### Tea and Sympathy

**by** MissMoe

**Summary**

Levi is working the counter at the Chibitan Bubble Tea Shoppe when a tall, blond hunk in a tan peacoat walks by and does a doubletake straight out of a Marx Brothers comedy. Levi stares back, furious, because it isn’t Erwin. Klaus continues to stare, forlorn, because it isn’t Taki.

[This can be read stand-alone or as a sequel to my other fic, Just Bounce One in the Dirt]

### Stats:
- Published: 2018-03-14
- Updated: 2019-04-26
- Chapters: 37/?
- Words: 94594
I received a prompt along the lines of: Levi is a nasty little tsundere shit and still pining for Erwin.

I’ve also been receiving requests to provide an epilogue of sorts to an earlier fic I wrote for the Maiden Rose fandom (Just Bounce One in the Dirt) because the ending was so depressing and abrupt and unsatisfying.

That got me thinking (always a bad idea, heh) and I decided to have two of my favorite pairings from two of my favorite mangas collide in a nod to all the people who think that Taki/Klaus and Levi/Erwin look awfully similar. The similarities, of course, are merely superficial. Or do they run deeper?
Levi is working the counter at the Chibitan Bubble Tea Shoppe when a tall, blond hunk in a tan peacoat walks by and does a doubletake straight out of a Marx Brothers comedy. Levi stares back, furious, because it isn’t Erwin. Klaus continues to stare, forlorn, because it isn’t Taki.

“Take a picture, asshole.” The small, raven-haired man glowers at him beneath his candy-striped paper hat. “It’ll last longer.”

The big blond remains frozen in the open doorway of the tiny shop—nothing more than a counter and three stools—the stranger’s rudeness catching him off guard. He quickly, furtively glances over both of his shoulders, golden eyes flashing, as if scanning for some unseen enemy lurking behind a light pole.

“Tch,” sneers the shop worker. “Either come in and order something or move the fuck along. You’re blocking the door with that gigantic gorilla body of yours.”

Klaus is insulted. And speedily falling victim to nostalgia. That rude little man is very obviously not who Klaus thought he might be when he first glanced his way, and it wasn’t just the nasty things the man was saying—words caustic enough to strip paint—that destroyed the illusion, or the fact that his irises weren’t blue-black but rather the palest grey—so pale that from where Klaus was standing, he could see just the black of his pupils, black like a sunny day in Hell—but still…he was almost the right height and had the same dark ebony hair and pale skin, a mouth plush and delicate and pink, almond-shaped eyes and elegant fingers…fingers that were now impatiently drumming on the counter.

“Well? Will it be this century or not?”

“Uh, yeah.” Klaus cleared his throat and dislodged the frog of disappointment that had been sitting in it. Everything rational in his brain was telling him, “Run, you fool, run!” but his body had a mind of its own and in four short strides he was standing at the counter staring down at Mr. Rude-As-All-Fuck, who apparently went by the deceptively innocuous pseudonym ‘Levi’ according to the name tag pinned to his neatly pressed white shirt. Klaus was fairly certain that the guy’s real name was Satan, Jr. “I’ll have a bubble tea.”

“No shit. What size?”

“Small.”

“Tch. Figures.”

There it was again, that annoying sound of disapproval and, for some crazy reason, Klaus felt like this Levi fellow was making some kind of snide and highly inaccurate comment on cock size rather than cup size. “Fine. Large,” Klaus shot back defensively. He couldn’t believe he was letting this diminutive prick walk all over his six-foot-five ego. What was wrong with him?

“What flavor?”

“Huh?”

Oh, Jesus. There were at least fifteen different flavors beautifully handwritten in cursive. The last time Klaus had seen such lovely script was in a letter he had received from Taki a year ago, a letter that Klaus carried with him in his wallet and read each day like one recites the Our Father and Hail Mary while fingerling the rosary, as if that act of humble reverence would make him reappear. He looked at the chalkboard, his face growing hot as painful memories ricocheted in his head, his eyes beginning to prickle. He blurted out the last thing he saw before his vision blurred, “Lychee.” Shit. He hated lychee. Why didn’t he say ‘mango’ instead? Mango was listed right below lychee. It struck Klaus that the flavors were listed alphabetically. When Levi turned his back to fill his order, Klaus wiped a hand across his eyes and smiled. His Taki had always liked things to be in good proper order. Good proper order. Goddamn it, what was he doing, stopping in a place like this, ordering bubble tea, something he never drank, and in a flavor he couldn’t even stomach? He left a twenty pound note on the counter and turned to leave. He would go back to his dumpy leased flat on Russell Square and have a proper drink at the pub around the corner: bourbon, neat, no chaser. He’d drown his sorrow in booze, the only thing good and proper in his life now.

“Hey, Shit-for-Brains!” called Levi. “You forgot your fucking tea!”

“Keep the change,” Klaus called over his shoulder, “and the tea.”

Levi swore under his breath as he watched Klaus disappear in an instant down the street, swallowed up by the crowds of tourists milling around the shops in London's Chinatown. He took a sip of Klaus’s tea and savored the sweetness. Lychee was Levi’s favorite flavor. He heard movement in the back room, then the soft rustle of the curtain as it was pushed aside and the shop owner entered the front area carrying a new batch of cooked tapioca pearls in an aluminum pot.

“Levi, how many times have I told you not to curse in front of the customers,” Taki chided softly. He poured the tapioca into a plastic container and set it next to the ones holding various diced fruit. “It’s bad for business.”

“Yeah, boss,” Levi muttered. “That guy was asking for it, though.”

Taki straightened and looked Levi in the eyes. They stood almost even; that is to say, they were both small men, even if Taki had maybe two or three inches over him. “Asking for it? He sounded perfectly nice to me.”

“He was just a big blond dope,” Levi insisted with a snort. He sucked a tapioca pearl through the wide straw and chewed noisily.

“Ah.” A sad smile graced Taki’s lips. “Your type, then.”

Levi sucked another pearl into his mouth, then leaned over and kissed Taki, passing him the pearl. “No. More like your type.”

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If you’re coming to this fic from one or the other manga fandom, or from no fandom at all and have no idea who the characters are, check out this short but hot fan-made video featuring Levi x Erwin, which includes a tiny excerpt of Klaus doing the nasty with Taki from the Maiden Rose OVA:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QyddivkLeCI

If you’ve only seen the Maiden Rose OVA and never read the manga, you are missing out on one of the most beautifully drawn mangas of all time, hands down (don’t let the OVA fool you with its so-so quality). Inariya is such a consummate artist and while I love Isayama's SnK story, his drawing
skills can't compare to hers. Here's a lovely fan-made video with panels from her manga:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jyK46FaQ3eg
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Klaus is pining for Taki. The Green-Eyed Devil makes an appearance.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was the weirdest thing, but after six shots of bourbon Klaus could swear he was seeing his double; even his older brother Ernst didn’t look so much like him. The man—sitting two tables away from him eating a plate of fish and chips and drinking pint after pint—wore his blond hair neatly trimmed and parted on the left. “Probably ex-military turned pencil-pusher,” Klaus thought to himself. And then, “I need a fucking haircut.” He finished the last of his steak and kidney pie and threw on his jacket, stealing a glance at his doppelgänger as he walked by his table and out the door. He trudged up the street to the Waitrose, where he bought a bottle of water, and then on to his leased flat on Russell Square. Tomorrow he’d take a stroll through St James’s Park. It was spring and the primroses would be blooming. Fuck. Primroses couldn’t hold a candle to the wisteria in Japan, those lilac blooms fluttering in the breeze, as fragrant as his Taki. Klaus washed his face and downed two painkillers, then stripped off his clothes and crawled under the sheets. He reached down and palmed his cock, but didn’t have it in him to do more than that. “Taki,” he whispered to the ceiling. “Where are you?”

He held him in his arms—his body small, compact, smooth, perfect—and squeezed, firmly, then harder, until he felt the smaller man struggle against him, clipped whimpers exhaled in breaths that grew shorter and shorter, damp and hot on his chest. He kept on squeezing, even as he knew he was crushing the life out of this thing, this precious thing. All he saw was ebony hair as shimmery as silk, luxuriant beneath the touch of his lips. He breathed him in, the scent of wisteria filling his nostrils and carrying him as free and light as a petal floating on an ocean breeze. It was beautiful, even as he destroyed the thing he loved most, even as he destroyed everything he had ever loved and wanted.

Klaus awoke with a start, jolting upright, his skull throbbing with the merciless hammering of yet another hangover. He was approaching thirty and no longer able to shake off a night of hard drinking like he used to. When he fell back down onto his pillow, he was surprised to find it wet. Was it sweat, tears, snot, saliva? All of the above? “Taki.” There was no one there to hear it, but he uttered the name into the silence of the room anyway, uttered it like a desperate prayer to the one he loved most, his throat parched, voice a painful rasp, tongue like sandpaper. “Where are you?” Klaus pressed the palms of both hands onto his eyes and felt wetness. Then his body shuddered on the mattress, shaking it as he sobbed without restraint. “I miss you. Come back to me, Taki. Save me.” He looked at the clock on the night table. Quarter to three. So many more hours until dawn. It was unbearable.

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Levi looked at his phone and grimaced when he saw that it read 2:58 pm. That meant that he had seventeen minutes of reprieve before he showed up, enough time for a quick smoke. He stood outside the shop and dragged like a madman on his cigarette and sent another text to Erwin:
got fstfckd by a grl lst nite ur wlcme mthrfckr!

Somehow, mashing the ‘send’ button didn’t give him the kind of pleasure he had experienced in the early days of their break-up when he was still hopeful that he was torturing his former lover with unsolicited blow-by-blow recaps of his sexual escapades post-relationship. That none of those violently passionate hook-ups were remotely real was beside the point and yet he couldn’t stop himself from prolonging the charade, the fictional nature of the missives gave him both solace and made him want to curl up into a ball of regret. It was complicated. So fucking complicated.

Sure enough, at exactly 3:15 pm, the Green-Eyed Devil walked through the door and slapped his grimy hands on the countertop like he always did, Monday through Friday, without fail, and ordered a large passion fruit bubble tea.

“Extra passion, please.”

The Green-Eyed Devil’s usual ‘special request’ for ‘extra passion’ was muffled slightly, but not enough, by the sound of Levi shoving the plastic cup into the ice bin with murderous intent. The idiot did, said, the same thing every fucking day, weekends excluded because the Green-Eyed Devil didn’t show up on weekends, and it drove Levi out of his mind practically to endure another person’s OCD.

“You don’t have to tell me that, sir;” Levi intoned, saying ‘sir’ the way someone would say ‘douchebag.’ His abs were rock hard from the strain of holding his temper at bay. “You order the same thing every time.” He scooped extra passion fruit into the cup and wondered what had gone so horribly wrong in his life. The idea that he may have had something to do with fucking up a perfectly good love affair with the man of his dreams was starting to bleed into his consciousness and his resolve to push such a ridiculous thought out of his mind was crumbling as each month waxed and waned, bringing him one step closer to the graveyard in which all hope for romantic fulfillment was laid to rest. He took a deep breath as he spooned the tapioca pearls into the plastic cup, poured the tea, then the sweetened condensed milk and carefully secured the lid. “Voilà,” he said, placing the cup on the counter. “Four pounds.”

The Green-Eyed Devil plonked four pound coins onto the counter with his usual grin. “How about you and me? Tonight.”

“No. And fucking no,” Levi said robotically. He abruptly turned his back and busied himself with a dish towel, wiping away imaginary germs. It was a joke, really. The two of them went through this asinine routine each and every time, as if anything would ever change. Today, though, the Green-Eyed Devil deviated from the normal exchange of pleasantries.

“Erwin thinks you’re pathetic.”

Levi froze, the hairs on the back of his neck standing up. When he whirled around, ready to rip into this long-haired scumbag with the smarmy ‘stache on his upper lip, he was met with a smirk. “What did you say?” Levi asked, his voice low and lethal.

“You heard me.” The Green-Eyed Devil picked up the cup and walked out the door, laughing over his shoulder, “He’s been fucking my ex for months now.”
Picture Eren post-time skip in the manga, i.e. long hair, caterpillar 'stache crawling across his upper lip, nineteen years old.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Taki flees to London in the aftermath of a marriage derailed by Klaus. Erwin is rocking the Hot Teacher-Dorky Dad look and Levi falls for it hook, line, and sinker.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

How he ended up opening a bubble tea shop in London’s Chinatown was a story too humiliating to admit in detail, so Taki did what he did best: he lived in a state of denial. After an injury-shortened career in baseball that coincided with a failed marriage to a woman chosen by his uncle, he had hightailed it out of Japan with a small monthly allowance doled out by his family, hoping to escape a past he would rather forget. His family was eager to forget, too. In retrospect, he hadn’t meant to be dishonest, but that’s what it was, wasn’t it: dishonesty? All the things he had felt in his heart he had pushed away, turned his back on, as if that would change anything. An honest man would have embraced what he was, what he felt. He had not. He had spent one year in America pitching for the New York Mets—New York! the biggest and most prestigious market in professional baseball—against the wishes of his family. He had pleaded with his father and uncle and somehow convinced them to let him follow his passion, and they had relented against their better judgment. What a big, fucking mistake in hindsight. Always in hindsight...wisdom gained too little, too late. Over the course of that year, his father had passed away, dead from a heart attack in his absence, and then Taki had proceeded to break almost every sacred vow he had made to his gods: to abstain from meat, alcohol, and sex. He hadn’t eaten meat. Enough said.

When the Mets declined to offer a new contract, he was fortunate to return to Japan and play for his former team, the Tokyo Yomiuri Giants. His surrogate father, Suguri-san, had done whatever it was that was necessary to protect his reputation in the media—either through bribery or intimidation, probably both—after Taki had engaged in a night of public drunken and drug addled foolishness, followed by some private debauchery and Taki was so very grateful for Suguri-san’s efforts to save his honor, so grateful that he conducted himself like a penitent sinner, agreeing to everything that was demanded of him by Suguri-san, by his uncle, by his team, by his country. That meant consenting to an arranged marriage to a young woman selected by his uncle—a lovely girl named Sana whose father was a high-ranking member of the Cabinet—after his return to Japan. He went through the motions, including all the things that had to be done on his wedding night. It wasn’t that bad. Sana was beautiful, petite and refined, and of good humor. She didn’t behave like a spoiled rich girl and she liked to drink and smoke.

“Don’t tell my parents,” she had giggled after they had made love for the first time, lighting up a Gitanes. She hadn't bled and Taki had been overjoyed. She wasn't the only one who had...it made him feel close to her.

Taki had gazed shyly at her nakedness, marveling at her flawless skin. When he reached out and brushed his hand against her breast, she had smiled at him, then taken his hand and sucked his index finger into her mouth. He had shuddered with arousal and relief when his cock twitched against his thigh. “Shall we…again?” he had asked.
For several months, Sana made him feel normal or at least what he thought was normal. They would take their meals together, sleep together, make love like any ordinary couple. It was liberating. His sisters and stepmother would visit them in their apartment in Shinjuku. Yura, his oldest sister, would be marrying in the fall. Life was good. Then, spring training started and his days were spent in Okinawa with the team. That was good, too, until the final exhibition game with the Hanshin Tigers when he had looked at the opposing roster and saw his name listed on the sheet and everything had snapped into focus, reality slapping him across the face: Klaus von Wolfstadt, the man who had turned his world upside down and inside out, the man who had driven him to break his sacred vows to his gods. He had made new vows since, marriage vows to Sana, his wife. But it all came down to dishonesty, didn’t it? And there was no way to escape it except to deny what he was, what he felt.

To see Klaus again, after almost eight months of separation, was something that Taki had prepared himself for as soon as he heard that the Hanshin Tigers had signed a former Met. So much was happening in his life, though, that it was easy to push that fact aside. Denial, after all, was one of Taki’s strengths. Even as he shook Klaus’s hand in greeting, he was able to maintain a cool demeanor, his composure intact, and then pitched the game as if a giant tsunami wasn’t crashing through his heart. It was Klaus who was wrecked like a boat against the rocky shore, shattered to pieces. The man struck out each of his three times at bat, not the kind of hat trick one wants to notch in a game. The fans in the stands cheered Taki afterwards, his teammates took him out for a celebratory meal, and Taki managed to say all the right things, thanking the fans, his teammates, for their support. He went back to his room that night and called Sana, like he did every night during spring training, and told her all about the shutout game against the Tigers, told her he missed her, wished he could feel her kiss upon his cheek, her warm arms around him.

“I love you,” he said before hanging up. Those words. At that moment, he realized in horror that they were not meant for her. Then he turned his face into the pillow and cried bitterly, hating himself.

He finished the season with a winning record, but his elbow was ruined. He had never been a hard thrower in the past, but that year his fastball was topping out at ninety-three, ninety-four instead of ninety or ninety-one, quite a difference and his pitching coach, while thrilled at Taki’s improvement, was worried about the potential for injury. Sure enough, he suffered a badly torn UCL during the last week of the regular season and underwent surgery to repair the damage a few days later. He was back home with his wife to recuperate during the offseason, and while his elbow would heal, his marriage would not. She had cheated on him but that wasn’t the problem. Taki had given her his blessing to take a lover—she deserved satisfaction while he was on the road so often—and he was more than willing to look the other way, but she had met a man she genuinely wanted to be with, have children with, and Taki, for his part, had cheated as well, but without being truthful, having told her that he had slept with some nameless baseball groupies, girls who threw themselves at players after every game in every city. In fact, he hadn’t hooked up with any groupies. He had hooked up with Klaus instead.

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Levi was a fine art student at the Universität der Künste in Berlin when he met Erwin Smith, his art history professor during his first semester. The man had walked into the classroom wearing a striped button-down dress shirt with an argyle sweater vest and a bowtie and rendered Levi breathless, quite a feat since Levi was not one to be easily impressed. But the hideous outfit—which shouted Go Ahead, I Dare You to Say it to My Face!—clashed so beautifully with the man’s hunky six-foot-two muscular frame, his neatly clipped and coifed blond hair, and his sparkling blue eyes, that Levi just knew the man had to be a freak in bed. Levi had a thing for freaks, especially if they were rocking the dorky/hot dad/teacher look. This was too good to be true. While Erwin showed images of the Great Pyramids at Giza and rambled on in the dark about Khufu, Khafre, and Menkaure—or, as Professor Smith intoned, “Cheops, Chephren, and Mycerinus according to the Greeks and, yes, I
expect you to memorize those names”—Levi fantasized about unzipping Erwin’s slacks with his teeth and then swallowing what he hoped would be a very substantial cock. Then Erwin recited a poem by Shelley about Ramesses the Great and Levi couldn’t help but wonder what size condom Erwin would need to wear…surely XL. When the lights came back on, Levi’s notebook was filled with obscene doodles of phallic obelisks shooting jism into the sky.

Erwin Smith proved to be a hard nut to crack, though, seemingly impervious to all of Levi’s very overt attempts at flirting before and after class, followed by blatant propositions of sex via email.

“I make it a policy not to date students,” Erwin told him two weeks into the semester. They were in Erwin’s small but neatly appointed office, on the pretense of discussing the first paper that was due at the end of the month.

“Who said anything about dating?” Levi replied with indignation. “I just want to grind on your junk.”

Another man might have flinched, but not Erwin Smith, who was used to this sort of thing. The only students nuttier than those in the fine arts were those majoring in psychology and, being a very handsome man, he was fully aware that his pervy students were undressing him with their eyes as he paced back and forth in front of the classroom during a lecture. He tried, therefore, to stand behind the lectern as much as possible, in some futile effort to combat X-ray vision. This Levi Ackerman, though, was doggedly persistent and sticking like gum on the bottom of his shoe, so Erwin decided to play his trump card early. “Grind on my junk? I don’t think my partner would be too happy about that.” He smiled like a man saying “checkmate” in a game of chess and pointed to a framed photograph sitting on his desk. It was of a bespectacled person whom Levi instantly recognized as Hange Zöe, his painting professor whose gender was still being hotly debated amongst the students in class. It didn’t help that Professor Zöe referred to said self as they/them.

“That’s your partner?” Levi snorted, clearly not convinced. “I’ll believe that when Hell freezes over.”

Erwin tented his fingers in front of his face, eyes unblinking as he leveled an icy stare back at Levi. The temperature in the room dropped to zero.

Chapter End Notes

It really is TRUE that Hyakujitsu no Bara is up and running again in Hertz magazine in their March 31st issue. I found it hard to believe until I saw the first scans and then I just DIED. I am so happy right now it hurts! A million thanks to Inariya-sensei for her persistence and to all her fans who didn’t lose hope. In this crazy world there is still such profound beauty to be had. Literally bawling my eyes out…

Thank you Georgia for the heads-up. If you hadn’t prepared me for the news, I would have had a freaking heart attack.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Suguri confronts Klaus.

“This was never a coincidence, was it? You’ve wanted it, too, haven’t you?” Klaus had uttered those words before he had set his mouth on him with unbridled passion. “Don’t run from me, Taki. We’re meant to be together. And even if you run, I’ll follow you.” Klaus had pressed his nose to Taki’s neck, breathed him in deeply and was lost in aching bliss. Taki—his scent—was inside him, beating in sync with his heart, coursing through his veins like a drug, in his fucking brain, and he would never be rid of him, would never ever wish to be free of him. Klaus had taken him in that hotel room after the last regular season game against the Giants in September, attacked Taki like a wolf on prey, went at him with ravenous intent, not even realizing until he awoke the next morning that Taki had clawed at him in desperation, marking him with red welts across his arms and chest. Klaus had been drunk and high the night before and god knows what he had actually done to Taki. But Taki was gone from the room; only the scent of him on the bed sheets told Klaus that it hadn’t been a dream. And now that dream had turned into a nightmare once more, like it always did.

Each time the Hanshin Tigers had played the Tokyo Yomiuri Giants, Klaus had found a way to hook up with Taki. It wasn’t easy, but Klaus was a man on a mission and the only reason he was in Japan eating raw fish and hitting ramen shops on his off-hours was because of Taki, his sole reason to be alive. He could have stayed playing in Las Vegas for the Mets’ Triple-A team until they booted his sorry ass out of the organization. Life there was borderline bearable if he indulged in enough booze and hookers. He could have just taken a nighttime drive into the desert and killed himself under the stars, needle stuck in his arm like some lethal Cupid’s arrow. But he had tasted something so much better: he had played in the big leagues for almost four months in New York for the Mets and had caught for Taki...and then captured his heart—seduced him, kissed his virgin mouth, fucked his virgin ass. He had glimpsed the Promised Land and then placed one foot in it. He hadn’t meant to desecrate it, but there was no going back, was there? There was no way to make pure what he had made filthy, so he kept stepping forward, trampling Taki in his path, stomping all over his perfect little body because he just had to have what he wanted and it was never enough.

One would think that the shock of Taki’s marriage would have been enough to deter him, send him scurrying back to America with his tail between his legs but, no, not Klaus von fucking Wolfstadt. Sure, it had left him fairly stunned at first, but Klaus was no helpless caterpillar stung by a venomous wasp to be dragged off to some hole in the ground and devoured alive by hungry larvae. Taki’s grip on him might be as paralyzing, but Klaus was a willing victim, eager to drink the poison, if that’s what it was, this consuming love that wouldn’t give him a moment of peace until it had driven him to his grave, happy and miserable all the same. He would accept what little Taki was able to give him, however furtive, few and far between. A starving man will accept the most meagre crumbs, especially when he doesn’t know when the next meal will be. A man with nothing left to lose will proceed boldly, recklessly so, and that is what he had become.

Each time he had Taki in his arms for a few stolen hours of heartbreaking joy, he considered it a triumph on the scale of winning a fucking war, though he wasn’t exactly sure who or what he was fighting anymore: Himself? Taki? That pain in the ass Suguri-san? The whole goddamn universe?
“I could have you eliminated,” Suguri threatened him one day. It was June and the Tigers were in Tokyo to play the Giants for a three-game set. Suguri materialized at the hotel where Klaus’s team was staying, taking the stool next to Klaus at the bar and ordering a bourbon. “They wouldn’t even find your body, Wolfstadt-san.” He lit up a Gitanes and offered one to Klaus. Smoking was still allowed in establishments in Japan, thank the fuck god.

Klaus accepted the cigarette and laughed into his drink. “I hope you’re prepared to escort me straight to hell yourself, old man, ‘cause that’s the only way you’re going to get rid of me.” He took a swallow of his own bourbon and muttered, “Actually, if you really wanted me dead, you would have offed me in New York.” That earned him a grunt from Suguri, who signaled the bartender for the whole bottle. Klaus figured he was in for a long paternal dressing down from the man, who looked even sterner than the last time Klaus saw him, as if that were even possible.

Suguri dragged smoothly on his cigarette but inside he was really at a loss, a rare thing for him. He was a man of experience, a man who knew hard work and success, a man of loyalty and very selective compassion. He knew what was right and what was wrong, although that didn’t necessarily influence his actions. The year that Taki, his young charge, had spent in America was an unmitigated disaster, mildly put, a black mark on Taki’s reputation that Suguri had worn upon himself to save face for the boy because the failure rested on Suguri’s shoulders. He hadn’t done his job properly and now there was this...this ongoing mess to clean up like garbage that kept washing up onto the shore, garbage in the guise of Klaus von Wolfstadt. Why oh why wouldn’t this hulking blond piece of shit just stay the fuck away? It was a hypothetical question, of course, because Suguri knew the why of it. He was a rational man, not prone to flights of fancy or abject religiosity, but he was also of the belief that there was more to life than the very limited view perceived by the human eye. As nauseating as it was to admit, Suguri knew there was no solution to the reappearing trash problem. Taki and Klaus were tied to each other through some inexplicable bond—call it fate, call it destiny, call it karma, call it tragedy—but severing those ties would be like escaping the Furies of Greek mythology: it couldn’t be done.

He had worked diligently to minimize the damage, smoothing things over between Taki and his uncle, who was rightly furious over what had transpired during Taki’s wayward sojourn in the West. It was with soul-crushing relief that Suguri had watched Taki follow through on the marriage, grateful that the boy wasn’t putting up a fight, saddened to realize that Taki had put a sword in his own gut, deadened himself so he could live the life that was expected of him.

“It is what a man does,” Suguri had told Taki before the ceremony. “A man does his duty and he does it with honor. Do not humiliate yourself.”

“Yes, otōsan.”

And Suguri had smiled grimly, then turned away, sickened by his own concern for this man-child, this boy who called him ‘father’ instead of ‘devil,’ this surrogate son who still loved him without reservation though he was being asked to live a lie. As much as it pained Suguri, it was the right thing to do, fate be damned. When Taki and Sana commenced married life together, things had gone much better than anyone had anticipated. They got along, had a social life, both sides of the family were more than pleased with the match, one wealthy elite family joined to another, balance maintained. It was good. It was proper. And the two made a lovely pair. Their children would be beautiful. Most importantly, the two were having sex; Suguri knew this for a fact because Sana was a close friend and former schoolmate of Taki’s sister Yura and the two women talked about everything, including what went on in the conjugal bed. Suguri was so elated, even he began to see the light at the end of the tunnel, a way out, an exit. He thanked the gods, thanked them every day that Taki was on the right path. And then, he was off that path, chasing after his demonic wolf-god or letting himself be caught by it, what did it matter? The result was the same.
“You know that he is married,” Suguri grumbled, lighting another cigarette. “Leave him alone. If you care so much for him, why do you want to continue ruining his life? Go back to America.”

It made sense. As much as it angered Klaus, it still made good sense. He had little hope of the Tigers offering him a contract extension at the end of the season. His batting average was so-so and he wasn’t exactly a model citizen and the only reason he had been offered a one-year contract in the first place was because his former manager in Triple-A was now managing the Hanshin Tigers. This one season in Japan was all he had to live for because after that, who knows? What would he have then? Nothing.

“I wish I could,” Klaus told Suguri. “I wish I could cut my heart out and give it to him on a silver platter.” He looked Suguri in the eyes and didn’t stop himself from letting the tears spill over. “Do you really think I want to hurt him? He wants this. I know it. And I’ll let him. Even if it kills me.”

Suguri had held his stare for a split second before he poured himself another shot. “You’re a fool, Wolfstadt-san. That is what love does to a man.” He gulped down the drink and then refilled both of their glasses. “Don’t think for a moment that I won’t be there to stop you. We both owe it to Taki, yes? And I will see you straight to hell myself.”
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Levi is hired to spy on Taki. Erwin doesn't exactly see things the way Levi does.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He was draped over him under the sheets, right leg tossed across a hip, palm on chest, index finger pressing on a nipple as if he were ringing the doorbell to the House of Love. He heard that buzzing sound and his finger twitched again. *Let me in, motherfucker! Open the goddamn door!*

Levi cracked open an eyelid and decided that he hated his bedside clock with its obnoxiously shrill alarm set at ten AM, hated it with a passion that should only be reserved for living things. He was pretty sure a clock qualified as an inanimate object. Too bad. He reached over and whipped it across the room, feeling only minimal satisfaction when he heard it shatter on the opposite wall. “FUCK! YOU!” he screamed at the ceiling. Then he rolled over onto his stomach and went back to sleep. Taki was going to be royally pissed at him because it was Levi’s day to open the shop and now he was going to be late. Again. Too bad for Taki.

Obstinacy. It was something they both shared, like a trait passed down through their genes. They shared other things as well, things that were almost genetic in nature but not. It was just a quirk of fate, Levi supposed. When he first met Taki less than a year ago, stood eye-to-eye with him, he was startled. It was like gazing into a distorted mirror and wondering: *is this* how I look to the rest of the world? The man who had contacted him not long after he had followed—stalked, rather—Erwin to London and set him to this task of being Taki’s minder, his shadow and protector, was a man Levi had never known before, a man who looked to be in his early fifties like his own Uncle Kenny, a man who was Kenny’s *business associate* in Japan, if Levi were to believe the tales his uncle spun.

“Just do what Suguri asks you to do,” Kenny had told Levi from his lair in Berlin. “He’ll pay you generously. If you want to keep up this ridiculous ‘starving artist’ charade, well, that’s up to you, you little shit. At least you’ll eat and drink well.”

Levi had taken that to mean that his Uncle Kenny would no longer be depositing funds into his bank account. He’d have to make ends meet another way, and that meant serving as this Suguri’s minion-spy if he didn’t want to peddle his own ass for rent money. The man, this mysterious Suguri, was probably yakuza in Levi’s opinion. Levi had grown up under his uncle’s roof and tutelage and he had yet to meet one of Kenny’s ‘friends’ who wasn’t mob or syndicate or some other breed of shady underworld scum. Whatever. They were his own kind, weren’t they?

Even if Suguri appeared coldly threatening, Taki seemed harmless enough, a young man silent with sadness, silenced by sadness perhaps. Levi’s ‘assignment’ as Suguri called it was to work at Taki’s hole-in-the-wall bubble tea shop and keep tabs on his clueless employer, make sure no one six-foot-four and blond and named Klaus von Wolfstadt ever came in contact with Taki. That sounded easy enough and his Uncle Kenny hadn’t lied for once. Suguri *did* pay well, well enough for Levi to lease a furnished flat with access to a studio space in the attic lit by three glorious skylights. The apartment
building was near King’s Cross Station, which put him within stalking…er…walking distance to Erwin’s workplace at UAL: Central Saint Martins. Yeah, he’d do what Suguri asked.

Somewhere along the way, though, Levi started empathizing with Taki, grew to like his closed-off demeanor, his island-in-the-ocean aloneness. Maybe it was a Japanese thing, or maybe it was just Taki being Taki. “You should be a monk,” Levi told Taki one day. “Go live in one of those mountaintop monasteries contemplating rocks. It would suit you.” Most days, Taki was as warm and communicative as a rock, but wasn’t he the same? Alone? Miserable? Lost in regret? So many fucking things to regret.

Perhaps it was their similarities that enabled Levi to work alongside Taki without having the desire to kill him. Levi was good-looking and he knew it—plenty of people hit on him, wanted to fuck him—and he liked watching Taki, who looked so much like himself, moving about his tasks quietly, always so goddam polite to the customers, watching Taki as if he were watching himself on the movie screen, pretending that he was a stranger looking at himself if he were a different person, someone with a personality transplant who wasn’t unremittingly unpleasant. Was it pure narcissism that made Levi kiss Taki in the back room one day? It was just a small kiss, quick and passionless, but not without affection. Taki had merely stared back, wide-eyed, and just for a moment before he turned back to dicing a mango.

“Hey,” Levi said, “you don’t mind, do you? I mean, it’s just a kiss, right?”

Taki went on chopping the mango into neat cubes. “Levi,” he replied softly, “you’re rather a pest sometimes.”

“Heh,” Levi snorted, “I’m going to kiss you again.”

The chopping stopped. “Right now?” asked Taki. He laid the knife down and turned to face Levi, his expression a closed door.

“Sure. Why not?” This time, Levi put his arms around Taki’s shoulders and kissed him for real, pressing his lips to his before swiping his tongue into his mouth a few times. “Hmm. You taste sweet.”

“I ate a piece of mango before.” Taki picked up the knife and went back to work.

For people remotely normal, that post-kiss moment would have been fraught with awkward tension, but not for them. “We’re such fucking weirdos,” Levi thought. It made him glad. Then the bell on the door chimed, putting an end to such a happy thought, and Levi walked out front to see to the customer. “Yeah?” Levi grumbled. “What can I get you?” He bit down on his bottom lip, idly wondering what Taki saw when he looked at himself in the mirror. Did he know he was beautiful? Did he know he looked like a living porcelain doll? Suguri had never given him any details, nothing beyond his directive to watch Taki and report back to him on a daily basis, and he knew better than to ask, but he did understand this: Taki was something precious to this Suguri fellow. He was precious and vulnerable and someone, be it Suguri or whoever Suguri was working for, was paying to ensure his safety. Someone loved him, loved him enough to do this, even though this thing was not exactly on the up and up. He was being asked to spy on Taki, after all. God knows, he’d hate it if someone did that to him.

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The first time Erwin had fucked him, Levi had gone limp with pain but he was still able to cum, it was that good and worth the six months of incessant harassment and badgering—badgering and not begging because Levi didn’t beg, not up to that point, at least—before Erwin had relented. He had
never had to work so hard to make a man have sex with him. Levi could have anyone with just a nod of the head, he was that disarming when he wanted to be. And yet. Erwin’s cool resistance was beyond infuriating and it had only driven Levi to try harder. Like psycho harder. He was determined not to lose to this irritatingly handsome and stubborn mule who happened to ignite every desire smoldering inside him. And when he had finally worn down Erwin’s resistance, made him betray whatever stupid bullshit ethics he supposedly believed in, it was Levi who had lost; even though he had claimed victory, he had lost: his soul, his strength, his pride, everything that had enabled him to survive in the past was rendered moot by Erwin. Levi was impotent, so fucking impotent because he was the one hopelessly in love, and Erwin was not. Erwin held all the cards in his hand while Levi was left powerless.

How could he love someone who refused to love him back? That was the question Levi asked himself, over and over, when he finally admitted to himself that he was in too deep, but by then it was too late. He didn’t know how to make himself fall out of love. Could that even be done? Was that even a thing? And so he acted like a desperate fool, tossing aside his pride, his dignity, his…god, it was laughable. The more he loved Erwin, the more he hated himself. “Just love me back a little,” Levi had begged one night. Yeah, he was begging by then, stoned and drunk and spewing his guts out. The badgering stage was long-gone, gone with his pride and dignity. And what had Erwin said in response? Nothing. There was just stone cold silence and a blue-eyed stare. The unspoken words from Erwin were, “You are dismissed.”

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It had been a mistake, or rather a series of mistakes precipitated by a lapse in judgment, and he was still paying for it. It seemed that changing employers—changing his country of residence even!—wasn’t going to be enough to escape this mistake. No. It was going to take more than crossing the English Channel to rid himself of that piece of gum that had gotten stuck on the bottom of his shoe. Levi Ackerman. Erwin wasn’t a stupid man. He knew right away that Levi was off his rocker—obsessive-compulsive at best, certifiably insane at worst—and yet he had let his guard down and whoosh! In the blink of an eye he was caught up in a shitstorm, his neat, orderly life spiraling out of control, all due to one eighteen-year-old, five-foot-three, raven-haired lunatic.

“I want to be a painter,” Levi told him over lunch at the cafeteria that first semester in Berlin.

He hadn’t invited Levi to eat with him. Erwin was sitting at his usual corner table on a Thursday and Levi had plopped his tray down and taken the seat opposite him without even asking permission. The rudeness wasn’t exactly a surprise. It was halfway through the semester and Erwin had grown accustomed to Levi’s sudden outbursts in class, the snarky comments shouted out at random and often inappropriate times, the questions that were always posed as a direct challenge to Erwin’s scholarship. Those unsolicited remarks and interruptions were tiresome, but Erwin was already an experienced lecturer at twenty-eight years of age and he knew to allow for all sorts of characters. It was an art school, after all, and that meant nuttier than average students all struggling to express themselves. He could handle it. And he had his colleague and close friend Hange Zöe, someone wackier than any of the students, to offer solace and advice. The two of them had met at university ten years earlier and it was Hange, who was already working as a painting instructor at the Universität der Künste, who told Erwin about the open position in the art history department after Erwin completed his doctorate. They had the good fortune of not only working together, but also of living in the same apartment complex that housed a number of the faculty due to its convenient location near the school. The closeness they had shared when they were students at university was rekindled. Everything seemed to be coming up roses for Erwin.

That afternoon the cafeteria was noisy and crowded and it made Erwin feel safe when confronted with Levi outside of class. That was the first mistake, thinking that a room full of other people would
be enough to provide protection from that lethal young man. Lulled by that false sense of security, Erwin had lowered his defenses just a little, opened the door just a crack, but that was all it took, that sliver of space, for Levi to shoot his poison arrow and hit the mark. Instead of maintaining his customary aloof stance and discussing class-related issues only, Erwin had asked, “Who are your artistic influences?” He figured Levi would roll out all the usual suspects, anyone from Basquiat to Banksy, Kehinde Wiley to Shepard Fairey, but to his astonishment, Levi didn’t name any of the artists popular among the painting students. Although his specialization was in post-1960s German art, Erwin’s knowledge of contemporary art was keen due to his friendship with Hange, who was up on all the painters from the current generation.

Levi, though, didn’t claim any influences from this century, or even the last century. “Gustave Moreau,” he said.


A defensive scowl took hold of Levi’s features, bringing them all crashing together and making Erwin see the boy for the first time—his thin, delicate eyebrows, the deep black of his pupils pulsating amid the light grey of his irises, a small, slightly upturned, almost doll-like nose, a mouth that could only be described as pouty and…asking to be kissed. “What do you mean by that?” asked Levi through clenched teeth. He held his knife and fork upright in both fists, sharp ends pointing at the ceiling as if he had never been taught proper table manners, clearly annoyed.

Erwin leaned back in his chair and wiped his mouth neatly with his napkin. “I mean, that’s like saying you admire Renoir’s nudes, or admitting that you love the Rococo. It's not exactly hip.”

“Yoshitaka Amano was influenced by Moreau,” Levi shot back. “Did you know that? Or would an old fart like you even know who Amano is?” He turned his attention back to his plate and began eating his hamburger—just the patty, which he had taken off the bun and cut up into eight equal triangular slices like a pizza—stabbing the piece at the one o’clock position with his fork.

Fine. Erwin wasn’t too proud to learn an extra thing or two, and he was enjoying Levi’s irritation. Let the boy get a taste of his own medicine. “Okay. Who is Yoshitaka Amano?” In his mind, Erwin was figuring the odds of Levi eating the slice at the two o’clock position next.

“Have you ever heard of Final Fantasy?” asked Levi, chewing and talking with his mouth full. “Well, have you? Or are you too much of a dead fucking dinosaur?”

“Sure I’ve heard of it.” Erwin took a sip of his coffee and shifted in his seat.

Levi wasn’t buying it. “Oh, yeah? Tell me. What is Final Fantasy?”

When Levi next ate the slice at the seven o’clock position instead of the two o’clock position, it really threw Erwin for a loop. There was no way he could fake an answer now. “It’s…uh…one of those kinky Japanese porno—”

“Wrong!” Levi interrupted, practically shouting at Erwin, but the cafeteria was so noisy no one paid any mind. “It’s a video game, one of the most seminal, influential video games of all time and Yoshitaka Amano created some of the most beautiful artwork for it, you ignorant fossil!”

He should have been angry and insulted by Levi’s rudeness but, instead, Erwin burst out laughing. He couldn’t help it. Levi was just so entertainingly obnoxious, Erwin could only be amused and…now really curious as to which slice of hamburger would be eaten next. He was betting on the slice
at the eleven o’clock position. When Levi did indeed stab his fork into that slice, the one at the eleven o’clock position just as Erwin had predicted, something happened: mistake number two. He felt a twinge of compassion for the boy—for his very obvious OCD, for his wildly emotional take on everything, for his tightly coiled fury and, bubbling and boiling right on the surface, his passionate need for acknowledgement, for love, for acceptance.

“Okay.” Erwin put his hands up in a I-give-up gesture of helplessness. “You caught me.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to my lovely Austrian friend—S.E.—who IS a talented art historian for her very helpful advice in this chapter.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Klaus goes back to the States and gets a job working for his brother-in-law. He's not a happy camper.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Klaus’s apartment was old and cheaply renovated, but it had a view of Lake Michigan and at least he had a job, a steady income, even if it was a handout from his brother-in-law Stephen. His sister Claudia had begged her husband, an executive at one of the top pharmaceutical companies, to put Klaus on the payroll after the Hanshin Tigers didn’t offer him a contract when his year was up. His performance had been mediocre, but it was probably those photos that surfaced at the end of the season of him and Taki leaving some love hotel together that sealed his casket more than his subpar actions on the field. Earlier photos of Klaus and Taki taken in some pseudo-Old West bar in New York the year before somehow began circulating in the media, as well. Suguri made it a point to escort Klaus to Narita, bidding him farewell with an unsmiling, “Sayonara, motherfucker. And don’t come back.”

Eleven hours later, he landed at Newark Liberty, back in the States with no prospects for the future, Taki stuck in Tokyo on lockdown and getting reamed out by his own family probably. Klaus wondered if Suguri would put Taki over his knees and spank him in front of his disapproving uncle for being such a naughty boy. It would have been hilarious if it weren’t so fucking sad.

“Just give him something, anything,” Claudia had pleaded. “He can be pretty damn charming when he sets his mind to it.”

Well, that was a big fucking lie and Klaus, who was sitting on the bed in the guest room listening to his sister and brother-in-law talk in their bedroom next door, had to chuckle. That Claudia…always bailing him out of trouble. He heard Stephen grumble, “I’ll see what I can do.” Of course he would. Anything was better than having Klaus living under their roof like some overgrown kid back from college with no job. Within a week, Stephen had arranged for Klaus to begin training for his new position as a sales representative for the company. He had to report to their corporate offices in Randolph for the next two months, learning everything there was to know about their drug offerings, proper protocol and procedures in dealing with the medical community. Then, if he was deemed sufficiently competent, he’d be assigned a territory to cover. Stephen had him sent to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where people on either coast went to die a slow death by artery-clogging dairy consumption.

“Thanks a lot, brother,” Klaus muttered at the dinner table. “It’s always been my fucking dream to live in the Cheesehead State.” Claudia shot him a warning look. Yeah, yeah, I should be goddamn grateful, Klaus thought bitterly. But he wasn’t. He was so fucking depressed. Stephen didn’t like him much, and the feeling was mutual as far as Klaus was concerned, but at least here in New Jersey he had Claudia, he had New York, he had the memory of Taki close by, even if it was just the ghost of it. Milwaukee, though. Christ. He’d be better off dead and buried. But he wasn’t. So he sucked in a breath and joked lamely, “Don’t blame me if I’m two hundred pounds heavier the next time you see
Stephen, who was as thin as a rail and a teetotaler, wiped his mouth on his napkin. “One out of three isn’t bad,” he snarked back, a blunt reference to Klaus’s drinking problem, “in baseball or in life. Three out of three is even better. So if you’re intent on batting one thousand, if you want to ruin your health with brats and beer and cheese curds, well, that’s up to you. At least you won’t have to pay for the Lipitor. Or the Viagra. A pretty good deal for a man like you.”

God, he really didn’t like that brother-in-law of his, Mr. I’m-So-Fucking-Right-About-Everything. Klaus couldn’t stand to listen to his holier than thou blathering another second. Milwaukee and all the unhealthy slobs living there was starting to look better and better.

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Back in Tokyo, Taki had his own problems. A week after he underwent surgery to repair the torn UCL in his elbow, his arm still in a sling, he was sent for by his uncle. Suguri picked him up and they took the Shinkansen to Kyoto, where his uncle was staying at an onsen famous for its healing hot mineral springs. It was in the bath that his uncle spoke to Taki, Taki sitting at the shallow end with his arm wrapped in a plastic bag, his nakedness on display. His uncle and Suguri relaxed in the deep end, submerged up to their necks practically. Taki kept his gaze on the surface of the water, his face red from the steam rising all around him, red from humiliation.

“Those pictures of you,” his uncle intoned with grave calmness, a wet washcloth covering his eyes as he leaned his head against a towel draped over the edge of the pool, “and that man…why were you at that hotel with him?”

Suguri grunted softly, a failed clearing of his throat, but he said nothing. He had spoken with Taki on the train ride over, discussed what he should say when questioned by his uncle, and now all he could do was hope that Taki would repeat what they had rehearsed. He looked Taki in the eye, nodded at him once in encouragement. In a soft voice, Taki started speaking, the lies upon lies that Suguri had scripted for him: how Taki had pitched all season with pain in his elbow, pain that had gotten worse as the season wore on; how Klaus, his former teammate on the Mets, had access to drugs that could alleviate the pain but leave the blood stream quickly; how they would meet at various hotels where Klaus would…administer the injections. Holy fuck. Taki almost choked when he said that last part. He expected his gods to strike him down with a bolt of lightning. Yeah. Klaus had administered those injections, alright, over and over. Hot beef injections. In his ass.

His uncle didn’t let on whether he bought the lies regarding Klaus, but he did say, unequivocally, “No divorce.”

“But, Sana…” Taki’s plea stuttered into silence. Sana was going to be so disappointed. She wanted out of the marriage, she wanted to spend her life with someone else, and now this.

“Sana has agreed it is best to honor her vows, her responsibilities to her family, as should you.” Taki’s uncle lifted the washcloth from his eyes finally and looked at him for the first time. “She has come to her senses, like the smart girl that she is. She has rejected her lover, a silly man beneath her status.” He stood up and Suguri stood up with him, helped him out of the bath. “And what about you, nephew?” he asked over his shoulder as he donned a yukata. “I expect you to be as sensible and put down that dog of yours. Go back to your wife. Don’t shame the memory of your mother.”

Taki was left alone to stew in his own juices, but all Taki could think about was his uncle’s one big mistake. He would have gone along with it all, gone back to Sana, apologized to her for the sham marriage they both had to live with, but to bring up his mother…his mother who had always loved with a passion, who had told him to follow his own desire. If only his uncle hadn’t mentioned his
deceased mother, this might all be over with. But now, he couldn’t possibly go back to the lie, not the lie his uncle expected him to live. His mother would have never abided it. He would speak to Sana again. She wanted freedom as much as he did, she was trapped, just like he was, stuck in the same cage. They would figure it out, something, anything that would give them both a way to move forward. He trusted her. Yes, she was smart, probably way smarter than he was and itching to live her own life. He couldn’t wait to get back to Tokyo.

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After six months in Milwaukee, Klaus was indeed several pounds heavier, eleven to be exact. He was so disgusted with himself, he started up with the amphetamines again, just to lose the weight. He stopped eating cheese and sausages. The alcohol, though…well, a man’s still gotta live, right? He bought a set of free weights, did one hundred push-ups, one hundred sit-ups, one-hundred squats, once in the morning, once in the evening. He got lean and hard again, just to spite all the doughy meatbags-on-legs he encountered in the waiting rooms of doctor’s offices and hospitals in the tedious accumulated hours before he gave his equally tedious sales spiel about why this, this, and this drug should be prescribed to patients suffering from hypertension, high cholesterol, and erectile dysfunction. Claudia hadn’t really lied. He could turn on the charm with enough speed in his system. If the physician was female, he knew he could lock in a sale lickety-split with a warm smile, a compliment on the office decor perhaps, a ‘woe is me’ comment about being alone and single in a hip and happening town like Milwaukee where there was just a plethora of beautiful women, all seemingly unavailable. As if! If the physician was male, all he’d have to do was talk about the Green Bay Packers, Go-Pack-Go! and all that Aaron Rodgers-for-President bullshit. Nobody even recognized him from his Major League stint with the New York Mets. Yeah, he was already a forgotten flash-in-the-pan athlete whose imaginary fame had lasted all of fifteen minutes.

Then, like manna from heaven, a card arrived. It was from Claudia. Inside the birthday card wishing Klaus a happy twenty-eighth was a letter, a letter from overseas addressed to Klaus, care of his sister, a letter from Taki. It occurred to Klaus that Taki didn’t have his mailing address in Milwaukee. Still, he could have called or texted instead, his number was still the same. Klaus had tried to contact Taki, but Taki’s number was no longer in service. He could only wait, and now, there was this letter forwarded by Claudia. Ah, they had met, Taki and Claudia, during that poker game in Taki’s condo in New York, the same night they had engaged in the public debauchery that had led to Klaus being sent back down to Triple-A in Las Vegas…ugh. Claudia must have given Taki her address way back then. What else had happened between them? It seemed a lifetime ago. But now he had Taki’s letter in his shaking hand. Why a letter? Was Suguri still monitoring his every move? Heh. Nothing like old fashioned snail mail to trump technology and prying eyes. He opened the sealed envelope carefully. Inside was a single sheet of paper, the words handwritten in blue ink in a beautiful flowing script:


Dear Klaus,

I hope this letter finds you well. I had to send it to your sister since I’m not sure where you are and if I called you, my family would find out. They check my phone records. They are having me watched, I know it. I don’t blame them because, well, here I am, doing the very thing they fear. I must not see you again. I hope you can understand and honor this request. I’ve loved you so. I know you have loved me, too, but I must not see you again.

I am in London. I tell you this only to put your mind at ease. I am well. You can go on with your life knowing that I am safe, as long as we are not together, I am safe. Do you understand? Do not try to find me. Do not look for me. You only have to look in your heart to find me. I am there, am I not?
Look no further than your own heart.

Your Taki

The first thing Klaus did was run to the toilet and vomit. Then he called Stephen’s office, telling the secretary that it was a life and death situation. “I want a transfer to London,” Klaus demanded when his brother-in-law picked up.

“You took me out of a meeting to ask me for a goddamn transfer?” Stephen was furious.

“Yes,” Klaus replied, his heart racing with shock, with excitement, with desperate joy. “Send me to London and you’ll never have to deal with me again.”

“Fine,” Stephen said, sounding half-disgruntled, half-triumphant. “Good riddance.”

In two months, Klaus was in London with his newly assigned sales territory and an even shittier apartment than the one he had in Milwaukee. London was an expensive city to live in, way more expensive than Milwaukee. Not a problem. He had lived in a tiny studio in Queens when he had played for the Mets, taken Taki's virginity, and he would have lived out of a fucking cardboard box if it meant he could be with Taki again. Taki. Taki was here somewhere in London and he, Klaus von Wolfstadt, former pro athlete turned pharmaceutical drug pusher, was going to hunt him down and steal him away to his lair, make him his captive prey, even if it took him the rest of his life. A year later, his life seemed ten years shorter, every day of looking and not finding cut another chunk of flesh out of him. He shored himself up with booze, like a farmer packing more straw into a scarecrow’s chest even as the birds gutted its belly with their beaks. He wouldn't give up, though, not until there was nothing left to him but a stake in the ground.

Chapter End Notes

Sheesh. I know this story really jumps back and forth in time. Please bear with me.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Levi’s attempts to win Erwin over via stalking backfire. Erwin makes a deal with the Green-Eyed Devil, much to Erwin's own dismay.

“You’re late.”

“I know.” Levi wrapped his arms around Taki’s slender waist from behind and felt him go rigid. “Fine. You’re pissed.” An angry Taki was hardly a threat to Levi’s mortality, even if he was holding a knife and carving the rind off a pineapple, so he slowly folded into him and rested his cheek against Taki’s shoulder, his lips brushing against the bare skin of Taki’s neck. “I pulled an all-nighter. You should come by tonight and take a look. I’m not the good-for-nothing piece of shit you think I am.”

There was a soft exhale of breath but no interruption in Taki’s steady cutting. “I’ve never said that.” That Levi, always encroaching on his personal space. Well, no, that didn’t even come close to describing Levi’s blatant lack of respect for the invisible bubble of privacy surrounding Taki. Still, it had tickled when Levi spoke, lips and breath caressing the sensitive skin beneath his jaw. It made Taki ache with loneliness. Klaus would always kiss him there, lick and suck and bite him there. So he let Levi hang all over him like a needy child. He was dying of need himself. Dying, dying, dying inside. Like the rind of the pineapple, he would cut it all away: need, desire, loneliness, the memory of Klaus inside him. Klaus.

Levi reached around and grabbed a slice of pineapple from the chopping block, popped it in his mouth and chewed wetly right next to Taki’s ear. “Yeah, well, you’ve thought it a million times.” Taki shot him a sideways glance, a mute admission, but Levi knew he deserved it. “I mean it, though,” Levi declared. He peeled himself off of Taki’s back and walked over to the small electric burner, gave the pot of tapioca a gentle stir as it simmered on low heat. Might as well pretend to be useful. “I think you’ll be...just come to my studio, okay? I want you to see for yourself. I’m not a liar.”

For the last six months, Levi had been working like a maniac at night in his studio. A gallery in London’s West End representing young, up-and-coming artists had offered him a show. Well, it was a group show, but he would have one whole room dedicated to his paintings and he had committed to producing four large canvases by the late August deadline. The show would open in September, along with a bazillion other exhibitions, to kick off the busy fall season. He had signed the contract a year ago, when he had first arrived in London, having already had several shows in Berlin and been published in the art journals. Then, he had done nothing, nothing at all worthwhile until that Suguri fellow had hired him to keep tabs on Taki. Two months after working in Taki’s shitty little shop, the idea came to him; it had been right in front of his face in the guise of a small, lonely, lovely prince from the East. Taki was his muse without even realizing it, without even trying. And then the work had flowed, despite Erwin’s refusal to meet with him, despite all the rejections and bitter yearning, despite the acid in his stomach burning a hole in his gut. The work flowed like blood gushing from an open vein. Even the Green-Eyed Devil couldn’t staunch the flow, the Green-Eyed Devil who was an irritating thorn in Levi’s side and had insinuated that Erwin, who belonged to Levi alone as far as Levi was concerned, had taken on a new lover. Nothing could stop the creative energy from pouring out of Levi and into the paintings. The paintings would be a talisman, a talisman to draw in the thing
he wanted most: Erwin.

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The irony of the situation would have been appreciated by someone like Levi, had he been privy to the sheer depth and beauty of its symmetry. Here he was—spy by day on the payroll of Mr. Badass Yakuza Dude, crazed painter by night toiling away in his attic studio, stalker par excellence of Dr. Erwin Smith, PhD—spying, painting, stalking, all the while ignorant of the fact that someone else was also spying on him and painting like mad at night and stalking his own ass. That’s right. It was none other than the Green-Eyed Devil, nineteen-year-old Eren Jaeger, second year painting major at UAL: Central Saint Martins, on the payroll of Dr. Erwin Smith to keep tabs on Levi. What a hoot!

“You should have seen his face, Dr. Smith.” Eren was jogging to keep pace with Erwin’s long strides as he walked down the hallway to his office, briefcase in one hand, cup of coffee from Pret A Manger in the other. The large portfolio slung across Eren’s shoulder was knocking into the throngs of other people in the hallway and slowing him down. Class had just ended and it would be another hour before Eren had to make his daily trek to the Chibitan Bubble Tea Shoppe. “I swear, he almost shit his pants when I told him you thought he was pathetic.”

Erwin abruptly stopped in his tracks, his thick blond brows crashing together in dismay as he swallowed a groan, eyes imploring the heavens for patience, and then he continued on to his office. As soon as Erwin unlocked the door, Eren pushed past him eagerly—nearly making Erwin spill the coffee down the front of his argyle sweater vest—and flopped down onto the small sofa against the wall, lanky limbs splayed in four directions. “I am SO fucking tired,” Eren announced to the ceiling, scrubbing his face with his unwashed hands and leaving streaks of charcoal down his cheeks.

“My instructions were for you to observe only.” Erwin dropped the briefcase on the floor behind his desk and sat down at his computer, started scrolling through his emails as he finished drinking his lukewarm coffee. “I don’t want you to talk to him.”

“How can I not talk to him? I gotta order my bubble tea, don’t I?”

“Yes, Eren, you have to order your bubble tea. I understand that. But do not provoke him or engage him in conversation. He’s dangerous.”

Eren snorted with contempt. “Dangerous my ass. I could stomp him under my feet, he’s such a shrimp.” There was a brief lull, and then Eren went on excitedly, backpedaling. “That other guy, though, the taller one…he’s really sweet. I could go for something like that…” The truth was, Eren was crushing like mad on Levi. He wanted to kiss that pouty mouth, mess him up, make him moan his name instead of Erwin’s. The other dude, the one who was much nicer than Levi, well…that guy was way out of his league. Even Eren knew that.

Half of a blond head poked itself around the computer monitor. “Something? I think you mean someone.”

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Half of a blond head poked itself around the computer monitor. “Something? I think you mean someone.”

“Something, someone, whatever. What difference does it make? He’s hot.”

At times like this, Erwin Smith questioned his own sanity. How the hell had it come to this? How had he sunk to such a low point? He was going to be thirty-three, a man in the prime of his life; he had a monograph on the work of Anselm Kiefer in the final stages of editing before publication, he had presented four papers and sat on five panels at various scholarly conferences since his arrival at UAL two years ago. He was on the road to success, so why this digression to Hell? His phone dinged. Ah, yes. Here was another missive from Satan’s minion himself, Levi:
“Is he really banging strangers every night?” asked Erwin.

Eren bolted upright, abuzz with curiosity. “Who?!”

“Jesus Christ,” Erwin muttered under his breath, and then louder, “Levi, of course. You are keeping track of his routines, aren’t you? Where he goes? What he does after work?”

“What he does after work?” Eren scratched idly at his balls, deep in thought. “Yeah, pretty much nothing. He goes to his apartment and stays there. He usually gets takeaway from the curry shop for dinner. He likes pizza, too, gets it delivered every other evening. He’s got no life. All he does is go home and paint in his attic every night. There’s nothing to worry about. Besides, I told him you had another lover.”

That off-the-cuff remark made Erwin gag on his coffee.

Eren’s apartment, which he shared with a geeky friend from his grade school days, was located directly across from Levi’s building. How did Erwin know this? Levi had showed up at his office out of the blue one day and told him where he was living, hoping to rekindle their relationship with an invitation to a home cooked candlelit meal. The lunacy of it was mind boggling to Erwin, not just the fact that Levi had followed him to London from Berlin, but that Levi would offer to cook a meal. Levi couldn’t cook to save his life and Erwin knew that for a fact, having endured three years of Levi’s culinary disasters when they lived in Berlin. He had called campus security and had Levi escorted off the school’s grounds and threatened him with a restraining order if he tried to see him again. As a precaution, he had hired Eren, who was in his art history classes and already employed by the department as a work-study student assistant, to serve as an extra pair of eyes for him. Erwin couldn’t believe his luck when he saw Eren’s employment sheet and realized he lived on the same street as Levi. Eren already thought of himself as some kind of mercenary superhero artist—bring justice and joy to the world through his horrible paintings of cartoonish ripped dudes wearing masks and capes and rescuing kittens out of trees and burning buildings, at least, that’s what it looked like to Erwin each time Eren showed him another one of his appalling canvases—and he had jumped at the opportunity to stalk Erwin’s stalker.

Soon after, Erwin had gone to Eren’s apartment to drop off a pair of binoculars and scope out the neighborhood. Eren’s flatmate, a small blond androgynous creature who introduced himself as “Armin Arlert, future accountant” had answered the door and made him an undrinkable cup of instant coffee while Erwin pointed out Levi’s building to Eren and showed him pictures of Levi on his phone.

“That’s what’s stalking you?” Eren had asked with a smirk.

“Not what, who,” Erwin had corrected. “My god, were you raised by apes?”

The binoculars allowed Eren to see into the windows of Levi’s apartment, the top floor in a narrow three story building, but the shades were almost always pulled down in what would be the living area. He could see into the attic though, which had a strip of clerestory windows that provided an unobstructed view into Levi’s painting studio. Perfect. On one of the days when Eren had no classes until the evening, he had followed Levi to Chinatown and discovered that he worked at the Chibitan Bubble Tea Shoppe. Bingo! It became a thing for Eren to stop by the tea shop each day at 3:15 in the afternoon, when he was on break from classes, and hone what Eren considered to be a pretty slick pick-up line: “One large passion fruit bubble tea. Extra passion, please.” I mean, c’mon, who could resist that, especially coming from a hot dude such as himself? Levi, apparently, had terrible taste in men if he could want Erwin, someone tall and blond and ripped but wearing a freaking Dad
costume, so Eren had done his damndest to make Levi see the light. After months of Levi rebuffing his very obvious invitations for sex, Eren decided to employ a different tactic. He prodded him, first by telling Levi that he knew Erwin ("Erwin thinks you're pathetic!"), and then revealing (untruthfully) that Erwin had a new lover. So, wasn't it high time to move on, Levi? Yes, time to move on to a willing partner like Eren Jaeger. Levi hadn’t been too keen, though, and now it seemed like Erwin wasn’t happy with him either. In fact, Erwin looked livid.

“Look, Dr. Smith. You’re the one who wants to be rid of him,” Eren said defensively. "If I can make him fall in love with me instead, well, then, problem solved, right?"

Erwin stood up behind his desk and crossed his arms angrily. “What exactly did you say to him, Eren?” He was dreading the answer.

“What? Nothing…” Eren said. He scratched nervously at a phantom itch behind his head, wilting beneath Erwin’s furious glare. “So…maybe I told him you were seeing someone else.”


Eren leapt off the sofa and grabbed his portfolio, slung it over his shoulder and reached for the door handle. “Nothing! Just…that you’ve been banging my ex.”

“What?” Erwin sputtered, straightening up to his full height. “And who might your ex be?”

“Oh, you’ve met him,” Eren called out over his shoulder. “Armin? My flatmate? See you tomorrow!”
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Taki visits Levi's studio for the first time.

Chapter Notes

Those of you who are Maiden Rose fans have probably noticed that Klaus never seems to take his pants off, even when he’s doing the nasty with Taki. I thought I’d have a little fun with that here.

Also, this chapter is for Tenkamchi-sama, who wanted some sweet loving between Levi and Taki and is the artist who created the amazing illustration at the end of this chapter. Thank you, Ten!

Taki checked his phone—nine o’clock on the dot—and pressed the buzzer on the brass panel by the door. Sitting on the landing beside the iron railing was a large footed pot holding tulips long past their bloom, about two dozen cigarette butts littering the soil among the wilting stems. The residents of the building apparently used it as a convenient ash tray. A memory, unbidden, rose up suddenly and Taki’s heart clenched like a fist. Suguri was a smoker. So was Klaus, though Klaus wasn’t picky about the brand. As long as he had something to light up afterwards, he was happy. Taki closed his eyes and that was all it took to smell it again, the scent of Klaus cloaked in cigarette smoke, then his huge hands on him, the chafing of Klaus’s trousers against the bare skin of his thighs as Klaus breached him once more. Round Two. Once was never enough for Klaus, and he never took off those damn trousers, he was so paranoid that Suguri would burst into the hotel room and shove his katana up his ass. “No way am I gonna be caught with my junk hanging out there when that crazy Suguri comes to kill me,” was Klaus’s standard explanation every time Taki had asked him why only one of them was naked. “I gotta be ready to make a quick getaway. Besides, you’re the pretty one in this picture.” Then Klaus would always stroke down Taki’s unclothed body, his golden eyes so full of awe, drinking him in, and Taki wouldn’t be able to do anything but spread his legs even wider for him.

And now his face was hot with shame, though the night air was pleasantly cool, his cheeks were burning, burning with shame and longing. So Taki bit his bottom lip to dispel the ache and gazed about. It was a quiet neighborhood, one block in from the main street and mostly residential. Directly across the street was a taller and newer looking building, probably constructed in the early 2000s. Levi’s building looked pre-war, maybe from the mid or late 1920s. The front door was capped with a marble pediment with a sunburst pattern carved into it and framed on either side by jambs decorated with stylized ivy tendrils. Nice. Taki’s own apartment was in a newly constructed building across from the Tate Modern, all glass and steel and strictly Bauhausian in its lack of ornamentation. He could only guess how much money his family shelled out to house him there. Then again, it was probably just another investment property, like the Zaha Hadid-designed condo he had lived in when he was in New York. His family owned prime real estate all over the world and, though he would likely inherit all of it one day, all of the wealth, he felt like the poorest soul on earth. The one thing he
wanted—the only man he would ever need or love—could never be his, not in this life at least. If there were another life, somewhere on the other side of the sky, would that be enough? Could he wait that long? Would there be anything left to him, to his wild and stubborn heart, when that time finally came to lay down in the earth beside his beloved? He should be so lucky.

The plastic bag rustled as Taki shifted it to his other hand. He had brought along a bottle of sake and some shrimp chips and roasted fava beans, and some red bean paste mochi because he knew Levi had a sweet tooth. There was green tea mochi for himself, in case he also felt like having something sweet. Though he had been living in London for over a year now, Sana still sent him his favorite indulgences. She knew that her husband had broken his vow to abstain from alcohol a while ago, so she always sent him the best sake from Niigata, too. She—*they*, that is, she and Taki—had agreed to the terms set by Taki’s uncle, to remain married on paper even if they went their separate ways. She now lived in a new apartment in Tokyo provided by her godfather, a notorious crime lord by the name of Asami Ryuichi, a man who, in the past, had procured “favors” for both Taki’s uncle and her own father by manipulating key players in the government who had enabled both men to advance into positions of prominence and power. When Taki had returned from Kyoto, desperate for her help, she loved Taki, was terribly fond of him, but she was tired of being bullied by his family and treated like a pawn by her own, like someone powerless to dictate her own fate. She was young, her husband was also young, they both had their entire lives ahead of them, and she wouldn’t be thwarted. She wanted to be happy, to feel fulfilled, to go her own way. So she had contacted the one man who could make it happen, her godfather, who had always told her to take what was rightfully hers.

She never asked Asami what he had done, what he had said to her father and to Taki’s uncle. The man likely had all kinds of dirt on both men. No one rose in the ranks of the government so quickly without some sort of shady dealings, but whatever it was, it had worked. Her father had given her permission to conduct her affairs as she wished, as long as she did it with discretion and remained Taki’s wife, and Taki’s uncle had allowed him to leave Japan, as long as he never came in contact with that blond-haired hulk again.

“Suguri-san will keep watch over you,” Taki’s uncle had told him. “Be careful. If this foreigner means so much to you, you will keep yourself hidden. If he finds you, he is a dead man. Do you understand?”

Taki had fallen on his knees and pressed his forehead to the floor. “Yes, Uncle.” Taki knew that Suguri would never hurt him, but Klaus was another matter altogether. If his uncle gave Suguri the green light, well…Klaus really was a dead man. And, good gods, had Sana made a deal with the devil in enlisting the help of this Asami?

“So you know this man personally?” Taki had asked Suguri as he packed his bags.

Suguri had merely lit another cigarette and dragged furiously on it. “I wouldn’t piss on his territory,” was all he had deigned to mutter before reluctantly admitting, “and…he’s beaten me at karaoke more than once…that honey-tongued bastard.”

So Taki had fled to London with his small allowance, money doled out in tiny amounts in his bank account so he had just enough to buy incidentals. The money for his bubble tea shop had been provided by his family, any funds needed for supplies paid directly by them so Taki couldn’t squirrel away anything substantial, his luxury apartment also provided by his family, the finest food and clothing delivered directly to his door. It was humiliating to have no control over his life, over his own livelihood—what his uncle dismissively called a “hobby”—but Taki would endure it if it meant Klaus was kept safe.
He had lied in the letter he had sent. He had told Klaus that it was he, Taki, who would be safe if they never saw each other again, but, really, it was Klaus who would be safe. Suguri had eyes everywhere—Taki had been told as much—and he would have been a fool to underestimate what Suguri would do to prevent Klaus from ever laying hands on him again. But he also knew that Klaus didn’t give a shit about his own life—the man would do anything to be with him—so he had lied, hoping that Klaus would at least think twice before endangering Taki’s life. And yet…if he had really wanted Klaus to stay away, he would have never written him that letter. He would have never given him that glimmer of hope, never told him where to look in the first place. The truth was, of course, the very opposite of what he had told Klaus in the letter. *Come get me! Find me!* Wasn’t that the real truth? What was that thread that would not break? What was that bond that had spanned so many years, from the moment he had seen Klaus in the Imperial Gardens when he was a mere boy, all the way to this very moment, when he was standing in front of Levi’s apartment building, holding a bag of snacks and a bottle of sake, still wishing for a miracle that would likely doom both of them to the grave?

There was the sound of loud footsteps and then the front door swung open. “You actually came!” Levi exclaimed in surprise. He was wearing a paint-splattered smock over a ratty old Pantera T-shirt, what looked like a pair of lederhosen, and Badtz-Maru slippers. “For shit’s sake, I would have worn my fuck-me pumps if I knew you were really going to show up!” He pulled Taki into the foyer, which was dimly lit with an Art Deco light fixture on the ceiling, slamming the front door behind them. “Come on up. I’m on the third floor.” He grabbed Taki’s arm and pulled him tripping up the travertine stairs worn uneven through the years, turning back and grinning maniacally, “You are going to shit your pants, boss.”

“Levi…are you high?” asked Taki. He could smell the distinctive acrid scent of pot on him.

There was a laugh that came out like a snort. “I’m *working*, Taki, so, *yeah*. Sheesh. You are too fucking adorable for this world.”

They made a pit stop in Levi’s apartment first, where Levi rummaged through the bag and ripped excitedly into the package of mochi, stuffing one into his mouth while he grabbed two glasses off the kitchen counter. The place was minimally furnished and very neat, just a small kitchen with a living room and a door that led to the bedroom ostensibly and another door that led to a bathroom. “Come on. Let’s go to my studio. Oh, wait.” Levi disappeared into what was the bedroom and then reappeared in another moment, having put something into the pocket of his smock. “Okay, let’s go.”

The studio, which was accessed by a staircase at the end of the third floor hallway, was organized chaos: tables with open books dog-eared and tabbed for reference, more reference material tucked up on the walls, tubes of paint arranged by color, cups of all sizes for mixing, brushes in various containers or laid out on the tables. There was a portable speaker blasting some thrash metal. Levi went over to it, fiddled with the iPod, and the song switched over to something by Kraftwerk. “Don’t blame me,” Levi mumbled to no one in particular as the first synthesizer strains of *Trans Europe Express* echoed through the room. “This is my boyfriend’s playlist. He’s such an old fart.”

Taki didn’t bother to correct Levi. He knew enough from Levi’s rants at work that this “boyfriend” wasn’t exactly a willing partner. He knew that Levi had followed this man here to London, was pursuing him as fast as Erwin Smith was running away from him. Poor Levi. It made it easy to forgive Levi all his rudeness, his jagged temperament, his self-centered outlook when the young man suffered so deeply from rejection. Taki had never been subjected to such a thing. Loss, yes. Rejection, no. What was it like, to love someone so much and have it all thrown back like garbage? And then it occurred to him: had he done the same to Klaus? Had he rejected him the same way this Erwin Smith had pushed Levi away? Gods, he hoped not. He hoped he hadn’t inflicted such an injurious wound. Those worries, though, flew out of his head when his eyes fell upon the large
canvas behind him. He couldn’t believe it. He found himself staring into his own likeness in the guise of Saint Sebastian being martyred, hands tied to a tree, his pale body shot full of arrows, a jewel-encrusted loin cloth barely covering his groin. The face, the hair, the body…it was him, Taki Reizen. In the background was a blond-haired man, a soldier in the Roman emperor Diocletian’s army, standing and watching with cold disdain.

“Levi…what is this? What are you doing? Why…” Taki gulped, disbelieving, “…why am I in this painting? And who…” Taki walked up to the canvas and peered intently. The Roman soldier bore an uncanny resemblance to Klaus, but upon closer inspection, he saw that this man had blue eyes, not golden ones. Still, “…who is this man here?”


“Then why am I in this painting?” Taki asked again. “Why isn’t this you?” Taki pointed to the swooning figure of the saint. “Shouldn’t this be you?”

Levi stared back into Taki’s confused face. “It is me.” He placed both hands on Taki’s cheeks. “You and me. Aren’t we the same? We’re both dying, aren’t we?” Then Levi walked over to the far wall and turned over three other canvases, all in various stages of completion. There was another scene of martyrdom—the stoning of Saint Stephen—and two with mythological subject matter: Semele being annihilated in the lap of Zeus, and Ariadne abandoned by Theseus on the island of Naxos.

“I don’t see any cohesion in this,” muttered Taki.

“Cohesion?” Levi opened the sake and poured two glasses, handing one to Taki. “Cheers.”

“The subject matter,” Taki said, taking a long sip. “It doesn’t make sense to me. You have me…us as martyred Catholic saints, and as women from Greek mythology. What does it mean?”

“It means we’re dying for love, for God or gods or men we fucking worship who let us down, who aren’t the heroes they should be because they’re all fucking liars!” Levi explained bitterly. “Nobody’s going to save us, Taki. Not your gods, not mine, not your man, not mine.”

Taki’s face froze. “What do you know about my man?” Taki had never spoken to Levi about Klaus, although…

“Don’t be an idiot,” Levi told him, downing his glass and refilling it. “You think I don’t know who you are? Jesus Christ, haven’t you ever Googled yourself? Taki Reizen. You’ve played for the Giants in Tokyo. For the Mets in New York. I’ve seen those pictures of you with that Wolfstadt dude. He was your lover, wasn’t he? Do you think I don’t notice the way you look at every big blond bastard who comes into your shop? You’re still in love with him, aren’t you?”

Levi knew he was probably saying too much, but he was tired of pretending he didn’t know how much Taki was hurting. It made his own pain that much worse, to aid and abet in this crime against love, especially since he had recognized Klaus right away when the man had walked by the tea shop that day and locked eyes with him. “That’s him,” Levi had told himself. That was the man in the pictures Suguri had showed him, the man who was never to come in contact with Taki. Levi had been spectacularly rude to Klaus but the moron had come into the shop anyway and ordered a drink. Fortunately, he had left before Taki had come out front, but the way Klaus had looked at him…Levi knew. He knew this man loved Taki. It was a look he had always wanted to see in Erwin’s eyes. And now, he wanted it all out in the open but…he couldn’t. If he told Taki the truth, he’d be kicked out of his apartment. He’d be off Suguri’s payroll and homeless and if this Suguri really was yakuza, then he’d probably end up dead, too, having met with a convenient “accident” somehow. He could
just see his Uncle Kenny shaking his head with disappointment and muttering something like, “That Levi, piece of shit nephew, I always knew he’d amount to nothing.” He couldn’t let that happen. No. He had to stay alive, long enough to finish the paintings and have his show. He needed to have Erwin see his work and understand what he had done to him, he needed Erwin to know that he had killed him in every way with his refusal to love him back.

“Taki,” Levi said, gripping Taki’s arm with one hand so he couldn’t pull away. “Who do you have in this world? Who do you have but me? We have each other, don’t we? Who’s going to save us but ourselves?” He pressed his mouth to Taki’s, felt him draw in a breath, then his body slump forward into his chest. “Let’s make love,” Levi whispered. “Let’s fuck it all away, everything we’ve ever wanted, everything we’re never going to have.”

“Yes,” Taki whispered back, his lips parting. He brought his hand up and carded it through Levi’s hair. He thought of Sana, her small supple body, her silken hair. Levi was all lean muscle, but he was licking at his cheek, at his neck and then at his ear like Sana would do, quick little nips that always filled him with desire. There was a bare mattress on the floor in one corner of the room. Levi often slept in the studio when he was working and too tired to go back downstairs, or too stoned. They stumbled to the mattress now, kissing, pulling at each other’s clothes. “Take it all off, Levi,” Taki demanded. “I want to see you naked.”

Across the street, a pair of green eyes was staring through the binoculars. Eren slipped a hand into his shorts and began stroking. This was too good to be true. Should he tell Erwin that Levi was finally cheating on him? Or should he keep it all to himself and maybe proposition them for a three-way the next time he visited the tea shop? Heh. He’d rub one out and then start a new canvas. He had ideas, so many filthy ideas.
I know I’ve just complicated things thoroughly by adding Yamane Ayano’s *Finder* series into the mix, even if it’s only a tangential reference at this point. I don’t know if it’ll get more convoluted. Probably. But for those of you familiar with *Finder*, here’s Takaya Kuroda, the amazing seiyū behind Asami Ryuichi, singing “Machine Gun Kiss” from the *Yakuza* video game series:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sQWuUxU9h6o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sQWuUxU9h6o)

His voice…makes me weak.

And, holy smokes, a million thanks to Tenkamchi-sama for providing the artwork for this chapter!
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Taki and Levi grow closer after a night of debauchery. Erwin feels the first pangs of jealousy and doubt as he recalls his past affair with Levi.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to Tenkamchi-sama for her English-to-German translating skills in this chapter!

It was the sun shining through the skylights and directly onto his face that finally woke Taki. His head felt clogged with cement mix and his body positively ached, especially his hips. He blinked several times, the sunlight stinging his eyes, and slowly came to the disturbing realization that he was not in his own bed. Oh…fucking hell. Those words that Klaus so often muttered were ringing painfully between his ears now. After an aborted attempt at swallowing, he lifted the thin blanket to peek down at his naked body and was mortified to find it covered in bite marks. Well, this was nothing new, not when Klaus was finished with him but…he hadn’t been with Klaus.

“Somebody kill me,” moaned Taki. He slapped both hands over his eyes and would have screamed aloud if it weren’t for his parched mouth, which made even the slightest sound die an instantaneous death in his throat. Then he smelled it, the scent of his own cum on his fingers, and someone else’s, too, and he quickly pulled his hands away, staring in disbelief at them, as if the lines in his palms could tell him what he had actually done the night before. As the great baseball sage, Yogi Berra, once opined, it was like déjà vu all over again. But he wasn’t in Klaus’s apartment in Flushing after a drug-fueled night of debauched sex; he was in Levi’s attic studio after a drug-fueled night of debauched sex. “I’m in a parallel universe,” Taki told himself. And then he wondered, in a panic, if Klaus was stuck in a different version of reality, one that would never intersect with this one in the future, this one where Taki had gotten bombed on sake, smoked a joint, and then…did all sorts of super smutty things with someone who wasn’t Klaus. Good gods, in this universe he was a hungry little slut who was cheating on Klaus and Sana. That wasn’t going to earn him a place in the afterlife, he was pretty sure of that, and if his gods didn’t let him into heaven, then he’d never see Klaus again, unless his gods sent him to hell instead, in which case, he might have a better chance of seeing Klaus again.

He rolled off the mattress and fell face first into a pile of clothes, his and Levi’s. Yeah, Levi had indeed been wearing a pair of lederhosen, and a fine pair it was, made of supple tanned deerskin, the real deal. He wondered idly if Levi was German or Austrian. God knows, he’d heard Levi swearing in German a million times in the tea shop, usually at the customers, sometimes at inanimate objects, under his breath but loud enough for anyone to hear. That Levi, such a smartass. Klaus was also a pro at swearing in German, so Taki understood all the cringeworthy insults that Levi uttered so freely
on a regular basis. A small part of him wanted to know what it was like to express one’s true feelings without restraint, to just let it all hang out there, decorum be damned. Growing up, he had heard Suguri-san use curse words, but never his own parents. Well, maybe his mother had sworn occasionally when his father wasn’t listening, but he’d never betray her. They had been allies.

Taki neatly folded the lederhosen, along with Levi’s T-shirt and smock. There were still two unopened condom packets in the pocket of the smock, as if doing it three or four times wasn’t enough. Taki hunted around in the rumpled sheets covering the mattress…nothing…Levi must have removed all the used ones already. He was very fastidious that way. The only thing missing were Levi’s slippers. Hmm. Taki sorted out his own clothes and put them on slowly, the dirty goings-on from the last twelve hours seeping back into his woolly brain. They had finished the large bottle of sake…but was that before or after they had sucked and jacked each other off? Then Levi had reached into his smock and pulled out a joint, which they had smoked in leisurely fashion while they snacked on shrimp chips and fava beans, and fed each other mochi like silly newlyweds, before he had reached back into his smock again for the condoms and lube.

“Who wants to go first?” Levi had asked, erection waving in the air like a delicious sausage-shaped flag.

At least, that’s what Taki thought he remembered. He stumbled down the steep stairs to the third floor landing and made his way to the door of Levi’s apartment. It was ajar and he could smell food cooking. Out of politeness, he knocked before entering and found Levi in the kitchen wearing an apron and his Badtz-Maru slippers and nothing else, his bare ass on display. “Hey,” Levi called out around the cigarette between his lips, turning to cast Taki a heavy-lidded glance before going back to stirring a pot at the stovetop. “You’re awake. Hope you like chicken curry for breakfast.”

The clock on the wall read quarter to twelve. Oh, no, it was almost noon! The tea shop was supposed to open at eleven. “We’re going to be—”

“Late,” Levi finished for him. “Yeah, yeah. Fuck it.” Levi looked over his shoulder again at Taki, smirking this time. His thin, elegant brows lifted. “Shit, boss, you should get a load of yourself in the mirror.”

“Wh-what? Why?” Taki stammered, instinctively smoothing the front of his shirt. He knew it was awfully wrinkled and that he’d have to go home and shower and change and…

Levi walked up to him and blew a lungful of smoke into his face. Then he planted an ashy kiss on his lips, pushing his tongue into Taki’s mouth like he didn’t care how filthy they both were. “You look completely fucked out.”

Taki retreated to the bathroom without so much as an “Excuse me” or “May I?” At this point, they were both beyond any pretense of good manners. Taki took one look at himself in the mirror over the sink and gasped. He was a hot mess, his lips bitten and bruised, his neck decorated with three large hickeys and, holy fuck, was that dried cum in his hair and on his cheek? So embarrassing! He quickly washed his face and ran a wet towel through his hair—yeah, that was cum alright—scrubbing at his ear to remove all trace of it. What the hell had Levi done to him? When he went back into the kitchen, two plates of reheated chicken curry on rice were set on the countertop, along with two glasses of what looked like tomato juice.

“Let’s eat,” Levi said, motioning Taki to the other stool. “I’m starving.” Using a butter knife and spoon, Levi mounded his plate of food into a circle and carefully divided it into eight equal segments. Once satisfied with his handiwork, he began methodically eating each wedge of chicken curry, starting at the one o’clock position.
"Is this tomato juice?" asked Taki, gingerly lowering himself down onto his seat and trying not to grimace. "Itadakimasu." He picked up his spoon and ate a little of the rice and sauce. It wasn’t terrible for leftover take away.

"Yeah, there’s some tomato juice in there. But it’s mostly vodka. So, uh, is your ass sore?"

Taki nearly choked on his drink, and not because of all the vodka. "Um…"

"It should be," Levi grinned knowingly. "I must have drilled you for a good half hour before you came the last time."

"Oh." Taki reflexively clenched his ass cheeks. Then he gulped down another mouthful of the tomato juice like it would wash away all evidence of his lustful sinning.

"Tch. For shit’s sake, boss, don’t feel bad. I’m the one who almost broke my dick on you. Besides, you fucked me so hard, I’ll be wide open for the next day or two."

Taki rubbed at his temples, certain that his face was going to burst into flames. "I…uh…don’t remember…” Why was Levi messing with his head like this? This was so not acceptable conversation over a meal! Even Klaus had never been this crass, and Klaus was never one to pay any mind to etiquette. And there was no way he and Levi could have done…whatever it was that Levi was claiming they had done…or had they? Good gods, his ass was sore.

"You don’t remember?" Levi snorted with snarky disdain. "Taki, you are a lying slut. Just admit you enjoyed it. I sure as fuck did. We should do this more often. That’s what I say.” Silence fell between them to Taki’s great relief, but then, as if a dark storm cloud had followed in its wake, Levi started muttering to himself in German as he ate his meal. ‘Fuck Erwin. Verficktes Arschloch. Und fick diesen grünäugigen, schwanzlutschenden Teufel! ‘Er fickt meinen Ex.’ Ja, sicher doch. Ich schwöre ich werde ihn ermorden! Erwin du Hurensohn, ich werde dich zu Tode ficken!’

"Um, Levi," Taki interjected. “I understand that you’re unhappy with this Erwin but…”

"Unhappy?" Levi retorted, snapping out of his murderous reverie. He turned to stare at Taki, mid-chew, and then his face crumpled, his shoulders trembling before the tears came. Levi swallowed, half-choking, and then spat out with bitter venom, “I gave him everything. Everything! I fucking worshipped him and he wouldn’t give one fucking thing back to me. And the worst part?" Levi dropped his spoon and brought his arms around himself, rocking back and forth on his stool, overcome with misery, sobbing, “It doesn’t even matter. He won’t give me anything, but I’d still just fucking eat it. Whatever shit he shoveled down my throat, I’d still fucking eat it! Just to have something of him…anything.”

It wasn’t like Taki to take the initiative when it came to personal matters. He had made a move on Klaus in a singular paroxysm of irrational desire, but never with anyone else, not even with Sana. Now, though, he found himself clutching Levi in what could only be a protective embrace, an act so out of character for him but what else could he do? Levi was in free fall and Taki was at a loss. He didn’t know what to say. His teammates had relied on him to pitch a good game, but this was something altogether different. This was a matter of the heart, and Taki was someone who had perfected the trick of burying his feelings, walling up his own needs; he had seen Levi do the same all these months in his own ways, hiding behind a prickly temperament and wicked tongue. Whatever this Erwin Smith had done to Levi, well, it was clear the man had broken Levi to pieces. Klaus had never hurt him like that…he may have broken him a little, but always with love, always with honesty. The paintings in Levi’s studio…Taki was beginning to understand them now, to understand why it was Taki’s likeness that Levi had painted, and not his own. Taki was loved, so deeply loved by Klaus, and Levi wanted the same for himself, as if Taki’s image could serve as a
conduit, a magnet to draw in that excess of love that was so freely given to Taki and so cruelly withheld from Levi.

“If I could, I would,” Taki told him, patting Levi awkwardly on the back.


Taki’s shirt was now wrinkled and wet. “Save you.”

***

Erwin Smith shut his office door and locked it. Not that he was afraid that Eren would waltz right back into the room; no, he knew that Eren had a ten o’clock studio class and was already late getting to it after dropping in to give him the latest update. He just needed to think.

“He’s fucking that guy he works with at the tea shop!” Eren had been practically jumping out of his own skin, he was so giddy with excitement to share this news with Erwin after months of boring, nothin’ happenin’ bullshit. Eren had debated whether to lie about it, but then the sheer juiciness of the truth had overwhelmed him in two seconds. “So, your worries are over, Dr. Smith. I’m pretty sure Levi won’t be stalking you anymore, not after the ass railing he received last night. Fuck! That was some mighty crazy monkey sex they were having! You should have seen them going at it like fucking rabbits! Even my best bud Armin was impressed, and he’s a total perv. We stripped our dicks like six times watching them pounding each other. I can’t wait to…uh…I have to get to class, Dr. Smith. See ya!”

And then Eren had disappeared down the hallway before he revealed what it was that he couldn’t wait to do. “Kids! They’re all out of their goddamn minds!” Erwin grumbled to himself. Beneath his calm exterior, Erwin was seething, and he didn’t know why. As much as he hated to admit it, Eren was right, he should be glad that Levi was finally showing signs of moving on to someone else. That was a good thing, right? It was what he had been hoping for, right? But instead of feeling unencumbered at last, he felt angry and resentful, even insulted. Erwin found himself muttering aloud, “You said I was the only one for you. Fucking liar.”

He sat at his laptop and edited the images that he was planning to show for his eleven o’clock class. Today’s lecture was on French Realism and Impressionism and he was staring at Édouard Manet’s irreverent Olympia and adding some notes to the slide. There was something in the petite prostitute’s unflinching stare and subtle smirk that made her nudity so much more in-your-face. It reminded Erwin of Levi. “You cheating little whore,” Erwin said to the screen, rage rising into his throat. “I fucking hate PowerPoint!” He rubbed his eyes angrily and took a deep breath. He should be celebrating, not feeling regret, confusion, self-pity. Had it really been all that bad? Had Levi really been so intolerable?

Their time together had been difficult at best, at least it was for Erwin. He was proud of the fact that he had put Levi off for an entire semester before giving in to his demands for sex. Erwin was no prude, but he liked to think of himself as a man of principles, of moral uprightness. Plenty of faculty had affairs with students—graduate students were fair game, after all—but most professors were disciplined enough to stay away from the undergraduates, who tended to be unstable emotionally, overly neurotic, or downright insane. Levi was all three, but his passionate lunacy was what made him shine, his talent was just so way out there, limitless almost, and just as unpredictable, uncontrollable, potentially destructive. “I gave it my best shot,” Erwin had always told himself. But it was never enough. No matter how much he tried to satisfy Levi’s demands for attention, for sex, for affection, the boy always wanted more, more, more.

Erwin knew that Levi had a troubled childhood, an unconventional upbringing. “My mother was a
whore,” Levi had told him one night over dinner at an upscale restaurant. It was Levi’s birthday, Christmas of all days, and Erwin had wanted to treat him to a decent meal instead of all the take away that Levi seemed to subsist on when he wasn’t cooking up completely bizarre food in his apartment. When Erwin had ignored the remark out of diplomatic regard for Levi’s slandered mother, who wasn’t even there to defend herself, Levi had gone on chattering loudly, telling him, as well as all the surrounding patrons, “She used to bring the most disgusting pigs home and fuck them right in the living room while I was watching TV. She used to let me drink right out of the bottle with her and her pig clients. It was great. Then she OD’d and I went to live with her scumbag brother. I guess I was around ten. He used to let his friends beat me up. That was fun. When I turned thirteen, he let them fuck me. That was even funner. Heh.” Erwin never took Levi back to that restaurant. All he had done was ask Levi if he liked the pumpkin stuffed ravioli and that was the diatribe he had received in response. He didn’t even want to think about whether Levi had been wildly embellishing the truth or not. It was more than Erwin could stand. Not long after, he had interviewed for the position at the University of the Arts London and made the short list. By late spring, they made him an offer. He didn’t mention it to Levi, and that summer, when Levi was busy working jobs for his Uncle Kenny, Erwin quietly packed up his apartment and moved to London.

But there were some good times leading up to that point, even moments when Erwin thought that perhaps, perhaps, he could overlook Levi’s tempest-in-a-teapot personality and make it work somehow. Yes, they were lovers, but it was almost impossible for Erwin to think of it as a relationship. Shouldn’t a relationship have some semblance of normalcy? There was none of that, except for brief lulls in the storm, their dealings with each other swung like a pendulum from one extreme to the other: Levi was either completely AWOL when he was working on a project, locked up every night in his studio and sleeping no more than two to three hours at a stretch, unwilling to spare Erwin even a grumpy “hello,” or he was not working on a project and crazed with manic anxiety, demanding that Erwin fill every second of his time because he couldn’t bear to face a blank canvas. That was when Levi would barge into faculty meetings just to tell Erwin that he was hungry and could he please fucking leave right now so they could go eat or, even worse, he would barge into one of Erwin’s classes and demand that he needed to be drilled right now or his balls would explode. Erwin would just smile calmly, as if he were a therapist enduring the latest meltdown from a mental patient, and manhandle Levi out the door with a, “We’ll talk about this later.”

Later was when it all went down: the sex, the screaming, the wrecked furniture, and then those rare moments of tenderness when they were both utterly worn out by the other, and Erwin could hold Levi in his arms without imposing his will on him. He could just be with him without the violence, without the anguish that Levi wanted Erwin to fuck, punch, slap out of him. One night, Erwin told Levi, “You don’t need me. You need a priest.” Whatever demons Levi wanted to exorcise, Erwin couldn’t do it for him. But Levi wouldn’t listen. He wanted what he wanted: Erwin Smith, a man who hated violence, who hated disorder, who hated melodrama, who hated all the waves that Levi made. And yet, during those quiet moments when Levi finally slept beside him, Erwin would gaze into his face, marvel at his features so delicate and youthful, and his heart would break with love and loathing.

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Gee whiz, I thought I'd add a link (sort of an apology for how depressing this chapter ended) to express the developing friendship between Taki and Levi, a friendship that is probably freaking everyone out. Neither Taki nor Levi is good at articulating his feelings, so I'll let this really old song do the job for them:

**When in Rome, "The Promise"**
“Itadakimasu” in Japanese = roughly in English: “thank you for this food” or “let us eat,” basically a word of gratitude said before a meal.

Levi’s rant in German = roughly in English: “Fuck Erwin. Fucking asshole. And fuck that cocksucking Green-Eyed Devil. ‘He’s fucking my ex.’ Yeah, I’ll bet. I’ll fucking kill him. Erwin, you motherfucker, I will fucking kill you.”
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Klaus meets a boy named Armin Arlert and sinks to a new low.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to Thallys for the suggestion that Armin could make it as a camboy and for the Bangmaster!Armin tag.

Jealousy had never been a problem for Klaus. He had seen others ruined by it: teammates convinced that their girlfriends or wives had cheated on them and then thought that they could assuage or even remedy the insult with their fists. “I never did that,” Klaus could tell himself with honesty. “I never roughed up a lover because I suspected infidelity. I never had the neighbors call the cops because I was beating the shit out of someone who had cheated on me.” It was true, but even if someone had cheated on him, it wouldn’t have prompted such behavior because he had never been in love before. Then, he had met Taki, and everything changed. It wasn’t the drugs and alcohol that had earned him a humiliating ride back to the Nevada desert. It was the fist fight with Noah Syndergaard—a fight fueled by jealous alpha rage—that prompted the Mets organization to roundly punish Klaus by sending him back down to Triple-A. It was worth the exile. There was no way Klaus was going to allow Thor to steal what was his.

The thing is, sustained jealousy requires love and a third party, and Klaus was certain that, no matter the interminable days that had elapsed like a prison sentence since then, Taki would be true to him; and, so, as badly as he suffered from the ache of separation—an ache like a lost limb that went on living a throbbing, phantom existence—he didn’t have to endure the added torture of jealous doubt. Taki had been a twenty-year-old virgin for shit’s sake! Didn’t that tell Klaus everything he needed to know about him? Taki was pure, so fucking pure and untouchable. Only…Klaus had touched him, this perfect thing that was his Promised Land, a mythical place that had been made real by crossing the border. And after he had touched him, all he could ever believe from that day forward was: “Only I should touch him. Only I should ever touch him.” It had been a violation, the touching, but one committed with the conviction of a man grasping for his soulmate. Didn’t that mean he was forgiven? And didn’t that mean he should find him again, make good on his promise that they would be together? Klaus had to believe it was so.

Obsession was a different animal than jealousy and, in that regard, Klaus knew that he was guilty of harboring such an animal. Yes, he was guilty, but he didn’t see it as a sin. That beast clawing inside him and howling for satisfaction was what kept him going, kept him alive. He had been raised Catholic, and though he no longer practiced the faith, he knew there was no greater assurance of going to Hell than killing himself. If he killed himself, he would have no chance of seeing Taki in Heaven. He was sure that Taki would be there someday, whole and unsullied, but before that day he would stay alive and, if he were lucky, if he had the stamina, he would find him, sweep him up into his arms and weep with the same kind of joy that the saints must have felt when they finally gave up this mortal coil and found peace with their Maker after suffering the most cruel and inhumane torture:
to be flayed alive, to be put on the rack, to have one’s body broken with hurled stones. “We promised each other, didn’t we?” Klaus would say to Taki when that day was upon them at last. And Taki…Taki would gaze back at him with his blue-black eyes and melt into him, his body small and pliant, his lips soft and trembling against his own. And in that moment Klaus’s life would start all over again, like a soul being reborn, and like a phoenix he would rise up from the ashes of heartbreak and carry his beloved across the sky. And, really, as long as they were together, what did it matter if they ended up in Heaven or in Hell? As long as they were together.

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Klaus sat himself down at one of the tables outside Battersea Pie Station in Covent Garden and sent a brief text:

my afternoon appt got cancelled. how about 3 pm?

In less than a minute, he received a reply:

ok [smiley face, thumbs up emoji]

Klaus groaned in disgust and took a long gulp of the Fuller’s London Pride beer that the waiter brought him. He hated those fucking emojis, but sent one back anyway, the pile o’ shit emoji. To his surprise, his phone dinged again with another text:

mud pie?

Mud pie? Klaus scratched his head. Then he remembered that he was dealing with a consummate pervert and angrily texted back:

u wish u little slut. i don’t bareback.

When he received a crying face emoji in response, he shut his phone off with a grunt and dug into his steak and kidney pie. He couldn’t believe what he had become, the things he had done, and he had lived in fucking Vegas for shit’s sake, that Hell in the Desert; Sin City, wasn’t that what Las Vegas was called? He wasn’t in Las Vegas, though, he was in London, but his world had devolved into something like Dante’s Inferno. Which Circle of Hell was he in anyway? He told himself all the requisite, convenient excuses: I’m a man, I have needs, it’s just for now, what else am I supposed to do? I’m so fucking lonely!

After six months of ball-bruising celibacy in London, he started using the hook-up sites that catered to men seeking Asian beauties: lithe, hairless, exotic young men with plush lips and pale skin, half of them barely legal in both age and immigration status. He’d scroll through the pictures on his phone and select the one that reminded him most of Taki. Then all it took was a few texts, a quick ride on the London Underground, and he’d be banging some slender young thing. If the room was dark or if he kept his eyes strictly on his cock pushing into some moaning boy’s ass, then he could imagine that it was Taki he was with and not some stranger willing to bottom for him. That lasted three months at the most. It made him feel too guilty, too much like the rabid, ravenous wolf instead of a man desperate to find his sweet prince. If he found Taki now, would he tell him the truth about himself: that he had given in to the basest desires, that he had fucked strangers he wouldn’t even dare to kiss? Who was he kidding? He had fucked strangers before, so many times before when he was playing in Las Vegas, escorts of every stripe, but it had never hurt him to his very core until now because, back then, he had never sworn the oath he had given to Taki: to be his one true love, forever and ever. What he would give to kiss Taki now.

***
Nineteen-year-old Armin Arlert wasn’t just a brainy freak, he was a brainy freak with an entrepreneurial spirit, a real ‘go-getter’ as his old fart of a grandfather would say. He was studying to be an accountant with the goal of becoming one of those super creative people who knew how to ‘cook the books’ for well-paying employers like the big banks or major investment firms or, better yet, the mob. There were plenty of Russians in London with a shitload of money that needed laundering, and Armin wanted to be the evil genius who could take a pile of filthy lucre and wash it clean. In the meantime, he was paying for his tuition at the London School of Economics and Political Science with a part-time job waiting tables at Battersea Pie Station in Covent Garden, and through advertising fees generated via his porny website: Bangmaster!Armin, where he had found rip-roaring success as a camboy specializing in all sorts of kink—spanking, watersports, bondage, ageplay, pet play, choking, you name it. His job at Battersea gave him opportunity to chat up potential fuck buddies and if that well ran dry, he could always count on his flatmate Eren to fill in. The apartment he shared with Eren afforded him his own bedroom, where he had several cameras set up at strategic points to provide enough angles to cover all the action, which was uploaded onto his laptop and streamed for the enjoyment of his eager subscribers.

Normally, he didn’t record an ‘encounter’ with Klaus on a weekday, but he didn’t have work or classes that afternoon so…why not? Besides, Klaus was popular with his viewers due to his muscular physique and substantial cock and his mysterious persona.

“No fucking way are you showing my face,” Klaus had told him three months ago when Armin had first propositioned him. It had been the usual lunchtime crowd—mostly tourists and a few locals—but Klaus had stood out. It wasn’t every day that one came across such a gorgeous specimen of alpha manhood: tall, blond, square-jawed, dangerously handsome. Armin had made sure to wait on him, laid the charm on thick…only it had had no effect on the man, who only seemed interested in eating his pie and drinking his beer in peace. So, not wanting to waste what might be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, Armin had brought Klaus his check with the accompanying question, “Have you ever done porn? ‘Cause, I have a website, and if you’re interested in making some easy money on the side, well…would you be interested?”

Klaus had stared back at Armin, unblinking and stern, and then burst out laughing. “Kid, are you ripped or something? I’m no pedophile.” Then Klaus had taken out his wallet and slapped forty pounds onto the table. “Keep the change and go home to your Mum and Dad.”

“I’m nineteen!” Armin had protested, pulling out a condom from his shirt pocket—what served as his business card with his web address and mobile number printed on it—and pressing it into Klaus’s hand, saying, “Call me!” Then he had watched Klaus walk away, grinning when he saw that Klaus had put the condom in his wallet. “Gotcha.”

Later that week, Klaus had called. His only demand was that his face not be shown on camera. “I have a real job,” Klaus had told Armin, “and I’ll lose that job if I’m recognized.”

“No problem,” Armin had assured. “I can work with this.”

***

At three o’clock, Klaus pressed the intercom button to Armin’s apartment building and was immediately buzzed in. He had swallowed a Viagra pill before he left Covent Garden and was feeling pretty confident. The pills were free, for fuck’s sake; he had more samples than he could ever distribute to the doctors who sat through his sales pitches. Besides, the urologist he was supposed to meet with had cancelled that afternoon, so, more for him. Klaus took the stairs up four flights and let himself into the flat at the end of the hallway. Armin had left the door open, as usual, and Klaus made a beeline for the bedroom off the kitchen. They had already done this six or seven times at least
and that meant that he considered it a ‘routine’ more or less. The door to the bathroom was closed so he barked, “I’m here!” and heard Armin’s high-pitched nasal voice ring out in a sing-song cadence, “O-kaaay! Be out in five miii-nutes!”

Once in the bedroom, Klaus saw that Armin had already stripped the bed down to the fitted sheet in preparation. Beneath that would be the plastic mattress cover that always made an annoying ‘crunching’ sound whenever they were on the bed. The kid was totally weird, but Klaus couldn’t deny that Armin was practical, organized, and hygienic in this semi-professional calling of his. On the nightstand was a box of disposable latex gloves, a bowl with a variety of condoms and rubber cock rings, another bowl with various dildos and plugs, and a one-litre container of lube in a pump bottle. Sitting on Armin’s desk next to the laptop was the mask that Klaus always wore to shield his identity: a mask that covered the top of his skull, eyes, and nose but left his mouth and lower jaw exposed so he could breathe freely. The mask itself mimicked a wolf’s ears, eyes, and snout and was bizarrely realistic. Whatever. He trusted Armin to know what his subscribers wanted, and if it meant fucking Armin wearing a scary wolf mask, well…okay. Who was he to pass judgment? While he waited for Armin to finish hosing himself out in the bathroom, Klaus stripped out of his clothes, then swiped through the pictures on his phone, pictures of Taki naked and looking utterly used and oh so beautiful. Taki had made him swear that he would delete those photos. “I will. I promise,” Klaus had told him. Yeah, he’d delete them, just not yet, just not ever. He was hard and ready to go by the time Armin sauntered into the room wearing a child-sized light blue terrycloth robe that barely covered his ass and carrying a stack of clean towels.

“Well, hello Herr Kommandant.”

“Don’t call me that, you little prick,” Klaus grumbled. “This isn’t WWII we’re re-enacting.”

“Hmm,” hummed Armin, “I’ve always had a thing for a man in uniform. We should try that one day. You can be Colonel Klink, a sadistic motherfucker with a monocle—oooh! you could wear an eye patch instead!—and I can be your cheating slut who’s been servicing all your men while you’ve been away. You bend me over your knee and spank me until I cum all over myself, then you make me call you ‘daddy’ and…”

Klaus stood up and palmed his erection, towering over the small blond, blue-eyed boy. It helped…it helped that Armin looked nothing like Taki and was perverted in all the ways that Taki was prim and proper. It helped Klaus believe all the things he told himself: “You’re not like anyone else, Taki. You’re separate, pure, on a pedestal and raised up high. This? This doesn’t count, it doesn’t matter. It’s just to pass the time. Nothing I do can touch you, soil you. When we’re together at last, you’ll wash me clean.”

***

At three-fifteen, Eren walked up to the Chibitan Bubble Tea Shoppe and found the door locked, the shop dark. “What the fuck?” Eren muttered. This was strange. In all the months he had been going to the tea shop, it had never been closed during regular business hours. Then it hit him. Those two…those two had been going at it like crystal meth addicts the night before…maybe they were still at Levi’s apartment and…shit! Eren ran down the street to the nearest Underground station. He didn’t have a moment to lose.

A friend asked me if I could name someone in RL who looks likes Taki. Well, I think it would have to be Taemin in the MV for his song Danger, where Taemin is actually channeling Michael Jackson and nailing Ian Eastwood’s choreography:
Okay, I admit that Taemin doesn’t really look like Taki, but there’s something about his hair that screams “I just got drilled nice and deep,” and the fact that, if I were Klaus, I would tap dat ass in half a second. I need to go to church…and stop thinking that I could ever be Klaus. Help!

I was also asked if I could name someone in RL who looks like Levi and my head just…exploded. So, no. Anyone got any ideas?
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Taki’s wife Sana enlists the help of her godfather, Asami Ryuichi. Suoh gets sent to London for "clean-up" duty.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to fanfic3112 for all the research and inspiration that went into this chapter.

His office was on the top floor of one of the tallest buildings in Tokyo and, from his vantage point in the clouds practically, Asami could see all of Shinjuku spread out below him at midnight like a glittering, pulsating mass of metal, glass, neon, and mindless meatbags. He wondered which one of those mindless meatbags was his own lover hot on the trail of some stupid story for that trashy magazine he worked so diligently for, foolishly chasing that one big scoop that was going to make him a success at last. Asami lit a Dunhill and inhaled with a frown on his lips. Who was the real fool in this, he wondered, feeling almost sheepish. Thank the fuck god he was alone; he’d rather put a bullet through his own head than admit to…just the other night he had uttered the most embarrassing words in a fit of post-orgasmic sappiness, calling Takaba “my cute little Akihito.” Ugh! Asami’s face burned with the memory of it as he exhaled with an angry grunt, turning away from the window and sitting back down at his desk. His laptop was open and he clicked on a folder, opening up the images that Takaba had taken two years ago at the wedding of his goddaughter Sana to that Taki Reizen. Takaba had been thrilled to cover that wedding—the Reizen family was as close to aristocracy as there was in modern day Japan, and Taki was a celebrity, a baseball star in a country that worshipped the sport.

“I’m moving up, Asami,” Takaba had smirked triumphantly when he revealed that he had been selected out of hundreds of eager photographers to shoot the event. Asami had merely smirked back, not letting on that it was he who had gotten Takaba that assignment with one well-placed phone call. “Let him be happy,” Asami had thought to himself. It was worth it to see Takaba so joyful in his delusions.

There was nothing joyful about the marriage, though, not if one looked beyond the surface. They made a stunningly beautiful couple, Sana and Taki, but Taki looked like a man being led to his execution. He had maintained an absolutely stoic demeanor throughout the whole ordeal, but his eyes gave it away: a combination of terror and resignation that Asami had seen many times before in the eyes of men before the trigger was pulled. Asami had seen it for himself because he had been the man pulling the trigger. This time, however, it was Taki’s uncle pulling the trigger and sending his young nephew to a living death. If Asami were a weaker sort of man, he might have felt a little sorry for the boy, but Asami wasn’t weak by any standards and the punishment for Taki could have been a lot worse than marrying a lovely girl to cover over a scandalous affair with another man. “Not my problem,” was what Asami had thought as he sat in the audience listening to them recite the ceremonial vows. Marriage was such an utter crock of shit. And then he had amused himself by watching Takaba flitting around like a spastic butterfly with a camera, imagined what it would feel
like when he had Takaba in his arms later, naked and moaning for him.

If only it had stayed that way—amusing—but a year after the wedding his goddaughter had come knocking on his door for a favor.

“Help me, Asami-sama!” Sana had pleaded, kneeling before him with an enthusiastic sob.

Asami wasn’t fooled by her crocodile tears. She should have known better than to try any feminine wiles on him. “Didn’t I already give you two imbeciles a billion yen for your wedding present?” he teased, thoroughly enjoying his cruelty. He already knew what Sana and Taki had been up to after that sham wedding…kids these days…can’t even keep their affairs under wraps. He could forgive his goddaughter—she was a girl, after all, the weaker sex supposedly—but that reckless boy of a husband of hers…Taki had no business marrying Sana if he was such a cocks**lut**, even if his uncle had insisted on the marriage for appearances. The boy had grown up with all the privileges afforded by wealth and status. He should have had the balls to tell his uncle to fuck off.

Sheesh. Nobody had ever handed Asami anything for free. He had clawed his way to the top of the Tokyo underworld with nothing but his own amoral ambition, eliminating any and all obstacles with nary a second thought about right or wrong, good or bad. Ethical questioning and family obligations were for losers, and Asami was no loser. And, yet, when Sana had come crying and begging to him for help, he couldn’t turn her away, couldn’t turn her down. There was something about her fierce concern for that wayward Taki that reminded Asami of someone else. If he were honest, he would admit that Sana reminded him of **himself**. How many times had he bailed that headstrong Takaba out of trouble? And how many times had he secretly relished his own role as the badass hero? It had always given him such smug satisfaction to know that he had the power to destroy a life with utter heartlessness, and even deeper satisfaction to save the one he held dearest to his soul. It was that desire to protect something precious that Asami saw in Sana’s teary eyes that day. Underneath those tears, though, Asami knew the girl could be a relentless, tenacious b**itch** if she wanted something, and so he had heaved a sigh and asked impatiently, “What the fuck do you want me to do?”

In half a second, those tears on Sana’s face had dried and she had straightened up, shoulders thrown back defiantly. “Don’t let my father or Taki’s uncle ruin us!” she had demanded. “Give us our freedom!”

“And what do I get in return?” Asami had asked. He didn’t try to hide his disdain for the whole sordid situation. “What could you possibly offer me as payment for this favor, little girl?”

“Hmph!” Sana had scowled, brows knitted together in anger as she wracked her brains for a worthy comeback. She had just one trump card, so she played it. “I’m pregnant with my lover’s child,” she had then confessed proudly, “and once it’s born, I’ll name it after you, even if it’s a girl, and I’ll leave it with you to babysit! That will be your payment!”

Asami had gone white as a sheet. He knew she was capable of doing such an evil thing and though he didn’t fear death, he was mortally afraid of **babies**. In fact, just the thought that Takaba might want to have children one day was enough to make Asami hide in a closet to hyperventilate in private shame. And, good god, babysitting a kid was definitely much worse than getting shot at by Russian mobsters and having his luxury apartment blown to smithereens. He had lived through both catastrophic events—the babysitting of someone's child and the demolition of his apartment after an insane shootout—and he could say without equivocation that he’d rather suffer through the latter than the former.

“Fine. Whatever. Just don’t ever use the B-word with me again!” he had shouted.

So, in order to appease Sana and put an end to any more talk about babysitting her child (that nutty
Takaba would probably say ‘yes’ to such an absurdity), Asami had called Suguri, invited him for drinks at Club Sion, plied him with his finest whiskey and sent him off to a private room with an escort of Suguri’s choice. Three nights later, they met again at a karaoke club, got drunk and made a bet.

“If I win this round,” Asami told Suguri, “I send my best man. If he takes your man out, then it’s over. Taki goes free.”

Suguri dragged on his cigarette. His pack of Gitanes sat next to Asami’s Dunhills on the table. The French and British had always been at odds throughout history, even if they didn’t openly despise each other now. Suguri held a certain degree of respect for Asami. The man was young, only in his mid-thirties, but Asami had made a name for himself with nothing except his own tenacity and drive and Suguri could only nod at the younger man. Suguri was beholden to Taki’s family, and that meant he would continue to do whatever it was that Taki’s uncle asked of him. What Asami was proposing though…it was a way out, a way for Suguri to remain loyal to Taki’s family and yet set the boy free. So he scowled at Asami, out of respect and thinly veiled gratefulness, and made his song selection, fully prepared to lose. Suguri would swallow his pride, swallow it because his love for his young charge, for Taki Reizen, was worth his own humiliation. Taki was the son he had always wished for and never had…except, well, the boy needed his help, didn’t he? Though he was grown, an adult and married, didn’t Taki still need him, need his guidance, his hand leading him in the right direction? But what was the right direction? Suguri didn’t think much of Klaus, but he couldn’t deny that Taki loved the man for whatever inexplicable reason. And love. Who could ever make sense of it? If Taki loved Klaus, wasn’t that enough?

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At least his boss flew him to London on his private jet rather than sending him on a commercial airline. Suoh sat next to Kirishima in the cockpit and passed the hours watching porn on his iPad. Kirishima didn't bother to make too much conversation, he was busy stewing over his own problems as he piloted the plane.

“Could this kid be any more of a handful than Takaba?” Kirishima opined when Suoh grumbled about being sent overseas to rescue some rich kid who had strayed too far off the reservation. “Boss wants me to haul Aki-kun's ass off to some monastery in the mountains. That brat's going to throw a massive shitfit, I just know it.” Kirishima sighed and pushed his glasses further up the bridge of his nose with his index finger, dreading the earful of complaints sure to fall from Takaba's lips later on. "You get some new suits out of this at least. Saville Row?"

Suoh grunted an affirmative. Their boss expected all his men to be dressed appropriately, and that meant bespoke suits that would likely be bled upon when beating to death some poor motherfucker who had crossed Asami. Still, a couple of new suits wasn’t a bad thing. Suoh switched off the iPad, having gotten his fill of hot chicks faking orgasms, and studied the file that Asami had given him about this Taki Reizen. Why couldn’t these rich kids just stick to fast cars and escorts and too much partying? Why did they have to hook-up with foreigners who would never be accepted by their families? Then again, Suoh was an outsider himself in many ways, an unwanted child who had found himself unique in ways that made it so fucking hard to assimilate. He had been raised in Japan, having never known a father who had abandoned both him and his mother. When he grew tall, and taller still, he stood out like a sore thumb, his hulking frame and heavy jaw considered unrefined and uncouth by the girls who pointed at him and giggled as if he were merely an ape at the zoo, a weirdly blond ape. He dropped out of school, made a reputation for himself as a thug, and on that serendipitous day when he had met a young criminal upstart by the name of Asami Ryuichi, it was as if his troubled, aimless life had finally found purpose. “I will follow this man,” Suoh had told himself. Now, years later, as Kirishima brought the plane down on the runway with the lightest of
touches, Suoh recited the same words again like a mantra. “I will follow this man.” He only hoped the assignment would be brief. He was partial to the cuisine in Japan and god knows what he’d have to eat and drink in London.

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If you've been seriously deprived in life and don't know the Finder series by Yamane Ayano, here's one of my favorite MMVs featuring Asami x Takaba:

One More Night, Viewfinder

And, if you didn't know already, Asami's fear of babies is thoroughly canon.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Erwin’s former treatment of Levi puts him in a bad light. Levi reveals something important to Taki.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The shock of Erwin’s sudden departure was so stunning that, like a patient dealt a fatal illness who reacts with unshakeable denial, Levi simply refused to believe it. For his entire senior year at university in Berlin, Levi operated under the self-imposed delusion that Erwin had merely taken the rudest leave of absence and would eventually return, at which point he would give Erwin a gigantic piece of his mind and then life could go back to being just fine and fucking dandy. Nothing this side of reality would convince Levi otherwise: not the annoying ‘mobile number no longer in service’ message that popped up on his phone every time he called Erwin; not the drunken midnight visits to Erwin’s old apartment, where Levi would stand outside the door, pounding on it with his fists whilst screaming obscenities until the current occupant, a little grey-haired lady who was decidedly not Erwin, would threaten to call the cops on him if he didn’t cease and desist; not the fact that his own painting instructor, Hange Zoë, had come to Levi’s studio to collect some books and ancient CDs that Levi had borrowed from Erwin.

As Levi’s mentor and advisor in the program, Hange knew full well that his incredible talent as an artist was matched by an equally incredible lack of sanity. Erwin had been sucked in by the diminutive bipedal tornado that was Levi—who could be maddeningly obnoxious, charismatic, sweet, needy, charming, hateful, all in the space of five minutes—but now that Erwin had fled the country for the sake of his own sanity, she was left to manage the raging inferno that Levi had become during the most stressful stage of his academic career. “He doesn’t teach here anymore, Levi. He’s gone,” Hange told him gently as she gathered up Erwin’s art books and Kraftwerk CDs. He had asked her to ship them to his new address in London and she figured that now was as good a time as any to make Levi accept the truth.

“Fucking liar!” Levi retorted, slamming the staple gun into the concrete floor as if he wanted to staple the living shit out of it. His dark hair was wild, falling in front of his pale face, but his eyes gleamed behind the curtain of ebony strands damp with sweat. “Liar, liar, pants on fire! Where is he then? He wouldn’t have left without telling me. Erwin and I are lovers, Professor Zoë, and you know it. Jealous, are we?” When Hange stood silent—she and the entire faculty had promised Erwin that they wouldn’t reveal his whereabouts to any students lest word get back to Levi—Levi resumed his task of stretching canvases and said with an overly confident smirk, “He’ll be back. He’s just on sabbatical.”

A million scenarios ran through Levi’s mind after Hange shut the studio door behind her, a million explanations for why Erwin was punishing him when he had returned to university that fall after ‘working’ for his Uncle Kenny all summer. Maybe Erwin had gotten wind of what ‘working’ for his Uncle Kenny entailed—drug running and peddling his own ass—and was angry with him for engaging in such illicit activities; Erwin could be so high and mighty about stupid shit like morality and ethics. Maybe Erwin was still pissed that Levi had trashed his apartment during their last
argument; Levi had spray painted the walls of Erwin’s bedroom with all sorts of pithy curses after he had seen Erwin flirting with some female colleagues at the faculty Christmas party and his jealousy had gotten the better of him. It was meant as a silly joke, some harmless venting of steam, but perhaps Erwin had taken it too seriously. Maybe Erwin had discovered that Levi had lied about his dead mother, that he hadn’t been some poor unloved child, that his mother had in fact doted on him like he was the center of the universe…but, shit, how was Erwin supposed to feel sorry for him if he knew how spoiled he had been for the first eight years of his life by a mother who had kissed him so tenderly each and every night? How could he convince Erwin to love him except to tell him how deprived of love he had been? What harm was it to tell a few lies if it meant Erwin would finally love him back?

It was worth it tell Erwin those lies. It was worth it to tell himself the biggest lie of all—“He’ll be back”—because it enabled Levi to exist in a bubble of pure fantasy while he produced a body of work for his final exhibition at university that attracted the attention of several curators in Berlin. He graduated with honors and then had a handful of shows at reputable galleries, met a few wealthy collectors and was written up in the art journals. His Uncle Kenny had attended the openings and, seeing that Levi had indeed made good on his claim that he was serious about his art, Kenny had agreed to call in a few favors and track down this Erwin Smith for his wacko nephew.

“He’s in London,” Kenny said one evening. “He’s teaching at the University of the Arts, Central St Martins. But if you think I’m going to fund your asinine obsession, you better get your pretty little head checked.”

Within a week, Levi was in London, coke stolen from his uncle’s ‘laboratory’ sealed in a plastic bag stuffed up his ass. He sold it on the street and it was enough to pay for a bed at a hostel and takeaway meals for a month; then, the money ran out. Kenny Ackerman, better known as Kenny the Ripper in Berlin’s underworld, had never made an honest Deutsche Mark or Euro, but he wasn’t stupid nor was he a completely heartless bastard. He knew that Levi would follow this Erwin fellow to London and make a shameless fool of himself, but he also knew it was better to let Levi run wild than waste what would be a fruitless effort to cage him in. He’d rather see Levi die on his own terms. Besides, Kenny owed it to the memory of his dead sister Kuchel to let her lunatic son choose his own path. Kuchel had been a hopeless addict, a wild child herself who had been knocked up by another user, but insisted on having the baby. “It’ll be nothing but demon spawn,” Kenny had warned her, but she wouldn’t listen. “My little angel,” is what Kuchel had called the mewling infant. “Yep, demon spawn,” is what Kenny had muttered in return.

Kenny called him just as Levi finished washing up in the communal bathroom at a homeless shelter. He had gotten into too many fist fights with the other people staying at the hostel and, now that he couldn’t pay up, he had been unceremoniously shown the door. At the shelter, he had a cot, a blanket, and a pillow, but more importantly, he had access to the showers, crummy as they were. It was better than nothing. He had burned through the money ‘earned’ by selling what little coke he could smuggle into the city, and was now reduced to selling his body to buy food. It was with relief that he listened to Kenny telling him that he had set up an account for him at such-and-such bank. He was keeping Levi on a short leash, but it would be enough to pay for a cheap hotel room and necessities. Two weeks after that—after Levi had paid Erwin a visit at work and Erwin had threatened to put a restraining order on him—Kenny had called him again and told him that a man named Suguri would be contacting him soon with a ‘job’ for him that would earn him a decent salary. Levi couldn’t believe his luck. He needed the extra money, money to pay for supplies and a studio where he could paint. He had signed a contract with a gallery in London when he had first arrived, but had no opportunity to work until now.

“Don’t fuck it up, Levi,” Kenny said ominously. “You know, your whore of a mother loved you more than you deserved, but I’m not the fool that she was. If you blow this opportunity, I won’t bail
you out. Remember that.”

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Had he blown it? He was supposed to keep watch over Taki, keep him away from this Klaus von Wolfstadt, not fuck Taki, for Christ’s sake! And yet…Taki was the only thing keeping him from losing his mind all these months. He was the one steady constant that made Levi know what was up and what was down, the horizon line that kept his world from tilting out of control. Did they have sex—he and Taki—or did they make love? Sex and love…they were two separate things. Levi had wanted both with Erwin, but Erwin had stubbornly refused to give him both, even after Levi had offered both, offered it again and again until he was nothing but bones stripped of flesh. *Just love me back a little.* He had uttered those humiliating words so many times and, though it filled him with the deepest shame each time he allowed himself to recall it, he would say it again if it would make Erwin…love him back just a little.

He often wondered while he stood before a canvas if he was truly undeserving of Erwin’s love. Had his mother given him his entire portion of love so that, once she was gone, there would be no more forthcoming? Had he, like a glutton, eaten it all at one sitting and was now doomed to starve for the rest of his life? Is that why Erwin had tossed him aside without ever having said “I love you” even once? The scales of the universe must be balanced, and perhaps Levi had already gorged on all the love he would ever get without tipping the scales. And yet, when he looked at Taki, he saw a young man whose capacity to hold—to *receive*—love was bottomless, like a vessel that could be filled to the top and yet never overflow. What was the trick? And could he learn how to master that miraculous sleight of hand? Could he fool the universe into giving him a larger portion, that portion that would finally sate his hunger, finally give him what he wanted most: Erwin’s love?

Taki had wanted to leave right after their ‘breakfast’ of leftover curry, but Levi had been overwhelmed with misery and Taki had stayed with him to offer comfort, an empathetic embrace that had led to a kiss, then another kiss, then errant groping and caresses, then the obscene sucking of fingers and cocks and the subsequent penetration of various orifices with said fingers and cocks. Several hours later, they stumbled into the shower, both of them filthy with all sorts of body fluids.

“Do you think you’ll ever stop loving him?” asked Levi as he scrubbed Taki’s back with a soapy washcloth.

Taki’s kneejerk reaction was to ask, “Who?” as if he were being interrogated by his own uncle. But it was no use denying Klaus’s place in his heart to Levi, so he said instead, “No. Why should I? Klaus and I…we’re meant to be together…even if we’ll never be together.”

At that, Levi wrapped his arms around Taki, pressing his body against him, the soap rendering their skin slick, slippery. Levi’s head was thrumming with endorphins as he rubbed his chest and cheek against Taki’s back, his cock sliding deliciously between Taki’s buttocks. He felt his jaw slackening, heard himself murmuring, “He’s here, you know…your Klaus.” The sensation of Taki’s body going rigid split Levi’s heart in two. *This* is what it is to be loved, thought Levi, to hear your beloved’s name and instantly respond with every cell, to turn towards your other half like a rose to the sun, seeking, searching, opening up like the most fragrant bloom. He didn’t care anymore if he’d blown his ‘assignment.’ He wasn’t going to pretend that the man had been a ghost. “I’ve seen him. He came to your shop.”

A tremble shook Taki from head to foot—he thought he might faint with joy—and he sucked in a shaky breath. “When?”

“Not that long ago. Last month?”
“How do you know it was him? How can you be sure?”

“I’m sure. Don’t ask me why, but I’m sure. He ordered lychee…and then he left it on the counter with a big tip. I think…I think he thought I was you at first. You should have seen his face.”

Taki bowed his head, his chest heaving, and then turned around in the circle of Levi’s arms and sobbed into his ear, “Levi…you’ve made me so happy.” It wasn’t a dream after all. The dreams that Taki had been having for months now…had it been Klaus reaching out to him across time and space? Had Klaus received the letter and come for him? “Gods! Please let it be so,” Taki prayed as he wept tears of elation, of hope. A ten-ton weight lifted from his shoulders and he could feel himself floating free, across the sky, to that place where he could be with Klaus at last. He hugged Levi tighter, squeezing him, all his doubt and regret falling away. Even if he never actually saw Klaus again, the fact that he might indeed be here in London looking for him was enough to release him from his prison of loneliness.

His hair was still wet as Taki walked down the street to the Underground station, his clothes a mess, but he had just one objective: to get to the shop and open it for business, no matter that it was three o’clock and he would be hours late. Klaus had been there! And now every step that Taki took became a pilgrimage to a holy shrine. Levi wouldn’t lie to him about having seen Klaus, and Levi, well, he had a good eye for faces. He could see a face and paint or draw it from memory. Taki had seen him do it whenever an interesting looking customer caught his attention, seen Levi make a quick sketch on a notepad that was eerily accurate. In the shower, Taki had asked him to describe the man who had come to the shop that day, the man who Levi claimed was Klaus, and Taki couldn’t deny that Levi described Klaus right down to the peculiar golden color of his eyes and the straw-like texture of his blond hair. Of course, Levi had seen pictures of Klaus on the internet, but he also described Klaus’s flippant tone of voice, his very American accent, and what more did he need to believe that Klaus was here in the same city as he was, breathing the same air? Taki was so abuzz with happiness, it was a miracle he got on the right platform and got off at the right stop, he had no awareness of his surroundings. Everything was bathed in a golden hue as if it were raining sunshine all around him, drowning him in joy. If he hadn’t been so distracted with excitement, blinded with eagerness to return to the very place at which Klaus had been sighted a month ago, he might have looked up as he flew down the steps of Levi’s apartment building and seen Klaus von Wolfstadt entering the apartment building across the street for his three o’clock ‘appointment’ with Armin Arlert.

He might have, but he didn’t. Instead, Taki saw the customer whom Levi called the Green-Eyed Devil as he exited the station at Leicester Square and was almost mowed down by Eren Jaeger running in the opposite direction. It took Taki a moment to place him—people who are familiar in one context can appear unrecognizable in another—but he didn’t have to struggle for long because Eren spoke first.

“Where have you been?” Eren shrieked. “I waited outside the shop for fifteen minutes! Don’t tell me you and Levi were still fucking around at his place!” And then Eren slapped a grimy hand over his own mouth, his green eyes screaming a loud “Oops!” as he slowly backed away before taking off again.

Taki stood for a few seconds watching the back of Eren disappear through a gate and down the escalator, and then Eren’s words sank in. What the hell? How did he know…no, he must have misheard him. That guy was totally bonkers to begin with, even Levi thought so and that said alot. Taki shook his head. He wasn’t going to let anything spoil his mood. After all the anguish of the last year, he was going to allow himself the fantasy of being near Klaus once more. And if Klaus had come to the shop once, then perhaps…perhaps he would pay it another visit. Next time, Taki thought with a smile as he unlocked the door, he would handle the order himself for Klaus. Next time, he
would make it with mango.

Chapter End Notes

Again, this chapter jumps around quite a bit time-wise. Hope it's not too confusing.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Erwin continues to justify his actions even as he begins to regret them. Suoh has news for Asami, but Asami's next order puts Suoh in a bind.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It wasn’t cowardice or expediency that made Erwin skip town without telling Levi, at least, that’s how he justified his actions. And it certainly wasn’t his fault that the timing was perfect: he was offered the teaching position in London earlier that spring and Levi was busy working his ass off for that scumbag uncle of his that summer, giving Erwin plenty of opportunity to pack up his old apartment and find a new one to lease, change his mobile number, and hightail it out of Berlin before the fall semester began. He wouldn’t have to face Levi in person, wouldn’t have to say, “Guess what? I’m dumping you. Have a nice life.” Erwin had to admit that on the surface it looked like a totally shitty thing to do to a student he had been fucking for the last three years, one with a notoriously fragile ego to boot. That was the crux of the matter and the reason that Erwin was willing to risk being the supreme asshole in this scenario. Levi’s tenuous hold on reality, his brittle mental state, was the reason Erwin had sworn all his colleagues to secrecy, especially Hange. He was doing it for Levi, he explained, not to him. Yeah, he was doing the merciful thing.

“If that nutjob finds out where I’m going, he’ll drop everything and follow me. I can’t have that. Levi’s got one year to go…he has to finish his degree,” Erwin insisted with a sincere concern that could have won him an Oscar for Best Paternal Performance of the Year if there were such an award. He and Hange were sitting in a dark corner of a bar in Potsdam a few blocks from Sanssouci, the magnificent palace and grounds of Frederick the Great, which was swarming with tourists. It was a beautiful day in late July, sunny and cloudless, but instead of lounging outside in the open air he was huddled inside nursing his Kölsch, paranoid that his intentions might be detected by Levi somehow and, like a shark homing in on a drop of blood a mile away, Levi would find him. “He’s fucking crazy, but he’s got something special, Hange. He can make it as an artist, he can have a real career.” Erwin reached out and draped a large palm over Hange’s hand on the table, imploring, “You’ve got to see him through this final year, make sure all those blood-sucking leeches visit his studio and see his work…make sure he doesn’t kill anyone before he graduates.”

“Kill anyone? Like you?” asked Hange. She washed down the accusation with a long gulp of her own Weissbier but didn’t pull her hand away. Instead, she squeezed Erwin’s long fingers and chuckled at the sight of his well-manicured nails compared to her perpetually dirty ones. Her hands always smelled of paint thinner and linseed oil but Erwin never seemed to mind. She wondered if Levi’s hands smelled the same. Probably. Then she wondered if Erwin had ever kissed Levi’s hands. Probably not. She and Erwin had slept together a number times over the years, usually when they were both a little drunk or high. In bed he was proficient and focused, just as he was outside of bed, but he was never overtly romantic, free and demonstrative with his affection like some men can be, not prone to acts of sappy tenderness. If she wanted him to do something specific, like use three fingers instead of two inside her, or suck harder on a nipple, all she had to do was tell him and he’d comply without delay. It was like having sex with a gorgeous android that was pleasingly compliant but devoid of feelings. She wondered what it was like for Levi, then, who was a bundle of raw
emotion, so starved for passion. “You’re going to drive him mad, you know, if you haven’t already. And now you want me to be the bad guy?”

“Not the bad guy,” Erwin was quick to say in his own defense, “the good guy. He listens to you, respects”—the loud snort from Hange barely made him pause, “—respects you. With me out of the way, he’ll be able to concentrate on his work. I’m just an unnecessary distraction for him. God knows, he uses me as an excuse to—”

This time, Hange slapped her hand over Erwin’s mouth. “Do you hear yourself? Jesus fucking H. Christ. How long have we known each other? Show me a little respect.” Their friendship had always been easy, natural, with little occasion for conflict, but Erwin, like almost all men she knew, possessed that innate sense of entitlement that he whipped out like a handy broom to sweep away evidence of wrongdoing whenever it suited him. She wagged a finger in his face, “You’re in the way? You’re a distraction? No, Erwin. You don’t get to give yourself a free pass with that kind of hypocrisy. The truth is that Levi’s in your way. He’s a monumental pain in the ass—we all know that—but you want to get rid of him and still tell yourself that you’re doing him a favor. Don’t act the magnanimous hero with me. I warned you right at the start that Levi would be more than you could handle, but you were so…so sure you could play with fire and not get burned.” Hange took an angry swig, spilling some of her beer down the front of her shirt. That Erwin, so cocky, so smugly egotistical, so insufferably self-righteous! He was a brilliant scholar and unforgivably handsome, with everything going for him in life, all the cards stacked in his favor. How could a kid like Levi stand a chance? “You’re going to break that little fucker to pieces.”

“He was already broken before I met him,” grumbled Erwin, refusing to cede his defensive position. “You can’t pin that one on me.”

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The day was done; Manet’s Olympia had cast her unflinching gaze upon an auditorium full of art students who were either snoozing or texting in the darkened room. What idiots, what foolish kids, thought Erwin. Just look at her: that pale skin, that small, vulnerable body, that defiant stare…Manet had painted a whore in nineteenth century Paris as lovely as Giorgione or Titian had done in sixteenth century Venice and they were letting this vision of corrupted perfection escape them. It was right in front of them—this thing of beauty in all its frightening, bare naked glory—and his students weren’t seeing it. Open your fucking eyes! Oh, if only he had opened his own eyes, he would have seen what was in front of him: that pale skin, that small, vulnerable body, that defiant stare…he would have seen Levi at his purest, seen into his heart.

After Eren had told him that morning that Levi had moved on from him, taken on a new lover, Erwin had replayed everything from the last few years over and over in his head, even as he lectured on autopilot to his class: the good, the bad, and all the excuses he had made to justify his own cruelty. I did it for your sake, Levi. But had he really? Hadn’t he done it for himself? He hadn’t started a new relationship since abandoning Levi, hadn’t dated anyone even though there had been plenty of opportunities; he’d had no interest, no one had caught his eye, not like the way Levi had. What did that say about him? Had his libido up and died in some dusty corner of his psyche? No, that wasn’t it. It suddenly struck him that, when he jacked it in the shower or in his bed at night, he always thought about Levi, his dark hair and pale grey eyes, his smooth, taut body so small and perfect, his breathy moans hitching higher and louder until he was screaming for him. Erwin! Erwin! It had always made Erwin a little annoyed that Levi would be so over-the-top, so out of control in bed. It was undisciplined, unseemly, overly indulgent. But maybe it was just himself being too close minded, ungenerous, withholding. Would it be so bad to hear Levi scream his name now? Yes, Levi, scream for me, and this time, I’ll say your name back.
Erwin gave a start. Mike Zacharias was standing next to his desk looking down at the book Erwin held in his hands. He hadn’t even heard Mike come into his office even though Mike, at six-foot-five, wasn’t exactly the sort to sneak up on anyone. “Uh, yeah, this is it. Here, have a look if you want.” Erwin handed the complimentary copy of his new monograph on Anselm Kiefer to Mike, who headed up the sculpture studio. On the floor by Erwin’s feet was a box holding four more copies provided by his publisher. One would go to the school’s library, one to the school’s dean, one he would give to Hange. His publisher was sending more copies to the art journals for review.

“Sweet,” said Mike, flipping through the pages and nodding with approval. Kiefer had been one of his own influences when he was in graduate school. Mike noticed that Erwin had dedicated the book to his deceased father, who had been a scholar in his own right, having written the definitive monograph on Otto Dix. “Your old man would be proud, eh? So, let’s say we celebrate this Saturday night? I’ll get a bunch of us together, drinks, more drinks, maybe some hot babes…get you out of that hideous jumper.”

“What’s wrong with my jumper?” asked Erwin. He smoothed down the front of his argyle sweater vest as if it had feelings that could be hurt. “It’s my look.”

“Yeah, well, that look hasn’t gotten you laid in ages, am I right? Your sadly neglected prick is going to shrivel up and fall off if you don’t start giving it a little love."

A little love. Christ. Everything today was making Erwin think of Levi for some nauseating reason and he didn’t like it one bit. Damn that Eren! Why couldn’t he have kept his flapping mouth shut? And why did the thought of Levi doing the nasty with someone else make him want to go on a killing spree? He wasn’t that kind of man, no, that wasn’t him at all. He was decent, rational, adult. God, he needed to think this through, this sudden spiral into teen angst. “Fine, fine,” he muttered, “just don’t expect me to dance.”

“You are such a killsport, Erwin,” Mike said, punching Erwin in the shoulder, “but don’t worry. I have the perfect place in mind.”

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After four weeks in London, Suoh Kazumi had news for Asami. “Boss, Suguri was right to have Reizen watched, but it looks like that spy he hired is helping himself to the goods, if you get my drift.”

“Ah. The greedy shit.”

Boss never wasted words and Suoh was feeling a little ridiculous for having uttered so many words himself. He figured he better rein it in before Asami made some snide comment about his sudden, uncharacteristic verbosity. “What next?”

There was a low exhale of breath, what amounted to a pleased chuckle, and then Asami said, “Let’s have some fun with Suguri’s little thief.”

“Such as?”

“Hmmm…seduce him.”

Suoh dropped his phone to his hip and swallowed a pained groan. He had never seduced anyone in his entire life. In fact, he had an almost neurotic aversion to being touched by a living person. Hauling a dead or even unconscious body into the trunk of a car or chopping it up into small pieces.
was easy as pie, and getting off on porn was enjoyable for sure, but the idea of being naked and actually banging another breathing human being was enough to make him lose his cool. All the times he’d had sex with a girl had taken place at clubs specializing in rubber, where each partner was covered head-to-toe in a body suit and there was no skin-on-skin contact. So what if it was kinky? Was it any kinkier than keeping his eyes on the road while his boss had sex with the flavor of the day in the back seat of the car? Sex fully sheathed in rubber, on the other hand, was very hygienic and hygiene was a good thing, especially since the better part of Suoh’s days involved disposing of bloody corpses. An order from Asami, though, was meant to be followed, not argued. Suoh straightened his back and put his phone back to his ear. “Yes, boss.” He was ready to push the “end call” button but Asami wasn’t done torturing him.

“Throw in some karaoke.”

Goddamn it. Boss loved karaoke and both Suoh and his associate Kirishima Kei had accompanied Asami to numerous karaoke smackdowns, but that was Tokyo and this was London. Were there even any karaoke clubs in London? Suoh wished a ten-on-the-Richter-scale earthquake would hit the city right about now. Not happening? He gulped down his dismay and said again, “Yes, boss.”

Upon his arrival a month ago, Suoh had set up temporary digs in the unit next to Taki’s flat and tapped into the feed from the hidden cameras that Suguri had installed in the various rooms. All he had learned from that footage was that Taki left his flat at nine every morning and returned at eight in the evenings. Except for the previous night. The cameras set up in Taki’s bubble tea shop had revealed something interesting sooner: Klaus von Wolfstadt ambling in and ordering a large drink that he left on the counter. Then Taki coming out front and that rude little worker-spy taking liberties with him. The other night, however, Taki had actually left his condo not long after returning from work and Suoh had followed him all the way to Levi’s flat. When Taki didn’t reappear until three o’clock the next afternoon, Suoh had called Asami to tell him this latest development. He would break into Levi’s apartment later to set up cameras there, too, and he’d also need to investigate the building across the street where he had seen Klaus enter just as Taki had left Levi’s place. This was just…the most unbelievable soap opera, more unbelievable than the Korean ones he liked watching so avidly.

After the phone call to Asami, Suoh had waited from his position down the block for Klaus to reappear, which took another two and a half hours. But before that, he saw a grubby, long-haired young man enter the same building that Klaus had gone into. The kid was muttering to himself as he stomped past Suoh, something about wanting a threesome. Then Klaus sauntered out smoking a cigarette and looking tired and grim. Suoh followed him to Russell Square, where Klaus entered a pub. Suoh waited several minutes outside, and then casually walked in, sat at the bar, and ordered a Guinness from the bartender before discreetly scanning the room. Klaus was sitting at a corner table in the back chugging an ale and staring at his phone and didn’t notice Suoh watching him, nor did he seem to notice his doppelgänger, Erwin Smith, waltz in five minutes after Suoh and sit at the empty table next to Klaus.

Klaus had a lot on his mind, namely, what the fuck was he doing with his life? Should he throw in the towel? If he found Taki now, could he even ask him to forgive him for being so unfaithful? What he did with Armin was pure bullshit, something to pass the time and forget his misery for a few hours, but he could have done other things instead, like read a book or feed the ducks at the park, things that didn’t involve sticking his cock into someone else’s body. He never kissed Armin, never kissed any of those anonymous hook-ups; he had never crossed that line and become truly intimate with anyone else. He would never kiss anyone but Taki. So…there was still hope, wasn’t there, hope for forgiveness, for redemption? Then his phone dinged with an email alert from his brother-in-law Stephen:
Your sales numbers are abysmal. Moving you to Sandwich, Kent. You’ll be working in Quality Assurance instead of Sales.

Th’ fuck? Klaus didn’t call Stephen back because he knew he would verbally throttle the man. He called his sister instead.

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Forgiveness. Redemption. Erwin Smith sat down at the one open table near the back of the pub and pondered these things with a heavy heart. He was guilty of treating Levi with utter callousness. He realized that now, but was it too late to make things right? It seemed rather stupid that he had poured all his energy and effort over the last few years into writing a monograph on an artist who was already established, maybe even over the hill, when he could have been documenting Levi’s progress right from the start, Levi who had the potential to surpass all those tired old farts like Kiefer, Richter, Baselitz. Kiefer had begrudgingly spared him five minutes for an interview over the phone, but Levi would have given him a lifetime freely. He could have ‘discovered’ him before anyone else, maybe even have been his raison d’être, that god in the sky that inspired Levi to greatness. Every artist has his muse, after all, and didn’t Erwin fit that bill? Hange had sent him the links to all the articles about Levi in the art journals since Erwin had been in London, but he didn’t need that to know that Levi had caught the attention of the critics and curators who were eager to tout the next great young artist; he had his own subscription to *Artforum*. But now it seemed as if Levi might have found his muse in someone else, someone that Eren Jaeger had said was hot. Well, shit, wasn’t he, Erwin Smith, hot? Erwin Smith had just published a monograph on Anselm Kiefer. Erwin Smith was a respected scholar. Erwin Smith was moving up in the world of academia. What the hell was Levi doing fucking a bubble tea shop owner? How had the world turned upside down?

What pulled Erwin out of enjoying a full-blown pity-party was the one-sided conversation he overheard behind him. The man sitting in the corner with his back now turned to the room was ranting *sotto voce* into his mobile over the noise of the crowded pub, but Erwin couldn’t help but notice his distinctly American accent and the fact that the man sounded even more furious and desperate than Erwin felt at the moment.

“I’m making porn, Claudia,” Erwin heard the man seethe through clenched teeth. “I’m fucking a blond-haired twink who wants me to dress up in a goddamn Waffen-SS uniform while I spank the shit out of him with a stuffed dog toy. Do you have any idea how sick that is? How disgusting? I mean, I never even did anything like that in Vegas! You tell that husband of yours that if he moves me to fucking Sandwich, wherever the fuck that is, I will make sure… I am calm!… I am doing my job! It’s not my fault there’s a generic for Viagra! Just how many guys have limp dicks anyway?”

This was getting interesting and, in an effort to hear all of it amidst the din of the room, Erwin scooted closer until he accidentally bumped his chair against the other man’s leg. The man whipped his head around and Erwin quickly put up a hand in apology, ready to say “Excuse me” but they merely stared at each other in surprise, one alpha appraising another alpha. It was…awkward.

Chapter End Notes

If you’ve never visited Sanssouci in Potsdam, it is well worth the trip, not only for a tour of the palace of Frederick the Great with its columns encrusted with seashells and the
fact that they make you wear gigantic slippers whilst walking through the palace proper,
but for the grounds with its rococo 'follies' that epitomize the rage for chinoiserie at the
time. If you visit in May, then you can also take advantage of all the spargel (asparagus)
that are on every menu.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Klaus is on the verge of losing his job. Suoh attempts to seduce Levi.

Chapter Notes

Thank you fanfiction3112 for the “Suoh is a blond tank” idea!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The stupid threat he leveled against his brother-in-law via his sister backfired on Klaus. When he finally stumbled to his flat at half-past midnight, his phone rang and it was Stephen giving him an earful as he shoved his key into the lock.

“So you’re a porn star, are you?” Stephen accused.

“I never said I was a ‘star,’” Klaus slurred back. He let himself into his tiny flat and slammed the door shut behind him, flicked on the light switch and then leaned against the door to steady himself as the room spun around him. “All I said was that I was—”

“Fine,” Stephen cut in, “go ahead. Make a goddamn fool out of yourself. This wouldn’t be the first time. I don’t care. You don’t work for this company anymore as of now. Go fuck yourself. Or, better yet, go find that little Japanese boyfriend of yours and go fuck him. That’s what this is all about, isn’t it? The transfer to London? You think my own wife doesn’t talk to me? You can’t be a decent, law-abiding American citizen, can you? No. You have to be your own man, do things your own way, except, everything you do is all about you. You don’t care how I feel, how your own sister feels, how you are an embarrassment to your own family.”

“You’re not my family,” Klaus shot back. “Why Claudia ever married a cold prick like you is beyond me.”

“Cold prick? I’m a cold prick? At least I reserve my cock for my own wife! I don’t chase some Asian piece of ass all the way to London and then shove my dick into any old hole!”

Yeah, the room was spinning, but Klaus forgot the vertigo for a second because he was seeing a new side of his brother-in-law. And…he was rather impressed. Stephen was always so uptight and proper; he had never been anything but too polite, distant and almost dishonest. Klaus had never managed to get a firm grip on the man and who he really was because Stephen’s aloofness had been a barrier. This was new and different—this Stephen who was angry and swearing and making no effort to be polite—and for some strange reason, it made Klaus feel awfully guilty. It reminded him of Taki: his politeness, his adherence to all things proper, the infuriating push and pull of him. What Stephen was saying to him…all of it was true, and he had to give the man credit for calling him on his bluff and winning.

“So, are you saying I’m fired?” asked Klaus. All the fight in him was gone. If he was fired, that
meant that there would be no paycheck, no income. What would he do? How could he stay in London with no income? He had little to no savings and could he even dare to ask his sister to loan him money? No, he had already asked too much of her.

There was a long silence, and then Stephen said calmly, “That’s really up to you. I’ll give you to the end of the week. You either agree to the move, or I’m done with you.”

The call went dead and Klaus couldn’t help but laugh. It wasn’t mirth that prompted the laughter. It was despair, the same kind of despair he had felt when the Mets had sent him back down to Triple-A after the night of debauchery in New York, the night he had brawled with Noah Syndergaard over Taki and everything had spiraled into the sewer. Why was everything looping around and around in a circle? Why couldn’t he break this cycle of ridiculous highs and lows and set upon a more even path of ho-hum, easy living? Why couldn’t he just let Taki go, let his own heart bite the dust? The stranger who had bumped into him at the pub had apologized, then offered to buy Klaus another pint. Well, shit, he wasn’t about to turn down another pint. They had ended up talking and swapped a few stories and then, as more pints were downed, the conversation had shifted to more personal things, things like hopes and dreams and lovers lost. By the end of the night, they had exchanged mobile numbers with the promise to meet up again for a drink. In the year Klaus had been in London, he hadn’t really made any friends, didn’t want to know anyone on a personal basis. But this Erwin fellow was someone he wouldn’t mind hanging out with once in a while. He was intelligent, sane, almost brotherly. It would be good for him to have someone to offer a different perspective on things, someone who wasn’t utterly obsessed with another.

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The Hello Kitty clock on the wall read 3:00 pm, just enough time for a cigarette break before his nemesis made his daily appearance. Levi gave the countertop another spritz from the bottle of grapefruit scented antiseptic cleaner and wiped it down with a paper towel, then took off his rubber gloves and sauntered into the back room where Taki was stirring a pot of tapioca pearls on the electric burner, the fourth batch of the day already. It was early July; the morning had been hot and tourists had been in and out of the shop for a cold drink since well before noon. The front area was air conditioned, but the back room was only cooled by a little ceiling fan, which was whirring away at full speed and tossing the hair at the back of Taki’s head. Levi walked up behind him and smoothed down a few errant strands, kissed the nape of his neck.

“Stop that,” Taki said. Then he turned his head and offered his cheek.

“Going out for a smoke,” Levi murmured after giving Taki a chaste kiss. When Taki didn’t turn his face back to the stove, Levi nuzzled at his ear, traced his tongue along the ridges of the shell before nibbling at the lobe.

“Mmm.” A lifetime of discipline enabled Taki to swim against the tide of desire and go back to minding the pot rather than fall deeper into that wet sensation. Besides, he had already given in to wanton lust earlier that morning when they had both arrived at the shop to prep for the day and had proceeded to blow each other instead next to the crate of mangoes and pineapples in the back room. Levi had gone at him first like a hungry kitten, taking him all the way down his throat and milking him dry. Then Taki, who had been raised to be considerate of others, got down on his knees and returned the favor with eyes closed, his mind sparking with memories of the last time he had done this with Klaus. Klaus was, well, hung like a horse, and Taki could never manage to fit more than a few inches into his mouth, but that had never stopped him from choking himself on Klaus’s dick, sucking on the crown like a greedy slut, licking up and down that thick long shaft and counting the seconds until Klaus would manhandle him into position, push into him until he was keening and biting into his own fist. In fact, ever since Levi had told him that Klaus had visited the shop, Taki had
been horny as hell, as if Klaus had left his scent behind and now those pheromones were buzzing
around in his brain and driving him as mad as an animal in rutting season. His lips were still a little
bruised from how avidly he had sucked Levi off hours ago, and now his stomach was clenching as
another wave of need rose up in him. He wanted so badly to be filled with Klaus, wanted to spread
his legs for him, open his whole body to him, wanted to feel those huge hands bending and twisting
him into sweet submission. His voice was thick in his throat when he told Levi, “You should cut
back a little. Smoking is bad for your health.”

“Bad for my health?” Levi smirked, his chin on Taki’s shoulder. “Not having your cock inside me is
bad for my health. Not having my—”

“Go on, then,” Taki interrupted. “Enjoy your cigarette.” He stared into the pot, trying to will Klaus
into being. Everything Levi had been doing to him…everything he had been doing to Levi was only
tearing him in two. He loved Klaus, wanted to save all of himself for him, but he had cheated,
cheated more than once and who knows what he’d do if he continued wallowing in his own…was
this what his mother had done? His mother had defied convention, tradition, and followed her own
passionate desires. She had married a man beneath her in status because she had wanted him and that
was reason enough for her, but the man Taki had known all his life as his father was dull and rigid
and cold. Had his mother taken on lovers? Had she cheated also? He hoped so; he didn’t want to be
the only wayward soul in his family. And what did he feel exactly for Levi? As much as he loved
Klaus, could he be falling in love with someone else?

“Yeah, I love you, too,” Levi said in jest, in…honesty. It should hurt, shouldn’t it, to say those words
and not hear them returned? But it didn’t hurt, because Taki wasn’t one for words, so Levi added as
he headed to the front of the shop, “Try not to miss me too much.” As Levi opened the drawer under
the cash register to grab his pack of Newport menthols and his lighter, two things happened
simultaneously: the door chimed loudly, almost violently, as it swung open and the room darkened
suddenly, as if the sun had passed behind a cloud. Levi looked up and saw that it was no cloud that
was blocking the sun, it was a man, a very, very large man.

Suoh stood in the doorway staring into the room, his hazel eyes casting about until they landed
squarely on Levi. The man’s cropped blond head of hair was practically even with the top of the
doorframe, which meant that he was at least six-foot-seven.

“What the hell is that?” thought Levi. “Some sort of blond tank?” Even Erwin wasn’t that tall and
wide and…hunky. The silent stranger was wearing a suit and tie in 32-degree Celsius heat and not
even breaking a sweat. “Guess that must be one of those summer linens,” Levi deadpanned aloud,
but the crack about the man’s attire elicited no response; then the man turned around and walked out
the door. “Th’ fuck?” muttered Levi. He put a cigarette into his mouth, letting it hang between his
lips while he contemplated his next move. The man was standing outside the shop on the sidewalk
and looking at his phone. Levi glanced at the clock: it was 3:08 pm, just seven more minutes before
the Green-Eyed Devil would make his unwanted entrance. Taki would never let him smoke inside
the shop, but Levi didn’t feel too keen on standing outside next to this mute weirdo…although, it
would afford some shade from the sun…

Serving as Asami’s bodyguard/cleaner/hitman/information extractor/occasional driver was a difficult
job, one that few men could even hope to master with skill and competency, but Suoh was that rare
man who could handle with aplomb just about anything his boss threw at him. Even when it came to
dealing with that brat Takaba, Suoh never lost his head, unlike his colleague Kirishima, who was
often reduced to shouting and swearing right in front of Asami if Takaba was pushing the wrong
buttons. Not that there hadn’t been situations that left Suoh flummoxed, like that time Takaba had
kicked Kirishima in the nuts and then jumped off the roof of Club Sion and, for a second, Suoh had
thought to himself, “Does Boss expect me to go after the little fucker?” Asami hadn’t asked him to
jump off the roof in pursuit of Takaba but Suoh was wondering now if it might have been better if he
had because he probably would have broken every bone in his body falling multiple floors to the
pavement and then he wouldn’t have to be standing in front of Chibitan Bubble Tea Shoppe in the
sweltering heat trying and failing to follow Asami’s directive.

He had Googled it: Ten Ways to Seduce a Man. Suoh had read the article several times that morning
but when he stepped inside the shop and saw Levi, his brain shorted out. Luckily, he had saved the
link to this grotesque article on his phone and was desperately scrolling through it right now as a
refresher on his plan of action. The good thing was that this method of seduction involved only ten
steps. The bad thing was that he wasn’t capable of performing most of them. They were:

1. Let your eyes do the work.
2. Practice your dozens of smiles.
3. Use body language.
4. Touch him often.
5. Send seductive texts.
6. Display your confidence.
7. Show off your intellectual side.
8. Be a little hot and cold.
9. Let the dance floor do the seducing.
10. Have some deliberate “accidents.”

Falling off a building and dying sounded way better, but Asami had not given him that option.
Kirishima had complained about having to babysit Takaba, but right now Suoh would gladly change
places with him. This Levi character looked to be even more of a handful than Takaba. And there
was that Taki Reizen to deal with, too…fucking hell, Suoh couldn’t wait to get out of London and
back to Tokyo where he could perform a normal task, like shoot someone in the head or punch an
informant until he was unconscious. Seducing some tiny young man was just too scary, and that
discomfiting panic was only rising as he read down the list again searching for a lifeline. “Practice
your dozens of smiles.” Dozens? He didn’t even have one, for shit’s sake! “Be a little hot and cold.
Would being just cold count? Let the dance floor do the seducing.” Oh man, Boss wanted him to go
the karaoke route, which was just as bad as dancing. “Stupid fucking article,” grumbled Suoh. He
shoved his phone into his pocket and stalked back into the shop and found Levi still standing behind
the counter with an unlit cigarette dangling between his lips. Hmm. That was good. Smoking was
something that was familiar and soothing in Suoh’s book. He could work with that. He walked up to
the counter and looked down, down, down at Levi, who was looking up, up, up at him.

“Can I get you something?” Levi asked around his cigarette.

“No,” replied Suoh. He decided to cut to the chase—when amputating one’s own limb, it’s best to
do it quickly—even as those ten steps were swirling around in his head and turning into a jumbled
mess of incomprehensible words. He forced himself to smile, which was really just a grimace, and
intoned ominously, “You would like to enjoy karaoke with me.”

Levi’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Is that supposed to be a threat or are you some kind of mind
control freak?”

Mind control freak? Was that the same as showing off your intellectual side? Suoh grunted, “You
will have date with me at karaoke club. Where is good karaoke club?”

“Dude…” Levi couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He’d been on the receiving end of too many
lame pick-up lines, but this was taking the cake. And making him very curious. This blond tank was
obviously a foreigner and social outcast who was wealthy enough to afford bespoke suits, but Levi
couldn’t place his stilted, accented English, which was vaguely similar to Taki’s accented English.

The curtain parted as Taki stepped into the front of the shop, and then Taki froze in his tracks. He’d seen this man before, but where? Where?

“Boss,” Levi said, “this guy wants to know if there’s a karaoke club around here. Isn’t karaoke big in your country?”

“Ah, yes,” Taki mumbled. Why couldn’t he remember where he had seen this man? And why was he interested in karaoke?

“Have you ever been?” asked Levi.

“Ah, yes…many times.”

“Are you any good?”

“Good?” Taki replied. “Um…I am…not bad.”

“Heh,” Levi chuckled. Not bad in Taki’s vocabulary meant great. Levi took out his phone and did a quick search, then he grinned at the tall blond stranger. “Sure, I’ll go on a date with you.” He shoved his phone into the stranger’s face. On it was the website for a karaoke bar in Mayfair. “We can go here, and my boss is coming along.”

Chapter End Notes

Those ten tips on seducing a guy were taken from an actual website I found:

https://sexyconfidence.com/how-to-seduce-a-man/

Check it out if you are curious. It's pretty hilarious.
It had been a weird week and it was probably going to get weirder. That hulking stranger had showed up at the shop and demanded that Levi go on a date with him, to a freaking karaoke club no less. The man was bizarre enough in behavior, but there was something else about him that Taki couldn’t quite put his finger on—maybe his face, maybe his accent—and then the Green-Eyed Devil had waltzed in and ordered his usual large bubble tea with extra passion fruit and proceeded to make no effort to conceal the fact that he was avidly listening to this blond stranger flirt with Levi. It was painful to witness what could only be described as an epic fail in slow motion; Taki had whipped up Eren’s order as quickly as possible to spare both Levi and his new admirer an unwanted audience, but Eren had merely taken a seat at the counter and sucked noisily on the straw, all ears and eyes. The blond man had robotically introduced himself to Levi as Mr. Suoh and then proceeded to shake Levi’s hand, then pat him on the shoulders, then pat him on the cheeks—sort of like a Great Dane molesting a kitten—at which point Levi swatted Mr. Suoh’s gigantic paws off his face and snapped, “Hey, man, skin-on-skin contact is going to cost you extra.”

That seemed to please Mr. Suoh immensely, who then barked, “Give me your mobile number.”

To Taki’s surprise, Levi had blushed pink, not from anger but from arousal—Taki knew the difference by now—and gave the man his number. Mind control indeed! Levi was behaving as if he were under this stranger’s antisocial spell. What the heck was going on? And how had he let Levi talk him into joining him on a date with this lunatic?

Taki opened the tin on the counter in Levi’s kitchen and sighed as he scooped out a spoonful of loose tea leaves, dropped them into the pot he had already warmed with boiled water. Levi only kept black tea in his flat and Taki had been tempted to bring him green tea because that is what Taki preferred, but he had balked for two reasons: he didn’t want to impose his own preferences on Levi, and he didn’t want Levi to get the wrong idea about their relationship. They weren’t boyfriends, just friends, even if they’d had sex on more than one occasion. They were each saving their hearts for their true loves even if other body parts were roaming off the reservation. That is what Taki told himself for the millionth time as he watched the tea steep, then poured himself a cup after several
minutes had passed. He sat down at the counter and took a sip. It was ten-thirty at night on a Saturday and Levi was upstairs in the attic studio working on a canvas. Taki had let himself into the flat with the key Levi had given him weeks ago, too anxious to wait in his own luxury condo. He felt ashamed that he had never returned the favor, never ever invited Levi to his place but, again, Taki had his reasons. He knew his apartment was being watched somehow, the same way his phone calls were being traced, his texts and emails read by prying eyes. Suguri had told him as much when he had accompanied Taki to London to settle him in over a year ago. “Your uncle is a generous man, Taki-sama, but he won’t turn a blind eye if you-know-who shows up in your life again. Be careful if you don’t wish to see his head roll.”

So he never brought anyone home for fear of dragging yet another innocent person into his clusterfuck of a life, and Levi never asked for an invitation. Instead, Taki always went to Levi’s flat and, now that he had a key, he could come and go as he pleased. He didn’t do it often, but every once in a while, if he were feeling especially lonely, he’d show up late at night to watch Levi paint or, even rarer, if Levi were asleep, Taki would slip into bed beside him and nestle against his small body. It was comforting, just like the tea he was drinking in Levi’s immaculately clean kitchen. In another hour or so they would leave to meet that blond tank at the karaoke club in Mayfair. Taki had been more than a little upset with Levi that day after both Mr. Suoh and the Green-Eyed Devil had left the shop.

“Have you lost your mind?” Taki had asked, his voice strained with exasperation. “For all you know, that man’s a mass murderer!”

“Damn straight,” Levi had laughed, “that’s why you’re going to come with me. You wouldn’t let little ol’ me go alone would you? What if he tries to have his way with me, huh?” Levi had pressed his crotch up against Taki and, there it was, that unmistakable bulge in his pants. “What if he ties me up and spanks me? If you’re not there to stop him, I don’t know what might happen…all sorts of bad things…”

So, against his better judgment, Taki caved in to Levi’s cajoling. He took another sip of tea to calm his nerves, still kicking himself for being played like this. If Levi wanted to fool around with this person, that was his own business, except…it was driving him up the wall, the fact that this Mr. Suoh seemed vaguely familiar and Taki was dying to scratch that itch, dying to know where he had seen him before. The man didn’t look Japanese, but his name was not uncommon in Japan, and his stilted English was another quirk. Well, if he was stuck playing chaperone on this crazy date, then he figured he could observe this man at least; maybe something would jog his memory.

There was the other reason, too, for tagging along, a reason that was becoming more and more jumbled in his head. That morning he had jolted awake at four-thirty to find himself lying on his stomach, the sheets sticky beneath him. He had been dreaming, and in the dream Levi was clutching him from behind and holding his legs apart while Klaus fucked into him. It had felt so real, so good, but even as he was dreaming he kept asking himself, “Does Klaus know what I’ve done with Levi?” The orgasm was long gone but his guilt and worry lingered on as he poured another cup of tea. Had Klaus slept with others, too, Taki wondered, and, if he had, would it negate what Taki had done? The questions filled him with a terrible remorse. He wished he could hide under a rock, a rock that would roll on top of him and mercifully crush him to death. But instead of a rock, it was Levi who came crashing through the door wearing his usual “studio” outfit: a T-shirt, his lederhosen, the Badtz-Maru slippers, and his painting smock. His nose and upper lip were dusted with a white powder as he stumbled into the kitchen where Taki was sitting, a lit joint between his fingers.

“What are you doing?” Taki asked.

Levi gave Taki a thorough once-over while he dragged deeply on the joint. “Taking the edge off,”
he squeaked without exhaling. He held the joint out to Taki. “Want some?”

“Aren’t I supposed to be babysitting you tonight?” The urge to wipe Levi’s nose was overwhelming.

“All the more reason to get high, boss.” Levi narrowed his eyes and rubbed a hand across his nose, smearing the coke onto his cheek. “Is that what you’re wearing? We’re going to a karaoke club, not a fucking funeral.”

“But…” Taki had been to numerous karaoke clubs with Suguri in Tokyo and they always dressed formally. Of course, there were informal bars where one could dress casually, but those places were for tourists and ordinary folks and were well beneath the kinds of exclusive establishments Suguri and his associates would patronize. That restaurant in Queens where he had sung that duet with Klaus, well, that was a whole other animal. “…this is what I usually wear for karaoke in Japan.”

“Jesus fucking H. Christ. We’re not in Japan! Nobody wears a three-piece suit to a karaoke club anywhere else on the planet.”

“Oh? You’re an expert on karaoke clubs?” Taki shot back. His eyes widened as Levi approached with a menacing look on his face, a hand raised as if to slap him, but Levi grabbed Taki by the back of the head instead and kissed him with plenty of tongue.

“I’ve been to a few,” Levi smirked when he came up for air, “and I can carry a tune as well as the next motherfucker. I dare you to keep up with me.” Taki’s cheeks were flushed and his lips so soft and warm to the touch; Levi indulged himself with another filthy wet kiss and sighed, “If you want to go dressed like some freaking yakuza accountant, go ahead. I’m getting showered and changed and then we can leave.” He disappeared into his bedroom; forty-five minutes later, he emerged wearing a tuxedo complete with a dark green paisley silk vest and matching bowtie. “What?” Levi feigned surprise at Taki’s shocked expression. The truth was, he had found the vintage outfit on Portabello Road and bought it with the intention of wearing it to his exhibition opening as a lark. Tonight, though, was as good a night as any to break it in, especially with Taki looking like an exquisite stuffed shirt. “I’m not letting you shine all on your own.”

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The club was a tourist trap on a monumental scale. Its cheesy name—Xanadu—was splashed across the façade in humungous neon letters that lit up one-by-one and then flashed ten times in quick succession. It was enough to send one into an epileptic fit. Inside there were four floors, each featuring a different theme: an “ice bar” where patrons were handed fur coats and hats before entering a room where everything was sculpted out of ice, including the tables, chairs, and glasses in which one could sip vodka and admire all the décor from Communist Era USSR; a “jungle bar” on another floor where everything was carved out of wood and patrons could swing on vines and the barmaids and bartenders were all dressed like Tarzan and Jane; a Harry Potter meets Lord of the Rings meets Game of Thrones bar, which was packed with Americans on vacation; and a karaoke bar on the top floor, which was divided into eight smaller private rooms ringing a large central public space featuring a raised stage for those extroverts with supreme confidence in their singing abilities or those with no shame.

Suoh, apparently, was a man who was confident and shameless because he had not reserved a private room. He was waiting at the bar when Levi and Taki arrived, his blond buzzcut hair easily visible head and shoulders above everyone else in the packed room. The three of them stared silently at each other, rather befuddled by the fact that they were all overdressed in three-piece suits amidst a sea of T-shirts and shorts.

“Way to stand out, right?” Levi shouted over the noise. A woman was on stage singing an old
Eurythmics song really badly.

Taki leaned over and whispered to Levi, “I think I want to die.”

“Drink first,” Suoh suggested. “Then we die.” If he was going to have to get up on that stage, then he’d need a few drinks first.

They decided to stick to martinis at Levi’s suggestion. “It won’t stain if we spill it,” was his reasoning.

They sat at a table and downed the first round like it was water. It seemed to have no effect on Suoh, who looked like he could drink a gallon and still remain sober, but Levi was flying high from the coke and the pot and now the alcohol and Taki was getting that warm and fuzzy feeling that was migrating from his stomach into his head. He felt brave enough to ask Suoh, “What do you do?” to which Suoh replied, “I run a cleaning business in Tokyo.”

Levi burst out laughing. “What? Like cleaning carpets?”

“Carpets, wood, terrazzo, leather, vinyl, cloth…all surfaces must be cleaned of blood, sometimes brains.” Suoh paused thoughtfully and then added, “Glass is easiest to clean. I recommend wearing thick rubber gloves.”

“Oh…wow…” Levi gulped, his eyes like saucers, “nothing sexier than rubber gloves…the thicker the better…” This date was getting off to a good start. He stared down at Suoh’s large hands and imagined them sheathed in polyurethane gloves, slicked digits probing him in intimate ways. He imagined Suoh bouncing him vigorously in his lap, impaled on his rubber sheathed cock. He imagined Suoh fucking him into tomorrow and beyond. Yowzah!

Taki was stuck on the mention of blood and brains, though. Perhaps the man cleaned hospital emergency rooms or was brought in to straighten out a crime scene after the police had gathered all the gruesome evidence. Perhaps he was cleaning up his own murders! He wanted to ask him all sorts of questions, but before he could get in another word, Suoh had gotten up to order another round of drinks at the bar.

“Pretty hot, eh?” Levi grinned.

“What’s hot about blood and brains? Doesn’t it concern you that—”

“Hey, look, let’s get on stage. No one’s up there right now and…” Levi was suddenly gripped with the urge to show Suoh that he was fifty shades of sexy. Erwin might not want him, but he was still desirable, wasn’t he? He was still absolutely fuckable. He grabbed Taki by the hand and dragged him to the stage, asked the DJ for a particular song. The DJ cued up the music and uploaded the lyrics onto the video monitor and that’s when Taki saw that they would be singing a duet about two lovers cheating on their partners. From the stage they could both see Suoh standing at the bar waiting for their drink order to be filled. Suoh raised an eyebrow at them, as if to say, “Well, do your worst.”

“I wish Erwin were here to see this,” Levi said to Taki as the first strains of the song rang out over the speakers.

Taki could only scan the room and sigh with relief. “I’m so glad Klaus isn’t.”
Here's the song that Levi and Taki sing: Secret Lovers by Atlantic Starr.

It's so sappy-cringey, it's great! Be sure to sing along and enjoy as you die of embarrassment!

Chapter End Notes

The club/bar they go to in Mayfair doesn't exist, but it is loosely based on various different "theme" bars that do actually exist.

And Portabello Road in London really is a great place to hunt around for vintage clothing. Lots of great places to eat, too.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

It's just one of those nights when the stars align.

Their second martinis were waiting for them at the table when they got off the stage. Levi immediately took the seat next to Suoh, who dwarfed him like a titan to a child. No, Levi was more like a horny cat rubbing up against a huge tree. From across the table, Taki cast them a furtive glance over the rim of his glass as he sipped, thinking mournfully to himself, “He’s going to climb that tree, that Levi, so shameless. He’s going to make me watch.”

It was confusing, these feelings swirling around in Taki’s head as the vodka warmed him through and through, feelings that landed in the pit of his stomach with an alcoholic splash, only to rise up and settle heavy in his heart like fumes smelling of longing, guilt, jealousy. The way that Levi and that big blond tank were sitting next to each other, elbows touching through two layers of fabric, two pairs of eyes gazing with intent—steel grey into hazel—made Taki wish for that rare connection, that overwhelming attraction that could make him forget his stoic upbringing and clutch at a body much larger than his own, a body that was firm, muscular, and pounding into him. He was so in love but what good was it without a lover, without Klaus? Could he live like a monk as Levi had once teased him, close off his heart until it had shriveled and dried into a desiccated nut rattling in a shell? He was supposed to save himself for Klaus, but instead he had cheated with Levi, and now Levi was mooning over this Mr. Suoh and making Taki regret everything he had done. Then Levi was egging him on, saying, “Hey, Taki. Why don’t you sing for us? Show us what you did in Tokyo.”

Taki was pretty sure that Levi was going to sit in Suoh’s lap as soon as he was on stage, but what could he really do to prevent such a thing from happening? Levi wasn’t his and it was absurd to want such a thing. It was no use feeling jealous and that left just two other emotions to grapple with: longing and guilt. So he slugged down the rest of his drink and wove his way through the press of bodies to the DJ’s station with its laptop to peruse the listing of all the songs available. In Tokyo, one could select songs by year or genre or artist or title in the privacy of a suite. Here, he had to type in either the artist or the song title in the search bar surrounded by drunken strangers pressing against him on all sides. He wracked his brains…and then it came to him. He was tipsy, so he typed the Roman letters in slowly: C-A-R-E-L-E-S-W-H-I-S-P-E-R. Suguri had sung this song beautifully once and it had moved Taki so much. He was no more than fifteen at the time, but the lyrics had spoken of desire and loss. The words had sounded so mysterious, so romantic at the time because he had yet to experience this thing called love with all the emotions pulled along in its wake, but he understood them now, too much, too keenly. So he got on stage and he sang the late George Michael’s regretful ballad, hoping against hope that Klaus would forgive him, guilty feet and all. Across the room, he could see both Levi and Suoh watching him, Suoh’s face stony, Levi shaking his head as if to say, “Don’t beat yourself up over nothing.” In Tokyo, in another life, Taki would have never worn his heart on his sleeve so publicly. No. In Tokyo, anything sung would have been performed in a private room in front of close associates, or friends, or friends of friends, not in front of a room full of strangers. The finest sake and whiskey would have been sampled, the most spectacular French desserts eaten on small plates with tiny forks, all to the crooning of men as serious about their singing as they were about political maneuvering or business acquisitions or, perhaps, the quiet erasure of a human life. To spill his guts like this so publicly was beyond the pale, but he had embarrassed himself like this before for Klaus. He’d do it again.
The song went by in a blur. He even heard some clapping when he wended his way back to their table, another martini waiting for him. He took a gulp, not even aware that Suoh had gotten up. Levi moved into the seat next to Taki, put an arm around his shoulder and said, “Man, that was beautiful. You really love him, don’t you?”

“He’ll never forgive me,” Taki mumbled. Good gods, he was trashed.

“Of course he will,” Levi assured. “I would forgive you. And I’m not one to forgive anyone.”

They both sipped at their drinks, some guy singing a Guns ‘n’ Roses song—Knocking on Heaven’s Door—before the next song caught Taki’s ear. He recognized the first notes right away and he looked up to see Mr. Suoh standing on the stage like a statue, his face impassive even as he sang the first two heartbreaking lines: Ue o muite arukou…namida ga kobore naiyouni…

Taki’s mind was reeling, racing, reaching back, back…and then he found it! The man’s deep voice intoning those lyrics was what finally enabled Taki to place the man’s face. Taki had just graduated from high school and Suguri had taken him out to celebrate at an exclusive club. His father was there, his uncle too, and several other men he didn’t know but who were obviously known to Suguri, his father, and his uncle, because the men had dropped the strictest formalities of speech and chatted amicably amongst themselves like peers. There were two other men who kept silent for the most part—a dark-haired man who wore glasses and who had stood watch at the door, and this man going by the name of Suoh who seemed to be a personal bodyguard to a strikingly handsome man dressed to the nines; Taki was sure of it because Suoh had sung the very same song that night: Sukiyaki. He had sung it because the hot-looking dude had ordered Suoh to perform it for their enjoyment, and this Suoh had obeyed despite his obvious reluctance. “Hai, Asami-sama,” Suoh had said, and then he had warbled like a gigantic bird.

Shiawase wa kumo no ueni…

Oh, fucking hell! The hot-looking dude…Asami-sama. That same man had been invited to the wedding. Asami Ryuichi…Sana’s godfather, the man Sana had enlisted for help, but at what price? If Suoh was one of Asami’s men, then did his presence in London have anything to do with Suguri or his uncle? Did it have anything to do with Sana? Was Suoh here to murder Klaus? Was he here to murder anyone who got close to Taki? Levi! Levi was watching Suoh sing about loneliness and lost love, not understanding the words but hearing the plaintive emotions expressed in the melody and Taki could see Levi eating it all up like a hungry kitten.

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In the semi-privacy of a filthy stall in the men’s bathroom, the words tumbled from Taki’s lips, desperate and full of fear. “Levi, listen to me. We have to go. That man, I know who he is. I remember now. He works with a man named Asami Ryuichi in Tokyo. Suguri…my family is having me watched. And this Asami…I don’t know if he’s yakuza or what, but he’s into all sorts of things. He’s my wife’s godfather. Sana’s told me stories about him…so has Suguri. My god, I was in a club with them once! If Suoh is here, then we’re in trouble. Do you understand? If they think you’re involved with me, then who knows what they’ll do to you?”

The steel grey of Levi’s irises formed just the thinnest ring around his blown pupils, his small, delicate mouth turned up at the corners in drug-addled joy. “Yakuza, eh? Fucking sweet! I never told you, but my own Uncle Kenny is mob.”

“God help us…” Taki muttered. “Please, Levi, let’s leave before Suoh knows we’re gone.”

Levi snorted in disbelief. “Are you kidding me? I plan on serenading the fuck out of him! I’ve got
just the song, too. He’ll be creaming his pants for me, just you wait and see!”

Taki grabbed Levi by the front of his jacket and shook him. “No, Levi! Don’t you understand? This man will kill you! If he thinks there’s something between us—”


The sharp edge of sarcasm in Levi’s voice cut Taki to the bone. It shined a stark, unforgiving light onto their recent shenanigans. There was no confession forthcoming, was there, no declaration of love? Taki couldn’t bear it. It was bad enough that he was being unfaithful to Klaus; he didn’t want to be dishonest with Levi, too.

“You’re right,” Taki finally said, releasing Levi from his grip and smoothing the front of Levi’s jacket in apology. “It’s not my place to tell you what to do. If you like this man, it’s your choice. Forgive me.”

Levi let his head fall forward with a thud against Taki’s shoulder. “You are such a silly fool. Don’t ask me to forgive you when there’s nothing to forgive. Just come watch me wrap that big blond tank around my little finger.”

***

The tears had been bitter at first, burning with vitriol. He couldn’t believe that his mentor’s words had proven true. “He’s gone, Levi. He’s left you.” That’s what Hange had told him countless times with compassion during his senior year at university. “Let him go. Forget him. You can make a success of yourself if you let him go.”

Levi hadn’t believed Hange then, that Erwin had really thrown him away like trash. He hadn’t believed her even after he had followed Erwin to London and Erwin had threatened him with a restraining order, as if Levi were a danger to him! He hadn’t believed her all those times he had stalked Erwin in the early evening hours after he had finished working his shift at the tea shop, watching Erwin leave the campus and following twenty paces behind, ducking into doorways whenever Erwin stopped at a corner to cross the street. He never caught Erwin hooking up with some attractive woman, or even with some hot guy. He never saw Erwin holding hands or kissing someone else, not until tonight, when Levi stepped off the stage after his obscene, mic stand-humping rendition of The Cars’ Candy-O; he sang the words ‘Daddy-O’ instead, sang it right at Suoh (Daddy-O…I need you so…can you help me in?) who was staring back at him near the edge of the stage, watching with unblinking eyes the smooth gyrations of Levi’s hips. Taki wasn’t paying any mind to Levi’s performance; he was too busy not-so-discreetly patting Suoh down with both hands. Taki was convinced that the man was packing a concealed weapon…probably a gun strapped to his inner thigh...

At song’s end, Levi leapt into a startled Suoh’s arms and from that higher vantage point in the crowd as he nuzzled at Suoh’s ear, Levi saw him, he saw Erwin standing in the doorway of one of the private rooms with none other than the Green-Eyed Devil pawing excitedly at Erwin’s arm. The Green-Eyed Devil. Erwin. Were they together? Were they fucking each other? Why else had the Green-Eyed Devil come to the shop every day? Was it out of curiosity, to see what Erwin had been banging before and then laugh in his face? In that moment, Hange’s words, her words telling him to let Erwin go…it all made sense finally, like a blurry image snapping into focus. Erwin really had left him. All the sleepless nights when Levi had lain in bed thinking of Erwin, pine for him, fantasizing about him, perhaps Erwin had never thought of him in return, perhaps he had another boy in his arms all along, someone with green eyes instead of grey, brown hair instead of black, someone taller and saner perhaps. Someone obnoxiously ordinary. Let him go. Forget him.
Well, there was no forgetting him. How could Levi forget things that had been seared like a brand onto his soul? The scent of him, the touch of his large hands on his skin, the slick wetness of his tongue curling around his own, the aching, agonizing pressure of his cock inside him driving him mad with ecstasy...no, there was no forgetting any of that. There was no forgetting the acts of kindness—the tea and toast Erwin would bring to him in bed in the morning whenever Levi slept over—or of tenderness—when Erwin would gently caress him until he fell asleep after their lovemaking—or the thoughtfulness—when there would be a card and a gift presented to him on his birthday, and another card and gift held in Erwin’s other hand, because it was Christmas, too. What had happened to make all of that go away? What terrible crime had he committed to make Erwin dump him without even a word of warning, move away, start all over again with a younger man who was cruel enough to visit him each day at work just to mock him? It was unforgiveable what Erwin had done—to treat him like a lover in every way except in honesty, then to take it away and give it to someone else after Levi had always laid himself bare for him, shown him his most vulnerable core only to have Erwin stab him in the heart. One wouldn’t even treat an animal with such inhumanity. It was too much to swallow. So, he planted a filthy wet kiss on Suoh’s lips before the man could even protest, then wriggled out of his arms and back to the stage before anyone else had opportunity to request a song. He whispered something to the DJ, then got back on stage, staring daggers at Erwin who was watching him with the piercing focus of an eagle sighting its prey. The Green-Eyed Devil was watching him, too, but Levi only saw Erwin.

The song wasn’t meant to be sung as a rant but that’s what Levi did, spitting out each word like a gunslinger aiming for the heart, or like a lumberjack chopping the living crap out of a tree, or like a jilted lover fighting back with every last ounce of withered pride. The people in the audience were staring back slack-jawed and nervous, casting worried glances at each other as if they sensed someone was about to go postal. It would take more than a jittery crowd to deter Levi. He had blown his fuse plenty of times at university when a critique didn’t go his way and his classmates had stood gaping at him, appalled by his behavior. He wanted to make clear to Erwin: THIS IS WHAT YOU’VE DONE TO ME! It felt so good to scream his lungs out, dignity be damned. So he screamed and screamed—You didn’t have to cut me off...make out like it never happened and that we were nothing—even as his heart shattered inside him, his eyes on Erwin, only Erwin, the only man he would ever love.

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As soon as Levi left the stage, Taki placed his body in front of Suoh’s, a tiny, insubstantial barrier since Suoh could easily throw him aside. “Levi, don’t go with him,” Taki pleaded. “I can’t help you if you—”

But it wasn’t Levi or even Suoh who was intent on thwarting Taki’s plans, whatever they were in his drunken state. A large hand had grasped his arm and was jerking him around and Taki assumed it was Suoh, who would likely lead both him and Levi into a dark alley and beat the shit out of both of them or put bullets in their brains. Wouldn’t that be a fine way to end the night? But he was wrong. It wasn’t Suoh gripping him so intently. Taki looked up and saw a pair of golden eyes blazing with fury. “K-Klaus? What are you doing here?”

Here’s what Taki sings: George Michael, Careless Whisper

Here’s what Suoh sings: Kyu Sakamoto, Sukiyaki

Here’s what Levi sings:
The Cars, Candy-O (thanks to fanfic3112 for reminding me what a great song this is!) and Gotye, Somebody That I Used to Know.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Klaus and Taki finally have words.

Suoh had taken out Suguri’s man just one week after he had arrived in London. On the flight over, Suoh had passed the time by studying the images Asami had provided of Taki’s apartment building, along with its surrounding area, and triangulated every possible vantage point with Kirishima’s help. Kirishima had been a fount of knowledge as he piloted Asami’s private jet. The bespectacled man prided himself on his abilities as a sniper, but Suoh preferred a more direct approach. Shooting a man with the barrel of his gun pressed to a sweaty forehead was more satisfying than pulling a trigger from a hundred meters away while staring through the crosshairs. He liked the visceral nature of it, the certainty leant by the hot splatter of blood and brains on the front of his suit. Yes, killing a man kneeling at his feet and begging for mercy usually meant a trip to the dry cleaners, but Asami paid well; Suoh could afford to have his suits cleaned as often as necessary.

It was almost too easy. Suguri’s man was stationed across the street from the entrance of Taki’s building every day in a coffee shop with a clear line of sight. What was he planning to do? Shoot Klaus von Wolfstadt if the man happened to walk by in broad daylight? Bust into the apartment if the video feed revealed that the two lovers had hooked up somehow? It was too amateurish a strategy for a man like Suguri, a sly fox with years of experience. The whole set-up—including the hiring of this Levi Ackerman to keep tabs on Taki—seemed to prove that Suguri was more loyal to Taki than to Taki’s uncle.

“He lost on purpose,” Asami had said after he had met Suguri for drinks and a vicious vocal smackdown at one of their favored karaoke haunts. “He really does care for that foolish boy. This will be an easy job for you, Suoh. It’s rather unfair.”

As usual, Asami was right. It didn’t take long before Suoh had figured out this discount assassin’s daily routine. And then all it took was for Suoh to follow him into the men’s room and leave him slumped in a stall, just some foreign bloke on vacation whose heart had stopped after an overdose of heroin. That was easy, effortless, and he didn’t even dirty his suit.

Now for the second part of his assignment, and probably the most difficult: to seduce Levi to Asami’s satisfaction. His boss was no ordinary man, and Asami’s tastes ran well beyond the gamut of your Average Joe. Though Kirishima was the one tasked with keeping Asami well-stocked in all manner of specialized toys, restraints, drugs, and lubes, Suoh had witnessed his share of perversions taking place in the back seat of Asami’s car as he drove his boss about Tokyo accompanied by some flavor-of-the-day who would be discarded upon arrival at whatever destination. Lately, it had always been Takaba that Asami played with and Suoh wondered if his boss had somehow become genuinely enamored with just one boy. Love was such a strange thing, not that his boss would ever admit to that. But, still…it seemed like love from where Suoh sat in the driver’s seat, the way Asami would look at Takaba, fuck the boy like he actually wanted to please and pleasure him, maybe even keep the boy. Suoh had never seen his boss look at anyone that way.

But the way that this Klaus von Wolfstadt was looking at Taki, it was the same expression that Asami wore whenever he was with Takaba—one of possessiveness, one that screamed, “You are
mine.” So Suoh was ready for Klaus to take a swing at him because even a man like Suoh, who had no interest in romance or love, knew what a man was capable of doing if he felt someone else was encroaching on his territory. What did surprise Suoh was Levi attacking Klaus first. As soon as Klaus had grabbed Taki’s arm, Levi had leapt at Klaus, shouting, “Take your hands off him, you motherfucker!”

Klaus had been startled for a second, but then he easily threw Levi to the floor, recognition dawning on him. “You’re that little shit from the tea shop, aren’t you? If you know what’s good for you, you’ll stay down!” Klaus had threatened. Then he had punched Levi in the face while Taki had screamed, “Klaus! No! Don’t!”

Levi was incensed and had gotten up and kicked Klaus in the nuts with all of his strength. Klaus had staggered back, doubled over in pain, and then another tall blond had gotten into the mix. Erwin Smith. The man had grabbed Levi by the front of his tuxedo jacket and told him to calm down. “You’re making a scene, Levi,” Erwin had told him. “You’re making a fool out of yourself.”

And Levi had froze, staring up at Erwin for a moment, then at the Green Eyed-Devil who had materialized beside Erwin, and then Levi had lost it—as if someone had stabbed him in the heart—screaming and sobbing, “I hate you!” at the top of his lungs until Suoh had pricked him with a needle at the side of his neck and Levi had quieted instantly, slumping into his arms.

“Go,” Suoh told Klaus. “Now.”

And Klaus had gripped Taki’s arm and pulled him out of the room and was gone in two seconds. To Erwin, Suoh muttered as he held Levi in his arms, unconscious, “Follow me or he dies.”

***

When Klaus received the text from Erwin, a man he barely knew who had bought him a drink the week before, he had hesitated to say ‘yes’ for a minute. And then Klaus had thought to himself, “Fuck it. Why not?” He was headed to Sandwich, for Christ’s sake. Sandwich? Who the hell names a town Sandwich? He’d do it. He’d go to Sandwich, behave himself, stay employed, save his money…then what? His alternatives were even worse: tell Armin he’d make himself available 24/7 for the most extreme perversions on camera and maybe rent himself out on the side, trading dick for pounds…or jumping into the Thames after dosing up on sleeping pills and a bottle of bourbon. Fuck the Thames. He could easily fill the bathtub with hot water and slit his wrists…but he didn’t want to go down like a pussy. If Taki found out somehow—that he’d mailed it in like a loser—Christ! He couldn’t live with that, dead or not, his pride wouldn’t stand for it! No, he’d play nice, take the punishment his brother-in-law Stephen was doling out, be a man. Be a man. Isn’t that what Taki would expect of him?

*Celebrating my new book at Xanadu on Saturday nite. Want to join in?*

Klaus stared at his phone for another second and then texted his reply to Erwin: *OK*

He was more than a little surprised when he showed up at Xanadu at nine o’clock on Saturday night and saw Armin standing next to his creepy flatmate, Eren, at the bar. “What are you doing here?” Klaus asked.

Armin smiled easily and chirped, “I’m glad you came! This place is the best for hook-ups. You know Eren, right?”

“Yeah,” Klaus grumbled. He didn’t trust the green-eyed kid, who always seemed to be lurking...
around the flat with a pair of binoculars every time he finished taping a “session” with Armin. Armin was weird, but this Eren was even weirder, a Peeping Tom who was obviously obsessed with the goings-on in the flat across the street. Jesus Christ, what was it with kids these days? Wasn’t porn on the internet good enough for them? Then Erwin had showed up with some other people—colleagues at his university who seemed decent enough: a tall guy with a cheesy moustache named Mike and two attractive young women whom Mike introduced as his graduate assistants, Nifa and Nanaba. To Klaus’s surprise, Eren seemed to know Erwin.

“He’s one of my student workers,” Erwin explained to Klaus as they ordered drinks. “This place is his idea. Mike had a different place in mind. I don’t know what’s worse: karaoke or dancing.”

“Oh, man. Karaoke is the worst by far,” Klaus replied. But, karaoke it was. At least they had a private room in which to embarrass themselves, and Suguri wasn’t here to pass judgment on his far-from-stellar singing abilities. Klaus was in no mood to perform, but after several drinks he realized that he could just sit back and watch Mike hamming it up for his two lady friends, lithe young women in their early twenties with whom he was obviously playing hide-the-sausage. It would have been so much easier, Klaus thought, to be like this Mike fellow. So much sorrow could have been avoided if he had just kept to the straight and narrow, been your average vanilla dude, had affairs with women who were satisfied with an uncomplicated tumble in the sack. That could have been him, it was him, until he had met Taki, and then all bets were off. Life would never be the same…or sane.

It seemed like Erwin was struggling with his own demons. As he and Klaus polished off a bottle of Maker’s Mark to the awful tunes belted out by Mike and his girls, by Eren and Armin who were equally tone deaf, it became clear to Klaus that Erwin was nursing as many regrets as he was.

“I did it to be kind,” Erwin slurred into his drink, “because I didn’t want to get in the way. And what do I get in return? Infidelity. Can you believe that? That’s all the thanks I get. Shit. I haven’t fucked anyone all this time…and this is what I get in return. I knew it. What a slut. They all are, these pretty young things…they’re all sluts.”

Klaus had no freaking idea what the hell Erwin was rambling about. What was apparent was that this “pretty young thing” was cheating on Erwin, a man who had remained celibate if Klaus were to believe Erwin’s drunken recounting. Gee whiz. Klaus took another swig of bourbon and let the alcohol burn a smooth path down his throat. The man must be a saint to keep his cock in his pants all this time. He looked up at Armin singing I’m Too Sexy by Right Said Fred and the guilt almost made Klaus punch himself in the face. He hadn’t been faithful, even though he had told Taki a million times that Taki was his one and only, his sweet, perfect rose, his home and heart. Was it all a lie? Had he lied to Taki? Taki. He thought he heard him, his voice, so pitch perfect and honey sweet. He’d heard Taki sing before and the sound of his lovely voice was like birdsong, like the notes carried on a breeze, like petals blowing in the wind. Klaus knew he was bombed and so when he heard that very same voice, he knew it could only be a figment of his imagination. It was just his heart yearning for the impossible. Taki.

***

The sound of a very angry man ranting on stage was what roused Klaus from his drunken stupor. He could see Erwin standing there framed in the open doorway, Eren next to him and Mike and his two lady friends right behind them, craning their necks with curiosity. “What the fuck is going on out there?” Klaus mumbled.

“Erwin’s ex is on stage,” Armin replied with a laugh.

“Erwin’s ex?” Klaus sat up and rubbed his eyes. Holy hell, he needed another drink just to sober up.
“Sounds like a dude to me.”

“Yeah,” Armin said. “He’s a guy…and he’s fucking some other guy. They’ve been banging each other right across the street from my place. Eren and I have jacked it more than a few times to them.”

“What? You guys are spying on them?” Klaus was mortified.

“Not me. Eren has Eren spying on his ex. I’m just along for the ride when things get interesting, if you know what I mean.” Armin took a sip of his rum and coke, his bright blue-grey eyes sparkling with mischief.

“Jesus Christ. You kids these days…you’re all a bunch of perverts,” grumbled Klaus.

The rant ended. Then in the silence before the next singer, Klaus heard it: a voice much softer, sweeter, plaintive: “Levi, don’t go with him.” Klaus froze, his heart suddenly pounding in his chest, pounding so hard he thought it might leap out of his throat. He knew that voice, heard it in his dreams, replayed it in his mind like a song he never tired of hearing. He was three sheets to the wind, the room shifting as if an earthquake were shaking the floor, but he pulled himself upright and muscled his way past Mike, Nifa and Nanaba, past Erwin and Eren, pushed himself through the crowd until he was near the bar and could see the stage clearly. And there he was. Taki. His Taki, arguing with that foul-mouthed bastard from that bubble tea shop, the little shit with the name tag pinned onto his pressed white shirt, the name tag that read ‘Levi.’ And those two, they were fighting over some tall blond goon of a man.

Klaus was rooted to the spot for a moment, mesmerized by this vision in dark blue silk and linen, this small, slender figure, so elegant and compact, the ebony hair and obsidian eyes. All he needed to do was to press his nose against his skin and breathe him in. Then, he would finally know that he was real; that heady scent, that perfume that was distinctly Taki’s and no one else’s…that would be the key to unlock the prison cell in which Klaus had been living. He wasn’t aware of Armin’s presence right next to him, Armin’s hand clutching his arm possessively. Klaus was a hunk and Armin liked for people to think that a dorky boy like him could snag a sexy slab of male meat like Klaus. Klaus’s sudden interest in the guy that Levi was fooling around with…well, Armin wanted to know more. Was that Klaus’s type?

“K-Klaus? What are you doing here?”

That’s what Taki said, even as Armin was pulling on Klaus’s arm, but all Klaus saw was Taki’s surprise and then fear. What are you doing here? The other guy was Erwin’s ex according to Armin, the guy who was banging his Taki, but which one? The little twink who looked like Taki’s evil twin, or the tall blond tank? Klaus didn’t have to wonder for long because in the next second, Taki’s evil twin was taking a swing at him, screaming, “Take your hands off him, you motherfucker!”

So it was him, that lunatic douchebag named Levi. Well, so be it. Klaus wasn’t in the habit of beating the shit out of little twinks but, goddamn it, he wasn’t going to let anyone come between him and his sweet beloved Taki. Klaus had been accused by Suguri of being a rabid dog, a rabid wolf, but even a wolf would be hard pressed to fight off an insane alley cat. He should have known better. That little shit…Klaus knew this Levi prick was off his rocker that day he had wandered into that tea shop and been confronted with the rudest asshole on the planet. And…Jesus Christ! Was Taki…was Taki with this crazy son-of-a-bitch? Levi was all over him, slamming a fist into his jaw. Klaus punched him back, a purely defensive reflex. In the back of his mind, Klaus was thinking, “Should I be punching this little dude? I mean, seriously, it’s like hitting a girl.”

Only, Levi was no girl. Levi was out of control. All he knew was that someone had grabbed Taki and that Taki was afraid. All he knew was that Erwin was here and watching him. All he knew was
that he was so...so overwhelmed and angry and heartbroken. He wanted to kill everyone; he wanted to destroy the whole world. So he lashed out, leapt onto this man who had his hand on Taki and Levi swung his fist as hard as he could, landing several blows onto the man’s jaw. It felt so fucking good, the pain exploding in his knuckles, it felt so good. The sudden blow on his own cheek. That felt good, too, and then something pricked his neck and he heard Suoh’s low rumble of a voice in his ear, saying, “Relax.”

***

Taki opened his eyes and saw Klaus sitting next to him on the bed wiping a cool, damp towel to his forehead.

“You were always shit at holding your liquor,” Klaus said. “If you weren’t so trashed, I’d have given you a real spanking. You’ve been a very naughty boy, Taki.” As cold and accusatory as his words were, Klaus’s eyes were kind, his hands gentle on his face.

“Where am I?” Taki mumbled.

“Buckingham Palace. Can't you tell?” Klaus gestured to the barren furnishings of his flat. “Luxurious enough for a spoiled little rich kid like you?”

“Klaus…” Taki wanted to tell him that he had nothing of his own, no money, no control over his own life, nothing to offer Klaus except his love, but did Klaus even want that from him anymore?

“What happened? How did I get here?”

“Well, first you puked on the sidewalk, then we took a taxi back to my place,” Klaus explained. “Don’t you remember anything? Your little boyfriend punched me in the face.” Klaus pointed to his bruised cheek and chuckled. “I never would have pegged you for...fuck...I thought you liked your guys big and blond.”

“Levi…” Taki turned his face away, ashamed. My god, what had happened to Levi? Was he okay? He didn’t know what to do! And then he remembered...Klaus...Klaus! Taki closed his eyes but the tears escaped down his face anyway. Klaus was here right next to him...finally! “Klaus...” It all came crashing down on him—the interminable days of doubt and loneliness, of uncertainty and resignation, of need and desire and regret—and it was too much. Taki covered his face with both hands and wept, curled onto his side away from Klaus while he wept with guilt and happiness.

“Don’t,” Klaus said. “I’ve done so much worse.”
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Well, there's butter and there's rubber and things are just getting started.

It was strange to see him after so long a wait. Taki’s hair was longer than it had been during his baseball playing days. It made him appear softer, more vulnerable, and he had seemed to weigh nothing as Klaus had carried him into his flat, like a groom carrying his bride over the threshold, Klaus had thought with a bemused smile. He had imagined this scene in his mind countless times: their eyes would accidentally meet across a crowded room, surprise and elation would grip them simultaneously, the distance would be closed in an instant, fireworks would explode overhead. The Reunion. Sheesh, it sounded like the title for a horrible rom-com and right about now the sappy music should reach its crescendo as the guy takes his sweetheart into his arms and he kisses her like he’s Rudolf Valentino in The Sheik except…their eyes had met in a fucking karaoke bar and the surprise and elation had been tainted by what looked like all-around infidelity, and the fireworks ended up being punches thrown between him and a pint-sized demon…and now, Taki was prone on Klaus’s unmade bed and crying like a baby, his expensive silk and linen suit stained with vomit, Klaus’s own shirt mottled with sweat and god knows what other fluids. It wasn’t exactly romantic, not by a longshot, not like that day in the Imperial Gardens when Klaus had seen Taki for the first time—a vision of a porcelain doll dressed in a splendid ceremonial robe, a boy more beautiful than anything he had ever set eyes on—and those tears running down Taki’s face now weren’t screaming, “Make love to me, you big dumb fool!” either.

There had to be some way to salvage the the remains of what should have been a fairytale moment. “Hey, Taki.” Klaus reached out and placed his hand on the smaller man’s shoulder, shook him gently. “You wanted this, didn’t you? You wanted me to find you. I read your letter…every day. I know it by heart. Do you want me to—”

“No! No…” Taki buried his face into the pillow and sobbed even more violently. That stupid letter. Taki knew it by heart, too, because he had agonized over the words, wondered whether it had been a big mistake to send it, because every day that Klaus didn’t appear, it had planted a seed of doubt in Taki’s mind, that maybe Klaus really didn’t love him after all. “What took you so long?” came his muffled wail.

“I…” Klaus’s fists balled up defensively on his thighs. What took him so long? Well, Jesus fucking H. Christ…it’s not like he had been dragging his feet on purpose! “I looked for you, Taki. I looked everywhere, but you didn’t give me an address or a phone number; there are no ‘Reizens’ in the London directory. What was I supposed to do? Go crawling back to Tokyo and ask Suguri to tell me where you were? He’d have my balls!”

At that, Taki bolted upright and angrily wiped the back of his hand across his face. “I opened a store and called it Chibitan Bubble Tea Shoppe,” Taki said slowly, “Chi-bi-tan. Chibitan, Klaus. You always called me that. How could you forget? All you had to do was Google it!!” Taki flopped back onto the bed and curled up into a ball of fury and frustration. This was so wrong, everything was wrong. He thought he was going to lose his mind; the tightness in his chest, his throat constricting as if a pair of hands were wringing his neck, fear and panic rushing through his veins. He felt like a cornered animal with no place to hide. But this was Klaus and not some cold-blooded predator, and
it was Taki’s own conscience that was driving him to run for cover. He had longed for this moment, but it was not what he had imagined either. All the things that had happened since he had sent that letter—oh gods, that letter!—it would all come out and then what? Would he lose Klaus all over again? Would he lose Levi, too? What would he do about Levi? And holy hell, what about Suoh? Was that maniac chopping Levi into small pieces right now? “Klaus, I have to—”

Taki rolled onto his back and froze. Klaus was staring at him and the sight of those golden eyes gazing so intently at him paralyzed Taki, sent him back some ten plus years to the moment when he had first seen Klaus. He had been a child then, too small to reach the wisteria blossoms, and that golden-eyed stranger had held him up with arms so much bigger, so much stronger than his own, lifted him up so he could pluck those flowers. “Oh…Klaus…” This was it, wasn’t it, the moment of reckoning? The man who had appeared like a god that day in the garden and remained dormant in his heart, a dream vaguely remembered through all the years, the man who had awoken the madness within him and shown him how beautiful it was…he had to prove he wasn’t just an unfaithful cheater. “…aishiteru.” He couldn’t believe he actually said it aloud. He had never even said it to Sana, an expression so intimate not even husbands and wives uttered it, but he said it to Klaus, reaching for him, arms outstretched like the boy he had been.

“Taki…” Klaus rasped, almost speechless with shock after hearing Taki say ‘I love you’ with that word, one spoken so rarely it was practically taboo. Well, if that wasn’t a green light for crazy monkey sex, then Klaus didn’t know what was. Clothes were torn asunder. Expensive suit or not, that shit was coming off in record time. Buttons pinged on the floor as Taki was stripped naked, his body assaulted with nips and licks and sucking kisses as more and more skin was uncovered. Klaus’s impatience meant that his own trousers were barely pushed past his hips before he was throwing Taki’s legs over his shoulders, but Taki wasn’t having any of that.

“Oh, no you don’t!” Taki protested, squirming out of Klaus’s grasp. “Take it all off.”

“Huh?” Klaus was on his knees, his cock rigid and standing tall like a good soldier between them.

“Your pants, Klaus. For once in your life, take off your pants!”

Said pants came off. Improvisation followed, prompted by desperation.

“Scheiße, scheiße, scheiße!” Klaus swore as he rummaged through his bathroom cabinets searching for anything that might suffice for lube. Jesus Christ, there were literally litres of lube in Armin’s apartment, but Klaus had never brought anyone to his own shithole of a flat and he normally jacked it in the shower with soap or whacked it dry in bed. Just saliva wouldn’t be enough, not with his thick long cock and Taki’s tight little hole. He was just about ready to suggest some shower sex—which wasn’t a bad idea, all things considered—but then he remembered he had what every red-blooded man kept on hand for one’s daily portion of bread: butter. Yeah, he was going to go Last Tango in Paris on Taki.

“This is going to be better than shower sex, Taki,” Klaus assured with a confident grin when he returned to bed with a small plastic tub of Lurpak.

“I-I’m not hungry,” Taki said, his face scrunched in confusion.

“You’re hungry for this, aren’t you?” asked Klaus, gripping his still-rock-hard cock and waving it enticingly in the air like a juicy bratwurst.

“Um…”

“Yeah,” Klaus said, popping the lid open and dipping his fingers into the container of creamy Danish
butter, “well, this is going to make everything go down easy.” He swiped his fingers along the throbbing length of his shaft and around the leaking crown and offered his butter slathered erection to Taki. Taki was on him like a ravenous cockslut. “Not hungry, eh?”

***

By the end of the night, Taki was sleeping with his eyes open, a fact proven when Levi waved his hand in front of his face and Taki didn’t even blink.

“He’s definitely out,” Levi mumbled. He turned to Suoh and asked, “Do you think he’s brain dead?”

Suoh shrugged. “No problem. Rich boy like him can live very well as a vegetable.”

That was news to Levi. “Just how rich is he? I mean, he’s a disgraced baseball player, isn’t he? He runs a freaking bubble tea shop. If he’s so rich—"

“You haven’t been to his apartment?” Suoh interrupted, and then snorted, a smug look in his eyes.

“No,” Levi shot back with a scowl. “I’m sure I’d be welcome, though. He’s just never got around to asking me over, that’s all.”

“So, he always goes to your shitty place,” Suoh stated rather than inquired.

“How the hell would you know if my place is shitty?” asked an insulted Levi. “I just might live in a fucking palace!”

Suoh’s face remained impassive, stony. “It’s shitty,” he grunted with certainty. Then he slung Taki over his shoulder like a five-pound sack of potatoes and said, “Come. I show you palace.”

***

When they arrived at Taki’s building, the sky was barely starting to lighten on the horizon, a band of azure bleeding up into the pitch black of night. The doorman gave Suoh a terse nod but didn’t question the fact that the man was carrying what appeared to be the unconscious resident of apartment 6C and accompanied by another tall blond man whose bright blue eyes were darting about nervously. The building was owned by a Japanese investment firm and almost all the units were leased to wealthy foreigners hailing from Russia and China, people who made their filthy lucre on the black market—dealing in luxury cars, arms, drugs, sex workers, political favors—and washed it clean with real estate and precious metals. Call it modern day alchemy. This Mr. Suoh had only arrived within the past month or so and looked like Russian mob to the doorman, but he only ever overheard him speaking in Japanese into his mobile whenever he entered or exited at all odd hours, usually just a monosyllabic “hai” or “iie” to someone he referred to as “bosu.” Tonight, the doorman just tipped his cap as usual, discreetly eyeing Mr. Suoh’s jittery associate as they headed for the lift with a clearly trashed Taki Reizen. It only occurred to the doorman after the lift doors had closed that Mr. Reizen was now wearing a black tux instead of a dark blue suit. “Whatever,” thought the doorman, “the wealthy are a strange lot.”

***

“Levi. Levi! Wake up, you crazy little bastard!”

Levi slowly moved his limbs. He was on a large bed, his right cheek pressed against a silk duvet. “Hmmm…so soft…” Levi murmured, running his palm against the cool, satiny surface.
“This is no time to be playing Sleeping Beauty. I swear, if we ever get out of this colossal mess you’ve gotten us into, I will spank the living shit out of you!”

“Nnnn…did someone say ‘spank’?” With great effort, Levi cracked open an eyelid and saw a finger waving an inch from his nose. He followed the finger up an arm and onto the face of Erwin Smith, who was glaring at him with the most hilarious mixture of fear and irritation. Levi opened both eyes and sat upright, clarity sparking through him. “Did you say you’d spank me, Erwin? Well…**bring it motherfucker!”** He lunged at Erwin and knocked both of them off the bed and onto the woven silk rug. “Whoa…this carpet is so plush—” The abrupt slap across his left cheek made him forget about the plushness of the rug. He rubbed his fingers against the sting, the familiarity of the sensation making his head reel.

Erwin grabbed Levi by the wrists and shook him. “We have to get out of here, Levi. We have to get out of here **now** before that…that **lunatic** comes back.”

“What lunatic?” Levi looked around, confused. “Where the hell are we?”

“In a building across from the Tate Modern. That guy’s apartment, I suppose.”

“What guy?”

Erwin let out a loud groan and carded his fingers through his hair, as if that could fix things. “That guy you were climbing like a fucking tree earlier tonight!”

“Mr. Suoh? Huh. Wh-where’s Taki?” On the nightstand by the bed was a framed photo of Taki in a ceremonial robe and headdress seated next to a young woman dressed in an even more ornate robe and headdress. It was Taki’s wedding photo. “Oh my god…” Levi murmured. He went over to the closet and opened the sliding door. Hung up neatly were Taki’s clothes. “I’m in the palace…”

“Levi, I don’t know what shit you snorted or smoked or drank tonight, but I need for you to focus. Do you hear me? We have to leave now or…crap…”

They both turned to see Suoh standing in the bedroom doorway carrying a large black leather case in one hand and a length of rope in the other. That could only bode ill, that and the fact that the man was dressed head-to-toe in a black rubber body suit. That couldn’t bode well, either. No, not at all. They both gulped, Erwin with trepidation, Levi with…anticipation.

Through the Bluetooth headset at his right ear, Suoh heard Asami intone, “Let us begin.”
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

More butter and some awfully bizarre goings-on.

Butter. By the time the first rays of the sun broke through the darkness of night, Klaus had made the flakiest croissant out of Taki, the richest shortbread; he’d savored the most delectable condiment to meet one’s tongue. There was nothing better than this, Klaus thought to himself as he lapped eagerly at Taki’s quivering hole glistening with butter. Klaus had eaten his share of bread and butter in his life—thick slices of bread browned perfectly in the toaster or straight out of the oven whenever he was at his sister Claudia’s house—but no bread had tasted as delicious Taki’s sweet taint slathered in butter.

“Klaus…don’t…I can’t,” Taki begged. For a boy who had denied himself satisfaction for the better part of his life—swearing off meat and alcohol and sex until he had given himself to Klaus at twenty years of age—this was just too much debauchery. And yet…the sensation of Klaus’s tongue tracing wet circles round and round his entrance, then pushing in and curling around the rim before penetrating him even deeper…it was so fucking mind-blowing, even better than taking Klaus’s cock into his own mouth and sucking all that creamy goodness down his throat. Klaus had cum suddenly with a shuddering groan, but Taki had swallowed it all, his own excitement reaching climax when Klaus had shoved his fingers inside him, finding his sweet spot and pounding it without mercy until Taki had shaken apart on his hand, his cries the most beautiful song Klaus had ever heard.

Then, in the bathroom after they had awoken from exhaustion, Klaus had taken him again, Taki held in his arms as he fucked him against the tiled wall of his shower stall, his cock sunk in balls-deep as Taki rode him like a pro and screamed his name, “Klaus! Klaus!” It was worth it. All the months of desperation and doubt…it was worth it to have Taki like this once more, writhing in his embrace and keening for him.

“You’re mine, Taki,” Klaus rasped into his beloved’s face and came once more inside him. “I don’t care who you’ve been with. You’re mine now.” In the back of his mind, Klaus was berating himself even as his stomach churned with the thought of anyone else laying hands on Taki. The things he had done with Armin—in front of a camera and streamed online no less!—not to mention all the handjobs, blowjobs, and cock-in-ass action with mewling strangers…he didn’t deserve a free pass for those things, and he couldn’t deny the dirtiness of it all even when he had his pure and innocent Taki cumming onto his chest and washing him clean. That rude little shit Levi who had battered his nuts…well, if Taki had strayed with that insufferable twink from hell, none of that could compare with the perversions he had enacted with Armin. “Whatever we’ve done…let’s forget it and start all over again,” Klaus said, hoping against logic that two wrongs or more could make a right and peppering Taki’s face with kisses. His softening cock slipped out of him but, still, he held Taki in his arms pressed against the tiles. “I won’t ever let you go. You’re coming with me to Sandwich.”

***

Electroejaculation. That was the technical term. The device was designed and perfected by animal husbandry specialists to quickly and efficiently obtain sperm from stud animals, but in the human sphere, it was used to treat ejaculatory dysfunction in males. An electric probe would be inserted into
the rectum and positioned adjacent to the prostate gland. The probe would deliver an AC charge
generating a current sufficient to stimulate contraction of the pelvic muscles, thus leading to
ejaculation in a mature male. That sounded dry and academic enough—ahem—except, in certain
BDSM circles, it was quite de rigueur. Such freaks! One needed to be careful or delicate tissue could
be burned. Used with precision and care, the device could override the inconvenient refractory
period in males. In other words, the device could induce repeated orgasms, well beyond what a
normal man under normal circumstances could achieve. What man wouldn’t want the ability to cum
and cum and cum? Weren’t women capable of multiple orgasms? So unfair! What man wouldn’t
want to experience such glorious delights? Men, though, weren’t built like women, who could
endure the pain of childbirth. Multiple orgasms? Piece of cake if one were female.

“Fucking hell!” shouted Erwin. “Someone fucking kill me!” He was in a swoon and not in a good
way. His arms were bound tightly behind his back, his body strung up in a makeshift harness
designed by some sadistic pervert. Why oh why weren’t his arms numb by now? Surely the blood
circulation had been cut off ages ago. Surely his fingers were black and blue. So, why the shooting
pain that lodged again and again at the base of his neck each time that sick motherfucker—Mr. Suoh
—shoved that probe up his ass and another orgasm jolted up his spine and into his brain and then
back down to explode in his severely mistreated prostate? He had ceased to cum into the beaker
positioned in front of his abused cock—a beaker full of his own spunk—because at this point he was
cumming as dry as the Sahara Desert. There wasn’t a drop left inside him.

Levi, meanwhile, was strung up in an identical contraption opposite him and laughing maniacally.
“C’mon, Erwin, you old fart! Is that all you ever shot inside my ass? No wonder you left me starving
for more!”

“My god, Levi!” Erwin groaned pitifully as Suoh cranked up the voltage. How did women survive
this? Multiple orgasms? It was fucking torture!

“My turn!” Levi shouted. “Forget him, Mr. Suoh. I’ve got more to give!” Levi licked his lips,
hungriely eyeing the beaker positioned in front of his own cock. It was almost filled to the top.

“Where do you…I mean…your balls, Levi…so darling…” And then Erwin lost consciousness as
Suoh removed the probe with an obscene schlurp. When Erwin came to again, awakened by a
hearty slap across his face, he found himself confronted with a straw pressed to his lips. “What the
—?”

“Drink up, loser.” Suoh held one end of the straw to Erwin’s mouth, the other end nestled at the
bottom of a beaker filled with…cum. But whose? Was it his own, or Levi’s? And Levi, Jesus
Christ, he was still laughing like the crazy fuck that he was.

“All you had to do was love me back,” Levi said. And then the satanic grin faded and Erwin finally
saw him, saw the lost soul that was Levi—brittle, breakable, needy, needing just one thing. “Then…
this would have never happened.” Levi burst into tears, sobbing and suddenly Erwin wanted to take
him in his arms, hold him tight, comfort him. Was it too late?

“All you had to do was love me back,” Levi said. And then the satanic grin faded and Erwin finally
saw him, saw the lost soul that was Levi—brittle, breakable, needy, needing just one thing. “Then…
this would have never happened.” Levi burst into tears, sobbing and suddenly Erwin wanted to take
him in his arms, hold him tight, comfort him. Was it too late?

“Levi. Forgive me.” With that, Erwin sucked on the straw, drinking it in, his cum, Levi’s, what did it
matter? It was his punishment, what he deserved for destroying this small, perfect, tortured boy. It
was bitter—the taste—bitter and salty with tears, bitter and salty with sorrow.

And then Suoh held a damp cloth in front of Erwin’s mouth, then Levi’s, and everything faded to
black.

***
The man was stunningly handsome, no denying that. Though Levi was partial to blonds when it came to bending over or being put on his knees, he’d willingly and readily spread his legs for this dark-haired paragon of alpha manhood. The man lit a Dunhill and pinned him with a no-nonsense stare. “So, you’re the one messing around with my goddaughter’s husband.”

The hairs on the back of Levi’s neck prickled. This must be Asami Ryuichi, the man Taki had warned him about in the bathroom stall, Sana’s godfather. Levi decided to play coy. His uncle had always told him to feign ignorance until proven a liar, at which point he should then fight tooth and nail and, if on the verge of being beaten to a pulp, he should as a last resort run as fast as his legs could carry him. Running wasn’t an option at the moment, so he continued to feign ignorance.

“Listen, old man, I don’t know you from Adam. All I know is my Uncle Kenny told me I had to do a job for this fucker named Suguri. That’s it. Period. So you can take whatever lame-o threats you’re about to make and shove it up your own ass!”

This prompted an indulgent smile from Asami. The kid had spirit, and Asami had a soft spot for boys who didn’t back down. “You’re an aspiring artist, are you not? A painter? Right-handed?” Asami dragged deeply on his cigarette. “I wonder how ambidextrous you can be. If you were to lose your right hand, could you reach the same level of skill with your left hand instead?” Asami stood close and whispered into Levi’s ear, “Shall we find out?”

The sound of Asami’s low voice was like the sweetest caress to Levi, who found it alarmingly irresistible, but Erwin was nowhere in sight for some reason. What had happened to Erwin? Why wasn’t he strung up in Taki’s bedroom anymore? Levi decided that he had to stay sharp, couldn’t let his own wayward desires make him lose focus even though he was still pissed at Erwin…fuck…the sight of Erwin ejaculating time and again was so fucking hot. It had made Levi want to scream daddy like he would when things had been so good between them. “Tch. As if you’d stop with my right hand,” Levi sneered. “Give me a knife and I’ll cut off my own dick so I can stuff it into your pervy mouth. Get off on that, you dinosaur! Old geezers like you cream your pants over shit like that, don’t you?”

The veins in Suoh’s neck were bulging. No one ever talked to his boss like that and lived to draw another breath, not even Takaba. Asami, though, burst into laughter. Now Suoh was really floored. Boss never laughed like that, not even that time he had held Takaba prisoner for three days and sexually tortured him for his own amusement. That had garnered a few chuckles from Asami, but never all-out laughter. Had his boss lost his mind?

As if he sensed Suoh’s distress, Asami turned to his trusted bodyguard and asked, “How is our other guest?”

“Fine, boss.”

“Hmm. Fine, indeed. I wonder…it seems a shame to deprive a young artist of his livelihood, especially if he still has work to complete before a show, am I right?”

“Fuck you,” Levi muttered.

Asami ignored the rude comment and continued to converse blithely with Suoh. “Perhaps there is another means of compensation…an eye for an eye, that sort of thing…”

“Jesus Christ!” Levi shouted. “Hallelujah! Let’s read the fucking Bible, why don’t we?”

Ah, there it was, Asami’s limit. He grabbed Levi’s hair and yanked it roughly, hard enough to make Levi yelp. “Young man, don’t be so eager to meet your maker. Trust me, life is a beautiful thing. Don’t make your Uncle Kenny regret saving your ass. Now put your clothes on and go. There’s a
taxi downstairs that will take you home. Be sure to lock your door, Levi, and sleep tight.”

The man that Levi assumed was Asami left the room and then Suoh methodically untied him and kept a watchful eye as Levi dressed himself. “What have you done with Erwin?” asked Levi. Christ, his arms ached! He rubbed at his purpled wrists. “You’re not going to hurt him, are you?” He couldn’t believe that the only thing on his mind was that Erwin be alright. Why should he care? Erwin had treated him like garbage, and yet…god help him, he still loved him more than life.

Suoh rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck. “No worries. He’ll live.”

Levi eyed him up and down as he slipped into his shoes. The man looked like some kind of golem in that black rubber bodysuit, that is, if golems wore black rubber bodysuits. “Are you sure you don’t want to fuck me before you let me go?” He shot Suoh a salacious grin, but Suoh’s face was impossible to read behind the black rubber mask. “My ass…I mean, it’s still nice and tight. You didn’t even let Erwin touch me,” Levi offered by way of clarification. It was hard to know if Suoh really understood anything that was said since the man barely spoke himself. “I don’t mind if you tear me to pieces. I like a little pain…heh…I can handle whatever you can give me.” When Suoh merely handed him some pounds for the waiting taxi, Levi assumed that their ‘date’ had reached its conclusion. “Well, it’s been interesting,” Levi muttered, rather irked with disappointment. “Next time, buy me dinner first.”

A few hours later, at nine in the morning when Levi had just fallen into his own bed after a much-needed shower, his intercom buzzed. It was the FedEx guy: special overnight delivery. The rectangular box was oddly heavy for its size. Was it a bomb? He held his ear to it and listened carefully. Nothing but silence. After five minutes, curiosity got the better of him and Levi opened the package. Inside was something both stiff and floppy wrapped in butcher paper. It was an arm, a man’s right arm.
Levi gets an earful, Erwin finds himself short one limb but maybe a better man for it, and Taki and Klaus start a new journey together.

Levi waltzed into the tea shop at ten past one. On Sundays, the shop opened at noon, so he figured he was a little over an hour late, not bad for having slept less than two hours that same morning. His mind was buzzing and numb at the same time, his body on edge and drained, a side effect of sleep deprivation that he was well used to by now. The drinking and drugging…well, that couldn’t be helped. He rubbed a hand across his burning eyes and consoled himself. Whatever lecture he was going to hear from Taki couldn’t be any worse than getting reamed out by his Uncle Kenny, whom he had called four hours ago. It was such a dumbass thing to do, but he was in a rare panic after unwrapping the limb. What had unsettled him wasn’t the fact that it was someone’s arm sitting on his kitchen counter, a counter that now needed to be scrubbed down with Formula 409 at least fifty times; it was the fact that it was Erwin’s arm, unmistakably so, because Levi had recognized the pair of overlapping wings—one blue, one white—that was tattooed onto the bicep, a tattoo that all the men in Erwin’s regiment had gotten when they had served their stint in the army. “Get a grip! It’s just a lousy arm,” Levi had told himself as he dry-heaved over the sink. It could have been eyeballs or ears or a tongue, it could have been a penis or a pair of testicles, all of which he had seen either delivered to or sent from Kenny’s place of business, as Kenny reminded him over the phone. “You had a simple job to do, Levi. A mindless worm could have done that job, but you had to fuck it up. You couldn’t help being the filthy cocks**lat** your mother was, could you? You just had to hoe it up all over the goddamn place with that twinky-twin-waifu of yours. You better be grateful that Asami-san-sama-sensei-senpai-samurai-whatever-the-fuck-dojo-master-motherfucker was willing to nee-go-tiate with me over this ree-dic-u-lous SNAFU of yours. Jee-zus Kee-ryst! I thought I trained you better than this. Wasn’t Mr. Suguri paying you enough? You greedy little cunt of a boy, sticking your finger into every fucking piehole!” Kenny sighed heavily over the phone. He didn’t need this headache, not while he had some whore sucking him off to no avail in bed because he was out of breath from ranting at his lunatic nephew who had garnered the attention of Tokyo’s most notorious crime lord. Suguri was an old school gentleman who played by the established rules, but Asami was a whole other kettle of shark-like fish. “Do you have any idea what your dear old Uncle Kenny had to do to save your overly-used-and-open-for-business-twenty-four-seven ass?”

“I—”

“Well, shut the fuck up, you pile of shit, or I’m going to come over there and rip a new hole into you so big I’ll be able to park my goddamn Rolls Royce stretch lee-mo-zeen in it.”

That his Uncle Kenny talked like some southern hick from the state of Louisiana was an affectation that Levi had always found particularly annoying. They were native Berliners for shit’s sake. “You’ve been watching too many reruns of Dukes of Hazzard, Uncle Kenny,” Levi dared. That was no lie; Uncle Kenny adored that crappy show. He was even in the habit of wearing a cowboy hat and spurs on his boots.
“Son, you’ve got one hell of an out-sized motor mouth for that teeny tiny body of yours. You come
crying to me about your Dorky Dad boyfriend’s surgically detached arm and then you have the
balls to tell me what I can or cannot watch on Ammo-zine Pee-reme?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry? Sorry ain’t gonna cut it.”

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There were three American college students at the counter when Levi entered the shop, so he didn’t
think anything of Taki ignoring him as he made his way into the back room to put on his apron and
paper hat. There was a pot of tapioca pearls simmering on the electric burner and a mango that
needed to be peeled on the cutting board. Levi made quick work of that...well, maybe not so quick.
He was an hour late but that didn’t mean he wanted to be scolded twice in one day. When he
finally walked out to the front room with the neatly peeled and diced mango, the three American
students were gone and Taki was wiping down the counter.

“Hey, boss,” Levi said. “That was some night, huh?”

The ensuing silence was deafening as Taki folded the dishcloth into halves, then quarters. This was
bad. Normally Taki greeted him with a sweet smile and a soft-as-silk “Good morning.” Well, it was
afternoon, so…

“Is there anything that wasn’t a lie...Levi?” Taki murmured softly.

Taki’s hair was in his face and Levi wanted so much to push it aside with his fingers and tuck it
behind an ear. Instead, he casually dumped the chopped mango from the cutting board into the
plastic container and replied with what he hoped sounded like innocent surprise. “What are you
talking about?”

“The lies, Levi,” Taki stated again, almost a whisper. “Were you ever going to tell me the truth?”

Levi scraped the last few cubes of mango into the container and turned around to face Taki. The
sight of Taki’s pained expression—pinched and oh so crushed with disappointment and betrayal—
made Levi draw back defensively. “What the fuck are you talking about?” Levi straightened his
back, made himself taller. “If you want to know, yeah, I fucked him, okay? It’s not like you and I
are...goddamn it! If you didn’t want me to fuck Mr. Suoh, why didn’t you just say something? I
mean...you left with your...you left with Klaus, didn’t you? What was I supposed to do? Wait
around until you finished letting him drill you every which way? I didn’t want to be alone, okay?
Not when you were—”

“Stop it!” Taki shouted. His fists were clenched at his sides, his cheeks flushed, his eyes glistening
with tears. “I went to your flat early this morning. You weren’t there. You weren't answering your
phone, my texts. I was so worried about you! I was so afraid something bad had happened to you.
Do you know what I found? What I saw?” Taki was gripping the counter behind him, his knuckles
white, his obsidian eyes flashing. “Your laptop was open. I must have bumped into it, I wasn’t trying
to spy, Levi, but...all those emails you sent to Suguri-san...please...tell me...was it all a lie? I
thought we were friends. I thought you cared about me as much as I cared for you!” Taki gulped in a
breath, his shoulders shaking, a hand covering his mouth as he stifled a wrenching sob.

Oh, fuck. Why had he left his laptop open in the bedroom? How could he have been so careless?
Levi normally took precautions, always logged off and shut it down. If anyone else booted it up, they
wouldn’t know the password, but...he had been high as a kite that night, amped up and ready to get
busy with Mr. Suoh and maybe Taki, too… a threesome would have been right up his alley…but now everything had gone to shit. Levi fought back the only way he knew how. He went on the offensive. “Since when do you go snooping around my fucking flat and read my fucking emails? I gave you a key because I thought we had an understanding, an *agreement*. I thought we respected each other’s—”

“Respect?” Taki interjected. “Is *this* how you respect me? All this time… you’ve been… I don’t even know what to say. Why didn’t you just *kill* me instead?”

“No! All those emails you sent to Suguri-san. Did you never care for me? Are you working for Asami, too? Who are you?”

Levi held out his arms beseechingly. “I’m me. Levi Ackerman. I’m who you think I am. I’m just a fool for you. I swear it. Those emails… to Suguri. It was just a *job* that my uncle told me to do. I wasn’t trying to hurt you, I swear it. I needed the money. I was homeless, Taki, *homeless*. Do you know what that’s like… to have *nothing*?”

Taki’s face hardened though the tears streamed down his cheeks. “Yes. I know. *Now* I know what it is to have nothing.” He reached into his pocket and set a key onto the counter, then he pulled out his wallet and removed a credit card and set it on the counter next to the key. “It’s all yours, Levi. This shop, whatever money I have in my bank account, it’s all yours. Maybe one day…” Taki took off his apron and folded it neatly before throwing it into the garbage can. “Maybe one day, none of this will hurt anymore.”

***

When Armin saw Klaus grab hold of that ebony-haired beauty whom Eren’s love interest—a.k.a. fantasy twink, a.k.a. Levi Ackerman—was banging, he was fairly shocked. In the months that Klaus had been drilling Armin’s own ass, Klaus had never spoken of having a lover of either sex. In fact, Klaus had been close-lipped about his entire private life, always telling Armin to mind his own smarmy business every time he had tried to pick that lock. The truth was, Armin liked Klaus, a lot, and it wasn’t just because Klaus was a money-maker for him. The man was big and brawny in all the ways that pushed his kink buttons and his refusal to share any personal information only upped Klaus’s desirability factor. There was no greater turn-on than a manly wall that was just asking to be breached or licked or molested with tiny hands. But when Klaus had disappeared with said beauty after Levi had kicked him in the nuts at Xanadu, Armin figured that his days of streaming porn with Klaus were over because Armin was as pragmatic as he was pervy. Besides, there was an even larger and hunkier slab of male meat standing right before his eyes, and this blond tank was holding an unconscious Levi in his arms. So hot! Then, when the blond tank carried Levi out of the room trailed by Eren’s professor at university, Erwin Smith, Armin had locked eyes with his best buddy and compatriot in sexual experimentation, Eren Jaeger, and the two of them had grinned in complicity.

***

His last name wasn’t Jaeger for nothing. Eren wasn’t one to let his prey slip away so easily. No. He was a hunter stalking soundlessly through the forest, or hiding up in a tree, watching, waiting. Then, when the moment was right, he would strike to kill. He had told Erwin that Levi would be at Xanadu that night. He had been there, after all, the day that hulking blond goon had propositioned Levi in the tea shop. That was more than intriguing, especially when Levi had agreed to this ridiculous ‘date’ with a stranger. In Eren’s nineteen-year-old brain, this unexpected turn of events signaled a radical change in Levi. If Levi were so willing to say ‘yes’ to a stranger, on top of banging his boss, then
maybe this meant that Levi was finally over Erwin, and if he were over Erwin and fooling around with others, then maybe, just maybe Levi would spread his legs for him, Eren Jaeger, pervert par excellence.

Things didn’t quite play out that way, however. That night at Xanadu, Levi had screamed, “I hate you!” to Erwin, but anyone could see, could hear that those words really meant, “I love you!” Those tears in Levi’s eyes, the bottomless fury in his voice, what else could it be but love? Being over someone meant that one didn’t care anymore, didn’t feel a thing, but Levi was raw with it, stripped and flayed and laid bare by emotions that could not be denied. He was still hopelessly in love with Erwin and that meant that Eren had to work all that much harder to win Levi, convince him to toss Erwin aside, throw away that obsidian-eyed boss of his too, say “fuck off” to that blond tank, and say “yes” to him.

“You’re mine, Levi,” Eren gritted out, paint brush in one hand, his cock in the other. He stood before an almost-finished canvas in his bedroom, one of thirteen that he had painted of Levi. This one was of Levi bent over the dairy case at the local Waitrose, shirtless torso revealing an exquisite tattoo inked down both arms, his trousers bunched at his ankles, his hands spreading his ass cheeks for Eren’s salacious enjoyment. “I’m going to fuck your brains out and you’re going to love it. You’re going to love me.” All it took was three more tugs and then Eren was cumming onto the canvas. He collapsed onto his knees, panting and spent, and ran his tongue along Levi’s painted ass before his jism dripped off the canvas. “Just like this, Levi. I’m going to make you scream.”

***

Erwin woke up at a hospital and it took only a few moments to realize his right shoulder was wrapped tightly in gauze and for him to lift the sheet with his left hand and heave a sigh of relief. Thank god. It was just the right arm that was gone and nothing else. “Levi, what have you gotten yourself into?” Erwin mumbled at the gridded ceiling. He had never been so scared in his life, not even when he had served in the army and been deployed to Afghanistan to fight a sham war. The men in his regiment had all bonded quickly. There was nothing like bullets whizzing by one’s ear and shit blowing up all over the place—buildings, vehicles, bodies—to make a man realize that he needed both God and his fellow soldiers. The tattoo they had all gotten before their deployment was their good luck charm. That’s what they told themselves. The only people more superstitious than soldiers were athletes, especially baseball players and maybe hockey players…yeah, they were a superstitious lot. The blue and white wings—Wings of Freedom—white for death, blue for heaven, a prayer to God that one would follow the other once they were set free from this mortal coil. Erwin closed his eyes and prayed, “Dear Lord, don’t let him die.”

He had enlisted in the army as soon as he had turned eighteen. He wanted to go to college and be an art historian like his father, who had died suddenly during an out-of-town conference to give a paper. The problem was, his father’s life insurance policy was barely enough to cover the cost of the funeral and a year’s mortgage and property tax payments on their house. The U.S. military, though, would fund a soldier’s education if he served admirably, so serve he did. Erwin had been fresh out of high school when he had committed those atrocities in that godforsaken hellhole in the desert, but what did he know about morality back then? He had followed orders and gunned down the enemy, even if they were old men, women, and children. He had seen the worst of humanity in friend and foe alike, engaged in unforgivable acts of violence. Regardless, it was worth it to kill those “insurgents,” even if they were innocent civilians, because after taking two bullets to his left leg, he was sent back to the States, awarded a medal, and given four years at Columbia University for his bachelor’s degree, then four more years at Yale for his master’s and doctorate. He had reached his goal—he was a successful art historian—but he had spilled blood to get there. It only made sense for it to all come back to bite him, karma at its finest.
The man in the black rubber bodysuit had cut off his arm, but it was the other man in the bespoke three-piece suit that was the incarnation of the Devil himself come to collect payment. *That* man had sat on the sofa calmly smoking a cigarette as the other lunatic had divested him of a major limb with the precision of the finest butcher in Berlin. Erwin didn’t remember anything after the heart-stopping pain, not until he had awoken in this hospital bed, and he didn’t know if he should even be grateful that he was still alive, that those two men had seen fit to let him live. Why had they let him live? If they were capable of cutting off his arm, surely they could have easily chopped him into tiny pieces and thrown him into the Thames for the fishes. Were they just trying to send a message, a warning? But a warning for what? What had he done to deserve this besides slaughtering people in the name of freedom…or, more likely, what had Levi done?

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Taki showed up at Klaus’s flat later that afternoon. He was dressed in a different suit and tie and had one suitcase with him. He had gone back to his condo after his ‘conversation’ with Levi and packed a few belongings. He felt like he was sleepwalking, or having one of those dreams where he was underwater but still breathing and wondering when reality would set in and he would drown. His bedroom had smelled oddly of bleach.

Klaus didn’t seem all that happy to see him, though. “You told me to come at four o’clock, didn’t you?” asked Taki when Klaus remained rooted in the doorway, his expression strained with worry.

“Yeah, four o’clock.” Klaus absently glanced at his watch. “Right on time.” He was taken aback when Taki suddenly lunged forward and wrapped his arms around his waist, clutching him like a life raft in a flood.

“You never gave up on me,” Taki murmured, his face buried in Klaus’s chest. “You…you waited for me. You didn’t forget me. I’m yours, Klaus. All of me. Take me away from here. Please.”

Klaus hugged him tight, his big hands caressing Taki’s trembling shoulders. “Don’t worry. I’m not leaving your side.” He lifted Taki’s chin and kissed him gently, tenderly, then with desperate ferocity, as if he would devour him. “I won’t let anyone tear us apart.”

It was with reluctance that Klaus broke their embrace, picked up Taki’s suitcase and led them into the living room. Standing by the sofa was Suoh and sitting on the sofa smoking a Dunhill was Asami.

“You’ve been a busy little boy, Taki-kun.” Asami’s lips curled into a wry smile. “It’s time you went back to your wife.”

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This fan-made animation stuck with me for some reason when I was writing part of this chapter. It always seemed like something that would play out in Eren’s wildest dreams:

*Super Psycho Love*
Steering his vehicle through the crowded streets of Hong Kong, Klaus turned the wheel sharply to the right, causing Taki to yelp in surprise. “What the—” he began, but Asami-sama cut him off with a dismissive wave of his hand. “I think we’re getting a bit of a following.”

Taki’s eyes widened in horror. He had been so focused on the flight from Tokyo to Hong Kong that he hadn’t realized they were being tailgated. “I—I don’t understand,” he stammered, his voice shaking. “Why would they want to follow us?”

“Follow us?” Asami-sama raised an eyebrow. “I think you’re referring to the three goons in the black sedans?”

Taki nodded, a cold sweat breaking out on his forehead. He had been so focused on his own troubles that he hadn’t even noticed the presence of the trackers. “Yes, yes, of course. I was just—”

Asami-sama smiled, a calculating gleam in his eye. “I think you’re missing the point, Taki. They want you both. And I’m afraid the only way to get rid of them is to make sure you’re never alone.”

Taki swallowed hard, the taste of fear souring his mouth. He had always thought of himself as a strong, independent person, but in that moment, he realized just how vulnerable he was. He didn’t want to admit it, but he was scared. More scared than he had ever been in his life.

“Listen to me, Taki,” Asami-sama said, his voice calm and steady. “You’re not alone. I’m here, and I know you have friends. You’re not alone.”

Taki took a deep breath and nodded, his eyes fixed on the road ahead. He knew Asami-sama was right. He wasn’t alone. He had friends, and he could count on them to help him. But that didn’t make the fear any less real.

“Thank you,” he said softly, his voice breaking. “Thank you for—”

Asami-sama’s hand landed gently on Taki’s shoulder. “You’re welcome, Taki. Now, let’s get you back to Xanadu and turn this thing around.”

Taki nodded, a smile of relief crossing his face. He knew it wouldn’t be easy, but he knew he could do it. He knew he was strong enough. And he knew he wasn’t alone.
of Suguri, did the man even know about this current state of affairs?

Asami chuckled, his face a picture of disdain. “You have it all backwards, Herr Wolfstadt. Suguri-san would have had you shot right in front of Taki-kun’s apartment, but apparently he overestimated your tracking abilities. Not much of a wolf, are you? You walked right into his tea shop a few months ago and didn’t even know it. Pathetic. This, though…your technique isn’t bad, but you need to invest in better…ingredients.” Asami held up the tablet so that both Klaus and Taki could see the footage recorded the previous night.

“Ohhh…shit…” Klaus’s jaw hit the floor. He didn’t need to look over at Taki to know that his blue-black eyes had probably fallen out of his head, although he could hear Taki gasping as if he were in cardiac arrest. “Th—that’s my flat,” Klaus stammered, “…my bedroom…how the hell…?” Yep, that was him alright, eating out Taki like a starving man gorging at a buffet.

The next video that played, though, nearly blinded Klaus. God help him if he wasn’t bleeding out of every orifice. It was of Taki and Levi sixty-nining and then humping like rabbits in yet another bedroom, balls jiggling like fruit dangling in the breeze, mouths twisted in ecstasy when not sucking on an engorged cock. Klaus exploded. “What the fuck is this, Taki? Jesus Christ, that’s that little shithead!” The images playing on the screen…it was like watching a trainwreck in slow motion. As much as he wanted to look away, he couldn’t. Seeing Taki arguing with Levi over some other man—that giant blond hulk who was sitting less than five feet away next to Asami—at Xanadu was one thing, but seeing them pleasuring each other in the most intimate of ways was too much to swallow. If he hadn’t been jealous before, he was beyond jealous now. Klaus was tempted to hijack the plane, fly it back to London, just so he could kill Levi with his bare hands. So much shit was hurtling through his brain like a tornado: Taki with that Levi motherfucker…his Taki was too good, too pure for such a scumbag. And this Asami-sama. Who the fuck was he? Klaus had dealt with his share of smarmy drug dealers and two-bit pimps in Vegas, but this ultra slick dude was in a whole different league. He was not like anyone Klaus had ever come across before, even Suguri wasn’t so threatening. The private jet with the plush leather seats, the Maybach sedan that had taken them to an airstrip at Heathrow reserved for billionaires, the Royals, and the Prime Minister…what did it all mean?

By the law of averages, things couldn’t get any worse, but then they did, because the video streaming after that gem of Taki and Levi rutting like animals was of Klaus jackhammering Armin against a humungous stuffed Totoro doll. It didn’t matter that Klaus’s face was hidden behind a Captain America mask because Armin kept screaming, “Oh, Klaus! Harder, daddy, harder!”

Well, Klaus didn’t even try to explain that NSFW footage. He could only sit back and give up. Whoever Asami was, he had him beat. “I can still crash the plane,” Klaus thought to himself. Little did he know that he and Taki were on the same wavelength. “I could storm the cockpit and bring the plane down. If we’re really headed for Hong Kong and we’re only one hour into this flight, then we’ll probably go down over the—”

“Please stop, Asami-sama,” Taki begged, intruding into Klaus’s morbid reverie. He buried his face in his hands, awash in defeat and despair. He couldn’t take any more doses of reality: first the discovery that Levi was a spy rather than a friend, then the revelation that Klaus was a freaking porn star, it was too much to digest in one day. Taki was willing to go back to Sana if it meant ensuring Klaus’s safety, but did he even want either him or Klaus to be alive after what he had just seen? Had no one been honest? Taki didn’t know who to believe anymore, who to trust, including himself. “Maybe you should shoot us both right now.”

“Now where’s the fun in that?” Asami reasoned. “Besides, only an idiot would shoot a gun in a plane, right Suoh?”
Suoh grunted, “Yes, boss.”

Taki’s face was beet red and so was Klaus’s and, well, even Asami wasn’t without pity. He had suffered the worst humiliation* in the past for a certain someone, a brat named Takaba Akihito who had demanded a birthday present that Asami had been forced to make good on though it had stripped him of his dignity and pride. Asami shut off the tablet and pretended not to see Klaus reach over and squeeze Taki’s hand in apology. “The foolish things a man will do for love,” Asami mused to himself. Then he got up to sit in the cockpit with Kirishima. He had a few people he needed to blackmail with the videos and then there was a boy with a cheap dye-job he wanted to call, just because he was a fool in love.

Yoroshiku onegai shimasu = this Japanese phrase has no direct English equivalent but can be very loosely translated as ”Please treat me kindly!” or ”Please let us be nice to each other.” It's basically an all-purpose bandage used to smooth over difficult situations, more polite than saying sumimasen and much more polite than saying kudasai.

*The humiliating event that Asami suffered (mentioned at the end of this chapter) is explained in a silly ficlet I wrote for the Finder fandom. You can read it here if you are interested.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Levi and Erwin deal with the aftermath in their own ways.

Well, he’d really blown it this time. Taki had left him, no, abandoned him, disappeared into thin air, perhaps with that Klaus fellow. Levi had manned the tea shop the day that Taki had confronted him with his spying activities, locking it up at the end of the evening with the key Taki had given him. The next day, Levi showed up ten minutes early, hoping to make a good impression on his boss (he figured Taki wasn’t going to be in the mood to be his lover anytime soon, so he was back to being his boss), but Taki never appeared. Nor did he appear the day after, or the day after that. He wasn’t answering his phone or his texts and then the messages started coming back as “undeliverable.” It was like Erwin leaving him all over again, someone Levi didn’t even want to think about right now because his brain couldn’t handle more than one shitstorm at a time.

“Maybe if I’m good, he’ll come back,” Levi reasoned as he brewed the tea. The shop had never looked cleaner, more organized. He hadn’t sworn at a customer for several days in a row—a first! The Green-Eyed Devil had come by every day at three-fifteen as usual and made especially lewd comments to him about the current state of his ass, but Levi let that roll off his back with nary a rude “fuck off”; he was too distracted by Taki’s continuing absence. By Friday, though, he was worried enough to go to Taki’s apartment building. His memory of the cab ride back to his flat that night was a blur, but he did recall that Erwin had said they were in a building across from the Tate Modern and there was only one residential high rise that fit that description. He figured he was at the right place because the doorman recognized him; that is, he mistook him for Taki at first.

“Back in London are we, Mr. Reizen?” The man was startled to see Taki, and then embarrassed when he realized it wasn’t Taki after all. “Pardon, sir, I thought you were someone else.”

“Is Mr. Reizen away?” Levi asked, dreading the answer. “When is he coming back? I’m a friend of his. I mean I work with him…uh…for him…whatever. I can’t seem to reach him.”

The doorman narrowed his eyes at Levi, suspicion spreading across his face.

“Look, I can prove it,” Levi insisted. He reached into his wallet and pulled out the credit card Taki had given him. “See. This is his. Taki Reizen. He gave it to me. We work together.”

“Wait here,” said the doorman, who took the credit card and disappeared into the building.

Levi stood on the sidewalk and peered through the glass entryway, watched the doorman approach the man at the security desk and hand over the credit card. The man at the desk picked up a phone and made a call. After some minutes, the credit card was handed back to the doorman, who came back outside.

“I didn’t steal it,” Levi huffed, grabbing the card out of the doorman’s hand and stuffing it back into his wallet. “Mr. Reizen gave it to me so I could order shit for his shop, okay?”

The doorman straightened and crossed his arms. Indeed, there was no stop-payment on the card, which had not been reported missing. “Mr. Reizen does not live here anymore.”
“Liar!” Levi shot back. “I’ve seen the inside of his place. He’s got a fancy Kashmir silk carpet in his bedroom…and this super fluffy duvet! There’s grass cloth on the walls and—”

“Sir, Mr. Reizen’s suite is empty. All the furniture was removed two days ago. I expect it will go on the market by the end of the month. Good day now.”

Levi didn’t go back to the tea shop. He went to his studio instead, snorted a week’s worth of coke and started a new canvas, music blasting from his portable speakers. He didn’t care if he never slept again, his whole life was a fucking nightmare anyway and there would be plenty of time for sleep later, eons of time. Taki had left. He’d left him! And Erwin…Erwin was short one arm and maybe dead and all he could think about was finishing this final canvas, having his show, and then dying. He didn’t know how—that that was the easy part, he supposed, the dying—the hard part was staying alive until then, completing his task, and then none of it would matter anymore. He wouldn’t have to feel anything after he was dead and buried.

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Erwin had left his capacity for violence behind in that hellish pit in the desert, so when Levi had wanted Erwin to bring that violence back to life in their relationship, he couldn’t do it, not for long at least. At first, he had thought that Levi just liked it rough, the sex, and he had to admit that it was thrilling. Until it wasn’t. He wasn’t a prudish man, and he understood to a degree the dynamics of dominance and submission, but what Levi wanted, needed, was something beyond what he could give. Or, perhaps, he had seen its true face during the war, because it had many faces, and it frightened him. Levi was young, but he had many lifetimes within him that spoke of incomprehensible pain and Erwin had seen enough of it when they were lovers. He wondered how deeply he had failed Levi, all because he didn’t have the endurance for yet another slog through hell.

After he was discharged from the hospital, he went back to Berlin to stay in Hange’s apartment for the remainder of August when he had no teaching or administrative duties at Central St. Martin’s. Hange was in Gröningen in the Netherlands for an artist-in-residence stint, and he had the whole place to himself. It provided some much needed alone-time to process recent events. He had thought he could run away from Levi, but Levi had proven him wrong. Not only had he followed him to London, he had harbored every gram, every milligram of passion and longing and hurt that Erwin had branded onto his soul. Levi had nurtured it, refined it, built up layers and layers of heartache like a grain of sand within an oyster and now…there was this perfect pearl. Erwin had seen it that night in the luxury condo, he had seen it in Levi’s eyes, heard it in his ragged voice: “All you had to do was love me back.” If Erwin had loved him back when it mattered, there would be no pearl, but there would be a boy just a little less damaged, and he would be a man with two arms.

Two arms. Plenty of men came back from the war missing a limb, or limbs. He had been lucky. He had been whole when he met Levi, he had both arms to hold him the first time they had made love. And, man oh man, did he need both arms! Their lovemaking had escalated from tender to savage in the space of a few minutes, both of them a little drunk…well, Levi was trashed, Erwin was slightly tipsy, but the result was all the same. They had fucked like wild animals, Levi crouched over his lap, impaled on his cock and shaking apart as he came into Erwin’s fist with a strangled cry. The shade hadn’t been pulled down on the window in Erwin’s bedroom and it had been a harvest moon—full and shining almost as bright as a lamp onto Levi’s pale skin, illuminating a face almost demonic in its beauty. Levi hadn’t even been hard when he climaxed and that had surprised Erwin, that and the fact that Levi could take him to the hilt, his body was so small and thin. He was afraid he might break him, Levi’s body, but it wasn’t his body that Erwin had eventually broken and, somehow, his missing right arm felt like proper payment. It was a start at least. After all, even by the most lenient, generous reckoning, an arm didn’t quite equal a heart in the larger scheme of things. The scales were as yet unbalanced.
Erwin poured himself a cup of freshly brewed coffee, the air conditioning softly humming through the vents in Hange’s messy apartment. Tomorrow, he’d begin cleaning and straightening up the place. Today, though, he’d take it easy, give himself time to settle in, maybe read a book or watch the news. As he slumped onto the sofa in the living room and flicked on the television remote, his eyes fell on the pile of mail sitting on her coffee table. On the very top was a postcard that caught his attention. The name of the London gallery was familiar. Erwin flipped the card over and read the announcement. *Saints and Sinners, Gods and Martyrs: New Works by Levi Ackerman. Opening: September 23rd.* Erwin’s breath hitched for a second, and then he smiled despite the regret washing over him. Why was he crying of a sudden? Why was he crying when the other half of him felt such pride and relief?

“I’ll be there, Levi,” he rasped into the room, the low baritone of the newscaster droning in the background. “For once, I won’t let you down.”
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Klaus and Taki end up in Hong Kong. Suoh asks Kirishima for advice.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a little wild and all over the place, but you probably should be used to this by now. I promise to tie it all together in subsequent chapters. Bear with me please!

“Keep your hips level and swing through the zone,” Klaus directed for the millionth time in garbled Japanese. “Don’t lunge forward. Don’t flail at the ball, for shit’s sake! Now, c’mon, kid, the sun’s going down and I’m hungry.” It probably came out sounding more like, "Hips not move and space traverse. Ahead not go. Ball not swat. Idiot! Boy! Hurry! Sun disappear and food to eat!” Klaus punched his catcher's mitt as he glared at the boy standing in the batter’s box to his left—Tao, his name was—suppressing a groan as he laid down the sign to Taki, who was waiting patiently on the mound.

Taki threw it right down the middle. Tao flailed once more and missed by a mile. Klaus groaned out loud this time and shouted to Taki in English, “I swear to god, this kid couldn’t hit it even if it were the size of the fucking moon!”

The prepubescent boy, who was fluent in Cantonese and passable in Japanese, knew enough English to scold back at Klaus, "You say bad word!"

Further away, behind Taki, Lin Xianming sauntered over from his position covering third and short towards Banba Zenji, who was covering second and first. There was no one playing the outfield because Tao never ever hit it out of the infield, if he hit the ball at all. “I do believe he’s even worse than I was,” Lin commented with a droll smirk.

“Was?” teased Banba. For that, he got an elbow in the ribs from his fellow infielder. “Now, now, Lin-chan. Give Tao-kun credit for trying at least. You never even bothered to—OW! Watch the face!” Banba spluttered. A leather glove slapped across his youthful visage hurt way more than a jab in the ribs. He watched the slender, long-haired blond shuffle back to his position and grinned with affection. He’d pay him back later for that slap with way too many kisses that he just knew would annoy the fuck out of his Lin-chan.

They were on the roof of a high rise in the middle of Hong Kong that Liu Feilong had converted into a mini baseball field for his adopted son Tao, who dreamed of making it some day in the big leagues in America, the only legitimate arena for baseball. Yes, yes, baseball was super popular in Japan and South Korea and Taiwan, in the Dominican Republic and Colombia and Venezuela. But America was where it had all started and where it counted for real. Nothing less would do for his little Tao. When he heard that Asami’s goddaughter Sana had married Taki Reizen, star pitcher for the Tokyo Yomiuri Giants, the wheels had started turning in Feilong’s mind. Then, when it came out that Taki had fallen from grace with his family due to an unfortunate liaison with a former catcher from the
New York Mets, it seemed like the perfect opportunity to capitalize on someone else’s misfortune. As leader of the Baishe syndicate, Feilong was always planning, scheming, thinking three, four, five steps ahead, and so he had chatted with his rival across the bay—with whom he had a long-standing love-hate relationship—and called in a few favors. He had acquired Lin and Banba in the same manner, though they had other uses—they were highly trained assassins, after all, who conveniently happened to play amateur baseball as the Hakata Tonkotsu Ramens when they weren’t killing people for a fee. Now, he had two former pro players to augment his private team to assist Tao in honing his skills. Like all proud and hopelessly blinkered ‘fathers,’ he couldn’t see that his ‘son’ absolutely sucked at baseball.

“That’s it, Tao,” Feilong cheered from the ‘dugout,’ or what was basically a very comfortable, upholstered settee under an awning positioned behind a screen that would shield him from any errant foul balls. For some reason, Tao’s wild swings of the bat seemed to send the ball flying backwards instead of forwards. The unmistakable “WTF?” look that Klaus shot him as he pushed his mask off his face was lost on Feilong, who took a long drag on his pipe, his eyes rolling into the back of his skull as the hit of opium sent him floating onto yet a higher cloud of delight. “You’re making me soooo proud.”

That did it for Klaus. He leapt up from his crouch, knees cracking in protest, and jogged to the mound. Banba and Lin drew close to hear what the big blond had to say to the much smaller pitcher.

“I can’t take any more of this,” Klaus grumbled. The three other men all nodded in agreement. “So, for sh*t’s sake, throw him a fat one—the slowest, fattest one in the history of baseball—okay, Taki?”

Taki grimaced. “What do you think I’ve been doing? A blind person could have hit ten home runs by now!”

Banba nudged Lin in the side. “I dunno. Lin-chan might have gotten a single out of—OW!”

“Jesus Christ!” Klaus shoved Lin off the mound practically. It was bad enough that he had to deal with that lunatic with the long, raven hair who wasn’t so insufferable, truth be told, when he was willing to share his drugs with him, but he didn’t need to put up with the antics of this blond cross-dresser who was almost as appalling on offense and defense as Tao. “Let’s just puh-leease let Tao get a fucking hit so we can end this charade for the day!”

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They had landed in Hong Kong two weeks ago on yet another private airstrip, and had been shuttled off in a limo to a luxury high rise, where they were eventually greeted by someone named Liu Feilong. Taki didn’t recognize the man dressed in the silk changshan embroidered with cranes, but Asami seemed to know this person, with whom he exchanged the briefest of pleasantries.

“Feilong.”

“Asami.”

Huh. No honorifics, thought Klaus. What the heck could that mean? He had turned to look at Taki for clues, but Taki appeared to be equally confused. Then a young woman had entered the room behind this Feilong person and rushed at Taki, throwing her arms around him and kissing his cheeks.

“Taki-kun!”

Kun? thought Klaus. It wasn’t until he heard Taki whisper, “Sana-san” that he realized it was Taki’s wife who was embracing him with so much affection. “Oh, shit,” Klaus muttered under his breath.
He looked at Asami, at this Suoh goon—knowing that both of them were packing firearms—and wondered how many seconds it would take for him to reach into one of their holsters, grab the gun, and shoot himself in the head. It had never come to that, though, because Taki’s wife had noticed Klaus standing beside Taki and turned to him with a not-so-friendly smile.

“You must be Klaus,” she said in accented English. “He gave up everything for you. Don’t make him regret it.”

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Suoh was feeling a little glum, nursing what could only be a bruised ego. He confided in Kirishima over coffee and pastries as they stood outside the Daily Yamazaki konbini in the shade of the awning, on a short break before a shift change. After a month away in London on assignment for Asami, the sights and smells and sounds of Tokyo were no small consolation to the hulking blond, who considered Japan his home even though his father was from elsewhere. As much as Tokyo kicked ass, Suoh liked the smaller cities as well—Sapporo, Kitakata, Fukuoka—it was still the same soil, the same je ne sais quoi that made him feel rooted. Or maybe it was just the food and the drink that moored him.

“Boss told me to ‘seduce’ this Levi fellow,” Suoh mumbled around a bite of his pomegranate cream filled donut. The sound of his bespectacled colleague choking on his coffee beside him made Suoh hesitate in his recounting of recent events. He had wanted to talk to Kirishima sooner, but there was little opportunity on the flight out of London to Hong Kong and then back to Tokyo finally.

Kirishima reached into the breast pocket of his suit jacket for a handkerchief and quickly wiped his mouth. His eyes were wide with disbelief behind his wire-frame glasses. “You? He asked you to do that? Ho-ly fuck.” Kirishima shook his head like a parent discovering that his teenage son had set up a meth lab in the basement. “Boss has really gone bonkers. Ever since he hooked up with that little brat, he’s made no sense at all, none whatsoever.” The image of Takaba on his knees in front of Asami—eagerly sucking Asami’s brains out through his cock like a hungry slut slurping the richest vanilla milkshake through a thick, throbbing meat-straw—flashed before Kirishima. Some things, once seen, just couldn’t be un-seen.

“No…I mean…” Suoh struggled to find the right words. He was never one for talking much, had always found it difficult to express himself. Maybe that’s why he communicated best with a gun or his fists. When Asami had given him the directive to seduce this Levi Ackerman, it had been a shock to Suoh, because he had a reputation for being, uh, deficient in that department and this was an honor that Boss had bestowed upon him. Asami was showing him a new level of confidence. Or so he thought. “I was ready to do it. I was doing it. I made him go on a date with me…and then I delivered him to the rendezvous point…”

“Yeah? Go on,” encouraged Kirishima, nibbling his sweet bun filled with red bean paste. “Were you got up in rubber?”

“Oh, yes. For sure.”

“Head to toe?”

“Yes. Head to toe.”

“And? What? You shot your load too soon?”

Just as Kirishima voiced that unfair sentiment, Suoh’s second donut exploded in his mouth and dripped coconut cream filling down the front of his bespoke suit. “Goddamn it! I just had this dry
Two days later, they were finally seated at their favorite ramen shop after a half-hour wait in the sweltering late summer heat and the conversation picked up where it had last left off.

“Did you even want to fuck him, this Levi?” asked Kirishima. “I mean, you don’t exactly like the whole skin-on-skin thing.”

Suoh sprinkled some hot pepper flakes onto his bowl of sliced pork belly and noodles swimming in a rich fatty broth. “I had a truckload of condoms. And...he was kind of cute. Small. Like a kitten. With a foul temper.” Suoh swiped through the photos on his phone and showed Kirishima a picture of Levi tied up in three strand jute rope employing kinbaku technique. Suoh had mastered shibari years ago at Asami’s request. God knows how many times he’d been asked to truss someone up in an aesthetically pleasing manner prior to an interrogation, an outright beating, or perhaps a more romantic encounter for his boss.

“So...huh...” Kirishima slurped a mouthful loudly because he was polite that way. The cook behind the counter nodded with gratitude in his direction as Kirishima wiped the oily broth off his lips with a napkin. “What stopped you?”

“Boss told me to stop. He was in the next room watching on the laptop. I thought, ‘Maybe he wants to fuck Levi himself,’ but then he told me to chop off the other guy’s arm instead.”

“Wait, what? There was another guy?”

“Yes, some blond guy. So, I chopped off the guy’s arm. What a mess.”

“Hmmmm.” This was rather puzzling. Asami himself had no qualms when it came to threesomes, but perhaps he didn’t want to put too much pressure on his Chief of Security. Cutting off a limb was far less stressful than banging two guys simultaneously for a man like Suoh. Most people took one look at Suoh and the word AUTOMOTON or GOLEM would flash before their mind’s eye, but Kirishima knew that underneath his fellow assassin’s wall-like demeanor lay a sensitive soul crying out for human warmth, as long as there was a layer of rubber in between. “Well, we’re going back with boss soon. Are you planning on sealing the deal then?”

“Yes,” Suoh agreed, “but I keep my eyes on the road. And I wear earbuds.”
“Riiight. You sure love your Tōhōshinki.”

“So, if Boss tells me to fuck Levi when we go back, what should I do?”

Kirishima signaled the cook for more noodles and said to his colleague, “I assume you’re going to top?”

“Yes. Always.”

“And, what? You think this Levi would want to sub for you?”

“Who wouldn’t?”

“Okaay. Let’s just assume you’re right. First off: agree on safewords. What do you normally use?”

“Uh…hard, harder, hardest?”

The sound of chopsticks clattering to the floor was muffled by the steady drone of slurping around them. Kirishima unsheathed a new pair from its paper wrapper and tried not to sound too schoolmarmish. “I don’t know what clubs you’ve been going to but…most people use more boring terms, like green, yellow, red. Does that ring a bell?”

Suoh stared at the ceiling, thinking like crazy. He could swear that no one had ever said green, yellow, or red to him before. This was all so confusing. “I don’t hear a bell ringing.”

“That’s just a—” Kirishima’s phone dinged with a text, prompting a groan. “Shit. I have to go. Boss wants me to pick up the brat.” He laid his chopsticks across the bowl and pushed the stool under the counter. “You know what? The next time you see this Levi fellow, just give him a good spanking first. Then go to town on him. That’s what Boss always does.”

Suoh’s bowl was empty, so he reached over and took Kirishima’s and proceeded to enjoy another portion of ramen. Go to town on him, eh? Spank him first? Yeah. Suoh nodded to himself as he continued eating. He could definitely do that, especially if he heard Levi screaming hard, harder, hardest.

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For those of you who don’t know Lin Xianming and Banba Zenji from *Hakata Tonkotsu Ramens*, here’s a fan-made AMV featuring them: [Banba x Lin](#). Lin is the cross-dresser with the long, blond hair and Banba is the adorable guy with the mop of brown hair.
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

The Green-Eyed Devil reveals himself.

“Fuuuuuck!!!”

The phone went sailing across the studio but, as luck would have it, it landed on the mattress instead of hitting the wall and shattering like the laptop that had been sent to Electronic Heaven weeks ago. It began buzzing for attention once more.

Levi stomped over in his slippers and picked it up, mashing the green ‘accept call’ button like he was putting out someone’s eye. “What?”

There was a long-suffering sigh on the other end, and then the monotone voice of Lisa, the PR person at the gallery. “We can’t possibly print that.”

“Why the fuck not?” snapped Levi. He hadn’t slept for days or eaten and was running on Red Bull and fumes, literally. “I already sent you my goddamn bio and artist’s statement and I’m not writing any more shit for your stupid press release.”

“What you gave me is incomprehensible, Levi, not to mention…weirdly obscene.”

“Oh, yeah? Like what?” He gazed at the almost-finished canvas on the easel, tempted now to paint thick gobs of cum dripping off the decapitated head of St John the Baptist. Good lord, the idea of giving the poor martyr a facial made Levi want to laugh and cry and step in front of a bus full of tourists. “I’m going to hell,” he muttered to himself, “in a fucking handbasket. I am. Mommy?”

“Let’s see…”, droned Lisa, who had learned to tune out Levi’s habitual, nonsensical ranting, “…ah, here’s a nice little gem: The serial for nude canvassing exploits the…dick toggle between…darkening licks…deserving and self-mortification—”

“Oh my god!” Levi shouted, jerking back to reality. He wanted to tear his hair out. “That’s not what I wrote! I fucking hate autocorrect! It’s supposed to say, ‘The series of new canvases explores the dichotomy between darkness and light, desire and self-mortification,’ not whatever garbage you just said I—”

“Well,” Lisa interrupted, “maybe you should send me a Word document like a normal person instead of texting me this garbled mumbo jumbo, hmmm?”

The huge dent in the lath and plaster wall was laughing back at Levi; the missing chunks gave the illusion of a winking face, or maybe it was just Levi’s sleep-deprived mind playing tricks on him. “I can’t. My laptop is broken.” He had actually slammed his laptop into the wall in a fit of furious remorse, as if he could utterly negate all the emails he had sent to Suguri through that act of violence and make Taki forgive him for his betrayal of trust, of friendship, of maybe even love if he dared to admit that kind of pain back into his heart. That laptop was an accusation, proof of his crime, and he couldn’t stand to see it or use it. Busting it to pieces, though, left him nothing but his phone. He had
always been impatient and not particularly interested in proper punctuation and grammar, but texting five thousand words of philosophical bullshit while wasted was probably a bad idea. “Listen, Lisa, can’t you just write it for me? Make up whatever crap you want, I don’t care. I don’t care if I fucking die right now.” Levi collapsed onto the mattress and stared up at the skylight. He had no idea what day it was. “I’m so tired.”

“Oh okay,” Lisa replied. Plenty of artists had meltdowns before a show; this wasn’t all that unusual. She had a stack of exhibition catalogues on the shelf from which to cull the kind of opaque, overblown phrases bandied about by MFA professors and their graduate students, not to mention the most egregious proponents of pomposity: the art critics reviewing the shows. Cobbling something together for the press release would take all of fifteen minutes for her, she’d done it so many times already. “Just keep your shit together. You can die after the opening.”

So much for sympathy. “Fine. I’m going to go make myself a cup of tea,” Levi said as he sat himself upright and muttered under his breath, “…you heartless bitch.”

“I heard that, asshole. I hope you scald that filthy mouth of yours when—”

He mashed the red button before she threw him more compliments and made his way down the stairs to his flat. As soon as he opened his door he heard his intercom buzzing. “What now?” The last time someone had rang for him at the front door, it was the FedEx guy delivering Erwin’s arm in a box. He had put the arm in a plastic garbage bag and shoved it into his freezer, just like his Uncle Kenny had told him to do, and then never opened the freezer again. That was weeks ago…was the FedEx guy back again to deliver another piece of Erwin’s body? God help him, there wasn’t room in the freezer for more limbs. If he didn’t answer the door, would the guy just leave the box on the front stoop? What if one of his neighbors saw it sitting there and brought it up to him? Shit, that would be bad, especially if the blood had seeped through into the cardboard…the people in his building already thought he was a freak. Would they call the cops on him? He didn’t want to go to jail. After what seemed to be an eternity, the buzzing still hadn’t let up. This FedEx guy wasn’t going to go away until he had delivered his package straight into Levi’s hands apparently.

“God, I hate my life!” With a groan of desperation, Levi headed down to the front door and flung it open, only to see the Green-Eyed Devil standing there with a scowl. “What’d you do with the FedEx guy?” asked Levi. He shoved Eren aside and looked up and down the street; no FedEx guy in sight. “Huh.” He turned and headed back inside, only to have Eren follow him into the foyer before he could shut the door.

“He left you, didn’t he?” Eren demanded. “You haven’t been going to the tea shop. In fact, it’s been closed all this time and—”

“Wait a minute.” Levi turned around on the stairs. “How the fuck do you know where I live?” Eren was silent, his large green eyes staring back at him with a knowing twinkle. “Have you been stalking me, you sicko?” The sheer hypocrisy of the statement was lost on Levi in the heat of the moment, but it wasn’t lost on Eren.

“Yeah, I’ve been stalking you as much as you’ve been stalking Erwin,” he sneered. “In fact, Erwin’s the one who had me watching you. Betcha didn’t know that, did you?”

Levi was speechless, hanging onto the railing for support. “What have you done with Erwin?” When Eren gave him the finger in response, Levi pounced, grabbing Eren around the neck and screaming, “What have you done with Erwin?” They went tumbling down two steps and landed hard on the floor, Levi choking the Green-Eyed Devil with both hands, but he was exhausted and weak and Eren easily threw him off, rolling them both over and pinning Levi down with his larger, heavier body.
“I haven’t done anything with him,” Eren grunted into his face. He had Levi’s wrists gripped in his own hands, holding him prisoner beneath him. “Calm the fuck down, you crazy little shit.”

A derisive laugh escaped Levi’s throat. “I’m crazy? What does that make you then?” He struggled to free himself for another few seconds and then went limp, completely drained and sobbing, “Where is he?” Levi wasn’t even sure if he meant Erwin or Taki or both. And why had his world gone sideways and blurry?

The sight of Levi shaking and in tears made Eren pull back. “He’s in Berlin,” he replied, sitting up with Levi straddled beneath his legs. “Erwin…he’ll be back in September. He doesn’t love you, Levi. He told me so.” To Eren’s surprise, he actually felt a little sorry for Levi. Maybe it was his pale skin, the dark rings under his eyes, the fragility of his small frame that made Eren want to explain himself. “Erwin is one of my professors at St Martin’s, but you probably know that already.”

Levi shook his head slowly, moaning pitifully. “You want me to believe he loves you?”

“No. Eww. He’s not into me and I’m not into him.” Eren laid back down over Levi, grinding his hips into him just a bit. “He was paying me to keep an eye on you, make sure you didn’t come at him with a machete or something. He hates you…well…maybe hate is too strong a word. Let’s just say he can’t wait to be rid of you. He told me you were the biggest mistake of his life. Yeah. But you know what they say: one man’s trash is another man’s treasure.”

“Is that what they say?” Levi gazed into those green eyes and wished for the Apocalypse to begin. He wanted to believe that Eren was spewing lies but his words seemed to carry the ring of truth to them, especially that part about Erwin wanting to be rid of him.

“I say: I see you, Levi, every part of you, all your insides, right down to your bones. I know how to give you everything you need. Forget about Erwin. He’s just an old fart. He doesn’t understand you, not like I do. I’m an artist, too, you know. I’m a painter, just like you. Do you know why you’re so unhappy? You’re unhappy because you’ve been barking up the wrong tree. Erwin’s not an artist, not like us. He’s a bladdy-blah-blah bullshit academic. He’s a stuffed shirt scholar. He isn’t you and me.”

All his life, people had told Levi he was nuts, but he had never believed them, never actually seen himself the way they did, but looking up at Eren and hearing him talk so seriously, his eyes were finally opened. He finally knew what insanity looked like, and it looked like the Green-Eyed Devil. “I asked you once and I won’t ask you again: how do you know where I live?”

“And I told you already,” Eren grinned as he reached into his back pocket, “Erwin doesn’t want you anymore.” He put the chloroform-soaked handkerchief over Levi’s mouth and nose, sitting up and putting his full weight on the smaller man’s chest, enjoying every minute that it took to finally render Levi unconscious. Then he opened the front door and let Armin inside and together they managed to drag Levi up the stairs and into his flat. “Hurry up and get the stuff,” Eren told Armin. “He won’t stay under for long.”

The slender blue-eyed blond smiled innocently even as he calculated the number of new subscribers he would be attracting with this latest venture into as-yet-unexplored kink territory on his website. “I’ll be back,” he intoned in a horrible fake Austrian accent.

As soon as Armin disappeared down the stairs, Eren turned his attention back to Levi lying prone on the living room sofa. He could see Levi’s eyes shifting back and forth beneath his lids. “Don’t wake up yet,” Eren whispered into his ear. Then he licked a wet stripe up his smooth cheek, from chin to temple. He reached down and slipped a hand under the hem of his lederhosen, letting his fingers scratch at the skin at the crease of his left thigh before groping even further in, not resting until he
was palming Levi’s slumbering cock. “We’re going to have so much fun. And when I’m done with you, you’re going to forget all about Erwin.”
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Problem: The Apocalypse is looming on the horizon. Solution: Get busy with your Plus One.

Chapter Notes

Here's an early Christmas present from fanfic3112, who was generous enough to write this amazing guest chapter for "Tea and Sympathy." I am so thrilled to post this and I hope you'll all enjoy it!

Taki signed for the delivery of the numerous crates, then opened one and pulled out what looked like...military rations? The name on the order form jumped out at him. “Levi, did you place this order? There must be some mistake.” The eager look on Levi’s face as he rushed past him, however, told him that maybe it wasn't. Levi started ripping open boxes, agog with delight, holding up first one item, then the next. “What is all of this stuff?” Taki asked, hoping Levi hadn't charged it on his credit card.

“Special delivery from my uncle. We're set now!” Levi said triumphantly.

“Set for what?” Taki asked, inspecting what looked like night goggles or some kind of fancy binoculars in his hand.

“You know...The End...The Big O...Countdown to Zero,” as if that actually meant something.

“What are you talking about?”

Levi began ranting with a maniacal look in his eye. “When it's just us or them. When the grid goes down. Rioting in the streets. Mass mayhem. Brother against brother. No tech. No cell. No Chinese takeout. Mothers’ milk drying up. We have to drink canned milk. You and me and any special friends...or beefy ones we can eat, anyway... Just us against them!”

“But who is them? Where and what is them?” Taki asked, trying to see through the haze of Levi's mind, wondering if he had sniffed glue again.

“They? Why...they're everywhere,” Levi said ominously, his voice echoing then falling off dead in the empty silence of the storeroom.

“Pretty creepy there, Levi, but I still don't get it. What is all this stuff and why is it taking up my storeroom? You know I have a delivery tomorrow and this stuff is cluttering the entire space. Where will our real supplies fit when they come in tomorrow?”

Levi leaned closer, his eyes holding Taki’s for a moment, just staring at him. “You know, you're pretty cute when you're all aggressive and angry like that. It's a real turn on. I could get down on all
fours so you can fuck me right now. You can even yell at me just like that,” Levi said, leering.

Taki rolled his eyes, counted to four and held his breath. Working through the muddled insanity of Levi's mind was always a challenge and often simple or direct was not the way. Levi could convolute and deflect a question like a magician, and he found more ways to proposition someone than Taki thought humanly possible, choosing the most inappropriate, often annoying or shocking times to do so and in the most unlikely ways and places. “If you answer my questions clearly and succinctly to my satisfaction—and that’s a big ‘if’—and you make sure all of this stuff is out of here before noon when my order comes in, then maybe I would fuck you on all fours, as you clearly want to be fucked.”

Levi dropped to the floor, crawling like a big sexy cat and going *meooowww*, then wiggled his ass just in case Taki had misunderstood his earlier innuendo.

“With real words, not just purrs and meows...okay?” insisted Taki.

Levi stared at him intently, like he was assessing the validity of his words for a minute, and then agreed, “You betcha.”

“So, explain in words I can understand: what exactly is going on here.”

“Military rations, gas masks, lanterns, solar panels. Taki, what do you think I’m talking about?”

“Uh....” Taki looked at him, still questioningly with an upraised eyebrow, still having no clue but wishing Levi would quit dragging this out and get to the point. He had work to get back to.

“What else but The End?” Levi declared.


“The Purge?” Taki asked, incredulous, thinking Levi had maybe confused the movie they watched last week with reality.

“Hell no, baby cakes, that's just fiction on TV. I'm talking the real cablooey. But I'm taking care of you, too, Taki, don't worry. I'm looking out for the both of us. You're my plus one. Nobody I'd rather huddle down in the dark with or eat in a pinch than you. Hell, we can even eat one another if times get really tough, nibbling away bit-by-bit like sharing a TV dinner,” Levi said, looking like he was really considering it.

“So that's what this is? Supplies or something? And where are you even going to put this stuff? You barely have room for your bed and your artwork at your place. If you're going to put it there, why didn't you just have it delivered there in the first place?” Taki asked, hoping for a rational answer.

“Why do you think?” Levi replied. Totally clueless, Taki held his hands up. Levi went on to explain, “I can't have everybody knowing my secret when it's you and me up against them. But don't worry, we're prepared!” Levi said excitedly. “K-rations (that's military speak for lasts for five to ten years and can be eaten hot or cold), night goggles, solar powered batteries, wind-up generators, wood burning stove with a year’s worth of wood, chemical toilets, ventilated filtered air shaft, fresh running underground spring water, solar panels, machine guns with at least a year of ammo, scythes for chopping folks up if we run out of food or if they try eating us, hammers and maces with ball and chains (coz like who wouldn't want those?), duck calls, ambergris, Yahtzee, rape whistles, spray...
mace, Tasers, stakes in case there's vampires, crosses, holy water, gas masks, oxygen tanks, penicillin, EpiPens, Clorox, bug spray, first aid kit, quinine, Quaaludes, condoms, rubber gloves, rope, duct tape, flares, thermal blankets, canned milk, lube, porn, cigarettes (in case we need to barter), battery operated flashlights, corn fuel scooter, tank that runs on rat fuel (coz there'll be plenty of those fuckers going after the corn), CB radio, walkie-talkies, Nikes, Ray-Bans, sunscreen, Cap'n Crunch, peanut butter..."

Taki figured this was probably some elaborate joke…rat fuel? It had to be. Taki briefly hoped Levi's reference to canned milk and his earlier comment about “mother’s milk” didn't mean anything, even though he often referred to the milk in his coffee as “special delivery from mother”…surely not really mother’s milk? Who would he be getting it from? Okay, maybe he should have asked about that sooner. “Wait, did you just say tank?”

“Yeah, tank, bow and arrows, lots of things to blow shit up also,” Levi said proudly. “My uncle’s got even more shit spread out everywhere. His people have places readied everywhere, but me... I decided that would be my last resort. I'm more of a duet kind of guy, not a groupie, but I know where to find him if we need back-up. He sent me a map of all the hidey-hoes they've got stockpiled. Okay, hiking boots and waders, did I mention those? And ponchos, of course.”

This sounded so crazy Taki was flabbergasted, but assuming it was a joke, he thought he'd just play along and see how far down the rabbit hole Levi was willing to go with this. “So, Levi, where exactly is our private honeymoon suite for the Big Bang? You haven't been using a spoon to secretly dig a tunnel under that place you call a studio and making a hole big enough to shove this stuff into, have you? I'm serious, Levi. I need this out by tomorrow noon.”

“Don't worry, Taki, I got it covered. I'll get a truck. It's not like it's far,” Levi said with such an air of surety that Taki paused for a moment and just looked down at Levi, now curled up at his feet like a cat, pawing at his shin, big grey eyes looking up at him with a smile.

“What do you mean ‘not far’? All of the buildings on this block are occupied, aren't they?” Levi just smiled a self-satisfied, secretive smile. “Okay, Levi, where exactly are you taking these things?”

“If I told you, I'd have to kill you,” Levi said with dead seriousness. The silence again rung ominously at his words, like they were in some bad Alfred Hitchcock movie.

“Now stop that,” Taki said. Then Levi smiled again and curved his finger slowly, turning it and pointing downward at the floor, leaving Taki further confused. “I don't understand. What does that mean?”

“This is Paris, baby! It's obvious, right? Did you miss your history lessons or what? Have you never been through that big grate on the back wall to see where it leads?”

Taki suddenly recalled coming in one day, not seeing or hearing Levi enter from the front, then hearing a noise in the storeroom, thinking something had fallen. He had gone to investigate and found Levi brushing off his jeans, his hand on the big ornate grillwork panel on the back wall. “Levi, don't tell me you think you're shoving this stuff into some space you found in the wall behind that vent?!?” Taki said, shocked.

“Hell no. That's just one path to it in case we get caught here in a pinch. There's also a way from my building as well.”

Taki’s mouth went dry. "To where, Levi?"

“I told you already: to our getaway away from...themmmmm,” he overemphasized, looking at Taki
like he was slow or something. Taki felt himself slipping down the wall, now realizing maybe this was more than a joke or a drug-induced delusion in Levi's head. Seeing Taki's expression, Levi leaned closer. “It's the Underground, Taki, the Big Magu. Folks have used these tunnels and caverns time and time again in a pinch. Check your history books. There's probably a documentary on it. I'm just recycling some prime hidden land space that's not in use and no one else will ever find coz I've got the only vaulted door and the only key. Unless they know the password, no one else is getting in but who we want in there,” he said, pulling Taki closer against his chest. “Of course, I was worried about vampires at first or early walking dead, so I checked that out, but so far nada. But I bought supplies for that just in case. It's the sewers to get there, of course, so dysentery is more of a worry than vampires really.”

“Levi, are you really serious about this? This isn't...a joke...or some campaign you're...thinking about and...hopefully going to rethink tomorrow...or maybe some reality game you stumbled into...maybe planning on using this as inspiration for a live art installation you're working on?” Taki fished about helplessly.

“No, but good idea. Maybe later, though, now that you mention it. I could recycle the work for an End of Days radical art party before we go underground. Maybe use some of the fireworks from down there.” Taki put his face in his hands and breathed, feeling like he had fallen into an episode of Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy or War of the Worlds.

“So, you ready?” Taki looked up as Levi batted his long lashes at him slowly. “I'm not getting any younger, you know,” Levi said suggestively. He rolled back on his haunches, then looked at Taki mischievously. “Meow. You know, this could be a good moment for you to appreciate my forward thinking.” Lick! And, yes, Levi really did just lick Taki’s cheek with a big flat tongue slurping up the entire side of his face leaving a glistening trail of saliva. “You know my uncle gives tours of his home away from homes to his big investors so they can... try out the honeymoon suite before they commit...make sure they know what they're getting into...or just coz they want to get their freak on someplace out of the ordinary,” Levi said as he began to suck Taki’s fingers into his mouth, one by one, then licked the flat of his palm. “You don't even have to pay me. Do a good job of fucking me now and I'll let you ride in the truck with me and I'll take you on the show-and-tell tour. Just you and me,” he said as he pulled back and arched up onto all fours again, then leaned his face down, rubbing his nose and cheek along Taki’s crotch, sniffing him and purring at him.

Taki jerked Levi's face up, meeting his eyes sharply. “You will not take me where there are rats or rat fuel and there better not be rats coming out of that grill into my storeroom either!”

“Now Taki, don't worry. I've already used the catch from this month and I've got cats down there to take up the overflow,” Levi said offhandedly.

God, Taki really didn't want to know what that statement meant; he forced himself not to ask or think further about some mysterious “catch” of rats.

“This isn't going to work if you keep sitting there, Taki. Unless you want to be on all fours? Even though you did say...” And there it was, Levi's convoluted mind had gotten off the rat-catching apocalyptic Ferris Wheel and was now on a one-track railway car down a specific rail and it wasn't the Apocalypse or the Underground he was driving at. Those glazed-over blown pupils said exactly where this track was heading and whom was he expecting to conduct this train. After all, in his own diabolical fashion, Levi had answered Taki’s questions, as horrifying and irrational as those answers seemed to be. Maybe tomorrow this pile of boxes would mysteriously disappear, and his own supply order would be in place so he would have tapioca balls to start the following day, without having to put up a sign that read “NO Bubble Tea” or, even worse, read “Closed for the day: off on Apocalypse Tour, hopefully will be returning before the actual big event!” Taki snorted a
laugh, it sounded so impossible... but not of course in a world with a meowing Levi, who was
prepared for everything. Taki had an image of Klaus walking by and pausing at his shop door,
seeing that sign and shaking his head, saying, “Ridiculous,” exasperated, then stomping off as
though someone were making a joke of him.

Levi was suddenly at his ear whispering, “You're thinking too much, Taki. Get that dick out or do I
have to come under there and find it packed away beneath that apron?” Taki couldn't stifle his laugh.
Levi really said some of the silliest things and yet somehow managed to keep a straight face...or a
horny alley cat face, that is...right now anyway. Levi turned around, seductively eyeing him over his
shoulder, with his butt facing him and wiggled his ass at him again hypnotically. “My ass is not
going to fuck itself, in case you're waiting for that show. That act’s not on the marquee today,” he
said, winking over his shoulder.

Taki’s eyes teared up with that comment and lascivious look. It was so hard to keep a straight face.
Taki slowly slid up the wall to his feet and took off his apron, tossing it onto one of the boxes. He
was sure his customers would later thank him for that. “Move over there kitty. Hopefully these boxes
won't be here tomorrow so let's christen them now for the End of Days event to come. Let’s just
hope wherever you're secreting them away, we will never need to use them.”

“That's the spirit, Taki!”

“Brace your hands on the edge of that lower box and feel free to cum anywhere on them, in them, or
wherever you want to mark them that trips your trigger or floats your boat. I know cats like to mark
their territory and we don't want those rats getting confused over who this stuff belongs to or
touching our goodies.”

Levi quickly arched up higher on all fours like he was coming to attention by the closest box and
quickly lifted the lid of the box, grasping onto the open edge with one hand for support as he
shimmied his pants down to his knees, exposing himself with his other hand, looking back at Taki
with an appreciative grin. “Now you’re talking, sweet cheeks!”

Taki smacked Levi's ass, leaving a bright red handprint, the sound resonating and echoing in the
room. “And now you've got some warm buns to match my sweet cheeks,” Taki said, bending his
knees a bit as he pulled his dick out and stroked himself with one hand while rubbing the flat of his
hand affectionately over Levi's ass, just as you would pet a kitten. Levi purred and tried to grind back
against his cock. “Patience kitty,” Taki said.

Levi's hand came back with lube from who-knows-where, saying, “Use the good apocalypse lube
since we're consecrating our stuff.”

Taki smiled as he squirted lube on Levi's ass until it ran down his crack, then on his own hand as he
stroked his cock. Levi's shapely round ass was always a surprise since he was so slender, with his
cherry pink hole all but winking at him. Taki secretly wondered if Levi tinted it or had it tattooed that
color to make it so appealing. His ass always reminded Taki of the ass on a milkmaid girl he had
seen in some cheesy cosplay porn when he was younger. The farm boy had pulled the milkmaid's
skirt up to fuck her while she was milking the cow, the cow mooing in the background as she cried
“Yes! Yes!” with each thrust. He vividly remembered the cow’s udders spewing milk all over her
breasts as she panted and screamed out her orgasm while the farm boy pulled out and shot his load
all over her ass, leaving both her breasts and her ass dripping with creamy white fluids. That porn
was his source of wet dreams and shower jerk offs for years. He hadn't thought of that for ages until
one night Levi bent over and said, “Fuck me and make me scream, Taki.” Initially, Levi had always
taken the lead role. Taki hadn't even thought about changing that up until Levi asked for it. Each
time to this day, however, when Levi waved his ass at him like that, he still couldn't help thinking of
that milkmaid when he saw his hole, all cherry red and cute, teasing him like that. He hadn't even known men's asses could look like that.

Taki circled his hole with his cock, watching his hole dancing before him erotically. Did Levi have any idea what he did to him? Taki’s body tingled as his breath sped up, the sound of his heartbeat echoing in his head in the cool silence of the storeroom. He wanted to feel Levi up, open him up, scissor him wide, but he knew when Levi was being like this, that was the last thing Levi wanted. So instead he leaned over, sliding one hand along Levi's hip, tracing over his flat stomach and up, tweaking first one nipple hard, then the other one under his shirt, sliding it up higher as he went, until he was leaning over Levi's arching back.

“Are you ready Levi? Coz I'm going to make you scream so loud you'll think the End of Days is here,” Taki whispered.

“Fuck yessss!!” Levi hissed out, then growled, tilting his head back, eyes closed as Taki rammed his cock in and Levi's whole body shuddered as he gasped. “Fuck...hard...so goooddd...harder! So hard!”

Then, not giving him time to relax or catch his breath, Taki pulled out and plunged back in again so hard Levi grunted and cried out, his teeth snapping shut. Pulling back out again, Levi's frame went rigid, bracing for it as Taki pounded in and out again, over and over until he heard a cry escape in a small voice...almost a fragile broken tearful sound, far different from the boisterous, loud, energetic sounds Levi had made earlier...“ah uhuuhhhhhhh”...there it was, like a song from deep within Levi...something inside—deep within all that strength and brashness and muddled confusion—broke. With each stroke after, Taki went slower, slower and longer, drawing them out to an excruciating degree, feeling every tiny draw of his flesh, his channel and his rim sucking at him, clenching, gripping him, unwilling to let him go. Finally, Taki rocked back and forth rhythmically with short thrusts as he knelt down and pulled Levi to him, wrapping his arms around him tight. Levi sobbed into each stroke now, one long rolling litany of sounds that varied between moans and cries, his mouth gaping open, slack-jawed as Taki held his weight. Taki slid his hand up over his nipples roughly back and forth as he shuddered and trembled along the whole length of his body, Levi’s breath hitching on each tug and tweak and twist of his nipple, Taki pinching his nipples hard between the pads of his fingers as Levi hiccupped little gasped cries as tears fell, his whole body now gyrating with shudders and trembling from top to bottom, vibrating through Taki as well. Taki slid his fingers along Levi’s throat up to his lips, sliding in first one finger for him to suck and chew on, then two, then three, now thrusting them in time with the rhythm of his cock.

“So good, kitty,” Taki whispered. “Such a good kitty. So perfect. My kitten. My perfectly adorable kitten. So obedient and sweet for me. Such a perfect kitty hole to fill. All velvety and perfect inside,” Taki said as he nuzzled Levi’s neck, biting and sucking at his throat and nibbling his ear, then tongue-fucking it as Levi hummed his pleasure. Taki’s hand slipped to Levi’s balls, pulling and tugging, running his nails along them, then scratching down his inner thighs, first lightly, then hard. “Are you ready to show me how good my kitty can be? Ready to make me some sweet kitty cream. Yummy cream for me to lick up?”

“Umm yes daddy pleassseee.”

Taki never knew where those words stemmed from and never asked. He figured Levi would have some smart-alec response if he did. Levi had never once mentioned his mother and father in all the time they’d been together. Only his uncle. He didn't even know if Levi had siblings. But, somehow, when he was fucking him like this, he always let "daddy" slip out. The harder and rougher he fucked him, the better he liked it and the sooner he called him daddy. “Yeah baby, daddy's going to fuck you just like you need. You're so perfect for daddy. My good little boy.” A tremor of pleasure
coursed through Levi as he moaned. Taki purred against his throat, grazing his teeth down along its length as he jerked him back hard against him, nipping him, then pulled out, leaving just tip the of his dick captured by his hole. He began jerking Levi’s dick hard; it was warm, pulsing and slick in his hand as he felt Levi’s hole clenching around his tip. Pulling out completely, he circled his hole with his dick as Levi whined, sliding it along his crack as he whined more for it. “Good kitties know how to wait for it,” Taki said as Levi became animalistic, humming and rumbling sounds vibrating through him. “Bad kitty!” Taki said, smacking Levi’s ass with his free hand, then rubbing along its curve and smacking it even harder.

“Yes pleaaaaasse,” Levi begged, grinding his ass against Taki’s length and humping his ass up and down, purring.

Taki smacked him harder again, then patted his hole with a little tap and dipped his finger in. “Naughty hungry kitty pie,” he whispered at his ear, then nipped his lobe. He grabbed Levi’s ass again hard, pulling it roughly up higher until Levi was forced to pivot his head down to the floor, his weight on his elbows, forehead to the cold stone floor.

“I’ll be good...better...I promise, daddy,” Levi cried out in a small breathy voice. Then Taki slammed his dick back in and bottomed out in one go, gritting his teeth because Levi’s hole had gotten all tight again and was gripping him so hard, trying to clamp down on him.

“Show daddy. Show daddy what good boys do,” Taki said, reaching under Levi and giving his cock a few hard strokes, knowing they were both too close to last much longer. He ran his thumbnail over Levi’s slit as he bit down on his throat.

Levi bolted up, yelling, “Fuckkkk!” as he arched back hard against him, then yelling Taki’s name almost fearfully as his body flipped over the edge into full orgasm, one long sound ripping from him as his body seized and spasmed, echoing around them like bells clanging, filling the room with a cathedral of sounds as Taki filled him with cum, then pulled out with a ‘pop’ to paint his ass with cum outside as well. Levi took that as a signal to shoot his load all over the box lid and across its contents with Taki’s hand twisting Levi’s nipple hard, watching the spectacle.

Taki took pleasure in milking his last drops of cum over Levi’s ass, with it dripping down his crack onto the floor as Taki murmured, “So good, Levi...such a good boy,” admiring the creamy white Levi’s ass was painted with. In truth, just as pretty as that milkmaid’s ass in the porn and just as dripping with cream from Levi’s twitching hole. Taki’s other hand was also now dripping with Levi’s cum, as well as cum dripping down the box lid. Taki momentarily wondered if this was how some lusty baker got the idea for the cream filled donut, the donut hole, the glazed donut or the cream filled French Horn. He kept these thoughts to himself, however, knowing that Levi would never live that comparison down and in the future would take every opportunity to remind him and make insinuations every time they were served in the shop. Cream filled French Horns would probably become Levi’s new favorite and who knows what sort of food eroticism that would lead him to contemplate? An image came to mind of Levi lying splayed out on a tablecloth under a tree with donuts, cream filled pastries, and donut holes spread about him, propped up seductively with a cream filled horn held over the top of his hard cock, the cream spread over the top with glaze dripping down his cock between his thighs.

“I’ve got what you want, Taki. It’s your turn now…come taste…” and somehow he just knew if Levi got up on all fours, he’d press a dripping glazed donut against his hole with the hole of the donut lining up perfectly so he could still see that cherry pink hole teasing him. Just the perfect treat for a hungry man to eat him out to get to the sweet cherry taste of him. Taki recalled Levi’s earlier words: “Hell, we can eat one another if times get really tough, nibbling away bit-by-bit like sharing a TV dinner,” and that cleared those erotic food images right up. Definitely don’t want to share those
images with Levi, for sure.

Taki’s eyes wandered to the box lid. Levi had indeed marked it well. Taki tried hard to push the scent of pastries and cream filling back from his senses, a scent that he could swear now wafted off Levi as Levi’s full weight suddenly sagged against him, his head leaned back at the curve of his shoulder. Taki wrapped his arms around Levi’s chest, holding him up, still panting. They just stayed there like that for some time, swaying like one entity, their hands overlapping and fingers intertwined.

“You get better at that every time, Taki,” Levi said with unusual softness, his voice hoarse, distant and dreamy as he brought Taki’s cum-covered hand up to kiss and lick.

Who knows what was really going on with all this stuff in these boxes? It could be illegal contraband for Levi’s uncle for all he knew, or some sideline delivery job Levi was doing. Anything was possible despite what Levi said. Levi’s cover stories were often very elaborate and sometimes he never found the truth of it all. Others times it would be months before he found out. He knew Levi had some hidden source of money he never explained and always changed the subject whenever Taki tried to ask. He also got up sometimes in the middle of the night to make phone calls. Taki could rarely make out the words and he always waited until Taki was asleep. Taki never asked since it was obvious Levi didn't want him to know. He was too erratic to be a covert spy but Taki often let his mind ponder on what Levi’s sideline job could be. He only hoped it didn't get him arrested or cause trouble to come knocking at their door. But he was sure Levi was thinking about him in whatever real or imaginary scenario he had concocted and, in the end, wasn't that great after all, reassuring in an odd sort of way? People had tried to change him, make him conform, threatened him on what would happen if he didn't do this or that and Taki had always given in, but Levi tried to change nothing about him and Levi himself conformed to no one. He pushed whatever boundary there was and if someone pushed him, he pushed back in his own zany way.

If the end of the world did come, he knew Levi would be there because he was a survivor and he'd be the one to have every ludicrous solution everyone else was too uptight to consider. He'd be the cockroach that made it past all the others and was the last one there hanging on by tooth and claw. It was a good feeling really to know he had been invited and would always have a place reserved at his side. One day, he hoped he’d leave all this or Klaus would come and stay with him here for good, somehow, some way. Making a home together for the two of them, without having to look over his shoulder all the time. But even then he wouldn't regret having spent this time with Levi. He could say he felt guilt. He really did, but at the same time he wouldn't have missed being a part of Levi’s chaos for the world. And no matter where he was in the future, he knew if needed, Levi would save both him and Klaus if he had to, and that was good too. He had never meant to become attached to Levi, never meant to feel conflicted. He loved Klaus and he knew the person Levi wanted most to be with was not him, but maybe he was feeling those End of Days anxieties for the same reason Levi was. Worrying a little bit now about what it would be like to not have one another to be with everyday. Worrying about what it would be like each day without the other one there. Yes, they had sex, but in truth they had become friends, allies, brothers in arms, neither burrowing beneath the layers but instead accepting who and what they each were without knowing the whys or wherefores. Maybe this was Levi’s way of preparing for the days to come mentally but also trying to assure him he would always be there for him no matter what happened later on. He had earned his spot as Levi’s plus one, no matter what else did or didn't work out.

“I'm glad I'm your plus one,” Taki whispered at Levi's ear and tilted his head around to press their lips together. Taki felt cum and sweat slick between them, cum dripping down Levi's ass as his softening cock lay nestled still against the crack of his ass. He ran his fingers across the slippery creamy warmth. “I covered you with lots of cream so you would be marked really well,” Taki whispered between pressed lips as they kissed softly. He brought his cum-covered finger up between
their lips, pressing it to Levi's mouth along the slickness of his tongue.

Levi detached himself and turned toward Taki, looking intently sincere, and pulled him back into a kiss, kissing him hard, then pulling away but not much, speaking low as if it were a secret. “I really do have a place, Taki...for us. You'll see. You'll like it. Anytime. It's always there for us. You. Me. Anyone you want or need, you can bring. They might not like me but I don't give a shit as long as you're happy and want them there, too. Any half-assed posers I've got clinging on later that we might have to eat if they get too bitchy...they'll all die off. Then there will just be me and you. So...never forget, okay?” Levi said searchingly. “I could tattoo a map onto you if you want so you never forget and you always know I'm here for you. For anything you need. When you need it. Even if it's someone I have to kill. I'm fine with that.”

And Taki knew he meant it. “I'll never forget. I don't need a map. It is impossible to forget you, Levi. Definitely no one purrs like you do,” Taki said, smiling and stroking Levi's cheek. Taki had never known anyone could be like Levi. So loud and outspoken and tough as nails, and then like this: all soft and sincere and...vulnerable and real and unashamed of it. There was an authenticity about Levi that sometimes stunned him but others times just left him marveling at it. “Good thing you mopped last night, eh?” Levi said with a grin. Taki smiled; since they ended up spending a lot of time on the floor, he was especially glad.

Levi began pulling his pants up and Taki looked around for anything to hand him to wipe off his cum but as he went to grab his apron to wipe his ass, Levi said, “Uh uh, I’m leaving your scent there to show I'm marked. I think I'll shake my ass real good at that green-eyed lil monster when he comes in today to spy on us. I want him to smell you all over me. I think I'll make several lascivious comments about how good you fucked me and make a point to walk bowlegged.”

Taki’s eyes almost watered. He grabbed Levi's upper arms tight and then bent over and sucked hard at his neck to the point of hurting, leaving a bright noticeable hickey. “There! And I'll come out when he's there and be extra possessive and maybe threaten him not to get close to you!” Taki stared at him intently for a moment, smiling, eyes glistening with amusement. “I might just bring you one of our cream filled French Horns and hold it up to your lips to lick the tip with him watching if you promise to say, ‘You know I love licking up your cream, Taki,’ and bat your eyelashes at me as you lick at it.”

Levi looked at him and then broke into a snicker. “My hero! Fuck yeah! I'm owned. He doesn't know what he's missing,” Levi said proudly.

“No, he doesn't. Not at all,” Taki said, kissing him sincerely again. Maybe he also wouldn't clean up, just to let that creature know he was treading on his territory by coming in every day spying on them. Maybe he would just...Taki searched for something aggressive to do. “I might just put lime in his drink! We'll see how he likes that!” Taki said with a smile.

Levi pressed his lips against his, saying, “There you go being cute and making me all horny again. Your cream really is the best, Taki.” Levi paused seductively but then gave a cheeky wink. “Let's have a bubble bath tonight and fuck there, too! I can't wait to see the look on his face when he drinks the lime! That is if he lives through me tongue fucking the French Horn. If he sports a boner, I might just push him down and shove my dirty shoe into the little creep’s mouth.”
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Klaus reaches out for help. Taki receives some unexpected visitors.

It was Klaus who told Feilong right to his face—because in-your-face was the only way Klaus rolled—that Tao would never amount to anything in baseball. “Your kid’s a total spaz out there. What makes you think he could ever make it in the big leagues?” Klaus’s honesty knew no bounds, especially when he was high. “I mean, look at me…okay, don’t look at me, look at Taki.”

Four pairs of bloodshot eyes honed in on the small man curled on a settee tripping somewhere over the double rainbow, all because Banba had dared Taki to lick his press-on tattoo, a promotional “prize” that had come with his bottle of Pocari Sweat sports drink purchased at a vending machine. Banba claimed that the tattoo of Hello Kitty was strawberry flavored—a flavor to which Taki was partial—which it was, but what Banba didn’t tell Taki was that he had taken the small square of inked paper and secretly laced it with LSD.

“My Taki had everything going for him,” Klaus droned on, “and he still fucked it up.”

The Baishe leader was baked but he wasn’t stupid. “I think you fucked it up for him,” Feilong stated with a knowing smirk. He spoke English with a typical Cantonese twang mixed with a clipped and mangled British accent. “That’s what happens when you swing your dick around like a bat.”

There was a loud roar of laughter from Banba, who was sprawled on one of the cushions on the floor of the ‘relaxation’ room, his thick brown mop of hair standing on end practically. “Oh, Feilong-sama, you are truly a wordsmith for the ages!” he declared with a wave of his hand through the smoky air. The ventilation system was whirring away overhead, barely keeping pace with the men sucking on their pipes like greedy fiends.

Lin, who was prone next to Banba and dressed in a girl’s lacy red teddy, picked up a cushion and smacked Banba over the head with it repeatedly. The Taiwanese-born Lin was in the habit of doing spur-of-the-moment type things, like attacking his Japanese lover for no good reason. This only made Banba laugh harder. He grabbed Lin by the waist and tickled him into submission, then began kissing him and rutting between his slender thighs. Public displays of affection always drove Lin wild with embarrassment and Banba wanted to see his sweetheart’s face blush the same shade of pink as his beautiful cock.

Feilong shot Klaus a bemused look that said, “Those two are shameless. What are we going to do about it?” Not that Feilong suffered from any shortage of lovers. If anything, he was tired of fending off too many unwanted advances, especially from that Russian mob boss, Mikhail Arbatov, who was stubbornly relentless in his pursuit of Feilong’s affections. That Slavic playboy already knew that Feilong had had his heart stolen long ago by a certain dark-haired bastard named Asami Ryuichi, but Mikhail wasn’t giving up any time soon, not while Feilong still stalked the earth like an exquisite fire-breathing dragon. Feilong took another hit of opium and eyed Klaus with a twinge of appreciation. The big blond was a useful bulldog to have around, someone Feilong could ‘display’ like some hunky male specimen whenever Mikhail dropped in from Macao, a man to stand between him and a too-eager suitor. Yes, Feilong liked Klaus, even if Klaus were expendable…and so rudely criticizing his beloved Tao’s meager abilities on the baseball diamond! “So, you really think it’s
hopeless, my Tao and baseball?” Opium always put Feilong in an agreeable mood.

Klaus nodded, drawing deeply on his own pipe. “He’s beyond hopeless. But he’s a good kid. Let him do something else, something that makes him happy.” He couldn’t help but glance over at Taki, who appeared to be in an open-eyed coma if not for the little moans he was making in his throat. It made Klaus’s heart leap in his chest to hear him…he wanted to make him whimper and mewl for him in bed, if only Taki would let him. It did nothing to calm his cock down when he realized that Banba was now actually fucking Lin less than five feet away, Lin’s slim ankles held in Banba’s hands as the larger man thrust into him, Lin’s long silver-blond hair fanned out around his flushed face. He and Feilong listened to the wet sounds of Banba’s balls slapping against Lin’s ass cheeks for who knows how long before Klaus roused himself and stood unsteadily. “I’m taking Taki to bed,” he announced to no one in particular.

“Happy fucking.” Feilong replied cruelly, his changshan tented at his groin. He knew that Klaus would put Taki to bed as untouched as a virgin and then jack it alone in the shower to great dissatisfaction.

Taki merely sighed contentedly when Klaus picked him off the settee and carried him bridal style out of the room. As he shut the door behind him, Klaus could see Feilong settling on his knees behind Banba for a threesome. Klaus had participated in plenty of kinky scenes in Las Vegas—this was different in that the setting was posh, the drugs high quality, and the partners far more beautiful than the escorts he’d had before—but sex was sex and drugs were drugs and he could feel himself falling into that familiar pit of addiction once more, except this time he was dragging Taki with him down that rabbit hole. He didn’t know how dangerous this Feilong could be. So far, the man had been generous and demanded only that they play baseball with Tao and party with him at night. The fact that they were prisoners or perhaps indentured servants was something that Klaus discussed with the others whenever they were out of Feilong’s earshot. He had learned that Banba and Lin had come into Feilong’s ‘service’ as reparation for them assassinating several of Feilong’s men back in Hakata, where Banba and Lin worked as paid killers. It was all a stupid power play between rival factions, and Banba and Lin had found themselves on the short end of the stick. As assassins, they had to chalk it up to bad luck that they had been hired by the losing side. Once they completed their ‘term of service’ to Feilong, they would be free to return to Japan and their normal lives of murdering and mayhem.

Klaus and Taki, though…their situation was more complicated. A little over a year ago, Taki’s wife Sana had threatened her family with an illegitimate child in order to force them to consent to a divorce for her and Taki. A divorce would free her to marry her unborn child’s father, a handsome dumbass who worked under the pseudonym name ‘Haru’ at an exclusive host club in Shinjuku, where they had met and hooked-up in the first place. She had asked her godfather Asami to shelter them until the baby was born, except she suffered a miscarriage at four months and her relationship with Haru fell apart when her family sent goons to beat the crap out of the poor fool. They made sure to ruin his handsome face and Haru, scared out of his wits, hightailed it back to his hometown of Sendai where only the cows on his family’s farm had to look at his toothless visage. After that heartwarming little incident, Asami sent Sana to Hong Kong under the protection of Feilong. He didn’t want to waste his own men as bodyguards in this marital shitshow—god knows he had enough problems keeping Takaba safe—and he knew the second-rate thugs employed by Sana’s family wouldn’t dare encroach on Feilong’s territory.

“What do I get in return for housing your goddaughter?” Feilong had asked.

“I’m sure I’ll think of something,” Asami had replied.

But it was Feilong who phoned him several months later, all giddy with excitement. “Let me have
Sana’s husband and that blond giant and we’ll call it even. I’m trying to put together a baseball team for my little Tao. He’ll be going pro before you know it.”

Asami stifled a groan. He had met Tao a handful of times and could already see that the only thing the kid was ever going to be a pro at was serving tea and mooncakes and pork buns. “Have you been talking to Sana about this idea of yours?”

“Hmm…perhaps.”

“And is she okay with this…perhaps? You do know that Taki’s family has a hit out on that ‘blond giant’ you want for your son’s team, don’t you?”

Feilong’s dramatic gasp made Asami pull his phone away from his ear. He couldn’t believe he had allowed himself to get tangled up in this ongoing fiasco. It was annoying enough to endure all the side-eyes from his men regarding Takaba, but dealing with Feilong was like managing a room full of hysterical schoolgirls.

“No, no, no, no, no,” Feilong cried in dismay. “That won’t do at all. I need that man alive. He used to play for the New York Mets! The New York Mets!”

“Will you please stop shrieking?” snapped Asami. “I heard you the first time.” He rubbed at the vein throbbing at his right temple. Great. Now he had a headache. “I’ll talk to Suguri-san and work something out.”

“I mean it Asami,” Feilong insisted. “I want that man alive and ready to play baseball for my Tao.”

“I said I’ll talk to Suguri-san! Now go take a hike!” Sometimes Asami wondered if it would be smarter to just fuck Feilong into submission rather than put up with his incessant ploys for attention. It had been such a mistake to have seduced him for fun all those years ago. Little did he know then that Feilong would fall so hard for him, but then again, who didn’t fall hard for him? Argh. Curse his irresistible good looks!

At least Suguri was an easy man to work with: he was ruthless but reasonable, on the sane side of sadistic and, when it came to Taki, the man was downright compassionate. Which meant he would be willing to bend. And bend he did, graciously allowing Asami’s man Suoh to take out his own man in London and not interfering when new terms were negotiated with Sana and Taki’s families. Both sides would grant a divorce in return for a legitimate heir, a child—ideally a son—who could inherit all the wealth. Even if Taki and Sana were in disgrace, a grandchild could still carry on the Reizen name and properly worship the ancestors in their noble lineage. If worse came to worst and there was no child, then Asami figured he could use all that juicy footage collected in London to blackmail the families into agreeing to the divorce. He sent Taki and Klaus to Feilong, hoping that said heir would be produced shortly, and returned to Tokyo, glad to be rid of this soap opera. He had other things on his mind, like a birthday present for his darling Takaba.

But Sana realized quickly that Taki was a changed man. He was no longer the sweet boy she had married, shy but willing to please. He was depressed, confused, unable to do more than go through the motions. And this Klaus von Wolfstadt. He was just as helpless to pull Taki out of the hole he had dug for himself. If anything, Klaus was digging his own hole, but at least he had the wherewithal to ask Sana for a favor before all was lost to a druggy oblivion.

“Please, Sana-san. Please call my sister and tell her where I am.” Klaus wasn’t allowed a phone or internet access, but Sana was free to come and go within limits. The woman was that evil kingpin Asami’s goddaughter and Taki’s wife and Klaus could only assume that she must hate him, but he wasn’t too proud to beg for help, if not for himself, then for Taki’s sake. “I need her to know where I
The sound of a woman’s soprano voice sent ripples through the silence of the darkened room. “What was that smell in the hallway?” It was a feminine voice that was hushed, vaguely familiar, but no-nonsense.

The voice answering was a man’s—low, gravelly, and very familiar—and he replied with just one word, “Opium.”

It was that stern and paternal baritone rumble that made Taki’s stomach lurch with both fear and relief. He forced his eyes open and rolled onto his back just as someone ripped the heavy curtains aside and he was blinded by the sunlight flooding into the bedroom. He quickly shut his eyes again, throwing both arms up defensively over his face. His thighs felt sticky. And…he wasn’t in Paris, in the tea shop, with Levi purring like a kitten and making lascivious comments about donuts and cream fillings. There were no boxes to move to some secret underground location, but the Apocalypse must have begun nevertheless, probably some time after Taki had licked Banba’s press-on tattoo—it had tasted awfully weird—and then ridden a magic carpet to France where Levi had totally maxed out his credit card buying all sorts of non-tea oriented supplies and then they had banged their brains out and might that explain why he had dried cum all over himself?

“Open your eyes, Taki-sama,” ordered Suguri.

With well-founded trepidation, Taki lowered his arms and cracked his eyelids just enough to see his lifelong physician and surrogate father peering down at him. The older man was not smiling.

Standing next to Suguri was a petite woman, her strawberry-blond hair swept back in a loose bun. She wasn’t smiling either. Claudia, Klaus’s older sister. Taki mumbled the equivalent of, “I’m so fucked” in Cantonese. That was Tao’s fault. The kid insisted on speaking that blasted Cantonese—as if Mandarin weren’t difficult enough to understand—and Taki had learned the one phrase that Tao was always muttering at the plate.

Suguri’s face crumpled into an even deeper frown. The man was clearly versed in all the choicest expletives in Cantonese and did not approve of Taki’s usage. “Your wife took pity on you,” Suguri told him, giving Claudia a wary sideways glance before adding, “and that idiot gorilla of yours.”

“You mean…Klaus?” Taki dared to ask.

“Who else?” Suguri’s scowl was an eleven on a scale of one to ten.

“Oh,” was all Taki said. When he was in the fourth grade, there was a boy in his class who couldn’t do math to save his life. The teacher would announce the test scores as each student was made to stand and bow at the front of the room before taking his seat once more and this poor kid had to endure the laughter of his peers every time the teacher shouted out: “F!” Taki could swear he was now that same pathetic boy getting a big fat F on every test.

He had been in Hong Kong for almost a month and hadn’t been able to perform his husbandly duties in the marital bed, couldn’t reach orgasm even once with Sana no matter how hard he tried. He hadn’t had sex with Klaus in order to ‘save up’ and to convince himself that he wasn’t irrevocably gay at this point but his dick was just not cooperating. Sana wanted a baby—they needed to have a baby if they were to have any hope for a happy future, but his cock had apparently gotten the must-have-straight-sex message and made a run for the hills. He wondered if this was the reason for Suguri’s sudden appearance: to beat some heterosexuality back into him. Why Claudia was here, though, was anyone’s guess. Perhaps she was planning on taking Klaus back to the States? Oh…
shit. This was all on him. Him and his recalcitrant penis. He didn’t have to wonder for long, though, because Suguri yanked off the comforter and exposed his shameful condition: morning wood, dried cum on his thighs from his filthy wet dream. The plumbing was obviously all good to go and... Claudia was staring at him with a raised eyebrow. Taki just laid there like roadkill. She’d seen him naked before—in Klaus’s shitty apartment in Queens after a night of unparalleled debauchery—so there was no use in covering up. He closed his eyes again and wished he could return to his LSD-induced hallucination: just mindless fucking and cream filled donuts and the prospect of the Apocalypse ending his misery. Sana, Klaus, Levi...I'm so sorry.

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Time for a few AMVs of our characters in this fic:

Banba x Lin

Klaus x Taki

Asami/Feilong/Takaba/Mikhail
Chapter Summary

Things are going rather south for Levi and Taki.

Chapter Notes

Well, I promised a chapter on New Year's...wishing everyone health and happiness, too!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Kirishima leaned closer to his computer screen, squinting behind his wire frame glasses, before sitting back in his chair with a huff. “I've never seen such sloppy work.” As if in reproach, he smoothed his neatly coiffed hair with both hands, then checked his manicured nails to give himself a view of something done right.

Suoh grunted in agreement. “The knots are all wrong. And in the wrong places.”

The two men were stationed outside Asami’s Tokyo office watching the live feed from the hidden cameras in Levi’s flat six thousand miles away in London—cameras installed by Suguri’s man when Levi was first ‘hired’ and then subsequently tapped into by Suoh—and they were decidedly unimpressed with the almost circus-like goings-on seen more typically on Japanese game shows.

“Who are these two twits?” asked Kirishima, his brows furrowed in dismay.

“Indeed,” came a deep voice from behind them, “who are they?”

They both jerked around to see Asami standing in his open doorway, his suit jacket off but his waistcoat still buttoned. The only clues giving away the fact that he had been engaged in any kind of physical activity was his rolled up shirt sleeves and the needy whine emanating from his office. “Aaa-sa-miii…I’m still hungry…my hole…”

Asami nonchalantly closed the door, not offering any explanation for why a drooling Takaba was draped naked over his leather sofa, and casually sauntered over to Kirishima’s desk. Suoh moved aside to make room for his boss and then the three men spent the next few minutes watching what could only be a BDSM scene gone horribly wrong or, more accurately, one that was obviously being enacted by amateurs.

“Tsk-tsk,” Asami scoffed, “those knots look like they’ve been tied by a monkey. Wouldn’t you agree, Suoh-san?”

“Yes, boss.” A surge of pride warmed Suoh’s humungous body. Asami thought very highly of his bondage skills and never failed to praise him for it.

Kirishima, who was no slouch in that department but too OCD for shibari, took off his glasses and wiped his eyes. “This is a travesty against art.” Kirishima knew lots about art, having dabbled in
pottery at his grandfather’s ceramics studio in Arita when he was a kid, but his OCD put a kibosh on that. He liked for things to be perfectly balanced, neat and tidy like himself, but Japanese aesthetics centered on the beautiful accident. Fortunately, Kirishima was able to find an outlet for his perfectionist streak when he went to work for Tokyo’s wealthiest business tycoon. The cold orderliness of spreadsheets and numbers was his cup of tea, and the occasional directive to snipe someone was fun, too. He put his glasses back on and continued watching the mess unfolding through the live feed because, deep down inside, he was a willing masochist. “I swear my eyes are bleeding.”

“Teenagers,” observed Asami disdainfully, “although that little blond seems to have potential.” He waved an unlit cigarette at Armin in a nurse’s outfit carefully dripping wax from a lit candle around one of Levi’s exposed nipples. Crouched on the floor between Levi’s poorly trussed thighs was Eren dressed in a Superman costume. He was enthusiastically smacking the soles of Levi’s bare feet with a twelve-inch dildo. “Not much hope for that one,” Asami said, jabbing his Dunhill at Eren. “That boy was clearly dropped on his head as an infant.”

Suoh scratched thoughtfully at his square chin and offered the clarification, “He’s the monkey who tied the knots.”

All three men heard a mewling sound and assumed it was just Takaba getting impatient in the next room, but the sound was coming from Kirishima’s computer. The men peered closer and realized it was Levi meowing on the sofa like a horny kitten. A smirk spread across Asami’s face, then a low rumble of laughter. He put his Dunhill to his mouth and Suoh automatically whipped out his lighter for his boss, feeling just a little sorry for Levi when Eren put down the dildo and held the chloroformed handkerchief over Levi’s face again. Prolonged exposure to chloroform can damage the brain and Suoh hated to think that Levi was being incapacitated by some know-nothing fool. It was very unprofessional. Asami must have been thinking the same thing because he was no longer chuckling.

“How many times has he gone under?” he inquired.

“Three…so far,” replied Kirishima. “They have no idea what they’re doing.”

“Idiots,” Asami headed back to his office with a disgruntled sigh. He had plans for Levi and if that wannabe Superman ruined his merchandise, he would make that boy pay.

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The room was spinning. His head felt like a split melon. And the Green-Eyed Devil was dangling a stopwatch in front of his face like some deranged Uri Gellar, solemnly intoning, “You will forget Erwin Smith. You will forget Erwin Smith.” It only made Levi pine for Erwin all the more. He was still trussed up like a Christmas turkey, wrists and ankles chafed raw from the ropes, his limbs numb but his joints aching, the dildo now shoved up his ass. He wasn’t sure what Eren was actually doing to him or had done to him, but he had the overwhelming desire to kill him. Maybe not right now because he was weak and nauseated and had no freedom of movement, but later, when the time was right, he would make the Green-Eyed Devil wish he had never met Levi Ackerman.

A wet handkerchief was placed over his face again. He didn’t fight it this time, didn’t struggle, and in a strange moment of clarity, or perhaps insanity, he saw a vision of flames. Yes, flames, and he was engulfed in them, the searing heat licking at his bare skin. “I’m not afraid,” Levi thought. “You’ll save me.” Levi closed his eyes and was swept back into a dark tunnel. Taki was with him, chattering about rat fuel and the Apocalypse and then they were in the tea shop, except they were in Paris and the light was so beautiful and he could see the Eiffel Tower outside the window and if he died right now…if he died right now, it would be okay.
Claudia knew something was wrong when her husband came home from the office one evening ranting about Klaus not showing up for his reassignment in Sandwich. Ranting for Stephen meant sitting down at the dinner table and announcing between pursed lips, “That brother of yours has shafted me for the last time. Please pass the gravy.”

They were having meatloaf and mashed potatoes and all Claudia could think was how much Klaus would have liked a meal like this: simple, basic, comfort food. By habit, she made an excuse, unconvincing as it sounded. “He didn’t report in? Maybe he had an accident. Did you ever consider —”

“An accident, you think?” Stephen paused mid-pour, gravy boat dripping over his plate. “The only kind of accident Klaus ever has is with a needle colliding with one of his veins…” He set the gravy boat onto the table and took a bite of his meatloaf, chewing angrily, “…or with his cock accidentally sliding up some boy’s ass.” Claudia groaned but Stephen went on, “I mean, how does one manage that anyway?”

Claudia refilled her wine glass, splashing Merlot onto the tablecloth. Fuck it. There was gravy on it already, so what did it matter. “Are we really going to talk about this right now? Anal sex?” That made Stephen shut up lickety-split, so she took a deep breath and lowered her voice. “He’s doing his best, Stephen. You know things haven’t been easy for him.”

There was a joyless chortle in response. “Oh, easy, yes, well, let me tell you about easy. Easy is having to explain to your Board of Directors why the man you vouched for is some sort of internet sensation amongst perverts!”

“Are you saying your Board is made up of perverts who like watching my brother fuck some cute little camboy?”

“Oh ho!” Stephen raised his fork in triumph. “So you’ve seen it!”

“Jesus Christ, Stephen, have you been watching?”

The table shook when Stephen slammed his fist on it, his face red with frustration. “Do you have any empathy for me? Seriously, Claudia, do you have any idea what I’ve had to go through to keep that dumb jock of a brother of yours employed? Do you not care how humiliating this has been for me?”

“He’s not dumb.” All the other stuff…she couldn’t deny. She pushed the peas around on her plate in silence. For some reason, she could only think about the years of mediocre sex she’d had with her husband. Oh sure, there had been passion in the beginning, and the occasional orgasm, but after ten years things had settled into something utterly dissatisfactory. Yes, she’d seen the footage of Klaus and that barely legal blond twink on that Bangmaster!Armin porn site. It was hard to watch and not just because it was her younger brother on display to the world. Seeing Klaus throwing caution and good sense to the wind was a painful reminder that she had given up the thrill of living life at full-throttle in exchange for soul-deadening stability. Her mother had abandoned home, husband and children to pursue her own passions and Claudia had hated her for it…but now, she finally understood the ‘why’ of it and she could only admire her mother for having had the courage to choose the more reckless path if it meant fulfillment. Klaus had done the same, risking it all to follow Taki to Japan, then to London. She had spoken to Klaus only a month ago and he had agreed to Stephen’s reassignment, still unable to locate Taki after an entire year of searching. Now she was worried. Had he fallen back to old habits, the drugs and the drinking?

For the next few days, she left phone messages and texts, but received no replies. She called her
Uncle Hartmann and asked him to send one of their embassy employees in London to check on Klaus. When she received word that Klaus was no longer living at his flat, the real worry began, so it was with tremendous relief when a woman claiming to be Taki’s wife called her one day and told her that Klaus was with Taki in Hong Kong. Claudia was so relieved, it didn’t faze her one bit when Sana reported that Klaus was hooked on opium and basically a prisoner in the hands of some Chinese mob boss. Mob boss, eh? After her conversation with Sana, Claudia opened her desk drawer and pulled out the business card that Suguri had given her after their one-night-stand in New York over two years ago.

She sent one brief text: Will you help me?

The reply came fifteen minutes later: Of course.

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Was her pride wounded? Yes, and deeply. It wasn’t every day that a woman comes face-to-face with the man who has stolen her husband’s heart. Then again, Taki had started his affair with this Klaus von Wolfstadt before they had married or even met, and Sana hadn’t exactly been faithful as Taki’s wife, so…she was willing to not ask for Klaus’s head on a plate. No, she was a modern woman and it seemed too hypocritical to demand that her besmirched honor be avenged when she had behaved as dishonorably as Taki had. She loved Taki—he was beautiful, breathtakingly so, and had been kind and generous to her during their time together—but not enough to throw her whole future away. If they could just do this one thing to placate their families, then they could both be free. Her first attempt at coercion had backfired—poor Haru!—but she had high hopes for this second plan of action. Taki had been an attentive and sweet lover during the early months of their marriage, and she saw no reason why they wouldn’t be able to get down to the task of making a baby even with Klaus stalking around in the background like a hungry wolf. Taki not only agreed to this latest endeavor, he promised her that there would be no hanky-panky between him and Klaus until there was a bun in the oven.

It was to both their surprise, then, when Taki couldn’t come the first time.

“You’re probably jet lagged,” Sana proposed gently. After the second, then third, then fourth time, her patience wore a little thin. “Are you clogged up or something?” Well, that didn’t help, because then he started going limp minutes into it, then not getting hard at all. They tried everything: herbal teas, Viagra, traditional Chinese ‘medications’ made from powdered tiger penises or whatever, acupuncture, massage. “Do you want me to stick my finger up your butt?” Sana came from wealth and was well-educated, but she could be appallingly direct. It was after that brutally blunt comment that Taki began joining Feilong and the rest of the ‘baseball team’ for their evening parties in the ‘relaxation’ room. Sana was at her wit’s end. She wanted to get this baby-making endeavor over with so she could get on with her life, hopefully back in Tokyo where she wouldn’t have to listen to any more Cantonese and where she wouldn’t have to see the way Taki would moon over Klaus when he thought no one was looking. Gosh, sometimes she wanted to slap him. “Hide all you want behind those bangs of yours. I can still see you making googly eyes at him!” That only made Taki more depressed.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” Taki said one night. He was in her room after another failed attempt, counting the minutes before he would go get high with Klaus and forget that he was utterly useless. He had let everyone down: his country, his team, his family, Sana, Klaus, even Levi. No, he had abandoned Levi. “I think…the gods are punishing me.”

“Well,” Sana mused, “if they’re punishing you, then they’re punishing me, too.” She lit a cigarette, having given up on taking any health precautions anymore. “Maybe we should just forget the whole
thing. I can ask Asami-sama to take us back to Tokyo. Would you like that?"

“We’d just be prisoners there, too,” Taki said glumly. *And I wouldn’t be allowed to see Klaus.* He rolled onto his side and took Sana’s hand in his, kissed it before pressing it to his heart and burying his face in the hollow of her neck so he wouldn’t have to face her. “You could just tell your family I can’t…you know…consummate the act. Maybe they’d let you divorce me on those grounds. It wouldn’t be a lie.”

“Oh, Taki-kun.” She squeezed him in her arms and breathed in that lovely scent of his. She would never allow him to be shamed so publically. A part of her couldn’t help but blame Klaus for their troubles. The man had some strange hold over Taki, like the moon pulling on the tides of the ocean, and she suspected that even if she had Klaus sent away, Taki would still yearn for him until he withered away to nothing. They had to find another way to make this work, and soon, because she was fearful that Taki would simply step off the roof after baseball practice one day, sacrifice himself so they could both be free.

When Klaus approached her soon after, looking haggard and desperate, and asked her to call his sister, she didn’t know what to think of it. “She’ll know what to do” he said. What did that even mean? And yet, what did she have to lose by doing as he asked? Things were awful at is was. So the next morning she called the number Klaus had given her and talked to Klaus’s sister in America and explained the situation. The conversation took no more than ten minutes, mostly because she was self-conscious about her English, but after she hung up, a violent storm swept across the bay, the darkened sky split with flashes of lightning and, for some inexplicable reason, she imagined amidst the turbulent clouds a goddess swept up in a shower of flower petals pursued by a great white wolf with golden eyes. The vision frightened her…and excited her as well. It filled her with the same kind of fear and exhilaration she had felt when she had carried on her illicit affair with Haru. Poor Haru was ruined, but Sana wasn’t ready to give up yet. She lit a cigarette and dragged indulgently, savoring the taste of it as she sucked the smoke into her lungs. Whatever storm was coming, she would face it head-on.
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Suguri is sent to Hong Kong. Erwin begins to take an honest look at himself.

Chapter Notes

This chapter and the next one are basically two steps back, one step forward, narrative-wise. It's hard to juggle various POVs, so please bear with me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was almost noon when Suguri finished listening to Taki’s uncle throw a fit on a Sunday. He had planned on playing golf with some old classmates from medical school that morning, but tee time was long past as Suguri hung up the phone. Taki’s uncle was thoroughly incensed that his nephew was in Hong Kong and employed as a menial laborer pitching balls to the adopted son of a Chinese mob boss. He had also heard through the grapevine that Taki was spending his free time smoking weed instead of impregnating his wife.

“This is unacceptable. What the hell is Asami doing, dragging the Reizen name through the mud like this? Haven’t I paid off my debt to him? I don’t owe him anything! He’s not even from nobility! For all we know, his mother was a common slut! My poor sister Sakuya would be rolling over in her grave if she knew her only son was whoring for the Chinese! What is this world coming to? Ah, why did we ever let him go to America? New York is full of perverts. Everyone knows that. A bunch of degenerates, that’s what they are. Taki was a perfectly good and upstanding boy before he left, but one drink of that American water and he’s ruined! It’s all that man’s fault, that von…von…von Wolf…whatever. Meeting in love hotels! It’s unseemly. Those Americans are known to be handsy, too. Good gods, and who knows what kind of drugs he was giving him. It’s definitely his fault that Taki’s become an addict. You should see the way my superiors look at me. ‘How’s your pothead nephew?’ they ask me. ‘I hear he’s quite the stoner!’ they say. Even my underlings…it’s too much. And why is there no baby yet? The girl had no trouble getting knocked up by that pretty boy, what’s his face, the one with no teeth now. Gyaahh! Go there and set him straight,” Taki’s uncle had grumbled to Suguri, finally getting to the point. “If Sana isn’t pregnant in two months, then drag his sorry ass back here and I’ll beat some sense into him myself! I’ll beat him with my own fists! And stop payment on that credit card of his. Since when does he need a new laptop? Kids these days!”

Suguri wasn’t quite sure where Taki’s uncle was getting his inside dope, but he didn’t bother to correct the misinformation; weed was fairly harmless compared to opium, after all, and Taki wasn’t exactly employed, and there was also the gigantic elephant in the room in the shape of Klaus von Wolfstadt that was better left unmentioned. Well, sighing heavily wasn’t going to fix any of it. Suguri kissed his wife on the cheek as she left for her hair appointment at the salon and scrolled through the contacts on his mobile. He might be able to gain entrée for himself in Hong Kong, but he would need a leg up if he was going to get Claudia an audience with Liu Feilong, a man with a reputation for being rather prickly. Not only that, the Baishe syndicate leader didn’t even try to pass himself off
as a ‘businessman,’ an acceptable bullshit persona that didn’t scream ‘crime lord’ in neon, even if everyone knew better. There was one person who might be able to help him, though, and too bad if it was the same person driving Taki’s uncle up the wall, a man who did operate as Tokyo’s wealthiest, sexiest bachelor tycoon: Sana’s godfather, Asami Ryuichi.

To smooth the way, Suguri suggested over the phone that they meet later that night at Nakayama, a ryōtei favored by Asami, but the man balked.

“How soon can you be at my place?” Asami asked in a semi-shout over the sound of loud hammering in the background.

“Your office or Club Scion?”

Now there were power tools wailing and Asami yelled on his end of the phone, “Come again?”

“Your office or Club Scion!” Suguri shouted this time. He wondered if Asami was standing in the middle of a construction site. Perhaps a body was being covered with cement mix right as they were speaking.

“My place! Grand Hills! I’ll send my car for you right now! We’ll have breakfast!”

Grand Hills? Grand Hills was the exclusive high rise in which Asami had his penthouse suite, the very same penthouse suite that had been shot to shit by Russian mobsters from a rogue faction not that long ago. An hour later, Suguri arrived at Asami’s insanely priced luxury condo and discovered this was the construction site. Asami greeted him in person at the door. He was dressed casually in jogging pants and a t-shirt and his hair was damp, as if he had just showered after a workout.

“I see you’re still renovating,” Suguri observed. The living room appeared pristine, but there was plenty of noise coming from the bedroom wing down the hallway.

“Just some minor redecorating,” Asami replied. He cast a glance in the other direction towards the kitchen, where two people were arguing as loudly as the workers in the bedroom, and said sotto voce, “Somebody’s birthday is coming up in a few months.”

A few months? Well, Suguri couldn’t fault the man for planning ahead, but god knows what he was having ‘redecorated’ in the bedroom wing. He had heard that Asami maintained a state-of-the-art love nest kitted up with every manner of BDSM equipment. Maybe he was having mirrors installed on the ceiling to complement the ones on all four walls. After taking off his shoes and putting on slippers in the entryway, Suguri was led past the spacious living room and into the dining room, where they sat at the table and sipped on Bloody Mary cocktails as they waited for the noisy maid and butler to bring out their meal.

Assuming the tone of voice that one would use in discussing the weather, as opposed to a delicate subject matter, Suguri said offhandedly, “You must know why I called.”

“Let me guess.” Asami offered Suguri a Dunhill from a container carved out of a block of jade, which Suguri graciously accepted. “My goddaughter and your godson can’t figure out how to wipe their own asses?”

Suguri’s left eyelid twitched involuntarily and both men swallowed a groan as they lit up and dragged deeply on their cigarettes, helpless against the grim truth. They gazed out of the floor-to-ceiling window, searching for answers hidden amidst the jagged Tokyo skyline sprawled beneath them.

A loud metallic clang in the kitchen interrupted their silent reverie—what sounded like a pot lid
falling on the floor—and then a youngish voice screamed out, “I told you to stay out of my way, megane!”

This was answered by a man’s deeper voice, threatening, “Say that again, you little brat, and I’ll spank you with this frying pan!”

Out of politeness, Suguri pretended not to hear the commotion. Out of deafness born of jaded familiarity, Asami didn’t hear any commotion at all. Suguri pressed on with his request before WWII erupted in the kitchen. “I will be going to Hong Kong to deal with my godson, and I will be escorting…a guest.” Suguri paused, clearing his throat, but Asami merely took another drag on his cigarette, so he continued, “She will need an introduction to Liu Feilong-sama. Well, we both will. Would you be willing to provide one?”

The corners of Asami’s lips quirked with interest. “Who is your guest?”

With a lift of his chin, Suguri stated without flinching, “Klaus von Wolfstadt’s sister. Claudia-san.”

That Suguri used an honorific with her name told Asami everything he needed to know. “You’ve fucked her, haven’t you?” Suguri was silent and that only made Asami smirk with delight. “Ever the gentleman. She must be attractive. You’ve always had a weakness for pretty women. Hmmm. She must not take after her hulk of a brother.”

“She is a lovely woman,” Suguri assured, and then added with a scowl, “Nothing like her idiot brother.”

“Well, if you’ve fucked her and you’re obviously interested in seconds…or is it thirds? You normally don’t go for thirds, do you?” It was just good-natured ribbing and Asami was enjoying making Suguri squirm internally when the kitchen door swung open and a young man wearing skimpy shorts and a tank top stomped into the dining room pushing a cart laden with rice, miso soup, broiled salmon, pickled radish, and tamagoyaki. He was accompanied by a bespectacled man in a three-piece suit and tie. Both of them were wearing aprons splattered with flecks of green onion, tofu, and beaten eggs.

The neatly dressed man bowed formally and placed the dishes on the table while the younger man stood with his hands on his hips and announced with a rude sneer, “Breakfast for old farts is now served.” Then he tore off his apron, mashed it into a ball in his hands and threw it on the floor before disappearing back into the kitchen.

Suguri recognized the man in the suit—Kirishima Kei, Asami’s personal assistant and a very excellent sniper—who calmly explained, “The brat is still in quite the mood about being sent to the monastery,” before bowing again and excusing himself.

“The birthday boy,” Asami commented to his soup. Then he chuckled over some private joke, telling Suguri, “I can’t wait for Takaba to see.”

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Hange returned to Berlin from her artist’s residency in Groningen the day that Erwin was leaving for London. His flight wouldn’t depart until that night and Hange was due to arrive before noon, so he had prepared sauerbraten in the slow cooker and baked a traditional almond cake. A bowl of macerated strawberries and whipped cream was ready in the fridge. He liked to cook and the meal, along with a freshly stocked pantry, was his way of thanking her for the use of her apartment. Getting away from London had been a good idea. He really didn’t want to see anyone from the university or his neighbors and have to explain why he was missing his right arm.
The three weeks had been spent hitting his favorite museums and puttering through the stacks at various archives, reading and researching, and generally “farting around like a boring old dinosaur” as Levi would have put it. The thought of making amends with Levi had drifted through Erwin’s head more than a few times during his stay. He imagined calling him up, perhaps sitting down to a meal together and talking things over. Maybe it was the familiarity of being in Berlin, a city he had called home for several years, maybe it was his missing arm and the events that had led up to that frightful night, but he found himself thinking of Levi more and more and feeling uncharacteristically nostalgic. That horrific experience in the fancy condo, it wasn’t all that different from the fear and anxiety he had endured during his military service, and it had left him permanently damaged. The weird thing was, the trauma and the very obvious physical manifestation of it made him feel close to Levi, as if they were now standing on common ground and sharing something new, that how he was on the outside was how Levi was on the inside: missing a vital part of himself and wishing for wholeness again. He was looking forward to discussing this with Hange over a home cooked lunch. They would hash it all out like they used to when they were colleagues at the Universität der Künste, drinking and talking for hours about life and hopes and dreams, about choices and right and wrong, but she showed up at the door with a young man in tow.

“Erwin!” Hange flung her arms around Erwin’s shoulders and planted a messy kiss on his lips. “Say hi to Moblit. I just might adopt him,” she enthused as she barged past him with her suitcase.

The young man held his hand out to Erwin, only to meet with air. Without missing a beat, he held out his left hand instead and gave Erwin’s remaining hand a hearty shake. “Moblit Berner,” he said. “I am from Holland. Nice to meet you.”

“Erwin Smith. Welcome to Berlin.”

Over a lunch in which Erwin couldn’t get a word in edgewise, he learned that Moblit was an MFA student at the school in which Hange had just finished her residency. He had served as her studio assistant there and Hange, in typical impulsive Hange style, had taken an instant liking to his chestnut hair and eyes and his firm young body and invited him to Berlin to live and study with her. Oh, and she was happily fucking him, too. “He’s only twenty-one!” Hange giggled. “I could be his mother if I had him when I was ten!”

She was so enamored with her new pet, that it wasn’t until Erwin was in the kitchen loading the dishwasher after lunch that Hange suddenly shrieked. “Holy fuck! Where’s your arm?”

“For Christ’s sake,” Erwin grumbled, “you’re just noticing now? How do you manage to tie your shoes in the morning?”

“I wear slip-ons,” Hange replied in all seriousness. “So, what’s with the missing arm? Tell me tell me tell me! Do you have a stump? Can I touch it? Is it gross? Do you have phantom limb syndrome?”

There were plenty of good drugs to be had in the Netherlands and Erwin could only wonder what Hange had ingested over those weeks. “Yes, I have a stump and, no, you may not touch it. I—”

“So where is it? Your arm…where is it? Are you keeping it in the freezer?” She reached out and touched the stump anyway. “Ew! It’s all lumpy!”

“Oh my god, what is wrong with you?”

Hange rubbed her hand as if it had been mucking around in a bucket of piranhas. “I just said it was lumpy.”

“That’s because it’s still wrapped. Jesus.”
“Are you going to get one of those prostheses, like one of those Terminator arms?”

“You know what, I had an accident. It’s over, I’m fine. Thank you for asking.”

Hange’s face fell, veritably crumpling with disappointment. “You mean it didn’t fall off from overuse?”

“Overuse?”

“Yeah, you know…” She made the universal sign for jacking-off: fist held at crotch-level accompanied by a vigorous pumping motion.

“That’s it.” Erwin threw the wet dishtowel into the sink with a huff. “I’m done.” He stomped out to the living room and joined Moblit on the sofa, where he was getting high. “Hey, kiddo, give me some of that.”

“Sure thing,” Moblit said, his eyes glassy and unfocused as he passed Erwin a very fat joint.

Erwin took a massive hit before passing it to a contrite Hange, who had flopped down on the sofa next to Moblit. On the coffee table in a plastic bag were the biggest buds Erwin had ever seen. Wow. Levi would be drooling right now, Erwin thought. Levi. Drooling. He sighed and reached over to the table next to the armchair and handed Hange a copy of his newly published monograph. “For you.”

He got an uncouth snort in return. “Oh, right,” Hange said. She flipped through the glossy pages. “I see they used heavy stock for the pompous ass…”

“Well, don’t go overboard on the compliments,” Erwin pouted.

“Huh?” It took a second for the light bulb to go on over Hange’s head, and then she slapped her forehead, saying, “No, no, Erwin. You dummy, I’m talking about Kiefer. Anselm Kiefer’s such a jackass. Did you think I was talking about you?”

“Weren’t you?” he accused, ego bruised.

“Look, I had to put up with being called Shitty Glasses by you-know-who for four years. You don’t see me walking around with a thin skin. So...have you seen him?”

Erwin took another hit. “Yeah. I’ve seen him.”

“Is he okay?”

He had no clue. Erwin could have gone to Levi’s flat after he was discharged from the hospital—he knew where he lived—but he had run off to Berlin instead. Was he afraid to face him, to find out if he had fared any better than him? It was such a cowardly act. What if Levi had lost an arm too? “I don’t know,” Erwin said, his face hot with shame. “I guess I’ll find out at his opening.”

“Yes, are you sure you don’t want to hang around for another night?” Hange asked, hoping to cheer him up. “We could have a threesome. Moblit would be game for it. He’s Dutch, you know, and the Dutch are into all that kind of kinky shit. They teach it in kindergarten practically. Isn’t that right, Moblit?” But Erwin wasn’t in the mood to be cheered, be it through getting stoned or having sex. Her attempt at levity flew like a lead balloon instead. “You know, Erwin, that new look suits you.”

He raised a bushy eyebrow at her. “What new look?”
“The whole ‘I’m missing a limb’ look.”

“Huh?”

“You’ve always been…disconnected from your feelings…” She had wanted to say ‘cut off,’ but that would have been in bad taste, even for her. “Maybe you’ll finally know what it’s like to really miss something. Sometimes, we don’t realize we need something until it’s gone.”

Yeah, Erwin thought. Maybe I’ll finally know how Levi feels.

Chapter End Notes

Ryōtei = a high end and exclusive Japanese restaurant serving traditional cuisine, often featuring entertainment by geishas.

Megane = Glasses in Japanese. In the manga, Takaba usually calls Kirishima “Glasses” or “Glasses Guy.” It’s totally rude, especially when you consider Kirishima’s high status within Asami’s organization, but that’s just Takaba being the brat that he is.

Tamagoyaki = a Japanese style omelette made with egg that is rolled into thin layers. It’s delicious and I’ve made it at home in an ordinary round sauté pan, but it is supposed to be made in a special rectangular pan and compressed in a bamboo mat. I skip the ‘roll up in a bamboo mat’ process and it still turns out very tasty.
The thin parchment-like paper crunched beneath his bare ass every time Taki shifted on the padded examination table. He was dressed in an equally thin and crunchy paper gown and feeling nervous and overexposed under the harsh fluorescent lights. They—that is, he and Suguri—were in the basement of Feilong’s Baishe syndicate headquarters. Taki hadn’t left the high rise the entire time he had been in Hong Kong; indentured servants weren’t allowed to roam free. On the roof was the baseball practice field with its panoramic view of Hong Kong and Victoria Harbour. The top floor was where Feilong kept his personal suite of offices and living quarters, the floor below housed his various ‘guests,’ and the basement was where he maintained a fully-staffed medical center, probably to prolong the lives of enemies until they had given up whatever intel could be beaten out of them in the sound-proof torture chamber down the hallway.

Taki hadn’t noticed anyone coming out of the torture chamber—what Feilong’s men referred to with a snicker as the Truth-Telling Room—but there was one other young man besides himself in the large open antiseptic space of the treatment facility. For all his youthful appearance, the stranger was huge, well over six feet tall and muscular, with his longish black hair tied back in a ponytail. He was, by all standards, very good-looking, and was sitting in relaxed repose with his legs splayed on an identical examination table—one of ten in the room—while a white-coated doctor attended to his wounds. Taki couldn’t tell if the man had been shot or stabbed, but he could hear snippets of conversation in Cantonese, most of which he didn’t understand, only managing to catch Tao’s favorite expletive being spat out repeatedly—*motherfuckers*—and the words *red scorpions*.

At the mention of those words, Suguri’s back stiffened even more than usual, and he quickly pulled the curtain around him and Taki, giving them some flimsy semblance of privacy. The previous night, Feilong had invited Suguri to dine with him and two other guests: a long-haired beauty named Lee Yut-Lung and his twenty-six-year old lieutenant, Sing Soo-Ling. It was this Sing who was sitting across the room from them, having been stabbed by members of the Red Scorpions that morning, a gang notorious for their aggressive push into new territories. The Liu family’s Baishe syndicate was almost wiped out while Feilong spent seven years in prison after his adoptive father—who adored Feilong—was killed by his jealous stepbrother, and his biological father—a scumbag politician—was killed by Asami, but Feilong had built the ‘family business’ back up through sheer tenacity in the years since his release and he now ruled Hong Kong’s underworld as much as Asami reigned over Tokyo. The rival Red Scorpions were based in Shanghai and, as descendants of the Ming, they were natural born enemies of the Liu and the Lee clans, who traced their ancestry to the Qing. Yut-Lung
was a recent transplant from New York’s Chinatown, however; even though his own father had once been one of the most powerful men in Hong Kong, the Lees were now at a disadvantage to the Liu clan. Yut-Lung was gunning to bring glory back to his family now that he had systematically eliminated his six older brothers and was hoping to enter into a mutually beneficial alliance with Feilong. It was all smarmy business in Suguri’s opinion. Power struggles between families was always messy. God, were they ever.

“Stay away from those crazy Chinese,” Suguri advised Taki under his breath, and then almost to himself, he sighed, “What is it with those long-haired freaks?” Liu Feilong, Lee Yut-Lung, Sing Soo-Ling, even that cross-dressing Lin Xianming, who was born in Taiwan but of Chinese ethnicity…all of them with long hair and questionable sanity. “Must be something in the DNA,” muttered Suguri.

“Are short-haired freaks any better?” asked Taki in a miserable mumble. He was thinking of Asami and his goon Suoh and even of Suguri, who had told him to masturbate into a cup as the first step towards fixing his ‘problem.’ His cheeks burned with shame to recall their conversations of late, all the cringe worthy answers he had to stammer through clenched teeth. Yes, yes, Suguri wasn’t just a father figure to him, he was his physician, too, and he had never felt ashamed to be examined by him before. Suguri had a gentle touch and was respectful; Taki couldn’t ask for someone with better bedside manners, but holy hell…to be questioned by Suguri in front of Sana regarding their inability to…well…his inability to…

He hadn’t been able to cum into the plastic cup. Couldn’t even get a chub going and he didn’t have the option of calling Klaus into the bathroom for some help. Klaus was up on the roof with Tao and Banba and Lin, tossing the ball around and taking batting practice like normal people, and Suguri wouldn’t have let Klaus near him anyway. Taki had tried to think about Klaus’s dick in his mouth—that always turned him on like mad—but even that didn’t do the trick. After half an hour, his own dick was sore and still limp and, because of that sorry fact, they were now in the basement medical center and Taki was breaking out in a cold sweat as he watched Suguri open up a small black case and remove what looked like a probe of some sort attached to a hard rubber handle; there was an electrical cord and a dial and oh god oh god oh god Suguri was putting on a pair of latex gloves and then slipping a condom over the ball-shaped end of the probe and then slathering it with K-Y and Taki was dry-mouthed and panting in fear. Suguri had always had an interest in animal husbandry.

“Th-this is what they do to…” Taki gulped a jagged rock down his throat. “I don’t want to do this… Suguri-san?”

Suguri’s face was grim, implacable when he turned to him. “Lay on your back and bring your knees up,” he said firmly. He plugged the electrical cord into a socket, adjusted the dial, and the box hummed to life. “This should only take a second or two. It’ll be over before you know it.” He held the probe in one hand and a small plastic cup in the other. “Would you like to catch the specimen yourself?” asked Suguri, cup held out to Taki.

He was so fucking dead. But surely a dead man could hold a cup to his uncooperative cock and catch whatever little specimen was forced out of his member as evidence of his shattered manhood. The paper crunched again beneath Taki as he made himself settle flat on his back, his head resting on a tiny pillow, then more crunching as he rucked up his gown and set his feet on the table, his knees up but thighs pressed tightly together. He felt so vulnerable as it was, he didn’t want to—

Suguri slotted another pillow under his hips. “Open your legs, Taki-kun.”

It was bizarre to hear Suguri use that endearment with him, the same endearment Sana used, the same endearment a father would use with a small child. Gone was the usual ‘sama,’ as gone as his
dignity. He covered his face with both hands even as he burst into angry tears, and opened his legs, just barely, just enough for Suguri to insert the probe. Suguri’s gloved hand was warm, thank the gods, warm on his knee, holding his leg in place, and then warm around his cock, holding the cup to it because Taki was a shaking mess and wasn’t capable of doing even one thing on command.

“Relax,” he heard Suguri say. A groan remained strangled in the pit of his stomach when he felt the probe breach the tight ring of muscle, then slide in another inch or two before Suguri angled it towards the ceiling where it rubbed right up against the spot that always drove him insane whenever Klaus had his fingers or cock inside him. He let out a stuttering exhale of breath, then sucked it back in, choking on his own shame, shoulders trembling. He wanted to run and hide, run and hide in Feilong’s torture chamber because it couldn’t be worse than this. Before he had time to envision the kinds of activities that unfolded in the Truth-Telling Room, there was a sudden jolt exploding deep in his groin, as if he had been kicked in the nuts and tasered simultaneously, and he screamed out a violent punch of a gasp into the buzzing fluorescent light of the room, his orgasm hitting him like a freight train. On instinct and in desperation, he flung his hands towards Suguri, clawing at his arms, but the man held him down with an elbow to his chest.

“It’s over, Taki-sama,” Suguri told him, “it’s done. Calm down. Just breathe.” The probe was removed with a wet schlurp and then Suguri laid a light blanket over him. “Relax,” he told him again, “you did well.”

There was a table set up against the wall with a microscope and a small centrifuge machine. Taki curled onto his side and watched Suguri place a dropperful of cum into a glass tube filled with a clear solution, stick it in the centrifuge machine, then, less than a minute later, place a dropperful of the ‘washed’ sperm into a petri dish and examine it under the microscope. He made some notes on a pad of paper, read them over, then grunted with satisfaction. Suguri walked back over to the examination table and placed a paternal hand on Taki’s shoulder.

“Good news, Taki-sama. Morphology is normal, numbers are more than adequate, and the little tadpoles are swimming like they mean business. So.”

Taki sat up, serenaded by more crunching, and shook his head. “I’m not doing this again.”

“Taki-sama—”

“I’m not an animal!” Taki shouted, although it came out like an hysterical shriek. He suddenly remembered the other guy that was across the room getting stitched up. Holy shit, was he still there? Had he heard all the humiliating stuff that had gone on? There was only a thin curtain separating them! “I’m not…” He lifted the blanket to his face and dry heaved into it. “Don’t make me do this again,” he begged. He didn’t need for Suguri to explain anything to him because it had already been discussed upstairs. If his sperm were viable, then it was just a matter of collecting the goods and they could go the old turkey baster route. “Please let me talk to Sana again about this.”

“As you wish,” Suguri said. He sighed and began putting away the equipment while Taki dressed. This was so not what he wanted to be doing. It brought back memories of his struggles with his own wife. They had wanted children and pursued every avenue available to medicine and still came up empty-handed. The sorrow was only a dull ache now and they had long since reconciled themselves to the fact that there would be no biological offspring; they were still married, but in name only. Carnal pleasure was sought and enjoyed with others. When Claudia had reached out to him, Suguri had been pleasantly shocked. Their hook-up in New York was one of those serendipitous things, a gift that falls into one’s lap, totally unexpected and free for the taking, and the potential for yet another passionate, no-strings-attached affair with a beautiful young woman was what made Suguri agree to come with her to Hong Kong, ostensibly to help her negotiate the release of her brother from
Feilong’s ‘service.’ He didn’t really care what happened to Klaus, but he did care very deeply what happened to Taki.

It hadn’t been difficult to answer Taki’s question—Why are you here?—when he first arrived in Hong Kong. Of course, he had run everything by Asami prior to his arrival; he wasn’t about to overstep. Suguri was beholden to Taki’s uncle, but Taki’s uncle was beholden to Asami.

“Babies,” Asami had grumbled. “Can’t stand them.”

Regardless of Asami’s deep-rooted dislike of babies, the man had told Suguri to do what he must to aid his goddaughter Sana and, by extension, her hapless husband. So here he was, gathering semen samples and evaluating sperm and, perhaps, just perhaps reconnecting with a lovely woman who happened to be Klaus von Wolfstadt’s older sister.

Much harder to answer were Taki’s questions regarding Levi, harder because the boy was clearly distressed. It was only the day after he arrived and Suguri was having tea, his first opportunity to speak alone with Taki, and the question directly following “Why are you here?” was not what Suguri was expecting.

“Is it true you hired Levi to spy on me?” was what Taki had asked.

“Your uncle wanted you kept under surveillance. You knew that.” The answer was the truth but it sounded ridiculously inadequate.

The prodding continued, but it was more than simple curiosity on Taki’s part, it was genuine concern. “Was he coerced? Did he have a choice?”

“Levi?” Try as he might, Suguri couldn’t keep his expression neutral and his brows knit together with dismay. Suguri’s man in London had installed cameras in Taki’s condo, the tea shop, and in Levi’s flat, a flat which had been conveniently leased to Levi via a contact who happened to work for a rental agency. Suguri was an astute man, and after years of moving in the same circles as men like Kenny Ackerman and Asami Ryuichi, he knew not to trust anyone, especially a boy like Levi. It wasn’t so much surprise as disappointment when Suguri saw what those two had gotten up to. He didn’t expect Levi to admit to the dirty goings-on with Taki, but it was downright infuriating that Levi had chosen not to report Klaus’s sighting at the tea shop. There was no excuse for that, but Suguri had let it pass without calling Levi on it, although he did express his displeasure to Kenny Ackerman. He would leave it to Kenny to reprimand his nephew when he saw fit. Levi had proven to be unreliable, dishonest in his ‘job,’ and Kenny had a reputation for being a real stickler for punishment. Suguri had no interest in dirtying his hands in other people’s family problems; he had enough trouble keeping Taki in line. Still, Levi did seem to give Taki a reason not to jump into the Thames and drown himself, so Suguri said nothing to Taki’s uncle in the hopes that Taki would lose interest in Klaus now that he had a new distraction. What he didn’t expect was for Taki to feel any responsibility towards Levi or, god forbid, to form an actual attachment.

“I know his uncle. Kenny Ackerman offered Levi’s services to me,” Suguri explained. “The boy needed extra work, so I hired Levi as a favor to his uncle. He wasn’t coerced. Why are you overthinking this? It was a straightforward business transaction.”

“A business transaction?” Taki’s eyes had widened. Is that what it was? What did that make him, then? Was he just merchandise to be bartered by his family, minded by paid employees until he had fulfilled his purpose in life? He had screwed up his career in baseball and taken Klaus down with him. Okay, that was on him. Now he had to produce an heir and he was screwing that up, too, and probably making Sana hate him. He didn’t want to fail her, but he didn’t want to be treated like some mindless stud animal either. He had feelings, so many stupid fucking feelings and he didn’t know
what to about them anymore!

Taki dressed quickly, telling Suguri that he wanted to talk things over with Sana again before they did any other god awful ‘procedures.’

“Don’t let your heart get in the way,” Suguri advised. He busied himself with washing his hands at the sink, figured that Taki wouldn’t want to look him in the eye. He heard Taki push the curtain aside and then his voice, soft and plaintive.

“Get in the way of what?”

He didn’t even know what to say, how to answer that. Suguri turned his head to the side, shoulders slumped, and muttered in reply, “Never mind.”

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There comes a time when one has to look in the mirror and face one’s own demons head-on and with honesty, and that moment of truth had come for Taki as he rode the elevator upstairs to Sana’s rooms. It was time for him to man up and come clean to her. The young man who had been stitched up in the basement happened to ride the elevator with him and was super chatty and appallingly direct, as the Chinese can be.

“Hi, I’m Sing. Sing Soo-Ling,” he said, all friendly-like and stuck out his huge paw of a hand to Taki.

Taki was startled, took a step back and bumped into one of Feilong’s guards who was escorting Taki upstairs. This Sing Soo-Ling wasn’t trailed by any guards. He was big, as big as Klaus practically, and Taki could only wonder how many men had come at him to inflict so many wounds, none of which seemed to bother the young man. But what surprised him was the fact that he was speaking to Taki in fairly decent Japanese, and not in the Cantonese he was using earlier. Shit.

“Rough day, too, huh?” Sing went on. He patted his own shoulder, bicep, ribs, where he had sustained injuries, and chuckled. “That’s Hong Kong for you. Good ol’ welcoming committee. Where I come from is no better.”

“Where are you from?” asked Taki. He hadn’t introduced himself in return—so rude!—but the moment had come and gone.

“New York. Chinatown. I’m here with my boss. He’s here to kiss Feilong’s ass, grease some palms. You know, the usual drill.” Sing looked down at Taki and smirked knowingly, shaking his head in admiration. “So, what did you do to piss off your boss? That’s some perverted shit you guys got going on. I mean, you look pretty wrung out…is your ass still tingling?”

Taki stared, speechless, his face burning. That flimsy curtain…Sing had overheard everything and assumed he had undergone some sick punishment. Well, that wasn’t too far off the mark. At least Sing didn’t know who he was. Rude as it was, at least he hadn’t introduced himself in return.

“Listen, Taki. I can call you Taki, right?” Taki’s loud gasp made Sing backpedal. “Okay, okay. Reizen-san, then. I should know better. My girlfriend is Japanese. She’d kill me if she heard me using your first name. I still have to call her Ibe-san around her family. You Japanese are so goddamn formal, honorific this, honorific that. Thank the fuck I live in America. You know, I saw you pitch for the Mets.”

By the time Taki arrived on the 102^{nd} floor, Sing had demolished whatever was left of his ego and
Taki was ready to lay it all on the line with Sana. The charade was over; he’d been found out and there was nowhere else to hide. They sat drinking tea in the anteroom at the little table set up by the window, his ass still buzzing from the electrical jolt administered twenty minutes ago. The furniture was carved and lacquered in the manner favored by the Chinese, the chairs with cushions upholstered in expensive silk and hand embroidered with sprays of peonies and peach blossoms. For prisoners, they were living high on the hog.

He sipped his oolong tea and told her that the ‘sample’ that Suguri had collected was all good and that they could proceed with artificial insemination. He didn’t bother to bring up the fact that he’d have to go through the most humiliating process in order to make it happen; the fact that a stranger had heard him…well, what was the point of trying to salvage his dignity? He had none left.

Sana was less than thrilled by the prospect, but she had an aunt who had successfully gotten pregnant through artificial insemination, and there was the royal family of course, who had conceived through means other than standard fucking. Haru had knocked her up almost immediately, though, so Taki’s inability to ‘finish’ inside her was beyond frustrating. If only they had forgone the birth control early in their marriage when he could still do the deed, before Klaus had come back into his life and gayed things up beyond repair!

“Where’s the love in this?” Sana asked. She took a furious bite of her almond cookie. “Are we just animals?”

Taki dropped his cup onto the saucer, chipping the fine porcelain and spilling his tea, his hand was shaking so violently. His own words to Suguri were rattling around in his brain: “I’m not an animal!” Then he heard Levi’s voice in his head, heard the words Levi had spoken to him after they had made love for the first time: “Taki, you are a lying slut. Just admit that you enjoyed it.” He saw himself standing in the doorway of his bedroom in the New York condo, Klaus passed out on his living room sectional. What had he felt then? Lust. Lust for a man he wanted more than anything in his life.

Taki slid off the chair, legs wobbly, and knelt down at Sana’s feet, sobbing like a child remorseful after a severe caning. “I’m so sorry,” he blubbered, his face pressed against her flat belly. “I’m so sorry…I’m such a…cockslut.” It was the truth, and it was killing him.

Sana patted his trembling shoulders, ran her fingers through his disheveled hair. Such beautiful hair, she thought, our baby will have this. “Who isn’t?” she mused aloud.

He dared to look up at her, but she wasn’t angry. “What?”

“Who doesn’t like cock?” she repeated. “I like cock. I like yours inside me, Taki-kun.” She sighed and wiped at his face with her napkin. He was so lovely, his eyes wide and wet, and all she could think about was the heat of his beautiful cock, the shape and weight of it in her hands, the smoothness of it against her lips, the way it rubbed just so when she was riding him or when he was on top of her and she had her legs wrapped high around his slim waist and she knew that she was close to the edge and all it would take was the sound of his voice calling her name for her to climax. Those had been happy times; she couldn’t believe that they were gone for good. “I don’t want to do the turkey baster thing. It’s…it’s not what I want with you. We love each other, don’t we? Our families can go buy a baby. I won’t be treated like this.”

“But…I can’t do it any other way. We’ve tried, Sana-san. I’m hopeless.” He rested his head on her knees and groaned. “I told you, I’m a cockslut.”

She continued petting his hair, his shoulders, thinking, thinking. Guys loved doing it with more than one partner. Wasn’t it every man’s fantasy to be serviced by a harem of women all at once? Well, maybe not in Taki’s case, but shit, she wasn’t averse to having more than one man loving on her, so what was the difference? She wasn’t a prude and she wasn’t ignorant. She liked and wanted sex. She
and Haru had shared some wild times together—light bondage, cosplay, and, yeah, they had enjoyed some threesomes, brought in another man or another woman. He had been a host, for crying out loud, and neither he nor Sana had been shy when it came to carnal pleasure. Taki was so proper with her, though, always holding back lest he…what, embarrass her or himself? Didn’t he know how desirable he was in bed? Didn’t he know he could let it all hang out with her? She closed her eyes and let her mind go free, let her heart rise up and set a path and there it was again, the vision she had seen in the storm of a goddess swept up in a shower of dancing flower petals, and panting at the goddess’ feet was the great white wolf with the golden eyes.

Chapter End Notes

The characters of Lee Yut-Lung and Sing Soo-Ling are from Akimi Yoshida's "Banana Fish" and "Yasha" manga series. I didn't tag for the mangas because I don't think they'll reappear in this fic later on. If that changes and they play a bigger part, I'll update the fandom tag.

Next chapter: it's back to London and Levi...
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Levi's exhibition opens.

Chapter Notes

Another longish chapter.

The gallery provided him with whatever he needed for the opening, but Levi still had to max out Taki’s credit card and clear out the remainder of his own bank account—a whopping seventy-five pounds, minus monthly fees—to purchase the laptop and supplies he needed for the ‘performance’ he would be giving to cap off his exhibition. He had no money to cover his rent and was reduced to begging outside the local curry shop for food and providing blowjobs in cars for extra cash because Suguri had stopped paying him weeks ago. That was no surprise, but then Taki’s credit card was suddenly making that awful ‘beep’ every time he swiped it and the store clerk would say, “Sorry, do you have another card you can use?” Fortunately, Levi had already purchased the laptop in Covent Garden by then; Apple just wasn’t going to get paid. Unfortunately, he still needed to purchase a shitload of other stuff: strobe lights, wood to build a platform, a metal pole, a smoke machine, shiny lamé fabric, and he needed to hire some models, too—i.e. prostitutes to pose naked in the gallery, and those people expected to be paid up-front with cash. When he called his Uncle Kenny hoping for a handout, the bastard refused to replenish his funds, telling him he could live off the fees from his new side job.

“What side job?” Levi demanded. He had blown through his coke supply ages ago and was sniffing paint thinner to take the edge off, but it only made him more irritable. “Enlighten me, douchebag.”

“Don’t tell me you did it for free,” Kenny sneered back. “Don’t tell me you gave your ass away without getting paid? What kind of a ree-tarded whore are you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” replied Levi, indignant. “I don’t blow anyone for free.”

There was a screech of laughter from Kenny. “Oh, you weren’t blowing anyone in that video, but you sure as shit were taking that gi-nor-mous dildo up your ass like the hungriest slut ever. You sure were moaning and mewling for those cosplaying fuh-reaks. Is that what you young’uns are into these days? You like dressing up like it’s fucking Hollow Ween and tying each other up and dripping hot candle wax on your nips for the whole wide world to see? Wellll, who am I to judge? If that kind of fuh-reaky shit floats your goddamn hentai boat, that’s your business, but at least get paid, boy.”

Levi’s blood froze. His recollection was fuzzy at best and there were times when he wondered if it had all been a very bad dream. What he couldn’t deny was that he had woken up over two weeks ago covered in dried cum and wax and vomit, his wrists and ankles ringed with freshly scabbed-over cuts and burns, his ass fucked raw, and every part of him throbbing with pain, especially his head, which he swore had three-inch nails driven into his skull. It took an entire day for his vision to clear, infuriating because he had a canvas to finish. He assumed he had invited some john to his flat and
things had gotten out of hand, maybe he’d smoked some bad shit, it wouldn’t be the first time and he’d be lying if he said he hadn’t blacked out before in his life. But now he had the sensation of something crawling beneath his skin and it made him break out in a cold sweat. What Kenny was telling him rang like a bell in his head, the clanging distant at first but sounding louder and louder in his mind as he wracked his brains. He wanted to vomit.

It was like pulling his guts out of his throat when he finally worked up the nerve to ask Kenny, “What video?”

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Seeing the video…as much as he had always poured himself into his paintings, as much as he had abased himself in countless ways, as much as he had made himself vulnerable to pain and humiliation, that video was more than just a simple violation of his body. It was a theft of his soul. Whatever he had done in life, he had chosen it. Even in the face of Erwin’s rejection, he wasn’t left completely powerless. He could still pick himself off the floor and fight. He could fight until he chose not to; it would be on his own terms whether he lived or died. But this…this was stealing.

For a long while he sat stunned, the breath knocked out of him. Groveling for Erwin’s affection was nothing compared to what he was seeing on that Bangmaster!Armin website. Shame didn’t even come close to describing how he felt, because shame would have been too simple and easily pushed aside. No, this was something that gutted him in a way that made all those empty spaces fill with fury, and fury was power, fury was action, fury was an unequivocal “fuck you” screamed at the top of his lungs. Day in and day out, that Green-Eyed Devil had come into the tea shop, a demon masquerading as an unwashed loser. He was one of Erwin’s students, he claimed, he was Erwin’s spy, he claimed, but all along he had set his greedy sights on Levi and Levi had been oblivious. Well. How does one defeat the devil?

“You motherfucker.” Levi slammed shut his new laptop. “I’ll show you.” The sudden change of plans didn’t daunt him. No, he would rise up to the challenge, look the Green-Eyed Devil in the eye and shove all the shit of the world right down his goddamn throat.

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Levi’s exhibition opening was in an hour and he would be ready come hell or high water. Although he had been contracted for four large canvases, he had started on a fifth one after Taki had left, and it was that fifth canvas that was his oblique love letter to Erwin, and maybe even his plea for forgiveness from Taki. The painting was of Salome presenting the head of John the Baptist to her stepfather Herod, and it was the only painting in which Levi had depicted his own face. He was the beheaded saint, even if he were anything but saintly. Salome, a lithe young woman shown dressed in a sheer gown encrusted with precious gemstones, had Taki’s countenance, and Herod…Herod was Erwin accepting the silver charger with the saint’s head. It was Levi’s way of saying, “I gave you everything.” Or perhaps he was saying, “I am done and I have no regrets.” But that last part would be a lie, because Levi did have regrets, too many to count.

The painting, along with the four other canvases, was already installed in the gallery, and now all he had left to do was to drag the mattress to the middle of his studio under the three skylights, set up the ring of candles along the perimeter of the room, and wait.

“Erwin,” Levi murmured as he sat on the mattress, shoulders slumped from exhaustion, “for once, see me. Don’t forget me. I wish you could have loved me.”

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“Goddamn it, Armin! I don’t want to be late!” Eren ran ahead through the tunnel and then elbowed his way past the people standing willy-nilly on the escalator as they exited the Underground. Stupid tourists! Always standing on the wrong side!

Armin huffed and puffed after him. He’d just recorded a two-hour ‘session’ for his pornosite with a new partner and he was sore and a little wrung out, his hips loose and aching. The man had been a lousy dom, he didn’t respect boundaries and he smelled like sweaty socks. Armin decided he would never use him again. Klaus hadn’t called him in over a month, much to Armin’s disappointment. The other great disappointment had been the slew of hate mail he’d received recently. His subscribers were flaming him for the live stream featuring him and Eren and Levi. It had been a huge miscalculation apparently, and Armin felt badly, not just because people were leaving the nastiest comments, but because he realized that they had probably crossed a line that they shouldn’t have. At least, he had crossed a line, even if Eren didn’t agree. People made such a big deal out of consent nowadays; it was something that Armin had never even considered in the past. He had never been made to do anything he didn’t want to do, after all, and it wasn’t until they had finally untied Levi and watched him vomit all over himself that Armin actually looked into his eyes. He couldn’t believe the depth of sadness he saw in them. “We did a bad thing,” Armin had told Eren, but Eren had only scoffed, “Don’t be such a wuss. He couldn’t get enough of me.”

So it was with more than a little reluctance that Armin followed Eren down the crowded street. At least twelve galleries were clustered along this particular stretch of the West End and they all had openings that night to kick off the busy fall season. People had spilled out onto the sidewalk, chatting loudly and holding glasses of wine. The night was warm and the atmosphere was festive.

“How up!” Eren shouted. “We’ve only got another hour!”

The gallery was jam packed when they finally arrived. It was a group show featuring three artists in total, and they had to push their way through the various rooms. The front space was taken up by the work of a female sculptor. On the floor were super-sized cast bronze penises, all of them at least four feet tall with prominent foreskins. Hung on the wall were gigantic cast bronze pussies with missing clitori and sewn up vulvas. The artist could be heard talking to a critic about the inhumanity of genital mutilation.

The next room was nothing but a spinning disco ball casting pinpoints of colored light on the walls of the darkened space, a strobe light flashing periodically, and an old tape deck in the corner playing “Stayin’ Alive” while people tripped and spilled drinks on each other, unable to detect the subtle indentations the artist had carved out of the floor. Right outside the room was an old inkjet printer on a table spitting out images of gallery-goers caught mid-trip or spill. The artist was charging five pounds per image, a glass fish bowl set next to the printer with a hand-lettered sign taped over it on the wall stating: “Pay up, losers.”

The last room was Levi’s. It was crowded but at least it was well-lit. No tripping and spilling here. There were four canvases hung on opposite walls; on one wall there was the Martyrdom of St Sebastian and the Stoning of St Stephen, and facing it was Semele Annihilated by Zeus and Ariadne on the Island of Naxos. A larger canvas hung on the wall in the back facing the doorway—Salome Presenting the Head of John the Baptist to Herod—and there was a kiosk in the center of the room with monitors built into all four sides. Standing in front of one of the monitors was Erwin Smith, who had arrived an hour ago, hoping to see Levi and perhaps make things right. Instead, Erwin had searched the room in giddy excitement at first, and then with disappointment when he realized Levi wasn’t there…yet? So he had busied himself looking at the canvases. They were beautiful, exquisite, so much more polished than the work Levi had produced at university.

“You always liked Gustave Moreau,” Erwin thought to himself as he sipped his glass of Pinot Gris.
The canvases were rich and smoky. They reminded Erwin of a fine Cuban cigar, or a nicely aged whisky, they had the same amber coloring and for some reason, he imagined he could taste the images on his tongue. They reminded him of the jewels in the darkened rooms at the Victoria and Albert Museum…the way the layers of thinly applied oils glistened under the lights. What was it but pride swelling in his chest? “You’ve come far, Levi, despite everything. Even in spite of me.”

He examined each canvas, every square inch, and the meaning was not lost to him. In each canvas he could see himself—as a soldier with a bow and arrow, as Zeus sitting on a throne with bolts of lightning emanating from his shoulders, as a self-righteous sinner casting a stone, as Theseus sailing off on a ship, as Herod accepting Levi’s head—and still, he felt proud, so proud of the boy he had met in Berlin, the boy he had abandoned. It was some time before he could get close enough to the kiosk in the center of the room to see what was actually playing on the monitors. And then he didn’t know what to think.

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“Dr. Smith!” Eren approached his professor with a hand raised to grab him by the arm. He clutched at an empty suit jacket sleeve instead. “Th’ fuck?” He hadn’t seen Erwin since the night at the karaoke bar, had only been told by the secretary at school that Erwin was spending his break in Berlin. “What happened to your arm? Did you wrestle a chainsaw or something?”

Erwin’s eyes were ice cold as he pulled his sleeve out of Eren’s grasp and gripped Eren’s shirt with his remaining hand. “Eren Jaeger.” The anger in Erwin’s voice was enough to make Eren think twice about gloating. He had had his way with Levi in Erwin’s absence, but now he could only wonder what had pissed off a man who was usually an emotional zombie. “Can you explain this?” Erwin demanded with a jerk of his head toward one of the monitors. He grabbed the front of Eren’s shirt and stood him in front of the kiosk and shoved his face into one of the screens.

Playing on the monitor was a video on a loop, edited in choppy cuts, of Levi…performing…naked: Levi dripping hot candle wax on his bare chest, Levi flagellating himself with a cat o’ nine tails, Levi fucking himself with a twelve-inch dildo, Levi carving the name ‘Erwin’ onto the flat plane of his pale belly, all the while speaking into the camera, “Erwin, he says you hired him, but I forgive you, even after what he did to me. I’ll always love you, Erwin. I’ll never forget you.”

Eren’s eyes were wide with confusion. What was this? What was Levi doing? He jerked his head around, scanned the room, dread pooling in his stomach, but there was no Levi in sight. Was this a joke? He looked to his left and saw Armin standing beside him, watching the video with equal shock.

“He…he’s mocking us,” Armin said, his voice barely above a whisper. “All the things we did…” but really, Levi was speaking to Eren. True, Armin had been the one to drip hot candle wax on Levi, but it was Eren egging him on, telling him to make sure he doused both nipples. Had Levi heard him, Armin wondered, had Levi heard Armin saying, “Please forgive me.” God, he hoped so.

At exactly five minutes to ten o’clock the monitors cut to static, and then came alive again abruptly to what looked like a live feed, the ticking time stamp running in the lower right of the screen seemed to confirm that it was live. The lighting was dim but it was enough to illuminate a naked figure standing on a bare mattress in the middle of a bare space. Chris Isaak’s Wicked Game began playing in the background and with it the lone figure began undulating, slow movements with just the arms lifted from the sides of his body, a shiny object held in each hand. Around the mattress was a ring of thick candles sitting directly on the wooden floor, which glistened in the low light of the flames. What was that? Water?

“Levi,” Erwin murmured. Thank god, Levi was alive, somewhere, he was stark naked but he was in
one piece and very much alive. And dancing slowly to the music, his eyes so dark they looked like black orbs, his movements trance-like. *He’s probably high as a kite, Erwin thought, isn’t that just like him?* But as the song and dance went on, Erwin realized that the shiny objects in Levi’s hands were knives; he was sure of it because of the cuts Levi made on his body and the thin lines of crimson leaking from those cuts and now there were astonished gasps rising all around him as the the people close enough to the monitors watched, mesmerized by the performance, because it was a performance, wasn’t it? It was *real*, wasn’t it? And if it was real, then it was just something following a rich tradition of performance art where an artist could have a friend shoot him with real gun and with a real bullet, where another artist could suspend himself from the ceiling with real hooks through his very real skin. It was disturbing and discomfiting and rather gross, but it was still *art*, so…nobody in the gallery started screaming until the flames erupted all around the dancing, bleeding figure, who seemed more than a little surprised.

“Erwin?” Levi spoke, his eyes wide and very lucid as he stared straight into the camera. “I did this for you.”

The image on the screen darkened in the next moments and then was completely obscured with thick black smoke, the song had ended, and a loud noise was heard, something between a crash and an explosion, then the feed cut out abruptly. There was a deafening silence in the gallery, and then someone screamed.

Eren Jaeger screamed as he lunged at Erwin Smith, the blade of his Swiss army knife plunged between the fourth and fifth ribs on Erwin’s left side. “He’s mine!” Eren shouted, pulling out the blade and stabbing again, aiming at Erwin’s neck. It was only Armin tackling Eren from behind that made Eren miss his mark and stab Erwin in his left shoulder instead.

Chaos erupted in the gallery as people fled in all directions. There was only one figure moving towards the three people grappling on the floor, a tall impeccably dressed foreigner who grabbed Eren by the back of his shirt, lifted him up and knocked him unconscious with one violent punch to his face.

The stranger dropped Eren onto the floor and then calmly put his mobile to his ear while both Erwin and Armin stared up in shock. “Suoh-san?” the man said. “Is it done?”

Here's the song playing at Levi's exhibition opening: **Chris Isaak, Wicked Game**
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Erwin and Levi have words.

The first thing Levi saw when he awoke was a pair of amber eyes glaring down at him. He’d seen those eyes before, the slicked-back, jet-black hair, the bespoke three-piece suit and tie, the cigarette dangling between lips curled into a cruel smirk. It was him—not the blond goon, although the blond goon, Mr. Suoh, was there, too, looming like a humanoid mountain in the background—it was the same freak who had materialized in Taki’s bedroom in Taki’s fancy-schmancy condo across from the Tate Modern, the man who was…

“You’re a very foolish brat,” Asami told him. He took a deep drag on his cigarette and then stuck it in Levi’s mouth, like he was giving candy to a baby.

Levi pursed his lips, inhaled, then coughed violently. The Dunhill landed on Levi’s chest, but when Asami reached for it, Levi snatched it up and put it back to his mouth; he wasn’t going to pass up a good cigarette, even if he choked himself on it. It occurred to Levi that he must appear a greedy child. Then he thought, “Who gives a fuck?” He was lying propped up in a bed somewhere—what looked like an expensive hotel suite—and there were three men in the room with him: the man who was Taki’s wife’s godfather if he remembered correctly, there was Mr. Suoh, and there was another tall, dark-haired man with glasses. “Who’s Glasses Guy?” Levi asked no one in particular. He sucked tentatively on the cigarette and this time it didn’t burn his lungs quite as much as before. No one deigned to answer him, but his question did elicit a fleeting scowl from the bespectacled man, who grabbed the Dunhill out of Levi’s hand and shoved an oxygen mask over his face before walking over to the sitting area and making a phone call.

“I’d breathe in if I were you,” Asami told Levi. “The chemicals in your studio were very toxic. You’re lucky my men got to you in time or else who knows what condition you would be in right now.”

Levi breathed in the pure oxygen, felt his head swim a little. Even in his weakened state, it didn’t make sense for them to save him if they planned on killing him. After a few moments, he pulled the mask away from his face and sneered, “I’d probably be a nicely charred piece of meat, as if you’d care.” Levi knew that the paint thinner he had sloshed onto the floor of his studio was flammable, and he had hoped for it to provide an appropriately dramatic effect—not Michael Bay explosion level—but a suitably colorful backdrop to his dance. If he were more technically adept, perhaps he could have done it in a safer manner, maybe through special effects but he didn’t have the software loaded on his computer for that, so he did it the old fashioned way. He figured if things got too wild and woolly, he had a fire extinguisher sitting a few feet away to take care of that. What he didn’t factor in was the volatility of the fumes, so when the room suddenly went up like a fucking blowtorch he wasn’t exactly prepared for the inferno engulfing his studio. Still, he had the wherewithal to at least tell Erwin that it was all for him and, maybe if Erwin were watching, then Levi could die knowing that he had done his best. He couldn’t see anything through the thick smoke, smoke that was burning his lungs more than the flames were burning his skin, but he did hear the skylights above him shatter with a thundering crash—probably from the heat and the pressure of the conflagration in such a small space—and in the moments before what he knew would be his end, he had a second or two to muse,
“Well, at least it’ll be quick.” Then the black smoke, thick like tar, clogged his lungs and he couldn’t pull in a single choking breath. There was another second or two when he thought, “This isn’t at all like in the movies” before consciousness was snuffed out.

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It wasn’t the heat and pressure of the fire that had shattered the skylights. It was Suoh’s two-hundred sixty-pound body crashing through the glass. Kirishima skillfully held the helicopter at a steady hover while his colleague hung by a cord, threw the fireproof sheet over the small body on the mattress, and pushed the button that wound the cord back up into the belly of the chopper, Levi’s limp form clutched tightly in this arms. Once inside, Suoh placed the oxygen mask over Levi’s face and prayed. If he was too late, Asami would kill him and Kirishima. Well, maybe not kill, but they would likely be severely reprimanded.

Not privy to any of his own over-the-top Hollywood-esque action movie rescue, Levi could only wonder aloud, “Am I in hell or something?”

Asami chuckled. “You imagine hell to be a suite at the Langham? My, my, rather expensive tastes for a starving artist who can’t even pay his rent.”

“Who the fuck are you?” Levi spat. If he really was dead and in hell, then he had nothing more to lose to the devil, who apparently was Taki’s wife’s godfather, and not the green-eyed scumbag who had violated him. “Were you the one who…did you send me Erwin’s arm? You cut it off, didn’t you?”

“Yes and no,” Asami said. He lit up another Dunhill but didn’t offer it to Levi this time. “Yes, I had the man’s arm…removed, but no, I did not cut it off. That would be Suoh-san.” Asami nodded at Suoh, who grunted an affirmative. “It was either that or your own arm. Would you have preferred that instead, Levi? I thought I was extending you a mercy.”

“Fuck you. You can shove your mercy up your ass.”

Suoh actually closed his eyes. He couldn’t believe the balls on Levi; the boy had no filter and his defiance reminded him of a certain someone back in Tokyo, whose own appalling behavior towards his boss drove his colleague Kirishima to new heights of indignation. Fortunately, Kirishima was busy making arrangements for their flight back home, otherwise there would be a mess for the cleaning staff to mop up.

Asami merely sighed, immune to such insults thanks to his tumultuous relationship with Takaba, and commented, “I assume you are not capable of feeling gratitude?”

“No shit, Sherlock.” It took all of Levi’s will power not to flinch when Asami raised his hand. Was he going to punch him in the face?

No, Asami didn’t punch him in the face or anywhere else on his body. He tapped the ash from his cigarette onto Levi’s hair, as if he were a human ashtray, and informed him, “Your uncle gave you to me, to do with whatever I please. Do you think he loves you? He could have let you die, but he gave you to me instead of putting a bullet in your head himself. Shall I kill you for him? Is that what you want?”

Who the fuck was this guy? Jung? Nietzsche? Levi couldn’t care less about philosophical, existential bullshit, which was basically just a sorry justification for whatever it was that motivated a person to commit the worst crimes. He just wanted to know the unvarnished truth. “Was it Kenny’s idea, then, to cut off Erwin’s arm?”
Asami arranged his face into an unreadable mask, but inside, he was rather impressed. Levi was self-centered, fearless, and he didn’t back down even when cornered, especially when cornered, and that made Asami’s blood rise hot in his veins. “What if it were his idea?”

Once again, Levi refused to flinch. A stranger maiming Erwin was one thing, but his Uncle Kenny knew how much Levi wanted Erwin, how much he loved him, ached for him, was willing to tear out his own heart for him. If it was his own uncle who had allowed this to happen, perhaps negotiated it, then...he wouldn’t give Kenny the satisfaction of winning. “I’ll make him eat it,” Levi said. It wasn’t until Asami took out a handkerchief from his breast pocket and wiped Levi’s face that Levi realized he was crying. Jesus Christ! Could things get any worse? He turned away on the bed, shouting, “Leave me the fuck alone!” Then he buried his face in the pillow and prayed for an asteroid to hit the earth. He hated everyone and everything, so much had gone to shit when he had thought there was absolutely nothing else to lose, still, there was more blood to be drawn. He sobbed into the pillow, bone-tired and too hungry to even feel the pangs in his stomach, he was beyond that now. He felt a touch on his shoulder and whirled around, ready to lash out. It was Suoh sitting on the bed beside him.

“Why?” Levi cried. “It was you, wasn’t it? Why didn’t you just let me die? Why did you save me?”

“I do my job,” Suoh told him. His face was stony, as stoic as ever, but his eyes were not cold. He placed the oxygen mask over Levi’s mouth and nose once more and said, “Breathe.” When Levi obeyed without protest, Suoh spoke again, his tone softer, “He’s not a bad man, my boss. You should show him gratitude, respect.”

Levi nodded, then pushed the mask away and asked, “How did you know...how did you know to even come?”

“Asami-sama has eyes everywhere.”

Of course they knew what Levi was up to; they’d been observing him for weeks. It was a stupid thing that Levi was planning to do, but Asami was a creative thinker and he knew how to capitalize on what should be a disastrous situation: an up-and-coming artist killed during a freak accident of his own making, all in the name of love. Before the opening, Asami had met with the gallery director, written out a check to cover the purchase of all the paintings, knowing that the ensuing publicity —Art World Mourns the Tragic Death of a Young Artist on the Cusp of Fame!—would increase the value of the paintings at auction, not to mention the work that would mysteriously surface post-death, work that would eventually be ‘found’ in Berlin at a storage facility owned by Kenny Ackerman and conveniently ‘authenticated’ by Levi’s former professor and lover, Erwin Smith.

Suoh kept all that close to the vest, of course. It was up to Asami to tell Levi whatever he wanted him to know. For now, Suoh was satisfied that the boy was in relatively good health, all things considered, and capable of making the trip to Japan.

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In the next room, Erwin Smith lay pondering the absurdity of his situation. He was back in a hospital room after yet another visitation from that black-haired devil in the three-piece suit, except this time the devil had perhaps saved his life from a crazed Eren Jaeger. The blade of the Swiss army knife was too small and short to puncture his left lung, a very fortunate thing, but he had still bled profusely as he lay on the polished terrazzo floor of the gallery watching the man knock Eren out with one heavy wallop across the boy’s jaw.

“Here,” the man had said, handing a neatly folded handkerchief from his breast pocket to a whimpering Armin, “hold this over the wound and apply constant pressure. And you,” he had said to
Erwin, “don’t move or the bleeding will get worse.”

The paramedics and cops had arrived shortly afterwards. The last thing Erwin saw before he was put into the ambulance was Eren being questioned by an officer. He was given an injection that made him groggy, made the pain slip away and his thoughts scatter about. The dark-haired devil was no where in sight. Until now, when the door opened and the man walked in accompanied by the tall blond goon who had cut off his arm over a month ago. Oh, Jesus. Were they here to take off his other arm? Had he accidentally ingested some overly potent ‘shrooms and was on a very bad trip? Come to think of it, Hange had sent him back to London with some cookies—“These are special Dutch ones,” she had said—and he’d been eating them ever since…

“I honestly didn’t think we’d meet again,” Asami said. He stood by the bed and lit up a cigarette while the butcher fellow waited in front of the door, blocking it.

“They don’t allow smoking in hospitals,” Erwin told him. He didn’t know what else to say, except maybe, Are you here to kill me? But he didn’t want to give the guy any ideas.

“What makes you think you’re in a hospital?” the man asked.

Erwin looked about the small room. It was cushier than most hospital rooms, with wood paneled walls and carpeting on the floor and heavy drapes on the one window, but perhaps it was one of those new fangled patient-friendly rooms designed to ease the anxiety experienced during most hospital stays. He looked down at himself, shirtless and his chest wrapped in gauze. He couldn’t tell if he was fully naked beneath the sheets and he wasn’t about to check with these two nutjobs in the room with him.

“Listen, is this an interrogation or something?” Erwin sighed out of frustration. “I don’t know who you people are but…normal people don’t go around chopping limbs off of strangers, so…does any of this have to do with Levi? Does he owe you money? Did he steal from you? Accidentally kill your mother?”

Asami shrugged. “In a way, he took something that belongs to my family. No matter. He’ll repay his debt.”

“Jesus Christ.” During their three years together in Berlin, Erwin had never asked Levi what kind of ‘work’ he did for his Uncle Kenny. He didn’t ask because he didn’t want to know but that didn’t mean he didn’t suspect it likely had to do with drugs or contraband or prostitution. Kenny Ackerman was a known criminal in that city and Levi was his nephew. He didn’t need to be a brain surgeon to put two and two together. Erwin had taken the same moral stance as all the other soldiers when he was stationed in Afghanistan: he had stuck his head in the sand when the shit went down. It was the only way they could live with themselves and he had done the same in his relationship with Levi; the less he knew, the safer he felt, but he had been a fool. There was no hiding from the truth, especially when it came to Levi. “Who are you?” Erwin asked. “I think it would be fair to let me know before you kill me. Dead men tell no tales, right?”

“Asami Ryuichi,” the man said. “Your boy, Levi—”

“He’s not my boy,” Erwin interjected. “You wouldn’t understand.” He clutched at the sheet and pulled it higher up his chest, as if it could hide his guilt. “I threw him away, treated him like garbage. I doubt if he would ever forgive me.”

“Ah. That’s too bad.” Asami took a leisurely drag on his cigarette. “Would you like to see him? It might be your last opportunity.”
Erwin gaped. “What? Like right now?”

“Why not? What better time than now?”

The blond giant helped Erwin into a robe and then into a wheelchair. He was pushed across the carpeted hallway and into a large suite.

“Erwin?” Levi was sitting up in a bed, his eyes wide with shock. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

“What the hell are you doing here?” Erwin shot back.

Asami directed Suoh to push the wheelchair next to Levi’s bed. “You two work it out.” Then he and Suoh left, shutting the door behind them.

Seconds ticked by as Erwin and Levi stared at each other in silence, Erwin at Levi’s ashen face, Levi at Erwin’s empty right sleeve.

“I went to your opening,” Erwin finally said.

“Oh,” Levi replied.

“The paintings...they were good...they were more than good.”

Levi snorted, turned his face away to look at the wall. Erwin had come and Levi wanted to cry, wanted to believe that it meant something, but all he felt was misery. He wanted Erwin to hold him, show him something, anything, but Erwin was his usual aloof self. Nothing had changed. Nothing! He was missing a fucking arm and nothing between them had changed.

“That video,” Erwin continued, his voice low and a little ragged, “what was that? What did you mean by it? What happened to you?”

“What happened to me?” Levi asked, incredulous. “You left me. You left me! You sent that piece of shit to spy on me! That Green-Eyed Devil...he drugged me...raped me! Are you happy now, Erwin? Are you satisfied? All I wanted was for you to love me. I never wanted any of this to happen! And now...look at you. You have no arm. Kenny sold me out. Taki hates me. I...I’m so tired. I’m so tired of being alive. I’m so tired of being alone. Why couldn’t you love me?” He had begged and pleaded and groveled in front of Erwin before. “Nothing will ever change, will it?” Levi sobbed. “You’ll never want me like I want you.”

Erwin reached out with his left arm, threw it around Levi’s shoulders and clutched him to his chest, the stitches in his side protesting. “You stupid boy,” Erwin murmured into Levi’s ear. “You don’t know me at all.”
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Taki continues his downward spiral. Claudia meets Feilong.

Où est la fenêtre?

Fermez ta bouche!

Cherchez la femme!

For some reason, the voice of his French language tutor came back to Taki. He was dreaming and he heard the man saying, “Écoutez et répêtez!” Then the face of the young Frenchman morphed into Suguri’s face and he was being told to write an essay on a play by Molière, only Taki knew that he had neglected to read the play and he’d have to fake it big time. Oh good gods, every time he tried to write a sentence, the words flew out of his head, he couldn’t put his thoughts in order and time was running out. In another minute, his teacher would collect the exam papers. Taki stared down at his booklet. It was empty. He had written nothing, nothing at all. What would he do now? And then he remembered he had forgotten to go to class all semester! The bell rang. He got up and trudged to the hallway and stood in front of his locker. He couldn’t remember how to open that locker, he couldn’t remember the combination. He couldn’t do anything but stare helplessly. He needed to change his shoes. If only he could open that locker…

Taki startled awake, panting into the darkness. He was alone, in his bed alone. The clock on his nightstand read 6:43 am. It wasn’t too early to get up. It was just another day. He wondered if Sana was awake. She had sent him away last night after they had taken a late meal together. He hadn’t been hungry, having eaten some sweets earlier in the evening, and had sipped on green tea while she ate a light dinner. They had tried again…and he had failed to reach orgasm once more.

“Maybe you should sleep in your own room,” she had told him.

After a chaste kiss, he had slipped out of her bed and crept into his own, and now he was awake and…what would he do? Another day. Klaus was barely speaking to him. Klaus had his sister Claudia to keep him afloat. Yes, that is what Taki told himself. Claudia and Suguri-san had been in Hong Kong as Feilong’s ‘guests’ for a week now, and Klaus was spending his free time with his sister while Taki did his best to impregnate his own wife. It hadn’t been going well. Suguri had suggested artificial insemination, but Sana had insisted on the old fashioned cock-in-pussy route as long as Taki was willing to try. Gods, did he try, did he ever! He wondered what Levi was doing. Levi…of all people. Taki pulled himself upright, sat up in bed with a pillow propped behind him and palmed himself. “Are you alright?” Taki whispered into the silence of his room. “Do you miss me?”

Then he closed his eyes and thought of Klaus instead, his golden eyes, his golden hair, his big hands on him, the scent of his skin, the aggressive curl of his tongue against his own whenever Klaus kissed him. He thought of the weight of Klaus’s body on top of him, the agonizing pain each and every time Klaus pushed into him…it was all so good…

It took only a few minutes to jerk himself off, his cum spurting onto his own heaving chest as he
swallowed the moans back down. What would he do? Taki prayed to his gods, pleading, “Help me. Help me or kill me.

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“This is like old times, sis, like when we were kids.”

With Taki spending his nights with Sana, Klaus had his room all to himself. It was nice not being alone for once, even if it was his sister lying next to him instead of a lover, it was better than nothing. Actually, it was much better than nothing. He was sober for the first time in weeks and it didn’t feel like the end of the world with Claudia keeping him company. She had given him an earful, of course, doing her Big Sister act and scolding him like crazy for wallowing in drugs and drink, but none of it had any real sting. That she cared enough to come all this way to help him warmed his lonely heart.

For her part, it wasn’t all that bad either, bunking with her brother and chattering back and forth through the night about the meaning of life and other deep shit, as if either of them had a handle on things. It reminded her of the interminable days that had followed their mother’s departure—the quick kiss on their cheeks late one evening and then the sight of her picking up a suitcase and walking out the front door, their father sitting, unmoving, in the den smoking a cigarette, her and Klaus speechless, disbelieving—when all they had was each other. So many years later, it felt like they were back in the same spot: what had been the anchor point on the horizon gone and now they were flying in the dark, directionless.

“I’m lost without him,” Klaus told her. “He’s here, but he’s not mine anymore. I don’t know what to do.”

As if she knew what to tell him. What could she tell him when she had realized, decided that she was going to leave her own husband. She was going to fuck Suguri again, goddamn it, and then she was going to leave Stephen. One had nothing to do with the other, but both had something to do with the desire to live again, to wake the fuck up and grasp happiness for herself before it was too late.

“He’s duty-bound,” Claudia said. Her heart had bled more than a little for Taki when Suguri told her more details. She knew what it felt like to give away a piece of your soul for a spouse, in the hopes that it would blossom into something beautiful, only to have it wither on the vine. She understood the burden of obligation, even if it was crushing you. And poor Sana. The girl was caught in the same net cast by her family, desperate to find a means of escape. Klaus was relegated to bystander status, but… “At least you’re still alive. Suguri-san told me they had it out for you. Taki’s uncle…he could have—”

“So why didn’t he?” Klaus huffed. “It’s not like they’re doing me any favors.”

Claudia turned and looked at her brother. That his professional career in baseball was over… yeah, that was something both she and Klaus should probably accept. He had always given in to addiction, and from what she had seen in the few days she had been in Hong Kong under the protection of Suguri, her brother hadn’t held back. That didn’t mean she had lost hope, though. No. Suguri had explained the situation to her, she understood what was at stake, and it had little to do with baseball: her younger brother was involved in a relationship with a young man married to a woman who was the goddaughter of the most powerful crime lord in Japan, and this same younger brother was the monkey wrench fucking up the marriage. She liked Taki. Claudia knew Klaus loved the boy and Klaus had never loved anyone until Taki… so, how could she not help them.

She was grateful to Suguri, of course. Without him, without his introduction to Feilong, she would have never been allowed to see Klaus at all. The day she had called Suguri after Sana’s phone call,
she had been surprised that he even remembered her. Men like him…she didn’t expect him to remember, much less acknowledge, a drunken one-night stand, but Suguri had not only remembered, he had spoken the most flattering words.

“Claudia-san,” Suguri had said, “how could I ever forget you? A woman like you…I am honored.”

Who had won that game of Texas Hold ‘em poker that night? Was it Suguri or was it her? It didn’t matter. Regardless of who had won, they had engaged in the most glorious night of lovemaking afterwards. At least, it was for Claudia. The kisses, the feel of his mouth on her skin, the strength of his hands on her, the gentleness, too, at all the right times, and oh! the silken feel of his tongue on her clt, the hard length of his cock carving into her body…how long had it been since she had felt so…worshipped? She and Stephen had sex three times a week and it was always about his own pleasure. It had been years since he had brought her to orgasm and, well, she had given up hope. So to see Suguri again, to have opportunity to feel pleasure once more…she wouldn’t turn it down. She would fuck him without hesitation, without guilt or regret but, first, she would make sure her little brother was safe. She couldn’t guarantee Klaus’s happiness, but she could at least keep him from harm.

Before making the trip, while she still had Suguri on the phone, Suguri had not only elaborated on the situation in which Klaus, Taki and Sana were embroiled, he had given her a few pointers on etiquette, protocol, and what to expect from a Chinese mob boss.

“Liu Feilong likes to collect rare and beautiful things,” Suguri had told her. “In fact, his own beauty is rather renown, but it seems he has no weakness for women. He does love roses, though.”

Roses. That was something she could work with. After their arrival in Hong Kong, Feilong had invited them to dinner and Claudia was grateful for Suguri’s honesty because Feilong was indeed stunning. She had never seen a man so beautiful in her entire life. Then again, she wasn’t used to seeing a man with long silken hair wearing an embroidered gown, a man who spoke English in the weirdest accent and who doted on a young prepubescent boy named Tao. All she could do was offer the one gift she had brought with her. Her grandparents had lived in Germany in a small town that was located on an old pilgrimage route, what had been called the Jakobsweg—the Way of St James. Her grandparents had cultivated roses on their property, old roses, roses that gave off a heady fragrance unlike the scentless roses found today in garden centers across the States, which sacrificed scent for mildew and mold resistance. No, the roses in her grandparents’ garden could trace their ancestry back to Roman times, and then even further back to the native wild roses in China, and it was a rosebush from her grandparents’ garden that she had transplanted into her own and then nurtured, propagated, and then taken a cutting that she hid in an empty tube of mascara, wrapped carefully in plastic wrap to preserve its moisture on the plane ride to Hong Kong.

She had presented the cutting to Feilong, telling him, “I can graft this onto a hardy rootstock suitable for your climate. In three years, you will have a plant producing blooms to rival your most exquisite peony in fragrance.”

The smile on Feilong’s face…it was a smile that she knew was rarely given, it was so tinged with melancholy. “I think we understand each other, Ms. Claudia.”

Then servants had brought out the first of a fifteen-course meal.

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The man Feilong was obsessed with had thought so little of him, so little, in fact, that he had allowed him to rot in prison for seven long years. Feilong had survived those years of humiliation because he had been loved at one time by an adoptive father who couldn’t protect him from a jealous, legitimate son, but he had loved him nonetheless. Liu Feilong had taken the name of a man who could have
rejected him like his own biological father—tossed him away like garbage—but, instead, the elder Baishe syndicate leader had given Feilong a home, a purpose, a world in which he could express his inner rage in a constructive manner. He was trained as an assassin from an early age, and he was very, very good at the tasks set out for him, but no one, not even his adoptive father, had prepared him to meet Asami Ryuichi.

He had been a mere twenty years old when he met Asami Ryuichi for the first time, the same age Taki had been when he met Klaus von Wolfstadt. Klaus was utterly harmless compared to an unapologetic bastard like Asami, but Feilong had never forgotten the memory of first love that had been seared into his soul. It was something that scarred one forever, like a tattoo inked onto one’s skin, a mark that could only be removed through hours and hours of pain. To this day, Asami mocked him for his ongoing efforts to gain his attention.

“You act like a silly schoolgirl,” Asami would taunt. “Cut your hair and man up.”

Cut your hair. As if he would ever. Feilong had grown his hair long because his beloved adoptive father had praised him for it, told him as a child how beautiful his hair was, the first time Feilong had ever heard kind words spoken to him. In prison, he had not been given a choice. His hair had been cut for the first time since he was a child taken into the Liu clan, but after he served his prison term, he only had the ends trimmed to maintain its flawless, silken beauty. His adoptive father was dead, but he would keep his memory alive by growing his hair long, just the way the man had liked it.

Family…it was such a strange construct, but so powerful. He had endured the relentless abuse from his older stepbrother because he was family, but once Feilong had a son of his own—Tao, a boy he had taken into his own household after the boy’s parents had been accidentally killed in the crossfire of a shootout between two factions—he finally understood that family trumped everything. He would do anything for Tao, give him his name and all the doors it would open, give him his legacy of wealth and power and dominance. And even though he himself could not win the heart of the man he had loved as a naïve and stupid twenty-year-old fool, his own heart was not so cruel and hardened as to be blind to what was right in front of his eyes. In the many hours of drug-addled indulgence he had shared with his most recent ‘acquisitions,’ one thing was made clear: Klaus and Taki were madly in love, and they were doomed. They were doomed because Taki’s and Sana’s families would see to it. They would make them choose obligation and duty over love. Feilong knew better. Obligation and duty had led to nothing but loss and sorrow in his own life.

When he received a call from Asami—the man who had crushed his soul with rejection—asking him to accept a visit from Suguri, Taki’s godfather, and Claudia, Klaus’s sister, he was tempted to say ‘no’ and ‘fuck off’ because he had no other way to regain a semblance of honor and dignity except to be rude to the man’s face. But then Asami had told them why Suguri and Claudia wanted to visit and Feilong had relented. He knew what it was to be used as a pawn by one’s own family. He would never do that to Tao, so he agreed. He would hear them out; he had nothing to lose.

Suguri was gracious, very old fashioned, and the man clearly cared deeply for Taki. Taki. Every time Feilong looked at Taki he was reminded of his own stupid younger self, helplessly in love and clueless about the harsh realities of external elements working to prevent any hope of a happily-ever-after. His own beloved father figure was gone and Asami had refused to fill that hole in Feilong’s heart, but Taki still had Klaus and he had Suguri, so not all was lost. And Claudia…he had invited both Claudia and Suguri to a dinner to welcome them to Hong Kong and right before the start of the multi-course meal, the woman had presented him with a gift: a cutting from a very rare rose bush. The woman was a trained botanist, and Feilong himself was very knowledgeable in horticulture, having cultivated numerous species of peonies, both herbaceous and tree form, in his own private gardens. When she offered to graft it onto a rootstock hearty to the region, he had accepted. He loved beautiful things, and the rose she had described had sounded exquisite, not only for its form, but its
fragrance, too.

They had talked about other things over that dinner: politics, art, wine, literature, baseball. Tao was sitting beside him like he always did at meals, and Feilong couldn’t help but notice the look of sadness in Claudia’s eyes.

“Do you have children?” Feilong had asked.

She had laughed, mirthless. “No. Some things are not meant to be.”

The furtive glance she exchanged with Suguri was not lost on Feilong. And then they had discussed the predicament between Taki and Sana, between Taki and Klaus, the real reason for their visit. By the end of the night, the three of them had struck up an amicable deal, a deal facilitated by quality drugs and drink after Tao had been sent to bed. They would each give up something in order to gain something else. In the end, hopefully, everyone would be happy.
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Taki gets a little help.

Taki’s mouth fell open for the first of many times that night. He was naked in bed with Sana, baby-making-attempt-number-whatever soon to be logged into the failure column, when Sana broke their kiss with a gentle push against his chest. Her other hand, the one stroking his limp dick, stilled as his eyelids fluttered open and he gazed stupidly at her breasts, avoiding what could only be a very disappointed look on her face. He wished she would be willing to do it in the dark but, no, Sana always insisted on keeping at least one of the table lamps on in the room, as if she needed any more proof of his raging impotence. All her attempts to be helpful—like trying to stick a finger up his butt—had only embarrassed him to no end. Good gods, the things he had done with Klaus, there was no way he could engage in such behavior with his wife! And yet, that was exactly what Sana was suggesting to him at the moment.

“I’ll bet you’d be hard if Klaus were in bed with us, wouldn’t you, Taki-kun?”

Taki gaped back at her in a panic. “Wha….us…?”

She gave his cock another squeeze and continued teasing, “Wouldn’t you like that, having that man inside you, fucking you senseless?”

The blush that painted Taki’s cheeks sent Sana into a fit of giggles. Her poor, ignorant husband, so clueless about his own transparent desires and her own proclivities. He would have a conniption if he knew what she and Claudia had talked about over tea and pastries earlier that day. They had gotten high on hash cakes and Claudia had spilled the beans about Klaus’s sexual exploits in Las Vegas while Sana had revealed her own carnal experiences with Haru, and both women agreed that the only way to fix Taki’s problem was to just fuck it right out of him. The sight of her former lover Haru getting manhandled during a threesome had been a real turn-on for Sana, and she couldn’t wait to see how thoroughly she could mess up Taki with Klaus as her tool. Though she didn’t care for Klaus’s coarse manner, he was handsome in a brutish sort of way and she was curious to know what this man did to capture Taki’s heart.

“But would Klaus be willing?” Sana had asked Claudia.

Claudia had doubled over laughing, then helped herself to another chemically enhanced slice of cake. “Oh, he’d be willing alright.” She rarely got high at home—Stephen was such a straight laced bore—but she could understand why Klaus had been indulging in illicit drugs like a pig at the trough, the quality and selection here were simply tops.

Sana still had qualms. “What about Suguri-san? He won’t be happy about this. He’ll tell Taki’s uncle, then Taki’s uncle will tell my father, then—”

“You leave Suguri-san to me. That man just needs an excuse to look the other way.”
Whatever Claudia had said to Suguri must have been convincing indeed because Sana’s bedroom door banged open and in walked Klaus, right on cue, announcing, “The cavalry has arrived.” Then he slammed the door shut behind him and stripped off his shirt as he headed to their bed.

That’s when Taki’s mouth dropped open for the second time. “Klaus, what are you doing?” He quickly pulled the sheets up to protect Sana’s modesty. “You can’t just—"

Klaus, who looked to be hammered on crystal meth, ignored his protests completely as he kicked off his pants, then stripped off his socks and briefs, tossing the articles of clothing willy-nilly on the floor. He was ready to climb into bed with them when he stopped abruptly, muttering, “Oh, yeah” to himself before picking up his pants and searching through the pockets. “Can’t forget the lube,” he stated with enthusiasm, holding the small plastic container up in the air for their inspection. As an afterthought, he rummaged through his pants pockets again and came away with a six-pack of condoms, which unfolded accordion style in his other hand. “For me, of course,” Klaus grinned. “Don’t wanna get Taki pregnant, do we?”

Was there nothing normal in his life? Taki wondered. From an early age, he had been told that he was special, that he came from a noble family, that he was meant to carry the burden of responsibility and tradition, and for the better part of twenty years he had done his duty, yet everything had turned upside down ever since he met Klaus: his career in baseball had crashed and burned, his sham marriage was in a bigger shambles, his attempt at independence had imploded in the worst way. His whole life had gone off the rails and now this! That Klaus might be nuts didn’t take any stretch of the imagination, but Sana, too? Taki’s head was spinning.

“Here,” Klaus said, flopping down onto the bed next to them and handing Taki a pipe. “Feilong says to take a few hits. It'll relax you, get you in the mood. You too, Sana. Heh, me three.”

Taki’s eyes went wide. Feilong? Did he put Klaus and Sana up to this? What was this world coming to?

“Suguri says you should keep a pillow under your hips afterwards,” Klaus told Sana as Taki continued to gape at them, his wife and his lover both naked in the same bed with him.

“Duh. I know that,” huffed Sana.

Suguri said what? Was there anyone who didn’t know that they were going to have a threesome? When Klaus held out his lighter, Taki didn’t hesitate to take a huge hit of opium. He might as well be somewhere in outer space at this point because nothing was making sense on earth. Several minutes later he really was floating on a cloud of bliss, his anxieties wiped clear off the map. He had not a care in the world, that was the magic of the drug. When he felt Klaus’s hands on his bare shoulders, the size and heat of them, and then his mouth sucking on the side of his neck, he let fall a shameless moan, forgetting that his own wife was lying against the pillows watching them. He reached down and fondled his own cock as Klaus rubbed and pinched his nipples just a little too roughly, the stubble on Klaus’s chin rasping against the smooth skin of his cheek.

“Show her what you’ve got, Taki,” Klaus growled into his ear. He pulled Taki’s knees apart as he pressed the smaller man’s back against his chest. “Show her that hard dick of yours.”

“S-Sana-san...” Taki threw his head back and gazed at her through heavy-lidded eyes, let his hands fall to his thighs to reveal his erection throbbing against his belly, the head flushed a deep shade of pink. “My wife...”

Now that was the Taki she had married, thought Sana, that beautiful boy with the blue-black eyes, the boy with whom she had made such sweet love in the beginning. She sat up higher only to feel a
rush of wetness dampen the sheets beneath her, she was slick with desire already. Through the haze of druggy bliss, she approached him on hands and knees. She could feel Klaus’s eyes on her, on her nakedness, and it made her feel powerful. “My husband,” she whispered into Taki’s mouth before kissing him deeply, every soft moan from him pulled into her own mouth and swallowed hungrily. “You’re going to cum so hard for me, aren’t you?”

He nodded once before sucking her left breast into his mouth, his tongue swirling about her nipple, and she clutched his face to her chest, fingers carding through the silken strands of his hair. She felt his hand at her pussy, fingers pushing in, the pad of his thumb rubbing circles at her clit and it took all of her self-control to not impale herself on his dick right away. God, she was so wet, she could feel her thighs slick with her own juices. “Get him ready,” she told Klaus.

She lay back and guided Taki’s face between her legs as Klaus positioned Taki on his elbows and knees, ass in the air for him. He lubed him up, using one finger and then two, stretching his hole while Taki laved his tongue across Sana’s clit, bathing it with rapid, firm strokes that had her climaxing almost too quickly. The sudden orgasm after so much frustration only made her ravenous for more. Behind Taki, Klaus was rolling on a condom and that’s when she got her first look at his erect cock and...holy hell, how was that ever going to fit inside her little Taki? She had to see for herself! Sana sat up once more, pushing Taki into Klaus’s lap, kissing and tasting herself on him as she and Klaus maneuvered his legs apart, Klaus’s hands behind Taki’s knees lifting him into a reverse cowboy position while Sana guided Klaus’s dick to Taki’s entrance.

An anguished cry was ripped from Taki’s throat as the head breached his hole and, oh, the sound of his tortured voice drove Sana wild with lust. She wanted to tear him apart, rip him to shreds to get at the very soul of him, this beautiful soul that had been kept hidden from her; she wanted to open him up and claim him, crush him, and put him back together again.


With a grunt, Klaus thrust up into Taki; another thick inch disappeared into him as Taki screamed again. Sana reached out and slapped him across the face and his eyes flew open in shock, his pupils so dilated his irises were two black orbs staring back at her in wonder. Tears welled up and spilled down his reddened cheeks, his teeth clenched against the overwhelming sensations sparking through him. Slowly but surely, thrust by thrust, he took every inch of Klaus inside him until he was seated balls deep, filled to bursting, his own cock leaking on his belly. He opened his eyes again and reached for Sana, her face so full of love as he drew her to him.

“Mine,” Taki said to her. “You’re mine.”

She crawled into his lap as Klaus continued to grind his hips into him, a thick arm wrapped around Taki’s chest to hold him steady. Sana lowered herself onto Taki’s cock in one smooth movement, plunging him completely into the hot wetness of her pussy. “I’m yours,” she assured, peppering his face with kisses. To have him hard and throbbing inside her once more…a throaty laugh escaped her as she rode him roughly, and when her eyes met Klaus’s golden ones full of mischief and mirth, she pressed a grateful kiss to his wolfish, grinning lips, both of them doing their utmost to wreck the boy in between.

In another moment, Klaus warned, “He’s close.” He could feel Taki clenching down on his cock, his breaths coming faster and faster. “Let’s get you onto your back,” he told Sana. He put his arms around her and rolled them onto their sides, then flipped Taki on top of her. Resting all his weight on his hands and arms, Klaus smiled down at Sana and winked, “Time to fuck some babies into you.” He began thrusting in earnest, short, powerful jabs of his cock, each thrust hitting Taki’s sweet spot, the bed shaking beneath them, the headboard slamming loudly against the wall, Sana’s body jolting
along with Taki’s.

Another orgasm rose up and crested inside her, spreading like wildfire from her core to her extremities as she keened with ecstasy and Taki came with her, gripped in a wrenching spasm. She could feel him spurting deep inside her, the pulses of wetness as he shuddered and shook against her. Moments later, the world finally stilled as Klaus climaxed with a groan. They fell apart in a sweaty, gasping heap, eager to do it all over again.
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

This chapter is just me, the writer, hitting a wall and having an existential meltdown. I’ve been trying to bring this story to a conclusion (it wasn’t meant to be this long!) and it’s been such a battle. I feel like I’m stuck in a war that won’t end and all my resources are depleted. It sucks to lose. I don’t want to give up quite yet, so I’m stuffing in this chapter as a stopgap (for my own consolation) until I can get my shit together.

Feel free to skip this chapter because it is NOT a part of the story.

MissMoe’s best boy Z. returns from his recent trip to Japan and they immediately get down to the business of drinking, drugging, and discussing how to fix her latest fanfic debacle, “Tea and Sympathy.”

Z: You need to stop. Just quit while you’re ahead.

MissMoe: Is it that bad?

Z: It’s a fucking trainwreck. At this point, the ‘plot’ [Z. emphasizes the word with air quotes] makes no sense. Jesus Christ, you write boring academic reports for a living. What makes you think you can write fanfiction? It's not even the same kind of animal.

MissMoe: Gee whiz. I wanted to expand my horizons…or something…

Z: What d’ya think the ‘shrooms are for?

MissMoe: Yeah…this story does feel like it’s gone off the rails.

Z: Pfft. It went off the rails way back in, what, Chapter 3?

MissMoe: Ouch.

A collective groan rumbles through the air and MissMoe turns to see a bunch of angry people staring back at her. The natives are most definitely restless.

MissMoe: Oh…shit…

Erwin: If you ever dare to put me in one of your stupid stories again, please have the decency to leave both of my arms intact.

Levi: Yeah, he is seriously a useless piece of shit with just one arm.

MissMoe: Excuse me? You’re the one who threatened to break both of his legs, in canon I might add.

Levi: Yeah, but then I was going to repair them, too.
MissMoe: How the hell were you going to do that?

Levi: I dunno…duct tape?

Taki waves his hand in the air: Shitsure shimasu! Shitsure shimasu!

MissMoe: Just use English, Taki.

Taki: Ah, yes. May I say that your Japanese is terrible. Also, how come you only let Klaus rim me just one time in this story?

All in attendance nod in agreement.

Klaus: Damn straight. I’m mean, c’mon. That pink little rosebud is just asking to be eaten on a daily basis.

MissMoe: Uh…well…health and safety reasons, I guess.

Erwin: I have a question, too. How come you didn’t let me cut off Eren’s penis?

MissMoe: Come again?

Erwin: I was all set to cut off Eren’s penis, right? That’s what you were going to have me do: cut off his penis and then give it to Levi all gift-wrapped in a shiny box with a big red bow on top. That was going to be my shining moment—in a story that is seriously lacking in shining moments—where I redeem myself in his eyes and then we bang. And then, post-bang, Levi was going to grind up Eren’s tiny penis in the Vitamix blender and serve it to Kenny as a hamburger. It’d probably have to be ‘slider’ sized because it’s so tiny and all.

Eren: Objection!

Levi: Objection overruled, Baby Dick. Hey, has everyone seen the preview for Episode 19 of A Slap on Titan? I’m totally awesome in it. That Tom Andre is a fucking genius, unlike you, MissMoe.

Erwin: Can we stay on point here? As I was going to say: it would be a goddamn shame if you quit on this ‘story’ like the pussy you are without including that scene. I do believe that scene is pivotal to my character development which, again, is seriously lacking in this thing you call a ‘story.’ Everybody knows I’m the hero. I mean, look at me. How could I not be the hero?

MissMoe: Look, EllenD’s idea about Levi serving Eren to Kenny in hamburger form is brilliant, but I don’t think there was any talk about serving dick. I was thinking maybe an arm, ‘cause—

Levi: No! I gotta side with Erwin on this. Dick is the juiciest cut of meat on a man.

Eren: Yeah, and mine is like the Wagyu beef of dicks.

Levi: Do you have any idea how dumb you sound?

Kenny: Ho-ly shee-iittt! I was supposed to eat a pee-nis burger? Buh-ring it, motherfucker!

Asami clears his throat.

Suguri: Oh, here we go…

Asami: I’m thoroughly disappointed in the poor quality of this story.
Feilong: I’m disappointed, too! When do I get to fuck somebody? Fanfic3112 has so many great scenarios for me. She’s willing to showcase my sexual prowess—"

Asami: Be quiet, girly man. As I was going to say, this story is a god awful mess, an even bigger mess than what I make of Takaba at any given moment, day or night, in Finder, where I belong, which brings me to my point: wasn’t I supposed to have a scene where I was getting blown by both Takaba and Levi simultaneously?”

Takaba and Levi together: Wait, what?

Claudia: What about me getting it on with Suguri? There’s no point in using me in this story if I don’t get to bang him.

Suguri: That’s right. MissMoe, you’re a horrible writer.

Sana: Hey, c’mon guys. Cut her a break. She’s an alcoholic and a hopeless stoner, so what can you expect?

Lin: You’re just saying that because you got to have a threesome. Banba and I didn’t even get to kill anyone in this stupid story. Why are we even here? You suck, MissMoe!

MissMoe: Hey, where is Banba?

Lin: He left ages ago, you dumbass. I’m leaving, too.

MissMoe: No, wait! Okay, I admit things have gotten out of hand, but I never claimed to be a real writer, so can’t we just all be nice to each other?

Erwin: I want a bigger role. I’m supposed to be a major player here, but so far I’ve hardly had any ‘screen time’ and when I do make an appearance you always make me come across like a complete douchebag.

MissMoe: In all honesty, you are kind of a douche in the manga, too. You never even bothered to kiss Levi, not even once.

Erwin: Is that my fault? Take up your complaints with Isayama. Besides, I’m already dead in the manga, so there’s not much I can do to remedy that.

Klaus: Is Taki gonna get pregnant?

Everyone in unison: What?

Klaus: I think it’d be hilarious if Taki got pregnant instead of Sana. Why didn’t you just make this story omegaverse from the get-go?

Taki: Um…no. It’s better if Sana gets pregnant.

Takaba: No, no, no. I’m the one who’s supposed to get pregnant.

Everyone in unison: When did he show up?

Asami: Heh. That’s my boy…

Levi: I want a puppy!

Erwin: You do not.
Levi: Yes I do. I want a puppy small enough to fit in my pocket. That way, I can bring it with me on a plane and no one will even know it’s there. I won’t even have to buy an extra plane ticket.

Everyone (except Levi) in unison: What’s wrong with Levi?

Hange: Oh, you know, Chapter 114 happened, then Chapter 115. Short Stuff’s got a very bad concussion.

Levi: Do NOT call me Short Stuff!

MissMoe: You’re right, Z. I need to stop writing this fic. Now, let’s crack open that second bottle.
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Things start to look up for Taki. Levi arrives in Japan.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is for Fanfic3112 who wanted Feilong and Claudia to see some action.

Well, now he’d done it; he’d allowed himself to be used as a shameless fucktoy and...he’d liked it...a lot. Taki screwed his eyes shut as he soaked in the tub, his hole still swollen and sore, and let his mind wander to all the filthy things he had done in bed not too long ago. Klaus had made him come on his cock three times that night, or maybe it was four times, he had lost count at three. That he’d been high as a kite was a convenient excuse for his slutty behavior, but who was he kidding? He had wanted it. And Sana, the way she had looked at him as she rode him each time, it made him feel whole again, like he was a man who could please a woman and not some loser being punished for his worthlessness. He wanted to do it again. He wanted to see the lust in his wife’s eyes, hear her moaning for him while Klaus wrecked him with his cock. It was all too horrible and too good. He had awoken with Feilong smirking at them...Taki couldn’t worry about that, not when he had baseball practice in another hour.

“One thing at a time,” he told himself. “Wash up. Eat breakfast. Play baseball with Tao.” Don’t think about finding Feilong in bed with them in the morning. That long-haired freak was Chinese, after all, and the Chinese were unfathomable. Yes. That’s all that was; it was just Feilong being Feilong.

In the room across the hallway, Klaus was enjoying a hot shower, not the least bit concerned that their ‘master’ Liu Feilong had decided to join them halfway into their threesome the previous night. Klaus wasn’t shy about sex. He had participated in plenty of wild scenes when he played for the Mets’ Triple-A team in Las Vegas, and that often meant sex with several people at once with onlookers in the same room, just harmless perverts desiring a vicarious thrill. Feilong had only sat in a chair smoking his pipe, jacking himself in languorous fashion while voicing the occasional directive: “Make him suck your breast” or “Put your cock all the way down his throat.” For some silly reason, it had reminded Klaus of a childhood game—Simon Says—the way he and Sana had obediently followed Feilong’s commands. At one point, they had broken out in laughter when Taki literally got fucked off the bed. Taki was so wasted, he hadn’t even complained about the rough treatment. Klaus had calmly picked him off the floor and rearranged him on the mattress; no big deal. The whole point of the exercise was to get Sana pregnant. If this didn’t do the trick, nothing would.

As Klaus stood under the hot spray lathering himself up with expensive soap imported from the Annick Goutal shop in Paris in a spacious marble tiled shower stall in one of the fanciest skyscrapers in Hong Kong, he had to admit that he didn’t mind this lifestyle. In fact, he could get used to it real fast. So what if he was no more than a slave, an indentured servant? If that were the case, then he was the most pampered slave or servant ever. He was fed, clothed, and housed in luxury. And now, he was allowed to fuck his one and only. In fact, it was his duty, his job. Hell, yeah. He could do this
forever.

In the room next to Klaus’s, his sister was just beginning to stir. Claudia rolled onto her back and stretched, the fine Egyptian linen cotton sheets silky soft against her skin. Beside her, Suguri stirred but did not wake. She cracked open her eyes and took in the sight of the naked man in bed with her, the sharp lines of his mature, masculine profile softened by his disheveled hair. It made him look startlingly boyish. Suguri was in his late forties, maybe early fifties by her estimate, yet seeing him relaxed in sleep, his forehead smooth and unlined after a long night of lovemaking, made her heart clench. He had made her come so many times she had finally begged him to stop pleasuring her. She couldn’t even remember the last time Stephen had put her satisfaction first, taken care of her that way. When they had fucked in Taki’s condo in New York the first time, they had been drunk on bourbon and mutual attraction. This time…she didn’t even know what she had smoked, but it had made every cell in her body responsive, ultra sensitive, crackling with electricity.

She and Suguri had debated for hours at dinner with Feilong over what they euphemistically called the “baby situation.” Suguri was all for medical intervention. Claudia had argued against it. She and Stephen had already gone down that road and to no avail.

“It’s cruel. It’s inhumane,” Claudia insisted. “Women are treated like cattle at these infertility clinics. Nobody cares how you feel.”

That had taken Suguri aback. His own wife had gone through all the treatments and never complained. She had never gotten pregnant either.

“Why bring a baby into this world if there’s no love involved?” Claudia argued. “What’s the point? Are we no better than animals being bred by a farmer?”

It was Feilong who suggested during the course of that dinner, “Just let Klaus fuck him. Have Sana ride him at the same time. I have just the right drugs for it.” When he was met with two shocked sets of eyes, Feilong merely shrugged, “The Chinese have never had a problem making babies.”

Well, that was hard to argue with. Japan’s population was dwindling to precarious levels; meanwhile, the Chinese couldn’t abort embryos fast enough. Claudia had locked eyes with Suguri at that moment and both of them gave in just a little, just enough. They had both been down the same road, side by side but never touching, wanting the same things and yet, their experiences had been so different. To be a woman. To be a man. What did it really mean? What could they truly share? Pain was pain, disappointment was disappointment, and never the twain shall meet. So…they looked into each other’s eyes and agreed, “Let love decide for itself what comes to be.”

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Levi stood in front of the refrigerated section of the FamilyMart contemplating which of the fifty varieties of coffee he would consume. Why so many choices? Fuck it. He closed his eyes, spun around three times, reached out, and grabbed a can off the shelf. In the old days, he would have methodically sampled each variety in alphabetical order, but no more. Ever since the fire in his studio, no, ever since that motherfucker Eren Jaeger had chloroformed him, he’d had more and more difficulty making sense of his world. The only time he could focus was when he was painting. His ability to watch a movie or read a book from start to finish…he couldn’t even get past the opening credits or the first sentence before his mind drifted into the ether. In a way, it was a good thing. It prevented him from thinking about any one thing for too long. On the other hand, he felt his sanity slipping away.

The small can he now held in his hand was some kind of latte from what he could make of the crazy English text. “Probably costs six trillion yen,” he muttered to himself as he trudged to the check-out
counter and forked over all the bills in his pocket. His ability to do simple math was long gone, and he was grateful that the pretty clerk behind the counter knew which bills to take before politely handing him his change. When he turned his back, he could hear soft, high-pitched giggles and then the clerk saying in accented English to the girl who worked the next counter, “Grumpy Cat.” More giggles.

“Well, fuck me,” Levi muttered without a shred of malice. Yeah, they made fun of him, thought he looked like that stupid grumpy cat, but being compared to a four-legged internet sensation wasn’t the worst thing that had happened in his life. He popped the tiny can open as soon as he exited the convenience store and his eyes fell to the kiosk that held all the free local newspapers. The man who was his current ‘employer’ was pictured right on the front page of the *Tokyo Times*: Asami Ryuichi shaking hands with a member of the Diet at some charity event. That bitchy bleached blond who lived with Asami wasn’t in the photo and it made Levi smirk as he gulped his ultra sweet coffee, then lit a cigarette. He’d been in Tokyo for three weeks now and had made it a point to learn no Japanese beyond what he had picked up from Taki during their days in London. *Taki*. Levi sucked hard on the cigarette, like he wanted to smoke the living shit out of it, like he didn’t want to cry. If he cried, would it make it all better? He frowned deeply and silently reaffirmed the vow he had made to himself on the plane ride over to Japan: he was done doing anything half-assed. He was done straddling the fence. If he had to endure living, then he would go full-on in-fucking-sane. Trying to be a passable human being was beyond his abilities, that was for sure.

He had been given his ‘assignment’ as soon as he had exited the private jet at Narita. He was to illustrate the Kama Sutra in some secret ‘room’ in Asami’s penthouse apartment in Tokyo. Then, once he was finished with said ‘assignment,’ he would be shipped over to Hong Kong where he would become the property of some dude named Liu Feilong. Liu Feilong was apparently a crime lord like Asami Ryuichi, except even nuttier, and Levi’s ‘job’ as Feilong’s ‘servant’ would be to forge famous Old Master paintings. Levi didn’t bother to ask “Why?” He would do what he was told like a good little boy because he couldn’t think two words beyond the present. He couldn’t think beyond, “I am hungry” or “I am thirsty” or “I need to take a piss.”

There was one thing he remembered and could play and then re-play over and over again in his mind like a video on YouTube. Erwin had made love to him that day in the strange hotel-hospital room after the fire in his studio. Asami had been there, and that blond goon named Suoh, but then Erwin had showed up. Levi couldn’t remember much of their conversation. Perhaps they had not really spoken at all, perhaps he had imagined Erwin speaking to him. It was hard to tell. His brain was all messed up. But…he was certain they had made love. Oh…it had been so long since Erwin had made love to him. They had exchanged words, words that were garbled and unintelligible in retrospect, but then Erwin had kissed him. He was missing an arm…yes, one arm was gone, but he remembered his warm lips on him, he remembered the weight of his body on top of him, the rich masculine scent of him filling his nostrils. It took him back all the way to Berlin when he had kissed Erwin for the first time and he just *knew* he was in love. That feeling…that feeling of intense *life* inside him, of possibility and hope and joy. Erwin had made love to him, Levi was sure of it, and then he was on a plane to Japan, doped up and all he wanted was to forget who he was. Levi Ackerman. Levi Ackerman was *dead*. 
Erwin has a plan. Levi begins his work for Asami.

Erwin was an inept liar. Aside from the occasional fib told as a child, he’d never had much need to lie and so had little practice. If anything, he had always prided himself on his moral uprightness. Hange disagreed with him, of course; she had told him repeatedly that he was thoroughly dishonest in his relationship with Levi.

“You strung him along. Then you dumped him like a coward.”

Okay, so he was a coward and a liar when it came to Levi. But only with Levi. What was it about Levi that brought out the very worst in him? Right from the start, that beautiful lunatic had dragged him down to the depths of some personal hell and Erwin had been helpless to pull them both back up. What choice did he have but to walk away? After what he had witnessed and committed during his stint in the military, he knew he couldn’t go there again, couldn’t lose himself to the violence and the insanity, and yet he did…for a while he traversed that razor’s edge with Levi before the soles of his bare feet became too bloodied.

“You should have made a clean break,” Hange had chided.

“You don’t understand,” Erwin had replied. “He’s like the Hydra.”

The Hydra, that nightmarish serpent of Greek mythology: lop off one head, and two more grew in its place. Levi’s voracious, desperate need for him only seemed to deepen and multiply every time Erwin pulled away, his grip on him all the fiercer. When he thought of Levi, what came to mind more than anything else was the memory of Levi’s hands digging into his biceps, his fingers raking into his back and leaving welts behind as Erwin fucked him to completion. The way Levi clung to him in the throes of passion, the way he howled like a feral animal when he came for him…Erwin felt as if he were being devoured alive. It was too much for him to bear, so he turned away, the need for self-preservation was too great.

All of that seemed rather distant and blurry now, the frightening intensity that was his relationship with Levi had become mired in confusion and mystery and, like the sun passing behind a cloud, Erwin could finally look upon the very thing that had always burned his eyes: Levi Ackerman. He still had so many questions about what had really happened the night of the exhibition opening. He could glean only so much information from that man who saved him from being stabbed to death by Eren Jaeger. That same man had previously ordered his right arm severed, too, yet another fact that made Erwin’s head spin, but he had been allowed see Levi afterwards, so he knew that Levi was alive and not dead, as was reported in the media for days afterwards. Artforum magazine even sent a journalist to Erwin’s office to interview him for an article on the tragic death of a young artist on the cusp of fame.

“You knew him in Berlin. What was he like? Did you recognize his genius even then?”

Erwin sat behind his desk, his blue eyes boring a hole into the journalist’s acned forehead. The bespectacled young man had introduced himself as Harry Potter, but even that wasn’t enough to
divert Erwin’s thoughts. How the hell had Levi’s death been faked? Whose charred body was it that was found in Levi’s studio? How was the DNA evidence manipulated? That Levi was currently in the hands of that devilish man named Asami Ryuichi was more than enough to freeze Erwin’s blood. Levi was alive and that was a good thing, but Erwin had been told in no uncertain terms that if he spilled the beans, he’d lose more than an arm and Levi would be dead for real. Playing along with the charade required lying through his teeth, though. Fortunately for Erwin, his reticence in answering any questions was interpreted as a sign of grief and shock by the journalist.

“I know this must be difficult for you,” Mr. Potter said, his excitement barely suppressed as he segued into his next, more salacious question. “After all, you and he were lovers, am I right?”

“We…uh…” Erwin was overcome with the urge to set things straight. They had been lovers, but were no longer so. Except, hadn’t they fucked before Levi was whisked away to god knows where? Was that just sex, or had they made love? Levi had cried in his arms, er, arm afterwards. He was overwrought and upset and heavily doped up and Erwin had remained stoic and rational to balance all of Levi’s despair. He liked to think that he was the anchor that Levi needed, the calm eye at the center of the hurricane raging inside Levi’s head. Now, all the emotions he had held back were itching to escape. It couldn’t happen at a more inconvenient time in Erwin’s opinion. He wasn’t the type to pour his guts out to some stranger ten years his junior. It was the hope that Levi might see the article that finally prompted Erwin to speak. He would tell the truth beneath all the lies, say the things he had never been able to express directly to Levi.

Erwin squared his shoulders and leaned forward in his chair, his hands balled together on the desk in front of him. “Yes, we were lovers. I met him in Berlin when he was a freshman at the Universität der Künste. He was one of my students. And he was the most talented artist I had ever met.”

After that, saying the right words became easier and easier, because they weren’t lies, were they? Things that Erwin had told himself before, yes, those things had been lies. Things like: I don’t love him, I don’t need him, I can forget about him. As he sat and talked to this Mr. Harry Potter, Erwin felt a great burden lifted from his shoulders as he told the truth about Levi: that he was possessed by some unseen muse, that he was honest and true and driven to express the madness that sat at the core of every genuine artist, that he was too good for this wretched world of mediocrity. The answers to the questions presented themselves without effort. It was liberating to recount those Berlin days from the safety of the other side and know that perhaps, in the near future, Levi would read the article and know that Erwin had really seen who he was and loved him all along. Just live, Erwin thought. Don’t die on me. Wait, and I’ll come to you.

He had been questioned by the police and asked if he wished to press charges against Eren Jaeger. Erwin had declined. Why? Even in his semi-delirious state after being stabbed, Erwin knew that he didn’t want Eren locked up in jail. If Eren were locked up in jail, then he would be out of reach, and Erwin wanted Eren to be well within reach. He wanted him to be easily accessible. After he had seen Levi and knew he was alive—though Levi was as brittle as glass and barely sane—Erwin vowed to atone for his terrible lack of good judgment. He had hired Eren to keep an eye on Levi, and Eren had violated his trust. He had violated Levi in ways that Erwin couldn’t forgive. Levi might be crazy, but that didn’t give anyone the right to ruin him further. The damage that Erwin had done himself to Levi was something he would carry with him to the grave, but he would make sure he made penance before that day. So he hadn’t pressed charges for the attack in the gallery, and Eren Jaeger returned for the fall semester at Central St Martin’s, none the worse for wear, still as arrogant as ever, and Erwin Smith swallowed his rage because he was a man with a plan.

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The ‘secret’ room with the mirrored ceiling wasn’t terribly large and it didn’t take long for Levi to
sketch out the scenes on canvases that would eventually stretch across all four walls like some kind of pornographic frieze. Asami had given him a copy of the *Kama Sutra*, along with photos he had taken of his lover in various states of ecstasy.

“Make sure his face is clearly delineated on all the figures,” Asami had told him. “His face and mine.”

Levi had scowled and said, “Yeah, yeah, whatever.” The truth was, he had wanted to cry, the feeling of envy was so strong. Asami was clearly obsessed with this Takaba Akihito in a way that Levi had wanted Erwin to feel for him but never did. And then, he had met this Takaba Akihito in person and the pain of his own unrequited love had been rubbed in his face. The boy was his own age, with dyed silvery-blond hair and possessing an insolent attitude on par with his own cocky demeanor and Levi had wanted to punch Takaba in the face, especially when Takaba had taken one look at Levi standing in the fancy penthouse and screamed in Japanese. He couldn’t be certain, but Levi could swear that the boy had shouted, “Asami, you bastard! Who the hell is this?” And Asami had put his hand on the small of Takaba’s back with reassuring *possession* and kissed him tenderly, murmuring something low and affectionate and Levi... he had puked onto the floor right where he stood in the *genkan*. The two of them were disgusting in their public displays of mutual attraction: Asami in his three-piece bespoke suit and Takaba in his torn T-shirt and ratty jeans... Levi had never felt so lonely in his entire life. He couldn’t even count the number of times he had wished Erwin would do the same with him—put his hands on him like he *owned* him, tell him all the things he needed to hear. He had given himself to a man who didn’t want him in the least, he knew that now, only to have it all shoved in his face again.

Thankfully, he was housed in a small flat several blocks away in a non-descript four-story apartment building. The flat was on the top floor of the building; it had north-facing windows and enough space in what would be the living room for Levi to work on his canvases. There was a small kitchen, a western style bathroom with a tiny washer/dryer unit, and a bedroom. It was less than what he had in London, but he was a prisoner now, apparently, and this was his jail cell. Well, he was a prisoner in a very loose sense of the word; his freedom of movement was limited by his own lack of desire to escape. He knew that if he attempted to hightail it out of Japan, Asami would simply haul him back and punish him for his bad behavior, or just kill him outright, which seemed like a pretty good option. He’d seen his Uncle Kenny do inhumane things to those who tried to get out of paying debts, and Levi knew he owed Asami big-time for sleeping with his goddaughter’s husband and getting caught with his hand in the cookie jar. He could still hear Taki’s frantic voice pleading with him to leave that karaoke bar before it was too late. Oh well. Shoulda, woulda, coulda. It was too late for regrets.

Levi put the finishing touches on the first canvas and then his stomach grumbled with hunger. The clock on the wall in the kitchen read two-thirty in the afternoon. He hadn’t even had breakfast yet. He gave the canvas one more glance and couldn’t deny that it was sexy hot. The image depicted was of Asami upright balanced on his spread knees while he gripped Takaba’s ankles in his hands, Takaba on his back with his legs splayed wide as Asami fucked into him. According to the *Kama Sutra*, this position was known as the “Captain.” Dang. Erwin had taken him like that more than once and the recollection made Levi’s gut clench painfully. He lit a cigarette, grabbed his jacket, and opened the front door. Levi didn’t even bother to acknowledge the man standing outside. It was one of Asami’s men who had been given the task of following Levi about Tokyo whenever he left the rented flat. Today, Levi headed to the little café down the street where he could get an order of omelet rice served by a waitress wearing cat ears. When the dish was delivered to his table, he saw that the waitress had decorated his omelet with a smiley face in ketchup. Levi stared at it for a second or two, and then he smudged the ketchup over the eggs before digging into his meal. He swallowed three mouthfuls before he realized he had forgotten to divide it into equal segments.
“Well, I’ll be damned.”

His lips curled into a sardonic smile even as he cried. He felt nothing. Nothing at all.
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Erwin starts on a new path. Levi settles in to life in Tokyo.

Erwin couldn’t believe he and Levi had actually fucked in that hotel/hospital room after the chaos of the exhibition opening. There was nothing remotely romantic about the act; if anything, it was just two doped up animals copulating, a way to blow off steam and stress after a traumatic event. It was a way of saying, “We’re still alive.” There had been no lube, just inadequate spit, and it didn’t even feel good. Erwin’s chest wound was screaming with pain and, on top of that, he was trying and failing to balance his weight on one elbow so he wouldn’t crush Levi beneath him, but crush him he did. It didn’t help that Levi had his arms around his waist, driving their hips together as if he wanted Erwin to murder him with his cock. The only merciful thing Erwin could do was bring them both to orgasm as quickly as possible and so he gave Levi what Levi always wanted from him: sex at its most brutal. They were a right awful mess as it was; what was a little more blood spilled?

He barely had time to clean them both up and give an exhausted and unconscious Levi a soft kiss on the cheek before the door opened without warning and the blond goon named Suoh announced, “Time’s up.” Suoh manhandled Erwin back into the wheelchair, not even giving him an opportunity to pull his robe closed, and brought him back to the room across the hallway. “Get dressed,” Suoh said. “You have five minutes.” He was given four minutes before Suoh was back and leading him to a small service elevator that took them down to the parking garage below the building. A silver-grey luxury sedan was waiting for them idling at a low purr, a bespectacled man in the driver’s seat, Asami Ryuichi behind him in the back. Suoh opened the other back door and shoved Erwin in before getting into the front passenger seat. No one said anything as they pulled out of the garage and into the light of day. The bright sun made Erwin squint hard. It was a sudden change from the rooms he had been in for the last twelve hours or so, rooms outfitted with heavy blackout shades leaving Erwin clueless as to whether it was day or night.

Ten minutes into the ride, Asami finally spoke. “If you ever want to see Levi again, show me what you’re made of.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Erwin glared at the impossibly handsome man sitting beside him calmly smoking yet another cigarette. Had he never heard of lung cancer? Or was he, like some comic book super villain, impervious to things like illness, bullets, death?

“You served in Afghanistan, did you not? I believe you even earned a medal from your country for your…contributions towards the war effort.” Asami stared out of the car window as if Erwin weren’t even there. Erwin couldn’t help but notice the natural elegance of the man’s movements as he tapped the ash from the end of his cigarette into an empty cut crystal glass which smelled of whisky, his eyes now trained on his driver’s neatly coiffed hair. Asami took a languid drag. “Eliminate Kenny Ackerman. Put a new hole in his head.” Erwin was silent, speechless, agog, not just from the insane request, but from the nonchalance with which it was uttered. When the car slowed down in front of Erwin’s apartment building, Asami handed him a mobile and told him, “When you’re ready, call the contact number,” and then Suoh opened the door and yanked Erwin out of the sedan, depositing him on the sidewalk like a sack of potatoes. He watched the Bentley Continental GT roll smoothly back into traffic and disappear down Charing Cross Road.
“Oh, Levi,” Erwin sighed, “looks like we'll be seeing each other in hell.”

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It was from seven hundred yards away, but Erwin took the shot. His spotter—a sadistic bastard from Ohio named Keith Shadis—whooped in glee.

“Holy shit, man! You hit the fucker!”

The fucker Shadis was referring to was a rifle-toting boy barely into adolescence tending a few scraggly goats. But this was war, and in war it was no-holds-barred. Everyone was fair game. They both walked out into the blazing sun, high-fiving. It was hot as hell under the sand-colored tarp and, even though the sun burned their skin, at least there was the feel of the occasional breeze to dry their sweat, a breeze that smelled of shit and hopelessness. Erwin took pride in being his unit’s elite sniper. His hand-eye coordination was tops, but he wasn’t the only one with such fine-tuned accuracy because in the next moment Shadis went down, a single “pop” ringing out across the valley clear as a bell. Erwin scrambled back under the tarp in the dusty gloom of the six-by-six bunker dug into the rocky embankment. It might as well be a grave six feet under...

Erwin woke up sweating, his heart pounding in his chest, the grit of sand still in his mouth. He rolled over in bed and made his way to the bathroom of his apartment in London, shaking, and stood at the toilet. It was a while later that he was able to finally take a piss. Goddamn it. The nightmares had come back more and more frequently. Ever since that disastrous exhibition opening, ever since he had gone back to teaching that fall semester, the dreams had become increasingly vivid. In his mind, he could rationalize it. It was his guilt over the crimes he had committed in the past, crimes that he had liked the thrill of it—the violence, the bloodshed, the adrenalin rush of killing a living thing—it had made him feel so alive.

When he came back from the war and pursued a career as harmless as being an art historian, Erwin thought he was done with his past. He could be a normal person once more. He could be good and upstanding; he would teach, give back in a constructive way to atone for the innocent souls he had sent into the afterlife. But Levi…Levi had opened that locked vault to his true self and demanded that Erwin reveal the man underneath the argyle vest and aloof demeanor, the man who could kill and maim and hurt another. He didn’t want to hurt Levi, not physically at least, but he had cut him to pieces all the same. The dreams…the nightmares…it was Levi reaching out to him across time and space and demanding justice. Or was it Asami Ryuichi demanding some kind of payment to clear Levi’s debt? Maybe it was both.

“I want it for you, too,” Erwin muttered as he pissed into the toilet. “Trust me, Levi. If I can set you free…I’ll do it.”

The problem was, Erwin had only one arm now, and it took two arms to fire a sniper rifle with true accuracy, so that limited his options. He could use a tripod, or even rest the gun on a solid surface, but the chances of a miss were much higher. A tripod also didn’t solve for the other problem that he would encounter before he left for Berlin, the problem presented by Eren Jaeger. Luring him someplace and knocking him out would be easy enough, but he needed one hand to hold Eren’s dick, and the other hand to hold the knife that would slice off that dick. Unless…he rigged up some kind of garrot that could be manipulated with one hand, or…if he had an accomplice. Unfortunately, Erwin didn’t know any psychopaths other than the one he wanted to castrate: Eren Jaeger. That pervy roommate of Eren’s—Armin Arlert—was weird, but he didn’t seem to possess the kind of self-aggrandizing ego that formed the basis of a true killer’s psyche. No, he’d have to do it alone.

Covering his tracks wasn’t too big of a concern for Erwin. He had already begun arrangements for a semester-long visiting faculty appointment with his former university in Berlin, ostensibly to promote
his new book and to begin research on the next one: a detailed analysis of the work of Levi Ackerman. He knew that Levi had left all of his student work and his paintings from his first exhibitions in Berlin with his Uncle Kenny. Erwin would conveniently be out of London by the time Eren’s body was discovered, if it was ever discovered. And if he got caught, well, at least he would have checked off one item on his bucket list.

Taking out Kenny wouldn’t be too hard in Erwin’s estimation. He knew that Levi had told Kenny about him, that he had been his lover. He imagined it would be easy enough to set up an appointment with Kenny—“Hey, remember me? The guy who was fucking your nephew?”—and ask to see Levi’s work with the truthful excuse of wanting to conduct a thorough appraisal—“For insurance purposes, of course. Levi’s work is going to be worth so much more now that he is no longer with us.” Kenny’s eyes would light up with greed. “Why, come right in, Professor Smith. Let me stand against this wall so you can take a clean shot.”

Okay, so maybe it wouldn’t be that easy. Erwin sipped his coffee, alone in his office and enjoying the peace of solitude, but the cheap cologne worn by that Artnet journalist was still hanging in the air and spoiling the taste of his coffee. In the past, such a thing would have annoyed Erwin to the point of simply throwing out the coffee and getting a new cup, perhaps at a nice café instead of from the school’s cafeteria, but his outlook on life had changed, the way he saw himself had changed. He had believed he was better than most people—smarter, more moral, more deserving—but really, he was probably no less evil than Eren Jaeger, whom he was going to kill, or Kenny Ackerman, whom he would kill afterwards, both of them scumbags. Did that make him a scumbag, too? Yeah, so instead of dumping out the coffee tainted with the aroma of cheap cologne, Erwin continued drinking it down, savoring the bitter taste of self-destruction.

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Levi was done for the day, the underpainting drying on the second canvas as he lit up a cigarette. He might be a prisoner stuck in a tiny apartment, but he was supplied with as many cartons of Dunhills as he cared to smoke. He didn’t want for cash. If he ran out of his daily food allowance, all he had to do was ask his guard for more money and it was provided. After a month, he had gotten used to the weird snacks, the sound of the foreign language, the cleanliness of the public spaces. That part—the cleanliness—was rather soothing. He wasn’t happy, but he wasn’t miserable either. Not as miserable as before, at least, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t lonely as fuck. He wished he could go out to a bar or to a club, get high and dance with a stranger, but his guards always told him, “No, not allowed.” When he wasn’t painting, he watched horrible game shows, or he soaked in the bathtub, or he walked the six hundred forty-nine steps to the convenience store with his guard in tow. In the beginning, his eyes were always open, searching, wondering if he might just happen to see Taki, if Taki was even in Japan. No more, though. It was stupid to think that Asami would squirrel him away in Tokyo just to have him run into Taki. For all he knew, Taki was being kept prisoner, just like him, in another country far away. If only he had done his job properly, they would still be together in London cutting up fruit and serving bubble tea to tourists.

“Shoulda, woulda, coulda,” Levi muttered.

On the television, a middle aged salary man was getting clobbered over the head with a gigantic Styrofoam hammer by a girl dressed in a Sailor Moon outfit. Every time she knocked him down, a young boy dressed like an old timey samurai would throw a bucket of mud over him and a woman dolled up like a French maid would pelt him with fruit. The show was called “Family Fun Therapy” and Levi got the distinct impression that this was way better than a session with a psychiatrist still under the thrall of Freudian theory.

Someone was supposed to come by to move the first finished canvas to a storage facility, so when
there was knock on the front door, Levi ambled over and opened it without thinking twice. He was shocked when he saw Suoh standing in the doorway blocking out the evening sun lowering onto the horizon.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Levi asked. He hadn’t seen Suoh even once since he had been deposited in Tokyo. 

The blond tank stared down at him and shrugged. “Boss is concerned about your nutrition. He told me to take you out for a real meal, not that convenience store food. Also, he wanted you to see this.” At that, Suoh shoved a magazine at Levi.

It was the latest issue of *Artforum* and Levi’s face was on the cover. “Huh,” Levi said, and then he tossed the magazine over his shoulder. “So, is this some kind of date? Where are you taking me, big guy?”

Suoh shrugged again. “What are you in the mood for?”

They ended up at a Karaage fried chicken joint, stuffing their faces with the crispy, spicy poultry goodness and washing it all down with too many bottles of Asahi Super Dry beer. Suoh didn’t talk much but neither did Levi and it made Levi feel a little less *lost*. The blond tank had never laid a hand on him—outside of that bizarre scene in Taki’s old condo—and Levi finally asked the question he had been meaning to ask for the longest time.

“Remember that night…at that karaoke bar in London?” Levi asked. Suoh nodded and took another gulp of beer, so Levi continued, “Did you even like me? I mean…were you just doing your job, or…did you want to fuck me at all?”

The big blond put his bottle down, his stoic face unreadable. “I thought you were super cute.” He crunched on a piece of chicken, his expression barely changing before adding, “You are still super cute.”

Levi smiled back, his heart breaking just a little. “Do you know where Taki is?”

Suoh grunted. “Even if I knew, I wouldn’t tell you. If you know what’s good for you, don’t ask again.”

“Okay,” Levi replied. “But if you ever want to fuck me, I’d be okay with it.”

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