Petrichor

by Misaya

Summary

It is the scent of earth, sighing up rich and loamy, after the first rain. It is the scent that weaves itself through Levi's memories, and it is the scent that Erwin's greatest love will wear like the most exquisite of perfumes, dabbed behind his ears and in the hollows of his collarbones.

Dryad!Levi x (gardener)!Erwin

Notes

A gift for Hope_Loneheart, for my 200 follower fic giveaway on Tumblr~

Written to: My Soul - July.
Erwin wouldn't realize it until he was much older, but the day his father left was a cliche by any other name. He was seven years old, eating a container of Strawberry Banana Bash Trix yogurt at the kitchen table, spilling most of it onto the already sticky plastic tablecloth, the one that had grapes and cornucopias dancing all over the weathered, white on yellow surface. He had come home from school just in the nick of time, because outside, the long-overdue storm was already falling, battering against the glass sliding door to their backyard and streaking down it clear and crystal, turning the plants outside a slurry of greens and washes of pink and peach and white where the tea roses were blooming. Erwin stuck his spoon in his mouth absentmindedly, spilling more yogurt over his homework, and made bets with himself on the raindrops streaking down the glass.

*If the one on the left wins, there will be spaghetti for dinner.*

*If the one in the middle wins, I won't have to do my homework until after bath time.*

*If the one on the right wins, Mommy and Daddy won't yell at each other anymore.*

The rain pounded against the glass, almost, but not quite, drowning out the sounds of doors slamming upstairs, and then the harsh tattoo of footsteps down the wooden stairs, the shrieking creak of the baseboard on the third one from the bottom. Erwin watched, out of the corner of his eye, as his father, a duffel bag slung over his shoulder, approached the kitchen table, anger a steaming miasma around him. The raindrops were beginning to merge paths, in the way that only raindrops can, slicking separation into togetherness and fluidity, belonging.

The yogurt was sweet against his tongue, pink and yellow halves of the yogurt cup swirling into one against his tastebuds.

"Hey, listen." His father was out of breath, as though he'd been running, as though he was in the middle of running away from his demons. Erwin turned to look up at him.

He'd always known his parents were on the older side of the spectrum, wrinkles fanning out from the corners of their eyes and bracketing their mouths and noses with fine spidery tendrils, grooves deep in their flesh that the other mothers and fathers who went to Open House didn't have. His father's eyes were wild, now, trapped and darting about the room, like the squirrel Erwin had seen lying half-dead on the side of the road, flattened and bloody. His mother had pulled him away before he could inspect it too closely. It wasn't a good look for him, and Erwin resolved to be a better son because his dad was always busy with work and always came home late, smelling like smoke and the unfamiliar acid aroma of something that Erwin could only describe as illegal.

"You be a good kid for your mom, okay?" his father said, more a statement than a question, more a command than a plea, as he lowered himself to look Erwin in the eye, ice blue on blue that had yet to develop into its full spectrum of colors. "Do your homework, come home on time, and make sure to eat all your vegetables so you can grow up big and strong to take care of Mom."

His father hugged him, tight, a shudder rippling through him, from what, Erwin wasn't exactly sure; he was wearing a wool jacket, and his body was warm against Erwin's. He smelled like too much aftershave and soap, the bitter fragrance of despair and regret, one that Erwin would grow up to know all too well, weaving its way through his childhood memories and his mother's wardrobe.

"But what about you?" Erwin asked, innocently, watching as his father pulled away, a pastel streak of soft pink yogurt staining the right shoulder of his jacket. "Won't you be here to take care of
Mommy?"

His father pinched at the bridge of his nose, an action that Erwin recognized as an attempt to stave off a headache. "No, I'm afraid not," he said, finally. "I'm going away for a bit."

"Oh." Erwin nodded, turning back to his yogurt and the glass sliding door. He had lost track of the raindrops he was racing, and tried to pick out a few more fat droplets, to try again. "Okay. Be safe, Daddy." His father was a busy man, who always went on lots of work conferences every year, and Erwin was assured that this would be no different.

His father sighed, the soft susurrus of his exhalation lost among the sounds of the rain battering at their home, their last defenses against nature. His footsteps tapped along the hardwood floor, receding into the distance with the thunderclaps that were growing ever closer - Erwin counted, one second two second three second four - and the front door clicked open and closed before the next roll of thunder rumbled through the sky, the underbellies of the clouds swollen and dark.

He picked out a few more raindrops, these ones just having landed fat and perfect in his direct line of vision.

*If the right one wins, I won't have to go to school tomorrow because it'll have flooded.* This was optimistic, but Erwin privately thought he could be making much better use of his time at home than stuck in school learning cursive penmanship that made his hand cramp and streaked the side of his pinky with silver that his mother always tutted at, informing him he would get lead poisoning or some other such frightening ailment.

*If the middle one wins, Mommy will let me have two cookies for dessert tonight.*

*If the left one wins, Mommy and Daddy won't be angry anymore.*

He stuck another spoonful of yogurt into his mouth, the bowl of the spoon scraping against the bottom of the plastic container as he watched his chosen raindrops intently, vaguely wondering why his mother hadn't come downstairs to wave goodbye. She usually did that, standing at the doorway and waving until his father's car had rounded the corner of their block, but this time the sputtering sounds of the car's engine turning over and the spray of gravel from the tires as his father backed out of the driveway was muffled by the solid wood of the front door.

*Well, Erwin reasoned as he scraped the last dollops of yogurt into his mouth and onto the tablecloth, maybe she was tired or sick or something like that. Maybe she had one of those big headaches that she got every once in a while, where she had to lie down, perfectly still, with all the blinds drawn and all the lights off and with no noise whatsoever.*

A bolt of lightning traced its way across the sky, and Erwin jumped in surprise, his spoon clattering to the floor and spattering pink and yellow yogurt everywhere. When his vision stopped dancing with the sparks of the remembered flash, he found, much to his dismay, that he had lost track of the raindrops again.

Perhaps it was for the better, he argued with himself as he hopped off the chair and pushed it across the floor to make a stepstool for him to reach the paper towels they kept in the kitchen cabinet. The one-cookie rule and the way cursive always made the side of his hand smear grey and silver were facts of life, just as much as it was common knowledge that his parents didn't get along as well as the other parents did. It was a fact that Erwin had long ago learned to live with, and he assured himself that it didn't matter which raindrop would have won, because nothing would change, anyway.
The sky grew darker, the rain still pouring down in massive sheets that soaked Erwin in a heartbeat the instant he stepped outside to put the empty milk carton in the recycling bin behind the garage. The earth seemed to be sighing with relief, the soft, loamy scent of rich soil and clean grass and rain.

It was a scent that would weave itself through Erwin's memories, laced heavy with nostalgia and bittersweet like the most exquisite of cologne, a fragrance that he would, at sixteen, learn was called 'petrichor,' flipping through flash cards of vocabulary as he studied for the SAT. It was a scent that would highlight the most crucial moments of Erwin's life, stretching out before him in an endless carpet of greenery, his first kiss, his wedding day, and his divorce.

And, though he didn't know it yet, it was the perfume his greatest love would wear, dabbed liberally between his collarbones and the backs of his ears, rich and delicate against Erwin's mouth as he rose up to meet his kisses.

It would be the fragrance of Levi's skin, and the taste of his mouth, and the sound of his laugh like leaves rustling in an autumn breeze, but Erwin was only seven years old and had no idea that his happy ending lay right outside.

Hunger gnawed at his stomach as the hours passed away, the sky growing darker and sinking deeper into the evening, and still his mother hadn't come downstairs. He had done his homework without being asked, had taken off his wet clothes in the laundry room and had taken a warm shower and gotten changed into his fire truck pajamas all by himself.

His parents' bedroom door was firmly closed, and his mother didn't respond to his knocks, so Erwin felt rather justified in microwaving a bag of popcorn for dinner, salty and buttery and crunchy between his teeth as he parked himself in front of the television and let the silly dialogue of his favorite cartoon characters fill the room, competing against the rain outside for his attention. Hours ticked into hours, and the programs switched until the cartoons ran out and Erwin's eyes were gritty and sandy.

Throwing the popcorn bag away and washing his hands, he headed upstairs for bed, pausing in front of his parents' bedroom door again, indecisive, wavering, his hand hovering in the empty space between himself and the doorknob. A clap of thunder, violent and terrifying in the darkness, had him grasping the metal and turning it, pushing his way in.

His mother was a lump beneath the covers, her back to him, and didn't respond when Erwin climbed into bed beside her, curling up to her back and burrowing his head in between her shoulder blades, seeking comfort from her leaching warmth. His mother was shivering, too, like his father had been, and Erwin clung to her in determination, because he had told his father he would take care of his mother while he was gone.

But her shoulders were too big for him to get his arms over, and so Erwin settled for just patting her a few times on the back, soothing, like she did to him whenever she came in to read him bedtime stories and scare away the monsters in his closet and in the shadows in the corners of his room. She didn't stop shaking for a very, very, very long time.

Erwin hoped his father would come back, soon, and strained his ears listening for the car crawling back into the driveway, tires crunching along the gravel, but all he could hear was his own
heartbeat rabbiting away in his chest at every thunderclap.

Similarly, Levi would not know, until he was much older, that he knew how to love, and that the man that would draw this realization out of him was only a scant sixty feet away.

The storm beat down around him, soaking creamy skin, and he stretched his limbs out, reveling in the weight of the water that spilt out over the branches of the silver birch he occupied. He could taste the water, pure and cold and utterly delicious, as it raced along every twig and every unfurling leaf.

The scent of the earth rose up around him, rich and musky, and, though he didn't know it yet, it would be the scent he would associate with Erwin, the scent that would weave itself into his dreams and memories. Levi inhaled, deeply, petrichor filling his lungs, and sat down between the roots of his silver birch home, watching the rain turning the world into a slurry.
The gloom had wrapped his mother in a shroud of a grey so thick Erwin could taste it, deep and heavy against his tongue, and it seemed hideously out of place that the sun was gleaming golden and butter yellow outside. The petals of the flowers were in full bloom, roses and tulips and daisies pushing tentative velvet heads out of the rich loam of the earth, saturated deep and dark with the recent rains and the daily assistance of the sprinkler system that went off everyday like clockwork at six thirty on the dot. The sparkles of water always decorated the kitchen window with pretty, dazzling lattices that streaked glistening tears down the smoothed glass panes, and overlaying the picture of the backyard outside, illuminating the rosy skirts of the flowers' petals and the soft spattered bark of the silver birch growing just to the side of the kitchen window.

Erwin thought it hideously unfair that the universe had the daring, the foolish surety, the audacity and certainty of an infinite continuum, thought it hideously unfair that the world should keep turning, that the sun should keep rising, that the birds should still be chirping and cheeping bright and brilliant, singing their love songs to each other in the branches of the treetops, while his own private world was shattering and being decimated further with every breath he took.

His mother looked at him over macaroni and cheese - the fourth night that week they'd had it for dinner - and assured him with teary, bloodshot eyes that this was not his fault. It wasn't reassuring, and Erwin pushed around the soggy orange noodles on his plate with the tines of his fork, holding his breath and counting down the seconds until his father would walk back through the front door. He would have his duffel bag and briefcase slung over his shoulder and his head, respectively, to protect his ash blonde hair from the rain that spattered the ground outside muddy. Erwin was familiar with the adage "April showers bring May flowers," but this, he decided, was absolutely ridiculous. Positively absurd. At least the thunderclouds burbling overhead and building over the distant mountains, swollen underbellies black and thick with future storms, were fit to match his mood.

The joke wasn't funny anymore, and Erwin just wanted his father to come home.

He hated the way the teachers and other kids at school look at him funnily, pity souring their expressions, hated the way the sitters at childcare were always treating him with caution and the generous application of extra cookies and apple juice at snack time, as if this would in any way make up for a father that Erwin couldn't seem to reach.

Divorce was an ugly word that he didn't particularly understand. It was a word, an action, an event that happened to other kids' parents, that happened to somebody else, anybody else but him.

Erwin didn't know it at that point in his life, but he would grow up to realize that, to another person, he was someone else. He was a safe scapegoat to ladle misfortune and catastrophe on when deemed acceptable. But Erwin was not aware of this now, because his mind, all of seven and three-quarters, was far too preoccupied with what was happening to his family as he knew it.
From what Erwin understood of it, his mother and father no longer wanted to live together or love each other, and, from what he understood of it, beneath all the strange adult subtext of his mother's shaky reassurances, this whole divorce business was entirely his fault. Adults had a sneaky way of doing that, saying one thing and meaning another - sometimes, the exact opposite - of what they had just said not two seconds ago.

His mother did it quite a lot.

"I'm fine," as she wiped away silvery tears onto the sleeve of a stained blouse Erwin was sure she'd been wearing for three straight days. It had started to take on the scent of sadness, cloying like overripe fruit wound silken and gossamer through every thread of the cloth.

"I'm sure your father will be back soon." A lie, every night as she tucked him into bed, a soft, shaky kiss feathering across his forehead, chapped flaky lips free of lipstick and gloss.

Erwin, though he would never admit it, missed the way his mother used to paint her lips with silly, vibrant colors, every imaginable shade of the rainbow, kisses that left waxy colored bows across his cheek as he left for school that he would feign disgust at and wipe off exaggeratedly with his breakfast napkin before slinging his backpack over his shoulder and heading out the front door. He missed those waxy circlets desperately, missed having to wipe them off, plum and crimson smears against the back of his hands, missed seeing them around the rims of her coffee cups as she pursed her lips in a perfect "O" to sip at the bitter dark liquid.

And, though it was discouraging to admit it to himself, Erwin even desperately missed the way she would leave sucking lipstick marks on her cigarettes, ashy tar leaving grey streaks over the pads of Erwin's fingertips as he scooped out the old ceramic painted finger bowl he and his father had made at CeramiCafe as a Mother's Day gift. The cigarettes he scooped out now, tarry nicotine against his hands, were white and grey, dead, ashes flaky against his fingertips, smoke filling his mother's waxen silhouette with a sweeping darkness that Erwin found it hard to push aside to get to the woman his mother had used to be.

"It isn't your fault, Erwin." Well, this was just the most blatant of the lies Erwin had ever heard, and he briefly resolved to himself that when he grew up he would always say exactly what he meant and nothing else, even if it was painful. It was agonizing, the way his mother looked at him when she thought he couldn't see, a mixture of regret and agony spilling inky darkness across hazel eyes. Surely she wouldn't have looked at him like that if he had been utterly blameless, and surely she would have remembered to pick him up on time from childcare and spare him the pitying glances of the sitters, and surely she wouldn't have smoked so many Lucky Strikes and made him Kraft Dinner four nights in a row if he had been completely innocent. It was all these factors that had Erwin utterly convinced that the divorce in process had been, entirely, his fault.

Guilt scraped him up from the inside out with confusion and a certain type of anger that he found himself horrified by.

The realization hit him as his mother was late picking him up from childcare for the third time. He peeked out of the thick glass that separated the demarcated white lines of the parking lot from the elementary school's hallways, which were painted a drab green and currently smelled frightfully like mildew and the way the laundry got if it was left in the washing machine for too long. It was raining again.

"Erwin, sweetheart, maybe we should call your mom?" Miss Petra, his favorite childcare sitter, was squatting down to his eye level, honey hair neat and straight like his mother's was, like his mother's had been, and Erwin fought back the overwhelming heat of tears that threatened to incinerate him from the inside out. Big boys didn't cry, he reminded himself sternly, and he bit
roughly at the inside of his cheek in an effort to distract himself.

"Here, come on. I'll call her. She probably just got held up at the grocery store or something. The rain really looks like it's coming down, huh?" Miss Petra dialed the list of digits Erwin rattled off, stroking a tender hand through Erwin's hair absentmindedly as she held the mobile to her ear, listening to the ringing, and Erwin's hands clutched at the straps of his backpack, watching the raindrops chase each other across the glass.

"Mm. Maybe she's got really bad signal or something," Miss Petra said, lowering the phone and smiling reassuringly at Erwin. "Come on." She held out her hand. "Do you want to hear the story of Peter Rabbit and Benjamin Bunny again? We can read it as many times as you want."

Erwin took a last glance out the window, his heart heavy like the raindrops cascading with gravity, trickling to the ground, hope faltering away before he followed Miss Petra down the hallway.

The little boy who lived inside the house was sad, gloom wrapping him in a shroud of grey so thick that Levi could practically taste it through the brick and stucco and glass. He had eyes the color of the sky above Levi's head, branches arching and stretching to test the feel of the sunlight against their leaves.

He soaked it up, sun and rain and all, and enjoyed everything in equal measure.

Oh, he was coming now, and Levi hid himself in the upper branches of his silver birch, holding his breath, quiet, still, as the little boy tramped into the garden, making little gasping noises like the wind that rustled through his leaves.

The boy's hair was soaked, burnished gold like daffodils bowing their heads to the dusk, and Levi watched, curious, silver eyes. He was raining, somehow, sky eyes swollen and leaking rain.

He flung himself amongst the roots of the birch tree, sobbing, mud and dirt and grass against the fair cream of his skin, and Levi watched, wide eyes, feeling the salt tang of the trickles like little pinpricks.

He soaked it up, and despised it immensely with an intensity that was breathtaking.

The rain swelled around them, sheeting, silver needles, and, though he didn't know yet why he did it, Levi wriggled his limbs, whispering through the tree branches, a small shelter of weeping soft green moving, creaking slowly into place, slender and supple, to protect the boy from the rain.
Remember that Levi is a tree spirit inhabiting a tree in Erwin's backyard. For the purposes of this AU, he can make distinctions between his "human" and "tree" body. They are *not* speaking the same language. Erwin doesn't understand what he's saying.

Fantastic fantasy, tracing spirals across the gnarled wood of the kitchen table, spooning yogurt into his mouth and savoring the flavor on his tongue and only half-pondering the implications of the soft click of the front door behind his father's retreating back. Dizzy daydreams, the taste of the metal in his mouth a sharp reminder of things gone and forgotten and misplaced, as he chased the raindrops with his eyes, attaching silly promises and hopes and wishes to every smudge of water. Invented imaginations looping quicksilver through his mind and wiping out his mother's words as she sat him down heavily at the kitchen table, the cherry of a cigarette cindering smoky between her fingertips as she exhaled fire, dragons, dragons, and told him that maybe some things were going to have to change around here.

Erwin tried to understand it, this soft, grown up falling out of the enchantment of love that had seemed to infect his parents with its despair. To wake up, heart blank and barren, unwriting affection and taking back its words. The concept was foreign, and Erwin had only been half-listening when his mother sat him down at the kitchen table, her free hand tracing over the whorls and knots in the wood, and told him in no uncertain terms that his father would not be coming back.

"Do you understand, Erwin?" she had asked, voice cracking at the edges. Erwin remembered thinking that even the fiercest of the dragon's flames was weak to the water.

He had nodded, his first practice of deception. Seven years old and already learning to lie. The cracks flooded spider thin into his heart to blot out the gentle ivory of childhood innocence.

Lies came quickly to the tip of his tongue now, a speed frightening when examined from the corner of one's eye. The syllables of deceit danced delicately through his mouth, making themselves at home in the crevices of his cheeks and hardening his heart obsidian.

"Yes, I am fine," Erwin repeated for what felt like the millionth time, his raincoat streaming puddles onto the sickly green carpet of the principal's office at school. "I told you already." Impatience. He watched the droplets trickle down the slick yellow material, adding to the muggy scent of dampening, awakening, flourishing mildew growing in the recesses of the carpet. He refused to meet the principal's eye, instead focusing his gaze on a hole that had somehow wormed its insistent way into the corner of his mahogany desk, and trying to ignore the cold chilling trickles that were creeping down the back of his shirt now.

"Your teacher says that this isn't the first time you've been late for class before," the principal explained, clearing his throat and adjusting the knot of his tie around his neck. It was a flutter of
orange silk in the corner of Erwin's vision, and Erwin had vague memories of raiding his father's closet, wrapping silk and cotton around his neck and pretending to grow up before his time. His mother had laughed, taken pictures, the flashbulb of the camera burning bright into his eyes.

"Why do you think that might be, Erwin?" he asked. The principal's tone held the vaguest notes of concern, the smallest tinge of pity winding its way into the spaces between his syllables, and Erwin's breathing felt loud and harsh, grating against his own ears in the silence.

Answers darted across his tongue, silver fish each squeezing roughly past his teeth, scales of white lies bitter in his mouth.

"I don't know." He shrugged, sullen. He didn't want pity, didn't deserve it, because even at seven his pride swelled like a beast in the pit of his belly, and, because, even at seven, Erwin knew that pity was a reserved emotion, two parts sympathy and one part indulgence. It was sickening. "Sorry." His apologies were half-hearted half-truths, and he scrambled out of the chair as though the seat were burning. His shoes squeaked across the linoleum tile of the hallway outside the principal's office in his hurry to escape, to find freedom away from prying eyes.

There wasn't a right answer, he reminded himself as his footsteps slowed, feet dragging now as he postponed his return to class.

Some things were going to change, his mother's whispers, smoke in the air, choking, suffocating. The fantasies burned away, the daydreams lost in the harshness of cracking eyelids, and Erwin was filled with why's and why not's, infinities of questions that didn't have right answers. They squeezed out the space between his thoughts, and he stood up on tiptoe to reach the spout of the water fountain. It tasted like metal as he sipped, swallowed, gulped, sloshing to fill the emptiness inside him with chilled clarity.

The skies had cleared sometime between his visit to the principal's office and the end of the school day. Erwin almost wished they hadn't. The clear azure, the pale puffy clouds, and the rapidly drying puddles didn't match his mood at all.

Flowers blossomed rapidly everywhere he looked, cheerful petals a riotous rainbow of colors. His backyard was a rampage, blooms and petals straining out of their boundaries, planted for his mother because his father had, once upon a time, loved her.

A fairytale, foolish fantasy, and Erwin was growing up.

The petals shred quickly in his fingers, silk gloss and velvet underneath the rampage of his hands, and he prayed for rain so that he wouldn't have to keep tasting the bitter salt of his tears tracing at the corners of his mouth.

Levi watched curiously, stretching from a mid-afternoon nap. The boughs of the silver birch he inhabited swayed delicately above him, around him, the leaves fanning out their broad sides to drink in the sunlight that warmed the steaming earth with its kisses.

The little boy had just come home from school, slamming the door of the house with a force that Levi could feel reverberating in his roots. Anger. The word came to Levi's mind and flitted away just as quickly, the concept slick and unsteady in the streams of his consciousness. It wasn't an
emotion that Levi was familiar with, it wasn't a feeling he wished to familiarize himself with, but it seemed like the boy was frothing with it, spilling over.

Levi watched, half hidden behind the tree bark, skin dappled and blending away as the boy came barreling out into the back yard, feet slapping wetly against the grass that was growing long, unmowed, untended, to curl up tickling around Levi's ankles.

The boy bent over the flowerbeds, riots of color and blooms, reaching out with ravaging hands to shred and pick and peel away the life. Wounds, over and over, ugliness to match the horror inside. That man had planted them, long before his image was reborn in the boy, had tended them with loving care and watched them blossom proudly beneath his fingertips.

Levi understood anger.

"Stop," he hissed, the grass curling around his ankles as he darted, quicksilver, to the boy, grasping his upraised wrist between willowy fingers. Shreds of petals bled velvet beneath the soles of his feet. "Vicious boy."

The boy's eyes were wide, perfect pale blue to match the sky above, and Levi caught traces of despair and confusion, milky metal, as the boy tugged himself away. Fear. The wet slapping sounds of shoes on grass as he backtracked quickly into the house, slamming the door behind him roughly to reverberate through the soles of Levi's feet.

His anger left as quickly as it had come, leaching out through the cool grass beneath his heels, and Levi shook off the remains of the chilling petals as he looked up at the sky, frustringly clear, and wished for rain.
Liberal use of magic (remember this is a fantasy story)

But childhood curiosity overcame fear, and imagination, warm and dappled, rewrote the cold chill of memory. Erwin did his homework at the kitchen table now, scrawling out numbers and gnawing at the eraser of his pencil, unable to shake the sensation that he was being watched. He stared out at the backyard from the corner of his eye, his mind half focused on his arithmetic and half on the boy outside. Could he, it, whatever it was, be called that? he wondered, rubbing out another sum and scattering the eraser shavings absentmindedly all over the kitchen floor.

He had looked normal, Erwin guessed, doodling in the margins of his spiral-bound notebook. But he lived outside, and his mother had told him that only bad people lived outside. Or maybe he had climbed over the fence separating their backyard from the neighbors’?

The boy's skin had been creamy pale, like someone who didn't go outside very much, so Erwin dashed his first thought on grounds of impossibility. And the neighbors didn't have children, Erwin was fairly sure of it. His mother had always warned him about bothering them, and he never saw any sign of their existence other than the black and silver cars that rotated shifts in their driveway.

Maybe the other boy lived in a nice warm place with pets and a mother and father who never fought and loved each other very much. Maybe he had just been taking a shortcut through Erwin's backyard on his way home. Maybe he loved flowers. The ones in the garden were pretty, and his father had spent hours on weekends in the backyard, bent over the soil and nurturing the shoots and blooms. He had tried to teach Erwin their names: sweetpea, tea rose, hyacinth, but to Erwin they had just been pretty things that came into color once a year before fading away into brown rot and decay. He remembered only *Myosotis sylvatica*, forget me nots, the syllables sibilant and lovely against his tongue.

"Are you done with your homework yet?" his mother asked, her voice strained, the syllables pinched. She was cooking spaghetti, sauce from the glass jar, and the steam fogged up the kitchen window. Erwin traced the curls of vapor from the pot to where they disappeared at a point somewhere over his mother's left shoulder, and he wondered if the boy was hungry. What did he like to eat? Did he go to school? What was his name? The questions ran rampant through Erwin's mind, and slowly, imagination built the fantasy up layer by layer.

"No," he replied, truthful, still doodling in the margins of his homework. His mother's sigh was lost amongst the burbling of the sauce pot on the stove. Erwin gnawed on his eraser, rubber against his tongue, and stared out into the backyard some more, his sums and the weight of his mother's disappointment completely forgotten.

Maybe the boy would be friends with him. Someone to play with after school, running through the sprinklers and crunching through the autumn leaves and huddling together on the back porch in winter, hands wrapped around steaming mugs of hot chocolate from the packet.

And maybe, Erwin thought as his mother set down a plate of spaghetti in front of him, an apology was in order. He ignored her halfhearted glance of disapproval towards the doodles in the margins
of his math homework, and twirled spaghetti around his fork.

The garage was full of discarded things, treasures to be discovered, and Erwin lost whole evenings there, weekends slipping away in the blink of an eye as he rummaged through the detritus of accumulated life. Dust rose in clouds from the cardboard boxes whose flaps he tore open eagerly, searching for his father's gardening tools.

Baby pictures of himself that he'd never seen before, stashed behind his parents' wedding pictures, and he traced a pudgy finger over his mother's face behind the glass curiously. Happiness, two people whom the universe had decided to press together for a brief breath of time, a gasp of a second. It was odd, seeing them without him, and Erwin found it difficult to reconcile the fact of his non-existence.

He hadn't been able to find another picture of just the two of them since. He had always been there, a smile, a burbling bundle, a tiny starfish hand waving from a mass of blankets to glue the husband and wife irrevocably into a mother and father.

Dust swirled frantic through the air as he placed the wedding picture back into the cardboard box. The silver wrought frame gleamed weakly in the milky sunlight as the flaps closed over it, sealing away the happiness for another time.

The little boy had something in his hands. Levi tensed automatically, the soft supple boughs of the birch going rigid in response, and he waited with bated breath, the leaves gone still in the late spring breezes. Cautious. Curious.

Waiting, tightly held bud, holding on for the opportune moment to blossom.

The seed packets crinkled in Erwin's hands as he tiptoed outside, casting his gaze every which way for the other boy. He noticed, with some lingering sense of guilt, that the blossoms in the side garden were looking rather bare, but color still flowed riotous amongst the green, wild and uncontrolled, weeds carving up verdant shoots through the soil.

Clouds stacked up high in the distance, coating the purple mountaintops with puffy skirts. It smelled like wet, damp, the air heavy and breathless, waiting for its retribution. Thunder rolled, low and heady, and with a final cautious glance around the backyard, Erwin left the seed packets by the soil and prayed for rain.

The rain came down in slick silver sheets, cool and soothing against his skin when Levi finally came out hours later, creeping through the weeping camouflagle of leaves before dropping to the ground. The grass was wet against his heels, promises of life and a whisper to forgiveness, as he quickly crossed the yard to find what the little boy had left behind.

Flowers smiled their dainty painted faces up at him from the white packets, and he stroked the
plastic uncertainly, willow fingers pressing against the outlines of hard bumps inside. Oh? He held up the packet for closer examination, shaking it to hear the rustle and rattle. Tiny, barely there whispers, muffled by the clinical whiteness, the forget me nots on the cover begging him to do just that.

He ripped open the packet quickly, shaking the seeds out into the palm of his hand. A replacement for happiness taken away, a crude, clumsy apology for the destruction of love years in the making.

The rain stopped, the cool spatters against his back suddenly disappearing, and Levi looked up to find himself staring at bright yellow spoked through with the same shiny metal the man had used to carve out his heart in every patch of soil.

The little boy was standing next to him, blue eyes wide, curious, careful, holding the yellowness of the sun over him. As Levi watched, the boy pointed to the seeds Levi cradled in the bowl of his hand.

"**Myosotic sylvatica.**"

Levi could hear the seeds whispering contentment at being named, soft soothing comfort stroking its way through their nubby coats. Trust.

The boy pointed to himself. "Erwin." It was a strange name, solid, and Levi rolled it around in his mouth, tasting at the letters. It fit, in a way, an apology, the yellowness juxtaposed with metal, the man and the boy promising for better tomorrows.

The boy looked at him expectantly.

"**Betula pendula.**" he murmured, nodding in the direction of the silver birch across the yard. He placed his free hand against his chest, his heartbeat steadying with every passing moment. "Levi."

"Levi," the boy repeated, his eyes widening with wonder, and Levi looked down to find that the seeds had started to sprout in his hand, drawing their comfort and nourishment from the idea that the boy might live to make his promise glorious.
Acacia

Erwin's world split neatly in two pieces, the fragmentation of his parents' marriage coming full circle to crack him right down the middle. It happened without him knowing, an iceberg cracking in the night, collapsing into the ocean. There was life without Levi - school, the inside of his bedroom, the grocery store - and there was life with Levi - outside, the knees of his pants wet and grass-stained, to rummage through the soil and trace the veins that ran through sprouting leaves with tentative careful fingers.

April slowly slipped away into May, and the forget me nots wriggled up from the soil, tiny green shoots reaching for the sunlight.

"Mrs. Smith." His teacher was talking, droning on about something or other, but Erwin was staring out the classroom window, hot sunlight on the black asphalt, and wondering what Levi was doing, counting down the minutes to go see Levi. "I'm just the slightest bit concerned about your son."

"Oh?" His mother's voice was raspy, the smoke and ash from her packets of Lucky Strikes tainting her lungs with tar. His mother was still Mrs. Smith? Erwin wondered absentmindedly, picking at a hole in the thigh of his jeans. Children were running on the playground, and their gleeful shouts filtered through the windows in the classroom, and Erwin longed for the freedom of the open air in the garden, crisp and clear in his lungs. "What seems to be the matter?"

Daydreaming in class...drawing on his papers...were there any problems at home that she should be aware of?

Erwin was only vaguely aware of the way his mother's hands were knotting themselves together in her lap, sallowed skin stretching taut and white across the bony ridges of her knuckles, making the stained sunflowers on her dress dance and bob their heads with every twitch of her fingers. Daydreaming? Well, of course he was. Sums and times tables and long division spun wildly through his head, important only for counting down the hours until he could burst through the front door, dropping his backpack unceremoniously by the kitchen table, and run into the garden to see what Levi had done today. Were the forget me nots blooming, purple and white silky petals against his fingers? Were weeds sprouting rampant greenery throughout the soil? His fingers itched to bury themselves in the rich, fragrant dirt, and the numbers in his class spun away from him in a blur of curves and corners that he didn't care enough to chase.

"He's probably just distracted," his mother said, choosing her words carefully. Adults did things like that, measuring the weight of their words to make sure they didn't exceed some unspoken daily quota. "You know how little boys get." Little? Erwin wanted to bristle. He was almost eight years old, after all, a fat round number that looped its way into infinity when tilted on its side, becoming beauty in its disgraceful fall. "Overactive imagination, most likely."

His teacher pursed her lips, pinching them together until they turned white at the centers. He tried not to stare at the way her lipstick was feathering and flaking crimson at the corners. He imagined her in the mirror, getting ready for school, swaddling herself in tight nylons the color of nothing, staring at herself open-mouthed in the medicine cabinet glass like he had seen his mother do, open mouth cherry lips brushing the shadows of wings across her eyes.

"Why?" he'd asked, once, pouting in the shadow of the doorway. Her back still turned to him, she had responded, Because I want to look pretty, can you at least give me that, sweetheart? Spat out in
irritation, and he'd quivered away, wondering when the pretty monster in the bathroom with the
glinting eyes of diamond and breath of brimstone had replaced his mother.

"Petra's shown me his drawings from after-school art. He claims there's a boy living in his
backyard?" Well, of course he had trusted Miss Petra with Levi's existence, and he felt a cold spit
of betrayal rise up thick in his throat, blocking off his words and the protests that rose to the tip of
his tongue as his mother turned to him, an inscrutable expression on her face.

"Overactive imagination, most likely," she repeated, slowly, firmly. "He loves the outdoors, just
like his father." Bitterness. Anger. Erwin turned away from her, and went back to staring out the
window at the golden afternoon, wondering when his mother would stop being Mrs. Smith and just
be his mother again.

"She said I had an overactive imagination, or something like that," he informed Levi later that
evening, when his mother had already cosseted herself in her bedsheets with a packet of cigarettes
and a bottle of clear liquid called Ciroc that smelled like industrial floor cleaner. Levi looked at
him patiently, uncomprehending, and Erwin wanted to throw up his hands and stomp off. He
wanted to scream, however irrationally, that this was all Levi's fault, his father's leaving, his
mother's dissolution, everything.

No. That wouldn't do. Erwin found his hours spent with Levi were lovely ones, a flower shyly
turning its head toward the sun, and he was both and neither.

The boy - no, Erwin, Levi would really have to start referring to him like that - brought stacks of
thick white paper out to him every day, covered with scribbled inscriptions, letters done in a large
childish hand, accompanied with rudimentary drawings where the colors spilled vibrant and
beautiful outside the lines.

Levi looked at them dutifully, giving each its turn, as Erwin pronounced their names exaggeratedly
slowly.

Tomato. A red circle topped with a green twig that Levi had been utterly unable to comprehend
until Erwin darted inside and brought out a tomato, kissed red and blushing by the sun, juicy in
Levi's mouth. He adored the taste, biting into it and licking away the juice that trickled down his
wrist, and had never forgotten its name.

Rainbow. The spokes of the sun struck through with metal that Erwin held - what had that word
been? oh, yes, an umbrella! Levi remembered now - had lowered, the rain drizzling to a stop, and
the sun had peeked out from behind its blanket bank of clouds to illuminate the sky with colors of
all sorts.

Tree. Erwin had run his hands over the spotted trunk of the silver birch Levi lived in, and Levi had
giggled, the sound burbling unfamiliar in his throat, at the way little fingers had tickled at the bark.
He had let the leaves down, coaxing slim supple branches to reach down and caress Erwin's face,
slim fingers of green tickling underneath his chin.

Friends. Two stick figures, one yellow, one black, and Erwin had pointed from himself to Levi, a
hopeful expression on his face.
"Fuh...fwa...ffllffriends," Levi repeated, slowly, and Erwin nodded, clapping with glee.

He rolled the word around in his mouth now, tasting the memory of tomatoes. Erwin was inside, eating dinner with his mother, and he could see them through the slight gap in the downy curtains tugged together over the sliding glass doors from the kitchen to the backyard. Friends. He liked the sound of it.
Levi picked up the language rapidly, learning new words and rolling the syllables around in his mouth with an ease that came quicker to him every day. Erwin had helped him learn his alphabets, As and Bs and Cs traced in the dirt at the roots of the silver birch that Levi lived in. As Erwin wrote the letters in the soil with fat, squiggly fingers, Levi laughed, a light breezy sound like leaves rustling together in late spring breezes, Erwin’s touch tickling at the roots of the tree and sending tingles of mirth wrapping gleeful up his spine.

He was overjoyed when Erwin spelt out his name, L E V I in the soil at their feet, the rich dirt pressing into the whorls of his fingertip. When Erwin was at school or inside with his mother, Levi practiced writing his name, tracing the straight lines on every available surface, his willowy fingers leaving eddies of slipstreams in the air. With every repetition of the letters on the smooth speckled bark of the trunk, he felt himself rooted, to the earth and to the boy. His small triumphs and happinesses were infectious, and the forget-me-nots bloomed riotous in the garden, tiny white and blue blossoms tumbling over each other, silky petals stretching out to kiss the sun. His small anguishes and upsets, bad days at school or his mother’s heavy moods, made Levi want to reach out and shelter him from life’s monsoons and maelstroms.

“She doesn’t like me,” was a frequent complaint. “She doesn’t love me anymore.” Love was a concept that Levi was still trying to understand. Love was another word that Levi had come to quickly recognize; it had three letters that were in his name, also, punctuated in the middle with the round of an O, like an emptiness waiting to overflow with the affection that language tried to capture in black and white on paper.

“No?” he asked now, to the familiar complaint. Erwin had come home from school and had banged through to the backyard right away, flinging himself down among the roots of the silver birch. His mother had been holed up in her bedroom, and a strange new pair of tennis shoes had taken up residence next to her high heels by the baseboards. “No love?”

Levi imagined love as rain after a long and dusky Indian summer, running down cool and soft down the branches to soak the earth with sweetness. It was the sun coming out in the mornings to wipe away the dew, warm and golden so all the little leaflets unfurled to kiss the light. It was the way Erwin’s father had spent so many of his summer evenings toiling away in the garden to bring life into bloom, for the women he’d loved, brushing their laughing lips with narcissus and honeysuckle.

“I don’t think she does,” Erwin repeated, unzipping his backpack to tug out his homework, a flower diagram he had to color for science. Stems, leaves, trunk, roots, his crayons drawing vicious lines along the paper as Levi watched, his knees curled up to his chest. “She doesn’t look at me anymore.”

He himself struggled to remember his mother, the glimpse of a smile, cradling his tiny body of a seedling in her boughs before sending him off into the world with a feathery kiss in a bird’s beak. She had loved him, unconditionally, every leaf and every twig of her being cupping him with memories for a lifetime, Levi was sure, and couldn’t help but feel that perhaps Erwin was mistaken. But he had that determined set about his face, his eyebrows drawn down and furrowed as he concentrated on labeling the plant, and Levi kept his thoughts to himself.
Years melted away, marked only by the comings and goings of winters that had Levi shivering inside the shelter of his bark, the cascading of rotting petals to the earth, and a parade of Erwins walking through the glass sliding doors to the backyard, growing taller and taller seemingly by the day. Erwin started spending longer hours in school, leaving books for Levi to read by the tree’s roots every morning. He devoured the words hungrily, fingers curling tenderly around the edges of the pages, immersing himself in story and waiting patiently for Erwin to come home.

The house resounded with the sounds of arguments and fighting, harsh words with barbs and hooks at the edges to dig roughly into the skin to wound and hurt and sting. Levi winced with every shout, and looked up only when Erwin came barging out of the house, slamming the glass door shut behind him so that it wobbled iridescent in its panels.

“I hate her.” This, exhaled breathlessly, the words of an injured child spilling from a mouth of someone who was no longer that, someone on the cusp of becoming a man already without quite being one, either. Disbelieving syllables, awkward adolescence blossoming into adulthood, thirteen years old. “I hate her, I hate her, I hate her.” This, childishly stamped into the dirt with every repetition, until Levi was wincing as the trembles rattled through his roots buried shallow beneath the soil.

“You shouldn’t,” Levi murmured, his slim branches quivering in the light breeze, wrapping willowy fingers around Erwin’s wrists to wriggle little leafy tendrils in the spaces between his clenched fingers. Slender twigs sprouted, smooth bark, uncoiling the force Erwin used to hold his hands into fists, tickling at the palms until his fingers relaxed. “She’s your mother.” Too many stories had protagonists who hated their parents, all-consuming angers that needled through their personalities and bodies like live wires. Too many stories ended with finding resolution between the two, wasting too much time and too many pages to realize that love had been hidden all along, the embers uncovered from ash.

“I do,” Erwin replied, breathlessly, but his palms remained open, knuckles soft against Levi’s hands.

Levi’s eyes widened, staring down at the mesh of their skin, smooth creamy silver against honey gold, and he imagined metal winding around their fingers. No. Too many books, too many stories, too many idle hours spent in fantasy in worlds of his own undoing.

He drew his hands away.

The silver birch had grown enough so its topmost branches could just barely scrape against the glass panes of Erwin’s bedroom window. Levi cradled his knees to his chest, clinging to the slender branches at the tip of the tree, watching as the boy tossed and turned in his bed, kicking the blankets off and lying sprawled out across the mattress haphazardly, the moonlight bathing his limbs milky.

He reached out, tiny twigs sprouting along his fingertips to reach out and splay themselves five-fingered across Erwin’s window to cast spidery shadows across Erwin’s face.

Love? He wondered to himself. Was this what it felt like?
Angry adolescence came with the toxin smell of chemical colognes laden heavy on the wind that Erwin stirred up around the silver birch’s branches as he blew through the house, blowing past his mother’s confused, angry words, ignoring the way his reflection in the hallway mirror came to resemble his father’s with every passing day.

“You always spend so much time outside.” Her voice chased him down the hallways of the house that had long ago ceased to be a home, accusations crawling into the corners and breeding shadows that grew darker in the strained silences that fell across the dinner table. She tutted, her disapproval lost in the quiet snick snack of the sliding glass door leading to the backyard as Erwin slid it closed behind him. With every inch he gained and every pair of shoes that he outgrew, he shed a bit of his childish violence. His tone grew snippier, anger hiding calmly behind his shattered syllables, and with bitterness in her mouth, Erwin’s mother watched as her son flung his gangly body in the dirt underneath the silver birch tree his father had planted to commemorate the start of their family together.

Fine. Let him be, she thought angrily to herself, tugging the gauzy curtains shut over the glass. Erwin was always like this, after a weekend spent at his dad’s place, a vibrating mass of irritation, refusing to look her in the eye.

“I’ve done my best,” she wanted to tell him, wanted to pound on the glass until it shattered in sharp panes beneath the heels of her hands. She wanted it to tinkle, crackling on the floor in diamond-bright jags, wanted to reach out with bloodstained hands and draw her son back from the riot of violent color that the garden had become in the past few years, overrun with flowers rampaging out of the neat order of their beds. “You don’t understand what it’s like, being alone in a crowded room. Where has my little boy gone?”

But Erwin was too far gone, boyish limbs growing long in the heat of an endless summer, and in one fell swoop she seemed to have lost everything. She had closed her eyes for a breathless moment, a breathless second, allowing herself to feel the taste of love again, in warmth in the bed sheets and another pair of shoes toed off by the baseboards in the entry hall. She had become the woman she’d been before, the reclaimed youth souring in her mouth, and when she had opened her eyes to find herself, inexplicably, alone, she found that her son had been stolen away in the night of his own growth.

Frowning and stifling a cough that threatened to rattle her breath right out of her lungs, she turned away from the milky light filtering in through the gauzy curtains and headed up to her bedroom, her heart growing heavier with every step.

“How was your father?” Levi asked, quirking an eyebrow at Erwin and trying to breathe past the riotous, overwhelming smell of that hideous spray Erwin put on himself every morning before heading out to school. It covered up the scents that Levi liked, rich earth and strawberry shampoo and lavender laundry detergent that wove itself through the fabric of Erwin’s clothes. “Is he doing alright?”

Erwin shrugged, trying to ignore the weight of Levi’s gaze. “He’s okay, I guess,” he replied noncommittally, refusing to meet Levi’s eyes as he unzipped his backpack, notebooks and papers fluttering to the ground. “I don’t like his girlfriend.”

“Is she not nice?” Levi wanted to know, reading over Erwin’s shoulder as Erwin plopped open his
science textbook, big blocks of words that Levi committed to memory, eager to look up later. Piece by piece, syllable by syllable, heavy in the words Erwin only hinted at, Levi had parsed together the fascinating complexities of Erwin’s family.

A mother who lit cigarettes one off the end of another, searching for love in all the wrong places and giving her heart up in spades.

A father who loved so purely that, at the first sign of his heart turning wayward, had driven away in the rain, his happiness lying over the curve of the next rainbow.

A son caught in the middle of the tempest, a son too afraid to trust himself with the bleeding, battered concept of love.

And now this same son was finally meeting Levi’s eyes, a question burning brightly in irises the color of the ocean, and Levi found himself breathless.

“You’re the only one who gets me, you know?” Erwin murmured, the uncertainty of his words ringing frantic in Levi’s ears. “The only one who listens.”

Oh. This, again. Levi gnawed at his lower lip, praying for patience as Erwin launched into his rhapsody again, his homework all but forgotten as he talked about his lab partner in his freshman biology class, a girl with honey hair and sun-kissed freckles like a constellation across the planes of her cheekbones. Erwin had pointed her out to Levi in one of their school yearbooks, beauty captured in a 1 x 1.5 rectangle of glossy grey scale. Levi had grown used to drowning out the words, had grown used to swallowing back the jealousy that wreaked human havoc through his heart.

Erwin paused, catching his breath, uncovering teenage troubles one gauzy strip at a time, and Levi stilled, trying to hear the last sentence again. “What did you say?” he asked. Uncertainty. Confusion.

“I said, I think he’s really cute.” When he looked up again, Erwin’s eyebrows were furrowed, his face a miniature study of anguish, pockmarked with the angry crimson scars of adolescence, and Levi’s breath caught in his throat. Erwin’s father had looked like that, the day he’d lowered the seedling of Levi’s soul into the ground. It had been raining, and Levi’s first memories were riddled with its cool crispness, laced with the bitterness of salt that dripped from the man’s eyes. Had he known, even then, that he’d already shattered what he’d started? Levi wondered to himself. “Do you think that’s weird?”

A soft wind blew through the branches, scattering leaves around them. Rain would be sweeping in, a few days gone. Levi longed for the clarity the rain would bring, spilling across the glass and turning the world into a slurry, the flowers opening their blooms in praise to the sky.

“No,” he replied, after a moment. Truthful words to cut through the confusion that had settled heavy on Erwin’s shoulders. “It’s you.”

Erwin exhaled, a long, slow sigh of riddled with relief, seeming not to notice the longing lingering in Levi’s eyes as he applied himself to his science textbook once again.
The day came when Erwin calmed, coming to peace with himself. Levi was grateful to see the turbulence of adolescence come and go, was grateful to find that they’d stemmed and staunched themselves, a bonsai growing neatly into the tender hands that had shaped it. And yet, as Erwin shot up in height, gangly limbs and long knobby fingers that hadn’t yet found the grasp of being an adult quite yet, Levi found himself longing for the little boy he’d once been, where a simple quiver of the branches could shift the leaves of the silver birch to dance around him and dapple sunlight across the small spread of his features.

And yet, so too was Levi growing, the roots of the birch diving into the fragrant earth and winding curving fingers towards the house and through the rest of the backyard. The tree he inhabited had grown just slightly taller than Erwin, soaking up the summer rains with delight, the tree’s bark solid beneath the heel of his hand every time he hauled himself up into the higher branches to tuck himself away among the leaves. His own limbs had lengthened, the dappled foliage wrapped tightly around his skin loosening to accommodate him, and he’d begun to notice Erwin’s eyes wandering over him in a way that had him blossoming under the attention.

Erwin’s conversations took on lower tones, his voice breaking into husky syllables as he talked about the boys and girls become men and women he fell in love with every day.

“The world’s so full of pretty people, Levi,” he sighed now, flopping down to pillow his head against Levi’s shoulder, the tip of a leaf tickling at his cheek. “I wish you could come to see them with me.”

And Levi was sure the world was glorious, sure that there were adventures waiting for him around every corner and every sidewalk crack, but he’d tried before and found that he’d been found wanting. Erwin had invited him into the house on a particularly rainy night when his mother had been lost in dreams scented with gin and the memories of a halfhearted love already disappeared out the door, and Levi had gotten as far as one step into the house before he’d felt an aching twinge in the pit of his heart, a breathlessness and an anxiety that had only faded away into memory once he’d edged his way back to the tree and placed the heels of his hands solidly against the wrinkled bark. Erwin had been disappointed, and Levi hadn’t had the words to know how to apologize for his failures.

But Erwin would be leaving soon, for a place that Levi could only hope to imagine, taking new steps into a new life, one that wouldn’t include Levi, and Levi would have been lying if he’d said the thought of that didn’t bother him at all. Erwin had brought the applications outside, essay prompts typed up neatly at the tops of the pages while he’d filled the blankness below with large inky scrawls of ideas that carried him farther away from Levi with every looping letter.

“Where do you want to go?” Levi had forced himself to ask, and Erwin had shrugged, oblivious.

“Anywhere but here,” he’d replied, and Levi wondered if this was what loneliness tasted like, a thick feeling at the back of his throat. “But I’ll come back,” Erwin had hastened to reassure him, as though he’d sensed it, too.

The envelopes had started piling into the mailbox, and Erwin always carried them out to the backyard to rip gleefully through the seals of the thicker manila folders and unfolding the lapels of the grimly slender ones. Acceptances, rejections, and the grass crept up, long and unkempt, to swallow the scraps of paper eagerly. The brochures the thick packets contained were glossy to the touch, and Levi looked through them, running his fingers over the faces of the students in the
pictures, smiling at a whiteboard and laughing as they strolled through sunny places, textbooks carried jauntily against their chests. It was discouraging, how easily he could imagine Erwin blending into the scenery there, burnished blonde hair gleaming under the sun of a far off land, his mouth curved around a smile because he was anywhere but here.

But despite the books he’d read and the years of time spent with Erwin, Levi hadn’t learned the art of subtlety, hadn’t learned that very human character of saying one thing and meaning another.

“I’ll miss you,” he blurted out, the birch branches quivering overhead and shaking new leaves all over Erwin’s shoulders with the weight of his confession. “Do you really have to go?”

Erwin’s expression had softened, the ocean opening up its welcome swells to rock Levi into reassurance. “I’d like to go,” he murmured, putting down the brochure he held in his hands. Its glossiness spread out over the grass and covered the greenery away with artificial viridians.

And why not? Levi thought glumly to himself as he watched from the topmost branches of the birch, Erwin’s room emptying by the day, the contents being spilled into boxes and bags and bins until all that remained was a blank desk and a mattress stripped bare. Erwin didn’t owe Levi anything, didn’t have to put his life on hold for some confusing faux-human notions that Levi might have mistaken for love.

Erwin’s mother took to stepping into the backyard late at night when the stars twinkled into existence, when Erwin was but a sprawled mess of limbs on his mattress dreaming the dreams of the future, when Levi was trying to work up the courage to press his palms against the glass of Erwin’s bedroom window in abject longing. She smoked cigarettes one off the end of the other, puffing tar into the air, and, for the first time, Levi understood exactly how she felt, the mad desire to inhale fire if only to warm the Arctic chill growing inside you for even a few moments.

He understood, and the feeling grew ugly inside him. Weeds sprouted in the garden to choke out the flowers, and bitterness speckled his palms with black.

On the day Erwin was set to leave for school, Levi had already determined he wouldn’t forgive him.

“Hey, Lee.” Erwin’s voice was quiet, knock on wood, the vibrations rippling up through the trunk to tickle at Levi’s skin. “Come down, would you? I’m going to be gone for a while.”

Stubbornness. Levi was particularly good at it, had taken to it ever since the word had been defined for him.

Erwin sighed, irritated, running his fingers through already-tousled blonde hair. Levi refused to look, arms crossed tightly over his chest as though this could help keep the loneliness from shaking him inside out.

Erwin’s lips, soft, plush, against the knotholes in the wood. A kiss goodbye, and Levi with unconcealed curiosity, leaned over to watch through the leaves as Erwin pressed farewells all over the speckled white and black trunk. Gestures of love, though he’d never said as much, and Levi watched with wide uncertainty as Erwin stepped back with a final pat to the trunk and began to make his way back to the house.
“Wait,” he murmured, breathless, all but scraping the heels of his hands against the rough trunk as he skittered down. The grass was cool and bent beneath his heels. “Wait.” Louder, now, and Erwin stopped, turned, listened. “I want to feel, too.”

Erwin tasted like rain, smooth and silky and soft against Levi’s mouth. A kiss hello, and Levi grew giddy on the affection even as it was taken away from him with a soft promise that it would be back as soon as it possibly could.
Levi thought that whoever coined the cliché phrase ‘absence makes the heart grow fonder’ should probably reevaluate their life’s priorities. Erwin sowed seeds of anger in Levi’s heart with the roaring of the car’s engine in the front driveway where Levi couldn’t venture, and Levi watered the seeds diligently with every day, every hour, every minute Erwin remained absent. The garden, once a colorful mass of riotous blooms, grew weedy with terrifying greenery to choke away the blossoms. Petals drooped, wilted, turned brown and eventually littered the soil with crinkly carcasses that crunched whenever Levi stomped angrily back and forth across the confines of his range. Not even the rains, which had started to come more frequently with the onset of autumn, could soothe him. The drumming of the rain on the rooftops and against the glass panels of the house’s windows only served to further remind him of Erwin’s absence, the sky forever shaded with grey with no trace of the bright yellow umbrella that Erwin had used to shelter them from the silver needles.

The roots from the silver birch grew gnarled and twisted, soaking up the nutrients in the soil and shooting out beneath the soil to push the grass up in unsightly mounds and little hillocks. Levi squeezed at the roots that protruded from the soil, feeling the reciprocating pains, shooting, up through the soles of his feet to tingle through his legs, and he cursed whatever divinities had created him in such a form. Useless, a pretty bird caged away behind golden bars, able to glimpse at the promise of freedom without any hopes of attaining it.

But, as all things must, anger faded away, slowly, slowly, day by day, as the ground grew saturated with the rain, water welling up around Levi’s feet whenever he walked across the yard, the grass sinking slightly into the ground beneath his weight. Time was passing, the world was turning, and Levi was growing even though he felt as though everything had stopped, a stagnated suspension, all straining and waiting for Erwin to come back and make Levi’s clock tick forward once again.

The anger dissipated with the rain, the ground steaming in the heat of the sunshine as summer tried to claw its way to one last bout of glory. Levi reveled in the humidity, the damp against his skin. Leafy tendrils wound their ways around and over his limbs to cover and coat him with green, and Levi admired their delicate slenderness with awe. This, this he could control, and he passed the days watching as the vines became extensions of himself, growing stronger every day as the branches of the silver birch rustled overhead in the cooling winds that were arriving in droves to blow out the last memories of the endless summer.

The leaves slowly turned yellow overhead, a beautiful color that reminded Levi distinctly of lemonade that he and Erwin had drunk from tall jelly jars slippery with condensation against Levi’s palms. It had been sour, bright, sloshing with ice, and Levi wondered why his memories of Erwin always seemed to be shaded with the nuances of summer. They had spent years together, over a whole decade now, long enough for the silver birch to sprout tall enough to allow Levi to nestle into the topmost branches and watch Erwin lose himself in his dreams. Long enough for the leaves to fade into yellow ten times, and flutter to the ground to crown Levi’s head with crispness. Long enough for Levi to forget that there had once been a time when he hadn’t known Erwin, when he hadn’t known the power that his own voice could hold, when he hadn’t known that he could live a million lives just by opening a book and scanning the dark inked lines written inside.

Erwin had given him that, and, much like the leaves fluttered down one by one, Levi too slowly forgave him. Why shouldn’t Erwin have these opportunities? Why shouldn’t Erwin be able to leave and see the world outside his house? Erwin had given him a million worlds, and Levi could not possibly begrudge Erwin the one he had available to him, one that wouldn’t disappear when he
snapped the covers shut.

But, with the million worlds, Erwin had also given him a million conflicting thoughts and emotions that he now had the ability to put name to. Selfishness. Gratitude. Anger. Love. Levi wanted, Levi needed, and as the leaves began to coat the ground, he spent more and more time covering himself with their blankets. The weight made him feel grounded, comforted him and brushed tickling against his lips in a false remembrance of Erwin’s kiss.

Erwin came back after the branches were already bare, slipping through the glass door and into the backyard, rosy-cheeked and bundled up in bright colors. Levi watched him fuzzily through sleepy eyes; he had retreated into the warmth of the tree trunk, pulsing with life around him, but not even the fogginess of fatigue could stop him from wincing at the way Erwin’s good cheer seemed to drain from his face as he looked around the backyard and the damage Levi had inadvertently wreaked on it. Erwin’s mother had never checked, though Levi had caught her standing at Erwin’s bedroom window, puffing away on cigarette after cigarette contemplatively, blowing smoke and ash out the window before the embers gutted out and she snapped the window shut with a sad sounding click.

“Levi?” he asked, tentatively. His syllables steamed into the air, a bright silver like the stripes on his scarf. His footsteps crunched across the grass, which had a light coating of not yet melted morning frost on the blades. Erwin laid his hands over the speckled trunk, and Levi repositioned himself within the tree so that Erwin’s hands were cradling his face. “Levi, you here? Why’s the yard like this?”

Levi didn’t respond, his limbs leaden, eyelids heavy.

“Talk to me, please,” he mumbled drowsily, his lips lax around the syllables, hoping Erwin would hear and understand. “I haven’t had a story in ages.”

“I’m sorry,” Erwin breathed, crouching down so that his face was close to Levi, still encased in the bark. How tall he had gotten! How handsome he’d grown, or perhaps Levi had just been missing him, absence makes the heart grow fonder after all. “I meant to come back earlier, but, oh gosh, Lee, I’ve got so much to tell you. Why don’t you come out? I’ll bring out a blanket, some hot chocolate with the little marshmallows you like? How about it?”

“Okay,” Levi agreed. It was hard to believe that there had ever been a time when he’d been angry at Erwin. He would really have to do something about the yard. Erwin was right, it was an absolute mess. He crept out of the bark tentatively, pulling his limbs away and smiling sleepily as Erwin’s bright blue eyes roamed over him, drinking him in hungrily and tracing the tendrils of dark green leaves juxtaposed with strips of creamy flesh. Levi had come into his own, a gorgeous and ethereal beauty that none of the girls at Erwin’s university could seem to mimic, and Erwin would have stared for hours had Levi not nudged him in the direction of the house with a request for the promised blanket and drink.

When he came back, Erwin bundled himself and Levi up in the old quilt he’d found in a hallway closet, limbs twining around each other. Levi sipped at his hot chocolate and watched Erwin’s mouth moving as he recounted his adventures at school, talking about his friends and his roommate. In the silences that fell between his sentences, Levi kissed away the memories of his jealousy, the memories of his anger, and tried to hold on to the memory of Erwin’s lips against his own for as long as he possibly could, hoping futilely that Erwin would never leave.
But of course the day came when Erwin had to return to school, and Levi found his bare branches shivering at the frozen promises of loneliness that whispered through his veins. Erwin had spent the vast majority of his winter break outside, his knees making divots in the packed earth as he tugged on thick gardening gloves and stained the palms with chlorophyll as he pulled the weeds out of the earth. They sobbed, soft irritating sounds in Levi’s ears that he dashed away as he watched Erwin make the garden lovely again.

He wanted to tell Erwin how much he looked like his father, in the way he set his bushy eyebrows as he gathered up handfuls of weeds and uprooted them, freeing the chokeholds they had on the bulbs and flowers laying dormant for the winter. He bit at his lip in the same way, frowned in the same way, and had it not been for the absence of wrinkles and the smatterings of grey at his temples, Erwin could have been a dead ringer for his father.

Levi’s heart skipped a beat. Erwin had that expression on his face, the thoughtful, contemplative one that mirrored his father’s, the look he had gotten whenever he’d been laying new tulip bulbs into the freshly overturned earth for his new wife’s happiness. The blooms had come up under Levi’s fascinated eyes, sprouting in flurries of orange and pink and yellow with the force of the man’s love, and now, Levi couldn’t help but feel a twinge of jealousy that Erwin would, could, should look that way as well.

He had found someone to love for his very own, someone for whom he would dig through the frozen earth, someone whose name danced light across his tongue with frequency. It rent agony through Levi’s soul.

“Hey, don’t be sad,” Erwin teased, tossing a scrap of stubborn dandelion at him. Levi brushed it away. “Or I’ll come back for spring break and all the weeds will be back.”

“What?” Levi replied, moodily. “It’s not like anyone will be around to see.”

Erwin tutted. “It’s not healthy for you to be irritated all the time,” he scolded Levi. “Come on, now. Why don’t you tell me what’s really bothering you? Is it because I’m going back to school?”

Levi refused to meet his eye; Erwin was perceptive as always, almost uncannily so, but despite the number of books he’d read and the vast library of words he had accessible to him, Levi found it impossible to describe the turmoil of turbulent emotions running rampant through him. Boredom. Ennui. Malaise. Despair. Potent and powerful words that couldn’t hope to even brush at their true meanings, couldn’t hope to contain such feeling in the rigidity of language.

“You’re lonely,” Erwin guessed. A chilly wind blew in, and Levi shuddered, crossing his arms over his chest and wrapping long fingers around his arms, the silver birch creaking as it tried to lean over, as though to shelter him from the wind rattling through its bare, skeletal branches. “Can’t you talk to the other plants in the garden?”

Levi sighed. All the beauty had leached out again, Erwin taking a whirlwind of color with him, and the flowers that had lived before were filled with vapid nonsense and more concerned with the colors of their petals than anything about the world beyond the fences of the backyard. Levi had retreated from them, turned a deaf ear to their sibilant whisperings about how odd he was, and slowly, bit by bit, had started to lose the language of the flowers.

Alone, silent, he waited for Erwin to come back, and fill his world with words again.
“You’ve gotta believe me, Lee,” Erwin murmured, and Levi looked up, surprised to hear the guilt and anguish in Erwin’s voice. “I would take you with me if I could. There’s no one quite like you there.”

An idea blossomed in Levi’s mind, small seedlings. The birch’s slender, supple branches were pushing out new spurts of growth, fresh bark to become lined with leaves and stretch out fingers to touch the sky. Perhaps it might work. Levi rubbed the new tip of a branch between his thumb and index finger, bending, bending, snap. A thrill of pain ran through him, harsh and stinging, but life still throbbed in the fragment he held tight between his fingers.

“Wait.” Sensing Erwin’s curiosity, Levi hastened to explain. “Have a piece of me and let me have the whole of you.”

Levi’s fingertips brushed against Erwin’s palm as he handed it over, and he tried not to pout too much as Erwin leaned forward to feather a kiss across his lips, to assure him that Levi had always had the whole of him.

It happened a few days later, an odd sense of disconnect, of exploring a facet of himself that he had previously found lacking, and Levi narrowed his eyebrows and concentrated fiercely as he tried to push his consciousness through to the small tendril of awareness he could feel tickling at his mind with feathering fingers.

His eyes opened, wavy outlines of unfamiliar surroundings, a bed, blankets, furniture that he had only hoped to imagine through Erwin’s reminiscences. Erwin’s face swam up towards him, blurry through what felt like a thick pane of frosted glass, sights smudged and words smudgier around the edges of the syllables.

“Hey, Levi, can you hear me?” Slow motion, and Levi looked around, fuzzy, as the edges of posters and pages of textbooks smoothed out clearer. A large, terra cotta pot of soil occupied the corner of the room, and Levi was overjoyed to find that the slender birch stem he’d snapped off looked healthy, flourishing even, the dark earth damp to the touch. “You good?”

Levi looked over at Erwin, whose features had swam into clarity, the sweep of golden hair gleaming with the sunlight, trusting blue eyes looking at him with concern.

“Yeah,” he breathed, looking around him with wonder. “I’m better, now.”
But promises are only precious for the fact that they can be broken, that they are fleeting beyond measure, and as Levi spent more and more time exploring this newfound fragment of consciousness and extension of himself inside Erwin’s college dormitory, he found that the whole of Erwin was something so much larger than he had ever imagined. Every day opened up new facets of Erwin that Levi had never seen before, had never even dreamt of, and certainly all of those books that he’d spent all of those hours reading all seemed to agree on the fact that people had to change and develop overtime, but Levi had imagined Erwin as static, as a calmly stationary body in the vast overflowing currents of time.

Much to Levi’s surprise, Erwin wasn’t like this at all, and the Erwin that came home for holidays and spent time outside with Levi was not the same Erwin who came home from class every day and tossed his backpack haphazardly by his chair before flinging himself facedown onto his bed.

From what he gathered from Erwin’s multitude of complaints, school was hard. Classes were hard beyond belief, and where learning and a love of it had come so easy to him before, he couldn’t seem to grasp the concepts and the knowledge anymore. The terms were meaningless to him, and the diagrams were a jumbled mass of colors and arrows and labels.

“I feel like I’m suffocating,” Erwin explained one lonely night, his knees curled up to his chest on his bed as Levi tried to comfort him with soft touches and softer kisses that just barely brushed against Erwin’s skin. “I don’t know what to do with myself, you know? I feel like I’m screaming and nobody can hear me.”

“I can hear you,” Levi whispered, but Erwin’s smile, when it came, was only half hearted, and he quickly moved on to another topic as though he hadn’t heard at all.

It happened on a Friday evening. Clouds gathered heavy and low in the distance, their underbellies shaded heavy with the promise of rain, and the air was damp in Levi’s lungs, soft wet winds carrying with them the scents of new beginnings and the inevitable coming of the spring, a rupture of blossoms and life tearing through the topsoil.

Levi uncurled from a short nap he’d been having, stretching out through the thin link of consciousness he had in Erwin’s dormitory only to open his eyes and find himself faced with darkness and the muffled wet sounds of someone – two someones – breathing. His first instinct was panic, and he yelped in sudden fear, his hands flailing around to find purchase on something, anything.

His hands fell on firm soil, the sandpaper rim of a large terra cotta pot, and his breath started to ease steady. He was still in Erwin’s dormitory, if the presence of his new offshoots was any indication, and as his eyes grew more adjusted to the sudden dark, he found a thin crack of light spilling through only a few feet away.

Cautiously, he tiptoed over to press an eye against it, to look through. He brushed aside clothes, drooping like dark ghosts over their wooden hangers, and peeked through the crack of what he now realized was Erwin’s closet door.

Their shadows danced like marionettes in the soft lamplight.
Her hair was a mass of dark curls that pooled like a glossy puddle on Erwin’s sheets and pillowcases, her skin creamy and already laddered with sucking strawberry crescents that looked like they had already been there for quite a while. Her eyebrows were furrowed in abject ecstasy so close to agony that Levi wondered for half a breath if Erwin was hurting her, if this was but another myriad facet of the young man he’d become that Levi couldn’t hope to understand.

“Erwin,” she sobbed, her syllables punctuated like wounds, “more.”

Erwin was a study in honey and burnished gold, the lamplight painting his limbs with glory even as he fell inglorious into the sheets, between spread legs, to kiss and claim and fuel his hunger in a way that Levi suddenly realized he’d been unable to satisfy.

Guilt, burning anger, nausea wound up in the pit of his stomach, and he ached to pull away even as he kept himself pressed up to the cracks to watch. Erwin’s kisses were rough, eating at her mouth and her soul even as she sobbed passion and pleasure into him. Violence, and Levi could hardly believe that Erwin had kissed him with the same mouth that could do all these things.

He sank to the floor, closing his eyes, unable to bring himself to reach for the closet door and push it wide. The wet sounds they made in their unity interspersed with the first spatterings of the rain against the heavy glass of Erwin’s window. Unneeded, unwanted, Levi slipped away, longing to drown. He pushed back through the hanging clothes, dusty fabric choking against his skin, and made his way back home, resolving not to press through the small link of consciousness Erwin and he had made together.

Stepping back into the garden, the grass wet beneath the soles of his feet, Levi was all but blinded by a flash of white. Rubbing the dancing phosphenes away from his eyes, Levi slowly blinked to find the backyard dimly lit up with flashing reds, whites, and blues, sharp tones and shouting from the front of the house.

A world of tragedy, and Levi almost had halfhearted thoughts about returning to Erwin’s dormitory, but the flashes of light over the birch’s branches, whipping in the soft breeze, reminded him far too much of limbs tangled in the sheets, seizing cream and honey, and with a soft sigh, he crept back into the bark, accepting the rough comforts of the rain as he closed his eyes.

This too will pass, he reminded himself slowly, slowly, and dreamt of floods.
Evening Primrose

Jealousy crept up, bitter and all too expected, and the roots in the garden ran wild while the rain lashed against the ground in sheets that left stagnant puddles over the garden. They soaked Levi’s bare feet up to the ankles whenever he walked through his domain, and he ignored the chill that ran up through his reedy limbs. The rainy season hadn’t yet abated, fierce winds blowing in from the northeast, and Levi thought that it matched his mood quite nicely. He was satisfied with it, in a sort of grim, cloudy manner, and even when Erwin came home on the occasional weekend and stepped out into the backyard in his rain boots, Levi remained hidden away from sight, pressed deep into the bark and not answering to any of Erwin’s increasingly pleading entreaties.

“Come on, Levi,” Erwin wheedled one weekend, when the raindrops were pattering down on the new sprouts of Levi’s leaves, budding and filling him with cold. Erwin’s palms were warm against the gnarled bark, and for half a second, Levi was sorely tempted to reach back out and lace their fingers together. “Whatever I did, I’m sorry, really I am. Please come out. Let’s talk, huh, just you and me? What do you say?”

Levi rolled over, turning to face the mountains in the west, a purple bruise fogged over on the horizon. He didn’t want to listen to anything Erwin had to say, not after that little display in his dorm room, and with a sort of savagery that he’d thought he’d long let go of, he wished the separate sprouting silver birch in Erwin’s closet a swift death.

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But, for all his faults, Erwin had a green thumb to rival any professional nursery worker. It was disgusting, really, how plants thrived beneath his care, beneath his tender scrutiny, despite Levi’s frantically whispered instructions for the garden to grow wild. He wanted weeds to sprout up where flowers had been before, wanted the roots of the silver birch to grow twisted and gnarled, pushing up beneath the foundations of Erwin’s house so that he could know the full extent of Levi’s displeasure.

Erwin, for his part, had sneaking suspicions about Levi’s behavior, and he did the best he could to try and make amends for his transgressions. He brought out Levi’s favorite novels, thick fantasy ones with creatures from another universe, left platters of sliced fruit and chocolates underneath the gnarled roots of the silver birch, and tried not to get discouraged when he came back out to find the plates empty, the pages of the books dog-eared, but no other signs of Levi.

His mother had started to pick up on his ennui through the thick fog of cigarette smoke and whiskey buzz she maintained to get through the day, but Erwin shrugged off her concerns. They hadn’t had anything to do with each other in a long while, and he had no intention of starting now.

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“She doesn’t mean anything to me, you know,” Erwin said quietly one afternoon, spreading a plastic tarp out on the ground and pressing his back against the damp bark, rough through his flannel shirt. There was a pause in the raindrops that slicked down the back of his neck, as though Levi was considering, contemplating. The smell of petrichor rose heavy through the air. “She’s just some girl.”

When this didn’t pique Levi’s attention, Erwin sighed in frustration, running his hands through his wavy blonde hair and making tufts stand up on edge. “Don’t be stubborn, Lee,” Erwin said, after a long moment of silence, watching the water sheet down the windowpanes of his childhood house.
“I don’t think I could bear it if you were mad at me forever.”

“I’m not mad.” Levi’s voice was soft, tinny, barely a whisper through the barren branches of the tree. Erwin’s heart leapt in his chest, and he seized onto the sentence, handed out like the thorniest of olive branches. “I’m just disappointed.”

Erwin wanted to laugh. It was a line his mother had used on him many a time, one that he’d seen and read in several novels and television shows, and he and Levi had used to make little jokes about it, about how disappointment could be a worse emotion than abject anger.

He placed a hand on one of the roots that had spurted out of the ground, feeling its comforting solidity beneath his palm. Erwin patted the dark, warped bark softly, gently. He and Levi would be okay, and he hoped to communicate that with every stroke.

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“What is her name?” Levi asked him, one gloomy day where the promise of rain hung heavy in the air. Erwin was on his hands and knees in the garden, the heels of his hands growing slick with damp soil as he dug through the dirt, clearing out the soil and planting new bulbs that would sprout with colorful blossoms. Levi couldn’t bear to bring destruction to the promises of new life, and he sat calmly in a fork of the birch’s trunk, watching with curious eyes while Erwin’s trowel cleaved the earth, turning it over again and again.

“Her name’s Marie,” Erwin said, after a pause, wiping his hands on an equally grimy dish towel. “She’s a communications major in my year. We met at a frat party.”

Levi didn’t care about the specifics, not a single bit, and informed Erwin as such. “Do you love her?” he asked, finally.

The silence stretched out between them, so taut that Erwin feared the recoil and whiplash of his answer. He measured his words carefully, and found them wanting. “Not like you,” he finished, lamely. “It’s different.”

“How is it different?” Levi wanted to know.

“She thinks that I’m someone else,” Erwin replied, turning his full attention back to the soil. Dirt wriggled its way beneath his normally clean and buffed nails, growing flowers in the beds of his fingers. “She loves the idea of me, and I love the fact that she thinks I’m, well, normal, I guess.”

“Why wouldn’t you be?”

“Well.” Erwin sat back on his haunches, sighing and rubbing the back of his hand across his sweaty forehead. It left rich brown streaks across his skin that Levi longed to reach out and rub off, but he stayed his urges, pressing his hands firmly against the rough bark of the tree to keep himself steady. “There’s you, for instance.”

Levi’s breath froze in his lungs, a sudden chill and ice across his airways. “What do you mean by that?” he choked out.

“Not many people fall in love with the trees in their backyards,” Erwin quipped, a shadow of humor tracing its way into a smile. “Most people have two parents that they see all the time, and are happy in their marriage together. Or they lie about it.” Erwin added, after a moment of introspection. “Mom’s sick, you know that, don’t you?”

“Sure,” Levi replied, guarded in his answers. Erwin’s mother seemed to be fading by the day, a
washed out grey slick of the woman she had been when she and Erwin’s father had first moved into
this house. Her breaths came ragged and wheezing, the coughs wracking through her body like
convulsions, and all the air was grey. A chemical smell drifted from the windows of the house
whenever she opened them, one that irritated Levi’s delicate sensibilities and had him wrinkling his
nose and turning away in distaste.

“I think she’s dying.”

“Oh.” Levi’s voice was barely more than a whisper. Erwin’s eyes were bright with the gloss of
stubbornly unshed tears. “And then what will happen?”

Erwin sighed heavily. The first rollicks of thunder rumbled over the distant mountaintops, and
droplets of rain started to spatter down, feathering through Levi’s hair.

“I don’t know.”

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The weeks and months and years passed in a blur in the stilted ache and pause of love and absence,
and Levi added more and more rings to the heartwood of the tree. He never once went back to the
shadowed closet of Erwin’s dormitory, but he could still feel the weak connection pulsing away
beneath the water and fertilizer and fresh sunshine that Erwin made sure the sapling got. For all
intents and purposes, it was dead to him, and he didn’t want to know any more than Erwin would
tell him about his life.

He loved in bits and pieces, in the small stolen weekends and school vacations that Erwin took, and
if he came back with his clothes smelling like cheap perfume and acetone, Levi said nothing about
it. He was only vaguely aware of the life Erwin led outside of the confines of the garden, and
Erwin’s graduation (summa cum laude) came and went in a blur. Erwin moved back home,
working at some office in downtown, and Levi would have been beyond gladdened by it, had he
not also brought Marie with him.

Levi enviously admitted that she was beautiful. Fresh faced, with the rosy complexion of someone
raised on milk and honey, and though she brought a clean scent and different flowers to populate
the garden, Levi couldn’t help but glare daggers at her back in the hopes that she would leave.

She didn’t, persistent as milkweed, and Levi only took consolation in the fact that Erwin crept out
into the backyard regularly like clockwork, every night after Marie was asleep, to feather kisses
over his mouth.

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“We’re going to be getting married,” Erwin informed him shortly after his mother’s passing, and
Levi’s heart skipped a beat, his mind racing in the hopes that maybe Erwin might possibly be
talking about him. “Me and Marie.” Hopes dashed.

“Congratulations,” Levi said dully. The bitter waspishness of his tone had faded out long ago, and
he took Erwin’s affections, or the remaining scraps of it. Whatever he wanted to give him. “Many
happy regards.”

“Thanks,” Erwin muttered, rubbing his hand over the back of his head so that his golden hair stood
out in spiky tufts. It was a habit he’d retained from childhood, and Levi craned his neck to look up
at Erwin, amazed at how much he’d grown, how much he’d aged, when Levi wasn’t looking.
Humans wore their age rings on their faces, and the corners of Erwin’s eyes sprouted crows’ feet,
his mouth bracketed with laugh lines. He had grown out of the saturated beauty of adolescence and young adulthood, had settled into himself in a way that Levi admired and adored and cherished beyond measure. “You know that — “

Levi cut him off. “I know that you still love me,” he finished for Erwin, and Erwin snapped his mouth closed, looking pained and regretful in a way that left Levi breathless, struggling for air long after Erwin had disappeared back inside, the sliding door shutting with a soft click.
Erwin and Marie got married on a Saturday in the middle of the spring, a few years after they had graduated from college. The weather forecasts had predicted a sweet, clear day, with a gentle breeze pushing the softly brushed clouds through the blue sky, but as it turned out, the meteorologist must have been examining another section on the map, because the day of their wedding dawned overcast. The undersides of the clouds were shaded a heavy gray, waiting to release sheets of chilling rain.

“What do you think?” Marie asked, pulling aside the gauzy drapes of Erwin’s childhood bedroom, renovated into a bedroom for a married couple to share. She peered out, pursing her brightly lipsticked mouth in a frown of disapproval. “You think it’s gonna rain?”

“So what if it does?” Erwin asked, listlessly. He’d been having cold feet on and off for the better part of the past half-year; if he was being honest, ever since he’d proposed, he’d been longing to back out. But the mess and devastation it would cause exhausted him to think about, and Erwin tried to avoid thinking about it as much as possible. But today was the day of their wedding, the day of the inevitable, and though Erwin had all but begged Marie to keep it a small affair, he couldn’t help but wonder why he was going through with this. “If it rains, it rains. And Father Collins is booked for months.”

Father Collins had been Erwin’s only concession to Marie’s requests about their wedding. She had wanted a big affair, in a church, an announcement in the Los Angeles Times with their headshots, a whole aviary of turtle doves released as they walked out of the church, newlyweds to begin their lives together. Erwin had vetoed each and every one of her requests, claiming that he didn’t want it to be a big deal, making up some excuses about how he wanted to preserve the sanctity of their union instead of commercializing it in some big occasion. She hadn’t been happy about it, but he’d refused to budge otherwise, stubborn, and she had finally acquiesced to his smaller ceremony, with only a handful of their closest friends, in the backyard of the house they occupied together.

Marie frowned outside again before letting the gauzy curtains fall shut with a soft whisper. “We can probably just set up a marquee, then,” she said, with forced cheer that made Erwin’s head ache just to look at her and her blatant refusal to acknowledge the fact that she knew he didn’t love her the way he should have. “Come on, aren’t you at least a bit excited about it, hmm? It’s our wedding day! Can you imagine?”

“I certainly can’t,” he responded with a sigh, pinching at the bridge of his nose to stave off a migraine. “I’m gonna go get ready before the first guests come,” he mumbled, gently brushing her aside and heading to the bathroom, clicking the door shut behind him.

Levi watched from his perch high above in the topmost branches of the birch tree as the man in the black suit – a priest, his mind supplied him with – read aloud from an old weathered book, peering through half-moon spectacles at Erwin and Marie. She looked rosy, radiant, in full bloom, her good mood not even ruined by the fact that it had started raining, a heavy deluge that turned Erwin’s carefully tended garden into a murky pond.

Only her parents, Erwin’s father, and his new girlfriend were in attendance. Levi knew what wedding ceremonies entailed, knew the whole speech the priest would give from beginning to end. In sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, and all that jazz. Erwin and Marie vowed to love each other for all of these things, and to stay by each other’s side through all matters of trial and
tribulation, but Levi couldn’t help but notice that when it came time to say “I do,” Erwin glanced up to where Levi was sitting, an unwilling spectator to the farce.

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“So, you’re married now,” Levi mumbled, leaning down to haul Erwin up into the sturdier lower branches of the tree. Erwin had managed to sneak out after Marie went to sleep, tiptoeing out of bed and sliding the glass door to the yard open sometime around two in the morning. Levi had been waiting for him to come out, had been waiting with bated breath ever since the ceremony had ended, and the rain was still coming down in heavy sheets. The scent of petrichor rose up and wreathed around Erwin’s delicate wrists, brushing along the backs of his ears, and the birch, older now, groaned beneath Erwin’s weight as Levi begged it to be stable for just this instance. “What does it feel like?”

Erwin shrugged. His breath smelled like champagne and the sickly sweet aroma of too many calla lilies, the main component of Marie’s bouquet. “It feels the same.”

They sat in silence, listening to the dark drippings of the rain around them. Erwin’s hand found his own, wreathed into Levi’s lap.

“No,” Erwin amended. “It feels like a lie.”

“Why’d you do it, then?” Levi whispered, hardly daring to hope.

“Because it’s what it’s expected,” Erwin murmured, letting his head fall back against the wet, knotted bark. Levi’s fingers carded through damp strands of golden hair, gently nudging at his temples where he had already started to go grey. “We dated all through college, moved in together, it was only a matter of time before people began to question why we hadn’t gotten married yet. We already were, in all but name. That, and it would break her heart.”

“And what happens now?” Levi wanted to know, pretending he hadn’t heard the last remark, pretending that Erwin didn’t know his heart was already shattered into pieces. He stroked his thumb along the side of Erwin’s forefinger, refusing to let go. “What happens to us?”

Erwin didn’t answer for a long moment. When he spoke again, Levi had to strain to hear him over the incessant pouring.

“Give me your hands,” Erwin murmured. Levi laid them trustingly in Erwin’s outstretched ones. The moonlight flickered and pooled in the gaps where their fingers laced.

“I, Erwin Smith, would like to take you, Levi…” He paused, considering. “Just Levi, then. I would like to take you to be my wedded husband, I suppose. I promise to always be true to you, in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I love you, I honor you, and I cherish you for all the days of the rest of our lives.” When Levi didn’t respond, he looked up hopefully. “Is that alright with you?”

Levi snapped his jaw closed, nodded furiously, frantically. “I, yes, of course,” he hastened to say, watching as Erwin dug into his pocket for a slim golden band that he slid onto Levi’s finger. It was engraved with twining vines wrought in a simple design, and though the metal chilled Levi’s skin, he cradled his hands to his chest and admired the golden gleam long after Erwin had kissed him and dropped back to the ground to head back inside to what was expected of him.
Crowsbill

The slender limbs and scarred trunk of the silver birch start to show signs of wear and tear; the slashes and aches of many years of rain and wind ripping at the bark while the rings spool together from the outside in in the center of the trunk where only Levi can see. They age together, and, likewise, crows crowd and make tracks at the corners of Erwin’s eyes, his temples become peppered with grey from age and the stress of his loveless marriage.

“She wants a baby,” he informed Levi, nonchalantly, one slow summer afternoon where the sky overhead was shaded thickly with dark grey clouds that promised rain. The whole earth was silent at his proclamation, the birds holding their breath as though to listen in. even the wind that had started to pick up in preparation for the midsummer storm died down, leaving his words to coat Levi’s thoughts with bitterness. Absently, he fiddled with the simple golden ring Erwin had given him, twisting it round and round on his finger. Vines and dark tendrils had wound their way around the gold, embedding it, refusing to let it go. Their worlds merged together, and if the ring Erwin wore on his fourth finger didn’t match Levi’s, Levi gave no indication of noticing or caring. “She says we’re getting older, that we don’t have much time left to have children.”

Erwin and Marie had been married for five years or so. Erwin assured Levi that he had felt married to Levi for far longer than that, a feeling of love and respect and admiration that spanned centuries. Levi knew he ought to feel guilty about it; he’d read about the ugly words, cheating, adultery, lying, in the books Erwin had brought him and continued to bring him, and even the flowers whose whispered soft syllables he could no longer understand seemed to turn away from him when he so much as glanced their way. The beds had grown back into neat order, with not a single weed to be seen, raised under Erwin’s tender care, and roses bloomed riotous. They were in full force now, their petals quivering at the slightest breeze, rich and velvet soft beneath Levi’s fingertips.

“How old are you now?” Levi asked after a moment, resting his head on Erwin’s shoulder. They stared at the house together, peering into the screened windows. Marie was sitting despondently in the living room, her eyes focused on the buzz of the television screen. Her hands were busy knitting wool into something that Levi couldn’t quite make out, something white and fleecy and impossibly small, as if in preparation for what Erwin was unwilling to give her.

“Thirty-five,” Erwin responded, with a sigh. “She’s right. We’re getting old.” It showed. Crows tracked thick feet through the fine skin at the corners of Erwin’s eyes, and his temples were peppered with strands of grey from the stress of work, his loveless marriage, and the strain of aging. “Don’t you ever think about having children?” he asked, turning to Levi with an inquisitive frown.

Levi frowned back, pursing his lips in distaste. “No,” he responded truthfully. “I probably have dozens.”

“What?” Erwin asked, his tone a mix of shock and anger, and Levi hastened to explain.

“You know how it goes,” he mumbled, waving his hand through the air as though to wave off the seriousness of the matter. “The birds and bees, they come and take and spread little parts of me all over the world. Next door, next block, cities away, even, there’s probably little saplings from me growing right now.”

Erwin settled back against the trunk, defeated now. Levi noted, with a gentle eye, that Erwin’s stomach had started to go soft, losing the firmed tone of his college years. It made him look vulnerable, that, and the crows’ feet, and the sprays of salt in his hair, and Levi leaned over to lay a
kiss against Erwin’s mouth, soft lips feathering over Erwin’s chapped ones. Erwin sighed, reaching up to tangle his fingers in Levi’s dark hair, pressing back into the show of affection.

“I don’t want kids,” Erwin admitted, after Levi had pulled back and resettled himself in the hollow the roots had created, just the right size for the two of them. “I wouldn’t be a good father.”

“Wouldn’t you?” Levi inquired. “You take such good care of everything. The flowers haven’t looked so good since…well, since your father was planting them for your mother.”

Erwin’s eyes trailed over to the flowerbeds, where the roses waved tantalizingly, their blooms lasciviously open to perfume the backyard with their fragrance. “I didn’t plant them for Marie,” he mumbled after a while, his hand reaching over to clutch Levi’s back at the knowledge that he was wanted, that he was needed, in a way that Erwin had never wanted and needed anyone before. It would never get old, and he squeezed back, slim leafy twigs starting to work their way between the gaps in their fingers until Erwin pulled back with a laugh. “That tickles,” he murmured, grinning, the creases at the corners of his eyes deepening further. He glanced away again, his smile fading as quickly as it had come, pensive now. “I planted them for you. It’s always been for you, Levi.”

Levi fell silent. All the leaves strained to hear.

“Marrying her wasn’t for me,” he said, after a moment, his tone flat, the playfulness of their earlier exchange burst like a bubble. “Thinking about having a baby with her isn’t for me, Erwin.”

“No,” Erwin admitted with a heavy sigh as he reached up to pinch at the bridge of his nose to stave off an impending migraine. “But if I say no….” His voice trailed off, staring blankly into the living room window, where Marie was pressing a wad of Kleenex beneath her eyes. “If I say no, it’ll rip us apart.”

All the branches sighed. The wind started to pick up again, and leaves fluttered down into Erwin’s hair. Levi made no move to remove them.

“Would that be so horrible?” he asked after a moment, feeling crushing guilt with every syllable.

“I’d be alone,” Erwin bit back, tightly, his face lined with the strain of admitting his own weaknesses.

“You’d have me,” Levi protested, softly, but it was a weak excuse, one he knew that Erwin had already thought over and discarded as worthy enough. “You’ll always have me.”

“And so I will,” Erwin murmured, refusing to clarify any further, and Levi swallowed back his tears as Erwin leaned forward to press a soft, chaste kiss to his mouth before standing up and heading back stiffly into the house. The clouds broke, spilling a deluge, a downpour, sheeting down the windows as Levi watched Erwin enter the living room and sit next to Marie. Their mouths moved in time with the raindrops pelting against the glass.
Marie slammed the door behind her as she left for the last time, hard, the vibrations so deep that Levi could feel them in his roots. Levi had seen her packing her bags for weeks, throwing her clothes haphazardly into suitcases and her belongings into cardboard boxes that she labeled with a thick, black marker. She spent her dreary days alternately sobbing into the cradle of her hands and shouting down the hallways that she was glad she was leaving, their whole marriage had been a mistake. The silence when she left was nearly shattering, nearly deafening afterwards, and Levi swallowed roughly. The mixture of triumph and sympathetic despair clogged his throat and made his words heavy like the lines that had begun to cross over Erwin’s face. If Erwin had looked old before, the rate of aging seemed to have sped up with the sadness that enveloped him like a shroud.

Levi tried to comfort him in all the ways he knew how, and as the weather turned warmer, the world slowly turning into summer, Erwin started spending more and more of his nights outside.

Levi knit his branches into a loose canopy to protect Erwin from the drops of morning mist that condensed into dew, and the spotted limbs of the silver birch groaned as Levi made it contort into a shelter for the two of them. Erwin’s skin lost its spicy chemical scent of aftershave and cologne, and Levi burrowed his face into Erwin’s neck now, breathing in the smell of petrichor and grass. Erwin was starting to smell like him, and Levi reveled in all the implications of that statement even as Erwin wrapped an arm tighter around him and sighed heavily into Levi’s shoulder.

Seasons came and seasons went, and the leaves of the birch fell to coat the ground in blankets that Levi helped Erwin rake up and stow in black garbage bags. Branches and stems started to crack off the silver birch, and Levi winced at the passing of each and every one. Erwin would pat at the split ends jutting jagged from the trunk, a soft solemn look on his face.

“Does it hurt much?” he would ask, each and every time, and Levi would shrug and reply with a noncommittal sigh. It happened, age and time caught up to the best of them, and like Erwin, Levi was not immune to the ravages of the years. The blonde in Erwin’s hair was gradually swapped out for grey, and crows left fine tracks all over his face, deep like rivers that Levi would trace with the tip of his index finger whenever Erwin was sleeping. Erwin would start waking up with more complaints of the ground being too rough, too cold on his back, and Levi would spend more and more times massaging out the knots before Erwin inevitably disappeared for the bulk of his waking hours to go to work. It was a separate part of his life that they didn’t discuss much, much like they hadn’t discussed Marie, much like they hadn’t discussed his mother.

But their existence together and as a part of each other was not airless, was not airtight. The clock stopped for no one, and though Levi’s limbs were still as supple and resilient as they had always been, Erwin’s were not.

“I can’t keep on like this, Levi,” he said apologetically, one early Saturday morning when he woke up with a horrendous crick in his back that even the hardest of Levi’s presses couldn’t work it out of him. “I’m getting too old for this.”

“Too old for me?” Levi asked, quietly, even though he knew this wasn’t what Erwin meant at all. Levi had started to need affirmation, more and more and more, and he swore he could hear the flowers laughing at him from their neatly tended beds on the other end of the garden.

“No, just old,” Erwin breathed. Liver spots dotted the backs of his hands and spotted his skin beneath his shirt when Levi pushed aside the swathes of fabric to have a look. “I won’t live forever, you know.”
“I won’t, either,” Levi whispered, laying kisses to Erwin’s jawline. His cheeks had started to sag as of recently, and the skin was soft and vulnerable beneath Levi’s lips. It only made Erwin all the more endearing to him.

Erwin sighed. His breath seemed to rattle through Levi’s limbs, bone chilling almost.

“I’m going to make a will,” he informed Levi. Levi sucked in a breath that whistled through his teeth, like the wind whistling through the topmost branches of the birch, bare now, supple, slender, susceptible to cracks.

“A will?” he asked, softly, hardly daring to believe Erwin’s words. “But surely you’re not that old.” You were twenty the last time I checked, he wanted to say, but it was the truth that neither he nor Erwin were young anymore. Rings surrounded the heartwood, far too many for Levi to count, and years piled on top of Erwin a burden.

“You can never be too prepared,” Erwin said, turning to smile at him softly. “Here one day and gone the next.”

“Don’t say that!” Levi protested, reaching up to press a hand over Erwin’s mouth. Erwin circled his wrist gently with two fingers, pulled it down again.

“Sorry, love, I’m far from immortal,” he said, with a sort of sad smile that pierced Levi to the heart. “Do you think there might be anything of mine that you might want?”

“What?” Levi asked, baffled. Surely Erwin couldn’t be planning on passing to the next life this soon, could he? And where would he go afterwards? The thoughts plagued Levi’s mind. In all the books and theories he had read over the years, no one had a concrete answer, and the endless possibilities terrified Levi more than they should have. “I’m going to come with you.”

It was Erwin’s turn to look surprised. “Wait, what?” he asked, arching an eyebrow shot with silver at Levi. “You want to come with me?”

It had been unplanned. It had been unprecedented, but Levi found himself repeating the words, more to convince Erwin now than to convince himself. “I’m going to go with you,” he stated, firmly, proud that his voice didn’t shake one bit. “Go with you into the light, or whatever that quote is.”

This was enough to break a smile across Erwin’s face. “I’m not sure that’s a quote, dear,” he said, lacing his fingers through Levi’s. “We’re supposed to rage against the dying of the light, and not go quietly into the night.”

“Whatever.” Levi rolled his eyes, flicking Erwin’s shoulder with the tip of a finger and reveling in Erwin’s laughter. “Just say yes.”

“Alright, then,” Erwin said, his smile making the creases at the corners of his eyes deepen. “Yes.”
Bluebells

The night before Erwin died, Levi could smell the scent of death on him. The reaper was coming to pluck Erwin from the earth, uprooting him from this existence and flinging him headlong into the next. Erwin, as though he sensed it too, brought out a copy of his will for Levi to read while he leaned heavily amongst the gnarled roots at the base of the silver birch, which had started to slump with the accumulated weight of seasons. Levi’s eyes skimmed over the page, pausing on a paragraph stipulating what to do with Erwin’s body after his passing.

“Clause 3B,” Levi read aloud. He frowned at Erwin, who smiled shakily back at him. The laugh lines bracketing his mouth deepened with the motion, and Levi reached out to trace a finger through the trenches life had left on the battlefield of Erwin’s face. “As part of my last will and testament, the coffin should contain wood from the silver birch tree in my backyard, located at 1756 Meadow Lane. The coffin and all materials it contains, inside and out, should be biodegradable, and the coffin should be placed in the Smith family plot.”

“Where’s this?” Levi asked, jabbing at the paper with the tip of a wrinkled finger. His bark had started going flaky, peeling off in large swathes, and it scattered all over the paper now. Erwin smiled tiredly, reaching down to pick up Levi’s hands, laying kisses over the skin rubbed raw. “Your family plot?”

“I can’t recall the exact address right now,” Erwin murmured, taking back the paper copy of his will from Levi’s shaking hands. “But it’s pretty overgrown by now, I think. My dad once told me that it wasn’t in any of the nicely organized cemeteries on the outskirts or something, but it doesn’t matter too much, does it? We’ll be together.” He clutched at Levi’s hands, trembling, desperate, and Levi’s heart ached with the thought of forever, happiness and ecstasy so intense it pained him. Eternity stretched out ahead of them, forever and endless, and he was overjoyed. “If that’s still something that’s okay with you?” Erwin looked so hopeful and needy that any doubts that Levi might have had dissipated and fled away in the wind.

“I’m more than okay with it,” he replied, leaning over to press a kiss to Erwin’s cheek and trying not to wrinkle his nose at the soft slow scent of rot that was spilling over the petrichor that perfumed Erwin’s skin. “Thank you for having me,” he whispered, his lips feathering over the sagging skin of Erwin’s face.

They would rot together, decay together in each other’s gentle encompassing embrace, and carpet the grassy floors with fodder for the new generations to come. Together, they would live forever, and the thought of having his arms and body forever bent around Erwin’s in soft embraces comforted Levi and helped him be courageous enough to take the next step into uncertainty.

“I love you, you know,” Erwin said, smiling shakily at Levi. They were seventy-three, but Levi wasn’t counting. Time had no meaning, not when the promise of forever stretched out so tantalizingly ahead of them.

“I love you, too,” Levi replied, his smile spilling across his face in rivers. The clouds broke into a storm, and rain crept down the back of Erwin’s collar as Levi painted his face with kisses. “I’ve loved you forever.”
broken for a little bit and Levi was shivering tired in his sentinel watch. He was balanced precariously on the edge of one of the birch’s branches, his hands cupping his face as he leaned forward to peer at Erwin in his last moments of vitality.

It was quiet, a soothing sort of gentle sound as the rain started to pitter down in drizzles again that crept along the curve of Levi’s spine and pooled in the hollows of his collarbones. It chilled him to the bone, and Erwin’s chest slowly, softly, stopped moving as the reaper stole his breath away.

Levi sighed. The water trickling over his lips tasted like salt, but before he had too much time to contemplate it, the long-suffering branch beneath him cracked, jagged sounds like ice breaking, pitching him headlong to the ground. An agony of aches spilled through his bones, and mud flecked its way across his cheek where it was pressed into the ground, and, slowly fading back into the trunk, Levi waited patiently for Erwin’s last wishes to come true.

The reaper came for Levi in the form of men in work boots and faded denim overalls, and he closed his eyes, holding his breath as pain raced up to lance through his core as the bite of the sharp metal axe cut into the soft wood. His head rang with the thudding, and he was weak and dizzy with the pain, fragmented and separated, watching from a plane above himself as he watched the men cart the pieces of himself away to a workshop. They were sanded smooth, bent gently around the frame of a coffin made of other, darker woods with fine cherry glosses.

Levi struggled to keep his eyes open for the final moments, but found his eyelids slipping closed anyway, too tired, too much. The heft of his body embraced Erwin’s dead weight as Erwin was lowered into it, and Levi slept.

He barely felt the rumbling of the hearse’s engine beneath them as the funeral home carted the coffin to its final resting place in the Smith family plot. The sensation of dirt falling on top of them was barely a tickle, and the soothing weight of the fertile soil around them was a soft blanket that Levi curled up into, tighter, tighter, his limbs tangling and bowing into Erwin’s with the weight of the years and seasons that passed.

Levi was woken up several seasons later, by a laughing, young voice saying his name. He struggled to open his eyes, squinting against the sudden brightness.

“Levi? You awake yet?” A hand nudged at his shoulder, and Levi swatted it away with mild irritation as he rubbed his eyes with the other, rubbing the sleep out of it.

“I’m up, I’m up,” he grumbled. “What do you want?”

His vision fell first on a pair of bare feet, young and youthful and spotted, smudged with dirt. The toes were fleshy and round like young peas, the calves connected to it coated with soft supple green tendrils, and his eyes traveled up to a face he knew only too well.

“Erwin?” he asked, his voice catching in disbelief. He held his hands up to his face, marveling at the new youth they’d been bestowed. Looking past Erwin, he found small stems of saplings sprouting from the dark earth, and the soil was firm and damp with the evidence of recent rains. Petrichor hung a heavy perfume across the land, and everything was blooming in full force. Chancing a quick glance over his shoulder, Levi found the small beginnings of a silver birch,
spotted bark pushing through the soil and roots winding deep into the earth.

“I want forever,” Erwin said, smartly, a smile casting a glow over his face. Leaves tangled fingers in his blonde hair, bright as the sunshine, and Levi swallowed back tears of joy. The cycles turned back to the beginning, ready for them to start again. “Can you give me forever, Levi?”

At the sound of his name, Levi looked up, accepting Erwin’s outstretched hand and letting Erwin tug him to his feet.

“I can,” he murmured, and Erwin wrapped him in a tight hug, the strength of youthful bones a secure embrace. “I can."

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