What Lies Beneath

by Mastia

Summary

As someone who suffers from a little known disorder that makes the lightest touch painful, Levi has to decide which is more important: the people he cares about or his sanity. Ereri/Riren, Tactile Defensiveness! AU, Art Student! AU

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
The slickness of the acrylic coated the tips of his fingers, some finding its way onto the backs of his hands, but Levi didn’t care. A few streaks of purple had found its way onto his jaw and elbow, and the feeling as it dried and flaked off his skin would have bugged him if it wasn’t for the fact that he was so immersed in the music blasting in his ears and the act of adding colour to canvas to notice. He’d been tired all day, every day, for the past three weeks, and even though painting wasn’t necessarily a calming act, he found that at 2 a.m. when the urge came, he could forget just how exhausting life had become.

He’d been listening to the same mix of songs for so long that they’d become one long piece of music, blending into a steady stream of white noise, and it distracted him from the feeling of paint on skin and the irritation that came with it. It allowed him to finally let loose, and he was grateful for the release because how close he was to giving up completely.

When the alarm on his phone went off, Levi forced himself to stop and take a break to stretch and clean up the chaos around his easel. Looking around at the tubes of paint scattered on his coffee table, he sighed and pulled the headphones out of his ears with a clean finger. It felt strange to be back in reality, but he ignored the empty feeling and grabbed the cup he’d been using for his paint water. Sitting in the same position for almost seven hours stooped over his work had the teen’s lower back burning and his legs numb, and he cursed as he stood up. It hurt to walk, the needles in his feet making him grimace, but he did his best to push through it as he walked to the kitchen sink.

It took a little longer than usual to clean up, and Levi groaned when he had everything packed back up before letting himself slide down to sit on the couch. He’d left everything where it was, knowing he’d have another wave of need the same time next morning. It was frustrating how engrossed he became when the mood struck him, how that no matter how hard he tried, it only came when it was inconvenient, but he’d learned early on to let it happen. His muse was an asshole, but a good one, and the end results always outweighed the hoops he had to jump through.

He could feel sleep tugging at his eyes, a migraine pulsing against his skull, and grabbed his phone, fumbling to punch in the correct numbers. The teen knew that he’d get yet another lecture for missing class, but called himself in anyway. His relationship with the attendance office was a close one, and Grace had graciously not asked much before letting him off the phone. The kind woman was one of the few people at his school that understood him- or at least tried too-and didn’t treat him like he was lazy or a liar, and he was grateful that she’d been tasked with handling his absences, though he did feel guilty for making her job harder than it needed to be.

After throwing his pajama pants and t-shirt in the washing machine, Levi grabbed a clean towel and padded across his living room to the bathroom. He prayed that the acrylic would come out of them, but knew that even if it didn’t, he’d still wear them. Call it an artist’s badge of honor, but the reality of how few pieces of clothing he owned always loomed over his head. The dried paint was starting to make his skin crawl and while he wanted to get to bed as fast as possible, but there was no way he was going to even try before he’d gotten a shower. The water only took a few seconds to fully heat up, and he almost tripped in his rush to get under the spray. It burned his skin, but the pain was welcome. Pain was something he could focus on instead of the itch.

When the water had fully soaked into his hair and the steam was starting to make him lightheaded, he got to work, turning off the dial to not waste anything. He could barely pay his bills with the little he made at work, and he didn’t want to tempt fate where his wallet was concerned. The tingle on his skin was starting to get worse and he realized that it had been a huge mistake to not get in the shower
immediately. He hadn’t been quick enough and his stupidity was going to cost him.

It was always the same, and if Levi had to describe it in one word, he would say ‘bugs’. An itch, faint at first, would eventually turn into thousands of insects crawling all over his body, biting and scratching as they went about their business. The feeling could be compared to falling asleep in a tub of fire ants, and the teen wouldn’t wish it on his worst enemies. A bad attack usually ended up with him curled in on himself covered in gauze; a good one would still be hellish enough to have him in tears.

Panic started to set in as he poured a palm full of body wash into his hand and ran the soap over his body. The tingling on his fingers had started to run up his arms, and he scratched at it, rubbing the cleaner into his skin roughly. It wasn’t working, and as the crawling on his skin worsened, tears began to pool in his eyes. No matter what he did, he couldn’t stop the feeling after it got to a certain point, and that fact made it so much worse. The helplessness made Levi’s chest heavy and he choked on it, leaning against one of the shower walls for support. Sobs pushed passed his throat, the only sound in the small bathroom besides, and his eyes widened in horror when he realized that the white foam on his arms had been tinged pink by his blood. He couldn’t even feel the sting of broken skin, the itch was so consuming.

The raven haired male gasped for breath, forcing himself to slide down and sit. He knew that if he didn’t stop, he’d do more damage, but he couldn’t. It was too much to handle, and the soap had started to mix in with the lingering paint residue to make it even worse. He could feel the prickling move down to his legs, and he whimpered as he began to claw at them as well. Levi had managed to quiet down after settling onto the floor, but the urge to tear off his own skin was still overwhelming.

By the time he’d calmed down enough to stand up and turn the water back on to rinse off, the suds had disappeared, and the pain from the scratches on his arms and legs had become more prominent. His skin was an angry red, from inflammation and blood, and the raised areas where his nails had dug in deep were too tender to touch. The itch was still there, but it was faint enough that when the heated water burned him, Levi could ignore it. It stung, but it was bearable, and he knew that he needed to get as much soap residue off as possible if he didn’t want to have another attack when he was dry.

Levi stayed under the downpour until well after the water had turned to ice, and by the time he shut it off and stepped outside, he was a shivering mess. He dried off slowly, taking the time to remove every last drop and bead of liquid from his skin. Ever since the disorder had reared its ugly head, he was unable to put on clothing if he was even a little bit wet, and while he’d usually make himself grin and bear it, he wasn’t going to risk it after his episode in the shower. It wasn’t worth it to begin with since he had no where important to be except his own bed.

The teen forced a smile as he rummaged around in his medicine cabinet for a bottle of rubbing alcohol and some bandages. He always made sure to keep them handy so it didn’t take long to find what he needed, and he stepped back into the shower after a moment of hesitation. Resisting the urge to scratch at the areas where the shampoo and body wash hadn’t rinsed off enough, he opened the container and took a deep breath. There were a lot of open wounds, too many for him to treat individually, and he knew that while he’d be wasting quite a bit, he grit his teeth and poured the rubbing alcohol onto his arms and legs. His eyes watered at the pain, but he refused to make any more noise, and his breathing evened out after a minute or two.

Drying off with a towel was going to be impossible, so Levi stood in the shower until he’d managed to air dry before stepping out to dress his wounds. As methodical as he was, wrapping the gauze over the cuts didn’t take long, but it brought the itch back, and he wanted nothing more than to cease existing in that moment, throwing them into a pile of the ground in anger. He began to laugh after a
moment, loud and uncontrolled, before making his way back into the living room. It was either laugh or cry, and he did both, his cackling quickly turning into a terrifying mix of the two as he sat back down on his couch to stare at his painting. The cold air felt good on his bare skin, but his migraine was back in full force, and he realized that between calling the school and his attack, he hadn’t had a chance to take any medicine.

His legs ached, and he had no energy left in him, but he somehow managed to make his way to the kitchen. Grabbing a glass from the cupboards and a carton of orange juice, Levi poured himself something to drink and snatched a bottle of pain killers from on top of his microwave. He bit his lip as he opened it, pouring a handful into his palm. His breathing deepened as he stared at them, counting. One. Two. Five. Ten. Twelve. Levi thought back to the itch and sucked in air. It could be easy. No one would be there to stop him, and the only people who really cared about him were too far away to even know that anything had happened. They’d probably just forget him and move on like they should. Like they eventually would anyways.

The teen’s eyes darted over to his painting for only a second before he sighed and dropped the tablets onto the counter. They bounced and clattered, some falling to the floor, and he carefully picked three up before popping them into his mouth and sucking. It was bitter on his tongue as they started to dissolve, and he swallowed them slowly, taking a sip of juice when they stuck in his throat. Without looking at the mess he made- he’d clean it up later- he shuffled to his bedroom for a much needed nap.

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Levi woke up to overcast skies and two-hundred and seventy-three missed messages on Skype. Most were from his friend Hanji, which wasn’t any surprise, and he groaned as he rolled out of bed to start a pot of coffee. His head throbbed, and he’d ran out of good tea a few days before, so he settled for the coffee for his daily caffeine fix with only a little complaint. It wasn’t what he wanted, but it was cheap and did its job. While it brewed, he threw a slice of sourdough into the toaster and turned the TV on. He ignored the medicine scattered along his kitchen to the best of his abilities, making sure not to step on any on accident and crush them. Getting powder out of the carpet was a bitch to do with his vacuum.

His phone buzzed on the coffee table, and the black haired teen rolled his eyes before picking it up and unlocking it to look at his messages. The text was from Erwin, asking him if he was alright and if the blond needed to come over to check up on him, and Levi rolled his eyes as he replied.

To: Captain Eyebrows

You know as well as I do you can’t just drive here from across the country.

He didn’t even have the time to set his phone down before he got a reply.

From: Captain Eyebrows

Who said I was across the country?
To: Captain Eyebrows

Well if you aren’t the fuck at home where the fuck are you?

Levi practically growled as he pressed send. He hadn’t had anything to drink yet, and his friend’s games were going to have him strangling the man through his phone. He couldn’t practically see the man’s smirk in his head.

From: Captain Eyebrows

Business trip :) I’m like 4-5 hours away…

The teen’s eyes widened a fraction of an inch, and his heart rate quickened with the news, but he made sure to not let it show in his text. The older man didn’t need more things to tease him about then he already had, and if Hanji got wind that they were even in the same state, she’d be demanding that they got together for pictures and other stupid things. And while he actually really did want to meet his friend, he also didn’t want the man to meet him. Talking over the phone or the internet was one thing, but what if after they met face to face, Erwin decided that Levi wasn’t worth keeping around. He didn’t know what he would do if either Erwin or Hanji abandoned him.

To: Captain Eyebrows

I don’t think I’ll have time to visit. Work’s been hell, and I have a mountain of homework to do. Senior year and all that shit.

From: Captain Eyebrows

If you insist. I’ll be here for the weekend though- if you change your mind.

His eyes skimmed over Erwin’s message and he sighed, throwing his phone off to the side to get up and get a cup of coffee. His toast had popped up a few seconds earlier and he smothered it in butter and strawberry jelly before throwing it onto a small plate. The painting from the night before stood on proud display on the coffee table, blocking the view of half the TV, but he didn’t really care. At this time of day all that they played were old reruns and some of the newer shows that he didn’t care for.

Levi stood up when he finished his meal, and he frowned when he set the plate into the sink to wash, thinking about how he was going to deal with the pills underfoot. There was no way in hell he was going to reuse them, even if his floor was practically clean enough to eat off of, but it was his last bottle, and he wasn’t going to have any more money left in his check after bills and food to get another one. He stared at the dish as he scrubbed, putting it carefully into its place in the dishwasher when he’d deemed it clean enough. After wiping down the counters, the teen padded to his laundry...
room to grab a broom and dust pan for the mess on the floor. It didn’t take long to finish, and he washed his hands quickly to remove any dirt or dust that might’ve made it onto his fingers.

It was dark, and after a brief look at his phone, he found out that he’d been asleep for a good fourteen hours. He was used to the binge sleeping so it didn’t really surprise him, but he was still tired, and he had to actively keep himself from going back to bed before finishing the homework that had been accumulating during his absences from class. As much as he doubted that he’d be able to keep up with the work, he was determined to graduate on time and finally be free of the idiots at school, and it gave him the ability to power through for a little while to finish. By the time he let himself stop for the night, it was already 3 a.m. the next day, and he gratefully went back to bed. His muse hadn’t paid him a visit, but he was glad, the ache in his arms and legs still strong and the burn fresh.
The sunlight that filtered through his blinds burned his eyes, and he cursed. His headache was dull, and the alarm clock next to his bed told him that it was 8:30 a.m. and that if he hurried, he’d make it to class on time. He scrambled to shed his clothes and practically ran to the laundry room to grab a fresh towel and get into the shower, relaxing only when he was under the hot spray. The soap that ran down his skin left goose bumps in its wake as he forced himself to ignore the tickle, and Levi turned the dial to the right for cold water. It managed to wake him up and soothed the scratches on his limbs enough that he thought he’d be able to wrap them for class.

Drying off didn’t take as long as it did the day before - or rather, he didn’t let it take as long - and he set his jaw as he pulled on a pair of pants and one of his t-shirts. Levi didn’t pay much attention to which, though. He had multiples of every article of clothing since finding things he could stand for long periods of time happened once in a blue moon, so as long as it was clean, he’d forced himself to not care too much what it looked like. Or at least pretend to even if he did. The gauze was soft against his skin, and despite the tingle, he was able to not let it take over his senses.

When he was dressed and the bathroom had had a chance to de-steam enough, he quickly brushed his teeth before running into the kitchen to grab a glass of orange juice for breakfast. The taste made him grimace, and the teen took out some hamburger from the freezer to thaw for dinner as he finished it in a few deep gulps. It was already almost nine by the time he had finished, so Levi had to practically run to gather up his things in time to be able to make it to class on time. He didn’t have that much, but it’d been a while since he’d gone to school, and he had to take the time to find his school ID and lanyard.

Sighing, he stuck the pencil behind his ear and grabbed his keys off of the small wooden table that his pushed off to the side of his almost nonexistent dining room. After opening the door to leave, he decided that it was probably going to rain and snatched the umbrella from the closet. Locking up was a quick endeavor, and as he crossed the street, he uttered a small thanks that he’d managed to find a place to live so close to the school. He lived right across from it, and that fact had kept his tardy count down to practically nothing. As far as he knew there was only one.

He pressed the button to let the office unlock the front doors with a blank face, only giving the lady a brief nod when she smiled at him before walking to his first class. He’d never been so happy to have no first block than when he’d received his schedule that year, and the raven haired boy relaxed a bit when he realized that he’d make it in time. The hall was flooded with students, but he paid them no
mind as he slipped into his creative writing class. His teacher gave him a look when he slid into his seat before standing up and setting a stack of papers on his desk. “You’ve missed a lot—though I don’t really need to tell you that, do I? You need to write ten paragraphs describing different sounds, review these stories for Friday’s group critique, and we started our units on creative nonfiction and drama. Senior projects are due on the 4th of May, before graduation. I’ll need forty pages of the creative nonfiction and ten pages of drama. There is no way you’re going to be able to make up last semester’s grade with the late deduction, but if you want to try and see anyways, I’ll need everything by the end of the day.”

Levi shook his head, frowning. “I won’t. There is no way I’d pass with everything getting a seventy percent deduction—and that’s if I have perfect stories. But I’ll have the sound assignments for you tomorrow.” He could see the skepticism in the older man’s eyes, but continued talking anyways as he pulled a couple sheets of finished work from his binder. “These are the stories that were due yesterday. And if I have any questions about the drama assignment I’ll ask. Thank you.”

The tardy bell had wrung already, and after roll had been taken care of, Levi stood up and headed over to the teacher’s desk. A headache had started forming from the stress of staying calm through the pain of the gauze on his forearms, and he knew that if he didn’t take any medicine or remove them, he was going to have another panic attack in the middle of class. He tried not to let the panic slip into his voice, and it must have worked, because the older man handed him a pass with an annoyed huff.

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Nurse Laurie and he had never gotten along before, and while he usually avoided her office like the plague, he needed the medicine. He scratched at his fingers as he made his way across the school building to her office, making sure to not do any major harm. When he finally got there, he followed protocol, signing his name and the time down quickly and taking a seat to wait to be called in. She had been talking with another teacher, but her animated tone grew flat when he spotted him. “What is it this time, Levi?”

He took the cue to walk towards her and the other lady, refusing to break eye contact with the older woman. The other teacher, someone he didn’t know, openly stared at his arms, and he did his best to ignore it. “I need my Xanax.” Laurie frowned and rolled her eyes, walking to one wall to unlock the medication drawer.

“Why?” Her voice was laced with sarcasm, and he knew that she’d talk about him when he left to the other woman, but it wasn’t new. He’d learned early on to either lie about what his problem was or get used to people thinking he was over dramatic or a liar.

“The tension headache and tactile defensiveness.” Levi forced himself to not mess with the wrappings on his arms or his fingers, knowing that he’d only cause himself more pain and incur more sass from the nurse. “The tension headache is something that I’ll give you the medicine for but you shouldn’t need it for the other thing. You just need to suck it up and take a deep breath. Relax, everyone has to deal with being uncomfortable. It’s just a matter of getting used to it.” She was moving so slow, taking her time, and the black haired boy had to mentally keep himself from glaring at her or walking out of the building as he told her to go fuck herself. The itch was growing worse, and he rubbed at the edge of the gauze without thinking. He tapped his foot, impatient and wanting to tear his skin off.

She sighed and directed her gaze towards his arm, finally noticing the bandages, “What are those for?”

“Uh- I had a panic attack the other day…” Nurse Laurie shook her head, finally handing him his
medicine, and he swallowed it without water. “And I didn’t have any band aids large enough.”

The woman cleared her throat, and his eyebrows knitted together when she started to speak. “I couldn’t help but overhear, but talking to a counselor is always an option. They’re always there to listen to anything you might need, and I’m sure it’d help you to not-.” Her eyes lingered on the gauze, and Levi kept himself from snapping at her. She was just concerned, and it wasn’t like he didn’t know what it looked like to someone who didn’t know about it. Hell, even Erwin or Hanji, as close as they were, didn’t know about how many times he’d hurt himself.

Nurse Laurie cut him off before he could say anything. “Oh, Levi here doesn’t need to talk with his counselor. It’s not as bad as it looks, Sherry.” The teen’s jaw tightened but he didn’t say anything. Arguing would just make the situation worse, and all he wanted to do was leave.

“Thanks for the medicine.” Ignoring the worried looks of ‘Sherry’ and the irritated one of the nurse, Levi grabbed the signed pass and left. Halfway down the hall he stopped and sighed, closing his eyes. It’s going to be a long day.

Chapter End Notes

Shout out to iimeepii- your comment made me feel less alone, and while I know how much it sucks and I wish you didn't have it either, the fact that someone else out there can understand how I feel really made my day. Thank you ^^

I hope to see you all here again next Saturday c: I’m thinking about starting a weekly chat for my fics again, so if you think you might want to join one let me know :D I’ll be on for at least a few hours if anyone wants to drop by: http://tinychat.com/mastia

Password: broose
Levi’s prediction had been right, and by the time he made it home, he could barely keep his eyes open, and his skull felt like it was splitting in two. He had so much homework to do, he doubted that he’d finish it in time, but the teen was determined to at least try. After placing his belongings in their prospective places and taking some more pain relievers for his headache, he shut himself in his bedroom and dropped into the chair in front of his computer.

He knew that he probably shouldn’t, but opened Skype nonetheless and sent a message to the group chat to let his friends know that he was home. A few of them were online and they answered back quickly, but Levi turned his attention to the task at hand. They would all understand. The black haired boy had a mountain of work for every class, and he was having a hard time prioritizing what needed to be done first- everything was needed for him to graduate, so it wasn’t like he could use that as a guideline and doing absolutely nothing was looking better every second he stared at the screen.

A few minutes of getting nowhere, and Levi closed his eyes before picking up one of the assignment sheets at random, letting fate decide for him. He glanced down at the paper in his hand with tired eyes, and opened up a new word document. “I guess it’s that shitty sound project first…”

Levi was about halfway through the task when his procrastination took over, and the writer’s block set in. His stomach rumbled when he closed the document, but he ignored the feeling. The teen had a limited amount of food to last him until his next paycheck, and unless he either got a substantial raise or more hours to put in, he’d need to figure out a way to stretch the last pack of hamburger meat. Burgers used too much at one time unless the patties were really small so those were out of the question, and he didn’t have any skillet noodle dishes to use. His eyebrows knitted together. *I could make soup…*

Not wasting any more time, he walked to the kitchen and pulled out the necessary tools. His favorite chef’s knife glinted from the artificial light and the small amount of sun that came through his window, and he set it on the plastic cutting board before grabbing an onion and some celery and carrots from the refrigerator. Prepping the vegetables was like being on autopilot after so many years of taking care of himself, and he had everything diced in no time. After rinsing off his hands and drying them, he put them in a pot on the stove to start sweating. Despite what people might think, Levi actually enjoyed cooking, and the smell of cooking vegetables caused his stomach to growl even louder. To keep himself occupied, he grabbed his phone and texted someone he knew would answer.

**To: Captain Eyebrows**

**Hey Eyebrows. How was work?**
From: Captain Eyebrows

Boring but productive. How was school?

To: Captain Eyebrows

I need some advice on hiding bodies.

To: Captain Eyebrows

I'd ask Hanji but she'd probably wanna dissect them or some shit.

From: Captain Eyebrows

Who pissed you off?

He didn’t know how to respond at first, some part of him wanting to rant about how the nurse had a stick up her ass and that he didn’t deserve her sass, but he didn’t want to make it a pity party and he knew that’s where it would head if he went down that road.

To: Captain Eyebrows

Who doesn’t?

From: Captain Eyebrows

Me and hanji?

To: Captain Eyebrows

You two piss me off the most. I just tolerate it.

From: Captain Eyebrows

Of course you do.
Rolling his eyes, the teen kept himself from calling the older man’s sarcasm. They both knew that as annoyed as he sometimes got, Hanji and Erwin rarely made him angry. He could actually count the times on one hand.

To: Captain Eyebrows

So what are you doing on this business trip of yours? It must be pretty important for the big boss to show up personally

From: Captain Eyebrows

Well the company is looking to expand its clubs to a new location.

To: Captain Eyebrows

Oh, really?

From: Captain Eyebrows

Yes. Trost seems to have a good need for one or two of our clubs.

To: Captain Eyebrows

You do realize the school I applied to is up there right?

To: Captain Eyebrows

Wait nvmd. Of course you do. You know everything

Levi shook his head and groaned. Erwin really wasn’t lying when he said he was close, and he had half a mind to force the blond to come and pick him up for a tour of the city he was hoping to move to for college. The teen had never actually gotten a chance to visit Sina since he never had the money or the car to travel alone. Sina School of Fine Arts was known for its low acceptance rate, but he’d applied anyways a few weeks before and was still waiting for his letter in the mail. He didn’t think he’d get in- he hadn’t even been able to submit a complete portfolio, but it’d been his dream to go there for years, but one of his classes had required him to apply to an art school so he thought it wouldn’t hurt.

His phone ding’d with a new text message, but he ignored it, taking a deep breath instead. He could smell the food cooking on the stove, and he stood to check it and brown the meat, typing a quick
response to let him know that he was done talking as he went. He had half a mind to not say anything at all, but he wasn’t that much of an ass, and despite acting like one sometimes, his friend really didn’t deserve it. Levi eyed the painting on his coffee table as he passed it, sighing. It was going to be another long night of playing catch up, and he really wanted to just sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the sudden cut off of the chapter, but I didn't have time to write the next part of it and thought it'd be better to just have a longer chapter next week and a shorter one this week than skip it all together. Mysti and I finally were able to get together to work on the next chapter of Untouched, and I posted chapter one of the boogeyman fic I've been dreaming up for weeks so I uploaded that before this one :D Kudos and comments are more than wanted

Until next week <3

End Notes

Hey there everyone c: I'm not even going to try and excuse the fact that I started another fic OTL Feel free to yell at me about my other stuff in the comments if you want. I'm well aware that I'm trash ;-; On the plus side, I should be able to have a regular update day for a while WHOOO. It's going to be Saturdays. And I'm going back to work on the other ones too (but I'm having to reread everything so bear with me ^^; )

I have a job now (a 12 hour shift) to juggle with 8 hours of school so until I graduate, my time online will be next to zilch outside of here and there and the weekends. I also got into ART SCHOOL IM SO EXCITED ;A;

Tactile Defensiveness is very much real, and I wouldn't wish it on anyone. There's going to be more explanations in the actual fic cause it's a HUGE part of the plot, but it wouldn't help to look it up if you get confused. I can also try to answer any questions you might have ^^ Don't be afraid to ask about the disorder or the fic or anything, really. I love talking to you guys so much.

Alternate Title: What Lies Beneath Just Might Drive You Insane
I'm Mastia on tumblr and I'll be tracking the tags ereri fic: wlb and fic: ereri td

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