendship."

"Nah," she dismisses, "Straight people can't be friends."

"I'm not straight," he corrects her.

"Bi. Pan. Whatever." She rolls her eyes and turns the blender on.

Levi stares at her with a straight face until she's finished running the blender so that he can tell her, "You make it very hard to take you seriously."

She smiles and laughs a little in her wolfish way. "Okay. I'll be serious."

He really doubts that.

"I seriously think that you're both like lame teenagers who don't know how to admit that they want to make out, so you tease each other and talk shit instead." While she arranges margaritas on a big round tray, she ignores the way he groans and looks up at the ceiling and she finishes her thought anyway, "You can deny it all you want, but you have a big, stupid crush on that Tinkerbell."

He ignores the rest of what she just said and repeats in confusion, "Tinkerbell?"

"You've never heard that?"

"Heard what?"

"That's what I call her body type. No tits, tiny waist, big, round, fuckable thighs and ass, natural back arch? She looks like Tinkerbell."

"You're heavy on the Disney references today," Levi notices.

"Huh," Ymir nods thoughtfully and pauses. "Maybe I have a Disney kink."

He goes back out to the living room with her when she's done making margaritas, questioning everything about what he thinks he might feel and what Ymir said. He has no frame of reference for any of this stuff. Even if Ymir was right – which she isn't, but if she were – he wouldn't know how to go about fucking somebody he actually gave a shit about. Would that mean he'd have to date her? If they're already actual friends and they added sex to that, hypothetically, would that be dating? Is that what a couple is? He doesn't know. He's literally never dated anyone before. He shakes his head. Anyway, it doesn't matter, because they're just friends. If he did try to kiss Erna, she would probably kick his balls into his throat so fast that he'd choke on them and die.
Anyway, he's going to make it a point of proving Ymir wrong. They can be friends. He can definitely sit on the couch next to her without feeling a goddamn thing.

He picks up a big stuffed goldfish off the end of the couch and tosses it to the floor to make room for himself. He can feel Erna shoot him a look that says that he's going to be getting all of her lattes from the café tomorrow and on all of his days off for the rest of his life, because not only has Krista been talking this entire time, but also a bunch of brats that she knows from the café and hates with a passion have already tried to say hi to her.

Oh well. He thinks, taking a long swig from his beer, at least this is different than sitting on the stoop all night.

But then Eren bounds over excitedly and yells to Kirschtein across the room, "Hey, Jean, show Levi your tattoo!"

"Because that's exactly what I want to do when I'm not at work," Levi says with some heavy sarcasm that Eren doesn't catch or just ignores.

"Get off my couch," Erna threatens him under her breath, "You attract too many hipsters."

"Fuck you," is his stock response to that. Though, she's right. They do love him for some reason. He thinks it might be because he has all of the authenticity that they lack.

He wrinkles his nose and squints his eyes as Jean steps over the coffee table and lifts the patch of gauze on his bicep to show off a terribly drawn tattoo of a bicycle.

Levi gets no pleasure out of telling him, "Sorry, kid, but that's infected."

Eren raises his fists in the air and shouts, "Yes!" like he just won a bet.

"Shit, are you serious?!" Jean turns his arm to look at it closely.

Erna pokes Levi in the ribs with her elbow a little and says conspiratorially, "Don't help him. Maybe it'll turn gangrenous and they'll have to amputate his arm."

Levi gives that some serious thought, because Jean is a pain in the ass, but he feels a moral obligation to fix bad tattoos. "Who did this?" He asks as he grabs Jean's wrist and twists his arm to get a better look.

"One of my mom's friends," he says defensively. "He did all of her tattoos and hers look fine."

"Trash."

"Is he licensed?" Levi asks. Jean's silence is his answer.

"Guy really dug into you," he says, pointing at the puffiness of the black lines of the bike that would be a lot sharper if they'd been done right, careful not to actually touch the skin that's bruised an angry green and yellow and crusted in places with pus and scabs, because if he does there's no way he's going to be able to fight the compulsion to go cover himself in hand sanitizer. He lets go of Jean's wrist. He's seen enough. "They're not supposed to bruise or scab over like that. Did you clean it?"

"Fucking told you," Eren grins as he punches Jean in the shoulder.

"The guy said to just rinse it in water," Jean says as he tapes the gauze back down and covers his abomination.
"Jesus..." Levi sighs; he's pretty amazed that anyone could be so stupid. "Get some fucking Bacitracin. If that bruise is still green in a week, go to a doctor..."

He decides to clarify that, because this kid clearly can't be left any wiggle room to fuck up, "A real doctor...one that graduated from medical school...not one of your mom's friends..." He rubs his temples. "There's a reason that tattoo artists need to get fucking licensed, dumbfuck." It sounds harsh, but he's letting the kid off easy. He really wants to smack him upside the head, but he won't. Kid has enough problems with that arm that's probably going to fall off in a few months.

Eren holds his empty palm out and Jean gives him a shitty look. Eren gloats, "I was right, pay up."

"Fuck you, Jaeger." Nonetheless, Jean reaches into the pocket of his bathing suit and pulls out a twenty-dollar bill.

Levi snatches it before it reaches Eren's hand and the two idiots look at him with confusion.

"Consulting fee," Levi explains tersely. "Now get the fuck out of here."

They shuffle away obediently and leave him in peace. Some tiki torches that are too close to the blinds and may or may not be about to burn the place down distract Krista. And suddenly, when he's alone on the couch with Erna, he can't help noticing how much she smells like vanilla cake with almond buttercream icing, which is so oddly specific. He doesn't understand how she always smells like dessert. She smells like she bathes in sugar and uses cotton candy as conditioner.

Erna pokes him in the ribs with her elbow and points across the room. She asks, "What's that one's name again?"

He looks and sees her pointing at either Connie or Sasha, he can't tell which, because they're so closely fucking intertwined at all times. At that moment Connie's sitting on a big living chair and Sasha is draped across his lap, curling herself so that she can snuggle against his neck even though she's like a foot taller. Levi shrugs at Erna and says, "Just use 'Springles'. It works when I do it." He drinks down about half of his beer before he decides to ask her, "Why?"

She says quietly, venomously, "Because that's about to happen..."

Levi looks again and sees Connie extricate his arms from Sasha's cuddling and reach for an acoustic guitar that's propped against the chair. As soon as his fingers wrap around the neck of it, Erna says very sternly, loudly enough for them to hear, "Springles, no."

Connie jolts like he just got woken up from a nice dream and found a spider on his chest. His eyes widen as he looks in the direction her voice came from and he sees Erna, holding a giant plushie tightly, but no less terrifying. He still picks up the guitar and he says, "But I—"

Erna cuts him off so fast he almost drops the guitar on the ground. "No. Absolutely not. You play one chord and I'll pour what's left of this bottle over your bald head and light you on fire like a fucking match."

Levi smiles slightly. This party just got a little better if it's going to be one of the rare ones where he doesn't have to listen to Connie play the same three Sublime songs every twenty minutes. He extends the neck of his beer bottle to Erna and toasts, "Good catch."

She clinks her stolen whiskey bottle against his and then she holds it up in front of her. She looks at how much is left and Levi thinks it's kind of cute that she doesn't know how much she drank without checking the level of liquid left in the bottle. Cute in an alcoholic kind of way, because half of that bottle is gone already and he doesn't know how she hasn't passed out already, because she can't
She quirks her lips a little as she looks at how much she's drunk and seems to think about something or assess her situation. Then she lets it fall back into her lap and she looks around the room until she sees Eren in the corner, smiling like a big puppy as he leans over so that Armin can put a fake Hawaiian lei with rainbow colored flowers over his head.

Levi likes watching the way these kids snap to attention when Erna shouts, "Hey, Bambi. Grab me a water."

Automatically, Eren starts to step towards the nearest cooler. He takes two steps before he realizes what he's doing and he pulls himself up to shout back, "I don't work for you here."

Levi smiles a little, because he didn't even try to correct her on his name. He just accepts that he's Bambi now. Levi lets Erna scowl for a few seconds as Eren redirects his attention to Armin, letting him put more leis around his neck and then he says quietly to Erna, "Watch this." He puts his beer down on the coffee table and shouts over to the brats in the corner again, "Oi, Eren, get me a bottle of water."

Eren almost knocks Armin over as he lunges for the cooler so fast. He jumps over the coffee table and lands right in front of Levi, holding out a water bottle.

Levi takes the water from Eren and hands it to Erna. She makes a huffy little noise, but she still takes it and she says, "Cute. Does he know any other tricks?"

Levi points at the closest lounge chair and says, "Eren, sit down."

Right away, without questioning it, Eren sits on the edge of the lounge chair. Levi looks at Erna who shrugs a shoulder and looks unimpressed. Levi looks back to Eren, who is every inch a dutiful, loyal puppy trapped in a human body and tells him, "Okay, Eren, fuck off."

The kid slumps his shoulders and goes back to his boyfriend.

"That's a pretty good trick," Erna admits, but then she adds sarcastically, "Does he suck your dick too?"

Levi doesn't know why the kid adores him so much. He's literally never done anything to encourage it, but ever since those brats moved in and opened their café, Eren's always been trying extra hard to impress him.

"He would if I asked him to," he deadpans with complete sincerity. Out of the corner of his eye he notices her now double fisting her whiskey and water bottle, alternating taking swigs from both, and he has to ask, "How do you drink that much? Can you even stand up?"

"Lots of practice," she answers. She holds up the whiskey bottle and checks how much is left again. "This probably gives me about as much of a buzz as that one beer did for you. I can stand just fine."

He doesn't believe her. "Then do it," he dares her.

"Not going to happen," she says, hugging the stuffed sea lion tighter. "I don't want Bambi to look at me again."

He wouldn't have guessed that Erna would be this insecure with her body. He never really thought about it. But that would explain why she wears long-sleeves and stockings and high collars in June and the most skin she ever shows is on her neck, and maybe her arms when she wears something
with shorter, puffy sleeves. It wouldn't have occurred to him that it was anything but a fashion preference until now. He feels for her, but also, seeing her squirm in a vulnerable moment is kind of nice.

He's not going to tell her that she's cute, he decides. That would be stupid. Because regardless of whether he actually does think she's cute or not, which he's not even sure about, he can be pretty goddamn sure that she wouldn't be happy to hear about it. That fact actually gives him some solace. It lessens the existential crisis that he's having. It gives him permission to push thoughts about whether he's attracted to his friend or not and what that means for his vow of self-discipline and celibacy to the back of his mind, because it doesn't matter. Nothing would come of it either way, because she is…well, she's Erna. She's hard and independent and not like other girls. She's not the kind of person he could seduce even if he wanted to…he's pretty sure…

While he's chasing that uncertainty around in circles in his head, he's suddenly caught off guard by a familiar voice shouting, "Hey, Levi!"

He doesn't even look. He just groans to himself.

"Hey, Hanji," Erna purrs as Hanji appears, dressed in a bikini top and long board shorts. For whatever reason, she seems to like Hanji. Levi actually thinks she might only pretend to like Hanji just because it annoys him. He doesn't know why it should annoy him, but it does.

In an instant, Erna's smooth, whiskey-soaked purr turns into a surprised and horrified yelp as Hanji, a little over-exuberantly, takes her by the wrist and pulls her up off the couch, saying, "Oh my god, let me see your bikini!"

Now Levi is less annoyed.

"You look so cute!" Hanji squeals maniacally.

Erna tries to take her wrist back out of Hanji's grip, but Hanji is a lot stronger than her and not great at social cues, and isn't letting go. They turn Erna around in a spin and then stop her so she's facing away. They point out very matter-of-factly, "You have the cutest butt dimples. Have you ever thought about piercing them? You could do little surface piercings right here and make them stand out even more." As they say this, Hanji pokes their thumb to the center of each perfect round dimple and makes Erna flinch like she's being branded.

And Levi needs to stop looking, because she does have perfect dimples at the small of her back. They would look really good with a couple of platinum surface piercings. "Hanji, let her go," he says, because if anyone's sticking a needle in that girl, it's going to be him.

"Sorry," Hanji singsongs with a big smile. They let go of Erna's wrist and she buries herself in stuffed animals on the couch again.

Erna hugs a plush shark tightly and pouts. She says, "I'm not cute," like it was an insult instead of a compliment.

Hanji isn't even listening. They're tapping a finger against their lip and thinking out loud, "Maybe a microdermal piercing instead of a surface bar…"

Erna warns them, "I'm not putting any holes in my skin."

Hanji whines pleadingly, "They'd just be tiny holes…"

A woman with short blonde hair in sort of a long-up-top pixie cut, dressed in a white wife beater
tank and khaki cut-off shorts comes over to them and hands Hanji one of the two beers she's holding with a smirk. "What are you saying about tiny holes?" she asks Hanji.

"Nanaba," Hanji perks up and introduces her formally, "This is Erna. She's Levi's friend and she has cute butt dimples that need to be pierced."

"Butt dimples?" Nanaba asks.

"Yeah, you know, those dimples at the small of your back, right above your butt?"

As they talk about it, Erna ignores them so that she can turn to Levi and tell him very seriously with a very straight face, "I don't like your friends."

"Yeah," he says after finishing off his beer. "Sometimes I don't either."

Nanaba breaks into their conversation. "So, what's up Levi? I haven't seen you in forever." She reaches over and ruffles his hair like he's the kid brother she never had.

He bats her hand away and fixes his hair by running his fingers through it and over his scalp. "Nothing."

"So surly," she taunts. Then she turns her attention to Erna and looks her up and down as much as she can around the cover of the stuffed animals. "Your friend is cute," she appraises.

Levi groans in pain. He knows what happened. Hanji told Nanaba that he has a crush because he accidentally drew Erna's face for a tattoo, and Nanaba came here to check it out. She's always treated him like a little brother or a son ever since he started working for Mike, and he didn't mind, but this is finally too far.

At least Hanji seems to have suddenly gotten the hang of social cues, because she takes Nanaba's arm and redirects her to another side of the room. "Come on, I wanna introduce you to Ymir and Krista."

As they walk away, Hanji throws Levi a look and a wink over her shoulder and he thinks he's actually going to die from humiliation.

"I don't get it," Erna says. "Why didn't you kill her?"

"She's my boss's wife," he groans as he leans over and rests his forearms on his knees like he's going to throw up.

"Oh, yeah, that makes sense then."

Levi stands up, because he needs another beer. He would ask Erna if he can get her anything, but if she asks him for more whiskey, he would consider it irresponsible and negligent to actually get it for her, so he's not going to give her a chance to ask for anything, except maybe, "Do you want more water?"

She shrugs. "Can't hurt."

Levi waits until he turns away to roll his eyes about that, because he doesn't care how high her tolerance is or how sober she can act, if she doesn't drink four or five more bottles of water in the next few hours, she's going to have the most painful hangover ever. He's going to come back with all of the water because he isn't dealing with taking her to the hospital for an IV drip.
He can't find any more Ommegang in any of the nearby coolers, so he goes to the kitchen, because he's not drinking that hipster piss beer that Ymir got for the kids. When he swings the door open, he sees that Hanji and Nanaba have found Ymir in there and are giggling about something, but they stop as soon as he comes in. Ymir quickly switches gears and points at the wall behind Levi, telling Hanji and Nana, "So yeah, we're thinking about blowing out that wall and opening the kitchen up to the living and dining room."

Nanaba is able to keep up the improvisation to make it look like they weren't just talking about Levi a second ago and says, "Or you could just cut out a window and have an open door frame. That would make it feel more open without actually losing the wall. My husband and I did that with our kitchen."

Levi rolls his eyes at them while Ymir asks about whether Nanaba and Mike rent or own, and he thinks that he needs fewer women in his life. Maybe just fewer friends in general. They go silent again as he digs through the fridge and he can feel them watching him, waiting for him to leave. He takes an Abbey Ale and two bottles of water.

He tells them "Shut the fuck up," as he turns around and pops the top off his beer on the side of Ymir's counter because she hates that.

"Didn't say anything," Hanji replies as he exits the kitchen.

When he gets back to the living room Krista is fawning over Erna again, kneeling on the couch next to her and invading her personal space. Erna isn't as cringe-y about it as usual. Levi wonders if that's because she's getting used to Krista or if it's because of the empty liter of whiskey on the coffee table. He throws a bottle of water at her as he sits down and Krista is in the middle of saying, "You smell really good."

"Yeah?" Erna drawls in that slight New England accent that Levi now knows is from actual summers in the Hamptons. That's why she sounds like Katherine Hepburn sometimes. "You probably wouldn't notice if you weren't right on top of me."

Krista doesn't take the hint. She takes the exact opposite of a hint, and she grabs Erna's forearm and runs her fingers over her skin. "What lotion do you use? You have such good skin."

Erna groans and tilts her head back in frustration. As she looks at the ceiling, she pleads, "Please stop touching me."

In her bubbly, high-pitched squeak, Krista says, "I will when you tell me what lotion you use."

Erna rips her arm out of Krista's grasp as she says, "Different things my cunty sister makes and sends me. Her brand is called RIPE, it's based in Seattle, and you can fucking Google it."

Krista completely ignores Erna's angry tone and tilts her head happily, saying "'Kay, thanks!" and bouncing off to a comfy living chair nearby to search for the website on her iPad.

Levi is glad that Krista noticed it too. He was starting to worry that he was going crazy and was imagining that Erna smelled like lemon cookies or strawberries and cream or whatever. Now it makes sense at least, but it's no less distracting and still makes him crave sugar.

Erna can relax now that Krista isn't breathing all over her, so she opens the bottle of water that landed on the couch next to her. She almost doesn't want to drink it out of spite, because she doesn't appreciate anybody trying to take care of her, which she gets the feeling Levi is trying to do by pushing water on her. For one thing, she can take care of her damn self. For another, if she doesn't
want to take care of herself and she wants to drink herself into a coma that will result in the nastiest hangover ever, then that's her business and nobody has a right to interfere.

But even through her blurry vision and slight tipsiness, she knows that water is a good idea. She's aware of how much she needs if she wants to beat that hangover and it's more than she's willing to take the time to drink. She does feel a little regret over drinking an entire bottle of whiskey alone, but it was unavoidable. Being drunk is the only thing that makes her halfway fine with being there in a bikini. She feels naked and it's not okay.

Truthfully, she wouldn't have stayed at all. She would have turned right around and gone back to her apartment the second Bambi looked at her with those big, dumbfounded green eyes. The only thing keeping her there is Levi. She'll stay as long as he wants, only because she's pretty sure that he'll leave whenever she does and she feels a little guilty about it. He hangs out with her so much and they only ever do the same nothing. She doesn't know why he lets her kill his social life with her agoraphobia. Maybe he never had one to begin with.

She turns her head to look at him, so she can be a bitch and say 'Thanks, Mom,' for the water, but the way he's looking at her stops her. He's fucking smiling. A real smile. It's small, but it's there, and it's different from the sarcastic smirk that she's used to seeing. Then he laughs at her.

"What's so fucking funny?"

"You look so miserable. It's cute."

She crosses her arms over the stuffed animal that she's using to hide as much of her body as possible. "I am," she confirms. She is especially miserable now. She hates being called 'cute.' She knows it's supposed to be a compliment, but it's a loaded word for her. It reminds her of all of the pieces of her identity that she's lost. Before all this, she was powerful, confident, respected. Nobody would have dared to call her cute when she still worked at Sina Publishing, and nobody would have had the balls to try and touch her or grab her or tell her that she smells good. She tries so hard to still be that person, but the sad fact is that she's just not. That person who she used to be was never scared or doubtful or anxious, and now she's all of those things, all of the time. It feels like she isn't herself anymore and she doesn't like who she is now.

And she's not cute.

She pouts as she reflects on her lost sense of self, but she's distracted when Levi moves. He puts his beer on the coffee table and reaches for the back of his tee shirt, pulling it over his head and off. Erna's eyes follow every inch of skin that gets revealed, because something about her sense of propriety got shut completely off the second she noticed that he has a faint happy trail of fine black hair starting below his belly button.

He holds the shirt out to her, but she doesn't even catch on that quickly that he's trying to give it to her, because she's very distracted by the fact that he has muscles she didn't even know existed on the human body, until he says, "Here. Will you be less miserable if you cover up?"

She will be. But she almost wants him to put his shirt back on, because he's making her feel very confused. More of her identity is slipping through her fingers, because ever since she first learned the word, she's identified as sapiosexual. It made sense. It fit. She was never physically attracted to people because of the way they looked; it was always an attraction to perceived intelligence. That's why she got so many crushes on professors. Before she learned what sapiosexuality was, she was afraid she had some kind of daddy complex.
But she doesn't think Levi's all that intelligent… She doesn't think she does anyway… Sure, he has a really good sarcastic sense of humor and he's incredibly creative, but that isn't her type. Her type is men with a doctorate in some kind of literature or social science. And yet she has to make a conscious effort to keep her mouth closed and not drool over his defined abs.

She snatches the shirt from him and whips it over her head. He smirks at her and says, "You can stop choking the shit out of that shark now."

She lets go of the stuffed animal and lets it fall to the floor. She mutters, "Thanks." And she does feel a lot better now about being covered up, but simultaneously she feels the discomfort of butterflies in her stomach. She's never felt that over a person. She hasn't even had butterflies in her stomach since she was eight and getting ready for her first dance recital. She doesn't understand what's even happening to her.

Levi takes his beer back off the table and says, "Not like you have anything to cover up anyway, two by four."

She honestly feels better now that he's picking on her. It feels more normal. She's about to come back at him with something snarky, but she's cut off when Krista scolds him loudly with much indignation and horror, "Levi! You have to be nice to girls!"

Erna hides her evil smile behind her water bottle as Levi jumps to defend himself. He points at Erna and says, "She literally made a joke about my dick being small this morning. She can handle it!"

Erna makes sure he looks back to her before she says this, because she's about to have a lot of fun with him. As soon as she has his eyes back on her, she shouts in mock outrage, "I'm anorexic, you prick!"

He doesn't believe her for a second. "Bullshit you're anorexic. Anorexic women don't have thighs like that," he says, looking at her legs.

First she makes her lower lip quiver. She lets her eyes get wider. She starts to sniffle like she's holding back tears. Then she wails, "Krista, he's so mean!" because she's evil.

Krista jumps up from her chair and is on the couch in a flash, wrapping her arms around Erna and comforting her. This time she's okay with it. She hates when people touch her without her permission. And she never gives anyone permission. But sometimes she does manipulate people into touching her, so she leans into Krista's embrace and whimpers quietly into her neck, "He said my legs are fat."

Krista cradles her head and strokes her hair while telling her that she's beautiful. Erna can feel her glaring at Levi at the same time.

Levi is unimpressed. He knows she's faking it just to fuck with him and make him look like a monster. He flips Erna off behind her back while she clings to Krista and pretends to be distraught. Then he gets up and takes his beer back to the kitchen.

The kitchen has gotten more crowded. Mikasa, Eren, and Armin had the great idea to make s'mores over the stove, holding the marshmallows over the burner with a fork. Ymir is still talking to Nanaba. Hanji is giving Jean a second opinion on exactly what kind of flesh-eating bacteria might be infecting his shitty tattoo.

When he looks back over to the stove-hovering trio, he can see Eren staring it him, forgetting his marshmallow and letting it burn. Levi can feel the tingles of humiliation, and is pretty sure his ears
are turning red. He asks Eren coldly, "What the fuck are you looking at, shit dick?"

Eren blushes, and turns back around before yelling in shock at his blackened marshmallow. Mikasa smacks the back of his head, admonishing him for letting it burn.

Levi stands against the doorway and chugs the rest of his beer. Ymir flashes him a grin and says, "So, how's it going?" in the most leading way possible.

"Well," he says, trying to figure out how to put this so that he'll enjoy Ymir's reaction as much as possible, "Erna tricked your girlfriend into cuddling with her."

Ymir raises an eyebrow, but instead of asking for further explanation, she goes straight to the door and peeks out into the living room.

Levi watches her face. He'd expected a little anger, but instead she looks a little confused and says, "Huh…"

"What?" he asks.

"Unsure if I'm jealous or turned on…" she says distractedly as she watches Erna snuggle up to Krista as she pats her hair and whispers to her. She keeps watching as she says casually, "Levi, would you be pissed if I tried to make this threesome happen?"

Not the reaction he was expecting.

He doesn't even dignify that with a response. His only response is to toss his bottle into the recycling and push her out of the way as he goes back out to the living room. He stands in front of the couch. Krista glares at him like he's the worst person on Earth. Erna keeps pretending to be traumatized.

He deadpans at Erna, "Hey. Wanna go?"

And just like he flipped a switch, she jumps out of Krista's arms and stands up. Immediately cutting all of the theatrics, she says, "Yes. Finally."

He lets her lead the way. As they go past the saltwater aquarium in the entryway, she says, "I was wondering when you'd get sick of that."

He's going to kill her.

She trails the fingers of her left hand along the wall of the hallway as they walk. That's one way he knows that she's drunk. The other way is that she doesn't notice that he's walking behind her, which she's usually so careful about. She always makes sure that he's either in front of her or next to her; she never lets anybody walk behind her.

He feels like a piece of shit about taking advantage of her guard being down to stare at her ass as she walks.

That doesn't stop him from doing it.

"You're not anorexic," he says one more time, defiantly, but also worried that somehow she might not have been lying. He doesn't think she could be and still have leg and ass muscles like that, but what does he know?

"Nah," she says. She doesn't tell him that she was bulimic off and on for most of her teen years and early twenties, because she doesn't actually want him to feel terrible. She just tells him, "I have some
undiagnosed body dysmorphia disorder. I don't see myself objectively. I can look in the mirror and think that I look too skinny and too fat at the same time." She stops as her fingers trail along the door of her apartment and she turns her back to the hallway wall and leans on it. "But I'm not anorexic."

"Sorry, I--"

He's about to apologize for what he said, which was not her intention. So she snaps at him, "Don't apologize. It's a personal thing. Like I could give a fuck about how you think I look."

She isn't sure if that's a lie. She used to not give a fuck about how he thought she looked, but now she isn't as confident about that. Her only purpose in saying it was to make sure he wouldn't feel bad, because she doesn't want him to stop teasing her and calling her a two by four or whatever, because it frees her up to do the same to him and she likes the way that she can say mean things to him without hurting his feelings.

But he looks disappointed, so maybe it didn't work. She tries for a distraction. "Smoke?"

He shrugs and says "Sure," and she watches the muscles in his arms and shoulders flex very slightly with every movement. She can't not look. There are parts of him that she sees every goddamn day that now, in this different context, are much more distracting than they should be, like the little barbells pierced through the skin just above his collarbone or the bob of his adam's apple when he swallows. Then there are things that are new to her, like the ridiculously well-defined muscles and the barbells through his nipples and the landscape of a tattoo stretching across his ribs on his left side.

She still stubbornly holds that tattoos and piercings are dumb. Why would anyone mar such an otherwise perfect expanse of skin? But they do look right on him, she thinks, or maybe she's at the point where she can't imagine him any other way. And the tattoo across his ribs that she didn't know about until now isn't what she pictures when she thinks about how dumb tattoos are. It isn't blocky and chunky and it doesn't look like a piece of metal head van art. It's finely detailed and drawn in a way that reminds her of really old children's storybook illustrations. She tore through books like that when she was young and the reminder gives her a warm feeling.

She fumbles a little clumsily for the doorknob, with her back still glued to the hallway wall. The whiskey has definitely caught up with her. She realizes that she's using the wall for balance. She hasn't been actually very drunk in a long time, but it's a familiar feeling and she has a lot of practice at it, so if one can be good at being drunk, then she's that.

The muscle memory for how to cope with it kicks in pretty quickly. The trick is to focus on one very important thing at a time and not get distracted so that you can do that one thing at least halfway well. She'd been focusing on Levi, now she needs to focus on getting her cigarettes, so she finally stops staring at him and looks at the keys in her hand.

Levi couldn't even notice whether she was staring or not, because he's used to her not making eye contact and choosing other parts of people to look at instead. Like, normally, if she even chooses to make it look like she's looking him in the eye, she'll actually be looking at his nose bridge piercing or his lips or something close, but not. Right now, he's too preoccupied with his own thoughts anyway, which revolve around what a stupid fucking idea it was to give her his shirt. Not that he needed it, but he knew it was a mistake the second he did it and he's been kicking himself in the ass ever since. How do women always look hotter when they're wearing your clothes than if they're actually naked?

It's completely unfair. It doesn't help that his shirt is a little loose on her. She's not swimming in it, but it's loose enough to hang crooked on her and reveal a lot more of one shoulder than the other and it makes her look unkempt, which is another new thing, since he's only ever seen her looking perfectly put together like a porcelain doll. It pushes a button that he thought he didn't have anymore and he
can't help wanting to make her look more disheveled.

He's already thinking that this is probably how she would look if they'd just fucked and she grabbed his tee shirt off the floor and put it on, a little messy, a little unbalanced. He feels like a jackass for it, but he can't get that thought out of his head.

And when she comes back out of her apartment with a lighter in her fingers and a black cigarette held loosely between her soft, glossy lips, it's not fucking helpful.

Levi has a crisis of conscience and cards his hands through his hair as he stares at her and tries to decide if he's going to be a horrible person or not. She tilts her head at him quizzically until he makes his decision and says, "Let's go to the roof. It's closer."

She just shrugs in agreement and trails her fingers along the wall as she starts off down the hallway.

He's technically right. It's a shorter walk to the roof from where they are than to the stoop. The thing is that he doesn't give any fucks about whether they smoke out on the stoop or on the roof. The only difference is that his view, walking behind her, is a lot better if he watches her walk up the stairs rather than down.

He's going to hell, but he's only human.

Erna goes up the steps a little more slowly than she normally would, because she knows her limits and isn't ready to break her neck falling down a flight of stairs, yet. Near the first landing, she hears Levi ask, "How did you get legs like that anyway?"

She snaps back, muttering a little around the cigarette held in her lips, "I don't know. How'd you get that ridiculous twenty-four pack of abs?"

"You first," he deadpans.

Erna keeps her answer short and factual as possible, because she's still not used to talking about herself and it's weird to her. "Ballet and horseback riding."

"So…rich, white girl stuff."

She snickers a little. "Yeah, rich, white girl stuff."

As they keep climbing, he tells her, "The riding I can kind of see. It's not a stretch to picture you with the blazer and black knee high boots with a little whip in your hand."

She interrupts to correct him. "It's called a riding crop."

He ignores her and finishes his thought. "But it's hard to imagine you in a pink tutu and tights."

"Well, I'd think it would be more unlikely to imagine me in a bikini and a…" she has to look down at his shirt to check which band it is, "…Misfits band tee, but here we are."

"Touché."

She stops on the tiny landing in front of the fire door and turns around, leaning on it and looking down at him in the dark.

Something about the position makes him want to grab her around her tiny waist and pull her down.

She smirks at him and says with some drunken mischief in her voice, "I only dabbled in riding. I did
ballet for fourteen years."

He raises his eyebrows. He can't see her as a ballerina. Though she does have the legs and ass to prove it. He thought ballerinas were supposed to be prissy little mean girls who never eat and…well, maybe he can see it.

He's still giving her a skeptical look and Erna is quite offended that he doesn't believe her. She tells him, "I started when I was six. I only stopped because I couldn't go professional."

"Why not?"

"Too short," she says. "Not graceful enough, not pretty enough…lots of reasons." She shrugs like she doesn't care, but really she still misses it, even seven years after quitting.

He says, "Bullshit."

And she takes it to mean that he just still doesn't believe her about being a dancer, so to prove it, she leans on the wall, treating it like a barre. She gets balanced on her right foot and lifts her left leg as high as it will go before she grabs it by the ankle with her left hand. She adjusts her grip to the outside of her heel and slowly she lifts her leg until it's almost straight up and down at a perfect 45-degree angle from her body.

Levi stares wide-eyed. He had actually been calling bullshit on her thinking she's not pretty enough for anything, but if this is a thing then he's glad she didn't catch his meaning.

She holds her hand-to-heel stretch for a couple more seconds. She could hold it longer, but it's not a good thing to do without warming up first and this would be a really dumb thing to pull a muscle over. She lowers her foot back to the ground and exhales a huff as if to say 'I told you so.' She spins around on the ball of her foot and pushes the fire door open.

Erna is glad Levi suggested going up to the roof. She feels safer up here. The stoop isn't terrible. It's less cagey than her apartment, but the roof feels completely removed from the rest of the world. She doesn't worry about anyone being able to see her or anything up here.

"So, you can do spins and shit?"

"They're called pirouettes, and I can do them in my sleep."

"What about when you're drunk?"

Erna puts her hands on her hips and turns around. Levi is putting a piece of scrap wood up against the handle of the door to effectively lock it. She makes herself sound offended. "Are you implying that I'm drunk?"

He just shoots her a look like he doesn't need to imply shit because they both know she's wasted even if she isn't slurring her words or falling down.

And she laughs, which is only further proof. She brings her lighter up to light the cigarette she's been holding in her lips this whole time. The lighter sparks and sparks, but it won't light. When Levi comes over and cups his hand around the end and lights it for her with his own lighter, she mumbles around the cigarette, "It's just out of fluid. This proves nothing."

He smirks at her and he nearly laughs, but he holds it in and says, "Just fucking inhale, you lush."

She does inhale until the end is evenly lit. She lets the smoke curl out her nose like a dragon. Then
her eyes widen as Levi takes out one of his own cigarettes, puts it between his lips, and leans in toward her.

Erna stands stock still as he brings his face closer to hers.

He touches the end of his cigarette to her cherry and inhales until his is lit too. He straightens back up and gives her a smug look, so she narrows her eyes at him, because he thinks he's so fucking clever and sexy. She tells him, "You could have just used your lighter."

"Don't want to run out of fluid."

Erna isn't sure if he's just trying to be a smartass or if he's flirting with her. If it's the latter, then she doesn't know how to deal with that. No one's ever flirted with her, at least not outside of a club setting where they were promptly told to fuck off.

That still works here in this situation, she decides, so she tells him, "Fuck off," while being unable to hold back a smile at his cocky expression. The little shit.

He holds the cigarette between his fingers and twirls it around while saying, "So, do a pirouette."

"Yeah?" she says sarcastically. "In bare feet? On this scratchy as fuck cement?" she paws at the rooftop a little with her toes. "Sounds like a good idea."

"Hold on," he says. He goes around the side of one of the brick walls enclosing the fire door and he comes back with a big, flattened cardboard box. He tosses it to the ground in front of her.

She looks down at the flattened cardboard, then up at him. "So, who break dances up here?"

"Guess."

She rolls her eyes and mutters, "Springles."

She presses her right foot to the flattened box and drags it toward her with her toes, stepping onto the center of it and flexing up onto the balls of her feet and testing her ankles. She hasn't done this in forever. And dancing while drunk is not something she's ever felt moved to do, so she isn't sure if she has the muscle control or coordination when she's like this.

But she's going to do it anyway, because he told her to.

She puts her feet into fifth position and puts her cigarette between her lips again, holding it loosely while she puts her hands on her hips. She sucks her stomach up into her ribcage, reaching for her spine to tighten her core enough to lift. She tries winging out her left foot while lifting onto the ball of her right foot. She resets and tries it a few more times to make sure she has the balance.

"Any day, Twinkle toes."

"Fuck you," she mumbles around the cigarette in between her lips. She curls her arms out in front of her, puts her feet in fourth position and then does three quick turns, brings her working leg up, curling her foot and pointing her toes to her standing knee. She lands in fourth position again without falling on her ass.

"Nice," Levi says sincerely.

"Shit." Erna breaks her position and stumbles a tiny bit. Levi steps forward, but she gets her balance back under her and leans on her hip. "I forgot to spot."
"What's that?"

"It's a thing you do with your eyes so that you don't get fucking dizzy while you're spinning." And it's a rookie mistake, she admonishes herself in her head.

"Yeah," he rolls his eyes. "That's why you're dizzy. Has nothing to do with that bottle of Lairds you fucking downed in less than an hour."

She smirks at him and says teasingly, "Were you going to catch me?"

"…I didn't want you to rip my shirt when you fell on your fucking face."

Sure. Her head is still spinning. She thinks he might be right about the whiskey. Before she can pass out, she lowers herself to sit and then lie down on her back on the cardboard. "I'm just gonna lie here until the dizziness passes," she says. She holds her cigarette between two fingers and takes a long drag as she looks up at the hazy, never-fully-dark-at-night sky.

Levi lies down next to her, because why not? He thinks of all the anatomy sketches he could do of ballet stretches. He tries to save a mental snapshot of her doing that stretch holding her leg straight up for that purpose. It's definitely an artist's reference, no other reason. He's definitely not preoccupied with how flexible she is.

As nice as staring at her ass and watching her pull her ankle up to her head is, he kind of feels like shit about the whole thing. First, he feels like a dick for sexualizing her at all. Second, what feels worse is that it makes him feel like he doesn't have as much control as he thought. This, along with seeing Petra and remembering exactly what kind of self-destructive, out-of-control behavior put him where he is, makes him feel like he's never going to have his shit together. Because as much as he tries to think that he doesn't need sex to feel like he has some control over something in his life, that urge is still there. He's an addict.

He wants to see how she would react if he got closer. Just to see. Just to know whether she'd be receptive or not, only because he's curious. He drops his cigarette and pushes himself up onto his elbows and turns onto his side. She keeps smoking and looking up at the sky, ignoring him, until he's over her with a palm on the ground on either side of her head. Her eyes go a little wide again. He's watching for other things, though. The devil is in the details. And as he lowers his face closer to hers, he watches her back arch slightly off the ground, her chin tilt downward, her lips part slightly so that her cigarette angles lazily. That's all he needed.

He lifts himself up again and goes back to lying on his back next to her. He promptly gets smacked in the chest by the back of her bony little hand and she scolds him, "Dick."

He is a dick, but he didn't actually touch her and he never would have done anything. He has never taken advantage of a drunk person. He's not that horrible. For some fucked up reason, he just wanted to know that he could.

He puts his hands behind his head and watches airplane lights cut through the hazy clouds.

After a few minutes of lying there in silence, Erna finally says, "Hey, Levi?"

"Yeah?" he says to the sky.

"Your abs are stupid."

Chapter End Notes
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Wednesday

"Okay, no, but, like," Erna puts down her latte and pinches the bridge of her nose as she rephrases the question for what feels like the thirtieth time. "Would you fuck him?"

Levi rephrases his answer for what feels like the fiftieth time and this time he goes a little more slowly. "I.. don't.. fuck.. anyone..

"Oh my god," she huffs. "You're no fun. You know what I mean. Hypothetically…"

Levi keeps drawing with his sketchpad propped on his knee that's resting against the edge of the wrought-iron table in front of him.

The outdoor tables are a new addition to One Shot Café's sidewalk and they've turned out to be a lot more comfortable than the he and Erna can smoke and drink tea and coffee and have really stupid conversations in the mornings while sitting in chairs like actual people, and not the hovering-around-poverty-line, underachieving scumbag that Levi usually feels like.

He can feel her eyes piercing him, but he refuses to look up from his sketchpad for this conversation. "I don't know," he says. "Never thought about it."

"Bullshit you've never thought about it. You have to have thought about it at least once." She gets angry when he doesn't treat these completely pointless conversations with seriousness. Talking very seriously about stupid shit is how she has most of her fun, and when he won't engage with her she thinks he's being a buzzkill.

"Why?" he asks, regretting that he ever told her that he's pansexual.

"Because he looks like a GQ model or the centerfold for Daddy Kink Quarterly."

"So you've thought about it."

"Not my type," she snaps back. "Now answer the question."

"What is your type?"

"Stop trying to deflect. That's not what we're talking about."

She's fucking relentless, and Levi's patience is gone. He makes a frustrated grunt and throws his pen onto the table, giving up on trying to get this sketch done while she's still harassing him. "I don't know!" he says. "Yes? Probably? If he bottoms, then sure."
Erna sips her latte calmly with a very satisfied expression. "Knew it."

Levi gets defensive. "This is only hypothetical. I don't have sex. I haven't fucked anyone in like four years."

Erna thinks about that and her eyes turn upward as she calculates and makes a mental timeline. Then she comes to the conclusion, "So you had prison sex?" She doesn't wait for him to confirm or deny. She gets a bright look in her eyes and asks, "What's that like?"

"Why do you have such a thing for me fucking guys?" he deadpans at her, lowering his eyelids and frowning slightly.

"Have to jerk off to something," she shrugs.

Levi picks his pen back up. He's not even going to touch whether or not she can refer to it as jerking off. "Being incarcerated isn't a turn-on. It didn't happen as much as you want to think."

Erna doesn't let it go and he's not sure if it's because she actually does care or if she's just trying really hard to be as inappropriate as possible because it's fun for her. "So, just, like, random blow jobs here and there?"

Levi tilts his head back and looks upward in defeat. "Yeah. Something like that."

"Hot."

"Oh my god," Levi groans. "Okay. Fuck, Marry, Kill: Erwin, Eren, and Jean." The only way to change the subject with her sometimes is to give her something equally or more ridiculous to think about. Besides, he's found that this is a fun game to play with her, because she always comes up with well-thought out explanations for her answers.

She puts her mug down and raises a finger to make a point as she says, "Okay, first of all—" She pauses and shuts her mouth as Eren comes outside with Levi's tea and a croissant for her. He sets everything down and checks that they're all set, being especially attentive to Levi. He's been even more like a lovestruck puppy ever since Levi took his shirt off at Ymir's party and he can barely look at the kid anymore because every time he does he's catching him staring.

Erna just glares at Eren and doesn't say a word to him. When he finally goes back inside, she continues where she left off. "First of all, marry Bambi so that I can get free lattes for life."

Levi nods. "Makes sense."

"Kill Erwin, just so you can't fuck him."

"Rude."

She ignores him and goes on. "And fuck Jean because he's super gay, so it would be kind of rapey and I'm into that."

Levi balls up a napkin and throws it past Erna to hit Jean, sitting at the other outdoor table, in the back of the head, and he says, "Did you hear that, Jean?"

Jean turns around, all teeth and rage. "I can hear everything you two are saying. Shut the fuck up."

Erna figures he's especially pissed because he seems to be on a date. There's a new guy sitting at the table with him. Someone tan with a lot of freckles. He's either an early brunch date or a late night
sleepover. In any case, it's an opportunity to humiliate the shit out of Jean and she's going to take it.

Levi turns his attention back to Erna. "Anyway, your answer is invalid. You couldn't rape Jean. He's got five inches and probably eighty pounds on you."

"I'd drug him first, obviously." She rolls her eyes like he should have thought of something so obvious. "Not enough to knock him out, because I don't think I'd be able to finish if I couldn't watch him cry."

Jean turns around again and shouts, "Oh, my god, could you guys not?!" while his date covers his mouth with a hand and snickers.

Erna ignores him and says to Levi, "Your turn. Fuck, Marry, Kill: Hanji, Bambi, and Ymir."

"Ymir's a lesbian."

"Jean's gay and you put him in mine."

Levi's about to argue that Ymir is, on the spectrum, way more gay than Jean—if that can be a thing—but he doesn't get a chance. Erwin walks up and interrupts them. "I see you two have found a new spot."

Levi greets Erwin as he pulls up a chair. Erna opts for "Erwin, what's your sexual orientation?" instead of a simple greeting.

She was hoping for a blush, a stammer, something. She thought this would finally be the thing that elicited a reaction.

Disappointingly, he simply tilts his head to the side and says, "Sorry?"

Levi covers his face with his palm as Erna sighs heavily in annoyance. She says slowly as if he didn't understand the question. "Do you fuck men, women, or vegetables?"

Without missing a beat, without even a stutter, he replies graciously, "I'm single, so no."

"Oh my god," Erna groans. Levi keeps his head down and smirks into his sketchbook. She rolls her eyes and says, "You're both no fun. You fucking deserve each other." She picks up her coffee and leaves the croissant. She wasn't hungry anyway. As she gets up to go inside and close herself in Mikasa's office, she looks at Erwin and points at Levi, telling the big blond man, "He wants to fuck you, by the way."

As Erna walks away, Erwin looks at Levi, raising his eyebrows in slight surprise. Levi shrugs and lies, "I have no idea what she's talking about."

Erna doesn't even ask anymore if she can go use the office in the back of the café. Mikasa told her that it's fine, she doesn't have to ask. It felt weird at first, but she's used to it now.

She walks through the café without a second thought, turns left at the back where there's a couch and a couple of living chairs and the books that she donated arranged in some built-in bookshelves with old cleaned up pieces and parts of industrial equipment as bookends giving them a sort of refurbished steam-punky look. Someday, if the café is ever as quiet as it used to be and she can have some privacy, she's going to curl up on that couch and read The Compass Rose again.
For now, though, it's still crowded and there are hipsters lying there apathetically, talking about the record label they're going to start exclusively for waifish female indie duos who play neo-folk, in which one girl plays acoustic guitar and the other plays a tambourine with a limp wrist and a glazed-over thousand yard stare.

That's what she guesses anyway. She never stands around long enough to listen. Her stereotypes of the customers are probably way more fun and interesting than they whatever they actually pretend to be. She stops just before pushing past the curtains that hide the small back hallway to the office, bathroom, and kitchen. She remembers to ask, calling over her shoulder towards the counter, "Hey, Bambi, what's the wifi password today?"

He grins, because he thinks it's very clever. He tells her, "It's 'chaihard'."

She relaxes her neck in resignation and lets her head tilt back, rolling her eyes toward the ceiling, she says, "Of course it is."

With that information, she goes and closes herself in the office. She opens the desk drawer that she stashed her Galaxy Tablet in, assured by Mikasa that nobody (i.e. the two other brats) would touch it. She made it sound like they would never be caught dead in the office, much less actually looking for anything in the desk.

Erna unlocks her tablet, connects to the wifi, and kicks her feet up on the desk as she gets ready to indulge in at least an hour of mindless internet-ing.

She skips Facebook and Twitter. She's never had much use for them. She goes straight to her Fetlife homepage. As Facebook is a stupid, pointless, time-wasting indulgence to normal people, Fetlife is that for her. Except Fetlife has pictures of naked people being flogged or caned sometimes, and that's fun.

Mostly, though, she thinks—as the page loads and she scowls at the notifications telling her she has twenty-seven messages and thirty-nine friend requests—it's a way for stupid, horny people to annoy her with what they think passes as intelligible prose.

She checks her messages first. Some of them aren't even worth opening, but she does anyway, because it's fun to see how astonishingly stupid people can be. There's a 50/50 split of new messages with subject lines that are simply "Hey" and others with more creative subject lines. The former category gets opened first, because they're usually more fun in that they are more idiotic. The first one she opens is from someone whose screen name is 'matt27wmu'. His profile picture is a badly lit selfie of him lying on a bed, covering his junk with a white t-shirt. She's grateful he at least had the decency to cover it. A lot of profile pictures that end up alongside messages in her inbox are just faceless cocks. So that's cool.

His message says simply, "Hey girl, how's it going? So how many people still are trying to break that cherry?"

Erna lightly hits her forehead against the desk. For one thing: gross. For another: where did he get the idea that she's a virgin? Maybe because she lists herself as a lesbian in the part of her profile that shows sexual orientation? Sometimes men are dumb enough to think that lesbians aren't capable of penetrative sex. Some are dumb enough to even assert that if there isn't a cock involved, then it doesn't count as 'real' sex.

Sometimes she thinks that she would have more faith in men and their intelligence if she had never heard of Fetlife.
Fetlife isn't supposed to be a hookup site. It's supposed to be a social networking site for like-minded kinky people to plan events, start discussions, ask questions, etcetera. That doesn't stop a lot of people from trying to use it as a dating site. And unfortunately, because it's centered around BDSM, it seems to make some douchebags think that it gives them free rein to spew any utterly vile thought that comes into their head into the inbox of anyone who checked off "F" as their gender.

When Erna first discovered Fetlife, she started with honesty. Her profile stated that she was a heterosexual, masochistic female, and in the body she wrote a couple of paragraphs about what she was into. That was years ago. Now, her profile is the textual equivalent of an electrified barbed-wire fence with 'Keep Out' signs all over it. She changed her sexual orientation to 'lesbian' and that cut down about 15% of the stupid messages that she was getting. Only now, the remaining messages sometimes included people's fantasies about converting her. Instead of talking about anything she is actually interested in as far as BDSM goes in the body of her profile, now it is only a list of things that she does not want people to message her about. At the end is a threat that if anyone violates these boundaries in their message then she is free to verbally (read: textually) tear them to shreds.

Changing that part seemed only to attract more submissive men, and they are just as pushy and desperate as the dominant ones.

The uplifting part of Fetlife is the discussion groups where people are more serious, more knowledgeable, and less driven to express exactly what their genitals want them to say. So she sticks around for that. Discussions are how she's learned so much about different kinds of dynamics and play without having to suffer through trial and error.

Her inbox remains where all the filth ends up. Her inbox is where her faith in humanity got smothered in precum and drowned.

She doesn't respond to matt27wmu. He is not worthy of the effort she would need to put into a response that could not be used as wank fodder. When messaging people back, she tries very hard to construct a message acerbic enough, so free from any hint of acceptance that it would be impossible for the recipient to think it would be a good idea to message back and try again. That takes some effort and thought, because she's found that men on fetlife are relentless. She could tell them that she thinks it would be fun to drive nails into their balls and they would take that as a positive indication that she at least wants to meet up and get their pants off.

The next message she opens is a request from someone who wants to be her sub.

Nevermind that she stubbornly still lists herself as a masochist in her profile. This one, she will take the trouble to answer. She thinks submissives are fun to fuck with. She responds:

Yes.

But I believe only in telepathic domination. You will receive a spiritual sign which will serve as an acceptance of your submission. All other instructions will be sent through vague symbols of nature. Any attempt to communicate with me through any means invented after 1901 will mean you wish to terminate your relationship with me. As will any attempt to seek me out in person. Now go to the lake closest to your house. That is where you will find the first spiritual sign of the acceptance of your gift of submission. It will guide you.

SI

She signs all of her messages with "SI", an abbreviation for her screenname, sharp-instrument.

She quickly checks the other messages and deems them not worthy of response. She's a busy girl
with discussions on shibari to check up on and pictures of floggers to stare at. She needs to come up with ideas for sessions with Annie. After the first session, Annie has been getting more and more of a feel for Erna's level of pain tolerance, and Erna has been pushing for harder and harder things. Last week she got a caning. This week she's intrigued by a discussion that's popped up in her Fetlife feed about roleplaying. It's not something that's ever piqued her interest before, but Annie gives her this strict, cold, intelligent professor feel and Erna thinks she might be into getting punished with a spanking over a desk for a bad essay. Who knows?

Levi had gotten rid of Erwin relatively quickly by telling him that he planned on leaving straight for work from the café, so if he needed him to pee in a cup he'd have to do it right there on the sidewalk. Erwin settled for a brief conversation just to check in on how Levi was doing and said that he'd be back for the drug test tomorrow.

But Levi doesn't go straight to work after the café. He never planned to. He goes back to his apartment first, and makes sure he has all his shit ready to go. He checks his schedule and does every responsible thing he can to stay on top of his shit so that he won't feel so guilty about indulging in some time-wasting pointless masturbation.

He's only going to give himself ten minutes. He can bang out an orgasm in ten minutes. He's not going to be late for work because of this.

He doesn't dwell too much on how this never used to be a problem as he lies down on the bed and pulls his jeans down far enough to be able to spread his legs a little. Whether or not he had time for a quick jerk before work never would have crossed his mind until a couple weeks ago, and if it had crossed his mind, he would have swiftly booted himself in the ass and just gone to work. Now it's not that easy.

It's that gothic doll's fault. Fuck her for being fun to talk to and for having the ass of a Victoria's Secret angel. Fuck him for getting so close and for holding onto the memory of her flexible legs.

His cock was already hard when he walked in the door, simply in anticipation of what he knew he was about to do. He runs the pad of his thumb over the 8g ring that passes through his urethra and out just slightly to the side of the frenulum before sliding his palm down and gripping around the underside of his shaft, lightly moving the five curved barbells that make the ladder of frenum piercings going up the underside of his cock.

Guys always ask when they're in the chair if getting their dick pierced is going to affect how roughly they can jerk off. They don't use those words; they dance around it. All Levi can tell them with certainty is that it hasn't changed anything for him. If anything, it makes it easier, more sensitive. The piercings rub at tissue in ways that you're not used to at first.

He closes his eyes and sighs long and deep.

These are all good things.

As soon as he and Erna had left the roof the night of Ymir's party, he knew this was going to be a thing. It didn't happen right away. He was able to wait about forty eight hours before he finally had to get it out of his system. He'd woken up hard as hell, and in a dream-like state he imagined her in a ballerina outfit: white tights, black leotard, even a little white fucking tutu. In his head he ripped the tights and leotard to get at what he wanted. He left the tutu alone. He came so hard he put himself in a coma, didn't even have the energy to clean up. He did the best he could with getting the dried cum off when he did wake up, but he liked the fantasy so much that he decided to masturbate again
immediately and actually gave himself something like rug burn on his dick from running his hand
over a spot of dried cum that he missed just under the head of his cock. He felt like a complete
asshole, not to mention his cock hurt for two days afterward.

He knows it's fucking wrong to sexualize the girl who's quickly becoming his best friend and that
just makes him come harder about it. Nevermind the guilt he always feels afterward.

This time he makes her more aggressive, rougher. Something about her talking about raping Jean got
to him. It feels right. She is just as unrelenting and evil as she is in real life.

He changes his grip to match what's happening in his fantasy. He eases up and switches to barely
ghosting his palm over the head, because in his mind she's on top of him and teasing. He opens his
eyes for a second to reach for some lube and spread it over his palm so that he can feel how wet she
is. She's hovering over him, toying with him. She splays her hands over his chest like she's ready to
bear down on his cock, but then she flashes him that crooked, wicked smirk that seems to be the only
way she knows how to smile and she flicks at his nipple rings.

She tells him that his piercings are stupid, like she has probably a dozen times before, only this time
it's not offhanded and conversational, this time her voice is full of mischief as she mocks him and
how badly he wants it. She arches her back as she reaches behind her with one hand and grips the
base of his cock, angling it the way she wants, sliding her hand over the barbells.

She murmurs about how desperate he is, how fucking hard he is for her. When she finally does
lower herself onto him, she doesn't even look down at him as she grinds her clit slowly against his
pubic bone. She's just using him to get off.

When he reaches for her hips, she grabs his wrists, forces them down and holds them. She tells him
that she's going to fuck him at her own pace and she doesn't give a fuck if he wants it harder or faster
or if he wants her to ease up. Then she bears down, fucking herself all the way down to the base of
his cock and canting her hips, raising them with an arch of her spine and going down, grinding
against him again. She tells him that she doesn't care if he likes it.

That's what makes him come, harder than he's used to, and faster than he would have liked. He lies
still, panting for a few seconds as clarity slowly seeps through the fuzziness of his endorphin-filled
brain. On one level, he feels purged. It feels like he can breathe again. On another level, he feels
fucking disgusting because he was so overeager that he forgot to even think about tissues and he's
got cum all over his t-shirt.

At least it's not a lot, he thinks as he carefully sits up and pulls his shirt off. He already masturbated
once that morning before going to the café.

The gut-twisting guilt starts to set in as he puts his cock away and goes to throw his shirt in the
hamper and get a new one. He imagines that she would never talk to him again if she knew about
this. That thought suddenly morphs into a fantasy about her catching him jerking off somehow. He
hits the heel of his palm against his forehead. He needs to not. Against all of his better instincts, he
actually pulls his phone out of his pocket to check whether he has time to come a third time before
work.

"Shit!"

He whips a new shirt over his head and runs for the door. He opens it, remembers his bag, flies back
to the kitchen table to grab it, and goes down the stairwell two steps at a time. When he reaches the
stoop he realizes he forgot his helmet, but fuck it. He doesn't have the minute it would take to run
back up and get it. Somehow, it's already five minutes past the time he's supposed to be in the shop.
After checking out and leaving some serious comments on the logistics of electrical play and the merits of certain brands of TENS units and then leaving some snarky comments on the beauty of submission (shit like that makes her gag), Erna stows her Note back in the desk drawer and tries to do some actual work. She pulls a folded packet of paper out of her coffin purse. It's just the first ten pages of the manuscript she's currently editing. She'd decided not to print out the whole thing in one go when she saw the description of the novel. She thought better of it and limited herself to working on it in ten page batches…so that she wouldn't risk going into a rage blackout and doing something she might regret.

There is good smut out there. She knows this. She's seen it. She's read it, mostly on websites like Fetlife, but still…she knows that the possibility of quality smut exists…which makes her just a little more upset that she's only ever sent the mind-numbingly bad shit.

The title of the manuscript that is going to be published when she's finished editing it is "Trailer Park Virgin."

The summary is worse than the title. Erna wouldn't have thought it possible, but the world is a surprising place.

Rick's been raising little Gracie for the past five years. She even calls him Daddy, but recently things have started to change, and that name has started to have a whole different feel to it.

Erna's mouth forms a grim line as she stares at those words…

Ten pages is too many… She smirks as she wonders to herself which name is creepier: Rick or Daddy?

Skeptically, with her nose and chin turned up slightly, because she is too good for this shit, she flips to page two. Her eyes lock onto a line of dialogue. It goes like this: Come on then and stand up. Let me see your pussy. You've been getting them titties for a while now, and I know that cunt's still fresh. I've been smelling it for weeks now, and it's time I made use of it.

She reads that in her head with a southern accent. How could she not?

From a literary standpoint, she admires the bravery it takes to use the word 'cunt.' She cringes at the word 'titties,' though, she supposes that is in character if you're going for a piece of trailer trash that sticks his filthy cock in his adopted daughter. She gives silent kudos to the author for word choice.

She skips further ahead to more dialogue: Little pussy must need some cock, yeah?

"Oh my god," she groans, because that actually got her a little wet and the shame of it borderline makes her want to off herself, not because the idea is taboo—she could care less about taboo—but because the writing is just so bad.

She's better than this. She's not getting off to a book titled "Trailer Park Virgin." That's not a thing that's going to happen.

That's it baby, get off on me.

Nope. Erna shoves the papers back into her coffin. Her agoraphobia is the only thing that holds her back from getting on a bus and throwing it into the East River.

She stands up abruptly. She needs a shower…or she needs to angrily masturbate to this manuscript
and then take the hottest shower ever. She's not sure. In either case, the first step is getting the fuck out of there.

When she hurries out of the café and into the sunlight again, Jean and his new boyfriend are still sitting at the same sidewalk table, making big, stupid, puppy love eyes at each other.

She turns left out of the door and goes straight to their table, slamming her coffin purse down on it, startling both of them, and leaning forward. She presses her palms to the table and stares icily at the tan-skinned, freckled idiot with a straight, neatly parted black hair, and he smiles back at her without a trace of nervousness. Jean covers his face with his palm.

Erna asks him very simply, "What is a relatively nice-looking guy like you doing with this obvious douche-hole?"

The guy's eyes wrinkle as he smiles at her. "You mean Jean?"

"Fuck you! What even is a douche-hole?"

"Douche-hole:" Erna recites as if she is reading from the Oxford English Dictionary, "Someone who is like the event horizon of a black hole and sucks the life out of you by being a complete fucking douche."

Levi goes to the gym with Hanji and Mike after work. They used to go work out together a few times a week, but he's been slacking, deciding most nights to go straight home instead.

"It's because…of his…girlfriend…" Hanji tells Mike between reps of bench dumbbell presses, answering for Levi when Mike inquires as to why he's been too busy for the gym the last few weeks.

"Tch. You trying to piss me off while I'm spotting you, Hanji?" Levi deadpans dangerously as he stands over them. "Remember that I'm the only thing stopping you from dropping those weights and crushing your chest."

Mike laughs silently.

Hanji drops the fifty pound dumbbells to the floor with a loud thud and huffs, "I don't need you to spot me."

"That's because you're lazy and don't lift as much as you could."

"I'm building lean muscle."

"Bullshit. You don't bother trying because you only come here to gossip."

"I'm okay with that," Mike says as he re-racks Hanji's weights, picking them up like they don't weigh anything. "Gossip away."

Levi rolls his eyes and walks away. He grabs a bottle of cleaning spray off the wall along with some paper towels. When he comes back to wipe Hanji's gross sweat off of the bench, she's mid-sentence.

"—and she has super cute butt dimples."

Levi cuts Hanji's description off as he sprays down the bench. "And we're just friends."

"You don't have to be just friends," Hanji sing-songs.
Mike strokes his beard contemplatively and says, "That's rough."

Hanji's mouth makes a little 'o' of surprise and they say, "Why?"

As Levi wipes the bench down with paper towels, Mike says, "It's just hard to date friends."

Hanji makes a little disappointed huff and frowns at Mike for being anything less than positive. Levi shrugs like he doesn't give a shit as he tosses the paper towels into a nearby trash can. "I don't date people."

"But you shoouuuullldddd," Hanji whines. "You're so cute and angry together."

Levi stands in front of the dumbbell rack and reaches for an 80lb weight before something stops him. He turns back around and pinches the bridge of his nose, sighing heavily. He asks Hanji, "Okay… Can you just be a real friend and not crazy for a minute?"

"When am I ever crazy?"

Mike snorts.

"Hypothetically," Levi asks, "How would this dating thing work?"

"You don't know?"

"I know how to fuck people and leave," Levi says. "I'm good at that. I don't want to do that now, but it's like I don't know how not to." He leaves it at that, picks up two 80lb dumbbells, and as he sits on the bench and starts to lie back, he says, "And if I jerk off to her one more time, my dick is going to fall off."

Instead of offering any helpful advice, Hanji says excitedly, "This is the most you've ever opened up to me!"

Mike is more helpful, though his advice is grim. "Let your dick fall off."

Levi responds between dumbbell presses, "I'd…rather…not…"

"You like being friends with her?" Mike asks.

Levi rolls his eyes. "Yeah."

"You'll lose that if she doesn't feel the same way about you. She'll think you were only pretending to be her friend, she'll feel betrayed, and will probably never talk to you again."

Levi would be lying if he said he hadn't thought about that.

"So let your dick fall off," Mike says matter of factly.

"Nooo," Hanji sobs, "You have to go for it. It'll totally work and you'll live happily ever after and you'll convince her to get her butt dimples pierced. Do it for the microdermals, Levi."

Levi's arms strain as he brings his elbows down. He holds the weights still for a second before using all of his frustration to press up with a grunt, over and over again. "I'm so…lucky…to have…you douche-holes…as friends…"

Hanji clucks her tongue in admiration. "The way you can use sarcasm and lift at the same time is pretty impressive."
When Levi gets home he's exhausted and in pain. He pushed his limits too hard in an effort to ease the frustration that his friends caused him.

The main source of his frustration is sitting on the stoop with a neglected and half-finished black clove cigarette laying on the cement step next to her. She's holding some papers in one hand and absentmindedly holding the tip of her thumb in her teeth as she reads.

She doesn't even look up, which isn't unusual, but this is different. He cocks his head a little to the side as he walks up. Her jaw is slack and relaxed as she runs her teeth over the thumb of her left hand. The way her thumb indents her lower lip does something to him. He wants to be the one pressing her lip down, feeling her teeth graze his fingers. Quickly, he checks himself and shakes his head. He tosses his gym bag onto the step next to her and she flinches. Her thumb leaves her mouth and she makes a short, little yelping sound.

She looks up at him and her pupils are dilated as fuck.

So he smirks and tells her, "Your pupils are dilated as fuck."

It's the first time he's ever seen her look really flustered.

"What? Shit. They are not." She shakes her head and blinks rapidly as she comes back down to earth. She rubs her eyes.

"What were you reading?" He snatches the papers out of her hand.

"Oh my god, don't!" She reaches for the papers, but he holds them out of her reach and she gives up easily, sitting back down and hiding her head in her hands. She groans. "It's so bad."

Levi scans the manuscript and it only takes two sentences to make him say, "Holy shit…"

"It gets worse," she groans, feeling confident in assuring him of that even though she doesn't know which part he's reading.

"Holy shit…"

"I know…" Erna tilts her head back in despair.

Levi clears his throat. He scans some more, figuring out more and more why her pupils were so dilated while reading this. He flips to the third page and stops in the middle of it. He reads a paragraph out loud. "I'm beating my cock fast as her pussy juice covers my tongue and lips. Her hips are starting to move with my strokes, and she's getting louder. I bet she's never even had an orgasm before, and I'm about to give her one with my mouth. Little Gracie's first orgasm is gonna be on her daddy's mouth."

"Oh my god," Erna groans, "Don't read it out loud. Reading it out loud probably summons redneck trailer trash demons from the abyss."

"You need Jesus," Levi deadpans as he tosses her back her manuscript.

"I'm already going to hell. I came to this…twice. I don't know what's happening to me."

It's not the first time she's mentioned jerking off or sex or orgasms, but it's the first time she's been somewhat sincere about it and not flippantly talking like a teenage boy. Levi's breath hitches and he
has to stifle a growl as he pictures her lying on her bed with her skirt pulled up around her waist…

He says, "I need another shower," even though his hair's still wet from the shower he just took in the gym's locker room.

"I need to go to church," Erna responds, and she disgustedly stuffs the manuscript in her purse for the fourth time that day. She picks up her forgotten cigarette and lights it with something like vengeance.

Levi does actually go upstairs and takes a shower—a cold one. It doesn't work the way it's supposed to.

Contrary to the obvious connection there is to be made, he doesn't imagine Erna getting plowed on the kitchen table of a trailer home.

He runs with her needing to go to church. He's the priest on the other side of the confessional, listening as she starts predictably with Forgive me father, for I have sinned. He's only a little disturbed as she stutters shyly through her confession about getting off to vaguely incestuous porn. He tries to pull his black ankle-length cassock up as quietly as possible as she whimpers through her confession. When she gets quiet, he tells her to go on, just so that her talking will drown out the sound of him unzipping his pants and freeing his straining cock.

She tells him how ashamed she is of herself, with a little hitch in her voice. While he strokes himself slowly, he asks her why she's telling him this. She sounds a little confused and tells him that she wanted to confess her sins, like that should be obvious.

He grunts a little as he grips the top of his shaft hard and he asks her, "Or did you come to hear someone tell you that you're a very bad girl?"

She whimpers and stifles a moan on the other side of the screen. He tells her to describe what happened in more detail, and to tell him exactly how she touched herself. She's shy at first, but as she goes on, she gets more turned on and more lewd in her description. She moans a little and he asks her if she's touching herself now.

The cold water from the shower runs over his shoulders and chest, and does nothing to distract from how badly he wants to come. In his fantasy, she says quietly, conflicted, that she can't help touching her wet pussy when she talks about it.

His chest starts heaving with deep breaths. He looks down at his cock, swollen and angry and red. Cold water doesn't make the best lube. Impulsively, he grabs a shampoo bottle sitting on the edge of the tub. He pours some onto his hand and it slides easier as he pumps up and down.

He breaks continuity in his fantasy and suddenly he's in the confessional booth with her, making her hold his rosary between her teeth to quiet her while he fucks into her from behind.

He's so close. A broken moan echoes off the white tile walls of the shower as he holds tight and swirls his palm over the head of his cock, teasing the slit with his thumb. His hips stutter as he strokes down to the base and imagines bottoming out inside her.

Then he hisses at a slight stinging pain. It distracts him a little from his building orgasm, but he tries to keep going anyway. Suddenly his dick feels like fucking fire. He lets go of it and shouts, "Ah, fuck!"

He keeps saying 'fuck' in a steady cadence as he lets the water rinse the shampoo lather off of him. He hits his head against the tile wall because he's a fucking idiot. Getting shampoo in your urethra
feels like a million flaming wasp stings. He groans at himself. He thinks he probably fucking deserves this.

He is definitely going to hell now.

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Thursday

Levi is in a tough spot. Some part of him wants to avoid Erna, because the way he just wants to grab her and taste her and then cuddle with her and make her feel safe is confusing and troublesome. But another part of him would never forgive him if he missed out on their mornings, smoking cigarettes outside the café.

She tells him, "I edited the shit out of that smut and sent it back. It was the devil. It's the fastest I've ever corrected someone's grammar in my life."

"I can't believe you got off on that," he tells her like he's truly disappointed in her.

She points at him with her lit cigarette. "You didn't even get to the bad part! There's a step-brother too!"

He thinks about that for a good minute before saying, "...I've been reading the wrong books."

"We all have..." she says quickly. Then she opens her coffin and takes out her new assignment.

"They sent me another vampire romance novel. I never thought I'd be so happy to edit vampire romance."

"What's it called?" he asks, because she's going to tell him anyway whether he wants to hear it or not. She loves sharing about the terrible shit that she has to work on. It's how she copes with it.

"Oh, it's good. It's called 'Vampire Bait'," she tells him before taking a sip of her latte.

He smirks. It's cute when she gets excited about how stupid this shit is. He watches her lick steamed milk off of her upper lip as he waits for her to rant about it.

She reads the summary dramatically. "Vampire slayer, Connie Bence puts her life on the line for humanity. While she acts as the bait to lure vile vampires into a trap, the rest of the slayers take down the vicious creatures. But one slip of the plan turns the tables and Connie finds herself drugged and kidnapped by the mark she was trying to lure away."

Levi's thin black eyebrows crease together in a troubled expression. He says glibly, "Problematic."

"Yeah, but at least I won't have any angry orgasms to this trash."

"You sure about that?" he asks skeptically.

"Yeah," she says casually. "Can't get off to vampires. The whole blood sucking thing just makes me think of ticks and grosses me out. I don't see the appeal."

"But incest does it for you..."

She slaps his bicep with the back of her hand and he winces. He's so fucking sore.

"First of all," she says, "She was adopted. Second of all, yes, I chose to believe that she wasn't
adopted in my head because it wasn't taboo enough for me yet."

"Um?... Good morning?" Erwin says as he walks over from his car that he just parked.

"What?" Erna says defensively. "Don't kink-shame me, Smith."

Erwin holds his hands up. "I'm not trying to kink-shame anyone."

"Why?" she asks. "Are you into something worse? Breeding? Tentacle rape?"

She stares at him with a grave expression. She'll give the fuck up if that doesn't get some kind of reaction.

Erwin blinks. Then he smiles and answers, "I don't judge anyone's preferences." But the tips of his ears just barely turn pink and that's enough for her to smile into her latte with smug satisfaction.

Levi gives Erwin a slight shove and tells him, "Let's go."

Peeing into the cup that Erwin gives him when they get up to his apartment is a piece of cake because he's been drinking liters of water, hoping that he can cleanse the stinging sensation from his cock. When he gives it back to him, he makes sure to mention very frankly, "If the test comes back fucked up, it's because I got shampoo in my dick-hole."

Levi wishes Erna could be there to see Erwin's calm, stoic expression break. It would be way more satisfying for her than it is for him to see the space between those big eyebrows crease as his eyes wrinkle with a mix of disbelief, then worry and confusion. Erwin puts the plastic jar down to cover his face with his hand and rub his temples as he says, "Oh, my god, Levi…"

With a trace of defensiveness to his trademark deadpan, he responds, "Could happen to anyone."

"I... I don't..." Erwin stammers as he looks at Levi again. "I mean... is this something you want to talk about, or...?"

Levi smirks slightly, his shoulders hitching as he stifles a chuckle. He's literally never seen Erwin stutter. He's never even known him to struggle for the right words. He can't believe Erna's missing this.

He crosses his arms and tells Erwin very seriously, "Don't kink-shame me, Smith."


In the late afternoon, Erna is sitting on the stoop of the apartment building, the café having gotten to be too much for her and her apartment being out of the question. She bounces around the three places every day.

She likes the stoop the most. The café is nice, but it makes her uneasy, because it isn't her space, it's public. Her apartment she hates. Depression soaks her brain when she's in there. The limited visibility makes her edgy too. When she can't see beyond walls or around corners, her brain automatically imagines horrific things to be hidden there and jumps to the worst possible conclusions.

The stoop is perfectly in between those two things. It's hers, and she can see everything.

Her wrists prick as she hears a car backfire on another street. She hates sudden noises. She's already on edge from needing to talk to the UPS guy earlier when he delivered a package from Deirdra. Even though Erna cut her out of her life, she still gets soaps and lip balms. There was no note or
anything with it.

Green and free as she is, Deirdra grew up in the same family environment as Erna and thus has trouble actually opening up and talking honestly about feelings. So instead, she sent a box of bath bombs and shit. Erna thought about throwing them away out of spite, but Deirdra wouldn't even know and Erna would actually have to buy body wash. Besides, nothing she can get from anywhere else would be half as good. So if Deirdra wants to ease her guilt by sending Erna more honey vanilla lip balm, then she can knock herself out.

Erna ashes her cigarette on the unopened cardboard box and slumps her shoulders. She rests her elbows on her knees and puts her chin in her hands. She sucks on the end of her cigarette and swears that she's glad to be rid of Deirdra. She was a nag, and she didn't know what the fuck she was talking about, and she wanted Erna to get better, even though she can't. There is no getting better. She's broken and always will be, and it's fucking annoying to talk to someone who is always insisting that you can be something different than you are. The thought of it makes Erna's eyes get dry and her nose itch with that psychosomatic allergy to stress that she never had before the whole stalking incident…thing… She doesn't know what to call it.

Sometimes she thinks that the guy who was stalking her was drawn to her because of something intrinsic about her that nobody else was aware of—like maybe he was just especially good at spotting people who would be easily broken. Sometimes she thinks it was completely random, because who knows why crazy people do anything that they do? The world is just a shitty place and she was unfortunate enough to be in the psychopath's line of sight at the wrong moment. Neither idea is more comforting than the other.

"Aw, smile for me baby. Why you look so sad?"

Erna looks up at the guy walking down the sidewalk cat-calling her. Cat-calling is nothing new in this city. She thinks it was invented here. All that's changed is the way she reacts to it.

There was a time when she would have told her verbal assaulter to go fuck himself up the ass. That's changed now, too. That changed the second her stalker attacked her and she realized that she is actually vulnerable. She isn't willing to take those risks anymore. The fact sickens her. It makes her want to cry for herself and rage against the unfairness of this shitty world.

She ignores the man as he gets closer, acting like she doesn't care, even though her heart is banging like a drum. She's frozen, because as much as she wants to just go inside and avoid the confrontation, there's still a part of her that's too proud for that despite how afraid she is of everything. So she sits there and lets herself be frightened and anxious as he walks toward her, stopping at the corner of the stoop, standing on the sidewalk, and asking her to smile.

Erna's so paralyzed that she doesn't hear Levi's bike, didn't expect it anyway this early in the day. She flinches when suddenly he's there, stiff-arming the asshole out of the way as he walks up the steps and telling him in that toneless, bored voice, "Get the fuck out of here."

When the guy doesn't get the fuck out of there and instead raises his voice, Erna flinches imperceptibly at the sound Levi's bag makes when he drops it next to her. He spins around, reaches the ground of the sidewalk again in an instant and the guy's collar is bunched and twisted in his fist as his arm coils to hit him, defined muscles moving under his skin.

Erna doesn't shy away from violence. Just the opposite. She hopes Levi will beat the shit out of this guy. That would be fair. It would make her feel safer. She wants to see the fucker's blood stain the sidewalk and know that he'll never be a threat to her.
She's disappointed when she sees the tension leave Levi's jaw. He stops himself and lets go of the guy. The most he does is turn the man around and bring his knee up to raise the sole of his boot and kick him square in the small of his back as he tells him again to get the fuck out of there. The man stumbles forward and makes a hasty retreat.

Erna wants to tell Levi that he should have beaten the shit out of that guy, but there's a weariness in his stormy blue-grey eyes that makes her think better of it. His chest heaves with a long, deep inhale and a restrained, almost broken exhale when he reaches up and cards his hands through his hair as he walks up the steps again.

She only says, "You're back really early."

"Yeah," he says.

His voice sounds bone-tired. Hesitantly and carefully, like he might break if she speaks too hard at him, she asks, "You okay?"

Levi tilts his head back and looks at the sky. He looks completely drained. He seems to think about her question for a second before answering blankly, "No."

Erna has never tried to comfort anyone, except maybe Deirdra when her gay boyfriend dumped her the day of her senior prom. She was shit at being comforting then, and she's probably not much better now.

He looks down at where she's sitting, and because she looks worried, he asks her, "You okay?"

She never is, but she says, "Yeah."

She doesn't want him to worry.

Levi picks his bag back up and takes his keys out of his pocket. He doesn't say anything else and she watches a little forlornly as he opens the door and goes upstairs.

She does the same after a while, the whole encounter and the last five minutes having jangled her nerves too much for her to feel comfortable outside anymore. The chaotic, discordant punk music playing too loudly seeps through the wall separating her apartment from his, but she doesn't mind like she used to. At this point it's almost 's proof that he's over there, and that makes her feel safer than when he's not. His presence is comforting. When he's not around, she feels isolated and vulnerable in her apartment.

She starts straightening up to make the place look nicer for her session with Annie tomorrow. If not for that weekly session, she would probably never clean at all. She would let the small space stay cluttered and dingy to match the way it feels inside her head. Forcing her to clean is just one more way the sessions help her stay healthy. They take her out of her head and force her to breathe. They make the unbidden, bottomless drops into panic less frequent. Friday afternoons and Saturday mornings are always her best time of the week, right after Annie's left and she feels purged of everything ugly and dark and fearful. It's definitely worth the money that she could otherwise be spending on therapy, and it's better than therapy, she thinks, though she doesn't know for sure since she's never been.

When she has everything put away and is satisfied with how neat the place looks, she takes all the empty cardboard coffee cups that she gathered over the week and goes down to throw them in the recycling. Her coffin purse is hooked on her wrist in case Levi decides to come down and smoke a cigarette with her. She'll try again at being comforting if he feels like talking about what has him
looking so fucking sullen.

She throws the bag of recycling into the dumpster from the edge of the alley. She still doesn't like stepping foot into the small spaces between buildings.

When she gets back to the stoop she sits down, bringing her knees together and splaying her feet like a kid. She sets her purse on her knees and opens its creaky latch. She's had her coffin purse since high school, but it only shows a little wear around the corners. When the latch started to creak a little on opening, she'd thought about fixing it, but quickly decided that she liked it. The creaky noise seemed like it suited the little leather coffin with its burgundy velvet lining.

Her fingers run over the neatly organized contents. She starts to take out the box of clove cigarettes, but her fingers falter. She takes out the rolling papers instead, along with the little amount of shake she has leftover from the weed she got off of Springles. She's going to have to go get more from them, legitimately this time.

She doesn't want to smoke it right now. She just wants to roll herself a joint because the action, the ritual, is comforting. Besides, this way she has it for later, for whenever she feels she should smoke it, which may be five minutes from now or two days. Whenever the buzzing of her nerves needs to be dulled and she feels the need to not be so reactive for a while—needs to not be so easily angered or saddened or both.

She's just finishing rolling it tight and licking it when a car pulls up to the curb and the largest man she's ever seen gets out. He's easily six foot five and muscular enough that she can trace the lines of his body through his white T-shirt. He's covered in tattoos on every visible inch of skin aside from his face. Erna's trying to size him up, to decide who here he belongs to. The tattoos make her think Levi.

The man runs his fingers through his sandy-blond hair and he seems to sniff the air as he walks straight up the steps to the door behind her. Erna ignores him and his polite nod as he passes her and she finishes rolling her joint. She tucks it behind her ear. Her skin pricks with stress. She hates new people. She wishes there were a way to make him go away without talking to him, but he hits the buzzer for Levi's apartment a couple of times and she has to turn and tell him, "The buzzers don't work."

He sighs like he should have known and he puts his hands in the back pockets of his jeans. His voice is deep, but somehow so quiet when he asks her, "Could you let me in?"

"Who are you here for?"

"I need to talk to Levi. Do you know him?"

She turns her attention back to her coffin, taking out a cigarette and holding it up to her lips. She keeps her tone short and clipped.

"You should call him and have him let you in."

"His phone is turned off."

Erna thinks all of this must have something to do with how distressed Levi seemed earlier. She takes her cigarette between her lips and lights it, thinking the stranger will go away soon. But he stands there quietly, leaning against the railing with his hands in his pockets.
The more he stands there the more she thinks he has a warm, gentle feel to him, in contrast with how he looks at a glance. He waits patiently, but he doesn't push or ask her again to open the door. He seems content to just wait for hours in case Levi should come down.

When her cigarette is burned halfway down, she finally asks, "How do you know Levi?"

"He works for me." As he answers, he takes a hand out of his pockets and he leans over for a handshake, introducing himself, "Mike."

Erna extends her hand and gets the most surprisingly light and gentle handshake she's ever experienced. She tells him her name and he tilts his head slightly at her. As she takes her hand back, he asks, "Have we met before? You look familiar."

Erna deadpans sarcastically, her eyelids half-lowered, "Maybe we're in the same sewing circle."

As Mike laughs to himself, Erna thinks about how early Levi came back. It was at least four hours before he would normally be home, even if he were leaving early because of a slow day. That combined with his boss coming here to see him doesn't look very good to her. So she asks, "Is Levi in trouble?"

The man's lips form a thin smile and his eyes twinkle a bit. "You care about him, huh?"

"Gross." She ashes her cigarette on the steps and she lies to him. "I'm curious. I like gossip."

"Sorry," he says. "He's not in trouble…not really…I just need to talk to him."

Erna examines him very closely with a hard stare, because he's right about her caring for Levi. She tells herself that it's because she can't imagine what an annoying, complaining, hot mess he would be if anything prevented him from working all the damn time, and not because she actually cares. She asks Mike frankly, "You're not going to go up there and fire him?"

He laughs and says, "No."

"Because I have to be around him and I'm not dealing with his pissing and moaning."

Mike's hand goes for the back of his neck and his eyes wrinkle as his lips curl upward into a sort of wry, knowing smile. "I can't promise about the pissing and moaning, but I can promise that I'm not here to fire him."

Erna narrows her eyes at him. That's not good enough. "If he comes down here any bitchier than his normal baseline of bitchiness, I will hold you fully accountable."

Mike, big tattooed biker thug that he is, actually holds his hand up as he swears that he is being honest. So, finally, Erna stands up, takes her keys out of her pocket, and opens the door for him. When she returns to her seat on the first step, low, nagging waves of anxiety ebb and flow through her about whether or not that was the right thing to do.

Minutes pass. The longer that he's up there, the more she worries. She thinks about going over to the café and getting her third latte for the day, but she wants to be here if Levi comes down, so she stays put.

When enough time has passed that she's thinking about going up there herself, the door finally scrapes open on its old hinges. Erna's head whips around and she can't help but narrow her eyes suspiciously at Mike.
He catches the death glare she's giving him and he smirks at her, holding his hands up. "Everything's okay."

"It fucking better be."

As he goes past her and down the steps, he comments, "You're very concerned for someone who doesn't care about him."

"Tch." She flips him off as he gets back into his car and drives away.

Levi comes down with his cigarettes and lighter only three minutes later.

"Did you let him in?" is the first thing he says, and Erna's wrists prick and her chest sinks as she thinks she's in trouble. She did the wrong thing.

"Yeah."

As the door swings shut behind him, he goes down to the first step and sits down next to her. He cups the cigarette in his mouth and strikes his lighter, and he mumbles quietly, "Thanks."

"Don't thank me. I thought he was here to kill you," she says sarcastically to lighten the mood.

"Should have, honestly," he mumbles just before his lighter finally gets a flame.

He leans back on his palms and holds the cigarette between his lips, taking slow drags and exhaling out his nose like a dragon. Erna stubs hers out and puts the filter back in the pack. She reaches for the joint she tucked behind her ear and she holds it in front of her. She just looks at it. She could smoke it now and it could calm her frayed nerves, or she could try doing the mentally healthy thing where she tells herself that she's okay and there's nothing to be worried about. She keeps looking at the little piece of rolled up paper and twirling it in her fingers, while she asks, "What did you do?"

"I fucked up."

"Bad?"

"Really fucking bad," he says. His palms leave the step behind him to rake through his hair as he tilts his head down. "And unethical…and fucked up…"

Erna smirks a little. It can't be as bad as he's letting on, especially if it's about work. Levi is conscientious as fuck when it comes to work, so Erna perks up a bit and says, "Sounds great. Tell me everything."

He makes a pained groaning sound and she thinks she's going to need to prod a little harder to get the story out of him, but after some cringing, he says, "So this guy came in and wanted to do a walk-in…"

"The nerve…"

"Shut up," he says, ashing his cigarette on the ground, and getting a little pissed off as he remembers the incident. "And he's this big fucker, with tattoo sleeves and neck tats and a shaved head, looks like he watches a lot of Sons of Anarchy…"

"I'm not familiar."

He ignores her. "And this big, racist piece of walking white pride shit asks me to ink a swastika onto his shoulder blade."

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He ignores her. "And this big, racist piece of walking white pride shit asks me to ink a swastika onto his shoulder blade."
Erna raises her eyebrows. This is good. She stops twirling the joint in her fingers and listens.

"So, I tell him 'sure,' and I have him sit in a booth, he takes his shirt off, and I tattoo a big Star of David right next to his back tattoo of SS lightning bolts."

Erna clears her throat, because she's going to laugh and Levi doesn't look like he finds any of this very funny. She takes a deep breath and stifles it. With a smirk, she asks, "Did he not appreciate that?"

"He lost his shit. Flipped a table, tried to punch me in the face, threatened to sue the shop…” he brings a hand up and rubs his temples. "Mike had to calm him down and promise to cover it up for free…”

"I feel like I'm missing the part where you did something unethical."

"It's un-fucking-ethical, because I could easily have told that prick to go somewhere else. I could have just said we don't do that here and turned him away, but I had to be an idiot." He adds a little sadly, "My decision making process has been all fucked lately."

Erna rolls her eyes. "Oh, come on. You're going to feel bad about fucking over a Nazi skinhead? You're the only person I know who could actually get down on themselves for doing something so awesome."

"It was a stupid thing to do. I could have lost my job."

"Yeah," she agrees. "Why didn't you?"

"I don't know." He rubs the piercing through the bridge of his nose and lets the hand holding his cigarette hang carelessly at his side.

"You really don't?" Erna says. This is something her sister used to do with her whenever she was being abusive to herself. Deirdra would always try to lead her to more logical conclusions than the ones that Erna would always jump to about herself being weird or broken by just asking her a bunch of stupid questions. "Did you even get punished for it?"

"Nah." Levi's hand leaves the bridge of his nose and instead runs over the shaved hair at the back of his head. "Mike wasn't happy about it, but he's not docking my pay or anything… Actually, he's changing some things around so that I won't get so stressed at work. No more walk-ins, no more desk work…shit like that…”

Erna's eyes roll upward and she hums to herself. "Wonder why that is…”

Levi is quiet for a few moments, then he says softly, "Because I'm really fucking good."

"Hm. Yeah. That makes sense," Erna says as though she hadn't already thought that and wasn't trying to lead him to that conclusion. Then she asks, "How big was the tattoo?"

Instead of trying to tell her, Levi pulls out his phone, unlocks it, and pulls up his gallery. He opens the picture he took before the guy got a look at what he'd done, and he hands it to Erna.

Erna takes the phone and smiles at the picture. It's not just a Star of David tattoo. It's a Star of David tattoo bigger than her fist, the lines of which are actually scrawling Hebrew letters. He couldn't have just made it simple, the overachiever.

As she gives him the phone back, she asks, "Are you Jewish?"
"No," he says at first as he slides the phone back into his pocket. Then he says, "Maybe? My mom could have been…no way of knowing."

"Why's your Hebrew so good?"

"I've had to draw every character of every alphabet at some time or another," he says. "Sometimes I just practice characters when I can't think of anything to draw."

"Oooh," she coos excitedly. "Draw my name in Chinese."

He turns to look at her, his eyebrows creasing together. "Your name doesn't translate to Chinese…"

"Lame."

"Here," he says, and he reaches for her hand, taking it in his as he pulls a pen out of his back pocket. Her stomach drops as he presses her palm down onto his thigh just above the knee. He pulls the cap off his pen with his teeth and holds it in the side of his mouth, and she watches, completely fascinated. He uses the thumb and forefinger of his left hand to hold her skin taut as he slowly drags brush strokes of black ink into two Chinese characters arranged vertically.

Erna taps her foot against the sidewalk impatiently to take her mind off the butterflies in her stomach.

"There," he says when he's finished.

Erna takes her hand back and examines it. She says a little hesitantly, "I thought my name didn't translate."

"It's a rough translation," he deadpans as he caps his pen.

"How rough?" she narrows her eyes at him.

"Well," he says as he puts his pen back in his pocket. "It either says 'Erna,' or it says 'Unreasonable Woman'."

When he turns to look at her, she lowers her eyelids and says, "I hate you."

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"Hey, dickhead," Levi quietly shouts outside Erna's apartment door, because he can't text her, and he figures that knocking on the door might startle the fuck out of her. Despite how hard she tries to act, he notices how she gets about loud, sudden noises.

It's one in the morning.

Erna is awake, lying on her twin bed on top of her big, fluffy comforter with a light pink and deep burgundy lace pattern, working on subject-verb disagreement in "Vampire Bait" or whatever. She recognized the tone and cadence of Levi's boot soles before he even decided to shout outside her door. She's very in tune with the noises around her—a function of her paranoia.

Even though she recognizes his voice, she stands on her toes and checks through the peephole in the door as she unlocks it. The moment she gets the door open, he's shoving a laundry basket at her and she remembers that she put a load in an hour ago…maybe a couple of hours ago…maybe three—anyway, she doesn't have a phone and it's hard to keep track of time.

"You owe me two bucks for the dryer and you need to get your shit together."
He gives her that half-lidded deadpan stare as she rolls her eyes and leans on her hip, crossing her arms in front of her. She clicks her tongue. "Tch. Maybe that's not my laundry."

"It is."

"What makes you so goddamn sure?" she says with a pretty good imitation of righteous outrage even as she looks down her nose at the basket full of black and white stockings and corsets and dresses.

"Because of this," he says as he takes a pen out of his back pocket, because of course he always has some kind of drawing implement on him. He puts the basket down and hooks a piece of clothing on the tip of the pen, holding it up for her to see. It's a white lace thong with black trim and a little metal skull on the back.

She acts like she doesn't recognize it. She says with a straight-face, "Maybe it's Krista's."

Now Levi rolls his eyes at her. He lets the thong fall back into the basket and he picks it up by its sides again. "Okay. I'll go give it to her then," which finally makes her reach for the laundry basket and rip it out of his hands.

She narrows her eyes at him and says, "I'll give it back to her."

"Sure you will."

She stares at him for a second and then shrugs. Switching tones, she says, "If any of my thongs are missing, I'm going to shank you."

He gives her a wry smile and puts his forearm against the door frame, leaning closer towards her. "I figured you wore bloomers to go with your whole Victorian-doll-thing."

"Yeah, well I figure that you go through a chemical shower and put on a hazmat suit before going to sleep on plastic sheets that you wipe down thoroughly with bleach every morning, but I keep my assumptions to myself."

"Fair enough." He steps back into the hallway so that she can slam the door.

As he closes the distance to his apartment door fifteen or so feet away, his palm runs over the back of his neck and up against the shaved hair of his undercut. He sighs deeply. He'd been a hair away from kissing her impulsively, and the thought didn't even make him nervous. He feels natural around her, relaxed. When he'd leant into her door frame, he got that sinking feeling in his gut that people get when they finally feel relieved after long periods of anxiety.

Mike's right, he thinks as he goes back inside and kicks his boots off in the doorway. It would be really easy to just kiss her, but the fallout could be horrible…and it probably would be if he just kissed her out of nowhere. She'd probably put a cigarette out on his eye or something.

His clothes get peeled off as he crosses the small apartment and he tries to do a risk assessment. Is it worth losing her as a friend just to see if there's potential of adding a physical component to their relationship?

When he puts it that way, it seems fucking stupid. Lose all the fun conversations just because he wanted to fuck her? He's an idiot.

Besides, he thinks as he puts his clothes in the hamper, what even are the chances that she wouldn't reject him? Probably slim, seeing as she's told him multiple times that she hates his piercings and his tattoos and once told him that his abs are stupid. Ymir could be right that all the teasing is actually
flirting, too, because they are both immature assholes, but what if it isn't? She could just as easily be completely sincere in those moments where she tells him that he looks like an emo fuckboy.

He's driving himself crazy as he lies down on his not plastic sheets. He should just fucking say something to her, even if it pisses her off; it couldn't be so bad that she wouldn't want to smoke cigarettes and talk shit with him anymore. He tells himself that he'll do that in the morning, except that when he thinks about it logically, he can't think of what the fuck he could say to her. He can't ask her on a date. Where would they go? The café that they hang out at literally every morning? The thought of asking her if she wants to go get coffee makes him cringe at the stupidity of it.

He groans and rolls onto his side. When did this shit get so complicated? Way back when, the most he had to say to someone was "Do you want to go chill somewhere private?" And he never had to worry about feelings or being rejected.

That's because he never fucked friends. Those things were always completely separate. That's why it was so easy.

Friday

"Okay, no, but…you know what I mean…hypothetically… If you were going to get a tattoo," Levi says as he impatiently taps his pen against his sketchpad on the wrought iron table outside the café.

Erna keeps staring at him with a bored, disgusted look. "But I wouldn't."

He rolls his eyes. "I indulge in your bullshit hypotheticals."

"Speaking of which," she says as she picks up her white porcelain mug daintily, "You never answered my fuck marry kill."

"Answer mine first," he says tiredly, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"My skin is flawless and I would never fuck it up."

"It's not fucking it up, it's adding art to it."

She is about to say something snarky and mean, he can tell, but before the words come out he changes tactics and says, "Okay. What if your skin wasn't flawless? What if you had a horrible scar that you wanted to cover up with something?"

"Can you even tattoo scar tissue?"

"I can," he says, meaning that it isn't easy, but he's good enough to do it.

She turns her head to the side and looks away. She looks like she's thinking. Then she says, "How did I get the scar?"

Levi's eyelids lower and he says in a deep monotone, "It's from the time I threw burning tea at you. Second degree burn scar right on your chest." His finger makes a slashing motion across his chest to indicate exactly where he's going to throw tea at her if she doesn't stop being difficult.

She stares at him, nonplussed by the tacit threat. Then her eyes narrow and she makes a quick grab for his sketchbook.

Luckily, Levi's reflexes are slightly faster than hers and he's able to pin the sketchbook to the table
before she grabs it. He has a sense of urgency about doing so because if she flips through a few pages she's going to see different versions of her face that he can't stop subconsciously drawing. One sketch in particular that he did this morning of her on her knees, facing away, head turned to look back over her shoulder, and her perfect ass framed by that thong with the skull. He's going to be the one with second degree burns if she sees that.

When he won't relinquish the book opened to the blank page he'd been unproductively staring at until he asked her the tattoo question, she huffs at him. Instead of struggling to take it from him, she lets it go and picks up the red pen she'd been using to edit the manuscript in front of her and she leans over the table. He watches her scrawl out something in a language he doesn't recognize.

Terribilum est amare quod mors potest tangere.

"I'd get that, but in black," she says as she settles back into her chair and caps her pen.

He turns the book around so that he can look at it right side up. That doesn't help. So he asks, "What's it mean?"

She shrugs. "You'll have to ask someone who knows Latin."

Of course.

He actually thinks about texting Erwin while he tilts the sketchbook against his knee and starts re-drawing Erna's words in different fonts and arrangements. He's the only person Levi knows who might know Latin. The big, blond parole officer was always nagging that Levi should reach out more and not be so isolated and antisocial. Asking for a translation of a Latin phrase should count as reaching out, Levi thinks as he switches his pen to his left hand and taps out a text to Erwin below the table.

If she notices, she doesn't say anything about it. She cranes her neck a little and tries to look through the window to the café next to them, and she asks him, "What time is it?" as she tries to get a look at the clock inside.

He says, "Nine-thirty-ish," absently as if he doesn't know. As if he isn't looking directly at his phone behind his sketchbook.

"Don't you have to get ready for work?" she asks a little tensely.

He wonders if she's getting stiff because she is touchy about any change to her carefully plotted out routine or if it's out of concern for him, from knowing that he hates being late.

"I have Fridays and Saturdays off now instead of Sunday and Mondays. Too many walk-ins on Fridays and Saturdays, and, as we've learned, I don't do well with walk-ins." That was part of the deal Mike offered him yesterday—changing his days off and giving all of his desk hours to Hanji and Hitch.

"Oh," is all she says, but he can feel her over there vibrating with tension. She stares at the papers in her hand, but her eyes don't tick back and forth the way they do when she's actually reading.

He hits send on his message to Erwin and keeps watching her over the top of his pad. Her fingers loosen and flex their grip around her pen and her teeth chew at her lower lip. Suddenly, she looks up at him and says, "I have someone coming over."

The space between his eyebrows creases with incredulity and maybe a little confusion. He says, "Okay?" because he hadn't been expecting that. As far as he knew, she didn't really have friends, but
maybe he was wrong. He doesn't know what she does when he's at work. He just figured she didn't do anything, because she never talked about having plans with or even knowing other people.

"Yeah," she says, a little at loss for words herself.

"Who?" He tries to sound disinterested, like he's not disappointed or jealous or anything dumb like that.

Erna looks back down at her manuscript and her eyes start ticking back and forth as she scans for spelling or grammatical errors. She says quietly, her chin tilted down, "Just a friend…woman I know from school…"

"I thought you didn't have friends."

Her lips form a thin line. The red pen starts twirling between the fingers of her left hand she rests her chin on the heel of her right palm. Her index finger curls to rest on her lower lip, to press and indent it, her jaw going slack to let her fingertip in and float along her teeth before they bite down a little on the nail. Her grey eyes seem far away as they try to feign focus on the pages. He watches her and tries to guess what she's thinking about when her jaw goes slack like that. He wonders what it is that sometimes makes her eyes glaze over and her fingers find her mouth. Last time he caught her doing that, she was sitting on the stoop reading that trailer park smut she'd been "editing."

Absently, her finger leaves her lips and she says, "I don't, really…"

"Then how do you have a friend coming over?" he asks, suspicious about her dilated pupils and sudden oral fixation.

"Well…" she says, "An acquaintance. Let's call her that.".

His eyes narrow at her, but she doesn't seem to notice. She suddenly folds up the pages of her manuscript and buries it back in her purse along with her pen and she says, "Anyway, she'll only be around for a minute and then I can hang out with you, since you're going to be a jealous bitch about it."

She closes and latches her coffin and turns her nose up a little at him. "Or you could hang out with Ymir if you can't possibly be here alone for an hour."

"Fuck you. I appreciate the time alone," he says, like he couldn't care less that she isn't going to hang out with him all day like she usually does on his days off.

"See you later then." She turns on her heel and bounces off down the sidewalk back toward the apartment building. He watches her, a slight scowl creeping over his features at how happy she is about the whole thing. Then she turns slightly, looking over her shoulder. She catches him watching her and before he can turn his head and make it look like he was only taking a quick glance away from his sketchbook, she winks and blows a kiss at him in the most sarcastic way anyone could ever perform that gesture.

He huffs in annoyance, then sits there and he tries to draw. He tries to just keep his pen moving and go with literally any idea that comes to mind in an attempt to keep himself busy—too busy to think about what just happened. He checks his phone. No response from Erwin yet.

He draws her face, winking, blowing him a kiss, with a little speech bubble that says 'fuck you.'

When he gets up abruptly, leaving some cash on the table for the tea, he goes down the sidewalk, coming up on the building and finding her still with that glazed over look, sucking on a cigarette now
instead of a finger. He squeezes the sketchbook tucked under his arm and taps out a cigarette for himself.

Erna's somewhat relaxed aura seeps slowly down into the sidewalk and nervous tension takes its place. She almost squeaks. "I thought you were going to hang out at the café."

"I remembered some work I have to do up there."

It's a lie. He just wants to see what she's up to. It's obviously something with the way she shifts her weight uneasily and looks up at the building and then back down the sidewalk.

As soon as Erna spots a black car pulling around the corner she bends over and grinds her cigarette out on the cement. While she shoves it back into her pack unfinished, Levi watches a woman get out and round the front of her car.

She moves predatorily, sizing everything up, her black pumps clicking across the sidewalk, heavy briefcase doing nothing to upset her balance.

She moves predatorily, sizing everything up, her black pumps clicking across the sidewalk, heavy briefcase doing nothing to upset her balance.

She locks eyes with Levi as Erna rushes to put her cigarettes and lighter back in her purse and get her keys out of her pocket.

There is something behind her cold, blue eyes that Levi instinctually doesn't like. Something in the way she looks at him, even though she's on the bottom step looking up, makes him feel small and intensely scrutinized.

When Erna gets herself sorted, keys in hand, and only a little flustered, she says, "Okay, um… Levi, this is Annie… Annie, Levi."

The blonde woman's heels click up two of the steps and she holds out her hand. He holds his cigarette between his lips to shake it and she grips him in the most unassuming vice grip, her index and middle fingers extending to press into his wrist. There's an energy about her that puts Levi on his guard.

Erna grabs Annie's other wrist, the one attached to the hand holding her briefcase and she drags her toward the door, hurriedly saying, "Okay, you've met." Then she says bye to Levi and maybe mutters something about seeing him later, but he can't tell with how quickly she opens the door and lets it slam.

In the stairwell, Annie smirks as Erna retracts her careful, bird-like grip from her wrist and nearly runs up the stairs saying, "I need this to be hard and quick and quiet."

Annie follows her up the stairs at her usual pace and clucks her tongue. "I can do that." Her manicured fingers trail over the handrail lightly. "Why the sudden concern about secrecy?"

Erna ushers her inside the apartment and as she locks the door, she says, "Hard to keep secrets behind thin walls." She tests the lock with her fingers and pulls at the door to be sure. Then she walks past Annie and goes straight for the box under her bed. She roots through it and pulls out a black rubber ball gag. Her head tilts as she holds it up for Annie and says, "Quiet."

Annie tilts her chin up and talks down at Erna. "I don't like gags. You can't use safe words with them."

"Have I literally ever used any word but 'green'?"

Annie's eyes narrow a little, but she drawls out, "Fine…"
She will admit that the little gothic Lolita can take a hit. These sessions have been fun for Annie because of that. For a long time, her clientele had been mostly men who were into humiliation. That had been interesting for the icy blonde from a psychological standpoint, for a little while at least. It got old quick.

Annie is grateful for the chance that Erna gives her to keep her physical skills sharp. Knowing and being able to feel when exactly it was time to ease up or go harder, with anything, is an important skill to maintain.

She sets her case down on the floor and crosses the room to Erna. She takes the ball gag from her and quickly grabs her upper arm and spins her around. With Erna now facing away from her and stiff with nervous tension, she reaches around her with the gag.

Erna opens her mouth willingly. She's never been one to fight. She bites down on the ball as much as she can as Annie carefully moves her hair out of the way to clasp it at the back of her head.

Erna stays still as her dominatrix goes and grabs the black wooden chair at her desk and sets it down in front of her. She moves behind Erna again and presses her palm between her shoulder blades, shoving her down until she has to grab the back of the chair to keep from falling.

"Stay like that," she says simply. While she opens her case with a sharp click, she says, "If you let go of the chair, everything stops the same as if you shouted 'red'."

Erna, of course, can't say anything as Annie removes a short riding crop and runs the loop of leather on the tip over her palm.

She takes deep breaths in and out her nose, her mouth already wet around the ball gag. She closes her eyes.

Downstairs, Levi makes an annoyed "Tch," sound when his phone vibrates. He whips it out of his back pocket and reads the message from Erwin.

Erwin:

I haven't had to translate Latin since Catholic school. It'll take me some time, but I can get you an answer.

Levi texts back "Thanks."

Just as he's going to put it back in his pocket the phone buzzes again.

Erwin:

What's it for?

Levi groans to himself. Erwin would be too happy to know it's about Erna. He's subtly not subtle about trying to get Levi to be more interested in her and Levi is stubborn about remaining aloof on the subject when Erwin's around because he doesn't like feeling manipulated.

He texts, "It's for a tattoo," which is only sort of a lie, and after returning his phone to his pocket, he rakes his fingers through his hair.

The filter of his burnt out cigarette hangs between the fingers of his other hand. He forgot about it while he was considering his options. He could go back to the café, he could call Ymir and see if she wants to do something, he could go to the gym…but all those things are pointless because he's not
going to be able to shake his curiosity about Erna's friend and her suddenly very strange behavior.

He slips the filter back into his box of cigarettes to throw away when he gets back upstairs. He'll just work on some sample sketches for clients he's going to see next week, and maybe reorganize his inks and needles. Then when Erna's friend leaves he'll be able to swoop in and ask her what the fuck all that was about.

By then he will have figured out a way to ask her about it that doesn't make him sound like a jealous bitch.

As he reaches his apartment, he thinks he hears a crack or a slap or something, but nothing follows it and he writes it off. He thinks he hears it again when he kicks his boots off inside the door, but it's muffled and he's uncertain about what he thinks he's hearing. He picks his Macbook up off of the bed and is about to open a playlist when he hears it again. It's a sharp, cracking slap sound and he's pretty sure it's coming from the wall to his left.

He closes the Macbook and moves to the opposite wall where his drafting table is. He flips open the cheap spiral bound notebook he uses to take notes while clients ramble on and on about what they want him to draw for them. Every consultation results in a page full of shit, half of which the client actually said they want and half of which is Levi inferring about what they would want if they had any creativity or good taste.

He starts working on a purple watercolor iris flower for a woman who saw one of his watercolor tattoos on the shop's Instagram and wanted one for herself. Actually, she'd wanted exactly the one she saw in the post and Levi had to explain to her for the first seven minutes of her consultation why he couldn't tattoo exactly the same thing on two people and the difference between flash art and something custom made for someone specific.

He's more than happy to put up flash art and ink it onto as many people as possible. It's easy work and easy money. Unfortunately, most people want to be special snowflakes and take half an hour to tell him all about why it's soooo important that they have these initials and these numbers next to this flower or that religious symbol as if he could give a fuck.

He makes two tapering lines for a stem, then one long, curving line that will be the edge of the largest petal, and then he stipbles black dots for shading near where the center will be. The rest is going to be done in paint.

Watercolor tattoos look great, but feel like twice the work for him. He has to paint what it will look like with watercolors for the sketch, then duplicate that look with his machine, which is a completely different process.

When he's satisfied with the line work, he leans over to get brushes and paint. Just as he touches the organizer drawer next to him, he hears that sound again, but this time it's followed by something else… it's some kind of muffled yelp. Before he can process what he thinks it might be, he hears both sounds again, in the same order, a crack and then a yelp, but this time followed by a keening whine.

His fingers leave the drawer unopened and he spins around in his chair, hopping down and crossing the room. He gets close to the wall that separates him from Erna and he shakes his head at himself, because what the fuck is he even doing? But then he flinches when he hears a sharp crack again, and again, a few times in quick succession, punctuated by small snatches of pained moans or yelps cut off again by snapping sounds, and his mind begins working overtime to make sense of what he's hearing.

He steps away from the wall again in a crisis of conscience, because it's none of his business. He
should just put his headphones on and get back to work. He turns on his heel to do that, but then he hears an especially loud crack cut through the wall and half a second after he hears a choked sob that makes him go still.

He paces up and down the length of the apartment. It's none of his business, except it sounds like his friend is getting beaten over there and he's pretty sure that's not something you just let happen. But what if he's wrong?

He must be wrong. It doesn't make any sense. Why would Erna invite over someone who was going to hurt her? But then again, he thinks, why does anyone in an abusive relationship keep running back to their abuser?

As he paces his apartment up and down the sound of a steady barrage of blows is reverberating softly through that wall. Suddenly, he's walking out the door. He didn't even notice when he put his boots back on.

He pauses in front of her door. Does he knock? Does he just barge in? Under the right circumstances, she would probably literally kill him for coming into her apartment unannounced, but now that he's closer, he can hear her talking in an almost stuttered gasping voice, sniffling like she's crying. He can hear Annie's response just well enough to make out the blonde's cold, curt tone, but not the words.

As he wrestles with the decision to knock on the door or go the fuck back to his apartment and work on that watercolor painting like none of this happened, all of a sudden the decision is taken out of his hands. The door opens. Annie looks him up and down, unsurprised and unimpressed. She keeps him in her sight while she says, a little sarcastically, over her shoulder, "Honey, you have a guest." Then she slides past him with her briefcase and walks off down the hallway toward the stairwell.

"What?" Erna says, voice tinged with confusion and disbelief. What Annie's saying doesn't make sense to her. She finishes rolling a black thigh-high stocking up her leg, hiding lines of angry red puffed up skin, and she looks to the door as she wipes her nose on the back of her hand.

Her jaw goes slack when she sees Levi in the doorway, looking angry and fraught with worry. When his hands clench into fists, Erna is unsure of what he has to be upset about until she sniffles again and remembers the tears wetting her cheeks.

His jaw clenches and he simply says, "I'm gonna kill her," and starts to turn in the direction of the stairwell.

Erna runs for the door, saying, "No, nonono, Levi!" She grabs his arm and braces herself. Somehow, maybe only because he lets her, she is able to yank him back into the apartment and lock the door. She leans against it to prevent him from trying to leave again and she says, "This isn't what it looks like… I don't think… Unless your mind is in a weirder place than I expected."

He crosses his arms, his muscles tense beneath the skin. He says carefully, like he's trying not to yell, "It looks like that woman beat the shit out of you."

"Okay, yeah, I can see how it looks that way," she nods as she wipes the tears away from her eyes with the sleeve of her dress.

"It looks like you were covering up welts on your legs."

"That's what I was doing," she admits.

"So… it's exactly what it looks like…"
"Ugh. No." Erna says in frustration. She drops her hands and smoothes out the skirt of her dress. Then she looks at him.

She thinks it's unfortunate that he had to just turn up at that moment, because she knows it looks bad, but she doesn't like being outed and isn't in the mood to have the conversation with Levi…or anyone.

She wrings her hands a little. Then she says, "Okay. It looks like Annie beat the shit out of me, because she did."

Erna winces at the look Levi gives her then. There's a flash of rage, but she can see him do a mental calculation, his eyes ticking over her shoulder to look at the door. He realizes Annie would be gone already, there's no point in trying to run down the stairs to catch her. So he has to deal with what's in front of him, and his expression turns to pity.

She quickly finishes her thought, like ripping off a bandaid, just so he won't look at her like that anymore, "She beat the shit out of me because I asked her to. Okay? I pay her to beat the shit out of me once a week, and then I feel better."

He is literally taken aback, his shoulders move as he takes a step backwards away from her and gives her the most confused look. She lets out an exasperated sigh at him.

She is not in the mood to hold an introductory clinic. She is supposed to be flying high on a cloud of pain-induced endorphins and adrenaline alone for a couple hours. The plan was to get beaten with a riding crop, lie down, read a book, take a bath. That was her self-imposed aftercare. Now, instead, she's talking to her neighbor who isn't supposed to know about this and still wouldn't know about it if he hadn't been an asshole at work and got his schedule changed.

So she pushes past him and makes her way to her bed in the back corner, but stops when she sees her cardboard box of toys pulled out from under the bed frame, complete with five different gags, a couple of floggers, a paddle, and a strap on harness with a flesh-colored dildo. She tilts her head back and sighs at herself. She turns and grabs her ball gag off of the chair where she'd left it and she drops it carelessly into the box, promptly kicking the whole thing back underneath the bed.

She busies herself putting the chair back with the desk on the other side of the room, so she doesn't see Levi blushing, pink just covering his forehead and the tips of his ears.

"So… you're okay?" he asks awkwardly.

"Yes," she huffs, slamming the chair down in its place. "I'm fucking fantastic."

She goes back over to the bed and smoothes her dress out, realizing what disarray it's in since she got it back on in such a hurry when Annie was done. She picks at a piece of white cotton lace at her collar that isn't laying flat.

"Are you though?" Levi asks again, earnestly this time.

"What? You mean like mentally?" she spits out.

"I mean like you have to pay a woman to come over here and hit you or whatever once a week, and that's fucking fantastic?" he says evenly, in as neutral a tone as he can, but it still sounds judgmental as fuck to Erna.

"Don't look at me like this is a new thing. This isn't new. I've been this way for a lot longer than you've known me."
"Erna," he says, pity and concern soaking his words, "You're crying."

She isn't, really, not anymore. The rawness in her throat that was proof of it is fading. She wasn't always a cryer. She doesn't know when that started, but lately it's something that happens anytime her session with Annie is especially rough or emotionally cathartic.

She waves it off and says, "That's just a thing that happens. You know, like how some people cry after sex?"

"Do you have sex with her?"

Erna rolls her eyes. "What is it with people and sex? That's not the whole point, you know? I'm not paying her to fuck me, I'm paying her to hurt me, and it's a lot better than sex."

"Jesus, Erna..." he says, running his hand over the back of his neck like he doesn't know what to do.

But she doesn't want him to do anything, except maybe leave and stop judging her. "Look," she says, "This is my sexuality. It's private. I don't come into your apartment to catch you jacking off and tell you that you're doing it wrong and need to cup the balls or whatever."

"But you're basically paying a prostitute..."

"Yeah, basically," she confirms without a hint of shame. "Would you rather I go out and find someone willing to choke me or shock me or hit me for free? This is a lot safer, I promise, so you can stop giving me that sad fucking face."

Levi tries to change his expression. His fingers run through his hair as he searches for the words to convey how fucking sad he thinks this is. "It's just... I don't know."

She finishes re-tying the corset laces at the back of her dress and looks up at him, and his face fraught with conflict and sadness. She feels herself softening as she remembers that he's her friend and not just some random judgmental prick. He's just worried because he gives a shit and it's not his fault that he doesn't understand.

"Oh, Levi," she says as she stops leaning on the bed and goes over to him. Hesitantly at first, her fingers lace around his sides and then she wraps her arms around him in a comforting hug. "I'm okay. I've always been like this. It's really nothing to worry about. Okay?"

She rests her chin on his shoulder and Levi feels himself melt. She's so close and her hair smells like jasmine tea, and she's actually hugging him. He's so content for a moment, but then he reminds himself that he just learned that she is into women and apparently gets off on being hurt. His heart sinks.

"Yeah, okay," he says as convincingly as he can.

She pulls away from him and looks into his eyes a little skeptically, but she lets him go and doesn't prod further. She says haltingly in a quiet voice, "See you later then."

"Yeah, see ya..." he mumbles as he turns and walks out the door.

On some level, he thinks, as he closes the distance back to his own apartment, this is good. It removes the burden of the crush he's been wrestling with. He doesn't need to wonder whether he should try anything or not.

Yet, on another level, he's pretty fucking depressed about it. He isn't even sure which part of the
whole scenario he's saddest about. Is he selfishly mourning the loss of any chance he had with her? Or is he just sad for her in a more human way because it's pretty fucking heartbreaking that she needs pain to get off like that? Because it's indicative of some kind of deep self-loathing or trauma or something, he thinks.

His boots get kicked off inside the door again and he goes straight back to his drafting table and busies himself getting together everything he needs to start painting.

Levi's experience with S&M is nonexistent, despite his massive amount of experience in almost everything else regarding sex. He just never got curious about it and never happened to fuck anyone who wanted him to do anything more violent than a little light choking.

The thought of it makes him uncomfortable. He could never combine sex and violence and not feel like a monster for it. He's never had a sadistic bone in his body.

Not that it even matters, he thinks to himself. He should have guessed that she wasn't straight. It seems so obvious now. She's told him that she hates men how many different ways over the course of their friendship? If he hadn't been so blinded by his stupid, misguided crush he would have guessed that she was a lesbian long before he would have guessed about the S&M thing.

It's still hard to picture as he sits down and drags the tip of his dampened brush through some deep violet paint. He would never think that someone as intimidating as Erna would have it in them to get down on their knees for anyone.

After about twenty minutes of trying to distract himself from his thoughts with painting, he gets off his stool and looks at what he's done so far.

The iris looks a lot darker and a little more twisted than he'd planned. It looks like it should be growing on the bank of a very still, very dark reservoir instead of an English garden.

His fingers find his hair and he sighs. He wonders if he should throw it out and start again. He's unsure. The client might like it better this way.

Before he can decide, his phone buzzes with a text from Ymir.

Ymir:

new OitNB. come over. now.

"Well," he says to himself, "that settles that."

After he gets his brushes cleaned up and sets the watercolor on the drying rack next to the table, he goes to Ymir and Krista's apartment, letting himself in and going straight to the living room where Ymir has already started the first episode of the new season of Orange is the New Black.

"I'm glad I hurried," he deadpans over her shoulder as the opening song finishes with the sound of a cell door being slid shut.

"Fuck yeah you are, I would not have rewound if you'd come in at the middle. When I say 'now,' I mean 'now'."

Levi swings his legs over the back of the couch and settles into the deep cushions, lazily resting his hands behind his head. "We're only doing three episodes a day… max. " he warns her.

"Why?" she sneers. "What is the point of the internet if we don't take advantage of our ability to
She has a point, and he doesn't have work tomorrow, and he would like to take advantage of the ability to not think for however many hours he can manage.

Krista comes down from the loft bedroom and leans over the stair railing, catching a look at the tv and shaking her head at the pair. She asks them with mild annoyance, "Are you guys going to be watching this all day?"

"You're welcome to join us, babe," Ymir says sweetly.

The petite blonde sticks her tongue out and makes a 'bleh' sound. Levi throws his arm over the back of the couch and turns to look at her on her perch. He gestures at the screen and asks, "How can you not love this show?"

Krista only puts her hand on her hip and rolls her eyes at them. Ymir answers for her. "She only likes shows with tons of graphic violence and nudity."

"That's not true," the pretty little blonde pouts and crosses her arms over her chest.

"It's mostly true," Ymir tells Levi. Then she turns to Krista and says, "We'll just binge watch every episode and then the tv will be all yours and we can watch one of your disturbing torture porn movies."

"Martyrs is not torture porn!" Krista stamps her bare foot on the wooden step she's standing on.

Ymir pauses the episode so that she won't miss another second while arguing with Krista, she turns to her and says, "I'm sorry, you're right. Tell you what: how about you take the laptop and watch those exploitation horror movies make her horny as fuck. That's why she's so pissed."

"Thank you so much for all of that information," Levi deadpans, taking the remote back from her and hitting play.

Not caring about his discomfort, Ymir continues, "I can't stand the movies she wants to watch, but she gets really wild when she's watching a helpless person in pain, and it's totally worth it. It's like better than angry sex... or makeup sex... or—"

Levi turns the volume up until he can't hear Ymir. He gets four seconds of uninterrupted OitNB watching before Ymir snatches the remote away from him, turns the volume down to a more reasonable level, and tells him, "You're no fun."

"Good to see you've figured me out."

Ymir ignores his response and asks, "So, how are things with Tinkerbell?"
"Could you not call her that?" He asks, because the nickname Ymir came up with for Erna always reminds him of those hips and thighs she's hiding under those gothic lolita dresses.

Ymir sneers at him and says, "Nope. How are you and Tinkerbell?"

Levi pinches the bridge of his nose and sighs.

"That good, huh?"

He blurs out, "She's a lesbian," because he needs Ymir to stop.

Without missing a beat, Ymir says simply, "No, she isn't."

"Yeah, Ymir," he says wearily, "she is."

"No, Levi," she says, getting steadily more pissed off, "she isn't. You don't tell me who is and isn't a lesbian. I already know. My lesbian detection is literally flawless. I am never wrong. That girl is straight as a ruler."

"You're wrong on this one," he tells her, but he won't get into how he knows.

"You have evidence?"

"What evidence, Ymir? How would I get evidence?"

"Well either, One:" she holds up a finger, "you would need video of her actually fucking a woman. Or Two:" she holds up a second finger, "you got a confession straight from her." She closes her fingers again and says, "Since I know you don't have a video, because if you did you wouldn't be here right now, you'd be at your own place watching that shit on repeat, I'm guessing that she literally told you, 'Hey, by the way, I'm a lesbian.'"

Levi's jaw clenches and he doesn't respond. He keeps looking at the screen and tries to watch the show.

Ymir pokes him. "Did she tell you that she's a lesbian?"

"No. Okay?" He doesn't want to let Ymir be right and gloat at him, but he also wants to protect his friend's privacy to some extent, so he just says, "I know that she has sex with women though."

"So do you," Ymir says quickly and dismissively, "doesn't make you a lesbian."

There's a long pause where Levi is just looking at her in disbelief, his mouth open a little at the nonsense she just said. She ignores his expression and keeps watching the show until he says, "Do you even listen to yourself sometimes?"

She holds her finger to her lips and shushes him, then points at the screen.

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They get to episode eight. By then, Krista came halfway down the stairs again to rest her chin on the railing and sigh at Ymir, trying to get her to take a hint. Levi had to leave when Krista said very matter of factly, "He's going to rape that girl," when she saw a scene with Coates and Pennsatucky.

Levi had shaken his head and said, "How can you know that?"

Krista indignantly gestured to the tv and shouted, "Look at how he's looking at her! It's so obvious!"
"If you're trying to ruin the show so that I'll come upstairs with you, it's not going to work," Ymir said stubbornly.

Levi was done anyway, though. He'd had enough reminders that literally everyone was getting laid but him. He flipped off both Ymir and Krista as he walked out.

Now, he's in his apartment again, just standing there, not knowing what to do with himself. For once, he just doesn't feel like working, and he doesn't really know what else to do with himself. Automatically, he hits the button on his electric tea kettle. While he stands and waits, he listens closely for the sounds of classical music creeping through the wall.

He doesn't hear any flutes or violins, so it's 50-50 whether Erna's in her apartment or not. Sometimes she sits in there in silence. She says sometimes she can't stand to have background noise muddying what noises she can hear outside.

He takes his phone out to check the time and notices a new message from Erwin.

Erwin:

Your phrase translates to something like "It's a terrible thing to love that which death can touch."

Truer words have never been written, Levi would be a good tattoo.

The kettle clicks at him and he throws a couple of tea bags in a large travel mug, pours steaming water over them, and he grabs his cigarettes off of the table by the door as he goes downstairs.

Every time he goes out the front door now, he automatically checks the spot where she always sits to see whether she's there or not. When he gets a glimpse of her black curls, his heart always skips a beat, only this time after that beat, it sinks and there's a clenching feeling in his chest.

She turns and tilts her chin at him. She takes her black cigarette out of her lips and asks, "Where were you all day?"

He shrugs nonchalantly. "Watching Orange is the New Black with Ymir."

He sits down on the step next to her, giving her a few more inches of space than he has been lately, and he asks a little bitterly, "How was the rest of your day?"

"Well, you fucked up my routine," she teases him sarcastically. "Fridays are supposed to be my day off. You're at work, I get a session with my dominatrix, then I enjoy an endorphin high for a few hours, take a bath, read a book, and am in a considerably better mood for a couple days."

He thinks about that. He guesses he did notice that she was always happier on weekends, but he thought that was just a weekend thing.

She continues, "But you fucked up my endorphin high and then my whole day was fucked, so I tried to get some work done instead." She picks up the manuscript she's been editing off and on all day and waves it at him.

He snorts a little through his nose and teases, "I'm sorry that I heard you getting beaten and crying and jumped to the illogical conclusion that you needed help."

"You should be."

He taps out a cigarette and realizes that he left his lighter upstairs. Before he can even ask, Erna is
holding hers out to him. As he lights the tip of his cigarette, she says quietly, a little vulnerably, "Just don't be all weird about it, okay?"

He promises that he'll try not to be weird.

Chapter End Notes

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Levi almost thought about asking Mike to put him back on the schedule for Fridays. He would have done it, except he didn't want to seem ungrateful for the huge favor his boss had done for him by taking him off the schedule for the two days of the week with the most walk-ins, especially after he fucked up like he did.

The first Friday morning after their whole misunderstanding, the air is filled with awkward tension between Levi and Erna. They're sitting on the stoop, smoking, and after five minutes of silence she finally asks, "So are you… like… gonna go? Or…?"

"Go where?" he asks with a trace of irritation.

"I don't know?" she throws her hands up. "Somewhere not here? Or don't. I don't care. But I'm not using a gag again, so it's going to be loud and I don't give a fuck if it makes you uncomfortable."

"Fabulous," he says sarcastically.

"Wonderful," she quips back.

"Fucking perfect." Levi grinds his cigarette out on the railing of the stoop angrily.

Erna sighs heavily and they both mope there for a minute before she lifts her chin and says, "I'll pay for all the tea you drink if you fuck off to the café for a while."

He wants to say he's not her whore. Her whore will be there in about twenty minutes, but he restrains himself, because he doesn't want a big fight… maybe a little one… but not a big blow out. It's been hard enough to get back to how they used to be, with Erna seeming a little more guarded and defensive and self-conscious around him, and Levi seeming generally a little more depressed and bitchy about the whole thing.

He says, "So I'm getting chased out of my apartment because you want to have a prostitute come over and hit you?"

Erna starts to yell, "She's not –" but she quickly cuts herself off and closes her eyes. She takes a deep breath. "All I'm asking for is one hour of privacy for one day of the week."

"Why don't you just reschedule?"

"I fucking tried. You think I wouldn't do that in a heartbeat if I could? Like I want to be having this conversation with you?"
It would be easy for Levi to go to the café for an hour, in fact, he would be doing that right now anyway if she weren't asking him to. It's just the principle of the thing. He doesn't want to be told when he can and can't be in his own goddamn apartment.

"Stop looking at me like that," she says, her eyes narrowed at him.

"Like what?" he asks. He didn't realize his facial expression changed… ever, but she picks up on the most minute things.

"Like you're sad for me," she says. "Be pissed all you want, but you're not allowed to pity me over this. If you have issues with it, then those are your issues, but I'm happy with what I'm doing, so keep whatever reservations you have about my preferences to yourself."

"So, you can keep me out of my apartment and I can't say shit," he sums up angrily.

She sounds a little tired and mostly pissed off when she answers, "You can say a lot of shit, Levi. Go ahead. What do you have to say?"

His jaw tightens. He grips the lighter in the pocket of his Black Flag hoodie tight enough for his fingernails to dig into his palm.

"I…" he pauses and calms himself. "…I'm going to the café."

He wishes he had his sketchbook. At least he'd be able to do something while he waits. When he gets to the counter Eren gets started on his tea right away without trying to push one of his specials on him. While he waits, Levi pulls out his phone and opens Instagram to see if Hanji posted anything new. He scrolls through pictures of tattoos from a bunch of accounts he follows before he hears Eren clear his throat.

Levi lifts his face and takes in Eren nervously holding out his tea. He puts his phone back in his pocket and takes the cardboard cup from the kid's hand. He says, "Thanks," hands Eren some money, and turns to leave.

He gets stopped by Eren's nervous, "Um…" preamble to, "Do you have a minute?"

Levi stops walking, but doesn't turn around. He tilts his head back and looks upward. "A minute for what?" he asks impatiently.

He hears Eren hop the counter and just like that the kid is in front of him with those big green eyes looking especially pleading. He says hurriedly, "Could I pay you to do a tattoo for me? Like now? Mikasa said it's okay if I'm back before the lunch rush."

Levi raises an eyebrow skeptically at the seemingly desperate twenty-something. This marks the fifty-seventh time Eren has tried to talk to him about a tattoo, but this is the first time Eren has actually asked him to do the thing instead of just trying to talk to him about ideas.

"You're serious?" he asks.

"Yes. Definitely," he answers earnestly.

"Right now?"

"Yeah, if you don't mind." Eren's hand finds the back of his head and he flashes Levi a sheepish smile. "I know you always tell me to make an appointment, but it's really hard for me to get away from the café, and when I'm done with work I'm totally wiped out."
Levi mutters to himself, "I wouldn't know anything about not being able to get away from work."

"What?"

"Nothing." He blows the steam off of his tea and takes a sip as he eyes Eren up and down, which makes the kid squirm. Finally he says, "Let's go."

Eren whips his apron off and throws it behind the counter, tells Armin to cover drinks for him, and shoves his fist into the tip jar. He comes up with a big wad of cash and takes off running after Levi.

It just so happens that Annie is walking up to the building at the same time as them. Erna flashes Levi an outraged look and crosses her arms. "What the fuck, Levi?"

Annie reaches the top step and stands next to Erna. She wears a bemused expression and she says, "More friends?"

"What the fuck is Bambi doing here?"

Eren hangs back behind Levi and says timidly, "Um.. Hey, Erna..."

Annie smirks. "Bambi?"

Levi reaches back and grabs Eren by the arm, pulling him forward and glowering at Annie. "His name is Eren."

"His name is whatever the fuck I call him," Erna counters, and then adds, "and what the fuck is he doing here?"

Eren cringes and tries to step behind Levi again, but the shorter man holds him still in a death grip.

Annie reaches and gently brushes a curl behind Erna's ear, saying with a slight hint of mockery, "It's cute when you're aggressive."

Erna blushes and loses her composure for a moment. Her eyes and chin tilt downward.

"I'm um… getting a tattoo…" Eren explains.

"Right now?" Erna shouts in exasperation.

Again Eren tries to wriggle out of Levi's death grip unsuccessfully. Levi ignores his discomfort as he squares off with Erna. "I need to fucking work."

She crosses her arms over her chest and says, "You're doing this on purpose."

"Like hell I am," he says.

She steps forward a little, which is what she does when she is about to really rip into him, but just as her mouth opens, Annie grips her upper arm and shifts her towards the door saying, "Shall we?"

Erna makes a frustrated little noise, but she doesn't argue. It's strange for Levi to watch her take direction from someone where normally she would be loudly telling them to go get fucked in a variety of ways. It's a whole different side of her that he's never seen, like a submissive, obedient doppelganger.

As Erna goes inside ahead of her, Annie turns and looks down at Levi on the sidewalk and says, "Lovely to see you again," in a bored, disingenuous way.
He waits until the door closes behind her to flip her off.

Finally Eren gets the balls to speak up and he asks Levi, "So who was that?"

Levi pinches the bridge of his nose and wonders what the fuck he should tell the kid.

He settles on, "Let's say she's Erna's girlfriend."

"Oh…" he stammers, "I didn't… Um, that's cool…"

They climb the steps just a flight behind Annie and Erna. When they reach the same floor, Erna is just unlocking the last lock on her door, and Eren notes, "Oh, you guys are neighbors?"

"Shut the fuck up, Bambi," Levi says over his shoulder as he violently opens the door to his apartment.

Annie sweeps in the door to Erna's apartment with her very specific quality of athletic grace in her corporate-looking pencil skirt and blazer, and she asks very matter of factly, "What's with you and that punky guy?"

"He's my neighbor. I hate him sometimes," Erna says as if that's a foregone conclusion – part of being neighbors.

"That's cute," Annie says with a bored expression. Before Erna can get defensive about it, she changes subjects, "What did we discuss for today?"

She goes to Erna's desk against the wall she shares with Levi's apartment, and there's an audible click as she opens her briefcase. On the left side of the case are some small BDSM tools and accessories. She always packs just what she'll need for the day's clients. When toys are involved she'll usually use what her client already has – a way of avoiding contamination – but there are still basics that she can supply herself. On the right side of the case are manila folders with names written on their little tabs in sharpie.

Annie flips through to the third folder, pulls it out, and opens it as she says, "I didn't have time to check notes from last week."

Erna whimpers a little, because she could give a fuck about the BDSM toys and tools on the left side of the case, but she loves that Annie takes notes. It just adds to her cold, academic, aloof charm that appeals to her sapiosexuality.

"Could you just fuck me?" Erna blurts out. Which is really smooth… so much so that she blushes immediately after the words leave her mouth.

"Take your fucking shoes off," Levi tells Eren as soon as he steps foot in his apartment.

Eren stammers and falls all over himself to do so and Levi rolls his eyes. He goes to the corner of his apartment that passes as a kitchen and gets him a glass of water. When Eren's just finishing getting his shoes off, Levi pulls him by his upper arm, puts the glass in one of his hands, says, "Drink that," and shoves him to one of the seats at the white formica kitchen table.

When Levi comes back with a piece of paper and a pen, Eren has some more resolve, which is good
because if he had to listen to the kid stammer through what is supposed to be a quick consultation, Levi was going to lose his shit.

"Okay. What do you want?"

Eren takes a sip of water, swallows, and then says, "I want this quote with an infinity anchor."

Levi's eyelids close. He takes a very, very deep breath, and steels himself. "What quote?"

"Too something to live, too weird to die?" He mutters as he checks his phone for the screenshot he took of the quote.

Levi sighs and tents his fingers over his forehead, massaging his temples. "It's 'Too weird to live, and too rare to die.'"

"How do you know?"

Levi gives the kid a half-lidded bored stare and asks, "Do you even know where that quote comes from?"

"Um… I saw it on facebook, so…"

Levi's eyes roll to the back of his head. He stands and rolls his shoulders as he goes over to the small table next to his bed. He doesn't read much, but he keeps a few books around that people go to most often when searching for a quote to get inked on them. Some things that he would otherwise never own like the Bible and Alice in Wonderland, and some that he wouldn't mind reading for pleasure like The Hobbit and the book that Eren is clumsily trying to quote: Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas.

He grabs the book by Hunter S. Thompson and tosses it onto the kitchen table in front of Eren.

"Open to the dog-eared page."

As Eren carefully opens the book and reads the highlighted quote in its original form, Levi sits across from him at the kitchen table and bangs out an infinity symbol with an anchor in less than five seconds. He's done about twenty-five of these infinity anchor things in the past two months. He's considering putting them on the get-the-fuck-out-of-my-shop list.

One of the rules at The Basement is that anyone can refuse any work for almost any reason. For example, Mike refuses to tattoo names on people. He got sick of the clients coming in a month later and asking for a cover-up after they broke up with their significant other.

Levi has a longer list of things he will refuse to tattoo, which he calls the get-the-fuck-out-of-my-shop list. Things that made the list are as follows: portrait tattoos (because he finds them boring), gang symbols (because half the time the people asking for them don't even realize that they're gang symbols), and stars (because after his two-hundredth five-pointed star, he just couldn't anymore). Infinity anchors are going to make the list soon after this.

Eren finishes reading the passage that his quote comes from and closes the book. He looks up and startles slightly at the way Levi is staring at him, looking somehow bored and murderous at the same time.

Levi tells him slowly, with emphasis, "First, I'm going to tell you every reason that you're going to keep your mouth fucking shut about this."

Eren swallows down a lump in his throat and nods.
"One:" Levi starts, "I could get in a lot of trouble for doing this out of my home. I could lose my license. If that happens, I have nothing to lose and nothing holding me back from killing you."

"I promise I won't --"

"I'm not finished," Levi growls.

Eren makes a small 'eep' sound, sits up straighter, and folds his hands on his lap.

Levi continues. "Two: You are not going to tell anyone who did this tattoo for you because what you're asking for is the most basic bitch tattoo I've been asked to do all year and I don't want my name attached to it. I have artistic integrity to think about. Honestly, I'm glad you wanted to do this under the table because if you came into the shop and asked for a quote you didn't even know the origin of, along with literally the most trendy, meaningless symbol in tattoos since tribal designs, I'd tell you to get the fuck out."

"You think it's basic?"

With his very straightest face, Levi answers, "It's more basic than a Lewis Carroll quote with incorrect grammar next to a Cheshire cat."

"Do you think I should get something else?"

Levi automatically makes a pained, frustrated grunt, not at Eren's indecisiveness, but because he hears Annie's fucking briefcase being set down on the other side of the wall. He can almost hear it click open. Then muffled voices; Annie's voice monotone and professional, then Erna's voice uncharacteristically high and tight and desperate. Levi refocuses himself, leans back in his chair, and takes a deep breath.

"After all the fucking good ideas you've come at me with in the years you've lived here… Yeah, I think you should get something else, but," he points at the infinity anchor symbol he just drew, "I just started working. You want to talk about different ideas, it's another twenty-five dollars. So how much do you have?"

Eren looks down as he roots through his pockets, some of his milk chocolate brown hair falls in his face and he blows it away as he comes up with a wad of assorted bills and change. Just as he starts counting, he pauses as he hears a girlish whimper through the other side of the wall.

Levi tells him, "Don't worry about that."

"Um…" Eren hums as he gets to counting. "I have sixty-three dollars."

"And how big a piece did you want?"

"I guess, like," Eren holds his hand out in front of him, "a little bigger than my hand?"

Eren flinches as another noise penetrates the barrier between Levi and Erna's apartments, like a piece of wooden furniture getting jolted against the wall. Levi is unaffected. He sighs and tells Eren, "You're lucky I'm in a good mood."

"You are?" Eren immediately realizes his mistake in what he just said and covers his mouth as Levi shoots him a look.

"Do you want black ink? Or color? I'll tell you now, you can't afford any colors unless you want to be making up the difference with free tea for the next six months."
"Unhh… I didn't know it would be so expensive," Eren whines.

"The cost goes up when I work at home," Levi explains as he gets up and starts gathering materials. "There's no overhead here, but the risk is higher, not to mention this is my day off, so I'm giving myself overtime pay."

He sets a large bottle of medical grade sterilizing solution on the table along with an unopened roll of paper towels. As he turns to go to the other side of the room to get his inks and needles, he catches the pensive look on Eren's face and stops.

He puts his hands on the table and sighs, before saying, "Look, kid. You've been talking about this for years. You want my advice?"

Eren nods his head enthusiastically.

"Don't stress about the content of the tattoo, just fucking get it done. You'll feel good about it no matter how stupid the design is."

Eren bites his lower lip a little, which Levi has to admit is a good look on him. He tries not to let on too much how warmly he feels toward the kid sometimes with his passionate, but hapless nature. His long, tanned throat bobs as he swallows and he nods at Levi, smiling with resolve.

"Good." Levi says. He lightly smacks Eren upside the back of his head before he walks over to his organized drawers of supplies and tells him, "Now pick a font."

"Um… shit… I didn't think about it," Eren says, rubbing the back of his head where Levi hit him.

"Anything but Lucida. I'm so fucking sick of Lucida," he warns as he looks down at his tattoo machine.

Eren hums nervously as he tries to make a decision, but soon his low, throaty vibration is drowned out by voices, clearer and louder this time. Levi swears he can hear Erna shyly stammering something out. When has she ever fucking been at a loss for words?

"Is that, um…" Eren stutters.

"I said don't worry about it," Levi growls. He grabs a bottle of black ink and wheels over the small industrial tool chest that holds everything he might need in the middle of a tattoo so that he won't need to cross the room.

"Did you think of a font?"

"Um…"

Levi pinches the bridge of his nose and rubs the ends of the barbell there. "How about typewriter? Hunter S. Thompson had a thing for typewriters. It'll make up for the fact that you didn't even know where the quote came from."

"Okay... Yeah..." Eren shifts uncomfortably in his seat.

"Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas is a good book," Levi says as he plugs in his foot pedal. "You should read it after getting part of it tattooed on your… Where did you want it?"

"I was thinking on, like, my hip?"

"You should read it after you get part of it tattooed on your hip forever."
"I will," the brunette says sincerely. Then he asks, "Can I borrow your –"

Levi would respond, but he's cut off by Erna making a noise that starts off like a shocked, pained gasp and turns into a whimper and sigh.

Levi takes a deep breath and goes over to the drafting table to grab the big, noise-canceling headphones that are normally hanging on the lamp there; only, he stops short because they're not where they should be. He mutters, "One second," to Eren as he turns around and goes to the closet to pull out his work bag. He squats down on the floor while he rummages through it looking for them.

While he does that, the silent spaces between the noises get shorter and shorter. There are a couple more soft moans that, even though he's trying to ignore them, go straight to his dick and bring forth unbidden imagery from fantasies he gave up on exactly a week ago when he found out about Erna's… preferences. Finally he stands up and shouts, "Shit!" because he must have forgotten his headphones at the shop yesterday.

Eren nearly jumps out of his skin and starts saying apologetically, "I can come back another time if this isn't convenient. I'll pay you for the consultation and all."

Levi stalks over and as he walks past Eren, puts a hand firmly on his shoulder and shoves him back down into the chair as he says, "I'm not getting chased out of this apartment by that psycho doll and neither are you."

Without a pause, he keeps moving and picks his Macbook up off the bedside table, sends a playlist to the wall mounted speakers, and turns it up as loud as he can stand. It helps a little, though as the music gets louder, so does the intensity of the session in the apartment next-door, and even The Ramones can't drown out what he's pretty sure is the sound of Erna getting spanked right against her desk which happens to be parallel to the kitchen table where he has to do Eren's tattoo.

He orders Eren to finish the glass of water he gave him and when the kid says it's okay, he isn't thirsty, he pinches the bridge of his nose and sighs. "It's not hospitality, fuckwad, your body dehydrates when you're in pain and I'm not letting you pass out in my kitchen. So drink the fuck up."

"Oh. Sorry."

As he gathers his materials and Eren finishes the glass of water, Levi asks, "Did you eat this morning?"

Eren starts describing his breakfast as if this is small talk while Levi wipes the table down in a sterilizing solution. He cuts him short again. "I'm not interested, kid. I'm trying to make sure you're not going to go into shock through some dumbassery on your part."

As he works out the fine details of his drawing, making it as perfectly symmetrical as possible, he asks, "Any history of bad reactions to needles?"

"Like how?"

"Like do you faint when you see them?"

That's something Levi asks everyone now. He's learned that people who have vasovagal reactions to needles are never up front about it. They either think this time will be the one time they don't fucking faint, or they don't want to own up to it because they know they'll be asked to leave because nobody wants to have to call a fucking ambulance to pick up a client with an unfinished tattoo.

Eren's chin is in his hands now, watching with rapt attention as Levi draws out the stencil and he denies ever having fainted at the sight of a needle. He adds that he has a high tolerance for pain.
Levi barely grunts in response to that. Everybody thinks they have a high tolerance for pain until they actually experience it. That thought makes his mind go back to Erna who probably actually does have a high tolerance since she actively seeks it out as a means to get off, which he still doesn't understand. In fact he finds it pretty sad, but judging by the sounds coming through the wall right next to him, she enjoys it just as much as any normal person enjoys sex. Though he wonders if the noises are exaggerated just to annoy him.

He shakes his head. Before he moves on to the lettering, he asks, "Any allergies?"

"I'm pretty allergic to pollen, but being in the city it's not usually a problem."

Levi drops his pen so that he can rub his temples. "Allergies that might be relevant, dumbass."

"Oh. Ummm..." His aquamarine eyes roll upwards as he thinks. "No, I don't think so."

The typewriter font quote is a little harder to draw than the infinity anchor was, which Levi is almost thankful for, because needing to concentrate distracts him a little from Erna's honestly sexy as fuck squeals and yelps. He draws out the quote in a simple curve underneath the anchor and holds the stencil up for Eren's approval.

Eren gives him a thumbs up, so Levi gets a piece of contact paper, copies the design, and turns around to wash his hands.

As he snaps on a pair of gloves, he tells the tall, tan, somewhat adorable barista, "Drop your pants."

.......................

Annie tells Erna just as she is reaching for the box out from under the bed, "Take off the boots, but leave the thigh-highs and the dress."

Erna wants to ask why as she unzips her chunky platform ankle boots. Annie answers her without being asked, "I like your outfits. They make you look like an innocent, mechanical little fuck doll."

And with that, she takes a strap-on harness with an average-sized, fleshy colored dildo out of the cardboard box. She digs around for another moment, then lifts her head, watching Erna step out of her shoes as she asks, "Do you have lube?"

"Huh?.. Um.." Erna stammers as she lifts one foot. "I don't think so... I never..." She doesn't finish that, instead it just trails off.

Annie smirks. "You haven't done this in a long time, have you?"

Erna can't answer. She feels her face get hotter and knows that she's got a glowing pink blush working its way over her face.

A wicked smirk appears on Annie's lips as she steps towards her client. She tilts Erna's chin up with a finger and tells her with evil sarcasm, "I feel so special."

Erna is forced to look into her eyes, icy blue and cold. There's a keen intelligence behind those eyes that is a little scary, that makes Erna's stomach drop nervously. She loves the way Annie can make her forget that she's safe. She's always had a thing for the threat of danger in safe situations like this.

Annie backs her up until she's leaning against the desk on the wall opposite the bed, and as she has her caged there between her arms, she sets the strap-on harness down and reaches past to take a small bottle of lube from her briefcase.
Catching the briefcase in her peripheral vision makes Erna remember something she wanted, but even though she's practiced the request in her head at least a dozen times, she's still shy about asking and she stammers as the words get strangled in her throat. "Could you… um…?"

Annie follows Erna's eyeline exactly to a small box of surgical latex gloves in her briefcase and she removes a pair and holds them up for the small, vulnerable girl. "You want these?"

Erna swallows and nods.

Annie puts the lube down on the desk next to the strap-on and pulls the gloves on slowly. "Just out of curiosity," she asks, "is it a germ thing? Or a medical kink?" and when Erna doesn't answer right away, she offers, "because if it's a medical kink, I can bring a nurse's uniform next time."

Erna deflects the question and instead of an answer, she says, "I don't like costumes." The truth is that it isn't a germ thing or a medical kink, though she does like medical play. It's that the gloves make it more impersonal and less intimate. She doesn't like any feeling of intimacy in her scenes.

Annie notices the omission of an answer to her question, but she lets it go. She could punish Erna for it, but from what she can see, the girl is being tortured enough by the difficulty of asking for what she wants. That should be punishment enough, especially if Annie makes her ask for everything.

"How do you want it?" she asks, even though, honestly, she can read the girl like a book and already knows exactly what she'll ask for if she gets the nerve up to actually say anything.

"I…" she squeaks. "Um…"

None of Annie's other clients are like this. Maybe because they're men. They're used to being forward about what they want, even if they're submissive. She thinks it's cute and she's going to draw it out as much as possible.

"Come on, out with it. When we first met you said you like to talk things through."

She brushes Erna's cheek with the tips of her fingers as she reaches to push an inky black curl behind her ear and she smiles at the way the girl's eyes widen as she swallows down her nerves like she's about to say something, but no words come out.

This is going to be an interview then, Annie thinks to herself. She asks matter of factly, "Oral?"

Erna shakes her head, then says, "Never liked it."

"Well that seems to conflict with —" Annie pauses while she reaches a little past and to the side of Erna for her folder on the desk. She opens it, riffles through a couple of pages, pulls up a sheet and points to a particular item, "your kink for deepthroating?"

Annie could almost laugh as the diminutive gothic girl unconsciously brings her hand to her mouth and gently grips the pad of her thumb in her teeth. Then she catches herself, brings her hand back to her side, and says, "Technically not oral."

The girl definitely has an oral fixation, no matter what she says. Annie pushes further. "So choking on a fake cock doesn't count? Or are you squeamish about fluids?"

"It's… um…" Erna doesn't want to say, but she knows that Annie is unrelenting especially when she feels she's backed her client into a corner. "It's not that."

Annie tilts her head at her for the first time and studies her quizzically. A pink blush starts to spread
over Erna's face and she looks down at her toes.

"Interesting," Annie says to herself.

Erna's thumb finds its way to her mouth again. Her heart races a little as she gets a rush out of the humiliation of being scrutinized so closely. She likes the feeling of Annie picking her apart. Maybe subconsciously that's why she's not as forthcoming with answers to her domme's questions.

Annie's eyes narrow a little and the corner of her mouth quirks upward. She says without too much of an accusatory tone, "You don't like pussy? Is that it?"

Erna's blush turns her face hot and she swears she's burning as Annie actually lets out a laugh for the first time. When she catches her breath, she asks, "Are you actually straight?"

Erna only nods, still not looking up from her stocking-clad toes.

"Oh my god, you adorable little thing," Annie says patronizingly. She tangles her fingers into Erna's hair and tilts her head back up to look at her. "I've never fucked a straight girl before."

Erna almost wants to apologize, but that doesn't make sense to her. She doesn't know what to say and instead she stammers, "I – I… um…"

Annie shushes her. "I won't torture you about it. It's just interesting… and something for me to cross off my bucket list." It's actually not unheard of in the BDSM community for people to play counter to their sexual orientation. Annie has at least a few friends who are lesbians with long-term male subs. People forget that it's not only about sex. For some, BDSM is something completely independent of sex and therefore, sometimes, sexual orientation doesn't come into play. Though, she supposes, some people, like Erna, do just really need to get fucked once in awhile.

She releases Erna's hair and gives her a break. "Let's move on. Any positions that you find painful?"

Erna's eyes turn upward as she thinks about that one. She can count the positions she's tried in her scenes on one hand, because Annie was right, she doesn't do this often. She views sex with penetration as something cathartic to be done maybe once or twice a year as routine maintenance. Otherwise she doesn't really care for being penetrated at all. She's not even particularly in the mood for it in this instance, but she knows it will be loud and obvious and it will piss Levi off. Finally she answers, "Not that I know of…" a little unsurely.

"Anything else you want me to know? Do you want to go over trigger words again? Anything new since the last time I was here?"

Erna shakes her head so emphatically her curls wave back and forth a little with the motion. All she wants is to finish the interrogation and be told what to do.

"You want me to treat you like an object?" Annie tells her more than asks as her fingers trail up her jawline, over her cheekbone, and suddenly tangle in her hair, grabbing it in a fist. "Something that I can use to get off and then throw away?"

Erna moans low in her throat and it turns into a sigh as Annie pulls harder at her hair.

The intimidating blonde orders her to speak with, "Safe words."

"Red, yellow, green," Erna whines.

"What a good toy," Annie purrs because she knows the keywords to make her subject feel
objectified and a little dehumanized, which seems to be her main kink. "Now," she begins, tugging at Erna's hair again, "do I need to warn you about discretion?"

"Ha- ahh," Erna whines again at the pain, "No!"

"Good," Annie says casually and she lets go of her hair. "Bend over the desk."

Erna turns around and rests her forearms on the desk. She turns her head to see Annie's deceptively delicate-looking hands lift the strap-on away and out of her view.

Annie hums to herself as if she's thinking when she runs a hand up over the back of Erna's thighs and pulls her dress up.

She says to herself, "I think I want to spank your ass red first."

Erna involuntarily winces in anticipation when Annie's fist finds her hair again. She was hoping for some kind of impact play first, but was again too shy to ask for it. The shyness is completely new, even in the context of a scene with a domme. It's something Annie specifically brings out of her, Erna thinks. At least she hopes that it's Annie and that it doesn't have anything to do with changes in her personality that are a result of her trauma.

Instead of pulling at her hair like expected, Annie pushes Erna's face harder into the desk and then lets go. She uses both of her hands to part Erna's soft thighs and adjust her position. Annie's fingernails rake over the black thigh-high stockings and then back up, under the dress, and over her ass, squeezing her flesh as she pushes the black ruffled skirt further out of the way.

Standing, Annie reaches down to pull Erna's panties below the curve of her ass. She rests her hand on her head again and this time firmly pushes Erna's face down onto the cool wood. Erna can feel her dominatrix's weight shift as she pulls back her arm, so she tenses, waiting for the blow. For a long moment, Annie stands waiting, until very calmly she tells Erna to relax.

Erna doesn't want to relax. It hurts more if she doesn't relax. But, biting harder on her lip, she takes a deep breath and does her best to comply. Annie's hand finally comes down full on her pale flesh with a sudden, sharp sound — once, twice. Again, harder, and she lets a long, relieved moan escape her lips.

When Annie starts hitting her with full strength Erna feels and hears the little shrieks and sobs coming from her mouth, but she feels more and more disconnected from the sounds the more the pain blooms and burns. Again Annie hits her, switching between each cheek. She pauses and grabs Erna's now-stinging ass, her fingertips digging in, leaving white circles in the red, aching skin.

Then a latex-gloved finger curls and gently traces over the burning skin and downward to caress the swelling lips of Erna's cunt, the new subject of her attention.

"Good?" Levi asks Eren after he gets the transfer onto his left hip.

He can just barely hear Eren's response over the loud music. "I don't know," he says uncertainly. "Do you think it's good?"

Levi's shoulders slump. He's never had such an indecisive client. He pinches the bridge of his nose and says, "Yes."

"Okay, then."
If he were being honest, Levi would have told the kid to go higher so that the quote would start just at the cleft of his ass, because artistically it would make a better line for the eye to follow, but for that he would need to make Eren take his navy blue boxer briefs off and the poor kid is sporting the bulge of half a boner already with Erna's moans and whines coming through the wall directly next to him.

Upon hearing his answer, Levi picks up his machine and starts concentrating on the design and the lyrics of the song that's playing; anything but the slapping sounds coming from the adjacent apartment.

Levi has Eren stay standing. It would be easier if they were at the shop. He could maneuver him into a better position to keep the skin flat. But he works with what he has, gets down on one knee, and uses the splayed fingers of his left hand to keep the smooth, tan skin of Eren's thigh taut as he passes over the infinity anchor first.

Eren flinches and Levi glances up at him with an irritated half-lidded look.

"Sorry," he yelps out.

"Hold the fuck still or you're going to have a shitty tattoo," Levi mutters at him.

"Sorry!" he says again, more earnestly this time.

"Don't be sorry, just don't move," Levi deadpans.

He starts his machine again, and then, just as an experiment, he gives Eren a sharp pinch on his lower thigh with his thumb and pointer finger instead of touching the machine to his skin. The kid jumps and yelps again and Levi shakes his head. "Look, if you can't handle this, I'm not going to keep going. The more you move the worse it's going to come out, and shitty work makes gives me a shitty reputation."

"No," Eren begs, "I can hold still. I'm sorry. Just..." and then, in an unexpected move, he brings his hand to his mouth and bites down on the thumb and sensitive fleshy part between his thumb and palm. Then he nods for Levi to go on.

Levi tilts his head and takes in the wrinkle between Eren's brows as the kid focuses on the pain in his hand instead of the tattoo. His eyes shut tight as he winces and, inexplicably, the expression makes him look hot as fuck. Levi shakes his head at himself and looks back down to the half centimeter of ink he's gotten down on Eren's thigh so far. He reminds himself that this is just work. He thinks the sounds on the other side of the wall are getting to him.

Erna feels a little of her breath leave her as the strong woman looming over her pushes her sternum harder into the desk. The coarseness of her voice when she says, "Tell me how rough you like it," contrasts how gently her fingers are playing over Erna's wet lips, softly prodding at her opening.

With an extra little parting shove, Annie releases the pressure she's applying to Erna's shoulders to reach for the lube on the desk and she tells the smaller girl, "Hold still," as she pushes two fingers just a little roughly inside her.

Erna bites her lip and groans at the harsh treatment and the strange feeling of fingers going inside her for the first time in almost a year. Even though Annie goes slow, it feels invasive to her and slightly uncomfortable. She thinks if she could spread her legs it might feel less awkward, but she can't move them any further with her underwear only pulled down to mid-thigh. Only just as she's starting to get
used to the pressure, Annie takes her hand away and she hears her domme's skirt whisper its descent to the floor. She bites the back of the knuckle of her thumb and her cheeks blush when Annie asks again, "How rough?"

Erna's eyes roll up and a pained, humiliated whine gets strangled in her throat before she takes a deep breath and admits, "Really rough," quickly and clearly, though her voice sounds high-pitched and pitiful and not like her own.

"Yeah?" Annie asks as she coats her palm in lube, then slides it over the head of her strap-on cock. She smirks as the smaller girl bent over her desk cants her hips back and whines like she's dying for it, as Annie takes the strap-on in her hand and slides the head over Erna's lips, finding her opening and teasing it with slight stutters of pressure. "You want it how hard?" She almost laughs as Erna pants and moans and comes undone on the desk under her, squirming and clenching her fingers.

"Really hard?" Erna whines. "Pleas--"

Erna's attempt at begging gets cut off at the beginning when Annie grabs her by both shoulders and pulls her back as she snaps her hips forward hard and impales Erna on her cock, only giving the smaller woman a moment for her scream to die in her throat before pulling back out, almost to the tip, and then pushing forward quickly to bottom out inside her again.

Erna's forearm, along with the edge of the desk under her, hits the wall hard. The resulting bang punctuates her pained wail. Annie's hips still for a second and, given the opportunity to breathe, Erna can only say, "Fuck!"

Evilly, Annie asks, "Too hard?" She splays her left hand across the small of Erna's back and continues to hold the base of the dildo so that she can angle it as best she can to avoid hurting her client too much.

"Color," she demands just before she pulls back, ready to thrust hard again if she gets a dishonest answer.

After a few breathless pants, Erna squeals, "Green."

"Hmm… Yeah? You want me to keep going that hard?" Annie gets ready for another brutal, punishing thrust as she watches Erna tense up.

"Yellow!" Erna backpedals, ashamed of what she sees as an admission of weakness.

"There, was that so hard?" the dominatrix asks smugly as she changes her pace and watches with pleasure as the realistic-looking dildo disappears more slowly. "You should be more careful what you ask for. Don't overestimate yourself."

As he's finishing up the last bit of the quote underneath Eren's tattoo, Levi distinctly remembers Erna getting defensive last week and saying that she and Annie don't have sex.

He remembers that because the very rhythmic banging against his wall and the screams suggest otherwise. From the wooden sound of the noise he can tell that it's a piece of furniture that keeps hitting the wall, and with how close it sounds, he'd have to guess that it's that wooden desk Erna has pushed up against the wall right where his kitchen table would be if there were no wall there at all. For all the good it does at shutting out noise, there may as well not be a wall there anyway.

He has to squeeze his eyes shut for a second and take one long deep breath to try and shut out the
question that comes to the front of his brain: Is she getting fucked sitting on top of the desk, or bent over it taking it from behind? Because that's irrelevant. What's important is that she's being fucking rude. She's a horrible neighbor and next time he sees her she's going to hear about it.

He tries not to rush. Rushing wouldn't be fair to Eren. It wouldn't be his best work. And after biting down on his hand, the kid's been much better at holding the fuck still, even though he's still whimpering every so often and his face hasn't relaxed from its wincing, pained expression. But he is holding still, so there's no excuse to give him a less-than-perfect tattoo, except he really just wants to get this over with and go outside and smoke maybe like three cigarettes.

So despite himself, he does the last bit of text as fast as he can without getting too sloppy. He wipes away the excess ink with a paper towel and sits back on his heels to make a quick appraisal before he calls it finished.

It takes him longer to get focused than usual. His eyes are staring at the line work of the tattoo, but his head is somewhere else. His cock is trying to jump with every thud against the wall accompanied by those delicious high-pitched yelps, whines, and whimpers. He thanks fuck that his jeans are tight as hell or he would be pitching a visible tent like Eren is right now.

At that thought, his eyes tick upward. Poor Eren. Even though the needle's stopped, his eyes are still screwed shut and he looks like he's in immense pain, though now it's probably more from blue balls than from the needle. Levi wants to tell him that it's not the first erection someone's gotten while getting a tattoo. For some reason the body just reacts that way sometimes, and he would tell him that in order to assuage the kid's embarrassment, except he looks fucking cute when he's embarrassed. So Levi keeps his mouth shut and goes back to his final check of the tattoo.

And then he yells, "Shit!"

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"Shit!... Haa—ah! Fuck!.. Me!... Ah!"

After easing up, Erna was able to adjust and give Annie the green light to go harder again and the pro-domme can't deny that she enjoys it much more that way. The harder she fucks Erna, the more vocal she gets and the less self conscious she is about her vocalizations. She seems so far gone, Annie doubts she even knows what she's saying anymore.

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"Motherfucker!" Levi shouts relatively quietly as he closes his eyes in irritation and pinches the bridge of his nose.

"What's wrong?!!" Eren asks a second time, looking down at Levi and quickly getting more and more worried.

Levi stands up and angrily slams his tattoo machine down on the table.

"Fuck me."

"Did I move too much?"

Levi cuts the cute, tan barista off, because he's not about to even let him apologize for his own massive fuck up. "No, you didn't move too much," he says, completely irritated with himself. He points at the finished tattoo on Eren's thigh and says, "Look."
Eren has been looking, but he doesn't see anything wrong. "I like it. What's wrong?"

"Jesus," Levi mutters. "You didn't get good grades in English class, did you?"

Anne didn't know that Erna could get this loud. When they're doing pain play, she's much quieter. Not silent, but not screaming like she is now. When she's being hurt in a scene she usually seems to be trying to concentrate and focus on the pain to get the most out of it. There's none of that focus now in the petite girl writhing and clawing at the desk as she comes completely undone.

As much fun as it is, Annie wonders if she's ever going to come, because she's just starting to break a sweat. She digs her fingers into Erna's hips and pulls her off of the desk so that she's on her feet and more upright. She has to bend her knees a bit to be able to keep fucking the shorter girl, but this way she can reach her clit with her fingers. As she starts rubbing in soft, quick circles, she brushes her lips against Erna's ear and whispers, "Come for me, pet."

"Ah!" Erna yelps at another thrust of Annie's hips, then catches her breath and whines, "I caaan't."

"I think you can," Annie assures her. She's made her come before without any fucking at all. It should be easier now.

Erna struggles to get her head together enough to explain, "No… I mean… Ah! I can't come with…"

Annie realizes that this isn't just the usual begging and whining, so she stills her hips for a second and stops moving until Erna catches her breath.

As she quiets down and pants for air, Erna tells her, "I can't come with penetration… Like, not just that it doesn't make me come, but it makes it impossible."

That's a new one to Annie. She pauses and doesn't say anything, her brows merely knitting together as she thinks on that for a second.

Erna rushes to fill the silence. "I don't need to. It's okay. It still feels good, it's just different."

She feels like she should apologize, but she's not sure what for. Because she paused the scene? Made it awkward? Because she's weird? She doesn't know why she's never been able to come with anything inside her – fingers, toys, whatever. It's like an interrupting switch that makes it impossible for her to get out of her head enough to have an orgasm.

While Erna tries to think of how to save the situation, Annie pulls the strap-on out of her. Erna whimpers at the sudden emptiness, which feels just as uncomfortable as being filled too fast.

"Hush," Annie chides as she goes about undoing the harness and dropping the whole thing onto the desk before picking her skirt up off the chair and pulling it back on.

"You don't have to stop," Erna begs. Her stomach sinks and she starts to feel depressed, thinking that she fucked up in some way.

Suddenly Annie grabs her tightly and spins Erna around to face her.

"Didn't I just tell you to be quiet?" she asks, with a growl.

Annie gives her a gentle shove back against the desk. She puts her hands around Erna's tiny waist and the girl takes the cue and gives a little push off of her toes as Annie lifts her to sit on it.
"Sorry," she says quietly, looking down so that her long black eyelashes shadow her grey eyes.

"I don't want you to apologize," Annie tells her. "I want you to come. Whether you 'need' to or not."

Erna worries her lip with her teeth and wriggles uncomfortably. She feels too self conscious now, too out of the moment.

Annie's hands press down on Erna's thighs as she leans into her, lowering her face to look into her client's downcast eyes.

"Touch yourself for me. Now."

Those grey eyes widen and Erna's skin quickly starts turning a dark shade of pink. Annie can feel the heat of humiliation coming off of her.

Erna regrets everything. She shouldn't have asked Annie to fuck her. She shouldn't have said anything about not being able to come. She feels far too exposed now and she's never been so self conscious.

Asking a client to masturbate in front of her isn't anything new to Annie. It's actually pretty common. But the look on Erna's face tells her she hasn't done this before, and she smiles. She likes pushing people out of their comfort zones. The girl said she liked humiliation on her list of kinks… she thinks she remembers that correctly. So many notes to keep up on…

"Come on," she says impatiently. "If you can't come while I'm fucking you, then I want to see how you can."

Tentatively, Erna reaches between her thighs and her eyelids flutter shut.

"What a good girl," Annie murmurs.

Eren looks hard at his tattoo. He loves it, just like Levi said he would. He doesn't see what the problem is. Maybe because from his viewpoint it's upside down? Is that how he's missing what Levi's seeing?

"It's 'too' with two O's, fuckstick," Levi snarls. Then he hits his palm against his forehead, because why is he getting mad at Eren? If he wants to blame anyone but his damn self, he can blame that witchy little succubus screaming and moaning in the next apartment.

"Oh," Eren hums looking at the quote. "Is it?"

"Yes."

Eren looks at the quote. Both of the 'to's only have one O. He shrugs. "That's okay. I don't care."

Levi almost sputters in rage. "The fuck do you mean you don't care? You should care. I care. That's a bullshit mistake. Who does that?"

Apparently he does.

Levi shakes his head. He's better than this. He's never gotten spelling or grammar wrong on a tattoo… until now.

"But it still looks awesome," Eren says cheerfully.
The fact that Eren is okay with it doesn't make Levi feel better at all. If anything he feels shittier about it. He rubs his hand over the back of his head and thinks about what he should do.

He gets back down on his knees and looks closely. The letters aren't spaced out enough that he could fit in the extra O's without it looking shitty. He sighs, cards his fingers into his hair and says, "Fuck me," again.

At almost exactly the same moment, he hears Erna scream on the other side of the wall, "Fuck! .. Ah!.. Oh my god!" like she's finally reached her climax.

He shakes his head and mutters, "Goddamnit."

Emma takes in the panting, disheveled wreck of a girl in front of her and asks simply, "You okay?"

Strange thing to ask after someone's just had a body-shaking orgasm in front of you, Erna thinks, but she answers quietly, "Yeah," though she's a little unsure. Physically, of course, she's fine. Mentally and emotionally, maybe not so much. She's never been brought to that depth of humiliation by anyone, and she isn't sure how she feels about it.

"Can you stand?"

Erna thinks she can, so she tries. She gets off of the desk and is glad that her legs don't go wobbly, but suddenly standing up makes her conscious of how disgusting she feels. Her inner thighs are all wet and she's sure she looks like a complete mess.

"Good," Annie says. Then she crosses her arms. "Now I'm going to ask you again if you're okay, and this time you're going to answer me honestly."

"I'm…" Erna wants desperately to say that she's fine and have it be true, because she doesn't want to be weak.

Annie's never had anyone so stubbornly refuse aftercare. She's seen people get a little embarrassed about needing it, but they come around pretty quickly as soon as they start to experience sub drop. Not this one.

"Look," she says seriously. "I'm going to stick around for a few minutes." She peels off her gloves, turns around, and tosses them into the trash can in the kitchen only some feet away in the tiny apartment. "I have some notes to take on you anyway and I'd rather do it now while my memory's fresh."

She moves back to Erna who still looks dazed and she smoothes her clothes out for her, straightening her dress back into place somewhat. She looks into her eyes to make sure she's hearing her and she says, "We don't have to call it aftercare. I'm just going to be here if you need anything. Is that okay with you?"

Erna nods slowly.

Annie gently moves her out of the way and grabs a bleach wipe from her briefcase. She proceeds to wipe down the desk so that she can use it to write down a few things for her file on Erna.

Erna stands and watches. Then, as Annie seems to not pay her another thought while she sits down and opens up her manila folder, she slowly begins to feel a little more normal.
She's also quickly becoming more and more aware of the gross feeling between her legs. She makes a face, peels her panties the rest of the way down her legs, and tosses them into the hamper by the bed. Accidentally, she catches a look at herself in the small mirror on the wall, and she frowns.

A litany of self-hate issues come forth toward the reflected image. She thinks she's ugly. She's disgusting. She's depressing and weird and hateful and horrible and broken. She wants to cry.

She finally starts to see the benefit of conventional aftercare.

Her stocking-clad feet pad softly as she crosses the room back to Annie who continues to act like she's not even there until Erna kneels next to the desk chair and rests her head against her domme's thigh. While still writing with her right hand, Annie cards the fingers of her left hand into Erna's hair and starts to pat her head slowly.

At first, Erna's even more ashamed for liking the gentle treatment. She's weak, she thinks. Then, after a minute, strangely, she starts to accept it and accept herself. It starts to feel okay to be a normal fucking person who needs aftercare after an especially intense scene.

After a while, she asks quietly, "What kind of notes?"

Annie is quiet for a moment, making Erna wonder if she's going to answer, but then she finishes the sentence she was writing and says, "That you overestimate your capacity for pain, you may not take humiliation well without care; you're sexually inhibited, possibly self-loathing, et cetera, et cetera," almost as if it's boring and perfectly ordinary.

It stings a little, but Erna has nothing to say to that. If anything, she should just admire Annie's power of perception.

Suddenly, Erna stands up, realizing she has an opportunity for something she hasn't done in a while. She blurts out, "Do you mind if I take a shower?"

Annie doesn't even turn her head. She just waves her hand and says, "Go ahead."

Erna hasn't had a real shower in weeks. She sticks to baths instead, which are adequate, considering she's not the most active person, but they're not the same. She loves showers, but for the longest time she's been too paranoid and too edgy for them. The water is too loud and she can't do anything lately that would inhibit her ability to hear everything around her. Being alert and aware is the only thing that makes her feel safe when she's alone in her apartment.

"You won't leave until I'm out?"

"Of course not," Annie answers dismissively.

The water feels so fucking good Erna could come all over again. She gives herself a scalp massage with her fingers as she works the honey shampoo Deirdra sent her into a lather and she breathes in the steam in deep breaths. She spends at least fifteen minutes exfoliating every inch of skin and using almost every RIPE product she has that isn't a bath bomb, lip gloss, or lotion.

When she finally comes out wrapped in a big, fluffy white towel, Annie has a glass of water for her and asks knowingly, "Feel better?"

Erna hums.

"Same time next week then?"
Erna is about to nod, then she remembers. "You still can't take me on any other days?"

"Oh, that's right," Annie says, remembering the last time Erna begged her to change her schedule. "I'll check again, but it's not likely."

"I can do literally any time on any day. Just not Friday or Saturday anymore."

"We'll see," Annie nods as she takes up her briefcase and heads for the door.

Levi rolls his eyes and mutters to himself, "Now she stops..." after the noises die out, meaning it would have been a lot more convenient for her to finish before he permanently fucked up a tattoo on Eren's thigh because of her fucking screaming. He grabs the remote for the speakers and turns the music off.

He starts to put his things away after covering Eren's thigh in a little bacitracin and a piece of soft cotton gauze. Eren just stands there like he's waiting to be told what to do, so Levi tells him to put his pants back on.

As Eren does, Levi tells him, "You're going to have to come back for a cover-up. The fact that I fucked up might be a blessing in disguise. Now I have to give you a better tattoo for free."

"Sorry," Eren says, even though he shouldn't be apologizing.

Levi tries to soften his tone for the kid. "Don't show that piece of shit to anyone and come back in a month with some better ideas. I'm good at cover-ups. I'll turn that into anything you want."

He turns away from his inks to see Eren just pulling his skinny jeans up over his ass. Then he smirks, because the kid's erection has calmed down a little but not enough for him to be able to comfortably zip them back up.

Fucking adorable hipster nerd.

"Hey, can I use your bathroom for a second?" he asks as if Levi doesn't know exactly what he's thinking.

"No, you can't jerk off in my bathroom," he deadpans.

Eren's mouth drops open and he stutters, "N-no! I wasn't... I swear!"

Levi points at the kitchen table. "You can sit in that chair until I'm finished cleaning up and then you're out of here, hard-on or not."

Eren lets out a long groan as he slumps down into the chair.

After Erna finishes cleaning up her toys she feels weighed down and exhausted. Her internal clock tells her it's time for a latte and a cigarette, but her cunt is sore and her eyelids are heavy.

She breaks routine for the first time in months, pulls her comfy black robe tight around her body, and crawls under the covers of her bed. She falls asleep almost instantly and has vivid dreams about being shamed and punished for various intrinsic shortcomings that Freud would have loved to analyze, and would have troubled anyone else who wasn't an admitted and self-identified masochist.
Levi, on the other hand, shames and punishes himself. He could kick himself for fucking up something that he would have judged someone else so harshly over. Bad grammar on a tattoo is unacceptable and anyone who is dumb enough to get something like that wrong and permanently ink it onto a paying customer is a fucking idiot.

So, according to reasonable logic, he is a fucking idiot. He tells himself this over and over and has no evidence with which he can defend himself against the accusation. The only thing he can do is play the blame game and think that he wouldn't have fucked anything up if it weren't for Erna. He grinds his teeth and tries to tell himself that it's all her fault, except that he isn't that childish or irrational. She had been distressed about his being there this morning. She'd offered to pay his café tab if he stayed away. In her own irascible way, she was almost apologetic about the timing. He'd been a stubborn ass and decided to be inflexible and stay in his apartment whenever he goddamn felt like it. He'd jumped on Eren as an excuse to justify sticking around and making her as uncomfortable as her sexual proclivities made him.

So he was a fucking idiot, and an asshole.

And if he thought about it through a more honest lens, he was acting like a pathetic little boy with a crush on someone unattainable. Something he'd never done before. In fact, he's never "pursued" anyone. He's never bothered to even look that way at anyone who wasn't visibly dying for a taste of him, but he knew the signs from watching other pathetic men make asses of themselves, getting indignant when it started to become clear that the object of their affection would never return the interest, turning into annoying little pigs who pull at ponytails or throw insults.

He thinks that's what he's going to become if he doesn't kick himself in the ass, hard.

He decides to at least try to work. Drawing something terrible in frustration is better than drawing nothing, so he sits down at his drafting table and flips through his sketchbook. He rolls his eyes at himself for the pages and pages of sketches resembling Erna. He tilts his head back and hits his forehead with his palm, closing his eyes and sighing.

He needs to get over it. Nothing more useless than harboring a crush on your lesbian neighbor. But then he thinks, what if she isn't. She could be bi. That could be a thing. He never specifically asked. He just assumed based off of her very obvious and admitted hatred of all things male-identifying… which, now that he thinks about, it is a pretty reliable assumption.

He shakes his head at himself and looks down at a sketch he's already been in the process of inking on someone's shoulder over the course of three appointments. The one where she's little red riding hood. It's his favorite because the eyes are different. There's some vulnerability captured there. It makes him feel hopeless again, because even if, against all reason, she could return his feelings, the one thing she was extremely clear on was that she gets off on being hurt, and he could never find it in him to cause her any pain, not even if it would make her happy.

When he thinks about it… when he isn't fucking pissed at her. All he wants to do is hold her and tell her everything is always going to be okay because he'll make it okay. He wants to make her feel safe. He thinks it would kill him to see her in pain, even if she wanted it. So there's that.

He's fucked himself with that train of thought, because now he can't stop thinking about holding her. Can't stop thinking about how good it would be to feel her and caress every inch of skin under all those skirts and ribbons and lace, and to get her to make those noises that are still ringing through his head.

"Goddamnit," he mutters as his eyes close and his hands automatically go to his pants.
He's not jerking off to one more thought of her. He's decided on that. It feels creepy and violating in a new way now that he knows for sure that she would kill him for it, but he got himself all worked up and he needs to jerk off to something. He tries to pull up past encounters, but they all seem so boring now and so far away. Instead, he pulls up that image of Eren wincing and biting at his lip. That's good enough.

Eren is much more in line with what he would typically go for: enthusiastically willing. It's easy to imagine Eren on his knees, licking Levi's cock eagerly and gratefully like a goddamn puppy. Levi thinks about twisting his fingers in that messy chocolate brown hair, tilting the barista's head back and looking into those big, blue, doe eyes as he stretches his pretty little mouth.

After a few minutes, it becomes clear to him that for some reason, this isn't going to work. The fantasy is hot, it's not that. In his hazy mind, he wonders if something about his technique is off. It might be easier if he was lying down, but he doesn't want to stop, get up, and cross the room to the bed. He leans back in the chair instead… as far back as he can without falling over. But the movement distracts him from his fantasy and it's hard to get back to it.

His eyes snap open and despite himself, he uses his free hand to flip the pages of his sketchbook to a quick sketch he did a week or two ago. The one where he decided to be a self-indulgent twit and draw Erna and her perfect ass in that thong he'd spotted when he pulled her laundry out of the dryer. It's a saving grace that he's close enough, he doesn't need to fantasize about anything specific. Just looking at that image brings him to the edge.

He ignores the creaking of the chair as he grips his cock harder.

If his eyes didn't close he might have noticed the upset in his balance. As it is, any falling feeling gets attributed to the impending intensity of the orgasm he's about to have.

That is, until he realizes that he is actually fucking falling backwards.

Levi rolls to his side on the floor and groans. From the pain, he's pretty sure the way he fell on the back of the stool bruised one of his kidneys. He kicks the broken chair away in frustration. Drafting stools were definitely not made to be leaned back in.

While Erna sleeps, Levi curses and cleans and swears he's never going to masturbate again.

It's late afternoon when Erna finally starts to come out of her drowsy subspace, and the need for things like food and nicotine and caffeine start to nag at her.

She has to look out the window to try and judge the time, but it's becoming dusk, and she can't tell if it's before or past cafe hours. She'd hate to miss two lattes in one day. Having missed one is bad enough. Missing her late afternoon latte will give her a splitting headache, so she dresses herself with less care and attention to detail than usual. She barely gets to smooth out her hair. She rushes, afraid that she'll miss her chance.

She does get to the café in time. Then she's made to feel self-conscious by Bambi who blushes now when he sees her and gives her the most awkward service ever. She lashes out after she gets her latte safely in her hands, no latte art this time, and shouts at him, "What?!!"

She gets a stuttered response that amounts to, "Nothing…"

She wants to tell him that no amount of blushing and stuttering he can throw at her is going to make
She's equal parts relieved and regretful when Levi isn't out on the stoop when she walks back. She's relieved that she won't have to talk to him yet, but worry gnaws at her. She's afraid that he might not have come down because he's angry at her, as he has a right to be.

She would be pissed if she were him. Any other time, she would welcome a screaming match, just for fun, but this time she genuinely feels bad about her behavior, and that takes all the fun out of a good fight.

So, with her tail tucked between her legs, she goes inside and climbs the many stairs it takes to get up to the roof. This way she can drink her latte, smoke her cigarette, and avoid finding out whether Levi is pissed at her or not until maybe tomorrow morning when there is a better chance he will have cooled off.

Ten minutes later, she nearly jumps out of her boots when she hears the fire door behind her slam. She spins around and her fingers turn to fists in mock anger.

She tells Levi, "You're not allowed to come up here to avoid me while I'm already up here avoiding you."

The low sun glints off of one of his snakebite piercings as he smirks at her. He lets the door slam shut behind him and reaches around the corner. He grabs a chair and holds it up, "You forgot to block the door."

She did forget. He's always the one to barricade the door and she's never been up here without him. She wonders, as he walks over and stands next to her at the edge of the roof, if he ever comes up here without her, or if he came to the roof to avoid her same as she was avoiding him. Instead of asking, she runs with her worst assumption, which has always been a defense mechanism against disappointment, and she says, "Why were you avoiding me?"

And he echoes back, "Why were you avoiding me?"

Erna sighs deeply and ashes her cigarette over the edge of the rooftop. She decides to be honest.

"Because I thought you might be angry."

She steels herself for a tirade of vitriol about how inconsiderate she is or something, but all she gets is a grunt from Levi as he takes out a cigarette and lights it. She prods him, "Now you."

"Why was I avoiding you?" He repeats as if he forgot the question. "Oh. That?" He says sarcastically, then he raises his voice louder. "I was avoiding you because I just heard you getting fucked very loudly against my wall!"

She crosses her arms. "Well, it's my wall too."

Levi gets animated and gestures with his cigarette, "Why couldn't you get fucked against the other wall? The Krista & Ymir wall? Their place is renovated, they have thicker walls."

Instead of saying that she's sorry like she should, she says, "You would have heard it either way. That's why I asked you to fuck off for a while. There's nothing I could do that would be quiet enough that you wouldn't hear it."
Instead of saying that he's sorry, because he knows he should have listened to her, he asks her, "Are you always that loud or were you just doing that to be an asshole?"

"Yeah, Levi, because I was totally thinking about you while I was getting fucked. In fact, I always do. I come every night thinking of new ways to piss you off and make your life more difficult. The only way I can achieve climax is if I'm making you miserable." She almost blushes, because even though she is being heavily sarcastic, there's a small amount of truth in it. There have been times that she's thought about him, though it kills her with how wrong it feels. She doesn't fantasize about anything specific. That would make it so much worse. But usually after a good argument with him, especially if she's able to get him close to losing his temper, she goes upstairs and can get herself off to how good it felt to get that reaction out of him. There's something she likes about the way he looks when he's angry, which makes her feel fraught with conflict, because as a sapiosexual she isn't supposed to be attracted to looks.

"Fucking worked," he mumbles around his cigarette before he takes it between his fingers. "Made me fuck up the kid's tattoo."

"Oh what's the difference? You're fucking up perfectly good skin either way."

"That's like saying that a painter is fucking up the canvas they paint on."

She shrugs at that. "I like a blank canvas just fine."

He rolls his eyes and tells her, "You're a waste of good skin."

Erna's stomach does a flip because underneath the insult he said that she has good skin. And then they're both quiet for a few moments. She soaks up the compliment and Levi thinks about all the things he'd draw on her smooth, unblemished, paper-white skin.

"How did you fuck it up?" she finally asks.

From her peripheral vision she sees him wince, and as he cards his hand through his hair, pushing it back from his face, she feels a strange flutter in her heart like a rush of adrenaline or butterflies.

"I fucked up the grammar in a quote."

"Oh, well, that's unforgivable," she scolds. "Did you misplace a comma? Because if you did, we can't be friends anymore."

"Worse," he smirks. "I used the wrong 'to'... twice."

Erna gasps and covers her mouth as if he just admitted to killing several puppies, then she laughs when he shoots her a look that says, 'shut the fuck up'.

"I'm flattered to have been so distracting," Erna says demurely, tilting her chin up and letting smoke curl out over her lips.

"Aren't there gags in bondage?" Levi asks desperately, "Isn't that a thing?"

Erna leans over to stub her cigarette out against the cement and she says, "First of all, I don't do bondage. I'm a masochist who hates being tied up. So if you have to refer to it as anything it's more politically correct to use the umbrella acronym BDSM."

"Yeah, I'm extremely concerned about being politically correct about this," Levi deadpans.
She ignores him. "And second of all, yes, but I used a ball gag last week and you heard anyway, so I don't see the point."

"I'll go to the café next time," he mutters.

"Yeah? Like I told you to in the first place? I was trying to do you a favor, you know."

"I see that now," he concedes. Then he puts out his cigarette and lights another one because he's been craving it all day while he was staying indoors and distracting himself with cleaning and avoiding going out for a smoke break.

"You made Eren get a hard-on while I was tattooing him," he says, looking at the horizon as the sun starts to set.

Erna laughs through her nose at the image, then she says, "I'd be terribly disgusted if I thought that were true, but I've seen the way Bambi looks at you with those big puppy eyes. If he got hard, it wasn't because of me."

She laughs louder as the realization hits Levi and he covers his face with his palm.

"You should have hit that," she teases him.

"Ugh," Levi groans, "I could have."

"Would you have?" she asks. "If you didn't like quit sex because you're an addict or whatever?"

"Of course," he says without a thought, because that's the thing about being a sex addict.

And at that Erna's a little disappointed, but she hides it with her dry humor. "Well, if you ever change your mind, you have my permission to fuck him against the wall."

"Good," he says, narrowing his brows, following with deadpan sarcasm, "Thanks."

She bends down quickly, her skirt puffing up a little against the air, and she picks her coffin purse up off of the ground. Levi watches the motion closely as she unlatches it, opens the box, takes the lighter out of her pocket. He focuses on the way her lips move to take the cigarette.

He has this bad habit of watching her light up. It's a bad habit because of what he thinks about when her cheeks suck in as she takes that first drag. She never notices, though. She's always looking off in the distance, keeping him next to her instead of across, always avoiding eye contact when she speaks with someone. She makes it look like she's being aloof. She takes a symptom of a lack of confidence and makes it look like she's too good for everyone.

Maybe she's tricked him, because he would agree that she is too good for everyone. Definitely too good for him. He resolves that he is going to get over the uncharacteristic romantic feelings he feels towards her and be a better friend.

Erna would never guess at any of those thoughts. In her mind, Levi is the morally perfect opposite of everything she normally hates about men. It's not a conclusion she came to lightly. She's been picking him apart for months and can't find a trace of misogyny or entitlement in him. It's almost depressing to have found something that could make a chink in her carefully constructed armor of misogyny. You think you have the world figured out, and then someone ruins everything you were so sure was true.

They're quiet for a while, just listening to traffic noise from the ground four stories down.
Chapter End Notes

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Or Whatever

Chapter Notes

I started working on this chapter like a month or two ago and suddenly my laptop fucking died for no good reason. I didn't have anything backed up, so I lost the entire beginning of this chapter. I said "Fuck it" and kept writing on a combination of my phone and actual pen and paper, which meant that when I finally got a new laptop and went to transcribe everything it was a disorganized mess of chapter pieces that were literally all over the place. Meanwhile, the beginning was still lost forever. I thought about writing the beginning over again, but… well… I don't know if you've ever spent time and effort on a thing and then lost it, but it really kills your drive to recreate it. So instead, I'm going to give you a summary of what happened in my very un-literary way with stilted dialogue and much use of the word "like". Here we go: Erna wakes up in the morning from a sex dream about Levi, which for her isn't really a literal sex dream, but more a masochistic "please punish me, Sir" kind of dream, of course. Oh, btw this chapter is very heavy on Erna perving on Levi and having no chill about it. Erna has an orgasm in her dream, and then another one because she wakes up still horny about it and masturbates before getting out of bed. I decided this poor girl needs to have like a million orgasms in one day. Anyway, starting her day that way puts her out of sorts and she's cranky and flustered and pissed at herself for dreaming about him and pissed at Levi for being crazy hot, like how dare. When she comes down to smoke her morning cigarette after getting up, Levi gives her the burner phone she asked for forever ago and instead of being like "Hey thanks buddy," she's more like "Whatever, I guess," because she can barely look at him and probably she's blushing a lot. So he is like "Rude. Wtf is your problem?" and she basically tells him that she's annoyed with him for being in her dream. He can immediately conclude that it was a sex dream, because… well, just because… the whole not being able to make eye contact and blushing to the tips of her ears probably gives it away. So he teases her about it, a lot. She denies it up and down. Then he offers to make her breakfast because that's the only polite thing to do after you've spent the night with someone. She tells him to fuck off probably, and demands that he go to the cafe to get her a latte and a croissant. So yeah. That's where we are. (Feel bad for my beta, Lucifae, because this is exactly how I write to her when I'm brainstorming. You're lucky I use adjectives and shit when I get to actually writing.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Levi walks into the cafe feeling much more smug and self-satisfied than ever, which almost makes him forget about the shame over the day before, that is until he walks up to the counter and is faced with his tan, big-eyed reminder pulling down the handle of an espresso machine.

"How you healin' up?" he asks the young barista before he catches his attention.

Eren nods happily as he fills a paper cup with a double shot of espresso and says, "I think I'm good. Nothing like Jean's flesh-eating bacteria tattoo."

Levi glares dangerously and says, "It's not going to get infected like that. My place is clean and I know what I'm doing."
Poor Eren nearly spills coffee on himself trying to get back in Levi's good graces at light speed. "Oh, I didn't mean to sound li-

"I know."

Levi rubs the bridge of his nose, face pinched in a short-lived grimace. He still gets very defensive about his work. He isn't that secure in it yet, though he'd never let anyone know it.

"Just follow your aftercare instructions. The faster it heals, the faster I can cover it up."

He shakes his head. He still feels extremely embarrassed about getting the grammar wrong in a tattoo even if he was under extenuating circumstances.

"I will!" Eren enthusiastically agrees. He's finished swirling steamed milk into the coffee he just poured and he sets the cardboard cup on the counter. He grabs a new one and asks Levi what he wants.

"Tea."

Eren makes a slight annoyingly disappointed huffing sound and says, "You and Erna never try anything new."

It takes him a moment to get Levi's tea. Meanwhile, Armin sweeps in from the kitchen in back. He quickly starts moving cronuts from a tray to the pastry case. Without looking over, he asks Levi, "Are you getting a croissant for Erna?"

Levi's brow crinkles at the androgynous blond's assumption. "How did you know?"

"Because you're here and she isn't."

Levi tilts his head and prompts Armin to explain.

"When only one of you is here you're always picking up for the other one. And she always gets either a croissant or a lemon square for breakfast. So I had a fifty-fifty chance of being right.""

Meanwhile, Eren uses the tip of his finger to push the latte he'd just made when Levi first walked in and says, "That's for her, by the way."

Levi mutters, "Fucking brats," as he grabs the croissant and latte along with his tea.

Erna makes a point of not looking at Levi when he comes back. She turns her nose up at him and twists her head the other way petulantly. He smirks, setting the paper bag with the croissant next to her.

"Here," he says, extending the latte to her, "because I'm a gentleman."

That snaps her head back around. "Oh fuck you. I didn't have a nightmare about riding your mostly metallic little fuckstick." She wiggles her pinky finger at him before taking the coffee for visual effect.

He smirks at her choice of words. "Then what did happen?" He asks with a slight teasing sing-song only barely disrupting his deadpan monotone.

"Nothing," she says as she crosses her arms over her chest after snatching her latte from his hand.

He knows it's something, because the blood is rushing to her face and turning her cheeks an apple blossom pink. He leans over her and asks in a low voice, "What are you so upset about then?"
"You were just being a complete prick and it seemed very realistic."

He decides to drop it, because even though he's pretty sure his first guess was right and it's fun pushing her buttons, pretty soon it isn't going to be cute anymore, so he completely switches gears.

"Want to get some work done at the cafe?"

Erna shrugs nonchalantly.

"Yeah. Let me go get my shit."

They both get up. Levi goes up to his apartment to retrieve his sketchbook from his drafting table. Once faced with it, his eyes latch onto the broken stool from yesterday and he groans at himself. He can't even get masturbation right. He feels pathetic all over again.

He goes to the cafe without waiting for her and grabs an outdoor table. She joins him a few minutes later with her coffee and a stack of paper. Before she sets her things down, she tilts her head at him quizzically as he draws. After a few seconds, she asks, "Do you get paid to work on your days off?"

He tells her that he doesn't, and she asks, "Then why do you do it?"

"Lots of reasons."

"You could never get me to work for free." She sits down across from him.

He keeps drawing, paying attention to his shading instead of her. "Because you hate your job."

She sighs. "I really do."

"Why don't you get a different job?"

"Yeah?" she says bitterly. "Like what? Know of anything for a paranoid agoraphobe who won't leave her apartment?"

He doesn't, so he drops it and continues sketching out the shitty tattoo he did for Eren yesterday so that he can draw a cover up for it.

Erna turns away and sighs at herself. She shouldn't complain about her job. She's lucky to have one at all. Overall, she's lucky that she was able to escape her situation without losing her independence. If she hadn't been able to find an apartment and a job, the next best option would have been living with Deirdra on her farm in Oregon. Her sister had offered and insisted before helping her move, but Erna refused adamantly, preferring even a dingy, roach-infested building over dependence on someone else's generosity.

She lets her eyes wander and gets distracted by the wind picking up leaves and swirling them around in mini-cyclones. Normally she would be happy to get lost in her work like Levi is doing, but the new manuscript she's working on is completely abhorrent to her. It's worse than any of the vampire fiction she's had to read in the past few months. There aren't any supernatural creatures or even any smut vocabulary words that squick her out like "pussy", but still the content is creepy as fuck to her. The whole plot romanticizes emotional and sometimes physical abuse that the handsome Italian ex-pat husband is inflicting on his boring as fuck Mary-Sue wife. At first Erna thought that the husband was going to be the antagonist and that the wife would naturally be introduced to a love interest outside her shitty, abusive marriage, but nope. Further reading made it quite evident that the author intends for it to be sexy when the crazy, controlling husband corners his wife while she's throwing a
tantrum about their loveless marriage and instead of, say, divorcing her, he proceeds to seduce her and somehow makes her come from some repetitive thrusting that seems to last maybe ten minutes at most, but it's supposed to be super fucking passionate and primal or what the fuck ever. The author's first name is Katrina, but Erna knows it must be a pseudonym for a dude… or it really is written by a woman who's never had an orgasm in her life.

She looks down at the red mark on the page that denotes where she left off reading. It's the only red mark she's made so far. Despite the author having gross, backwards ideas about sex and romance, they have a perfect grasp of language and grammar. Erna left off at a part where the wife is telling her husband that she doesn't love him and doesn't want him to touch her anymore, but then she gets excited about the idea of him ignoring the ultimatum and raping her, because he's supposed to be hot enough that rape seems totally cool and not disgusting and tragic at all. Erna's eyes roll so far up that for a moment she can only see black.

She keeps reading and gets more and more annoyed that something so dumb could have been written by someone who knows how to use semicolons and never trips over a run-on sentence. Additionally, she's been prolonging her suffering with this novel because the lack of errors and her disgust with the author's plot have made her vindictive and she pores over every paragraph, looking for mistakes that aren't there. Despite starting on it the day before, she's only on page fifty, which is a snail's pace for her..

Finally, she thinks she's found something, but she isn't quite sure. She taps her fingers next to the word in question for a second before lifting her head and asking Levi for his phone.

He looks up from his drawing and asks, naturally suspicious, "What for?"

"I need to look up a word."

"What?"

He holds back a laugh and shrugs. "I thought you were a master of the English language and your brain was more reliable than any dictionary."

"Did I say that?"

"A couple times, yeah," he reminds her smugly. Nonetheless, he reaches into his back pocket and takes out his phone.

She snatches it out of his hand as soon as he unlocks it and snaps, "I just need to check that I'm right."

He smirks at her and leans back, folding his hands behind his head and watches her eyebrows knit together while she taps at his phone. After a couple seconds she wrinkles her nose and huffs angrily, dropping the phone back to the table like it insulted her. She crosses her arms and mutters something to herself. Levi takes the phone back and looks at the screen.

He sees the word that she looked up and smirks. "You didn't know that one?"

She makes a disgusted noise. "Ugh. Kind of? No? I guess not." She pouts and mumbles, "I thought there was an 'i' in it."

He doesn't rub in the fact that he knew a word that the woman with a doctorate in English Literature didn't, except to say, "You're thinking of 'fission,' but that has a completely different meaning from
Erna groans miserably and hides her head in her hands, because Levi correcting her spelling turns her on in ways that aren't fair. There's nothing hotter to her sapiosexuality than someone who is smarter than her, even if it's only in this one instance.

"I give up," she moans, and sprawls her arms over the table, resting her chin on it. She looks up at him with big, grey eyes and says mournfully, "I'm done. Draw me a picture or something."

"Like what?" he asks, instead of telling her to fuck off while he's working. The pouting is cute and she's never asked him to draw something for her or even taken a passing interest in his art, not even to steal a glance at his sketches.

"Make a pretty headstone for me."

"Did being wrong for once kill you?"

"Yes."

Levi looks at her a little longer. She lies there sprawled over the table, perfectly still like she's really dead. Her black curls cover most of her face and he gets a sudden urge to push them out of the way. He shakes his head and instead looks down. He starts sketching out an elaborate headstone with grieving angels adorned with white lilies. He gets so absorbed in his drawing that he doesn't notice when she blows a curl away from her eyes and then visibly stiffens and sits up, exhaling a hostile little sigh. When he finally senses someone approaching the table, she's already glaring with her dark, narrowed eyes.

He says, "Hey," like always. Erna grumbles "What are you doing here?" as Erwin comes to loom over them with his quietly imposing figure.

"Same as always," he answers Erna with a charming smile. Then he turns to Levi and says, "I thought you would be about to leave for work."

Levi gets defensive at the concerned tone Erwin uses and says curtly, "My hours got changed. Was I supposed to tell you?"

"Don't get snippy with your boyfriend," Erna sarcastically admonishes him.

They both ignore her. Erwin smiles and says, "I just try not to bother you on your days off in case you have plans. Do you have time now?"

Levi rolls his eyes as if he has a choice. Erwin is the most polite motherfucker to ever become a parole officer. He puts his pen down on his sketchbook and stands up.

Erna watches them walk back to the building together and pouts about being left alone. Her eyes drop to the manuscript she's supposed to be working on for only a second before willfully skipping over it to Levi's abandoned sketchbook. She lightly grips a corner of it in her fingertips and spins it around to face her.

As they walk to his apartment, Levi says to Erwin, "So Mike didn't tell you that he changed my hours?"

"No. We don't talk as much as we used to lately. I've been busier and I think he's becoming more of a homebody in his old age," he says with a playful smile.
"Nanaba might have something to do with that," Levi deadpans. He's glad they didn't talk about it. He isn't proud of the reason Mike changed his work hours, and he doubt Erwin would be very approving of it either, not that he thinks he actually violated any of the conditions of his parole by tattooing an elaborate Star of David on a white supremacist douchenozzle.

"Speaking of homebodies," Erwin says casually as they walk up the stairs, "you spend your days off here, with Erna?"

Levi doesn't like what he's implying. What if he does? It just means he's being slightly less antisocial while he stays at home and works, which is all he ever did before she moved in anyway. Besides, she's just always around. They enjoy the same stuff, (i.e. smoking and working) and that puts them in each other's company a lot, which doesn't mean what Erwin (and increasingly everyone around him) is implying.

"We're friends."

"I never said that you weren't," Erwin replies as he enters Levi's apartment. He sets his briefcase down and says slyly, "You two seem to get along very well."

"Stop trying to be subtle, old man."

Erwin laughs. "Okay. You're right."

Levi glares at him.

Erwin only smiles bigger. "What? Is it wrong to think you two would be happier together?"

Levi deadpans, "She's a lesbian," even though he isn't completely sure of that. He just wants to burst Erwin's bubble.

Instead of admitting defeat, Erwin crinkles his brow and tilts his head at Levi. "What makes you think that?"

Levi hesitates about the ethics of telling Erwin private details he knows about Erna, but he shrugs off his concerns thinking that if anyone could be trusted to be discreet it would be Erwin. So he says very frankly, "Because she pays a woman to come over once a week to beat her or fuck her or whatever."

Levi expects to get one of those rare shocked looks out of Erwin, but instead the big fucker laughs. Levi crosses his arms and wonders if he can legally kick Erwin out of his apartment, because it's not fucking funny, but then the blond man recovers and says, "That just makes her a practitioner of BDSM, which often has little to do with sexual orientation."

That makes no sense to Levi. "How?" he asks. "Isn't it just another word for kinky sex?"

"Not really," Erwin says nonchalantly. "It's much more complicated than that."

Instead of inquiring further about all of the complications and correcting his apparently wrong assumptions, Levi asks shrewdly, "How do you know?"

Erwin shrugs. For professionalism, he should keep tight-lipped about his hobby, but he's torn. On one hand, it's inappropriate. On another hand, Levi's parole is going to be over soon and Erwin is worried about him. His job is to help Levi assimilate and he feels like his client has always only been going through the motions. He has all the responsibilities of a normal life in society, like a job and bills to pay, but he's completely lacking in meaningful social connections. For a long time Erwin has
been worried about the superficial nature of Levi's relationships with other people. Humans are social animals. They need deep connections with others. Without them they fall easily into depression, which Erwin is sure would lead straight to Levi falling back into old, bad habits. So, to his mind, it's in his professional interest to do whatever he can to nudge his client in the direction of a fulfilling romantic relationship with the woman he's obviously interested in. If he has to reveal a little too much on a personal level to help that along, he doesn't particularly mind. So after shrugging his shoulders, he tries to sound casual as he says, "BDSM and educating others about it is a hobby of mine."

He consciously omits the small detail about having met Erna years ago at a BDSM club they both frequented, and he will definitely never mention that he gave her the idea to hire a pro-domme for play until she could find a way to trust men to top her.

After a long pause in which he is searching his parole officer's stoic face, Levi finally says, "Are you fucking with me?"

Erwin laughs again. "Is it that unbelievable?"

"Yeah. It is." Levi thinks back to the many references Erna has made to Erwin looking like the clean-cut spokesmodel for a variety of incredibly boring and wholesome things. It is extremely hard to picture him in a BDSM scene in any way. Immediately Levi is wondering what kind of role Erwin plays and just as quickly he's wishing he could tell Erna about this, because she would love it and Levi would have no end of entertainment watching her eat Erwin alive about it.

Erwin shrugs his broad shoulders again. "Well, if you ever have any questions and you don't feel comfortable asking Erna for whatever reason…" and he trails off.

Levi doesn't even know where he would begin with questions. At the moment he's still dealing with feeling pretty fucking shocked. They both then go about the usual business of one of Erwin's visits in somewhat awkward silence until, while he's peeing in a plastic cup for another drug test, Levi shouts from the bathroom, "So do you get off on getting the shit beat out of you too?"

Erwin is unbothered by the provocative question. He simply answers back loudly enough, "No, I'm more on the dominant end of the spectrum… and I rarely beat anyone…” without pausing in his survey of Levi's apartment.

When he leaves, Erwin reminds Levi again that he can call or text him anytime… about anything. Levi stuffs his hands in his pockets and grunts a farewell as the parole officer gets in his car. Levi feels like he's literally going to need to bite his tongue as he walks back to the cafe to keep himself from telling Erna about what Erwin just told him.

Erna carefully flips another page of Levi's sketchbook while she waits for him to finish with Erwin. She's never gotten a look at Levi's work before. She's always too busy with her own work to peek over his shoulder and she's never asked him to show her, because that would be an admission of interest which would ruin her aloof veneer. So aside from seeing his tattoos, which she will only begrudgingly admit to herself are fascinating to her, this is the first time she's really getting a look at his art… and she kind of loves it.

She knows that she doesn't know a thing about art, but she knows what she likes, and she thinks she has pretty good taste in most things except maybe food and coffee which she is indiscriminate about.

Levi seems to have a few different styles that he draws. Some things are thickly outlined while being delicately shaded like 1930's art deco. Other drawings are hyper-realistic and almost photographic. She especially likes the landscapes and nature drawings that he draws in a pen and ink style that is reminiscent of old field guides or children's book illustrations from the 19th century.
She feels warm and gets a charge out of looking at the sketchbook, the same way she used to get whenever she had a well-worn, heavily used book in her hands. It feels personal and intimate without any of the drawbacks of actually having to be close to a person. She likes looking at the seemingly random assortments of small sketches on each page the same way she used to like looking at the handwritten notes in the margins of a paperback that someone owned before her.

She tries to infer which sketches were specifically done for clients and which ones were just Levi drawing for the sake of it. Her favorite drawings are the ones that were obviously drawn for no reason in particular than to keep drawing, like tiny delicate wildflowers along the edge of the binding, or a small pair of eyes tucked into the corner of a page.

She's dwelling on the deep purple color at the center of a little violet at the bottom left corner of a page that's mostly taken up with a thickly outlined flaming skull that was obviously commissioned by a client when suddenly the book gets ripped from her hands.

She looks up at Levi only slightly apologetically. "Sorry, was that rude? I wasn't sure about etiquette surrounding sketchbooks.'

But quickly she realizes that Levi doesn't look angry. Instead he has a worried, almost panicky look. His eyes move from the page back to her and he asks in disbelief, "You're not pissed?"

"About what?" She assumes he means about him leaving her alone while he left with Erwin, and she's mildly offended. He should know that she can entertain herself. She's not dependent on him or anything.

Levi puts the sketchbook back down on the table and points at a little drawing in the opposite corner of the page. It's a pretty, half-naked girl in a sort of pin-up girl pose, on her knees with her back to the viewer, turning to look over her shoulder with a wry smile.

Erna still doesn't get it. "Why would I be pissed?" Half-naked chicks aren't her thing, but it's not like she's easily offended.

Levi's brows knit together, making a wrinkle in the middle of his forehead that makes him look truly perplexed. "You don't think that looks like you?"

She looks again. "No. My waist isn't that small and my jaw is more square..." she narrows her eyes and scrutinizes the sketch carefully. "... and my thighs are bigger." She could go on. She thinks her eyelashes aren't that long and her whole face is more awkwardly shaped and less feminine. Overall it is too pretty. That isn't how she sees herself.

Levi is almost offended, because the drawing he's pointing at wasn't even accidental like some of the other times he's drawn her, it is a very purposeful rendering he decided to draw of her and may have kind of masturbated to the day before. Not that it's important, but she's basically saying that he drew her inaccurately, which in a way is insulting to his artistic ability. So, impulsively he argues, "That looks exactly like you," even as he realizes how stupid he's being because the last thing he should be doing is trying to convince her that he's so obsessed with her that he draws her in is down time.

Erna glances again, barely even bothering to look closely before saying, "I don't see it."

Levi gets annoyed beyond reason and quickly picks the book back up and flips to another page, then sets it down in front of her and jabs at it with his finger. "What about that one?"

Erna looks at the beautiful, realistic portrait of a woman with high cheekbones and cupid's bow lips. She shakes her head. "It's pretty, but no."
She doesn't understand why he seems so frustrated when he nearly shouts at her, "Then what do you think you look like?"

She shrugs carelessly. "I'm not pretty like that."

She tilts her head at him, because he looks angry, but she can't figure what she's done to make him so. If she could figure it out, she would do it more often because she likes that look on him. She likes the abruptness of his movements when he picks up the sketchbook and kicks the other chair out to sit across from her. He takes his pen off the table and starts sketching furiously. She watches him quizzically while sipping her latte.

After a minute or a minute and a half, he puts the sketch down in front of her and stabs at it with his pen, saying, "There. That's you. That's what you look like." as if they're having an argument that she wasn't even aware of.

Erna looks closer this time. She can see that the woman in the sketch has her hair, but that's about it. She doesn't see any of the flaws in it that she sees when she looks at her reflection, so it doesn't resemble what she knows about her face at all. The face on the paper has a translucent, waifish, beautifully sad look with almond eyes, long, thick lashes, and pouty lips. It doesn't have any of her awkwardness or ugliness, so she quirks the side of her mouth skeptically and says, "Nope."

"Jesus christ," he mutters to himself as he takes the book back and shakes his head. "It's like you don't own a mirror."

She shrugs and says, "Maybe you're not as good an artist as I thought," with an evil twinkle in her eye.

He mumbles into his sketchbook as he flips the page back to what he was working on before he left. "I'm a great artist and you're in denial."

She smirks at him behind her latte.

They don't say any more about it. Erna gets back to work on her depressingly bad novel and Levi works on a few different choices for cover-ups of Eren's grammatically incorrect tattoo.

A little later, Levi gets a text from Hanji. When he looks away from his drawing to look at it, he catches Erna staring at his sketchbook absentmindedly.

"Eyes on your own work," he teases sternly.

She startles a little and whines at being caught. "But my work is so boring and stupid and socially problematic."

Levi ignores her and checks his phone. Erna, disappointed, gets back to her editing.

Hanji: soooo boooooored…

Levi: Work isn't busy?

Hanji: not even any walk ins. everyone is staying in because of the storm.

Hanji keeps texting him, but Levi ignores the notifications and checks the weather instead. It looks like all the wind and humidity in the air is actually the preamble to what's going to be a lot of rain and wind. He cringes because if it's still raining tomorrow he'll have to take the bus to work instead of his bike, which he hates doing. He goes back to his messages and there are already seven short texts
from Hanji jumping to other topics now that they have his attention, mostly about the tattoo convention next month and nagging him to go with them. Even as he's scrolling down he keeps getting new texts that are short pleas of "Come on." and "Go with me. I'll be bored without you." and "It'll be fun!"

He still isn't sure about that. He already talked about it with Mike who wants him to go in his place this year. He didn't commit one way or the other. He knows he probably should go. He'd get paid the same as if he went to work, but with the added bonus of 100% pay on any tattoos he did instead of the smaller percentage he takes when he works at the shop. It would be good advertising and Mike would comp all of his and Hanji's travel expenses. He can't think of a good reason to not go.

He looks back up at Erna who is slumped in her chair, looking more sour than usual as she stares at the papers in her hand and waves her red pen back and forth slowly and apathetically.

"You look like your dog just died," he teases.

"This novel is depressing."

"I couldn't tell if you were even reading it."

"I kind of have to."

"Yeah, but usually you reading is more… I don't know. You do a lot of crossing out and stab the paper with your pen a few times every page."

She sighs. "There's just nothing wrong with this one… Not grammatically anyway."

"Isn't that a good thing?"

She groans mournfully and then whines, "I don't know. I guess. But the content is so cringe. It's like lifestyle porn for women who think that emotional abuse is sexy? Or that being completely dependent on someone who controls your every move is romantic? It's like it's written to appeal to women who enjoy being victims. It's gross. I don't get it. It makes me sad for humanity."

Levi smirks at how dramatic she's being. He's never seen her feel so much about anything.

"What's lifestyle porn?"

Without looking up from her scanning of the manuscript she answers, "It's stories about how great it is to be rich and powerful. Usually there's a helicopter ride at some point. All of this abuse takes place in a mansion and there are expensive cars and shit."

"What's wrong with that?"

"It's always done unrealistically, because being rich is actually fucking boring. If the characters actually had that much money they wouldn't be worth reading about because they'd be fucking dead inside," she says bitterly.

"Like you," he teases.

"Like me," she readily agrees.

Levi frowns because she sounds sad and far away, and he thinks he went too far. Usually she matches sarcasm with sarcasm, but this times she doesn't seem to have taken it as a joke.

"Hey. I was kidding."
Her shoulders slump and she drops the manuscript onto the table. "Oh, I know," she whines. "It's just so depressing. I can't even read it anymore. I hate this job."

Levi tries not to smirk, because it's inappropriate, but she's cute when she's being so dramatically morose.

"What did you do before, again?"

"Fancy secretary for the biggest publisher in the country," she says dismissively.

He forgot about that. It seems even stranger now than the first time she told him. He wonders what that must have looked like, because he's never seen her wear clothes that would be appropriate for an office job. At best, with the way she dresses, he could picture her as a cashier at a Hot Topic, or maybe a server at a Japanese maid cafe. He tries to use his imagination to picture her in a pencil skirt and black pumps or something, but it doesn't seem possible. Besides, he likes the maid idea better. Before he can get too deep into a daydream about it, Erna breaks his train of thought.

"And what did you do before?"

He narrows his eyes at her. "Before what?" he says impatiently.

She hums as she thinks about how she'll phrase it. "I don't know. Did you have many jobs between this one, starving art student, and punky drug dealer?"

He doesn't appreciate her tone, so he answers sarcastically, "Nothing more interesting than whatever you did in between rich girl shit like ballet, riding ponies, and spending mommy and daddy's money."

See? He can remember shit too.

He stares dead at her as her nostrils flare and the corners of her eyes wrinkle with enmity. He can tell she wants to rip him a new neck hole, so he braces himself, but suddenly her expression changes to calmness and her shoulders relax as she says, "Fair."

He wasn't expecting that, but he counts himself lucky and doesn't question it. He looks down at his sketch again and gets back to work. He wants to finish as much as he can before the storm comes and chases them inside.

In her head, Erna nurses her wound and decides that she'll give Levi thirty minutes of uninterrupted work time as a reward, because secretly she loves when he lands a good insult on her. To her it shows intelligence and pushes some sapiosexual and masochistic buttons at the same time, so she plays power exchange games in her head. He doesn't notice, but every time he says something witty and insulting, she does something she knows he wants that at the same time feels like a punishment for her - like leaving him alone while he's working, or making eye contact while talking to him, or volunteering to get tea and coffee from the blue-green-eyed barista brat inside.

She looks down and twirls her pen in her fingers. Her eyes refuse to focus on the words in front of her. She thinks her brain is trying to save itself from the objectionable material she's exposing it to by using avoidance techniques like allowing itself to become easily distracted. For the first time, she contemplates cheating and not doing her job. Seventy-five pages in and she hasn't found one grammatical error in this whole manuscript. What are the odds that she'll find any in the remaining two-hundred pages of helpless abused victim erotica? Or whatever they're calling it. She could probably just send it back and say that she finished without actually reading the rest.

Sadly, pride and perfectionism won't allow her to do that.
She looks at where she left off. She'd stopped reading at yet another problematic sex scene where the protagonist doesn't actually want to fuck her husband, but gives into his seduction because he's just so sexy even though he has all of the personality of an abusive potato. As a person with a pretty dark, fucked up sexuality, she's offended that the author has made rape somehow so fucking boring. She's read through five or six of these sex scenes so far and every time it's the same conflicted feelings, dubious consent, and then the most boring, vanilla sex she's ever read, and in missionary position every fucking time, with the most unlikely orgasms. After reading so many romance novels for this job, she doesn't mind anymore when characters come at the same time (despite how unrealistic that is) as long as there's some effort put into it and at least an acknowledgement of clitoral stimulation. Instead, the protagonist in this book comes at the same time as her husband, every time, just from him clutching at her shoulders and thrusting away for five minutes. The lack of creativity disgusts Erna more than the domestic abuse and rape.

Even worse, it reminds her that sex is a thing without giving her any outlet for her imagination, so her mind wanders much more than usual. She gets so bored with the sex scenes that without even meaning to, she stops reading and fills in better scenes in her head. Her mind wanders to fantasies about Levi beating her thighs with a riding crop while saying mean things to her. She gets curious about how many piercings he has in his cock (he told her once, but she forgets) and whether she would be able to feel them in her throat, and all manner of things that are way more interesting than vanilla missionary sex between two people with no personality and no reason to be attracted to each other.

When her face gets hot and she realizes she's blushing, she is jolted back to reality. She assigns another punishment to herself for letting her mind wander, which is why she sucks at domming herself. She only ever encourages more bad behavior because she chooses punishments that she kind of likes. She decides to punish herself with ten more minutes of leaving Levi alone to work, no matter how bored she gets.

She tilts her chair back on its hind legs and looks up at the grey sky instead of at her own work, afraid that reading more will only make her fantasize more. She watches clouds slide by until a raindrop hits her square on the nose. She rights her chair and Levi shuts his sketchbook to protect the pages from getting wet. He smirks at the way she crinkles her nose and he asks, "Want to go in?"

Contextually, that could only mean two things. Erna asks, "In the cafe? Or back there?" and she tilts her head over her shoulder at their apartment building.

Levi shrugs. "Building?" It makes sense to him to go back now, because the rain is only going to get worse and walking back from the cafe later is going to be a bitch without an umbrella.

Erna's shoulders slump as she pouts and turns her head to the side. She whines, "But I'll be so bored."

"It's not like we can't hang out there," Levi says, but as the last word leaves his mouth he wishes he could backpedal from that statement, because he may have just accidentally invited her to his apartment, which is … weird. Not that it's strange for friends to hang out at each other's apartments, just that he would feel weird about her being in his apartment, and if she takes him up on it he doesn't know how he's going to be chill about it.

She tilts her head at him and in her totally naive way, asks, "Like… where?" She's confused because there aren't any common areas or a courtyard or anything. It doesn't even occur to her that they would hang out together in either of their apartments, because that's just not something they do.

He doesn't answer right away, because he's fucking terrified…
Which gives her time to figure it out. "Did you just invite me up to your apartment?"

The thought terrifies her too, because while he is basically her best friend, she also daydreams about him verbally and physically abusing her until she has body racking orgasms. Her social skills are okay, but, she thinks, probably not good enough to prevent her from being creepy and awkward about being alone in his apartment with him.

While she contemplates the idea, Levi is able to compose himself again and ask abruptly, "Cafe?"

"Yeah. That," she says a little too quickly.

He thought she would be snarky, not flustered. Instead of being aloof and hostile, her eyelids flutter and close for an instant, and he's far too fluent in body language to miss it and suddenly he's much too confident to let it go. He goes back on the offensive and teases her again.

"Are you afraid of my apartment because you had a sex dream about me?" he deadpans.

Her reflex is to say something like 'fuck you,' but he liked it too much when she got flustered about it earlier. Instead she calmly crosses her arms as they both stand up and she says darkly, "I don't dream about sex."

She watches his narrow, half-lidded eyes grow slightly bigger as he takes her meaning and she comes up with the best exaggeration she can.

"It involved a studded paddle, restraints, and a car battery." She leaves the actions purposely vague to let him imagine the worst things possible.

"Jesus." He picks up his sketchbook and walks towards the cafe door ahead of her. "I don't want to be in your dreams anymore."

"Don't kink shame me."

As she follows him inside, he says, "Don't involve me in your kink and I won't shame you about it."

Which makes Eren spit out the coffee he was drinking at the bar.

"Fair enough," Erna replies with self satisfaction as they take a table in the nearest corner. He takes the chair with its back to the door so that she can sit in the corner with her back to the wall - another of her paranoid idiosyncrasies that he's learned to indulge.

While the rain keeps falling in bigger and bigger drops, she keeps track of how much time is left before she can start making herself a nuisance to him again. He has fifteen minutes left to work before she starts bothering him with her random and uncomfortable hypothetical questions again. She makes a very half-hearted attempt to keep reading her manuscript, but quickly shifts instead to trying to think of a good 'fuck, marry kill,' or 'would you rather?' to ask Levi when her self-imposed silence is over.

She wants to ask something wildly inappropriate. She hasn't done that in a while. She likes the way his muscles stiffen when she shocks him, but it happens less and less now. He's getting used to her preference for making people uncomfortable. She needs to come up with something more personal if she wants any shock value to it.

She looks down at the table to scan the words on the page again and realizes she still hasn't gotten through this awful sex scene. She sighs to herself as she wonders how this author can make dubious consent and rape sound so boring. Suddenly that gives her an idea and she asks as casually as if she
were asking him about the weather, "Have you ever been raped?"

He gives her just the reaction she wanted. That sudden stiffness, slightly widened eyes, then eyebrows knitting together like he's wondering if he even heard her correctly. She changes nothing about her expression. Most of the fun of this game, for her, is acting like she's said absolutely nothing wrong.

"What brought that on?" he asks, instead of getting disgusted or irritated, because he's used to this game by now.

"This book is basically one long, boring rape fantasy. Now answer the question."

Levi puts his elbows on the table and leans forward. He says in a low, dark voice that sounds so cold and emotionless in its monotone deadpan, "I thought you liked rape fantasies."

It catches Erna completely off guard. He isn't playing right. She's supposed to make him uncomfortable and flustered and then she gets to smirk at him and feel superior for a little while. He isn't supposed to turn it around and make her blush while her lips part silently as they wait for the words she's at a loss for.

"I…" she stammers. "You… I don't..."

He smirks condescendingly at how much of her chill she's just lost and she smacks her pen down on the table and says, "Oh fuck you."

"No," he answers calmly, "I've never been raped." He would ask the same of her, but the fact that she can ask so glibly and has brought the subject up offhandedly before tells him that it's extremely unlikely, which he's very glad for.

Erna is composed again, and interested, and she leans over the table, resting her chin in her hand as she watches him get back to drawing. She asks eagerly with a lot of intrigue, "Has anyone ever tried?"

"Do you know how creepy you are?"

"I'm bored."

He doesn't look up from the drawing he's almost finished and he says, "Imagine if I were asking you the same thing with the same tone you're using." It would be horrible and cringe-inducing and it's hard to even imagine because he's not the kind of disgusting creep who would do that.

"I'm going to choose to embrace the double standard in this instance." She replies, because she is that kind of disgusting creep sometimes and she's completely unashamed about it, and for some reason, despite all his decency, he loves that about her.

But he rolls his eyes and ignores her question.

"Come on," she persists. "Prison rape is a thing…" Still no response from him. She keeps going. "And you're attractive…" Nothing. Not even a muscle tic. "It's hard to believe nobody even tried."

He still doesn't look up from his sketchbook and shuts her down. "I'm not answering you because you're looking for something to jerk off to again."

She frowns at his refusal to play her game and she pushes the manuscript on the table away from her, saying with frustration, "Well I can't jerk off to this! It's too boring!"
"I feel for you," he says sarcastically.

Erena twists her lips and then pouts after huffing to herself. "I'll just make something up."

"You said you wouldn't involve me in your kink anymore," he reminds her.

"I lied," she concedes unapologetically.

He still isn't upset. He knows that she likes it when she's able to get him annoyed, and that's what most of this is about. He highly doubts she's actually going to make up a rape fantasy involving him, though he never knows for sure what she's up to in that dark, sharp mind of hers. She did mention fantasizing about raping Jean once, but he assumed it was for shock value and not a real thing. Now he's less sure of that. Just to be safe, he tells her sternly, "Get back to work."

Erena hides it well, but the commanding tone turns her on, and for once she actually listens and obeys. She pulls her manuscript back over the table and begins reading again with as much reverent focus as if he just gave her a task to do within the context of a power exchange relationship. She submits to Levi without him even knowing that inadvertently he is becoming a kink for her, which makes her feel wrong about it and heightens the shame so that it feels even better and is quickly turning into an addiction.

She pretends that he's punishing her for being a brat, and she actually starts reading again. She gets through the bad sex scene and then some 'woe is me' inner monologue from the main character followed by another new manipulative power play by the handsome abusive husband. It makes her want to gag, but she tells herself to get through at least ten pages before giving up again. She does a half-assed job, but she gets it done. She even keeps going for another ten pages now that she's getting better at scanning for errors without actually absorbing any of the content. She starts flipping through finishing a page every few seconds. She finishes the whole thing, though she's scanned so quickly that she can't be totally sure she hasn't missed anything, she can't find it in herself to care either. She hasn't let a mistake slip by in any of the books she edited before this, so she doesn't feel terribly pressured to give it a second read through to be thorough.

Though she's relieved to be finished, she is actually annoyed that she couldn't find any mistakes. It isn't comforting to her that someone who is stupid enough to think that looks adequately substitute for personality and that victimization is an acceptable expression of love is also somehow smart enough to write an entire novel without even one missed comma. The nerve. The intellectual incongruence.

With nothing to do, she leans back in her chair and lets her eyes wander around the empty café. Eren is already wiping down tables knowing that nobody else will come by with the storm outside. Armin and Mikasa already went upstairs minutes ago, leaving him to clean up by himself.

She turns and looks at Levi again and says, "I'm done."

"Yeah?" Levi says without looking up. "Good for you."

She smiles just slightly to herself, because she wanted him to say something like that.

She watches him draw and wonders if he would be a good dominant. She wonders how long she can make herself content with just this… with manipulating him into saying sarcastic or mean things to her and doing all the punishment and rewards on her own in her head.

She's been thinking more and more about whether she should ask him to be her boyfriend or something. "Boyfriend" is such a stupid word to her. She'd rather ask him to be her dom and beat the
fuck out of her, but she knows he would be automatically put off by that. She could be more frank about it and tell him that she likes his company and wouldn't even need him to do any of her weird BDSM shit (as he puts it) and he wouldn't need to break his weird vow of celibacy or whatever because she barely even likes vanilla sex… and they could just keep doing what they do now… She sighs and wonders what the point even is. She doesn't know what she wants. It sounds like a friends with benefits situation without any of the benefits, which is what they already basically have. If that's the case, she doesn't see why she feels any need to say anything to him, but she does. It's like this overwhelming need to be fucking honest for once and tell him that she thinks he's really hot. She shakes her head and tells herself that it's just her setting herself up for a really big adrenaline rush and possibility of crushing rejection. She's a masochist. She does shit like that. She's set herself up to be rejected before just for the high of making herself vulnerable, usually with older men in a context where they would be putting themselves at professional risk if they were to accept her advances.

Her own self destructive impulses aside, she does still think he's really hot. She plays with her pen between her fingers and absently flips through her novel while stealing glances at him as he works. She thinks she's stealing glances anyway, but it's more like staring openly because she thinks he doesn't notice her anyway.

Levi can feel it without even looking away from his work. He's used to being stared at, so he has somewhat of a sixth sense for it. He holds his sketchbook up in front of him so that he can tilt his head up and look at her with his peripheral vision without looking like he's looking at her. He's done with his last of three cover up sketches for Eren anyway, so he just shades gray scale bars at the bottom of the page to make it look like he's still working.

She's oblivious anyway. He can tell she's lost in her own world yet again. He catches her like that more and more lately. It's the same look she had when he caught her that one day zoning out to that trailer park smut she was editing out on the stoop. Her eyes unfocus and get a more liquid look to them as her pupils dilate so much that her irises are nearly blacked out and her eyelids lower unconsciously. He watches her bring her thumb to her lips and press down. She squirms and shifts in her chair a little as her teeth roughly graze over the pad of her thumb. Levi wonders what she's thinking about this time and if she's staring at him or just staring at nothing in particular.

Erna, in fact, knows that she's staring at Levi's collarbone. He has two little flat circular surface piercings studding his clavicles that she can see just above the neck of his t-shirt and she finds them fascinating. She's also starting to think that she has a kink for his throat, especially when he's deadpanning dry insults at her. Her tongue gets wet and unconsciously touches her thumb as she thinks about licking his adams apple. She starts to feel that familiar throbbing, warm feeling between her legs and closes her thighs tight trying to stay with her train of thought without getting uncomfortably wet.

"Can I get you guys anything?"

Erna nearly jumps out of her skin at Eren's voice. She was so lost in thought she never noticed him come over to the table. She gives him a withering look for interrupting her daydream and groans, "Oh my god, fuck off, Bambi!"

Levi simply pushes his cup to the edge of the table and says, "More tea." Then, as Eren walks away, he smirks at Erna and asks, "You okay?"

His total confidence and that self-satisfied crooked smirk make her want to fall at his feet and just be good for him for once instead of her usual brattiness that she inflicts on him. She's alarmed by the strength of the unbidden feelings so much so that she stands up abruptly, leaving her unfinished latte and saying, "I can't do this."
She tosses her manuscript in the trash on her way out.

Once she's locked safely back inside her apartment and out of her wet clothes, she curls up under the warm comforter on her bed and masturbates her feelings away. She doesn't think about sex while she closes her eyes tight and frantically rubs at her clit as she gets closer. She thinks about being punished. She thinks about Levi's face the few times she's been able to push him to get truly angry and how his eyes get darker. She thinks about him leaving her bound and gagged and refusing to touch her because he knows that's what she wants.

She makes herself come once, and then again about ten or fifteen minutes later, however quickly her refractory period will allow her. She feels like a creep, like Levi accused her of being earlier, but at least she thinks she has it out of her system for a while. She snuggles against her pillow and falls into a dreamless sleep as the rain pours harder outside.

When she wakes up the wind is howling outside through the spaces between buildings. The overwhelmingly loud white noise of the storm would normally put her on edge and have her checking and re-checking the locks, but she can hear Levi's music next door, so she feels safe.

She is like a prey animal, always hyper alert and ready to run, using sight and sound as her defense instead of teeth and claws. She stands at the bathroom door and narrows her eyes at the shower that takes both of those away. This feels like a problem. She won't ever admit to herself or anyone else that the sudden depressive fits or rages or self destructive impulses she's had since the attack are something she should get help for, but she's willing to concede that damn near having a nervous breakdown every time she wants to take a shower might be a problem. She glares at the off-white shower curtain. She hates how she can't hear or see anything but the water and the tiles while she's in there.

She feels afraid and angry at herself for being afraid, and angry at the motherfucker who made her this way, then ultimately angry at the entire world for being a fucked up place. Before - now it feels like forever ago - she liked to listen to music while she showered, as loud as possible to carry over the sound of the water; and she took her time. Now she wouldn't dream of adding music to the noise of the shower and she can only stand five minutes at most. It's five minutes where her heart is beating out of her chest as she imagines that she hears the scraping and rapping noises of someone trying to get in the door from the hallway.

She knows it's stupid and she knows that she's paranoid and she knows it's a symptom of post traumatic stress, but after she's washed her hair and rinsed away any traces of soap and conditioner, she has to wrap herself in her robe as quickly as possible and peek her head out to check the door, just to be sure. When she sees that it's locked and just as she left it, like it is every time, she can relax and go about the comfort of her routine.

Levi rushes in his apartment soaked to the bone after running back from the cafe with his sketchbook safe inside his hoodie. He should have left right after Erna, but as soon as she'd gotten inexplicably flustered and left, Eren had taken her place and sat across the table to stare at him. It had been productive on his end at least, because he was able to show Eren the finished sketches and rush the brat to pick one to cover up the tattoo Levi had fucked up. He picked the one that Levi liked the least. No accounting for taste. Then he asked for some modifications to it and while Levi added and altered things in the sketch, he felt Eren staring at him even harder than Erna had been. When he decided he'd really better get home because the rain was getting aggressive, he offered Eren the rest of his tea and told him that he looked thirsty, hoping that the kid caught his meaning. He doesn't mind getting drooled over like a piece of meat, but he knows the barista has some kind of
relationship with his two partners at the cafe and while he isn't worried about Armin, he might be a bit concerned about how Mikasa would handle jealousy. He would have to be blind to not have noticed how intense she is when it comes to her partners, and even if Eren doesn't seem to pay it enough mind to not be so fucking obvious about his crush on the tea-drinking tattoo artist, Levi is very wary of pissing off the quiet, foreboding woman.

Not that she has anything to be pissed about. As obvious as Eren's thirst is, Levi would never take advantage of it. He's made it a point to not be that person anymore. Losing Isabel and Farlan made him let go of all of his reckless, self destructive, shitty habits and he's never looked back no matter how tempting it is to fall back into them. He stays disciplined and responsible the way he should have been while they were still alive. If he has an urge to stay home from work like a lazy shit, or to go out and bring someone home for a good fuck, he beats himself up and tells himself that if he'd been more of a fucking adult back then his friends would probably still be around. Erwin has tried more than a few times to change his thinking about that, but Levi doesn't want to.

He changes into a white cotton t-shirt and sweatpants, hangs his wet clothes in the shower, and he ties a white bandana around his face to cover his nose and mouth while he cleans. He thinks it protects his lungs from getting a chemical burn from all the bleach he uses all over the apartment. Some people drink or do drugs to turn their brains off and escape reality for a while; Levi draws and cleans. Logically, he knows it isn't necessary to disinfect things like the legs of the kitchen table or the backs of the plastic and steel chairs, but he does it because it's something to do. It keeps him busy and if he wants, cleaning can be never-ending. He can always find something that requires attention or could be slightly cleaner.

While he's wiping down the table in the kitchen area a third time, inspiration hits him like lightning the way it sometimes does. He drops everything, putting the cleaning supplies away and pulling out paper towels, ink, plastic cups, and distilled water automatically. He gets ideas for tattoos like intrusive thoughts and he's learned that when he has one, there's no getting away from it. He has to just drop everything and get the idea tattooed on his skin or else it will nag and nag at his brain like a song that's stuck in your head and won't go away until you embrace it and play it at full volume.

The design that came into his head is a compass with a light almost art deco sunburst behind it in black and white. It's telling him that it belongs on his neck, on the right side under the ear, behind the jaw line, going just barely down the line of his shoulder.

It's a tough thing to take on. Normally he wouldn't think to do a neck tattoo on himself. For one thing, he can't see his neck without a mirror. For another, it's going to hurt like a motherfucker. He would just sketch it out and ask Mike to do it for him at work the next day, but what's in his head calls for a delicate hand and style which Mike doesn't have. He does more traditional, blocky tattoos, like the wings that Levi had him draw on his back.

Besides, it's urgent. The idea in his head needs to come out right now. So after setting up his equipment, he goes and grabs the mirror hanging in the bathroom and props it up on the end of the table that's pushed up against the wall. He only needs one try to stencil it and it comes out perfect, exactly as it looked in his mind. He peels his shirt off, folds it, and puts it back in the drawer before looking in the mirror and carefully transferring the stencil to his neck. After that, all of his quick, efficient, automatic movements become suddenly much slower and much more careful. The set up was easy. Now he has to concentrate. He doesn't even turn his machine on before he passes over some of the lines a few times, making sure that looking in the mirror doesn't fuck up his spacial reasoning and make his hand go right when he means to go left or anything. It's the first time that he needs to actually think while he works.
When he trusts his hands, he turns the machine on and goes slowly. He applies pressure and winces, breathes deep, and wills himself to not flinch despite every nerve in his body telling him to do something to escape the pain.

Erna plugs in her curling iron at the bathroom sink and waits for it to heat up so that she can go through her whole ritual. She has many, because she thrives off of predictability and routine and is comforted by doing the same things at the same times in the same way. Smoking is a ritual, lattes from the cafe are a ritual, her weekly sessions with Annie are a ritual, and she makes taking care of her appearance a ritual, otherwise she would probably never do it. It's a rule that she showers or bathes every day (baths being preferable because they're quiet), but four times a week she takes time to really take care of her skin with exfoliating scrub and lotion and twice a week she washes her hair and then curls it. Today she has to do both, which takes forever, but that doesn't bother her, because it's not like she has anything important to do.

While the curling iron heats up, she pats her hair dry with a towel as best she can. The smell of rich honey from the shampoo Deirdra gave her soothes her senses and makes her take deep breaths. Her hands reach for one of four bottles of lotion from the edge of the tub. She doesn't take the trouble to check what she's using - she knows she likes each one the same. When she opens it the smell lets her know that she picked the newest creation Deirdra sent her which smells citrusy and luxuriously exotic. She checks what's in it out of curiosity. The ingredient lists on Deirdra's products always make her smile, because about half of the list is stuff she swears she could eat like bananas and coconut and vanilla. This one has oranges and oil from the crushed petals of some flower she's never heard of. She holds it up to her nose to take some deeper whiffs of it because it's new and smells so good to her that it makes her actually feel happy for a few seconds.

Erna massages lotion into her skin with enough pressure to work some of the tension out of her muscles, which are always stiff, especially her shoulders. The stiffness is because she never actually relaxes. Even in sleep her jaw is clenched.

She's only halfway finished quenching her thirsty skin when everything goes black. The only thing she can see for a split second is the led display on her curling iron, but then that goes out too. Her heart nearly spasms and panic rushes in all at once, still making her hyperventilate even as she realizes that it's a power outage and nothing to be alarmed about. She curses under her breath steadily as she gropes in the dark for the door frame and shuffles carefully to the desk where she left her purse when she came in. Once she feels the soft leather her fingers easily find the latch, open it, and feel around for her lighter. It sparks twice before making a flame that she holds out in front of her as she catches her breath. For the sake of it, she uses the light to check the locks on the door and the window again. Then she releases the button on the lighter because she can get around okay in the dark. The apartment is tiny and she's spent enough time in it to know its spaces and corners.

"Bullshit," she mutters, angry at the storm for fucking up her routine.

She finishes massaging lotion over her thighs and legs in the dark and then stands there for a few seconds wondering what she should do next and whether the power will come back on or not. She isn't used to power outages. Her family's home had a backup generator and the utilities were always taken care of quickly at her Manhattan apartment. She's never been without electricity for more than twenty minutes in her whole life.

It takes a minute for her to decide she should get out the scented candles Deirdra sent her for aromatherapy that she thought she would never use. She sets a couple on the sink and lights them, then she sees her reflection in the mirror and whines in frustration. If she knew the power was going
to go out, she wouldn't have gotten her hair wet. She hates her hair in its natural state. It's wavy and unruly and doesn't curl in the perfect way she wants it to and she can't stand the prospect that it might dry without her curling iron to fix it.

Then, a new thought occurs to her and makes her heart sink even more: without sufficient light there's no way she'll be able to put one of her dresses on without it looking like a total mess. They aren't exactly "pull on and go" dresses. There are a lot of buttons and a lot of bows that need to be tied perfectly, not to mention lacing up a corset in the dark sounds impossible.

Her eyes itch and she sniffs hard as her frustration builds. She can't cope with not having things the way she wants, can't take anymore stress than she is already constantly under. Anything unexpected feels like a tragedy, even though she's not illogical and knows it's not the end of the world, her brain leaps to despair at the slightest hardship. She wants to cry and wail and get all of the feelings out, but she doesn't because of pride and the knowledge that Levi would probably hear everything through the wall.

She takes some deep breaths and tries to ignore the irritation that her eyes feel at holding back tears. Instead of one of her gothic lolita dresses, she pulls out a pair of dark grey yoga pants and a big cream-colored sweater that her sister left there the night Erna moved in. She meant to send them back, sort of. More like she had the intention to send them back, but then didn't because that would necessitate leaving her very small comfort zone. Now she was glad that she didn't.

Erna used to have a more diverse wardrobe with clothes for lounging and work, but when she moved there was limited space for things she could take with her, so she left the comfy clothes and the work clothes and only saved her gothic lolita dresses. It feels strange to be "comfortable" again. She's built differently from Deirdra. The pants fit like leggings and are a little too long, bunching up at her heels. The sweater is one or two sizes too big and nearly hangs off her shoulder. She groans at the mirror and crosses her arms. She wants a cigarette and would even brave the storm to smoke one, except there's no fucking way she's going anywhere dressed like this. She's gotten too used to her dresses and feels naked without one.

She gets the phone that Levi gave her that morning out of her purse to check the time. Not even 5pm yet and she's starving…

After fifteen minutes of steady work, Levi only has half of the outline of his tattoo finished, thanks to the difficulty of working in a mirror and the searing, blinding, incredible pain.

When the power goes out, he gets a respite from the pain, but still he clucks his tongue and mutters to himself.

"Tch. You've got to be fucking kidding me."

He puts his machine down on the table carefully and growls. He gives the power a few seconds to kick back on like it does sometimes if it's just the shitty building's wiring having a hiccup, but when it stays dark he accepts that this outage might last hours. He reaches for his phone and uses it to light his way to the closet where he has a high-powered led lantern. He turns it on and sets it down in the middle of the table, lucky that it still has battery life. It lights the whole room well enough that he can clean up his ink and his machine and put things away. He leaves the mirror where it is and looks at his work again. He wonders what he's going to do if the power doesn't come back on soon. He doesn't want to go to sleep without finishing, because the stencil will smudge and getting it on there again in the correct placement with half the tattoo already done is going to be difficult. He'd planned on doing the whole thing in one go. All he can do now is hope that the storm will pass and that
nothing will smudge the stencil on his neck before he can finish.

He slowly twists his neck to get a better look at what he's done so far. It looks good. The skin that he tattooed already is still red and angry, but it's fading pretty quickly. He's always been a quick healer.

Before he gets back to cleaning up, he hears Erna through the wall. He can't make out what she's saying, but she's agitated. It sounds like she's having a conversation with someone, but he can only hear her side of it. He bangs his fist on the wall the way he does sometimes to get her attention either to tell her to turn her music the fuck down or to let her know he's going down for a cigarette break. He doesn't get the usual response of her shouting back some obscenity at him or banging on her side of the wall in return. Instead she seems to get louder and more angry with whoever she's talking to. He picks up his phone again and texts her fair warning, "I'm coming over."

He pulls on a pair of socks and his slippers, but doesn't bother with a shirt. He's worried that it'll fuck up the ink on his neck.

When he knocks on her door, she opens it quickly, still yelling. He sees that she's on the phone. He should have thought of that. She holds up a finger as if telling him to wait a second. Then she says into the phone, "Oh fuck you! It's just a little weather!" in a shrill and offended voice.

Shortly after, she holds the phone away and looks at it in disbelief. "I can't believe they hung up on me." Only then does she look up and acknowledge Levi to ask him, "Do you know any place that will deliver in this weather? I wanted chinese, but the guy said the storm is too dangerous, and I'm fucking starving."

Levi doesn't answer right away. He's still very much taken aback by her appearance. He almost didn't recognize her. It's like a more casual, less scary and severe version of Erna ousted her from her apartment and took over. Her hair is a little damp and wavy in a controlled, messy way, like it was styled on purpose to look like disheveled beach curls. It's jarring how much her silhouette is changed without one of her usual dresses cinched tight around her waist and puffing out in a bell at her hips. His eyes wander and quickly make sense of the dramatic and unexpected change. For the first time since Ymir's party, he can actually see her collarbone and some of her chest thanks to the loose neck of the oversized sweater she's wearing. Then his eyes wander down and get distracted by the way the yoga pants cling to her thighs.

So there's that. There's also the fact that he hasn't ordered take out for himself in years. So he tells her, "Why don't you just make yourself something."

He misses the fact that she's staring at the way his sweatpants cling just half a centimeter under his hip bones as she says absently as if coming out of a dream, "I guess I could make ramen…"

"Seriously?" he asks.

For a second she flinches because she thinks he just caught her staring at his V-line, but when she looks up at his face, he just asks, "That's all you have?"

She crosses her arms defensively. "I don't cook."

"So you live off of pastries from the cafe, ramen noodles, and take out food?"

"It's not like I can go grocery shopping."

He pinches the bridge of his nose the way she loves and sighs as if she's hopeless. He tells her to "Come on," as he turns and walks back down the hall.
She follows unquestioningly, something that she's gotten more used to doing with him, after tossing her phone to the bed, grabbing her keys and locking the door.

She watches his back and shoulder muscles moving under the blue and white wings that cover his entire back intently as he walks ahead of her to his apartment. She's never drooled over anatomy the way she does when she looks at him. It's always seemed ridiculous to her. She remembers when she was younger and her sisters tried to initiate her into their post-pubescent world by talking about guys and whether pecs or biceps were more important than abs and shoulders, and she would tell them that she couldn't imagine anything more stupid than obsessing over body parts. Being normal sisters, they would then tease her about being a lesbian, which is probably why she's so shy and sensitive about playing with women now.

It took a dozen or so years, but she finally sees what they meant about how important visual stimuli can be.

She is completely lost in staring so that she doesn't even stop to think when he opens the door and steps into his apartment ahead of her. She just follows him. If she had been thinking, she would have done her whole suspicious questioning thing or at least realized that it might not be a great idea to follow him in because he makes her heart beat out of her chest and lately she apparently can't even hang out with him for a couple hours at the cafe without needing to run back to her apartment and masturbate. But suddenly she's there and the door is swinging shut behind her and all her panic does is make her stand stock still as he goes over to the fridge.

After a couple seconds of rummaging around, he turns around, sees her still just standing there like an idiot, and he tells her, "Sit."

The way he deadpans it without any pleasantries makes her cunt throb and she just wants to go back to her apartment to get under the covers and rub her clit again. She doesn't contemplate it seriously because that would be creepy as fuck, but her shoulders slump as she resigns herself to having to suffer through this and she pulls out one of the chairs at the kitchen table.

She slumps down in her chair and rests her chin on her hand. Then she looks at him quizzically to ask, "What are you doing?"

"Fucking feeding you."

He sounds irritated and impatient with her and she squirms in her chair and tries to think about anything else so that she won't get wet.

He doesn't help by saying, "How can you be so fucking smart, but not know how to fucking take care of yourself? Is this what happens when you always have servants waiting on you?"

Her pupils dilate and her breathing slows because it turns her on when he rips into her, but she tries to hide it and maintain a certain level of biting sarcasm when she responds, "Nobody calls them servants anymore. They're house staff."

He rolls his eyes and opens a cupboard to take out a couple of bowls.

She wants to ask him why he's not wearing a shirt, but is struggling to think of a witty or sardonic way of putting it because she's completely distracted by how good he looks. She figures it's probably better to try and act like she doesn't even care. Besides, if she says something there's the possibility that he'll decide to put one on and that would be tragic. It would deprive her of the opportunity to stare at his tattoos that somehow perfectly emphasize hard lines of muscles and do nothing to detract from his smooth skin.
She averts her eyes for a second when he turns around. She isn't sure if he would be able to see her staring in the light of the lantern on the table, but it's not worth risking it no matter how much she wants to look at the fine line of black hair that trails from his belly button down underneath his sweatpants.

He tosses a bowl of leafy stuff in front of her with a fork and he sits down with the same for himself. She looks at it suspiciously and asks what it is.

"Kale, apples, radishes, almonds," he says. "Healthy shit, because apparently you eat a lot of fucking garbage."

She looks down at the salad, then up at him, and then with complete deadpan seriousness, she says, "Know how I know you're gay?"

Which is a phrase he hasn't heard since middle school. Instead of asking her if she is an actual twelve year old boy because that's what she sounds like, he simply says, "Know how I know you are?"

She crosses her arms indignantly and replies quickly, "I'm not actually."

"No?" he raises and eyebrow and asks skeptically.

"Straight as a board," she says as she takes a forkful of salad into her mouth.

He tilts his head at her and can't help but smirk.

"What?" she says with her mouth still full. After she swallows, she says, "Just because I fuck women I have to be bi or whatever?"

"Is that a crazy thing to assume?"

"Well it's not very open-minded."

He can concede that. People can be a lot of things. He still thinks it's an odd argument. He asks, "How do you identify then?"

"Mmm… heteroflexible," she says in between bites.

"Uh-huh," he says skeptically. As he gets up from his chair and goes back to the counter to wash his dishes, he adds, "That's why you were staring at me like a piece of meat."

Her jaw drops a little. Luckily he can't see... she thinks... She isn't sure what he can see with his back turned anymore. She hurries to try to think of a plausible excuse or denial, but she's at a loss. When he comes back to the table and sits down, he's looking at her much more intensely, scrutinizing her almost, with dark eyes. After a moment she starts to feel her temperature rise and hopes that her face isn't getting red and proving her guilt. Then he says, "You're not wearing a dress."

Her snark kicks back in and she says, "Sorry. I didn't know we were dressing for dinner. To be fair, you're not wearing a shirt," as she points at the small silver barbells through his nipples with her fork before taking another bite of salad.

He turns his head to the side and points to the unfinished tattoo on his neck. "Didn't want to fuck this up. The power went out before I could finish."

Erna rests her elbows on the table and leans over to look more closely, but he turns back to face her
and give her a shrewd look again, asking "What's your excuse?"

She huffs a little and makes a face about not getting to look at the new ink, but she answers honestly, "I can't deal with those clothes in the dark. There are too many laces and tiny buttons and bows to tie."

His eyebrows knit together, like he had thought she just pulled one of those things over her head and was good to go. "Then why do it at all?"

"I like it." She says simply, as if the reasoning begins and ends there.

Levi won't let it go at that, and in an incredibly ill-advised move, he says, "I think you look better like this."

Erna's eyes narrow and her nostrils flare. Her voice drops to a colder tone than he's ever heard her use with him or, in fact, anyone, as she tells him, "I'm not here for you to enjoy looking at me. The point of lolita fashion is to reject the male gaze and sexual objectification without having to sacrifice femininity…" She pokes at a dried cranberry in what little is left of her salad and adds on a less serious note, "... Dick."

He smirks at her, because he knows she isn't really mad. He thinks he's proven his feminist credentials by now and she should know that he would never objectify anyone intentionally. He pulls the nearly empty bowl away from her, stopping her from playing with what's left of her food, and when she looks up he says, "Is sex that scary that you have to dress like a doll and only fuck women when you're actually straight?"

As she sets her fork down, she says in a small voice, "Maybe."

Levi almost doesn't ask his next question, because he doesn't want to put ideas in her head, because her choosing to stay away from men with the exception of him suits him fine, but he needs to sate the curiosity about what he genuinely doesn't understand.

" Couldn't you just be careful about finding a guy to beat you or whatever?"

She sighs, "Yeah, you would think so." As he takes her fork too and goes back to the sink, she explains, "If we were talking about it in a cultural vacuum I probably could, but the BDSM community is different. Not only are there a lot more issues with safety in general, but there's also this pervading antiquated notion held by most of the hetero male portion of it that consent doesn't need to be a thing in power exchange, which is fucked up and dangerous. Then there's a lot of entitled douchebags who think it's just about tying someone up and getting their dick wet. Add to that an extremely specific set of preferences on my part, and no. I can't just be careful about finding a guy to beat me or whatever. Even if I did find one who isn't a rapist, entitled, inconsiderate, and ignorant piece of shit - which I haven't - there would still be very slim odds that I would actually find him attractive and even slimmer odds that our kinks would match up. I could find someone basically perfect, but then find out that he's afraid of blood when I have a thing for needles, or that he can only get off by licking toes or whatever."

Levi has to laugh softly at that as he sets the dishes in the drying rack on the counter.

"Don't laugh, that's a real thing," she scolds, but she's also smirking and there's a twinkle in her eyes.

"It can't be that bad," he says incredulously. Every dating scene has its ups and downs. He's gathered that at least from hearing others talk about it. He suspects she's probably just very picky or doesn't really want to find someone, which again, suits him just fine.
"It's worse than that." She holds out her hand and says, "Give me your phone."

He raises an eyebrow at her, but he does it, because he's curious about where this is going. He unlocks it for her and waits and watches quietly as she taps around the screen. Then she turns it around and gives it back to him.

She explains, "There's this website called fetlife, which is like facebook for kinky people."

He looks at the browser window she opened on his phone as she says, "That's my inbox on there. You can open pretty much any of those messages and get a fair representation of men in the scene."

For a second, Levi just looks at it. He hesitates to open any of the messages even though she offered. It feels so personal and private, but curiosity gets the better of him anyway and he taps on the most recent message at the very top with a subject that just says "hi," which seems innocent enough, but then when he clicks through to the body of the message it reads, "heyy baby id love to rape you" No punctuation or anything, which somehow makes it worse.

He grimaces and wisely decides not to read any more. He sets the phone on the table. "Okay, but that's just online where people are going to be creepy anyway." And as he says it, he doesn't know why he's arguing.

She shrugs. "I used to go out to BDSM clubs a lot and I promise they're not a lot better in person. The men are creepy either way because they think just the fact that they identify as dominant means that all women should fall at their feet regardless of preference and shit. Not that there literally aren't any smart, respectful, attractive men, but they're a rare minority and they tend not to stay single for longer than a blink, so I just gave up entirely at some point, which has made me a lot happier."

"So you pay prostitutes instead and that's better?" he says skeptically.

"They're called pro-dommes."

Playing devil's advocate again, he says, "Couldn't you hire a man instead if you're straight?"

"Oh, that's not a thing," she says matter of factly. "Men only do it for free so that they only have to follow their own rules."

"Sounds complicated."

"Isn't all of human sexuality?" She tilts her head at him. "What are you into?"

He doesn't even know how to answer that. He isn't particularly "into" anything. "Just normal sex," he answers.

She rolls her eyes. She doesn't understand that the same way he doesn't understand S&M. And it doesn't help her prove her point, so she asks instead, "Then what attracts you to someone?"

He's thought about that before, but he doesn't really know. His friends used to point out how he didn't seem to have a "type." There was always an incredibly large range of body types, genders, styles, and personalities among his partners. He shrugs. "I'm pretty much attracted to anyone who's attracted to me."

Erna gives him a quizzical look and asks carefully, almost hesitatingly, "How many people have you fucked?"

He doesn't think about the exact number. That would be impossible. He deadpans with a straight
face, "... Hundreds."

It honestly could be anywhere between six hundred and a thousand, he thinks. Probably not more than a thousand.

He expects some kind of strong reaction from her, but her face doesn't even change its expression. She barely even blinks. After a second, he asks, "You?"

She looks off to the side, as if she's suddenly interested in the mirror against the wall, and says indifferently, "It depends on how you define sex."

He knows which definition he wants to know about, but he doesn't want to give her a reason to call him an entitled misogynist prick by implying that only PiV sex is real sex, so he keeps his mouth shut and sits back down at the table, leaning back in his chair and stretching his legs out while he waits for the goddamn power to come back on.

Erna turns and looks at him again, squinting, and then she takes the lantern in the middle of the table in her hand and holds it up toward him as she asks him to turn his head. He turns his head to the left so that she can look at the unfinished tattoo. He holds still until she says quietly, "It's pretty," and puts the lantern back down.

"If you ever want to get hurt without paying for it, I can just give you a tattoo."

"Yeah?" she smirks. "For free? I've seen you charge fifty dollars just for talking to people about tattoos."

"Only when those people are fucking annoying."

"True." She thinks about how Eren and Jean and seemingly all of the hipster brats on this slowly gentrifying block are always cutting in on their conversations at the cafe to ask Levi about tattoos or piercings or whatever. He never seems interested in talking. Rather, he seems openly hostile about it. She thinks it must be kind of like when dudebros wander into her fetlife inbox with their cocks out and think that she'll want to talk about kink with them simply because she's there and she identifies as kinky. So she's flattered when he talks to her about tattoos, even if it's persistently to try to convince her to get one even though she's said repeatedly that she thinks they're dumb.

"I could put a flower chain along your collarbone," he says, staring at her neck and collarbones exposed by the loose sweater. "That would hurt like hell."

"You seem to really have a thing for marking me up," she says in a throaty voice, "Normally I appreciate that in a man, but not in this context."

He'd have to admit that she's right. He is often preoccupied with ideas of how he could turn her skin into a work of art, usually when he's sketching across from her at the cafe. He wonders if it's the challenge, because she protests so often that she would never get a tattoo, or if it's just that she has a good aesthetic for it. The lines of her body match his art style and she has good skin for it. She'd be a good canvas if she would just consent to it.

He tells her evenly as the rain slows down, "The offer's always on the table if you change your mind."

She shrugs as if she doesn't care. "I'd rather have bruises."

He still thinks he'll wear her down someday.
Erna looks away again and her eyes wander around his apartment curiously. There's an awkward silence that Levi doesn't notice, because, as is becoming his bad habit, when she looks away he takes the opportunity to watch her. He's more preoccupied than usual because it's so strange, in a good way, to see her without her entire torso covered in black fabric and white lace, restricted and bound tightly like she wants to hide everything or make it something else. He can tell that she isn't wearing a bra under the loose, oversized cream sweater, but his eyes keep wandering upward and finding her neck and collarbones more alluring than the small bumps of her nipples just barely raising against the soft fabric. He could have drawn her shoulders himself, long before he met her, if he were trying to depict an ethereal, haughty Roman patrician goddess. Her neck could have been sculpted from marble by Rodin in Paris.

If she would just fucking let him, he would tattoo her neck, shoulders, and sternum with dotted, starry nautical navigation constellations to go with the compass on his neck.

The lights flicker and then turn back on and she blinks rapidly at the brightness. Levi had to order the bulbs in the overhead lights online and spend half of one of his paychecks on them, because he can't stand working in dim, yellow light. His apartment is brighter than an operating room, and more sterile.

He could almost curse the power for coming back on, even though that's what he was hoping for, because he has to force himself to stop staring at her before she notices. He stands up, turns the lantern off, and moves to get his tattoo supplies out again.

"Back to work."

Erna tenses and she starts to move to leave. She'd started to feel awkward being in his apartment anyway. But she watches him move with that graceful efficiency, quickly wiping down the table and getting inks and needles and she wants to stay even if it feels awkward. She watches, entranced, as he snaps a pair of black latex gloves on his hands, and she asks tentatively, "Can I watch?"

"Knock yourself out," he answers as if he isn't excited and overeager about the fact that she's showing any passing interest in his work.

When he gets everything set up and finally sits down, she's glad to be able to stare openly without him being able to accuse her of leering again, even though she knows she is definitely leering and inwardly drooling over the way the muscles in his arm flex as he brings the needle to his skin. She sees him wince as the buzzing machine makes contact with his neck, and she doesn't ask if it hurts, because that's obvious. She asks in a deep, lustful, intrigued voice, "How much does it hurt?"

"Enough."

She leans on her elbow and brings her thumb to her lips. She bites a little at the nail and asks, "Do you ever get used to it?"

"Not really."

"What kind of pain is it?"

Her eagerness is showing, because he says in his stoic deadpan, "Are you getting off on this?" without looking away from the mirror or pausing in his work.

"Maybe."

He retraces over a line and she watches carefully, captivated by the way his hand moves so carefully. He doesn't balk at her perversion, he simply says, "Then let me do you."
"No thanks," she says, bemused at his persistence. "I like watching, though."

"What do you have against tattoos?" he asks over the buzzing of the machine. Then he stops and wipes away some excess ink with a paper towel.

"They're permanent," she says. "Too much commitment."

"Some things are worth committing to," he thinks out loud.

Erna hums and adds, "Yeah, but how do you know which ones?"

Chapter End Notes

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First Friday

The alarm on his phone wakes Levi up at 8am, even though it's his day off, and he could sleep in. He doesn't like to deviate from routine. Routine is what keeps him disciplined and keeps him from fucking up.

He pulls open the one window curtain for some light as he gets dressed quickly, grabbing jeans and a band tee from his dresser under the window. He reaches for his scuffed, aged black boots in front of the door and ties them with two quick tugs before he's thudding down the stairs in a half run.

It's always an adjustment when he goes from the dark stairwell out into the light of day, but his eyes adapt and focus quickly.

"Tch.. Fuck.."

Erna turns around, her back curving as she stays seated on the top step of their stoop, and she says, "I told you, I'm always going to get down here first."

This is their new game. The latest way to keep themselves entertained. Whoever comes down to the stoop last in the morning has to get breakfast from the café.

"How?"

She makes him wait for a second for her answer while she takes a long drag from her cigarette.

"I know when you wake up. I've heard your alarm every day at 8am ever since I moved in. Since we made up this game I just get down here at 7:55."

Levi looks up at the clouds and clucks his tongue. "Tch. I didn't think it was that loud." He goes down the steps to head to the café for the sixth day in a row.

She stops him when he reaches the sidewalk. "I went earlier. Here's your tea," she says, handing him a still steaming cup of black tea.
He takes it, but not without suspicion. Ever since they started playing this game a week ago, she's loved taunting him about losing and making him go to the café.

"Why?" he asks in a low voice as he walks back up the steps to her and takes his tea. He takes the lid off and looks at it like he needs to make sure she didn't do anything to it.

She shrugs and says as casually as possible, "It's Friday."

Levi blinks. He fails to see why she would do something nice just because it's Friday. It takes him a few seconds before he remembers what Friday means.

His shoulders fall and he says, "So you want me to leave for a couple hours."

That makes Erna feel terrible, and she says, "You don't have to. I just thought it would make you uncomfortable. I don't really care. Do whatever you want."

"It's fine. I'll fuck off." He says it stoically, without much inflection, but she can tell he's not happy, having learned well enough to decipher any scarce hints of emotion in his deep, monotone deadpan.

She calls after him as he walks off toward the café, but he doesn't turn around.

She rests her chin in her hand as she sucks again on the cigarette between her lips. She blows the smoke out the side of her mouth as she pouts. She makes herself feel guilty for upsetting Levi, and she waits for Annie to come over and beat it all out of her.

She sits there and wonders what it would be like to not have her kink on demand and controlled and exactly the way she wants it. It sounds awful to her. Despite being a masochist with a slight submissive streak for the right person, she's a fucking control freak. For example, today she's in the mood for the thuddy warmth of a good flogging and she can simply tell Annie that and she'll get it. If she were with someone in a real relationship she would need to take their feelings into consideration and ask if they were in the mood to flog her and they might not be for whatever reason, or they might be in the mood for something else that she's not as enthusiastic about. It all seems like a waste of time to her.

She also likes being assured of the level of skill of her tops, like Annie. Hurting someone for kink isn't rocket science, but it's not easy to do it well either and there are a lot of ways it can go wrong. God forbid Erna should need to teach someone how to do it right. That's why she's never really tried to pull from the vanilla dating pool. There were a few times in college, before she started paying a pro-domme, where she got sexually frustrated and drunk enough to attempt hooking up with vanilla men (after talking about their graduating thesis and deciding whether they were smart enough to be attractive), but it only happened three times and always ended very badly. There was the first guy, who, when she told him to pull her hair while they were making out, didn't do it right and pulled from the ends rather than the roots, which was a big enough turn off that she simply stood up after a few seconds and left, telling him that she had to go very curtly. The fault of the second guy, who was a teacher's aide in one of her seminars, was that he was just too gentle and too careful and too considerate, which probably makes him a very good person, but he groped her like she was made of porcelain. She tried getting more aggressive just to sort of tacitly give him permission to do the same, but he didn't respond in kind. Instead he kept being ginger with her while seeming to welcome her rougher and rougher treatment. It was the closest she's ever been to dominating someone and she hated it. So when they were still fully clothed and he started to shift to lay down on his back inviting her to get on top of him, she again stood up and left, this time without a word. Neither of them ever brought it up the rest of the semester.

The third one was special enough he made her swear off of trying to fool around with vanilla men.
forever. It was December and snowing hard so that when one looked out the window the world looked like a snowglobe. She’d met him at a party on campus right before the winter break started. She’d worn white thigh-high stockings and a simple black dress, not the gothic lolita style that she adorns herself with every day now, but a very casual nod to it. Her on-campus, feminist weed dealer, Sandra, had told her about the party that afternoon when Erna had stopped by to pick up a few grams to take home and help her bear being back in the presence of her family for two weeks. Erna had shrugged, said she wouldn’t mind going, and arrived with the girl, but quickly separated. She didn’t like to be too social with her dealers.

She was feeling bolder than usual with the strangers crowded into the two-bedroom apartment, because she felt she genuinely didn’t give a fuck anymore; she just wanted to get laid. That was how much frustration had built up over the years of never finding a suitable fuck buddy or boyfriend or dom or whatever. Standards got lowered a bit and it didn’t take her too long to spot and casually corner a man who looked well-enough put together, and carried himself with at least a little more confidence and seeming intelligence than the rest. She challenged him and teased him and when he didn’t fuck off (as a lot of guys will do when presented with a smart, sarcastic woman who doesn’t seem easy), she told him that she had a joint in her purse they could share if he wanted. He told her that he knew the people hosting the party would be upset if they smoked inside, so he offered his car as an option to shelter from the cold and snow while they got high. She followed him into the backseat, which was telling, because if she wasn't interested in him she would have insisted on the front. He had to reach forward to start the car and get the heat going. They passed the joint back and forth and she took bigger, longer drags than he did, because she has always been fucking greedy. When she was smoking down the end and there would have been nothing left, he gently reached for her lips and took the small end of paper from them as she watched him wide-eyed. He rolled down his window an inch to toss it outside, and while he did, Erna, turned on even more by the commanding nature of his action, pulled her knees up onto the seat, leaned forward onto her hands, and, as he turned back to her, his lips met hers.

Erna never liked kissing and would skip it entirely if it weren’t so expected as something that normal people do, but this was different. His lips were soft but not too wet and he kissed her like he was devouring her. He pushed his tongue into her mouth like it was a game and a play for power. It gave her butterflies of excitement. Sex was never interesting to her without some kind of element of power exchange, or giving and taking away. He leaned into her, bending her back painfully until she was forced to splay her thighs to get her knees out from under her and lie back. She bit his lower lip and he growled at her. Her legs wrapped around his waist so that she could grind her hips against him, and in response he pushed against her. He’d smirked at her and called her a bad girl as he slid his hand up her thigh, which made her think that maybe she'd accidentally found another kinky person. He bit gently at her earlobe, and then harder at her neck while pulling her panties down in three forceful tugs with his one hand. She bucked her hips for his hand, begging for friction, and she got it for a second before he pushed his index finger into her and curled it upward at a little too sharp an angle. She yelped and arched her back, which he must have thought meant she liked it, but was actually a reaction to the pain. He started driving his finger in and out of her even though she wasn’t wet enough yet. There was no warm-up to it and his pace was like a jackhammer. She made a few pained noises and tried to back away, but she was already pushed up against the car door, so she used her words and told him it was too rough. She’s a masochist, but genital torture doesn’t fall under her list of kinks. Getting pleasure out of pain doesn’t mean she necessarily likes all forms of pain. He seemed to grunt in acknowledgement, but didn’t do anything different. He kept his head buried in the crook of her neck, sucking and biting, and he kept jackhammering away so that it stung, and in a panic, she kicked him. Even then he didn’t stop immediately, so she brought her legs in towards her and used them to push him away. Years of ballet had made her legs ridiculously strong. He must have felt like he’d been kicked in the chest by a mule. He stared at her dumbfounded and after she pulled her panties back up and smoothed out her dress, she told him calmly, "You suck at this,"
and she exited out into the snow. Her cunt was sore for days afterward and that was the last time she attempted to hook up with anyone outside of BDSM.

So, sadly, at 28 years old, she could technically be considered a virgin depending on how narrowly one defines sex. She aborted all of her attempts to rectify that so early that she's never even touched a guy's cock. Not that it matters that much to her. She thinks sex might just not be her thing anyway as Annie pulls up and gets out of her car.

Erna jumps to her feet, betraying her overeagerness and making Annie smirk at her with her thin, pink lips. She feels self conscious and composes herself, primly folding her hands behind her back as the blonde pro-domme walks up the steps a fraction more slowly than usual and makes her wait.

After Erna tells Annie what she was thinking for today's session and receives permission, she pulls her box of toys from under the bed and takes out her preferred flogger. It isn't necessarily her favorite, it's just the one she wants right then. It's simple, without any studs or pointed metal tips, so it will make the hits feel "thuddy" and not sharp and stinging.

Annie asks her to strip naked, something that once embarrassed Erna, but now feels as clinical and impersonal as taking your clothes off for a doctor's examination. She has Erna lean over and grip the metal bed frame. She confirms safe words, asks her if she's ready, and starts warming her up with soft hits all over from her shoulders down to her calves, which feel nice almost like a massage. She hits harder and harder incrementally, so that Erna doesn't notice when soft stopped and punishingly hard started.

Annie rolls her shoulders midway through what she plans to be the end of Erna's flogging, working out a little soreness. She should have stretched first, but she can see the end coming soon. The skin over Erna's back is turning from flushed pink to an angry and painful red, and she's just barely starting to flinch. The deal is that as soon as she lets go of that bed frame, they're done, and Annie doesn't think it will be much longer.

The blonde dominatrix is becoming very fond of Erna as a client. She's a refreshing change, not just because she's a woman, though that's novel and interesting, but because she is relatively easy. She knows what she wants and demands it most days, doesn't ask for it. Annie's other clients are much more submissive. Some of them aren't even masochists. And they always need to be made to ask and beg and plead for what they want after she ascertains what that is, because it's part of their kink. Being straightforward would ruin it for them. She loves days like this where she can show up, have Erna tell her what she wants, and put very little mental effort into creating a D/s atmosphere, or an appropriate power exchange. All she has to do is hurt the girl, not too much and not too little. No roleplay required, no humiliation, no mindreading. If she had the time and energy for it she would ask Erna to become a permanent play partner whom she could take to dungeons and clubs for public scenes and demos. Sadly, she never has time for such things, having a long list of clients and a busy schedule. She hardly even takes new clients or responds to messages inquiring about services anymore, unless they are very interesting to her.

She shakes her head and pulls herself out from getting lost in thought. She needs to pay attention to technique, and pay even closer attention to Erna's reaction to every hit, keeping herself keenly aware of whether she's going too far even before her client needs to safe word. She smacks the flogger hard against a part of Erna's shoulder that is starting to fade in color and gets the barest sign of a flinch out of the girl, but no yelps or screams yet, which means that she probably isn't as close to being finished as she thought. For a moment, she stops and gives the toy in her hand a closer examination. The braided black leather tails on the flogger are rather soft leather so that she has to hit hard to get the effect she thinks Erna wants. She asks contemplatively, her voice sounding so significant in the otherwise silent apartment, "Do you want to switch to something harder? Maybe a paddle?"
Erna wasn't expecting any questions, and takes a second to get her brain back online to answer with a slightly slurred, "Nuh-uh. Keep going."

She can't see Annie shrug as if to say, 'If you say so,' and the next hit comes surprisingly quick.

Erna will hold onto the bed frame stubbornly for as long as she is still able to think about letting go of it. She knows that the pain won't be enough until it becomes so much that flinching and letting go of her support isn't a thought out decision but instead an involuntary act like breathing. Every week she tries to get as much as she can out of her scenes without lasting harm or trauma, because she needs the release that she gets out of it to last until the next week... and she is needy as fuck.

Finally, she cries out loudly as the flogger comes down hard on her back. Her spine arches, pushing her forward and away from the source of pain, and then curls over to rock her back towards it, almost following the tails of the flogger as they pull away, reaching for it hard enough that her fingers are pulled off of the bed frame.

Her consciousness goes in stages. First rational and logical thought escapes her. In the absence of thought, everything is only concentrated on her breathing. That lasts only a short time, and then everything is gone – black. She can see, but isn't viewing. She can breathe, but isn't aware of it. There is pain, but there is so much of it that it's indistinguishable from transcendental pleasure and all sense of self and ego escapes her so that the awareness of having let go of the bed frame and stopped the session is only very far away and dim.

Her consciousness slowly comes back in stages, too. Annie knows this and waits. She'll know Erna is ready to talk when her breathing loses its ragged sound and a look of awareness comes back over her face to replace the fucked-out, feral look she gets when her body is absolutely flooded with endorphins. She lets Erna alone until then, but watches her closely for any signs of shock, like a chill or dehydration.

For a minute, Erna's spine is curled, hunched over in exactly the position she bent into when she finally cried out and let go of the bed frame. Then she flexes her fingers slowly, curling and straightening them as she stretches up to stand up straight. She turns around to face Annie, blinking rapidly. Her face is perfectly serene and calm, though tears flow in a steady stream down her cheeks without any whimpers or sobs to accompany them. It strikes Annie as eerily beautiful.

When her client's breathing is steady and no longer audible, she says in a serious, even voice, "Do you want to get dressed?"

Erna shrugs at her and looks down at her naked body. "I was going to take a bath after you leave." She looks pointedly at her dress and corset on the floor. "It would be a pain to go through all the work of putting that back on only to take it off again."

Annie smirks at her wording, at the irony of describing the chore as 'a pain'. She clears her throat and nods towards the bed behind Erna. "Sit down. I have to discuss something with you before I go."

Levi is at the café for two and a half hours, sitting alone and keenly, painfully aware of every passing minute until Erna finally shows up. She scans the long room of the former townhome with its restored tin ceiling and rustically crumbled plaster walls and patches of exposed red brick until she sees him, standing out as always with his distinctive piercings and his now always visible neck tattoo, and she flounces over to sit across from him.

He barely acknowledges her, but as he sips his tea without twisting around from his sideways
position in his chair to look at her, he can feel her eyes probing him. He asks somewhat passive aggressively, "How was it?"

"Therapeutic," she says matter of factly without a trace of apology. Then she asks, "What are you still doing here?"

"Pretty much sitting on my thumbs since you chased me out before I could grab my sketchbook."

"I didn't," she starts to say a little shrilly, but then catches herself, calms herself, and says, "That wasn't my intention. I'm… sorry…"

"Don't be. I shouldn't be working all the fucking time anyway."

"I should have told you that you'd be good to come back after a little under an hour anyway. It never lasts that long. Didn't think you would stay here until I came and gave you the all clear."

He wants to deny that that is what he was doing, but it would be a lie. He thought about going back a few times while he was sitting there fucking around on his phone, checking Instagram and texting with Hanji, but he didn't want to walk up to the sound of her moaning again. It would feel like an intrusion and it would make it harder yet again to keep up his internal promise to stop jerking off to her, which he was still doing well with so far.

"How long did it last?"

She hums as she thinks and answers, "Maybe thirty minutes? Flogging can't go much longer than that unless it's really soft, but then what even would be the point."

"Then what were you doing the rest of the time?"

"Took a bath. My muscles get sore. Then I have to massage lotion into my skin for a while because I don't like bruises. The aftercare takes longer than the actual session." She brings her hand unconsciously to the base of her neck and kneads the skin there as she thinks about the soreness. As she's working it out a particularly tense spot, Eren comes over and quietly sets down a latte in a large porcelain mug in front of her.

For once, he turns on his heel quickly to go back behind the bar without trying to greet her or make asinine small talk and Erna smirks triumphantly at finally having the young hipster trained, but as he's leaving, Levi stops him with an, "Oi."

Eren turns back around so fast and with so much puppy-like hopefulness at the small bit of attention from his obvious crush that Erna can barely look at him. She rolls her eyes and huffs out a breath in disgust.

Levi demands, "Bottle of water and a croissant," making the barista's eyes light up as he scurries to get the requested items.

"Like a good dog," Erna mutters. There's still a little bitterness to her tone as she asks Levi, "Did I make you skip breakfast too?" because he never gets food from the café. She assumes he has food in his apartment and eats breakfast there like a normal person, unlike her.

"It's for you," he says stoically, still not turning to look at her as he sips his tea and grabs his phone off the table to see if Hanji put anything on the shop's Instagram today.

"Why?" Her voice is still bitter and dark, but now for suspicious and defensive reasons.
"Because when you experience a shit ton of pain, your body goes into a low level of shock and you get dehydrated as fuck. Coffee is going to make that worse."

Erna is stunned. She opens her mouth to ask how he knows that, but then she remembers his line of work. Of course he'd be familiar with biological reactions to pain.

He gives her a second to respond if she's going to, but there's only silence on her end of the table, and then he adds, "Your eyes are already bloodshot."

"Because I know that you take shit care of yourself."

She can't really deny that. She's always been bad about being good to herself and her body, preferring to punish it rather than care for it.

Eren comes back to set the water bottle and croissant almost reverently in front of Levi and ask him if he needs anything else at all, then slinks back to the bar when he gets a firm and monotone "No," to work on the other orders that he ignored while he catered to the raven-haired punk. Levi pushes the items over to Erna.

To continue where he left off with his last thought, he says to her, "So drink."

He doesn't show it, because he's mastered his facial expressions so that he's good at not reacting, but he is absolutely fucking stunned on the inside when he hears her twist the cap off the bottle and take a long sip. He expected defensiveness, sarcasm, and anything but her being agreeable and… obedient? Not that he isn't glad about it. The request, though blunt, came from a place of genuine concern for her, but still…

After she drinks down at least half the water, proving Levi's assumption that she was dehydrated, he gets the expected snark when the mouth of the bottle leaves her lips, she licks any moisture away, and says teasingly, "When may I have my latte, Sir?"

He smirks at the screen of his phone and answers, "Fuck you."

First Saturday

Levi looks forward to Saturdays with Erna, now, as the day where they can chill together for as long as possible without the awkward interruption that Annie presents on Fridays, or the complications of his inconsistent work hours through the rest of the week. Business has picked up lately – the warmer months always get busier as people think more about getting tattoos when they can dress in a way that will show them off more – and sometimes he doesn't even see Erna except in the morning before he leaves. Some nights, if he gets home late enough that he missed her appointed time for sitting on the stoop to smoke and drink coffee, he'll agonize over whether or not he should text her and ask if she wants to take a cigarette break, just as an excuse to see her face. He hasn't gone that far yet. For some reason he feels weird about texting her, but he does make a lot of noise when he gets home and, coincidentally after he puts his stuff down, makes himself some tea, and goes back down to the stoop to smoke his last cigarette of the day, she'll always be down there first, already lighting up.

Saturdays are reliable and consistent and uninterrupted, and he thinks he's noticed that Erna is more upbeat, almost bubbly, on Saturdays, which she attributes to her sessions with Annie the day before.
Upbeat and bubbly for Erna is different than it would mean for other people. With her, he thinks he can tell she's in a better mood because she tries to annoy and tease him more than usual. She's more straight-faced and sardonic and she likes to ask inappropriate, uncomfortable rhetorical questions and almost seems to make a game out of distracting him from his work. His part in the game is to pretend to be more annoyed than he actually is, because he can tell that she likes getting the reaction from him. He doesn't mind indulging her. He might even find it kind of endearing.

Something is off about this Saturday, he can tell as he sits across from her at a table outside the café. He looks up several times from his sketchbook trying to figure out what's different. Finally he sees the missing piece.

"You're not working."

She looks up from her phone that she's been focused on since they sat down. The burner he got her is like a smartphone, but with no data plan, so she can fuck around with it as long as they're near wifi. He hasn't seen her do much of anything with it until now. Normally he'd look up to see her staring at a stack of paper instead.

Her gaze only ticks up to him for a second before returning to the phone and she explains, "I'm looking for a new domme. Annie told me that she's going on a work trip in about a month."

She says all of that like it's completely normal, but Levi has so many questions. Such as, "Work trip?"

Erna sighs as she remembers that a lot of the things she's so used to aren't exactly common knowledge. She explains, "When a dominatrix feels like going on a vacation, they don't usually stop working. They advertise and set up appointments wherever they're going, so that they can keep making money while they're on vacation. She's going to Montreal for a few weeks."

"And you can't just… not… for a few weeks?"

She smirks at his inability to articulate out loud what exactly she does, and she replies ironically, "I can't just not ever."

Levi frowns slightly. "Have you ever tried?"

"Remember what I was like when I first moved here?"

Levi thinks back to his first impressions of her. He remembers fucking hating her.

"That was me trying," she says after that short pause.

"Then I hope you find someone fucking quick," he mutters into his sketchbook.

"Yeah, well…" she says passively, scrolling down her phone more, "That's why work might get put on hold for a while."

Levi can't help but snipe back, "Must be nice to have that luxury."

He almost winces, because he thinks he might have just invited her to take that as a deep dig against her personally when he's not sure he meant it that way. He just has a resentment for people who don't work as hard as he does and apparently it runs deep enough that he can't control the impulse to spew bile about it at his friend.

But Erna, without looking up from her phone, answers with completely casual and unashamed
honesty, "It is."

If Levi were ever going to like someone rich and overprivileged, it would be her, because she's not fake about it. There's no hypocrisy or denial about it with her. She knows that having money is a good thing and doesn't try to minimize its power to make life better. She's keenly aware of her privilege while being neutral about it, not exalting in it or feeling guilty. Not like the upper class hipster children of the New York elite who are at this moment buying up decaying industrial lofts or abandoned warehouses to renovate and use as their open art collectives or what the fuck ever.

Erna stares at her phone and wishes she'd done something like bookmark every pro-domme on fetlife she'd ever been slightly interested in, because now that she needs to find one, it seems as impossible as finding a purple unicorn that poops gold and breathes fire. Not that there aren't mistresses and pro-doms on fetlife. There are a lot. It's just that none of them are very appealing to her. Every profile she reads is a little too narcissistic – not in the good way, but in the "Dunning-Kruger effect" kind of way where they are so narcissistic and so sure of themselves that it would never occur to them how ignorant and boring they come off. She wants a domme who's smarter than her. It's a requirement. Not that it takes a lot of brains to beat someone properly, but it's a kink of hers and she can't get off with a person who isn't smart enough to manipulate and gaslight and be truly, cruelly sadistic. Dumb people can be cruel in their own way, but it's not the same.

Levi stares at his sketchbook and tries to clear his head of inconvenient thoughts, like how annoying and confusing his crush on the woman across from him is, because he needs to come up with some creative ideas for flash art that he can take to the tattoo convention he promised Hanji and Mike he would go and work at.

Flash art is pre-drawn examples of tattoos either to give clients ideas or to be used directly for a quick walk-in. Levi doesn't usually do it. He has a portfolio prospective clients can look at, but no book of flash art. He prefers clients who have their own ideas and want something personal or meaningful to them (even if they have bad taste and dumb ideas). He's not a big fan of tattoo collectors who will walk in pretty much anywhere and just get the first piece of flash art tattooed on them for the sake of having another tattoo, but Mike sat him down earlier in the week and talked to him about how that's most of what he's going to get at the convention. He was very careful about being encouraging rather than demanding about Levi putting together more examples of flash art for people who want tattoos but won't want to put much thought into them, presumably because he's grateful about Levi taking his place and will do almost anything to keep him from backing out.

Levi's brain seems to rebel against his attempt to do some flash art because it's bored to fucking death with the usual roses and skulls and shit. Instead of giving him creative ideas it's going completely blank or getting distracted by chatter at other tables and the way Erna chews on her lip pensively as she reads on her phone.

Since she's always interrupting him when he's trying to concentrate, he decides turnabout is fair and he says, "Give me ideas for flash art."

Erna decides not to ask what flash art is, because she doesn't want to look like she cares, so instead she answers, "What's in it for me?"

"If you come up with something I can actually use, I'll make you dinner again."

She's intrigued. That time the power went out and she got to eat at his place, the food was really good. She sets her phone down and leans on the table with her elbows, looking at him with lowered eyelids. "What sort of ideas?"

He shrugs. That's the point. He can't think of any. He just says, "What would you want if you were
going to get a tattoo?"

Erna picks her phone up again as if she's done with this conversation. "We've been over this before."

"Imagine that they're temporary and not a lifetime commitment. Then what would you want?"

She's willing to consider that. She hums before getting lost in the world of fetlife on her phone again. "You should do ballerina figures. You could get at least ten different ideas just using the different variations of the second act of The Nutcracker as inspiration."

"What are the variations?"

She says distantly as she goes back to searching networks of pro-dommes, "You can google it."

Levi doesn't shoot the idea down right away. It's definitely different from skulls and roses. He decides to check out what she's talking about and starts to google 'Nutcracker variations'.

While he starts his research, she asks, "What's for dinner?"

He has to think about what he has in the fridge. He shrugs at her, because he can't give her an answer yet.

She doesn't let it go and insists, "No salad this time."

Reluctantly, he agrees, "Okay, no salad." Though he likes salads. Healthy food makes him feel better mentally and emotionally, not to mention physically. He tries to remember what he has. "I might be able to make vegetarian lasagna."

Erna crinkles her nose. "Vegetarian food is against my religion."

"That's tough."

"How do you make lasagna vegetarian anyway?"

He answers her glibly as he pulls up an image search for the Sugarplum Fairy. "Portobello mushrooms and kale instead of meat."

"Gross. You and your kale. My sister would love you."

"Does she look like you?"

Erna pauses and gives his question some serious thought before answering, "No."

"Shame."

That is the closest he has ever come to openly and undeniably flirting with her. Unconsciously, his heart rate speeds up and his shoulders get stiff while his stomach starts doing flips in anticipation of how she will react.

But there's silence. He glances up from the thumbnails of ballerinas in tights and flower-adorned tutus to catch a pink blush fading from her cheeks as she looks down at her phone and brings a finger to her lips to gnaw gently at a nail. Her eyes are already dilating again and getting that far away, lost-in-thought look.

He thinks he should just try his luck and try to kiss her and see what happens, but he knows he's a fucking coward, and even though the signals seem clear, he's not confident enough to feel totally
sure that lustful look in her eyes is because of him and not because of whatever she's reading. Instead he sits there silently and he smirks to himself as he reads more about the second act of the Nutcracker on Wikipedia. Basically, it's a bunch of dances that are themed around candy and desserts. He wonders if she is even aware of how fitting that is for her, because he only ever sees her eating sweet cookies and pastries from the café, her hair always smells like honey, and her skin always smells like some kind of cookie or cake or candy from the lotion she uses. He gives one of his sketches a bun of pitch black hair, straight bangs, and thick, muscular thighs. He's already learned that she can't recognize herself in his drawings, so he doesn't sweat anymore over drawing her likeness, and he thinks it's very fitting to draw her as the Candy Cane dancer. He's going to make the costume mostly red, because her skin supplies all the white.

Erna is quiet for once. Levi takes it as a reflection of how important the search to find a temporary domme is to her. When she's editing books, she lets herself get distracted often and by unimportant things. She asks him crazy rhetorical questions or puts hypothetical scenarios to him, or just offhandedly asks him about ridiculously inappropriate things. Now, as she taps and drags her finger around the screen of her phone, she doesn't get distracted. She seems focused and frustrated. Levi decides to leave her alone if it's so important to her and they sit together without any further conversation for hours, both concentrating on their respective projects.

Eventually they've been there for so long that Eren comes outside with Erna's midday latte, knowing that the deal is she gets one in the morning, one around lunchtime, and one more before closing. The strong smell of dark, rich espresso makes her finally look up and take a break. Levi asks Eren to get him another tea. He doesn't fail to notice how she scowls every time he talks to the kid like she's jealous.

Levi stretches his arms over his head, straightening out his shoulders. He tends to hunch over when he's drawing and it kills his back.

Erna brings the white porcelain mug to her lips and sips slowly, her eyes narrowed and looking right through him. She looks tired and annoyed and not like her usual, bubbly Saturday self.

"How's the search going?"

"Not well," she sighs. "It's hard."

She feels better as she drinks more of her steamy latte. It makes her decide to give her search a rest for a while. It's mentally exhausting, and she's starting to feel it. Unfortunately, there's no good way to use the fetlife search engine to find a list of results for women who identify as mistresses or dominants, so instead she's been doing a difficult, meandering, click-anywhere investigation of the members of groups related to pro-domming. It's basically an exercise in falling down rabbit holes and chasing after hope, usually to find any number of very real deal breakers like dommes who live in completely different parts of the country, or who only do online play, or who simply aren't taking new clients or female clients or whatever.

She sighs and wonders if she's going to find anyone in time for Annie's three week long vacation. If not, she supposes she could go three weeks without BDSM, but it won't be pleasant.

Erna looks across the table and feels like she's neglected Levi. Normally she would have annoyed him much more by now. So she sets down her latte carefully and thinks about what might be an uncomfortable or irritating thing to say.

She has something on the tip of her brain, but her knack for bothering him is dulled after so much reading and research. It only comes to her like a shot when he goes to pick his pen back up and keep drawing.
"How do you know if someone is attracted to you?" She asks, innocently enough.

Levi pauses, a little taken aback, and more than a little worried that this is referencing his flirting earlier that he'd hoped she had totally missed.

"Why?"

"Well," she says, in that posh New England accent, "you said you're attracted to anyone who's attracted to you. So how do you know?"

Levi, still suspicious, nonetheless answers as honestly as he can. "It's in their body language. There are a lot of ways. You just know."

Her eyelids lower and her voice drops to a deeper tone as she leans on the table and rests her chin in her hands mischievously. "So when Bambi gives you those big, 'fuck me' eyes, do you feel attracted to him?"

"Does it matter?"

"I'm curious."

Levi feels trapped. He doesn't want to answer honestly, because the answer would be 'yes'. Not that it matters, because he would never act on it. Luckily, the barista with the big 'fuck me' eyes comes back out with a mug of tea and interrupts Erna from badgering him for an answer.

Erna rolls her eyes at the back of Eren's head as he sets the tea on the table in front of Levi. She scowls at the back of his head when he dares to open his mouth, shyly asking, "Hey, how do I know when my tattoo is all healed? I'm excited to get that cover-up."

"You'll know," Levi says curtly, because he needs Bambi to get the fuck out of there and stop making him feel awkward.

Erna picks up on that, and where she would normally be glaring at Eren and wishing he would spontaneously combust, she instead speaks up to get him to stay longer, just to make Levi more uncomfortable, and she says, "Let me see."

Eren flinches very slightly, like he had almost forgotten she was there. Then he looks at Levi like he needs permission. Levi shrugs at him as if to say he doesn't give a fuck. So, without thinking too much about it, Eren pulls his jeans down until enough of his thigh is exposed to show off his tattoo. Levi is a little surprised. He'd thought the kid would be more modest. Shows what he knows.

Erna doesn't balk at all. First she smirks at the grammar fail in the quote. Then, without saying anything, she reaches and digs her thumb hard into the center of the infinity anchor adorning Eren's thigh.

The kid squeals in pain. He automatically jumps back to safety.

Erna says calmly, "I don't think it's healed yet."

"Shit!" Eren hisses to himself as he pulls his pants back up. "Fuck!"

Levi knows it's useless to try to scold Erna for the dick move. Instead he tells Eren, "I'd give it a couple more weeks."

"Okay… Thanks…"
Levi feels bad for him as he slinks back inside with his tail between his legs. He tells Erna, who is smiling just slightly to herself, "It's almost like you're jealous."

"I just don't like him," she says with her best poker face. She levels her eyes at him, like she's looking right through him again, and wonders out loud, "So it's as simple as a look? That's how you know if someone wants you?"

Levi thinks about it. He always just knows. He's attractive, so he's seen a lot of examples of what people look like when they want him. After a while, he even began to think that he could tell whether they would be good or bad in bed just from looking at them.

He was fifteen when he first knew.

He'd just been placed in yet another new foster home. After being shown his bed and getting the rundown of the few house rules, and meeting a few of the other foster kids, he'd gone outside. He always felt weird and too confined, not to mention uncomfortable trying to make himself feel at home in a place that was obviously strange to him and only temporary. He would usually stay outside for as long as possible if he could until he got acclimated to the new place.

He remembers the street well. It was one of those streets where every house was exactly the same. Little paper box relics from the old factory town that it used to be. The factory went out of business, but the little identical houses packed tightly together stayed.

His new home didn't have more than ten feet of distance from their neighbors on either side, but there was still a fence, and just then there was a girl with wavy, dirty blonde hair leaning on the other side of it and smoking a cigarette.

When she looked at him, he just knew. He couldn't name exactly what it was or what cues made it obvious, but he could see that hot spark of interest immediately and knew what it meant without question.

He tried to pretend not to see her even though she was less than ten feet away. He focused on the peeling white paint chips on the back porch he was standing on.

She offered him a cigarette to get his attention.

They'd talked for a while. She told him about the town, the school, and he told her about his last foster home that got shut down for 'negligent' practices. She asked how old he was, which is always a prudent question, he learned. When he told her his age, she said she was happy that he wasn't a freshman. She was wrong, but he didn't correct her. He'd been held back a year because of all the moving he did. When schools had trouble making sense of your records, they put you in the lower grade just to be safe.

When he finished the cigarette, she asked him if he wanted to come over. He asked her why. She said because her parents wouldn't be home for a few hours. He probably looked very cool and stoic when he nodded okay, but he was shaking inside and if he was quiet it was only because he didn't know what to say.

He wasn't that good his first time. He knows that. Like how the first thing he ever drew was only a little better than a stick figure. Everything takes practice and effort. He learned faster by asking a lot of questions - Does that feel good? Softer? Faster? - and taking constructive criticism in the form of moans, gasps, and clenched fingers.

After that first time, he always knew that look. He could spot it from across a crowded room.
He answers Erna, "Yeah… Mostly…"

Because she makes him unsure. He doesn't know with her. He thinks he knows, but then he doesn't, and he's terrified of her and the insecurity she makes him feel.

He thinks he can tell in those times when her pupils dilate and her eyelids get heavier. He knows what she's thinking about when she bites the pad of her thumb. He knows why her legs get fidgety and why she closes her thighs tightly together, because he's seen that look hundreds of times before, and if things were different and he was at a different point in his life, he would have simply said, "Do you want to go to my place?" because that was the extent of his flirting. He'd never had to be any smoother than that because he never got rejected. Not even times when he had no place to take them back to. He's had sex in plenty of secluded stairwells, alleyways, and parked cars, because fuck it. Once even in a moving car when Farlan was giving him and a girl he'd just met a ride home and Levi decided he didn't want to wait. Farlan refused to give him anymore rides until he paid to have the car cleaned.

But he doesn't know what to do with Erna. He's not accustomed to being worried about rejection, and he's terrified of it with her. Even though her body language always has that look, even when she's trying to mask it, he feels he can't be sure enough to take the risk.

What he can tell is that she is very much enjoying his obvious discomfort with the whole line of questioning, so he turns it around.

"Can you tell?"

"Can I tell what?"

"When someone finds you attractive."

She shrugs, looks away and says, "No one ever has."

"That means you can't tell." For which he's pretty fucking relieved. One, because even though he is good at being expressionless, he's sure there are moments where he has tells that she would pick up on. Two, because even he's noticed strangers checking her out before and even though she doesn't notice them, it makes him want to put his arm around her waist possessively.

Erna rolls her eyes. She's been told before by Deirdra that she's shit at being able to tell when someone is obviously interested in her, but she's been told more often by her other sisters that she's ugly and weird, and she trusts that assessment more. It rings so true that even when guys have literally expressed interest in her - whether it's at an extravagant charity dinner where someone tells her she looks beautiful, or in the dungeon of a BDSM club where someone is telling her they would love to do a scene with her - she's rationalized that it isn't because they're actually attracted to her. They couldn't be.

As the interruption is seemingly over, Levi goes to pick up his black pen again. He looks back down at his candy cane ballerina in the middle of a pirouette and he draws the curved line of Erna's calf muscle perfectly from memory.

It's like Erna was waiting for him to get back to work to suddenly ask, "How do you go from fucking hundreds of people to fucking nobody at all?"

Levi doesn't let go of his pen, but he pinches the bridge of his nose with his other hand and tries to think of an answer that will be good enough for her to not ask him thirty more questions about it. He answers her with another question.
"Have you ever tried to quit smoking?"

"Heaven forbid," she says, scandalized by the very thought.

"It's like that," he says, because he tried off and on when he was younger. "You miss it a lot at first, then after a while you don't so much, and then eventually you don't even remember what you liked about cigarettes in the first place." Except, he thinks, you still really crave a smoke when you get drunk.

"So you don't remember what you liked about sex?" she says skeptically.

"It's not that…" he thinks out loud, because obviously sex is always good. "Just everything else about it. Or the reason I was doing it so often with so many people."

"What was the reason?"

"Sense of control," he says almost under his breath as he gets back to outlining the figure on the page. He still has issues about feeling in control, but he doesn't want to assuage that anxiety with sex anymore. He has other ways he can feel in control of his life.

"I get that," she says. To her, sex and everything surrounding it is nothing but control and power, and taking and losing it. She picks her mug up and takes another long sip before leaving him alone and resuming her search for a domme.

Second Thursday

Early in the morning, Levi walks up to the café and is pleased to see the outdoor tables are finally clean to his standards for once. Erna is already sitting at the one nearest the door, sipping a latte and glaring at the back of Eren's head as he finishes polishing the next table to a high shine. When Levi sits down across from her, she nods towards the barista and says darkly, "He's trying to impress you."

Levi ignores her childish jealousy. If Eren sucking up to him makes this place cleaner, then he isn't going to discourage it. He reaches for his work bag and takes out his sketchbook, opening it to the finished flash art he's kind of excited to show her. He puts it on the table facing her to show her the finished Nutcracker candy-themed ballerinas.

She looks away from her laptop screen for a second and says simply, "Pretty."

"That's it?" he says, his eyelids lowering with indignation.

"What?" She looks again at the flash art he finished last night and says, "They're pretty. What am I supposed to say?"

He doesn't know why he expected more of a reaction. He felt like he deserved some more praise since he took nearly a week to work on the ten figures, and, in his opinion, it was the best flash art he's ever done, even though it isn't going to get much interest at the tattoo convention. He has some regular clients who like small, delicate work like this, but that's not what people go to tattoo cons for. It's mostly going to be people who are looking for basic shit like dragons and skulls and other tattoo cliches. He doesn't regret drawing the ballerinas, because the assignment got his creativity going again and gave him ideas for other flash art he can get done before he has to go to the convention, but still. He stupidly expected more gratitude since he felt like he was doing these drawings for her.
"Let me practice on you."

She doesn't look up from her laptop screen for him while she says tiredly, "We talked about this. No tattoos. Ever."

He reaches into a pocket in his work bag, pulls out some markers and holds them up. "No tattoos," he agrees.

She looks at the markers suspiciously. "Not permanent?"

"Washes off with soap and water," he confirms.

She still looks like she doesn't trust him, but turns her head back to her screen and says, "Fine."

Levi pulls a chair closer to hers. Closer than it needs to be. She ignores that and keeps scrolling through whatever she's reading. He peeks and sees the telltale black background and white text of fetlife.

"How's your dominatrix search going?" He uncaps a black pen with his teeth and grabs her right wrist, pulling her fingers from the trackpad. He quickly pushes up the sleeve of her dress before he can think better of it or hesitate. Then he turns her hand over and presses the back of it flat the table to expose her delicate wrist.

The sudden physical closeness startles her a little and she isn't looking at her screen anymore, instead looking at her arm, almost as if she's confused as to how it got into that position. Levi keeps his eyes down as he starts dragging the pen across her skin, trying to look like he's working, and not trying to ascertain the meaning of the goosebumps she gets when he touches her.

Erna collects herself and answers his question finally. "I put up a personal ad," she says with a self-pitying groan, "because I'm pathetic."

"You make getting laid sound so difficult."

"It is when you want something specific and won't just fuck anything that looks at you the right way."

He stabs her a little with his pen for that. She flinches only very slightly and smirks at him.

"Fuck a few hundred people and everyone thinks it's okay to slut shame," he mutters sarcastically around the pen cap in his teeth.

"I still don't understand how you go from that to complete celibacy."

"I already told you, it's not that hard."

"So you just don't need it," she says, obviously not believing him.

"Nope."

"Or you just jerk off a lot."

He eases up pressure on his pen for some light shading and smirks. "Is that what you got out of that?"

"I mean…" she drawls. "That's what I wanted to hear."
"Yeah," he says with a sarcastic smirk. "All the time." Although truthfully he didn't do that much either until she came around.

"I wish that worked for me," she says wistfully, turning her face away from watching him to glance at her laptop again.

"You can't masturbate?" he deadpans, not believing that at all. He's pretty sure literally everyone does, even if they have weird, hyper-specific kinks.

"I do," she says with a sort of daydreaming, longing tone. "It just isn't the same. I only get something like an eighth of the endorphins out of an orgasm that I could get out of a good spanking."

Levi clears his throat. There's something about it when she's speaking completely candidly and not being over the top that makes his skin get hot and his cock pulse with an insistent rush of blood. There's something about the way she says 'spanking' that makes it sound tempting.

He switches to his markers to color in the small figure he just finished outlining a couple of inches above the barely visible veins of her wrist.

Her skin takes color perfectly. Not everyone's does. There's usually a certain amount of compensation Levi has to do to get the color he wants against someone's skin tone. Hers is the shade of paper. The color comes out exactly the way he wants it to.

He can't imagine what it would be like to get more endorphins than what he gets out of a normal orgasm. He thinks he would fucking pass out every time he jerked off. He takes out a pink gel pen to get a thicker shade and texture on the costume of the ballerina he's drawing, and mid-stroke, he gets an impulse and he presses the tip of the pen deep down into her skin. He looks up at her eyes watching the way they go liquid black as he keeps steady pressure to indent a little pen-tip sized dimple in the fragile skin on the inside of her forearm. She bites her lip and drags her teeth across it, but she doesn't whimper or flinch in the slightest.

Finally he lifts the pen away and asks, "How long does that hold you over for?"

She pouts and says, "Maybe five minutes," before holding her wrist out like she's asking for more.

He caps the pen and drops it back into his bag along with his sketchbook. "Too bad." There's the flash of a quick, evil smile behind his eyes. "I have to go to work."

"Fuck you, tease," she says in exasperation as he walks away. She sighs and looks again at the flood of messages in her inbox in response to her personal ad. They're all from men, even though her ad specifically stated women only. It's like they can't read. No, that gives them too much credit. They can read. They just don't have respect for preferences or boundaries because they're assholes.

She deletes all of them.

She looks back down at her wrist. The dent from Levi's pen is quickly fading.

He's so fucking hot when he hurts her – verbally, physically, whatever. She can't stand it. He brings out primal feelings in her. Urges to claw, bite, and ravage that she's never had before. She's falling apart.

She thinks one more minute of 'just friends' is going to kill her probably, but she doesn't know what to do about that. She doesn't know what the point is of trying to form a relationship that would ultimately be sexually unsatisfying. If she wants a relationship that's sexually frustrating, she can just keep fucking being friends with him and never tell him that she wishes he were a sadist who wanted
to hurt her. Logically, she knows that there's nowhere for her to go with this. Emotionally, her gut keeps telling her, "Not enough."

She might just be dramatic, but the situation feels dire enough for her to do something she thought she never would again.

She takes her phone out and starts to text her sister, typing in Deirdra's number from memory. She gets straight to the point.

**Erna: So I think I like a boy.**

The response comes in less than a minute, like Deirdra had been on standby, waiting for Erna to break her stubborn silent treatment.

**Deirdra: Alert the fucking media.**

-------------------------------------------------------

After his last appointment of the day, Levi goes in the back to find Hanji fucking around in one of the small soundproof rooms they usually use for clients who want some privacy or need it (i.e. genital piercings, etc.)

"Levi!" Hanji says, after turning around startled at the sound of the door. "Way to barge in. What if I was doing a piercing?"

"Yeah," he deadpans. "Or what if you'd been in the middle of shoving a needle between your eyes?" Which is clearly what they were about to do. Hanji had the skin between their eyebrows pinched in a pair of forceps and a needle in the other hand, looking in the mirror on the wall when he opened the door. "During work hours…" he adds.

"Don't tell Mike," his androgynous, genderfluid coworker tells him before nodding toward a box of gloves and saying, "Give me a hand."

He sighs and pulls on a pair of gloves. Hanji motions for him to come over to the mirror and hold the forceps.

"Thanks. This was going to be really hard on my own."

"Then why were you about to do it?" He keeps a firm hold and watches Hanji stick their pierced tongue out slightly in concentration before positioning the needle.

"Because people on reddit said I couldn't… Duh…"

Levi rolls his eyes. This is not the first time Hanji has done something to prove someone in the piercing group on reddit wrong. It wouldn't even be the second or third time.

"Does it count if I'm helping you?"

"Well," Hanji says just before shoving the needle through in one clean go without even breaking their cadence, "It wasn't about whether or not I could do it by myself. Someone said that there's too much mobile tissue here and the piercing would migrate or reject. Fools."

Once the jewelry is in, Levi puts the forceps down on a tray. He appraises the curved barbell now adorning the inner corner of each of Hanji's brows with a silver ball. "Good thing you were there to prove people on the internet wrong," he muses with heavy sarcasm.
"I know, right?" Hanji says, very pleased as they clean up, dabbing a little alcohol on the piercing and moving to put the needle in the 'sharps' container. "So, what's up?"

Levi almost forgot what he'd come in for. He hesitates for a second before coming out with it. "Remember my neighbor you wanted me to go out with or whatever?"

Hanji drops what they're doing. Literally. The needle they were holding hits the floor and Levi is immediately clucking his tongue at them and squatting down to look for it as Hanji jumps up and down excitedly.

"Are you going to do it!? Finally? You should do the thing!"

"Calm the fuck down before you stab yourself." He finds the needle on the floor and glares at Hanji as he puts it in the sharps disposal.

Completely ignoring him, Hanji goes on, "Did you ask her out already? Are you dating? Because you should. That would be the cutest. Also you should convince her to get a Monroe piercing, because her face is cute."

As Hanji manically babbles on, Levi turns toward the door and says, "I don't know why I try to talk to you about anything."

"Okay. I'm sorry." Hanji takes a deep breath and, with laughably fake calmness, says, "What did you want to say?"

"I guess...I don't know. How do I ask her...on a date? Or something?" He doesn't even know how to put the question, because he's that perplexed about how this shit works.

"You just ask her to the movies or something. Have you not watched TV? This is common knowledge."

"She's agoraphobic. I can't take her to the movies or something. So if we can't date, then what? Do I ask her to be my girlfriend?" He shakes his head and says to himself, "That sounds stupid." Then, to Hanji, he asks, "How the fuck does this work?"

Hanji is silent for much longer this time. Levi can see their brain working out the problem. Then they finally say, hesitantly, "...Netflix and chill?"

"Oh my god, Hanji." Levi shakes his head as he opens the door and goes out to the front of the shop.

He goes to the computer and clocks himself out. Mike is already waiting at the door for them to finish cleaning up and getting their shit together so that he can lock up. Levi joins him outside, nodding at him and saying he'll see him on Sunday.

"You have plans?" Mike asks before Levi reaches his bike.

Levi thinks about it. Truthfully, he can't say he does. "I guess not."

"Want to come up? Nana's making dinner."

Hanji comes out the door then in a whirlwind, trying to throw their bag over their shoulder as they get their long fingers tangled in the rubber band they're trying to tie their mess of brown hair back with. Mike tries not to laugh. When Hanji gets one hand free and drops their bag on the ground, Mike asks, "Coming up for dinner?"
Hanji answers, "Yes. Definitely." They finally get their hair tied up into a ponytail and pick the bag back up.

"I thought you were going to the gym."

Hanji tilts their head at Levi and asks why. He points at Hanji's Pussy Riot tee with the sleeves cut off and cut open so far that most of their side is visible and says, "Sports bra," motioning to the neon green racerback underneath.

"Oh! Nah. I just felt mannish today and didn't feel like dealing with a binder."

"I see biological men with tits every day. They don't wear binders."

"Good point."

Mike reaches inside to turn out the lights and locks the door, before twirling his keyring on his finger and asking Levi again if he's coming up.

Levi looks at his bike, then at Mike and Hanji. (The latter is now giving him puppy dog eyes and pouting, begging him silently to hang out).

"Just for a couple minutes," he says, because he'd rather go hang out with Erna, and besides that, he's worried that she'll get anxious if it gets really late and he's not back.

They go in the door at the side of the building and climb the stairs to Mike and Nanaba's apartment above the shop. On the stairs, Levi pulls out his cell phone and looks up Erna's number. He wonders if it's dumb to tell her he's going to be late. It's not like they have actual plans that he's ditching.

More than anything, he hesitates to text her because there's a strong chance she's going to bust his balls either way. He gets over that and types a quick message at the top of the steps and hits send before he enters the apartment. All it says is, "I'm going to be home late."

As soon as it gets sent, he cringes, but before he can get in his head and worry about what he just did, Nanaba is sweeping him into the apartment and giving him a quick hug before going back to the kitchen to check on something that sounds like it's boiling over. While everyone around him makes conversation, Levi flinches at the buzzing of his phone.

Erna: Okay, honey. Should I wait up? Do you want me to keep dinner warm?

People always say that it's hard to get tone across in text form, but Erna's sarcasm is strong enough to transcend that difficulty. Levi doesn't hear Mike ask him if he wants something to drink because he's busy typing back.

Levi: Fuck you.

Mike asks him again and makes Levi remember himself. Before he can ask for a beer, Hanji interrupts, looking over his shoulder (easy to do since he's so short) and yelling to Mike in the kitchen, "He's busy texting his girlfriend!"

Nana sticks her head out from the kitchen and says in a sappy, cooing voice, "Leeevi! Why didn't you invite her!? Tell her to come over!"

Levi groans and goes to sit on the couch. Hanji yells back, "She's agoraphobic."

Levi's phone buzzes.
Erna: Fuck you more.

Nana yells from the kitchen, "What's that mean?"

Mike, who has never been a fan of loud noises and racket is making a pained face as he comes out with three bottles of beer. He puts one in Hanji's hand and reminds them that they could just go in the kitchen if they want to continue the conversation with Nanaba. He suggests, "You know…instead of yelling across the room…"

"Oh, yeah."

Hanji jumps to do just that. Mike makes a relieved sighing sound and sits down next to Levi who pinches the bridge of his nose like he's already getting a headache. He takes the bottle Mike offers him and twists the cap off as his phone buzzes in his pocket again. He doesn't look at it until he's taken a long drink.

Erna: How ever will I survive without you? I feel weak already.

Levi feels the rumble of Mike's suppressed laughter next to him and looks up to see him looking over his shoulder at his phone.

"Shut up."

Mike smirks and says, "I like her."

Levi groans. "I do too. I don't know what to do about it."

"So she's not your girlfriend?"

"Fuck no," he says emphatically as if she has cooties.

Levi: I changed my mind. I'm never coming back.

Erna: But honey, what about the children?

"Why not?" Mike asks, as if it's so simple.

"Because…” Levi struggles to keep up with both conversations with once, not really being able to come up with a satisfactory answer for Mike while he tries to think of what to text back to Erna. "Because how?"

Mike shrugs in his easygoing way and answers, "You just do what feels right."

Levi mutters under his breath, "What feels right might be a consent violation," because there have been so many times in the past month when he wanted to say fuck it and shove her against a wall.

"Okay, then. Don't do what feels right. Do something else."

Levi: You can have full custody of the hipster brats. I don't want them.

Erna: Don't you dare…

Levi: Have fun explaining to Eren.

Erna: Fuck it. I'm going to tell them that you're dead. I'm tearing down the wall right now
and your apartment is going to be my play dungeon.

Levi: Good luck finding anyone to play with you.

Erna: Prick.

Mike cuts into Levi's train of thought. "Have you tried to ask her on a date?"

"To where? My apartment? Does that sound creepy enough? She'd probably punch me in the throat."

"... That's a dilemma…"

"What even is the point of dating anyway," Levi asks, exasperated. "We already talk every day. We know everything about each other. We're basically married without the paperwork."

"Or the sex," Mike adds.

"Or that," Levi mutters, thinking to himself about how much more complicated that aspect is than Mike even knows.

Mike drinks down a third of his beer and then gets serious. "People like honesty. You should stop thinking about the right way to go about it and just be honest about how you feel and why you're scared of her."

"I'm not scared."

"You're petrified."

"I just don't want her to punch me in the throat."

"If you're honest, she probably won't."

Levi looks at his phone again and sends one more text.

Levi: Seriously, don't wait up. I'll be out late.

Erna: I won't. Thanks for letting me know. Be safe.

Over dinner, Levi gets more relationship advice for his non-relationship than he can handle. Most of it is conflicting since Hanji, Nana, and Mike all have their own ideas. They argue more between themselves rather than give him anything actually helpful. It's completely overwhelming for Levi, and he drinks more trying to forget what they're even talking about. In a stroke of brilliance, he takes the battery out of his phone and shoves it into his back pocket so that he won't do anything stupid if he gets the urge to text Erna about his actual feelings if he gets drunk.

Second Friday

He does get drunk. In fact, he drinks enough to make himself black out. He knows this because he wakes up in his bed the next morning, with a dry mouth and a splitting headache without knowing how the fuck he got there. He frees an arm from the tangle of his sheets and reaches for his phone on the night stand, but it's dead. He never put the battery back in.

He closes his eyes to alleviate the dizziness and tells himself it doesn't matter what time it is because it's his day off anyway. He rolls over to face the wall and tries to sleep it off. Through the fuzziness
of his hangover, he thinks he hears a thudding noise, but he writes it off as the pounding of his headache.

Then he hears that familiar moan, a sigh and a gasp after another, sharper-sounding whacking noise, and he realizes he's listening to Erna through the wall.

He groans in pain, physical and existential. He's supposed to be at the café right now so that he won't have to hear this. He pulls his pillow over his head to try to shut out the noise, but he doesn't hold it that tightly, because she sounds so good and he's a horrible person. He lets go of the cool pillow and reaches under the tangled sheet for his naked cock that's already becoming impossibly hard even though the river of alcohol in his system should prevent it from getting up at all.

He ignores the thwacking sounds, not wanting to know what they actually are. He concentrates on the noises Erna's making and imagines that she's under him instead of on the other side of a wall. He grips his cock tight and thinks about her bucking and writhing on it. He can almost feel her legs wrapped around him, thighs gripping tight as she ruts frantically for more friction and deeper penetration.

She begs him to give it to her harder (she's actually begging Annie, but whatever). He wants to grab her, dig his fingers into her thighs, and lift her hips. He wants to make her scream louder. He thrusts into his hand needily and bites back a groan.

She sounds close to finished on the other side of the wall. Her squeals get more high-pitched and start to break and get punctuated by hissed curses and yelps. Levi tightens his grip and tries to hold back and come at the same time, but his hand doesn't cooperate, increasing the friction, squeezing harder, and making him think about her tightening up around him and convulsing wildly. It pushes him over the edge and his hips thrust erratically as he shoots hot jets of cum all over his hand and onto the sheet.

He covers his mouth with his clean hand so that Erna won't hear him through the wall when he shouts, "Fuck!"

Thankfully, the noises stop a minute later. That doesn't make him feel like less of a fucking creep, but it cuts down on the post-orgasm overstimulation. His cock calms the fuck down and his breathing slows to normal again as he dwells on how guilty he feels. It at least distracts him from how shitty he feels physically for a little while.

When the physical discomfort finally weighs stronger on him than the guilt, he has to get up and take a hot shower where none of those guilty feelings and the sense of his betrayal of his friend are strong enough to keep him from wrapping his hand around his cock again after he washes off the dried cum. He presses his other palm flat against the tile wall to support his weight since he feels like he can barely stand. Water saturates his hair and makes it cling to his forehead as he breathes big lungfuls of steam, but it sucks as a lubricant. He has to tease the piercing at the head of his cock with his thumb to coax out more precum and in his head he falls into a fantasy that will make him come faster. Instead of fucking her he thinks about licking between her thick thighs and teasing her clit, making her come on his fingers and on his tongue. He always gets off more on being giving and unselfish. He's greedy only in that he wants to make her come as many times as possible. He gets so lost in his imagination that he loses track of what he's actually doing with his hand, and he's almost shocked when suddenly he's twitching and feels a stream of cum warming his palm. Then the oversensitivity hits him like electricity and fires his brain back into reality, ripping him out of that fantasy and making him moan at the physical pain and ecstasy of coming when he's too fucking dehydrated and poisoned to be doing it without feeling like shit. He feels sore everywhere, even in his balls. He stays in the shower, unmoving under the water, and he keeps turning the cold tap down
and the hot tap up until he's burning.

It makes his skin turn pink and dry as fuck, but it eases the pounding in his head.

When the fog in his head lifts, he finally cuts the water and dries himself off. He walks back into the main room of the apartment naked and has two competing impulses that he wrestles with as he stands still between the bed and the dresser.

One impulse is to fuck getting dressed, lie back in bed and jerk off again, because those moans she makes when she's with Annie are resounding and echoing in his head, and instead of trying to forget them, he wants to have them recorded in his memory forever and he wants to come to them again and again, even if it physically hurts. He's not that young, and he actually has some kind of refractory period now that he should be more mindful of before he has anymore painful orgasms.

He thinks that impulse might be coming from a place where subconsciously he's trying to punish himself. Maybe he's giving himself too much credit. Maybe he's just an actual creep.

The competing impulse that's quieter and getting pushed further to the back of his head every second is trying to tell him to get dressed and go downstairs, smoke a cigarette, wait for her to come down, and do literally anything about this all-consuming crush that is destroying him. He could honestly ask her on a date, even though he can pretty much only ask her to do any of the things that they already do as friends, which is awkward, but fuck it. He could even just say, "Hey, real talk for a second, I think you're fun and smart and sexy as fuck, and I expect absolutely nothing in return for saying that, but I had to get it off my chest so that I won't feel like this pervert who leers at you without you being aware of it." Yeah. That sounds good. Oh, wait, no, that sounds entitled and creepy as all fuck.

Thanks to however much he drank, he can't remember any of the advice his friends gave him the night before. Not that he thinks it would have been helpful anyway, because all the advice he got was given without his friends knowing the one most important part of his situation, which is that the whole BDSM thing scares the shit out of him.

He thinks he could deal with some of it, maybe. He's had women ask him to choke them during sex before and he's done so lightly and carefully. And ever since Erna mentioned it the other morning, he thinks he could be alright with spanking. He could possibly even get over his reservations about hair pulling. That's about as far as he can see himself going, and he knows that isn't far enough for her. He knows because those noises on the other side of the wall don't sound like love taps, and he knows from allusions Erna's made about flogging and caning, and he knows because he may have done a really morally dubious thing and checked out her fetlife profile on his phone after she showed him those messages in her inbox and never logged out. He still feels bad about it. He would take it back if he could. It was just too tempting to get an honest look at that side of her life. Her profile wasn't even anything salacious like he expected, being on a kink website. There was an 'about me' section where she only wrote two sentences: "If I haven't contacted you first, then fuck off and get away from my profile. Don't message me." She only had one picture posted, which was of a dark and cold landscape. Those things weren't scary. What did make him worry was when he got into her group activity and her list of kinks at the bottom of her page. Words like asphyxiation, belt-whipping, and consensual nonconsent scared him (and those are just the a,b,c's). He wonders what Hanji's dating advice would have been if he'd mentioned the whole asphyxiation thing.

He's never been okay with violence against women. The thought of hurting her hard enough to leave a bruise makes him actually feel nauseous. That first time he kind of barged in on her and Annie and saw the welts on Erna's thighs made him feel horrible even after he found out the activity that led to the marks was completely consensual. He's been trying to see it the way Erna does, but it's hard enough to conceptualize that some people like being in intense pain and even harder to think that
anyone who would want to do that to another person and could get off on it isn't a fucking monster.

As he stands there and tries to decide what to do, he thinks that he's glad exhibitionism wasn't among her kinks, because if she had naked pictures of herself in her fetlife profile, he would never stop looking at them and feeling simultaneously horny and guilty, which isn't the best combination of feelings to be holding onto. He finally shakes his head and rejects both options he's giving himself. He gets dressed, but he doesn't go downstairs for a cigarette. He sits down with his laptop, makes himself a blank fetlife profile, and starts doing some actual research like Erwin suggested.

He looks for the basics of the most basic information. Naturally, that makes him gravitate toward a discussion group for "Novices". The educational posts he finds aren't at all kinky. They have titles like "Limits, Consent, and Staying Safe" or "Relationships, Communication, and Partners". Nothing about caning or asphyxiation, which helps him calm down about the whole thing.

He gets so absorbed in FAQ's and educational articles that he forgets the time. He forgets to eat. He forgets to make himself tea. And eventually, even though what he's reading isn't overtly about sex, the fact that he's reading it with Erna in mind makes sex come to the forefront of his mind. Despite his attempts to focus and be disciplined and learn, he somehow gets around to picturing her as a submissive, on her knees in front of him, with her hair disheveled and her lips red and wet and stretched around his cock. Those desperate, needy mewling sounds he always hears through the wall muffled as she sucks and licks at the head before masochistically choking herself on the pierced length of it.

That image sticks for a few seconds and then he shakes it from his head and gets back to reading. He's in the middle of an essay about the keys to setting up a good BDSM scene. He swears he isn't thinking about her anymore, but then he finds his fingers pushing under the waist of his jeans. He ignores what his hand is doing and skims a paragraph about how to read body language, which is redundant, because that's the language he's the most fluent in, even more than English. He keeps skimming for something more useful. While he's distracted, his hand reaches for the zipper at his hips and pushes his jeans down before palming the bulge in his underwear. Levi keeps looking at the words on the screen, in complete denial that he's losing control again. At some point soon after that, his eyes are closed and he's not reading anymore and he's trying to remember in vivid detail how soft Erna's skin was in his hands yesterday when he grabbed her wrist to draw on it.

Finally he has to accept that he's doing this and he puts the laptop safely down on the floor and gets comfortable in bed after pulling his jeans and underwear off. He takes a deep, shaky breath and a loose hold of his cock because he wants it to last this time if only so that he can extend the time he gets to fantasize about her and delay the guilt that will probably hit him after.

He spreads his legs and uses his free hand to massage his balls while slowly dragging his other palm up and down the shaft of his cock, ghosting over the ladder of frenum piercings going up the underside of it. He teases himself while he imagines teasing her, rubbing his cock against her, getting her lips wet with it, rubbing the metal ball at the end of the barbell through his head against her clit and watching her hips buck toward the friction.

He tries to prolong it. He tries to stick to imagining a scene where he's just teasing her and she's begging him to fuck her. But, just like in real life, he's lacking in self control and it doesn't work the way he's planned. Quickly, he feels that overly familiar tightening below his abdomen. His lips part slightly and his hand starts frantically jerking at his cock hard, his hips buck up and stutter unevenly as he tugs himself through an alarmingly intense dry orgasm. He gasps as he feels like the air is rushing out of his lungs and he falls flat and boneless against the bed. His eyes snap open to see the white ceiling spinning.
He groans because he's dehydrated and his dick is actually sore and he's a fucking idiot. After a minute, when he feels confident that he won't pass out, he carefully gets out of bed and gets himself a glass of water. He sits down and drinks the whole thing while he forces himself to eat some dry toast. Then he puts his pants back on, muttering to himself about being a horny shithead.

He goes downstairs to smoke a cigarette, mostly just to get out of the apartment, and maybe break the cycle of jacking off every fifteen minutes.

When he opens the door to the outside, he sees the back of Erna's head first. She's sitting there on the top step of the stoop as usual. Her head lazily and contentedly lolls to the side, turning around at the sound of the door. Her grey eyes are narrowed and a tendril of smoke escapes her lips as she looks back and up at him. He's never seen anything so hot in his life. So there goes his effort to break the cycle of jerking off until he makes himself pass out. The way her pink lips look when they part to exhale smoke and that sort of serene, uncaring, fucked out look she apparently has after a session with Annie gets logged in his memory bank for future wanking.

Her eyes widen a little when she sees that it's him, and she says, "I didn't think you were home."

Levi steps out of the door frame and stands on the same step she's sitting on, though he has to balance himself with a hand on the railing. "Where else would I be?"

"I don't know," she says as if she couldn't give a fuck, but is simultaneously annoyed about it. "I didn't see you this morning, so I thought you didn't come home."

"I was in bed." *Totally truthful.*

"Did I wake you up?"

"Nah." *Totally false. "I just woke up." I definitely did not listen to you and jerk my cock until I nearly died.*

"You okay?"

"No," he says, again truthful. "Drank too much."

Erna is quiet and thoughtful for a moment, dragging on her cigarette and puffing smoke rings out around her tongue, a new trick for her. Trying not to sound concerned, keeping her voice very flat, she asks, "How did you get home?"

That's a mystery to him. "I don't know. I blacked out." He looks around, then points at his bike parked a little further down the sidewalk. "I assume I took that."

She clucks her tongue at him. "Tch. Don't do that." She ashes her cigarette angrily. "You live in a city. There's public transportation everywhere."

"I fucking hate public transportation," he says, but he shuts his mouth tight when she glares up at him with her basilisk stare. He drops his shoulders and placates her, "Next time I'm blackout drunk, I'll remember not to drive." Though he doesn't plan on there being a next time.

She releases him from her honestly scary murder gaze. When she finishes her cigarette, she stands and picks up her coffin purse. "Caffeine is good for hangovers. I'll get you some tea."

"Thanks," he mutters as she walks away. He fumbles blindly for the cigarettes in his pocket as he watches her go down the sidewalk in her chunky black platform boots. He never thought about it before, but they must be heavy, like walking with five pound weights around your ankles, but she
never makes it look like it takes any effort. He wonders how strong her legs still are even though she
doesn't dance anymore.

He nearly drops his cigarettes and curses at himself. He safely gets one into his lips and feels around
in one pocket for his lighter, then the other, then the first one again.

"Fuck."

He forgot it upstairs. Whether or not it's worth going back up to get it is a difficult decision, but in the
end he decides that his heart might quit on him if he tries to go back up without getting some caffeine
in his veins first.

When Erna comes back, she pretty much shoves the cardboard cup of tea in his hand. She says
unapologetically, "I hope you like honey and lemon."

The citrusy sweet smell of his tea hits him after she says it. He only ever adds honey and lemon
when he's sick… which he guesses he is now. He only grunts his gratitude to her, not feeling very
verbose at the moment. She puts her latte down on the steps and stands close next to him. Then
there's fire in front of his face. Too slowly, he registers that she's lighting his cigarette. The one he
forgot was hanging between his lips.

"You're a hot mess," she says after he finally gets it together and inhales.

He plucks the lit cigarette from between his lips and nods at it and the tea, promising, "I'll be okay
after this."

"You're lucky I know everything about hangovers."

He forgot that she said she used to drink a lot. He can drink a lot, but he doesn't normally get very
drunk from it. He hasn't had a hangover since the very first time he drank when he was a teenager.

Satisfied that he can stand on his own for a few minutes, Erna sits back down, elbows on her knees,
chin in her hands, and feet splayed like a forgotten marionette. She reaches into her purse and pulls
out a small white paper bag. She says cheerfully, "I told the hipster brats that you were sick and they
gave me cookies for you."

"You can have them." He's never had a sweet tooth.

"I was going to, obviously," she says just before she pops a sugar cookie into her mouth.

He finds the action adorable. He has the stupid impulse to wrap his arms around her in a crushing
hug.

Without thinking, he asks, "What are you doing the rest of the day?"

She shrugs. "Read stuff? Take a bath? I don't know."

Mentally he smacks himself in the forehead. It was a dumb question. He tries to recover with, "Want
to hang out?"

"Don't we always?"

This is what he was trying to tell his friends. How do you ask someone on a date when you literally
already spend all of your time with them? He rubs the barbell at the bridge of his nose and closes his
eyes. "I mean… like… do you want to do something different?"
She raises her eyebrows at him. She seems fascinated when she asks, "Like what?"

"I don't know." He feels like an idiot. "Watch a movie?"

Her brows lower and knit together slightly. "You don't have a tv."

"I have a laptop…"

Erna takes another cookie. Before biting it in half, she asks, "What would we watch?"

He shrugs. This is turning out to be just as difficult as he imagined, if only because she's being so obtuse. "Something on Netflix?"

She turns and looks up at him slowly, with narrowed eyes, and she asks, "Are you asking me to Netflix and chill right now?"

"No!" he blurts out quickly as if she just accused him of a double homicide.

"I was kidding," she deadpans.

"Don't do that." He exhales the breath he was holding. "I thought you were going to punch me in the dick."

"I would never do that." She takes out a clove, lights it, and thus commits them both to at least ten more minutes outside while she smokes it down to the filter. "I would probably break a finger on your piercings."

He smirks and suppresses a laugh. While he sips his tea and waits for her to finish her cigarette, he starts to feel a little better, physically, except for the part where his heart feels like it's going to beat out of his chest. He refuses to attribute it to anxiety and instead thinks he didn't drink enough water.

Erna takes her time. She keeps trying to blow smoke rings, something she used to be good at. It's easier indoors, where the air is still. The slightest air currents ruin them. She used to do this occasionally in the bedroom of her old apartment, even though smoking indoors was prohibited. She didn't even particularly like or need to smoke inside. She just has a natural inclination to break rules sometimes. It's in her spiteful nature. She's a brat.

After half of her cigarette is gone, she quits trying for rings and just smokes. She stares idly ahead as Levi drinks his tea. There is still a flood of endorphins running through her. Her caning session with Annie only ended two hours ago and she can still feel the stinging soreness everywhere the long rattan cane kissed her skin. It keeps her mood up. The effect is a bit like being drugged. She feels optimistic and happy and excited to do something different with Levi – especially something inside his apartment, which she finds so interesting. It has such a clandestine feel because Levi never invites her in aside from the two times she's eaten dinner there, (the first time during a power outage and again last week) and she loves things that feel illicit.

That's why, when they get upstairs, after she remembers to take her boots off just inside the door, she starts looking around and examining his things more closely while he picks the laptop up off the bed and starts fidgeting with it. She looks around and first goes to his drafting table. There's a big piece of cardstock with more polished, more detailed versions of the small ballerina sketches he did at her suggestion with beautiful curly calligraphy labelling each one: Candy Cane, Marzipan, Sugar Plum Fairy, etc. She smirks. She had lied to him when he asked her for an idea. She would never want a ballerina tattoo. She's had so much ballet in her life she could choke on it. Add to that the fact that she's never actually liked The Nutcracker, always being more attracted to the lesser known ballets like Coppelia or Dmitri. She just thought it would be entertaining to get someone who looks as hard
and as punky as Levi to draw some saccharine, fragile, little ballerinas.

Her eyes move to the side of the table where all his art tools are organized. She carefully picks up and fondles a Copic brush pen.

Levi stares hard at his laptop, closes out of the fetlife page he left open, erases his browser history immediately, and opens Netflix. Then he looks around and curses his minimalist lifestyle. At any point, he could have gotten a cheap couch from Ikea and easily prevented the awkward situation he's in right now. The only places to sit in his apartment are at the kitchen table, which would definitely be weird, or the bed, which... just no. He starts to over analyze. If he asks her to sit at the table, will she know that he's afraid to sit on the bed with her because she's fucking terrifying? If he asks her to sit on the bed is she going to accuse him of trying to Netflix and chill with her? He panics as seconds go by and he can't make a decision. Then he looks up and sees Erna examining a small bottle of Fusion tattoo ink and automatically, he says, "Put that down."

She exhales heavily like he's no fun and puts the bottle back where she found it, only slightly out of place. She looks up and his eyes are narrowed at her. She likes that look. To encourage more of it, she rolls her eyes at him and flounces carelessly over to where he's standing, peering over his arm at his laptop screen.

Levi wants to tell her to put the bottle back the way she found it. It will be too distracting to him if it's out of place. Just as he's about to say something, his arm feels lighter, missing the laptop he was cradling because Erna's swiftly snatched it out of his grip and is suddenly sitting on the bed with it.

"What are you doing?"

She answers very matter of factly, "Checking your history for some insights into your fucked up psyche."

He mentally commends himself on having the foresight to erase his history.

"Or, failing that," she says as she sees the blank browser history, "checking your bookmarks for the same."

Levi sighs and walks to the other side of the room to turn the ink bottle so that the label is facing the right way, because he knows she won't find anything. The only thing he ever uses his laptop for is work.

When he crosses back, he's immeasurably relieved that she's already decided to sit on the bed and taken the decision out of his hands. He sits next to her on the twin mattress, moving back to lean against the wall and folding his hands behind his head. He watches her, smirking silently as she looks for incriminating things in his bookmarks until finally she whines, "You're so boring."

Undeniable, he thinks. "Just pick something to watch."

"Do you really not watch porn on this thing?"

Levi leans forward, reaches, and takes the laptop back from her, simply saying, "Boundaries."

"I don't get it," she says, sounding perplexed and a little annoyed. "Do you watch it on your phone or something?"

"I don't watch porn," he deadpans as he opens the Netflix tab again.

She mutters, "Bullshit."
Levi scrolls down looking for anything that looks good and asks, "Do I get to look at your browser history now?"

"My history would frighten you and offend your sensitive soul to it's core. I wouldn't want to corrupt you."

"Yeah, because I'm so pure," he says sarcastically.

"As the driven snow, compared to me."

He wonders about that. And he wonders if she'll judge him based on what he picks to watch, so he hands the laptop back to her again. She takes it very willingly and goes straight to the Recently Watched category. She finds a bunch of documentaries. Levi rarely watches anything for entertainment.

"Though this does make me a little more sure that you might be a serial killer. You probably don't watch porn because you can only get off on the life slowly dying out of your victim's eyes."

He reaches for his tea on the nightstand and mutters, "I'm going to watch the life die out of your eyes if you don't pick something."

"Don't threaten me with a good time," she quips back, but she obeys and starts scrolling through movies, assessing each one with an adjective disqualifying them. "Boring… Dumb… Romantic comedy… Low budget… Pretentious… Torture porn…"

"Thought you would like torture porn."

"Can't watch it," she says absently. "Nothing with rape scenes."

That's curious to him, because she seems to be so flippantly able to talk about rape for its shock value.

"Oohh, dark," she says when she hits something she might like. He glances over at the title, Experimenter. She explains, "It's a movie about the Milgram experiments."

"What's a Milgram experiment?"

"Milgram is this psychologist who did fucked up experiments that proved unsettling things about humanity."

It sounds almost like a documentary, so Levi is down. He's relieved she doesn't want to watch something like an action movie or a romantic drama. Not that she seemed like the type to be interested in either of those things.

"Sounds good."

Erna hits play and sets the laptop down on the bed in between them before sitting back to lean against the wall with him.

After the movie starts, Levi vaguely remembers the social psychologist that it's about. He heard about the experiments and what the revealed about human nature either from some article or it was something he picked up in school or just in conversations. He can't remember.

As they're watching actors play the parts of somewhat horrified social experiment participants, Erna asks Levi, "Do you think you would have shocked the other person?"
"No," he says seriously without any deliberation.

She believes him. She normally wouldn't believe someone who said that and she would call them naive, but Levi might be one of the rare people who has it in them to stand against authority in favor of humanity.

"Would you?"

The side of Erna's mouth twists in thought. She doesn't have any delusions about being morally upright or heroic, but she has a lot of feelings about the infliction of pain and it seems anathema to her character to cause it in other people rather than take it herself.

"I don't think we'd get that far. I would refuse to participate unless I could be the one receiving the shocks. I have a thing for electrical play."

Levi smirks slightly and shakes his head at her. "What if they wouldn't let you?"

"In that case, I think I would get off on being coerced into doing it by that cold, aloof, stern man in the lab coat," she says, pointing at the man on the screen whose job it is to represent an authority figure to the participants in the study.

"You wouldn't feel guilty?"

"I would and that would make it even better."

Levi doesn't respond for a few seconds. Then he says, "...You are dark."

Calmly and contemplatively, Erna asks him with a quiet voice, "Am I a monster?"

"Nah."

The way he answers quickly, without a trace of concern comforts her. It was a serious question for her part. One that she asks herself every day as she wishes the world would burn all around her and destroy most of humanity so that she could feel safe, so that she could know that there's nobody left who would be a danger to her, nobody who could grab her and drag her into a darkened alley ever again.

Second Saturday

After sharing the customary cigarettes and caffeinated drinks on their stoop first thing in the morning, Levi asks Erna to the café where they can, as usual, sit at the same table to work independently and punctuate concentration and silence with snark and sarcasm.

"I can't," she says a little sorrowfully after she drops the filter of her clove into her empty coffee cup.

"Can't?" Levi repeats incredulously, surprised at the prospect that she might have plans of any kind. Aside from the one appointment she keeps every Friday morning, he's never known her to have any obligations at all thanks to her antisocial nature and agoraphobia.

"Annie's leaving in two weeks and I still haven't found someone to replace her."

Levi recognizes a hint of worry and anxiety in her voice and it annoys him to think that this is that important to her. He leans on the railing lazily, as if protesting, committing himself to staying right there until she agrees to leave with him. His eyes narrow as he looks down at her, seated on the top
step ahead of him, her shoulders slumped and her posture slack and apathetic-looking, the way it is only when she sits on the stoop and smokes. Put her in a chair and she straightens right up, but for some reason, without that accoutrement of civilization, she assumes the posture of a discarded rag doll.

"Can't you keep up your search at the café?"

"I could," she agrees lazily, not turning around to face him, but instead she watches the butt of her cigarette fizzle out in the moisture left at the bottom of her cup, "just not with you." She pauses as she hesitates to finish her thought, and then after a tense beat she says, "You distract me."

Levi snorts disdainfully. "I don't do shit to distract you."

"You're right." Erna stands up, taking her cup with her past him to the door. "I let myself get distracted by you." She rests her fingers lightly on the handle and casts him a glance. She can tell from his expression that he's annoyed at her decision to not spend time with him, and grotesquely it makes her a little happy. Before she leaves him, she says, "I just really need to focus and get this done so I can stop worrying about it."

He thinks he hears her say, "Sorry," as she opens the door and disappears behind it, but that might have been wishful thinking.

"Tch." Levi clucks his tongue to himself. He wouldn't care if it were for anything else, but he feels personally offended that he's getting the shaft so that she can search the internet for someone to give her sexual release at a financial cost.

Suddenly, he feels self-conscious about how worked up he feels over it. He presses the heel of his hand to his forehead and cringes at himself. He admonishes himself silently for caring so much. He used to have a life, he thinks. He isn't even dating this girl, but he apparently gets all possessive and surly if she wants to have some fucking time to herself for once. He doesn't like this new aspect of himself. It reminds him of someone he knows.

He decides to text Ymir and see what she's up to.

There are a few things intrinsic to Erna that she knows will never change no matter what life hits her with, no matter how her brain continues to develop with age. These traits have been a part of her since she has had any kind of sentience and she doesn't see them going away like a temporary habit or quirk.

One, she has always been sad. Not depressed, necessarily, as her level of sadness has always ebbed and flowed up and down according to situations and hormones and brain chemicals. Though she knows that she is never as happy as most people, she's never felt the need to seek help through therapy or antidepressants. She has a bar set. She'll seek help if she ever feels that she's a danger to herself, and, while she has many harmful and self-destructive, self-abusive habits, she has never felt even close to suicide. The survival instinct in her is too strong.

Two, she likes to read. She learned how much earlier than most and it has always been her method of self-soothing. If there isn't a book around when she feels bored or anxious, she can self-soothe by reading labels on bottles or any meaningless drivel as long as it's in a language she understands. Aside from the pacification it makes her feel, she has always found reading novels to be a better way of connecting with the world than actually going out and doing the thing. Books are her tools to experience without action. She has approximate ideas of what it is to be cold, insane, oversensitive,
reckless, insipid, loving, every shade of humanity she can feel and understand at least a little because of good literature. Books have allowed her to perceive the world and what it means to be human, even if she's never taken much of an active role in either of those things. She knows what heartbreak feels like, though she's never fallen for anyone. She knows what a friend would do and feel for another friend, though she's never really extended herself to true friendship with another person.

Three, she is a procrastinator. And much the same as most people victimized by this trait, she doesn't know why she does it. To torture herself? To feel that rush of panic upon the sudden closing in of a deadline? It could easily be a masochistic, adrenaline-seeking thing, but it comes with such a sense of anguish that she can't imagine even on a subconscious level that she's enjoying it as her heart races and her brain works overtime to do whatever important thing she's put off until she's built what could have been simple into this urgent, sickening, direful thing.

Annie is going on vacation in two weeks. For a fifty page research paper, two weeks would not feel like a terribly scarce amount of time. For finding a pro-domme that she likes well enough and is willing to do private sessions in her apartment? If she pulls it off, she'll be immeasurably surprised. It's an impossible amount of time. She knows that. She's trying anyway, because failure means the creeping back in of an unbearable height of anxiety and depression.

She lowers her standards to try and prevent that failure. She starts sending beseeching messages to women she otherwise wouldn't. Her desperation makes her reach out to pretty much any pro-domme who is actively taking clients and lives in the city, whether they seem intelligent, skilled, or even safe doesn't weigh as heavily as it did before. She words her messages more and more desperately, hoping to appeal to sympathy, but Erna is a hard sell. Half of the women don't even believe she's real. Those who do believe her sincerity still prefer to work in their own space or public dungeons and have rules against house calls. The very few who don't have either of those limitations, unfortunately, have other reasons to reject her like sheer geography (this was easier when she had a more attractive address) or simply feeling that they don't "click" with her. It's true. They don't. But Erna could not give less of a fuck about "clicking" right now.

After Levi finishes up some work at his drafting table, he finally texts Ymir. He would have done it first thing in the morning when he was really feeling the angst of Erna's rejection, but it's Saturday, and even though he doesn't know what Ymir does for a living (if anything), he believes strongly that it's indecent to text or even call anyone before noon on a Saturday.

Levi: Doing anything?

Ymir responds right away, so at least he doesn't have to worry about having woken her up early.

Ymir: No. Let's get day drunk and go to a diner

Levi sits for a few seconds, contemplating his phone's screen. It's not that her plan doesn't sound good (except the "day drunk" part, because he's still traumatized from yesterday's massive hangover). It's that he wants to ask if Krista will be tagging along. He has some shit that he has to work out and he doesn't feel comfortable enough talking around the short, blonde nymph. It's not that he has any reason to not trust her… It's just that she's unsettling in a way that's difficult to pin down. Besides, Ymir is useless as a confidante with Krista by her side. She never speaks candidly around her girlfriend; still, after all these years, she feels insecure enough to automatically put up an irreverent, tough-guy front for the blonde despite the fact that Krista obviously, with massive eye rolls, sees right through it.

Despite his reservations, Levi exhales loudly, putting on his boots and grabbing his wallet and a
hoodie. There's no way he could ask subtly enough whether Krista is joining them or not that wouldn't make Ymir defensively raise her hackles and take it as an affront. Any miniscule perceived slight against Krista is equivalent to insulting the religion of a fanatic, since Ymir's girlfriend is her highly revered goddess. He'll just have to go over, find out, and act accordingly.

When he gets there, it turns out that Ymir is in much the same boat he's in. Ditched. Home, alone, and brooding about it. Krista went shopping. Ymir wanted to go with her, she says, but got turned down on account of being "no fun to shop with."

She's swinging a beer bottle around as she gestures and rants, "I'm more fun than she's going to have alone! I mean, yeah, watching her shop for girly things is boring as fuck, but I can hide how bored I am."

Levi thinks that she's more confident in her poker face than she should be. If anything, she broadcasts everything she's thinking and feeling more magnified and more loudly than she's actually feeling it. Which means that, right now, despite the gesticulations, she's actually only feeling slightly indignant about Krista going shopping on her own for a few hours.

"So what's your deal anyway?" she asks, pointing the mouth of her beer bottle at him sitting across from her chair in the living room. "Why aren't you hanging out with your girlfriend?"

"Still not my girlfriend," he shoots back glibly.

"Don't act like you don't know what I mean, dork." She swings a leg over the arm of her chair and settles in. "I hardly ever see you anymore because you're always following her around."

"I don't follow her."

Ymir snorts out a hard, joyless laugh. "Whatever." She's content to give him the silent treatment until he finally answers her question.

"She wanted to be alone."

"And you're all butthurt about it," Ymir says derisively, like it's a weakness. Though, if it is, it's one that they share in spades.

Levi obviously caught Ymir in a bad mood. He doesn't care. Her moods aren't nearly as bad as his. Even when she's being a dick, he isn't put off. They work well together because of that. They both tend not to get bent out of shape over harsh words.

So he fires back, "I'm not all butthurt about being alone for a few hours like you are. I'm all butthurt about her ditching me so that she can look for a sadistic woman she can pay to top her."

Ymir's mouth opens and she points a finger in the air as if she's going to come back with something witty to say to that, but instead, she's silent and her jaw just hangs there, mouth agape and at a loss for words until finally she says, "Okay… That's… different."

"Yeah." He reaches for the tea he had to make himself in Ymir's kitchen when she refused to on account of, she said, not knowing how to boil water. He sips and waits, but she remains silent, so he goads her. "This is where you say something gross or insulting."

"I know, I know," she says in exasperation. "But..."

Levi can see she's got nothing for once. With a callous, ill-tempered sneer, he taunts, "But at the same time, you were kind of right about her being straight." That should confuse her more.
She sips her beer and thinks. Levi is starting to feel proud of having confounded his normally quick-witted, irascible friend, until she says, "So even with you being all obvious and drooling over her like a lovesick puppy, she'd still rather get some pussy than go anywhere near your joystick."

"Fuck you," he deadpans, his eyelids lowered dangerously.

"I mean, at least she has good taste."

Levi slumps in the chair and rests his temple against his fist while he waits for her to finish.

"Oh, I know," Ymir says with a lascivious grin, "Tell her Krista will do it. She loves that shit."

Levi assumes that Ymir is kidding. He can't see it. Krista is sweet. Maybe a little manic, but... He says without changing his bored expression for her, "I can't tell if you're being for real."

Ymir swallows the last third of her beer with a big gulp, burps, then says, "Very real. She makes me fear for my life sometimes. She's rough as fuck and scary in bed."

Levi's brows knit together slightly and he straightens up in his chair. "I wouldn't have thought..."

"Yeah, everyone assumes I'd be the dominant one." Ymir snorts. "I fucking wish. I love her, but I swear if she weren't doing crazy shit to me, she'd be some kind of serial killer, fucking people with knives or something."

Levi takes a long pause, then says, "I'm never going to be able to look at her the same way again."

Ymir shrugs carelessly. She waves her bottle back and forth between her fingers and says, "So you haven't pulled the trigger because you think you're not sexually compatible? Or are you just afraid of rejection?" Before she gives him room to answer, she adds, "If it's the rejection thing, then just don't, because I can say with 100% certainty that Tinkerbell is head over heels for you. And I've never been wrong."

"What if it's the first thing?"

"Levi..." Ymir seems to put some thought into what she's going to say. "It's not like I was a kitten in the sack before I met Krista. Before I had that little psycho in my life, I was what you'd think of a typical butch lesbian, always on top, always the one wearing the strap-on. I'd make girls come like they were getting demons exorcised from them."

"I got the picture, thanks."

"Anyway, Krista wasn't into that. I'm not fully into what she wants to do to me either. Some of the things she talks about are definitely illegal."

Levi tents his fingers over his temples. "The point, Ymir?"

"You fucking adapt, shithead. And not in the way where it feels like you're both settling. If it's meant to be, then your ideas about sex evolve with the person you love..." Sensing that she may have accidentally just said something wise, she adds an irreverent, "Or whatever."

Then she gets up and mutters to herself about needing another beer and something about him being a pussy.

While she goes to the kitchen, Levi sits in silence and lets that advice gestate. He feels dumb for worrying so much in the first place. He was getting way ahead of himself worrying about Erna's
masochism when he doesn't even have the balls to ask her on an honest date or anything. When Ymir comes back, she falls into her chair again, shooting him somewhat baleful glances as she drinks, annoyed with him for making her say something sincere and smart.

Levi finally thinks out loud, "You know, I don't even care about sex. I'd be happy to just hang out with her and watch Netflix and dumb shit like that."

"Good," Ymir says curtly. "Then just keep being friends with her."

"Okay, I care about sex enough that I want more than that."

Ymir smirks knowingly. Like she told him so.

Levi drops his head to his hands, pressing at his forehead and then carding his fingers through his hair. "I've never wanted to be friends with someone while wanting to fuck them at the same time."

"See, I don't even understand how you can get a boner for someone without also feeling like you'd want to hang out with them."

"I just do." Levi says. "I always have. That's part of me. She makes me feel like I'm not myself anymore."

"That's dumb."

"You're dumb."

"Smarter than you," Ymir mutters into her beer before taking a huge sip. When she comes up for air, she says very cogently, "So it's not that you're scared of the whips and chains and it's not that you think you'll get rejected, it's that you're having some stupid existential crisis because you've never really had a crush on a girl."

"It doesn't feel stupid."

"Oh, boo-fucking-hoo. People change all the time. I'm surprised you haven't figured that out by now. It's, like, science. Your brain is made out of completely new cells like every fifteen years or something."

Levi shoots her that look that tells her he's having trouble taking her seriously again.

Sensing that he doesn't believe her, Ymir reaches for another personal example, since that worked well enough the last time, and after thinking for a moment, she tells him, "When I was in my early twenties, I listened to classic rock all the time. Now I can't stand the shit."

"Classic rock?"

Ymir nods and takes another drink.

"Like The Eagles and shit?"

"And I wanted to be a morning zoo DJ," she adds.

Levi's eyes widen a bit at that. Just to clarify, he asks, "Like... Howard Stern or something?"

"Exactly."

Levi is shocked. "I feel like I don't even know you."
"That's the thing." Ymir leans forward and sets her beer on the table. "You do know me. You know the me I am now. And who I am now is the furthest possible thing from the me I was back then."

"Thank fuck."

"But you don't see me crying about it, being a little bitch and whining about some tail making me catch feels."

A clear, high, and sweet voice echoes from the hallway opening behind Levi, "Catch feels?"

Levi turns around and gives Krista a slight wave. Ymir scrambles to sit up so fast it's comical. Levi snorts at the way she rushes to unhook her leg from the arm of her chair and get up to help Krista with her bags. She simpers apologetically, "I was talking about Levi, babe. You're the only tail I have feels for."

Levi deadpans at Krista, "Did you know your girlfriend used to listen to classic rock?"

Ymir had been in the middle of leaning down for a kiss, but at this new information, Krista recoils and says, "Ew, Ymir." She shrinks away from her girlfriend and climbs up the stairs to get changed.

Ymir drops the bags, turns, glares at Levi, and points toward the door. "Get out."

"What?" he deadpans with mock innocence. "We're not going to the diner now?"
Erna: Dinner?

And the second after she sends it, her gut twists with dread at every negative possibility she's just opened herself up to. The worst of those being no response at all. She'd prefer a rejection. At least that would mean he's paying attention.

Levi: You taking me out?

Erna's eyes light up at the tease, but her mouth curls in a pained expression. She wishes she could. She misses going places. She's sure that someday she'll be able to get over her stultifying fear of the outside world, but for now the thought still paralyzes her. It's not safe out there for her.

Erna: I'd order you pad thai, but I thought your body's a temple or whatever.

Levi: I could go for pad thai.

Erna: There's sugar in it, you know.

There's a pause in the exchange, and Erna waits. She gets nervous that she'd caught him in the middle of something, or that she's bothering him. If she wanted to give him some space so that he wouldn't grow to resent her, she's doing a terrible job of it.

Levi: So this is your way of saying you want me to make you dinner.

Erna: Got it in one. Very observant of you.


Levi: What do you want to eat?

Erna is surprised that he's giving her an option. Usually he just makes whatever gross healthy stuff he wants. Not that it's actually gross. Despite her preference for sweets and sodium, she really likes the food he makes. She just pretends not to so that she can tease him about it. It's still hilarious to her that he looks like this grim, punky tattoo artist, but he drinks tea and eats quinoa like a crunchy yoga instructor.

She doesn't answer his question right away, because it's much too open ended for her. She doesn't know what she wants to eat, or if she even wants to at all. Years of intimate relationships with eating disorders has fucked up her metabolism so that "hunger" isn't a thing and she needs to remind herself to stay on track with the whole eating thing. Obviously cravings for foods aren't something she's ever allowed herself to entertain either.

Erna: Whatever you're making.

Levi: I can make whatever you want.

Erna bites her lip. She thinks she can tell that he's going to get annoyed with her if she doesn't make a decision.

Erna: Crepes? Breakfast for dinner?

Levi: Easy

Erna: I'm going down for a cigarette.
Levi: I'm out. Be back in an hour.

Erna is thrilled. That means she has time for a quick cigarette, an orgasm, and a shower. The orgasm part is important, because going over to Levi's makes her twitchy. Being in his apartment with him makes her blood seem to run hotter and rush to her face more easily. When she watches him in his own habitat there's a more noticeable fluid, feral grace to his movements that makes her eyes mist over and her lips part to beg for something to sate an unknown oral fixation.

She thinks coming before she goes will help. It never does, though. Maybe this time. She's the definition of a fool.

She does have one good idea: to take the smoke break last, to masturbate and shower first, so that when he returns she's on the stoop, fresh-faced and blowing smoke rings like she doesn't care. Like she didn't put so much mental gymnastics into what she could do to seem cool while aching to be around him.

He shows up with Krista and Ymir, so the coolness comes more naturally, her eyes narrowing at the manic pixie dream girl and her somehow always lascivious, if completely faithful, girlfriend. Even though he's with them, Levi still looks completely separate, and it strikes her that he probably always looks that way no matter who he's with. He walks up to the door without waiting for the duo, without acknowledging that they're there anymore. His penetrating gaze locks instead onto her as he reaches for a cigarette. It's her favorite movement of his. He keeps his lighter in his back pocket and his shoulder muscle flexes beautifully as he reaches around for it, emphasizing the hard line of his neck on that side for a moment, which was aesthetically pleasing enough without the gorgeous, starry compass he recently put on it.

His every movement and word lately makes her feel small in the way that she likes. Inferior. The way that he inhales with invisible effort and exhales his smoke away from her makes her shudder from her chest outward. She used to have so much confidence in her ability to hide every feeling behind her mask, but now she hopes and hopes that he won't catch every intake of breath, every muscle tremor, every single little response her body has to him, because he's proven himself to be so much more goddamn observant than she'd ever expect of anyone.

"Hey."
"Hey yourself."

Ymir and Krista catch up. For once, Ymir ignores Erna but for a slight nod, trudging past her up the steps. No leering grin, not even a hint of a depraved spark in her eye that she usually treats Erna to along with some sexual remark. The gothic lolita almost feels snubbed. Grateful, but still snubbed. Krista, at least, follows her usual programming, half-skipping up to the steps and bending over with a squeal to wrap her arms around the sitting girl's shoulders, slightly nuzzling her button nose against Erna's ear and lamenting, "We haven't seen you since the party! How are you?!!" with a sincere fervor of enthusiasm.

Ymir rolls her eyes and grabs her girlfriend's elbow, pulling her up the steps, "You never see her because you hardly ever leave the apartment, and you hardly ever leave the apartment because," she swirls the short blonde into a suffocatingly tight embrace and leans her much taller frame over her, "you're busy... with me... so let's go upstairs."

"But I wanted to ask Erna about—"

"Nope," Ymir cuts her off. "Leave them alone."
Erna watches Krista get dragged inside. When she looks back to Levi, he's wearing a pained expression though he seems relieved that they're gone.

Ironically, Erna smirks and asks him, "So, how was your day?"

He only grunts. So she follows up with, "You always seem so annoyed by your friends. I don't get why you hang out with people you don't seem to like very much."

He inhales a lungful of smoke thoughtfully. As if it's an acceptable answer or a rebuttal he says, "I like you."

He confuses her. She doesn't know how to respond to that. Her lips stay tightly shut around the black filter of her clove.

"How was yours?" he asks.

She doesn't even reach to take the cigarette out from between her lips, so her answer is mumbled around it, "Put a lot of effort into total failure."

"So no new domme," he concludes, sounding a little too sardonically pleased.

"Nope," she answers bitterly and parts her lips to let the stub of her cigarette fall to the step below her where she can crush it with the heel of her boot. She looks up at him then, still taller though he's standing on the sidewalk and she's sitting a couple of steps above him. She narrows her eyes and accuses him of seeming happy about it, though his expression is as stoic and unreadable as ever. She adds to that accusation, "I thought you hated Annie, anyway."

He smirks at that. "Maybe I've gotten used to her."

"Oh, well, that's very important, that you approve of who I'm getting topped by. Maybe I should run all candidates by you first."

He snorts slightly, derisively, as if to say, 'Only if you never want to get laid again.' As if his taste is so much more discriminating than hers.

The bitterness and uneasiness about the failure of her whole day sinks away from her and a slow smile spreads across her face. She enjoys the derision. She loves his sarcastic way and how he always seems to be looking down on her while somehow making it feel respectful, always careful of her, revering her presence while teasing her mercilessly. The warmth radiates down through her spine, her stomach, her cunt. She should have masturbated more, edged herself more, she thinks. She fools herself into believing that she could possibly have done something to counteract the feelings his demeanor sets off in her. Like this is merely a biological nuisance.

It does feel like a biological imperative to follow him when he finishes his cigarette, moves past her to the door, and says, "Come on."

She puts conscious effort into going slowly so as to not look eager. Not that he should notice. He walks ahead of her the way she prefers because of her aversion to anyone following her ever. A sensible preference for anyone who's been stalked for a long period of time that he never gives her shit about, because there's no harmless way to tease about something so solemn. She almost wishes that he would tease about it. Like treating her trauma with less seriousness would help. Gallows humor can be a kind of therapy.

Levi still doesn't turn back to look at her even when they pass the threshold of his apartment. He slings his olive green canvas messenger bag to the floor and unties his tightly laced boots without a
Erna has learned not to wait to be invited to sit or make herself comfortable. He treats her like she knows how to behave. That's a mistake. As soon as he's busy in the kitchen, she moves over to his workspace and spies on his drawings and starts moving things because she's picked up that moving his pens and inks and various other tools irks the hell out of him, which is made even more fun by the fact that he's too proud to admit his obsessive compulsiveness about it, so he has to suffer it and act like it doesn't bother him while clenching his jaw and intermittently casting baleful glares at a slightly tilted stack of paper, or a misplaced eraser.

If he would turn away from the mixing bowl on the kitchen counter, he would catch her at her game. But he doesn't. He remains focused on what he's doing and apathetic about her presence, as if she's a house cat.

After setting a sufficient amount of objects off kilter, only slightly, gaslighting, she skips on the balls of her feet innocently over to the kitchen area to peer past his arm at what he's doing. She watches him whisk the cream-colored batter and comments, "I didn't think you'd know how to make crepes."

"I didn't. Took five minutes to learn."

She tilts her head. "How?"

"There's this thing called the internet." He keeps whisking with one hand, turns on a stove burner with the other hand, and tilts his chin towards his phone resting on the counter, the browser opened to a recipe.

Erna leans her elbows on the counter and rests her chin on interlocked fingers. The recipe looks like gibberish to her. She never learned to follow one. It never occurred to her to even try to cook her own food. Why bother when it's so easy to have it made for you?

She says sarcastically, "I didn't know anyone used the internet for anything aside from masturbation."

"You going to sit down or are you happier being in my way?" he growls.

"As if you needed to ask," she teases, dipping her finger into the bowl he's set down while he bends down to retrieve a large frying pan from the cupboard below. When he stands up, he catches her licking batter off of her finger and he squints hatefully at her.

"When was the last time you washed your hands?"

"Don't tell me you're going to throw that out and start over because it's contaminated," she emphasizes that last word with a spooky quality, making light of his aversion to anything that's slightly unclean.

Not one to back down on principle, Levi keeps his eyes locked on her while reaching out for the bowl and dumping its contents down the sink without a word.

"You're ridiculous," she says as her shoulders slump heavily and she tilts her head back to roll her eyes along with her neck.

"You're disgusting," he deadpans back, probably unaware that it triggers a bothersome surge of warmth throughout her body, concentrated between her thighs. "Wash your hands."

She sticks her tongue out, but trades places with him and stands in front of the sink to do as he asks while he gets to work making a whole new bowl of crepe batter.
After she dries her hands on a paper towel and tosses it, he orders her, "Go sit down."

"So bossy," she chides as if she doesn't love it. As if she doesn't purposefully manipulate him with her behavior so that he will get bossy with her.

She sits at the table, hands folded primly and resting on her skirt, posture perfectly upright, and she gets rewarded with a plate of perfectly thin, beautiful crepes in only a few minutes. After he sets them in front of her, he asks, "What do you want on them?"

"Just butter and sugar, but you don't allow sugar in here, do you?" She still remembers when he tried to give her iced tea without any sugar because he didn't have any. It was offensive enough to her that she'll never let it go.

His eyelids lower dangerously at her and he stays frozen there for a moment as she stares back, challenging him to say something sarcastic and biting. Instead, he turns away, grabs his bag from the entryway, and pulls something out of it. She thinks he's opted to ignore her again, so she goes to the counter and grabs the butter that he used to grease the pan. She can do with at least half of her preferred toppings. When she turns back, he's standing over the table again, looking down at some kind of glass cylinder in his hand and writing on it with a black sharpie.

Erna retakes her seat, but holds off on buttering her crepes to watch him curiously.

Levi sets down a glass sugar dispenser like you would find at a cheap restaurant. The kind with a metal lid and a pencil-eraser sized hole for sugar to come out. It's about three quarters of the way full with white sugar and labeled with a piece of masking tape, "Erna's Sugar" in his blocky print hand.

She can't help smiling. "Where'd you get that?"

"Stole it from the diner Ymir dragged me to for lunch," he mumbles perfunctorily as he goes back to the counter and grabs a plate for himself.

Erna thinks it might be the nicest thing anyone's ever done for her. She doesn't say so, because it would be a sincere statement and she shies away from sincerity with him. Instead she harrasses and provokes him. "Does this make us married now? Should I keep a toothbrush over here?"

He rolls his eyes. Doesn't use any of "her" sugar. He tops his crepes with healthy berries and no butter or sweeteners. He tells her, "I don't know how you eat like that."

"Like what?" she asks as a dare.

"You're basically just eating a thin sugar cookie. Do you ever eat anything that isn't a carb or dessert?"

She acts like she needs to think about it, though, of course, she doesn't. "No."

"It doesn't make sense that you don't put on any fat."

"Don't ever say the 'f' word around me," she warns before bringing a forkful of sweet, buttery goodness to her lips.

He doesn't say anything, but he gives her a look, like he's not sure if she's being deadly serious or completely the opposite. So she clears it up for him. "It's a trigger. If you don't want me to starve myself, don't mention it."

His eyebrows knit together like she's talking nonsense. "I've seen you. You're not -"
"Don't."

"Not even to point out how skinny you are?"

"Doesn't matter how you say it, I'll twist it to mean that I should go on a diet or starve myself altogether," she says matter of factly.

She doesn't mean to make him sad. She forgot that eating disorders are a thing that people have feelings about. She's hardened herself to have no feelings at all about it. But she catches that look he gives her and remembers that she's exceptional. She waves her forkful of sugary crepe at him and says, "Look. I'm eating. Calm the fuck down."

He exhales a silent laugh. Pushes the sugar dispenser across the table closer to her. He watches her eat with a twinkle in his grey eyes. "What are you gonna do for food when I'm gone?"

"Planning on offing yourself?" she purrs. "But you're so young… I assume… I've never actually asked, have I?"

"I have that convention next weekend." He takes a bite of blueberry-filled crepe and then adds, "And I'm almost thirty."

Erna is pretty sure he'd told her about going away for a weekend at some point, but she completely forgot about it thanks to her self-centeredness. Upon remembering, she's disappointed all over again. She'll be so bored without him. Nothing to distract her from how depressed and angry she is, which is probably going to result in a lot of crying and breaking things. She puts on a stoic mask and deflects. "So what's being an old man like?"

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-seven."

"That's surprising."

"How so?"

"Because you look sixteen and talk like a twelve year old boy."

Erna steals a piece of crepe off his plate and spears some strawberries along with it. Before bringing it to her mouth, she says, "Fuck you, old man."

Third Thursday

Hanji's long pointer finger slides over the checklist that Mike made for them and Levi. They cluck their tongue thoughtfully at the boxes of supplies in the back of their old, rusty golden station wagon. Hearing the shop door open once again, they look up, push their glasses back up their nose, and tease Levi. "Are you trying to clean, or preserve organs for transplant?"

"Can't have too much alcohol," he says humorlessly as he places the short cardboard box, holding altogether eight bottles of the stuff, into one of the few empty spaces left in the back of Hanji's car. He then snatches the checklist from their long fingers and looks over it himself.

Hanji has learned not to be offended. It isn't that Levi doesn't consider them to be responsible. He just doesn't trust anyone to be as responsible as him. They assure their surly coworker. "That's
everything."

"What about shit you didn't think about?"

"I've done this before. I know what we need and what we don't," Hanji reassures.

"Got enough gloves?"

"More than a dentist's office."

"Needles?"

"Don't go anywhere without them."

Levi fixes a half-lidded, unimpressed glance on his coworker, then at the packed car, and back again. Before he can think of another thing to list off, Hanji says encouragingly, "I didn't forget anything. Relax. This is supposed to be fun."

"This is supposed to be work."

"But also fun," Hanji emphasizes.

The chime above the shop door rings again as Mike comes out, holding out a black, rectangular box, the kind that body piercing jewelry comes in. "Forgetting something?"

Levi shoots Hanji a look. They just shrug and sigh carelessly, "I could have bought some when we got there."

Mike carefully places the cargo somewhere it won't get tossed around no matter how recklessly Hanji drives, then takes an envelope out of his jeans pocket and warns, "Not with this money."

When Hanji reaches for the envelope of spending money, Mike retracts it, holds it out of reach, and reminds them, "This is for necessities. Food, water, gas."

Levi crosses his arms. He sees the need for this lecture in Hanji's case, but he's not a child. When Mike starts to lower his hand again, he snatches the envelope before Hanji can and stuffs it into his work bag with a sulky, "We got it."

Mike's straight-lined mouth turns down slightly at the corners and his eyes wrinkle with almost fatherly concern. If that weren't an incongruous enough look for the sandy-blond man with about a mile of tattoos and a giant, heavily muscled frame that intimidates even the actual Hell's Angels that come into the shop, he adds to it by saying, "Don't do anything that I wouldn't do."

Monotone voice dripping with sarcasm, Levi says, "Shucks, Pops, we won't." Hanji snickers loudly and quickly covers a hand over their mouth. Mike sighs, but keeps any other reservations to himself. Levi antes up and reminds him, "Don't get overwhelmed on your own for a whole weekend."

"I've still got Hitch."

"Lot of good that will do you," Levi sneers. Hitch is still useless in his eyes. She couldn't even tattoo a melon.

Mike pretends to think seriously, rubbing his chin between his fingers, he says, "Maybe you're right. I should probably keep Hanji here and send Hitch with you."

Levi only scoffs at that ridiculous idea, but Hanji is naive enough to take it seriously and wails,
"Nooo, I've been looking forward to this for weeks!"

Levi gives Hanji's shoulder a rough shove and reminds them as he walks over to his motorcycle to head home and get a break from his coworker before the next morning, which will begin the six hours of combined commute time plus about thirty-six hours that he'll be spending with them working over the three-day-long convention, not to mention that they have to share a hotel room. Not that he's counting. "You have to go, four-eyes. You're the only one with a car."

"Oh yeah."

Mike lets them go and, without any other admonitions or advice, he goes back inside. Just as Levi is swinging his leg over his bike, Hanji runs up and grabs his arm, with a breathless, "Wait, Levi!"

"What?" he deadpans, looking down at her hand on his arm with a half-lidded dangerous stare deadly enough to make them retract their hand quickly, the way you would from a hot stove.

"Let's go out and celebrate?" Hanji says, their tone apologetic and pleading for him to forgive the temporary invasion of personal space.

"Isn't that something you do after the work is done?"

Hanji brings their hand to the back of their neck and squints as a big smile takes up half their face. "Nah. We'll be too tired after. We should go out tonight instead." Then they see the deadpan, unamused glare that Levi's giving them and they try to sweeten the deal with, "There's a show I was gonna go to. It should be kind of your scene… I think… It's, like, an underground thing in a warehouse space and in between bands there are going to be, like, sideshow acts? And burlesque dancers." Levi doesn't even show a spark of interest, so they add, "Should be a good place to talk up potential clients?" When his facial expression doesn't change in the slightest, they finally add with a sigh, "And I'll pay for your cover and all of your drinks."

That gets him. Free things always appeal to his frugal side. "Text me the address."

"I can pick you up," Hanji beams.

"Fuck no. Going to be bad enough driving for three hours with you tomorrow."

"I'm a good driver," Hanji protests as Levi covers his ears by putting his helmet on. He doesn't comment, unless turning the ignition and riding away is taken as the comment it's meant as.

When he gets home, he parks, takes off his helmet, and waits on the stoop, knowing that Erna will "coincidentally" come down for a cigarette about a minute after hearing his bike.

She acts like it's all accidental, opening the door and stepping out with an, "Oh, you're here," look. He lights up when she does, if only to add to the short luminescence of her own small flame and get a better look at her face that he misses during the day no matter how many times he draws it. He swore to Ymir that he wouldn't let another week go by without saying something about how he feels. He thought it would be an empty promise, but his freckled friend won't let it go. She texts every day to ask him if he grew some balls. He tried to argue that briefly saying, 'I like you,' last Saturday counted, but Ymir wouldn't be fooled. It didn't count. He didn't make it clear enough. He has two more days, technically, but if he doesn't want to be a pathetic twat who tells a woman that he likes her from like a hundred miles away via text message, then really he has a few more hours.

Right now would be a good time. It would be less awkward to break their easy, habitual evening silence (neither of them having much to talk about at the end of a work day) with something
awkward and honest than to try and slip it into a normal conversation. Instead, he's already imagining the excuse he'll tell Ymir when he has to admit that he chickened out again. Not that she'll take any excuse he can come up with. It's still better than admitting that he's a fucking coward…which he is.

The worst part is that it's not the rejection that scares him anymore, and it's not the masochism, or the identity crisis. If he's completely honest with himself, it's acceptance that scares the hell out of him. He has absolutely no frame of reference for what to do if she accepts his confession. He doesn't know how to do a relationship. Doesn't even know where to begin. Doesn't even know if he would like it. What if it turns out that it makes him feel trapped? What if they have sex and all it makes him feel is that he needs more, from a variety of people, like before? What if her validation isn't enough and he falls into old habits? Then he would probably hurt her. And, at the heart of everything, that's what paralyzes him with fear. That's why he doesn't say anything, because, ultimately, the words might end up hurting her.

Not knowing that any of this is going through his head, she leans against the railing opposite him and asks, "How was work?"

He wishes that she didn't care about him. It would be easier to come clean and get this crushing weight off his chest if he could be sure that she would reject him, that he would be the one to get hurt. But every day she asks him how his day was, even though she knows he'll never have anything interesting to say, because she actually cares about him like nobody should.

"Had to spend two unpaid hours packing up for the convention."

"Oh, yeah," she says, as if she forgot again. "That's tomorrow?"

"I'm leaving in the morning." He inhales a long drag from his cigarette and after exhaling, he assures her, "I'll be back Sunday night."

She hums carelessly.

He isn't fooled, so he asks, "Will you be okay?"

That makes her smile. She almost laughs at the conceit of the notion. She asks mischievously, "What if I won't be?"

"I'd stay," he says with complete sincerity.

She turns and looks away from him, as if something caught her eye across the street. "Don't be stupid."

He wants to make her look at him. If she would look him in the eye more, and not so much everywhere but his eyes, he might not need to fumble with words the way he does.

"Want to do something?... Tonight?... Before I go?"

She ashes her cigarette over the railing, and tilts her chin down, watching the ash float down to the sidewalk where it will become invisible in the grey light against the grey concrete. "Like what?"

"Was gonna go out, but…"

"You should go out, then," she says bluntly, with a terse, irritated edge.

"I don't have to."
She turns toward him and narrows her eyes, shooting him that intimidating, stoney glare. "Are you asking my permission to go somewhere?"

"No, just…" but he realizes that he is. And his palms are sweating. Instead of finishing his defense, he brings his cigarette back to his lips and pushes his other hand through his hair.

"Don't do that," she says. "Makes me feel guilty. I'm not trying to prevent you from going out and having a life."

"Didn't say you were," he mumbles around the cigarette trapped between his lips while his fingers card painfully, twisting through his hair.

"Then why are you acting like I'm holding your balls in a velvet-lined box?" she says bitterly.

Any other time, he would laugh. Instead, he says quietly, "You could go with me."

"No," she says, irritated, "I couldn't." She flicks the ash off her cigarette angrily. "And I don't need to. It's not like you're going to be gone for a month. And I'm not codependent with you. I'm fine on my own."

"Fine," he bites back, not knowing why he's even angry. He kills his cigarette and goes upstairs without her. If she's so fine on her own, she can smoke in the dark by herself. He throws his bag and his helmet in the closet, turns his music up loud, and takes a shower so hot that the steam makes the paint peel in one spot where the wall meets the ceiling.

He does go out when he knows he should stay. She isn't there on the stoop when he leaves to make him think twice about it.

The place is easy to find, only because there are a bunch of young hipster and punk kids milling around outside it, smoking, drinking, waiting for friends or rides. Otherwise it would just look like a warehouse. He texts Hanji to let them know he's here and they come out, grab him by the wrist, and drag him to the door, paying his ten dollar cover and offering his hand. When he's able to forcibly retract his wrist from their grip, he looks at the stamp. Skull and crossbones. So original.

"You're rolling your eyes," Hanji says, disappointed, walking backwards and leading him in, "You hate it already." They pout.

He does. But he doesn't want to be rude about it. He's not that much of an asshole. "Sorry," he says. "I'm in a shitty mood."

"I know how to fix that!" Hanji leads him over to a makeshift bar with only a little bobbing and weaving. The place isn't packed, but definitely not empty either. The crowd is tighter out front, closer to the stage, and at the bar. Levi notices that there are no taps, no register, no sink, and he clucks his tongue.

"Tch. Hanji."

"What?"

"I'm on parole and you bring me to a place that's serving without a license."

"Oh, come on," they whine, but they don't deny it. "It's not like we're going to get busted. And if somehow we do, just say it's BYOB."

He squints and his eyebrows squeeze together. "It doesn't work that way?"
Nonetheless, Hanji grabs his elbow, stiff-arms a couple out of the way, wrenches him up to the bar, waves to get the "bartender's" attention, and says, "Put him on my tab." Then they bother to ask Levi what he wants.

"Whatever's cheap." He's not a dick. He knows Hanji makes as little as he does. He's not going to take advantage. Cheap turns out to be one of two options, a light beer handed to him from a cooler full of ice. He guzzles it so that the taste won't stay in his mouth for long. Fast enough that it trickles out the corners of his mouth and down his neck, but, in seconds, he puts the empty can on the bar, wipes his mouth with his forearm and asks for another. He slams the second one the same way. Hanji watches with an eyebrow raised, concern slowly covering their face.

But after the second one, he doesn't reach for another. He feels fine for now. There's a slight glow of a buzz inching its way through his veins and it'll grow if he gives it a minute.

"Are you upset about something?" Hanji asks carefully.

"Yeah. No. It's stupid. Nevermind," he says over the music. He looks toward the stage, which is best described as ramshackle. It's foundation is made of wooden palettes. The acoustics are terrible. "This venue isn't legal in any way, is it?"

"No. That's what's great about it," Hanji beams.

When he was nineteen he might have thought so, too. If there weren't such heavy consequences attached to him getting arrested for something stupid, he might still think so. But even without that to consider, the music is more wailing than he likes, more emo-pop-punk than what he grew up with. The freaks and artists all seem too ironic. Nothing feels genuine or natural. He doesn't feel a connection to any of it the way he used to. Maybe he's too old for it. He shakes his head. Hanji is older than he is, and they seem right at home. It's just him. He's out of touch with the scene he used to love.

"I'm gonna go dance. You good?"

"Your tab still open?"

"Yeah," Hanji answers slowly, voice tinged with some worry.

"Then I'm good."

Hanji hesitates to walk away. Levi can tell they're thinking about warning him against drinking too much or simply telling him to be careful, but he shoots them a look that says that would be a mistake. They should know that he would only drink more for spite.

He's relieved when Hanji turns on their heel and leaves him alone without any lecture. He didn't want to have to drink himself sick just to prove a point. He does get one more beer, but he doesn't chug this time. He's buzzed enough that he doesn't mind the taste anymore. He drinks at a normal pace and waits for it to make the music sound better. It doesn't work. The band that's playing still sounds too whiny to him.

He slaps the bar to get the bartender's attention and tells them, "One more." He takes it outside. Maybe in the time it takes him to nurse that beer and smoke a cigarette the current band will finish and the next one will be better.

It feels strange smoking without Erna. It's that inexplicable feeling that you're missing or have forgotten something, but you can't figure out what because it's such second nature that you normally don't give it a second thought, like an accessory you wear every day until you take it off before
showering and forget to put it back on. That missing component makes everything else feel different too. He looks at his cigarette with new eyes. He never noticed the rich taste of the tobacco before now.

"Hey. Can I bum a cigarette?" A high, nasal voice cuts into his moment of self pity and reflection.

That old line.

He looks up. She has black hair, ironed straight and curled under in a long bob. Straight bangs. Thick, black eyebrows plucked to perfection. That 90's gothic Uma Thurman look. She's younger than him. Anywhere in between twenty-two and twenty-six. Behind her, maybe ten feet away, a few of her friends look on, some watching blatantly and giggling and the rest trying to play it cool and look like they're not looking at all. They're all smoking.

"Can't get one from them?" he nods toward the small group off behind her.

"Oh," she flips her hair and pauses. "None of them smoke my brand."

Levi covers the small letters printed on the thin paper in his fingers. "What brand?"

"Umm…"

He softens a little. Can't help but smirk as she tries to figure out what he's smoking.

"Parliaments?"

"Nah."

Her shoulders fall a little. Her full, painted red lips pout and she pleads silently with big eyes. He misses that look, that feeling when someone new wants him desperately. It washes over him as he takes in her posture and the way her body language screams please, please, please.

He ashes towards her, points with his cigarette at her little, black, patch and button-covered backpack. "You have a pack in there, don't you?"

Her pointed nose wrinkles when she smiles. "Guilty." She reaches for it and pulls out a pack of Camels. It strikes him how clumsy she is about getting one out of the pack and lighting it. He's so used to Erna's deft, nimble fingers. Once the new girl puts her lighter back in her bag, she extends her hand to shake his and introduces herself as 'Lissa.

"Levi." he holds her hand for an extra second and watches her eyelids lower, then blink rapidly, fluttering. He teases her, because he doesn't care anymore. If she reacts negatively, good. If she doesn't, that's just as well. "Do you know how many cigarettes I've lost to girls who didn't have the balls to just start a conversation?"

She laughs. It's a high-pitched, cloying sound, and he's guessing based on that what she would sound like if he were making her moan.

She tries to eye his cigarette more closely. "What would the right answer have been?"

He pulls the yellow pack out of his back pocket. "Spirits. And I still wouldn't have given you one."

"But you don't mind talking?" she asks hopefully.

"I don't mind yet." That might change.
Predictably, she asks him about his piercings and where he got them done. More predictably, she acts very impressed when he says he did all of them himself. She has a few cartilage piercings up her ears, a small hoop through her eyebrow, and a Monroe piercing that he would have placed differently for aesthetic quality. Whoever did hers put it too low, too close to the lip. It should be higher and to the left, at the top outside arch of the swell of skin above the upper lip. Not that it makes her less attractive. He just thinks that if you're going to bother to do something, do it right.

"Even the snakebites?" she asks, staring suggestively at his lips.

He can't help darting his tongue out to play over the thin rings through his lower lip before nodding and putting his cigarette back in his mouth to suck on it.

"Even —"

He isn't sure which of the many pieces of jewelry she's about to ask about, but he cuts her off.

"Yeah. All of them."

"That's hot," she says very matter of factly.

He pulls his phone out of his pocket and checks to see if Erna texted him or anything. She didn't. He doesn't know why he thought she would. Wishful thinking. But that's not something she does. When he's not there, it's like he doesn't exist to her. "Sorry, what?" he says to the girl who is more than willing to give him whatever attention his broken ego needs right now.

"Did you come here with someone?"

"A friend… coworker…" He leans down and picks up the beer he left on the ground to free up his hands, courtesy of said coworker, and it's then that he knows he's leaving before Hanji, and not alone. 'Lissa is close enough, he thinks. She has those straight black bangs, and he can trick himself into not noticing that that's where her similarities with Erna end… especially with a few more beers. He hears the music die down inside. Good time to head back in. She follows him, continuing to make small talk about the show, piercings, whatever. He isn't really paying attention. He gets himself another drink and doesn't offer to buy her one. He never offers to buy drinks, because he doesn't want to create the illusion of a date.

She flirts somewhat awkwardly, trying not to be too obvious. He doesn't need to be shy about taking her hand, making her interrupt herself mid-sentence to giggle. Her eyelashes flutter again. She steps into him and leans. He wraps an arm around her waist to support her. When she looks down at him, he looks into her big brown eyes and she doesn't shy away. She stares right back. She sighs breathlessly. When she leans down and her lips are close enough, he brushes against them, pressing the snakebites that she was admiring against her lower lip. He can feel a tremor go through her.

He knows she'll go home with him right now if he asks, but he wants to make her wait. Even though he'd like to get the fuck out of there because neither the music or the people interest him, he turns her around to watch the next band. He keeps his arms around her and stubbornly holds her in place whenever she tries to turn around to face him. It makes her wriggle and laugh. She sways her hips against him with the music. He presses his face against the back of her neck, nuzzles, and kisses behind her ear. She arches her back. He missed the rush of unchecked confidence that he gets from this. Nothing else in his life makes him feel this, like he has complete power and control over something. It's not about getting off. It's about being able to make somebody else get off, to play them like an instrument and get all of the reactions he wants out of them.

He lets his hands stray from her waist, lightly exploring. Nothing totally indecent. He's not that into public displays anymore. He just wants his hands to let her know that he wants her too, that this is a
done deal if she'll go home with him.

When he asks her if she wants to leave with him, she's hesitant, which he totally understands. She runs more risk than he does of getting violently raped and murdered by someone she just met. She asks if he'll go to her place instead. Which he would, any other time. And he tells her that. "It's just that I have to wake up and get going early."

"Then how am I going to get home when you kick me out?" she teases.

"There's a bus stop on the corner of my block," he shrugs. It's not an attractive option, but he doesn't have a lot invested in this. He's not going to offer her a ride home in the morning. At most, he might buy her breakfast from the café, but he doesn't mention that. Naturally, he doesn't want to commit himself to anything past the next few hours. Long term commitment, even just into the morning, has never been his thing.

She doesn't deliberate for very long. She texts her friends and says, "Okay. Let's go."

Hypocritically, he thinks he would be more careful if he were her. He finishes his last beer. His head is swimming a little, but not enough to make him visibly drunk, so there's no question about whether he's okay to drive – though maybe there should be. They get to the apartment safely anyway. He rushes her in the door.

He asks her to take her shoes off, which makes her silently laugh a little, because they're definitely coming off in a minute anyway, but he doesn't care. He doesn't want even a little dirt from the ground outside getting on the floor between the door and the bed. She can unzip her black, fake leather boots that stretch midway up her calf. He has to bother with laces. While he does, she walks in and looks around.

"You're an artist?" she asks, looking at the big, professional drafting table.

"Tattoos," he grunts, pulling off his boot.

"Ooohh, can you do one for me?"

He steps over to her, notices that they're closer to an equal height now, without her heels adding three or four inches to her. He kisses her neck without stretching up on his toes and murmurs, "Maybe…if you come by the shop."

"Where do you work?" she giggles. She does that a lot. He wonders if it's nerves or if she's just a giggly, playful kind of person.

"The Basement." He gently pushes her to step slowly backwards until the backs of her thighs hit the foot of the bed.

"Oh, I think I follow you guys on Instagram!"

He stops. "Yeah? What do you think?"

She smirks and her eyes twinkle. She teases playfully, "You're pretty good," as if she isn't all that impressed.

He squeezes her ass, since she wants to play. He reaches down, gripping under her thighs, and lifts them up quickly, flipping her onto the bed. She giggles again until he kneels down, pushes his hands under the skirt of her dress and gets his face in between her legs. She's wearing fishnets, but no underwear, and he almost tries to fool himself into thinking that could work as some kind of dental
dam, because he really wants to lick her. He's too cautious, though, and only uses his fingers. He
took to be bold about oral sex. He misses that. But when he was young they didn't know about
things like HPV.

She squeals gleefully when his breath hits her, followed by his careful hands. A memory of Erna hits
him like a hammer on hot iron. It's all wrong. He'd thought this girl would be a reasonable facsimile,
and he'd be able to get his lust for her out of his system, which is a shitty way to use someone, but
she'd never know. It wouldn't hurt her. But it's all wrong. She doesn't make the right noises. Erna
would never giggle.

She would never wear the fishnets that he's pulling down right now, and she'd scoff at 'Lissa's dress
that was obviously bought at a Hot Topic, a cheap polyester thing that could be a teenage vampire's
homecoming dress (her words, not his). She would never wear the ruby red lipstick and thick black
eyeliner. She wouldn't need to cake white powder on her face. It's already white enough, and her
skin is perfect. And upon closer inspection, their bodies could not be less similar. 'Lissa has no
curves, no waist, no thick thighs. She's skinny in different places and bigger in others. She's missing
all his favorite features. The cheekbones and the long, black eyelashes that he's drawn a hundred
times. He thought none of it would matter. At the show he saw a gothic chick with black hair and
thought that would be close enough. It's not.

He almost wants to pull back, but it's too late. He feels like he owes her something now.

He has her mewling, bucking her hips, squeezing and relaxing her thigh muscles, and wet enough to
soak the sheets before he moves up and over her to mouth at her stomach through her dress, and pull
at the bodice of it until at least one of her breasts is free. He fakes enthusiasm to match hers. It will
look like it wasn't a conscious decision to leave her clothes on, and she won't know that it's because
even through the dress she smells wrong to him. Not bad. She just smells the way almost all women
smell, like the chemicals in perfume and soap and shampoo and hairspray. He used to like that. Now
he's filled with revulsion at the unnaturalness of it and he wishes she smelled like honey and vanilla
and caramel and oranges, with a hint of clove cigarette underneath it all.

She's loud as fuck. He hopes that Erna is a heavy sleeper. If she isn't, then he hopes that she's angry.
Her anger, he can deal with.

Erna does wake up at midnight, but it's the briefest moment of wakefulness. She thinks that she hears
someone laugh, but her lazy brain attributes it to noise from outside again, drunk people down on the
sidewalk loudly wandering home.

She dreams about Levi for the fourth night in a row. She forgets what the dream was about when she
wakes again at 1am. It was about him torturing her in some way, probably. The drunk girl laughing
outside is too loud. It's the same giggle that woke her up before. Shouldn't she be home by now? The
curiosity of it keeps her from falling back to sleep right away this time. Wakefulness slowly seeps in
and noises other than the high-pitched, piercing voice register. Like smacking, and grunting, and
moans.

"Oh, god," she squeals, "Right there!"

Erna's eyes open fully and stare at the ceiling. Then her stomach twists painfully. Saliva floods her
mouth and just in time, she rips the covers off and runs to the bathroom to let the bile burn her throat
as her guts empty their contents. Her eyes sting with hot tears as she pushes herself away from the
toilet to sit and cradle her knees in the corner nearby. She can hear them in there, too. It's loud.
She coughs hard as she fights her diaphragm's impulse to push everything up again. There's nothing in there for her to throw up. Only stomach bile that burns like fuck. She doesn't fight it hard enough. Her body wins, and she starts to like the burning in her throat and the soreness of her clenching abdomen at least more than this abstract, broken-hearted feeling in her chest that won't manifest itself physically.

She flushes the toilet and brushes her teeth, thoroughly scraping her tongue and gargling with mouthwash.

It feels like she should be crying, but she doesn't. She's still in shock. It still doesn't feel real. It's more like a nightmare. There's hope still that, in the realistic light of day, it will all turn out to have been a misunderstanding.

Too bad she's never been much of a dreamer or one to fool herself for comfort. She finds her legs and steadies herself with a hand against the wall. Unthinking, in a daze, she goes back out and hits the light switch. She gets dressed automatically, that surge of saliva flooding her mouth a warning that her feelings are going to try to physically manifest right back in her fucking toilet with every creak of his mattress on the other side of the wall.

With luck, and the strength of will to keep her stomach down, she gets outside without needing to brush her teeth again. It is blessedly quiet. The street is abandoned. She curses her shaking hands as she lights a clove.

She finds herself walking because standing and smoking where she first met him, where they've shared over three hundred cigarettes, hurts too much. She turns right off the stoop, away from the cafe, walks past the bank, past multiple alleys that under normal circumstances she wouldn't get within twenty feet of after dark, and stops at the liquor store where she buys cloves. It closed at 7pm or else she would be buying a handle of whiskey to kill before morning. She stops and looks inside anyway, because she's never walked further than this.

The fact that she moves forward isn't her suddenly becoming unafraid. She's still agoraphobic. She's still scared as fuck and convinced that something horrible will happen. It's that now, in this moment, she would welcome something horrible. So she keeps walking and lingers at the dark openings of alleyways. She morbidly wishes for her stalker to come back and finish the job. Nothing he could do would hurt like this.

She walks five blocks away before survival instinct and risk aversion come back online. She looks up and down the dark, empty street. She mutters into the lonely streetlight lit night, "Shitty fucking world," for being dangerous when she doesn't want it to be and completely fucking safe when she wouldn't mind being in harm's way.

She lights another clove on the way back. It's finished by the time she reaches the stoop. She sits down and lights another while she wonders what amount of time she should let pass before it might be more safe to go back inside. An hour? Two hours? She doesn't want to risk hearing them again. She decides on three hours, just to be extra safe.

Three hours is a long time to be alone with your thoughts. She feels like she should spend some of that time crying, but it just doesn't happen no matter how sad she feels. It makes her angry. She's cried over misplaced things, dirty coffee cups, cold showers, stubbed toes, and a myriad of other stupid things since developing PTSD, but of course when it's actually appropriate the wrenching sobs and hot tears won't come. Instead she feels nauseous.

Additionally, she feels like a complete fool and weak for wanting. She blames herself more than anything. When did she stop being careful about wanting anything too much?
Erna has been something like allergic to feelings since, in early childhood, she had her first lesson in love and misery and how closely linked and complementary they were. Her education came from her older sister, Cynthia (the middle child of five), and a little stuffed animal that Erna was given at the age of four and fell in love with. It was just a little stuffed dog. It looked like a golden retriever with floppy rounded triangle ears and deep brown eyes, and like a normal child, Erna formed a ferociously deep emotional attachment to the toy for no particular reason other than that it resonated with her. She carried it everywhere for maybe a year or two. It attended tea parties and was cuddled during naps and it laid across her lap when she read. Then, one day Erna did something to annoy Cynthia, she doesn't remember what, but in unequal retaliation her sister brutally destroyed the stuffed animal.

Normal children would have cried for a while and gotten over the hurt with time and continued to form emotional attachments to possessions, animals, people, etc. despite having learned that loving can hurt. Not Erna. She did cry. She wailed and screamed and sobbed relentlessly for probably forty-eight hours straight, and at the end of that catharsis she didn't come out more resilient and ready to move on. She decided that if feeling emotions and loving something that much could result in that much pain, then she simply wouldn't get attached to anything ever again, and she decided that what Cynthia had done was for the best. She was glad to be rid of the thing that she'd loved so much. She never made that mistake again, and she kept people at an arm's length at all times lest she start to feel too much for them. If she saw an object that she particularly liked a little too much, she rejected it before she could start feeling an inordinate amount of attachment to it, because all things are only temporary.

The very sensitive need to find ways to protect their breakable hearts. Erna's defense had been good until now.

Levi wakes up slow and easy, cuddling, naked, inhaling his conquest's scent that is less disagreeable to him than it was before he'd made her sweat and scream and come three or four times. He feels lazy and content, until a sudden jolt of anxiety hits him and he reaches over her for his phone on the nightstand. She murmurs sleepily as he checks the time and hisses to himself.

"Shit."

He gets out of bed quickly, hoping that will wake her up without him needing to shake her or anything. That always feels like a dick move. It doesn't work. She only turns over and nuzzles into his abandoned pillow.

"Hey, I need to get going," he says at a normal conversational volume. When that doesn't wake her up, he leans over her, lips close to her ear and tells her, "I'm gonna take a quick shower and then I need to leave. Sorry. You gotta get up."

She barely opens her eyes, mumbles something, and tries to go back to sleep. Through with being nice, Levi pulls the covers off of her, and when she reaches for them, he drops them on the floor behind him, away from the bed.

'Lissa whines and thrashes in a little tantrum. This is what he gets for sleeping with someone who is obviously not a morning person. Bad decision, the whole thing. He's full of regret, but doesn't have time to dwell on it. "Hey," he says as soothingly as he can as he reaches for her hands and holds them still in his own. He bends down to kiss her just to make her stop for a second.

It works, and when he pulls away she looks up at him with placid brown eyes rimmed with a raccoon mask of smudged black eyeliner. He used to like the look of messy morning after makeup.
Now, for some reason, it makes him feel a little sad and disgusted.

He tells her again, "I'm gonna take a shower. Do you want to get cleaned up and I'll walk you to the bus stop?"

"Mmyaokay?" she slurs as she slowly starts to wake up.

He'd pictured her putting on her clothes from the night before and washing her face in the sink. Instead she opens the curtain and gets in the shower with him, letting all the steam out and pressing her palms to his chest before reaching down for his cock. He groans in frustration and grabs her wrist. "I really don't have time. I'm sorry," he growls.

She pouts. "It's okay. Can I just take a shower with you then?"

He doesn't really want to let her, but who is he to say no? He lets her get under the water with him, lathers up and rinses as fast as possible, and leaves her in there alone so that he can brush his teeth and check the time again.

"Shit."

He takes his bag from the coat closet and tosses it it on the kitchen table on his way to grab some clothes from the dresser. He doesn't have time to pay attention to what he's taking, he just gets what is hopefully an appropriate amount of clothes for three days. Then he pops his head in the bathroom again and warns 'Lissa, "I've got to get out of here in five minutes. Can you hurry?"

She hums dismissively and after Levi packs a few more things, he decides to pick her clothes up off the floor for her. He meets her with them just as she's finally stepping out of the shower. She wrinkles her nose at him and whines, "Ugh. I hate putting dirty clothes on after I've showered."

"Shouldn't have showered then," Levi says through gritted teeth, trying to sound as understanding as possible.

"Can't I borrow something?" She pouts playfully trying to be cute. "I'll give them back, I promise."

"No."

"Ugh, fine." She takes her bundle of shitty polyester and ragged black fishnets from him impatiently, like he's being a dick for not letting her steal his clothes. Then she flips and tries to be sweet again. "Want to grab coffee before you go?"

He crosses his arms. "Not gonna have time."

He watches her get dressed, like he needs to make sure she actually does it and isn't going to stall anymore.

When he finally gets her downstairs and opens the door to let her out ahead of him he gets a physical feeling like being punched in the gut before he even sees Erna. As soon as the air from outside hits him, he smells the smoke from one of her cloves and he feels sick.

He pauses in the door for a second, paralyzed, not wanting to take a step forward until he can think of how to handle this, but then 'Lissa's high, nasally voice is cutting through his tether, gushing at Erna, "Hii-eee. Oh my god, I love your dress! Where did you get it?!"

Levi bounds down the four steps of the stoop two at a time, swinging his arm around Lissa's skinny shoulders and sweeping her forward and away from Erna before the gothic lolita can tell her to fuck
herself. In the same smooth motion, he points down the sidewalk and says, "Bus stop is down there. Should be one coming any minute"

He tries to turn around after giving her a gentle shove forward, but she grabs his wrist and says, "I thought you were gonna walk with me."

"Don't have time, sorry." He cards the fingers of his free hand through his damp hair and turns around to see Erna's back as she walks up toward the door.

"Then can I get your number?"

Hanji's car pulls up to the curb just in front of the building and as soon as it comes to a full stop, he hears Hanji lay on the horn.

"Shit." Levi pulls his wrist out of 'Lissa's grasp and says as regretfully as possible, "Sorry, no."

As he runs back to the building, smacking his palm on the hood of Hanji's car on his way and telling her to knock it the fuck off with the horn, 'Lissa calls after him, "Asshole!"

Yeah, he thinks. He is.

He catches the door just before it slams closed. And gets himself inside to watch Erna just starting to walk up the stairs.

"Shit, Erna," he pants, nearly out of breath from that sprint, "Wait!"

"Fuck off."

She's told him to fuck off way more times than he can count, but this time it sounds immeasurably different. This time it's very sincere.

He has to grab her to keep her from continuing on her way up the stairs and as he does it, he knows how wrong it is, but he's panicked. He doesn't know how to stop her with words, so he grabs her around the waist and turns her to face him a lot more violently than is wise to do with someone who holds a premium on personal space.

Normally, he would expect her to slap him across the face. She'd be well within her rights. But instead of her hard-edged usual self, she's limp and she spins easily in his hands. She looks down at him on the landing and her eyes are red-rimmed, the skin around them all puffy, and her lips look like they've been bitten raw. She doesn't look like she got any sleep. She looks hurt, which was his greatest fear all along, and instead of actively avoiding it, he hurt her fabulously and he fucking hates himself for being such an idiot.

Her chest heaves strenuously as she stiffens and pushes his hands away from her. He holds them up defensively and says, "Shit, look, I'm sorry!"

Simply satisfied that he isn't touching her anymore, she doesn't assault him, but crosses her arms protectively around her waist and says softly, "Nothing to apologize for."

It's infuriating, that even now, with all the proof all over her face, she still can't admit that she feels anything. "Then why are you so upset?"

"I'm not," she says glibly, like he's not worth wasting words on. Hanji's horn blares again outside and she looks pointedly at the door behind him. "You should go." She turns around again and says, "See you Sunday."
His throat swells and feels tight. He tries to swallow, but it's painful. She gets one more step up and away from him before he grabs her again, this time by her wrist, and he holds her.

He's an asshole holding her against her will, but he doesn't know what else to do...and it turns out he doesn't know what to say, either. He can't think of words with Hanji's obnoxious car horn outside, so he drags Erna back down the steps. She fights him every step, but he's a lot stronger than her, not something he would normally take advantage of. He pushes the door open, and as Erna struggles to get out of his hold, he yells outside, "Hanji, knock it the fuck off!"

The horn stops, and he lets the door swing shut again. He doesn't defend himself when Erna kicks him in the shin. He hisses and curses under his breath. It hurts a lot more than he thought it would.

"Let go, prick!"

"Listen to me, and I will!"

She stops struggling and he lets go of her. At least she looks more angry than hurt now. Angry doesn't make his chest hurt and his throat get tight.

"I know I fucked up," he says, which is, at the very least, unimpressive, "and I'm so sorry. The last thing I ever want is to hurt you. I kind of thought…" he pauses and struggles, because being honest is going to lay him bare and more vulnerable than he's ever been. "I guess I thought that you're way too good for me, and that I should…I don't know…get over these feelings I have…about you…"

Erna takes deep, audible, quick breaths in and out her nose like she's trying not to cry, and he wants to throw his arms around her but one more invasion of personal space is probably going to get him a well-deserved punch in the gut, and he won't be able to tell her anything with the wind knocked out of him. So, instead, his hand goes to the back of his neck, and he looks down for a second, takes a big, deep breath, and says, "I love you, you know?"

His own words scare the shit out of him, and, judging by her wide-eyed expression, they scare her, too. And, not having the balls to find out what her response will be, he goes for broke, leans in, and gives her a quick, chaste kiss on the cheek before running out the door and getting in Hanji's car.
The whole drive back from the tattoo convention, Levi keeps unlocking his phone and re-reading his text messages.

"It's fine. You're fine. Stop apologizing."

He'd texted Erna about fifty times on Friday. After telling her that he loved her and running away he'd passed out in Hanji's car, the emotional turmoil and his lack of sleep knocking him the fuck out for half of the three hour long drive to the convention center. When he'd woken up, they stopped to get food and take a piss. Then he started his texting campaign, begging Erna for forgiveness, admitting that he was an idiot, making himself more and more vulnerable with every message sent and dreading what it meant when she didn't immediately message him back like she normally would.

After the tenth variation of "I'm so fucking sorry" in a span of two hours, she finally responded with:

"It's fine. You're fine. Stop apologizing."

And he couldn't tell if her tone in those three sentences was angry, or just annoyed, or sincerely forgiving. But "Stop apologizing" was an imperative and he respected that. So he stopped.

He would have had to stop anyway, because soon after that he and Hanji got the table at the convention set up, and he had to get to work. He didn't get a chance to check his phone, which isn't a quick, easy thing to do in between tattoos because it means he has to wash his hands after touching it and before touching someone's skin.

He had to wonder about the meaning of that message all night. What, he wondered, did, "It's fine," mean? He didn't get much sleep. Hanji's snoring in the other bed could take some of the blame for that. He finally had to turn his phone off just so that he would stop checking it.

When he woke up and turned it back on, it buzzed immediately with a notification and his heart skipped a beat, but it turned out to just be a message from Ymir asking if he'd grown a pair yet and told the scary angry girl that he had a massive boner for her. He'd groaned in bed and typed back, "I skipped that and went straight to telling her that I love her."

He could feel Ymir staring at her screen on the other end and shaking her head. Then, she texted, "You're hopeless. You know that?"

Yeah, he knows that.

"What'd she say?"

He, unfortunately, had to be honest and tell her, "Nothing. I got in a car right after and I'm at a
convention now."
"Fuck you ."
"Yeah, I know."
"Pathetic."
"Yeah, I know."
"You're the worst."

He got five or six more messages along those lines before Ymir left him alone. He can't imagine what she'd have said if he told her the part about the one night stand. She might have gotten in her car and driven all the way there to kick his ass.

On Sunday, around 10am when he and Hanji were treating themselves to free bagels courtesy of the organizers and waiting for potential clients, Levi finally got a new text from Erna that said, "When do you get back?"

Normally he would be able to tease her about being bored without him or not being able to take care of herself or something, but he's lost the right to tease her, so he types, "Sunday, around 11pm."

"I'll be asleep. See you Monday."

At least she still wanted to see him.

From there, Hanji got progressively more irritated with him, because this was supposed to be fun, but he obviously didn't want to be there. He pushed her to break down their table early on Sunday so that they could get home ahead of schedule. Hanji probably wouldn't have been so annoyed if he told them why, but he couldn't stand to tell the story. It was fucking painful to think about what he did. He couldn't wait to get home just to move forward. Even if he just fucked everything up more, at least he'd be fucking up in new ways and not dwelling on the huge mistakes he already made.

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On Friday, after getting kissed on the cheek and watching Levi take off, Erna stood at the bottom of the stairs for minutes in complete bewilderment.

She replayed what he said over and over and it didn't make sense. Loved her? How even? She is literally unlovable. She feels she knows this as a fact.

So, when she was back in her bathroom, making herself vomit while waiting for the bathtub to fill with water, she told herself very convincingly that he meant "as a friend" the same way she convinces herself that she's fat or ugly or monstrous despite contrary evidence, because that fits with the image in her head. It's the only way to make sense of it without shattering her world view.

So in her mind, what happened was: Levi, for whatever reason, fucked some random woman, saw that it upset Erna (despite her best effort to look neutral about it), apologized, and tried to comfort her by telling her that he loved her (as a friend), which makes her feel like the most disgusting, pitiable creature in the world. The worst part is that he felt he had to apologize…that he felt that sorry for her… When he really had nothing to apologize for. It's not like they were anything more than friends, but there she was, sulking over him like a pathetic idiot and being obvious enough about it that he'd felt he had to placate her.
She canceled on Annie for that morning. She called and told her not to come even though she knew she'd lose her deposit. She didn't go to the café all day, too nauseous with suppressed feelings for lattes or croissants or even a lemon square. She spent the day locked in her apartment trying to retrain herself to not feel things.

On Saturday, there's a black hole where her stomach should be. It's been awhile since she went more than twenty four hours without eating. She thinks she can go longer. She doesn't feel cold or shaky yet.

The tricky thing is that she really doesn't want to attract attention to herself. Passing out and needing to be rushed to a hospital wouldn't be conducive to keeping her self-abuse invisible, so she does need to eat at least a little. That's the only reason she gets dressed and gets a few croissants from the café. She takes everything back to her apartment where she gets two sips out of her latte before the caffeine is too much and makes her feel like she can feel her blood pulsing in every vein. She eats half of a croissant slowly and puts the rest in the fridge so that she can give herself breadcrumbs if her body starts giving her signals that it's going to rebel and quit functioning if it doesn't get some food.

She doesn't go out again except for brief intervals to smoke. She indulges herself in a cocoon of self-pity and revulsion at her own weakness in her apartment all by herself. She hopes that, while he's away, Levi will forget about how pathetically she reacted to him bringing a girl home. It hurt like fuck, but that was her own private pain. She shouldn't have put it on him and made him feel like he owed her anything.

Sunday night, Levi gets back around 11pm despite rushing Hanji to book it home. Relief makes him feel heavy and almost content as he climbs the steps to his apartment. He's looking forward to finally being back in his own space and getting to sleep in his own bed, alone, without Hanji's snoring.

That sense of relief quickly and completely vanishes as soon as he opens the door and remembers that he rushed out of there without having time to clean anything on Friday. The comforter from his bed is still on the floor from when he had to rip it off 'Lissa to wake her up. His sheets are a mess, and there are used condoms on the floor. He just wants to forget what happened, but he can't. He has to put new sheets on the bed and straighten up. Angry at himself, he opens the drawer on the nightstand next to the bed and grabs the box of condoms he'd kept there "just in case" and he throws them out along with the used ones.

He wakes up early Monday morning, even though he has the day off work and he's exhausted enough to actually sleep in for once. As he gets dressed, he mentally coaches himself to get his shit together, go down there, and talk to Erna about what he said. He has no idea what her reaction will be, or what he's going to do from there, but he needs to find out. It's been torture not knowing whether she's angry at him or hurt or happy or whatever. He should never have dropped that bomb on her and then run away for three days.

When he gets downstairs, she's already sitting there on the cement steps, smoking a cigarette, like always. She turns at the sound of the door and he feels like he doesn't deserve to look at her, so he looks at the ground and reaches for a cigarette from the pack in his back pocket, gets one between his lips, and sits down next to her. He thinks about what he's going to say before he blurts out anything stupid, but before he can say anything, she holds out a white cardboard cup from the café and says, "Got your tea."

"Thanks." His heart melts. She shouldn't be so nice to him. Before he can lose the nerve, he blurts out, "I'm sorry about Friday," even though she told him to stop apologizing.
"You didn't do anything wrong," she says so easily.

He doesn't know how to take that. Does she mean that she doesn't care about him fucking that girl he picked up? Or does she mean that it wasn't wrong to tell her that he loved her and then run away? Or all of the above? Her response to his apology doesn't tell him anything about how she feels about him, or whether she thinks he's a fucking idiot or not. Does she still want to be friends? Does she want to admit that she looked so fucking hurt on Friday because she's had a concealed crush on him the way he does on her? Did he hurt her badly enough that she doesn't want his friendship or anything now regardless of whether she'd had a crush on him or not?

These are things he could be asking her frankly, but he's paralyzed with fear at the possible answers she might give him, and since she doesn't seem like she hates him right then, it's easy to just not ask.

She leans back on her elbows and he finally turns to look her in the eye. Her face is expressionless, half-lidded and bored looking. Her black cigarette hangs between her lips. The paper crackles and the cherry throbs with a brighter glow as she takes a long, lazy drag and then exhales out the side of her lips. Then she asks, "How was the convention?"

So she isn't going to talk about it either, he thinks. She's determined that they're just going to go back to normal and smoke together and bust each other's balls and be friends the same as before. He's skeptical about whether or not that's possible, but if that's all she's offering, then he'll take what he can get.

"It was boring as fuck. Same shit, new place." Then, as if he didn't rip her heart out of her chest with an impulsive one night stand and then tell her he loves her in a confusing as fuck move, he teases her just like he would have before everything went to hell, "How bored were you without me?"

"Well, it was quiet at least," she bites back, playfully narrowing her eyes at him. "And the service at the café was better without Bambi jizzing on his apron over you."

"So you want to go to the café without me from now on?"

"Oh god no," she almost laughs. "The stupidity you inspire in the barista might be annoying, but without you there, people might actually try to talk to me, or worse, look at me."

"God forbid."

"I need you to scare them all away."

"You need me for more than that, Princess," he teases.

She smirks at him. "You're right. I nearly starved to death without you."

It's too easy to fall back into the old routine. Levi ashes his cigarette towards the sidewalk. He wants to ask her straight up how she feels about what he said on Friday, but he's afraid that this is his answer. If she isn't going to bring it up, then maybe it's because she doesn't feel the same way. If she's acting like they're still just friends, then that's probably all she wants to be, so, instead of trying to talk about it, he asks if she wants to come over for dinner later.

Erna says she does, though there are a few things she has to do first. Levi says the same. They don't ask each other what they have going on in the interim. Neither of them wonder why they're not going to hang out at the café for a few hours like usual. That would be prying. Normally, they would pry and tease and snark, but it's too soon and too strange to go back to the same level of familiarity.

If Levi were to ask Erna what she had to do today, she would have to lie to him, because the truth is
pitiful, and she thinks there isn't anything worse than being pitied. The truth is that she has to go to Sasha and Connie's apartment to pick up more weed, because her appetite is completely gone thanks to biology and the way the human body slows its metabolism to nothing when it's going through starvation. She's okay with the starvation and not being hungry, but it isn't conducive to having dinner with him. If she doesn't smoke and kickstart her appetite again, she'll only barely pick at anything he makes and then probably throw it all up later, which again, she's fine with as a course of action, except that it would result in the whole pity thing and she'll curb that at any cost. She may be pathetically heartbroken and depressed about it, but she has her pride.

She goes over to visit Sasha and Connie around 1pm, except "visit" isn't the right word, because she refuses to go inside. She makes Connie bring her quarter ounce to the door, even though she could probably get a free contact high just from five minutes in their hazy apartment, but it's not worth it to her. It's not like her own apartment is the epitome of cleanliness, but theirs is beyond intolerable. Erna just doesn't like straightening up. Her apartment is a study in clutter and disorganization, but she takes the trash out and does her laundry. There are never dirty dishes in the sink or filth laying around. Sasha and Connie have no such scruples about cleanliness and their apartment reeks of dirty laundry, weed, and the sticky sugar congealed at the bottom of empty soda cans.

When Sasha tries to convince her to go to some show they're putting on after hours at the café later in the month, Erna thinks that the only thing she hates about smoking weed is that it forces her to talk to and be relatively nice to people she otherwise wouldn't. She tells them she has plans so as to not seem too rude, because, after all, they're her only connection now. She acts like she can't come inside and hang out because she has a really busy day ahead of her, which is laughable.

After picking up a latte with a white steamed milk rose on top from Eren, she doesn't actually have anything at all to do but brood and feel sorry for herself for a bit. She does that in the bathtub so that she can feel like she's multitasking. She runs the water uncomfortably hot and drops in a bath bomb. As it fizzes between her legs, she leans back against the tile wall behind the tub and closes her eyes. Her bath lasts for hours, cooling down until she's almost shivering, heating up when she runs the hot water again… and again… She practices thinking about nothing, banishing any of the sickening feelings that crash their way to the forefront of her mind for only short moments before she can push them back again to the place where she can't hear them consciously. She is pretty successful for someone who is so sensitive and feels so strongly, but every so often, through the black veil over her mind, a feeling stabs through and screams something like, "He never liked you because you're pathetic and hideous." She absorbs that information, but refuses to feel anything about it. She pushes the thought back before it can scream other horrible things that she'll take as truth, and she rationalizes it. He said he loved her. Obviously he meant 'as a friend.' And that's okay. That's what they were. It's ridiculous to feel anything other than 'okay.' So that is what she forces herself to feel. Underneath the surface, her suppressed feelings still fuck with her, making her nauseous and sore and sleepy. She knows it's severe depression when she feels like she can't possibly get out of bed in the morning or when her toes ache with phantom pain, but nonetheless she prefers the physical symptoms of repressed feelings over allowing herself to feel the things she needs to move on and be actually okay. It's her belief that if she can push the feelings down long enough, then eventually they'll just go away.

She sinks her shoulders beneath the water, now colored a deep, dark opalescent blue from the bath bomb Deirdra sent her. The color is so thick that she can't see her skin under the water. She waves a hand through the bathwater and watches clouds of darker blue puff up, then swirl away under streams of pearly, polychromatic stardust-looking stuff. It's beautiful. She rolls over and submerges her face. When she finally needs to come up for air, she checks her phone resting on the edge of the tub and finds out that she's been in there for almost three hours. It doesn't feel that long. Time gets
away from her lately.

Her usual skincare routine gets skipped in favor of drying off quickly and without pampering herself. Denying herself nice things that she needs is another form of self flagellation. Her favorite tin of lip gloss doesn't get opened even though her lips are raw from getting bitten all weekend, sometimes even bleeding under the abuse of her canine teeth. Lately she finds that she likes the chapped lip look and she doesn't mind the tight way her skin feels when it's dry.

She only needs to smoke one joint to get her appetite back, because it's been a while. One more to numb any painful feelings that might surface. A third one just for overkill. It makes her feel calm and almost happy and able to think about him without it hurting.

No longer anxious and over thinking, she simply goes over to Levi's when she hears cooking sounds on the other side of the wall, not feeling like she needs to text first. As soon as he opens the door for her, he flashes her that smirk that makes her feel diminutive and hopelessly submissive.

"You're high?"

"Yeah," she answers, defiantly unapologetic. She crosses her arms defensively at the amused look he's giving her. "What? You've seen me high before."

"It's not that."

As he moves to let her in and gives her space to take her boots off in the skinny entryway he says, "It's just that…" like he's about to laugh.

"What?" she asks, short and clipped, because now that he's hurt her she doesn't like the teasing tone as much as she used to. It still makes her feel small and it turns her on, but now she hates that. She doesn't want to be attracted to him.

"Don't fucking hit me for saying this."

She narrows her eyes, making no promises.

"But you kind of look like a stripper."

Erna looks down. Nope. She didn't somehow wear a cheap bikini and 6 inch platform stilettos today. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"The body glitter?"

"I don't-" she starts to say, and then stops as she looks at her hands, covered in a fine dust of silver. Slowly she realizes what might have happened and then suddenly she pushes past him and into the bathroom. She makes a beeline for the mirror on the medicine cabinet and shouts, "Fuck!" when she sees herself.

Levi leans in the door frame and watches her still amused, but also curious about how she could have gotten so much glitter all over her without being aware of it.

Erna mutters under her breath, "Going to kill that stupid bitch," as she takes her phone out of her dress pocket.

Levi asks with sarcastic concern, "You okay?" and she holds up a finger as she puts the phone to her ear.
Instead of 'hello' when the other person picks up, she starts with, "You fucking cunt! I told you to never glitter bomb me again!"

Deirdra says calmly, "I didn't? What are you talking about?"

"One of the bath bombs you sent me was filled with silver glitter powder."

Levi fights the urge to laugh, smiling and holding his breath, he goes back to the kitchen and leaves her to her conversation.

"Are you sure? I've been very careful about that since you last expressed your dislike of glitter by calling me a fucking cunt. Did you open an old one? What was it called?"

"I don't fucking know!" Erna yells back in exasperation. "It was, like, really blue."

"That narrows it down to seven that I can think of off the top of my head," Deirdra says without a trace of concern for how serious the situation is. "Oh well. Just read the ingredients on the label next time and be more careful."

"Fuck you! You be more careful."

"Also, take a picture. I bet you look cute all sparkly. I'll put it on the website."

Erna's nostrils flare with rage. "I absolutely will not."

"Oh calm down, Ernie."

"You calm down! I look like fucking Twilight!"

She hears Levi laugh from the kitchen and she hangs up. The phone gets shoved back into the white lace trimmed pocket of her dress as she goes back out to tell Levi to shut the fuck up.

"So you took a bath in glitter?"

He's facing away from her, busy cutting something green on the counter, but she can feel him smirking.

"Not intentionally." She crosses her arms and pouts about it. "My cunty sister sabotaged me with a bath bomb."

Levi stops what he's doing and turns around, hitching his elbows back and leaning on the counter. He watches Erna take her phone back out to flip off the camera as she takes a selfie of her sparkly face and mutters, "Put this on your website, you bitch."

He can't help the warm smile that creeps over his face. He likes the glitter, which doesn't really look much like an exotic dancer's body glitter, but more like a fine silver lustre that gives her skin an otherworldly, iridescent look.

Her pixie-like shiny-ness is adorably incongruent with the narrow-eyed, annoyed look she gives him when she catches him smiling and says, "Quit making fun of me."

"I'm not. It's cute."

She rolls her eyes and makes the most exasperated sighing sound, like 'cute' is the worst thing he could call her, but he doesn't care. He'll stand by those words. She looks past him at the counter and stove and asks, "You just started cooking, right?"
"Yeah, why?"

"Can I use your shower and wash this shit off?"

"What's wrong with your shower that's less than twenty feet away?" he asks. Not that he doesn't like the idea of her using his shower. It just seems so obvious that she would use her own that he wonders if she forgot that she had the option.

She looks down at the floor and mumbles "Nevermind."

"What?"

"I get, like… Don't give me that look again."

"What look?"

"That one where you're sad for me or whatever."

"I won't?" As far as he knows, his face never really changes much from its singular expression.

She takes a deep breath and says all at once, "I get really paranoid in my shower because I can't hear if someone is trying to break in, and I know it's literally crazy, but I get really scared and it just helps for my peace of mind if, like, I know…"

"It's fine, I get it," he assures her to relieve her of the burden of explaining. And he makes a conscious effort to not let his face do anything. Just on the off chance he fails, he turns around and goes back to chopping dill as he tells her, "Towels are in the closet."

"Thanks."

"Try not to get glitter all over my goddamn bathroom."

"Better than getting it all over your goddamn apartment," she replies from behind the closet door. She retrieves a white towel that smells too much like bleach and mutters to herself, "Who the fuck would want a bath bomb with glitter in it anyway? Fucking hippie moves to Oregon and is still a pain in my ass from across the country."

Erna takes a short shower and when she comes back out, she is almost completely glitter free, but otherwise the same. She was careful not to get her hair wet. Levi is disappointed on a few ridiculous levels. First, he had kind of hoped that she would ask to borrow clothes after showering, like 'Lissa had, because he has a thing for seeing her in casual clothes ever since the party and the power outage. Second, deep down, some very stupid part of his brain was hoping she would come back out in a towel and real life would play out like a really terrible, cliche porno. Third, he just liked the glitter, especially the way it made her curse and scrunch up her nose in disgust.

"How much glitter is in my shower?" he deadpans.

"I washed it all down the drain so that we could eat and I wouldn't need to wait for you to sterilize the tiles like a fucking maniac. I'm starving."

"That happens when you smoke."

"I thought we'd be eating by now," she whines.

"Salmon isn't even out of the oven and when it is it'll need ten minutes to rest."
Erna crumples defeated into a chair at the kitchen table and moans, "Why does your stupid healthy food take so long? It takes me five minutes to make ramen."

"Ramen isn't real food."

She lays her forehead on her overlapping hands on the table and pouts quietly, "Tastes like real food."

He can't argue about subjective taste, so Levi leaves it at that and lifts a lid to check on the rice and sees that it also needs a few minutes. He frowns, knowing how hard it is to have the munchies and no snack food. He opens the fridge and asks her over his shoulder, "Can you eat an apple?" like he has to ask because maybe it will kill her, being real food without any sugar or preservatives.

"Ugh. I guess."

He tosses a fuji apple at her head and, surprisingly, she catches it. More surprisingly, instead of complaining further, she takes three huge bites right away. Levi stares at her wet lips as she chews, dumbstruck. He lets himself look at her – actually look at her without cheating and glancing past her or downwards – for the first time since Friday when the look she got when he hurt her broke his fucking heart, and he notices that her normally glossy lips are chapped and the skin under her eyes has a faint blue-grey tint. Her face looks more gaunt, like she is starving literally and not figuratively.

She notices him looking with her red-rimmed eyes and asks with a biting frost to her voice, "What?"

It's on the tip of his tongue, but he bites it back, swallows it, and asks, "You want something to drink?"

"Water," she says tiredly.

Levi takes two bottles out of the fridge and in the three strides back to the table works up the courage to say, "Can we talk about Friday?"

There's a slight spark of recognition in Erna's eyes that widen just slightly before she takes another big bite of apple and answers with feigned apathy before she even finishes chewing, "What is there to talk about?"

He hates when she answers his questions with questions. Hers are so hard to answer.

He sits down again so that they'll be on the same level and he sets the water bottles on the table. "I don't know…" his hand pushes his hair away from his forehead as he leans back and gets comfortable in the hard plastic chair, slumping, subconsciously putting himself in a more vulnerable posture in reaction to how defensive she sounds. "I guess I wanted some kind of closure on the whole thing? Like an answer?"

"I don't recall you asking me anything." She takes another vicious bite of the apple.

It feels like she's torturing him again, which, usually, he can take pretty well, but this is too agonizing. He deadpans, "I told you I love you."

Her jaw locks mid-bite and she retracts her fangs. In what seems like slow motion, she reaches for a water bottle and uncaps it. Only after she makes him wait while she takes a sip does she say hesitantly, "I thought you meant, like, platonically."

In a way he's fucking relieved, because that makes sense of all of her behavior since then. In another way, he's sweating, because it means he needs to explain himself, that he didn't bite the bullet as hard.
as he thought on Friday and he needs to confess all over again with nowhere to run away to this time. "I mean, yeah, platonically. You're my best friend, but also…”

"But also not…”

"Yeah."

There's more silence than he can stand after that. Maybe one and a half seconds of it. His mouth sprints to fill it. "I mean, you don't owe me anything. If you don't want to talk about it, that's fine. I'm not asking you for anything."

His fingers knot in his hair as he looks down and addresses the rest of this to the table. "It just felt shitty not being honest with you. So now…you know… It's up to you. I'm happy being your friend and I can do that and keep having this crush on you without being a creep about it. Or, if you're not comfortable with that, I can fuck off forever."

"I don't want you to fuck off forever," she says quietly.

He glances up again. She's dropped the defensive shields of apple and water bottle, having surrendered both of them and set them on the table. It feels like there's less between them. There's silence again, but Levi waits patiently and lets it be.

"I…” She stops and shakes her head. Her turn to address the white table. "If you had told me that like a month ago, I would have been really happy."

His heart seizes up and feels calcified. He can't hide it from his face, because when she looks up for his reaction she says, "Don't look like that." Then, "Fuck. I'm not good at this. I don't like talking about feelings."

"I know." He wants to add that she doesn't have to, that he's sorry he made her, but he doesn't remind her that she isn't obligated to tell him how she feels, because he wants to know, badly.

"You really hurt me," she says softly, eyes more bloodshot than before.

"I know." He sucks back his mantra of 'I'm sorry,' because she told him no more apologizing, and he respects her too much to disobey.

"And it kind of reminded me that feelings hurt and I don't like having them and maybe I sort of just don't want to feel so much anymore."

He nods. He remembers what it's like to not want to feel.

"I'm, like, really sensitive," she says like she's ashamed. "Way more sensitive than I pick on you for being,” she adds with a sad smirk. "And besides, I've never even been in a real relationship."

"Neither have I," he says, pleadingly, like that commonality means that of course they should try it together.

"And I'm kind of mentally ill…and I don't know how that would work… I don't want you to feel like you have to take care of me and deal with my paranoia and how angry and sad I am all the time."

"I like taking care of you."

"I don't like being taken care of," she says, with a hint of that trademark haughty pride sneaking its
way back into her voice.

But this is where he can't make a concession. Darkly, almost angrily, he warns her, "I'm still going to take care of you when you're being a dick to yourself."

"Fine," she says petulantly. Her fingertips rest themselves delicately on the plastic cap of the water bottle and twirl it around slowly. "I'll think about it. Right now, it's just... a lot."

"I get that," he assents. "I just don't want you to think that this changes the way I act around you. I feel the same way I have this whole time we've been friends. The only difference is that now you know about it. I wanted you to know."

"You could have said something forever ago."

"You could have."

"Too scared."

"Me too."

"We're the worst," she says, her nose scrunching up and the corners of her red eyes wrinkling as she smiles.

Levi pushes himself up from the table, like he's bone-tired, and turning towards the kitchen asks, "You still hungry?"

"Not especially."

He gets out two plates anyway and says, "Too bad. I can tell you didn't eat all weekend."

"How do you know?" she asks, not denying it.

"Have you looked in a mirror?"

"Only to check for pixie dust."

"Well, you look like shit."

He hears her slight breath of a laugh from the table and he smiles to himself as he loads her plate up with rice. He sets it in front of her and says more seriously, "And you can use the shower here anytime you want."


In the days after, they both make it a stubborn as fuck point to not be weird around each other. It's lucky that they both already have a lot of practice being friends and hiding uncomfortably desperate, wanting feelings. To anyone on the outside, it looks like nothing at all has changed between them to the extent that Ymir gives Levi shit about backing out of what he promised to do (until he tells her in great detail what happened).

There is the one difference – they both know now, so they respect the unspoken. Levi doesn't try to flirt with her and Erna stops her overt teasing.

Erna also tries to stop staring at him. That is harder. She can't not find him attractive, though, curiously, she stops having her masochistic fantasies about him. It isn't a conscious decision, they just stop on their own. She doesn't think about him spanking her or hitting her with a riding crop or
anything. She figures it's because it's too real now. There's too much pressure there. If she wants to insert him into a sexual fantasy, she has to also think about the relationship that he put on the table and she doesn't want to think about that. That's too hard to think about.

She looks in the mirror more, trying to see what he sees. So far, she's seen nothing likeable or beautiful, but she keeps trying. She figures that if she can start to see whatever he sees, then maybe she's healthy enough to entertain what she thinks he means by a relationship, though the logistics of that whole arrangement are still a mystery to her. How do you do a relationship with someone who is afraid to leave their home and has an aversion to physical contact that isn't violent? She wonders if he's thought about the practicality of it. She wonders why he would want to bother with something that sounds so difficult.

Another thing that changes is the way she treats herself. She takes better care of herself. Not much better than before, still surviving mostly on cigarettes and lattes, but better enough that he won't have to take care of her. She's never liked anyone taking care of her. Not even him, though it feels less patronizing when he tries to do it.

When her sister calls and asks if she's started therapy yet, she doesn't lie, but she promises that she's trying. She takes less than baby steps. One day she forces herself to think about looking up a local therapist for exactly thirty seconds. Another day, she entertains the idea of maybe searching for the nearest reputable doctor on her phone as she's sitting at the café with Levi. She doesn't actually do it. Thinking about doing it is hard enough.

Deirdra says that people do cognitive behavioral therapy over Skype now, and that she should try it. Erna knows that wouldn't work for her. It would be too easy to hang up on a call. Too easy to escape. She needs to be trapped in a room before she'll feel compelled to talk. She's the kind of person who needs feelings forced out of her, sometimes violently.

All that changes for Levi is that he doesn't feel guilty anymore. He'd thought that it would hurt after she said that she only wanted to be friends, but it doesn't. The thing is that he likes being friends with her, and it's easy. He knows how to be a friend. He would still rather be a friend with permission to put his hands around her waist and explore her mouth with his tongue, but for how much he loves her, physical affection seems like a trivial thing to go without. Not having it doesn't outweigh how good it feels to have gotten that secret off of his chest and to know how she honestly feels. Closure is a wonderful thing, even when it doesn't go exactly the way one had hoped.

Everything else stays the same. The cigarette breaks, the sarcasm, and the way he draws her. Erna is grateful. She has never handled change very well.

On Thursday, they walk back from the café early in the morning, respective caffeinated drinks in hand, and she asks as if it's totally normal, "Do you have time to let me use your shower before you leave?"

He checks his phone and chews at his lip, conflicted. "I have an early appointment. Can you wait until I get back?"

She rolls her eyes at his apprehension about refusing her and says sarcastically, "I don't know. I have so many plans for today. Places to go, people to—" and suddenly she stops mid-sentence.

Levi pulls himself up and turns around, giving her a quizzical look as she stands rooted to the sidewalk, looking past him at their building with wide eyes. She says to herself, "Fuck…"

Before he can turn to try and see what has her so shocked, she cups her free hand to her mouth and
yells past him, "Get off my stoop, you cunt!"

The girl standing at the door to the building with a large gym bag over her shoulder and a rolled up sleeping bag at her feet looks up, waves at Erna, and then flips her off, yelling back, "Fuck you, let me inside so I can put my shit down and give you a hug!"

Given the context and the linguistic similarity, Levi assumes the brown-haired woman flipping off his friend is the sister he keeps hearing about. Erna marches past him angrily while he hangs back, wondering if he can sneak past them and get his sketchbook from upstairs without drawing attention, because from what he's seen, Erna's family is kind of fucking terrifying.

"I'm not letting you in," Erna growls, her eyes narrowed dangerously. "Go the fuck home. Nobody asked you to come."

When, in response, the taller woman wraps her arms around Erna in a big hug that lifts her boots off the ground and doesn't get her killed, Levi knows for sure it's her sister. He doesn't want to intrude, but he needs to get his sketches for work or else he may as well not show up today. He approaches the steps and tries to figure out how he can sidestep past them, but the sister drops Erna, locks her hazel eyes on him and asks rhetorically, "And who's this?"

"Jesus Christ," Erna mutters, fixing the black bow at the hem of the white chest panel of her dress. "Nobody."

"Don't lie, I saw you walking together." She ruffles Erna's black curls, making her scrunch her nose and slap at the offending hand. Deirdra avoids getting hit and walks down a couple steps, extending her hand to Levi and asking too sweetly, "Are you Ernie's new friend?"

Levi blinks. "Ernie?"

Erna's voice rises to a shrill tone as she yells, "Oh my god, if I let you in will you stop being so fucking humiliating?!"

"No promises," she says over her shoulder with a wink. She pushes a chunk of long, straight hair behind her ear that Levi notices has been dyed purple to stand out against the rest of her ashy brown color and she shakes his hand. "I'm Deirdra. Ernie's my adorable little sister."

Erna rolls her eyes and mutters as she reaches into her coffin purse for keys. "Levi."

She looks him up and down, then turns to address Erna who is unlocking the door in a rush, and asks, "Is this the guy you have a huge crush on?"

Levi pinches the bridge of his nose and walks up the steps past Deirdra. Erna gets the door open just in time and lets him in first. As he steps in, he tells her under his breath, "I get it now."

"I wasn't exaggerating when I called her a cunt," Erna responds indignantly.

Levi escapes up the stairs. Erna bars the doorway with her arm when Deirdra goes to follow. She looks pointedly down at her sister's hand and says, "Why do you have a sleeping bag?"

"I'm staying for a few nights, obviously. I figured you don't have a guest bed."

"I don't remember giving you permission to stay?"
"Come on, Ernie," she says, stressing the nickname that Erna has always hated, knowledge of which only made Deirdra want to use it more as they grew up and got closer. "I haven't seen you forever and I worry about you. I flew all the way out here. You can at least put me up for a couple nights."

"One night," Erna says, her teeth clenched.

"We'll see," Deirdra smiles.

Erna sighs and steps out of the way. As Deirdra crosses the threshold she looks up the steps after Levi, who has wisely already disappeared and says, "I thought he would be older."

Erna edges past her up the steps and deadpans, "He's like thirty," assuming that maybe Deirdra thinks he's younger than her, because he certainly doesn't look that old.

"Yeah, but I thought you had a daddy complex, so I expected him to be at least forty-five."

Erna pinches the bridge of her nose and sighs, "Oh my god." Then she changes the subject. "Did you bring me lip balm?"

"Yeah, I brought your favorite and a new flavor I'm working on. It's got this oaky, merlot scent. I want to name it Delirium Tremens. Is that in poor taste?"

"That depends," her sister answers with a wry smirk. "Are you trying to sell it to alcoholics?"

"Well, they're not my main demographic, but I don't want to exclude them. That's why I figured I'd run it by you first." Which is a smart, thinly veiled dig about Erna being a lush. Deirdra can be as biting and brutal as Erna, except she's sneaky and nice about it, where Erna is straightforward. Deirdra will insult you while leaving you wondering whether you've just received a compliment instead, which is skill that Erna admires, though she would never want to practice it, preferring to instead make people cringe and cry.

She lets Deirdra into her apartment just as Levi is running out of his, sketchbook peeking out of the bag that Erna's sure he threw over his shoulder as quickly as possible, full cup of tea still in his other hand. She shoots him a look that says, 'Can I call you if I need help burying a body?'

He gives her a slight, pained smirk, and mouths, "Good luck."

As he takes the stairs two at a time to get out of there fast, Deirdra looks over Erna's shoulder and says matter of factly, "He's cute. What's his deal?"

"We're friends."

"Yeah?" Deirdra steps back in and sets her things down. "He's very solicitous of you."

Erna shuts the door. "Can we talk about something else?"

Deirdra squints knowingly at her. "So you like him a lot."

Erna's fingers find her temples. When rubbing them doesn't work, she brings the hot cardboard cup in her hand to her forehead, using the heat to soothe a nascent headache.

"Okay, okay," Deirdra smiles. "Let me take a shower and then let's go somewhere."

"I don't feel like going anywhere."

"Why not?" Deirdra asks suspiciously, because Erna's been lying about getting better.
"I have a lot of work to do," Erna says, glancing at her laptop on the desk that she hasn't touched in days. "Can you just entertain yourself?"

"But I came to see you."

"Well, then you can watch me work, I guess," Erna shrugs, hoping that it sounds boring enough to get Deirdra to call up some old friends and go out with them for most of the day.

"That's okay," Deirdra says, calling her bluff. "I brought a book that I didn't finish on the plane. I'll just chill here with you."

Erna tries to hide the disappointment from her face. She goes over and slides her laptop off the desk, cradling it on her hip. "We can at least go to the café. There are people there you can bother who aren't me."

"Don't try to act so tough. I know you love when I bother you."

"Debatable," Erna mutters.

Levi gets home early in the evening, his fingers almost numb from the constant vibration of his machine. Instead of being greeted as usual by Erna's soft, begrudgingly caring 'Hey', he watches her rub at her closed eyes with thumb and forefinger as her older sister stands over her on the stoop and waves at him.

If he looks for it, he can see the familial resemblance. It's in the high cheekbones and the sharp, intelligent eyes. Everything else is so different. Deirdra dresses in loose, flowing clothes somewhere between bohemian and hipster, wears her hair long and straight, has at least three inches of height on Erna and softer curves, a bigger chest, bigger waist, and thinner hips. She has an easier way about her than Erna. She's relaxed. He doesn't think he's ever seen Erna relaxed unless she's high or coming down from a session with Annie.

"Hey, Levi!" She shouts before he can even tap out a cigarette. "Want to go somewhere with us?"

From behind her, Erna shakes her head at him.

"I can't."

Deirdra fixes him with a frown, narrowing her eyes slightly. He recognizes that look. It must be a family trait. And he's pretty sure he's just been caught colluding with a lie.

"Deirdra, can we just not? I'm not in the mood."

"Not even to go to a bar?"

Erna takes out a cigarette and makes a face before lighting it. "I'm an alcoholic."

That's how Levi knows it's serious. The Erna he knows would rather admit mental illness than ever categorize herself into the ranks of those in recovery. He doesn't take out his own pack of cigarettes, instead staying down on the sidewalk, leaning on the railing until he decides whether or not he's going to stay. He's on the fence. He missed Erna and wants to hang out with her, but the atmosphere is tense and he wants no part of whatever drama might suddenly explode.

"Hookah bar?" Deirdra offers.
"No," Erna exhales a cloud of smoke at her sister. "Full of tourists and hipsters."

"You could say that about literally anything in New York," her sister huffs. "What about that used bookstore you love? The one with no obvious system of organization and so much clutter you could get lost for days?"

Levi almost smiles as he pictures Erna hiding in a maze of bookshelves, knees tucked under her, and her nose in an old, used hardcover.

"That's really far from here, Deirdra," she says tiredly. "Besides, it'll be closed in less than an hour. Can we just smoke a joint and order sushi?"

Deirdra pauses, gives Erna a few seconds to change her mind about giving her the runaround, then when Erna doesn't take the chance, she asks point blank, "When was the last time you left your apartment?"

"When I came down here five minutes ago for a smoke," she answers with bitter sarcasm.

"You know what I mean."

Erna doesn't answer. Levi can hear the paper of her cigarette crackle as she takes a long drag.

Then Deirdra locks her eyes on him, with that same challenging, sharply intelligent look he gets from Erna less lately and she asks him, "When was the last time she went anywhere?"

He keeps his mouth shut and decides he's going to have to smoke later. He avoids eye contact with Deirdra and walks toward the door. Erna keeps looking at the sidewalk and says, "Leave him out of it, Deirdra. Stop being a cunt."

That's the last thing he hears before the door closes behind him. When he gets upstairs, he puts his shit down, gets undressed, and cracks eight out of his ten stiff fingers, pushing down on each middle knuckle with his thumbs until they pop.

Before he gets in the shower, his phone vibrates with a single word from Erna: "Sorry."

He smirks and texts back, "Sorry I couldn't help."

"I'll get her out of here tomorrow. Thanks for not trying to lie for me."

He sets his phone down on the sink in the bathroom and steps into the shower. He goes down for a cigarette later when he can hear murmurs of Erna and her sister talking on the other side of the wall.

One Erna is scary enough. Two of her is terrifying.

He turns off his alarm for the morning, because he's drained. Work has been busy as fuck and he never got a real chance to recover from the emotional hangover he's been feeling since that conversation with Erna on Monday. He planned on sleeping in for once. Instead, he wakes up to frantic banging on his door.

He curses and reaches for his phone to check the time. It tells him that it's 11:30 am, and he has three texts from Erna. Instead of checking them, he wraps the sheet loosely around his naked hips and gets up to check who's knocking. He sees her looking pensive through the peephole and opens the door. "Fuck," he groans sleepily. "What? Why do you look so worried? Did you kill her?"

Her face changes drastically from mild panic to that loose-lipped, liquid-eyed look she used to give
him when she thought he wasn't looking and she looks him up and down before saying, "Do you know how hard it is to talk to you like that?"

"If you want to catch me fully clothed, then don't force me out of bed."

"Okay," she says absently, before her thumb starts to gravitate towards her teeth. "Fair."

He gives her a second to see if she's going to snap back into reality, but instead her pupils dilate as she stares at his abs. He asks, "Did you need something?"

"Shit," she says abruptly, like she's suddenly remembered. "Yes. I'm sorry."

"My eyes are up here."

"Sorry!" She finally looks up and focuses. "I need a favor."

"I'm listening." He doesn't want to commit without hearing what it is, though he'd walk through fire for her.

"I need you to babysit Deirdra for an hour."

But he won't do that. "No," he deadpans. Then, "Wait, why?" as he pinches the bridge of his nose. It's too early for this. He hasn't even had his tea yet.

She chews her bottom lip and looks at him with big, pleading eyes. "Because it's Friday."

"Why the fuck should—" and then he remembers what Friday means. "Oh," he grunts in recognition.

"I just…need you to make sure she doesn't come back for at least an hour."

He rolls his eyes. "Can't you just cancel? Tell Annie she can't come."

"I can't," she whines, her voice getting high and shrill. "I'll lose my deposit, and this is the last week before she leaves for vacation, and I haven't found anyone else and…I really need it."

The way those last words come out, desperate and hungry, make his stomach tighten and he slightly curls in on himself as he wills his cock, half-hard already since he woke up, to not react to her for once.

"I'll buy you all of the tea forever. I'll get all your cigarettes. I'll literally never ask you for anything ever again."

"Stop… Just… You don't have to do any of that."

"So you'll do it?" she asks hopefully.

He curses under his breath and then gives in. "Yeah."

She bounces a little on her toes and brings her hands together like he just answered her prayer. "Thank you so much! I would hug you, but…"

"Yeah, don't," he says curtly, then he sighs. "Shit…" he shakes his head. "Can't fucking believe this." This is not what he wanted to do with his day off.

"I know. I'm sorry."
"As soon as she leaves, we're having a long talk about this."

"Whatever you want."

"I'm serious."

She nods solemnly, then asks, "Want to get dressed and come down for a cigarette?"

"Can I take a shit first?" he asks irritably.

"I guess?" she says, trying not to laugh, because he's so not in the mood for laughter.

He notices her eyes tracking downward again and asks before he closes the door, "Are you done staring?"

"Fuck," she says under her breath. "No, yeah, I'm sorry." She pauses as she forces herself to look up at his face again, then says, "You know, I feel like I can say this to you now: you're, like, really hot. Like unreasonably so."

"Yeah, I know," he says bluntly, annoyed that he isn't going to have time to jerk off about the way she stares at him.

Erna finally turns to go back to her apartment with an, "As long as you know," thrown over her shoulder.

He meets them downstairs fifteen minutes later and catches them mid-conversation with Deirdra already giving Erna shit about her suspicious behavior. Levi checks his phone while Erna tries to make the lie about having a Skype meeting with her boss sound believable. He knows Annie usually comes around noon. It's 11:50.

He lights a cigarette and stays the fuck out of their argument. He almost hopes that Deirdra won't give in and he won't have to spend an hour with her. If Erna has to cancel with Annie, it's a bonus for his jealous side. Then, Erna wins with, "Besides, I thought it would be good for my sister and my best friend to get to know each other?"

Levi feels like he's going to gag. Deirdra rolls her eyes, but then looks at him, her eyes narrowing with hidden motives and ideas behind them, and she sighs as if it puts her out still, "Okay, you're probably right, Ernie."

Erna scowls at the nickname, but she doesn't say anything other than a very quick, "Okay, great, see you guys later," as she turns and runs back in the building and upstairs to get ready for Annie.

Deirdra's lips curl up on one side. "What do you want to do?"

"Tea," he answers automatically. "After that, I don't give a shit." He gestures with a nod towards the café and starts walking, not turning to see if she's coming or not.

She catches up with him and starts the interrogation. "She never actually leaves her apartment, does she?"

He sees no point in lying. He doesn't think she would be trusting enough to believe him anyway. "No," he answers, "but you knew that."

"Pretty much. I just wanted her to admit it. She's so frustrating."

"In what way?"
"In the way where she won't ask for help or do anything positive or even think about trying to get better."

As she walks next to him and the wind changes, Levi's hit with the same kind of natural scents that he catches from Erna, only different. He remembers that she gets all her lotion and shampoo and stuff from Deirdra. He can recognize the raw, organic fragrances and the way they catch his attention more than the usual chemical smell of soaps and perfumes, except that Deirdra is more earthy. She smells more like woods and patchouli and pines, where Erna goes for sugary things like honey and vanilla or sweet, cloying flowers and citruses.

"She thinks she doesn't need to get better," Levi says in between drags of his cigarette.

"I miss the old Ernie," Deirdra says sadly.

They stop outside the café entrance so that Levi can finish the last half of his cigarette. He's silent as he wonders if he wants to know. Then, he decides to ask, "What was she like before?"

"She was like…" Deirdra trails off, trying to think of how to put it. "Well... you could never find her."

His eyebrows crease. That doesn't sound like a desirable trait to him.

"When she was little, she was always kind of off hiding somewhere. Then when she was old enough to drive, she would go out for hours and hours. I don't know what she did. It's not like she had friends. I don't even think she would stop anywhere, just drive. I think she liked people not knowing where she was or what she was doing. She's intensely private like that."

"You miss that?"

"I know, it sounds crazy. But it's always been such a part of her, it's scary to see her lose that."

"Anything else?"

"She's so scared now," Deirdra says candidly. "I understand being cautious, but she's a lot more stressed than she needs to be. I keep telling her to get help for the PTSD, but she refuses. It's fucking stupid," she says, with traces of that same posh New England accent that Levi catches in Erna's speech sometimes. "It's not like there isn't a way to fix what her brain is doing, but she acts like it's impossible."

Levi shrugs. He can't really confirm or deny, and he's only ever known one Erna, so he can't sympathize with wanting a different version of her. He puts out the last of his cigarette against the brick wall behind him and asks, "Feel better?"

"A little," she sighs. "I've told her all of that a hundred times, but it always turns into an argument. It's nice to talk to someone sensible."

He snorts. That's definitely the first time anyone's called him that. When they're waiting in line at the café, she tells him out of nowhere, "I can see why she's attracted to you. You seem more like what I would picture her type being."

He wonders if this is genuine or the same small sadistic inclination that Erna has for saying very uncomfortable things to people and watching them squirm. Luckily, because of that inclination, not much makes him squirm anymore. He just raises an eyebrow at her and asks, "How's that?"

"The whole punk thing," she says dismissively. "Like, all the piercings and the neck tattoo."
Deirdra laughs. "Yeah, well, you can't trust her." She clucks her tongue and pulls out her phone as she says, almost to herself, "She's such a little liar." She opens her photos and starts tapping to dig through folders and folders of pictures before she finally turns the screen towards him and says, "Ernie, circa, hmm, 2000 or 2001."

Levi looks at a picture of a much younger Erna, still pale-skinned with a bob of black wavy hair and straight bangs, leaning against a brick wall in that completely lackadaisical way that only teenagers can pull off believably. Her lowered eyelids are covering half of a death glare at the camera person. Her cheekbones are exactly as high and rounded on her doll-like face as they are now, and for all those similarities, he can still barely believe that it's her, because her black, chunky-but-cutesy platform boots are replaced with army surplus combat boots. The thigh-highs that she only ever wears in white or black are missing, and in their place are ripped fishnets underneath a short and frayed brown corduroy skirt that flares away from her hips, improved with sloppy, asymmetrical bits of lace, zippers, and pointless buckles. Her lean stomach barely peeks out under the bottom hem of a threadbare band tee with the sleeves and collar cut off to reveal her collarbones and slender arms.

"Holy shit," he says in disbelief as he reaches for the phone. Deirdra surrenders it with a smirk.

Levi looks closer and notices the dark, smoky, heroin-chic eye makeup and paler than natural pink lip gloss. Pearl earrings in her earlobes and little, childish baby barrettes scattered randomly through her hair. If he squints, he thinks he can see a smudge of glitter, just on her one cheek. He looks closer at the band tee shirt and recognizes it as a now vintage Bikini Kill design.

"She was a riot grrrl," he says to himself in disbelief.

"Yeah. Devoutly," Deirdra confirms. "I still tease her about wanting to be Courtney Love."

Levi can't say anything but, "Shit."

Deirdra takes her phone back and swipes through some folders. "She only started dressing the way she does now when she was seventeen or eighteen," she says with an upward inflection as she tries to remember. "It was kind of gradual. The babydoll dresses started getting blacker and more Rococo instead of grungy and vintage." She looks back up at him mischievously and says, "I have a lot more of these," waving her phone enticingly.

"Show me everything," he deadpans as if this is a very grave life-or-death matter.

They get a table and sit there for over an hour as Deirdra holds a private clinic on how to embarrass your little sister as much as possible in front of the guy she likes. She shows Levi more pictures of Erna's riot grrrl phase, which was Deirdra's personal favorite, with Erna in a variety of outfits that are a disheveled feminist reclamation of girlish clothes with grunge accents. He gets to see what she looked like as a kid thanks to a Facebook album of childhood pictures Deirdra had put together solely for the purpose of annoying Erna and teasing her about how adorable she used to be (she looks much the same as she does now, short bob of curled black hair, no makeup, and never smiling). He learns things he never even thought to ask, like that her favorite city is Paris, which makes sense of her preference for espresso, cigarettes, croissants, and sweet pastries.

Erna is a mutual favorite subject that breaks the ice between them. Sometime after Deirdra reveals that her little sister's first word was 'No', the conversation finally starts to stray, and they feel more comfortable talking about themselves.

They talk about the benefits of tea and organically grown food. Deirdra tells him about how she gets
the ingredients for her products through fair trade networks so that she and her customers can rest assured that her business is ethical, and anything she can, she grows herself. Her most recent project is keeping her own honey bees, which is much harder than goats.

She shows Levi her tattoos, a Libra symbol on her wrist and some lavender flowers on her ankle. They're not bad. They're not that impressive to him, either. He pulls out his phone and shows her why. She looks through his online portfolio and they spend another fifteen minutes talking about art, and he helps Deirdra loosely design her next tattoo, for once without it feeling like a burden or like work.

He gets Erna's midday latte from Eren before they go back to the apartment building, and Deirdra gets too many cookies, knowing that her sister will steal at least half of them.

After a longer-than-usual session with Annie where Erna gets the most out of her last time for a few weeks, she takes a quick shower and goes downstairs for a cigarette. She does not like what she sees when she gets down there.

Instead of being tense and annoyed and miserable, Deirdra and Levi are there and they're happy. They're smiling like old friends.

They turn around to greet her and do not look immeasurably relieved to not have to suffer each other's company anymore. She scowls as she takes out a cigarette and lights it with quiet anger. "What are you talking about? Why are you smiling? I don't like it."

Deirdra smirks at her like she's being cute and takes a bite from a cookie. She holds up her phone and says, "I'm showing Levi a video from your first ballet recital when you were eight."

Erna frowns and pinches the bridge of her nose. "Why do you even have that?"

"Because you're my adorable baby sister and I love you," she says with her sweet voice laced with undertones of evil that only Erna recognizes.

Sisters are hell.

"Here's your latte," Levi says, holding the cardboard cup from One Shot out to her without looking away from the video of her in her first pink tutu.

Erna takes the cup, drops her barely smoked cigarette into it, then snatches Levi's cigarette from his lips and does the same. When he looks at her with surprise and anger, she feels like she's returned her world to the natural order of things, and, before he can yell at her for wasting one of his cigarettes, she grabs his hand and pulls him toward the door, saying, "We need to talk."

Deirdra smiles at her flustered sister and sing songs casually, "I'll wait out here, then."

Erna drags Levi up to the first landing of stairs, far enough away from the door that Deirdra won't hear if she starts yelling…which she does, with a shrill and horrified, "What do you think you're doing?!"

"What you asked me to?" he narrows his eyes at her, annoyed with the histrionics.

"I didn't want you two to be friends!"

He looks at her like she's insane. Then, Ymir passes them on the stairs on her way to the basement,
laundry basket on her hip. She elbows Levi out of the way as she passes and says, "Get a room."

Erna pinches the bridge of her nose again, muttering, "Oh my god." Then she shoots Levi a severe look as he smirks at her like he thinks she's cute when she's angry, just like her annoying sister. She starts up the steps and orders him, "Come on."

He follows her up to her apartment where she unlocks the door and all but shoves him inside. He almost laughs and asks, "Why are you so upset?"

"Because you were just supposed to keep her occupied!"

"I did that."

"You're not supposed to be friends!" She groans. "This is a nightmare."

"So tell me again why you couldn't cancel your thing with Annie," he says smugly.

Erna's shoulders slump. She doesn't like being reminded that this is all her doing in the first place. Her lips pout, and she looks away.

Levi crosses his arms sternly. "You lost the right to not talk about it when you got me out of bed to hide your kink from your sister."

"It's just…" Erna starts, but she doesn't know where to start explaining to someone who doesn't get it. She's never made it a habit to try to talk about BDSM with anyone who isn't already familiar. She thinks he's never going to understand that it's a lot more than a sexual release or even an orgasm. She can't put subspace and the high of pain and humiliation into words that he'll understand, but he stands there, waiting, not willing to let it go, because now she's involved him.

"First of all, it's a lot of money and I lose half of it if I don't cancel with 48 hours notice."

"How much?" he asks severely, with disapproval like asking how much a drug habit costs.

"None of your business."

"You made it my business. And you agreed to have a serious talk about this if I helped you."

There's a long, defiant silence before Erna crosses her arms and mutters, "About twelve hundred an hour…"

Levi's eyebrows rise and his jaw almost drops. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Well it's not—" she starts to explain.

"Twelve hundred?"

"It's—"

"An hour?"

"Yeah, but—"

"How much fucking money do you have?" he asks in disbelief.

Erna looks down at the floor. "Not as much as I'd like to keep this up for a lot longer." She looks back up as her stomach sinks with that admission that she hasn't allowed herself to think about until
now. "But I need it."

Levi cards a hand through his hair, and it's his turn to look down.

She hates the way he's making her feel about this, like she's weak, like he pitied her, and she tries to explain. "My nerves get too shot without it, and it's not something I can do myself. It doesn't work. And it's not safe enough to find someone who wants to do it for free."

He keeps looking at the floor. She keeps trying to make him understand. "I've tried to just not, but I get depressed and self-destructive, and I start acting on this risk-seeking behavior that makes me put myself in bad situations despite how vulnerable I am."

When he still doesn't say anything, she whispers quietly, "So… I just… have to…"

He does finally look up, and she's fearful that he's going to argue, because that's going to be a fight on the level of trying to tell a sensible person that it's a choice to be gay, because this is a part of her, not something she could turn off and not something she would ever want to change if she could. Her hackles already rise with the assumption that he would want her to change.

Instead, against all her expectation, he looks right at her and says calmly, "I can do it."

That's not what she was planning a response for in her head. The grinding of the brakes she has to put on the angry tirade that was building up in anticipation makes her need to pause before she can even process what he just said.

Finally, she catches up and formulates a response. "No, you can't."

"Why not?"

"Because it's a lot more complicated than you apparently think."

"Erna… You're spending more money than people do on heroin."

"Yeah, well, I need it more than they need heroin," she bites back defiantly.

"And I'm willing to do it for free because of that. Because I'm your friend."

She stares him down suspiciously, offended that he would deign to think that it's just that easy, like anyone can do it. She wants to explain all the reasons that it's complicated and dangerous, all the ways things can and do go wrong with rough play and inexperienced tops trying things they don't know enough about. She starts thinking of horrific examples and cautionary tales to use, but then she stops. She's sick of it being her responsibility to educate. She's never had any interest in trying to make him understand, and now here she is wasting valuable energy on just that when this is supposed to be her own private thing that she shouldn't have to justify to anyone.

He takes her extended silence personally and says, "You don't trust me."

The opposite is true. She doesn't trust anyone but him. She thinks that if she gave him the opportunity he would try to be as careful and conscientious as possible, and he would realize he got in over his head quickly. She thinks it will make him feel insecure and that he'd torture himself over misgivings about getting it right and trying to delineate that very fine border between hurting her and not hurting her. She thinks the consent issues alone would keep him up at night, because he's careful, he's a perfectionist, and he's a workaholic.

And she's a monster. And for presuming too much, she wants to see him suffer.
"I trust you a lot," she says. "Enough that we're even talking about this."

"At least let me try. If it doesn't work out, then you just go back to paying someone thousands of dollars."

She narrows her eyes at him and crosses her arms. "What do you get out of this?"

"I don't need to get anything. Why are you so suspicious?"

"Because I don't understand what you have to gain."

"Nothing, except maybe you being happier. That's how this friend thing works. You do things without expecting to get anything out of it."

"I don't trust it," she says stubbornly and he rolls his eyes at her. "Fine," she relents, and she crosses the room to her desk, opening the laptop and warning him, "You're going to have a lot of reading to do."

He doesn't want to tell her that he already started reading weeks ago when he started seriously thinking about asking her to go out with him. As he tries to subtly look at the screen over her shoulder, he asks, "What's that?"

She doesn't answer until her printer comes to life and produces the document she just sent it. She holds it out and says, "This is what I would give any new domme. List of medical stuff, hard limits, triggers, safe words, et cetera."

Levi reaches for it, but then she seems to suddenly think of something and retracts it quickly, placing the paper on her desk and reaching for a black sharpie. She mutters, "Hold on," as she uncaps it and starts blacking out parts.

"What are you doing?" he asks, offended, thinking she's censoring something she assumes he won't be able to handle.

"Well," she says casually, scanning the words and making another short, black bar. "I hardly think the parts about strap-ons apply to you."

Chapter End Notes

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"Excuse you?" Erna says like a bratty teenager. Her neck curls to look at the object of her disdain, but she keeps her shoulder leaned against the brick wall, and her legs, one stiff and supporting, and the other lazily bent at the knee and not holding any weight but pointed at the person she was originally speaking to. "We're having a private conversation. Fuck off."

Gracious as ever, Erwin smiles and smoothly apologizes. "So sorry." He gives Levi a look and tells him, "I'll wait inside. Take your time."

Levi almost rolls his eyes at the congratulatory smile Erwin gives him when Erna isn't looking. He never had a dad, but he sees what people mean about them being a fucking embarrassment.

After Erwin disappears behind the cafe door, Erna finishes a long drag off her cigarette and says, "So, what were you asking?"

In moments like this, there is such a cool confidence about her. Erwin brings it out of her even more, and Levi could kill him for showing up at the wrong time and making her lower her eyelids to only offer anything she sees a half-interested glance, as she sucks her cheeks in slightly to suck on the end of her filter. Even he probably looks like a scared little boy in comparison; at least, he feels that way. He clears his throat to assure that his voice won't fucking crack like an awkward little shit, and he repeats the question that he had to get her alone outside the cafe to ask her. "What do you want to do on Friday?"

He prays for a straight answer for once. If she acts like she doesn't know what he's talking about, purely to make him squirm, he swears he'll fucking die. He sips his tea while he waits for her to say something, even though the last thing he needs right now is a stimulant making his heart race even faster.

She smirks at him, first. Not a good start. He swallows the steaming hot tea a little too hard and almost coughs, but he wills his diaphragm to hold the fuck still and save his goddamn pride.

"You know," she says, "the point is kind of that you tell me what to do."

How could he ever when she looks at him like that? She makes him feel powerless with nothing more than a sly sneer and a teasing glance.

He tries to sound unfazed and at least somewhat competent. "I'd rather talk about it than try to make you do anything you don't want to." He goes on in his head, 'Because you'd laugh your ass off if I tried that.'

"That's smart," she says carelessly, and then her eyes focus on her cigarette as if she's already
forgotten about him.

He waits for her to elaborate. She doesn't. He's forced to ask again. "So?"

"So, whatever you're comfortable with," she says. "I gave you a list of kinks and hard limits."

He knows. He's read it eighty-one times. The corners of the paper have worn off, and some of the ink is smeared with the sweat from his hands.

"So there isn't a lot left for me to do," she continues calmly. "I'm not going to tell you what to do and dominate myself." Her lips pucker around the black cigarette she holds lightly between her fingers, and, after another drag, she says, "Kind of defeats the purpose."

He's glad when, immediately after saying that, she puts her cigarette out and goes back inside, because fuck him if he could think of a remotely witty response to that. He waits a second to follow her, watching the door swing shut after the pitch black ruffle of her skirt, and he melts against the wall, lightly hitting the back of his head against the bricks.

It's only Tuesday, which makes Friday feel like it's both too far away and breathing down his neck at the same time. A hopeless sigh breaks the morning stillness around him, and he resigns himself to going inside with slumped shoulders.

He steps just over the threshold and spots Erna standing at one of the tables, leaning her fists on it, and yelling shrilly at Deirdra, who has managed to overstay her welcome in Erna's apartment for five days and is currently seated across from Erwin. "You can't talk to him!" Her eyes are wide and horrified that her sister is even sharing the same space with her nemesis (though the nemesis relationship is completely one-sided).

Levi has to suppress a laugh. From the door he can only see the back of Erwin's head, but he can see Deirdra's face, ignoring her sister and amorously staring at the blond man seated across from her.

"Erna, calm **down,**" she says dreamily.

"Oh, do you know each other?" Erwin asks innocently.

Levi sees Eren start to make his way over to the table with Erna's latte on a little white saucer. She slams one of her palms down on the marble top with a loud smack and yells at Erwin this time, "Stay away from my stupid, cunty sister!"

Eren turns on his heel and retreats back behind the bar without even breaking stride.

Deirdra rolls her eyes and purses her lips. "Really, Erna? Your vocabulary is so revolting sometimes."

"You're revolting! How can you..." she sputters. "With him!?" She clutches her stomach as if in pain. "If you don't stop looking at him like that, I'm going to fucking vomit."

Levi needs to get out of there or he's not going to be able to hold back the laughter. "Oi, Erwin," he calls from the door.

Erwin turns and then stands up, politely nodding at Deirdra with a, "Very nice to meet you."

Erna flips the man off as he walks away, and, as Levi opens the door to leave, Deirdra gives Erna a venomous look before reaching up, grabbing her hair, and giving it a harsh tug. He turns to follow Erwin and hears Erna's shocked little shriek, and then a sharp smacking sound before he's safely
outside. He quickly walks away as the crash of a plate and clattering silverware reverberate past the closed door, and catches up to Erwin who walks at a normal pace, casual as ever.

"Are you always this much trouble to have around?"

"I never set out to start trouble, if that's what you mean. I was only being friendly."

"Men who look like you can’t be friendly."

Erwin laughs quietly. "I meant no harm. I'm very sorry."

"Whatever," Levi says sharply, not completely believing him. "I need your help with something."

Erwin smiles. He loves when Levi actually lets him be helpful. It's always felt like a battle to get him to accept support of any kind, and supporting him is pretty much Erwin's job.

When they get upstairs, Erwin waits patiently, but Levi doesn't know exactly what to say about the mess he's gotten himself into. He digs his fingers into his temples in frustration before running them through his hair, and, instead of trying to explain the awkward situation with Erna, he grabs the sheet she gave him last Friday and hands it to Erwin, asking, "What am I supposed to do with this?"

Erna's name isn't on it, so Levi doesn't feel like he's breaching any confidentiality in giving it to Erwin, though the man can obviously put two and two together.

He doesn't say anything for a minute as he reads. His eyebrows only tick slightly higher every line. Levi understands why. He can recite that list from memory by now.

Safe words: red, yellow.

Trigger words: any and all words relating to body weight or intelligence.

Medical conditions/allergies: none.

That was the relatively normal part. Nothing in the beginning that made him feel completely overwhelmed. But then…

Kinks: asphyxiation, impact play, orgasm denial, verbal humiliation, objectification, consensual nonconsent, edge play, needles, electrical play, strap-on deepthroating/face fucking, sensory deprivation, medical play.

Hard limits: aftercare, slave protocol/positions, fluid bonding, sensual play, body writing, clamps, ageplay, scarring, exhibitionism, petplay, vibrators, bondage.

First, Erwin swallows. Then, without looking up, he says, "I've never seen aftercare as a hard limit."

Levi is glad that he isn't the only one who's slightly horrified.

Erwin starts to ask, "Are you…"

"I'm supposed to try to dominate…someone... " Levi opts to say, even though they both obviously know who he's talking about, "and I have no idea what I'm doing."

Erwin hums thoughtfully. Then he says, "Then I can't recommend trying any of this."

"Then what do I do?"
"You ask her…I mean them…"

"I did that. It didn't go well."

Erwin sighs heavily. He sits down and Levi feels like he's about to get "the talk".

"So," he says, "as you can see from this," he holds up the list and then sets it back down, "BDSM encompasses an almost endless array of kinks and dynamics in a range from mild to extreme. There's only one thing that is a constant, and that's communication. Without communication, it's hard to get consent. And without consent, you cross that line into abuse."

"And if the other person won't communicate with you?" Levi asks, when really to be more accurate he means 'And if your sub is being an asshole and torturing you for no good reason?'

"I don't know." Erwin looks down at the paper he set on the table. "Personally, I wouldn't play without open communication…especially with someone new. Communication and consent need to be ongoing."

"I feel like she's fucking testing me." All week, whenever she's had a free moment from her sister, Erna has been gloating over him, not in any obvious way he can point to, but he feels it. It's like she wants him to fail.

Erwin smirks at him. "How did you get yourself into this?"

"By being a fucking idiot," Levi answers frankly.

"Well," Erwin says casually, getting up from his chair and grabbing his briefcase, glancing cursorily again at the paper on the table, "That list is unusual. Those are some extreme kinks, and I've never seen such mild things like vibrators as hard limits, but that just goes to show how complex people can be." He gives some parting advice on his way out, "Obviously, stay away from hard limits. Do something you feel confident with… Nothing that could get you arrested."

When he reaches the door, Levi stops him. "No drug test today?"

"No. You have enough to worry about. I'll check on you sometime next week. You have my number if you need anything."

Levi thinks he needs a lot of things. He'd settle for finding at least one thing he can feel confident with, like Erwin suggested. He can't think of anything, especially not when it comes to Erna. Being around her lately is not conducive to building confidence. If anything, she's made it her mission to make him feel small and unsure of himself.

He picks his tea back up and drinks it as he starts getting his shit together for work. Then, he hears the door to Erna's apartment slam. He can almost feel it shake the walls. He figures it's safe to go down and leave for work now, so he hurries out the door, but when he gets down there, Erna is sitting on the steps. It must have been Deirdra slamming the door.

When she turns and says, "Oh, it's you." she's holding an ice pack wrapped in a paper towel over her left eye.

Levi raises his eyebrows at her. "What happened to you?"

Erna rolls the one eye he can see. "I won't repeat what I said, but I can assure you I deserved it." She looks down and mutters, "Bambi gave me ice for it."
Levi goes down to the sidewalk and kneels in front of her. "Let's see it."

"Don't worry. Bitch can't throw a decent punch anyway," she says as if she already knew from experience before this. She lifts the ice pack, and he sees a small, blue bruise already forming around the lower edge of her orbital bone.

She flinches slightly, leaning away from him distrustfully like an animal when he goes to touch the skin. He looks her in the eye and tells her, "Don't move."

She narrows her eyes, well one of them anyway, and spits back, "Why not?"

He touches the swelling skin around her eye and says distractedly as he presses down gently, "Making sure your face isn't broken." She blinks rapidly, but doesn't flinch or grimace like most people would when they're in pain, so he has to ask, "How much does that hurt?"

"It's just sore," she says quietly and pouts as she looks away. "It's whatever."

Levi sighs and stands up, not sure if she's more upset about getting punched in the face or him trying to take care of her. He checks his phone and looks up at the second floor. He could run upstairs and be ten minutes late for work. That wouldn't be a big deal. He's more okay with being late for work, lately, if it's for her. Only, he's afraid if he sees Deirdra up there, he'll fucking deck her, so he takes his keys out of his pocket and takes the key to his apartment off the key ring. He holds it out to her and says, "Go upstairs and get a bag of frozen peas out of the freezer. It makes a better ice pack."

She doesn't hesitate to take the key from him, but she raises an eyebrow and asks skeptically, "You trust me alone in your apartment?"

He hadn't thought about that, and it's disconcerting that she makes it sound like he shouldn't. He dodges the question and instead asks, "Is she leaving soon?"

"She's supposed to be getting her things right now."

"Do you have any other sisters that are going to come beat the shit out of you?"

"Nah," she smirks. "There are three others, but Deirdra is the only one who likes me."

"That's fucking terrifying," he muses, but he's glad that it's unlikely any of them will be visiting. He doesn't think he could handle it. He starts to walk away and tells her, "I'll get you some pineapple later. It'll make the swelling go down faster."

Ema sticks her tongue out like a child. The only way she eats fruit is if it's inside something sugary, but she doesn't protest because she definitely hates bruises more than fruit. As he gets on his bike and rides away, she looks curiously at the key in her fingers.

She touches the bruised cheek he was just gently prodding a minute ago and thinks she should probably be nicer to him. She knows she's been kind of a dick when he's really trying and all he did to deserve it was care about her and try to help. She just felt so offended that he seemed to think BDSM was that easy, so she's been sniping at him, trying to make him rethink his offer. It seems to her like he'll back out of his promise before Friday anyway. She can see how nervous he's been and she plays off of that, saying things and giving him looks that will make him even more insecure. She feels kind of terrible about it now. His heart is in the right place. She just has a bad habit of being a cunt to anyone who is nice to her. Like her sister, she thinks, who was entirely justified in punching her in the face.

Deirdra comes outside with her stuff and looks sympathetically at her little sister.
"Erna, I'm-

"Don't apologize. I basically forced you to do it."

Deirdra smirks. "You've always had a way with words."

It's a talent. Erna can make just about anyone react any way she wants them to with a few words and some mind fuckery. Spewing vitriol at her sister and making her lose her temper and get violent was how she really communicated that she needed her space and was ready for Deirdra to go back to Seattle.

As she orders a Lyft on her phone, she tells Erna, "I left you some leggings and shit. You can't always dress like that. It looks uncomfortable as fuck," her vocabulary returning to its more crude natural state since Erwin isn't there to flirt with anymore.

"I like being uncomfortable."

Deirdra ignores her. "And get some pineapple. It'll make the swelling go down. And some iron to make the bruise heal faster."

"Fucking hippies," Erna mutters.

She lets Deirdra hug her before she goes. Normally she would put up a fuss, but this time, honestly, she's just so relieved to see her leaving that she'll tolerate anything.

But as Deirdra pulls her in close and tilts her chin down to whisper in Erna's ear, "By the way, I got Levi's number and I sent him all of those teenage riot grrrl pictures of you." Erna pushes her away and looks at her with big, horrified eyes and an open jaw. Deirdra smiles and waves as she turns to get in the car.

Erna yells after her, her voice still laced with shock at the cunning deceit and betrayal, "You fucking whore!"

Levi is in the middle of a piercing and doesn't notice when he gets about ten messages from Deirdra. He keeps his phone silenced at work, even a vibration being too much of a distraction when you're in the middle of something important like stabbing a needle through someone's cheek.

When he takes his client back out to the front to pay, Hanji, as always, gets in their personal space to look at the dimple piercing he just finished.

They say quietly to themselves, "Good," while staring intently as the client's face twists into a grimace at the creepy behavior. Then Hanji turns to Levi at the desk and chirps, "Why don't you have more piercings in your portfolio?"

He shrugs. "I just pick up the walk-ins that you don't." The client tips Levi more generously than they have to, because asking for change would mean being stuck there for ten more seconds and being examined by Hanji further.

"You're good," Hanji tells him. "You should work more piercings into your portfolio. Then you could pick up appointments for some of the harder, more expensive ones."

Levi would act like he doesn't care, but when it comes to making more money he always cares. It's not like he scrapes by from paycheck to paycheck, but he'd like to be able to rent a better apartment
Levi's seen corset piercings before. People don't ask for them often because they're not meant to be a permanent thing. It's a vanity piece that maybe you can keep in for two days maximum, but trying to keep them any longer than that guarantees migration, rejection, and scarring. He doesn't take them that seriously, so he gives Hanji a skeptical look.

They catch it, one of the few moments where they choose to acknowledge a facial expression, and say, "I know, but they're pretty. They draw people in."

"They draw teenagers who don't know shit about body piercing."

"Teenagers have a lot of disposable income."

He considers that for a second, then concedes, "I'll think about it."

Hanji brings their finger to their lips as they think on it more and mutter, "Only problem is you need someone with a really high pain tolerance."

Just like that, it clicks for Levi. He knows what he can feel confident with. Sadly, just as he thinks of it, another person comes in off the street for a walk-in tattoo and he doesn't get a lot of time to think for the rest of the day, handling five walk-ins in a row. He doesn't even get to check his phone and smile at the pictures Deirdra sent him until he's cleaning up at the end of the day.

He pauses while waiting for the autoclave to finish cleaning some stuff and stares at one that he almost wants to make his home screen. The pictures aren't just quick, badly composed shots. They're artful. They're all candid. He figures that's because Erna would sneer and flip the camera off if she knew they were being taken. He wonders who took them and what kind of camera they used. The one he's staring at is black and white and a close-up profile from the waist up of Erna leaning against a mirror in what looks like a dance studio, wearing a ripped Hole band tee over a black leotard and smoking a cigarette. The lighting is incredible. There's a slight white highlight on her lower lip and a strip down her nose. The photographer even captured the smoke curling out her slack mouth as she looks slightly away from the camera like she's lost in thought.

He assumes Deirdra took the photos. She does seem to have a sort of fascination with her sister even though they grate on each other.

The cycle signal on the autoclave buzzes at him and he puts his phone down to unload the machine. Just as he's finishing, Mike comes into the back having heard the buzz, too. "Ah, you're already here."

Levi grunts at him as he makes sure everything is sealed. Mike lingers, apparently not having anything better to do, and nosy old man that he is, looks at Levi's phone on the counter still open to the black and white picture.

He says to himself, "That face is so familiar."

Levi turns his attention away from the sterilized needles he's handling and catches what Mike's looking at. He drops what he's doing and snatches his phone off the counter. He rolls his eyes at his boss and reminds him, "She let you into my building."

"No, I know, but before that. I could swear I've seen her before."
"Dementia, maybe," Levi says sarcastically.

Mike sniffs. "Not that old." He pouts slightly under his mustache as he crosses his arms over his muscular chest. "You finished yet?"

"Did Hanji mop the floor out front?"

Part of what Levi likes about his job is that there's a lot of cleaning required. For a shop to have a good reputation it needs to be clean as fuck. Otherwise people get infections and skin diseases. Tattoo shops need to follow stringent standards of cleanliness or at best they lose business and at worst they lose their license to operate altogether. Mike's standards were already pretty high when he hired Levi, but Levi's are higher.

He likes how none of his coworkers raise an eyebrow if they go through two ten-packs of paper towels in one day just to make sure nothing gets contaminated. Nobody at work tells him he's being "OCD" if he says a surface needs to be wiped down and sterilized again because someone set their phone down on it. No one tells him he's crazy if he stays an extra two hours to clean before going home, which he's definitely going to do tonight whether Hanji mopped or not because it's just one of those days for him. There are times when he needs to clean either to think or to stop thinking so much. Tonight it's so that he can think.

When he finally gets home he's hoping to see Erna smoking on the stoop, but she isn't there and he figures he's missed her. As he walks up he texts her that he needs his key back. She texts him back that the door is unlocked, which makes him hurry up the stairs faster.

He opens his door and goes for the light switch, but the lights are already on. He guesses that Erna turned them on and forgot to turn them off. Then he almost jumps when he hears her voice.

"Hi, honey," she says sarcastically from the bed where she's sitting up against the wall with her laptop and a set of earbuds in her ears.

"What-" he starts to ask, his mouth hanging open. He shakes his head and blinks. "What the fuck are you doing?"

She holds up a thick paperback sitting next to her on the comforter and says, "Been reading… and trying to steal your wifi. What's your password?"

"Why are you still here?"

"I like your place better," she says, still not looking away from her laptop. "It's cleaner."

"Then clean your own apartment!"

"What?" she says like she doesn't see what the big deal is. "It's not like I jerked off in your bed or anything."

"Oh my god." He pinches the bridge of his nose. "You can't live here."

She sighs heavily as if he's really inconveniencing her. "Fine." She carries her laptop and her book on her hip, but when she gets to where he's standing in front of the door, she pauses, narrows her eyes at him, and holds her hand out. "Phone."

"Huh?"

"Let me see your phone," she says very seriously as she curls her fingers.
He sighs, already knowing what this is about based on her determined glare, and he reaches in his back pocket for it. He unlocks it and gives it to her, because they're pictures of her and she kind of has a right to go into his messages and delete them. He's glad he didn't go along with that urge to make her his home screen. Just so that she won't think he feels penitent at all about it, he tells her, "I can text your sister and ask for them again."

"Ugh," she groans. "I hate that you two can talk to each other."

"What was that you told me a few weeks ago about punk music being the atonal expression of impotent adolescent rage by the way?"

She shoots him a look. "Hole isn't punk. It's grunge."

"Bikini Kill is punk."

"Who said I listen to Bikini Kill."

"Guess."

"I hate that fucking cunt."

He smirks at her. "Why were you hiding that?"

"So that I could give you shit, obviously," shedeadpans. "Besides, I don't like talking about music with people, so don't think we're going to bond over Sleater-Kinney or some shit."

"Yeah, okay. Fine," he says. He isn't going to press the point even though he disagrees, because he's sort of in a rush to get her out of there. He needs to do some research.

He moves out of her way so that she can reach for the doorknob, but then he remembers something and tells her "Hold on," as he reaches in his bag.

She still narrows her grey eyes at him, pissed off that he learned her secret, until he hands her a can of sliced pineapples for the bruise under her left eye. Then, for some reason her eyes soften. Her lips curl up a little sardonically on one side as she mutters a "Thanks." She opens the door and Levi turns around to start taking his boots off.

Before she closes the door behind her, she pauses in the doorway and says carefully, "Um, about Friday…"

He stops untying his laces and turns around.

"It's okay if you want to change your mind. I won't give you shit about it. I know you're nervous and I've been a bitch."

He's glad for a second, not because she's going to let him get out of the situation he got himself into, but because she's being up front about what he wasn't sure of for the past five days. Now at least he knows for sure that she's been making him feel insecure on purpose and it isn't just in his head. He would almost be grateful, because he's still not sure of himself, but he committed to this. He lowers his eyelids to deadpan seriously, "I'm not changing my mind."

She tilts her head and looks at him curiously for a moment before shrugging nonchalantly like it isn't her fault if he isn't going to take the easy out she so generously gave him, but she simply says, "Okay," before closing the door.
After getting his shoes off, Levi looks around. He wonders how long she was in there. He wonders how many things she moved slightly out of place to irritate him. He looks everywhere, especially at his art supplies, but doesn't see anything obvious. He looks harder. It wouldn't be like her to be obvious.

He thinks about how Deirdra described Erna as someone who used to always be moving even with no destination and only resting and hiding in unexpected places. He figures if that's true then it must kill her to be confined to the same room every single day, trapped by her own fear.

He looks at the key she left on the kitchen table and decides to get a spare made tomorrow.

Erna walks down the hallway in the opposite direction of her apartment, reaching into her dress pocket for her cigarettes. She takes a small joint rolled in white paper that stands out from the rest of the black clove cigarettes. She was going to ask Levi to go up to the roof and chill with her after he backed out of their deal for Friday, but he wasn't doing what she expected, so she walks up into the night sky by herself.

She pulls a big cloud of smoke into her lungs and wonders what got into him. He was so obviously nervous since last Friday up until just now. She thought she was doing him a favor.

"Stubborn asshole," she murmurs to herself as she finally exhales.

She can't decide if she's excited or disappointed. She would lean in the excited direction except that she knows he isn't going to be good at this. He's going to be too hesitant, too incompetent, and it's going to ruin all of her fantasies where she pretends he could be good at making her cry and moan or that he could be cruel to her without feeling bad about it.

She wouldn't mind if they didn't go through with it. She could go back to manipulating him into doing small dominant things that he isn't even aware of and she could just masturbate about him a lot, like before. The only thing is that she needs the pain... even if he would be bad at it. Halfway satisfying is frustrating, but probably better than nothing for the next month.

Her legs dangle over the roof’s ledge and she thinks she can only blame herself for the whole situation. If she were stronger... not that she wouldn't still need the pain, but she wouldn't be here. She wouldn't have gotten so scared that her brain got all fucked up about it. She would be comfortably in her spacious Manhattan apartment where she never had an issue getting a reputable pro-domme to visit and beat her until she was a shuddering mess.

Then there's the counter-argument that maybe she'd be dead. It's possible that flight was the right choice. She'll never be able to know for sure.

Thursday

Levi tries not to make it a big thing when he gives Erna a spare key to his apartment. He knows how easy it would be to make it seem like an overly intimate or romantic gesture. It's a thing couples do. It feels almost like an engagement ring in his pocket, only much less expensive. He doesn't want her to think he's being an idiot and inviting her to live with him or something when she already told him she's not into the idea of any kind of relationship beyond being friends.

So he walks up to where she's sitting outside the cafe and basically throws it at her... which is very smooth. At least he didn't knock her latte over with it.

She stares at the little key in the center of the table, then at him, then she says, "What the fuck?"
He doesn't even know, but he says, "In case you ever need to get into my apartment."

She cocks her head to the side a little and says, "Oh?"

He clarifies, because he doesn't trust that look in her eyes. "When I'm not home."

She crosses her arms, annoyed that he could read her mind. "Lame."

He rubs his temples and sits down. "You still have to knock when I'm there."

She sighs as if that's no fun at all, but she slides the key across the table and off the edge into the open coffin purse on her lap. "That's nice and all. When am I going to be worthy of your wifi password?"

"You're loaded. Get your own wifi."

She looks down at her latte and he feels like he hit a nerve. She says quietly, "I don't like to leave a paper trail."

He forgets often that she's only ended up here because she's fucking terrified that someone is trying to find her and kill her. As an apology, he takes a pen from his pocket and writes the password, "MagnoliaChurch" on the napkin under her coffee cup. That makes her perk up again.

Unfortunately, when she's happy, she torments him. "So," she says as she folds the napkin and puts it in her pocket, "What are your plans for today? Read up on badly written BDSM erotica until you feel like you know all about being a big, special, domly snowflake? Watch videos of women attached to ridiculously complicated torture devices fake loud orgasms while cheap mascara runs down their cheeks?"

He glares at her. He wishes he could tell her how much he's been reading and researching actual informative shit about BDSM in every moment of his spare time without sounding like an overly defensive moron.

Before she can get a rise out of him, he tilts his chin and gestures behind her where Eren is coming out with a cardboard cup of black tea. "Those are my plans."

She looks behind her and makes a very audible disgusted sigh. Eren comes over to the table completely oblivious to the way her resentful eyes follow him because he's too focused on Levi, infatuated and blissfully ignorant to anything else.

Levi stands up from his seat, takes his tea, and asks the kid, "Ready?"

Erna makes a whiny, displeased sound and says, much more high pitched than she intended, "What are you doing?"

Levi takes a sip of his tea, fingers tented over the rim. He takes his time and makes her wait before he answers, "Covering up his shitty tattoo."

He smiles condescendingly at how she can't hide her jealousy. Her lips pout and her nose wrinkles slightly as her shoulders slump with all of the feeling of a little internal temper tantrum.

"Want me to let you know when I'm done?" he patronizes her.

"Please," she huffs sarcastically, "Like I care…"

"Suit yourself." He turns to Eren who is wisely standing a little behind him, out of Erna's reach.
"Come on."

She refuses to let him find her the rest of the day, breaking her routine and going out for cigarettes at different times and staying inside when she knows he's going down to smoke. He doesn't mind. He's flattered by how jealous she gets of Eren and with how she's been behaving all week, he enjoys rubbing it in. Besides, he can take the extra time alone to read up more and mentally prepare himself. Avoiding her until tomorrow might even be a good thing. It means she can't say anything to shake him and make him nervous again.

Friday

Autumn is Erna's favorite time of year, not for any romantic or spiritual reasons. The weather just agrees with her. This morning is the first she came outside and was finally able to smell the change in the air, though the temperature hasn't dropped more than a degree or two from the August average and there's only a hint of a breeze with the slightest impression of traces of humidity. She's more in tune with it, because she's in love with Autumn. It's closer to Winter, and Winter is the antithesis to Summer which she hates with a passion.

All of this makes her feel slightly more optimistic as she blows a curl of her black hair away from the cherry of the cigarette she holds in her lips. She tilts her chin back up to avoid more close calls with singeing the ends of her hair. She'd been pouting.

She's anticipating that this whole thing with Levi is going to go badly. The more she thinks about it (which has been much, much more) the more convinced she is that he's too kind and too sensitive and too good to even pretend to have a sadistic bone in his body. It's going to ruin the crush she has on him, and she likes harboring her crush, even if it was way more fun before she found out that it was mutual.

The problem, which never seemed like a problem before, is that she much prefers ideas of people rather than the reality of people. She had a crush on her idea of him. He's going to take that away from her with harsh, fumbling, clumsy reality and she's going to let him. It would be easy to say that she changed her mind about letting him try to top her, but she can't do that. She's given him too much shit about it and turned it into a competition. While she doesn't think of herself as a competitive person, she does fucking hate losing, especially at stupid fucking games of "chicken".

So when the door of the building opens behind her at 8:30am as usual, she doesn't get excited, and she refuses to even turn around, because she's very busy sulking. She does catch a glimpse of his hand picking up the cardboard cup of tea sitting next to her on the step.

He doesn't thank her for the tea like he normally would and she's in the middle of cynically wondering if that's intentional when he sits down on the step directly behind her and subtly traps her by placing his feet on the step she's sitting on, one on each side of her. Before she can tilt her head back and look up at him with her 'I'm not fucking amused' face, he envelopes her in his arms, though careful not to touch her, circling them around her shoulders and holding his phone in front of her. Caught completely off guard, she can only stare at the screen in front of her as he says, with his breath too close to the black curls of hair tucked behind her ear, "This is what we're doing."

She stares silently at the picture of a woman's naked back and shoulders, two perfectly symmetrical lines of silver rings pierced through the skin to each side of her spine with a black ribbon laced through them to resemble the lacing of a corset. If she were considering the image purely from an aesthetic angle, she would think it was pretty. She likes corsets. She wears one almost every day. However, she's surprised and a little annoyed that she's about to need to tell Levi for the hundredth
time about her indisposition toward piercing her skin. She's disappointed in him already, even more than she thought she would be.

"Before you say 'no piercings,'" he says after giving her a second to look and before she can admonish him, "This is meant to be temporary. The rings will stay in for less than ten minutes and they won't scar."

She tilts her head slightly and keeps looking at the picture he's holding in front of her. It occurs to her that this is actually kind of brilliant of him.

As she keeps staring silently, he says, "You said you have a thing for needles."

She does. And she doesn't know anyone who would be better with a needle, but what turns her on more than the kink and the probability of pain is that he didn't let her win and he was so fucking smart about it.

"No scars?" she asks in a quiet, subdued murmur.

"No scars," he promises, "And it's going to hurt… a lot."

She should add Levi's deep, monotone, expressionless voice to her list of kinks. That's the ridiculous thing she's thinking about while he probably thinks the silence means she's struggling with whether or not she trusts him or wants this.

Then he says, "One more thing," and she hums. "I need a picture for my portfolio. I'll keep your face out of it."

That's an attraction, not a deal breaker. She likes connecting it with his job. It makes it feel more depersonalized and that makes her feel more comfortable with it. So her only remaining question is, "When?"

"Whenever you want," he says, releasing her from the cage of his arms and putting the phone back in the pocket of his jeans.

"Now."

She wonders if he's back there smirking at her and thinking that she's over eager. She's okay with seeming that way, because she is, and this is the one area in her life where she lets herself let go of her pride.

He lets a second tick by before he stands up and goes inside, not holding the door for her, because she'll trust him to put a bunch of holes in her back, but still not to walk behind her. She follows him, and takes her boots off in the doorway without being asked, though, because of her bad habit of manipulating him she thinks about acting like she forgot just so that he'll have to tell her to.

He doesn't watch her, but goes about his business, which isn't unusual. He always gives her space the second she's through the door, maybe to compensate for her being out of her own space and her comfort zone, but usually he's heading for the kitchenette and keeping his back to her as he works at the counter. This time he goes to the opposite side of the room and keeps his back to her as he opens organizer drawers of needles.

Ema walks past the skinny entryway and realizes that she forgot her latte outside while wishing for something to do with her hands.

"We need to talk about aftercare," he says, hands full with small sealed plastic packages of needles
and body piercing jewelry.

Her eyes roll automatically. At least eight women with more experience than him have tried to give
her the lecture on the necessity of aftercare. She crosses her arms as she watches him get a large
bottle of clear cleaning stuff from one of the cupboards in the kitchen and set it on the counter before
turning the tap on to wash his hands.

"I do my own aftercare," she says to his back while she wonders how the skin on his hands doesn't
 crack more from all the hot water and soap he abuses it with every day.

He dries his hands on paper towels that he throws in a trash can at the end of the counter with an
empty liner and then he wipes the white laminate table down with the cleaning solution while telling
her, "If you don't want scars you have to let me do some aftercare on your skin."

Erna nods. She's smart enough to know when she doesn't know enough, so she says, "Okay," to
having her skin cared for, because that isn't the part of aftercare that she objects to. It's the holding
and the cuddling and being kept warm and calm as her body slowly deals with leveling out her
oxytocin.

"Also," he says, looking up from the table to fix his eyes on her, "I know you said it's a hard limit,
but I can't do this without making sure you're okay after."

"I'll think about it." She won't.

"Can we at least agree that you're not leaving if you're obviously in shock?"

She loves a good negotiation. "If I'm shaking and dehydrated, sure," she offers, because she doubts
they'll get to that point. "But if I tell you that I'm fine and I want to be alone, you have to let me be
the fuck alone." He doesn't agree right away. He gives her that look that is a silent implication that he
knows she isn't honest about things regarding how she is feeling. She pulls the experience card and
tells him that she's been doing her own aftercare for a long time without any problems.

Levi shrugs, which is a temporary victory, but leaves Erna suspicious that this will get brought up
again later. Additionally the exchange has brought her out of that more submissive mindset she'd
fallen into when he was making promises about pain in her ear. Now, feeling more defiant and
aggressive, she asks bluntly, "Where do you want me?"

He nods toward the bed, she thinks, but realizes he was actually gesturing to the laptop on the bed
when he says, "Pick out some music first."

She tilts her head at him while he continues to go about getting tools together. He looks up at her
after a beat of realizing she isn't moving, and explains, "I work better with music. I'd wear
headphones, but I need to be able to hear you. So pick something you're not going to hate."

Her lips quirk and she makes a tiny huffing noise out her nose, because she doubts there's anything
in his collection that she won't hate. But she flops limply to the bed and takes the laptop in her hands.
"I assume you were smart enough to delete any guilty pleasures before I came up?"

Before he starts washing his hands a second time, he deadpans, "I don't believe in guilt over
pleasures, but if you're going to waste your time looking for a Taylor Swift album, you're only
hurting yourself."

She does check. No Taylor Swift albums, so she moves on to browse for nothing in particular. Music
isn't something she thinks about anymore. It was important when she was young, and then something
shifted and it didn't make her feel as much as it should have. Unable to catch the feelings she used to
when she listened to a good song, she got discouraged about it and stopped listening to anything. Despite how much she picks on Levi’s taste, there’s a lot in his library that she used to love before she lost feelings about it. There’s a Silverchair album with the first song she ever choked herself to, ’Ana’s Song’. If she were an honest person she would pick that, but she hides behind a mask of insincerity nearly all the time, so she chooses a Violent Femmes album from 1983 instead. She sets it to shuffle and repeat because she doesn't know how long this will take and it starts playing over the speakers above her head.

She winces at the coincidence of the first lyric of the first song it shuffles to.

Just last night I was reminded of/ Just how bad it had gotten and/ Just how sad I have become

She should have set it to play some other song first. She gently tosses the laptop to the side and stands up like she doesn't notice that this song is passive aggressively calling her on her shit.

When her feet touch the cold floor and she looks up to see Levi carefully pulling white nitrile gloves onto his hands, her cool mask of apathy slips off the second her lips part and a shudder runs up her spine. She forgets the song and walks over to the chair he pulled out for her in a halting, dream-like way.

But it could change with this relationship/ De-deranged, we've all been through some shit

She can’t stop staring at his hands and at those gloves. He says something that she misses, so she looks up at his lips and he says again, ”You're gonna have to strip.”

And if we're a thing, I think this thing’s begun

"Everything?" she asks, not nervous about the one thing it would be very normal to be nervous about, because she takes that as a given when in a scene. Taking her clothes off is like muscle memory joined to her positive associations with power exchange. She's already pulling at the buttons on the front of her dress before getting an answer.

"You can leave everything below the waist." He tries to sound nonchalant, but he sincerely needs her to leave on everything below the waist because he needs to have steady hands and some focus. She pulls the dress over her head, so he's pretty sure she doesn't see his throat bob as he swallows and takes a deep breath. After tossing her dress to the bed, she stands in front of him in a black corset and matching thigh-highs, and looking at her without being allowed to touch leaves a vacuum in his chest. He wants to be honest and tell her that she's beautiful, but he knows the compliment would make her uncomfortable and the silence after it would be awkward if he can't fill it with pulling her into him and kissing her vanilla-scented neck.

He'd hoped that she wouldn't wear a thong and he got his wish, but he wonders if the black, lace-ruffled cheeky panties she's wearing aren't much worse for him with the way they hug her thighs. When she turns around he's sure they're much, much worse than a thong because they frame her ass like it's art, covering from just below those cute back dimples only down far enough to make the bottom curve of each cheek peek out so that he can see that line where the round muscle meets her thighs.

He's staring, but at least he's so self-conscious about staring that he's hyper alert and able to quickly rip his eyes away when she turns to look over her shoulder and point at the bow at her lower back to ask if he can untie it for her.

His muscles tense as he almost moves toward her to unwrap her like a gift. Then he remembers and holds up his gloved fingers. "Can't touch anything unless you want me to waste another pair of
gloves on you."

She huffs and turns to face forward again. "Maybe I do."

She has a thing for watching him put those gloves on. It makes her breath stutter and her chest tighten up in anticipation of something.

She reaches behind her and unties the corset herself easily, like she has a hundred times, but sudden shyness hits her the second she lets it fall on top of her crumpled dress. She feels incredibly self conscious and doesn't want to turn around. That evil voice inside her tells her that her breasts are too small, her waist is too big, her shoulders are too bony and it occurs to her that this is the first time she's been even half-naked in front of a man, and worse, she cares about what he thinks. She's ashamed that she wants him to think she's pretty. It seems so stupid and makes her feel completely foolish.

It takes her a minute to actually turn around. Levi can't help noticing, clenching and unclenching his fingers, feeling like it's taking even longer because of how much he desperately wants her to turn around quickly so that he can see. But he's careful to ignore the tingling in his fingers and only chases the blush spreading over her body with his eyes.

When she finally does turn around, it's with her arms crossed over her chest, which would be disappointing if it weren't so fucking cute with the way her hands delicately rest on opposite shoulders and cover a pink blush starting to spread from her cheeks down her chest, painting her with an eager vulnerability that he never gets to see.

He steps out of the way and lets her straddle the chair he turned around for her. She lets her hands fall once she's sitting down and the back of the chair covers her exposed chest like a censor bar.

Levi swallows hard, but the sound is hidden underneath a deep bass in juxtaposition with the singer's off-key, almost nasal voice.

He wishes she'd chosen something else. This album matches her or the way she makes him feel a little too much. He could even work with her classical music. Bach wouldn't do this to him. He inhales deeply and asks her, "Do you want me to tell you about what I'm doing?" because some people need that when he's piercing them, especially when they can't see what's happening. It makes them feel more secure.

She shakes her head. "As long as it hurts and doesn't do permanent damage, I don't need to know anything."

He's relieved for the sake of his dry mouth and he goes into work mode, pushing his stool behind her with his foot. The song melts into the next and while he wipes her back down with green soap, he tries to look at her as just another client. He focuses on her skin as nothing more than a blank canvas and cleans it with an alcohol wipe before picking up a violet pen. He freehands tiny, nearly invisible marks down each side of her back.

"Are you comfortable?" he asks over a chaotic crescendo of music, manic and dark-sounding, melting into another deep sensual bass line for her response.

"Comfortable enough," she answers, because for obvious reasons, comfort isn't really a priori to her in this context.

"Because I need you to not move for a while," he warns distractedly as he leans back to get a better look and make sure his marks are perfectly symmetrical.
Erna relaxes her shoulders and crosses her arms over the top of the chair's back. She tilts her hips a little and relaxes, losing her perfectly straight posture and letting her spine settle into its natural arch. "Okay."

Levi's tongue swipes over the twin snakebites in his lower lip before he picks up a pair of disposable forceps and pinches the first piece of skin. His well-practiced fingers take a needle from its sterile packaging and he barely touches it to the skin it's going to go through. One more time he checks. "You're sure."

She hums languidly at him. "Do it."

He's never had anyone relax so much for a piercing. All of his clients should be masochists. Work would be much easier.

In one quick motion, he pushes the hollow needle clean through her skin and hears her sharp gasp. He tells her quietly, "Breathe," though he may as well be telling himself, as he holds it in place and takes away the forceps as gently as he can, being extremely careful to not let the needle wiggle. Marring her perfect skin with a bruise would be a crime against art.

Her shoulders heave with deep, but measured breaths. He tries not to think about what she's feeling. When he's working he focuses on the skin and what he's doing with his hands, not the person. That's why he likes to have music.

Could you ever want me to love you, Could you ever want me to care/ Disregard my nervousness, Please ignore my vacant stares

Usually…

Once he gets the small ring of jewelry securely just under the surface of her skin he gives her a second and then asks, "You okay?"

In between deep breaths that he can hear even over the twanging guitar, she says, "It's… more than I thought…"

"I can make it more painful or less painful."

She's quiet for a long pause. "More," she says finally.

Levi's leg twitches with the drum beat. He repeats the steps on the other side of her back, only this time he pushes the hollow piercing needle through her skin much more slowly and instead of a gasp he gets a whimper and quickened breathing. When the sound suddenly stops he can picture her biting her lip to hold it in and it makes him feel bitter and entitled. He wants all of those sounds she used to make on her side of the wall. Against what his better judgment would tell him, after getting the jewelry in he doesn't give her a minute to recover, but he tells her, "Let me know if you need a break."

"Uh huh," she whimpers as he rushes to get the next needle and poke more noises out of her.

He makes it go through just as slowly as the last, forcing a whine out of her lips and faster breaths. He wishes she were turned around so that he could see her face. He wishes a lot of things… like that he were doing something else to make her moan.

Nothing I can say when I'm in your thighs…

Like that.
Her breathing stays just shy of hyperventilation, so he keeps going, relentlessly getting a new needle and making a new puncture, slower this time. So much more slowly than he should be comfortable with professionally. He's spent so much time learning how to make this art hurt less than it should. Doing the opposite feels brutal and savage and wrong, but jealousy makes him not care. He's determined to make her moan and cry like she did for Annie when he shouldn't have been listening, resolved to prove that he can hurt her better than she thought.

He gets two more pieces of jewelry in, getting into a groove and eager for the next noise she's going to make. She gets needier and whinier with every stick, just on the edge of making those desperate noises. The lyrics start to fade away and lose the ability to nag at his consciousness as he listens more to her, trying to drink in every sigh, but he can't block out the hectic chaos and deep sexuality of the music itself winding itself through his bones and making muscles twitch, still giving him ideas about pulling her hips up and fucking her over the chair.

He pierces one more piece of skin and gets what he wants, a long, wanton and high-pitched moan that makes his cock so stiff that he needs to take some deep breaths along with her.

He gets the ring under her skin, reaches past her for another needle from the table, and just before he can get the plastic off she sighs, "Yellow."

Levi almost jumps off of his stool, not even thinking to hide the worry from his voice when he asks, "Are you okay?"

She huffs a quiet laugh at his reaction out her nose. "I'm… fucking fine…” She fills her lungs with air and exhales, then says a bit more evenly, "I was worried I was gonna flinch… I wouldn't care, but you made it sound like not moving was important."

"It is," he deadpans, a little miffed that he has to stop, even as he's grateful that she was honest with him and used her safeword. He discards the needle he was about to use and stands up. At the same time the playlist moves on to 'Blister in the Sun'. Finally a song that isn't darkly maddening and sexy like her. He adjusts his softening erection and goes to the fridge, tossing his gloves in the trash on the way.

He uncaps a bottle of water and sets it on the corner of the table near her, but doesn't say anything about it. You can only lead difficult, stubborn girl to water. He avoids her with his eyes, but catches a quick glance at her, only trusting himself to be able to handle that much of her glowing, lightly flushed face and her fucked out gaze and parted lips. Even letting himself see that much for a second has him frustrated that he's only allowed to touch her to hurt her. He turns away and gets his tea from the counter. It's barely lukewarm anymore, so he tilts his head back and gulps it down. A small rivulet of it snakes out the corner of his mouth and follows a vein down his neck. He tosses the cup in the small recycling bin at the end of the counter and looks at her again.

It isn't fair to look up and see her staring at him so hypnotized and undone. Supposedly he's the one in control, but it feels like he's the one submitting and not getting what he wants, because if anything were really up to him he would be licking his way up her beautiful thighs and devouring every inch of her flushed skin.

Erna keeps breathing and assessing the burning pain throbbing through her back and craving more, but not trusting herself to hold still for it. Self control has never been her thing.

She ignores the water Levi gave her. She doesn't want to move, doesn't want to distract herself from the pain. Besides, she can't think about necessities like water when she could watch Levi instead. Any hesitation she had about staring disappeared when he tilted his head back and bared his throat while he drank his tea. Now, her unfocused eyes can't look anywhere else while he seems to catch
his breath and look right through her with that stoic expression of aloof indifference that she falls for
every time he's featured in one of her masturbatory fantasies.

She feels dreamy and content as the pain doesn't feel so much like pain anymore and endorphins rush
to her brain, making her eyelids heavy with oxytocin. She feels an overwhelming need for him stop
looking at her like that and touch her, but she couldn't begin to verbalize it if she wanted to. There's
something she wants that she isn't sure of, but it has to do with the way his adam's apple bobs when
he gulps tea and the way he moves back to the table to clean his hands again and take two more
gloves out of the small box on the table. She's entranced by the way they snap when he pulls them
on and she doesn't even realize that her thumb is already pressing on her lower lip, scraping her teeth
while she fantasizes about his fingers pushing into her mouth.

She imagines a feral glint in his eyes and a struggle to suppress something across his face. She thinks
she's probably imagining anyway. Intense pain always warps her sense of reality like a drug. When
he goes behind her and she hears his weight move the stool again she wishes she could turn around
and look at him a little longer.

"Let me know when you're good."

She's so good, she thinks. Out of curiosity she wonders, "How many more?"

"Five."

"I'm good." She barely recognizes her own voice as it comes out dreamy and languid. "More." Her
body wants to stretch and move and she has a nagging need to arch her back more and rub herself
against the seat of the chair.

The thumb in her mouth suddenly comes to the forefront of her consciousness when he pushes
another needle into her back and she bites down on it hard. "Hngh-ahh!"

He doesn't ask if she's okay and pull her out of the moment. She can imagine him, even if she can't
look, stone-faced and ignoring the reaction as he threads a ring through her skin.

Only four now, she thinks wistfully, and she does nothing to hide the yearning in her voice when she
whines, "Can you go slower?"

"If I push them through any slower I'm going to damage your skin."

That's funny. She didn't know there was a line between damaging and not damaging skin when
you're piercing it with hollow needles. She pouts. The chemical reaction in her body is making her
feel used to the pain and it isn't as intense as it was before. She's getting diminishing returns on her
high.

"I can give you less time to recover," he offers.

Before she can enthusiastically agree, he's already pricking her again on the other side of her back,
making her need to breathe deeply and fight instinct to keep herself still.

On the third one her vision starts to go white and her brain dumps any inessential thoughts in favor of
an overload of endorphins. Her legs spread further apart and her pelvis rocks against her will, curling
her lower back and making Levi let go of the needle so it won't pull at her as he tells her to hold still.

She can stop moving, but she can't do it without whimpering and whining at the unfairness of it. She
hears the whisper of the wheels on his stool and thinks she can feel his breath on her back, though it's
impossible to tell with her nerve endings throbbing and so preoccupied with the pain.
She moans eagerly before he even opens the next needle, anticipating the pain when the forceps clamp down on her skin. Her hips rock again. Her wet cunt searches for more friction, the muscles tighten and relax. The inner muscle clench seems to reverberate through her whole body, taking over her breathing, timing her soft, ragged inhales and exhales with the twitches of her abs and the tremble of her spine.

Levi softly whispers a reverent, "Fuck..." against the back of her neck, his forehead breaking out in a light sheen of sweat and his lips a centimeter away from her skin, but she can't hear or see him... or anything anymore.

He gets the needle ready, holds onto the forceps, and as soon as her lower back is still for a moment, he drives the last needle through quickly. She yelps and gasps loudly. He would think that she just came, except she still sounds desperate for more and her body doesn't melt with the telltale relaxation of a good orgasm.

The second the jewelry is in, he jumps up, his stool rolling away from him, and turns around. He winces at the blue balls he's getting from not being able to do what his instinctual urges tell him to.

He whispers "Fuck," a few more times under his breath to collect himself as he turns the music off, not convinced it was helping him focus in the first place anyway. He picks up a long piece of half-inch thick, shiny black ribbon and pulls the stool back underneath him.

He would tell her that she can move a little now, but... her hips are already rocking in a soft, undulating rhythm that couples entrancingly with her metronomic panting, whining on every exhalation of breath. He doesn't think he could handle it if she moved more.

It takes a minute before she calms down enough for her to realize sadly, "No more?"

He's threading the ribbon through the fourth pair of rings down already. "Uh-huh," he tells her after he swallows his own groan at how needy her voice is.

The sound she makes is the most pitiful he's ever heard.

"Can you do more?" she asks like she's already begging.

Literally, he could. He could put corset piercings up her thighs, down her calves, along the sides of her waist, and across her sternum, but, he tells her, "Safely? No," because if her body isn't already in shock (which he's not sure it isn't), it will be soon if he keeps going.

"But..."

"You've had enough." He cuts her off as he pulls the ribbon just barely tight enough to look taut and ties the two ends into a bow. He sits back and takes a look. Her skin takes piercings well. No blood to clean up and the redness and swelling around the first rings he did has already faded. He needs to wait for the skin around the newer ones to calm down before he takes a picture, but that's okay, because he has to discuss something with her anyway.

He stands up and moves around to the front of her, leaning down a little and checking her eyes. They're iris-less and completely black. She doesn't look up at him, but past him, focused on nothing. Her consciousness is somewhere under her skin, refusing to extend to give a fuck about anything that isn't the pleasure of adrenaline-released endorphins flooding her body and dampening her inhibitions. It makes her chest move visibly with deep breaths that are slow and relaxed. She blinks slowly, and she whines a little, again, as if to plead that it's not enough. Her legs spread slightly wider and her feet arch upward so that only her toes are touching the floor.
Levi read about subspace, but purely as a biological reaction. Nothing he read conveyed how beautiful it would look on the outside.

He reaches past her and pulls his black leather upholstered stool around, straddling it and facing her. As he peels the gloves off his sweating hands, he asks, "You feel better?"

It's probably shitty to take advantage of her floating in subspace to get her to talk honestly to him, but it doesn't feel like she gives him a lot of options.

"Uh-huh," she murmurs dreamily, her eyelids slowly fluttering as her pinky finger finds its way to her mouth so that she can chew lightly on the tip.

He stifles a groan. Someday he wants to fuck the oral fixation out of her mouth so that she won't ever torture him like this again. But for now, he tries not to look at her wet tongue hiding just behind her open teeth and he pulls her list out of his pocket. He shows it to her and she sighs as she has to come out of her dream a bit to focus and look at it.

"If you want to keep doing… this… we need to talk about your list."

She sighs, a little put out, but whispers, "'Kay."

"What's the one thing on here that you can't live without?"

Erna reaches with the hand that isn't keeping her mouth busy, and one finger points to the words as she mutters them, "Impact play."

In his head he lets out a deep sigh of relief that she didn't say asphyxiation. He tells her slowly, careful not to go too fast for her in her almost drugged state, "Okay… I'm fine with almost everything else on here as long as you can be patient. I don't want to fuck up."

She swallows hard and takes a deep breath. He can see her trying to come back. She says, "Fair," in a soft approximation of her normal voice.

It's so tempting to get her to talk more, to ask her to describe exactly how and why she has a preference on this list for facefucking, because of all the things, he could definitely do that he thinks as he watches her finger rub over her lower teeth and push at her barely open lips.

He looks in her eyes and makes sure he still has her attention, then points at the one thing that bothers him. He says, "We're not doing 'consensual nonconsent'… ever. That's my own hard limit," because the thought of even pretending to rape her makes him feel sick to his stomach.

Her finger leaves her lips. He wants so badly to replace it with his own, but he isn't sure what the rules are. He doesn't know what he's allowed to do and what's a violation and whether or not this is even supposed to be overtly sexual at all or if she only wants him to do the painful things. The way she makes a soft, disappointed sigh upon hearing that he's not okay with pretending to force himself on her makes him think it's not purely about the pain, but it would be a dangerous thing to assume especially while her decision-making powers are severely hindered by a flood of disinhibiting brain chemicals.

Her obvious disappointment over his refusal to negotiate on raping her does something to him. He doesn't put his fingers in her mouth, but he does tell her, "If I'm going to fuck you it's only going to be with very enthusiastic consent, with you begging for every inch of me."

Her lips close to muffle a moan that sounds like agreement before turning into a whimper. Her eyelids struggle to stay open as her pupils expand again and her hips rock with desperate want. He
almost regrets getting that reaction out of her and he tells her, "Hold still," as he slides his stool back behind her, not because it's important for her skin anymore, but because there's a damp spot on the front of his underwear uncomfortably pressing against the head of his cock and he needs her to close her legs and stop moving her hips if he doesn't want it to get any worse.

Deep breaths, he thinks. He leaves her list of kinks and limits on the table and pulls his phone out of his pocket. Her skin is free of any trace of stinging redness, so he takes a few pictures, all of them framing her back only from the base of her neck down to very bottom edge of her lower back (He has to include the butt dimples. They're important… because art).

After standing up again and adjusting the aching cock trapped in his tight jeans for the third time, he sets his phone down on the table next to the water she ignored, telling her, "Here," and meaning 'Look if you want.'

When he turns around from the sink after washing his hands again, she's swiping through the three pictures he took, her face blank. She says absently, maybe not even to him, "Pretty."

His heart swells, happy that he could give that to her. It's the only time he's ever gotten her to acknowledge that something about her is pretty.

With fresh gloves protecting her skin from anything that might cause infection, he unties the ribbon, carefully threads it back through the rings and starts taking them out, making her skin sting again just as it was getting used to the jewelry. She sits still for him and is perfectly quiet while he sprays the small puncture wounds with a saline solution twice and then tends them with antibacterial ointment.

He's looking closely, trying to decide how much more aftercare her skin is going to need when she asks too eagerly, "Are you done?"

"You got somewhere to be?" he bites back.

"No," she whines, "I just… Can I go?"

He takes his gloves off and reaches past her to grab her wrist resting on the top of the chair's back. He holds it level and counts while watching the second hand of the clock over his door. Then he slides his hand up to feel her forearm and drops it. "Your pulse is fast and your skin is clammy, so, no."

"But-"

"You're in shock."

"But-"

"Did you even eat this morning?" he deadpans with a trace of accusation.

She whines and it turns into an exasperated sigh. "But I need to come."

He isn't surprised, except at that she would admit it. He can sympathize.

"You're just going to have to wait."

She verbalizes exactly what he's feeling with a desperate, pitiful whine. He's jealous that she gets to complain about it and he has to remain stoic. He gets up, satisfied that he's done what he can for her skin for now, and he gets her a t-shirt and his warmest hoodie, handing them to her with instructions, "Nothing tight-fitting for at least a day. I'm going to give you salt to soak your skin with every four
hours to be safe."

She whines something about having homework while he turns around and goes to grab a granola bar from the kitchen. When he comes back, offering her food like she's a feral animal he's trying to domesticate, she's already zipping his hoodie up and hugging it around her torso.

"Stay here until you've finished that bottle of water and eaten something, then you can go."

"What if I take the water and the granola bar and do that at my own place?"

"You want to come that bad, huh?"

She sneers a little, annoyed that he won't give in before she shoves the granola bar in her mouth and says, "It feels better if I do it before I come down," while she's still chewing.

"Fucking eat breakfast next time and drink something other than coffee and maybe you won't go into shock."

"I feel fine. It's not that big a deal. I know how to handle it."

"It's hard to trust you when you don't care enough to prevent it."

She finishes chewing and, after she swallows, concedes. "Touché."

He pinches the bridge of his nose and rubs the skin up and down, playing with the barbell there as his eyes close. Even when she's being impossible she's fucking cute.

While she chugs the bottle of water, doing nothing to hide how quickly she wants to get out of there, Levi starts cleaning up, picking up the trash can and swiping discarded plastic wrappers off the table. He looks back to her when she stands up and he realizes that he didn't give her any pants, maybe unconsciously intentional. So she stands there with his big hoodie just barely covering the tops of her thighs, leaving a naked strip of flesh peeking out above her black thigh high stockings.

"Satisfied?"

He swallows. If he were honest, he'd tell her that he won't be satisfied until he can wreck the composure she's reconstructed around herself and make her scream. He's never going to be satisfied unless he has her waist in his hands and his mouth on her sweat-slicked skin. But this is a start.

He takes her wrist to check her pulse again while she rolls her eyes. It's less fluttery this time and he nods and tells her to keep herself warm. She starts to leave.

"Forgetting something?"

She turns around with her hand on the door and he throws her dress and corset at her. She blushes slightly as she tucks the clothes under her arm. "Thanks."

"Have fun," he says, just to see her blush darker before quickly closing the door.

As soon as the door is safely locked, his stoic facade evaporates and he unbuttons his jeans in a hurry, stepping out of them and leaving them on the floor at the foot of the bed. He sits down on the mattress and leans back against the wall, pushing his boxer briefs down just enough and immediately taking his cock in his fist. He works it mechanically and hard, dying to relieve the built up pressure. He doesn't even think about anything in particular, only images, mostly of her mouth. He opens his eyes and looks down at his red, sore, aching cock and thinks of pushing the almost purple head past
her lips and letting her lightly graze her teeth over it and touch it with her tongue the same way she
does with her fingers when she's needy and distracted and dying to come. An animalistic moan rips
through his chest and he pumps his steel-hard shaft, pumping frenum piercings up and down with the
skin and slicking his thumb over the barbell through the head with the accumulated wetness that's
been bothering him for ten minutes.

He's barely conscious enough to worry about how loud he is or isn't being as he grunts and lightly
hits the back of his head against the wall. Hopefully Erna is too distracted by her own problems to
hear him. For once he doesn't even try to make it last. He pumps himself hard and chases his release
until cum is shooting clear over his abs and chest, all the way up to his neck and face. He gasps in
shock, opening and closing his mouth for air and growling only a little less with every breath.

"Fuck…" He's never come that hard. He lets that fact sink in before wincing and making a disgusted
groan.

He reaches for the tissues. Cum on his face is a new one. He wipes his face while heading for the
shower, his cock still hard, but no longer sore and angry. After he turns the water on, his right eye
starts to sting and then burn. He curses to himself some more and checks in the mirror even though
he has a good idea of why it's hurting. He gets in the shower and flushes his eye with water as best
he can to stop the acidic cum from burning his eyeball and wonders when he'll be able to jerk off
again without hurting himself.

"............................

"Smoke?" is what she texts him two hours later.

He dutifully meets her downstairs.

She's still wearing his hoodie, but at least she put some leggings on. It doesn't do a lot to lessen the
visceral reaction he has to seeing her in his clothes.

She puts her latte down and asks, "What happened to your eye?"

"Don't ask."

"Well that just makes me want to ask more. Why's it all red?"

Levi sighs. He just saw her at her most vulnerable. He guesses they're at a stage in their relationship
where they can be brutally honest.

"I got cum in it," he deadpans with a dead straight face.

Her lips part. No witty comeback for that one. When she recovers from the shock, she smirks and
says, "So you liked it?"

"Fuck…" He says under his breath. His fingers card through his hair as he says, "Yeah… The way
you moan does things to me." A barely-there-blush colors the tips of his ears as he admits it.

Erna is glad. She was afraid he wouldn't like it… any of it. She had a fear that he'd get all on his
moralistic high horse about it and give her that pitying look about how sad hurting her made him,
because he's that nice and that good.

She takes a drag on her cigarette before asking, "Want to do more tomorrow?"

He would blurt out an enthusiastic 'yes', but thankfully he has more chill than that. He shrugs.
"Depends. What do you want to do?"

"Something easy," she drawls around the black filter of her cigarette. "Like we should have done in the first place. Sorry I left you to figure it all out on your own."

"So you're going to be more helpful now?"

"Well, yeah, now," she teases.

He narrows his eyes at her, more playful than angry. "You're a bitch," he tells her as he tries not to smirk.

She takes her cigarette out of her mouth to take a sip of her latte. After she licks the steamed milk off her lips, she says, "That's hot. Tell me again tomorrow while you're spanking me," with narrowed eyes and an evil grin.

Chapter End Notes

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More Intimate Than a Flogger

Chapter Summary

In which Erna and Levi take turns making each other extremely uncomfortable.

Or, two people - one with way too much experience and the other with none at all - try to negotiate a BDSM scene and it is awkward as fuck. Like, you know those BDSM fics where the characters have done this before and know exactly how to negotiate a good scene and they're all about communicating well and making it all safe, sane, and consensual? This isn't like that. These two cannot communicate for shit. They are the two most immature, emotionally stunted characters it has ever been my pleasure to write.

Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

The block is quiet in the morning, like always. Quiet is good for Erna's nerves, except this isn't the pastoral quiet that comes of the kind of privilege that she’s used to, where the right amount of money can buy you a place where you don't have to hear or see your neighbors. Her block is quiet because most people who live there can't afford a car, which cuts down on road noise significantly, since the only other traffic is slow moving, trawling cars checking to see if anyone is out dealing. People looking for drugs drive slowly, which ironically makes them seem like very considerate drivers.

Erna smirks at Levi coming back from his turn to get drinks from the café, causing him to hunch his shoulders under his black Misfits hoodie defensively and ask her, “What?”

“Your eye is still kind of pink.”

“Tch.” He holds out her latte and sighs. “Goddamnit.”

Erna smiles. She pulls the lid off her cup to check for artful milk squiggles. She got a swan this time and she refrains from stirring it into oblivion. Maybe she's just happy. Maybe at this point she'd be insulted if Eren didn't add dumb, pointless latte art to her drinks.
She tries not to smile too much, or to at least hide it behind her cup. She has an illogical bias that tells her that being happy is for idiots, and, when Levi sits next to her on the steps and her pulse thrums with electricity, making goosebumps break out over her skin, she's ashamed of how light and dynamic it makes her feel.

She rolls her eyes at herself. Feelings are dumb. People act like they're this big, mystical gift to humankind, but they're just chemicals and firing electricity in the brain. That's what she tells herself, because they scare her with how monumental and powerful they are.

She's felt drunk since last night, though not the same kind of buzz she gets from alcohol, because booze hasn't made her “giddy” since she was sixteen, but she doesn't know how else to describe it. She sat outside with him for hours the night before, lighting cigarette after cigarette until she had to start bumming his brand because the cloves started to make her lips numb, and talking… about nothing. At least nothing relevant. Just dumb things. Stories, likes, and dislikes. And the more she talked, the more drunk she felt, so, by the time she finally went back to her apartment, she couldn't sleep.

By the way Levi's leg is twitching restlessly with his heel bouncing against the concrete step as he sips his tea, holding his cup in that peculiar way that she's grown to find terribly endearing, she wonders if he feels the same giddiness. She immediately doubts it. He couldn't. It's just her. She's hopeless. It's probably been a suspiciously long time since she said something dry and sarcastic, so she takes a sip of her latte and teases, “At least people will just think you have pink eye.”

“Not sure if that's better.”

She hates that she thinks it's fucking adorable when he sulks. “Would you honestly rather people assume that you're so sexually repressed that your dick exploded and you cumshot your own eyeball?”

Levi snorts and then takes another sip of tea. “Yeah, because it sounds hot when you put it that way,” he says sarcastically.

“I know. All those romance novels I have to read for work are making me all poetic and shit.”

“You're lucky you can't injure yourself masturbating.”
Then it's Erna’s turn to snort, because he knows nothing. “I came close to accidentally killing myself like five times just experimenting before I even reached adulthood, so your cum-stung eyeball isn't shit to me.” She smirks as Levi has to pause mid-sip and cough after swallowing wrong and choking on his tea.

“How the fuck...?”

“First time was a belt around the neck until I passed out when I was thirteen, because I had to find out if I liked being choked or not.” She pantomimes the act, full with eyes rolling back and tongue lolling out the side of her mouth as he shakes his head and pinches the bridge of his nose.

“Jesus Christ…” Levi winces. “You don't do that now, right?”

“I mean…”

“Erna,” he frowns. “People die that way.”

“Yeah, because it feels really good.”

“Oh my god…”

Truthfully, she doesn't asphyxiate herself. That one time she fainted scared her enough so that she never did it alone again. She will tell him that at some point, but for right now it's too cute how his brows knit, and he gets all serious about it. His deep voice makes a shudder tingle up her spine when he mutters into his tea, “Don't fucking do that.”

She smiles and looks over at him, leaning in with her elbows on her knees and taunting, “Is that your first domly order?”

“Does it need to be to get you to listen to common sense?” he shoots right back.

She hums. “Probably the only way you'll ever get me to do anything sensible, honestly.”
“Then yeah,” he sneers as if he's a little disgusted and disturbed that he has to tell her not to accidentally choke herself to death, “It's an order.”

Goosebumps again. She's glad her dress has long sleeves and a high neckline. She smirks and looks down at her coffee, sips at what's left of the now warped swan, and continues to tease him half-sincerely. “I've never had a lifestyle dom. How exciting.”

“Does that mean I can order you to do shit like eat breakfast and clean your fucking apartment once in awhile?”

“I wouldn't get your hopes up.”

“Did you eat anything yet?” he says accusatorily, raising a thin, pierced eyebrow at her.

“Do I need to?” she asks suggestively, glancing at his face so that she won’t miss his throat bob when he swallows his nerves down.

“Did you wanna…”

She does want to. All the time. Whatever the situation. She's thirsty as fuck. He could play with her twenty four hours a day, seven days a week, twelve months out of the year, and she probably wouldn't get sick of it, because her attraction to him and her absolute need for pain both know no bounds. Even so, she doesn’t answer. She lets the blank part of his sentence that he wasn't brave enough to finish hang in the air silently because it's fun to watch him squirm.

She waits for the tips of his ears to turn pink before she asks, “Want to what?” with facetious naiveté.

He sets his tea down next to his boot and tilts his head back, eyes possibly looking for some divine intervention. Finding none, he cards the fingers of one hand through his black hair and sighs, “...Fuck…”

Erna smirks and lowers her lashes. Her lips hover over the rim of her latte. “Pretty forward of you…”

“Shit. I didn't mean-”
“I'm fucking teasing you, nerd.”

“You're fucking killing me,” he groans.

Erna’s brain fires off a dozen responses to that about how she'd like for it to be the other way around with him torturing her instead, but her lips seal shut tight. She can do sarcasm. She can do dry humor. She still cannot flirt with any competence or confidence. The closest she can get is cruel teasing, like a little boy with a crush.

She says, “Sorry,” down into her latte in a tone that means she's really not.

“I don't have to work today,” he tells her, less pained and starting to sound more stoic again. “So,” he pauses to take a cigarette out of the pack in his pocket, “If you wanted…”

“Always.” She decides not to leave him hanging this time when he trails off. As a bonus, she answers truthfully instead of busting his balls some more. “Literally whenever.”

She swirls her coffee cup and watches the liquid inside make a little whirlpool, concentrating on the visual as if it could hypnotize her into fighting off the blush starting to glow over her cheekbones, but the grinding, quick clicking sound of his lighter distracts her from focusing on her coffee and forces the image of him lighting up into her brain. She never had a smoking kink before. She doesn't think she has one now. She just likes the way he looks when he cups his hand around the end of his cigarette and his deft, skillful fingers flick a flame into existence. Her fascination is confined to the act of him lighting up, not to the actual smoking. She thinks it's a hand thing rather than an oral thing. His fingers are beautiful. She's watched them draw more than she's actually looked at the results of their drawing. His fingers move with quick, dexterous grace in everything he does, and she wants to be able to watch them work over her skin.

She is hypnotized in a way, for a moment. It doesn't stop her from blushing.

“We should talk first.”

Suddenly her heart sinks and she asks quickly, “About what?” because those words, should or need to and talk never mean anything good.
“I don't know, boundaries?” he says, getting flustered again. “…and…like, what you're okay with? Or what I can do?” He throws his hands up and repeats, “I don’t know.”

Erna is frustrated, both with him and herself, because normally she would agree. Normally she’d think that talking would be a very sensible thing to do. But, now, instead, she wants to shout at him and complain that they should just do more and talk less. It finally hits her that she has a bad case of sub frenzy, something she’s read about and always believed adamantly that she was too superior to ever feel. New subs get sub frenzy. People who don't know what the fuck they're doing and are probably incapable of critical thinking even outside of a kink setting get sub frenzy. Sub frenzy is for basic bitches who trust the first Dominant they talk to without question because they're so excited to have finally discovered kink that they rush into stupid shit.

And now she's one of those people.

Because a dumb punk who’s good with his hands and has too many piercings makes her heart all fluttery.

Gross.

Her mood significantly deflated, she frowns and snatches his lighter from his loose grip as she says, “Yeah, fine.”

While she reaches down and unlatches her coffin purse to get a cigarette, he grumbles accusatorily, “What's wrong with your lighter?”

Nothing is wrong with the black Bic in her purse. She just wanted to take something from him. When she gets her clove lit and tosses it back to him with a flick of her wrist, he catches it and shoves both it and his fist into a pocket of his hoodie.

Erna takes an angry drag off her cigarette and says, “So, talk.”

“Here?” he deadpans skeptically.

Even though she doesn't always like what he's saying (like right now), his deep, rich, careless monotone voice makes her knees weak. She thinks yeah here, because, now, she has no patience for waiting. The sooner she can let him paint a clear picture or set up boundaries or whatever the point of
this talk is, maybe the faster they can get to doing the things she actually wants to do.

Sadly for her, the door opens and Ymir and Krista pass them on the steps, providing a perfect example of why it would be better to wait to talk until they're alone—so perfect that Levi raises an eyebrow at her like he told her so—and she clucks her tongue in annoyance.

Krista chirps a “Good morning.” Ymir says, “Hey, nerds.”

Levi barely grunts an acknowledgment. Erna completely ignores them and focuses on her cigarette. On the sidewalk, Ymir swoops her arm around Krista’s waist and tugs her closer while they head in the direction of the cafe. She stops suddenly and swings her girlfriend to turn around with her, hitting her forehead with the heel of her palm like she forgot something important. She calls over, “Hey, we're having another party later. I'll text you.”

Levi puts his cigarette out with a twist against the concrete steps. “I'm not going.”

“Yes you are,” Ymir says, untroubled by his obstinance as she resumes her course toward the café.

“So…”

“Oh, fine!” Erna huffs and puts out her half finished cigarette. “Inside,” she says, standing up and gathering her purse.

Levi moves much more languidly, not being in the rush that she is. He picks up his unfinished tea and as he turns toward the door he says, “Let me get a shower first.”

“Oh my god,” Erna almost throws her hands up in the air. It's like the more impatient she gets the more it feeds his ego and where he was all flustered before now he's back to being stoic and apathetic and infuriating, she thinks. “How long does that take? An hour? Two?”

His brow creases as he smirks at her. “Fifteen minutes.”

“I would have thought you'd have to wait for water to boil and soak yourself in bleach or whatever,” she mutters while wondering if fifteen minutes is long enough for her to masturbate.
He opens the door, and Erna looks down at the stubbed out halfway finished cigarette in her hand that she'd extinguished so eagerly. She has half a mind to light it back up and just stay where she is for fifteen minutes, but as Levi goes inside he tells her before the door swings shut, “Fucking eat something and drink some water if you don't want aftercare again.”

“Of all the stupid… infantilizing… motherfucker…” she mutters angrily on her way to the café to get one of those maple bacon cronuts that Armin makes. Her obvious anger makes Eren nervous, but for once she doesn't notice or take advantage of that.

Armin refuses to take her money for the food, and she rolls her eyes and makes a disgusted sigh at his genuine, positive, sweet demeanor instead of lingering to argue. She throws a five into the tip jar and walks briskly past a line composed of the morning rush of people. She wonders where they keep coming from, seemingly increasing in volume every week, and why the fuck they come here.

Admittedly, the lattes and cronuts are worth literally fighting for, she thinks as she heads to the door with her anger over being made to wait for the one thing she wants (Levi) lessening as she has a new thing she wants (maple bacon cronuts) in her hands. She almost walks right by Ymir and Krista sharing a table near a window, and she would have walked past intentionally even if she'd noticed them, but Krista makes her pause with a light touch of her two fingers to the back of her hand. Erna recoils from the touch, but it gets her attention.

Krista smiles warmly, her eyes squinting as the corners of her lips turn upward, “Erna, hey, sit with us for a second.”

Erna sighs through her nose. Her eyes scan back and forth, checking the geometry of the two empty chairs at the table with the line of sight to the door and assesses the placement of each, deciding which one makes her more vulnerable to being grabbed from behind. She chooses the chair that lets her face the door and has its back to another table instead of the aisle of space people move through while ordering and getting drinks.

She sets down her paper bag, pulls her skirt underneath her, and folds her hands in her lap. Her posture and her cold eyes say that she's already done with this interaction, but Ymir doesn't seem to care enough to be put off, and Krista doesn't even notice, simply smiling brightly as Erna says, “What?”

Erna misses what Krista answers with as she looks down at the table, eyes locking on a book automatically as they lock on all books, because books are sacred, except this one. Her eyes squint at the all too recognizable cover. The stupid fucking grey tie that’s adorning its face.
Krista waits for an answer as Erna glares at the book. Then she gets her attention back by saying her name. Erna’s shoulders slump, she huffs, and looks back up at Krista.

“Can you come to the party?” she asks again.

Erna ignores her question and asks her own. “Are you reading that?” She points at the book on the table and makes a mildly disgusted face.

“I already read it,” Krista smiles. “But I’m skimming it again because it’s the theme of the party tonight.”

Erna blinks. “Fifty Shades of Grey is your party’s theme?”

“Yeah!” Krista’s shoulders tick upward, and she tilts her head to the side as she flashes a big, pleased smile. Ymir seems to be playing a game on her phone. “Have you read it?”

Erna had given it a shot when it became a thing. She was skeptical from the beginning, anticipating all the things it would probably get wrong about BDSM. It surpassed all of her expectations for how horrible it could be and then some. Not only was it an inaccurate and harmful portrayal of BDSM, but it came with the bonus of fetishizing controlling, abusive behavior and female helplessness. Then, there was the grammar and writing style. Erna could write a fifty-page thesis on all the things wrong with that book.

Even so, that thesis wouldn’t change the mind of anyone who was a fan of Fifty Shades. If she’s learned anything from her job editing shitty romance novels, it’s that there are women (apparently a lot of women) who love their helpless victim porn featuring entirely blank and boring characters written by authors who could really stand to crack open a thesaurus once in awhile, and who is she to judge? She has kinks, too. Someone who likes Fifty Shades would probably be just as horrified by a real, consent-based negotiation about needle play as she is by the image of a man fucking with his shirt on because he gets squicked out about his torso being touched.

Erna rolls her eyes. She grumbles, “I gave it a look.”

“Did you love it?” Krista asks excitedly, Erna suspects because she is either ignorant of or stubbornly ignoring body language cues.
No, Erna thinks. How could anyone? That book is an insult to literally all that she is. The combination of misogyny, disregard of consent, stalking, bad writing, boring characters, abuse, and just plain wrong ideas about one of the closest things to her heart, BDSM, make it the perfect shitstorm of horrible in her eyes. She loathes it. Does that mean she wants to get into an argument about what a fucked up abomination it is? Not really. But she also can’t bring herself to say anything positive about it, not even to avoid conflict, so what happens is: she quickly takes her phone out of her pocket, creases her brow as if concerned, and says, “Sorry, I have to go.” Standing up as though she’s in a rush, she says hurriedly, “I don’t think I’m going to be able to make it tonight, but I’ll try.”

That’s a lie, but it will keep Krista from feeling like she should make an effort to convince her to show up.

Erna sidesteps away from the table and hurries out of the cafe. She shoves a cronut in her mouth on her way back to the apartment building and shakes her head. She doesn’t bother to finish chewing as she mumbles, “Crime against metaphor… fuck is becoming of literature… low self esteem Mary Sue too dumb to exist…” and there she pauses, stopping on the sidewalk and swallowing. Is she being a dumb Mary Sue by trying to skip any discussion of consent with Levi because she’s going through sub-frenzy? Is she acting like an Anastasia Steele?

Bile rises in her throat and she nearly doubles over. She’s able to keep her breakfast down with a long sip of her latte. She tilts her head back, mutters, “Goddamnit,” and continues walking, shoving the door open and climbing the steps, walking past her own apartment and straight to Levi’s. She bangs on the door with purpose.

When he opens the door, she looks him up and down, taking in his damp hair and plain white t-shirt and jeans. She shoves the bag with the rest of the cronuts against his chest and says, “Thanks for not answering the door in a towel. I’m over stupid fucking cliches already.”

Levi’s brow creases in confusion. “Have I ever done that?”

Erna smirks, because of course he wouldn’t remember, meanwhile the image has been burned in her brain since they first met. He steps out of her way quickly as she pushes past him, going straight to the kitchen table and grabbing a chair, she says, “Get comfortable. Maybe get a fucking notepad and a pen. We’re going to do this right.”

Levi leaves the pastries on the counter and slides into the chair across from her. He tears a page out of the sketchbook on the table and picks up an adjacent Micron pen. When he lifts his eyes, relaxes his shoulders, his head tilting apathetically, the carelessness of his body language accentuated by his half-lidded eyes, she squints at him, annoyed that he’s so attractive, and she fires across the table,
“Don’t give me that look, this isn’t going to be fun. It’s fucking boring… and necessary… and you’re the one who wanted to talk… and you better remember that when we’re in hour three of discussing the fucking details of consent…”

He huffs a nasal exhale of a laugh at her. As relaxed as she is fired up, he says, “I’m fine with that.”

She narrows her eyes and starts off with, “Boundaries and compartmentalization,” and waits for him to take notes. When he puts pen to paper, she continues, “When we’re in here, in the context of a scene, you can dominate the fuck out of me. Out there,” she nods over her shoulder in the direction of the outside world, “if you try that shit, I will literally break your balls.”

Levi nods. “Got it.”

“No,” she says, “you already don't. Trying to tell me when to eat,” she shudders as she remembers that being a part of Christian Grey's abusive, controlling identity, “isn't okay. Outside of one specific context, I'm a fucking independent adult and you can't say shit about my decisions.”

“I say shit about your stupid decisions as your friend. I can't be your friend anymore?” he deadpans, putting the pen down.

Erna groans and tilts her chair back. She looks up at the ceiling for a moment, then feet on the floor again, she looks at him and says, “This is messy. This is why I like professionals.”

Levi gives her a withering look and starts to stand up. “Then by all means…”

“Hey, I'm trying,” she suddenly pleads as he turns away and she quickly realizes how hurtful what she just said was too late. “This is even harder for me, because I have habits and preconceived ideas and preferences. You get to just sit there and, ironically, wait for me to tell you what to do and how.”

Levi pauses, turns back around, and places his fists on the edge of the table. He leans over it. “You could just trust me to not be an asshole.”

Erna avoids eye contact and says nothing.
“Jesus christ, Erna, I'm not a fucking idiot. I'm not going to try to pull you into a scene at the cafe.”

“I just want to be sure-”

“You know me, for fucks sake.”

“People get weird with power, Levi.”

“I don't,” he says emphatically, pointing at his chest with his thumb before returning his fist to the table. “This isn't even my kink and you're treating me like the basic misogynist shithheads you said made you give up on finding a play partner.”

“I want to be safe.”

“Between the two of us, who do you really think is more risk averse?”

“I…” Erna starts to say, then pauses, her mouth slightly open and frozen because she can't lie. He makes her look reckless as fuck. “Okay. I'm sorry. I was projecting shit onto you,” she admits.

Her eyes follow him as he slowly sits back in his chair again. She takes a deep breath, closes her eyes for a second, and reminds herself that he isn't a consent violating, entitled, abusive man-child trying to get his dick wet. She isn't in Fifty Shades of Grey. She's in the very unique situation of trying to turn her best friend, who doesn't have a sadistic bone in his body, into her dom.

Which presents it's own set of problems.

“So compartmentalization,” Levi quips.

“So, in here, when we've agreed to it, you're my dom. The rest of the time we're friends.”

“So it's not like…”
“It's not like we're dating,” she finishes for him, and Levi gets a strange sense of deja vu, only he's on the other side of the conversation he's had with hundreds of people and his restrictions were even more prohibitive. She is at least okay with being friends. He didn't even give anyone that.

“Okay.”

“So, it's, like, the same… except this one thing,” she says uncomfortably, pausing and stalling between almost every word.

He smirks at her. “You alright?”

“Ugh, no.” She groans and lays her arm across the table, bending her other elbow to rest her face on. “This is hard. I don't know how to submit with someone I'm going to have to see in, like, everyday life.”

Levi feels better knowing she was only projecting her own difficulty with compartmentalization onto him when she was accusing him of even having it in him to try to dominate her outside of a scene when she's the one who has always run the show in any of their interactions. He can think of several snarky things to say about it, but she looks so distraught. Instead of giving her a hard time, he gets up and opens the fridge. He reaches for a beer, twists the cap off, and sets it next to her limp, outstretched arm.

She turns her head and opens her eyes to look at the bottle suspiciously. As he retakes his seat, he says, “If you don't want it, I'll drink it, but… makes talking easier.”

Erna sits back up, holds the neck of the bottle lightly, and wrinkles her nose before taking a dainty sip. Then she winces like she just drank gasoline. She sticks her tongue out and concludes, “It tastes like carbonated bread mold.”

“That’s kind of what it is.”

“It would take ten more of these to get me drunk.”

“I'm not that generous and I’m not trying to get you drunk.”
Erna twirls her finger through the condensation at the flare of the bottleneck and muses, “Liquor store opens at noon,” and when she lifts her eyes she's getting an extremely disapproving look from the intense grey eyes across from her, so she huffs, “Fiiine.”

Like a kid drinking cough syrup, she holds her nose, tilts her head back, and gulps down the entire bottle, not pausing for a breath or letting a single drop escape her lips. It takes her sixteen seconds. Levi only watches for the first five seconds and then he closes his eyes, because he's had enough of awkward boners making it uncomfortable to sit down around her. He opens his eyes again when the gulping sound stops, watches her put the bottle down with a wrinkle between her brows, and he smirks when she asks in disbelief, “How do you drink that stuff? It's gross… and bubbly… and not alcoholic enough…”

“You done?”

The back of Erna's neck tingles. She knows she's stalling. As always, she'd secretly hoped he would call her out on it. Not letting her get away with shit has become something she looks for in a dom/me.

“I'm done,” she answers contritely.

“So aside from your issues with not being able to pay me to go away…” he earns a sneer from her with that, “What else is important?”

Erna swallows. “Consent is usually the whole thing, but you already have some kind of weird kink or anxiety for that.” She narrows her eyes at him. “I haven't decided which yet.”

Levi smirks at the thought of consent as a kink. He, too, isn't sure if his obsession with clear consent started as an anxiety over doing the right thing and not hurting anyone before it started to turn him on. Sexual preferences are complicated things that he's never found worth in analyzing. “Could be both,” he shrugs.

Erna rolls her eyes a little, but she restrains herself from calling him a fucking boy scout. “So there's verbal consent which is easy and obvious.” He nods and she says, “Then there's just…” She has to think about how to put it. “…gut feelings you're probably going to have… if we get to doing anything rough, you have to watch body language or pay attention to breathing, because sometimes people go nonverbal when things are intense.”

“You mean ‘people’ do? Or you do?” he asks, finding it interesting that she's suddenly in the third person.
She looks to the side, toward the corner of the table and is silent for a moment. Then she admits finally, “I could.”

“I'm fluent in body language.”

“You think you are, but it gets confusing when pain reactions are mixed up with pleasure reactions.”

“Fair enough.”

“So, I guess you just have to pay attention.”

“You guess?”

“Well it's not like I've ever done it myself. I've never experienced things from the side you're going to be on,” she says, with distress barely creeping into her voice. She's never had to give anyone advice on how to top, having only ever been with people who already thoroughly knew what they were doing. “I don't know what to tell you.”

Levi holds his hands up in surrender, smirking at her, trying to show her it's not a big deal. “It's okay. I just thought you knew everything.”

That makes her return to her normal, acerbic self and she snipes back, “I know shit that you'd have to be an idiot not to know. Like stop for the safeword and never hit anyone in the kidneys.”

Levi looks down at the paper and acts like he's taking notes, saying to himself, “no... kidney... shots...”

She laughs and says, “Fuck you.”

“I know more about anatomy than you do, so you can skip the obvious.”
Erna shrugs and supposes he's right. Normally, with a pro-domme, this conversation would center around kinks and limits and what they're each comfortable with. Things would be getting crossed off Erna’s list that were deemed too much of a liability. But she and Levi already talked about that yesterday, so she doesn't know what else needs to be said. “What do you think you need to know?”

“Like…” he shifts uncomfortably in his seat. “Can I…”

She watches him go uncomfortably stiff while his lips purse in a tense, straight line, then he says, “Forget it. Nevermind.”

Erna doesn't like seeing him uncomfortable. She needs at least one of them to be relaxed and it isn't going to be her. The way he shifts in his seat sets off quiet alarm bells for her and makes her fear that she's done the wrong thing, that this was a bad idea from the beginning. She's filled with fear yet again that he doesn't actually want to be doing any of this and is only trying out of pity, which makes her feel disgusting. She tells him, “Just fucking chill and say it,” fully expecting he wants to back out of this whole thing and already feeling crushingly disappointed about it.

He collects himself and says, “It's hard to chill when you gave me a list of shit we can do that includes deepthroating.”

Erna, of course, misunderstands at first, and as Levi buries his face in his hands she says matter of factly, “It’s fine if you don’t want to, you’re allowed to have limits too.”

“Oh my god,” he groans into his palms.

“I wasn't going to ask you to, I figured… you know…” What she means is, she figured, after he explained multiple times about kind of having a sex addiction, that it would be like him offering her a handle of moonshine.

“Oh course I want to.”

There's a moment of silence while she watches his fingers twitch and twist in his damp hair and she processes his words, first realization making her go, “oh,” and then, as it really hits her clearly, “Oh…” He still doesn't lift his face, but now she notices the blush spreading over what skin she can see and she almost laughs. “Then why are you having a crisis about it?”
He groans again and his fingers twitch like he's going to pull his hair out, so she tells him, “It's fine. It isn't any more intimate to me than a flogging.” Which is normally true, because the equivalent that she's used to is a pro-domme with a strapon, which has never felt much more intimate than anything else.

Finally he lifts his face to look her in the eye to deadpan, “My dick is more intimate than a flogger.”

“Okay?” She shrugs, because she still doesn't understand what the big deal is. “Then I guess it's good we're talking about it?”

“It just feels like… I don't want to take advantage of you…”

“How would that be taking advantage of me? Because you would like it?” She smirks, aiming to lighten the mood, and throws in a sarcastic, “God forbid.” He still looks at her just as gravely with a troubled, almost guilty expression. She can't help rolling her eyes at him.

“Look,” she says, “I'm not a creep.” He tilts his head at that and raises a thin eyebrow at her, so that she has to pause and acknowledge, “Okay, except for when I am. But I'm not a creep about this. I'm not trying to make you do anything you're uncomfortable with.” She tries to stress that point, because it's bad enough that he's doing this more for her than for himself. It makes her feel a little creepy about it already. “It's better for me if you like it anyway, so don't feel like you have to do me any favors. If you don't like something then we won't do it.” She pauses and thinks to make sure she hasn't left out anything important, then adds, “And if it occurs to you to stop being a basic vanilla bitch and get curious about a kink that I'm not into, then tell me and we can work it out.”

Looking at him, she feels like nothing she says is helping and she doesn't get it. If anything his face is redder than when she started and he has an expression like a guilty puppy dog.

“Are you actually sweating?”

His finger self-consciously pulls at the collar of his t-shirt and he seems to exhale for the first time in two minutes.

Still trying to be helpful, Erna asks, “Do you want to start with facefucking instead? Most people start with spanking, but you'd probably be better at something you've actually done before.”
“Oh my god,” he says before he puts his forehead on the table.

“Okay, I'm confused. Do you always get this weird about blowjobs?”

“No.” He turns his head so that now it's his cheek resting on the table. “I've never felt this weird about it.”

“Then I don't get it,” she says. “Is it me?”

“Kind of?!” Levi says, his voice uncharacteristically rising in pitch and volume. He sits back up, looks like he's about to say something, pauses, and gets up to turn the kettle on instead. Erna turns in her chair to watch him.

“Did I say something wrong?”

“No,” he answers quickly. “It's…” He tilts his head up toward the ceiling. “It's because it's you. I've never fucked someone I had feelings for. It's different.”

“So it's, like, a big deal?” she asks, genuinely trying to understand.

“How do you think it's not?” he answers, trying not to get too exasperated with her. He turns around and leans against the counter while he waits for the water to boil, crossing his arms and watching her face as her eyes look upward in thought.

“I guess…” she says to herself and pauses. “We have different…” she can't find the right words and she huffs, because usually she's so good with words. She tries to do an analogy instead. “I think we're working with different scales of intimacy? Like if you put your hands around my neck and choked me that would be a really big deal to me because it requires a lot of trust and it feels so good… oral sex just doesn't seem like that big a deal… it falls somewhere on the lower end of an intimacy scale from one to choking… it's probably like a five?”

Levi nods like he understands, then deadpans ironically, “I'd put it closer to an eight.”

“Eight for me is like what we did yesterday… or knifeplay.”
“Oh my god,” Levi mutters at the mention of knives. “So what's spanking compare to?”

Erna shrugs. “For vanilla people? Probably like a handjob?”

“Oh.”

“But like a really good handjob,” she stresses. “Like a mainstream porn quality handjob.”

“I get it,” he says, recognizing the mischievous tone in her voice, and hoping to stop her before she can make him hard again.

“Like with a perfect grip and edging and-”

“Please stop.”

“Oh,” she says with her crooked smile and that wicked glow in her eyes.

That look gives him ideas and a dry mouth. It makes him uncross his arms and grip the counter behind him as an anchor. Then the kettle clicks and blesses him with a reason to turn around and keep his hands busy. As he reaches up for a bag of loose tea and a strainer from the cupboard, she says, “So now that we're past that, do you have any other questions or concerns?”

He does, because literally nothing about that conversation was reassuring and he still has the same basic concerns. “How do I make sure I'm not taking advantage of you in the middle of something?”

She rolls her eyes as he comes back to the table with his tea. “Why do you have such a phobia about consent?”

“Because I saw what you look like in subspace yesterday and it's like you're drugged.”

“I mean technically, yeah,” she sighs, “but everything is a drug. Tea, cigarettes, oxygen…”
He doesn't appreciate her trying to make light of it and tells her very seriously, “It would have been easy to convince you to do something you would regret.”

“Yeah, okay, I'm familiar with the whole argument.” She is, in fact, bored with the consent debate that is ongoing and passionate within the kink community. She can see where it gets very problematic and predators taking advantage of people in subspace is definitely a thing, but it doesn't feel like it's a thing that affects her personally.

“Look,” she says, trying again to assuage his fears, “If you're already this worried about it, then it really isn't going to be a problem.”

“That doesn't make me feel better,” he deadpans.

Erna’s face clouds over with a scowl curling her lips. Sub frenzy has been creeping back up on her since they started talking kinks and she's too eager to get on with the actual play to be much more reassuring. “Well, if you're that worried, then we just have to negotiate before every scene and micromanage everything.”

“Why do you seem pissed about that?”

“Oh, I don't know,” she sighs. “It's safe and it's a good thing to do, but you can see how it takes some of the fun out of it, right?”

He smirks as her expression takes on more of a pout. He leans back in his chair and tells her in a voice like velvet, “I like the idea of you telling me exactly what you want me to do to you.”

The way his eyelids lower with a dark expression, encouraging her to start talking, makes her knees weak and grateful for the chair under her. He reminds her of Annie for a moment, except Levi has a history with her that Annie didn't - a history of getting teased mercilessly by her at every opportunity she's found. He, unlike Annie, is not going to make it easier for her to speak candidly or even offer her something to write words on if she can't say them out loud.

As good as Erna is with words, and as frank as she can be about sex when it isn't serious, she is extremely shy about asking for what she wants in detail. Honesty is a humiliating thing and it makes her feel too vulnerable. That's another thing she has always liked about professionals. Good ones don't need a lot of detail. She can pick an implement, or an act, and a safe word and that's about all
she needs. Levi isn't going to be satisfied with that.

She tries to open her mouth to say something, but what comes out is a stifled little, “umph.”

Levi tips his chair back and brings his hands behind his head. He mocks her, “Do you want a minute to think about it?”

Erna exhales deeply out her nose, stands up on her shaky legs, and without a word, she walks to his fridge. It's easy to find his stash of craft beer in the bottom row of shelves in the door. She stands in there and mechanically untwists a cap, brings the mouth to her lips, tilts her head back, and gulps down an entire bottle before placing it empty on the counter next to her.

Levi's self satisfied smirk starts to turn to a frown as she reaches for another and repeats the motions. She holds up a finger to tell him to shut up when he starts to say something while she's a third of the way through a second bottle. He gives up, lets her finish off that second one and a third, and lets himself be impressed. He's never seen anyone able to drink like that. When she closes the fridge door, he simply says, “Recycling is behind you.”

She waves off the advice with a flip of her hand and leaves her empties where they are, because alcohol makes her a defiant, mean-spirited cunt, but he was right. It makes it easier to talk.

The back of her hand wipes away a lingering taste at the corner of her mouth and she mutters to herself, “Gross…”

When she sits back down, he says simply, “You owe me a six pack.”

She ignores him and forges ahead before she completely loses her nerve, which is only one snarky comment away from happening.

“So, placement is whatever,” she says. “Hands and knees, bent over your lap, or any piece of furniture, you can pick your own preference.”

She's looking down at the table. She would look him in the eye, but she's sure he has that condescending look on his face that's going to make her wet and self conscious about it. She tries not to think about his face and instead think of this as a powerpoint presentation on how to do a good spanking scene.
“Um.” Her face starts to feel warm as she tries to think about what else is important, because it's been years since she had to really deconstruct something simple like this. There are things that seem intuitive to her that he probably wouldn't assume. “I'd like to keep the dress on, because,” her throat tightens and she decides she can't explain, so she says, “I don't know.”

Levi, who's been calmly sipping his tea and thoroughly enjoying the snarky, normally poised, well-spoken woman fall apart and pause and stutter like a nervous wreck, chimes in, “because it feels more spontaneous.”

“I guess?” she says, as if she didn't know.

“Because there's something dirty about feeling like a disheveled mess.” He takes another sip of his tea while she chews at her lip and sighs. It's strange, being on the side that she's usually on, saying things extremely frankly to watch the other person squirm, but seeing her actually being shy makes him more bold about this whole give and take.

“Yeah… or… I don't know. There's something about the imagery of it that gets me off.”

“What else?” he asks, wanting to keep her going.

“Unh, give me a second.” She chews lightly at the tip of her curled middle finger absently. “This is really hard.”

When she looks up away from the table finally and her eyes meet his, he sets his tea down and assures her, “You're doing well.”

Erna's teeth clamp down on the skin of her finger a little harder, bringing it to the front of her mind and making her suddenly remove it from her mouth. She folds her hands in her lap, determined not to let her oral fixation make such an obvious display of how nervous this makes her.

She decides to try and stick with technical details. “I don't need a lot of warm-up, but I don't love bruises, so don't hit the same spot for an eternity. Thighs are good. Inner thighs are stingy,” she says, like that's a desirable thing, trying not to actually think about how much she loves the stinging pain of a harsh smack to her inner thigh.
Her fingers wrap around each other under the table. She says quietly, “Try to hit hard enough that I don't have to ask you for harder... unless I'm supposed to be begging, which is also okay.”

“So you like begging?”

“I mean...” Erna squirms slightly in her chair and murmurs in almost a whisper, “I guess, yeah.”

The way she can't just say it outright makes him think she likes it a lot, because what he's learning quickly - which he wish he could have learned a long time ago - is that she has an easy time saying things that aren't particularly important to her, but she chokes up when it's something honest and personal.

“So you guess?,” he says, wanting a more definite answer.

She sighs and is quiet for a moment before saying quietly, “I like being forced to beg.”

Levi needs it clearer than that. He asks her straight, “Do you want me to make you beg?”

He can barely hear her whimper under her breath. He waits and watches the muscles in her arms twitch under the sleeves of her dress as she wrings her hands under the table. He gives her a second, sips his tea, then tells her, “I need an answer.”

He can hear the slight rustle of her crinoline under her dress as she rubs her thighs together, and it's quiet, but her answer is just as quiet. He would have missed it if he hadn't been watching her mouth.

His lip twitches. He's heard her beg before, from the other side of the wall. It makes it easy to imagine what she'll sound like being for him.

“What else?”

“Fuck,” she sighs, exhaling a deep breath. “Give me a second.”

“Take your time,” he says sincerely. It would be so easy to make her flush go from blossom pink to
fire engine red in a heartbeat, and it would be fair revenge for all the times she's made him squirm with a hard on under the table, but it's starting to feel cruel. It was fun at first, but it's quickly becoming disconcerting to see her so vulnerable and hesitant and it makes him want to hold her instead of continuing to torture her.

“Okay,” Erna says to herself as she tries to calm down, think clearly, and not lose the courage she needs to get through this. “Um… Also…” She pauses and whines, wishing she hadn't started this sentence. Her teeth worry her lip as she contemplates leaving her thought hanging there and not saying it out loud.

“Also what?”

“You…” her thumbnail somehow ends up in her teeth and she says the rest around it, “don't have to just spank me… grabbing feels good… it's like sensation play if you just run your hands over the skin with varying levels of pressure.”

He tries to keep his face completely neutral. “Got it,” he deadpans. “Anything I should avoid?”

Erna hums as she thinks, then seems to suddenly remember, “Oh yeah, don't try to make me count. It's fucking lame and cliche and this isn't Sesame Street.”

He lets himself laugh at that and asks her if there's anything else she hates, because talking about what she doesn't want seems to be a lot easier for her.

“I can't really think of anything… I just have certain words that are triggers…”

“I don't have to say anything.”

“No,” she disagrees, “You kind of do…”

Finally it's Levi's turn to feel flustered again, because dirty talk is out of his depth. He swallows and tries to sound stoic as he asks, “Like what?”

This is where no amount of alcohol in the world could make it easier for Erna to tell him her
preference. She knows, in precise detail, exactly what she'd like him to say while he's beating her, but saying any of it out loud might actually make her faint. She tries to convey as well as she can what she wants in abstract terms. “It's... kind of like roleplaying, because I obviously don't expect you to believe anything you're saying, but if you could just pretend to... maybe hate me? or feel disgusted by me? I don't know.” She rests her temples on her fingers, closes her eyes, and feels absolutely pathetic and ashamed.

“You can't just tell me what you want me to say?”

“Unhh,” she groans, “I could, but there's no way you'd be comfortable with it and if you're uncomfortable it would come out really awkwardly anyway and it wouldn't really work.”

“I'm willing to try if it's something you need.”

“I don't know if I'd call it a need... It's hard to get off without it, but...”

“Can you get off from being spanked?”

“Well yeah,” she answers like it should be obvious. “If you're calling me a dirty little whore and really fucking me up.”

Levi takes a deep breath and closes his eyes. She's right. He can't picture himself saying that to her. But he does want to see her come, maybe badly enough to say shit he would never think in his right mind.

“Okay.”

She puts her hands down on the table, taking a deep breath and steadying herself. She echoes, “Okay.” Then she asks, “Did I miss anything?”

Levi nods, because he wants an excruciating amount of detail agreed on beforehand so that he can be absolutely sure he isn't violating any boundaries. “Underwear on or off?”

“Off. Or pulled down. Just not on, because it won't hurt enough. Skin on skin is better. You can rip
them or cut them or whatever if you want, but if you fuck up my dress I'll kill you.”

He tries to act completely unfazed by the permission to rip her panties off and asks, “Is there a time frame?”

She shrugs. “Either I'll safe word and we'll stop, or your hand will go numb and we'll stop.”

“I'm ambidextrous,” he deadpans with a straight face.

She exhales a slight laugh. “I forgot about that.”

“How do you decide when it's enough?” he asks carefully, hoping she won't pick up on the subtext which is: I don't trust you to stop before it's too much.

“Well, either I come, which I don't think is going to happen, or I just get to a point where I can't take it.”

“If you're trying to come…”

“It's okay if I don't,” she says. “I can finish myself like yesterday.”

“I mean, I could…” Levi pinches the bridge of his nose. “If you're okay with me touching you…”

“Oh…” Erna hadn't even thought of that. “No, yeah,” she bites her lip hard. “It's just…”

“No, it's okay, nevermind. Forget I said anything.”

“Oh my god,” Erna groans, quickly getting fed up with how fucking awkward this is. She gets short with him and says, “Levi, do you want to?”

“Of fucking course,” he fires right back.
“I was just going to say that I'm really sensitive. So no button mashing my clit.”

“I know how it works,” he growls, deeply offended at the implied insult to his skill in one of the few things he feels extremely competent in.

“And if you try to jackhammer me with your fingers I'm going to rip the barbells out of your nipples.”

“I wasn't even going to try to finger you!”

“Good!”

“Why the fuck are we fighting about this?!”

“I don't know!” she shouts. “I wanted to not negotiate anything and just do the thing, but now we're down to micromanaging exactly how you're allowed to touch me and it's your fault! I just want you to fuck me up!”

“If you wanted me to pretend to hate you, I think I can do that now,” he says in a deep, expressionless monotone.

“Good,” she snipes back. “Scene negotiation complete?” Without waiting for an answer, she stands from her chair and Levi mimics the action thinking they're going to start, then his shoulders fall as she picks up her purse and her latte, turns on her heel, and heads toward the door.

“What the fuck?” he says in disbelief as her fingers go for the doorknob.

“Oh,” she cranes her neck to look over her shoulder at him. “Did you think we were going to start now?”

“Obviously,” he growls.
“Nope. I'm a little buzzed from all that beer,” she tilts her head and sing-songs, “and that means I'm not safe to play.”

“Goddammit,” he mutters, his hand reaching for the back of his head.

She smiles wickedly. “Normally I'd be okay with that, but you're sooo concerned with consent…” she trails off as she opens the door to the hallway, waving goodbye as she leaves.

When the door closes and she's gone, he pauses for a beat, completely surprised even though he shouldn't be surprised by any vindictive thing she does anymore. Then he abruptly kicks his chair across the room with a loud clatter.

He tilts his head back and shouts,”Fuck!” at the ceiling before going over to the counter and throwing her discarded bottles at the recycling bin. They shatter and rain glass into the bottom of the blue container next to the counter.

Erna smiles to herself on the other side of the door and whispers as she walks to her own apartment, feeling not even a little buzzed from that amount of alcohol, “take that, fucker.”

When the door closes her into the emptiness of her own apartment, she is suddenly acutely aware of having shot herself in the foot for spite yet again. She really wanted him to spank her… and maybe press his cock against the back of her throat, now that she knows that's okay… and instead, somehow, presented with every opportunity, she's still alone and he's breaking bottles on the other side of the wall.

She smirks and shakes her head at herself. It's worth it if it proves a point about how she doesn't like being forced to talk, and maybe makes Levi think about being a little less uptight about his consent issues. Not that she doesn't think it's important, but he acts like she's going to take him to court if he looks at her the wrong way.

In between sips of her latte, she mutters about him being a cockblock, and she smiles to herself every time she hears him curse or knock something over on the other side of the wall. She stands in the middle of her apartment and wonders how she should keep herself busy, because she only had one plan for the day and that plan just got fucked. She starts to seriously consider going back down the hall and telling Levi she was fucking with him, obviously, and seeing if he's still willing to spank her, but then she hears his door open and slam, followed by his heavy boots hurrying down the stairs. She hastily drops her latte on the desk and picks up a fresh pack of cigarettes, but as she reaches her own door, she hears his bike start up outside. Her hand goes limp against the lock and her shoulders slump. She sags and rests her forehead against the door before twirling around, pressing her back to
it and slowly sliding down to sit on the floor. She gives her head a slight hit against the door behind her and whispers to herself, “Shit.”

For that brief moment, she blames herself for being too goddamn stubborn and getting in her own way of what she wants. Then, very quickly, she blames Levi instead, because she's an immature brat and it feels better to blame someone else.

When she finally collects herself from sulking on the floor, she decides to actually get some work done for the first time in at least a week. She checks the most recent email from her boss and prints out the attachment. She promises herself that no matter what it is, she's going to be more forgiving and less critical now that she's been reminded that Fifty Shades of Grey is a thing. The universe challenges that promise with a Christmas-themed erotica anthology called The Naughty List. She cringes and whispers into the silent emptiness of her apartment, “It's only August.”

Erna’s goal is to throw herself into work and forget about Levi until she's ready to talk to him again. An easy plan. A plan she's executed a few times before with great success. This time, the nature of her work makes it not so easy. There is nothing less sexy than Christmas porn, at least not that she knows of yet, (her job surprises her sometimes) but Christmas porn with a D/s relationship and spanking as foreplay? Even if it's a little boring and basic and written for vanilla people who can't imagine anything kinkier than calling their partner 'Sir,' it makes it difficult for her to forget how close she was to having her own kinky fun, free of charge, with a guy whose intelligence and voice made her melt all the goddamn time.

And it makes her very, very aware that she fucked up.

It's so easy for the couple in the story she's reading. They're in an established relationship. They're comfortable with each other to the point it's almost fucking boring. They don't have to talk about safety or consent and they can fall into a scene casually under a decorated tree and then get into an argument after. Erna shakes her head. Always save the argument for after.

She finally learned a thing from the shitty erotica she has to read.

She never would have behaved the way she behaved with Levi if it were Annie. As she pushes her chair away from her cluttered desk, she thinks of all the reasons why that is. Annie had a certain way about her that didn't make Erna feel encouraged about giving her any shit, whereas she fucks with Levi all the time, because she can, and normally he takes it pretty well and gives it back. He’s one of the first and only people she feels on an equal footing with. She’s scared, maybe irrationally, that the feeling of equality is going to change if she lets herself submit to him. There's a fear that her submission would bleed into social interactions.
Some people like for their submission or dominance to be a 24/7 thing. Erna is very much not one of those people. Her identity isn’t simple like that. It took her years to reconcile that she could be a sexually submissive masochist with a dominant sadistic personality, and that was difficult even though she only let herself be submissive with one discreet person for one hour at a time. Hiding that submissive side of herself from the rest of the world has become so habitual that, even though she trusts Levi, it’s scary to think of a person seeing both sides of her. While she does very much want to let him dominate her and hurt her in all the ways she’s fantasized about for months, she’s also a bit existentially terrified about it.

She taps a finger against her lips as she wonders how to put that to Levi in a way that won’t sound like she’s acknowledging any fault of her own. She doesn’t want to apologize, even though he probably deserves an apology.

She picks up her phone and types first, *When are you coming back?* She stares at that for a couple seconds, then shortens it to *Are you coming back?* Then she deletes that altogether and types instead, *I'm sorry I was a dick*, just to see how that feels. She doesn’t like it and deletes the message without sending it. A deeply dissatisfied sigh rushes out her nose in a huff.

“Shit.”

She texts Deirdra instead.

Later, in the middle of a deadlift at the gym, Levi hears his phone vibrate and nearly drops the weight to grab it. He’d been hoping Erna would text him. Realistically he expected her to say something snarky that meant she missed him without actually saying so. He smirks, pleased with himself and his decision to go to the gym and make himself unavailable until she had to ask him to come back. But the text he sees when he unlocks his phone is from Deirdra, not Erna, and it says, *What did you do?*

It’s not Erna begging him to come back, but still intriguing enough for him to leave the barbell on the floor and text back, *Nothing. Why?*

*I got a message from Ernie about crushes being stupid and feelings in general being fucking bullshit. I didn't ask, but figured that must be about you. So what did you do?*

The thing is, he thinks, he still didn't do anything. She was the one who walked out for no reason he could understand. He wasn’t even sure if they were arguing. It felt like they were, but it wasn’t obvious what it was about. He puts his phone back down, picks his weight back up, and decides that unless Erna wants to tell him herself what the fuck that tantrum was about, then he’s going to be busy for the rest of the day. He thinks about all the errands he can get done, doubtful that she’ll ever get
over enough of her stubborn pride to call or text him.

He should be used to her moodiness. She's always been harshly unpredictable, seeming relaxed and agreeable in one moment and then suddenly closing herself off and freezing him out for no reason he can figure. He usually doesn't think much of it, gives her a few minutes to herself, and then she's back to being agreeable all over again.

This time was different. This time she actually drove him fucking crazy. This time when she suddenly froze him out, seemingly to her own great self satisfaction - fucking christ, the look on her face when she flounced out the door - this time it was to deny him something he'd been wanting desperately and had been willing to work for. He tortured himself for a week trying to figure out how he could prove that he is committed enough to figuring out this BDSM thing just for her, just to prove that he gives a fuck, and maybe, the part that makes him feel shitty enough to not say it out loud, to get his hands on her in a way that would make her moan.

And he'd been so close.

He racks the barbell, adds another 90 pounds of plates, and strains to lift it to his shoulders and above his head.

Later, after making every part of his body sore at the gym, and going grocery shopping, and checking in at The Basement, and getting a protein smoothie because it's been a bad fucking day, he checks his phone for the twelfth time on his way up the apartment stairwell - not an easy feat while also carrying bags of produce with sore shoulders.

He doesn't think it's weird, as he unlocks his door, that Erna didn't text him. Not at all. In fact that's expected. She's stubborn as fuck like that, and he could have predicted that she would prefer to act like nothing ever happened. After unpacking groceries, he hits his fist against the adjoining wall three times. It would seem rude to a normal person, but she's said in the past that it freaks her out less than knocking on the door. Anyone can knock on the door. If she hears knocking against that wall she knows it can only be him. “Unless someone broke in and serial killed you,” she'd quickly added to take some of the sincerity out of it.

After he hears her knuckles hit the other side of the wall, he yells, “You want dinner, brat?” because they stopped pretending they couldn't hear each other through the paper-thin walls a while ago.

“Don't call me that! and no, I'm busy.”
Levi mutters to himself in confusion and disbelief, “the fuck?” because what does she have to be busy with ever?

This warrants actually going over there. She answers the door with a scowl and half her hair curled into perfect, thick doll curls and the other half in messy waves. She crosses her arms and goes, “What?”

Levi gives her an incredulous look. “You're busy?”

“I'm getting ready to go to Krista's party.”

“By yourself?”

She gives him a sour look. “I was bored and didn't know if you were ever coming back. So yeah.” She tilts her chin up so that she can look down her nose at him. “I can do shit by myself, you know. Did you think I just power down and put my hard drive to sleep when you're gone?”

“You gave me that impression, yeah,” he says in a low monotone, inconspicuously inching his boot into the doorway in anticipation of her trying to slam the door in his face.

Her lips purse slightly, making an annoyed, little pout. Levi watches her jaw clench and wonders what she's thinking about saying or not saying as her eyes stray off to the side to avoid looking at him. His fingers curl and uncurl in and out of fists as he waits for any kind of explanation or apology for that morning.

Erna steps out of the doorway without slamming anything in his face and retreats back into the open bathroom to finish curling her hair. He steps inside and leans against the wall opposite the bathroom door, stuffing his hands in his pockets and watching her sulk at the mirror. Deft little tips of her fingers grab a chunk of hair and wrap it around a curling wand quickly and carefully without getting burnt. Her eyes stay trained on the mirror while she asks bitterly, “Were you trying to punish me by leaving?”

“Were you?” he asks in turn about the way she'd stormed out of his apartment, claiming to have caught a buzz from a few beers when they both know she can drink a bottle of whiskey on her own without so much as a stutter.
She doesn't answer, which is all the answer he needs. She lets go of the section of hair and smooths it through her thumb and pointer finger into a perfect curl, then quickly combs out a new section, picks up the curling wand again, and ignores him. Seeing and knowing that she's pissed at him just makes him angry at her in return, because he's objectively sure that he didn't do anything wrong. He asks, “Were you only going to go this party because you're pissed at me?”

She puts on that superior accent that makes him think of the way actresses sound in old black and white movies and says, “I don't know what you're talking about,” as if he's the one being unreasonable. “I was only going to go without you because you weren't here, but if you want to go…”

“I wasn't going to -”

“Fine then -”

“But if you're going then I will.”

“You should know that I'm only going because I think it's going to be the worst.”

“Wait…” Levi raises a hand to his temple, growing increasingly confused. “Then why would you go?”

“It's like…” Erna pauses, finishes off another curl, and grabs the last section of uncurled hair resting against her cheek. “You ever heard of hatefucking?”

“No.” His eyebrows knit and his face takes on a troubled expression, because it sounds pretty self explanatory and disturbing.

Erna huffs. “You really don't watch porn then.”

“Or our search keywords are very different.”

She turns her head a little without letting her hair loose from the barrel of the curling wand to smirk slyly at him. “I think it's going to be so awful that I could have fun hating it. Have to go to find out.”
“What's the theme?” He knows there's a theme. Ymir and Krista never throw a party without a theme.

“Fifty Shades of Grey.”

“That book?” Levi is in just enough touch with pop culture to know that it's a book and it's about BDSM or something.

Erna gives him a simple, “yep,” and unplugs her curling wand, smooths her palms over her roots where her hair is perfectly parted down the middle, and runs a comb through her straight bangs. “I take it you haven't read it.”

He would say that he doesn't have time for reading, but that isn't necessarily true. He tells her honestly, “Books have never been my thing,” with a nonchalant shrug, hoping she won't take offense, because they're obviously important to her. Even just a glance at his surroundings makes that obvious. Piles of books take up a significant amount of the scant square footage of her apartment. There are books everywhere but where they should be - neatly organized on a shelf. To be fair, she doesn't have any shelves, so apparently counters and the floor and literally any surfaces are just as well. The clutter makes him twitchy and it's why he never invites himself over.

He must have broadcasted more hesitancy about his admission of not being a big reader than he thought, because she says, “I get it,” as if to say there's no need to apologize. “You're visual.”

He thinks she's too right as he focuses on the way her hands smooth some kind of lotion or something up over the back of her bare neck and his heart jumps into his throat while she goes on talking, completely naive of his gaze. “I like words.”

The way she says it makes Levi swallow, like words are equivalent to good sex. Which, according to the scale they worked out this morning, would probably be equivalent to choking, or something, in her mind. And suddenly he's having intrusive thoughts about spanking and handjobs while she turns away from the mirror.

“Well,” she says, “with the exception of shit like Fifty Shades of Grey.”

On the short walk to the next apartment over, he asks, “Isn't it about BDSM?”
“No,” she says bitterly. “It isn't.”

“I thought-”

“The dumb cunt who wrote it doesn't know shit about BDSM. It's like…” she pauses at the door and faces him. “Okay, imagine a subject you really love.”

She gives him a moment to think, but that subject is in front of him, so he doesn't need to think of a fitting object for her analogy. She says, “Now imagine a really terrible artist, like not just terrible, but someone who is so bad at art that it should be an actual crime for them to pick up a pen, drawing that subject as badly and distorted as possible and completely missing the point and turning it into some toxic piece of shit…”

“Okay.”

“Now imagine everyone looking at this objectively terrible drawing of your favorite thing and eating it the fuck up so hard that it gets made into a fucking movie that basic bitches run to see at least three times.”

“Okay.”

“And all of a sudden all your favorite art galleries or whatever are full of dumb fucks who think this piece of shit is the end all be all of art and a completely accurate portrayal of the subject and no matter how knowledgeable artists try to explain why it's harmfully inaccurate, they won't be persuaded because they can't muster the brain cells to even be able see the fucking point.”

A smile creeps over Levi's face as she keeps going. “And they think they want kink, but really all they liked about the thing is the creepy stalking and emotional abuse and the rich and famous lifestyle porn that didn't include even one discussion about consent and and…”

“So you feel strongly about this.”

Erma blushes a little, realizing how worked up she got. “... Yes.”
She turns her hand around and taps the door with her knuckles a few times. While they wait, she looks at him again and goes, “What are you smiling about?”

“Fucking cute when you're passionate about something.”

Her face seems to turn brighter red as she looks back to the door and tells him to shut up. He reaches past her and knocks much harder. Usually it's best to just text Ymir to come to the door if it's loud inside, but this time knocking works and she opens it after a moment, stands there blocking the doorway in a black suit and skinny black tie, and she sneers mostly at Levi. “Thought you weren’t coming.”

“So did I.”

Ymir’s eyes flash and she makes the smallest nod toward Erna before shooting him a look like he's whipped. Then she crosses her arms and tells them, “Dress code is formal.”

“Formalwear is one of my triggers,” Erna says, seeming dead serious.

“No exceptions this time,” Ymir singsongs carelessly and closes the door.

Levi’s body relaxes slightly with relief. Not only was he not even mildly interested in the first place, but going with Erna to something she fully expected to hate sounded like a recipe for disaster. He turns to go back down the hallway and says, “So, dinner?”

Erna, her fingers balled into fists, violently spins on her heel, mutters curses to herself and stalks back to her apartment, unlocking and ripping the door open and telling Levi, when he stops and gives her a quizzical look, “Wait one second.”

She disappears and then comes back out with a cardboard box on her hip. Levi, after a glance can see that it's full of different toys and tools like paddles and gags and a lot of things made of leather and metal that he can't even identify. She nods at him in the direction of his apartment and he is all too willing to open the door for her. Once inside, she drops the box carelessly to the white linoleum floor, muttering, “May as well keep this here anyway,” then she goes straight to his closet and starts flipping through hangers.
That is not what he was expecting.

“What are you doing?”

“Trying to go to that party.”

“Still?” He thought she'd be as happy to give it up as he was. He casts a forlorn look at the box on the floor and wonders what the point of bringing it over here was if not to use anything in it.

“Ha!” she says triumphantly, pulling something off a hanger. “Found one!”

Levi looks back to her and the white, long-sleeved dress shirt she's now holding. He lowers his eyelids and deadpans, “I'm not wearing that.”

“No shit,” she says quickly moving from the entryway closet to the kitchenette, tossing the shirt over a chair at the table and starting to unbutton the back of her dress. “I am.”

“Sorry?” Levi asks, not sure he heard right or what the fuck is going on, but he also doesn't press her for an explanation while he watches her untie ribbons and pop buttons through their holes. He stares when she's loosened enough of the restraints of her dress and reaches for the hem, pulling it over her head without any wavering demurral.

For a second, he's elated just to watch her undress again. Even though he just saw them yesterday he's still captivated by every one of her curves and angles. Then, suddenly, he's extremely annoyed with her. “You're wearing a corset?”

“That obvious?” she answers sarcastically as she drops the dress on the chair and picks up his shirt, obviously intending to put it on over the black on black floral patterned corset that had been concealed under her dress until now.

“I told you nothing tight-fitting for a while.”

“What?” she says, heedless of his obvious indignation, “I thought it had been a while.”
Levi pinches the bridge of his nose and closes his eyes. Just as she's about to put her arm through a sleeve of his shirt, he stops her and says, “Take it off.”

Erna pauses and finally turns and gives him her attention. She shoots a defiant, clipped “Why?” at him.

“Because you said you don't want any scars from the piercing I did yesterday and that's how you fucking get scars. The tight dresses are bad enough, but I wasn't going to give you shit about that because at least they breathe. Are you always this shitty about aftercare? Did you even use that saline solution?”

Erna’s lips curl back just on one side in a sarcastic sneer as she sets the shirt back down over the back of the chair and crosses her arms over her chest, turning to fully face him, she says, “I didn't,” like a defiant brat.

Levi's eyes darken. He tells her again, slowly, “Take. it. off.”

Erna’s eyes glimmer with a spark that he sees every time she's being sadistic with people or teasing him - same thing - and he's seen that look directed at him so many times he could draw a perfect reproduction in alarming detail. Automatically, he's already annoyed and turned on, a trained, pavlovian reaction to that fucking mischievous look on her face.

And then she says, “Make me.”

He cocks his head at her. “What did you just say?”

“I said,” she repeats, annunciating her consonants very clearly, “Make me.”

And if she expects him to devolve into some kind of idiot caveman about it, then she must have forgotten who she's fucking with, because he's very much in control of himself, whether he is actually pissed off and horny enough to want to rip her corset down the center or not. As he keeps his eyes fixed on her and refuses to move a muscle, it dawns on him what the purpose of her belligerent attitude she'd been in and out of the whole day was really about.
Erna widens her stance barely, tilts her chin at him, and waits to see if she needs to start getting personal and cruel to goad him into doing what she wants. She starts thinking of what she could say to get him to lose his temper, mentally paging through her catalogue of his insecurities, thinking of the most vicious things she could say to get the scene she's wanted since this morning on her own fucked up, not so safe and sane, terms. This fast-moving train of thought is derailed unexpectedly when he asks with complete directness, “Is that what you want me to do?”

Suddenly she's nervous deep down in her gut. There's a feeling of danger that she swallows down her very vulnerable throat and any further thoughts of fucking with his head or manipulating him disappear under a faint shock of slight fear and more pronounced need.

“Yes.”

Finally, what she wanted all day happens. Unsmiling, with dark lidded eyes, he takes a few calm, unrushed steps over to her, places his hand on her shoulder with a firm, careful grip, looking her in the eye and giving her a second to react and tell him to stop, if she's going to, before spinning her around and pushing her down to the table.

With one hand on her shoulder, holding, but not pinning her down, he unties the laces at her back. “Next time,” he says, “Fucking ask me.” His voice shows how irritated he is, but his fingers stay relaxed and steady as he pulls at the black ribbon crisscrossed down her back.

“Thought I did.” She smiles smugly to herself, rests her cheek against the table, and enjoys the silky sliding feeling over her back as his fingers pull at the laces. Her shoulder gets pushed down slightly, and all of a sudden she feels a harsh slap at the lower curve of one side of her ass, quick and hard. She yelps more from shock. The pain comes a second later as the sting settles into her skin.

“And if you want to be a fucking brat, you can tell me that too,” he snarls, immediately returning to pulling the back of her corset open. Then his voice softens a little as he gets a look at her back, checking for irritation or infection, at the same time telling her, “but I'm sick of your manipulative bullshit.”

Erna’s teeth settle into her lower lip. It's hard not to wriggle her hips, but she does her best to hide her excitement at being scolded. She hears him make a small grunt behind her, seemingly dissatisfied with what he sees when his sharp eyes rake over her back. “So,” he says, “It’s better if you think you're being punished for something?”

“Yeah,” she squeaks, automatically shifting from her usually haughty tone to one that's more soft and submissive, “I like when you're annoyed with me.”
His dark promise that he is “beyond fucking annoyed,” makes a shudder run down her spine. It settles as a nery prickle in her lower back and from there goosebumps follow the trail of his fingers over her hips. “Annoying or not, I'm never going to do anything like this unless you ask first.”

His fingers gently hook her panties and they slide over the curves of her ass, all the way down her legs. He bends down and touches her ankle to signal her to move it and then the other one so that he can take the simple black underwear off completely and set it on the table next to her. She can hear him inhale before telling her slowly, “Spread your legs.”

She does, a little, and his foot moves to her instep to push it out further until he's satisfied. His hand runs up and down her inner thigh, unhurried and patient, while he tells her, “You have to ask for what you want or I'm not going to fucking give it to you.”

Erna whines, feeling this is truly unfair of him. It's hard to make coherent requests or even words. Her focus is too occupied with feeling the rough callouses on his fingers where he normally grips his pens against her skin. “Unh,” she whimpers, “I want you to punish me…” then she adds, “please,” so that he can't accuse her of not having asked nicely.

“Yeah?” he asks, sounding intrigued by this new side of her, and still slowly smoothing his hand up her thigh, pausing a little longer near the apex of her legs where she's growing hotter every second, “Do you want to know what you're being punished for?”

“Please,” she begs.

“Where do I start?” he hums to himself before suddenly robbing her of his touch and smacking her inner thigh before she can whine about it, making her gasp before moving on calmly, switching to caressing her other thigh. “First, if I give you aftercare instructions, it's not for my fucking entertainment.”

He slaps the inside of her thigh and she makes a short little yelping sound. It stings, then it burns, and she thinks that his hands are impressively sharp, because she's never hurt this much this quickly. Her legs spread further when they feel his touch again, this time his hand settles against her skin just below the glowing red mark he made. She feels his fingers squeeze slightly and indent the flesh under them.

“Second,” he says, “you need to grow the fuck up.” He smacks one thigh, and then the other before she's even through squealing from the first. This time his hand doesn't return to hold or caress and
she's free to squirm while her body processes the pain burning the sensitive skin of her inner thighs.

“Did you think it was fucking cute to leave me waiting this morning?”

She sighs out the breath she was holding before trying to answer. “I thought…” but she doesn't remember what she thought.

“And then you pull this shit,” he hisses. “I'm fucking insulted that you would even think you could make me lose my temper and hurt you.”

She moans after he slaps the backs of both of her thighs, right at the crease where they meet her backside. The fingers of both of his hands trail over the twin red marks he just made and he asks, “Do you feel good about being an ungrateful little bitch?”

She moans, needy and long at the word that she uses all the time but he makes sound so taboo. She doesn't mean to cry out when he spansks the side of her ass, but the noises come out anyway. High, little moans and cries as he spansks her again and again, breathless gasps for air when he drags his rough palm over her raw, stinging skin. The pain is sharp and sweet and has her reeling.

He squeezes like he's trying to warm his hands against her and she rocks her hips thoughtlessly into every touch, seeking something to relieve her of the building pressure and the desperate need to release it. Her thighs press together and she writhes and twitches every time he hits her again, every slap making her flinch and drive her hips against the hard edge of the table. He lays into her, not letting up until she screams and arches her back as her fingers curl and try to gouge into the tabletop.

When her scream dies in the suffocatingly close air, the blows finally stop and she can hear her own labored breathing again for a quiet moment. The frenzy of sublime pain ebbs to welcome a wave of relaxation that loosens her defensively rigid muscles before Levi’s determined hands pry her thighs open again and strike her hard and high up on her inner thigh where her flesh is already tender. A shudder makes her breath shake out of her when his hand remains on her skin and trails up dangerously close to her cunt. He rubs his fingers into wetness that's accumulated and weeped down her tightly closed thighs while he'd been raining down blows on her like a lightning storm, and he finally speaks again.

"Do you want to keep going?”

“Yeah,” she answers too quickly and too desperately, “Please?”
“Is that how you beg?” he asks, rubbing small circles into the dampness on her thigh with two fingers.

“Levi,” she whines with profound need.

He digs his fingers into the crease of her thigh, calmly mocking her, “Yeah?”

“Please!” Her hands shake. Her whole body shakes before she tilts her hips up, unconsciously offering herself to him. She makes a pitiful, high-pitched whine and pushes back against his maddeningly close fingers, but he's clear headed enough to react quickly and move his hand out of the reach of her hips so that she can't force what she wants. She gets an unstable, sinking feeling and sobs into the table.

In seeming slow motion, his touch disappears from her thigh and she complains with a bitter wail before finally he hits her again.

Erna whispers, “Fuck, fuck, fuck,” again and again into the solid white table. She pants and places her forehead against her wrist, her hips and ass moving with unconscious muscle clenches.

She feels for a moment like the pressure inside her might explode. Tremor-ridden moans leave her mouth in waves and her consciousness dissolves to nothing as he holds her down with his hand between her shoulders until her body goes limp all but through her hips that violently twitch and and rock and buck when he hits her ass again and again. The next time he asks if she wants to keep going, she doesn't hear him over the noise in her head, or over the scratch of her nails on the table or the rasp of her sore screams. He takes that as permission to stop and he lets go of her and the whole act, finally allowing himself some deep breaths and whispering to himself, “fuck…”

His hands settle comfortingly between her shoulder blades and his thumbs rub circles into the edges of her backbone while she comes back to herself and he asks, “You okay?”

“Yeah,” she murmurs, half turning her head. With a weak wave of her hand she tells him, “Just can't move. I'm good here.” She rests her cheek against the cool table like she's content to stay bent over it until morning.

He pulls at her shoulder. “Come on. Get up.” She whines at him until he hooks an arm around her waist, lifts her upright, and sweeps her legs up to carry her over to the bed and drop her like the dead weight she is. She doesn't resist and bounces, boneless against the mattress, settling on her side, blissed out and smirking up at him playfully. He doesn't smile back at her and after a beat, she asks, “Are you okay?”

Levi blinks, seeming perplexed at the question. “I don't know.”
Erna pushes herself up halfway, supporting herself on a palm splayed on the bed. She tilts her head and gives the troubled crease between his brows a good look before asking, “What do you want to do?” which is her abstracted version of what a normal person would say, *what can I do?*

“Can I hold you for a while?”

Normally she would be vehemently opposed, but she’s worried by the drastic change in his expression and the way his shoulders are slumped forward like he’s falling in on himself, so she nods and holds still, reminding him, “As long as we’re clear that this is for you, not me,” as he crawls onto the bed behind her and wraps her naked body up in his arms, loose hold quickly transitioning to desperately tight like she’s an anchor to this world.

“Don’t feel bad,” she says, lightly admonishing him as he rests his chin on her shoulder.

“I don’t know why I do.”

“You ever heard of dom drop?”

“No…” he says, “I read about sub drop.”

“Same thing, only for you,” she whispers. “Makes you feel depressed and weird.”

“How long?”

She shrugs as best she can with his chin digging into her shoulder. “I guess for however long you keep telling yourself you’re a monster. Which you’re not. Don’t be dumb. I literally asked you to do that shit to me…” she adds with a small, playful wiggle of her naked hips against him, “and it was really good.”

He rubs his cheek against her neck, wrapping his hands all the way around opposite sides of her small waist and he pulls her closer like he’s trying to get inside her. “Don’t crush me,” she teases.
“Sorry,” he rasps. “Never cuddled with anyone.”

“Me neither, so I'm not an authority on it, but if you crack one of my ribs, I think it's safe to say you're doing it wrong.” He loosens his arms slightly and she rolls over to face him, but avoids eye contact by settling her face against his collarbone and hands against his chest.

She feels his muscles that have caused her confused feelings of attraction for months wrapping her in a tight hold and it enhances the natural blissed out feeling she's already riding. She feels high and content and overwhelmingly affectionate, and would have no inhibition about pushing his shirt out of the way to splay her fingers over his abs and kiss his chest if the mood were different. Unfortunately, grooping him seems highly inappropriate when he's suffering from the sudden onset of a shock sinking him into an emotional low. If it's like sub drop, she knows, it seems to come out of nowhere and blindside you with depression so intense you just want to curl into a ball.

Her voice vibrates quietly against his chest. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“I just feel… guilty.” He starts absently massaging circles into her back, and asks, “Are you sure you're okay?”

“I'm sure I'm okay, but if you need to be sure I'll do whatever you need to prove it.”

“I do.”

“You want to look me over? You're not gonna find any bruises.”

He shakes his head and is quiet for a beat, then asks, “You're okay with me saying that shit to you?”

“Levi,” she says with her voice cracking with compassion, “I asked you to. And yeah. I get off on it.” She separates herself from him by a few inches and tilts her chin to look him in the eye for a moment. “Look at me.”

He looks down at her, blue-grey eyes all stormy with conflict and doubt, and she tells him, “Don't feel bad. It's not like you would have done any of that if I hadn't asked you to. And I know you don't mean anything you said.” She holds his eyes for a beat to make sure he gets it before burying her face against his chest again because the intimacy of being held and maintaining eye contact makes her squeamish. She adds, “This isn't so bad either. I still don't need aftercare, but I'm okay with you
She can hear him exhale a breath of a laugh before telling her, “It’d make me feel better if you wanted aftercare. That shit is hard for me. I just want to be nice to you.”

“What you just did was nice,” she mutters dreamily, “cruel to be kind…”

“You're sure you're okay?”

Her eyes roll behind her closed eyelids. “I'm very okay,” she says sincerely, “and I'll say it as many times as you need to ask.”

He holds her on just the right side of too hard. It's comforting instead of claustrophobic. She greedily soaks up the warm, solid, safe feeling of being held tight, though she isn't ready yet to admit that she likes it out loud.

“I'm sorry I pushed you,” she whispers. “Should have let you talk it out more beforehand.”

“Your kink for getting me to lose my temper and hit you wasn't on the list,” he deadpans stoically.

“I know. It's fucked up… and selfish… and I'm sorry…”

Levi makes a noise in the back of his throat like a hum or a grunt, a sound that means he agrees about what she did being fucked up and selfish, but he doesn't want to say it. He's quiet so that she almost feels she can hear him thinking until his hands move up her back and start massaging tight circles into her shoulders and working out muscle knots of tension that have been there so long she forgot they were even a problem until now. Somewhere in her she's angry that he's so nice to her when she doesn't deserve it, but she's too high to focus on anything but his fingers digging into her shoulders and his chin resting on her hair.

She mumbles into his shirt, “I was overeager and wanted you to just fucking hurt me without needing to talk about it so much.”

“Aren't you the one who said it was important in the first place?”
“It’s important for me when I don’t trust someone… but I trust you… so I didn’t think it was necessary.” She sighs and wriggles to move her in the tight space he’s trapped her in. He gives her room, which she uses to move her hands up and around his neck and pull herself closer - for him, she tells herself - not like she needs it. She lets her fingers rub against the grain of the stubble of his undercut and says, “I was only thinking about myself. I forgot that you have feelings and stuff.”

“I forgot that you don’t.”

Erna’s lips curl into a smirk against his neck. “Do you feel okay yet? You’re not gonna cry, right?” Levi snorts at her and pushes his thumbs into her shoulders. She arches into him and away from the pressure digging into the center of one of her muscle knots, scrabbling at the back of his neck with her fingers and hissing, “Not that you’re not allowed to because of your gender.” She yelps as he presses harder, “I’m just uncomfortable with any open displays of emotion.”

“Think I’m good now,” he assures her. His hands trail down and settle on the small of her back, having accomplished their apparent goal of getting her to cling to him as closely as possible.

“Good,” she says. “Because you holding me while I’m naked and being depressed about it is starting to really negatively impact my self esteem.” Her hands flatten against his chest again and she grunts as she tries to push herself away.

Under her hands she feels a laugh rumble in his chest before he says, “Was trying to be a fucking gentleman about it.” He lets her wriggle away to the edge of the mattress and says, “I was remembering pictures of infected tattoos to keep my dick from digging into your leg.”

“That makes me feel better.” Erna rolls her eyes and grabs Levi’s pillow, pushing it into his face as her feet touch the floor and she stands up. He sits up, shoving the pillow back into place and watching her pad back over to the table on the balls of her bare feet. His eyes travel up from her thighs, linger on her perky ass, and then trail up her tapered waist to her shoulders, and he remembers to ask, “You did use that saline solution, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, of course,” she sighs vaguely off-handed while she grabs her panties off the table and pulls them on.

He should have known to call her bluff. That isn't something someone who was so concerned about their skin would forget. “What about the corset?” He asks, “Was that just to piss me off?”
“That,” she says, as she pulls his white dress shirt on and starts buttoning it from the bottom, “I genuinely forgot about. I wear one pretty much every day.” She looks a little longingly at the corset he's referring to, still unraveled and useless on the table before finishing buttoning herself up in his shirt. She twists to try to look at her back, then looks down while smoothing it over her waist, and asks, “How much of my ass can you see in this?”

“Not enough.”

“Don't be an idiot.”

He tilts his head in order to be able to give her a better answer. The shirt comes down just low enough that he can't quite see her underwear unless he's really looking, and he is. “Can't really see anything. Why?”

“Because I don't own any cocktail dresses, but I still want to go to that party.” Her fingertips make self conscious little tugs at the hem of the shirt, trying to make it longer.

“I thought you were over that.” Levi flops back down on the bed and stares up at the ceiling.

“No, I got distracted because you're fucking hot when you're annoyed with me.” Levi interrupts her with a groan, not thrilled with the idea that she needs to piss him off in order to find him attractive. “And now I still want to go,” she bounces back over to the bed, climbing up onto the edge on her knees and grabbing the pillow from him before he can hide his face behind it again.

She gives him her best attempt at a cute pout. “Come on. Shouldn't you be encouraging me to do healthy, social things where I leave my apartment or whatever?”

Levi snatches his pillow from her and shoves it back under his head. “You're out of your apartment now.”

“I wouldn't call this healthy or social.”

Levi groans. “Can't I just make you make those noises again?”
“You literally can't. I have a limit."

Levi flashes her a cheeky smirk. “I'm up for a challenge.”

He pushes himself up onto his palms and sits up. Erna scowls and smacks him upside the back of his head and hisses, “Not interested in your vanilla shit, fuck boy. If you're up for a challenge then we can skip to a tutorial on caning.”

“Ow,” he rubs the back of his head. “Fuck. Fine.”

Satisfied, Erna gets off the bed again and walks toward the front of the apartment. Levi stands up and stretches. “What am I supposed to wear? You've already got my most formal shirt on.”

Behind him, he hears her rummaging through that box she brought over, and when he turns around, she's twirling a pair of shiny metal handcuffs on her finger with a smirk. “You wear these.”

Five minutes later he's outside Ymir’s apartment again. This time trying not to think about why Erna looks immeasurably sexier when she's wearing his stolen clothes or about the pair of handcuffs dangling from his left wrist. He goes to knock, but Erna stops him and tells him to text Krista to answer the door instead. Krista's reaction to Erna’s interpretation of the dress code is much more delighted than Ymir's would have been. She grabs Erna’s hand and squeals, “You look just like that one part in the book!” When she glances at Levi and frowns, Erna grabs the handcuffs on his wrist and says with a perfectly straight face, “He's my inner goddess.”

That seems to be good enough for Krista. Levi has no idea what's going on. He's pretty sure he doesn't want to be anyone's inner goddess.

Later, they're sitting together on the edge of a king-size four poster bed in the middle of the living room. It's the only place Erna could find to actually get comfortable, because, in a reach of a reference to spanking, Krista decided that nobody should be able to sit. Therefore, there are no chairs. The bed doesn't even seem to be for anyone's comfort, but more for decoration and as sort of a table for themed cake pops and candy and wine glasses on trays. Nonetheless, Erna is sitting comfortably, popping custom, grey colored m&m's into her mouth and giving him a crash course of her own very colorful footnotes on Fifty Shades of Grey. He wonders if she realizes the irony of being (probably) the only guest who literally just got a spanking and is fine with sitting down. Then he wonders if that means he didn't hit her hard enough. Maybe if he'd left some visible marks on her thighs she wouldn't have wanted to go out in public.
The party doesn’t bother him as much as he thought it would. The only truly objectionable part of it is the tea Krista enlisted Eren to serve as a butler, in uniform, complete with a black bow tie and everything. Levi had taken a cup expecting the high quality tea he gets at One Shot every morning and instead he choked down the weakest, shittiest sip of tea he’s ever been served. Eren winced and looked down when Levi told him he should be ashamed of himself. He whined, “I know. Krista made me do it. The main character only drinks really weak English breakfast or something…”

When he caught up with Erna, finding her sitting on the bed with a cocktail and scooping grey m&m’s out of an apothecary jar, he told her, “I hate this book. Why would the main character drink weak tea?”

Erna smirked at him. “Not just weak tea. Twinings.” She pops an m&m in her mouth with a wicked grin and adds, “And I could make a stretch and call it symbolism for the weakness of her entire character who is in her twenties and has never had an email address or an orgasm, but honestly I think it’s just blatant self insertion of the author who is exactly the kind of lame bitch who would only drink her tea weak like a fucking child because she thinks it’s cute and whimsical. I bet she holds her cup in two hands like a fucking infant.”

The more she tells him, the less he likes these characters everyone is apparently trying to emulate… Except for the part where he gets to see Erna’s bare legs under his white dress shirt because at some point in the book the main character stole her stalker’s shirt to wear while she made breakfast or whatever. That, he can get behind.

The theme and decor isn’t as dungeon-y as he expected for a book about BDSM and when he says so, Erna corrects him again that it’s not about BDSM. It’s about a basic vanilla woman with the mind of a child falling in love with an abusive shithead for literally no reason and trying to cure him of his sadism with the power of her love. Then she makes a gagging gesture.

Levi leans back on his palms on the bed and looks around. The living room is all red and grey, and the only thing that would make him think of BDSM is an assortment of toys hanging on one wall, apparently meant as prizes for winners of different party games. Otherwise the rest of the decor is references to the book that he doesn’t get, like different quotes scrawled on the tags of wine glasses or tie-shaped cookies dipped in grey icing.

They got to the party late, which means more interesting people watching as the guests get more and more drunk and emboldened, and he fully expects to see some kind of clumsy attempt at a D/s flirtation before Erna will finally let him leave, but he isn’t all that interested. He’s only looking around so that he can be less obvious about checking out her legs every five seconds.
Erna scans the room with more genuine interest. She looks at people like they're zoo exhibits. He catches her say quietly to herself, “I wonder if people actually associate formal clothes with BDSM or if it's just a common vanilla kink.”

Levi reaches for a glass of wine from a tray behind Erna and answers, “People just think getting dressed up is hot. Pretty sure vinyl and leather are still associated with BDSM.”

“Do you?” she asks, like he's now part of her study in vanilla sexuality, which he thinks he would actually be a terrible example of.

“I've never cared about clothes. Why? Did you want to see me in a suit?” He gets progressively more defensive and thinks about how he literally hasn't worn a suit except for a handful of court appearances he's had to make in his life.

“No,” she says in quick response, “Gross.” Then she stirs her cocktail with a little grey and white straw and says, “I've been around suits and forced into fancy dresses most of my life. Kind of kills any kink for them.”

“So formalwear really is a trigger,” he smirks.

She hums and takes a sip of reddish amber liquid over ice from the rocks glass she's been holding and then makes an offended, sour face. She puts the glass down on a tray to her left and looks away from it like it's personally offended her.

“I guess that's not whiskey.”

Her voice is high and distressed. “I tried to ask for whiskey but the bartender,” (she says this with air quotes, because what kind of bartender, even at a theme party, would refuse someone a whiskey neat?) “said there are only two cocktails. I had to choose between ‘The Lip Bite’ and ‘Vanilla Sex’.”

Levi sips his red wine and hides his smile, because he can guess which one she chose on principle. He tells her, “Wine isn't bad.”

She reaches for his glass, turns the black tag tied to the stem so that she can see what's written on it. She narrows her eyes at the quote, “Laters Baby” and says simply, “Pass…” before popping another handful of candy into her mouth.
Levi shrugs. She's the pickiest alcoholic he's ever seen, but that's fine with him. He can picture how quickly things would get tense if she did decide to drink and started telling anybody but him what she really thought of this whole party. He's already been a little surprised at how well she's kept to herself so far. The relaxed, candy-devouring Erna next to him is a big departure from what he expected. He can only assume she's still high on endorphins, and he lets himself feel a little pride for his part in that.

He's wondering how much nicer in general she would be if he gave her a spanking every day when she interrupts his thoughts with a nudge. Once his attention is on her, she points at a silver tea tray behind him and off to the side of the giant bed, and asks, “Can you grab me one of those cake pops?”

He would love to watch her close her lips around a cake pop, but he gives her a shrewd look and tells her, “Get it yourself.” Because he's smart, and because she has to twist around to lay across the bed on her stomach and stretch to reach the tray she wants, which means if he looks, he can finally see her ass in those little black panties again.

The problem with his plan, though brilliant, is that so can anyone else - mainly Eren, who he catches out of the corner of his eye. Levi shoots him a deadly look and startles him out of staring with a deep, “Oi, Eren.”

The tan, chocolate-haired barista nearly jumps out of his skin, which only makes him look guiltier as Levi orders him to look at the floor. Erna finally pops back up with not one, but three red velvet cake pops, completely oblivious as to why Eren is blushing and saying, “Sorry, Sir,” to Levi.

She raises an eyebrow and demands to know, “Did Bambi just call you Sir?” before biting into one of the treats.

Eren keeps his eyes on the floor and says, “Sorry, Krista told me to call everyone Sir or M--”

“If you call me Mistress without my consent, I will end you,” Erna warns him.

Eren squeaks, “Sorry!” before Mikasa drags him away with a finger hooked through his bowtie.

“You ready to go yet?” Levi asks, now that he's irritated and mindful of the fact that as much as he loves eye-fucking Erna’s thighs, he hates catching anyone else doing the same.
She shrugs and seems lost in her own thoughts as she bites another cake pop in half. He follows her eyes past his right shoulder and over to the wall of BDSM toys. She points at it with the last uneaten cake pop in her hand and says, “I want that.”

“Want what?” he asks as he squints in the darkened room.

“That riding crop.”

“Don't you already have one?” He's pretty sure he saw one when he was checking out the box of toys she left at his place.

“Yeah, but that one's braided leather. It would hurt differently than the one I have,” she answers, her voice dropping lower. She rests her hand on his upper arm and says, “Win it for me?”

Levi pinches the bridge of his nose. “Couldn't you just buy one?”

Erna switches like a flash from sweet and pleading to cold and vexed. “Couldn't you just not be a dick?”

He drains his wine glass and replaces it with another. This one says, “I don't make love. I fuck. Hard.” at which he rolls his eyes. He tells Erna, “Win it yourself.”

The corners of her mouth twitch as her jaw clenches, which makes her “Please?” come out terse.

“After all the shit you gave me today?”

“I'll be good next time, I promise,” she pleads.

“What am I? Your date at some kind of kinky carnival? I'm supposed to win you a giant stuffed bear in leather chaps?”
She smiles at the image, then teases, “If you can't, it's okay.”

He scoffs. “I don't see what I would get out of it.”

“You get me,” she says, clarifying, “You get ‘agreeable, willing to cooperate’ me, instead of ‘pissed off and ready to fuck with your head’ me.”

He doesn't need to weigh his options long. “Fine.”

She follows him over to the toy wall and when he finds out that the task he needs to do to win the riding crop is called “Steal Ana’s Cherry”, which is a cutesy theme name for basically bobbing for apples (but with cherries), he gives Erna a severe look and says, “We’re leaving right after this, right?”

She can barely give him a straight answer as she tries to hold back her laughter. “Oh my god, yes.” She snickers behind her palm. “I'm so sorry.”

The game’s rules are that the person’s hands need to be tied behind their back, but Erna uses the handcuffs already hanging from Levi's wrist instead of the available nylon rope. While Ymir gets the timer ready on her phone, Levi grumbles at both of them, “You are way too happy about this.”

“To be fair, I didn't know it would be this bad,” Erna says.

Ymir sneers and points at the whiteboard she's been keeping scores on. “You need to get at least twelve cherries in twenty seconds to win.”

He gets on his knees in front of the grey flexible silicon tub filled with water and cherries with an annoyed, “Whatever.”

He ends up getting twenty cherries in twenty seconds. What can he say? He has good mouth dexterity. Ymir is so shocked she almost forgets the timer. Levi stands up with the last cherry still between his teeth. While Erna greedily reaches for the brown leather riding crop she wanted, he swallows the cherry, but not the stem. After a second, he holds his tongue out with the cherry stem resting in the tip of it, tied into a perfect knot.
Erna's jaw drops and when she picks it back up after a small whimper, she says under her breath in a dreamy voice, “fucking hot…”

She grabs his arm and pulls him just as he's spitting the knotted stem out. She almost pulls him off balance and he reminds her, “Oi, handcuffs!”

“I know,” she says, “I left the key back at your place.”

“You've gotta be kidding me,” he deadpans as she jerks him toward the door by his elbow.

“Be nice or I won't take them off,” she warns.

When they make it back to his door, Erna grabs the handle, but it doesn't budge, because, of course, it's locked.

“Key's in my back pocket,” Levi says, tilting his head back and gesturing over his shoulder.

Erna looks at him, then at the crop in her hands. Not wanting to set it down on the hallway floor, which is admittedly gross even by standards not as stringent as Levi's, she opens her mouth and holds it between her teeth while she steps behind him.

She tries the left pocket first and Levi has to tell her, “Right side.”

She squeaks, “Sorry!” and retracts her hand quickly.

“Are you?!” he says accusatory as fuck, because he definitely gestured over his right shoulder.

“I mean…” she answers, a little muffled with the riding crop still between her teeth. Her fingers slide into his right pocket and it takes her a few seconds to find and close them around the key. “Not really…”

He groans through clenched teeth. “Could you save the groping for after the handcuffs are off?”
“Okay,” she sighs, finally extracting the key and taking the crop out of her mouth. “But you don’t need to be pissy about it. We could think of this as a learning experience.”

He growls as the lock clicks. “And what the fuck did we learn?”

“Well, I don't know if it's useful information, but I learned that you're really good with your tongue.” She pushes the door open and steps to the side so that he can walk in first, and she follows him, hitting the light switch. “And that you have a nice ass…”

Levi turns on her and glares in a way that makes her insides melt.

“And we learned that you really, really don't like bondage.”

“How the fucking key…”

Chapter End Notes

This wasn't edited at all, so let me know if you see glaring typos or dumb grammar that was obviously not a stylistic choice.

Also, you can just hit me up about whatever on here or on tumblr.
“Get the fucking key…”

Levi didn’t need a demonstration to find out he wouldn’t like being handcuffed. It isn’t even bondage as a kink that he has any issues with—it’s the handcuffs specifically. They bring back memories he’d rather keep buried.

Erna watches him closely, noticing the way his shoulders flex and strain. Veins in his neck become more visible and his eyes darken. He looks genuinely dangerous, which makes her brain send out contradictory signals. Her blood runs cold, but still there’s a pulsing heat between her legs.

She chews lightly at the tip of her pinky finger and, teasing him with her coy, soft tone she says, “I’m not sure I should.”

He growls at her and tugs at the steel locked around his wrists, “Don’t fuck around.

Her heart pounds hard enough for her to hear it. His eyes are razor sharp, pinning her in place, cutting through her as she reaches for the breast pocket of the shirt that she stole that is only long enough to barely hide how wet she’s getting watching him clench his jaw and breathe deeply through his nose to suppress a seething storm of rage.

Slowly, she pulls the little silver key out of the pocket and holds it up. “I was lying…”

“Tch. You little fucking…” he snarls.

Her cheeks heat up. She steps closer, not wanting to miss a single word, but he lets himself trail off, breathing deep again through flaring nostrils.

She tries to lamely excuse herself, “I didn’t think…”

“You thought it was a good idea to handcuff someone who spent a few years locked up?” His voice has gone hard and low.
“Forgot about that,” she admits, moving closer, standing only inches away from him so she can feel the anger radiating off of him. She drinks it in and lets it hit that little primal fear spot at the base of her spine. She knows, in the front of her mind, that she should be more sympathetic, that she should care very much that he is obviously upset…and she does care…not for him, but selfishly wondering how she can provoke him further. How much longer does she need to leave himuffed if she wants him to resemble a real threat? Is there any amount of time she could leave him like this that would make him forget that he cares about her and make him more animal than human?

“Erna.”

Her lips are parted and her eyes black to the edges. She wants him to bruise her and break her and make her bleed.

“Erna,” he repeats her name, startling her back into the real world with his cold, dark, deadly serious voice.

“Huh?” She tilts her chin up to meet his eyes and find the violence building up behind them, powerful but kept in check.

“Don't fuck with me,” he warns, as if it's more for her own good than his.

She smiles. “Just a little?”

“Now.”

“Fine,” she drawls as if very put out. She goes behind him and touches his wrists, now red and angry from flexing and testing the restraints. It’s such a tiny thing, she thinks as she pinches the flat little face of the key, careful not to drop it, that can keep so much at bay. She unlocks one and then the other and all of a sudden there are no cuffs and no key, except for the rattling clinking sound of them hitting the floor and sliding.

She’s swept up in his arms, picked up easily, bending to go along with whatever malevolence she stirred up and just willingly set free, scrabbling her arms to cling around his neck while he crushes her too close to see his eyes and what intent there is in them. He holds her around her waist and hooks a hand under her thigh, pulling it up and around him with a rough, jarring tug. He turns, fast enough that the room spins for her before he places her ass down on the table, giving his hands
freedom to reach for her shoulders and hold them firm, straight-armed, looking her dead in the eyes to say, “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

She smirks. Manipulating instead of requesting is a shortcoming of hers. She’ll work on it. Later. Right now she’s caught sight of a spark of brutality in his eyes, and she’s rushing to fan it into a fire she can play with. She smirks at his face, twisted with ... frustration? rage? hard to decide. She tells him very honestly and unsympathetically, "I just think you're so much hotter when you're mad at me."

One of his hands stays on her shoulder, like he’ll need it to keep her at an arm's length, which might not be a bad idea, but the other hand that strays down to her thigh and digs into the muscle there, gouging into her skin and pulling to spread her legs wider, could keep her in place just fine all on its own. He leans over a little, looks her in the eyes. She smiles while his lip curls slightly and he snarls at her quietly. He steps into her, pushing his hips into hers. The table thuds against the wall. His nose brushes over her cheek and his lips go for her ear. He pushes her hair out of the way and nips at her earlobe while his hand slides up her nape to tangle in her curls and tilt her head to the side for better access.

He bares her throat and uses his teeth to score the surface of her skin with pink lines. She gives him a ragged gasp when he ends at her collarbone with a bite that distracts her from his thumb pressing firm behind her ear. She's too focused on his mouth until suddenly that thumb is digging at a pressure point and making her body freeze involuntarily, debilitated by an overwhelming shot of pain that hits her brain and doesn't let up and feels like an electrical current with nowhere to ground.

He pulls back to hold her wide-eyed gaze as pain shoots through the nerve. She loses her breath in an instant and is silent but for a little hiss before he asks, calm as anything, “Do you think that's hot?”

It's blinding. Overwhelming.

“It’s called a compliance hold.” He watches closely as a light, natural flush glows over her cheeks, and her pouty lips part, speechless. He looks for signs of pain, like wrinkling at the corners of her eyes that are still, as of yet, blown wide and wet and wanting. He presses a little harder and gets a stuttering moan out of her. “I know. Hurts like a bitch,” he tells her evenly. His thumb presses against the small pressure point at her jaw slightly harder. His blood is thrumming in his veins and he can barely see her. Everything is bathed in red.

His voice goes right through her. She pulls herself in toward it with her thighs, tightening and straining around his waist in an urgent spasm that jerks them closer together. His thumb slips, the pain disappears suddenly, and he's only cradling her neck in his fingers.
Instead of going back for the point behind her ear, he flattens his palm against her back, presses, and holds her while her hips rock against the table. His lips press against hers with a feeling of insistence. Her eyes stay wide open. Kissing is alien to her. She doesn’t remember the last time she tried it or know if she ever was any good at it. She freezes, stunned until his wet, wine-soaked tongue opens up her mouth her eyes close. Her hips go languid again. She moves automatically, legs curling inward and squeezing around his waist, doing nothing to dent skin over his muscles that feel too hard to be real.

With her eyes closed she’s even more conscious of the twin metal rings in his lower lip pressing against hers. She wonders if it’s okay to bite them and considers trying it before getting distracted by another piercing she forgot about, metal under his tongue that she explores with eager curiosity. Then she pulls back and nips at one of his snakebites anyway. The amused but threatening look he gives her makes her inside twist and turn. The grip of his hand against her nape tightens, and she leans into it with thirsty interest.

He isn’t discouraging her from clinging to him as closely as possible with her legs. His one hand gropes its way down her side and grabs a handful of her ass, pulls her into his hips so hard he almost lifts her off the table. She asks, “What are you—” and then she's wincing. She makes a noise like, “Hnn-ah!” as his fingers caress over the back of her neck and gently forward as if to pull her into a kiss again, only to dig hard into a spot just at the point of her jaw, pressing inward and up so that she's paralyzed with overwhelming pain again, her mouth fallen open in a silent scream.

He holds her so easily, even as she sags against him with her entire body weight, makes her feel small and powerless. The worst part is that he's able to do it with so little effort that he can maintain a cocky smirk the whole time she's struggling to breathe and biting her tongue to hold it back from giving in and safe wording. Because she sees it as giving in. Not as a healthy way to communicate one's limits. Because she's not healthy.

His fingers reach around the curve of her ass and squeeze hard. This time, when she flinches, he doesn't let go. His fingers follow her, pushing against her pressure point with steady force, digging into her flesh. She can only pant, tongue out, eyes tight shut, face twitching with pain, until he slides his hand from holding her ass to cradling her cunt and he says, "I could do whatever the fuck I want with you right now."

Her eyelids close and open slowly as his words seem to catch in her throat. She swallows them and they settle, warm and heavy in her abdomen. She squeezes her thighs around his hand, clenching and relaxing her muscles unconsciously, wanting him to ravage her, split her apart, and make her look as fucked as she feels. He spreads his fingers across her throat, keeps his thumb pushed against the one side of her jaw and finds the same pressure point on the other side with his index finger. When he presses down on it her vision goes white, then black, then she screams.

And when he stops and looks scared and asks if she's okay, she insists that she's fine, even though
lying to him about it does them both a disservice. She takes the ugliness of it and tucks it deep down, because this was her fault. She saw a hint of chaos and had to wrest it from him. She didn't think it would be so dark or so overwhelming. Now she knows better.
Chapter Summary

“So you've never imagined anything specific like begging for a better grade and getting taken advantage of.”

“Correct.” She's a dirty fucking liar.

“And you're not lying about that, because that would be stupid when I'd be more than willing to do anything if you did want something specific.”

“Correct.”

“Especially since I would punish you if it turned out you were holding out on me.”

“Cor-- wait…” she tilts her head at him and says, “what kind of punishment?”

Chapter Notes

Well… I had two ideas for a gross theme party Krista could have that Erna would very much want to go to and Levi would very much not want to go to. I couldn’t decide between them. So the previous chapter was the first idea, this chapter is the second idea, and I am not ashamed at all about it.

As this story is a work in progress, you might have noticed that some shit got edited… and that this chapter falls in between two that were already finished… because I can do these things.

Trying to get this ship back on course with my outline.

This chapter dedicated to the woman across the fucking world who gets excited about my head canons at 3:30am.

The hints of Erna’s growing sociability are small at first. That morning when they’re smoking, Connie and Sasha walk up with paper bags of groceries in their arms, and as they approach the steps she acknowledges them with a nod of her chin and a muttered, “Nerds…”

Levi doesn’t like it, though he feels directly responsible for it. He’s seen her for less than a few minutes every day in between excruciatingly long shifts at the shop. He’s been a ghost for a week.

When Springles invite them up to wake and bake and Erna doesn’t immediately tell them to go fuck themselves, but instead shrugs as if it’s a ‘maybe’, he waits for the couple to go inside and then says to her rather aggressively, “It’s my day off.”
Erna, in a passive, disinterested breath responds, “Oh.”

Right away he’s incensed that she could write him off so easily, even though that’s exactly what he’s done to her for a week, leaving as early as possible for work, barely stopping to say good morning or good night, and in turn he’s noticed her become less… relentless. She hasn’t begged him to stay, not that he was expecting it… okay, he was a little, but she hasn’t even acted very disappointed or lonely, which he supposes is very healthy of her and he knows he should be happy about this positive trend, but truthfully he hates it.

He’s about to echo back her ‘Oh’ back at her, but with bitter sarcasm. Fortunately, she breaks the silence before he can do anything childish. She mutters, “So, you didn’t want to, like,--” He holds his hands out, like ‘obviously,’ because it’s the first time in a week he has time for anything more than a cigarette and a half-assed attempt at dinner - that she never takes him up on anymore - and, yeah, he fucking missed her... misses her.

And he watches her turn her head to look up at him, craning her neck and squinting, letting her fingers fall away from her mouth, trusting her black cigarette to cling to her glossy lower lip. Now he starts to ask, “Do you want to --” he was going to suggest, ‘go inside,’ but he stops when she rolls her eyes. He’s about to tell her to fuck off just as a reflex he’s found he has to her and rejection, but the way her shoulders slump and her jaw sets tightly as she looks straight past him, he realizes quickly that the look isn’t in his direction. He turns around and sees Erwin walking up from the cafe and whispers under his breath, “Fuck.” His shoulders drop what feels like ten inches.

She says something in German, he assumes based on the sound of it, as she squints and spits in the direction of the sun. Erwin smiles and offers tea and coffee to the angry, vertically challenged people both scowling at him. Levi, in an automatic way, puts his cigarette out, tosses at the nearby dumpster, and takes his cardboard cup of tea like he has done this hundreds of times. He has. He will dream of taking shitty cardboard cups of shitty tea from Erwin over laminate tables probably for the rest of his life, and will still, in dreams, find a way to feel begrudging and resentful about it even though the man has literally never done him any wrong.

He rolls his eyes in weak protest of the tide he’s getting pulled on as he turns on his heel and reaches for the door, then there’s the sound of a small splash, cardboard cup hitting the ground, Erna shouting in a foreign language at his probation officer. He rips the door open and Erwin walks briskly in, waving and saying something genial to the small, angry gothic lolita girl sitting on the steps. She crinkles her nose in disgust at him and whips her head back around to glare at the pavement. Levi smirks at the back of her head once Erwin is safely inside, and he says, “Want to hang out later?” leaning against the door frame, a hand braced against each side.

She sits up a little straighter, folds her hands daintily, tilts her chin, and say in her most clear New England accent answers, “That would be lovely.”
Erwin is up a flight and Levi is after him when the door swings shut behind him and he calls up the stairs, “Your fucking timing.”

“I'm sorry?”

Levi bounds up two steps at a time to catch up. Erwin stops to let him. He punches him in the arm lightly, the only physical contact he's ever allowed with the man beyond shaking hands, and he says, “Your timing always sucks. I was working on something.”

The blond man raises his eyebrows and smirks as Levi walks up ahead of him, jingling his keys out of his back pocket. He says, “I'm sorry?” again, questioningly, and then, “It's so hard to tell with you two. I'll note that if you look like awkward teenagers who are afraid to talk to each other, then that might actually be you making progress.”

He says it with such an even tone and serious expression that Levi gets up a full flight of steps before saying, “Did you just burn me?” And Erwin's laugh in response is deep and rich. Levi turns his key in the lock of the apartment and goes, “I felt that.”

“So how are you?” Erwin asks, raising his eyebrows as Levi crosses straight to his laptop on the table and slams it shut. He’s been doing a lot of research lately. He looks up as Erwin walks further in and the door closes behind him and answers, “Fucking fine. Why do you ask?” He sips his free tea. Erwin tilts his head, says, “It's my job to ask, but that doesn't mean I'm not interested.”

Levi pulls out his phone and stares down at it while he types a text and continues to sip his tea, only stopping quickly to say, “I'm great. Getting cockblocked by you is the perfect way to start my day off.”

“Glad to be of help. I thought you'd be off to work anyway.”

“Schedule changed. This is my day off now.”

“Isn't Friday usually busy?” Erwin asks before he sips his coffee. Levi wonders what the motive behind the question is. There's never an innocent question from Erwin. He answers honestly and carefully, “Yeah, usually.”

“Mike must really value you to give you such a busy day off.”
Levi shrugs the praise away and explains, “I'm too busy with clients anymore to do walk ins or work the fucking desk anyway.”

“Because you're good.”

Levi doesn't answer. He tells himself he has no feelings about it. He refuses to be baited into being proud of himself. “I do okay.”

Erwin sets his jaw, but quickly the tension is changed to a smirk, and he says, “Ah, I see…” Then he asks, again, innocently enough to make Levi suspicious, “You make your own hours more or less now, don't you?”

He shrugs. “Mike would give my shit away if I stopped coming in long enough, but yeah.”

Erwin nods slowly, as if to give Levi time to volunteer more. Levi cocks his head at the man and Erwin says, “I came a few times this week.”

“Must have missed you.”

“I came the same time I always do.” Levi shrugs at him in response. “Any reason you've been leaving so early?”

“I'm not avoiding you if that's what you're getting at.”

“Okay.” Erwin seems to be happy enough with that answer. Levi wonders if he has a lot of people trying to dodge him regularly. He explains, “I've been, uh… I've been avoiding Erna…”

Erna stands in the dingy hallway, huffs, quirks her lips to the side distastefully, squints and makes a sour expression, and then slumps her shoulders, lets out a big, dramatic sigh, and raps her knuckles against the door she’s facing.
When Sasha swings it open she smiles down at her and teases, “Changed yer mind?”

Erna crosses her arms defensively. “No.” She is quiet for a stubborn second. Then she mutters, “Levi left and I was without anything else to do.”

Connie calls from the kitchen as she squeezes past Sasha, “Do you want bacon?”

The atmosphere is already thick with a fog of smoke from the stove and the bong in the middle of their coffee table and even though she can’t think about food until after she’s had her coffee, she says, “Yeah, maybe…” and she makes her way to the comfy, plush, lime green stuffed armchair next to the sofa that faces their tv on an angle. As he whips around the kitchen he asks her feelings on different brunch options. Yes to toast. No to orange juice. And do you have any fucking coffee?

Sasha starts heating water and then gets the fuck out of Connie’s way in the tiny kitchenette. She flops onto the couch and leans over the arm, chin resting on hand, gazing at Erna with bleary eyes. She offers her guest the bong, but Erna waves her hand and says, “I’m not smoking with you. It’s like nine am.”

She could spend hours there. They make it too easy, being that kind of couple that makes you feel like an important guest in their presence, accommodating as fuck, always steering you toward the comfiest chair and never failing to anticipate a need. They’ve proven to be like that with everyone who stops by, and Erna isn’t unconvinced that it isn’t part of the trade. They sell more weed when they make people feel comfortable with them. As it is, she’s learned, Connie does at least four hours a day of deliveries all over the city and is at the point where he needs to keep a separate phone for work. Sasha’s side hustle is baking edibles and shipping them. They make a lot more money than she would have thought. They spend a lot of that money on video games. Erna has learned all of this in a few days. She’s also gotten to know that Sasha’s sense for hospitality could put Martha Stewart to shame, and that Connie is so fucking agreeable and down for anything that he would gladly get on his bike and ride a mile to the nearest random pharmacy that carries your favorite snack food you have a sudden craving for than let you go without it.

“What’s Levi doing?” Sasha asks, innocently enough.

“He’s with that cockblocking nazi,” she groans, frustrated and feeling very sorry for herself.

“Oh, Erwin’s around?” Connie shifts direction quickly, changing course with his spatula away from the stove and heading for the deadbolt on the door across the room without waiting for an answer.
Sasha rolls her eyes. She thinks he’s paranoid. Connie protests that Erwin technically counts as a cop. Sasha shakes her head and turns back to Erna, asking, “Are you gonna hang out with him later?”

Sasha fetches Erna’s coffee, pouring it into a mug that says, “Live Slow, Die Whenever” next to a drawing of a sloth. She hands it to her black, knowing that Erna doesn’t do cream or sugar unless it’s in a latte. Erna answers her question with a little shrug after she takes a sip. Connie assembles plates for all of them, inhales his food at the counter before the girls have even touched their forks, and goes to run out the door with his bike, planting a kiss on Sasha’s nose on the way past the couch, shouting that he’ll be back by five if the trains are on time. Sasha sighs as the door swings closed. The trains haven’t been on time since 1943.

When Erna looks up from her coffee, the brunette is pointing a triangle of toast at her and saying, “What is up?”

“With what?”

“You guys.”

Erna shuts her mouth and tries to play dumb, but Sasha locks those deep brown eyes on her and makes her feel trapped. She still tries to play dumb. “Me and Levi?” she says, “he’s all ‘busy’ with ‘work’.” She makes air quotes with her fingers, because she finds it suspicious that suddenly his schedule has gotten so tight that he needed to be at the shop from before open until after closing.

“Fuck it,” Sasha answers, which is what Erna wanted to hear, which is why she likes this girl. “Fuck men, honestly.” She seems to assume the same as Erna, which is that being unavailable is deliberate.

“What about Connie?” Erna asks, regarding the blanket decision.

“He’s perfect. The rest are trash.” Sasha takes a big bite of the toast her boyfriend made her and Erna thinks she’s not necessarily wrong.

“Yeah. Fair.”
Levi fingers the microdermal piercings at the nape of his neck and says to Erwin who’s now seated at the kitchen table, sipping at a coffee, “I think I need to tell her I can’t do this.”

“What makes you say that?” Erwin asks after a beat, calm, but serious, not minimizing how anxious Levi obviously feels.

“Because…” he struggles to find words that convey how much gravity he feels about the conflict he’s in. “I haven’t… I’ve never had a panic attack, but that’s what it feels like… when I’m trying to…”

“When you’re topping?” Erwin says easily, leaning back and putting his feet up on the chair across from him, “That's not unusual. All that trust and responsibility and the way we’re socially conditioned to think about violence, and on and on… It can be a lot.”

“Look,” Levi says, higher in volume than he meant to. He pauses to control his voice, and sound calm. “We don’t have to talk about it. Don’t you just have to, like, make sure I’m not fucking up, take some piss, and carry on?”

Erwin rubs the bridge of his nose, not looking frustrated, but smiling slightly. He breathes, then says, “Technically, my only job is to make sure you don’t recidivate. How I achieve that goal is up to my discretion.”

Levi tilts his head at the man he’s known for years and still remains as inscrutable as the first day he met him. He deadpans after a second, “So you’ve decided that my sex life is under your jurisdiction?”

Erwin smiles again, seeming to have something humorous to himself. Levi finally deigns to sit across from him, so that he can receive the lecture he so clearly wants to give.

He looks over his coffee cup with his penetrating blue eyes as he takes a sip. Then he asks, “Do you remember when you were waiting for your date?” Levi nods. He means his date of release from prison. They make you wait a goddamn long time between telling you that you can leave and actually telling you what fucking day you can leave. Erwin takes another sip of coffee, and says, “And I suggested you go to some SLAA meetings?”
Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous. Erwin had suggested it after prying for goddamn hours about Levis’ history and after he refused NA. He only went because he knew the fucker would be relentless about it if he didn’t. He nods. Erwin asks him, “And what was the first thing you did?”

“What was the first thing you did?”

“Seduced the group leader and fucked his face in the utility closet. It was alright. I hadn’t come in like a year. Felt like I could finally breathe again.”

Erwin winces at his choice of graphic words and he feels a small victory and smirks to himself behind his tea. Then Erwin asks him, “Why, though?”

Levi shrugs and gives the same answer that he did four years ago. “Prove that I could?” He knew his motivations by then. It didn’t make them easier to curb.

“Because you’re a classic addictive personality,” Erwin says, “Textbook.” He sips his coffee to punctuate his point. “With obsessive compulsive self soothing techniques and all of the self hatred and inflated ego.”

“Okay, fine,” Levi cuts him off. He hates hearing about this. He knows he needs to be careful. “but what does that have to do with this?”

“Levi, you’re so afraid of loss of control that you wake up to an alarm on your days off.”

Levi shrugs like he doesn’t know that’s not normal. He does not like being called out on his compulsions, even by those who know them well. Erwin pushes on anyway, “BDSM has been a very good tool for people with issues surrounding control. It helps them to find a balance.”

Levi remembers the many times he’s wondered about the extent of Erna’s alcoholism and wonders if there’s a correlation. He asks, “Like how? Because that girl makes me feel the exact opposite of in control?”

Erwin looks concerned and puts his coffee down. “How do you mean?”

“Last week she locked me in handcuffs and put me in a rage blackout.”
Erwin takes some time to process that. He grimaces. Seems to imagine how awful it would have been for someone like Levi. Then he sounds weary as he asks his question like he already knows the answer, like he’s already disappointed, “Have you talked to her about it?”

“....... No.”

“Because why would you do that?”

“Fuck you.”

“Maybe,” Erna stares up at the ceiling, having draped herself over the armchair like a rag, “Maybe he just, like, isn’t into me anymore? But he can’t tell me? And he’s just going to, like, live at work to avoid me?”

Sasha coughs. A cloud of smoke settles between them, and she jumps up and runs over to the stove to check on the cookies she started baking ten minutes ago. While she grabs the oven mitt, she says, “Don’t get me wrong, I’ve seen men do stupider things, but…” She pauses while she checks the doneness of her cookies with a toothpick. “That seems…” The cookies fill the room with the smell of chocolate. Sasha sets them on the counter next to a wire rack and as she moves them to cool, she says, “Like, far fetched. Like you’re just coming up with the worst case scenario.”

“Yeah,” Erna mutters quietly, chewing at her thumb. “I do that.” Then, she remembers, “He asked me to hang out later.”

“See?”

“I still don’t think it’s unreasonable to think he might be avoiding me.”

“Why?”

“It’s dumb. It’s just, like, we were supposed to try… a thing, but then I realized that he hates being handcuffed, which I guess makes sense, so obviously I had to do that because he’s just like infinitely
hotter when he’s angry, and I think he got inordinately butt hurt about it and has been passively holding a grudge and avoiding me at work.”

Sasha puts down her spatula. “I… wait… what?”

“That’s about the extent of it anyway.”

“The most important tenet of the BDSM community is that play be ‘safe, sane, and consensual,’” Erwin tells Levi like he hasn’t read those three words about a hundred times already while he’s tried to research a way to be okay with this.

He responds, “Yeah, no, she hates all of those things. Those three specific things might be her least favorite things.”

“That’s problematic.”

“She’d definitely rather piss me off until I want to hit her.”

Erwin winces. “That’s… far from okay.” He looks genuinely pained. He offers, “Perhaps you could talk about it with her and work through it? Could it be a misunderstanding?”

“You really want this to work.”

“I did…” Erwin rubs his temples. “I have doubts now.” He leans back a little and seems to settle into his chair. “Do you want it to work?”

Levi cards his fingers through his hair and sighs deep and long. He’s been thinking about it for days. He simply says, “I like her a lot.” Doesn’t mean he knows what the fuck to do with that like.

“Then talk to her.”
Like it’s so fucking easy, Levi thinks. As if Erwin has ever successfully talked to her.

“Meanwhile,” Erwin says, “I can at least show you some resources on dealing with dom drop and anxiety and depression,” and he turns Levi’s laptop around and opens it. Levi remembers too late with an “Oh - fuck -” as his screen glows with the browser that he left open to a fetlife video of a couple in the middle of a flogging scene.

After the second that Levi takes to facepalm, Erwin pauses the video, opens a new tab, and says in a completely neutral way, “First of all, I think you need to slow down…”

^^^

“First of all,” Sasha tells Erna, “the key to a good relationship is, like, being supportive? and considerate of the other person’s needs?” Erna nods even though it sounds like the worst to her. She hates emotional labor. It exhausts her. Sasha continues, “but, like, if you’re depressed and you have this negative narrative surrounding yourself.. Like circling in your head.. then you are quicker, to, like,” she pauses and tries to figure out how to put it. Erna fills in for her, “...be a bitch?” and Sasha snaps her fingers. That’s it. It’s as simple as just not being depressed anymore.

Sasha says, “Have you tried therapy? One of our clients is a therapist. I could get you a free appointment.”

Erna shudders to think of the quality of care she would get from one of their clients. She can therapy herself, thanks. Sasha asks, “Have you ever been? Do you have a diagnosis or anything? I’m pretty good at matching strains to medical needs, I could try to hook you up.”

Erna takes a second, because it seems rather personal, maybe rude, but if she’s going to be rude all the time she could probably take rudeness back in stride as well, so she simply says, “Depression, anxiety, post traumatic stress, occasional insomnia, disordered eating...”

Sasha simply nods along, steeples her fingers underneath her chin, and seems to think. Erna remembers, “Oh and agoraphobia.”

“Well you’re not so bad that you can’t leave your apartment,” Sasha says. “You should see some of the people we deliver to.” While she talks she stands up and goes over to the closet where their products are neatly organized, and now fastidiously labeled after the time Connie mixed up Erna’s
order with a different strain with completely different effects than what she asked for. She stands in front of the open door and taps her finger against her lips as she hums. “You should try a hybrid. How often do you smoke now?”

“Like,” Erna says as she thinks, “When I’m here and when i’m trying to sleep.”

“Don’t worry, I got you,” Sasha says quietly almost to herself, “This’ll be better than therapy.”

Sasha hands Erna a vape pen, new in its packaging, along with three cartridges of concentrated oil. “This’ll chill you out without any of that lazy, euphoric indica feel that I know you hate.”

Erna takes it carefully with just the tips of her fingers, saying with pronounced disgust, “A vape pen?”

Sasha smiles. “It’s discreet.”

Erna has to quirk her mouth and nod. She’s not wrong.

“It’s a much more mellow high. It’s like… a social high?”

Erna smirks. “I’ve never felt social,” she says, as if it sounds like a fun, new venture.

“Welp,” Sasha smiles. “Let me know how it works. Let me be your personal pharmacist.”

“Uh huh,” Erna says cynically. “How much?”

“Like one fifty. You can venmo me.”

Erna thinks she low key likes Sasha because in a lot of ways she reminds her of her sister.
Levi thinks he feels safe talking with Erwin about this shit because they’ve known each other for so long. He’s been a misplaced father figure for years. Levi can’t even deny it. His advice has always been good and he’s never been judgmental. Well, except for right now, a little bit.

“So you got drunk together, let her provoke you into a scene without communicating first, and then decided to avoid talking for a week? Did I get all that?”

“I mean, we weren’t that drunk?” Levi raises his hands lamely and earns a disapproving look from Erwin. He defends himself a little more strongly with, “What? You should see how much she can put away.”

Erna checks her phone after Sasha sits back down and finally sees the text from Levi that says, “Do you want to come over?”

“Yes,” she sends back without hesitation or self awareness.

She waits and chews at her lip for a minute before her phone vibrates again. It says, “Give me five minutes.”

Levi, who has been waiting for his phone to vibrate for minutes, puts his hands in his pockets while nodding at Erwin and saying, “I know,” repeatedly.

“What’s one of the biggest predictors of whether or not you successfully assimilate?”

Levi tilts his head back, sighs, and echoes what he’s been told at least monthly for a year, “Support network. Strong, deep, interpersonal relationships with people I care about.”

Erwin nods, his lips tight, displeased at being robbed of the chance to deliver a lecture.
“Communication, Levi,” he says as he grabs his briefcase and stands.

“Yeah.”

“And-”

“Ongoing consent,” Levi finishes for him so as to avoid the lecture.

“Correct.” Erwin opens the door and sees himself out and Levi can’t even wait until the door’s fully closed to pull out his phone and text Erna, “Okay, i’m free.”

Erna: I’m at Sasha’s.

He grits his teeth and becomes very conscious of the tightness in his jaw.

Levi: Then take a shower and come over.

Erna: I didn’t even smoke.

Levi: You always smell like weed when you hang out there.

Erna: better than bleach and cigarettes

Levi: What?

Erna: What?

Levi: Get the fuck over here.
He brushes his teeth again, deletes his internet history, listens to her walk into her apartment and run the shower, eats a protein bar while he finishes his tea and tries to catch up with the emails in his inbox requesting tattoo appointments and avoid thinking about his feelings or what he’s going to say to her.

Turns out any thought would have been wasted anyway, because she shows up at his door, hair wet, holding up a postcard sized invitation that looks familiar to him, asking, “Did you know about this?”

He leans forward and tilts his head at the copy of a party invitation Ymir had given him on Tuesday and he remembers. “Yes.”

“Did Ymir tell you to invite me?”

Levi’s eyelids lower and he crosses his arms. “Yes.”

“And you decided not to because?”

He cannot catch a break today. “Tch. How did you find out about it?”

She hesitates, folds the invitation in half and puts it back in her coffin purse. “Sasha told me.”

He steps back and finally gets a chance to look at her as she walks in, dressed in clinging, grey leggings and a long-sleeved black turtleneck, shiny wet hair in a short ponytail. He’s scared to tell her that he hates those fucking dresses that she wears, but he does. He hates them so much so that when Ymir had given him the invitation to Krista’s annual “Back to School” party (even though none of their immediate circle of friends has been to school in at least three years) and he’d sneered at the dress code (plaid skirts, etc.) and said “Why do all of your parties seem like an excuse to get people into fetish wear?” he hadn’t actually thought it would be such a bad idea to try to get Erna to go.

“I didn’t tell you about it because I’m not going. I didn’t think you would want to either.”

She stops on her way in, turns her head, and says, “Why would you think that? Of course I want to go.”
“Why the fuck?” he asks in sincere confusion, but it comes out like mostly frustration because he didn’t even expect to be having this conversation. He’d prepped himself for a completely different conversation.

He stares at her for details. White knuckled fingers clutching the handle of her purse. Tight shoulders angled upward. She takes a noticeable breath and exhales. Her shoulders level out. “I don’t know. Because it’s, like, healthy? Because I still look good in a plaid skirt? Because free booze and food?”

“There’s a five dollar cover.”

“Okay, nearly free booze and food,” she says. “I’m not forcing you to go. I don’t care what you do. Why are you being such a dick about it?”

“I’m being a dick?” he asks in disbelief. He’s about to counter with how fucking unfair and inconsiderate she’s being when she beats him to the punch and says, “You haven’t fucking been here! You’re gone for sixteen hours at a time.”

That is genuinely his bad, he knows, but he’ll be goddamned if he’s going to take the blame for it now and here in his apartment with his temper. “My schedule fills up, so you start hanging out with Springles and suddenly want to go to shitty parties without me?”

Her eyelids lower with her voice and she says, “Levi. Don’t treat me like I’m dumb. You make your own schedule. You’ve never had a problem limiting yourself to an eccentric ten hours a day. So all of a sudden you’re out of your apartment from morning until night and that’s just…”

“What?”

“Got nothing to do with me?”

“Yeah. No. I mean…” He pinches the bridge of his nose and closes his eyes. “You could have said something. If you wanted me I would have dropped everything. You know that.”

She crosses her arms and looks past him, through him, like he’s not worth looking at. Much more intent on the door behind him, she says in a hollow voice, “You’re upset that I didn’t beg for your attention.”
“That’s not it,” he warns, strongly, because he’s worried that very well might be it. He had thought there would be more begging. “You could have texted me. You could have said something every morning instead of ‘kay, seeya, fuck stick.’”

“It felt like I should leave you alone.”

“Why the fuck would you think that?”

“Because... “ she says, “I didn’t want to... I know that sadism isn’t your thing and I kept provoking you, which was creepy and I’m sorry for being a creep... “ She pauses to look at the floor. “So I thought I should leave you alone and then you were gone all the time and I may, generally, be a misanthropic bitch, but I still get lonely, and Sasha and Connie—”

He corrects her, “Springles.”

She sighs. “Fine, Springles, is really nice.”

He feels like an absolute fuckboy, being mad at her for having friends and not begging him to beat her or whatever the fuck. He doubles down on his shittiness and says, “They’re idiots.”

“Yeah, well, they’re here.”

“I’m here now,” he’s pleading.

“Yeah, me too,” she says, unimpressed. “So do you want to go to this party with me?”

He doesn’t answer her right away. She turns her hip and leans against the kitchen table. He wishes she would just sit down like she’s staying, and he tells her, “Nah, I’m not going.”

Her body wiggles momentarily in a full tantrum as she goes, “Why-y-y not?” She slaps the tabletop to her side for good measure.

“Because,” he has reasons. He went to several catholic schools and he refuses to ever wear one of those fucking uniforms again. Krista throws this party every year and he has never had fun when
he’s gone. He hasn’t gotten to just relax at home in a week. He stands there, watching her tap her fingers against the table, trying to decide which reason to give her. He drops his shoulders and says, “I just wanted to talk to you.”

“That statement’s always great and doesn’t make me at all terrified when said in the grave tone that you just used.”

“Fuck, look,” he reaches for the back of his neck and it feels hot under his palm. “It's not bad. It’s just, like…” He takes a deep sigh, remembers what Erwin said, and tries to be as honest with her as possible. “I want to keep trying to... dominate you, but,” he says, leading with the positive, and following with the negative, “Hurting you makes me feel like out of control and anxious and… I don’t know if I--”

“Yeah, no, I know -” she says quickly, “I mean, I figured, ... since you started hiding at work and avoiding me.” He feels like an asshole. “I don’t want to do any of it,” she says, “if it makes you feel bad… I mean, I’m disappointed, clearly, but I only took you up because you offered and...”

“I want to.”

He wasn’t sure until he said it, but he does. It’s worth it, he thinks. “It’s just,” he says as she looks at him carefully, “your kinks are a lot, and i’m not trying to shame, but…”

She shrugs, as if she would feel ashamed, but for the fact that she doesn’t have that capacity in her, then she seems to catch something in her eye, her chin suddenly tilting up and her eyes looking down in its direction. She says, “I gather that list can be pretty daunting,” and Levi whips around, remembering that while he had the forethought to wipe the internet history evidence of his research, he didn’t bother to put her list of fucking kinks and limits away. She says, with a hint of a sneer, “Did you spend any time looking at that?” as if that would be stupid of him.

He tilts his head at her, he thinks he almost snaps his neck. “I fucking studied it.”

She reaches over the table and grabs at it with an open palm, holds it up, sways her hips and shoulders back and forth as she reads it, then informs him, “I mean, so much of this is contextual. Some of these things that are limits I would be totally okay with doing with you.”

“Like?” He narrows his eyes. He’s not going to let her get away with being vague.
“And then other things, that I would normally desperately want,” she plows forward, getting away with what she damn well pleases, pointing at the kinks listed, “I would be terrified of trying with you. So, like, if you wanted to just stick to the very basics…” She shrugs. “I’m always going to be this way and I can’t apologize, but I understand that it’s not your... thing - and I’m…”

He breaks in and promises, “I’m not trying to ask you to change.”

“Listen,” she says, frustrated at being interrupted, and he feels like a complete dick. “Look.” She rolls her eyes and sighs as if she’s very put out, and says, “I’m willing to… compromise… on some things…”

He was about to continue the thought he had before listening to her, but he pauses, catches up, takes a breath, and says, “Such as?”

He wants her to just say sex. He feels like a shithead, but if she would just say it, he would do whatever the fuck she wanted short of hanging her from the rafters by a noose.

“I don’t know,” she says softly, suddenly shy. “I’m... like,” she makes a face like she hates what she’s about to say with immeasurable disgust, “Annie says I’m sexually inhibited.”

“I’m fucking shocked.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“You?”

“Look, asshole,” she snaps, “I do think about sex, but when I think about it, it’s dark and fucked up and violent and un-fucking-safe. I have never come to porn that didn’t have an element of rape or violence to it, so I don’t know if sexually inhibited is even the right term. It seems a little too general.”

“Well I can’t,” he says. He just can’t and it isn’t a judgment. It’s his own inhibition.

“Oh my god, you never listen,” she sighs and rolls her eyes. She leans on the table again. “I’m not
asking you to. I’m saying I’m vaguely curious enough about your conventional, safe, acceptable vanilla bullshit to maybe try a little of it.”

“Oh…”

“Unless you don’t want to.”

“Don’t be dumb.”

“Don’t be an asshole.”

“I want to do all of the vanilla bullshit.”

“Don’t think that you’re going to convert me.”

“Oh my god.”

Levi is deep into color tests for a prismatic tattoo he’s supposed to do next week when his doom knocks at his door. He figures it’s Erna ready for a smoke break, but he opens the door and finds a manic gothic pixie trying to pass as a stripper in a slutty schoolgirl outfit. He looks her up and down from her sparkly, pink barrettes to her chunky, ass kicking boots. It’s not not Erna. He recognizes those boots at least. He starts to say “What the fuck are you doing?” as his eyes travel back up to her face. He stops at her lips, wrapped around a little red lollipop, eyes smeared with black makeup closed as she gives it a good suck, and he forgets that he asked a question or ever cared about the answer.

He turns and looks over his shoulder at his drafting table with rows of different shades and hues of ink set out in plastic cups. He looks back to her, wearing a tight, black little polo shirt and a pink and black plaid mini skirt with the tops of white thigh high stockings peeking out under the hem. He looks back at the inks it took him almost an hour to get ready, and then back to her looking like an actual porn star in the hallway outside his door.
She looks at him from under lowered, long black lashes and says, “Last chance.”

He thinks he can feel his dick jump to attention. He blinks, sneers at the whole fucking situation, and slams the door. “Tch.” Muttering to himself, he strides over to the closet as he rips off his shirt. “Fucking horny idiot.” He grabs his single white button down shirt off its hanger and puts it on. “Blowing off an hour of work over…” he shoves his arm through the sleeve with a grunt, “a fucking plaid skirt,” He tugs his jeans down, “and a goddamn lollipop.”

She is still at the door when he opens it again, newly dressed in his best imitation of what a teacher might wear. It’s really just his courtroom outfit, sans blazer - white button down shirt, black pants. He hates it. He had planned on never pulling it out of the closet again, but here he is dressed like a fucking tool. She looks at him, blinks, still sucking on that fucking lollipop.

“Where did you even get a lollipop?”

She exhales a small sigh through her nose at him, annoyed at his having apparently broken the illusion. She holds the candy in her teeth and hisses, “Shut up,” at him while she reaches for his arm. He lets her pull him outside, swinging his door shut with his other hand while she starts fucking with his shirt. When he looks back to her, she’s folding and pushing his sleeve up to his elbow. She does the same with his other arm when surrendered. He’s still looking down when she finishes and steps back. When he looks up at her, she’s fixated and drooling on her lollipop. “Does this do something for you?”

She startles out of her subtle leering. “Huh? No. What? I mean. It might be a thing.”

He flexes his forearms.

She takes the lollipop out of her mouth, awestruck for a second, then collects herself and says clearly, pointedly, “Fuck. You.”

He follows her down the hall and points out, “You’re wearing makeup.” because he is full of intelligent observations.

“IT felt right for the occasion,” she says, as if she’s a reincarnation of Tallulah Bankhead and not literally dressed as a kinderwhore.
“You never wear makeup.”

“If you’re just going to give me shit --”

He holds his hands out in his defense of how defensive she’s getting. “I’ve just never seen you wear makeup!”

“Because it’s an oppressive fucking tool of the capitalist patriarchy, Levi!”

“Yeah I know!?”

Calmer now, she answers with a shrug of one shoulder, “I looked too much like a ‘little’ in these clothes. Had to do something to age myself up.”

“Good move. The raccoon eyes make you look at least fourteen.”

“Fuck you.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not sure that’s not what Ymir is going for.”

“Gross.”

He tugs at the collar of his shirt and unbuttons the top button. It isn’t too tight, but psychologically makes him feel like he can’t breathe. “If she gives me shit this time I’m going home.”

Ymir does not give them shit, though when she opens the door she does eye them both warily, arm barring the door frame, as if this is some kind of trick. Then she holds her hand out for cash, which Erna retrieves from her purse and hands over while Ymir looks at Levi and says, “You made it.”

She stamps each of their hands with a purple bee. Most of their parties don’t merit the extra effort, but this yearly “back to school” party is big, and annoying, and Levi hates it. Erna ducks under Ymir’s arm and disappears inside, leaving Levi alone with his friend staring suspiciously at him. “You said you weren’t coming. Wait, no, you said that you would ‘rather die of ass eating bacteria.’”
“I stand by that.”

“We do this party every year and you always skip it,” she says, as if coming around to something.

“The Catholic school aesthetic is triggering,” he says, nodding at her deep red blazer and button down shirt with plaid pants.

She smirks at him, he says, “Not like that.” She shrugs and says, “It’s packed in there. Do you have a cigarette? I pre-gamed too hard and need to wake up.”

She starts to head for the door to the stairs that go up to the roof. He gets a quick look inside the apartment, seeing if he can find Erna, but it is packed, and she had seemed unworried about leaving him behind, so he decides he can bum Ymir a cigarette.

As soon as Erna’s far enough inside to be out of Levi’s eyesight, she rips her new vape pen out of her coffin and sucks on it. She actually likes the little machine quite a bit, but she’d rather die than let Levi see her using it. She would never hear the end of it.

So she pushes into a crowd of people and doses herself in peace with the concentrate oil. When Levi doesn’t catch up with her, she pushes her way back out. She looks around once, twice, and doesn’t see him anywhere, but sees Sasha standing on the stairs up to the loft, also looking around.

Ymir peels a single dollar off of her roll of cash and hands it to Levi for the cigarette. He breathes out a small laugh at the gesture, but still takes it, shaking his head and shoving it in the pocket of his shirt. He holds his lighter out to her and says, “You must be wasted.”

“How’s that?”
“You’re smoking and giving me money.”

“Thought you needed it, seeing as you work all day and night now. Too fucking busy...”

“I’m back to my normal hours next week,” he says, because it’s as easy as deciding to reduce or expand his schedule. Independent contracting is nice like that.

“No more parties until Halloween,” she complains. “And I can already tell you’re going to be too busy to come play poker.”

“How do you figure?”

“Because, that’s what happens with you people when you hook up. You get all starry eyed and forget about the rest of the world.”

“You people?”

“Like, you know, you single people.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“Yeah?” She narrows her eyes at him, takes a slow drag off her cigarette, and says, “What made you decide to come to this party that you always stay away from on account of how much you hate it?”

He takes a cigarette out for himself, can’t think of a decent lie, and gives it up and says, “Can you fault me for trying to get laid?”

“I can fault you for being so bad at it.”
Erna follows Sasha up the stairs to the loft, which is about the size of her whole apartment. She looks over the railing at all the people below them and asks, “What do Krista and Ymir do?” because honestly as far as she can see, they don’t do anything, yet they have the money to buy up three or four apartments and gut them to create one, actually nice place, in this shitty tenement.

“Krista’s a party planner… like, for other people, not just herself. I don’t think Ymir does anything?” Sasha answers.

“I keep her busy,” Krista says from the closet. She peeks out from the venetian door and then kneels back down, digging for something underneath piles of shoes and bags. “I’m an event organizer, by the way.”

Sasha shrugs and says, “Yeah, I’m an independent entrepreneur.”

They both look at her. Erna scowls. “What?”

“What’s your fancy word for what you do?”

Erna sighs long and deep while she looks upward and thinks. “Acerbic lush?”

Krista tilts her head. “Do you not work?”

“I do. I don’t like to talk about it.” She sucks on her vape pen, that she’s been holding caged in her fingers. Krista emerges from the closet with a pink baby backpack and throws it at Erna who looks it over, and then puts her coffin inside it.

Krista dives back into her closet pile and says, “You’re not easy to get to know, huh?”

“Sorry.”

“But you come to all my parties.” She throws a pair of heels over her shoulder and they hit the dresser, knocking down a ceramic ring box that breaks into pieces against the reclaimed wood floor. She pays it no mind and continues her search and her subtle interrogation. “So it isn’t that you want to be left alone.”
Erna sucks on the tapered mouthpiece of the vape pen again, taking a big, long hit this time, actually tasting the almost flavorless vapor and letting it out with a little cough before choking out, “I used to be a very good personal assistant,” in order to steer Krista back toward that topic and not toward whether or not Erna would like to be left truly alone as she sometimes wonders herself.

“That’s surprising,” Sasha says, now leaning over the railing and looking down at the party.

“I can see it.” Krista seems to finally have found what she had been looking for, and she stands up, turns around, and places the lenless, black glasses on her face, adding the finishing detail to her outfit of white polo, short blue striped tie, and black miniskirt and mary janes. “You seem like you would be good at keeping people on task.”

Erna doesn’t know why she blushes. She’s not accustomed to feeling her face heat up unless it’s around Levi. The deadly accuracy with which she just got read might be a little intimidating, especially since she doesn’t know anything about Krista. The blonde woman stands up and carefully puts a pair of black framed glasses on Erna’s face, who doesn’t flinch away once she figures out what’s going on, but she does close her eyes on the off chance that Krista’s aim is bad. Then she hears Krista gasp, opens her eyes, and sees the other woman grabbing at her hand, turning the back of it up to look at the stamp and asking, “Did Ymir make you pay?”

“It’s fine.”

“Oh my god.” She grabs her phone off of the bed and starts typing a text, furiously, assumed to be to her wife, and as she taps angrily at her phone she asks in a contrastingly sweet voice, “Can I get either of you anything?”

“I’m good,” Sasha says, “I just came up here to see if you wanted this,” she pulls a pre-rolled joint in a baggie from the pocket of her skirt. Krista answers by taking it and looking around for a lighter, which Sasha provides. When it comes around to her, Erna waves it off. She’s good. She takes another hit off of her pen, trying to stay only slightly toasted. As they smoke, Sasha asks why there are so many people. Krista advertised this time. She doesn’t know even half of them.

“Where did you advertise?” Erna asks.

“Just college campuses. I figured it’s early August, people are starting orientation, make it a real back to school party for once.”
They sit with that. Sasha nods. Krista eventually says, after a couple more hits, “This is better.”

It’s loud. It’s beating. There are at least forty people beneath them, more in the kitchen, and more migrating up to the roof or down to the sidewalk for cigarettes or fresh air. Conflicting interests. Erna doesn’t mind the way an introvert like her normally would. She is accustomed to large crowds at social gatherings. She feels anonymous in this setting, knowing that she is more unworthy of notice the larger the crowd.

She says, maybe to herself, maybe not, “I think I want to dance.”

Krista sweeps her up immediately, grabbing her by the arm and dragging her to the stairs and down, leaving Sasha to finish the joint and wait for Connie.

There’s a misconception some people hold, that ballerinas know how to dance by virtue of knowing ballet. In her opinion, ballerinas are terrible at actual dancing. She’s okay. She’s too much muscle memory tied to the sharp mathematics of an allegro. She couldn’t care less right now, blended into the back of a small sea of bodies with Krista, who is a much better dancer, and says over the music, “Did you come with Levi?”

“I lost him.”

“That’s okay. I lose Ymir a lot. They’re probably together anyway. Levi hates this and Ymir gets annoyed about not getting all of my attention when we have more than, like, eight people over.”

Erna thinks about it. She says, “I don’t think I mind crowds.”

Krista shouts over the music, “Same.”

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“I’m so fucking sick of parties,” Ymir groans as more people filter through the fire door.
“Watch Krista find some reason to have one in September or early October,” Levi says, not comforting her at all.

“She promised to cool it until Halloween.”

He finishes that thought out for her. “But you know Halloween is going to be extra as fuck.” They’re each on their second cigarette, sitting leant against the wall. They used to do this more often. He didn’t realize he missed it until just now.

“And then there’s Thanksgiving, and Friendsgiving, and Diwali, and Christmas, and New Years…”

“I’m not doing Friendsgiving this year,” he says, calling it, opting out as early as possible.

“Yeah, you also said you weren’t coming to this.”

He frowns. “For real.”

“Fuckboy.”

“Hey, fuck you,” he says, finally wounded. “Yeah, I may have gotten tricked into coming to your party by that slutty outfit—”

“So hot though. I love summer theme parties.”

“But now I’m up here with you, so don’t bitch at me.”

“Oh, yeah, great,” She smacks the back of his head as he cranes his neck forward for his cigarette. “Because I missed you so much,” she says with so much sarcasm that he knows she did.

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Krista tries to hand Erna a cocktail in a martini glass that matches the pink in her skirt, but for once, she turns down a drink. She reaches over the bar and grabs a bottle of water instead. Krista shrugs and drinks the cocktail down in long, continuous sips, quickly setting the empty glass down on the bar in the living room and picking up the drink she ordered for herself while the caterer scurries to pick up empties and pour out drinks. Krista gestures for her to follow and leads her back up the steps, to the loft where it isn’t so loud and crowded, much to Erna’s relief. As they are going up, Krista turns, leading with her drink, almost smacking Erna in the head with the bottom of a rocks glass, to say, “I just feel more comfortable when I’m surrounded by people, you know?” Erna shrugs, stubbornly taciturn at the attempt at getting her to open up or converse about anything deeper than small talk.

Connie and Sasha are sitting on the floor upstairs, surrounded by scattered, small groups of people who have wandered up and are watching the couple, Sasha grinding up a gram of hindu kush, and Connie pulling a large glass bong out of his inconspicuous blue backpack. Other guests hover, hoping to be invited to share. Krista doesn’t seem to know any of them, but separates herself from Erna and goes about correcting that. Erna sits next to Sasha, nodding to Connie, who looks up, flashes her a smile and says, “You look hot,” in a genuine, kind and un-creepy way, so innocent that she doesn’t even think to get self conscious. “That skirt looks familiar.”


“Oh I remember that! You had that in, like, middle school!”

Erna notices that they are wearing matching school uniforms that look pretty legit. Very pale yellow shirts, matching green ties, green plaid skirt and pants. She asks if they went to school together and they confirm, so she asks, “When did you start dating?”

Sasha takes a folded business card and funnels her ground weed into the bowl of the bong Connie brought up while they both think about the answer. Connie says, “Our anniversary is Valentines Day.”

“Anniversary of what?”

He tilts his head and looks dumbstruck as if he never thought about it. Sasha pauses, then starts digging in her pockets for a lighter, then she says, uncertainly in a high voice, “I think like tenth grade?”

“That sounds right.”
Sasha says, “Honestly, it’s like, the same as being friends. It all blurs together.” As she goes to light the bong, Erna stands up and goes back to the stairs, excusing herself, not wanting shit from Levi about smelling like smoke when she finds him. She goes back downstairs by herself, leaving Krista to introduce herself and promote her services to new people. From the stairs she does a quick sweep to make sure she can’t see Levi and then she puts her vape pen between her lips again. It buzzes with a little vibration when she’s pulled enough and she holds it, exhales, and feels it mellow her nerves a little - enough for her to have no reservations about pushing back into the living room and dancing by herself.

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“The problem is that I want her all to myself all of the time.”

Levi hums. He and Ymir both are sipping beers now, Ymir having recruited a random party attendee to fetch them by way of an angry glare and a barked command. They’ve come around to talking about love life shit, as they always do, which previously only ever consisted of Ymir talking about her and Krista and then ragging on Levi for not having a sex life to talk about.

He takes a sip of beer, nods, and says, “Relatable.”

“She says it’s a fear of abandonment thing.”

“Like, because you were abandoned?” Levi says, dryly.

Ymir smirks. “Yeah.”

“But doesn’t she get, like, crazy fucking jealous if she can’t have you to herself whenever she wants?”

“Yeah,” Ymir says casually. “but I like that.” They leave it at that, having come to no point. They tend to stay carefully away from giving each other heartfelt support and advice most of the time. They pass a minute in silence.

“What if, like, you couldn't have sex with Krista?”
“I'd kill myself.”

“Seriously.”

“Okay, I feel like we’ve moved on to talking about you and Tinkerbelle, but I’m lost.”

He pinches the bridge of his nose and wonders how he can convey all of his issues in as few words as possible. “She’s only into BDSM. Sex is not necessarily part of that.”

Ymir takes a long sip of her beer, swallows. “That's wild.”

“I fucking hate it.”

“I thought that stuff was, like, the handcuffs and whips, and also fucking.”

“Sometimes it's just the handcuffs and whips and no fucking,” Levi informs her. “And sometimes the woman you really care about tells you that she wants you to call her a bitch and slap her across the face.”

Ymir thinks about that, then shrugs. “I'd do it.”

Levi looks at her incredulously. “Yeah?”

“Does it get her off?”

“Yeah.”


“It makes me feel like shit.”
“You put that girl on too much of a pedestal. That’s your problem. If she wants you to hit her, just fucking hit her.”

Wise words, he thinks.

“And then ask her for a handy or whatever you people do.”

He closes his eyes and brings his hand to his face. “Oh my god, Ymir.”

When they go back downstairs so that Ymir can get back to making sure nobody gets into this party for free, Levi spots Erna in the living room, at the back of a crowd, dancing. He didn’t know she did that. He knew she did ballet, but, like, he’d seen her ballet. Deirdra had shown him videos, and it wasn’t anything close to what she was doing now. Her body moves so easily with a beat, eyes closed and watery, and he really has to wonder how someone can move like that and not have any inclinations toward sex, because fuck.

He tries to skirt the crowd, loses sight of her while she catches sight of him, and then she’s gone. Annoyed, he heads for the kitchen instead to bitch with Ymir some more. He finds her getting water from the fridge, and gets right into it, with, “She comes over to my place sucking on a lollipop to get me to come to this party, and then she fucking runs away from me.”

“Single people are so weird. Like, why don’t you just move in together already so that one of you doesn’t choke to death on an apple alone in your apartment?”

Connie comes in and chimes in, “I would have died like ten times if I didn’t live with Sasha.

Ymir answers, “It’s amazing you survived long enough to get an apartment together.”

“True,” he agrees, reaching for hors d’oeuvres on the counter. Before he pops a stuffed mushroom cap into his mouth, he asks, “Are we talking about Levi and Erna again?”

“Again?” Levi looks at Ymir.
She holds her hands up and says, “What? I don’t watch soap operas. I need to embrace the drama around me.”

While inhaling more food, Connie says, “She’s been coming over every day, and she’ll hang out for hours, but as soon as you get home, she just,” he holds up his hand, contracts and blows out his fingers, and goes, “Poof. Out the door.”

“Every day?” is the only part that caught Levi.

“Yeah, it’s been tight. Helped us clean up the place in exchange for edibles, organized our inventory, rolls us perfect joints. I’m not allowed to play my guitar while she’s there, but otherwise it’s solid.”

“See? You better do something to scoop her up before Connie & Sasha make her a sister wife,” Ymir teases.

“Nah, man,” Connie says as if carefully considering, “I couldn’t live without my guitar.”

Levi presses at his temples with thumb and forefinger stretched across his face, rubs downward, and stops at his chin. He looks at Ymir with dead tired eyes. “Don’t give me shit, it’s more complicated than you think.”

“It is not,” she scoffs. She leans over the counter on her elbows. “Hey, Connie, if Sasha wanted you to punch her in the face, would you do it?”

“If she wanted me to?” He echoes.

“Yeah, like, if she got off on it.”

Levi does his best not to react, although it’s very hard to not roll his eyes at Ymir and her childish bullshit. He doesn’t have to control his face for very long, because Connie doesn’t deliberate, he says without hesitation, “Yes.”

“See?”
“Fuck you,” he sneers. “I told you it’s complicated.”

“Like how?” she scoffs.

“Okay, Connie,” he says, turning to him. “What if instead of asking you to punch her in the face like a reasonable person, Sasha decided it was more fun to be a fucking demon and provoke you to lose your shit and then punch her in the face?”

Connie blinks slowly. He thinks, but not for long, and says, “That would be a bummer.”

“See?”

Ymir scowls at him, rolls her eyes at both of them and shrugs like he and Connie both being overly sensitive on the subject.

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When Erna gets upstairs again she looks behind her and is relieved to not see Levi’s stupid, sexy face that she cannot handle right now. She sidesteps her way along the wall until she finds some negative space near the bed, finally takes a deep breath, closes her eyes and tries to center herself. Then Krista is in her face, grinning, seemingly from out of nowhere when she opens her eyes and she gasps. Her wrists prickle with alarm and she lets out a little shriek. Krista says, “I saw all of that.”

“You’re like a goddamn Cheshire cat!”

Krista doesn’t react at all, as if she didn’t even hear Erna, and she goes, “Why are you avoiding that boy?”

She narrows her eyes. “I have my reasons, I assure you.”

Krista shrugs one pointed shoulder, though she seems displeased, looking away from Erna and pursing her lips, annoyed at not being indulged with gossip. Sasha, from her place leaning against the
railing, turns and asks, “Did you see Connie down there? Is he getting food?”

Erna is eager to move again, because up here feels too caged. Too easy for Levi to find her and stare at her with those beautiful, knife silver eyes so that she can only think about him choking her until her vision goes black.

She says, “Come on, I need a smoke break..”

Erna is immeasurably relieved once out on the roof, with more personal space. She and Sasha sit near the edge, eating from a tray of food that Sasha stole from a caterer on their way out, Erna sucking on her vape pen and exhaling clouds of scentless smoke while pretending to pick at the garnish.

A tall, muscular, brunette guy sidles up to them and asks Erna, “hey, is that a concentrate pen? Can i get a hit?”

Erna stands up slowly, unhurriedly, holds her pen up, looks at it, and asks, “This pen? The one my mouth’s been on because it’s mine?” She places it between her lips and sucks until it vibrates, then she exhales toward him before saying, “No.”

He calls her a selfish bitch, quickly and easily like he’s used to saying it to women, so she perhaps overreacts when she shouts, “I am literally entitled to this, I bought it, and you are some strange incel come directly out of nowhere, so fuck all the way off.”

By now, Sasha is standing as well, and, as the strange incel walks away dejected, she laughs, “Can I just bring you everywhere?”

“No, unfortunately,” Erna says, solemnly.

Then, suddenly, Sasha looks through Erna, her eyes dart back and forth, and she mutters something about how she's going to go find Connie. Erna is in the middle of beginning to ask her ‘what the fuck,’ but she cuts her inquiry to her retreating friend short when she feels something, presumed to be a hand, curl around her left side, and she swings the backpack hanging on her opposite elbow around at about kidney height, makes contact, and turns to see the top of a black head of hair.

“Oh my god I'm so sorry!” She reaches carefully for Levi’s shoulder as he’s bent over catching his
breath, but retracts her hand, afraid to do more harm than good.

Levi takes a gulp of breath and stands. “My bad.”

“What would you sneak up on me?” Why would anyone sneak up on someone known to them to be paranoid and jumpy?

“Wasn’t thinking,” he says, still pained, like she knocked the wind out of him. She watches him guiltily, until he straightens up, recovered, points at her hand, and asks, “Is that a vape pen? Do you vape now?”

“Fuck.” She puts her hands behind her back. “It’s not what you think.” He raises his eyebrows and she explains, “It’s drugs.” She shakes her head. “Weed. Concentrate oil. Ya know, so that I can do this people thing and not have a panic attack.”

He says, “Interesting,” in a neutral way, and then, because he couldn’t care less about her douchey vape, “Why did you drag me here and ditch me?”

“I did not drag you here!”

“You came to my door dressed like a porn star and sucking on a lollipop like you wished it was my - -” he cuts himself short as Erna stares at him, and he realizes, “Oh my god, I’m a fuck boy.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you.”

He groans. “I feel gross.”

“If it makes you feel better, I feel pretty gross right now, too.” Erna drops her backpack and crosses her arms. “I thought I’d be able to handle it, but it’s really hard to be around you right now.”

Levi flexes his forearms and smirks. “This?” She tells him to fuck off and he smiles. “You see my forearms every fucking day.”
“It’s not that!” She shrieks, and blushes, and amends, “Although,” and whimpers while staring shamelessly. Then she collects herself, looks down, and says, “It’s worse than that. I’m the worst.”

“Is whatever the fuck you’re talking about the reason you ran away from me?”

“I couldn’t fucking talk to you.” She’s half whining, half laughing at herself. Then, she seems to calm down, and says, very seriously, “I shouldn’t have asked you to come with me.” She worries her skirt between her fingertips. “But I didn’t know you were gonna dress like that and I may have, like, a pretty pronounced kink for hot, angry teachers, and…”

He reaches for her face and her heart races. She’s afraid it’s beat is audible. She holds perfectly still, wide eyed, hoping that he might slap her or reach to pull her hair, but instead, very carefully, he takes the glasses off of her face. Her brow knits a little, as she wonders what his actual intent is here. He puts the glasses on. She’s read the word ‘swoon’ before, but she thought it wasn’t a thing. Just a literary device. But she feels actually weak in the knees and it’s the first word she can think of to label this stupid, terrifying feeling.

And he can definitely see it, the way he’s smirking at her. She tries to erase all expression from her face. “You were literally just mad at me for looking like a ‘porn star’ and leading you around by the dick as if it were owed something, so don’t look at me like you can be on a high horse about this,” she warns him.

“I think my horse is about as high as yours right now,” he says, looking coolly unaffected in those stupid glasses.

“Not unless you’re thinking about playing on my deepest insecurities and perceived flaws until I snap and do something hurtful to you. Then we’d be on the same level.”

“I was thinking about how shitty it feels to know that deep down I’m actually a fuck boy who apparently feels entitled to shit and has thoughts about how you look like you’re asking for it the second you wear something slutty.” He flattens his palm over his face and cringes.

“That’s some slut shaming, rapey shit and I am very here for it in a consensually adult kind of way.”

His eyes twinkle at her and he laughs, and she loves it. He goes, “So in this context slut shaming you is okay?”
“Did you think I was completely unaware of my actions with that lollipop?”

He takes a deep breath and looks her up and down. Then he laughs quietly to himself for a moment before saying, “I always feel like you're at least five steps ahead of me. Was this all about getting me dressed like a teacher and getting me to call you a slut?”

She pouts just a tiny bit and tilts her chin down, angling her face away from him. She stares at the cement for some time without answering, then she finally feels pressured by the silence enough to admit, “I may have improvised that along the way, but only after I saw how hot you looked with your sleeves rolled up, and how easy it was to get you to follow me in this stupid outfit.”

He pinches the bridge of his nose. She is quick to defend herself. “I can't help it! Look at you!”

“Erna,” he sighs, “Just ask me.”

“Okay, okay.” She shakes her hands out. “Would you like to please do a scene with me before I trick you into hurting me instead?”

“That's the way you decided to ask?” he deadpans.

She brings her hands together and taps the pads of her index fingers against each other. “Um. Yeah.”

“Good enough,” he says, clipped and short “Seems like progress. Let's go.” He wastes no time turning and heading for the door.

She squeals and is quick to pick up her bag and follow him to the stairs while he tells her, “This isn’t going to be like last time.”

“Yeah, yeah.” On the way down, she shoulders the bag, hooking her thumbs under the straps. She follows his steps as closely as possible as she asks, “Wanna try something new?”

“How bad is it?” he asks with much trepidation because of how excited she sounds.
“Very, or not at all, depending on your personal tastes.” She says, pleased with how cryptic she was able to make that. He simply says, “Hit me with it,” before making a judgment. Erna shyly folds her hands behind her back, tapping the steps with the heels of her boots, and says unsure but hopeful, “Roleplaying?”

“Uh-huh.” He says, judgy as fuck, possibly annoyed at almost being tricked into acting out her fantasy involuntarily. She rolls her eyes at the back of his head as they descend the stairs. He’s so touchy. She would be thrilled if he tried to manipulate her into participation in some twisted fantasy. He asks her, “Is that it?”

“Well… Do you have a ruler?”

1.. 2.. 3.. She counts the steps it takes until he answers. 6.. 7.. 8..

“So I have a ruler,” he repeats as if it’s a stupid question.

“What?”

“Wood, plastic, or metal?”

“Well,” Erna smiles as she thinks, “plastic would break, wouldn’t it?”

They hit the landing and he turns slightly to get half a look at her. “You think so?”

She claps her hands together and says, “We should find out!”

As they descend another flight of stairs, she hears people on their way up to the roof, and Levi, just loudly enough, decides to say, “So you want me to pretend to be your teacher and smack your ass with a ruler?”

She hates him. She hears a snicker, then two from down the stairs and she punches him in the shoulder. He turns and holds his hands up, smirking like a shithead, “Just making sure I got it right.”
She doesn’t return the smile. She stares him dead level in the eyes and says, “Yeah. And you said you wanted me to pretend to be twelve? Or ten?”

“Nope. Okay. You win.”

“But I shaved and everything!”

The group coming up the stairs turns out to be the cafe trio, trying not to laugh. Erna quickly hooks her arms over Levi’s shoulders from behind and leans on him. She gets possessive when the barista brat is around. He’s been getting more and more obvious about his deep, enthusiastic interest in her new top’s dick.

Levi gladly takes it a step further, reaching back and hooking his hands under her thighs. He pulls her up and she hooks her arms around his neck as he picks her up to carry her down the rest of the stairs. She smiles, evil behind his ear, gives it a nip that makes his fingers dig into her legs, and then, as the brats come up the narrow stairwell and are about to pass them, she asks him in a high-pitched baby voice, “Daddy are you going to play with my kitty before you tuck me in?”

She can almost feel him shudder in disgust. After the brats pass, snickering, he tells her, “I am going to throw you down the stairs.”

“But Daddy--”

“Nope.”

She cackles, but then promises to never do it again, and, perhaps as a reward, he reaches one hand up her leg to just the crease of her ass and calls her a fucking brat.

“Is that all you got? I was hoping for more slut shaming.”

“Like what?”

“Liiiike,” she hums while she thinks of some of her favorite words and combinations. She pulls herself closer to his neck, whispering low in his ear, “You dirty, cock-hungry little whore.”
“Oof.”

“Too much?” she asks, with a not so well hidden pout.

“I mean…” he trails off and slaps her hand away from playing with the collar of his shirt. “As hot as it is to hear you say it, as a privileged cis male I try to avoid thinking anything close to that ever.”

“Acknowledged.” She locks her legs around him and holds herself up, freeing his hands from holding her. “And added, that if you seemed like the kind of guy who ever entertained thoughts like that, we wouldn’t even be here.” She can appreciate the irony, even if its’ been a problem sewn through her life, directly connected to her inability to date like a normal person. The kind of guy she likes isn’t the kind of guy who wants to beat her.

They get to their floor and he stands up, setting her down on the step above the landing. “So what did you want to roleplay?”

And now that he isn't carrying her, he can look at her with those intelligent eyes and it's too much. She can feel her face burning so hot she's about to start sweating. She starts walking ahead of him just to not have to look at his face while she lies, “I hadn't thought about it.”

She reaches for the handle of his apartment door, suddenly remembers that it's locked and she doesn't live there, and retracts her hand sheepishly. She swears he actually slows his walk to make her wait longer for him to open it. After she follows him in, he places a hand on the small of her back and guides her over to the wall opposite the bed, with its many organizer drawers. He points at one and asks, “Do you want to choose your ruler?”

It feels very ominous to start off here, picking her instrument of torture, and she appreciates it. She looks down at about six different rulers of varying materials & sizes. She spots the one she likes best right away, and then stalls, looking like she’s considering very carefully, humming to herself. The hand Levi led her here with strays from her lower back down to her thigh and up under her skirt. She snatches up the clear, plastic ruler and spins around, smacking him on the arm with it, tilting her head at him, giving him an unamused look, and saying, “Oops,” like it was an accident.

He takes the ruler from her, turns it over, and gives it a look. “I actually like this one. If it breaks, you’re buying a new one.”
“If you like using it on me, I’ll buy you a new one for every day of the week.”

That makes him smirk, just for a second, then he points to the chairs at the kitchen table and doesn’t have to tell her to sit, she’s quite intuitive. So she does her best heel-toe walk in a perfectly straight line, hands folded like finishing school, and crosses her legs at the ankles, because that’s the best way she can think of to make this more absurd. Dress like a stripper, behave as properly as possible. She checks her posture and makes sure her shoulders are straight. All of this is perfect for keeping her mind off of how that buttoned shirt looks just a little too tight on him and she can definitely see the bumps of his piercings under it. He sits down across the table from her and hands her the ruler, saying, “You can hold that for now.”

She lays it across her lap and flattens her fingertips over it while he asks her, “So how’s your fantasy go?”

“I haven’t—”

“Thought about it.” he finishes for her. “Bullshit.”

She stares him down silently.

“Did you lie to Annie this much?”

“Of course.” She smiles at him. “But it was easier.”

He frowns at her, getting genuinely annoyed. “Tell me.”

“Why?” she whines. “I’m not asking for anything specific. You can say or do whatever, just, ya know, keep the glasses on and hit me with this.” She holds up the ruler and smiles hopefully.

She almost thinks he will let her get away with it as he looks at her across the table. She would think it if she didn't know him and his fucking stubbornness so well. Her heart races as he stands up from his chair. He eyes her shrewdly as he rounds the corner of the table. “You’ve obviously thought about it before.”
She looks him in the eye and shuts her lips tight. He smiles, just barely, the corners of his mouth twitching and then going back to their customary straight line. He says, “It must be pretty fucking good if you’re this shy about it.”

She blushes instantly. “I am not!”

“Clearly.” He places his palm on the table and leans on its surface, looming over her in her chair and making her feel very small. He looks down at her thighs, stares at them, making her shift uncomfortably. “Is the outfit part of it?”

“No,” she quickly denies. “Just a coincidence.”

“So dressing like you want me to fuck you through the floor doesn’t factor into your fantasy at all…”

“I mean…” she thinks about his words, all dark and foreboding. She tilts her head this way and that as if thinking. “When you say it like that…” She’s still careful to not admit that there is any fantasy at all. Just a kink. For him wearing glasses and wanting to hurt her. “I could be into it.”

“What level of school were you thinking?”

“Oh, god,” she says, “as old as possible? Graduate school?”

“So you’re a graduate student, working on a thesis, dressed like that.”

She shrugs. If this is the part he can’t suspend disbelief about, then she’s going to have to inform him that not many graduate school professors have about a dozen piercings in their face. He goes on, “So you’re either trying to get fucked for a better grade --”

She cuts him off with an excited little, “Oh oh oh!” She has an idea. “Can I be a stripper trying to pay off my student loans?! Because that seems like a really dark vein of rape culture that’s rich with slut shaming.”

“Only if I can get a lap dance.”
She shakes her head slowly and says, “No,” with such a big smile you’d think denying him things gave her immense pleasure.

He smiles back, but not a good natured or defeated one, more like a ‘we’ll see about that’ smile. She runs her fingers over the clear, raised numbers of the ruler, pressing it into her lap.

They stay there, silent for some time. She fidgets with the ruler and tries to think of something to get him to drop it, to make him feel like they’ve talked enough and can start the scene. She can’t come to it. She can’t think, keeps getting distracted by the smooth feel of the hard plastic, so thin. He says, “You know, it could be better if you tell me.”

There’s nothing at all to tell him about all the times she’s masturbated herself to sleep while picturing herself the victim of a particular teacher she disappointed one too many times. It’s too fucking humiliating to admit that she’s had a crush on every passably attractive teacher she’s ever had and has imagined, vividly, getting spanked over a desk for every late paper she handed in from middle school through graduate school.

“I don’t have, like a specific fantasy,” she shrugs, “It’s just hot. It’s probably like a sapiosexual thing.” She sticks with the lie that this hasn’t been a deep and long-held fantasy of hers for a ridiculous amount of years.

“So you’ve never imagined anything specific like begging for a better grade and getting taken advantage of.”

“Correct.” She’s a dirty fucking liar.

“And you’re not lying about that, because that would be stupid when I’d be more than willing to do anything if you did want something specific.”

“Correct.”

“Especially since I would punish you if it turned out you were holding out on me.”

“Cor-- wait…” she tilts her head at him and says, “what kind of punishment?”
He leans lower, coming closer and looming over her. “It doesn't matter, because you're definitely not lying to me… right?”

She sets her jaw and looks him directly in the eyes. “Definitely not.”

“Okay,” he says, and she thinks she detects just a hint of skepticism and sarcasm. “So do you want me to just improv? Aside from remembering to hit you with the ruler I can just do whatever I want?”

“Yes, please,” she says cheerfully, and oh so eagerly.

He raises an eyebrow at her, asks, “You sure that’s a good idea?”

If it’s meant to be a threat, it isn’t effective. “That’s the thing. I trust you, and then I see what happens. That’s the fun part.”

“Nothing you want to negotiate out of right now?” He asks.

She shakes her head slightly. “No.”

“You just want to give me blanket permission to do whatever I want?”

“You got something to say about it?”

She knows it isn’t the safe and acceptable way to play, but she’ll be fucked if she’s going to sit here and be shamed about it by him.

“I mean, it’s your prerogative.” She narrows her eyes at him. Since when did he become a gatekeeper of safe bdsm? Then he says, “Just one thing, for the scene, not personal.”

“What?”

“Am I a thesis adviser or are you taking a class with me?”
She says, “Class,” with her best impression of offhanded casual indifference. Because she never had a crush on her thesis adviser, but there were so many professors she wanted to bend her over a desk in her six years of college.

“What college?”

She shrugs and says, “Bryn Mawr,” because that’s where she wished she went. “Does it matter?”

“I’m detail oriented,” he deadpans, and then asks, “Do you live on campus or off?”

Erna raises an eyebrow at him. He’s asking easy questions fast, trying to throw her off. “On.”

“How are your grades?”

“Good.”

“What class am I teaching you?”

“The Mores and Politics of Human Sexuality from Ancient Greece to NeoClassical Rome,” because she did have a crush on that professor and thought about him spanking her in his office every night for a whole semester. She's careful to add a little upward inflection as if she’s thinking of it off the top of her head, but the way he tilts his chin, she knows she just fucked up.

He says, “But you never think about it,” with all of the irony.

She tries to smile and shrug as cute as she is able. Maybe if she’s adorable it’s okay that she’s a liar. Meanwhile, Levi moves toward the door, picking up a chair like it weighs nothing and taking it with him. As he opens the door and disappears outside he asks, “So who taught that one?”

She refuses to answer, but then, curious about what he’s doing, she walks to the door on her toes and says, slowly, “Dr. Ryder,” because she’s already been caught and there’s no point trying to lie further. She finds that he’s set the chair down in the hallway, its back to the wall next to the door to
the apartment. He points to it and says, “Three minutes for lying.”

Erna sniffs and drops her shoulder and feels her mouth get dry. There’s a tense moment between them, but she gives in with much grumbling and muttering, sitting herself in the chair and saying, “Are you really giving me a time out right now?”

“Five minutes.”

She laughs and says, “Okay,” sarcastically, because when he said ‘punish’ she’d hoped for something a lot more painful.

“Seven.”

Erna’s tongue passes over her lips as she wrestles with the decision to keep them closed or not. She crosses her arms. “What do you have against rounded numbers?”

“Eleven.”

“This is fucking—”

“Thirteen.”

She’s only just realizing that they passed eleven, which is more than ten, which feels like a very long amount of time. She doesn’t even like to shower for more than ten minutes. Automatically she feels a need to call his bluff and she even opens her mouth to do so, but then stops for the pained warning look he gives her. Stubborn fucker. He would keep going like this forever. She crosses her arms and hunches down in the chair, but as soon as he’s back inside the apartment, she stands up and squints angrily at his door, then at the chair she was just sitting in. She glances to her own apartment door. It would be easy to just walk over there, turn some music up so that he hears and knows that she’s being a brat, and then hopefully gets angry and... nope... no. She needs to not. She’s going to drive him away again. If he ghosted on her for another week she won’t survive the loneliness.

The door opens, scaring the shit out of her so that she actually jumps. Levi gives her a look like she’s fucking ridiculous, points at the chair and deadpans, “Sit the fuck down,” and when she does, he throws her borrowed backpack at her. Luckily she puts her hands up in time to save herself from getting smacked in the chest. He tells her, “Twelve minutes now,” as she unzips and starts rifling...
Just as the door is closing, she shouts, “Where the fuck is my phone!?” The door slams shut with a shudder, with her question unanswered. She checks every pocket of the bag again. She knows he wasn’t stupid enough to leave her phone in there, he wouldn’t just give her a tool to alleviate her boredom, but she fidgets with her bag, then sets it on the floor, then readjusts it so that the little coffin inside won’t be resting on one of it’s corners, then remembers that she didn’t look inside of her purse. The phone doesn’t turn out to be in there either, but she does pop up triumphant with her vape pen, still very full of concentrate oil.

She thinks it’s hot that he was smart enough to keep the phone and she thinks about it while she sucks on the tip of the pen until it vibrates at her. She has never been punished in this sense. Rules and rewards and punishments weren’t something she ever talked about with any of her dommes. She claimed to be all about the pain. Going to the trouble to reward and punish and set boundaries and protocol, et cetera, all seemed much too intimate to her to be requesting them from a dominatrix.

It’s her warped mind that finds it romantic in a way. Just that he would give enough of a shit about whether or not she was lying to punish her for it.

The door opens again and she hides her vape pen between her legs quick. Levi peeks out and looks at her a second and she takes it to mean time is up. She starts to get up but he says, “Sit down,” and after she does, “It’s only been six minutes.” She tilts her head at him far enough that she feels the stretch in the left side of her tense fucking neck, and he cards a hand through his hair. “Are you okay?”

“You know I spend eighty percent of my day still and alone?” She rounds her lips around the vowel of the last word, making it look and feel halfway like a moan, trying to subtly persuade him into shortening her punishment. He rolls his eyes at her as if at the tediousness of her predictability, then goes back in. She makes a displeased expression, takes the vape pen from between her thighs and turns it on again, deciding not to hide it next time he comes out just to see what will happen.

Ultimately, after seven or eight more minutes of crossing and uncrossing her legs, sucking on her vape, and thinking about how fucking hot Levi looks with glasses, she does hide the vape pen between her legs again when he comes to get her, and she slips it into the bag before she follows him in. She isn’t willing to risk more time in the hallway when he looks so serious and has just tricked her
into admitting to a lie so that he could punish her.

He has her sit at the table again, only now he’s made some effort to make it look halfway like a desk by setting some shit on it. Before he even sits down she fucks herself by saying, “Thanks for seeing me, Professor…” and she realizes that she doesn’t remember his last name. She learned it once and could not have given less of a fuck about it. “Levi?”

“Yeah, no, they call me Doctor Professor Levi, but it’s whatever.”

“Fuck you.”

“Fuck YOU, you forgot my name?!”

“Only half of it!”

“Oh my god.”

“Is it important?!”

“IT’s my name!”

“Did you ever even tell me it?”

“It’s on the goddamn mailbox you pass every day, right fucking next to yours! How self centered are you?”

“Very!”

He shakes his head at her, looks down, reaching for the bridge of his nose, rubbing above the piercing there, behind his glasses now, and she feels terrible, but also can’t help the way she apparently needs to laugh at this moment. She’s trying not to, but her diaphragm won’t stop and he looks up. He curls his fingers, motioning for her to get up. She bounces onto her toes, happy to oblige. He points to the corner. “Get on the fucking bed.”
She takes bouncy steps that are close to skipping, very pleased that she was able to make him want to hurt her right away, and she teases, “You have a bed in your office?” He smacks her ass with his hand as she passes him. She yelps and scurries, sits herself on the bed with a huge smile on her face. He looks very annoyed, which makes her buzz with anticipation. He takes the glasses off and she shouts, “No fair. Those stay on.”

He narrows his eyes at her like she has no qualifications in judging fairness and he tosses the glasses to the table and closes in on her, putting his hands on her thighs and trying to look her in the eye, but she’s much too evasive. “How about I put them back on when you can remember my whole name?” He grips her legs and twists her over so that she’s bent over the bed with a small grunt. She feels the cool air on the back of her thighs and inhales, then lets her breath out with a yelp when he smacks her ass again.

“Too hard?”

She hums and whines some pathetic needy noises, not altogether a coherent answer, but he seems to understand well enough. He smacks her again much harder, enough to send her scrabbling across the bed and hissing at the deep, thuddy pain of it. She twists a piece of his black comforter in her fist and bites it, unconsciously still crawling uselessly up the bed trying to escape the pain that feels like it’s sinking through her muscle into her bones. He grabs her at her knees and pulls her back, spreads her legs and delivers a few sharp smacks to the inside of her right thigh, and holds her down with a hand on her lower back, right at the base of her spine. She moans into the darkness underneath her in this very black and white apartment with its harsh lights and the stark shadows they create.

She feels his weight shift through his hand on her back and she anticipates. She flinches and whimpers, but realizes after reacting that she only feels his palms drag over her. No pain. She only feels his fingers on each side of her hips, sliding their way underneath her least sexy pair of underwear. She should have worn a thong, or something lacy, but she didn’t trust the shortness of that skirt and wore a plain white pair of cotton panties instead.

She plasters her forehead to the blanket again and moans. He rubs circles into her hips, asks her, “Do you like that?” and while she stutters out an incoherent response, says to himself, “This fucking skirt.” He doesn’t bother trying to get it off, it’s tiny and slung low on her hips and all he has to do is unhook his fingers from her underwear and push the pink and black plaid up to her narrow waist to expose her raised ass. He spanks her again, no less hard, but she’s acclimated and it doesn’t set her clutching at the blanket. She whines, “Harder.”

“Did you want the ruler?”
Her hips reach back involuntarily. “Yeah.”

“Did you still want to be my slutty student?”

“Please?”

“Then,” he says, going to unhurriedly picking the glasses up off the table again, “before I give you the ruler...” he comes back over to the bed, hooks an arm under her, and lifts her up from where she’d been obediently holding very still. She stands and he turns her around to face him. “Tell me why you’re here, Erna.”

She tries to swallow, but her throat is so tight. He slips the black framed glasses back on and she wants to cry. She squeaks, “I need an extension?” The first line she thinks of, because she’s said it so many times. Years ago, but so often, hoping that just one time it would work and someone in a position of authority would lose their temper with her.

He blinks slow, and she notices his eyelashes. They’re long and dark and it’s a tragedy that she doesn’t look at eyes more. He says, “Did you think you’d get one if you came here dressed like that?”

She blushes and says weakly, “I came from work…”

He smirks and raises an eyebrow, looking her up and down thoroughly and obviously. “Where do you work?”

She can’t watch him eyefuck her. It makes her face too hot. She looks off to the side, shrugging, suddenly shy. Luckily, he leaves her alone for a moment to grab his chair from the table, turning it around, and sitting. “What do you do?”

“I’m a dancer.”

He doesn’t react with any surprise. He simply asks, “Did you run out of time for your paper because you were taking your clothes off for strange men?”
She inhales embarrassingly sharp and loud, the new idea he just introduced turning her on more than she would have thought.

“Let me see.”

“What?”

He smirks. “Let me see you dance.”

“What about my extension?”

“Oh, you’re not getting that.” He spreads his legs and relaxes into his chair. “You’re going to dance your way onto my fucking lap, I’m going to punish you for being shameless enough to even ask me for an extension, and then you’re going to write that paper or fail my class.”

She whimpers, so high it’s almost an inaudible frequency, then forces herself back into character and turns her nose up, drops her shoulders, and says, “That’s ridiculous. If you’re not gonna give me an extension, then I may as well just leave.” She inches closer to where her backpack fell. She will ruin her own goddamn scene if he wants to try to run with flawed reasoning and overtip his hand in negotiating her stupid fantasy.

“Deadline is noon tomorrow. If you stay I’ll give you until 1.”

She goes over near the door and scoops up her backpack. She shoulders it like she’s still leaving. His jaw tenses, eyelids lower, his tongue reaches for his right canine, something he just does when he’s annoyed and she doesn’t think he knows it, but she loves when his tongue curls up she can get a good luck at the little metal barbell through his tongue web.

She feels some semblance of the power she does in social situations, watching his body tense bow tight over those three seconds as she leans her hip toward the door, and it makes her find her voice again. The one that’s dark and deep and sure, that she uses out in the world when she needs things, and not the high, wavering one he seems to rip out of her when she’s alone with him. It flows out her mouth like rich smoke when she asks with a disgusted sneer, “What am I going to do with an hour?”

He curls his finger at her. “If you want more, you’re going to have to convince me.”
She tells him he’s a pervert, but she’s still moving back toward him slowly, like she isn’t quite sure about what she’s doing as she sets her bag back down on the floor.

He waits so fucking still that she is genuinely shocked when she gets closer and his arm shoots out to grab her around her waist and pull her so close that she needs to straddle her legs over his knees to not fall over him. “Yeah?” he says, to her insult. “And you’re so innocent? Coming to my office dressed like that?” He slouches in his chair, pulls her over his lap with an eager tug, and presses a kiss to her abdomen, just where the hem of her shirt is too short to cover the expanse of skin above her skirt. She blinks rapidly down at his hair, fails to shrink away, and has to put her hands on the back of the chair as he wraps both arms around her lower back and pulls her into his mouth as he sucks at her skin. She exhales a shocked little gasp, her eyes go wide, then just as quickly shut tight because his hands are moving again and suddenly his mouth hurts, like he’s sucking a layer of her flesh off, his fingers knead at her ass through her skirt, and she doesn’t even think to use her safe word. She leans back, lets go of the chair, and smacks the back of his head.

Right away, he stops and lets go as she says, quite eloquently, “Fuck!” and then, as he’s sitting back up in the chair, “What the fuck?!” when she looks down at the deep purple bruise to the right of her belly button. He’s staring at it, too, when she looks up at him. She narrows her eyes at him looking smug as fuck. He shrugs at her and says that she tastes good.

“Yeah? Did you take a chunk out of me?” she wonders as she looks down concerned at her skin. She’s never been bitten. “Am I gonna get a blood infection?”

“Definitely.” He pulls her down, into the chair with him, onto his lap, hands grabbing and moving her like a doll. She frowns at him and goes to get up. He doesn’t stop her, but before she gets all the way out of his space, he smacks the left side of her ass and says, “May as well give me a lap dance, since you’re going to die of blood poisoning.” He puts his hands on her waist and turns her around so that she’s facing away from him, so that he can get a handful of her ass while he runs his other hand up the inside of her leg.

She whips around and looks behind her to ask, “Did I mention this being part of the fantasy?”

“Nope,” he answers without a hint of shame.

She bends over and starts untangling her boots. “You’re so basic.”

“Uh huh” he mutters as his one hand slides up her lower back, dragging her skirt up with it.
She kicks the heavy boots off and stands on the balls of her feet and leans back as she uncurls herself upward to stand, sways her shoulders and her hips, and turns around. She pushes his hands away and says, “Don’t touch me while I’m dancing,” for no other reason than to make him feel frustrated.

His lip twitches and his brow creases, like he thinks that’s the dumbest, worst rule he’s ever heard of but he’s biting his fucking tongue because he knows she has a lot of power at this moment. So he says, “Fine,” while looking like he could murder her.

Luckily, she loves a murderous look. She turns away from him again, reaches down for her toes. She brings her nose to her knees and says, “This is better with a pole.”

“I will install one in the middle of my apartment for next time,” he says with deep conviction.

“And it’s easier with music,” she says, popping back up, and sliding her spine in a serpentine. He fumbles for his phone, forgets where the right app is, asks if she wants a particular song, and finds Spotify.

“No,” is her answer, but it’s a lie, of course. She just can’t make herself the little bit of vulnerable that telling him her favorite sexy song would take. So she keeps dancing and his eyes dart up and down as he tries to type in the search without taking his eyes away from her. She turns to face him though it kills her with the heightened risk of eye contact. Her eyelids flutter, she tilts her head trying to look at what he’s typing. She almost sees before he hits the delete button and starts typing something new. She raises her hands over her head, keeps circling her hips as she rolls her eyes at him and he gets lost in song choice. She actually has to stop after a few seconds and tap her fingers against her thigh. “Did you want to be alone with your playlist for a little while?”

“Shit.” He looks up at her, sees her torso stretched out in front of him, her abdomen peeking out from under her tight shirt, and murmurs, “Fuck,” looks back down at his phone, deletes and types one more thing, and finally fucking hits play. Erna recognizes the sound immediately, not the name of it, but the familiarity is bone deep. It’s something she played five hundred times over a summer, she knows that right away, and as she moves easily with it, she remembers, Fiona Apple, and then the name of the song, Criminal.

She has to smirk at him, and she has to ask questions. “What made you--”

“Felt right,” he says quickly, bouncing his leg eagerly, “Want me to change it?”
She doesn’t, but she asks, “What made you think I’d like Fiona Apple?” as she keeps moving with the syrupy song and runs her hands down her body.

“Feminist, good lyrics.” She sees his hand move for her hip, but he remembers, no touching, and puts it back down, closing his eyes momentarily and taking a deep breath, says, “You’re into words and shit.” She straddles his lap and hovers inches away from sitting on him, reaching for his neck and lacing her fingers together over the piercings at the nape of his neck. She smooths over the stubble of his undercut and up into his hair, tangling her fingers in it and pulling his head back. He moves so easily for her, offering no resistance at all, so she bends his neck as far as it will go and bites at the skin of his exposed throat. She leaves her teeth marks over the compass on the side of his neck.

It takes one minute before he says, “Stop dancing so that I can touch you.” She’s sucking at the other side of his neck and can feel the words rumble through his vocal chords under her tongue.

Stopping is easily done as she never wanted to be dancing in the first place. She slides down his body, rolling her spine from shoulders to pelvis and popping back up to stand. She starts to step back, but his hands hook around the back of her thighs, picking her up as he gets up out of the chair. She circles her arms around his neck to hold on until he drops her ass down on the bed and climbs over her. She scrambles back to the wall and he moves with her, hovering over her until she’s caged against it. Once her lips are trapped, she surrenders and reciprocates, pushing her tongue past his lips. The tip of her tongue searches for the piercing underneath his. He fucking moans against her mouth and it isn’t fair. He’s never moaned for her. The deep, masculine sound has her hips rocking completely out of her control, small needy movements that make her feel pathetic.

He pulls away from her when she flicks at his piercing and she thinks she’s done something wrong. She hasn’t tried this in years…and years. But he takes a breath and whispers, “Fuck,” and then his hands are trying to devour her whole, fast and hungry and moving up her legs, thumbs kneading at the hollow outline of what abs she has left from when she was a real dancer. She’s so self conscious her skin starts turning pink, her body blushing everywhere he touches. Up her ribs, pausing and squeezing, making her squirm, making her feel pathetic. She evades his eyes and looks at the metal balls between them, dotting each side of the bridge of his nose, then she looks at his eyebrow piercing. Then his face dips down and he’s mouthing at the side of her neck, and fuck, it feels good, and it’s new, but it’s not…

Erna leans away from his mouth slowly as she reaches to her left, fingers fumbling over the bedspread, patting until she finds the pillow. He doesn’t care, he’s still locked on her neck, trying to hold her still while he sucks a deep bruise into it. She finds the hard plastic with her fingertips and clutches at it. A moment later she’s pushing him away, shoving it in his face, saying, “This.”
He almost snarls. Deep lines show between his brows as his eyes narrow at the clear plastic ruler in her fist, and he asks, “Right now?” all teeth.

She nods emphatically. He snatches it from her while she smiles at him, quite pleased with herself. Then she blinks, twitches her shoulders, and reaches back between her shoulder blades while asking quite incredulously, “Did you unhook my bra?”

“I mean, maybe?” he shrugs as if he doesn’t even know, but his tongue darts over his snakebite piercings, belying the intentionality of his actions.

“Fucking ridiculous,” she mutters. She gets up on her knees and hooks a thumb under the collar of her shirt and pushes her bra strap down and pulls it through her sleeve. As she takes off her already loosened bra, she says, “Where do you want me?”

He’s fidgeting with the ruler now, slowly turning it over and running his thumb over the short edge. “Where are you gonna be comfortable?”

“Wherever you want me.”

The breath he releases has a deep, growling sound to it. He backs up off the bed, stands, takes her wrist, and twirls her as he sits back down on the edge of the mattress. When he has her facing the right way, he stops her and pulls her to the bed with him, making her sprawl over him, face pressed to the bedspread and ass raised over his lap. When he asks, “Okay?” She whines and mewls a long pleading sound as her answer.

“I want a real answer,” he says this time.

“Yeah,” she whines, so high. Her throat stings and feels like it will close forever.

He adjusts her, pulls her hips up higher, and she feels him run the ruler over her, tracing a silhouette from her lower back over her ass and down the back of her thighs. He sucks at the crease where her thigh meets her ass and after a full body shudder, she whines, “Levi…'

He grunts, “Why do you taste so fucking good,” into her skin. She feels his hands and mouth leave her skin momentarily unassailed and it makes her feel oddly bare. He reaches for the bulge in his pants and adjusts himself. She thinks she hears him whisper, “Wanna lick inside you,” but it’s hard to
tell with one ear pressed to the bed and she doesn’t even know what that would mean anyway, she only knows she wants the sting of that clear and hard piece of plastic he’s got in his left hand and seems so intent on not giving her, so she provokes him. “I want a week.”

“Excuse me?”

“For the extension I asked you for,” she says, breathy and uneven.

“You can ride my dick for a week and still get fuck all for your paper,” is his quick answer before he lights her skin up. He hits the backs of her thighs first and it stings, though not too intensely. Her skin is still warmed up from when he punished her for forgetting his name. She still can’t remember it. He grabs a handful of her inner thigh, squeezes hard, slaps her nice and sharp and she sobs into the mattress. She can’t remember her own either.

His fingers that were just grabbing her deep and rough now trace the edges of the thin, plain white fabric of her underwear getting wetter with every smack. It hurts that much more for the recovery time he gives her in between, rubbing her skin and letting her rock against his hands, and she wonders if he knows. Maybe he thinks he’s doing her a favor when he pauses in hitting her to trace her clit through her panties with an index finger, but he could not be fucking her up more. He hits her, she yelps, and if he would just keep hitting her, she would moan, but he keeps breaking rhythm, taking something he wants, then giving her just a shot of the sweet stinging pain, not enough to break her like she needs.

She’s about to tell him to stop fucking around when she feels the ruler hit the curve of her ass and then hears it, loud, hard and echoing off the wall. Her breath leaves her and she gasps for air, then breathes it out as a wet sob of a moan and rocks back against his hand that’s cupping her by her wet cunt now. When he asks her if that’s good, she could cry. She knows he’s just checking, but holy shit. She can’t offer an intelligent answer, or even a snarky one, she instead frantically nods her head and hums.

“More?” he asks her.

She hates when he makes her talk. She tries to sound sarcastic when she answers, “Yes, please, Sir,” but she’s wrecked and it shows through her voice, she can hear it come out much more like she means it earnestly and desperately.

He murmurs, “Still can’t remember my name, can you?” and he traces his fingers so gently over her, then punishes her for it with a crack of the ruler that has her shutting her eyes and burying her face in the bed so that she can scream as loud as her lungs need to assuage the sting of the hard plastic. She
wishes he’d started off that hard. She just needs… “Keep going…”

His off hand, that had seemed magnetically drawn to her cunt, finally leaves the hot juncture of her thighs and thrusts into her hair, tangling a fistful and pulling her head back so that the next sob that comes out of her isn’t muffled into the mattress. He holds her by her hair while she scrambles to prop herself up on her elbows. He twists and she winces and tries to arch her back even further to ease the pain that has her hissing and crying out.

“Do you like your punishment, slut?”

“Fuck…” she whispers, and *smack*, shrieks, “Yes!”

“Naughty little brat,” he leans over her to whisper in her ear and she moans for him, while he wonders, “Why am I trying to punish you with something you like?”

Her head is clouded with confusion, because he’s right, but she’s trying to come up with reasons why he shouldn’t stop. He hits her again and again, at different angles, on different coordinates along her ass and thighs, giving her hair a slight tug with every hit. She likes the ruler, loves the way he hurts her with it, just hard enough, and relentless, and so fucking loud. Her moans, the crack of the ruler, then Levi shouting, “Fuck!” Erna twists her neck to peek behind her when he lets go of her hair. He picks something up off the bed and she sees him holding two broken halves of ruler. She pushes off her elbows and sits up on her knees. He doesn’t look at her while he says, “Shit,” and then, “I liked this ruler.”

Erna rubs at her sore scalp and begins to say, “I’m sorry,” but her apology seems to go unheard as he stands up and tosses the broken ruler in the trash. When he returns, he stands over her in front of the bed, cards a hand through his messy hair and says, “Don’t worry about it, my fault, not yours,” and his face is completely different from before he walked away. Suddenly he’s no longer severe and intimidating, but open and caring and clearly looking her over to make sure she’s okay.

She doesn’t know what to say. He faces her, still on her knees on his bed, and he asks, “Do you want to keep going?”

“Yes.”

“How?”
She reaches for him. Specifically for the waistband of his pants, grabbing and pulling him two steps closer to the bed while he smirks down at her. She wastes no time reaching for his belt and sliding the worn, pliable black leather through his belt loops. She makes quick, easy work of the buckle, pulls it off of him with a whir, and folds it in half so it forms a loop. Levi, who had been watching wide-eyed and wet-lipped suddenly frowns when he realizes that she’s only taken his belt because it makes a pretty good device of torture, not because she’s trying to get his pants off. She pouts up at him as she snaps the leather between her hands.

“We didn’t talk about that.”

“My bad for not putting in place a Plan B,” she says sarcastically.

“I…”

“You’ll do fine,” she corrects, “amazing.” She hurries to convince him, feeling him slipping out of scene with her. She bares her left forearm, takes the loop of belt in her right, and demonstrates how hard with a wince and then a contented sigh. “Just… not as hard as the ruler. It hurts different.”

She shoves the belt into his hesitant fingers. He holds it, and she sees him calm with the weight of it in his hands. He loops it and bends it over his sharp knuckles. “Better or worse than the ruler?” he asks, a brow raised in curiosity.

She lets a frustrated little breath that she can’t suppress out her nose. Her mouth has literally started watering and she pouts about the delay for his stupid question. “I just said it’s different,” she makes a point to passive aggressively enunciate every word.

“Don’t be a bitch.”

“Unhhhh” she whines at him for not just doing the thing she needs now. She tucks her knees up, crossing her ankles in front of her and holding her arms around her calves. “It’s, like, contextual,” she pauses as if to be sure of the veracity of the words in her head, “but it’s good, the way it hurts, and the way you look holding it…”

He runs the leather over his palm, considering it. “Where can I hit you?”

“Everywhere.” It’s after she says it that she wonders if she should take it back, but she stands by her
pithy answer if it will just get him on with it faster.

“Get on your hands and knees…”

She’d prefer to stand. It makes it easier to flinch out of the way, and she knows from previous experience that she is a flincher with a belt. But she puts her palms down on the bed and stares at her splayed fingers. She likes to not look, to not know when and where the blow will come from. Though it makes her feel silly when she assumes the touch to her inner thigh is going to sting like fuck and she nearly jumps. The light touch disappears as soon as she startles, and he takes a second, it seems, to let her face turn fully hot and red before saying, “Spread your legs for me, Erna.”

She whines long and high, embarrassed as fuck, wishing he would just fucking hit her until she spreads her knees about two feet apart and he does hit her, right on her sensitive inner thigh, close to her wet cunt that feels so aching and raw and obvious even without being naked and visible. She can’t suppress a scream. He asks if she’s okay when she’s done arching her back and mewling to herself, and she murmurs, “Yeah,” somehow, without any breath in her lungs.

“Good?”

“Yeah,” again, then she shakes her head, “I mean, no.” She curls her toes, stretches them, and curls them again while a deep shudder shakes its way down her spine. “I mean, harder.”

He gives her harder and finds out that the belt has a liquid quality to it with enough force, wrapping around the curve of her thigh and curling almost like a cat’s tongue to lick her skin with its painful drag. There aren’t the long pauses that tortured her before, just relentless, escalating pain.

After one particularly rough hit to her thigh he gives her a break to twitch and burn and feel everything sink through her muscle to the bone while her ragged breaths rip through still air with a thin whine as they force their way out her constricted throat. It’s quiet except for her half moans and sighs and whimpers, until he says to himself, “So red.”

She hisses when his hand touches her and adds a whole new layer to her pain that she wasn’t ready for. Her heart races as he retracts his hand and she’s sure she must look like a hot mess. He asks, “You don’t want to stop?”

Fuck no comes out instead as an nnngh and a head shake. He grabs her from behind, arm around her waist, tells her to get the fuck up. When he has her sitting up and facing him, legs hanging over the edge of the bed, he says, “You said I can hit you anywhere?” as if to make sure that he heard her right or to make sure that she doesn’t want to take it back.
She brings her thumbnail to her teeth to worry and chew at it while she’s thinking. She stares at him now, with her dark, dilated eyes, and tries to figure if he’s asking that question for innocent reasons or because he can use those words against her? She lets out a long sigh before slowly and carefully confirming, “I did say that…”

“Hands behind your back then.”

“Why?” She asks, her voice suddenly wild and vulnerable.

He smirks at her. “Why so worried?”

Her brow furrows with worry while she narrows her eyes at him. He’s gonna make her say it. Once her hands are folded at the base of her spine, she says, “Don’t hit my tits.” She hates having her breasts and nipples hurt. Growing up with four sisters who are fond of punching in the chest will do that to a person.

“Was that so hard?” He asks, frustrated, like he knew she was holding something back the whole time.

She curls her lip at him, rolls her eyes. “You know I hate admitting vulnerability.”

“I know… and I hate to break it to you… but you're in a very vulnerable position right now.”

“Well…” she concedes with as much of a shrug as she can manage with her hands behind her back. He stares at her silently for a moment. Less than a minute, but it feels like forever to her under his always too close scrutiny. There’s something about not being able to put her hands in front of her that makes her feel so defenseless. She’s slowly tensing, casting her eyes downward, drawing herself in the only way she can as he stares at her open and unguarded. Her eyes close and instead of asking her to look at him, he slackens the belt in his hands and then gives it a crack, loud enough to make her think it means pain and causes her to nearly jump out of her skin. When she realizes that she isn’t hurt and she opens an eye to see him standing there, feet about shoulder width apart, forearms folded in front of him, smirking down at her, she loses her temper, and control over her mouth. She narrows her eyes, scrunches her nose, and says, “Fuck you,” like she’s spitting it at him.

She would have flinched, but the belt moves so fast she doesn’t see it before she feels and hears it slapping her side with a vicious smack. She rubs the skin of her abdomen, the small strip exposed
beneath the short hem of her tight polo shirt, left side of which is now turning bright pink and warm. She should appreciate the accuracy and be impressed, but given the circumstances she’s just cursing under her breath and blinking the hot wet feeling from her eyes.

“Hands,” he reminds her, and she looks about herself confused for a moment. When had she moved them? She looks down where she’s soothing her abused skin by pressing her palms down on it and is quick to fold them behind her back again, not abashed about breaking the restriction, but reticent to show that he hurt her enough to make her forget herself. He looks her over once returned to position as if formulating a plan. Then he says, “I wanna see how flexible you are.”

She stares back at his shrewd grey eyes examining her from behind black framed glasses and smiles, because she is very, very flexible. He doesn’t tell her what to do, he moves her with strong calloused hands, getting her on her knees on the bed, sitting her down, feet splayed out of the way. He pushes her knees further and further apart until she’s flat against the bed, legs split apart, skirt covering and hiding where she’s open and wet and needy. He looks less than impressed - she supposes she can’t blame him. She already showed him that she can stretch her leg above her head - or maybe he just always looks that way. “Can you keep your legs like that and lie back?”

She has little difficulty getting her shoulders to the bed. She can manage it with a slight sigh. She feels the stretch through her hamstrings and her inner thighs with her legs bent out and back. She breathes deep, and for a moment her body forgets all about the pain it’s collected in the past five minutes. She takes deeper and deeper breaths while she waits for her next order. She can’t see him anymore, heartbreakingly. Now all she can see is the ceiling, or the pillows if she cranes her neck a bit. She tells him, “I think I can get my lower back flat if --”

“You’re perfect.”

That gets a little eye roll and lip quirk in her expression that she hopes he can’t see. There is no depth of subspace she could fall into that would make her believe that she is perfect. She folds her hands in the hollow under her lower back, then goes stiff when she feels the mattress shift, tries to lift her head when she feels her legs being grabbed. Levi’s picking her up and pulling her to him so that one of her legs is at each side of his lap, her ass seated against his upper thighs. She lets her head hit the bed again and wishes she could cover her eyes or hide her face, wishes he couldn’t see how hot she feels all over, like she’s burning everywhere he touches her. She’s sure she must be a hideous shade of red and the thought makes her want to smother herself with a pillow.

She’s stiff as a board until he slaps the curve of her thigh with the belt, and then she reacts as if it were a cattle prod and not a strip of leather. She writhes on his lap, hears him curse through his teeth. The belt quickly licks the same spot on her other thigh with the same electricity and she leans one way and the other and whines through small puffs of breath.
He closes his eyes for a moment and hisses through his teeth, momentarily losing his icy exterior. It takes him a second to collect himself, but when he does, the glasses come off, much to her dismay. He drops them on the bed and unravels the belt from his hand, then he folds the belt into a short loop and reaches down. His hand disappears under her skirt, and he rubs the loop of leather up and over her cloth-covered slit with a press and a flick. Her eyelids flutter shut and she moans long and devastated and she stops thinking about word games or teachers or which kind of pain hurts better. She can only think about how she will unravel if he doesn’t do that again.

“You want me to hit you?”

“Yes. There?” her eyes dart down to look at where her pelvis is rocking on its own and begging for him. Her eyes going wide as he retracts his hand and pushes her skirt up out of the way. “Yeah. Please. I…” She wants to move her hands so badly. “I, I… -- Ah!” He reaches for her again, her circling hips meet him and this time he presses his thumb against her soaked underwear, right at the bottom of her slit, where she wants him to push inside her. Her eyelids feel heavy. His thumb presses. She begs, “Please, I ca--” her word is bitten in half, strangled when the belt hits her right over her clit. Her back arches completely off the bed, leaving her shoulders pressed to the mattress and her ass pressed tight to him.

He takes his hand away from her and the pressure is gone. Her body relaxes and comes back down, her back settling to the bed. He moves back to her thigh for the next hit and she whines at him until he brushes a finger over her, from the bottom of her slit to the top, playing with her almost aimlessly while he watches her face with stoic, curious eyes. She whimpers and feels heat in her face, but feels hesitant to look away. He keeps fucking with her when she closes her eyes, so she watches him, her lips parted, hands pinned under her lower back. She allows herself a slow blink when it’s too much, when the way his hair falls in front of his face makes her heart pound. He keeps playing with her slit through her soaked panties when he smacks her clit again, harder, missing his own fingers by centimeters. Her hips buck and then rock as she absorbs the pain, as it throbs through her where she was already swollen and raw. With one hand, he grips one of her legs and pulls her back down to the front of his thighs. She feels her muscles almost twisting, trying to decide which way to go, toward or away from pain, friction all over her already warm, pink, throbbing skin. His fingers dig into an as yet invisible bruise on her thigh and drag her up so that she’s writhing over the hard bulge in his lap.

She squeezes her eyes shut, because this feels too exposed and needy and vulnerable and she needs some kind of distance. His hips buck with a rough snap and make her clit meet the belt before the best arc of its fluid curl and it thuds against her. She squeals. Her muscles keep clenching, lifting her body, and he keeps pulling her back down, bucking his hips into her, rubbing against the backs of her thighs, pushing the bulge of his hard cock against her ass.

He takes a ragged breath and husks, “Hands.”

She hears, but takes seconds to register and stop moaning and realize that she’s thrown one elbow
over her eyes and has the tip of her left middle finger in her mouth, and now that she’s aware of it, the weight of the finger against her lips feels so good, so comforting. She whines and gives the smooth pad of it a bite and a lick before rejoining her hands behind her back again.

“Good.” He throws her leg to the side, spreading her wider, and slaps her several times in quick succession, lower, giving her clit a break and letting her swollen lips take some abuse. She feels disconnected at her lower back, her hips move independently of any intent. Now he has a hand high up on her thigh, long fingers brushing, pressing against her slit while he alternates hitting and rubbing her clit with the belt. Suddenly her stomach is clenching and her eyes closing tight, her moaning silenced, limited to mouthing disjointed syllables wordlessly as she tips over the edge and her needy hips stop searching for his hard cock as every muscle in her body tightens in a climax that rips through her silently, without any screaming or exaggerated moaning, too intense for her throat to let noise through. When it’s over she feels like she can breathe for the first time in minutes and she drinks the air in big breaths as she pushes away from him, up the bed, clamping her legs together. He grabs her thigh, as if to hold her, to keep her from getting away, but just as quickly he lets go and asks if she’s okay.

She can feel her abdomen clenching as aftershocks roll through her. She’s panting. Somehow she says, “m’okay,” anyway, and, “I’m just - I’m good…”, because if he hits her again, she thinks she will literally die. “We can stop.”

“Was that too hard?” She shakes her head adamantly. He tilts his head slowly back and forth at her, trying to meet her eyes. She keeps looking away. He says, “Did I... make you come?”

She groans and hides her face behind her hand and she hears him laugh lightly at her. His hand circles around her ankle and slides up her calf. She flinches, clenches her legs tight again reflexively, and he soothes her, “It’s okay…”

She doesn’t know why she’s so horrified. It isn’t the first time she’s come during a scene. It’s just never been so unexpected or so intense. She tries to affect a cool mask, like it’s not a thing. She tells him, “Don’t get a big head about it.”

He shrugs. The corner of his lips turns up just slightly as he says, “Just surprised it was so easy.”

“Fuck you.

He swings his legs over and sits on the edge of the bed, picks something up off the floor, comes up with her slim black vape pen, turning it over and eyeballing it. It must have rolled out of her bag at some point. He says, to no one, “This shit is wild.”
She asks him if he ever smoked weed. She can’t remember. He answers simply, “Yeah, sometimes.”

“So there was a time when you were fun?” she asks sarcastically.

He answers, without sarcasm. “Too much fun.”

“So that’s why you’re all straight edge?” she teases, happy that he’s preoccupied with something that isn’t her for a moment, free from his intense silver eyes, she wiggles down the bed, getting comfortable and leaning against his pillow, wishing she could take off her now very wet panties. “Scared of too much fun?”

“It’s just… being out of control,” he says, and she gets it. She sits up a little straighter. Her entire existence is a fear of the loss of control. He turns to look at her. “If I let go, I don’t know if I could get it back again.”

She’s been staring and letting her mouth water over corded back muscles pressed against that white shirt, and she’s jealous that he’s so good, and she’s not, and he has the self control to even entertain the question of whether to hold onto it when she lives in a hell where that fear of loss of control is so pronounced that it has become a deeply ingrained sexual fetish. He complains about chaos trying to suck him down while she is living in it daily in her cluttered apartment with her disordered and violent thoughts.

But he turns to look at her and she nods, her eyes wide with sympathy, because she knows what sort of reaction he deserves from her. Because he’s so good and she’s so not. And she says, “I’m sorry about pushing you… last weekend…” even though she is not sorry, not strictly speaking. She only knows that she very much should be. Maybe she’ll feel sorry later, in the middle of the night, when she wakes up in a cold sweat and her brain and body are suddenly ready to feel all the things she had ignored. She whispers, “I get why you ghosted me.”

“I shouldn’t have. It was shitty.”

She likes how he can still be sorry when she’s the one apologizing. The talent for self flagellation is amazing. She says, “Nah, I understood.”

“It’s just, like, I work so hard to keep myself from turning into a complete shithead. Like, I don’t enjoy waking up early and drinking the same tea every day, but I have to or I’ll fucking unravel.”
“And then I made you have a rage blackout.”

“Yeah,” he sighs and puts her pen on the table next to his bed.

She criss-crosses her fingertip over her heart and says, “Won’t happen again…”

He turns to look at her, head tilted. “I don’t know why, but I feel like I shouldn’t believe you.”

“Yeah, well,” she huffs with a shrug. “I wouldn’t.” She feels like she can be done with pretending to do emotional labor and just tell him, “You’re hot.”

His eyebrows crease. He tilts his head at her again. “Okay?”

“It makes me want to emotionally manipulate you so that I can feel bad about myself, and then make you either angry or disappointed with me or, ideally, both, so that I can feel much worse, and then provoke you into either physically or emotionally abusing me.”

He covers his entire face with his right hand, his fingers tented over the edges of his forehead, his eyes closed. She hears him take the longest, deepest breath. He rubs his temples and slowly cards his hand up into his hair, pulling the longer pieces in front away from his face, and asking after an entire beat, “Does… has - Has that ever worked on anyone?” with so much concern in his voice and on his face.

His reaction frustrates her, because what she just described sounded genuinely hot to her and she hates him treating her like it’s weird or concerning. She feels a little judged, which never goes well. Her eyelids lower, her shoulders sway a little. She stares him in the eyes and says, “It worked on you…”

“Shit…” he hisses softly under his breath, looking away and bringing his hand back down to his face, rubbing the corners of his eyebrows with thumb and forefinger.

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“Ugh.” Now she feels bad. “I wouldn’t have…” she wonders if that’s accurate. “I won’t…” He gives her that wounded look that makes her feel so much more horrible for the fact that she didn’t intentionally engineer it. “I won’t do it again,” she rushes to promise, to make that expression go
away. “I didn’t know it would be so triggering, and I’m sorry, and we can do the whole ‘safe, sane, and consensual’ thing if that’s what you want.”

He watches her closely with a slight frown on his face. After a moment he asks, “Are you going to be able to do that?”

She’s wounded that he would doubt her. Though, she guesses, it is the shrewd thing to do. She did just admit that his face makes her want to do terrible things so that he might hurt her. She nods. He moves to sit next to her on the bed and put his arm around her shoulders, and she thinks she can. She even offers “We can even do that whole relationship thing, provided that it doesn’t become a nightmare of enabling and harmful behavior.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know,” she says, wonderingly. “I’ve never tried it. What kind of labels do we use?”

“Not a big labels person,” he says.

“Same.” She reaches for his hand that’s on her shoulder and interlaces her fingers with his and leans her head on him.

He turns to look at her vape pen on the nightstand and he asks, “Would that thing show up on a drug test?”

“Oh yeah,” she assures him, “It’s still very much weed.” She can feel him deflate a little with disappointment. “When do you get to stop doing those?”

“Like six months.”

“So six months before I never need to see that wholesome as fuck, self-satisfied motherfucker ever again?”

“You should be nicer to him. He was here encouraging me to top you this morning.”
“Oh. My. God.” she says slowly and clearly and full of disgust. “What?! Did he tell you to put on a nazi uniform and make me lick your boots, because I bet that’s what that fucker is into. Oh my god, is he kinky? What’s his kink? Did he tell you?” She is now, somehow, on her knees, straddling Levi’s abdomen and shaking him by his shoulders and shouting, “Oh my god, you talked about me?!”

“I mean, I kind of had to…”

“Ew!” she shrieks.

“It turns out he’s like an expert on BDSM.”

Her eyebrows rise an inch and her eyes go wide. She says, “He. Is. Not.” in a completely scandalized voice.

“He’s all about safety and consent and shit.”

“Ew!” she squeals. “Gross. Is that why you’re always all over his dick?”

“What do you want me to do? I literally have to talk to him!”

“Okay, but you don’t have to, like, drop everything when he comes around,” she says, her eyes rolling upward with an insolent sway of her shoulders.

He pinches the bridge of his nose. “I actually do.”

“You can’t, just, like, reschedule with him?”

“I…” he says, exasperated, then he stops. “Wait.” He eyes her suspiciously. “Are you just trying to get me to spank you?”
“Was it about to work?” she asks with an evil smile.

He gathers her in his arms, says, “Come here,” but it gets mostly muffled in the hollow along her collarbone. He pulls her down on top of him and punishes her with cuddling. She squirms, gets comfortable, and rests her chin on her hands folded over his muscular chest. He looks in her eyes, still dilated and glassy looking, and asks, “Did you really forget my last name or…?”

“You think that was me playing dumb, too?”

“I would not put it past you…”

She stares at him and he waits for an answer. Her expression remains the same, Cheshire grin refusing to fade.

Finally, he tells her, “It’s Ackerman…”

Her eyes roll upward, she blinks rapidly and shouts, “It was on the tip of my tongue, oh my god!”

“You’re the actual fucking worst.”

“You love it.”
Levi gets a text early in the morning while he's smoking and wondering where the fuck Erna is.

Rebel girl, rebel girl, rebel girl you are the queen of my world...

He doesn't always keep his phone silenced.

Erna: Can you do me a favor?

That's an improvement. There's a question mark on the end of it. She used to just demand favors.

Levi: like what?

Erna: grab my latte and bring it upstairs?

Levi: am i your errand boy? get it yourself.

Erna: I can't.
Levi: the fuck do you mean you can't?

Erna: Just

Nothing follows. Levi thinks she must have fucked up and hit send, and now she is either taking time to write him an opinion piece on what makes her so fucking entitled to treat him like a servant, or she's given up and is on her way down. He turns out to be mistaken on both counts as he gets one more short text twenty seconds later.

Erna: Come up here.

He puts out his cigarette and slowly trudges back up the steps, muttering the whole way, about her being too fucking lazy to come down and walk less than half a block to get a cup of coffee. He starts practicing what he's going to tell her about trying to take advantage of his fucking kindness, muttering about what a spoiled brat she is. He knocks once and she opens the door right away like she was waiting, phone to her ear, scowl covering her face…

Levi's jaw drops.

All he can say at first is, “Your face…”

Erna holds up a finger and says into the phone, “Stop fucking the goats or smoking the bees or whatever the fuck you do up there and call me back. Your face cleanser is fucking defective. You fucked up my face, you patchouli drinking whore,” She hangs up and looks at Levi like she's daring him to say something, and she waits.

He takes his time before saying anything. When he speaks up, he can only state the obvious. “Your face is grey…” which doesn’t really do it justice. Really her face is a light, shimmery, pastel blue/black color, but for right now, “grey” is close enough.

She rolls her eyes, taps the floor with her boot, and says, “Yeah, I know.”

“What happened?”
“Deirdra’s new coal-based face cleanser happened.”

“You try washing it off?”

Erna doesn’t answer, except with a dead level stare and a straight, unamused face.

The inanity of his question settles on him and instead of waiting for an answer, he smirks at her. “You look like a dark elf.”

“Shut the fuck up and bring me coffee and maybe bleach for my face. Is bleach safe for faces?”

“Oi,” he says, “fuck off if that's how you're gonna ask.” He rolls the shoulder his bag is hanging over and tilts his head back, asking seemingly no one, “Don't they teach you manners at finishing school or whatever?”

“Rich people don't need manners, Levi.”

“Uh-huh,” he grunts as he takes the phone from his back pocket and snaps a picture of her.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

“Art reference,” he says as he checks the picture and puts the phone away again.

“Oh my god. Don't draw this. Just get my latte.”

“Sorry,” he says with a careless shrug. “Have to go to work.”

“Please?” she says with some force, like it's actually a magic word, and, if she says it hard enough, she'll get what she wants.

“Too late.” He turns away and heads for the stairs.
“I’ll get withdrawal,” she pleads.

“Tough,” he says as he descends. “By the way, you're not rich anymore. Learn some fucking manners.”

“Levi!” is the last thing he hears as he hurries back down the stairs. As soon as he's out of earshot he starts getting text messages from her, which he ignores while he sends the picture he just took to Deirdra.

Deirdra: oh that's what all these new voicemails are about.

Levi: ignoring them?

Deirdra: I was sleeping. have you two heard of time zones? It's like 4am here.

Levi: check your voicemail.

Contrary to what he told her, Levi fully intends to go to the cafe and get Erna a latte before going to work, because he's a sucker with too much sentimentality, but when he reaches the sidewalk he decides to read the texts she's sending at ten second intervals. Unfortunately for her, the very creative adjective/noun combinations she's applied to him dampen any minute feeling of sympathy he'd felt a second ago. He stops mid-stride, turns around, and goes straight to work instead after texting back: “if you calm your tits I’ll get your coffee on my lunch break. good luck with your fucking face.”

Erna doesn’t get his message right away because she’s already on the phone with Deirdra, on the verge of tears while her sister asks her a dozen troubleshooting questions. Her conclusion, finally, is, “Try the elderberry soap bar?”

“Which one is that?”

“The one that smells like elderberry,” Deirdra sighs, like it’s painfully obvious.
“I don’t know shit about your hippie plants or flowers or whatever. What does it look like?”

“It’s purple. Use the purple one. Unless you have witch hazel. Have you tried witch hazel?”

“Oh my god, Deirdra, why would I?”

“It’s good for a lot of things. I always keep a big bottle of it under the sink.”

Erna shrieks, “Fuck your herbal remedies or what the fuck ever! You’re lucky you live on the opposite side of the country.”

Deirdra sighs calmly. “It’s not like it was intentional, Erna. The stuff I send you is untested and sometimes it's not perfect, but that's why you get it for free.”

“You would charge your own sister, you fucking cunt. Underneath that yoga-practicing, crystal healing, zen-spewing, fake-as-fuck exterior, you’re just a basic capitalist bitch.”

“I’m hanging up.”

“I hope you choke on a chakra.”

“That’s not even how that works!”

“Namaste, asshole.” Erna hangs up first, which means she wins, and makes her feel a little better.

Levi rolls up to the shop early, but he stalls at the door when he sees Hanji and Mike through the glass deep in conversation, one of them gesticulating emphatically. He decides he wants no part of whatever that's about and steps to the side to lean against the window and smoke a cigarette.

“Hey,” a man walking up, small cardboard cup of coffee in hand, gets his attention. Levi gives him a sidelong glance of quick acknowledgement, then focuses back on his cigarette, hoping for the
unlikely possibility that the guy was just being friendly and has nothing else to say.

“You work here?” the man says, nodding at the shop Levi's leaning against.

“Yeah.”

“You do walk ins?”

Levi looks the man over before answering. He's dressed in plain jeans and a white t-shirt, has a build like a smaller Mike, and calm blue eyes. Levi had pinned him for younger at first because he's in good shape, but now that he looks closer, the sprinkling of grey hairs and the self-assured, secure way the man carries himself makes him look closer to fifty than thirty. More importantly, his arms are covered in tattoos already. Levi hates doing walk-ins for virgins. They never sit still, and they talk a lot.

He takes the cigarette out of his lips and says, “Yeah. What did you want?”

“Plain old knife,” he says. “Right here.” He points to the left side of his neck.

Not that he's going to try to dissuade him, but purely out of curiosity, Levi asks, “What do you do for work?”

“Private security,” he says with a slight smile.

It's an ambiguous label that could mean anything from bodyguard to drug cartel member, but Levi doesn't care. At least he knows he won't be hurting the guy's chances of staying employed in his field. He puts his cigarette out on the sole of his boot and says, “Fair enough,” adjusts his bag on his shoulder, and tells the man who just started to take out his own cigarette, “Wait out here until we open.”

After he opens the door he starts to ask Mike if he has time for a walk in, because he has a more traditional style that works for old guys in ‘private security’ who want neck tattoos, but he stops mid-sentence as he realizes that Mike isn't going to hear him over Hanji’s miserable whining.
Mike says tiredly, like he's already said it a hundred times, “Go home, Hanji.”

Levi silently goes over to the desk to clock himself in while Hanji coughs into the crook of their arm, then pleads, “I'll wear a mask all day. Please?!”

Levi looks up from the computer. “Are you fucking sick?”

“Barely,” they say, betrayed by their hoarse, nasally voice.

“Go the fuck home, Hanji.”

“C’mon, Mike, I'm not contagious.”

Mike, already turning away to get his work station ready, reminds them, “It's a liability. You know that.”

“But I have appointments…” Hanji snifflles.

Mike, without consulting him, volunteers Levi to take care of Hanji’s clients until Levi reminds him that he has his own schedule to keep.

“Well do as many as you can, it's more money for you,” he says, while getting out water and inks. “Hanji, get on the phone and cancel the rest.”

Hanji pouts, but reaches for the phone on the desk until Levi covers it with his hand, narrows his eyes, and tells them, “Not this one. Don't touch anything.”

Hanji groans and heads outside, looking completely dejected. Mike calls out, “Feel better,” just as the door is swinging shut after them.

Levi stays at the desk and starts fucking with the schedule, picking up as many of Hanji’s appointments as he can, scowling at the screen because he hates dealing with the fucking schedule on a normal day. While he kisses any free time he was going to have goodbye, he asks Mike if he
can do the walk in for that guy outside.

“Have an appointment in ten minutes.” He pauses, waits to see how Levi will respond, then lifts his eyes from his task to shoot him a look and say, “You don't look busy.”

“Tch.” He finishes pulling Hanji's appointments and filling up his day with her work, then stands, palms on the desk, wondering if he should tell the guy outside that he'll have to come some other time. Like he can read his mind, Mike scolds him, “Go on. Get to work.”

“Goddamnit. Fine.”

Mike looks down and keeps his smile to himself as his surly co-worker stalks up to the door and commands the man standing outside to come in and sit down.

Eight minutes later, Levi is about to pin the man to the small table next to him with his elbow across his throat if it will just get him to hold the fuck still and stop screaming.

He pulls away just in time to not fuck up his line work as the man flinches for the thirtieth time in twice as many seconds. His fingertips turn white as his grip tightens on his machine. The man quiets to a hissing, whining sound and Levi rolls his eyes… again. “Tch. It's almost like you didn't know that this was gonna hurt.”

“Not this much.”

“It's your neck... ”

“I don't know if I can do this.”

“Well you're not walking out of here with a half finished tattoo…” Levi pauses and thinks for a second, then says in a serious monotone, “I could have Mike knock you out.”

Mike speaks up from his adjacent work area where he's working easily on a client with a much higher tolerance for pain and simply says, “No.”
“Can you go faster?”

Levi's eyes roll back up into his head again. “Good idea.” He restrains himself from adding 'fuckstick,' because Mike's there. “I hadn't tried that yet.” He avoids profanity in front of his boss, but sarcasm is approved as an acceptable outlet for dealing with frustration. “Oi, while we're trying things, how 'bout you give not moving a shot.”

He puts his earbuds back in and turns his music up as loud as he can. He goes to finish up the handle of the knife he's drawing, and, this time, the guy nearly jumps out of his chair before the machine even touches him. The earbuds get yanked back out, and Levi asks, “Seriously, how did you sit for all these other tattoos?”

“I was a little drunk,” he says, nearly hyperventilating. “Well… more than a little.”

“I'll pay your fucking tab if you go to the bar across the street and come back shitfaced enough to stop flinching.”

“Levi,” Mike warns over the hum of his machine without skipping a beat in his own work, “No.”

“Tch.”

“And watch your mouth.”

Levi bites at one of his two lip rings, splays his fingers over the guy's skin to stretch it tight and bears down with the needle again faster than he can flinch away. He winces and almost turns away as the scream pierces his eardrums but keeps going.

Erna sees Levi's text message after she hangs up on Dierdra and she responds out loud, “Calm your own tits.” She huffs and goes back to her bathroom to look for the purple soap. She checks the plastic caddy next to her tub, texts a threat to Dierdra, checks again, sends the text, looks in the medicine cabinet, types out another text laced with profanity, unwraps what looks like a bar of soap packaged in paper, sends the text to Deirdra, and goes on like that, sending Deirdra a total of six long, angry, disjointed rants before finding what she thinks is the bar of soap her sister was talking about. It isn't even a facial soap, but a body bar. She looks at it skeptically, but she's willing to try
anything to return her face to a human skin tone found in nature.

She's almost more relieved than angry when she lifts her face, looks in the mirror, and sees that it didn't work… at all, because it means Deirdra was wrong, and she'd already been outlining the justifiably angry text she was going to send if it didn't work. It's a good one. It features a few completely new turns of phrase like 'essential oil bleeding cuntcicle'.

Erna makes her face tingle with how many times she rubs soap or exfoliant or whatever else she can find on it, and rinses, and repeats, her eyes getting more red every time she lifts them to the mirror, and her skin is getting a numb feeling as her heart beats faster. The charcoal stains don't fade, even though she would think at least some of the color would come off with the skin she's probably buffing off with her towel every time she rinses a new product off and dries her face.

Finally, after ten minutes, she's tried everything — even a strawberry-based shaving cream, because why not? When it doesn't work, she's even more pissed off because she liked that shaving cream and is unlikely to get more now that fall is coming and strawberries won't be in season.

Pretty soon, her self satisfaction at being right about her sister being a fuck up is fading, and fear is blooming into an irrational, nagging anxiety that makes her wonder if her new, opalescent, coal miner chic look might be permanent.

Her face is important to her. Looks are important to her. She is full of contradictions on this front. She knows that being pretty is not important, especially when the idea of pretty is only an oppressive tool of the patriarchy that keeps her down. She knows that. But she looks in the mirror, and pretty feels important. It is full of importance. She knows exactly where those feelings come from, though the knowing doesn't banish them.

Her nose starts to itch, which is the first symptom of being overwhelmed. As repressed as she is, she feels "overwhelmed" physically long before the actual emotion can escape its cell-deep prison inside her and make her feel it in her head. She sniffs. Her eyes itch and water and she has a powerful urge to scratch at her face and scream. Before she can give in, she turns to the desk and digs her fingers into her coffin purse. They emerge with the key to Levi’s apartment.

She doesn't tear the place apart, not at least by her estimation, but Levi would probably be horrified at every cupboard door she leaves open and object she doesn't put back exactly in its place.

After some frantic digging, she finds altogether five different soaps and cleaners that might be safe to use on human skin. She isn't sure. She stares long and hard at them all laid out on the kitchen table and ends up actually reading labels instead of haphazardly trying everything in reach like she did in
her own place where everything is organic and safe and shit because it comes from Deirdra… except the one thing that stained her face to look like someone painted her with a light ink wash.

And suddenly her head splits right down the center with a clear, pure, shooting pain. It makes her wince and close her eyes. She needs a stimulant to ease the caffeine withdrawal, but with her face like it is, she can't go out and smoke a cigarette. She moves and reaches and feels her way to the bathroom door and the medicine cabinet. Levi has to go through caffeine withdrawal sometimes, too, with how much tea he drinks. He has to have something for it. Some kind of over the counter bullshit with a percentage of caffeine to ease headaches.

There's nothing. The medicine cabinet is home to some fucking toothpaste, hydrogen peroxide, and remnants of what was probably once a full first aid kit, but no pills.

The nails of both of her hands scratch the metal shelves. She should have guessed that he wouldn't keep any kind of pain relievers on hand. He loves to suffer. That's why he hangs out with her.

The splitting headache down the center of her forehead evolves into a throbbing pain, and it's not okay. None of it is the good kind of pain. It's like when he stabbed her pressure points last night. It hurt, but not the right way. That's why she said she was tired and went back to her own place after a cigarette break on the roof. She couldn't tell him about good and bad pains and where the difference lies. He would have taken it too hard. It would have required emotional labor that she isn't equipped to do.

Her headache stabs her again, and her left eyelid vibrates with a tremor. She abandons the medicine cabinet, leaves it open, and goes back out to lean on the kitchen counter while she heats up water.

She rests her cheek on the cool surface of the counter. She can see the kitchen table and the soaps and cleaners she left there. She remembers her face. The pain made her forget for a minute. The overwhelmed feeling finally spills over the edge of the deep containment reservoir inside her and leaks out of the corners of her eyes while she sniffs through her itchy nose again and again.

She doesn't wait for the kettle to click. She makes tea with lukewarm water and three tea bags. Then she loads it up with sugar from the glass cylinder with her name scrawled on it and swallows it down like bitter, caustic medicine. She doesn't say anything about how disgusting it is because Levi isn't there to listen and argue about it. One hand holds the mug to her lips and the other fumbles to reach blind for the kettle, turning it on again so that she can make more tea in a minute.

Then she trades the empty mug for a bottle of green soap that she's pretty sure is safe. She reads the label twice, scrutinizing the names of chemicals and trying to make sure. Her nose itches. She
shouldn't care so much about her stupid face. She shouldn't, but she can't help it. She's helpless to change her feelings about it, and, even though she isn't completely sure that she won't get some kind of disfiguring chemical burn, she takes the bottle to the bathroom sink and washes her face. Again.

She knows that it works before she even looks in the mirror because the water swirling down the drain runs grey.

Her chest heaves with huge, lung clearing breaths. She looks in the mirror for almost three minutes straight, tilting her head one way and the other, tracing her fingertips over her cheekbones. She feels the kind of relief that settles in your stomach and makes you feel like you're sinking in the good way, like relaxation is liquefying you from the inside outward.

She takes a second mug of black tea from the kitchenette, sips it and breathes in its steam until the pain in her head throbs lighter, tapping in her skull instead of hammering. Then, she falls on the bed and throws her arm over her eyes.

She hears her mother's voice ask, “Will you turn that noise off and go outside?”

Grammatically, it's a question. Thematically, it's a command.

She's lying on top of the covers on her twin bed in the smallest bedroom of Rosewater, the family vacation house on Martha's Vineyard, inherited through her father's side of the family, adorned with many peaked roofs but lacking in modern amenities like central air. She hates it. She wishes it were December, the time of year they vacation in Paris. She pretends that she didn't hear the question over the music emanating from her CD player. As if Kathleen Hanna’s shrill screech could ever carry over her mother's.

Her mother doesn't retreat from the doorway. Erna stands and stretches only when “Deceptacon” reaches its end. She picks her book up off the bed and, without a hint of emotion, answers, “Okay.”

“Are you going out like that?”

In the language of passive aggression that her family speaks, there are a lot of questions that aren't actually questions. She's fourteen and fluent by now.

She is one of five daughters, named in alphabetical order, Ava, Barbara, Cynthia, Deirdra, and her.
She is the oddest one out. Ava and Barbie act like real sisters. They go everywhere together. They share clothes and gossip, preppy and rich and feared. Cynthia is independent and self sufficient, blonde, tan, with the right amount of freckles, athletic and kind and welcome in any clique, beloved by all. Deirdra is a quiet rebel. She smokes pot and talks philosophy with other misfits from other rich families, but she doesn't rock the boat at home. She never gets in trouble or bites the hand that feeds her. She's also intelligent. Those things may be correlated.

Erna doesn't get along with any of them or with her parents. She is universally disliked or ignored at best. Ava and Barbie are too petty to ignore her and have learned from their mother a myriad of passive aggressive ways to point out how unpretty she is. Erna is their practice dummy for verbal evisceration. Cynthia has no opinion of her and maybe sometimes forgets that she exists, too above everything to be bothered about her. Deirdra hated her for years, in a more personal and passionate way than Ava and Barbara, because she was afraid of not fitting in, which was something Erna actively did without concern. She is older now, less afraid, and only just starting to see her sister as a person worthy of anything but revilement.

Erna's mother makes space for her to walk past her. They don't touch, not even accidentally. Touching is unsophisticated. Even so, her mother snatches at one of her chin-length curls and quickly releases it in disgust, asking, “Lord, Erna, what is in your hair?”

She makes it sound like she’s found signs of lice, but they're just the pastel plastic baby barrettes that people put in their little girls’ hair or that little girls put in their dolls’ hair. Erna started placing them haphazardly through her black wavy curls a few weeks ago after seeing a picture of Courtney Love wearing them in SPIN magazine.

She answers glibly because her mother hates glibness, “Barrettes.” Then she adds, to open her mother up for a verbal aggression, “To look younger.”

“For God’s sake, why?”

“Cheaper and easier than a facelift.”

Deirdra, who had just been walking past on her own way out, snickers, and both Erna and their mother glare at her, her mother because it's known that she makes it a point to get a facelift every three years, Erna because it's her verbal dig, and Deirdra didn't earn the right to be in on it. If she wants to laugh at their mother she can make her own sarcastic comments instead of giggling under her breath in passing and disappearing safely out the door.

Her mother turns her attention back to Erna. “Why don't you put on some makeup? Highlight your
Erna crosses her arms and looks away. Her mother sighs audibly and asks, “Can't you just be normal?” So she goes downstairs, and, while no one is looking, she fills a steel hip flask with fifty year old scotch, because that's normal in this family. Hidden alcoholism, elective surgery, and extramarital affairs. Normal.

Ava stops her in the living room where she's on the couch looking at magazines with Barbie. “Where you going, Skeeter?”

That's her new nickname, referring to the fact that she's all legs and no tits. Mosquito bites. Not that she wants tits. Apparently they make boys try to talk to you, and she wants none of that.

Her older sisters are princesses on this island. Erna is only reluctant royalty by association.

For her sisters, Martha's Vineyard is summer. They don't hate it or wish they were in Paris instead. They thrive on the exclusive island, hair in perfect beachy waves and summer boys falling at their feet.

Barbie started teasing Erna about being a lesbian last year because she doesn't want any attention from the opposite sex. To be fair, she doesn't want attention from anyone, but especially not boys. Her mother and sisters have made it hard to respect men. They treat them like poor, dumb but noble animals to be easily manipulated and toyed with for fun and validation. Erna pities them. She can't be attracted to anything she pities. She also resents them for being stupid and pitiable, and she avoids them so that she won't need to feel any of these things.

The sun is high and bright. Her bare feet are armored from the heat and grit of the sandy roadside with calluses from years of ballet. A pair of black Vans joined at the laces hang over her shoulder. Her sips from the flask get longer and longer as the scotch burns less and less in her mouth. At first it always tastes like an ashtray, and then like nothing.

She practices walking a perfectly straight line while drunk. Alcoholism is only a disease insofar as it causes you to be an embarrassment. Her mother can drink wine all day, but, so long as she isn't an embarrassment, then she isn't sick. There are people in their social circle who drink less but are whispered about more because they embarrass themselves. If you can hold yourself together, walk a straight line, and control the volume of your voice, no one cares if there's a drink in your hand from breakfast 'til bedtime.
A bike rolls up and slows next to her on the otherwise deserted sandy gravelly road. At first she only knows from sound. She refuses to turn her head and look, even when the owner says, “Hey.”

Erna doesn't change her pace. She takes another sip from her flask and acts like the voice next to her doesn't exist. She's a good actress, but he is persistent. He gets off his bike and walks it alongside her. That makes her turn and acknowledge him.

He's blond with dark blue eyes and a strong chin. She doesn't think she's seen him before, but she isn't sure because everyone like him looks the same to her. Conventionally attractive and perfectly forgettable.

He looks down at her hand, not the one with the flask, and asks, “Whatcha reading?”

She looks down with blurry eyes and feels disconnected from the hand she's looking at, but she recognizes her book.

“Hemingway.”

If this were her fairy tale, and he was the prince in it, he would start a conversation with her about Hemingway and whether his exaggerated machismo was a mask for sexual insecurity and anxiety. He would ask what she thought of Fitzgerald and would agree with her about him being a lowkey misogynist, overly concerned with beauty and both lusting after and demonizing it because he was a weak, bitter ‘nice guy’ who totally would have loved the term “friend zone”.

Instead he nods and asks, “Is that a band?”

“What’s Hemingway?” she asks, a bit bewildered that anyone could not know Hemingway.

“No,” he points, “your shirt.”

She looks down at her thin, lavender t-shirt with the Le Tigre logo in red across her chest. It is a band. It's close to her heart, so she lies, “It's French for tiger,” because she doesn't want him or anyone else to know anything that is close to her heart.
“Cool, cool,” he says. She looks down the road and keeps walking and sipping scotch every few steps. After a short, awkward silence, he asks, “Where you headed?”

“The beach.” Though, everywhere is beach. She may as well say ‘outdoors’ for how specific that is.

“Mind if I join you?”

Erna’s had it. She stops. He stops. She looks at the bike he's holding between them and back up to his sincere, earnest, cheerful face. Tan and blond and conventionally attractive, not like her. Not brooding and short tempered and ever searching for something to fill a hole inside. She glares at him, wrinkles her nose, and keeps her eyes locked on him as she takes a long swig out of her flask. She wipes her wet lips with the back of her hand and finally asks, “What's your game?”

He holds his hands up and smiles. “No game.”

She crosses her arms and doesn't know what to do with him. She looks him up and down and decides he must be close to her age. If he were older he would be driving, not riding a bike. She wonders how old he thinks she is with her short stature, flat chest, and baby barrettes.

He extends his hand. “I'm Chip. M’staying at Beechwood for the summer.”


She shakes his hand and tells him that her name is Erin. She tells him that she's just going to the beach to read her book. Her real plans are to walk to the candy shop, get a brick of fudge, then go to the beach and eat fudge and drink scotch until she passes out. The book is for pretending to read so that nobody will try to talk to her. People in Martha's Vineyard respect the sanctity of summer reading.

“I don't mind,” he says.

“So,” she wraps her lip around the word for a second. “like… you're just going to sit there while I read?”
He shrugs and his blue eyes squint a little when he smiles. “Sure.”

“Why?” Her voice is as cold as the Atlantic waves.

“Why not?”

They stand in a quiet stalemate for moments until he says, “You don't trust me.”

“I don't understand what you get out of it. Why would you want to just sit there while I read?”

He leans on the handlebars of his bike and lowers himself a little so that his eyes are closer to being level with hers. “Why wouldn't I want to sit next to a pretty girl?”

Oh.

“Fuck off.”

She stalks off down the road again, walking and drinking faster. Wincing at the bright sunlight in her eyes. Bitter about being picked on, sure that he was teasing her the way Ava and Barbie do.

When she gets to her reading spot on the beach with her fudge, her flask is empty already. She tries to read For Whom the Bell Tolls, but she's neither sober nor drunk enough to enjoy reading. She looks at the same paragraph over and over, scowling, depressed and dull.

She senses someone approaching from a group of teenagers closer to the waves, holding an informal party around a bonfire. She lifts the book to block her face and protect her solitude, but quickly drops it to her lap when it's Deirdra’s voice asking, “What are you doing here?”

“Fucking reading. I read here every day. So don't get bitchy about who owns this stretch of beach, because I'm the one with squatter's rights.”

They are unused to talking to each other and are not good at it yet. Luckily, Erna’s drunk enough to make her forgiving, but not enough to make her cruel. She’s “social and contemplative” drunk. And she has a question. It's been in her head and bothering her. Even though she doesn't think much of Deirdra, she's as good a person as any to ask.

“Have you ever read Edith Wharton?”

Deirdra shrugs. “Like Age of Innocence? That Edith Wharton?”

“Yeah,” Erna says, “or Fitzgerald, or … I don't know… Bronte or whatever…”

“Yeah, I guess,” Deirdra answers carefully, not sure what her sister is getting at.

“Do you… do you think we're like… those characters? Like what Wharton and Fitzgerald write about? Where the protagonists are upper class and wealthy and terribly sad, but you just can't sympathize with them no matter how real their misery is because they fucking have everything?”

After a pause, where Erna picks her flask up and attempts to take a sip, having forgotten that it's empty, Deirdra answers judiciously. “Well,” she says, “I think if they're that miserable then maybe they're missing something.”

“But who cares?” Erna says, eyeing the empty flask. “They don't have any right to feel depressed. Even with the best writing it's impossible to feel sad for them.”

In her short life, Erna has never felt anything but sad. She has also never known a moment where she could not have everything she wanted, unless it was approval or affection.

Deirdra looks back to the group of friends and the small bonfire she left and says, “Why don't you come join us?”

Erna leans slightly to the side to look past her, then looks back to her book. “No.”
“Come on.” She points at Erna’s discarded flask in the sand and says, “I can refill that for you.”

Erna casts a withering glance at her for exploiting her weakness, brushes the coarse, rocky sand off her calves, and stands up. Deirdra takes the flask from her, and Erna follows in silence.

She doesn't know anything about Deirdra, even though she's always been around. She only knows that, for some reason, Deirdra’s always been a dick, and suddenly, right now, she isn't. It's very suspicious.

She squints as she follows behind her sister and supposes it has something to do with being a cliche rebellious teenager. Until somewhat recently, Deirdra wouldn't have dreamed of laughing at a joke made at their mother's expense or doing anything to not conform to their family's ideas with such adamance that she gave the impression of being terrified of standing out. It wouldn't be an irrational fear. Each of Erna's sisters will inherit millions of dollars, not to mention trusts, houses, antiques, and art. And they don't have to work or beg for it. All they have to do is not fuck up too badly.

For two years, Deirdra has slowly been experimenting with how much non-conformity is okay. How much personality of her own is she allowed to have without falling out of good graces? She goes to Phish and Ani DiFranco concerts now and braids feathers in her hair sometimes. Nothing egregious enough to draw comment from their parents.

She refills her fourteen year old sister's flask with booze stolen from other wealthy families’ liquor cabinets and introduces her to her friends as her baby sister. Erna wrinkles her nose at that, not feeling that after one short conversation she's earned the right to call her ‘baby sister,’ as if they shared a childhood or have ever been anything more intimate than acquaintances. But Deirdra sounds proud and pleased with her, and it gives Erna’s heart a feeling like the way blood tastes. Rusty and tangy and coppery and bad, but good. When one boy asks what ‘Le Tigre’ is, Deirdra answers before Erna can lie about it. “It's this band she's into. It's like electronic feminist punk.”

And he nods and says, “Cool.”

Deirdra sits on a piece of driftwood to carefully roll a joint on her thigh, and everyone goes back to their conversations or to smoking or drinking or just staring at the fire. Erna drinks from her flask and turns her face to watch the waves. As much as she hates Rosewater and summer, she's always been drawn to the Atlantic ocean. She finds it romantic. It's cold and hard and unlikable, and she gets that.

Deirdra asks, “What do you think of Hemingway?”
Erna doesn't answer right away, not because she has any shortage of opinions about Hemingway, but because she has always been quietly anxious about change, and, right now, Deirdra is trying to change their relationship. As unpleasant as it's been, it's at least familiar.

“The writing is good, but I can't get into his content. He's so in love with masculinity and afraid of strong women.”

“He writes strong women, though, doesn't he?” she asks like she's trying to remember, like she hasn't read him in a long time.

“Yeah, but he doesn't like them.”

“You think he was secretly gay?” Deirdra asks with a little amused smile before licking her rolling paper and sealing it tight.

“I don't know,” Erna shrugs. “He said he had a crush on Gertrude Stein.”

“Probably a cover.” Deirdra taps the calf of a girl standing next to her and pantomimes a flicking motion with her thumb. The girl hands her a lighter. She places the joint between her lips and goes to light it, then stops herself and takes it back into her fingers to say, “Like that boy in your class who pretends to have a crush on you.”


She has to wait for Deirdra to take two hits, pass the joint to the girl next to her, and exhale before she answers. “You know. Bennett?”

Erna can't picture him.

“Brown hair? Really full lips? He's on the track team?”

Erna shrugs. She really can't picture him, but that isn't unexpected. She barely talks to anyone at
school and almost never has her nose out of a book.

Deirdra squints at her like she's realizing something about her sister. “You really don't give a shit about people.”

Erna takes a long sip from her flask. “So?”

“Anyway,” Deirdra says with slight exasperation, “He's very much in the closet. So when his dumb guy friends are talking about girls, he pretends that he has a crush on you. You're pretty enough make a believable case for him being straight, but you're so scary that no one would ever expect him to try to ask you out… or even talk to you.”

“So I'm Gertrude Stein.”

“You should marry him. He'd get a beard and you’d get to just read books and listen to music all day, and he'd never touch you.”

“I'm not…”

“Yeah, you're not gay. You just hate people. Equal opportunity hatred.”

Erna’s mouth quirks and she laughs via a soft breath through her nose. “Yeah.”

“Including yourself.”

Deirdra is very, very smart. Smart and keenly observant. Erna makes a note that, when she is sober again, she should be much more careful about what she says around her. For now, she just closes her mouth altogether and sits down next to her big sister.

She drains every drop of alcohol from her flask. It makes her meaner. She accuses Deirdra of only having filled it halfway.

Deirdra tells her to chill with a soft, non-combative voice, and Erna remembers the rule. Don’t
embarrass yourself. It's not alcoholism so long as you're not an embarrassment. She practices self control. She glares at her sister, but, instead of picking a fight, she quietly gets herself a refill.

Later, when it's dark and time to go home, it turns out that she is too drunk to walk. She's as surprised as anyone by this discovery, but each time she tries to stand, her legs are as wobbly and useless as a baby deer. Deirdra gives up trying to help her up, let's go of her hand, and says simply, “I think you drank too much.”

A couple of her friends offer to help her, but Deirdra says it's fine, she can handle it herself. Rosewater isn't that far. She piggybacks her diminutive baby sister back up the road. Erna falls in and out of sleep with her arms draped over Deirdra's shoulders and her legs cradled in her hands.

“You're heavier than you look,” Deirdra says under her breath.

“Huh?”

“Nothing.”

Erna sees the high peaked roofs through bleary eyes and slurs, “Jus’ go through th’patio, s’closer.”

“Mom and Dad are still out there with the Davenports. We're going the long way.”

Erna groans. “Who gives a fuck?”

“I do. I give a fuck about getting caught,” Deirdra says, then rolls her eyes at herself for trying to reason with a shitfaced fourteen year old.

Erna mumbles something that she doesn't make out. Deirdra jostles her, trying to lift her higher on her shoulders, stumbles, steps on a rock, and quietly hisses in pain. She loses her patience for a second and sneers. “Could you try to not be dead weight for a minute?”

“Should’ve jus’leff me on the beach.”
“You would've passed out and drowned when the tide came in.”

“Yeah, I know,” Erna says, as if that was the whole point.

Then she falls asleep again.

Deirdra gets her up the stairs and to her room where she pulls the chain on the white wicker ceiling fan and drops Erna into a gilded day bed befitting a young princess. Without opening her eyes, Erna mumbles as her sister brushes hair away from her sweaty forehead, “Fuckin’ hate it here.”

Deirdra shushes her. “Go to sleep, lush.”

Erna turns onto her side and clutches at her pillow. “Deirdra?”

“What?”

“You're scary smart.”

“Oh, I don't know,” she responds quietly.

Erna’s eyes are still closed, but she isn't asleep and her fingers dig into the pillow and mattress, then relax, then dig again, like a cat kneading. “Smarter’an me,” she praises.

“I'm just a lot more careful than you. You're pretty smart.”

She would say more about how she admires Erna’s courage, about how she's jealous of her for not being afraid to be herself and piss people off. But Erna starts snoring softly and her fingers lose their tension. Deirdra turns off the light and goes back to her own room.

In about as many years as Erna has been alive so far, Ava and Barbara, a corporate lawyer and doctor respectively, will become bitter rivals as they fight more and more about which of them should inherit Rosewater and the penthouses in Paris and the jewelry and antiques and countless other things. Cynthia will be in Addis Ababa with the Peace Corps, teaching children English, living
off her trust, and allowing her mother to go ahead with wedding preparations so that she can marry her fiancé upon her return without ever needing to look at a color swatch or go to a tasting. Deirdra will be proving to her parents that she is responsible and has a good mind for business and hoping that she can get them to increase her trust or leave her more in their will than originally promised without getting married.

Erna will be twenty-eight, disowned, and running out of money, because she is irresponsible, because she doesn't give a fuck about herself or anyone, and because she's always been sad. She will vacillate back and forth between needing her older sister and pushing her away, because she needs her approval and affection, but she is also terrified of needing it.

And she will have about as much sympathy for herself and her situation as she's ever been able to muster for any character in an Edith Wharton novel.

“How did I know you'd be here?”

Erna startles at Levi's deep monotone voice. She nearly falls out of the bed while he kicks his boots off in the doorway.

“Sorry,” she says, shaking her head, blinking her bleary eyes, and wincing when he hits the lights.

He puts a cup in her hand and the smell of espresso fills her head and soothes its ache. She looks down at the comfortingly familiar cardboard cup and asks, “Where'd you get this?”

“One Shot. Where else?”

She looks to her left at the window. It's dark out already. “One Shot closes at 6pm,” she says, confused. “And this is still warm.”

“I called Eren and made him come down to make you a latte.”

She remembers that he said he was going to get her one on his lunch break, but she hadn't taken it seriously and was too preoccupied to think of it anyway. “You didn't have to do that.”
“I wanted to,” he says, and it isn't up for discussion.

She takes off the lid, and looks at the pretty leaf design in the frothy milk on top for a second before taking a long sip, then a deep breath. Levi is standing in front of her, watching with his hands in his pockets. It makes her feel self conscious and she looks around. “Sorry I trashed your place a little.”

“And then fell asleep in my bed. Fucking Goldilocks.” He looks at the half empty mug on the end table. “Drank my tea, too?”

“Sorry.”

“You aren't grey anymore.”

He sits on the bed next to her and reaches past her, grabbing for the mug of cold tea she left half-drained on the end table so that his neck is right in front of her lips as he tents his fingers over the rim. She pictures herself tracing the line of his neck up to his undercut with her tongue. She wonders if his stubble would feel like sandpaper. Then he straightens back up, brings the mug to his lips, and looks to her with an arched, pierced eyebrow.

“None of Deirdra's shit was working. I thought you'd have something better.”

He hums thoughtfully. “What'd you end up using?”

“Green soap.”

“Good stuff.”

“Sorry.”

“For what?”
“Invading your space. Making a mess. *Being* a mess.” She shrugs.

He takes another sip of cold tea. “Don't be sorry for any of that. Thought you'd be up here, pissed off, yelling at me in German, nagging me to beat you or something. Got the latte to calm you down.”

She smirks at him. “I knew it couldn't be just to be nice.”

“Could also be that.”

“You're not that nice.”

“Fine. It was to save my ass.”

As he gets up to wash the mug in the sink, she holds her coffee close to her face, lets the steam open up her veins, and smiles. “I don't yell at you in German. I yell at Erwin in German.”

From the sink he scoffs and asks, “Then what language do you yell at me in?”

“Russian. I'm not fluent in Russian. It takes the most effort.”

“Well,” he says as if it's an honor. “What's that one word you always say? It sounds like 'sooka’.”

“It means 'bitch’.”

“Nice.”

“It's a very romantic language,” she quips. She takes a big sip of her cooling latte. Levi starts putting away the different bottles of cleaners and soaps she left on the table and Erna worries her thumb between her teeth a little before asking, “Do I nag you to beat me?”

He stops where he is and puts down the bottle of rubbing alcohol he'd just picked up. “Did I say
“That?”

“Kind of. Yeah.”

“No,” he says. He picks the bottle back up, looks at it as if he just noticed what it was, turns to look at her, and asks, “Were you going to put this on your face?”

“I mean… if nothing else worked.”

“Jesus,” he sighs. He opens the cupboard under the sink and starts putting everything back. With his back to her, he says, “I don't think you nag. I had a fucking day, so it wasn't hard to picture you getting pissed about the coffee and giving me shit.”

“And nagging you to beat me?”

“Give it a rest,” he warns softly before closing the cupboard door.

Erna pouts, sets her coffee on the nightstand, tents her fingers over her lap, starts worrying at them, picking at the skin, scraping fingernail against fingernail, and she says softly, “It's fine if you don't want to. I don't care.”

He stands and leans against the counter and regards her from across the room for a moment. When she notices that he's gotten quiet and looks up from her fingers, he raises an eyebrow at her and asks, “You don't care?”

She looks away and shrugs just one shoulder before putting it more truthfully. “I could make myself not care.” She reaches for her coffee again. “If you don't want to…”

“Of course I fucking want to,” he cuts her off. “Why are you being weird? You're apologizing for shit and not yelling at me… What the fuck is wrong with you?”

She finishes her coffee in one long sip to stall and then holds the empty cup between her hands, squeezing it and denting the cardboard. She says quietly, with a cracking voice, “I'm not…” then, she checks herself again and tries for honest. “I get, like,” she pauses for a quick, deep breath.
“When I start to like something too much I get scared.”

She expects complete incredulity or sarcasm, or both. Instead, Levi says without hesitation, “I get that.”

She looks up from her mangled coffee cup and says a touch slowly and very seriously, “No, you don't.”

“Yeah,” he argues, “the more you like something, the more it hurts if you lose it. It's like that quote.”

Erna’s brow creases. “What quote?”

“That Latin thing.” He shrugs. “You put it in my sketchbook.”

It takes her a moment to remember, but then it clicks with an, “Oh.” She closes her eyes and recites, “Terribilum est quod amare mors tangere potest.” Then she opens her eyes and says, “It’s a really old Irish saying. Took me forever to put it into Latin.”

“It's a terrible thing to love what death can touch.”

Erna narrows her eyes at him and her body language becomes closed off and wary. She asks him, “How’d you figure that out?”

Levi suddenly becomes visibly stiff. He can’t imagine what kind of storm of fury she would unleash if he admitted to sharing what she’d written with Erwin just to find out what it meant. He gathers his thoughts and quickly tells her the most uncomplicated lie he can think of, “I googled it.”

He expected that to be enough for her to let it go, but her expression doesn’t change. Eyeing him up and down suspiciously, she says, “You can’t just google translate Latin. It’s too complicated. If you could, I wouldn’t have spent so much time on homework.”

Plan B, get defensive. “What’s the big fucking deal? Let it go.”
Erna quirks her lips and tilts her head. Her eyes move a little, like there are calculations going on behind them. Then she says, “It’s just strange.”

“Why? You don’t think I could have figured it out?”

“Well,” she says, folding her hands in her lap and correcting her posture, choosing her words slowly, with a demure mien, “you did figure it out, but it's curious.”

“How's that?”

“Because,” she says, “ego te intus et in cute novi.”

They stare at each other. After a beat of silence, Erna smirks. As he turns away, Levi tosses her a “fuck you,” and she asks with a smug smile, “Who helped you?”

He deflects as he digs through his bag to pull out his sketchbook and get started on the hours of work ahead of him, “Where did you learn all this shit anyway? Know ten different languages, but never learned to talk to people politely in any of them.”

As he sets himself up at the drafting table on the other side of the room with his back to her, Erna sighs and flops herself backwards to lay on the bed and stare at the ceiling, her arms falling straight out, palms up. She waits. She gives him just enough time to start to get focused. When she can feel him starting to get lost in his work, she asks the ceiling with a honeyed pout, “So you don’t have any time to hurt me?”

The way he sounds distracted, she can tell he doesn’t even pause his drawing. “I don’t have time to eat or shower, so no, on the list of things I would do if I had time, that’s not near the top.”

Erna wouldn’t care. She could just not care. It’s really fine, she thinks. She doesn’t need it. Except that a dark, cold feeling in her gut gives her doubts and makes her worry that she’ll never feel his hand around her neck again, and, reactively, she is all of a sudden very fucking needy for the only thing that can calm her down.

“Then, could you just, like, say something mean to me? Or something?”
“Yeah,” he says, without turning around, “either shut the fuck up and let me work or go back to your own apartment.”

That’s not completely unsatisfactory. It makes her feel warm in her chest but also hungry, starving for a more intense feeling, whether it’s good or bad. She wants to respect the fact that he already told her no, a few times, but her nature won’t let her. She sits up and splays her fingers out over the black blanket over the bright, bleached white sheets on his mattress. “Could I,” she starts, pausing to worry her lip with her teeth, staring at his back and shoulders hunched over whatever he’s working on, “I don’t know. Could I, like, do something for you?”

She can see the slight motion of his arm stop, and she watches, entranced, as he rolls his shoulders back, straightens up, and cracks his neck, tilting his head to one side and then the other before slowly spinning his stool around to face her. He taps his pen against his thigh and raises an eyebrow at her.

“Like what?”

She swallows a rising lump in her throat. “Like… anything? Like what do you need done?” She looks around. “I’d make dinner, but —”

“No.”

Erna nods. “Completely fair.”

“What is this?”

“What?”

Levi’s eyelids lower and his brows knit slightly. “Is this you trying to be a service sub?”

Erna’s shoulders drop dramatically, and she huffs a small sigh before pouting. “Where did you even learn that term?”

“The internet.”
“Ugh.” Her face twists into a pained grimace. “I guess? I don’t know.” She crosses her arms in front of herself defensively. “I just… Can I?”

“Thought that was a hard limit for you.”

“Fine,” she says emphatically. “Maybe it’s in the soft limit category.”

“You don’t have soft limits.”

“Why are you making this so painful?” she whines. “What’d I do to you?”

“Lately?”

Erna muffles a frustrated squeal, because he’s right, and she can’t counter argue. Her hands fall to her sides in defeat but ball themselves into fists anyway as she stamps a foot against the stupid, shiny, white linoleum floor.

Levi smirks and breathes a barely audible laugh at her as he spins his stool back around. He makes her wait a few seconds while he goes back to drawing before he tells her, “Make some fucking tea if you need something to do.”

He can hear her turning on her heel, then, with a fair amount of cheek in her voice, she asks, “Can I call you ‘Sir’?”

“Absolutely not.”

She turns the kettle on and spins on the balls of her bare feet to lean back against the counter and watch the back of his head while she waits for the water to boil. “Daddy?”

“Do I look like a daddy to you?”
Erna smiles, delighted. She would be horrified if he called her bluff and agreed to any cliche honorifics. “Levi, then?”

He hums his assent, then adds, “As long as I can call you a brat when you're being one.”

“You could call me worse things,” she tells him sincerity and a little badly hidden longing.

“You aren't anything worse. You're just a fucking brat,” he mutters to the figure he’s sketching.

Minutes later he can feel her over his shoulder. He refuses to turn and look, because her favorite thing to do when he’s genuinely trying to get work done is to try to distract him and he isn’t an idiot. Not today. He switches his pen to his left hand, and she puts a warm mug in his right.

His pen drags a line across the paper to put a lower border on what’s going to be an astronomy-themed armband, and he sips his tea without faltering until she chirps behind him, “Now what?”

“Now we’re back to shutting the fuck up,” he mutters as he tries to fix the hitch in his line.

He hears her huff and can picture her face with its indignant pout. “Come on. Isn’t there anything you don’t want to do yourself? I could be, like, actually helpful, you know.”

“You can’t cook and you can’t clean and you being here is a distraction.”

She bites back with her sharp tongue, “Is that literally all you need?”

“Yes. That, and for you to shut the fuck up,” he says before taking another sip of tea. He can hear her tapping her foot now and can feel the angry squint that comes with that motion. He deadpans, “Are you about to say something?”

She sucks at being submissive, he thinks. Much better at being a brat. He hears the rub of fabric on fabric as her arms fold in front of her, and he listens to catch anything snuck out under her breath, but there’s only a very audible, petulant sigh, and then the swish of her skirt. He finally turns to look and doesn’t see her indignant face staring daggers at him until he looks down to find her kneeling on the
floor next to his stool, hands folded in her lap, shoulders rolled back, chin tilted up, defiantly silent.

He quirks his lips, quells the urge to get into the argument he can feel her sucking him toward like a black hole, turns back to his drawing and simply says, “Good.”

He almost forgets about her. She can tell, because his hand is moving fast and the tension slowly evaporates off of his shoulders, letting them fall and move with his arms in smooth movements rather than jerking. As seconds tick by, the combativeness drains out of her, she forgets being annoyed, forgets feeling like she didn’t get her way, and her silence feels more like an offering than a ‘fuck you’. She sinks into subspace without a touch or a word and her breathing slows to almost nothing. Everything, especially the incessantly critical and paranoid voice inside her head, feels relaxed and quiet. When he drops his arm, outstretched fingers gripping the lip of his empty mug, she takes it without any snark and floats over to the counter to refill it and return it to his waiting hand.

She kneels again, he sips, and, as she’s folding her hands, he says, “I could get used to this if you wanted to make it a permanent thing.”

And to remind him that scenes like this are not to be an expected or oft-repeated thing, she mutters, “Suka.”

He holds the mug between his knees while he turns to a blank page and wonders, “Where did you learn Russian anyway?”

“Am I allowed to talk now?”

“You already did,” he points out. “May as well.”

She takes her time about answering, because, even as a sub, she’s a brat. She pulls her skirt under her and sits on the floor, stretching her legs out in front of her and rolling her ankles, flexing them against the way they should naturally bend, curling her toes under and touching the balls of her feet. Then, she shrugs and volunteers a tactful, noncommittal response. “A guy I knew.”

She hears the stool turn, and she looks up. She stares at his face, at the shrewd look he’s giving her, before he repeats, “A guy you knew?” with a raised eyebrow.

“What?”
“From you ?”

“What?” she asks more shrilly.

He narrows his eyes and looks at her suspiciously, as if this suddenly turned into an interrogation. “What does that mean?”

“A friend,” she offers as an explanation.

“You don’t have friends. Besides, you would have just said that. Why are you being weird?”

“Why are you being weird?” she counters louder.

She expects this to blow up, turn into a stupid fight so that they can silent treatment each other for ten minutes, then talk about something else like nothing happened. It doesn’t blow up. Instead, it smolders in his eyes while he just keeps staring at her, waiting for her to crack.

She looks down at her dress and smooths out her skirt. “Just a guy. He was a Russian Lit. professor. I had a crush on him. It didn’t work out.” She picks at a barely perceptible, near-microscopic piece of white lint stuck to the edge of a black, satin bow.

“Why not?” he asks, his voice wooden and hollow.

“He was submissive, too.” She fingers the loop of a bow and gives it a gentle pull. “So it was an incompatibility issue.”

The breath Levi was holding nearly hisses out of him while she continues. “Despite being a bitch in every other context, I couldn’t even begin to dominate someone like that.”

“Did you try?”
“Kind of. I mean, no. Not really. I tried to think about it. We talked about it, but anytime I tried to picture myself doing anything he would want, I’d get kind of dizzy and short of breath and it felt like I was going to black out.”

“Like what?” he asks gently, while she picks at imaginary flaws on the fabric of her skirt.

“Forced feminization and other things that squick me out.”

Levi can’t imagine what to say next. He wants to ask so many things, because he’d forgotten again that she used to be a person, with a life, with a whole history, and with connections to people he’s never known. It’s like there’s two of her and the other Erna is removed from him, dead, but still haunting the doll-like girl splayed out on his floor whose voice gets empty and eyes vacant like her insides are carved out when she talks about the person she used to be.

“So we decided to be friends with this frustrating, impossible mutual crush and sometimes he would text me dirty talk in Russian,” she says matter of factly. “So I know some words, like, suka …”

Levi’s gut twists and feels ready to drop straight out of him. He wants to know what those texts said. His lips purse and press into a straight line slightly downturned at the corners as he shakes his head at himself.. “So, what happened?”

He can hear the bitterness in his voice. Erna doesn’t let on that she notices if she does. She laces her fingers together in front of her and flexes them against each other to crack her knuckles as she says casually, “He killed himself.”

“Shit…”

“It’s whatever,” she says, keeping her fingers interlocked and arms stretched out straight in front of her.

“I’m sorry.”

“I said it’s whatever.”
He almost wants to ask if it was over her, because to his mind, killing oneself over as intense a girl as Erna isn’t a fucking stretch. It would be sinless poetry, to get all twisted over this violently sharp, terrifying little fireball in a prim, ribbon-laced dress whose passion could be so scorching and oppressive that she should need to keep people at bay or else destroy them, only to have her say as cool and dismissively as could be that your death was ‘whatever’.

He turns himself back around to look down at the new, blank page on his drafting table and stops, conflicted about getting to work on the skull and scythe he’s supposed to be drawing for a client.

She’s leaning back now and slowly drops to her elbows, tests that out, then seems to decide ‘fuck it’ and lies on her back on the floor, looking up at the ceiling, hands behind her head. She asks with childish curiosity, “Do you know anyone who killed themselves?”

Levi’s lips purse. His pens stops moving for a split-second pause and starts again.

He doesn’t answer. She thinks he’s being obstinate, as usual, and she lets the breath out of her lungs until her spine flattens against the floor even in her lower back with its deep curve of an arch. Her vertebrae pop, and she closes her eyes.

By the time he says anything, she’s forgotten that she was waiting for an answer at all, and it takes a second to connect when she hears him say in a straight monotone, “I killed my best friends.”

After a second of silence for her to process, she asks evenly, “How?”

He starts dry, “They asked for pills,” and on the breath in between, “I gave them pills,” his cadence breaks a little like he’s short of breath, “and they overdosed.”

Erna’s fingers twitch and her wrists tingle with a thousand pin pricks. She says slowly, hoping that she won’t sound antagonistic for disagreeing, “So you didn’t kill them.”

“Agree to disagree,” he says, his voice a clean, smooth deadpan again. He brings the mug to his mouth and takes a long sip.

Erna sits back up and crosses her legs under her dress. She knows that she can’t ask any of her questions. None of them are fair. Is that why you punish yourself? Is it why you don’t let yourself have real friends? Why there aren’t any painkillers in your medicine cabinet? Would they be happy
to know that you don’t let yourself relax or stop working ever? They’re all accusatory. And she
knows the answers to all of them. And they all feel like a fight.

Instead of asking if he thinks of them often or what they were like, because she’s afraid to pry and
would rather that information be volunteered than asked for, she lets a minute pass, then asks, “Are
you really not gonna eat or shower?”

He stops drawing and rolls his head to the side and back until the back of his skull is resting between
his shoulder blades and he’s looking up. He taps his foot against the stool. After the eighth tap, he
asks, “Do you want to order a pizza?”

“Sure,” she shrugs.

“You’re paying.” He nods his chin back down and touches pen to paper again.

“Asshole.”

“You’re a terrible sub.”

Chapter End Notes

I wrote this over a very long period of time with breaks in between and in completely
different states of mind for each part, so if it seems a little off or disjointed in some way,
that would be why.

It’s been hard to focus. I don’t have time time to sit and write for hours anymore, but I do
pieces here and there wherever I can.
i've been getting a lot of feedback about "when the fuck is Levi gonna get off?"
the answer is maybe never. maybe this chapter, maybe next chapter. don't ever ask a
social sadist when they're going to let your fav character come. but, no, also, keep
asking me, i get off on it a little, especially if you're very, very frustrated about it.

Levi shrugs his hoodie closer around his neck and zips it up higher. Yesterday it was sunny and hot
and he’d been comfortable as hell in his sleeveless threadbare band tee and jeans while Erna had
pouted under a black lace parasol. Overnight the temperature dropped to sixty and he woke up
fucking frozen and clammy in the damp, cold air rushing through the box fan in his window and
now she’s sitting across from him with black, lacy layers of skirts warming her thighs, thick black
leggings, a dress with a neckline only inches below her chin, a black velvet corset hugging her
middle. She’s like a soft, smug, warm, little black cat, not even a single accent of white on her today.
Her bell sleeves hide her wrists as she reaches for her latte, her fingers standing out starkly white,
buffed and filed little oval fingernails gleaming, peeking out and curling around the white porcelain
handle of her mug with deft, efficient grace.

He pulls his knees up and hugs them almost all the way to his chest. “Can we go inside?”

“I like it out here.”

She’s a definitionless black hole. He hates her dresses. It’s one thing to leave everything to the
imagination, it’s another to confuse and disorient the imagination with layers and layers of black,
swirling lace patterns like a bas relief, and things like puff sleeves and petticoats designed to hide
every natural curve. He huffs to himself and rubs his arms.

She lights up a black cigarette, committing herself to at least five minutes at this table outside the
cafe, while she watches him from underneath her black bangs, and blacker, thicker, feather-light
eyelashes blinking at him. “It’s only seventy degrees. Are you sure you don’t have a thyroid problem
or something?”

He hates fall.

And winter.
And temperatures below seventy-five fahrenheit.

She looks more radiant the colder it gets. Her skin turns white like powder snow and glows.

It’s a problem. Not for him. She fails to make his heart skip beats anymore. He’s been exposed to her symmetrical, upturn-nosed, glossy-lipped face for too long. The only thing that gets him to do a double take at her anymore is yoga pants.

Another buttoned-up asshole in an expensive coat looks at her for too long on their walk to the cafe door and he swears changes in temperature make fuckboys come out of the woodwork.

“Tch.”

He hooks his thumbs through the holes in the cuffs of his hoodie, sheltering the backs of his hands and his wrists from the cold.

“Seriously, do you have a circulation problem?” she mutters behind the rim of her mug.

“Fuck off, you’re wearing fifty layers of clothing.”

“Yeah, you could be too. Go get a sweater.”

“Fine.”

“-or does toxic masculinity tell you that it’s gay to be warm?”

“I’m…” he says, unfolding his legs and standing from his chair. He checks the time on his phone. “Fuck.”

“-or is it just vanity?”
He leaves a five on the table in case he doesn’t have time to come back. He runs back to the apartment. It isn’t like he doesn’t own a sweater, it’s just that he’s an organized fucking human being who does shit like pack winter clothes away when it gets to be a hundred degrees in the sun. He has to dig them out of his closet and open the vacuum bag around them. He reaches in and puts on the first sweater he grabs, black with white five-point stars down the sleeves. He tugs his hoodie back on, more snug now, and runs back downstairs.

Some new fuckboy is talking to her already even though she could not look less interested or more angry and mean. He gets it, though. He would try it too.

He comes up and pulls his chair out, completely startling the guy who had been leaning toward it like he was about to try to sit down while Erna glared at him.

As he’s walking away defeated, Levi asks her, “What do they even say?”

“They start with ‘hey,’ say something about my dress, ask about what I do, basic shit, you know.”

He rubs the bridge of his nose. It’s so… disgraceful… gross… offensive that she should have to suffer that, and hypocritical of him to be offended, because he’s sitting across from her, attempting to strip that dress down with his eyes every five minutes.

“Are you just gonna stay here all day?”

She looks at him. He’s standing up because he has to go already. He basically came back to chase that guy away and now he has to go to work and he’s already worrying. Her brows knit at him. “Yeah. Why?”

He can’t hide the disgust from his face when he asks, “Does that happen the whole time I’m not here?”

“Does what happen?”

“Do scumbags hit on you all day?”
She looks momentarily taken aback and answers, “No one’s hitting on me.”

He’s lost for an answer to that. She lives in a different reality and he doesn’t know how to communicate with her across the gap between them. He pinches the bridge of his nose and rubs at the barbell there. “Erna, why would… Do guys try to talk to you when I’m here?”

“… No.”

“So that one time I got up to take a piss and I came back to some bro asking if he’d met you somewhere before, you thought that was, like… genuine?”

She looks a little put off and says, “No, I thought he was bored and fucking with me.”

“Oh my god.”

“What?”

“So same with the guy who took my seat last week as soon as I got up, because it was ‘crowded’?”

“It was crowded.”

“Are you naive?”

“No, I’m just, like, not cute. No one is hitting on me.”

He presses his fingers to his right temple as he shoulders his bag. All he can do is groan at her while she looks at him with confusion all over her face and goes, “What?”
He can’t tell her what. He walks away, hoping that she’ll see reason on her own, gets on his bike, and goes to work, but even there he can’t let it go, letting his insult eat away at him while he’s working so that he can’t not talk about it by the time he and Hanji are picking up lunch.

“But if she doesn’t know she’s that cute, then she’ll probably lower her standards for you.” Hanji offers helpfully, with such a big, sweet smile that he cannot tell if they are trying to burn him or not.

He wants to shoot back that she already has lowered her standards for him, but that doesn’t seem like as good a comeback as it should be.

It shouldn’t bother him that she doesn’t understand how pretty she is - Hanji’s right, it probably benefits him - but he is bothered by it. He feels insulted when she says it. He’s a fucking expert on aesthetics. People literally pay him to put pretty things permanently onto their bodies. It would be like him telling her that her favorite book is poorly written.

When he gets home he has to ask her, “What *is* your favorite book?”

“Moby Dick,” she says, quickly, without giving it any thought. “Have I never talked about it?”

Maybe she did a long time ago and he wasn’t listening because of her beautiful fucking face. She sits at his kitchen table talking about Melville and his tragic life and his anger at God for being a dick and then she begins to give him a quick fucking master class on American Classical Literature and why Moby Dick is such a unique and artful deviation from traditional style, how it still polarizes critics for being so different, and he understands none of it, but it is the first time she’s ever sat there and talked enthusiastically about something she genuinely likes, so he does not stop her to ask for clarification, he just watches her.

When she’s finally done and she hasn’t touched any of the food he put in front of her because she was too busy gushing about her favorite book, he tries to tell her, “You’re so fucking pretty.”

She clears her throat like she just choked on something, blushes, and when she recovers, says, “Gross. Don’t do that.”

“What?”

“Don’t, just, like, say things because you feel like you have to.”
“You think I’m lying to you?” he asks low and dark, because she better fucking not.

“I mean…” she blinks, wrestling with her cognitive dissonance. “No. Not, like, intentionally.”

He is almost in awe. “You’ve got a crazy fucking blind spot.”

She stands up, flattens her palms on the table, and leans. “Stop trying to be deep and hurt me,” because she always comes expecting a scene and can never manage to be patient for it.

“If I told you that it sounds like Moby Dick is poorly written,” he deadpans at her, not getting up from his seat, “What would you say?”

She looks very offended and huffs at him, “You don’t know shit anyway. It’s perfect. You haven’t even read it.”

“Okay, have you even looked in a mirror?”

She takes his meaning and picks her hand up off the table and hits it in frustration. “I told you, I don’t see myself.”

“That doesn’t mean anything. You’re not a vampire. You have a reflection.”

“No,” she says, frustrated, “It’s, like, a thing.” She leans over the table and reaches for his phone. She unlocks it, taps at it, and after a few moments, turns the screen to face him. “This thing.”

He looks and it’s open to a dense academic article from a psychology journal and he rolls his eyes impatiently. “Can you give me the gist?”

“Fucking…” she mutters. “It’s called BDD. It means I can’t see the whole picture of my face. It’s a brain thing.”
He takes the phone from her and bookmarks it to read later. She tells him, “My eyes work, the signal doesn’t get interpreted well.”

“Good,” he says, annoyed. “Then you can just believe me, because I’m right and now I know that you can’t prove me wrong.”

She crosses her arms, looks down at him, and says, “You’re just being nice,” sullenly as if it’s not very nice at all.

His brows knit at her. He rocks his chair back slightly. “Who hurt you? Like how do you get through life being that pretty and thinking you’re not?”

She shrugs and says quietly, “Everyone always said I was ugly.”

“Maybe on the inside.”

“Fuck you.”

“You’re gorgeous. Why did you think guys at the cafe try to flirt with you despite your intense resting bitch face?”

“That’s not a compliment. That doesn’t mean I’m pretty. Men just try to fuck everything.”

Levi’s lips pull to one side. He pauses for a good long time while he tries to think of something to refute that. He ends up saying, “You’re not wrong, but also - fuck - you really don’t get it?”

“What?”

“Tch. Nothing.” He stands up from his seat, resigned that he’s getting nowhere. “What did you come over for?”

She perks up and stands a little straighter. Her body rocks on bare heels and she laces her fingers together behind her back while batting her eyelashes at him. “Spank me?”
He wouldn’t even do it, but she gets that mischievous look in her eyes when she can see that he’s annoyed with her and gets so pleased with herself. He forgets what he was annoyed about. Her oil-black eyelashes flutter over an almost imperceptible smile. “Please?”

He shrugs because that’s a simple request. The hardest part is finishing her while not getting himself off or mauling and fucking her into oblivion. Her smile widens, her shiny pink lips part to reveal straight white teeth. He thinks that she’s perfect down to the bone and pulls her to the bed, onto his lap, no discussion necessary. Her skirts rustle as he tries to push them out of the way.

He likes spanking her on his lap, facing him, because every time he hurts her and she tries to get away from his hands she has to rub herself against his cock. He hates it for the same reason.

He tries to tell her, “I hate your fucking dre--” but she tugs gently at one of the piercings in his lower lip with her teeth and makes him stutter to a groan. Her hands leave his shoulders, she sits on his lap while she leans back and a second later all of those layers covering her legs are falling around her knees, revealing a beautiful, unbruised expanse of thigh for him.

She says, “It’s a skirt.”

He wraps an arm around her corseted waist and lifts her, makes her stand up so that he can kick that black pile of fabric away. He sits her down on his lap again, pressing her hips down into him where they start to buck and roll for friction against the throbbing bulge in his pants. When she goes to bite and tongue at his earlobe, he tells her, “I’m not doing the time it takes you to finish.”

It takes her longer the more they do this. He thinks she’s taking it for granted.

She lets go of his ear and whispers, “But I wanna come…”

It feels like it takes him a solid minute to exhale, but his breath leaves him with a frustrated growl. He could make her come in less than thirty seconds if she would just let him… attempt other methods.

He raises his hand and brings it down, smacking her perky ass, still steadying her with his other arm, holding her as close as he can and rubbing the head of his cock against her through three layers of fabric, his underwear, his jeans, her fucking thong with a little bondage buckle at the front of it for no reason other than that it’s really hot and makes him want to rip the flimsy lace it’s attached to the fuck apart. She clings tight to his shoulders and moans little breaths while he warms her up with his hands,
patiently turning all of the exposed skin between her thong and her black thigh-highs a light, warm pink.

She’s arching her back, licking at his neck, and murmuring, “Please?” pushing her ass back into his hand while he grabs at her skin. And he isn’t supposed to fuck her. His thumb hooks her thong and her hips roll in an elliptical circle. He reminds himself again that isn’t an invitation, even though it reads like she’s begging him to take his cock out so that she can ride it.

It’s not like he doesn’t want to keep spanking her until she comes. That is at the top of his priorities. It isn’t like he wouldn’t put in the work. It’s just that he’s afraid that if he keeps this up for ten or fifteen more minutes, his cock is actually going to hurt and he didn’t even know that was possible, but it turns out it is.

“If you want to come,” he says, “You need to do it in the next minute.” He ends the ultimatum by unhooking his thumb from her barely there thong and giving the side of her ass a sharp smack, making it turn a deeper, brighter, hotter pink.

She whines, already giving up and melting on his lap, arms slung around his shoulders, she complains in his ear, long and deep and drawling, “But Levi…” until another slap lands on her other cheek and makes her yelp. He hits her harder and harder, drawing more sounds out of her, making her body rock against him like a stormswept tide. She gasps like she’s surprised and she sobs when he rains down several smacks in quick succession without pause.

Her thighs clench rhythmically in no time at all, because he’s a quick learner. He’s gotten good at her.

All the tension leaves her muscles and she leans on him, resting her cheek on his shoulder, nuzzling at his neck, and he’s still rock hard and dying to come, doing himself no favors by smoothing his hands over her skin as if it’s to soothe her and not just for the sake of feeling the warmth on her smooth skin.

He breathes deep and shifts her weight on his lap, rubbing her over his cock and making the air leave his lungs. The pads of his fingers dig deep where they’re cupping her ass and she hums. The low, contented vibration makes a shudder go up his spine.

He clears his throat and asks with his eyes closed, “You good?”
Her whole body tightens against him, around him, and she murmurs affirmatively. He turns his head to try to look at her. She’s nestled her face firmly into his neck, but he can smell her hair, takes a deep breath of oranges and vanilla, and tells her, “You need to go.”

Her shoulders bounce in a contained laugh because she knows why.

She thanks him, gets her skirt, and wishes him luck like a smartass. He would insert her into some degrading fantasy for spite, but there isn’t any fucking time, he’s already been leaking precome for minutes. He pushes his jeans down to his thighs, without time to even kick them off, the exquisite torture already built to such a height that he feels dizzy, feels like he can taste electricity on the edges of his tongue. He rubs his thumb through all the wetness leaking from his slit and around his piercing and his entire body flinches at the contact to the over sensitive head of his aching cock. He drags it down his shaft, fingers smoothing over the bumps of barbells, and jerks himself off messily, with little effort for about fifteen seconds before he comes so hard it hurts, grasping at the sheets with his other hand with a shudder that rips a moan out of him. His eyes roll back in his head and cum streaks his shirt up to his chest, and after some ragged, air-gulping breaths, he groans at himself, “Fuck.”

He needs to stop doing that.

He makes himself get up and change and get his laundry together, knowing that once he does lie down, he’ll never get back up. So he carries a canvas laundry bag down four flights of stairs.

“Tch.” He can hear the machine at the top of the steps. He goes down anyway to see how long is left in the cycle and there she is, still in that skirt and those thigh high socks and her black, ruffly secretary blouse with a neckline almost all the way up to her chin, a black, velvet corset hugging her middle, all wrapped up in layers of light-obscuring, definitionless darkness, her chin tilted down so that her shiny, thick ribbons of curls hide all of her profile but the tip of her cute nose.

She lifts her face, blinks, raises her eyebrows at him, and asks, “You feel better?”

“Do you?”

“Yeah, like, a lot, lately, thanks,” she says almost meekly for her. She lifts her book again and blushes behind it. He just escaped the succubus, he thought. He was so close. She starts to say, “If you wanted to, again--”

“Uh-uh. No thanks. I can’t. I’ll die.”
“Sorry?”

He squints at her a little. She looks genuinely confused. He asks, “Do you really not get how hard that is?”

“What’s hard?”

He drops his laundry to the floor and puts his head in his hands, pushes his hair back, and says, “You came on my lap. I thought I was going to pass out because too much blood was rushing to my dick.”

Her lips part as her jaw sags a little and she says, “Ohhh…”

“Oh?”

“I had no idea.”

He holds his hands out in desperation. “How?”

“I don’t know, I don’t get the same feelings, and I have no experience with…” she shrugs, “any of that.”

“What do you mean?”

She tilts her head at him, like she’s confused that he isn’t getting it, like he doesn’t understand something she thought he did. She says, “I’ve had like,” she looks up and thinks, “maybe three unsatisfying and off-putting vanilla sexual encounters.”

He walks over to her, leans his elbows on the washing machine next to her, and drones at her low and clear, “As your new dom, I want details.”

“The first two weren’t even anything.”
He cups his chin in his hand and stares at her. “What does that mean?”

“We made out and I hated it.”

He closes his eyes and rubs his temples. “Oh my god.”

“Shut up.”

“So what was your one unsatisfying and off-putting vanilla experience.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

He’s highkey disappointed, but he doesn’t press it. “So you have been curious.”

“Enough to find out that I don’t like it.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean?”

“What didn’t you like?” He’s eager to find out, because no matter what it is, he can easily just not do that thing. He can swear to never even think about doing that thing.

She pouts, her eyelids start blinking fast again, but he stares at her. He isn’t letting her go anywhere. She says quietly, “It hurt.”

He does not react for a beat, because he is expecting more. An explanation, maybe? Because normally she’s pretty fucking thrilled and glittery-eyed about things that hurt. He searches her face for more, she blinks at him, and he deadpans, “Are you fucking with me?”
“It’s different!” she rushes to explain, although that is, in fact, the extent of the explanation she’s willing or able to give him at the moment. When he asks her how it’s different she won’t tell him exactly what happened. She just says it was a different kind of hurt and she didn’t like it, which is incredibly helpful.

“If you don’t tell me, I’m not going to spank you bent over that dryer.”

It takes her a second to get what he’s saying, but when she does her eyes light up. She puts her book down, slides herself off of the dryer to stand on the ground, and says, “I got fingered badly in the back of a car,” but with the completely wrong tone of voice because now she’s excited about getting spanked and she sounds very happy and enthusiastic about it.

She turns around and puts her palms on the top of the dryer. She has to wait a couple seconds, because he is taken aback by how quickly and honestly she answered that. He was expecting a lot of whining and pleading and attempts at manipulation instead. She turns her face to the side to look at him, wiggles her ass, and pouts, “You promised.”

“Yeah,” he says almost absently, like his mind is somewhere else. He blinks, shakes his head, and goes over to her even though he’s full of questions now. His hands pull her hips back until she’s only got a loose fingertip grip on the top of the dryer. He takes her skirts up in a fist over her lower back, brings his opposite hand up and back, and slaps her ass literally once before he lets go of her and walks back to the side of the washing machine to rest on his elbows.

To say that she is livid is an understatement. She’s standing up, nearly vibrating in place with how frustrated she is. “That’s not--”

“I said I would spank you.”

“But--”

“And I did.” She stomps her boot and sticks her tongue out at him, and he reminds her, “And I’ve been doing that a lot lately. Maybe we should try something new.”

“Yeah?” she says with her sarcastic edge creeping back. “Such as?”

He gives her a sympathetic, disconcerted look. “Correcting your bad impression of vanilla stuff?”
She stands and stares at him like she’s skeptical, but curious. The washing machine that had just finished spinning comes slowly to a stop and buzzes loud and harsh. She flinches and seems broken out of whatever curiosity she’d had, whatever had her leaning toward him with oily black pupils pinpointed on his lips. She goes for the stairs without an explanation, forgetting her book.

If she thinks that’s a valid way to escape a conversation, she’s underestimating how much time and patience he has. She’s underestimating the pure power of sexual frustration to stretch people. He knows she has to come down for her clothes. He just waits. He actually gets a very decent amount of work done free of distractions, sitting on the dryer next to her book with his sketchbook in his lap.

When she comes back down the stairs and stops stock still staring at him in shock, he asks, “So what are you afraid of exactly RE: vanilla stuff?”

“Did you wait here?”

He gives her a shrug of his hoodie-clad shoulders. She comes closer, reaches to take her book with a hand gracefully stretched far from her. It reminds him of a ballet movement.

Levi unfurls his legs from on top of the dryer that finished and came to a halt about five minutes ago so that when she tries to take her clothes and avoid his question she has to try to open the door with the backs of his heels against it. She is too smart, looks at the little dryer door handle, looks at him blocking it, and crosses her arms, and tilts her head. She has the gall to tell him, “You’re being a brat.”

“Coming from an expert.”

She huffs at him. “Is it that important?”

“You said--”

“Is it like a dealbreaker?”

He is physically taken aback, his neck arching as he looks up from his sketchbook and tilts his head back. “What?”
“If I don’t want to, would you need to stop domming me?”

He is horrified. “Oh my god, no. How shitty do you think I am?”

She gives him a look like she isn’t sure. Somewhere in between turd and shitstain. Which is fair, he guesses. He tells her, “I didn’t mean to pressure you. Fuck. Did you really think that?”

Her hand cradles her opposite elbow. “Yeah, no, I just like thought that you would think I was leading you on and then you’d never hang out with me again… so…”

He rubs his temples with his left thumb and forefinger, tapping his pen against his sketchbook. “Yeah, but you’re insane.”

“I will admit that my anxiety can draw me toward illogical conclusions sometimes.” She rocks a little bit to lean onto her right hip and looks down.

There’s quiet while he tries to collect all of the reasons that he would never want to pressure her into anything and decide where to start, while she turns around and leans back against the dryer, between his legs. He sets his sketchbook to the side and takes his pen between his teeth while his hands slide over her ribs and wrap her in a hug. He leans over and rests his forehead on the back of her head. She still smells like oranges and vanilla.

He puts all his thoughts succinctly with, “I’ll continue dominate the shit out of you whenever you want and keep jerking off. It’s not a big deal.”

“That’s very sweet of you.”

“Yeah, I’m a saint,” he murmurs defeatedly into her thick ribbon curls of hair.

He lets go of her, takes one of her hands in his, and his pen in the other and starts drawing on her, because he doesn’t want to let her go again. That, and, he has an idea for a kind of negative space henna design, like lace, and she’s as good a canvas as the paper in his book. The washing machine keeps turning in its clunky rhythm and it’s the only noise for a while.
“It’s just such a part of my identity,” she says eventually. “I’m almost more scared I would like it.”

“You’re gonna like it a lot,” he affirms calmly, without expression.

“You don’t know that.”

“It’s me. I do know that.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“So we can work some vanilla into your scenes?”

She hums. “A hint of it.”

“You fucking smell like vanilla,” he says, for no reason, only she does.

“That’s my lotion.”

“Want to eat it,” he murmurs absently, filling in the space around a loop of vine he lined. “Want to eat you.”

“I’ve never…” Her hand twitches. “Can I get my laundry?”

“Not done.” He holds her hand still. “You’ve never what? Been eaten out?” The skin he’s drawing on is changing color and getting pink. “Figures you’ve had strap on sex and have never been eaten out. Is that like a submissive thing? You’re not allowed to like oral?”

“It’s not a--” she starts to say defensively before stopping herself. “Oh, actually, maybe it is?”
“You’ve never thought about it,” he says, disbelief coating his words at how anyone could get this far in life without devoting at least a few hours of thought to oral sex.

“No. Have you ever thought about choking yourself with a belt?”

“No.”

“Well I think that our minds are occupied with different things, then.”

“My mind’s been occupied with a lot of things lately,” he murmurs, tracing the outside center of a flower.

She stands still a little longer, letting him loom over her like a gargoyle, craning his neck to drag his pen over the bones of her hand, and then she gets restless again and asks, “So can I get my laundry?”

“Not done yet,” he husks at her, focused on the balance between line thickness in the outline of petals and leaves.

“You’re doing that thing,” she points out. “You’re holding me hostage.” He blinks. Lets go of her hand. She turns around to face him, but looks down at her hand instead of into his eyes. She says just above a whisper, “If you want me to stay just ask me to, don’t draw on me.”

“Take that as me asking,” he says, too much of a cocky idiot to actually do the thing, and still refusing to put his pen down and let her go.

She quirks her lips. “It’s late.”

“Stay over.” The washer slows to a stop next to him, clicks, then begins to spin, off-center, violently.

“And do what?”

“Not like that. Just sleep.” He misses the feeling of sleeping next to someone.
“On your bed?”

“No, I’m taking the bed. You get the floor.”

“Your bed is tiny. We barely fit on it.”

“Yeah, that’s what’s so great about it.”

“I’d feel too claustrophobic.”

He deadpans seriously, “I’ll get a bigger bed,” because he means it.

“Then you’d have even less space.”

“I’ll get a bigger apartment.”

“I wouldn’t be able to follow you there,” she says, all hollow and honest.

He breathes a sigh, says, “We should work on that,” so that she won’t feel alone about it.

She says noncommittally, “Yeah, maybe…”

“Did you call that therapist?” The one he knows Deirdra referred to her, who does skype sessions, who specializes in addiction and PTSD, whose number she has in her phone because he watched her save it.

He holds her hand still while she huffs and shakes her shoulders. “I’m scared and I don’t want to,” she enunciates very clearly, with a demure little inflection.
He can’t help the laugh he breathes. He surrenders her hand back to her as her reward for being vulnerable and honest about it, even though he wasn’t done. She holds it up and hums, “Pretty.”

He asks, “What else are you scared of?” and she turns around to stare at him in open-eyed confusion about why he would ask. He doesn’t give her any help, just sits perched there and waits for an answer.

So she says, “Everything.”

“What’s a small thing?”

She crosses her arms and from the look on her face he can’t tell if she’s trying to think or refusing to, so he gives her one himself, “Are you still afraid of your shower?”

She covers her eyes with her hands, hiding her embarrassment and the heat rushing to her face. She groans. “I’m not afraid of the shower, I’m afraid because I can’t hear when I’m in the shower.”

“If someone was trying to break into your apartment,” he makes her face the harsh reality, “you would fucking hear it over the sound of the shower.”

And she nods like she knows this because she’s thought about it so many times, and she responds fast with, “But it would be too late.”

And he realizes the level of alertness and paranoia she’s operating on.

It’s not an illogical fear that she will not hear a break-in over the sound of running water, it’s a logical leap to the sound, but outside the box conclusion that if she could just hear the footsteps earlier, from further away, then there could be time to save her life.

He caps his pen. Sighs. Doesn’t know what to say besides, “Want to go upstairs?”

“And?”
“Netflix and fold clothes?”

She huffs, but he can tell she’s happy. “Yeah, fine, but I’m sleeping in my own bed.”

She’s probably right about the bed. It makes an okay couch with the pillows up against the wall, but the one or two times he’s tried to lie down and cuddle with her on it he’s ended up with at least one numb appendage. She sets his laptop on the table and says, “It’s my turn,” regarding who gets to make a case for what they want to watch this time while the other complains loudly.

“I have a request for consideration,” he says, with little emotion to start.

She smirks, standing next to the laptop, looking down at him seated on the bed. “What?”

“Whatever boring as fuck documentary or black and white movie you are about to put on, can it at least be halfway visually interesting?”

“What does that even mean?”

“Nevermind. What is it?”

“Well now we’re watching Mulholland Drive because it’s terrible and you’re going to hate it.”

“Don’t assume I haven’t already seen it and hated it.” He narrows his eyes at her, daring her to click play and suffer through it with him.

She crosses her arms, lowers her eyelids, and warns, “I’m not watching one single more Wes Anderson movie, I cannot do it, I will gouge my eyes out.”

“They have aesthetic!”

“They are boring!”
“Philadelphia Story is boring.”

“You are boring,” she says, with cold, emotionless finality, as she turns and hits play on A Streetcar Named Desire, which he actually doesn’t mind.

They have different priorities in movies that overlap sometimes. Streetcar is visually interesting, with impeccable lighting, set design, and shot composition, whether she knows it or not. Not that it matters. She could pick a documentary about jellyfish for all he fucking cares, he just knows that she likes to argue. It makes her curl up with her warm little ruffle and ribbon-adorned body pressed close against him faster. Her basket of clean clothes sits on the floor while he asks her, “What’s your thing with old movies?”

“Do not,” she warns him. “Not after yesterday. You can’t critique my taste in movies.”

“Seven Samurai is a perfect movie.”

“It is three and a half hours long.” That was her main complaint.

“And every second of it is visually perfect.” She also hadn’t liked the fact that he wouldn’t let her leave until it was over. He let her have a smoke break in the middle and during it he stood outside with her and explained why lighting is so important and so hard to get right. She didn’t care. He complains, “It should be illegal to be as beautiful as you are and not give a fuck about aesthetic.”

He doesn’t have to look to feel her blush. She literally gets hot and he can feel it. She says weakly, “Stop it.”

He shoots back immediately, “You’re hot and dumb. It’s sad.”

“Okay, this isn’t even complimentary anymore.”

“Gonna keep saying it until you get it.”

She huffs and elbows him, but cuddles closer underneath his arm in the process. He figures she has a lot of conditioning to reprogram. He doesn’t mind saying it as often as he thinks it, at least until it
stops making her blush. Because having her next to him and not having the freedom to let things happen organically is hard as hell and she needs to realize that and have some fucking sympathy for him.

It’s that much more frustrating because he can tell that she wants something by the way she squirms against him. He knows it’s useless, but he tries. The arm he has slung over her shoulders squeezes tighter, he turns and kisses her cheek, his knees fold under him. The corner of her lips curl up in a smirk that he trails kisses across her face to reach and bite at, because she’s decided that kissing is boring and gross, but she’ll let him do it if he bites her enough. He isn’t complaining about the restriction as her tongue slips past his lips and traces his teeth.

It would be preferable to get lost in it and not feel tension in every muscle while he tries to go slowly enough that she won’t…

“Yellow.”

“Fuck,” he says against her closed mouth.

“Did you want a scene?” she asks condescendingly.

“I wanted to make out with you.” He lets his forehead fall on her shoulder and whines, “Why can’t we just see where it goes?”

“Because,” she says primly, leaving no room for any argument.

“No,” he says this time, “Because why? You let me spank you or whip you with my belt or a riding crop without any negotiation.” He lifts his head off of her shoulder and stops leaning on her, fixes his eyes on hers, and waits for an answer.

She blinks at him, pouts a little, and then says, “Because it’s new and scary and I don’t like not knowing what’s going to happen.”

He huffs and taps his fingers on his thigh. His brows knit for a moment, then slowly relax into sympathy. “Fuck.”

“Yeah.”
“You’re getting really good at being honest and vulnerable at moments where it’s going to fucking wreck me.”

“If I’d known it would be so effective I would have started sooner.”

He resumes his position next to her, but keeps his arms around himself instead and lets his shoulders fall as he decides he may as well watch the fucking screen. After a while, she makes a humming sound before saying, hesitant and quiet, like she’s resisting letting the words spill from her mouth, “Why do you always stop? You could just negotiate it out with me and keep going.”

“Feels weird. I only know how to improvise.”

Marlon Brando comes on screen and she starts squirming against him again, slight, needy, little movements she probably doesn’t notice she’s making. He tells her, “Stop that.”

“What?”

“By the way are we only watching this because of your crush on young Brando?”

“I do not--”

“Don’t you?”

“... Tennessee Williams’ plays are transcendent and tragic without being cloying or too goddamn long,” she emphasizes, casting him some side-eye. “And my desire to watch this has nothing to do with casting.”

“Because you just have a thing for the character who beats his girlfriend, you don’t care who’s playing him.”

“I do not!”
"Uh-huh."

"Are you actually jealous of a fictional character in an adapted play right now?"

He’s jealous about a lot of things.

When the movie’s over, he tries to get her to stay, again, because he always has to at least try. He says, “You don’t even like being alone and you don’t like your apartment, so why not?” She stands up from the bed and he hooks his fingers through loops in her skirt holding a ribbon in place around her waist. He holds her still when she tries to move to get her boots. “You like me and you like my apartment. Stay here.”

“It’s not that I wouldn’t prefer to,” she says, turning and looking over her shoulder and down at him. “I just don’t want us to become a hot, codependent mess.”

“We won’t.”

“Yeah, well,” she sighs, gently removing his hands from her skirt, “it’s nice that you think that, but I can only refrain from being a toxic piece of shit toward you for so long. It’s better if I go.”

“I don’t think you’re a toxic piece of shit.”

“That’s because you’re an enabling piece of shit.”

Alone in bed, he looks up double mattress prices online and eyeballs how much floor space he would have left if he went through with buying one. After spending fifteen minutes finding the most comfortable looking mattress and making himself sleepy looking at it, he remembers to read that article he bookmarked.

He’s jealous of the way she’s oblivious.

He’d thought she was always too aloof to notice all the times when people stared. He thought she was so above it as to not react or comment at all on it. Now he knows she isn’t even unaware of it, but she has rationalized dark, ugly, mean reasons for the attention because she literally cannot see
that she’s beautiful.

She sees a collection of tiny details, all of which are imperfect or ugly to her. He doesn’t know why he’s fixated on it, but he is. He wants to know what she sees, asking her, “What about your eyes?” across the table inside the busy cafe the next morning.

“Wrinkled at the edges, oily lids, too small,” she lists off carelessly.

“They’re not… any of those things,” he says, bewildered as to how she could see any of that.

Now that he has her thinking about it, she holds one hand in front of her face and goes, “I hate how bony and veiny my hands are.”

“They’re hands.” He pinches the bridge of his nose. “They’re supposed to look like that.”

“And my lips are too thin and i can’t wear lipstick because my skin is too weird and pale and there isn’t a color that doesn’t make me look like a dry old crone.”

“What the fuck are you even?”

“I’m serious.”

“You’re insane.”

She shrugs. “Maybe.” She pulls out her manuscript she has to work on. “You asked.”

“Yeah, well, I’m an idiot,” he mutters, hunching over his sketchbook to get five more minutes of work done before leaving to do more work at the shop.

She looks up and asks him after a minute of sipping her latte, “Can I take a shower at your place?”
“No.”

Her brows knit at him, because she’s confused, because he never says no. The truth is, he feels petulant about being denied the prospect of maybe seeing her in a towel, even though he could get her into a scene and ask her to strip anytime he wants… but he has to ask for it. Has to be so organized. It’s like choosing something to listen to versus hearing your favorite song on the radio. And that’s initially why he refuses. Pure brattiness.

But then he says, “You called me an enabling piece of shit.” He puts his sketchbook down and looks at her. “So maybe I should be tougher on you.”

Her mug makes a little clink against its saucer when she lowers it and her eyelashes. She lifts her chin in slow motion, eyes gazing down at her coffee, and the remaining half-blurred steamed milk rose on its surface. She sighs after a moment, and says, “I like that idea, except I think you should start being tougher on me after you let me take a shower at your place.”

“Why don’t you spend any time in your own apartment?”

“I just don’t like it,” she says defensively.

“That wouldn’t have anything to do with the fact that it’s a cluttered, filthy mess because you never clean.”

“It wouldn’t,” she purses her lips and crosses her arms in front of her. She looks away from him.

He stands from his seat and says, “Take a shower at your own place.”

She makes a disgusted little noise, so he leans over the table to say in a low, quiet husk, “It’s an order.”

She gives him a haughty look, lifting her chin and lowering her eyelids. “How will you know if I did it or not?”

“You’ll tell me,” he deadpans, reaching for his bag and slinging it over his shoulder.
“And you’re just supposed to believe me?” she says with skeptical derision, as if she’s supposed to believe in the tooth fairy too.

“I trust you.”

Her nose wrinkles at him and she frowns. “Gross.”

He says, “Fuck you,” as he leaves, because somehow that is how they always end up saying bye to each other.

At work, Hanji is chilling at the desk with their feet up, enjoying a gap in their schedule. It’s convenient for Levi, because Mike banned his headphones from the shop for being ‘antisocial’, so that now he is, horrifically, expected to be able to make small talk. He hates it, but Hanji will do it for him unwittingly if given the opportunity. They are deep in a conversation about photography with the twenty-eight year old engineer whose calf he is tattooing with a japanese maple in black with red watercolor accents on some leaves when his phone buzzes at him.

He ignores it. It’s never important. Hanji is complaining about how the new smartphone cameras are too good. The best one right now can mimic a thirty-five millimeter with how accurately it can adjust its aperture and focus, and all conveniently on their phone. Levi and his client both do not know why that’s a thing to complain about, as Hanji has the newest smartphone with the best camera. Hanji clarifies, remembering that they left out the important part about how they bought an expensive Nikon last year for important pictures and it’s rendered basically useless now.

Levi’s phone buzzes again.

Hanji whines that it’s just collecting dust in their closet. The client nods and agrees that’s a drag.

Levi’s phone buzzes a third time and Hanji comes over to peer at the screen and inform him, “You got texts from ‘scary neighbor girl’.” They pick up the phone from the ledge of the half wall around Levi’s cubicle and, finger poised, ask, “Do you want me to read them?”

He’s about to tell Hanji to go ahead when his client speaks up to say that it’s been a while and they could use a break anyway. Hanji surrenders the phone back to its place on the wall and Levi puts his shit down and takes his gloves off.
He swipes at his phone expecting some sarcasm or a demand to run an errand. He is not expecting two uncharacteristically short messages:

“I did the thing.”

“Here’s proof.”

And a picture of her, from the neck down, face just cropped out of frame. The lighting inside the shower is bad, so it’s a little grainy; not so bad that he can’t see individual water droplets clinging to her naked skin. He can see her pink nipples peaked in full view above her smooth tapered waist and proudly jutting hip bones, water flowing to the apex of her thighs. She’s squeezing her legs together with her body bent in a serpentine shape, shoulders leaning one way while her hips lean the other, like she was in the middle of writhing when she took it. Lines of water carry iridescent bubbles over the curve and flow of faint muscles and help his eyes find depth and imagine the topography of her smooth, freshly scrubbed, polished veneer that he knows is going to taste like lemon-rose vanilla shower gel later.

He takes a deep breath and licks his lower lip slowly from right to left with the tip of his tongue. Dragging his teeth over the snakebite piercing on the left he texts her back, “Appreciated. Turning my phone off.”

It’s sent and he shakes his head and blinks suddenly, like coming out of a dream. He shoves his phone in his pocket, breathes deeply, and husks from somewhere deep in the nagging tightness of his abdomen, “Hey Hanji - that camera you were talking about - can I borrow it?”

Chapter End Notes

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