Final Tour

by gougruheddo

Summary

It's been twenty years in the army, and Levi is finally home--retired, bored, directionless. The world has moved on without him, including his friend Erwin. He struggles to learn to adjust, to deal with his nightmares, to flourish in a world he's never understood, only to find that Erwin is dealing with the same thing.
Levi wants a cigarette.

It’s been twelve hours on the plane, and he wants a cigarette so bad that the warnings plastered in the bathrooms and along the ceiling read more like schoolyard dares than federal laws. He smacks his lips against the wad of gum in his mouth and presses his pen deep into the sketchbook laid out on the
foldout tray. Levi’s not the type of man to back down, and with nearly forty years of experience, he knows he’s hard-headed. Unfortunately for him, he’s law-abiding unlike his uncle, and he’ll wait to land before he finds relief.

The screen on the back of the chair in front of him shows the plane’s course from Tokyo to Detroit. They’ve traversed so much ocean that he briefly considers how no amount of safety videos could prepare them for their deaths if they fell from the sky right now. With an agitated sigh, he sets down his pencil and watches the little CGI plane inch its way across the screen. His hand is tired, and his eyes are heavy. He leans his head against the window and tries to sleep, but he can’t. He’s barely slept in a week. He runs a hand down his greasy face and rolls his eyes up to the ceiling. He’s reminded of the cigarettes he can’t consume, and the dim lights remind him of the sleep he can’t receive. He growls.

They land in Detroit, and he passes through customs with soft whispers of gratitude for his service. He comes out the other end, distracted briefly by the passport photo of himself—Levi Ackerman a mere six years younger. But his eyes are less pillowed with sleep deprivation, a face less tortured from too many nightmare-like memories. He pockets it and moves to find the gate for his transfer flight. He hasn’t slept for over twenty-four hours, and there are still over six hours until he’s back near his hometown. He limps slightly to an available seat at his gate and slumps back as he scarfs down a plain toasted bagel and hot black tea.

The next flight pops his ears so bad that he gets a headache. He rests his head against the headrest, his eyes clenched tight as he listens to the gentle modern classical music in his earbuds. There are a few moments where he drifts off, but jolts awake at the slight bit of turbulence, reaching instinctively for a knife that isn’t there.

Rain pounds on the hull of the plane when they descend. The plane seems to brake for an unusual amount of time. He takes note of the passengers around him. Burns the nervous one’s faces into his memory. Knows that if something were to happen, he’ll have to help them out of the emergency exit. He is always the last one to leave. Always.

The brakes catch and they land safely. Levi relaxes in his seat as best he can.

The final announcements air over the intercom. Welcome to Scranton. Local time is 10:43 AM. It’s forty-two degrees with a heavy rain. Do your best to keep dry out there. Thank you for flying with us. Please remain seated until the fasten seat belts sign is turned off.

The plane comes to a stop. He watches the men and women with the baggage collection pull up to the underside of the plane. Everybody is moving around him, rising from their seats before they are allowed to. The man sitting next to him gets up and pulls the overhead bin open and grabs his luggage, nearly smacking the woman behind him in the head. They’re eager in their silence, bodies restless even though the flight was short, but they are anxious nonetheless for whatever this destination means to them.

Levi stays seated and looks out his window until the bodies down the aisle have turned from casual clothes to airline attire. His fingers curl as he stands, feels the stiffness in his legs linger as he points his toes and elongates his spine. He scoffs at the mess his seatmate left and picks up the peanut and pretzel wrappers and pockets them into his hoodie. Grabbing his rucksack from the overhead bin, he proceeds down the emptied plane aisles. The flight attendants give him a half-hearted ‘thank you’ as he steps off the plane, their smiles reflecting eerily to those found on the in-flight pamphlets.

He’s back on American soil. It’s been three years. And he really needs a cigarette.
The concourse is small, the gates mostly empty, floors covered in dated carpet patterns of circles and triangles. Each gate is still using the aged marquee tags to update flights on the display boards. It smells like bleach and old people, and he can hear a screaming child over the sound of his headphones. He shoulders his rucksack further up his back and quickens his pace toward the exit.

Levi pauses as he passes the security guard at the exit and closes his eyes. He breathes in deep as if the air here is different from that of Afghanistan, South Korea, Japan.

It doesn’t feel any more free to him.

Opening his eyes, Levi lets out his breath, so long and deflating that his limbs slump with it. The exhaustion hits him—hard. Not that he’s not used to it, but he’s a civilian now. He has to get used to sleeping in a bed again and getting at least six hours of sleep. Or whatever.

There are eyes on him, and they’re two blue anchors to his past. He blinks and looks behind him, realizing through his exhaustion that he was being picked up. His eyebrows crease slightly. Frustration flares in his chest, knowing that this friend of his had to park the car somewhere to come in. Had to pay something like ten dollars just to do that fucking task. Ten dollars to come in and wait with his hands all tucked into his pressed slacks, a dumb smile shining on his face as if it were nothing at all. It’s like he was expecting Levi to forget. Like Levi’s a fucking child. And the man is so damn tall, he’s looking down on him like one too.

Levi opens his mouth to quip something out but is cut short when he recognizes the tie around the man’s neck. His mouth threatens to reveal a grin despite his agitation. It’s a little too short, making his long limbs seem disproportionate. “I can’t believe you still have that,” Levi says, nodding his head toward the tie.

“Still my favorite Christmas present,” the man says. Levi gives him another casual glance, noticing that one set of shoelaces is draping on the floor. The man reaches into his pocket and pulls out a pack of cigarettes, and extends it as a silent and expected peace offering to Levi with a genuinely handsome smile.

Levi takes the pack, pulls the cellophane off and presses the container under his nose and breathes deep. He can’t help but roll his eyes back and let out a soft moan, coaxing a small chuckle from the man that gifted him the delicious, precious sticks of relief.

“Welcome home, Levi,” he says quietly, his smile clear in his voice.

“Erwin,” Levi says simply. He slaps the pack of cigarettes against his palm before tearing the paper slot open. “I hope you brought a fucking lighter, because I need one of these right now.”

Erwin moves to place his hand on Levi’s shoulder, but he’s already walking off toward the parking garage. “Of course.” Erwin takes longer strides to keep up with Levi despite the twelve inches of height difference. He catches up and hands him the lighter as they pass the luggage carousels. “Do we need to wait for anything?”

Levi shrugs, his rucksack bouncing as they race toward the exit. “Just this.” There’s a cigarette already in his mouth.

Levi lets Erwin take the lead once they get to the parking garage. The cold seeps effortlessly into Levi’s sweater, sending a chill through his body as he sucks in the first delightful breath of his cigarette. He’s already finished with it by the time they make it to the car, and he’s lighting up another one to replace it. Levi sticks his finger out in the direction of Erwin’s car, cigarette cradled between his forefingers. “You got an upgrade.” And quite a steep one too. He was used to the shitty
Civic Erwin had when they were in high school. By the time Erwin was done with that car, Levi wouldn’t be surprised if every piece of it had been replaced before it hit the junkyard.

Erwin nods once, taking Levi’s rucksack from him and putting it in the trunk of his Benz. “I uh, got it when I got the promotion.”

“Mm,” Levi mutters as he gets into the front seat, closing the door before Erwin makes it to the driver’s seat. It’s one of those fancy cars with internet radio, backup cameras, and keyless ignition. It still smells like new car and fresh leather. He lets out a huge breath of smoke as Erwin enters.

“I don’t really…”

“You don’t need to explain it to me.” Levi takes another drag, holds it in, then lets it out of his nose.

Erwin doesn’t say anything else. Instead, he cracks the windows and waits a few minutes before putting the car into reverse. The camera switches on the dash, but Erwin puts his arm on the back of Levi’s seat to reverse out of his parking spot. They pause again, and Levi catches Erwin tilt his head away from him before switching the car into drive.

They talk little on the way to Erwin’s. Erwin attempts to ask questions, but Levi deflects with disinterested and tired grunts. Levi slumps against the door and rests his head on the window. He finds more sleep in their hour trip than in his entire flight home.

They pull into Erwin’s driveway, and the lack of motion startles Levi awake. He looks around, wide-eyed, until realization seeps into them and he relaxes against the seat. He sits quietly, takes the cigarette that had fallen from his lips when he drifted to sleep and puts it into his mouth. He takes the lighter from the cup holder to ignite it. They sit together silently, waiting for the other to move, but neither does.

Levi has never been to Erwin’s new house. Never seen his new car. Doesn’t know much about his new job. But things seem to be going well for him.

Good for him.

Levi reaches for the door handle and hears the pop of the trunk as he rounds the car to grab his rucksack. Erwin is out of the car, his back arching in a stretch, his head tilted back to catch Levi’s gaze. “Home sweet home.”

“Not for long,” Levi mutters, and follows in step behind Erwin to the front door.

Erwin reaches for his keys, pausing for a moment, lips going thin. He says, almost absently, “No smoking in the house, okay?”

Levi looks up at him, eyes set dark. He wants to tell him to fuck off, that nicotine is the only thing that keeps him from shaking all the time, cuts the edge from all the dumb thoughts in his head. He stares for a few moments, waits for Erwin to finish with a phrase that is less stupid—less offensive—but it doesn’t come. He nods slowly, and takes the cigarette from his lips and drops it on the porch. He snuffs it with his toe and shrugs. “Fine.” He watches as Erwin’s eyebrow furrows, and he feels a little better. A little in control. Just a little.

The house is large, much too large for a single middle-aged man like Erwin. It’s old, and the floorboards groan under their weight as they enter the foyer. It smells like cinnamon and cologne and burnt toast. There’s a mirror across from the coat rack on the wall, and he sees just how well traveled he looks. He looks disgusting.
Placing his rucksack on the floor, he bends over and unties his boots. He slips them off and shoves the laces into them and points the toes against the wall. Without Erwin, he pads deeper into the house, as if he has been here before, as if he has lived here for years. The first large room is the dining room, a modestly sized oak table with two chairs sitting in the center with a boring chandelier above it. There’s artwork on the walls—mountain landscapes and sprawling plains—but it’s nothing but uninspired against the beige paint.

Further down the hall is the living room. The decor is sparse, cheap and masculine as if he’s been waiting for a woman to come in and dress it up for him. The wall adjoining the dining room and the living room appears to be a sliding wall, allowing the two rooms to open up and accommodate several guests. Levi wonders if Erwin has ever had that many people over at once. The large sectional sofa, covered in papers like the coffee table, may speak some truth to that, along with the impressive entertainment system. The contradiction is in the mess. The doors would be able to open if there weren’t piles of boxes lining up against it. At its peak, the boxes tower as tall as him and end at where the hallway meets the living room.

Levi frowns and turns back to Erwin. “What’s with all the…”

“Your room is upstairs,” Erwin interrupts. “I said you couldn’t smoke in the house, but you can feel free to smoke in the sunroom.”

Levi eyes him but doesn’t fight the tight smile that touches his lips. “Okay.”

Erwin goes to the entryway table and pulls something out from a wicker basket. He walks back to Levi and hands it to him. “Here’s the spare key, but if you ever lock yourself out, there’s another one taped under the third step of the porch.” He doesn’t match eyes with Levi, and his shoulders are stiff and raised slightly. Closed off but that feels all too familiar when it comes to Erwin. “I have to get back to work.”

“What if I’m hungry?”

“What’s mine is yours. If you don’t like anything here, downtown is about two miles away.”

The metal is cold in his fingers, and he feels a lingering pang of loneliness by the idea of Erwin leaving him alone within the first few hours of being back. He sets his face straight and nods. “Okay.”

“Mike will be over tomorrow,” Erwin says as he walks back to the front door. “You remember Mike, right?”

“Yeah.”

“He’ll help you look at some apartments. He has a truck too, so he said he’ll help you with getting furniture if you would like.”

Levi breathes through his nose. “I don’t need the help.”

“Levi…” Erwin reaches for the door, his head hanging before he seems to find the strength to lift it again. “Have a good day.”

“Yeah.”

The sound of the front door seems to echo throughout the house, swelling the wood until it creaks back into place. He’s alone, and the big house feels that much larger, like it’s going to swallow him. He eyes the boxes in the living room again, and there’s a curiosity clawing in his gut that makes him
want to rifle through all of Erwin’s things. He wants to see everything that Erwin has dealt with and has been in the last twenty years. But he can’t do that to him, too tired to do that to him, and finds his heavy limbs dragging him up the stairs.

The stairs leading up end in a small landing that then turns into a hallway. There are six doors in the hallway, two to the right, four to the left. Only the bathroom door is open, and he takes note of it. He manages to drag himself to the furthest right-hand door, places his hand on the handle but can’t bring himself to turn it.

He goes back downstairs.

Everything aches, and he’s tired, but he’s restless. The limp in his leg returns as he finds himself in the dining room, in the kitchen, on the porch to smoke, then back in the living room to eye the boxes.

It doesn’t take him long to find the cleaning supplies under the kitchen sink. He fills a bucket with half cleaning solution, half water, and takes to scrubbing every surface in the kitchen until the water has gone a dark brown. The refrigerator has so little food in it that it’s easy to wipe down to near factory perfection. The toaster crumb tray gets cleaned, and it seems he’s effectively managed to eradicate the burnt toast smell in the house.

He turns his attention to the living room. He lingers next to the boxes, stares at them for a long time, almost reaches out and touches them. Erwin has lived in this house for at least two years. Maybe three. The last time he visited the States, he stayed with his Uncle Kenny and never made it back home to see Erwin. None of that mattered though—the lazy fuck should have everything unpacked by now. He grunts angrily and moves off to clean up the hurricane of papers on and surrounding the couch, eyes darting back to the boxes like an anxious tick.

Levi still has more to do. He wants to clean the dining room and the foyer, but his knee is slowing him down, his body pushed too far into exhaustion. Sitting down onto the couch, he rests his head back and shuts his eyes. Sleep takes him so suddenly, so completely, that he doesn’t hear Erwin return home.

Erwin takes a seat on the couch, his weight shifting the cushions and breaking the slumber that Levi had drifted into. He turns his head and smiles at Levi. “Morning.”

“No way.” Levi kicks his feet and grips at the back of the couch as he sits up. His eyes blow wide as he searches his surroundings.

Erwin chuckles. “No, no. It’s evening. You didn’t sleep through the day.” Erwin leans forward and takes a container of food from the cleaned coffee table. “I got us Japanese.”

Levi’s breathing returns, and his grip on the cushions lessens. “I’ve been in Japan for a year,” he says, his throat gravely from sleep.

Erwin pauses, a piece of sushi near his mouth before he brings it back down to his plate. “Oh. Right…”

Levi looks at Erwin, then back down at the food on the table. He goes to the edge of his seat and leans over to pull a container of vegetable gyoza from the stack of food. “At least you remembered I like this stuff.”

Erwin grins, but it fades quickly.

They eat on the couch, one whole seat cushion away, Levi’s right leg tucked under him and chopsticks held mindlessly to his mouth. He’s become accustomed to life without TV, chose to not
have it when he was stationed in the quieter parts of the world. However, he had a weak spot for food shows, and cooking competition shows more so. All the contestants had some kind of overactive sense of self-worth and had no hesitation to talk shit even when they were losing.

“Look at this fuck,” Levi says around a bite of his meal, “He’s gettin’ kicked off this episode.”

Erwin gives him a side glance, hinted with a smile. “Why do you say that?”

Levi shakes his head, seemingly annoyed that he even has to explain it. “He over salted it. He fuckin’ knows it. Now he’s hoping somebody else will fuck up more than he did. He’s gotta take responsibility of his own shit.”

Erwin hums, “I suppose.”

The contestant ends up going home that episode as Levi had predicted. Erwin loses a bet he didn’t even know he was in. “I win,” says Levi.

“What?”

“I win,” he says and takes a gulp of water, “So, I don’t want to see Mike.”

“What? He’s just going to come…”

“I can do it myself.”

Erwin sets his wine down. His knuckles flex slightly. “I know.”

“Then call him off.”

“Levi.”

“You act like I haven’t lived here my whole life.”

“You haven’t.”

Levi snaps his chopsticks within his fingers. He stands up and drops his utensils on the coffee table. Their eyes meet, fired and ready to ignite the air between them. He’d forgotten. Ever since he got off the plane, since they were kids, Erwin always watched over him, feeling for whatever reason this overbearing need to protect him somehow. Well, Levi had been the one protecting him for the past twenty years out on the front lines. All Erwin did was get a cushy job, a nice car, and a beautiful, big house to fill with cardboard boxes.

“I’ll call him,” Erwin states, turning his attention back to the television. “Go get some rest. It’s probably better for you to adjust over a couple of days anyway.”

Levi wants to fight more, the winding in his muscles making him feel sick with a need to physically wreck something—like Erwin’s face. He leaves the room, fluidly and quietly, sits outside with a cigarette to knead the tension from his limbs, but the shaking in his hands remains. Going back inside, he grabs his rucksack from where he left it earlier and moves upstairs. He goes to the same room as before but doesn’t hesitate this time to open the door. He predicted correctly, the large windows opposite the door looking out into the sunroom that sits above the front porch. He throws his bag against the far wall and shuts the door behind him hard enough that it shakes the frame of the painting on the wall.

Just like the rest of the house, despite its age, its old radiators and ornate molding, it’s devoid of any
personality—especially Erwin’s. Eggshell colored walls, a single dresser, a nightstand with an
electronic clock and a lamp, a painting of the ocean above the bed. He climbs on to the plush
bedding, sits against the headboard with pillows surrounding him. From his pocket he removes a
small paring knife he stole from the kitchen and leaves it on the side table.

He falls in and out of consciousness, head lulling to the side and jolting upright as his anxiety shoots
him back awake. His eyes open as he hears the house whine around the weight of Erwin’s steps up
the stairs. There’s a small knock on the door, and Levi frightens out of his cloudy state of mind.

“Good night,” Erwin says through the door.

Levi stares at the door and waits for the house to groan again as Erwin walks away. He says it back,
the darkness of the room pulling his eyes shut, and he finds sleep somewhere in the unfamiliar
comfort of a stranger’s house.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to my two beta readers: Sumikin and my roommate. lol.

I don’t really have a writing schedule for this, but I’m taking this on as my pet project for
the year. I hope you enjoy, friends. <3

If you’re on Tumblr, we should scream about Erwin together:
gouguruheddo.tumblr.com
Levi wakes before the sun rises. He holds the paring knife in his hand, pressing his thumb against the blade until it slices a small crescent in his skin. He dozes as the blood pools in his palm, and the room is glowing a soft orange when his eyes open again. He brings his thumb to his lips; the blood tastes like dirty water, is warm like the desert sun, and is red like flag stripes.

He wants to blame the jet lag, but he’s never been able to sleep a full night. Not since that day.

He’s careful to not get any blood onto the bed sheets when he gets up. In the dim hallway, he finds his way to the bathroom and runs his hand under water that turns it an angry pink. The man looking back at him in the mirror is greasy, disheveled, dark haired, and leering with purple phantoms of sleep hanging below grey irises. Wrinkles stamp crows feet at the edge of his eyes and thin lips are cracked like old roads in winter. The nose is too small, the bridge cocked and ugly from an aged break. He glares at him, hands gripping either edge of the sink bowl, slightly crooked teeth gritting until he swears they’ll break.

“How?” He hisses. “How did you let it happen?” And his voice sounds so foreign like he’s speaking a different language, and it may be that he is.

The light in the room changes orange to white, and he doesn’t remember when he started filling the tub. It’s steamy, and he can’t see the man in the mirror anymore, a reality that brings him a relief so great that it comes with a shaky breath.
The tub is large, classic, and claw-footed. Levi undresses and sinks his body into the still filling tub. The heat of the water turns his skin red like a newborn. He runs firm fingers along creases of muscle, the pressure waning across the scar on his left shin, his hand trailing up, his thumb stopping to rub hard into his kneecap. It hurts—it hurts so damn much that he groans with his bottom lip between his teeth. It still feels like it’s bleeding, still feels the shrapnel lodged into bone.

Oh, how lucky he was that they were able to stop the bleeding. How lucky he was that he didn’t lose his leg. They said it like it was a miracle. A privilege.

Levi, you survived.

He sinks deeper into the tub, the water sloshing around him until his nose is free just enough to continue breathing. He turns the water off, the faucet dripping and echoing in the small room, the droplets causing ripples across the surface. His eyes close lazily, heavily, feels the dizzying effect of sleep tugging at his brain until he snorts water out of his nose. Again. And again.

It’s not until the water turns cold does he wash. The imagined blood seeps away like tendrils of tulle. The shrapnel floats to the top of the water, bobs like rubber ducks. And it still hurts, because he can see them, and he would have given himself for them. A million times over he would have given himself in exchange for them.

When he gets out of the tub, he stands for several minutes in the water until his knee is able to hold his weight. He swings his bad leg out, and carefully balances himself with the sink. It takes a well-calculated maneuver for him to get his good leg out without crumbling. “Fuckin’ god damn piece of shit.” He catches the glance of the man in the mirror, says the words with such disdain that he averts his gaze as quickly as they leave his mouth.

The linens are in the closet next to the bathroom in the hallway. He’s naked when he limps out of the room, rummaging through the towels until he finds one that doesn’t look frayed and dries himself off with it on the cold wooden floors. He lingers, droplets of water gathering at the tips of his hair and falling to the floor. The floor splatters with dark brown spots, and he toes the water to smudge across wood planks. Ages of dirt sticks to his skin and he wonders when the last time Erwin ever fucking cleaned the place.

Wrapping the towel around his waist, he goes back to his room and grabs his discarded rucksack and dumps it out onto the bed. Everything. This is it. He rifles through the pile: underwear, pants, socks, shirt. He puts them on methodically, as if it’s the first time he’s ever done the motions, and in a way, it is. Everything suddenly feels so foreign. Being here in this house, with these clothes, in this town, this country. He’ll wake up in this bed tomorrow, the next day, until the end of the week, maybe even for a month. It feels like a cage, a prison, a straight jacket wrapped too tight and pushing his chest down with each shallow breath.

He goes into the sunroom to smoke a cigarette, fingers shaking, eyes trained on the mess of belongings on the bed. Snuffing out his cigarette on the window sill, he moves back in to organize what he can. The army service uniform is the most prominent thing in the stack, dark navy and adorned with medals and ribbons. Above the left breast pocket is a plate that says “ACKERMAN”. It’s his name, but it’s not who he is now.

Folding the uniform, he leaves it at the bottom of the stack of his other clothes. The rest of the rucksack has a couple of books, some toiletries, a pair of shoes, his sketchbook, pencils, passport, a photograph, as well as some other miscellaneous paperwork and objects. He shoves what he can in another free drawer, looks briefly at the photograph before putting it face down on top of the dresser and leaves the bedroom with a book in hand.
It’s mid-morning by the time he makes it downstairs, and Erwin is already at work. There’s a note on the kitchen counter that expresses gratitude for him for cleaning yesterday and some phone numbers to use if he needs anything. Mike’s number is there. Erwin’s loopy, well manicured handwriting signs the bottom right corner of the note. Levi leaves it where he found it and makes some toast to eat at the dining table, his book opened to a dog-eared page. It takes reading the same page three times for him to abandon his toast and step outside on the porch to have a cigarette. He runs a hand down his face and sighs out small clouds of smoke.

He’s waiting for something. To be told to do something. To tell his men to do something. Out here in the mountains of Pennsylvania, there’s nothing but the distant caw of a crow, the eerie whistle of wind through skeletal branches. The knife in his pants pocket is a steady reminder of the exact danger he’s not in.

He rests a hand on the porch railing, sways with the breeze, and repeats his name inside his head until his bare fingers grow numb.

Levi wakes the next day with a startle, his limbs flailing against the bed, his feet hitting the floor and lifting him out of it, hand gripping his knife—steady and trained. It takes him a few moments to realize he’s not in danger. That the sun hasn’t risen yet. That he’s in Erwin’s house. That he’s safe.

He sits back down on the edge of the bed and sighs. It’s a shaky, broken sound, one that requires him to piece the edges of his reality back into place before he rises again. Limping stiffly to the door, still mostly clothed from the night before, he opens it and eyes the hallway with a raised eyebrow, knife still white-knuckled in his hand. The first door to the left of the stairs is cracked open, a slice of light illuminating the dark corridor. He waits, fighting everything in him, forcing himself to think rationally.

He’s in Erwin’s house.

He hears a grunt and some metal clang.

Levi prowls into the hallway, his weight light and his movements cat-like, not even the old wood floors dare to give him away. Placing a palm flat on the door, he pushes against it slowly, his knife rising congruently with the changing angle. The light floods the hallway, burns his eyes into a squint. After a few blinks, the room comes into focus. The walls are white, the floor wooden. There are weights scattered on the floor and a speaker with no MP3 player in the cradle. An exercise bike and a bench press fill the rest of the room. Laying on the bench press is Erwin, his presence being the only thing to inject a bit of interest between the four walls, even if it’s primarily his smell.

Erwin’s hands are gripping at the weightlifting bar still in the cradle. With the plates, it must weigh only a little over a hundred pounds, more for toning than for strength—nothing a man with Erwin’s build couldn’t handle without a spotter. Levi hardly notices that he’s sitting up and staring at him until he says something. “Oh, Levi. I didn’t wake you, did I?”

Levi blinks again, his shoulders relaxing as he shakes his head. “What time is it?”

Erwin wipes his forehead with the towel around his neck. “About five.”

“That’s… Early.”

There’s a pleasantness on Erwin’s face, but no smile. “Yes, well, I have little time to do it otherwise. It takes me about an hour to get to work every day, so I have to make sacrifices in my mornings.”
“Little Erwin would be so upset with Old Erwin. I remember having to drag you out of bed at 10 AM on most weekends.” Levi rests a shoulder on the doorframe, his body growing soft with the thought of themselves young and untarnished. Then again, he doesn’t believe that. They have always been tarnished.

Erwin chuckles, eyes bright with a smile. It affects Levi in a way he can’t describe. “Old Erwin will just need to tell Little Erwin that, unfortunately, people change sometimes. Though, the coffee helps, too.” He gets up and stretches his arms. Levi shifts in his spot as he watches Erwin’s eyes trail down him, studying him. One of Erwin’s eyebrows raises. “What’s with the knife?”

Levi looks at it as if it had materialized there just moments before. Looking back at Erwin, he tries to say something, but he can’t find the words. He doesn’t know how the knife got there. “I…”

Erwin watches him for an uncomfortable amount of time, until he nods, his expression on the brink of melancholy. “Feel free to use this room, of course.” He walks to the door and waits for Levi to step aside.

He smells like sweat and deodorant and Levi tries to connect these smells to those routed in his memory, but they just won’t. All he can remember is the smell of fresh air and flowers from Erwin’s old garden, and that’s not how it is now. “You’ll need to start wiping down the equipment when you’re done, then,” Levi chastises.

Erwin laughs softly as he goes into the bathroom across the hall. Levi looks at the knife, waiting to hear the shower water start, then he lumbers off into the bedroom until Erwin leaves the house.

Levi wakes again with a startle. He sits for a few moments gaining his breath, eyes training onto the clock to check the time. It’s a struggle to adjust, but the 5 AM start in order to work out with Erwin seems to come easy. He waits to hear the clanging of metal before he enters the room, always wearing the same clothes from the day before. They switch between equipment, speaking little as they allow themselves the quiet morning routine. When Erwin leaves to shower, Levi goes back to the bedroom to sit. He reads, or thinks, or dozes. It’s been several days, and the jet lag is still killing him. He can’t seem to dissolve the ingrained motions imposed on him by the military. He feels lethargic and energetic all at once—he doesn’t know what to do with himself.

But at least he can work out.

He showers. He cleans. He reads. He smokes. Erwin returns home with take-out. Indian. Pizza. Mexican. They watch television. Sitcoms. Reality shows. A movie. Levi goes to bed, sitting upright, fingering Erwin’s knife, staring at the dresser until his eyelids are too heavy to stay open. He sleeps, restlessly, but he knows if he sleeps he’ll be able to work out again.

It occurs to him on the seventh day that he needs things. Clothing, a phone, some cleaning supplies. He’s never been a materialistic man, but he sees the problem with wearing the same pair of jeans for a week straight.

“How can you drop me off in town today?” Levi asks, his legs peddling the exercise bike, his tempo slow as his stiff leg loosens.

A strain wavers Erwin’s voice as he pushes the weight bar above him, “Sure.” He rests the bar on the pegs. His head drops to the side to focus on Levi. “What for? I wouldn’t be able to pick you up until later.”

“I need stuff. I don’t care if I have to wait.”
“Are you sure?”

Levi rolls his eyes. “Just fuckin’ do it.”

“Yessir.”

Levi wakes with a startle. They continue the routine, but he leaves the house with Erwin this time. They’re quiet as they always seem to be, and Levi shifts in his seat as a silent answer to any question Erwin may try to ask.

Time changed a lot in his hometown. Small business used to rule downtown areas. Levi remembers when he and a few of the other kids from school would be chased out of the hardware store for pocketing nails and screwdrivers, not because they needed them, but because they wanted to do it. But every downtown has a soft underbelly, and when prone, is easy to gut and bleed out. Shells of businesses, flaunting dusty empty windows and backward signs, remain in the wake of the big box stores that moved into towns. Lehighton was not immune.

It roils in Levi’s stomach as he and Erwin pass their hometown that morning. The feeling sinks deep into it and weighs him down— that anxious feeling of being watched when nobody was there.

Levi has only been in a Walmart a handful of times before, but it’s the only shop left in town to buy everything he needs to function in modern America. The fluorescent lights are sterile, so unnaturally white that it makes his skin look like paper. The floors have been freshly waxed, and it smells clean, besides the dank aroma of bread from the Subway at the entrance. He looks around briefly and decides that there are entirely too many broken looking people here. It becomes his mission to get as much done in as short of an amount of time as possible.

Most of the clothes he buys, he does so without scrutiny. All the sizes are guesstimates. He thinks his jean size is a 32, but he gets a 34 instead and grabs a belt. He grabs two packs of plain black t-shirts, a sweater, a button up shirt, and a winter jacket that’s probably too cheap to actually keep the negative degree weather at bay.

He takes care to rush past any mirrors that appear in his path.

He spends the most time in the outdoor sports section. A clerk helps him select a nine inch, black carbonitride titanium folding knife. The clerk tells Levi that he and his Pa use that same exact knife to clean the deer they hunt. He asks Levi if he’s a hunting kind of man. Levi tells him he’s been hunting once, but that he just likes knives. The clerk doesn’t seem to judge him for it.

Stopping in the fitness department, he thinks of things he can add to Erwin’s home gym but can’t find anything that won’t add twenty pounds to his rucksack. Instead, he goes to the home decor aisle and finds a pine scented candle. With the two of them in there, the room has turned into a mini locker room. There’s an odd comfort to it, but a comfort that brings anxiety along with it.

Before he leaves, he buys the cheapest smartphone there and has the clerk help him set it up. They ask him if he needs help transferring any information from his old one. He declines, opting only to migrate Erwin’s number over. He doesn’t see the point in having anybody else to get into contact with.

It’s noon by the time he’s finished, his rucksack heavy with his homely garbage. He sits at McDonald’s so long that his shitty tea grows cold, and when he orders another, that one does too. The staff nervously look at him but none dare to ask him to leave when he’s overstay his welcome.

He jumps when his phone buzzes. It’s a text from Erwin telling him that he will be there within the
hour to pick him up. Levi sighs, confused as to how it got so dark out–how it got to be 5 PM already. Stepping outside, he sucks down a cigarette, his fingers growing tight from the cold before he responds to tell Erwin to meet him at the Giant Eagle. When Erwin arrives, they fill the trunk with ten bags of groceries, a gallon of milk, and Levi’s rucksack.

“How you aren’t a fat sack of shit after all the take-out you eat,” Levi mutters as he slams the trunk shut.

“It’s quite impressive, isn’t it?” Erwin smiles, and when his teeth show, he looks twenty years younger.

Levi bows his head into his shoulder, fighting a smile back. “You must take after your father. He was always so scrawny. I bet he still is.”

“Yes,” Erwin opens his door, “Yes, he is.”

They eat baked chicken breasts, steamed broccoli, and rice pilaf on the couch that night. Erwin comments on how he can’t remember the last time he had a home-cooked meal. Levi asks if he meant one that tasted that good, but he doesn’t respond.

Levi wakes with a startle, but it takes less time to settle his nerves now. The morning exercise has become the only thing in Levi’s life that seems to have any purpose. It grounds him more than a cigarette between his fingers. It makes his leg feel less stiff. It’s not like he has stopped exercising, not that this is any different than a week ago when he was still in Japan.

“Can you call Mike?” Levi’s fingers roll over the cold steel of the weight bar.

“Are you ready to look at places?” Erwin leans back on the exercise bike to look at Levi, his arms crossed over his chest.

“I think so.” Levi grunts as he takes the weight off the pegs, slowly bringing it down to his chest before lifting it straight up and parallel to his body.

Erwin waits for Levi to do a few presses before answering, “I know he has today off. It might be a bit short notice, but I can ask.”

Levi replaces the bar and breathes out deep, “Okay.”

Erwin nods and slows his peddling to a stop and gets off the bike. Levi sits up to watch him. There’s something off about Erwin this morning. He’s more quiet than usual, his posture a bit sulky. Erwin tugs at the bottoms of his sweater to pull it above his head when he turns to leave for his shower. The bottom of his undershirt rides up with it, revealing a large puffy white scar on the left-side of his abdomen. It’s covered again when the sweater is torn off and the shirt falls back into place, but Levi’s seen it now.

The bathroom door is closed before he can even ask, and he feels a lingering pain in his left leg. The thought of it pesteres him, and he keeps his distance from Erwin until he leaves for work. It pesteres him and upsets his stomach, and he wanted to do other things around the house but it irritates him.

Injuries like that kill greater men than him. He saw it happen more times than he cares to remember.

Levi is already sitting outside on the porch step when Mike pulls into the driveway. He hops over to the truck, cigarette in his mouth, and opens the door. Mike shakes his head at him. “Erwin might put up with that shit, but not in here. Get rid of it.” Levi eyes Mike and his thin wiry beard and dirty blond hair—he looks like a guy that would smoke himself. It takes a lot for him to not roll his eyes,
but he can’t deny his respect toward those that aren’t afraid to be honest in the face of a stranger. He flicks the cigarette away and jumps into the truck.

“Where’re we goin’?” Mike’s hand is on the back of Levi’s headrest, his eyes set out of the cab window as he reverses.

“Into Lehighton. All the ones we’re lookin’ at are there.”

“Where you and Erwin grew up?”

Levi nods but replies when he realizes that Mike is focusing on the road. “Yeah. Pretty much our whole lives. You’re from Philadelphia, right?” He has met Mike a couple of times in the past, but Levi was always so busy melting into the walls that he didn’t get many chances to learn details about Erwin’s friends.

Mike hums, “Nah. Pittsburgh. We just met in college.”

Levi pushes back into his seat and looks out the window. His uncle Kenny lives in Pittsburgh. Kenny had lived in Lehighton with him for several years after his mother passed away. It always seemed like there was a timer above Levi’s head–the day he turned 18, he was gone. He still had six months before he left for basic training. It made for an interesting Christmas.

“Right,” Levi says, softly.

Mike shakes his head as he turns the truck onto route 209. Jim Thorpe, Pennsylvania is a little town nestled in a valley of mountains, and his old mid-90s Dodge Ram roars up the steep inclines that leave town. Winter salt paints the asphalt like water stains in a ceiling tile. Frozen waterfalls of ice leak from the crevices of rock carved into the hillsides. The sun catches the natural sculptures and twinkles bobbles of light against the glass of the windshield.

Levi’s fingers worry at the seams of his pants. He doesn’t really want to go back to Lehighton, but it has the cheaper rent, and it’s familiar. He always figured if he didn’t die out on the field, he’d die in Lehighton.

“Why did you move here?” Levi’s voice comes out a near croak. His teeth saw his lip, and he tries not to think about how badly he wants a cigarette. How badly he wants to know about the scar.

“There’s decent manufacturing jobs in the area.”

“When did you…” The scar, it’s so big.

“About twelve years ago. Met my partner here. Got married. Tried to have kids but…” Mike’s tone doesn’t change until then, a hint of sadness creeping into his voice, but he shrugs it away. “We like it here.”

“Kinda boring.” He was a teacher, now he’s a dean. Why does he have the scar?

Mike huffs out his nose, and Levi thinks it might be a laugh. “I’ve had plenty of excitement. I like boring.”

Levi had the same, but he suspects in less entertaining ways. He’s seen his friends die, he’s killed men, he has seen his shit life flash too many times before his eyes. He doesn’t ever want to live a life that allows him too many moments to reflect on it. He turns his head toward the window, watches as they crawl higher up, curving sharply along the carved hill. Trees shelter them briefly, bringing with it a feeling of claustrophobia.
He wants to ask Mike about the scar. It’s old enough to lose some color, he might have been around. Did he take care of him when it happened? Did Erwin’s father take care of him like he always did?

“I hate boring,” Levi says.

Why didn’t he tell Levi?

“Well maybe we should be lookin’ elsewhere.”

But Levi has no idea where elsewhere possibly could be. Erwin is all he knows here, and even that absolute knowledge is being shaken. Carbon County is sleepy, but it isn’t a time capsule. He can’t smell the open air and the flowers anymore, even when he’s outside. Everything tastes greasy, everything is dressed up in bargain clothing.

The Lehigh River below them cuts deep into the valley, frozen and still. It carries its secrets miles away to meet with the Delaware.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to my two betas: Sumikin and my roommate. You guys rool.... I'll just leave that typo there.

I actually went to northeastern Pennsylvania this past weekend to scout this because I have issues? But actually, it was super cool, and if you're in the area, you should check these towns out. I've been to a lot of cute little places in the Northeast, but Jim Thorpe takes the damn cake.

The next chapter will be kinda fluffy, so get excited. Then it's just angst forever. lmao. sorry not sorry.
Stranded

Chapter Summary

the best prisons are the ones we make in our own minds.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The wood panel sidings buckle and creak against the wind. It feels like the whole house is swaying, bracing to fly off into another universe--into a storybook where the monsters in his head can get crushed by the foundations of prairie houses. The oak tree in the front yard and all its skinny little fingers rake at the roof shingles, make them scream like the skeletons in his dreams.

The sunroom is near freezing from the poor insulation caused by old windows. Levi sits on the wooden Adirondack chair with the green paint that’s chipped and peeling along the armrests. It’s the same chair that used to sit on Erwin’s porch when they were growing up, his and Erwin’s names carved in the supporting beam below the seat. He has taken a liking to sitting in it when he feels particularly restless. The wind wails again, sucking the atmosphere from every crack of the house, causing the door’s latch to click due to the pressure change. It leaves warm skin chilled and shivering, and Levi presses his knees to his chest, lets the cigarette shake against his lips before he takes another puff and breathes out steadily.

Ice crystallizes at the corners of the windows as the snow squalls. The glass rattles against wood, and the house sighs again, old and tired. But it’s seen and been through decades of winters. This one will be no different. It will survive.

Even in the dark, the white flecks dance vividly for him. Each one unique, each one may be a little broken, but each one of them falls. He hasn’t seen snow like this in years--maybe even a decade. He sinks deeper into the chair, the hood of his sweater slumping over his forehead.
He’s just like them. He’ll fall and he’ll never be able to get back up. He can never be individual and pristine again.

He curses as he jolts awake, the cigarette he had been smoking having burned a hole in his new pair of jeans. The sun rises, the sky grey and pregnant with low clouds as snow continues to fall. His toes curl against the edge of the chair while he stretches his limbs inwardly and untucks himself to stand and go to the bedroom. He lingers, as if he’s forgotten something in the other room, takes a hesitating step back toward it to check. He shakes his head, goes to the dresser and looks briefly at the photo on the surface before placing it face down again. It must be close to five. He stiffly wanders to the home gym where Erwin is already sweating. He’s in the middle of doing lunges when he notices Levi in the doorway.

“Good morning, Levi.”

Levi watches him do another lunge before saying quietly, “Mornin’.”

Erwin stops, stands up and stretches his back with his hands on his hips. “How did apartment hunting go yesterday?”

Levi blinks, could have sworn that they talked about it yesterday when Erwin got home from work, but maybe… No, he must have gone straight to the bedroom. How did it get to be morning so fast? “Not great.”

“What’s that?”

“First one was too small. Second one was too large.”

One side of Erwin’s mouth creases into a smile. “You’re like Goldilocks.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Levi shoots back, but it holds little venom. He holds a strand of hair between his fingers before he sits his butt on the bike. “Do I look like a spoiled little blonde brat to you?”

“Well, maybe not blonde, but...” Erwin starts to say, his voice sounding ever so slightly sing-songy.

“I’m not afraid to kick your ass.”

Erwin laughs. It fills the room, and it feels so much warmer, far more inviting, than the sounds of winter that lulled Levi to sleep that night. “I’m going to go shower. Looks like we have a snow day, so I’ll be home all day. I hope that doesn’t bother you.” He pats his towel to his brow.


There’s a look on Erwin’s face for a very short moment, and it almost looks like he might have forgotten that fact. He offers a smile and nothing else when he turns to leave the hallway.

Levi’s eyes linger on that spot—the spot below Erwin’s ribs and above his hip. Feels his mouth go dry as he listens for the bathroom door to close. Hears the pumping of his own blood roaring angrily in his ears as he pedals the bike. The anger unsettles his stomach, tastes the bile but swallows it down like a hard liquor.

The good education, the cushy job, the empty house, the nice car, the one shoe with shoelaces that are too long. The scar. The scar.

He takes his folding knife from his pocket and flicks it open.
Closes it.

Opens it.

Closes it.

He spends the rest of the morning cleaning up around the house. The rooms, besides the two he hasn’t been in, have already been cleaned throughout the week. His project for the last couple of days has been scrubbing the windows and cleaning up the dust and dead bugs sitting in the window tracks. He finds the living room to be particularly difficult. Three windows sit behind the couch and moving it is near impossible with all the cardboard boxes in the way. The only way to not disrupt the boxes is moving the coffee table out of the room and dismantling the sectional.

Wedged between couch and wall, Levi scrubs the windows until his bicep is sore and his elbow feels like it needs to be oiled. It cracks when he lets his arm rest at his side, and he rolls his neck around to stretch the crick out of it. His breath plumes against the cold glass, leaving a thin film of gray between him and the glass. He watches it recede in on itself before breathing again and drawing a frowny face in the fog before wiping it away with a rag.

In the kitchen, he finds a broken tile from the backsplash behind the microwave. He spends an hour between cigarette breaks trying to find spackle to repair it. However, Erwin has so little that he can’t even find a palette knife to spread it if he could.

Frustrated, Levi decides to rummage through the cupboards and pulls out ingredients to make homemade pancakes. The fragrance of burnt butter lingers in his hair, and he smells it as he ascends the stairs with breakfast stacked on plates in both his hands. They drip with sticky all-natural syrup, and big purple blueberries poke out from the fluffy dough. He stands in the hallway, debates going back downstairs and tossing everything, and return to cleaning this dirt pit Erwin calls a home. However, he finds himself quietly moving toward the ajar door next to the gym despite better judgement. He peeks through the crack and sees rows of books along the wall. He shoulders the door, lets it swing lazily open with a drawn-out creak. There’s a window covered in a sheer curtain, a big wooden desk with a decorative candelabra sitting on the far corner, and a roller chair occupied by a crouched and focused Erwin. The taller man swivels his head around from the disturbance, eyes round from surprise.

Levi looks at him, shrugs his shoulders. “Pancakes.”

Erwin looks at him, then at the pancakes, then back at him. His lips part slightly, his chest deflating, and a smile presses his lips back together. “Yes, thank you.” He rolls his chair to meet Levi and takes a plate to rest on his lap. “These look delicious.”

Levi looks around, sees that there’s a modern style chaise lounge on the opposite side of the mini-library, and he drops down to sit. “They ‘look’ delicious. Save your judgments until you actually eat it.”

“You’ve been cooking for the past several nights, and I have yet to be disappointed. I’m sure you can manage to make an amazing pancake.”

Levi’s fingers tighten around the edges of his plate, his eyes drilling holes into the pancakes. “Just eat the damn food.”

They finish their meals, and Levi finds himself browsing the small library of books Erwin has on the shelves. He picks up one called *Book of Ymir: The Myths of Titans* and flips it open and starts reading as he flops back down on the couch. Time passes in pages, and he’s nearly a fingertip’s
width in before he places the book down. Erwin’s still writing, so old-fashioned that he barely taps a key on the laptop sitting in front of him. There are pages and pages of stray papers scattered across his desk, and Levi can’t even comprehend how there’s any order to it. “What are you doing?”

“Work.”

“No shit, but like… What kinda work?”

“I’m reviewing budgets for my department. We need a new adjunct professor, but we don’t currently have the necessary funds for it.”

“Sounds boring.” Levi says. Erwin shrugs and shuffles to another piece of paper. Levi dog-ears the page he’s on and closes the book. “I didn’t think teachers did that type of stuff.”

“I’m an associate dean.”

Levi feels his face flush a little. His new job. Of course. “Right.”

“We’re projected to get an influx of science majors in the fall, so I’m planning ahead. I’m looking mostly to help Hange with the biological sciences so they can focus more on teaching higher level courses and mentor graduate and doctoral students.”

Levi nods because he doesn’t know what to say. He can’t relate. His duties as a captain in the military never involved balancing checkbooks. He imagines he wouldn’t be good at it. He flips open his book again, tries to read, but he’s started to feel restless again. He feels the anxiety of not doing anything rise in him like mercury in a thermometer. With a sigh, he gets up and collects their plates and goes to move downstairs. To his surprise, Erwin follows along and pulls a glass from the cupboard when they reach the kitchen.

“Thank you for breakfast, by the way. It was delicious,” Erwin says, filling up the cup from the tap.

Levi ignores the compliment. “You need some shit.” Levi’s finger twirls at the backsplash, his back leaning against the kitchen counter, “To fix that.”

“I didn’t even know it was broken.” Erwin peers over and nods. “Ah, I see. It appears it is.”

“Probably need a few other things too.”

Erwin comes next to him, leans against the counter so close that their arms almost touch. Levi leans away. “Let’s go and get some things.”

“Right now?”

“Sure, why not?”

“Don’t you have work to do?”

“Mmmm, you’re right, but I can finish it tonight.”

Levi turns his head toward the kitchen window. “There’s like ten feet of snow outside.”

“I would say more like a foot. But yes. Right now.”

Levi studies his friend. He feels a panic rising in him. It was okay that Erwin was here today, disrupting his routine only slightly, but this blew it all apart. He looks at the backsplash, wants to take back bringing it up. The windows still needed cleaning, the bathroom could use another wipe down,
his room needed to be aired out. “I have…”

Erwin places his cup in the sink and moves toward the foyer. “I’ll meet you outside.”

Levi glares at his back and shakes his head. He takes the few minutes to clean the dishes in the sink, bundle up into his winter jacket, and tie his boots on before meeting Erwin on the porch. When he makes it outside and sees what has been rained on the world, Levi outright refuses to get into the car.

“You don’t trust me?”

“Not in that fuckin’ thing.”

“I have snow tires.”

“And I lived through too much to die wrapped around a phone pole.”

Erwin can’t seem to find a rebuttal to that and reserves to taking the lead as they walk into town. It doesn’t take long for them to abandon the unshoveled sidewalks to tread down the half-plowed roads. “Nothing is going to be open,” Levi complains. His voice is muffled behind a white scarf he borrowed from Erwin, the lingering scent of old cologne burned into the material. The hood of his jacket covers across his forehead, making him nothing but nose and eyes.

“Sure there will,” Erwin says. His head is bare and catching snowflakes in his blond hair. The shoulders of his charcoal peacoat have gone white.

“Nobody’s going to risk going out in this for a box of screws or to eat a fuckin’ bagel.”

Erwin looks down at him with a smile. “You underestimate people’s tenacity.”

“Stupidity you mean.”

“There’s a difference?”

Levi huffs a laugh, the exhale illustrated in thin clouds of air.

Erwin nearly slips three times going down the hill, and Levi almost goes down with him as he tries to keep him upright. Levi tosses a snowball at Erwin’s head when they reach level ground, shouting at him for being a dumbass, for dragging them out here in the first place. Erwin returns the favor by pulling Levi’s hood down and putting a handful of snow into it before shoving it back over his head. Levi twists around and goes to punch Erwin in the gut but stops himself before his fist connects. The scar. He pauses, eyes wide and focused on the tortoiseshell button of Erwin’s jacket, before he abruptly turns away. They finish their walk several yards apart. Levi’s too grumpy and wet, his shoulders nearly up to his ears, while Erwin follows behind with a smile that doesn’t quite have the will to fade.

Downtown is quaint, cute, and echoes old water color illustrations found in turn of the century novels. Mauch Chunk train station sits at one corner of the main intersection in town, the courthouse bells across the street chiming twelve times as they plod up to the walk signal. Christmas wreaths and tiny bulbs of unlit lights decorate the lamp posts, and the brick buildings tower three stories high above them.

Levi lets his eyes wander up to Erwin, notices how red his nose and cheeks are. It reminds him of the times that Erwin would meet him outside of his middle school and walk him home. Erwin would tell him about how different high school was, how much he wanted to join the football team, how the blue of his eyes brightened when he told Levi that he—a freshman—was as tall as the star senior
player. But his father had insisted he joined student council, and because of that, it gave him more
time to walk Levi home. Levi always felt guilty about having Erwin around like that. That because he
couldn’t do something he wanted to do, he was stuck walking home with a child two years his
junior.

He needed it, though, as much as he hated admitting it then, as much as he hated admitting it now.
Levi had friends, but not ones that understood him like Erwin did. His eyes drift back to the road,
looks both ways, and walks across on red. Just as expected, nobody’s in town, and their footsteps are
the only ones left behind on the street. Against the white landscape, the colorful rowhouses down
Main Street pop like book spines on a shelf. It’s quiet, except for the occasional scraping sound of
shovels against the pavement. They walk by a business owner, shovel tucked under her arm as she
adjusts a glove. She nods at Erwin, and he returns it with a smile so charming and genuine, that Levi
swears the woman’s cold pinched cheeks grow a deeper pink.

Erwin guides them to a store, pulls open the door and sighs out as he stomps his boots clean at the
entrance. Levi does the same, pulls his hood down and shakes the snow from it. The heat thaws
warmth into his skin, makes it tingle with tiny pinpricks as feeling begins to return.

“‘Ello there, son,” a bald man at the front counter greets them.

“Good afternoon,” Erwin says, the smile from before still lingering on his face.

“Helluva storm we’re havin’ ‘ey?” There’s a low bit of chatter emanating from behind the counter,
and Levi can see that the man has a television hidden behind a jewelry display, the screen
broadcasting an old hockey game.

Erwin nods. “Sorry to bother you on such an inopportune day.”

“Nah! Keepin’ me busy. Stay as long as ya like. I live right up the road. The wife woulda been
pissed if I didn’t get my ass down ‘ere,” he leans an elbow on the glass counter, “An’ honestly, I can
use the break from ‘er.” He winks as he sits back down in his seat.

Levi unzips his jacket and pulls the scarf off from around his neck. He gives the shop a cursory
glance: knick-knacks, clothing, and locally made food products. The upper middle class, granola
eating kind of demographic, a store that thrives enough during tourist season to stay afloat. Luckily
for the town of Jim Thorpe, that’s almost every season of the year.

He spots a table of teas. Levi is frugal by nature, has a savings account to last him through retirement
even without his pension. But price rarely ever matters when it comes to tea. Picking up a canister,
he reads the ingredients, takes note that it’s packaged somewhere in Vermont, and that it’s intended
to “melt away the stresses of the day with its lavender infused undertones”. His lips purse, his very
skin aching for the warmth of a nice cup of tea to fill his throat and relinquish feeling to his freezing
hands and to ease his sore knee.

“Find something?” Erwin leans over his shoulder, his hands deep in his pockets as he tries to read
what Levi’s holding.

Levi jumps slightly, putting the tea back down on the table. “No.” He shuffles away from Erwin and
goes to absently look at the rest of the store. In the corner, next to a window, is a shelving unit of
artisan glass sculptures--dogs, cats, pumpkins, spheres, flowers. He latches onto a small figure of a
flower, its petals white and flat, the stem a deep emerald and no longer than three inches. It’s just a
white flower, he tries to tell himself. Just a generic looking flower with no significance.

He brings the trinket to the front and places it on the glass counter.
“You an army man?” The man says, pointing at Levi’s sweater, the word ARMY screen printed large across the chest.

Levi follows his eyes and nods once. “Used to be.”

“Same here. Engineer Regiment. You?”

“Special Forces. Spent most of my deployments in Afghanistan.”

The man brings a hand to his chin before extending it in an offer. “Name’s Dot.”

Levi takes Dot’s hand. It’s a firm grip, strength coming from a camaraderie that didn’t have to be built on the battlefield. A camaraderie of experience, of respect. “Levi.”

“Nice to meet ya, Levi. I’s good to have you back. But this life, it’s a hard one to get used to again, in’nt? Whodda thought not being told when you can piss would take so much gettin’ use to.” Dot laughs, the crinkles around his eyes deepening.

“Yeah.” Levi’s head hangs, hair falling in front of his eyes. He feels Erwin at this side, knows that he’s listening, and it makes him uneasy. “It’s only been about a week, and it’s been…”

“Why’d ya leave?” Dot interrupts as if he knows. A total stranger, but he understands.

“Twenty years is a long time. I’m not built like I used to be.”

“Boy,” Dot cackles again, “Do I er’er understand that.” He goes quiet for a moment while he wraps the flower in tissue paper. “Listen, what ya got goin’ on?”

“Not much…”

“I run this place to keep mahself busy.” He places the flower into a small paper bag and takes the cash Levi hands him. “I can see ya need somethin’ too. My health ain’t that great these days. Honestly, my niece Petra runs this place most of the time. If you want to, you can come in and help around if ya want. I can’n pay ya much…”

“I dunno…”

Dot hands Levi his change. Erwin shifts his weight at Levi’s side. “He’s nice meetin’ your acquaintance. Keep warm out there.”

When they’re outside, Erwin sticks his hands into his jacket and turns his head down to Levi. “He was nice.” He moves them further up the street to their next destination, one that Levi is paying no
Levi rolls his neck side to side. He still feels uncomfortable, like he has maggots burrowing in his muscles. His routine. His life. Is this how it was going to be moving forward? He still has windows to clean, rooms to air out, boxes to empty. “I guess.”

Erwin nods, and Levi looks up at him to see that there’s not much to see at all.

The snow stops falling, but the sky is still heavy with clouds, and nighttime seems to come quicker because of it. They’ve exhausted most of downtown by the time they start walking home, street lamps and holiday lights illuminating red brick as they walk. The roads are still slushy with dirty snow, but they’re much more manageable than when they came in the afternoon. They walk in the road, avoiding the occasional cars that come driving down, Erwin’s hands weighed down by paper bags of books he found at the second-hand bookstore.

Erwin sees Levi’s knee buckle, and he flings his bags into the snowbank when he goes to catch Levi.

“What the fuck.” Levi’s arms are up above his head, legs flung out in front of him, and Erwin’s arms under his armpits. “Oi, fuck, let me go.”

Erwin breathes against his ear, and Levi can feel the baritone of his voice vibrate against his back. “Are you…”

Levi struggles, pushing his weight against Erwin’s as he tries to find purchase so he can stand again. “My fuckin’... Leg. Goddammit, let me go!”

Erwin lifts him up and sets him down. He places a hand on the back of his neck, eyebrows upturned and eyes wide. “I couldn’t just let you fall.”

Levi glares up at him, his left leg bent to avoid putting weight on it. “Yes, you could have.”

The soft orange light of the lamppost casts a deep shadow over Levi’s features. He’s furious—at his own weakness, at Erwin’s need to protect him, at being so fucking fragile now. Erwin finally looks away and pulls his phone from his pocket. “I’ll call Mike.”

“I can make it.” Levi spits as he turns to hop a couple of steps up the hill.

“Levi.”

“Fuck you.”

Erwin dials the number anyway. Apologizes to Mike for bothering him, promises him a beer this weekend to make up for it. He watches as Levi makes it a few more yards away and stands under a globe of light from a streetlamp for the duration of the call, head down and shoulders shaking. Erwin places the phone back into his pocket and goes to retrieve his books, the bags soaked through from snow, the pages of the books probably wilted and damp.

Levi returns to help, hands Erwin a bag without looking him in the eye.

They walk back into town and wait inside one of the restaurants for Mike to pick them up. They don’t say a word between sips of water and small bites of pie.

Mike arrives, and it takes about fifteen minutes for his truck to get through the snow and up to Erwin’s house. He drops them off at the house, promising to see Levi again on Friday. The tires of
his truck catch on piled snow before they gain traction and become nothing but two glowing tail lights in the dark. Levi limps a little up to the porch, doing his best to ignore the ache in his leg, trying his best to not be frustrated and disappointed in a day that ended so sourly because of him. He buries his nose in his scarf, breathes in Erwin as the other man unlocks the front door and lets him in.

They unbundle. Levi takes his boots off, puts the laces inside, and points the toes at the wall. He grabs the glass flower from his jacket pocket and clutches the bag in his fingers. Without saying a word, he struggles up the stairs and goes into the bedroom. Softly clicking the door shut behind him, he sighs out a breath, rummages in his pocket and pulls out a cigarette and places it between his lips. He lights it before he even hits the sunroom, unwrapping the trinket and dropping the trash on the floor to then take to immediately worrying his fingers against the stem of the flower.

They might have been equals once. Despite their age, their height, their educations--they were equals. But how could they be now? Busted leg, giant scar. Lives distant by twenty years. A man and his house.

He finishes his cigarette and moves back into the bedroom. He flips the photo on the dresser and leaves it face up. He delicately places the flower next to it. Pulling his sweater over his head, he lets it drop to the floor, lets the sleeve slip through his fingers when he notices it. On the bedside table is a cup of tea, its lavender scent diffusing into the room. He takes a sip, finds it to be over steeped and cold. He wonders how many cigarettes he had actually smoked, how much time had slipped away. He wants to be mad at Erwin, and he is a little bit. He doesn’t need gifts; he doesn’t need his kindness; he doesn’t need him to keep him from falling. He’s not a child. He hesitates before taking another sip. He takes another and another until he finishes drinking it while he sits on the edge of the bed. He’s angry, but the tea does its job, and the smell and the taste tugs him back into the pillows and the comforter.

His eyes lazily focus on the dresser, on the glass magnolia, until they grow too heavy to stay open.

Chapter End Notes

thanks as always to my beta readers: sumikin and my roommate. <3 super extra thanks to the roommate for mapping out the outline for this entire beast. it sure is making things easier to write. lol.

that sure was a fair amount of fluff. the next few chapters not so much. a lot more answers to questions, i promise.

your guys' comments have been super great, and i'm glad you are enjoying it so far. <3 you're all total babes and i wanna touch your butts.
For the first time since they started, Levi sleeps through their work out. Erwin knocks on the door, startling Levi awake. “What?” Levi says, his legs swinging out of bed and his hand rushing to his head as the world spins around him. He groans, his eyes closing against nausea that sinks into his gut.

He had a fitful night of sleep. He kept hearing them. He kept seeing their faces when they were able to smile, when they were able to laugh. Those were the worst times to see them—like how they are in the picture. His eyes dart to the photo on the dresser, still upturned and adorned with the glass flower. He doesn’t need to see what it looks like—he’s burned the image into his mind to the point that he wishes it would smolder—that the charcoal would muddy it away until he couldn’t see their faces.

He digs the heel of his hand into his eye as if it will rub away the vision.

Erwin cracks the door open, lets the gap grow large enough so he fills the empty door frame with his body. “I’m about to go. Do you need a ride into town?”

Levi runs a hand through his hair as he continues to focus on the photo, lets the strands fall back into place over his forehead before shaking his head. “Nah… I’ll be fine.”

Erwin follows Levi’s gaze, is quiet for a moment before adding, “I can pick you up, at least? I insist.”
Levi looks up at him, sees where his eyes are, and suddenly feels very much like a growing teenager with his hands caught down his pants. He stands up, the world rushing up with him and threatening to sweep him off his feet. With a steadying step forward, Levi’s presence forces Erwin to take a step back, grounds him to a reality he so desperately needs to connect to. Erwin’s head tilts to the floor as they both enter the hallway. “Fine. If it shuts you up.” Levi closes the door behind him.

“I’ll be there around six.”

“Sure.”

Erwin lingers, all dressed in a tweed, leather elbow patches, silk blue tie, black socks. He’s handsome, and it’s a wonder how he isn’t out dating somebody; doesn’t bring home a pretty middle-aged woman with two kids; how he doesn’t have a wife to share a bed with.

Levi’s trapped under Erwin’s gaze, like a specimen in a petri dish. There’s nothing there, or at least it seems like it. Maybe sadness. A bit of pity. Levi steps forward again, filling the space between them with square shoulders and a stern glare. Erwin’s shoulders slump a little as he nods, rounds the banister, and starts down the stairs. Levi looks over the railing, catches Erwin looking back up at him. No, it’s none of that—Erwin is thinking—about him or what he’s doing or why he let him into this house with all the dirt and lack of personality and all the damn boxes. He slaps his palm on the banister, and Erwin turns his head and continues down the stairs. Levi keeps staring, looks at the same stair-step Erwin had been standing on, sees how the middle is warped and bare of varnishing. There’s a crack toward the wall, a giant knot from the wood pitting the step. The front door closes and with it a rush of cold air up the staircase. He lets out a breath he didn’t know he was holding.

He eyes the closed door at the end of the hallway. Levi’s been everywhere else in the house, even the basement and all its moldy, musty, dampness. However, he only entered rooms that had been opened for him. He had made this house his temporary home, but it wasn’t his. It wasn’t his business to go into Erwin’s room but just like the boxes, it nags him. The muscles around his shoulder blade tense, and he breathes out. With steady steps, he walks to the door and puts his hand on the doorknob--turns it.

He entertains what he might see on the other side. An unmade bed in the middle of hardwood floors. Bare white walls with a wall sconce. A closet door left open with dirty clothes at its gaping mouth. Hung photos of a woman he loved, a wife he never had, friends he doesn’t call anymore. Levi’s sleeping bag on the floor, neatly zipped and topped with his pillow, waiting patiently for the sleepovers that happened with more frequency as Uncle Kenny continued to grow negligent and belligerent...

Levi retracts his hand, shakes it as if it’s been burned. He stares at the door, waits for it to tell him answers instead of showing him. But rooms don’t talk, and Levi digs his fingernails into his palms.

He goes to the bathroom to fill the tub, stares at the man in the mirror as the steam rolls up around him like he’s in a bog. He sees the cracks around his eyes, watches them bleed down his cheeks and drip off his chin. The blood isn’t his, and he can’t wash it off. It’s become a part of him.

Erwin. Handsome, smart, athletic, compassionate, secretive. Became his friend because his mom passed away too. Took his hand outside of school and walked him home. Allowed Levi to become his shadow, to become his best friend, his surrogate brother.

He said they could be friends. That they’d be the only thing they’d know. Then he went to school, said they’d be ok. That he’ll be back. He promised.
But Levi went to the military. Chose to forget Erwin like he had been forgotten. He found new friends and made them his family. He watched them die. He felt their blood on his skin and felt it grow sticky as it evaporated into the hot sun.

He was alone.

He is alone.

The man in the mirror is distorted, disappearing, fading. Fade.

“Go away.”

Levi turns off the faucet and leaves the bathroom with the tub full and steaming, the movement of his body pulling wisps of air with him and leaving a ghostly void behind.

He leaves the house unwashed and walks into downtown. He arrives too early to work. He munches on a bag of graham crackers while sitting on the steps until he gets up to wander around the street to smoke. His rucksack is full of home repair supplies from the hardware store. It’s heavy and a bit uncomfortable, but it’s a sacrifice worth enduring to fix the shit Erwin has neglected around the house.

He’s leaning on the side of the wall when a red-headed woman comes toward the shop door, her arm buried deep in a purse as big as her torso. There are light freckles across her round cheeks, and she looks young enough to be his own daughter. She pulls a set of jingling keys out and rummages among the keyring to get the right one.

The woman finally notices him with a slight jump. The keys fumble in her hands before she grasps them again and the shock on her face is replaced with a smile. “Oh! Hi!” She seems to have found the proper key and inserts it into the lock. “You must be Levi?” The door opens with a chime of the bells on the handle. Levi nods in response. “Good, great! Come in, come in.”

The store is dark and cold. Levi stomps his boots out on the doormat and stands awkwardly at the entrance as she goes and turns on the lights. She comes back, bare of jacket and purse, and offers her hand to him. “Petra. Petra Bozado. My uncle told me a bit about you.”

Levi takes it and shakes. “There’s not much to say.”

Petra laughs. “Yeah, not really, but I trust ‘im. He’s a good judge of character.” She goes to the door and flips the ‘closed’ sign to ‘open’ and goes back behind the counter. “We’ll be hanging around together a lot. I’m sure I’ll get to know you more.”

Levi tries not to snort. Petra seems nice and all, but he isn’t here to make friends. He’s just here to get his mind off of things and to get out of that damn prison of a house. “Of course.” He unzips his jacket and removes it. Petra takes it from him and puts it in the back. He’s wearing his best clothes—clean new jeans and a black t-shirt. He doesn’t have much else, but she doesn’t seem to give him a second glance about it.

“It gets kinda boring in here sometimes. I mean, we have a steady stream of people during the day sometimes, but nothing that’s too difficult to keep up with. I’m generally here by myself most days. My uncle comes in sometimes when he’s feeling like getting in trouble.” She smiles brightly at him. “But honestly, I’m kinda behind on a few things. I just don’t like cleaning, you know?”

Levi raises an eyebrow. “What kind of cleaning?”

“Well you know, like, there’s a lot of product here, yeah? I dust enough at home, I don’t want to do
“it here too.” She laughs. “God knows my husband is a lazy sack too. But the difference is that I’m trying to make an impression here. Unfortunately, I’m not in the market of selling dirt.”

“I can help with that.”

“Are you sure?” She asks. Levi nods, his hands tucking into his pockets under the discomfort of her eyes. They’re a deep amber, sticky and sweet just like honey, and when he tries to look away, they seem to harden him in his spot. “Oh, that would be so awesome. I’ll have you do that then, for now anyway. You really don’t mind?”

“I enjoy it. Honestly.”

Petra nods in response. She’s still beaming like he just said the most amazing thing in the whole world. Her energy is almost contagious. “The cleaning stuff is in the back. Feel free to pull what you need. You don’t need to ring any of the customers out, but if you can just guide them to stuff they might be asking for, or just call me over, that would be a big help too.”

Levi didn’t even think of the customers. He never had a simple job before, one where he wasn’t at risk of being shot at. Everything in the store is so mundane and unimportant. Luxuries. He plays out scenarios with customers in his head. Tries his best to guide them so that he doesn’t end up insulting them in the end. He fails four out of five times.

After finding the cleaning supplies, Levi starts over at the glass sculptures. He picks up each piece with care and ease, cleans it with a gentleness reserved for lovers, and replaces it in the exact spot it was before. He needs to locate a step stool to get to the shelves, his height being quite a damning shortcoming for the job. He takes extra care to not topple onto the floor as he reaches for the tallest shelf, removes the heavy glass orbs from it to wipe them down and replace them. He finishes with a sigh, turns his head toward the wall at the front of the store to see that it’s already one o’clock. He has been at it for three hours.

Petra comes to him and lets him know he can take lunch if he wants. “I usually eat lunch in the office and poke my head out when a customer comes in. I don’t know if you brought anything, but I have plenty of food to split if you want. The hubby made way too much pulled pork last night.”

“No thank you,” he says. Reality hits him, and the cigarette craving reels him into the point that his hands are shaking at his sides. “I think I will go out and grab something and have a smoke, though.”

Petra waves her hands. “Oh goodness, of course. Take your time. Take an hour if you need to.”

“I won’t be that long.” He grabs his coat from the back and shoulders it on. When he’s outside, he realizes he didn’t need it at all. The weather is unseasonably warm for early February, a warm front having followed in the heels of the nor’easter. The snow from the storm yesterday melts in big globs off of the buildings, slicks the sidewalks with water on melting ice and slush. Everything is glimmering in the sunlight, the pavement blinding white at obtuse angles. He walks a block down the street, his hands deep into his jacket pockets before he finds a quiet place to lean against a wall and smoke. He takes a drag, eyeing the ‘no smoking’ sign hung against the brick of the wall, and does his best to finish it before anybody notices.

He goes back to work after having a lunch of black tea and three cigarettes. The rest of the day is uneventful. He finishes dusting and arranging the glass ornaments, and starts sorting and organizing through a basket of trinkets before Petra locks the store for the night.

“Where do you live?” Petra asks, her giant purse shoved under her arm as she holds the door handle in one hand and her keys in the other.
Levi nods up the road. “That way. Just a little bit up the hill outta town.”

“Do you have a car?” Levi shakes his head. “Need a ride home? That’s a bit of a walk for being on your feet all day.” Petra rattles the door handle to check if it’s locked. Satisfied, she goes down the front steps and faces Levi.

“My friend is picking me up.”

Petra makes a noise, one that raises the hairs on Levi’s neck, and he stifles a dark look. She nods, “All right then. Well, I’ll see you tomorrow?” Levi nods. “You did a good job today.”

“It was nothing.”

“No, it was something. You really helped me out. Thank you.” She offers her hand, and Levi reluctantly and hesitantly takes it. The grip is weak, shakes it once before they separate. Levi rolls his shoulders to dislodge the discomfort in his limbs. “Have a good night, Levi!”

Levi crumbles to the stairs at that point. He still has an hour before Erwin is supposed to be here to pick him up. The sun has already set and the Christmas lights around the Victorian-inspired lampposts cast a cordial and inviting light. Levi shifts in his seat before getting up to limp away from the shop to light up another cigarette.

Erwin only lives a twenty-minute walk from the store, and even if it’s mostly uphill, it wouldn’t be an awful trek. He considers it, walks up past the opera house, snuffs his cigarette out on the top of a trash can before throwing the butt in, and turns back around. Rubbing his hand against his kneecap, he seats himself back on the store steps. Tomorrow, he will have to raid the bathroom cabinets and take all the painkillers. Normally, he avoids any sort of remedy, be it pills or bottle, but if it would help get him home at least.

Levi pulls the last cigarette from its pack and adjusts his rucksack on his shoulder. He doesn’t light the cigarette, presses his palm to his forehead and lets out a deep sigh. He bounces a leg anxiously. He feels like a fucking kid waiting for a ride after school. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad if he didn’t have to wait. He thinks of calling Mike, but his number is still sitting on the kitchen counter yet to be added to his phone.

A woman walks by, and she turns her head to watch him as she passes. A man walks by and nods. A couple walks by and ignores him.

He shakes his head trying to calm his nerves.

He tries to calm down.

Just calm down.

Erwin arrives ten minutes earlier than expected and stands in front of Levi before saying his name. Levi head snaps up to look at him and studies the outstretched hand Erwin has offered him. He rolls his shoulders and stands up with the assistance of the stair railing and walks to the car to get in. Levi slams the door behind him, not putting on his seatbelt as they start to drive away. “I can walk home tomorrow,” Levi says.

Erwin glances at him, nods, and says nothing.

They get home and eat leftover lemon chicken and buttered broccoli for dinner. Erwin leaves him another cup of tea that grows cold while Levi falls asleep on the balcony.
Levi wakes up on time the next morning to work out but stays in bed. His eyes guard the picture on the dresser. It must have been a couple of hours by the time Erwin knocks on his door. It startles Levi to suck in his breath, and he hopes desperately that Erwin doesn’t come in without an answer. He releases the tension in his chest as he hears the footsteps of Erwin’s steps down the stairs, slow and hesitant. Levi knows that Erwin’s left side falls heavier, the creaking of the old wood protesting against the taller man’s weight. The house shudders as the front door closes. The car engine hesitates and starts. After a brief period of time, he gasps in a breath, shivering against his own nerves, and crawls out of bed to take a quick shower.

As the shower water runs, he rummages through the medicine cabinet. Most of what's inside are over the counter drugs--stomach relief, sleep aids, vitamins, cold medicine. He finds the bottle of ibuprofen and puts it down onto the sink. Left behind it is a turned auburn prescription bottle filled with little white pills. He closes the medicine cabinet and takes four pills from the ibuprofen bottle and swallows them down dry. He takes the rest of the bottle and puts it in his pocket after he showers and dresses.

Levi walks into the kitchen and stops in the entryway and looks around quickly before continuing. There’s food set out on the counter. He can see that there’s a note alongside Mike’s number. He walks cautiously over to the counter, putting the weight on the balls of his feet to keep his steps quiet as if the food is still living and may be startled away.

A sandwich, neatly made and wrapped in cellophane. A pack of crackers. A granola bar. Leaning over, he reads the note and scowls.

*Have a nice day. -Erwin*

“Who the fuck else would it be,” Levi says out loud to the empty house. The house groans as a gust of wind hit the siding, and his mouth twitches into a frown.

He shakes his head, moves over to the sink and pulls a plastic bag from the cabinet below it. Moving to the refrigerator, he fills the bag with yogurt, a container of their dinner leftovers, a whole bag of mini carrots, and a bottle of water. He lets the door shut behind him, and he throws the bag of food onto the bench in the foyer before picking up and putting on his boots. He moves out of the front door, pulls it behind him so hard that it slams and rattles the windows along the front of the house.

He walks to work, feels the time melt away in hours before he leaves for lunch. Anger sits in his belly and he can’t bring himself to even eat a snack but brings the bag of food with him as he wanders outside. The sandwich, the tea, the rides, being picked up at the airport. The god damn boxes, that stupid room, that fucking house. The scar. What the hell was the scar?

And their faces, he can’t get them out of his mind, and he presses a palm to his forehead as he grits his teeth, and he doesn’t even remember when he lit the cigarette that has fallen from his fingers and onto the ground or how he got a block away from work. He leans his shoulder on the wall of the alcove he had wandered into. Brick buildings surround him, and he’s towered by a statue of a dead man from a war long since fought.

He tosses the plastic bag of food in a trash can before he returns to work.

The sun has set by the time that he treks up the hill toward home. There’s the insistent babbling of the stream that runs through people’s yards, under the manhole covers, along the roadway. He pauses at a rock wall and sits under the orange light of a streetlamp to watch the moving water struggle under chunks of ice. He runs a hand through his hair, bites his lip and sighs out before limping for a brief time up toward home again--Erwin’s home. He makes it inside but even after all the pills he’s downed during the day, he can’t stand long enough to make dinner. He goes to bed
angry and hungry. He wakes up the next morning to a fresh teacup on the nightstand.

He skips the work out. He takes a shower. There’s another sandwich on the counter with a different assortment of snacks alongside. The note reads the same but is a different kind of paper. He slams the front door as if he has an audience and walks to work. The hours feel like minutes before it’s already almost time to leave. “I can’t come in tomorrow,” Levi says. “I’m looking for apartments.” He feels guilty about it because, at the moment, it’s not necessarily true.

“Oh! That’s fine. I’m starting to run out of stuff for you to do anyway!” Petra laughs. She leans on the glass counter, and Levi’s mouth twitches as he sees her drag her fingers across the surface. “Oh, by the way, my uncle wants to know how you want to get paid.”

Levi occupies his hands with shuffling through greeting cards. People never put them away in the right spot. He had organized them by occasion earlier that day, and already three had been misplaced. “I don’t need anything.”

“He insists.”

Levi looks across the store, his eyes land on the tea that Erwin had been making him every night for the past week. He tuts at himself for wasting such quality shit— he was sure that Erwin must have gone through most of the tin he had purchased at this point. It just annoyed him more thinking about it. “Tea.”

“Tea?” Petra laughs again, and it’s clear and bright and without judgment. She’s really far too happy for her own good.

“Yeah.”

“Well, that works! Make sure you take some before you leave today.”

Levi nods. He takes a peppermint blend, fingers the rim of the tin in his pocket on his walk home. He makes a cup as he cooks that night—steak tips and rice pilaf. Erwin comes home after Levi plated their food.

“Smells good,” Erwin says from the foyer.

“Dining room,” Levi says from the kitchen. He turns the faucet off and lets the rest of the dishes sit in the sink until he’s done eating.

Erwin meets Levi with a tired smile, and he sits down in front of his plate on the far side of the table. “Looks delicious.”

Levi’s nose twitches. Like the pancakes. Like the tea. Like the scar. “It better be.”

Levi had always enjoyed cooking because Erwin was always a captive audience. There were nights that Erwin’s father had to work late, and they would have to fend for themselves. Levi would stand in front of a cookbook rattling off ingredients as Erwin gathered them and the necessary cooking aids. They’d start off prepping together, but even in all of Erwin’s wisdom, he could never nail down which was the correct abbreviation for tablespoon or teaspoon.

They would sit at the dinner table, one-time using candlelight to see what it was all about, and smiled over forklfuls of food. It was easier to smile back then. It was easier for Levi when he felt needed. When he had fewer demons to fight.

“How was work?” Erwin asks. Levi blinks and shrugs, thinking of the note. “Good, then?” Erwin
looks down at his plate and shovels a heap of rice into his mouth.

“It was fine.” Levi corrects as if there was a difference, but it was his word, and not Erwin’s.

They would do dishes together. Erwin had his growth spurt early, and he would take the clean dishes from Levi and dry them before putting them away in the cupboards. They talked about that one English teacher everybody hated, how every girl in gym class either didn’t wear underwear or wore thongs all solely based on the party lines of their activewear, and how they didn’t quite understand how Latin was considered a language of use to learn.

Erwin clears his throat. Levi nervously raises his eyes, feels the heaviness of Erwin’s on him. He swallows a mouth full of water before taking the final bite of his steak and chewing slowly. It’s a little well done, chewy, the cut a bit tough. It was on sale. His gaze sinks to the table.

Erwin told him he was leaving for college as he was drying a plate. Levi stopped scrubbing his dish, dug his fingers into the porcelain until his knuckles hurt. Levi said he was going to the military, not because he wanted to, not because he planned to, but because it was the only thing he could think of to say to make Erwin maybe hurt as much as he did.

Erwin congratulated him.

“Hey!” Erwin says, his fork still full of steak and halfway to his mouth. Levi pauses and turns. He looks down at Erwin’s plate that somehow got into his hand then back up at Erwin. “I wasn’t done.”

Levi looks confused, but he shakes it quickly. “Right…” He places the plate back down in front of Erwin and sits back down across from him, looking anxiously at his own empty plate.

“Levi…” Erwin starts. He places his fork down onto his plate and lets his fingers trail along the sewed seam of the placemat. “Is there something wrong?”

They had a final dinner before Levi left for basic training. Nothing complicated, but special in its own right. Baked macaroni and cheese with fontina, Havarti, cheddar, and brie topped with buttery crackers. They didn’t talk about how long Levi would be gone. Instead, Erwin talked about who his roommate in college was going to be. They talked about how different Philadelphia would be from Leighton, and Levi tried not to worry about him. He was the one that was probably going to end up halfway across the world. They talked about how they should both try to see each other once a year, maybe catch some drinks with some old friends at the same time. As if it was a possibility. As if they cared about anybody else.

Erwin said that Levi always had a place to return home to.

“Levi?”

With a raised eyebrow, Levi says, “No. No... Nothing...”

Their eyes play tag with each other before Erwin’s finally settle onto someplace around Levi’s neck. “It’s just that…”

The tea. The sandwich. All the rides. Christ, he just needed some space. Some goddamn respect. He was gone for twenty years with his fucking life on the line. He can handle shit on his own.

He is in control.

“Stop it,” Levi says, and it’s like a whip that licks at the skin on Erwin’s face.
“What?” Erwin’s eyes grow wide, and there’s a color coming to his cheeks as his temper starts to rise.

“The tea. The lunches. The rides.”

“But…”

“I don’t need to be taken care of.”

Erwin adjusts in his seat, his neck rolling to the side as he locks eyes with Levi. “I never said you had to be.”

“You don’t need to say it.”

Erwin pushes his plate away with the backs of his forefingers and sighs out. “I do not pretend to know what you’re going through. All I am looking to do is to make things easier for you if I am able to.”

“I can handle it.”

“Of course.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” Levi stands from his seat, his knuckles on the table, his body leaning over and into Erwin’s space.

Erwin stands up, his chair screeching against the hardwood of the dining room before he speaks again. He seems taller, his eyes level with the chandelier hanging above the table. He’s looking down at Levi. Down on him. Levi’s expression goes dark. “It means exactly that. Of course, you can handle it because I never thought you were unable.”

“Then knock it off.” Levi grabs Erwin’s still unfinished plate along with his and leaves out of the dining room.

Erwin rounds the dining table and pushes past the guest chair. He pauses in the doorway and looks into the kitchen at him, his mouth in a straight, tight line. “I will. I apologize.”

Levi drops the dishes, food and all, into the sink and turns back around. He moves past Erwin, their arms brushing against each other before he pauses in the foyer. He tries to focus on Erwin, tries to see him, but he’s nothing right now but static and Levi can’t quite remember how to breathe properly. He nods before scrambling up the stairs and rushing into the bedroom. Closing the door behind him, he sits on the end of the bed, his eyes focusing on his shaking hands between his legs.

He had only seen Erwin a few times in the twenty years, yet he still had a home here. Why did he care? Why did he care when he left him behind?

He didn’t want that.

He didn’t want this.

He doesn’t want this.

He wakes the next morning to see that no tea had been left for him.

Chapter End Notes
wow thank you for being so patient as i got this out. i know it’s been a long wait. i had the first 3 pages of this written for over a month, but was struggling to get it out. what i had to do to fix that was split this chapter up into a few parts so it wasn't so overwhelming, so the next few chapters are more rigidly planned, but i'm not sure exactly where i'll make the breakpoints. sorry for the promises of more answers before. haha. i just left you all with more questions probably.

ANYWAY. thanks to my betas: my roommate and sumikins. my roommate has been, once again, a great resource. he's helped me shape this story so much and i just can't with how much kindness he's given me.

please enjoy. love you all and the wonderful comments you've left. they mean so, so much. <3
It’s been half a week since Levi worked out, and his whole body feels old and tight because of it. Erwin has not been taking good care of the room since Levi abandoned it. Some weights are haphazardly set between both pieces of equipment and three dirty towels sit bundled up in the corner of the room. Erwin has already left for the day, so Levi takes his time to clean up a little—depositing the towels into the hamper in the bathroom, arranging the weights in a line across the far wall for easier access, and sweeping the dust from the floor. He takes extra time to sanitize every crevice of the equipment before he uses it himself.

He burns a candle as he does his cardio. It’s a weak attempt at ridding the small room of the smell of sweat and bleach. It takes a while. They say that smell is most linked to memory, and this is a smell that reminds him of too many things. The whur of the exercise bike lulls him to close his eyes, his body swaying from side to side as he pedals. He crosses his arms and leans back, tries to kick out the thoughts of old locker rooms and small tents in the desert. He stops only when his breathing becomes labored, and he downs an entire glass of ice water, chewing on an ice cube as he goes to set up the bench press with the appropriate weights.

Reality is fading around him, and it isn’t a new thing for him. Routines helped, and he has allowed his routine to be disrupted. Working out centers him. Cleaning rejuvenates him. Reading enlightens him. Ever since the day out in the snow, Levi has been off kilter. In order to survive, he has to get back into it. He has to stop thinking.
The burning in his arms feels great. He finishes his repetitions and sets the weight bar down. He shakes out his arms and sighs as he pushes his palms to his forehead. His face is hot, and he’s still breathing heavy from his cycling.

Or maybe it’s because he’s thinking of them smiling at him.

They were sitting out under the stars, and they were smiling even though their cheeks were pink from cold. They were thousands of miles and an ocean away from home, but they managed to smile together. They were talking about their hometowns. Magnolia missed the farm—all the horses and sheep and ducks. She was going to use the money she had in savings to go to veterinary school. Maybe ask that boy from high school out while she was at it. You deserve better than that, Levi and Furlan said. She giggled and told them to shut up—she can do what she wanted to.

As for Church, he was probably going to leave that tour and become a physical therapist. Maybe move someplace out west where the property is cheaper and life is quieter. He hated growing up in the city. Hated living with cockroaches and eviction notices. And he had enough of this life—it was nice while it lasted.

Levi talked about returning home and starting a business, even though he had no idea how to run one. Wanted to sell fine beverages—no, not alcohol, Church. Tea, goddammit. Coffee. Lattes and cold brews and all that other shit. He talked about Erwin, and he felt something in his gut. The other two noticed, went quiet for him as he struggled to combine words to talk about him. It’d been ten years and he…

Runs a towel against his forehead. “Work out, done,” he says to himself, voice shaky. “Go shower.”

He crosses the hall and starts the water. He avoids looking in the mirror. Not today. Shampoo. Soap. Scrub it away, scrub away the sweat and the dirt. The dirt that got into everything. In his shirt, in his underwear, between his fucking toes. He scrubs until his skin is red. Rinse. Rinse. The water turns to mud. It clogs the drain and makes it gurgle.

No, it’s clear. There’s nothing there.

“Dry off.” Levi turns off the shower dials with a squeak. He walks to the bedroom naked, rubbing a towel into his scalp and trailing water behind him. He dresses into a pair of sweatpants and a black shirt. He looks over at the picture, at the magnolia, before grabbing the pack of cigarettes on the nightstand and walking out to the sunroom and smoking through two of them.

He plans out his day. He finished his work out. He showered. He needs to clean and start doing some of his repairs around the house. Then he needs to make some calls to setup apartment viewing appointments. He’ll have to call Mike for a ride. Then he’ll come home and make dinner. Sleep—actually sleep. He thinks about the sleep aids in the cabinet. He might have to take them.

He presses the knuckle of his thumb into his inner eye. No. He will not. He’s in control.

The bathroom gets cleaned first. He doesn’t clean the mirror, checks the medicine cabinet again before closing it. Scrubs the toilet with bleach, then gets on his hands and knees and washes the floor with a bucket at his side. The mud he thought was in the tub is gone, but he cleans it so vigorously that his muscles burn, and his eyes are red from the stench of bleach. He pulls down the shower curtain and replaces the plastic portion with a fresh one. He spackles a crack he finds near the ceiling in the corner. He finds minor water damage under the sink and takes notes on the supplies he’ll need to purchase later to fix it. The floor is still dirty. He can see brown within the grout, and he grabs his toothbrush in frustration. He leans close to the tile as he scrubs between each ridge. He frowns when he remembers too late that he has yet to use it to brush his teeth.
But it looks good now. It’s clean.

The radiator boards—he forgot to clean those. He dumps a rag into his cleaning bucket and wipes the dirt off the panels. Taking them off, he cleans the backside too. He blows out into the radiator coils to kick the dust out. He sneezes and feels light headed. After a few moments of recovery, he replaces the panels.

Now it’s clean.

He goes back to the exercise room and spackles cracks in the plaster that he finds. He does the same for tiny holes left by removed nails—remnants of things that may have hung on these walls. Things that might have actually added character to this damn house. The patches of spackle stand out in the warm light of the ceiling lamp. He wonders if Erwin would mind if he were to freshen up the paint throughout the house. He doesn’t want to ask. He figures he’ll ask Mike tonight to maybe drop by the hardware store so he can pick some up.

He sweeps the hallway. Organizes the linen closet by towel size and color. Takes out the extra bed sheets, re-folds the fitted sheets properly. Arranges the other miscellaneous items in the closet so they’re easy to get to. He scrubs down the door, then the adjoining wall. He goes back to the other two rooms and scrubs the walls there too.

Magnolia laughs. He can see the dirt smeared on her cheek. The blood trailing down her forehead, down to...

The bedroom. It needs to be done, but he can’t go back in there. He has to sweep and make the bed and organize his drawers and wash the windows—but he can’t go back in there. He needs to air out the sunroom. But he can’t go in there. The photo is in there, and she’s smiling when she shouldn’t be. They should have never smiled.

Leaning against the hallway wall, he pulls his phone out and goes onto the internet. “Apartments,” he says, “Look for apartments.” He goes to craigslist, finds a couple of studio apartments in the area and calls the numbers. “Can you show today? Great, I’ll see you later.” It’s scripted, controlled, almost normal. But his hands are shaking so much that it rattles up his arms and into his jaw. His teeth chatter as he goes down the stairs to grab Mike’s number. He finally puts it into his phone contacts, presses Call and waits until the third ring before hanging up.

He calls again two minutes later. Waits until the third ring and hangs up.

He goes back upstairs. It’s almost noon, but he’s not hungry. There’s too much to do downstairs to finish cleaning the whole house today. He’ll finish the upstairs and be done. He needs to do the bedroom.

His phone rings. Scrambling in his pockets, he pulls it out and swipes to accept it. He brings it to his ear. “Hello?”

“Hey, Levi. What’s up?”

“Uh, I was wondering um…” He clears his throat, tries to compose his voice as best he can. He doesn’t need Mike asking questions—doesn’t need him relaying bullshit back to Erwin. “I made some appointments today for apartments.”

“Ah, need a ride?”

Levi nods. There’s silence, and he realizes that, of course, Mike can’t see him. “Can you?”
“I’ll be there within the hour.”

“All right.”

“See you then.” The phone call ends, and Levi finds himself liking Mike more and more. He says only what needs to be said, doesn’t make things unnecessarily long-winded. Doesn’t try to coddle him with words of endearment, with promises of companionship, with dedications of comfort.

Church slapped his hand on his back as they were about to deploy. Told him they would do just fine. His eyes were bloodshot and vacant. His blood was on Levi’s hands as he tried to pile Church’s entrails back inside his body. He’d been at this for years, he’d seen people die, but this was different. Sweat ran down his forehead, tears leaked from his eyes, and...

Levi rests his head against the wall. Let’s the coolness of it dissipate the fever running hot against his skin. He tilts his head down to the end of the hallway. He can’t finish the bedroom within the hour. But he’s done every other room upstairs, it only makes sense that he finishes as much as he can. He turns his head to look down the opposite end of the hall. He presses his lips tight. Erwin’s room probably needs some spackling as well. And he can at least sweep up the floors and pull together any laundry that needs to be done. It’ll be fine.

His steps fall across the hallway floor lightly. The floorboards don’t speak against him, keep his secret safe as he leans into the door. He presses his ear against the wood, checking to make sure Erwin really had left for the day—that he wasn’t hiding a lover or an animal or whatever the fuck else in there. Putting his hand on the doorknob, he lets it sit there.

This isn’t his business. Erwin’s room is an oasis from Levi. It’s his right to have this.

He turns the doorknob.

Erwin may have been smothering him with kindness, and Levi knows it’s coming from a good place. But goddammit, he needs his space. He’s in control. He doesn’t need anything from Erwin. And what right did he have when he has that damn scar?

The door swings open with a gentle push. Levi steps back and leans against the wall as if he’s expecting open gunfire. He peers in after the door has opened enough—after he knows it’s safe.

He doesn’t know what he was expecting, but he knows it wasn’t this.

Placing one step inside, he looks around. It’s a decent sized room, not as big as the bedroom he has been staying in, but bigger than the office. The walls are empty besides a painting of some mountains—a painting he remembers being in Erwin’s living room when they were kids. In one corner is a plain dresser, two of the drawers half pulled out and drooping. There’s a closet with one of the bi-fold doors open and exposing cardboard boxes below an assortment of hung summer and formal attire.

On the other side of the room is a bookshelf lodged in the corner. Only one of its shelves is filled completely with a collection of law books. On the floor are three filing boxes, one opened and its lid laying across the other two. There’s a folded TV tray next to them with a folding chair next to that. There’s a half-full coffee mug on top of the manilla folder sitting on the tray. It’s not moldy, but Levi doesn’t recognize the design on the mug. Inside the lid is a manilla folder opened to a stapled packet of papers with a popular insurance logo at the top of the letterhead.

Levi looks across the room again. There’s no bed. Not even an air mattress or a cot.

Levi’s steps fall backward, and his back hits the wall so hard that he coughs out a moan. He moves
his hand to his forehead, grabs a fistful of hair with it as he sighs out with realization.

He’s been sleeping in Erwin’s room.

Erwin must have been sleeping downstairs. On the couch probably. In this big fucking house, with rooms that were perfectly accommodating to a guest, with a couch that is perfectly functioning and comfortable… No, he fucking gave up his room to Levi.

He looks down the hallway into the open door of the bedroom. He shudders at his anger, and he needs to bend over, his hands on his knees as he heaves desperate gasps out of his lungs. “Oh goddammit,” he spits, “Oh god fucking dammit.”

Being picked up at the airport, the rides, the tea, the lunches. That was nothing compared to this violation of personal space. He said he would give Levi space, but never mentioned this. This was the worst of it all. How little did he think of Levi? That he would need to be pampered so damn much? Like he wasn’t used to stiff cots and sleeping bags. He’s Erwin’s fucking friend, not some kind of person to be put on a pedestal and protected. And worse, he feels so fucking stupid for not figuring out sooner.

There’s the sound of a horn honking outside.

And what the fuck was Erwin’s problem? Did he have no goddamn self-respect? Asking him if it was ok that he worked from home? What kind of idiot question was that? And all the mess and the disrepair in the house? How long has Erwin been here? Didn’t he give a shit at all to put away all those damn boxes? Keep the fucking place looking acceptable? He’s an adult—a grown ass man capable of taking care of himself. Yet he’s been eating take out for how long?

His phone vibrates in his pocket.

Oh, these rooms. This room, Erwin’s room, the living room, the dining room. Levi moves away from the wall and paces in the hallway. His hands shake in front of him. He stares at them, clenches them, bites his lip until it’s painful. It feels like his skin is crawling with little bugs migrating around under the muscle. There’s a thickness in his throat that makes it hard to swallow down a breath. He wants to tear through the bedroom and smash every window. Rip the sheets off the bed and slice the mattress open. Throw the lamp against the wall and topple over the nightstand. Scream at the top of his goddamn lungs until it burns all the way down into his belly...

Like when his knee was torn open, his chest on fire from the shrapnel lodged in the soft tissues of his body and sticking out of bone. His blood, their blood. Everywhere. It looks so much darker when mixed in the dirt—purple like royalty, a majesty of pain. Fuck, he should have been more cautious. He was their captain. He should have...

“Levi?” Mike calls from downstairs.

Levi looks at the stairs and blinks several times. Mike’s inside the house—probably has a spare key or used the one under the steps. He runs a hand down his face and smooths over his nerves. “Hey.”

“Ready to go, man?”

Levi nods and then realizes that Mike can’t see him, and says, “Yeah… Yeah, I’ll be down in a second.”

They visit a couple of apartments that afternoon. One of them is right in Jim Thorpe and a mere block away from the store. It’s a second-floor apartment above a business rental, the building packed against a carved out part of the gorge. It’s small, perfectly sized for what he needs, but he knows in
the summertime the street in front of the apartment will be busy with pedestrians and cars. He fills out an application, takes the realtor’s business card, but decides he’ll ignore any phone calls he gets from the young man.

The other is in Leighton, a couple of streets away from where he grew up. It’s a bit out of the price range he wants to spend, and a bit too large for his needs. It brings back too many memories being this close to home. As he walks back to the truck, he looks out across the crest of the hill and to the mountains across the gorge. It must be a couple of miles away, but it’s so vast and present, holding onto the river like a mother to her child. The naked brown trees contrast against the purple hues of the setting sun, and Levi takes a moment to appreciate it.

“Hungry?” Mike asks as they climb into the truck. The cab is still warm, but Levi rubs his bare hands together to get the February chill out from underneath his skin.

It occurs to Levi that he hasn’t eaten at all today. He… He doesn’t think about it. Not now. “Yeah.”

Mike shifts the truck into gear and drives them down the hill and into the main drag of town. “Anything in particular?”

“No.”

“Good. I’ve been craving a Big Mac.” He side glances Levi and smiles. Levi returns it the best he can. They arrive at the same McDonald’s Levi had waited for Erwin at a week ago. He doesn’t want to think about Erwin right now. He lingers outside as Mike goes to use the bathroom. He sucks down a cigarette as fast as he can, tries to leech out the jitter in his muscles. Tries to forget about sleeping in Erwin’s bed. Tries to picture magnolias without blood splattered on their petals. Tries to remember Erwin before the house and the scar and the abandonment.

It’s hard. It’s so fucking hard.

He goes inside and makes an order before sitting down with Mike. Despite not having anything for the day, he only gets a small thing of fries and eats them one at a time. He cleans his fingers with a napkin between each one.

“You like cars?” Mike asks.

Levi shrugs. “They’re all right. I’ve been gone too long to enjoy them as a hobby. I like bikes.”

Mike nods with a crooked smile. “Yeah?”

Motorbikes were used relatively extensively in his time in Afghanistan. Due to their light weight, they didn’t trigger booby traps designed for heavy armored vehicles. They made it easier to avoid and retaliate against potential ambushes. On a personal level, Levi liked their nimbleness—how he could maneuver on a dime, speed through desert and town and rocky landscapes without resistance. The feeling of the wind whipping in his hair, making him feel free—like he was flying.

It’s one of the only things he missed.

“Yeah, I’m thinking I might get one soon.”

“What brand?”

Levi shrugs again. “Depends on if I go with a motorcycle or a motorbike.”

“Motorcycle would see more use.” Mike takes a bite of his burger and places it back down in the
“Probably something fast. A sports bike.”

Mike grins so wide that his teeth show. “Nice. I’d love to go shopping with you if you decide to get one.”

Levi looks down at his fries, smiles just enough to have it be recognized as one. “Sure.”

They eat for a few minutes in silence before Mike speaks up again. “You didn’t like either of those places.”

“Nope.”

“Figured.” Mike chews on a stack of fries before swallowing them down.

“Sorry.”

Mike shakes his head and sips some of his drink. “Don’t be. They kind of sucked.”

Levi smiles despite himself as he bows his head. Yeah, he likes Mike. “Thanks for helping me out.”

“It’s been fun.”

Levi snorts. “Why?”

“Because,” Mike smiles again, piling more fries into his mouth, but he has the decency to chew with it closed. “It’s nice being around a guy that doesn’t take shit.”

Levi pokes at a fry before picking it up and chewing it in half. He didn’t really feel like that kind of guy lately. “I think you have me mistaken for somebody else.”

“Nah. I’ve been around plenty of guys that think they walk the walk. It’s taken me decades to realize they’re the ones that talk shit.” Mike leans back in his seat and puts one elbow up on the seat back. “You don’t.”

Levi’s eyes peer up, his head still tilted toward the table. “What?”

“I’m too old to bullshit people, Levi. Just take the compliment.”

Levi looks back down at his fries, and he’s even less hungry than he was before. He supposes he’s been a hardass—that he’s been honest with Erwin about how he wants to be treated. And it makes him shift in his seat when he realizes that Erwin maybe hasn’t given him the same level of respect. That apparently twenty years really did have an effect on their relationship. He wonders if Mike would still have Erwin in his life if he had been treated like Levi was being treated.

Levi mouths between words, but can’t seem to pick the right ones. He mutters out half words before landing on, “Okay.”

Mike looks Levi up and down, runs his forefingers against his mustache before nodding. “I’m going to buy something to bring home to Nanaba. You can wait in the truck.” He brings his arm down from the back of the seat and pulls his keys out of his pocket and slides them across the table.

Levi takes them greedily, sliding out of the booth and out the doors into the fresh, biting cold air. He breathes in deep before unlocking the passenger side door and stepping in. He lets his hands fall between his jittering knees, his head hanging as his jaw grinds.
Mike doesn’t say anything when he steps into the truck and sees Levi like that. He doesn’t even tell him to strap on his seatbelt. He nudges Levi’s arm with his elbow when they pull into Erwin’s driveway. Erwin’s car is already parked up in front of the detached garage. “Hey.”

Levi snaps his head up and looks wildly at Mike. “Hey.”

“You want to drive around?”

Levi looks up at the house. White paneled with black shutters. Two stories of no stories. A blank slate—not even the mailbox has a name on it. It can be anybody’s house. It could even be his house. “No.”

“See you soon, then?”

“Yeah, probably.” Levi opens the door and leans his body out to step down.

“Don’t be a stranger.”

Levi looks back at Mike and nods before closing the door. He watches as Mike pulls out of the driveway. There’s something nice about Mike. Something comforting, even while he had been battling panic all day. He doesn’t ask anything from Levi, barely even asks for his friendship. He pats the phone in his pocket and feels a bit of relief for the first time all day. It feels vaguely nice to have an acquaintance.

He goes into the house and pulls off his boots, points the toes at the wall, and tucks the laces inside. He hangs up his coat and smooths it out against the other ones on the coat rack. Looking down the hallway, he sees that the light is on in the living room and a soft noise is coming from the television.

“Levi?” Erwin says from down the hall.

The voice grates on him. It flares agitation in his brain and holds it down like a snare. Levi realizes he’s not ready to talk to him. He’s not ready to be here. He’s not ready to deal with this.

He climbs the stairs but stops halfway. He battles with taking the higher ground. It was a simple acknowledgment. Erwin had respected his wishes last night and this morning. Even if he was sleeping in his room. Even if he was sleeping in his bed. He grasps onto the railing and leans over.

“I’m going to bed.”

He waits on the stairs for a few seconds for an answer. It’s quieter, the tone changing to a lower, more defeated sound. “All right. Sleep well.”

Levi squeezes the railing and bites his lip. He wants to go down and scream at him. He doesn’t want to be in that bedroom, in Erwin’s bedroom, sleeping on his bed or being in this damn house for that matter. He’s going to sleep on the floor, or in that old Adirondack chair, but not in that bed. He gathers the last bit of his self-control and goes up the rest of the stairs.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow is Saturday, and Erwin will hear the gamut of his anger. But for now…

He stands in the doorway of the bedroom, and for the second time in one day, he doesn’t know what to do.

There’s a picture of him on the dresser. Smiling. Church and Magnolia on either side of him smiling with him. They’re bent down to below his height, the photo missing the eye roll he had expressed moments before. Their names are sewn across the pockets of their uniforms, and they weren’t really happy but they were content enough. The desert sits sprawled behind them, the sun high in a crystal
blue sky. They had made the mistake of becoming family. He had made a mistake by surviving.

The photo has been touched. It has been framed.

He imagines the oil of somebody else’s fingerprints on it, and it makes him want to retch. He leans against the doorframe, and he doesn’t know what to call the sound that rips out of his throat as he charges in and smashes the frame across the floor. Glass splinters in all directions, the wooden frame falling skewed and ugly against the picture. He stomps a barefoot across it, doesn’t even wince when a piece of glass gets lodged in the soft arch of his foot.

He has his knife out when Erwin enters the room, and there’s rage so deep in his eyes that it’s feral and unrelenting. Levi can’t make out what’s right or wrong. Not anymore. The voices in his head are screaming, and he presses the palm of the hand, the one holding the knife, to his forehead.

He just can’t. Fucking. Do. It.

“Levi…”

Like a pistol trigger being pulled, Levi’s across the bedroom and pressing his blade against Erwin before either of them even have time to think.

Chapter End Notes

ok this came out faster than expected (i wrote it all in one night, lol). i wanted to release when i had at least half of the next chapter written, but... i'm too impatient. i know what's going to happen, and already have the cover drawn, i just gotta write it. i know it's an asshole thing to leave it on such a cliffhanger, but i promise i'll have it out within a week!

special thanks to my roommate and erwinsalive for beta reading this. they helped me figure out things i needed to highlight a little more.

very excited for the next couple of chapters. hope you're enjoying, and all of your comments are so much appreciated! <333
Uncle Kenny was a man that liked hunting. He also liked getting into fights. And if it was one thing that he taught Levi, it was how to hold a knife for either of those situations.

Hammer grip is easy, stable, and works with all kinds of knives: folding, tactical, hunting, cooking. He taught him how to strike; what kind of stance to be in to hold his ground. There’s a fluidity to wielding a knife. It’s a dance, he said. Not that faggy ballet shit or your stupid ass school proms or whatever. No, this is a dance that uses the beat of your pulse to keep time, pounds through your ears to set the rhythm, turns your entire body into a thing made for killing. He took Levi’s wrist and snapped it back, smiled when the small boy screeched in pain and dropped the butter knife to the floor.

Switch to reverse grip for stabbing if necessary—like this. Kenny spun the butter knife in his hand and rammed the blunt edge of it into Levi’s rib cage. Even though it wasn't sharp, it still bruised him and made him wail. He crumpled to the kitchen floor, his wrist still held tightly in Kenny’s hand. He tried to wrench his hand away, but Kenny was too old, too strong. Too absent from the role of parent to understand.
"Don’t ever let them disarm you!"

And that’s exactly what he let happen. When his mother passed away, when Kenny grew more negligent, when Erwin left, when Church and Magnolia died… He lost his weapon. He let himself get disarmed. Unhinged.

Somewhere, selfishly, foolishly, he blames them. Hates them. The pain in his ribs feels fresh again, and all he can hear is the rush of blood through his arteries. He’ll avenge himself, that fallen boy in the kitchen, that young man on Erwin’s bedroom floor, that man covered in the blood of friends he promised to keep alive... For all the years that fucked him up. He’ll get his life back. He’ll...

Swipe his knife once, twice. And it does—it does become a dance. Erwin backs toward the door with light steps. He doesn’t raise his hands, moves his body in quiet predictions of Levi’s movements. It’s like he’s done this before—like he’s an extension of Levi. But he misjudges where the doorframe is, stumbles against the nightstand, and that’s all that it takes.

Erwin’s butt lands on the surface, the lamp sitting on it falling to the side and crashing onto the floor. His back hits the wall as Levi presses into him between his legs. Even sitting, Erwin is a good six inches taller than Levi, but there’s a sobriety to the moment. Levi is in control. He has the knife.

“Levi,” Erwin says, and it’s calm and undisturbed, like a frozen pond.

“Why!?” Levi shouts, and it takes him to ask a second time before he realizes he’s saying it in a different language. He shoves his free hand into Erwin’s sternum, causing Erwin’s back to slam against the wall, the lone painting of the ocean swaying and rattling to the left of him. “Who the fuck are you!?”

“Levi, calm down.”

Levi’s eyes blow wide, and he shoves all of his weight into Erwin, bringing his knife up to Erwin’s face. He forces his knuckle into Erwin’s chin and holds the blade a centimeter away from the man’s cheek. His eyes try to focus—they dart all over Erwin’s face, blinking rapidly as the breathing through his nostrils becomes frantic. Heavy. The air wheezes in his throat. “I told you to leave me alone!” He’s shaking now, his voice cracking into whimpers, but his knife hand stays steady against Erwin. “That wasn’t yours to touch!”

“Let me explain…”

“No!” Levi leans more into Erwin, hears the air sigh out of the man’s chest. “What do you think you’re doing? Putting me in here? In your room? Like… Like… Some kinda…” He pulls Erwin forward by the front of his shirt to then slam him back against the wall. Erwin coughs out and briefly closes his eyes as his brows furrow. The painting slaps against the wall. “That wasn’t yours!”

“I know.”

Levi stutters and shakes, struggles to land on words as if they’re pops from automatic pistols. “You let me in here and just… Let me… Live here. Give me space, or…” Levi blinks rapidly. His heart is beating so fast that it hurts. He gasps for breath. “But you don’t! You never do! You say ‘what’s mine is yours’. Well—” He rasps out, presses his fist into Erwin’s chin, guiding Erwin’s head to rest in profile against the wall. Levi’s jaw is so tight that his teeth hurt. “I never said the same!”

“Talk to me.” And it sounds like a plea, but there’s so little emotion that it frustrates Levi even more.

“Fuck you!” Levi leans up into Erwin’s face. Erwin watches him from the corner of his eye. Levi stares at his nostrils, wants them to flare, wants to see some fear in the man’s face. He has a fucking
knife to him—how can he be so fucking calm?

There’s goddamn nothing.

Erwin begins to raise his hands, but Levi sees it. His knee comes up to rest between Erwin’s legs, and he does his best to climb onto the nightstand with him. The blade presses into Erwin’s skin, and he can feel it sinking into flesh. There’s red, and it flows down pale skin and rounds along planes of strong bone. He’s killed men before. “Don’t fucking move.” Erwin has no fucking idea. “Just don’t.” He has no fucking idea what he’s capable of. “Don’t.”

“Please.” It’s quiet, composed still, even as the blade grows red with his blood. “Levi. Talk to me.”

“Don’t,” Levi says again. Oh god, he doesn’t want to hurt Erwin. He doesn’t. “Don’t…the don’t don’t.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Of course you fucking didn’t! It wasn’t your business!”

He’s hurt him. What is he doing?

“Levi.”

Levi’s mouth falls open, and he can’t quite think of how to respond. It was true, the photo is important to him. But framing it… Framing it made it a good memory, one to be celebrated, to be cherished. Erwin didn’t know who those people were, he had no right to assume shit. “Idiot.” Levi presses the knife in deeper, and the flow of blood becomes wider and rushes more freely. It drips to Erwin’s shirt and on his tie. “You fucking idiot!”

He wants to stop.

“Talk to me, please.” And his voice wavers slightly. Sounds pained, finally.

“Why? Why did you…” Levi’s body begins to lose tension, his knife slipping from the slit that formed in Erwin’s cheek.

Erwin seizes the moment. His hand comes up under Levi’s right arm and grapples onto his bicep. Using his weight against Levi, he twirls them around so they’re facing the same way and then spikes the side of his hand into Levi’s elbow and anchors his own arm down. Levi yelps, but he keeps his grip strong on his knife, even as the pins and needles rise through his upper arm and through his shoulders. He struggles his arm, but it does nothing but sting more. Erwin presses Levi’s shoulder down so his body becomes perpendicular to the floor, and Levi winces against the pain.

“Fuck you!” Levi spits again, and he feels a sob rising in his chest. He can see the picture faced down and covering them… But he can see them smiling. Why do they have to be smiling? He kicks his feet as he cries out, howls like a wolf caught in a bear trap. Maybe, maybe if he can get his arm free just enough, he can lodge the knife into Erwin’s shoulder, then they can howl together.

And goddammit, he knows how to get out of this. Kenny taught him how to slip out of a hammerlock, he learned CQC in the army, but he can’t remember. Doesn’t want to remember. He sees Erwin’s blood dripping onto the hardwood floor, and he squeezes his knife. He wants to see more. He wants to see less. He wants to scream. Fuck. Fuck.

“Whatever happened… It wasn’t your fault.” Erwin says into Levi’s ear.
The plug pulls. Levi shuts down, his limbs going limp, and he leans into Erwin. Simple words so completely unravel him, and he sighs out a shaky response. “W-what…?”

“I want…” Erwin catches the emotion before letting it surface. Returns back to stoicism. He holds Levi’s weight. “I want you to fucking talk to me, Levi.”

Levi struggles weakly once more. “Let me go…”

Erwin holds him for another minute before releasing him. Levi thinks briefly about sticking his knife into Erwin—gutting him from one end to the other—cut that damn scar open again and let the man see what it’s like to look at intestines on the outside of his body, falling through his fingers like wet snakes. But Erwin isn’t… Afraid. Or he doesn’t care. It makes Levi worry his bottom lip as he tries to make sense of it. He steps back, and he finally notices the piece of glass that found its way into his foot. He winces, leans down and pulls it out before dropping the shard on the floor. He limps off bleeding toward the door.

“Levi.”

“Don’t,” Levi mutters. He stops in the hallway and looks at the stairs. “Just… Don’t…” He sways down the steps, hurries as he sees Erwin following him into the hall.

“Stay.” Erwin’s voice reaches a peak as he rounds the banister, watching as Levi rushes down the stairs. “Levi!”

Levi clambers into the wall across from the end of the stairway before rushing to pick up his boots and flings the front door open. Erwin’s heavy steps fall after him, but Levi is off the porch, out of the driveway, and running down the road barefoot at full speed, boots in one hand and knife in the other. He doesn’t feel the gravel, the rocks, the stray pieces of litter stabbing into his feet. He only looks behind him when it hurts to breathe, his throat dry and raw from yelling and heaving in too many damaged breaths.

Erwin hasn’t followed him, so he takes the moment to slow his pace down to a stroll. He pockets his knife and pauses at an abandoned looking porch. He sets the boots down on the steps next to him as he takes a seat. The paint on the porch is chipped, weeping algae along its floorboards, random pieces of junk filling its space—all rusted and dilapidated. There’s a sign on the door that shows hours of operations, the Don’t Tread on Me flag zip tied to the rungs of the porch fluttering against a chilly breeze.

Levi pats his pockets for a cigarette, but he left them at the house. He forgot his jacket too, and the cold is starting to penetrate past his adrenaline. Pulling one boot down, he assesses the damage to his feet before putting them on. Dirty and bloody, but feet are resilient. More resilient than the mind. He ties the combat boots tightly around his shins before standing up and walking down the street toward town.

He stops at the stream and its rock wall. Struggling up the small incline, he takes a seat and lets his legs hang over the edge. The cold from the stone numbs his thighs, and he bounces his heels against the edge of the wall. He pulls the knife from his pocket and turns it in his hand. The blood is still wet, smeared across the blade and the handle and on his hand. Erwin’s blood. Their blood. His blood.

His fingers open one at a time, and the knife falls into the bubbling water below him. It makes a hollow sound as it hits the water, quiet like a drop in a bucket as if it weren’t an object so heavy with turmoil and rage and remorse.

It was ten years ago, and he survived for a long time on an aching knee and hours of physical
therapy. The physical and mental stress had become too much, and he knew he had to retire. But he had no idea what to do. Where to go. His last trip to the states had been awful. Seeing Kenny was a mistake. Only after a few days, he discovered the hypocrisy that drove him to stay in a hotel for two-thirds of his three-week stay in America. A shitty little hole of a hotel in Pittsburgh. Alone. Television on, take out boxes piled neatly next to the garbage bins, clothes re-worn, clothes not worn at all. He thought about taking a bus to Lehighton. Just to feel some bout of normalcy while being in his home country. He decided against it.

It wasn’t until a week before he was set to return home for retirement did he sort through his email to find Erwin’s. It surprised him to see the timestamp—four years ago. Christmas. Erwin started it, Levi responded, Erwin replied back. Nothing. He felt bad, reading it like he was just using Erwin because he had a place to stay. But he also found himself wanting to hear his voice, even if it was through text.

_I’m coming home. Can I crash at your place for a few weeks?_

And even though it was three in the morning in America, Erwin responded almost immediately.

_Of course. When will you be back?_

He told him his flight information. He explained he didn’t need anything, that he would do his best not to be a bother.

Erwin insisted it was fine. That he was happy to hear from him. That he couldn’t wait to see him.

Levi bunched his jeans within his fists, maroon patches of blood painting the dark blue of the fabric. He breathes out, steady and long. “You’re the idiot.”

He doesn’t know how long it’s been when he stands up. He’s moving but his legs don’t feel like they belong to him. The porch light is on, and it acts as a beacon for Levi as he returns up the hill to the house. Erwin is sitting on the stairs, a cigarette perched between his fingers, the tip glowing orange and smoking into the air. He looks up when he hears Levi’s feet kicking up the gravel in the driveway, but doesn’t leave his gaze there. He flicks the cigarette and looks back down at his feet.

Levi stands in front of Erwin, watches him before Erwin finally says something. “I didn’t know where you went. I wanted to be here when you got back.”

His words slice at Levi, and he winces against his guilt. Of course, he thought of Levi. Of course, he expected him to come back. “Smoking?”

Erwin lets out a disappointed tut, before dropping his cigarette to his feet and snuffing it alongside the other three. “Sorry. I borrowed a few from you.”

Levi kneels down to pick up the butts, placing each one into the opposite palm before closing it and dropping them into his pocket. He looks up at Erwin to assess the damage he had caused. His eyebrows pinch together at the haphazard bandaging Erwin had done, the gauze soaked through with blood and trailing dark red streaks down his cheek. Carefully, he places his hand on Erwin’s shoulder. “You did a shit job patching that.”

Erwin shrugs and doesn’t match Levi’s eyes. He’s staring off at something distant, his mouth opening and jutting to the side as his tongue runs along his teeth as he sighs. He closes it and shrugs once more as he shakes his head.

“I’ll fix it for you,” Levi offers. And that’s when Erwin looks at him, his blue eyes dark against the dull light of the night. “Com’on.”
Erwin nods. Levi climbs up the porch past him, and Erwin stands up after him as they both move inside. Levi pulls off his boots, points them at the wall, and puts the laces inside. He waits for Erwin to go up the stairs first before limping up behind him and into the bathroom. “Sit down,” Levi commands. Erwin pulls the toilet seat down and sits on top of it as Levi rummages through the medicine cabinet. He pulls down gauze, medical tape, scissors, antibacterial gel, a few cotton balls and rests them on the sink edge. He moves in front of Erwin and pulls at the tape of his bandage, watching as Erwin’s face contorts against the pulling of his skin, showing more pain than when Levi held a blade to it.

It’s nasty and smeared with blood, but Levi’s happy he held some sort of self-control. It’s not deep enough to require stitches, but it didn’t look like Erwin did anything else but place a bandage over the wound. He throws the bandage into the garbage and washes his hands thoroughly in the sink before wetting a cotton ball and returning to Erwin. Setting himself between Erwin’s legs, he looks down at the man, holding his chin up with two fingers as his other hand dabs the moist cotton ball against Erwin’s right cheek. The red on his cheek gradually begins to disappear into the cotton, and Levi tries to keep focused. Tries not to see the blood on his skin, on Magnolia, on Church.

“Isabel was better at this,” Levi says quietly.

Erwin looks up at Levi, his lips peeling apart to reveal a sliver of his teeth, but he says nothing.

“She was, um, well. She wasn’t your typical woman, that’s for sure.” Levi’s voice is so quiet, it’s nearly a whisper, but he keeps going, dragging the cotton ball along Erwin’s cheek for one last sweep before nodding shallowly at the blood-free skin. “But she took care of us. She was good at this shit. Patient and steady-handed.” Levi tosses the cotton ball in the trash and brings his hand back into view, exhibits its unconscious shaking to Erwin. “She was gonna be a vet.”

Erwin is quiet, his expression softening as Levi talks.

“There was one time when Furlan cut his palm on a fucking can of peaches.” Levi lets a hint of amusement tickle his throat. “He uh… Never opened a can with a knife before. I told the dumbass how to do it.” He finishes cleaning the wound, applies a line of antibacterial gel to his finger before gently rubbing it against Erwin’s skin. “But she took care of us. She was good at this shit. Patient and steady-handed.” Levi tosses the cotton ball in the trash and brings his hand back into view, exhibits its unconscious shaking to Erwin. “She was gonna be a vet.”

Erwin huffs out of his nose, smiles as he lets his chin rest heavily on Levi’s touch.

“He whined the whole night. Fuckin’ Special Ops, and bellyaching like a goddamn child. Isabel gave him stitches, and he was useless for a whole week.” Levi clicks his tongue as he moves away from Erwin and starts to prepare some makeshift butterfly bandages with the tape. “Peaches…”

“Did he get to eat the peaches?”

Levi looks over at Erwin, the corner of his lips curving into a smile. “Hell no. I dumped that shit outside.”

Erwin laughs. “Why?”

“What if he got blood into it?”

“That’s not why you did it.” Erwin smirks at him.

Levi doesn’t catch his eyes, shrugs as he moves to set himself in front of Erwin again, tilts the man’s
head up and places one piece of tape vertically over Erwin’s cut. “Of course not. He shoulda fuckin’ listened to me.” He places the second one down and smooths it over gently. He lets his thumb linger on the tape as he looks down into Erwin’s eyes, smiling.

“That goes without saying.”

Levi’s jaw sets, and he leans over to get some gauze and places it over the wound. It feels better to talk about it… To think of them living and breathing during those mundane moments. All the moments outside of battle, all the moments sitting in chairs with their feet up and shooting the shit. It helps.

“I apologize,” Erwin says. He doesn’t look at Levi when he says it. His breath is shaky as Levi tapes the gauze in place.

“I’m the one that cut you,” Levi says, and it’s a bit sharp. Accusatory. Again, Erwin's thinking little of himself and concerned more about Levi.

“I promised you I would give you space. I misjudged.” Erwin grabs Levi’s wrist and looks into Levi’s eyes. “It was a nice picture. You…” He swallows. “I intended it as a gift.” He’s trying to keep Levi there, and normally Levi would struggle, but he can’t now. Not after what he had done.

“I…” Levi twists his wrist, but he’s not necessarily trying to escape Erwin. “I know. It’s just…”

“It was not my place.”

“No, it wasn’t.” Erwin releases Levi, but Levi sways in even closer. He presses his fingers against the bandage to ensure its security, even though he knows it’s fine. The guilt wrenches him. The way Erwin is looking at him… “It’s ok, though.”

“Is it?”

Levi moves away and stands in front of the sink. He washes his hands again before sitting on the edge of the tub and assessing the wound on his foot. “Yeah.”

“I’m…” Erwin leans his elbows on his thighs and watches Levi. “I’m glad you had them in your life.”

Levi wets another cotton ball and works on cleaning the dirt and blood off of his foot. His cut is less thrilling than Erwin’s, needs less attention. “Me too.” He bites his bottom lip before saying, “I can leave.”

“What?”

“That was fucked up,” Levi says, and he feels his voice catch in his throat. “You should call the police on me.”

“Never.”

Levi looks at him from the corner of his eye. “I’m serious.”

“I am too.” Erwin leans forward, sighs out deep as his fingers interlaced and tent between his legs. “I would never kick you out.”

Levi’s eyebrows furrow and his mouth sets to a frown. “Dumbass.”

“Maybe,” Erwin says, and he’s up and standing next to Levi, his hand resting on Levi’s shoulder.
“I’m sorry.”

Levi looks up at him, studies his face, a face that shows so little, but right now, at this moment, is showing him everything. It’s pained in every way—along his mouth, under his eyes, across his eyebrows. Levi wants to argue with him. Wants to tell him he has nothing to be sorry about. Levi gets it now—or at least gets it to some degree—and what Levi did was inexcusable. Unacceptable. Even if Erwin had invaded his space, at least he didn’t threaten him with a fucking knife. When he stands back and looks at it—really looks at it—Erwin barely even asks for his company on a daily basis. He’s always given control to Levi, so when did he start seeing it as the opposite?

What happened to them?

“I…” Levi breathes in, but can’t say the words he should be saying. “I’m sleeping on the couch tonight.”

Levi can tell it wasn’t what Erwin was expecting to hear, but he nods regardless. “Yes, of course.”

“You didn’t have to do that either.”

Erwin squeezes past Levi and the sink, and Levi can smell cologne and cigarettes on him. He smells manly and unobtainable and something from twenty years ago aches deep in his chest. Erwin stands in the doorframe and looks back at Levi. “Thank you for the new bandage.” Levi nods shallowly. “I’m going to go to bed. Would you like to move your stuff first?”

Levi shakes his head, peels a standard bandage from its paper and places it on his foot before standing up and moving to put all the first aid supplies back into the cupboard. “I can clean up tomorrow.”

“Then I’ll see you in the morning?”

“Yeah.”

Levi hears Erwin pad down the hallway and closes the bedroom door behind him. He lingers in the hall, sees that the spare room door has been closed from earlier in the day and moves downstairs. He tries to sleep, but his nerves are still too high strung, the guilt still too heavy in his belly. He thinks of Church and Magnolia, Kenny and his mother, Erwin and his father.

Erwin and his kindness. Erwin and his protection. Erwin and his friendship.

Erwin left him, but he had promised. He kept that promise. Even when faced with adversity he stood by Levi. “Why…” Levi says into his knees.

“Because I care about you, Genevieve.” The television answers.

It’s nearly midnight when he goes to the kitchen to make tea. He sets out one cup, loads the tea infusers with the mint tea, and pours the hot water into the mug. He waits a few minutes for the tea to steep before climbing up the stairs with it in hand. Light pours out from under the bedroom door, and Levi pushes it open without knocking. Erwin looks at him, a book in his lap, and nods when he sees what Levi is carrying. Levi gives him the mug and takes a quick survey of the room. Erwin has cleaned up the glass from the floor, wiped down the blood, but left the photograph where it had fallen.

Face down.

Smiling.
“Thank you,” Erwin says quietly, blowing a breath against the hot liquid.

Levi shrugs and lingers a little longer before hesitantly pulling the door shut. He rests his back against it, knows that neither of them will actually sleep tonight, and sighs out a sound that borders a sob before heading back down the stairs.

This empty house and all its secret. A man and all his kept promises. They had grown and they had changed, but Erwin still remained loyal and honest to him. In the end, he deserved a respect higher than what Levi had just given him.

Erwin deserved the Levi that he had promised to all those years ago.

Chapter End Notes

thank you to my roommate, sumiscribe, and erwinsalive for betaing this at random points in creation. there was a lot of care that needed to be done with this chapter as it's important for allowing us to start seeing erwin's side of things in the coming chapters.

also thank you to my roommate for putting me in a hammerlock. that shit hurts. don't recommend.

thanks so so so much for all the amazing comments. i really appreciate it. more than you can ever imagine. *hearts*
Dinner

Chapter Summary

emotions are draining; recharging is important.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Levi tries to regain his routine the next day.

They both end up in the work out room a bit later than normal, having spent the night restlessly trying to sleep. When Erwin finishes showering, Levi changes his bandage, makes them breakfast, and takes his own shower afterward. Erwin goes to his office to do work, and Levi sits on the chaise to read. After some time, Erwin leaves to run a couple of errands in the late morning, and Levi opts to remain at home to do some clean-up.

Levi starts with the obvious: Erwin’s room. He sweeps up the stray glass, makes the bed, and brings the empty teacup down to the sink. It takes him awhile to muster the courage to see their faces again. Smiling at him with broken bones—bones as broken as the frame surrounding them. He keeps it face down as he picks it up, collecting the destroyed frame to put in the trash, and puts the photo on the dresser next to the magnolia. Rummaging through the drawers, he pulls out his clothes, army service uniform, books, and drawing supplies. He tucks the photo inside the folds of the uniform and pauses. He pats his pockets, finds his cigarettes, and steps out into the sunroom to smoke one.

It was never easy for Levi to make friends. Many people would say he had trust issues, and he wouldn’t particularly disagree with them. When the only parental figure in his life was a drunk, abusive piece of shit, it was pretty hard to open that door to people. When Erwin left him, he couldn’t think of investing that kind of love and care to anybody again to just have it all fall apart. Because of that, Levi had never been in a serious relationship and rarely established friendships...
above the acquaintance paygrade.

Levi shakes out a breath.

Church and Magnolia were different. They…

He turns his back and looks out the window, can’t bear to feel their eyes on him even though they’re face down and buried in his uniform—even though they’re dead…

They…

They somehow managed to break his wall. Church came from a rough past; Magnolia was trying to make the best of her situation. He related to them, saw pieces of himself, of his struggles, in them. Their interactions were natural, their intuitions on point—they were a team. A family.

He scrubs the vision of blood from his eyes, puts out his cigarette in the ashtray on the arm of the Adirondack chair, and goes back into the bedroom to pick up his stuff. It all fits in his arms with a little bit of finagling. He goes downstairs and catches himself at a loss of where to put his things. He walks between the dining room, living room, and downstairs bathroom, before settling on the oversize laundry room. There’s a dresser there that currently only serves as a catch-all. He empties one of the drawers of stray dryer sheets, a phone book, and three pennies before neatly piling his belongings inside. He keeps the magnolia out on the dresser after cleaning it with his shirt, and he goes to the kitchen to start throwing together some lunch.

Erwin returns home a little after noon. He elbows the doorbell, and Levi opens it. Erwin’s hands are full of grocery bags, and it seems that he is still the type that refuses to make extra trips. Levi takes a couple of bags from his hands before closing the door behind them. “What’s all this?”

“I figured we could make something tonight,” Erwin says as he makes his way down the hallway, his boots still on and tracking dirt into the kitchen. He lifts the bags onto the counter and lets out a soft grunt while he shakes out his arms. A baguette falls toward him and makes the plastic bag gape open to reveal some indistinguishable leafy greens.

“I just fuckin’ swept,” Levi grumbles as he puts his bags up next to Erwin’s and starts to put the groceries away.

“Oh, right. Sorry,” Erwin says. He rushes back to the foyer and removes his shoes and comes back with a broom and dustpan to clean up his mess.

“What did you have in mind?”

“I’m… Not sure,” Erwin says, sweeping his dirty footprints into a pile before bending over and pushing it into the pan. “I just grabbed a bunch of stuff. I was hoping you would have a better idea.” He tosses the dirt away into the trash can and returns to help Levi.

Levi paws through the ingredients and hums softly when he comes up with an idea. “We can make some bruschetta. A simple white pasta…”

“How did you keep up with cooking while you were gone?” Erwin comes up to the counter, leans his body against it as he looks at Levi.

Levi looks away and finishes putting away the last bag of groceries. “I read a lot.” He puts a box of cereal up in a cabinet. “I wanted to know what I could do to make the shit food less shitty.”

“It seems like it worked.”
“I guess.”

“I guess.”

“Maybe I can learn something from you.”

“You never could before, what do you think has changed now?”

“I have a Master’s Degree, for one.”

Levi shakes his hands next to his face. “Whoopie.”

Erwin smiles. “Hey.”

“No, don’t worry, I’m really impressed,” Levi says, deadpan.

Erwin finds one of the sandwiches Levi had set out and takes a bite out of it. “I knew it.”

Levi rolls his eyes and hides his smile long enough for Erwin to turn his back and walk into the living room. He stays in the kitchen to eat his meal, tries to erase the grin between chews, but he can’t. Erwin’s mood is unusually chipper, especially after what had happened the night before. Maybe Erwin really did understand him—could tell on some level what he actually needed. He just needed a couple of weeks to adjust, just like Levi needed to adjust to him.

Things almost felt like they did back then. Easy. Comfortable. They had some skeletons in their closets, sure, but Levi wasn’t going to let them surface again. Not like that. Not again. He shakes his head as he pops the last bit of his sandwich in his mouth, swallows it, and joins Erwin in the living room. They spend the rest of the day lazily on the couch. Erwin sorts paperwork, Levi draws in his sketchbook, and they comment randomly on whatever they’ve chosen to watch. Being together like this is nice—a reminiscent dream of their childhood. Asking for nothing but to hear the breathing of the other person in the same room.

Maybe things didn’t change much after all.

As the sun starts to set, they move into the kitchen to make dinner. Levi tasks Erwin with cutting tomatoes as he slices the baguette into small medallions. “How did you survive without being able to feed yourself for so long?”

“It was easier when Marie was around,” Erwin says. He's careful with his slices, obviously trying hard to make them all perfect and of equal sizes. “She was good at cooking.”

“Marie…” Levi says, and he hopes the jealousy doesn’t flare from his throat too eagerly.

“I cooked sometimes,” Erwin admits.

“Yeah?”

“She said she liked it.”

“She was a liar.”

Erwin laughs and continues onto a fresh tomato. “Perhaps. You are certainly the most honest person I know.”

“Bullshit takes too much effort.” Levi shrugs. He places the bread onto a cookie sheet and drizzles it with olive oil.

“I know. It’s what I like about you.”
Levi shifts uncomfortably. He hears Church’s words through Erwin’s mouth, and he rolls his shoulders. “You don’t need to be so precise. It’s just bruschetta.”

“You pay attention to your own thing.” Erwin waves his knife at the cheese Levi’s cut into.

“You trying to impress me? Flaunting your degree didn’t work before.”

Erwin tilts his head down, but Levi can see the grin creasing his cheek, sees the deep divot of his one dimple exposing itself under the cut Levi had sliced into the skin. “No.”

Levi’s expression goes soft, but there’s still jealousy and questions burning inside of him. All Levi knew about Marie was that she and Erwin met in college and that they were engaged at some point. She was nice enough, quaint and typical, a simple girl from the country with a heart bigger than the farms she came from. Her laugh was like the sound of bells, but it made Levi’s stomach clench whenever he heard it. The way Erwin smiled at her, the way he laughed around her, the way he held her and pressed his lips to her forehead. The thought drives his knife deeper into the cutting board.

Levi had been invited to the wedding. Erwin even asked him in a roundabout way to be his best man. He wrote to Levi, said that he understood it would be difficult for Levi to get time to come back home, that Mike could be his back-up, but Levi would always be his first choice. Levi declined, and when the opportunity arose, he signed up for another tour even though he knew the military wouldn’t be the same with a fucked up knee.

But, somehow, it would be better than returning home.

“Weren’t you engaged?” Levi spits out, a little harsh, a little sharp. Erwin’s face draws long, and he stops chopping his vegetable. Levi’s heart sinks into his stomach. “You… I mean…” He regrets his tongue immediately. It didn’t matter to bring up old shit like this; what would it change now?

“Yes,” Erwin says as he starts to chop again. His shoulders sag, chin falling along with his eyes, his motions slower than before. “It didn’t work out. Obviously.” His words come out quiet, defeated, sad. It’s the first time Levi has seen true emotion shown on Erwin in decades.

Love cuts deeper than physical pain, he figures.

Levi nods, twitches his lips in discomfort. “That’s… Too bad.”

“Yes, it is.” Erwin pushes the chopped tomatoes over to the side of the cutting board, cleans the knife off with his finger, and goes for the last one and starts slicing into it. His shoulders come up again as his back straightens. His slicing speeds up. “But she is happy now, and that is all that matters.”

“Yes…” Levi trails.

“Is it…”

Levi raises an eyebrow and shakes his head as he places mozzarella slices on the bread. “I’ll teach you how to cook so you won’t starve when I’m outta here.”

Erwin’s jaw tightens, and he gives a nod. He finishes his tomatoes, stands at the counter, his fingers working against the counter edge before he moves to the sink and washes his hands. “What do I do now?”

Levi shows him what to do, reads the ingredients and the instructions. After a half hour, Erwin has produced his bruschetta, and Levi pulls out his toasted baguette with melted mozzarella and places it on the stovetop. He empties the pasta into a colander in the sink, tosses them in a flavored olive oil
with some spices, has Erwin spoon the bruschetta onto the baguette pieces, and plates their meals. They eat in the dining room, a glass of wine for Erwin, a cup of water for Levi, and they smile weakly at each other as they toast for no other reason than having a meal to eat together.

Levi takes a bite of the bruschetta and lets it sit in his mouth, eyes the expression on Erwin’s face before he spits it out onto his plate. Erwin does the same.

“I messed up the salt,” Erwin says, flatly.

Levi looks at his plate, a little disappointed but only for the outcome. He should have kept more of an eye on Erwin. “Teaspoons, Erwin.”

Erwin frowns at his plate. “Damn.”

Levi picks up another piece of bread and shoves it in his mouth, chews it with concentrated concern. It’s so salty, it makes Levi close his eyes in order to push aside the disgust.

“Levi…”

He swallows and swigs down three whole mouth full of water before sighing. He meets Erwin’s eyes and shakes his head slightly, his eyebrows upturning, but his lips produce no smile. “Not bad.”

“Liar.”

Levi shrugs and picks up a forkful of pasta and piles it into his mouth. He tries to ignore the soft smile on Erwin’s face, but it affects him. Flutters butterflies somewhere in his stomach. Erwin’s smiling at him despite it all, the bandage on his cheek pulling at the thin wrinkles of lines at his eyes.

And it makes Levi feel like he’s home.

Chapter End Notes

thank you for your patience everybody. i got caught up with overtime at work and had to put this down for a couple of weeks. this was actually part of one chapter, but it got too big so i had to split it into three. good news is, though, i’ll be releasing those other two chapters through the rest of the week (i’d rather have shorter chapters than one big 8k monster).

as always, comments are welcomed and loved. you guys have been entirely too kind. i love you all. :)
Friends

Chapter Summary

it's not that hard to play well with others.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I can’t make it,” Erwin says over the phone. Levi leans back in the passenger’s seat of Mike’s truck. His stomach turns as he shrinks against the door, holding the phone closer to his face, the heat of it burning his cheek. “Sorry for the last minute notice.”

“Why?”

“I have to stay at work late. There’s too much to catch up on, I’m afraid.”

Levi looks over at Mike and bites his lip. “I guess we can cancel.”

“No, no. Just have dinner without me.”

Levi rubs the bridge of his nose. They had gone a couple of weeks in relative normalcy. Levi found his routine again, worked away anxiety through busy work at the shop, and even started folding Erwin in on cooking adventures that continued to have mixed results. However, in Erwin’s frustrations, he suggested they go out to dinner on Friday with his friends. He said it would be good for them.

And now the bastard was ditching him.

Not that Levi didn’t like Mike. They spent the afternoon looking at apartments again, and as usual, he was left entirely too unimpressed with them. Mike asked him if he had any intention of filling out
applications with any sort of determination, and Levi didn’t offer an answer. He knows he has to move out, but if he’s going to, it will be for the right place, not just to get out of Erwin’s house as soon as possible.

But he’s going to meet Nanaba, Hange, and Moblit for the first time in almost ten years, and he wants Erwin to be there as a buffer. His fingers dig into his jeans, and he wishes so badly that Mike would let him smoke in his truck.

“That sucks,” Levi says.

“You’ll be fine. You’ll like them,” Erwin says gently.

Levi huffs. “We’ll see.”

“Thank you, Levi. Enjoy your night.”

Levi hangs up without responding. He groans out angrily, as he presses his palm to his forehead.

“What’s up?” Mike says. He smacks on his gum as he gives Levi a sideways glance.

Levi shakes his head, keeps his gaze out the window. “No need to wait for Erwin.”

“He’s not coming?”

“Nope.”

Mike hums as if he understands. It makes Levi’s neck muscles tighten, tries to ignore his anger in his helplessness. They continue down the road and pull into the diner a few minutes later. It’s a small family owned joint, with metal plating on the sides of the exterior and large paned windows with neon signs. It’s in the middle of dinner rush when they arrive, and Nanaba and Hange haven’t shown up yet. They request a booth for four and wait for the rest of their party to show up.

Nanaba shows up first—a blonde middle aged woman with pale blue eyes. She’s shorter than Mike, easier to smile, and she wraps Levi in a hug before he can say no.

“Levi! It’s so good to see you again!” She says, pulling back and squeezing his upper arms.

“Nanaba.”

She nods and wraps her arm around his. “Mike’s been telling me about your adventures.” She sways into him. “Only good things, I promise.”

Levi looks up at Mike. “I’m not sure I believe that.”

Mike smiles back at Levi. “It’s mostly true.”

They are guided to their seats, and shortly after that Hange shows up. “Where’s Erwin!?” Hange says as they slide into the booth next to Levi.

“He canceled,” Mike says.

“Ahhh, that’s unlike him,” they muse, pulling a finger to their chin in thought.

“Probably off dancing. It is Friday night,” Nanaba says.

“Dancing?” Levi chimes in, moving more toward the window as Hange knocks knees with him
under the table.

Mike nods. “Yeah. He was into contra dancing for a while.”

“For years,” Nanaba adds.

“What the fuck is that?” Levi asks.

“It’s like line dancing!” Hange says, leaning into Levi.

“No, it’s not. It’s like…” Nanaba holds her chin in her hand as she thinks. “It’s like group dancing… To folk music. It’s fun. We used to go with him and Marie pretty consistently, right, hun?”

“He used to be pretty obsessed with it before the accident,” Mike says.

Levi feels lost, his eyes swimming in their sockets as he brings his hand to his forehead. He didn’t know Erwin liked dancing, and... “Accident?”

“Accident? The car accident?” Mike notes.

Levi’s eyebrows furrow and he tries to recollect anything he would know about an accident. He remembers Erwin saying something years ago. It happened shortly after Magnolia and Church, but it sounded like it was just an inconvenience. A day in the hospital for whiplash, a new car—but overall safe. He never really asked though, had no reason to suspect. “Accident…”

“Yeah! The one that got him all fucked up. He was outta work for like a whole year. I had to take over his classes.” Hange wraps their arm around the back of the booth, their hand dangerously close to Levi’s neck. “You didn’t know? Aren’t you, like, best friends or whatever?”

“Hange,” Mike says quietly.

“I knew about it,” Levi says.

“He and Marie got all messed up,” Hange continues.

“Marie was there too?” Levi asks, and his ignorance makes him burn with anger.

Hange nods. “Yeah. The door caved in on him when they got hit. Ripped him open like,” they tear the paper from around their silverware, the hiss of the paper sounding like the sizzle of heated iron to water. “Her back got all fucked up from the collision. Well, not like super fucked up, but she had to change careers. She can’t stand for long periods of time anymore.”

“Hange,” Mike says, sternly.

“Where’s Moblit?” Nanaba says.

Hange pauses and looks at Nanaba wide-eyed, rushing their hands to their pockets in an attempt to locate their phone. “I forgot to tell him. I can see if he can make it?”

“It’s too late. We’ll have our food by then,” Mike says.

Nanaba rolls her eyes, puts them gently on Levi and smiles. “They are pretty forgetful.” She winks. Levi tries to relax his shoulders, tries to smile in return, but he feels so claustrophobic against Hange, against his ignorance, and he needs to get some air.

“I need a cigarette,” Levi says, moving his way toward the edge of the booth. He’s practically on top
of Hange before they realize they need to move, and they both slide out as he makes his way toward the door. He pulls a cigarette out of his pocket, lights it, and drags in a breath before shaking heavily. He presses the knuckle of his thumb into his eye and bites his bottom lip. He doesn’t notice Mike standing next to him until he says something.

“Hange’s a handful,” Mike says. “It’d have been better if they didn’t forget to bring Moblit.”

“What, does she need a trainer or something?”

Mike offers a crooked grin. “That’s not too far off.”

Levi huffs a laugh, sucks another drag, and breathes a stream of smoke from the corner of his mouth. “Good to know.”

Mike looks inside the window of the diner, watches as Hange flails their arms around wildly in front of an uncomfortable Nanaba. “I thought you knew about it.”

“I did…”

“I always thought it was weird we never heard from you.” His mouth twitches as he leans his back into the window. “I told Erwin so many times you were a shit friend.”

Levi’s jaw tightens. “Nice.”

“I know better now.”

“You don’t know me.”

Mike smiles, taps his nose. “The nose knows.” He waits for Levi’s smile, as small as it may be. “How much did he tell you?”

“That he got hit. That he was in the hospital, and that he was ok.”

Mike nods. “Well… He didn’t lie. Typical Erwin.”

“Typical Erwin…” Levi sucks down the rest of his cigarette and holds it in his lungs. He snuffs it on the ledge of the window and pockets it into his hoodie. He lets the breath out long enough that it makes him feel a little dizzy. “So… Where’s Marie?”

“Married. Has three kids.”

“That’s good.” The empty house, the decor, the feeling of a man without a second half. The canceled engagement, the sad acceptance, the broken man. He scratches the side of his face and nods. “That’s good…”

“Looks like the food is here,” Mike muses. He heads toward the door and opens it, holds it while he talks. “It was hard for him, so I understand why he didn’t say much.”

“Of course it was.”

Mike holds the door with his foot, runs fingers through his facial hair before saying under his breath, “He cares about you.” Mike walks through the doorway and lets the door close behind him, and Levi watches Mike’s back as he makes his way back to his seat.

His fingers ring around each other, and he swallows deep. He grinds his teeth, sweeps his head to look out toward the parking lot, breathes out unsteadily. Reaching for another cigarette, he pulls one
out and brings it to his lips but doesn’t light it.

Of course, Erwin cares about him. Annoyingly so sometimes. But all these years, all these changes... He feels like he’s opened and started to read a book at a random page, has to learn the characters when half of their story has already been told. He doesn’t understand why he’s still a part of this story—why Erwin, with this life that has moved on without him, that’s filled with friends like Mike and Hange—still gave any kinds of shit about Levi.

And then he pressed a knife to him, threatened his life, a life that had already been threatened by death before. Yet he’s still part of his story. He’s still a character involved in Erwin’s life. A last-minute addition, one held up with care inside hands that should be shaking as much as his own. “Typical Erwin,” he says around his cigarette.

He removes the cigarette from his mouth and puts it back into the pack. He opens the door to the restaurant, Hange’s voice overpowering the music and all the other patrons, and he tries his best to press down nausea in his stomach.

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“Levi!” Hange says. They push into the booth and take the window seat instead when he draws near.

Levi tries to ignore them. He looks at the unwrapped silverware in front of him, the ones that Hange unraveled earlier in their off-color display of Erwin’s accident. He leans over and takes his fresh one next to Hange and pushes the soiled ones aside.

“I kept them away from eating your food,” Nanaba says, smiling.

“Liar. I don’t eat fish.”

Levi looks down at his meal. It’s diner food—fish and chips—and the smell of cooking oil is strong enough to threaten to turn his stomach. He pokes it with a fork, but resorts to the fact that he will probably not be eating much of it. “Why’s that?” Levi tries to make conversation. These are Erwin’s friends, he should try to see why he keeps them around.

“Mmmm,” Hange takes a bite out of their reuben. They talk with their mouth full, “I mean… I probably should eat fish. It’s been researched pretty heavily to see if they have any pain receptors, and the overwhelming conclusion is that they do not.” They swallow. “Or at least not the same way mammals do. So if anything, it can be debated that they are more humane to consume than, say, a cute little cow or chicken.” They take a sip of their tap water before continuing, struggles to get the liquid down, their shoulders coming up as if it will help to push it into their stomach. They fall back into a relaxed state as they pick up their sandwich again. “But I just don’t like the taste so…” They hold up their reuben, sauerkraut falling from the middle and onto the plate. “I’ll continue to be an asshole.”

Levi smiles.

“I’m not much of a fish person either.” Nanaba admits, spearing a stack of lettuce from her salad onto her fork. “I like salmon and that’s about it.”

“I like fish,” Mike says, grinning devilishly.

“Shut up,” Nanaba says, elbowing him as she takes the lettuce into her mouth and chews.

Levi rolls his eyes as he cuts into a piece of fried fish with the edge of his fork. He eats it, but it doesn’t taste like much. Oil and bread, some remnant of cheap fish. It’s familiar, though. He eats another piece as they talk. A few times he laughs, genuinely, and he decides that he rather enjoys
Erwin’s friends. Hange a little loud; Nanaba a little polite; Mike a little brash. But they’re good people.

They took good care of Erwin when he was gone.

Hange is spending the night with Mike and Nanaba, so Nanaba leaves with Hange as Mike takes Levi home. They sit in a comfortable silence for the start of the ten-minute car ride. The radio plays a classic rock station, and Mike beats his hands against the wheel in time with the drums, singing snippets of the chorus that he knows on a key lower than the original. All things considered though, he doesn’t have a bad singing voice. Levi meets him at the end of one song, his voice low and timid compared to the passion Mike has found at the bottom of his lungs.

Mike turns the volume down on the stereo as he pulls his truck into the driveway. “Erwin’s home already?”

Levi shrugs, leaning up to try to make out Erwin’s black vehicle in the dark. “Would he normally be back this soon?”

“No.” Mike parks the truck. He looks over at Levi and shrugs. “But who knows why he ditched us. He gets in a mood sometimes.”

Levi looks at the lit porch with anxiety pooling in his stomach. He doesn’t really want to leave the truck, doesn’t want to know what’s on the side of the boysenberry painted door. “I don’t blame him.”

“Didn’t say I did.” Mike rummages through his cup holder, pulls out a pack of gum, and takes a piece out to stick in his mouth. “Listen. I know you’ve been through shit but cut him some slack.”

Levi looks over at Mike, glares at him. “What do you mean by that?”

Mike touches his cheek, then points his finger at Levi. “Just sayin’.”

Levi grinds his teeth. “I’ll see you later.” Levi pops the door open and slides out.

“Night.”

Levi stands watching the lit porch, watches his shadow grow large across the garage doors as Mike pulls out of the driveway until only the porch lights illuminate the pathway. He takes out a cigarette and starts it while taking a seat on the porch steps.

Erwin’s behavior during the week has been rather jovial, but he sounded off on the phone. Erwin is a hardworking man, brings his work home on weeknights and weekends without a complaint. It seems odd for him to stay at work late when he has been working overtime consistently for the past several weeks. Maybe the dancing theory wasn’t so far off, but he is apparently home too early to make that a possibility. He lights another cigarette and smokes through it before he stands up and walks inside.

He stands in the foyer, takes his boots off, points them at the wall, and puts the laces inside. The television is on and loud enough to hear all the way down the hall. The lights are out, and the hallway is dark besides the faint blue glow coming from the living room. Levi pulls at the bottom of his shirt before he walks down toward the living room. Leaning around the edge of the wall, he looks into the room. Erwin’s laying on the couch, eyes closed and mouth open absently with snores on occasional breaths. There’s an empty and open takeout container on the coffee table, along with a bottle of uncorked wine alongside a half-empty wine glass.

Levi steps into the living room. He’s angry. About the scar, about the accident, about Mike, about
hurting Erwin, about losing contact. He’s angry about Marie, about their engagement, about how it failed. He’s angry at himself for being selfish, for pushing Erwin away, for losing the people he cares about in one way or another. But Erwin canceled plans to see his friends in order to drink himself sleep... And that was...

That’s fucked up.

He cleans up the coffee table, making enough noise in an attempt to wake up Erwin. It doesn’t succeed. The wine bottle, nearly empty, has a label on it that doesn’t match the other bottles in the house. The price tag is cheap, clearly bought for the purpose of tonight—the purpose to pass out, alone, on the couch. He frowns and goes into the kitchen to pour the rest of it into the drain and places the bottle into the recycling.

He goes upstairs to wash his face. He takes his pants off and stands in the bathroom in his boxers and t-shirt. Leaning forward into the mirror, he pulls a finger at the bottom of his eyelid, sighs out as he closes his eyes. He tries to forget when Church used to get this way, used to hide away behind a bottle after particularly jarring missions. He felt helpless in those times, made him question his own interest in alcohol in order to remain strong for those that he cared about.

He opens the medicine cabinet door, looks through the medication bottles again, finds two prescriptions behind some over the counter medication. Two things he knows exactly what they’re for. They’re nearly full, the bottle says to take them orally, but they’re expired by well over a year. He runs his hand down his face and turns his head to look out into the hallway.

What is going on with Erwin?

With shaking hands, he goes into Erwin’s room and stands on the sunroom to smoke. It’s dark out, and he can’t see out the windows, but he tries to focus on the faint outlines of the tree limbs outside. Tries to count each branch. As much as he wants to yell at Erwin, he can’t do that now. Not when he’s drunk. Not after he injured him. It takes him two cigarettes to feel his pulse return to normal.

Mike told him to be easy on him—that he’s been through a lot. Levi had no idea. No fucking idea. The house, the car, the job, the education. Erwin has it all and had everything else at one point too. Erwin even had him...

He goes out and opens the closet door in the hallway and gets a blanket out from it. Pausing, he goes back into the bedroom, places the blanket on the bed, and smokes one more time. Goddammit does he want to scream at him. Pull him up by the collar and see his drunk eyes try to focus on him. What the fuck is he hiding from? What the fuck could ever constitute drinking a whole goddamn bottle of wine? He knew Levi would be home late. He knew he couldn’t hide from this. Levi picks at the edge of the window sill, chews on his bottom lip until it’s red and puffy. “Fuckin’ idiot.” The words taste foul on his tongue, and he snuffs his final cigarette for the night before continuing on.

He goes downstairs, pours a glass of water, and pads his way into the living room. Placing the water in front of Erwin, he carefully draws the blanket over Erwin, his fingers lingering over the man’s unbandaged cheek. The wound is healing well, Levi has taken extra care to it every morning to ensure it wouldn’t get infected, that it would heal to nothing but a pale regret along his cheek. Pulling his hand back, he grabs the remote, and huddles himself into the corner of the sectional. He flips through a few channels, looks over briefly at Erwin, before settling back on the Food Channel.

With toes curling into the plush of the couch, he breathes out a long breath through his nose. He tries to focus on the television in an attempt to forget that Erwin is sleeping next to him. It takes everything in him to resist the urge to smack Erwin’s calf, to shake him awake and rub his nose in what he’s done. Like a child. Like a dog.
But they've both been through a lot, he guesses.

“Erwin,” Levi says softly, and it hurts to say. Shoulders more than it has in a long while. The infomercials start playing by the time Levi finally falls asleep, head resting on the back of the couch and being lulled to sleep alongside the soft, even sounds of Erwin’s breathing.

Chapter End Notes

ok i have no self control so here's the second part to the long ass chapter. haha. i'm gonna have to put more love into the third part, so that will be a day or two out still. it's REALLY important. :X

also, i want to note... i do headcanon hange as nonbinary, but on the sense that they have so many other things to care about, their gender is so far down on the list of things to care about. so levi does use 'she' when addressing them, and hange will not bat an eye to it.
“Wake up,” Levi says, nudging Erwin’s leg. Erwin moans, mumbles something, but Levi ignores it. He leaves a glass of water and three ibuprofen behind on the coffee table as he makes his way back into the kitchen.

He isn’t ready for this, honestly—this loaded discussion he needs to have with Erwin. It was nice waking up next to him. It was just like when they were kids. Erwin passed out, snoring softly into the crook of his arm, one leg hanging out from under his blanket and planted on the floor. It took some self convincing to not let Erwin sleep in like he used to. Back then, he was a straight ‘A’ student, and now he’s an overworked associate dean—he needs a break whenever he can catch it.

On top of that, Erwin was always the type to play by the rules. He never picked up a drink under age, refused Levi’s attempts to get him to smoke behind buildings next to dumpsters. Straight laced and proper—a real daddy’s boy. And maybe that’s what made Levi so attracted to him—he was everything he wasn’t. They were a complement to each other, keeping each other wild and free with mild restraint. But all of that was different now.

How much did Erwin drink normally?

Levi stretches in the entrance of the kitchen, his joints popping and echoing in the room. He walks over and swings the door open to the refrigerator and takes inventory. Levi hadn’t been ass-up drunk since his youth, hesitated to drink much at all when Church fell into it, and later abstained from
alcohol completely after his injury. He tries to remember what’s good to alleviate a stupid man’s hangover.

Pulling out the carton of eggs from the fridge, he places them on the counter and reaches up on tiptoe to take down a pan from the suspended rack above the island. He puts on a kettle as he cooks up some simple scrambled eggs with salt and pepper, and he lets the kettle whistle for a couple of minutes as he serves the food onto two small plates. Pouring the hot water into two separate mugs, he starts to steep some peppermint tea as he goes to bring the plates into the living room. He places them noisily onto the coffee table, drops the forks so they clatter against the glass before he returns to the kitchen. He brings in the tea, diffusers removed, and sets them all out on the coffee table before taking a seat in front of Erwin’s shins and shoveling a huge bite of fluffy eggs into his mouth.

Erwin groans, breathes in air through his nose and then lets it out, rumbling in his chest like a bag of marbles. He shifts his body toward the back of the couch, smacking his lips as he growls into his bicep.

“Wake up,” Levi says again after swallowing down his eggs. He immediately goes for another forkful, his eyebrows furrowing.

“Mmm. What time is it?”

Levi chews, swallows. “Eight.”

Erwin groans again. “Fuck.”

“Yeah, you would say that. You almost drank a whole bottle of wine last night.”

“Did I?”

“Get up and eat something.”

Erwin shifts and stretches, kicking his legs against Levi’s back and nearly sending a forkful of eggs to the floor. He rolls over, blinks in the light with a pained groan and fingers buried deep into the bridge of his nose. “What did you make?”

“Eggs. And peppermint tea. And ibuprofen.”

“That’s an odd combination.”

“Hangover food. Now eat before it gets cold.”

Erwin sits up slowly. His chest hits Levi’s shoulder, and he breathes out morning breath so foul that Levi’s nose upturns. He elbows Erwin away from him as he takes another bite of his meal. Erwin leans over and pops the pills into his mouth and gulps down the entire glass of water before sucking in a deep breath and letting it out in another pained groan.

Shifting up the couch, Erwin pulls his legs to his chest and turns to sit properly, his head hanging in his hands. Levi’s nearly done with his meal by the time that Erwin groggily grabs his fork and brings the first bite to his mouth. He chews slowly, his eyes closed. When he swallows, he smiles, and says quietly, “Thank you.”

Levi pushes his plate away on the table and picks up his tea by the rim of the cup. He drinks a sip down and shrugs. “Sure.” He leans over and turns on the television. He scrolls through a hundred channels before finding a cooking show about some middle aged woman who lives on a ranch. He watches without really absorbing anything. Erwin is the only thing occupying his mind. Erwin and
his scar and the drunken night alone when he could have been with his friends—with him.

“What didn’t you tell me.”

“Why didn’t I tell you?” Erwin puts down his fork on his empty plate and rests back into the couch with his tea cup cradled in his hands.

“The accident.”

Erwin’s quiet, runs his finger around the rim of his cup before bringing it to his mouth to take a sip and placing it back down on the table. “I did.”

“You said you got hit... That your car got fucked. Not that you almost died.”

Erwin runs his hand along the nape of his neck, the bones cracking as he turns his head away from Levi. “It happened shortly after you were injured. I didn’t want you to worry.”

“That’s a stupid reason.”

“You wouldn’t have been able to do anything about it.”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“Why?”


Erwin nods, eyes Levi curiously as if he’s genuinely confused. “Yes.”

“Because you almost died!”

“Kenny called me about your injury.” Erwin stares off at the television. “He left a message on the answering machine. It was a good thing I had caller ID, because he didn’t leave his number.” He sighs. “But it’s not like it mattered. I called him three times a day for two weeks straight, and he never picked up. I started hunting down people you were friends with and hoped you still were in contact with them. They didn’t know anything.” Erwin rubs the bridge of his nose. “I had no idea if you were dead or alive. No idea.”

Levi watches Erwin. “…”

“And then six months later, you send me an email. All you said was ‘I’m fine’. ” Erwin looks at him.

“Levi…”

“I was.”

Erwin’s mouth grows tight, but he forces the frown away quickly. Levi can tell he’s getting angry. “So I didn’t want to worry you. I was fine too.”

Levi sits back into the couch. “How long were you in the hospital?”

“A little over a month.”

“You could have had somebody call me.”

“Levi.”
“No. You have friends and family. If you couldn’t fucking do it yourself, you should have had somebody tell me.”

“It doesn’t matter now, does it?”

“Holy shit,” Levi stands up and shakes his limbs. “Are you fuckin’ kidding me?”

“Sit down,” Erwin says, his voice deep and commanding. Levi flexes his fists. “I don’t want to fight.”

“We’re not fighting. I’m telling you that you should have told me.”

“What does that change now?” Erwin’s voice is still strong and booming. It lassos around Levi, drags him down to flounder against his words. He hates that the longer he waits, the more sense Erwin makes. It doesn’t change anything—he’s right. He looks over Erwin, sees the man’s teeth gritting, the muscles of his jaw poking through his skin.

“We wouldn’t be having this conversation, for one,” Levi says weakly.

“And we still both would have been injured.”

Levi looks at him, studies Erwin’s face. It’s blank, controlled, his blue eyes burning above the dark circles under them. He isn’t going to back down, never willing to back down when he’s right.

“You were wrong,” Levi says.

Erwin folds his fingers, cracks his knuckles back and takes another sip of his drink. He holds the cup to his lips as he says, “About what?”

“It was my fault.”

Erwin puts his cup down and looks over at Levi with a cautious gaze. “What was?”

Levi sits down again. “I told them to go in. Our intel told us that the building may be booby trapped. I made the judgement on the ground, I had a gut feeling that it was wrong, but I told them to go anyway.” Levi holds his left knee in his palm. “They told me I had foreign bone buried in my shin when I woke out of my coma.”

Erwin is quiet but focused. He watches Levi with curiosity and respect.

“I was lucky I didn’t lose my leg—that they were able to stop the bleeding.” Levi’s fingers tug at the bottoms of his boxers and his legs bounce uncomfortably. “I was lucky I survived. They said it like it was some kinda fuckin’ privilege.” He turns his head, scoffs softly under his breath. “I could’ve given a shit.”

Erwin looks at Levi. “I give a shit.”

Levi tuts. “Sure.”

“Levi.”

“No, no. That’s why you didn’t tell me. That’s why you sat here all night drinking. You totally give a shit. About me, about life, about it all, right?”

Erwin’s eyebrows draw and his mouth creases. He can’t hide it, can’t hide the emotions anymore. “Don’t.”
“Don’t what? Don’t tell it how it is?”

“Don’t tell me how I feel.”

“Like you feel anything.” Erwin draws a hand down his face, his muscles flexing as he resists the urge to stand up. However, Levi does, grabs their plates from the coffee table and starts to head into the kitchen.

Erwin growls and gets up to follow, stumbling a bit over his feet as he does. “Levi.”

Levi practically throws the dishes into the sink, winces at the sound, expecting one of them to crack and break just like him. “No, fuck you, Erwin.”

“Fuck me? Fuck you.” Erwin slams his palm onto the kitchen counter, his eyes lighting fiercely on Levi. Levi jumps back a little, eyes growing wide and his body shrinking a bit at the imposing force of the taller man. “Don’t you ever tell me I don’t care about you.”

“I…”

“You hear me?”

Levi presses back against the counter, and he averts his eyes, bites his bottom lip.

“I didn’t want you to feel how I felt. I didn’t want you to be worried.”

“But Kenny was the one that told you. I wouldn’t have worried you either. That’s not my shit.”

“You wouldn’t have told me at all…”

“I dunno.”

“Levi!” Erwin’s voice booms again, and Levi shrinks more. “Don’t you think I deserved to know?”

“Right? That’s exactly what I’m saying!”

Erwin stops, blinks. He shakes his head as he runs his hand along the nape of his neck.

“I couldn’t tell you, because nobody fucking knew about my shit back home. You weren’t exactly my emergency contact, asshole. The people that did know about you were fucking dead.” Levi gasps in, and it hurts so goddamn bad to say the word out loud, he collapses into the corner of the counter, eyes wide and breathing heavy. “I just… Fucking had… That piece of shit, and he didn’t… He didn’t tell you anything…”

“Hey…” Erwin takes a step closer to Levi.

“I would have told you, but they fucking…” He gasps again. His hands are shaking, he wants to flee, wants to hit Erwin, wants to scream. He can’t. He can’t, he can’t. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t want you to worry.”

“Why didn’t you tell me.”

Erwin pauses. “I didn’t want to believe it happened.”

“Yeah…”
“I could have done something.”

“Could you?”

“If I wasn’t late leaving the house that day, we could have avoided the driver.”

“Really?”

“I should have looked closer. He wouldn’t have hit us if I had seen him coming so fast. I should have been more cautious.”

Levi breathes in deep, staggered and heavy and defeated. “Me too.”

“I fucked up.”

Levi grips the counter edge, hangs his head and breathes out long. “Me too.” He feels the constriction in his throat, the nausea rising in his belly. “I killed them.”

“You didn’t.”

Levi looks up at Erwin, and he feels them. The tears coming down his face and he can’t stop them. Not this time. Furlan. Isabel. They’re dead, and it was because of his decision. His choice. This person, this sack of bones and skin, this man that dared to even call himself one, sent them to their deaths when he had the choice not to. “I fucking killed them, Erwin.”

Erwin steps forward, wraps two arms around Levi and draws him close. Levi head turns against his chest, looks vacantly at the fridge, tears falling in a way he hasn’t felt since that day. His body shakes against the sturdy bulk of Erwin, and he lets himself be enveloped in the feeling. He presses his face to Erwin’s chest, brings his hands up to grip at the back of the man’s shirt and pulls. “It’s not your fault,” Erwin says softly, and Levi hears it deep in his ribs against his cheek, and he sighs out as he rubs his tears into the cotton of his shirt.

“You’re wrong.”

“It’s not your fault.”

Levi presses his forehead to Erwin’s chest, tries to free himself from the man’s arms, but he’s so weak, so small, so broken. All his anger from before having transcribed into sorrow, and he doesn’t want Erwin to see him like this. All of these ugly sides of him. Why was he here with him? “I didn’t deserve… To live…”

Erwin squeezes him closer, and Levi feels the man’s chin land on the crown of his head, and he heaves and struggles more against him. “Yes, you did.”

“Shut up.”

“Levi, I’m so glad you came home.”

Levi sobs out. Erwin’s words strangle around his throat, settle around his brain, and he feels foggy and overwhelmed. He pulls on Erwin’s shirt in an attempt to keep his legs steady, to keep grounded. He doesn’t understand Erwin. Doesn’t understand why he’s here or what he did right when he had hurt him, when he had yelled at him, when he done just as much to abandon him out of rage, out of confusion, out of pain. But he wants to be here. Wants to be here with Erwin because he does care, because he’s a good man, because he’s his friend.
But he’ll fuck up again. He’ll fuck up like he always does. With Church, with Magnolia, with the knife and his friends and his fucking life. He’s a teetering pile of blocks, and with just a strong enough breath, with a slight jostle of the table, he’ll come crashing down. “I wish you had told me…” Levi whimpers. “I… I would have found a way to come back.”

Erwin presses his palm flat between Levi’s shoulder blades and brings him closer. “I’m sorry.”

Levi closes his eyes. “No.” He concentrates on his breathing, tries to regain it. Erwin’s arms feel so good around him, just like they always did. “Don’t be.”

Erwin settles away from Levi, gives him space to breathe again. Levi looks up at him, traces the etching of the pink scar on his cheek before settling on his eyes. And Erwin’s face is so soft, so gentle and concerned, it makes Levi blink heavily against more tears. He won’t let them come. He’s let enough of them escape for a lifetime.

It wasn’t his fault.

It wasn’t Erwin’s fault.

“It wasn’t your fault.” Levi says softly. His hands fall down from around Erwin, but his hand tugs at the bottom of his friend’s shirt. “You couldn’t have known… About the other guy, I mean.”

“I know. But it doesn’t have to make sense.”

“Can I see? Where it happened?” Levi matches eyes with Erwin. The scar has haunted him for almost a month, and he wants to see it. Wants to see what it has done to him, what it could have done to him. The thick skin was a sign, a reminder, that Erwin could have been ripped from his life almost a decade ago. A matching symbol to the scars on his own knee, across his chest, in his heart.

Erwin looks down at Levi, presses his lips together and nods slowly. “Yes.” He lifts his shirt up to the bottom of his ribcage and doesn’t flinch when Levi moves his hand to press the back of his index finger against the white, flat skin of the thick scar. “It destroyed my kidney.” Levi looks up at him, his lips falling apart in quiet awe. He nods and swallows as he turns his finger to press into the flesh. “They had to remove a small part of my colon too.”

“Shit,” Levi mutters. His thumb draws along the edge of the scar gently. Erwin twitches, the skin of his stomach pulling tight across his abs, and he lets out a soft sound between his lips. It looks like a shark bite, encircling the side of his body, jagged like teeth, a tongue of an incision dragging out about an inch to the left of it. “And you eat all that shit food?”

Erwin laughs, smiles down at Levi. He pulls his shirt back down, Levi moving his hand away as he does, and pats his belly. “Well, not anymore.”

“Yeah, because I feed you.” Levi sways and leans back against the sink. He folds his arms, lifts one hand up to drag the heel of his palm against both of his eyes. Erwin moves to lean next to him, their biceps touching as they stand next to each other.

“Yes. I’m spoiled.”

Levi looks at his hands, picks at his nails. He wants to go out and have a cigarette, but he wants to stay here—with Erwin. “I should have told you too.”

“It’s ok.”

“Ok…” Levi scratches his arm aimlessly. “Erwin…”
“Yes?”

“If you’re going to drink again, tell me first.”

Erwin’s quiet. He nods slowly. “I didn’t mean…”

“I’m serious. I’ll kick your ass,” Levi says. He walks away from the counter and back toward the living room, his arms hanging at his sides. “Tossing me out to the sharks like that was a dick move, too.”

“I knew you’d fare just fine.”

“That’s not the fucking point, and you know it.” Levi turns and collapses back onto the couch. He pulls a blanket over himself and rubs his thumb and index finger against his forehead.

Erwin leans on the entryway of the living room. “I know.”

“You may be… Emotionally and physically exhausted or whatever,” he pauses and tries to work around the words that feel foreign for him to say, “But don’t… Just…” Levi’s fingers curl around his knee.

It’s easy—it’s easy to hide it behind a brain that always feels cloudy, where landing on a thought for longer than a few minutes is a rarity. But Erwin’s a better person than that: smarter, stronger, more capable. He was the one that held him up, took the beer cans from his backpack and dumped them into the sink one at a time as Levi screamed drunkenly and fought wildly against him. Erwin held him off, pushed him to the side of the sink so hard that his rib bruised against the counter, but Levi was wild. He returned the favor, hard and sturdy across Erwin’s cheek, leaving his eye black and purple for nearly two weeks.

But Erwin held strong because he always did. Wished for his friend to get better, to learn to deal with his shit instead of hiding from it when he was so young. Too young. Saying the same things to him: you’re too smart, too strong, too capable.

Levi scratches his cheek. “Don’t drink a bunch of wine like some kind of bitch. Christ, drink some whiskey like a man.”

“Ease off, Levi. I’m emotionally and physically exhausted.” There’s a hint of a smile on his voice. He comes over and sits next to Levi. “Don’t you have some pity for me?”

Levi barks a laugh. It startles Erwin, causes him to turn his attention to Levi. Levi turns and looks at him. “Well… You are pitiful.”

Erwin doesn’t control the grin, doesn’t hold back the laughter as he brings his hand to his mouth to chuckle. Levi laughs in response, and his head falls onto Erwin’s shoulder without even thinking.

Erwin goes stiff, then relaxes, and doesn’t make any effort to move away.

Chapter End Notes

i was really excited for this chapter. i kept pushing it deeper into the plot because it's so important. and then it evolved into something i wasn't really expecting. that's mostly a good thing, but i just hope you all can understand and forgive levi for how he controls
this particular scene... plus it's just been a ride finding out more about their past as i continue to write. haha. writing a long fic is hard, fam. send help.

the next several chapters are going to be a slight change in style, so i just want to warn you all before that. i hope you enjoy!
Reacquaint

Chapter Summary

[April 8th, 2017]

The bath fills until it hits the drain. It gurgles as the water displaces, Levi’s body filling in the space with aching knees and itchy scars. Two months. It’s been two months, and he finds it hard to believe it’s only been that long. Twenty years seems so far away now, like his entire life until now has been nothing but a dream, snatched away with the flick of his eyelids.

He’s able to focus longer. He thinks of them smiling less, is able to see a man worth more than dirt when he looks in a mirror. He’s not fixed, not whole, but he hates less. He enjoys more.

He enjoys Erwin... Particularly, he enjoys their time together. Folding Erwin into his routine has been easier than he expected—almost to a point that it frightens him. Now, the idea of losing him feels desperately overwhelming. Moving out of the house would mean new routines. Or rather, same routines, but less fulfilling. No more soft grunts of push ups, or careful hovering over pots of boiling
water, or even the deep laughter brought on by an uninspired joke from some shitty sitcom. Erwin is a collection of these things, and he has become a comfort. The thought sends a chill through Levi’s gut, and he sinks down into the water to warm it again.

It’s always been about routines. He would go to Erwin’s house in the morning so they could walk to school together. Their age difference meant they had friends outside of each other, but it was not uncommon to see Levi following Erwin deep within his shadow with his head down. Little Levi with hands in his pockets and shoulders jutting up toward ears that grew faster than the rest of his features. An entire foot shorter, but four foot nine and half feet of unapologetic attitude and anger.

The rest of the kids saw their friendship in various ways: brothers, best friends, boyfriends… It didn’t take much for Levi’s fist to go flying into rat kid’s eye when he accused Erwin of being a queer. He damn near knocked the his eye out of its socket, screamed at him for reasons that he wasn’t even sure of.

Maybe it was because Erwin was too good to be something like that… Erwin wasn’t like him.

He was suspended for a month, and he didn’t even have to explain why he attacked the kid for Kenny to be proud of him. He clapped him on the back so hard it made Levi cough air back into his lungs. Slammed a bottle of beer in front of him and told him to chug it down—he was a man now. The appreciation was nice, and for the first time Levi felt connected to this man that was supposed to be a surrogate father. But it only took a few days for him to revert back to negligence—to return home late at night doing god knows what to crash on the couch. Levi had to steal money from Kenny’s wallet to go to the grocery store, to be the responsible one, so they would have some damn food to eat instead of filling their bellies with hard liquor and cheap beer.

What made it bad was that Erwin was upset with him. He was upset because he hit his rat-faced friend, because Levi let his temper control him, that he should have been the one to walk away and been the bigger man about it. But Erwin forgave him, because Erwin is Erwin, and that’s what he does. He told him that it didn’t matter. That even if he was gay, it shouldn’t matter. He smiled and placed a hand on Levi’s shoulder, and it made his cheeks burn with anger, with confusion, and most of all, with a feeling he had been trying so hard to ignore.

Levi dunks his head under the water, holds his breath for a whole minute before rising out of it with a great gasp.

Of course it shouldn’t matter—but it did. It always did. Erwin is a handsome man, and he was handsome even back then. Girls fell for him easily—blonde, tall, built, and intelligent. Levi asked why he turned them down, and he always received the same answer: “I need to focus on my school work.” He didn’t accept his first date until prom, and she was the prettiest and most appealing thing that could have hung off of his arm that night.

Levi didn’t get any of that. He didn’t want to take any of the girls on dates, let alone to prom. Instead, he drove around town with his senior friends, loitering around abandoned factories throwing rocks at broken windows and smashing empty beer bottles across brick walls. He had his first kiss that night—Derek was his name. Levi was pretty sure he was too drunk to remember. Derek wasn’t particularly friendly to men like him. Which was fine with Levi—Derek was a shit kisser anyway.

Levi sits up, lets his head hang off the edge of the bathtub as he looks up at the ceiling. It was easier to be angry. Anger made the feelings less prominent, made any regrets or discomfort or depression sedate to a dull roar in the back of his mind. But he didn’t hate Erwin anymore, was on his way to forgiving him for leaving him when they could have…

There’s a knock at the door.
“Levi?” Erwin says through the door.

It takes Levi a moment to recollect where he is. The water around him has grown lukewarm, and he grounds both of his hands on the edges of the tub. “Y-yeah?”

“I need to grab something real quick. Is the door unlocked?”

“I’m taking a bath.”

“Is the door unlocked?”

Levi huffs out his nose and hastily draws the shower curtain around the tub just as Erwin opens the door. “Jesus fuck, Erwin.”

“I’m sorry, I need to make sure I make it to the bank before they close.”

“On a Saturday?” Levi says, shrinking into the water. He watches the shadow of Erwin’s body cast against the shower curtain as he moves to open the medicine cabinet.

“I don’t have any other time to do it,” he explains, almost like it’s something Levi should have known.

Levi sloshes around in the tub, brings his knees to his chest and rests his chin on them in an attempt to recover some modesty. He wasn’t bashful of being naked in front of other people—it was part of military life. But being naked in front of Erwin… It always bothered him. “True…”

There’s a rattle of a bottle, a pop of a cap, the running of the faucet. Levi leans back to peer through the crack in the curtain, looks up at Erwin cautiously, feeling a little voyeuristic as he does so. Erwin turns, looks down at him, and smiles gently. He’s handsome even when his hair is messed, his clothing leisurely, his scar beating pink across his cheek. “I apologize again. I just really needed some pain killers. I’ll be back in a couple of hours.”

Levi shrinks away from the crack and huddles into his knees again. “All right.”

“Would you like to do something today?”

“I’d like to finish my bath.”

Erwin huffs a laugh. “Right. Sorry.”

“Stop saying sorry.”

“Sorry,” and Levi can hear the smile on his voice as the door clicks behind him.

Levi smacks his lips, tastes dirt and blood and the hoppy, earthy flavor of beer on another’s tongue. He presses the heels of his hands into his eyes and sees them smiling at him, Church looking at him with pale vacant eyes, and he sinks under the water until his lungs burn so harshly he would rather be dead then fill them again.

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[April 10th, 2017]

It’s one in the morning when Erwin’s back straightens and his attention wildly diverts around the room. “Oh!”
Levi raises an eyebrow. He has dozed sitting on the chaise, his arms folded over his chest and chin tucked into his neck. He breathes in a yawn. “What? What time is it?”

“I meant to give you this.” Erwin rolls his chair over to Levi and hands him a paperback book with a picture of some kind of monster on the cover.

“What is it?”

“It’s a sequel to that titan book you were reading a couple of months ago.”

“Oh.” Levi takes the book from Erwin and fans through the pages. “That one was ok.”

“I remember you saying you enjoyed it. I saw it while I was shopping the other day.”

Levi studies the cover, turns the book in his hands and settles back into his seat, pulls his feet up and under him, and opens to the first chapter. “You didn’t have to do that.”

Erwin rolls his chair back over to his desk, picks up his pen, and starts to work through his paperwork again. “I know.”

Levi reads the same paragraph five times before he finally comprehends it; it takes all of his brain power to keep a smile off his lips. “You should go to bed,” Levi says under his breath as he finally turns the page.

“Yes, I should.”

Levi wakes up the next morning with a blanket over him and the gentle heat of the sun kissing his skin through the office window, the book, dog eared and closed, sitting next to him on the side table.

[April 13th, 2017]

They get a new shipment of product in. Petra shows Levi where she wants it to go, vaguely waving her arm around the table of seasonal products as if it’s a magic wand. “Just make it look… Good.” She shrugs and smiles at him. “You have a good eye for things.”

Levi looks at the boxes at his feet then back up at her. “Are you sure?”

“You’ve been here for a couple of months. You understand my crazy mind at this point.”

Levi wants to correct her, but he actually doesn’t think she’s wrong. Petra’s arrangements make sense—based on size, type, and price. She’s good at merchandising, at making the displays look pleasant and inviting. He isn’t sure he’ll be able to do as nice of a job, and she believes in him for some reason, and he’s all about proving her wrong.

He opens the first box and pulls out a wind chime. Its tubes are about the length of his arm and made of copper, the wind catcher a long flat piece of glass marbled with three different colors. It makes a low bellow as the clapper hits the pipes, haunting and melancholy and beautiful all in one. The fluorescent lights hits the wind catcher, shines the blues to turn them green, the reds to turn them pink. He looks at it for a long time, gets lost in it, remembers the sound from the porch of his mother’s house. The scent of fresh sheets hanging on the clothesline. Forehead kisses with cold glasses of sweet lemonade.

Setting it aside, he goes through the rest of the boxes. It takes him three tries and three hours to set up
the small table. He calls Petra over. She shifts between her feet, hums and haws with her finger on her chin, before she nods. “Looks great!”

Levi tenses and clears his throat. “Really?”

“Of course! I knew you had an eye for this stuff.” She laughs and bumps shoulders with him. “I’ll fluff it up with some other stuff, maybe move some things around slightly, but it’s great.”

He looks at his creation, presses his lips together and nods. “Hey, Petra.”

“Yeah?”

“Did you grow up around here?”

Petra raises her eyebrow and puts her hands on her hips. “Yeah. Well. Close enough, anyway. I grew up in Parryville.”

“We went to the same high school, then.”

“Did we?”

“Well, I’m older than shit compared to you.”

“I’m pretty old myself.” Petra gives him a half grin. She makes her way back toward the counter with some of the trash Levi had created, and Levi follows behind her.

“I’ll be thirty-nine in December,” Levi says.

“Ah, ok, so you weren’t lying.”

Levi looks at her, and she goes to open her mouth to apologize, but Levi interrupts her with a laugh. “I look okay for my age, though.”

“Do you?”

Levi grins, looks down at the box in his hand and sees the wind chime is still there. “Oh, I want to buy this.”

Petra leans over the counter and into the box. “Ah, ok. Sure! You can just—”

“I want to pay for it.”

Petra rolls her lips between her teeth, tries to stare Levi down, but it hasn’t been a game she has been able to win yet. “You can pay for the cost without mark-up.”

“That’s fine.” He pulls out his wallet and hands Petra the money.

“Have you found a place yet?” she asks. The register chimes as the drawer flings open, and she makes change for Levi. He shakes his head, shifts the box up onto the table, and shoves his hands into his sweater pockets. “Getting this for when you do, then? Or do you have a special someone?” She wiggles her eyebrows.

“If you can call my mother a special someone.”

“Of course! I’m the specialist someone my husband and two kids have! I bet she’ll love it.”
Levi doesn’t correct Petra. There’s not enough energy left inside him to bring her up, to hear the apologies that mean nothing, apologies that won’t bring her back—won’t bring any of them back. Nobody ever returns from the dead no matter how much you pray or wish for it. She’s the oldest memory, the sound of her voice having degraded over time into oblivion, the warm hugs nothing but a faint chill. No, she serves best as a memory inside of the hollow sound of wind chimes, glasses of lemonade, and freshly laundered sheets.

At the end of his shift, he takes the wind chime and wraps it in newsprint, and tucks it under his arm as he walks home. When he gets there, he rummages through the toolbox, grabs a cup hook, a step ladder, and goes out onto the porch. Asking for permission seems like too much work; he figures he’ll ask for Erwin’s forgiveness if he gets upset for drilling a hole into the wood of the porch beam. Or more realistically, he’ll tell him to deal with it.

He un wraps the wind chime carefully and hangs it on the hook. It tinkles in the soft breeze that passes through, its melody drawling across low empty tones. Stepping down from the ladder, he pulls out a cigarette and watches it swing in the breeze, watches as each pipe hits the clapper, and he memorizes the notes each one makes. He goes through three cigarettes and a dozen memories before returning back inside.

Levi is in the kitchen when Erwin returns home. He’s cleaning the surface of the counter with a homemade cleaner, and it smells deliciously citrusy. Erwin comes into the kitchen after removing his shoes and leans against the island and watches Levi as he works.

“How was work?” he says, watching Levi as he concentrates on a dirty spot that may not actually exist.

“Good. You?”

Erwin reaches up and pulls down a pan and goes to put it on the stove. “It was just fine. Thank you.”

“There’s fresh lemonade.”

“Did you make it?”

“I said it was fresh.”

They turn to look at each other briefly, and share the small type of smile that they had grown to share over the past month. Erwin goes to the refrigerator and pulls out the carafe of lemonade and a pack of chicken breasts. He places the chicken on the counter and brings the carafe with him as he walks across the kitchen toward Levi. He grabs two glasses from the cupboard, fills them with lemonade and offers a glass to Levi. He turns, resting his butt against the counter and looks down at Levi. “I like the wind chime.”

Levi bows his head and pauses. He takes a sip of his lemonade, overtly sour and just a bit sweet—perfection. He swallows before he looks up. “I figured it could liven up the place a little.”

“It’s lovely.”

Levi nods, drinks down more to alleviate the light feeling in his chest. A breeze flutters through the open kitchen window, smelling of blooming trees and spring heat. His mother calling to him to help pull down the sheets, her smile as she chases him through the rows of clothes lines. Cold sweating glasses of lemonade in his hands, in his lap, his feet pointing and toes spreading as he kicks his legs on the oversized lawn chair. The tinkle of the windchime, melodic and peaceful and shimmering fractures of color across the white painted porch.
It belongs to Erwin now. It has for most of his life. He just didn’t have the luxury to share it until he got back. And Erwin embraces it, validates it, calls it lovely. Levi wants to tell him these things, to talk about the few memories he has of his mother, but maybe now isn’t the time. He’s heard them all before anyway.

Erwin turns to start dinner; Levi tries to catch his breath.

[April 21st, 2017]

“I think I’m gonna start looking for a bike.” Levi says, looking out the window of Mike’s truck.

“And an apartment,” he mutters, his attention following the road he’s turning onto.

“I’ve been doing that.”

“Not very well.”

Levi leans his head back against his seat and huffs a laugh. “Well, that’s not my fault.”

“Don’t get me wrong. I love spending my Fridays off checking out all the available bachelor pads in Carbon County.”

Levi’s face grows dark. “Maybe we can start looking for bikes instead.” Mike makes a noise that unsettles Levi. He shifts in his seat. “Or I’ll just put a security deposit down on the next fucking shack we look at.”

“Don’t get pissed at me. I want you to be happy with your choice. Just keep focused on your priorities.”

Levi looks back out the window, folds his arms over his chest. “Then I guess you don’t want to go look at the Ninja 1000 I found…”

Mike peers over at Levi as they come to a stop sign. “What year?”


Mike fingers his facial hair, lingers at the stop sign a little too long. He waves another car into the intersection as he thinks. “Where is it?”

“Near the next apartment we’re gonna look at.”

“Convenient.”

“I’m not interested in wasting your time.”

Mike smirks. “Is that so?” He rolls through the intersection and Levi watches the cars around them cautiously. He grips the armrest until they make it to the other side. He breathes out softly. “Yeah, all right. Maybe you can look for one for me too.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, just don’t tell the wife.”

“It’d be pretty hard to keep it a secret if you bring one home.”
“Eh, I’ll keep it at Erwin’s.”

Levi rests his elbow on the edge of the window, cups his mouth in his hands. He fidgets, pats the pack of cigarettes in his pocket, bites his lip. Erwin already kept Levi around like a piece of broken equipment, having a couple of motorcycles around probably wouldn’t bother him at all. Plus, the idea of working on the bikes with Mike sounded… Fun. “That could work.”

They make it to the apartment, and Levi doesn’t even put in an application. They return to Erwin’s house that evening with a black 2012 Kawasaki Ninja 1000 in the bed of Mike’s truck.

[April 23rd, 2017]

“Put it back.”

“What?” Erwin stops in the entryway of the living room.

“That’s for after dinner.”

Erwin looks at the pudding cup in his hand, then back up at Levi. “But I want it now.”

“How about never?”

There’s a moment of contemplation, a stare down across ten feet of wooden floors before Erwin finds an answer. “I can eat one now and after dinner.” Levi shifts in his seat on the couch, and Erwin takes a step back.

“You need to eat better. Your body’s all fucked up.” Levi plants his foot firmly on the floor, his body leaning forward and ready to spring at Erwin if he fights anymore.

“It’s not like it’s changed in the past ten years. I’ve recovered.”

“I want you to live another ten, so knock it off.”

Erwin holds his spoon in the same hand as the pudding, and rubs his chest with the other. He moves his lips between his teeth and starts to turn back into the kitchen, tapping the spoon on top of the container. “Maybe I’ll have some fruit instead…”

“There’s gonna be more changes, old man,” Levi says.

“I’m not looking forward to it,” Erwin shouts back.

Levi settles back into his seat, pulls his knees up to his chest and focuses out across the coffee table where there’s a small pile of junk food wrappers scattered across piles of paperwork. He can see the stress, knows that blood pressure is a thing Erwin should be looking out for too. Or is it cholesterol? At least he exercises. It could be worse. But his back is probably bad from sitting so much. And all the writing might lead to carpal tunnel. Maybe the accident fucked up his spine or something too. He can’t be doing all that when he had the accident. He can’t be…

“Here.” Erwin hands Levi a bunch of grapes, still dripping from having run under sink water.

“Couldn’t grab a paper towel?”

“We’re out of paper towels.”
“No we aren’t.”

Erwin places his bunch down onto his lap as he pops a few grapes into his mouth. They pop against his teeth as he chews, his attention on the television. “I figure I should be more environmentally conscious as well.”

Levi picks a grape off the vine. “We can do that too.” He sticks a grape in his mouth and chews, and he finds himself focusing on repressing yet another smile he doesn’t want to have.

[April 30th, 2017]

“Well listen, maybe if you had proper fuckin’ footwear, Erwin…” Levi says. He sits on the dirt hiking trail, Erwin’s foot cradled between his legs.

“I forgot,” he says, looking down at Levi from a rotting tree stump. He winces when Levi applies pressure to the side of his ankle. “That hurts.”

“Looks like a sprain.” Levi looks around anxiously. They were already an hour into the hike, and the loop was coming up in a quarter mile. Either way, they were a long way away from Erwin’s car, and they’d have to go down some steep pieces of land. “Goddammit.”

“I’m sorry.”

“How did you make it to thirty-nine anyway?”

“I’m forty.”

“Oh jesus. Might as well just roll you off the mountain and put you out of your misery now.”

Erwin shifts his foot, smiles, and hisses through his teeth as he tries to move it away from Levi. “I’ll be fine.”

“Of course you’ll be fine, but you shouldn’t be walking on it.” Levi looks around again, runs his hand down his face and digs his pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and lights one. “How are we gonna get you back down without killin’ you?”

“I’ll be fine, Levi.”

Levi shakes his head and places Erwin’s foot down onto the ground gently. “Ah, fuck you. I’ll go find something to splint it up,” he says, walking back toward where they came from. “Maybe something to lean on too,” he keeps muttering, moving his hands about in thought, “No, crutches won’t work…”

He returns with two sturdy thick branches for a splint, and a longer one to use as a walking stick. He takes Erwin’s backpack and shuffles through the contents until he finds Erwin’s folding knife. He pulls it out, looks at it in his palm, looks up at Erwin’s scar, and swallows. He drops the knife back into the bag and rolls back onto his butt. The ground is damp from melting snow from an early spring. It soaks through him, makes him shift in his spot as he focuses intently at the task before him. He snaps the branches until they’re the right size, and he goes through the backpack again until he finds a spare t-shirt. Scooting over to Erwin’s foot again, he takes it in his hand gently and places a splint on either side of the ankle. “Hold this,” he says.

He feels something on his head, fingers brushing against his hair and falling back into view and
resting on Erwin’s knees. Levi hesitantly brings his hand up to his head, feels the damp coolness of a petals against his fingers. “What the shit?”

“I crown thee... Sir Ackerman.” Erwin smiles. It’s youthful, playful, and brings an ache to Levi’s chest.

Levi looks down, tries to bury the heat. He unzips the top of his hoodie a little. “It’s just a sprain, you shouldn’t be delusional at this point.” He tries to split the ankle by himself again and fails. “Shit.” Frustrated, he drops them to the ground and looks up exasperated at Erwin.

“It has been a long time since we have been out here.” Erwin’s eyes are soft, but they seem to look through Levi.

Levi fingers the little flowers around his head, remembers when Erwin used to make crowns and necklaces out of the dandelions in his backyard, and much to his father’s dismay, the flowers in the garden. They’d wear the crowns around the yard, holding scraggly sticks as swords to the likes of the neighborhood kids. Erwin the knight, Levi his squire. They scraped their knees, nearly poked out the other kid’s eyes, and they always won control over what they came to conquer. They always won when they were together.

And out here along the gorge, where Erwin’s father brought them several times during the year, they’d hike along the trails and gather the most beautiful flowers and weave them together when they returned home. They came up with stories for their talismans: yellow was protection, blue was loyalty, red was strength.

Levi bites his lip, bows his head. This is stupid. So stupid. Erwin left him, and in turn, he left Erwin, and they were never supposed to be here, together like this, ever again. He should still be out on tour. He shouldn’t be here. He can’t be here.

“My liege,” he says softly. And something about it feels so real. Everything seems so loud—the returning birds in the trees, the creaking of swaying trees in the wind, Erwin’s breathing. The play on words spooks him, he rushes to pick up his sticks again, until Erwin places a hand on his shoulder. He looks up, tries to focus but he can’t. Erwin left him when they… When he got close last time they all...

“Loyal until the end.”

“The end of what?”

Erwin stares off again, his smile growing thin and sad, heavy with thought. Levi disregards the splint, wraps the t-shirt tightly around Erwin’s ankle so it won’t swell, and offers him an arm to lean on as they slowly make their way back. It takes them until the sun sets to make it back to the car, the flower crown still sitting atop Levi’s head. Levi checks the rearview mirror, the blue flowers vibrant against his dark hair, and he drives them both home in silence.

Chapter End Notes

i took some prompts for the next several chapters from people on tumblr. it really helped me find some concrete themes for the next few chapters that way. you can see requests by erwinsalive and hvppy cadet. the illustration itself was a prompt as well as i didn't have that scene planned out--again, big thanks to my bff abbysucks for that.
thank you so much to everybody that has come and talked to me about this fic and told me what they like about it—both here and on tumblr. it just... i can't even put it into words. this fic keeps getting larger as i plot it out, but i'm so excited to write it, and i'm so excited that people are enjoying it.

thank you to my beta (which i think i forgot to credit the last few chapters): my roommate. cool guy is a good guy. ye.
Levi moves the old green Adirondack chair down onto the front porch with Erwin’s help and permission. He convinces Erwin to buy another one, still staking a claim on their old chair, tells Erwin it’s good for him to get some fresh air. He’s inside entirely too much.

Levi comes out onto the porch with a container of water and fills their glasses. The porch table is covered in a thin blanket of yellow pollen even though Levi had wiped it off that morning. A small pool of water rims the glasses, the warm, dry air causing them to sweat away condensation.

It’s almost seven, and Levi always starts dinner at that time. But he hesitates, thinks about starting a little later, stretching his routine to bend to his will and not to his anxiety. Erwin shifts in his seat, stretches his legs out before crossing one leg over the other as he turns a page in his book. The wind chime plays a slow, lazy song.

Levi sketches the trees across the yard. The leaves came in a couple of weeks ago--surprisingly early for northeastern weather. Erwin comments on it, says something about global warming; Levi is just happy to see green leaves on oak trees again. He chews on the eraser of his pencil, resists the urge to
pull out a cigarette with Erwin sitting so close. His lines press hard into the paper as he battles against the urge, his teeth burying into his lip.

“It’s Mother’s Day this weekend.” Erwin says, as if it’s a headline to a newspaper, as if there is a segue to this conversation they hadn’t started.

“Yeah?”

“When was the last time?”

“Last time for what?”

Erwin tilts his head to look at Levi over the top of his reading glasses. “The last time you visited your mother.”

Levi erases a large section of a tree as he contemplates an answer. It’s been years. The last time he visited Kenny he went to leave a bouquet of grocery store flowers at her headstone. It was simple, quick, unceremonious. He’s never been one to kneel and talk to dead people. The thought makes him uncomfortable, as if he’s confessing and believing in an afterlife. He’s smarter than that. She can’t hear him, can’t help him with a squeeze of a hand, can’t carry away these demons in his head back into hell where they belong.

The time before that was a few months before he left for basic training, before Kenny left him in his mother’s house alone after his 18th birthday. He realizes then that he has only seen his mother enough times to count on one hand. “A long time.”

“She’s in Pittsburgh, correct?”

“Yeah.”

“I can take you if you would like.”

Levi crosshatches a series of lines, and another set, and another, until there’s just a big black block of graphite on his piece of paper. “No.” He sighs. “No, it’s fine.” He peers over at Erwin who has gone back to reading his book. “How about you?”

“I have not decided.”

Levi looks down at the wood of the porch. A breeze, smelling of fresh cut grass and warm pollen, floats by. The wind chime howls. “You always used to go.”

“Yes.”

Settling back, he curls his socked toes around the edge of the chair and puts his sketchbook down. He checks his phone to see that it’s exactly seven o’clock. He looks back at Erwin, draws his profile with his eyes: sharp nose, pronounced upper lip, strong chin that forms into a strong jaw. Eyes set and sullen behind the golden rims of his glasses. As usual, there is nothing giving up answers about the thoughts inside of Erwin’s head. An affirmation is all Levi is going to get.

Levi goes inside to start preparing dinner, leaving the wind chime to play its sad song on repeat for the man burying his life inside of a book.

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“This whole town smells like chocolate.” Levi curls his nose.
“Isn’t it great!?” Hange’s head is outside of the car window like a dog. They’re driving through downtown Hershey, Pennsylvania on their way to Hershey Park. Hange moves to sit back down in the back seat of Erwin’s car with Moblit, their legs bouncing with excitement. “Maaaan, I can’t wait to try the new coaster. You in, Erwin?”

Erwin looks up in the rearview mirror and nods. “Of course.”

“Do you like rides?” Hange smacks the back of Levi’s seat.

“Depends.” Levi says, his attention out the passenger’s side window. He can see Hange through the glass, animating wildly.

“All right! Well, once we get in, we’re running to the new one so we can beat the crowds. Then we’ll go around the loop until we hit the water park. Then we’ll cool down and come back home.”

“And buy some chocolate.” Moblit mentions, matter of factly.

“And buy lots of chocolate.” Hange grins.

“Sounds like a plan.” Erwin says.

Apparently this is the plan every year. New rides first, walk the same loop, water park, chocolate. They get in with their pre-bought tickets and hustle their way to the new coaster, where the line is already queuing with a wait of over an hour. They make it a half hour in before discomfort swells in Levi like a tidal wave after an earthquake.

“I don’t know if I can do this.” Levi says. His knuckles turn white as his fists wrap around the silver railing of the queue. He shakes his head and swallows thickly.

“It’s not that bad, I promise. It just looks scary.”

“No.” The next car of patrons flies by, screaming and cheering at sixty miles per hour. “I really can’t.”

Erwin puts his hand on the small of Levi’s back, looks at him intently. “You’re shaking.”

Levi looks up at Erwin. “I can’t.”

“What’s wrong, Levi?” Hange says, leaning back on the railing. Their legs kick up and they almost spin around the bar before Nanaba stops them from toppling.

“Nothing.” Levi mutters. He turns his body completely to look only at Erwin, and he lowers his voice. “I’m gonna go wait with Moblit.”

“Let me go with you.” Erwin offers.

“No, god dammit. Just…” Levi crosses his arms, picks at a scar on his forearm. He was invited to this annual trip. He has no intention of being a burden to Erwin’s enjoyment. “Just pretend I’m not here.”

“Don’t say that.”

“That’s not what I meant… I…” The rest of the crew is chatting happily among themselves, smiling. He wonders how long until he’ll be normal enough with them to have that. If he’ll ever have it. He knows if he leaves now, Erwin won’t be missing out, so he goes for it. Rushing away bending under the bars, he pushes aside people without apologizing or offering excuses. He hears Mike calling after
Erwin, and Levi almost makes it away, but even with Erwin’s bulk, his legs are much longer. Erwin grabs him by the arm and halts him at the entrance of the ride. “I fucking told you…”

“Levi.”

“Stop it!”

“I…”

“I don’t care what you’re trying to do. Just fucking enjoy your day with your friends, Erwin! Stop worrying about me like I’m a fucking child!”

Erwin stares at him, as do a few other people around them. “Watch your language, there’s actual children here.”

“Fuck the children.” Levi takes his arm back, turns and stomps off toward where they all left Moblit, leaving Erwin to stand by himself at the entrance. He folds his arms, resists the urge to look behind him. He finds Moblit around the edge of a shrub sitting on a bench, and Moblit perks up as he sees Levi approaching.

“Oh, Levi.” Moblit perks up and moves to the side. “Where are the others?” Moblit shoves over Hange’s massive backpack to allow Levi to sit down.

“Still in line.”

Moblit nods in understanding. Doesn’t ask for anything else. He digs a water bottle out of a side pocket of the backpack and hands it to Levi. “You’ll get heat stroke if you don’t keep hydrated.”

“I don’t drink from other people’s shit.”

“Germs?”

“Something like that.”

Moblit chuckles and pops the cap open with his teeth and chugs down four mouths full of liquid before putting the bottle back. “This is our fifth year coming here together on Memorial Day weekend. It’s turning into a tradition.”

“Seems kind of childish.”

Moblit shrugs. “Maybe. But I won’t complain about the singing cows if it means I can leave here with a metric ton of chocolate.”

Levi smirks. “You know grocery stores exist, right?”

“Yes, but we’re at the source. The is chocolate Mecca.”

Levi laughs. “You’re all fucking insane.” He reaches down and takes the bottle that Moblit had been drinking and pops the cap open with his fingers and squirts some water into his mouth. “No wonder Erwin hangs out with you all.”

“He’s a good man. He watches out for us.”

Levi raises an eyebrow. “Oh yeah? How?”

“Whenever any of us are in trouble—financially, physically, mentally—he’s always there to help. No
matter the time or place, even in the face of his own personal life. He commands a lot of respect for his lack of self. I am very lucky I crossed paths with him and Hange.”

Levi stares off, tries not to feel a pang of jealousy, because what does that say about him? Being jealous of Erwin’s friends because he’s a good friend to them? What a radically ridiculous thing to feel. But Levi could have been anybody… He would have let anybody live in his house, would have been happy to have anybody back from the military. Would have been happy to pick up anybody from the airport. Would have let anybody hold a knife against him.

Levi stands up, gnashes his teeth together as he looks around. “What’s wrong?” Moblit asks.

“I need a bathroom.”

“There’s one a little bit that way.” Moblit points. “I’ll wait for you here.”

Levi makes it to the bathroom, bumping into shoulders of men and women that grumble rude remarks to him as he passes. He makes it inside, leans his body on a sink. The automatic faucet goes off intermittently as he stands there, refuses to look up at himself, grips the edge of the sink as several men walk around him. He cups his hands below the stream, splashes it against his face a few times before wiping his it off with a paper towel.

He had thought for a moment that Erwin was his. And the audacity of that statement makes his stomach flip.

He makes it back to Moblit. Everybody else is there when he returns, hair a little misplaced, smiles all toothy. Erwin smiles at him and waves, meets him halfway before turning and walking back to the rest of his friends. “You doing all right?” Erwin asks, quietly.

“Yeah.”

“We’re going to switch over to the water park. Is that alright?”

“Stop doing that. If you guys want to do it, we’ll do it.”

Erwin nods and lightly puts his hand on the back of Levi’s shoulder to guide him toward the water park with the rest of the crew.

They get changed in the locker rooms. Levi wore his swim trunks under his pants, and keeps on his t-shirt, having brought an extra. Erwin did the same, though he returns without a top, the large scar blasted across his side as a nasty reminder of a life nearly ended. Levi tries not to stare, rubs the side of his neck as they make their way into the park.

It’s a half hour into waiting for the water tube ride when Levi gets fidgety. It’s past lunch, and he still hasn’t had anything to eat. Hasn’t had a cigarette since the parking lot. He doesn’t want to be a burden, he doesn’t want to bail on another ride, but he can’t. His routine. “Erwin.” Levi says quietly, trying to keep his attention away from the rest of the group.

“Yes?”

“I need something to eat.”

“We’ll be through the line soon.”

Levi rubs his neck, fidgets. “I really can’t.”
Erwin doesn’t look down at him. “You may leave if you wish.”

Levi looks down the line at Mike and Nanaba, looks behind him at Moblit and Hange. He wrings his fingers together and nods. “I’ll stay.”

“We’ll get food right when we get out. I promise.”

Levi nods, presses his shoulder into the wall, and bounces his leg to exert his energy. To channel his anxiety. “All right.”

The ride is underwhelming, and his stomach is angry by the time they step out of the wading pool. They get into line for food, dripping wet, but the heat of the sun cooks away the soft coating on their skins and leaves behind a strong scent of chlorine. Levi takes his fish sticks and moves to an empty table and stakes a claim on it as he waits for everybody else. His t-shirt sticks to his skin, makes him feel claustrophobic. He pulls the shirt up and over his head and wrings it out onto the terra cotta colored pavement as everybody else filters in with their food.

“Oh, Levi. You’re fit as hell.” Hange wiggles their eyebrows.

“Shut the fuck up.” Levi shoots back.

Nanaba makes a noise of agreement. “They’re right.”

“What did you say?” Mike shoots.


“As if we’re not taken.” Nanaba chuckles again, grabbing hold of Mike’s hand and leaning into his arm. He draws her close and places a soft kiss on her forehead.

“Yeah, come on, we aren’t that bad looking,” Hange pulls Nanaba over and presses their cheek to hers. “We’re fuckin’ sexy!”

“Sure, four-eyes,” Levi says. He tries to preoccupy himself with his meal. He’s hungry. He’s irritable. He’s trying hard to battle his emotions from springing to the surface.

“What’s your type, Levi? This is important. I hooked up Mike and Nanaba.” Hange says proudly.

Mike rolls his eyes. “They introduced us at one of Erwin’s parties not realizing we were already married. Congratulations, Hange. A real match maker.”

“It worked, though!”

“They almost divorced that night.” Erwin grins at Levi.

“Oh shut up, you.” Nanaba says with a mouth full of fries.

“I bet you like… Tall types.”

“Yes.”

“Well that’s not too hard.” Mike says.

“Hey.” Erwin warns.

“Good one, Mike. I’m perfect fist-to-nut height, just in case you wanted to know.” Levi shoots a
playful glare and pantomimes a punching motion. Mike surrenders his hands, a chicken tender falling to the paper boat as he does.

“Ok! Tall… Probably brunette. Has tits about…” Hange squeezes their chest, “About this big.”

“Oh my god.” Mobilt puts his head in his hands.

“Wrong again.” Levi shakes his head, a smirk curling gently at his lips.

“Man, if you don’t like this, then you must be gay or something.” Hange cackles as a couple of the others offer a soft giggle. Levi stops mid chew. He swallows, covers his mouth with a napkin, and tries to repress his heartbeat. He tries to keep his composure, tries to repurpose it into the joke it’s supposed to be. But Erwin is here. Erwin is here and what if he...

Moblit looks at Levi, then back at Hange. “Ah, Hange, I think you should drop it.”


“What?” Mike says.

“It’s great that it’s such a nice day out today, huh?” Moblit tries to interject again, tries to protect Levi, and for what it’s worth, Levi appreciates it.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Levi. I didn’t know!” Hange gets up from their seat and rounds the table to wrap their arms around Levi. “Don’t be mad, I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.” Levi says, but it’s not. It’s really not fine, and his blood throbs in his neck.

“Hange, leave him alone.” Moblit begs.

“What Hange is saying is that we’re sorry we outed you before you got to tell us yourself.” Nanaba says calmly.

“And that it’s hella cool that you’re gay.” Hange squeezes Levi before releasing him and taking a seat next to him.

Levi adjusts himself, pushes down the seat, hanging his head to the side. “Sure.”

“It doesn’t matter what you are.” Mike chimes in with a shallow nod.

Erwin looks at Levi, and Levi would rather have died from heat stroke right there instead of being put under that magnifying glass. “It matters to some people.” Levi answers, rubbing the crook in the bridge of his nose. “But here I am with a fucked up nose because of it.”

“It shouldn’t matter.” Erwin says. It echoes his past. Levi hears it coming from a younger voice, one that tries to dismiss a rat boy’s words and actions.

“I want to hear this story.” Hange says, leaning back in their seat. “I’m just curious.”

“If you’d like to share it,” Moblit adds.

Levi looks around the table, shrinks into his shoulders a little under Mike’s gaze. “It happened early
in my first tour.”

“It happened when you were in the military!?” Hange says.

“Let him finish the damn story, Hange.” Mike barks.

“Some people get lucky with who they get to serve with. I didn’t have that the first time I was out.” Levi plays with a napkin so he doesn’t have to look at any of his friends as he keeps talking. “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell was in effect, and that worked all right. Figured it wasn’t anybody’s business to know shit about me anyway.” Erwin’s looking at him with lips parted in awe, and he just wants to be anywhere but here. Wants himself to shut up, but part of him wants Erwin to know too. That maybe he’s… “I fucked up one day. I went off base to meet with a guy I had been keeping in contact with at the time. We went to a public place, probably fucking kissed or something stupid. Some bastard found out somehow, spread it around camp.” He waves his hand, eyes still focused on the torn napkin twirling in his other hand. “Next thing I know, my nose is broken and bloody and bleeding all over the shower floor.”

“In the showers?” Nanaba says softly.

Levi pushes a smile, tries to laugh about it. Maybe it is a little funny. “What better way to catch a fag being a fag, right? One look at a cock and you have an excuse to hit ‘im.” Levi shrugs. “Turns out, they didn’t need one.”

“Did you shove it back into that cunt’s face?” Hange is riled up, they’re leaning over the table now, practically spitting the words out.


“No.” Levi hangs his head, a little ashamed. “He ran away before I got my senses back.” He looks up at Erwin, sees the recognition of a lie in his eyes, and immediately look back down at his napkin.

“That guy was a coward.” Mike says.

Levi smiles for real this time. “Yeah. Asshole got caught fighting with another recruit a year later. He was dishonorably discharged.”

“Good.” Erwin says as he tilts his cup of water back and sets it back on the table. “Fuck that guy.”

Nanaba and Hange hoot. “You know he’s a shit person when the Commander doesn’t like ‘im.” Hange grins a wild smile.

“The ‘Commander’?” Levi asks. He relaxes his shoulders. They were all moving on to a different subject, much to his relief. Mike keeps his eyes on him a little longer before he too joins back into the conversation.

“Yeah, we got a little squad here.” Hange motions with their arms around the table. “It was Moblit’s idea.”

“Our little squad.” Moblit shrugs, embarrassed to hear it when it’s said out loud to an outsider.

“Isn’t that what the kids are saying these days?” Levi pokes fun at him.

Hange slaps their hand on the table, laughing. “Yeah, it is what those kids are saying these days, isn’t it?”
Mike raises his paper cup of soda and smiles around the table. “To being kids.”

“At an amusement park with singing cows and dancing candy bars.” Moblit raises his cup.

The rest of the table raises their drinks, touches cups, and then take sips behind smiles that don’t quite fade. After filling themselves with overpriced cafeteria food, they make their way to the locker rooms again to change back into dry clothes. Mike offers Moblit to change with him to save time, laughs as he says it, but it makes Levi uncomfortable. He takes his time getting out of his wet clothing, dries himself off with his towel, making sure to keep his feet in contact with his dirty clothes instead of the floor. He didn’t really want anybody knowing, but he supposes it was bound to happen eventually. He just didn’t like people knowing his shit. Especially when it was so closely related to their “Commander”.

“You alive in there, Levi?” Mike knocks on the door.

Levi blinks, nods, realizes that Mike can’t see him, and mutters under his breath, “In a minute.”

“All right, man. We’re all outside.”

Levi huffs, pulls his pants on and a dry shirt. He meets them all outside. They make plans to head back toward the entrance, the sun weaning in the sky as they do. Levi waits outside with Moblit as the other four go on a couple of more thrill rides until they finally hit the carousel.

“A classic!” Nanaba wiggles, takes Mike’s hands and drags him into line.

“We always end the day with the carousel.” Moblit mentions just before he gets dragged away by Hange.

“You in on this one?” Erwin asks.

“I think I can handle a couple of fucking inanimate horses, thank you very much.”

Erwin grins and elbows Levi’s arm. “Get one next to me.”

“I’ll get whatever one I want. You figure out your horse problems on your own.”

They don’t wait in line long and are able to get in on with the next group of people. Levi walks down between the horses, knows that he wants one that in the middle and that moves--what fun is a carousel without a horse that moves? He finds a spectacular black horse, decorated with a sky blue saddle and bridle. He hikes himself up with the stirrups, hesitates to place his hands on anything on the horse, but figures he’ll make sure to stop at a bathroom to wash his hands later. Erwin takes up a white horse with a dark green set of saddle and bridle. His horse stopped at a taller position, and Erwin towers over Levi, but he’s smiling.

Levi admits to himself in that moment that it’s a beautiful smile. A smile that breaks the haunting ones from his mind for a short time.

“I’ll race you.” Erwin says.

“You’re forty. You’re a grown ass man, Erwin. Really?”

“You’re scared I’ll win.”

“I’m scared you’ll lose your mind before whatever god has mercy to just end you.”

Erwin laughs, and he shifts back in his seat a bit when the ride starts to move. Erwin clears his throat
and looks down at the floor. “Levi?”

“What?”

“Why did you really not fight back?” Erwin asks.

Levi grips around the pole of the horse. He looks around at the squad, confirms that none of them are paying attention. Why was Erwin bringing this up now? “I dunno… I guess I didn’t want to admit that I was.”

“Was…”

“That I am ... You know…”

“It’s fine that you are.” Erwin draws his eyes up, apologetic and caring. Always caring. It twists Levi’s stomach.

“It wasn’t then. If I said anything, I could be discharged.”

“So you hid a part of yourself so you could just stay in a place that wouldn’t accept you for who you are?”

“You’re making it sound like it’s something you don’t understand.” The music of the carousel almost drowns out his voice as it cracks.

Erwin stares at him, his lips parted and eyebrows upturned slightly. He shakes his head. “What do you mean by that?”

“It wasn’t a phase.” Levi bites his lip. “You said it would be.”

“I should have never said that.”

“Well you did.” Levi snaps. He swallows, grips the wooden mane of his black horse. “I needed to stay in the military... Just like you needed to move to Philadelphia.” It hurts to say, stings the back of his eyes. That the whole reason… It must have been. That must have been why he left.

Erwin rubs his hand along his nape. “Levi. It’s fine that you’re gay.”

Hearing the words out loud make him sick. He tries to focus on his horse, but he can’t. He grabs his stomach, tightens his jaw so hard that it cracks. “No it’s not.” Levi blurs out. He slinks off his horse, stumbles, and the music box tinkle, the pounding of the snare drum, the whistling of the organ flutes, swirls around his head. He grabs onto the edge of one of the sleds, bows his head and tries to stop the world from spinning, but he can’t. Physically he can’t, and he wants to jump off the ride. He contemplates it--it’s not going fast enough for him to get injured. He could make a run for it. He could make it to the parking lot, but then what? Take a bus home? Where was home if it wasn’t somewhere in the desert, nestled between arid mountains, in lands filled with language he didn’t understand.

Where was home if it wasn’t with Erwin?

“Levi.” Erwin leans against the sled, looks down at him. “I had no idea how… It worked back then.”

Levi feels it again. On his lips, the sinking in his heart, the knot in his stomach. “It meant nothing to you.”

“What?”
Levi runs his hand through his hair, “Forget it. You clearly did.”

“The kiss?” Erwin says quietly, hushed and secretive. Levi can’t tell if that’s worse.

“Forget it. I didn’t say anything.”


“Don’t fucking touch me.” He wobbles his way toward Moblit and Hange’s horses.

“Levi, it did.” Erwin says after him. “It did…” Levi pauses. He turns to look at Erwin, and he’s gotten through to him. Again. There’s a sadness in his eyes, even though they dart nervously around. But it’s just them right now—the music, the spinning, their friends. It all disappears. It’s just them. “It scared the hell out of me.”

“Why?” Levi’s face is burning. His eyes hurt. His breathing picks up.

“You are my best friend.”

“Was.”

“No.” Erwin takes a step closer but stops when he notices Levi leaning back. “You are.”

Twenty years of self destructive tendencies didn’t break him down enough. Pushing Erwin out of his mind, out of his life, it didn’t work. Erwin left him because of what… Because he was scared. Of a kiss?

“You’re a fucking moron, Erwin.”

“Maybe.”

“Shut the fuck up. Just shut up.”

Erwin drives closer to him, determined in his actions. He corners Levi against a horse, spreads his arms out across two poles to make his body a barricade. “Why did you join the military?”

“Who cares?”

“Why?”

Levi shrinks against his horse, looks out, sees that the world is spinning slower. The ride in hell is finally coming to an end. “I dunno.”

“Please.”

“You left.” Levi keeps staring. Refuses to say anything else. He can’t say anything else. He can’t without losing control of himself. His body goes rigid, and he sets his jaw.

“I see.”

Levi watches as Erwin’s throat flicks. His body eases, his arms falling to his sides. The conversation ends, Erwin has signaled it. For once, Levi is relieved. The carousel comes to a slow stop but the music keeps playing. The beats of their relationship forever playing, pausing in intervals to intersect and fail, intersect and fail.

When Levi steps off the platform the world is still spinning, and he just wants it to stop. Wants to be
where Erwin is. But he’s just not sure how possible that is right now. If ever.

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Some of the clothes in his dresser have acquired a stale smell—like old wood and aged cologne. He pulls everything out of his drawers in the laundry room and sets them out into three separate loads to wash: darks, whites, and delicates. He runs the first load as he cleans around the downstairs rooms. He pulls the couch out from the wall to clean the windows, runs a bucket of floor cleaner to wash the hardwood, bleaches the kitchen counters not once but twice. He steps outside to smoke a cigarette, goes back in and brushes his teeth, only to go back out again and smoke two more times.

He cleans out the fridge, cleans the stove, runs the oven cleaner, washes the large sliding glass doors that go out to the back porch. He piles the paperwork on the coffee table to one side, tilts his head to look at the boxes. The boxes. One, two, three… Nine, ten, eleven… Twenty three. There’s twenty three. He counts again. And again. He counts them even as he leaves the room, remembers their dimensions, commits it to memory. Twenty three. He starts another cigarette before he even leaves the house.

Eventually, he returns to the laundry room. He switches the loads, put in a new one. Leaves out to go out and check on the oven, feels like he forgot something in the laundry room. He opens the top of the washer and closes it when he realizes that it just starts, that it’s still running. He presses a palm to his forehead before turning to look at the remaining drawer that he hasn’t opened. Cautiously, he walks over and slides the drawer open. At the top is his uniform, folded neatly, ribbons shining in the overhead light. Pulling back the uniform, he sees them. Smiling.

He picks it up by the corner, like a flower past its age, delicate petals threatening to fall. The photo feels heavy. Weighs a thousand pounds in his hands, and it drags him to the floor. There’s blood on his face, his blood, smeared and ugly. He’s always been ugly. But there’s some of his blood on Magnolia, just like that day, and he can’t have that. Won’t have that. He digs his fingernail into it, scratches it free. Keeps scratching. Scratches. Scratch.

The washer beeps as it finishes its cycle. The oven beeps when it finishes its self cleaning. Levi scratches.

Erwin returns home. Calls his name. He hears it but doesn’t react. He scratches. His face, his dirty, filthy fucking face disappears into his fingernails and is replaced by a white blotch. Better. This is better. He’s better.

“Levi?” Erwin peers into the room.

His mother pulling open curtains. Waking him up with a kindness held only by maternal instinct, brushing his hair aside and placing a soft kiss on his forehead. The way she looked in the hospital bed, scraggly hair matted to her skin, the monitors around her beep, beep, beeping. A weak smile as she touches his small hand.

“Levi.”

Magnolia pressing her finger to his temple, toppling him over out of his chair, startling him awake just before he hits the floor. The laughter of his squad, the rare happiness Church expresses, where if life was any different, if they had been back in the States and civilians, maybe something could have happened… Much more than the grubby, stick, stick, sticky feeling of dirty blood caked on his hands. Shattered smiles tangled in sinew and bones.

“Levi, please.” Levi stops. He looks up, and his head wobbles. He wonders if he’s been crying
again, but he can’t tell. Erwin kneels down next to him. He’s handsome and close and he smells nice.
“Levi.” Erwin presses a cool hand to Levi’s cheek, and Levi leans into it. “How are you?” He sounds like he did then. Gentle and caring. Levi felt like his whole world then. And then something happened and they were gone. Gone gone, bye bye.

“I’m good.” He mutters, but he doesn’t believe it. Why were they smiling?

“Were you doing laundry?” Erwin looks around at the room at the two dirty piles on the floor. So dirty. His hand moves away, and Levi gasps softly.

“Yeah.”

“Would you like help?”

“I can do it.”

Erwin sits back against the dresser, his shoulder pressing against Levi’s. They sit together until Levi stops scratching. The light from the window fades out, and it’s past seven o’clock. His mother, Magnolia, Church, Erwin—they all turn their heads to him. They smile. Oh god, why are they fucking smiling?

Levi turns his face into Erwin’s shoulder and closes his eyes tight against the streams of tears that flow down his cheeks. And Erwin doesn’t move away. He hesitates, but he does it. He moves his hand into Levi’s open palm, his fingers resting between Levi’s, and Levi breathes in so deep around a sea of tears he worries he might actually drown.

Chapter End Notes

i’m getting to chapters that i’m really, really excited to write about. so i kinda just threw this all up in two days and i just. ngh. i’m sorry.

you should all really go to hershey, the whole town really does smell like chocolate.

this last scene is probably my favorite part of the whole story so far. it kinda hurts tho. a lot.

thanks to my roommate for betaing this. he helped me make things flow a little better with his insight.

as always, your comments are my life blood. *praises* love you babes.
Levi arches his back and drops a ratchet to the garage floor. He wipes his forehead with the back of his arm. The humidity in the air sticks to him, makes his t-shirt cling to his skin, makes him shift uncomfortably on the rickety old metal stool. Mike climbs out of his truck and walks up the short gravel path into the garage, a six pack hanging from his right hand. “What’s up, man?” Mike says over the sound of the radio.

“Almost got this damn thing running. It’s like the guy that owned it before had no idea about… Anything.” Levi gestures at the motorcycle in front of him.

“It’s looking sharp, though.”

“She sounds pretty good when she’s started up. She just can’t go anywhere. I need a new chain. A couple of belts… Somehow the clutch is fucked…”

“You’ll get her there.”

Levi nods. “I found one you might be interested in.”

Mike pops a can off of the plastic rings and hands one to Levi. Levi shakes his head, nods at the bottle of water on the workbench, and Mike shrugs as he pops the tab and takes a sip. “Oh yeah? What kind?”
“You into Harleys?”

“You into Harleys?” Mike takes a seat on a upturned milk crate, places the beer can on the ground between his feet and looks at what Levi has been working on. “We can go out later and look at it. Do you have places you need to look at?”

Levi shakes his head. “No. Everything is shit.”

Mike is quiet for a few beats, causes Levi to turn his attention away from the bike and onto him. “It’s been four months, Levi. Aren’t you tired of sleeping on the couch?”

“I’ve slept on worse.”

“Where the hell do you jerk off?”

Levi looks up at the ceiling, works through the words to say. Truthfully, he was never the type that needed to relieve himself multiple times a week. Being at Erwin’s made it even less desirable. The bathroom worked just fine for when he did do it. “When you have to jerk it quietly in front of a dozen men, you learn some tricks.”

Mike laughs. “Damn.”

“A couple of places I was stationed, we had designated spank shacks.”

“What?”

“They were, uh,” Levi tries to keep a straight face, cracks a smile as he motions with his hands the shape of a tent. “Tents, that they stuck porn mags in. When you left the barracks, we called it the ‘walk of shame’.” He shakes his head. Even the stupid shit like that made him miss the military. “Nobody gave a fuck though.”

Mike picks up his beer, takes a gulp. “We’re all human, right?”

“Unfortunately.”

Mike nods. “I think we should at least look for something today.”


Mike brings his beer to his lips, hesitates as if he’s about to say something, shakes his head, then takes another swig. “Whatever.”

Levi turns his attention back to his bike, tries to divert the conversation to a problem with the clutch that he can’t quite figure out. Mike looks at it, helps him, talks with him, but something seems off—something doesn’t seem quite right. When Mike leaves a couple of hours later, he feels strangely like he did something wrong. He wipes his hands off on a rag, looks at his bike one last time before pulling on the strap to close the garage door. Going inside Erwin’s house makes him feel like an intruder, an unwelcome guest, even though there’s pieces of himself on the porch, in the living room, in the laundry room, inside Erwin’s heart.

But it is still just an empty house full of boxes and white walls, and maybe now would be a good time leave.
Levi spends his lunch break looking at apartments on his phone. He has a legal pad in his lap, scribbles numbers and square footage down. Notes which one has more legit pictures, which ones seem to be in decent neighborhoods, which ones seem to be furthest away from the house he grew up in.

But he doesn’t want to leave. He doesn’t want to leave Erwin alone in that big house to eat take-out again, to bury himself in more paperwork, to exercise by himself. Does it matter what he wants? He thinks for a moment that it does. He tears the paper from the pad, wads it in his fist and shoves it into his pocket.

Another time.

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“No way.”

“Hm? What?” Erwin turns in his office chair to look at Levi.

The office as become their space. They co-exist now in each of the rooms: the living room is where Levi sleeps; the kitchen where they unwind from the day and cook; the dining room for the more ‘classy’ meals--ones that breach budgets Levi feels comfortable with; the exercise room where they start their daily routine together in comfortable silence. But the office--that’s where they work, talk, read, and live. Levi has taken it upon himself to decorate the walls with some artwork he found at the thrift store in town. Vintage watercolors behind yellowed glass, wooden frames painted periwinkle blue, chipped and weathered over years of changing owners and homes. Erwin helped him hang them.

“You have your high school yearbook? What is this…” Levi flips through. “Oh man, it’s when you were a junior.”

“So you were…”

“A freshman.”

Erwin swivels his chair and gets up to sit next to Levi on the floor. “All right. I’m interested.” Levi flips to the freshmen, and there he is, first in line like always: Levi Ackerman. “Oh my god, I forgot that hair.” Erwin leans his arm into Levi, his breath tickling the side of Levi’s cheek.

“Shut up. It was the ‘90s.” Levi tilts his head toward Erwin.

“The long punk rock look was for nobody. The whole world should have collectively known that.”

“Well, remember that time you tried to cut my hair?”

“Moving on.” Erwin clips behind a smile. He’s so close his nose almost touches Levi’s skin.

“No.” Levi moves his head back to look at him, smacks the back of his hand against his shoulder. “Tell me. Remind me how that went.”
Erwin tries to capture a laugh in his chest, but he can’t. He covers his face with his hand. “We learned that cosmetology was never going to be a career path for me.”

“I should have just shaved it after you butchered it like that. Like honestly, you have eyes, how did you fuck up so bad?”

“Why didn’t you shave it after that?”

Levi places his fingers on either side of his portrait, blocks out the long hair, the oversized ears, the soft jawline. “Because having any hair was better than none.” His sees his mom smiling at him, too young to be so unhealthy.

“I guess the long hair wasn’t terrible.” Erwin trails.

They go through each page commenting on old friends, past enemies, and people they forgot even existed. They make it to a page that Levi tries to turn, but Erwin stops him with a hand in the book. “Wait.” He chuckles. “Oh, I forgot Nile had the rat tail.”

Levi’s face goes sour. “Rat boy.”

“At least he grew up to look less awkward.”

“Still awkward though… Hold on…” Levi looks at Erwin, surprised. “You still talk to Nile?”

Erwin shrugs, still focused on the yearbook in Levi’s lap. “We’re Facebook friends, so take what you will from that.”

“But like, you don’t get drinks with him or anything, do you?”

“The last time I saw him was about two years ago. No… Actually, last year.”

Levi hums, then clicks his tongue. “I hated him.”

“I know you did.” Erwin motions for Levi to keep turning the pages, but he doesn’t. “He was a friend out of necessity. Or rather, convenience. We always had the same classes together. Just made sense at the time.”

“And now?”

“We aren’t friends , per se. Just acquaintances really.”

“He still lives in the area?”

“Levi, just turn the page.”

Levi rolls his neck. “I should have ripped that tail out from the back of his neck.”

“Come on, Levi.”

“Fuck him.”

“Keep going. We have to see how great I looked.”

Levi shifts in his spot, nods as he turns a few pages to Erwin. His hair is pushed back, shaved on the sides, but fluffed tall, his smile crooked and eyes bright and wide. There’s lasers shooting in the background behind him. “Classic.”
“Nevermind.” Erwin chuckles. “You can close that now.”

“No, no, no. Holy shit, what were you wearing?”

“You don’t remember that shirt?”

“I would remember that shirt. Is that plaid? Patchwork plaid?”

“Yes.”

Levi makes a disgusted noise through his nose. “Did you burn it?”

“I think Bailey got to it. She torn it apart into rags.”

“Smart dog.”

Erwin shifts closer to Levi. “Check the back. I want to see who signed it.”

“Oh, this will be good.”

“A bunch of zit-ridden teenagers instilling past me with snippets of anecdotes and proverbs, I bet.”

Levi pushes his chin toward his chest, not bothering to suppress the grins that Erwin gives him anymore. It’s so easy now. He turns to the back page. The whole spread is littered with various sizes and styles of handwriting, scaling from the legible to illegible. They read a few out loud, laughing at the one from their mutual friends Gelgar, telling Erwin a very important tip on how to keep his ‘do in check so he can catch all the ladies. They skim across the rest until they find Levi’s, scrawled in the bottom right hand corner of the page, beautifully written and eloquently said.

“High school sucks. Let’s have fun this summer.” Levi reads, and it swims in his head, feels weird to be reading something he doesn’t at all remember writing.

“What did we even do that summer?”

Levi leans against the bookcase, clicks his feet together out in front of him. “Was that the summer we went camping?”

Erwin thinks for a moment. “Yes… Yes, I believe it was. We forgot to bring one of the sleeping bags.”

“We had to unzip yours and sleep on the floor of the tent with it over us.” Levi tries not to look at Erwin, but the memory warms him, the thought of their backs pressed against each other on the hard ground, waking up to the sun turning their tent into vellum.

“It was so uncomfortable.”

“A week in hell.” Levi mutters.

They look at each other, and it’s like they never skipped a beat. Like high school and all its terrible horrible discomfort was just yesterday, but even high school was survivable with Erwin around. It was the two years without him that were hell. The twenty years without him were hell.

“It wasn’t so bad. It was still a week with you.” Erwin says quietly.

Levi rereads his autograph, blinks away the words Erwin says, and closes the yearbook. “We’ve had better.”
“We’ll have better.” Erwin smiles, and Levi wishes he could take a picture of it and keep it forever in his own personal yearbook.

“We’ll…. Have better.”

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Levi gets a text message from a rental agent. It says they’ve chosen him for the apartment, if he would like to come in and sign the paperwork, he can move in as soon as July 1st.

He deletes the text message.

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Levi’s comes home from work, a new gift wrapped in newsprint tucked under his arm as he enters the house. He unwraps the green glass vase and places on the entryway table.

Levi has time, and the day had been particularly stressful. He has been growing more comfortable with initiating small talk with customers that come through the shop doors. Nothing special—talk about the weather, about the town, about the products. Summer tourism has started to pile in, and with it comes patrons with less than savory attitudes. Petra had to step in and alleviate a conversation that had started to get heated. Levi tries to play it off when the customer leaves, tries to apologize in the only way Levi knows how, but Petra dismisses it. She understands. She didn’t hire him for that, knows where his strengths lie and what he has to do. He should just probably stay away from using the word ‘fuck’ around sixty year old ladies next time. She suggests that he directs them immediately to her in the future if he’s having an ‘off’ day.

But it frustrates him. Makes him feel inadequate. Stupid. He busies himself with housework before he starts dinner. He finds himself in the dining room, sorting through papers he discovers inside of tall bookshelf. It has three shelves and three drawers, and he’s emptied half of the first drawer out onto the table. A lot of it seems to be junk, stuff that somehow traversed locations—like grocery receipts from five years ago, old car repair bills, and scattered photos of relatives that Levi vaguely remembers meeting once or twice. He sorts them out into piles onto the dining room table, intends to have Erwin sit down and sort through them while he cooks dinner.

There’s a thick piece of paper under an old travel brochure, ivory in color and creased at the corner. He pulls it out to read it, his hand moving to fan the piece of paper as the feeling flares up in his gut. Oh, it’s gorgeous—letterpress black ink, elegant typography. Erwin’s name large, the bottom of the ‘E’ hooking into the points of ‘M’ for Marie’s name.

The wedding of Erwin Smith and Marie Karth. September 18th, 2010. RSVP by July 30th.

He shakes out a sigh as he takes a seat at the dining table. He could have made it if they went through with it. Erwin dismissed him from his role of Best Man, a role he wasn’t even sure if he would have been able to fulfill without finding himself in a constant panic attack. But he could have made it. He knew enough in advance to ask for the time, but being away, signing up on an injured leg for another tour… No, that was a better idea.
She was beautiful. Oh, she was beautiful, and smart, and quick witted. The way she made him smile and laugh. The way he looked at her. Levi tried hard to be happy for Erwin the one time they met. But all he felt was empty jealousy that hollowed away his stomach, made his throat thick with mud, and eyes glassy, unattentive. This woman with brunette hair and kind blue eyes… No, he owed it to Erwin to not be there. She was so fucking beautiful, Erwin was so goddamn handsome. It was like a fucking fairytale.

Levi taps the edge of the invite on the table. She had hugged him that time they met. Said, just like everybody else said, how much Erwin had talked about him. How she felt like she already knew him before they met. That it was an honor to meet him, not only because he was a soldier, but because he was special to Erwin. He thought he offered her a smile, but Erwin took him aside later that night at, asked him what he thought.

“She’s fine.” Levi said, a beer can in his hand. He had barely touched throughout the night.

“Are you sure?”

“Why do you care what I think?”

“You’re my friend. I care what my friends think about who I choose to spend my life with.”

“What?”

Erwin looked off into the living room. He had an apartment at the time, and he was having an Independence Day get together. There was a dreamy smile on his face. “I think she’s the one. I want to ask her to marry me.”

“You’re kidding me.” Levi swallowed down two full gulps of beer. He thought about moving to something heavier once he finished the can. When the fuck did Erwin ever talk like he was from a romantic comedy movie?

“Why would I joke about something like that?”

“No, it’s great. She seems great.” He pushed past Erwin to the fridge. Erwin watched him pull out an ice tray from the freezer and place it on the counter. Rummaging through the cupboards, Levi pulled down two tumblers and cracked an ice cube into each. Reaching for the bottle of whiskey on the counter, he poured two fingers worth into each glass, hovering a bit longer on one, and handed Erwin the one with less alcohol. “Hopefully she’s dumb enough to say yes to a guy like you.”

Erwin smiled, took the whiskey, and wrapped an arm around Levi’s shoulder, both looking out into the living room where Erwin’s friends were gathered. “Me too, Levi. Me too.”

The front door creaks open, and Levi jumps to his feet. He hastily gathers all of the garbage on the dining table and shoves it back into the drawer. He closes it quietly before Erwin makes his way into the kitchen.

“I like the vase, Levi.” Erwin says. He places a couple of bags of groceries onto the counter before heading off into the living room. “Levi?”

Levi rushes out of the dining room and comes up behind Erwin. “I’ll fill it with something tomorrow. Unless you want to.” He leans an arm on one of the piles of boxes, trying his best to act like he didn’t do something wrong. And he didn’t really, at least he doesn’t think he did, but he’s going to be more cautious in the future as to what he cleans and doesn’t clean.

Erwin turns to look at him, his smile fading as he eyes Levi’s posture. He walks over to Levi, presses
his hand onto his shoulder to turn him toward the kitchen again. “That sounds like a good idea. After all, you bought it for us.” He pauses, Levi walking a step ahead of him before pausing as well. “For the house, I mean.”

Levi eyes Erwin, sweeps a look across the living room. This could have been Marie’s. She could have been buying vases, paintings, and wind chimes for this house. But now it’s Levi, and it’s never going to be ‘us’. “I’m taking it with me when I move out.” Levi says, but it hurts to say, he barely even finishes the sentence audibly. He scratches his arm.

“Yes, I know.”

“Ohay…”

Erwin returns the next day with a single daffodil. He says he picked it from one of the school’s gardens. Levi asks him where. Erwin says around the admissions office--they have the best flowers there. Levi smiles, impressed by the new Erwin that steals from authority when he’s authority himself. He fills the vase with water and places the flower into it.

The rest of the week, a bit of Erwin greets him every day he comes home, and the house starts to feel a little bit less like a place and more like a living space.

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Levi dials the number, gets a middle aged woman on the phone. He schedules an appointment for after work, the apartment being on the outskirts of downtown. Petra offers to drive him there, but he declines. It’s not that far. He can walk it.

He ends up walking home instead.

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Erwin returns home with a styrofoam container in his hands. Levi meets him in the kitchen, leaning on the island. Erwin holds up the container, but doesn’t look at Levi. “Did you eat?” Levi shakes his head. “It’s seafood alfredo, if you want it.”

Levi watches Erwin, watches as he slides the container across the granite surface to him. “How’d it go?”

“It was fine.” Erwin says. He pulls down a tumbler from the cabinet and goes to open the cabinet that Levi is all too afraid of being opened.

“If you’re going to drink, get a glass out for me too.” Levi snaps.

Erwin turns and raises an eyebrow. “You don’t drink.”

“I do if you do.”

Erwin pauses. He opens the cupboard and puts his glass back. “I’m fine.”
“Are you?” Erwin looks at him, and he’s been getting worse at it. Worse at holding together that stoic face around his emotions. Around Levi. “How did it really go?”

“He’s changed.” Erwin says. He digs the back of the knuckle of his thumb into the bridge of his nose. “We don’t talk like we used to.”

Levi nods, tries to understand what it’s like to have a dad. The closest thing he’s ever had was Vincent. God knows Kenny was never one. He struggles with the idea of a paternal relationship that didn’t start off sour. Instead, aging outside of a fine wine and into a curdled milk. “Shit happens.”

Erwin finally finds his eyes up to Levi’s, he struggles with a smile, but Levi just wants him to stop. He doesn’t need to pretend. Levi moves toward Erwin, but he shrinks away a little, and it only serves to drive Levi closer. “We just… Fight all the time now.”

“How?”

“It is always about things I can’t control.” Levi is next to him now, and he’s close, feeling that familiar warmth of Erwin’s body heat next to his bare arm. “About things I did… To get here. I don’t know what he requires of me.”

“To be his son, probably. And you’re a damn good one too.” Levi hangs his head. He wants to hold Erwin’s hand. He looks at Erwin’s hand curling against the edge of the counter. Big knuckles unscathed by scars, puffy veins drawing across thin skin, soft dirty blonde hair creeping up from his wrist. “Better than I ever could have been.”

Erwin huffs a laugh. “Then perhaps we are both terrible sons.”

Levi leans closer, his arm touching Erwin’s. “He’s your dad, and he still loves you. Vince doesn’t hate people.”

Erwin smiles, but it’s so close to teetering into a quiver, that it fades away completely. “I suppose not.”

Levi swallows the lump in his throat. With care, he places his hand on top of Erwin’s. They match eyes, and they’re both wide, both their breathing going hitched at the tenderness, and it’s Erwin that pulls away his hand. He moves across the kitchen and goes to open the fridge. He rests with his head in it, doesn’t actually pull anything out when he closes it. He shakes his head and heads toward the foyer. “I am going to bed.”

Levi doesn’t retort. Doesn’t say that it’s only eight at night. Doesn’t ask him if there’s anything else he wanted to say.

Levi makes two cups of tea later, but doesn’t bring the second one upstairs. He sits and watches it until the steam stops drifting from the cup. And he can’t stop thinking about how stupid that was. He shouldn’t have touched him like that. Erwin doesn’t want that from him, doesn’t need it. He should have just told the asshole to get over it. At least he has a fucking dad to share Father’s Day with. He’d rather send a piece of dog shit to Kenny than pretend for a moment that he was ever a father figure to him. So Erwin and Vince have some issues? At least they have issues at all.

Levi dumps the rest of his tea out, dumps out Erwin’s tea on top of it, and drops the cups into the sink. They clatter against each other, the handle of Erwin’s cup snapping and breaking off to rest against the metal surface of the sink. Levi sucks in a gasp, turns, and leaves into the living room.
Levi schedules four viewings throughout the course of the week. He texts Mike to see if he can take him to the ones on Friday and Saturday. Mike asks why Erwin can’t take him on Saturday and Levi makes something up—he has to go to the bank. Mike agrees.

Levi puts in an application to the place he views on Friday. It’s not anywhere near what he wants or needs. The price is wrong. The size is wrong. The location is wrong. But he doesn’t care.

“I hope you get it.” Mike says.

“Me too.” Levi mutters as he slams the truck door behind him. “Me too.”

---

Levi spends the morning pulling down every book in Erwin’s office and dusting it off before replacing it back up onto the shelf. Erwin sits at his desk, reading over paperwork and typing away on his laptop. Like clockwork, every hour on the hour, he leans back in his chair and sighs with agitation.

“Take a break.” Levi says. He replaces a Bible that he’s sure has never been opened.

“I’m almost done.”

“It’s the weekend. Take a damn break.”

Erwin places his pen down and removes his reading glasses. He turns his chair to face Levi, his posture sunken and relaxed. “Do you have something in mind?”

“It’s almost lunch time.”

Erwin rolls his pen on his desk, doesn’t look at Levi. “Would you like to go out and get something?”

Levi takes down a stack of books, wipes the dust off of all of them, and places them back up one at a time. “We have food in the house.”

Erwin nods, his mouth jutting to the side as he lets out a staggered sigh. “Yes, that is true. I could just use the fresh air.”

“Open a window.”

“I could go for the walk into town.”

“My knee hurts.”

Erwin rocks in his chair, his hand on his chin. “I need to drop off something at the post office too.”

“Go by yourself.” Levi finishes the rest of the shelf he’s working on before he turns to Erwin. “I have shit to do.”
“Begging won’t get me anywhere, will it?” Erwin smiles.

“Nope. You can go by yourself.” Levi moves to the next shelf and starts the repetition all over again.

“You drive a hard bargain.” Erwin stands up, walks over to Levi and takes away Levi’s cleaning solution.

“What the fuck?”

“If you want it back, you’ll have to come get it.” Erwin starts to leave out the door.

“Are you really going to hold my cleaner ransom?”

Erwin is out in the hallway, “Will it work?”

Levi draws his eyebrows down, snorts out his nose as he rushes to catch up. “No.”

Erwin’s stepping down the stairs, quickens as he hears Levi catching up. “I think it is.”

“No it won’t, because I’m faster and stronger than you. And you’re ancient.” He starts running down the stairs. Erwin rounds the foyer and trots into the kitchen. Erwin has the kitchen island between him and Levi, his legs spread out and ready to dart in either direction. “Erwin, come on.” He hesitates a start to the right, causing Erwin to jerk the opposite way. “Give it back!”

“It’s working.” Erwin grins wildly. He moves the bottle behind his back as Levi darts to the left, and Erwin spins and dances along the island, until his head hits a hanging pan. “Oh, shit.” Erwin groans, holding his head in one hand, his body doubled over in complete lack of composure.

Levi barks a laugh and takes the chance, swipes the bottle from his hand and bounces back a few feet away. “Such grace.” He moves the cleaner behind his back and steps backward toward the foyer again.

“Bad form, shrimp.” Erwin shakes it out, lumbers toward Levi as the other man sprints back up the stairs.

“Eat shit!” Levi shouts. He makes it to the office and slams the door shut. He clicks the lock on the doorknob and rests against the back of the door. Erwin pounds on the door behind him, and Levi is laughing. He’s laughing so hard he’s almost crying. “Nobody’s home!”

The pounding stops. “Oh no.” Erwin’s voice is muffled, quiet. “My house is haunted…”

“Yeah, that’s it.” Levi catches his breath, but the smile remains. It hurts his cheeks. “And this ghost wants you outta here.” He breathes heavily, waits patiently for Erwin to start pounding again but is not rewarded. “Erwin?”

The lock pops and the door forces open, causing Levi to stumbled into the room. He turns with feline precision, regains his balance, and shoots toward Erwin. Erwin grabs him by the wrists, holds him strong, smiling down at him with boyish charm. “Go to lunch with me.”

“No.” Levi pushes back, tries to twist his wrist to aim the spray bottle at him.

Erwin notices, pulls his head back, smirking down from the corner of his eye. “Don’t you dare.”

“Let me go.” Levi’s mouth goes thin.

“I can help you when we get back.” Levi contemplates this, lets his guard down, and then he’s spun
around and his back flat against Erwin’s chest. Erwin wraps his arms around him, strong and sturdy, and it’s all Levi has to keep his heart from jumping out his throat. “Please.”

Levi puts his hands down, relaxes his shoulders, and the smile returns much to his dissatisfaction. “Fine.”

Erwin squeezes Levi to him once, before letting him go. “Great. I’ll meet you downstairs.”

Levi stands in the office by himself, tries to catch his breath, tries to process what just happened, what’s about to happen, tries not to read too much into it. He looks at the books, at the window, at the messy pile of papers across Erwin’s desk. He looks at the spray bottle in his hand, moves to the bookshelves and leaves it there. He pulls out his phone and goes to his text messages.

Erwin’s bringing me to see the apartment. Thanks for the offer.

“Levi!?” Erwin calls up the stairs.

Mike responds. Good luck.

Levi turns, his heart strumming against his chest. “I’m coming.”

Chapter End Notes

i’m a monster and wrote this in a day and didn’t have anybody read it so hopefully it's not terrible i just want to get to the next chapter i just WANT OT GET TO THE NDXT CHAPTER *flips table*

once again, your comments give me all the life. like i was dead and now i’m alive again. i love you ugys. I LOVE You it's 12:30 and i ust don't can't about smelling right now no i'm not drunk though just lazy

ok
Dot Pixis owns an old turn of the century home, painted coral pink except for the white wood panels denoting the attic space. The front porch is decorated with America themed pinwheels, buntins, and flags that flap and spin lazily under the hot summer sun. The smell of charcoal and meat along with the sound a beating bass streams up to the sky in a trail of grill smoke from the backyard. Erwin opens the gate toward the backyard, allows Levi in who is carrying a very large bowl of pasta salad. A massive german shepard meets them, sniffs their crotches excitedly, bounces on its paws before running out back again, only to return to try to jump on Erwin, tongue hanging out and panting.

“Down, boy!” Erwin laughs. He kneels down, lets the dog slobber all over his face, spouting words fit for a baby, not a dog.

“Gross.” Levi mutters as he continues into the backyard without him.

“Levi!” Petra waves and trots over with a beer bottle in her hand--something local probably. “You really made it!” Her nose and cheeks are a roseey pink from being in the sun for so long. There’s only one tree in the yard, and it’s not doing them any favors.

“Where do I put this?” Levi motions with his big bowl.

“Ah, right, follow me!” Petra takes him by the arm and guides him to three large banquet tables. The American flag tablecovers billow from a passing wind but stay intact, being held down by an onslaught of food fit enough for kings. She shoves aside a bowl of potato salad and chip dip to make
Levi puts the bowl down, and Petra takes the opportunity to wrap him in an unwanted hug. Levi pats her back stiffly before she steps away. “How many people will be here?” He asks.

“That should do it.”

“Uncle Dot knows everybody in town. He leaves it open for everybody in the neighborhood and then some. It’s an open door policy.” She shrugs. “Who knows.”

Levi nods, picks at his fingernails as he looks back at the entrance for Erwin. “We’ll stay for a little while.”

“Stay as long as you like, hun.” She follows Levi’s gaze. “Is Erwin here with you?”

“Looks like he’s been attacked by the dog.”

“Zeke sure is a beast.” Petra laughs. “He’ll be ok. A little damp by the end, but ok. You hungry?”

Levi shakes his head, looks back at the entrance where Erwin is finally making his way toward him, Zeke trotting contently next to him. “Not yet.”

“Petra!” Erwin opens his arms when he arrives and she falls into them. He rubs a single circle on her back and steps to move next to Levi. They had met a few times by chance when Levi chose to accept some rides homes from Erwin or Petra. They were both annoyingly bubbly around each other. But it’s nice too—to see the bridges that formed, to see connections forming across his life. A discovery of normalcy. “How are you?”

“I’m amazing! Nice to have a day off with family, friends, and, of course, all the food.”

“Talking about food…” Erwin eyes the smorgasbord. “Are we allowed to nibble?”

Levi raises and eyebrow. “‘Nibble’?”

Petra nods. “Of course! We’ve started to grill some things, but if you want the quality stuff, wait another hour or so.” She winks. “Listen, I gotta make my rounds. Part of being the niece of the host or whatever.” She shrugs. “I’ll catch up with you in a bit, ok?”

Levi and Erwin nod, and Petra walks off to another pack of guests. She hoots a laugh as she is wrapped in another hug that lifts her off the ground, and Levi strays his attention back to the food table. “Are you hungry?” Erwin asks.

“Yeah.”

“Good. I thought I was the only one.” He smiles down at Levi, goes to the end of the table and hands him a paper plate. “You do not have to feel like we have to stay here the whole time.”

“I know.”

Erwin nods. “If you ever get uncomfortable, please let me know.”

“I was the one that invited you.”

Erwin piles a spoon of potato salad on his plate. “I realize that.” Levi looks at him. He’s straight and stone like, his chest broad in the polo shirt, the sunglasses perched up on his head kicking stray pieces of hair about. Levi nods, swallowing a lump in his throat. Good old predictable Erwin, watching out for Levi as always. Then again, Erwin just watches out for anybody, doesn’t he? “Promise me?”
“Sure. Whatever.” Levi piles some three bean salad, some lettuce, and a few cherry tomatoes onto his plate.

They attempt to mingle. They come across Dot once, probably already a twelve pack in, but still yammering coherently as ever. Erwin points out the faces in town: the guy that owns the hardware store, the principal at the elementary school, the guy that bags his groceries at the store. Petra wasn’t lying: Dot really did know everybody. A surprising amount of people rotate in and out of the party in the short hour they’ve been there. Levi gets caught up in a story about the strange creature at Mauch Chunk Lake a few summers ago. How they had to close the beach for nearly a week as swimmers kept swearing up and down that they saw some sort of monster wading through the water. Levi misses the conclusion when his eyes land on the man, and his hand crushes the paper plate in his hands.

“Erwin!” The man says.

Erwin turns his head from the small group of people they’re with. He raises his hand into a wave, and his voice, his voice, sounds far too jovial. “Nile! Ah, and Marie.” Levi doesn’t have to see the smile to hear it, and he feels like he’s going to toss up everything in his stomach. He watches as Nile and Erwin shake hands, then for Erwin to go over and embrace his ex-fiance as if it were nothing.

“How are you doing? I feel like I don’t hear from you much anymore.” Nile keeps his hand on Erwin’s shoulder.

“I’ve been so swamped with work lately, I suppose I lost track of time.”

“I can’t believe it’s July already.” Marie pipes in. She’s smiling. She’s so damn pretty.

“Still working even when school’s out?”

“Yes, of course. No rest for the wicked.”

Nile laughs. “I guess not.”

“How did you manage to get the day off today, Sergeant?” Erwin muses. He brings a knuckle to his chin, a sly smile on his face.

“He has to work a double tomorrow.” Marie says, folding her hand into the crook of her husband’s arm. Her wedding band is gold, her engagement ring riddled with diamonds so big they catch the light like icicles.

“Ouch.”

“Well, I haven’t had a Fourth of July in fuck knows how long.” Nile trails.

“At least you’ll be able to watch the fireworks with the kids tonight.” Erwin takes a sip from his beer bottle before nodding.

“Always looking on the bright side, Erwin. I like it.” Nile nudges Erwin’s arm.

Levi shifts, tries to hide more behind Erwin. The sun cooks his scalp, there’s sweat beading underneath his black t-shirt, and he already feels a burn throbbing against his cheeks.


“Well shit, if it hasn’t been a thousand years. You two are finally back together?”

Levi can’t contain it, he shoots a glare at Nile that is nothing but contempt. He barely parts his lips as he speaks through his teeth. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“Woah, I was just--”

Erwin places a hand on Levi’s nape, presses his thumb into the bone and shakes his head. “He just recently retired after twenty years serving our country.” The space where Erwin’s fingers rest burn, and Levi begins to shake in his spot. Holding him back like a fucking dog. He glares up at Erwin.

“Oh, I wasn’t aware you were gone for so long, Levi. That’s really incredible. Thank you so much for your service.” Nile says, and it just sounds like poison dripping from his mouth.

Erwin presses his thumb down, gently strokes the other side of his neck with the rest of his fingers. “Sure.” Levi hisses. He digs his hands into his pockets, too afraid he’ll assault Nile then turn it back onto Erwin.

“Welcome back, Levi.” Marie bows her head.

Erwin moves his hand down to Levi’s back, rubs a circle once before moving his hand down to his side, his thumb hooking into his khakis. “He’s been staying with me since he got back.”

“Ah,” Nile says, and it sounds condescending. Suspicious. “Is that so?”

“It’s been hard finding just the right place.” Erwin adds.

He’s standing right there, he can speak for himself. But he can’t. He doesn’t want to. And he certainly doesn’t want to share it with Nile. He holds his breath, his shirt feeling like a constrictor across his chest.

“Hah, so you guys are camping away in your room just like when you were kids?” Nile cackles.

“Oh, Nile.” Marie tugs on his arm.

Levi closes his eyes, tries to compose the anger seething, curling, and bubbling in his veins. Apparently, Nile is a police officer now, and hitting an off-duty cop probably wasn’t a good idea, even if he was a war-torn veteran. He shoves his hands deeper into his pockets, his body bowing forward slightly.

Erwin offers a light laugh in return. “No, not quite…”

Erwin wraps his arm across Levi’s shoulder and rests his hand there. And at that, Levi’s off. He doesn’t care where, but it has to be away from here. He make a beeline for the back porch, hears Erwin calling after him and Nile dismissing him, hears the words “Let ‘im be” as he opens the sliding glass door. He turns, sees Erwin looking at him with concern, thick eyebrows upturned and lips silently mouthing questions at him. Levi shrugs and swats his hand at him as he walks inside.

Cigarettes were out of the question, but maybe being away from people will help. He’s never been to Pixis’ house before, but the porch enters into the dining room, which is connected directly to the living room. The television is on and singing a cheerful song, repeating words and numbers and colors in a hypnotizing beat. He removes his shoes at the door, points them at the wall and puts the laces inside before stepping into the living room. Gunther and Eld, Petra and Oruo two kids, are sitting at the coffee table, a box of crayons sprawled across the table in front of them.
Eld looks up, his light hair pulled back into a loose ponytail, and he cheers out. “Levi!” Gunther, the younger of the two, and much shier and serious, peers up at Levi but continues on coloring. They’d been to the store several times over the past few months with their father. He’s taken quite a liking to the Bozado family.

“Hey, squirts. What you up to?”

“I’m coloring a dinosaur. Gunther is coloring a dog.” Eld says matter of factly. “I tried to tell him that dogs aren’t purple, but he won’t listen to me.”

Levi kneels down, then rests back onto his butt, pulling his knees to his chest. “Dogs can be any color they want to be.” Gunther nods with a grin.

“No they can’t!” Eld says.

“Yes they can, Eld. Shut up.” Gunther tosses aside a light purple in order to get a dark purple crayon. He scribbles the dog’s back with a thick swatch of color.

“Hey, that’s not a nice thing to say to your brother.” Levi says.

Gunther bites his lip, dark eyebrows downturn in concentration. “Sorry.”

“Can I color too?” Levi asks.

“Ok!” Eld tilts his coloring book up, and struggles to flip through the pages, trying multiple times on a few to turn them. Levi smiles gently as Eld rips a sheet from the book, no care at all at tearing it near the spine, and passes the misshapen piece to Levi. “Here you go.”

“Thank you very much.” He looks at the picture of two cartoon birds, their wings furled open and reaching to the sky. They look like they’re dancing. He lays the paper down flat and colors quietly with the two boys. He listens to them talk, chimes in every so often, and it makes him feel calm, relaxed.

He’s colored one of his birds in when Petra enters the room. “I was wondering where you went.” Petra says softly.

Levi jumps a little, but regains composure and continues coloring. “Hey.”

“Boys. Mind jumpin’ outside and helping Uncle Dot and your father setup some of the games outside?”

“No we have to?” Eld groans. Petra nods sternly, and Gunther is already getting up, and Eld doesn’t protest again as he gets up with heavy limbs to follow his brother outside.

“What’s up?” Petra asks.

Levi keeps coloring. It gives his hands something to do, calms the shaking and the nerves and the feeling of being trapped by his past. He sighs out. “Didn’t expect to see some asshole from high school today.”

“Ah, yeah. I’ve had that happen one too many times at one of these parties.” Petra walks over to where her boys had been sitting. She takes a seat, picks up a crayon, and colors on the page Eld had been working on. “That’s just part of not moving far enough away from your hometown. I’ve had times where I’ve hidden in the bathroom for hours to keep from seeing ex-boyfriends.” She rolls her eyes and sighs. “So, who came in the form of your Christmas Past?”
Levi huffs a laugh. “Nile Fucking Dok.”

“Oh damn, the Sergeant?”

“Guess so. I had no fuckin’ idea he was a cop.”

“He’s been sergeant for awhile now. He’s pretty active in the community. He’s always been a pretty nice guy.”

“I didn’t know he was with Marie.”

“Oh yeah! Marie is a real sweetheart.”

“Erwin was gonna marry her.”

“What?”

“Yeah, it was a long time ago but…”

“And they’re out there talking right now?”

“I know.” Levi presses down on his crayon so hard it snaps and he places it down on the table. “I know.”

“That’s so… Awkward. Power to them, I guess.”

“How can they look at each other when…”

“There’s so much pain?” Levi shrugs and nods in response. “Why do people do anything?” She exchanges her crayon for another, her tongue sticking out of her mouth as she keeps coloring. She looks up briefly. “Can I ask you something?”

“What?”

“What’s up with you and Erwin?”

“We’re friends.”

“Uh huh.”

“Not you too.”

“I know it’s none of my business. I hate to admit that I even talk about it with Oruo, but you’ve been in that house for a long time now. You talk about him like he means… More.”

“I do not.”

“Come on. I thought we were closer than that at this point.”

Levi rests his forehead in his palm and shakes his head. “You thought wrong.”

“Fine…” Petra looks back down at her paper, worries her lip before picking up the crayon again. She sighs. “Listen. I don’t know Erwin very well, but I’ve never seen that guy in a bad mood. He just seems like that kind of guy that keeps the peace.”

If only she knew. “True.”
“I’m sure he doesn’t want to be out there either.”

Levi swallows.

“Not saying that talking to your ex-fiancé with the husband of your three kids isn’t a fucked up thing to do. I can see why you’re so pissed off.”

“At least I’m not crazy…”

“Far from it. I’d say you’re the only sane one.”

Levi’s shoulders sink and he nods. They’re quiet for a few more moments. The children’s show on the television repeats the word of the day three times before they sing another song. Levi breathes out of his nose, pausing mid stroke and staring at his hands. “He does mean more…” Levi says softly. Petra nods, but leaves it at that.

They finish coloring their pictures, signing their names and ages on the pages and go into the kitchen and hang them on the fridge under tacky magnets from all around the country. Levi wraps an arm around Petra’s shoulders and squeezes her to him before they go back outside.

When they leave the party, Erwin struggles to keep a smile, and Levi tucks a hand around his arm and brings himself closer. Erwin doesn’t distance himself, presses Levi’s hand to his ribs. When they make it to the car, he places a hand on top of Levi’s, pausing at the passenger side long enough to rub his thumb slowly across Levi’s knuckles before reaching into his pocket to get his keys.

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It’s two in the morning when Levi wakes up from a nightmare. He sits with his face buried in his knees until he can convince himself that they were nothing but visions in his sleep. Those smiling faces, the blood, the screams… They were all dreams.

He tries to go back to sleep, but it’s an hour later and insomnia has taken him. He gets up and starts to putter around the downstairs, doing his best to keep the noise down. Every clack of a plate in the sink, every slide of a drawer, rings in his head so vividly that he rests against the counter and tries to cool his head. He thinks on it, the clock on the microwave glaring back at him 3:30AM, and the only thing he can think of that will calm him down is a bath.

Quietly, putting as little weight onto the steps as he goes up, he makes his way up the stairs. He notices immediately the glow on either end of the hallway--one from Erwin’s room and the other from the spare room. Both doors are slightly ajar, and Levi has never been one for wasting energy. He carefully walks to Erwin’s room, pushes a knuckle against the door. It makes too much noise as it creaks open, and he stops. Nobody answers, so he figures if Erwin is in there, he’s asleep. He flicks the light off and pulls the door closed, turning the knob to make sure that it latches quietly.

He carefully moves to the end of the hallway to the spare room, and pushes the door open without restraint. It swings completely open, squeaking and creaking in a long cry as it does. Levi was wrong. Erwin startles awake in his chair, his eyes blowing wide and searching wildly around the room before they rest on Levi.

“Oh… Shit.” Erwin smacks his hands to his face, leans over with his elbows on his knees.
Levi tries to find the words. He searches the room around Erwin. The cardboard boxes with all the papers, papers that were semi-organized before, are scattered all over the floor around Erwin’s feet. There’s a short stack of them on a folding dinner tray, along with an empty tumbler and a bottle of whiskey on the floor under it. The whiskey was unopened earlier that night—Levi has their alcohol on inventory—and Erwin had drank through over half of it. The lamp on the dresser in the back corner of the room is dull, barely enough light to make it comfortable to read, but it doesn’t look like this is about comfort.

“Erwin.”

“Fuck.” Erwin groans. “Fuck.” He spittles onto the floor. His arms cross and he doubles over in his chair.

“Hey.”

“I’m going to be sick.”

“Ok, ok. Hold on.” Levi rushes over to him, pulls him up by the arm and carefully brings him into the bathroom. He rubs a hand in a single circle along his back as Erwin retches into the toilet. He spits a few times before he does again, holds his forehead in his hand as he wobbles next to the toilet. Levi runs his hand through Erwin’s damp hair, tries to place the strands back in place, tries to calm his breathing. He runs his hand along his shoulder blades again as Erwin throws up once again. Levi presses his forehead to Erwin’s bicep, shakes his head in silent desperation.

This used to be a frequent occurrence with Church, at least until he got a handle on his drinking. Until he found other things to look forward to than looking out the end of an empty bottle. Levi knows because of all of that, that sometimes expelling the garbage usually made everything better. Usually.

“Erwin, are you alright?” Erwin breathes heavily against the toilet and nods shallowly. “I’m going to go get some water, ok? And a washcloth.” Levi rubs his forehead against Erwin’s arm, leaves a kiss on his arm without thinking, but doesn’t worry about it. Erwin is too smashed to remember.

He moves downstairs, quickly fills a glass of water and trots back upstairs. He grabs a washcloth from the towel closet and returns to the bathroom. Erwin is already up and brushing his teeth, swaying heavily into the sink, his forehead touching the mirror of the medicine cabinet, the toothbrush dropping out of his mouth and into the sink as he falls to his knees again and throws up for the final time. Levi places the glass on the floor and wets the wash cloth with cool water before kneeling down. He pats the wash cloth across Erwin’s forehead. “How do you feel?”

“Like… Shit.” Erwin mutters. He chuckles lightly.

“How much did you drink?” Levi wants to hear Erwin say it.

“Uhhhhhh…” Erwin looks into the toilet and wrinkles his nose. Levi flushes the toilet and pulls Erwin’s head back to wash the rest of his face. “Not that much. I just feel bad.”

“Yeah.”

“Levi.” Erwin says, placing his hand on Levi’s. “I’m sorry. I drank… I drank without you.”

Levi wants to be angry, but that would go nowhere. Erwin is too stupid and drunk right now. It’d be like yelling at a wall made of jello. What is wrong with Erwin… Why would he drink himself into sleep on a shitty folding chair? Bury himself under stacks of papers and manilla folders and whiskey… “It’s all right, Erwin. It’s fine.” He combs his fingers through Erwin’s hair, rests his hands
on either side of his face and rubs his thumbs gently against his temples. “I just want you to… I just want you to be ok.”

Erwin smiles, chuckles as his eyes fall closed. “You care about me.”

“Shut up.”


“I know, you idiot.”

“No… Levi… Like…”

“Erwin.”

“Like a lot.”

“You’re drunk.”

“No I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.” Levi drags the washcloth across the scar, holds it there as he looks into Erwin’s bloodshot, watery eyes. He hates this. Hates seeing him like this. He feels both of their hearts broken on the bathroom floor, and he’s not sure how to repair them.

“The kiss. Levi.”

“Don’t. Erwin. Seriously.”

“I never… I’ve never… I shouldn’t have.”

“Let’s get you to bed.”

Erwin leans into Levi, the sour smell of vomit, the peppermint of his toothpaste, and the strong scent of whiskey on his breath turns Levi’s stomach, and he moves his head away from Erwin. “What… No. Levi. Wait.” He places a hand on Levi’s, places his face in the crook of Levi’s neck. “I should have stayed.” It comes out slow, his vowels dragging into consonants and petering out into a groan.

“Come on, big guy.” Levi ignores the flips in his stomach, the lightness he feels. He undoes himself from under Erwin, and pulls the taller man to his feet. He stammers into him and leans his weight onto Levi’s shoulders, shuffles his feet alongside Levi as they walk into the hallway and down to Erwin’s bedroom. Levi opens the door and switches the light on, and he guides Erwin into bed, not bothering to put him under the covers. “Wait here and try not to throw up.”

“Yessir.”

Levi’s head twitches to the side, but Erwin’s too drunk to think straight. He goes to grab the glass of water, the washcloth, and a bucket filled with a little bit of water. He brings them into the bedroom and forces Erwin to sit up and drink the entire glass of water as he continues to press a damp cloth to his cheeks.

“There’s a bucket here. Make sure you hit it or you’re cleaning up the mess yourself.”

“Levi.”

“What?”
“Levi, stay with me.”

“*What*?”

“Here. Next to me. *Please.*”

“No.” Levi goes to leave, but Erwin reaches out and grabs his arm. He turns to look at Erwin, and he sees it. If alcohol does one thing to Erwin apparently, it’s paint every array of emotion on his face. He’s exposed, every thing he tried to see when they were fighting, yelling at each other, when he held a knife to him...

“Don’t leave me.”

Levi stares down at him, face set to stone, eyebrows drawn tight. His nose flares as he sighs in and nods. “*All right.*”

Erwin lets go of him, his arm falling heavily to the edge of the bed, his cheek resting on the mattress. Levi walks around the bed, takes a pillow and fluffs it against the headboard and sets it up vertically. He climbs into bed, crossing his legs out in front of him and folds his arms across his chest. Erwin shifts, rolls over so he faces Levi and curls into him, his forehead against the side of his thigh.

“Thank you.” Erwin mutters. “Thank you.”

Levi doesn’t say anything. He rests his head against the headboard. He runs his fingers through Erwin’s hair, brushes it behind his ear until he’s snoring softly against him. He stays awake, too afraid of nightmares, too afraid of Erwin waking up alone and hungover. The sun rises a couple of hours later, his phone having nearly died in his hand, his other hand sitting lightly on the side of Erwin’s neck, when he finds some sleep.

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Erwin stretches alongside Levi, his free arm coming up and sprawling out across Levi and landing heavily on his stomach. Levi shakes awake, his fingers tensing and drawing fingernails across the nape of Erwin’s neck.

“*Ow.*” Erwin mumbles into Levi’s leg.

Levi shoots his hand away, sees Erwin’s arm across him, and panics. “*Holy shit. Shit!*” Levi tries to scramble off the bed, but Erwin holds him there, presses his face into Levi. “*Let go, idiot.*”

“My head hurts.”

“Yeah.” Levi manages to wiggle free and he slides off the bed. He sucks in several gasps, trying to catch his breath as if he’s just been running. “I’ll get you some water.”

Erwin shifts with Levi crossing the room. He looks at him bleary, squints at him with one hand propping up his head. “Did you sleep with me?”

Levi hoots a laugh. “*No! Never! No. Fuck no.*”

“Oh.” Erwin drops his head back down to the bed with his eyes closed. “I thought you were sleeping next to me.”
“Oh,” Levi juggles the edge of the door between his thumb and index finger, his other hand around the rim of the empty water glass. “Y-yeah. I slept next you last night.”

Erwin nods, eyes still closed. “I thought so.”

Levi bows his head and goes downstairs to fill the glass with filtered water. He takes a moment to splash water on his face. The water drips from his chin, and he closes his eyes, breathes out steady and long before washing his face more. He goes outside to smoke a cigarette, feels an intense desire to run down the street and never return. He can’t face Erwin. He can’t take advantage of Erwin like this--to let him say things he doesn’t mean. To touch him in ways he’ll regret.

Levi returns inside and climbs up the stairs with a glass of water in hand. He goes into the bedroom, but Erwin isn’t there. He looks around confused and goes back into the hallway. He walks to the spare room and looks in. Erwin looks back up at him, hands full of papers that he looks like he’s tried to organize, to put back into place, but he’s frazzled and upset and it unsettles Levi how unhinged he looks. “What are you doing?”

“I wanted to put them away…” Erwin lifts the papers, and he looks so childlike it claws at Levi’s heart.

Levi kneels next to him and takes the folder and papers away from Erwin. Erwin turns his head, holds his forehead with a wince. “What are these?”

Erwin’s silent. The clock on the wall ticks so loudly Levi wants to smash it into pieces. “Insurance papers.” Erwin says.

“From what?”

“The accident.”

Levi shifts and turns to sit down on the floor, his knees up and spread, his heels touching. “Why? That was… Forever ago.”

“I don’t know, Levi.” Erwin shakes his head. “I don’t know why.”

Levi sets the folder down and sits back. “Try to tell me.” Erwin looks at him, his shoulders sagging at his side. “I promise I won’t judge you.”

“Sounds impossible.” Erwin offers a half smile.

“Trust me.” And Levi is serious.

Erwin gets the hint, huffs in a deep breath and lets it out slowly. “I just know… That if I was more careful… If I wasn’t late getting ready…” Erwin starts.

“Stop it.”

Erwin looks up at Levi. He searches Levi’s face and nods. “I wasn’t at fault, but everything else was.”

“What do you mean?”

“The accident itself was his fault.” Erwin’s voice grows tight, and the tendons in his neck protrude. “He was drunk and didn’t pay attention. He hit us so hard we rolled. I have never been so… Scared.” Levi watches intently while Erwin shuffles with a new stack of papers in his hands
aimlessly. “I didn’t even wake up until I was in the hospital several days later. I had no idea where I was, or where Marie was.” He looks up at Levi. “What if she died? What if he killed her?”

“Erwin…”

“I was in and out of surgeries for a greater part of the first half of the month. Then I was set to recover for over a month in a hospital bed.”

“But you survived.”

“It didn’t feel like it.”

Levi averts his eyes. He knows that feeling all too well to fight him on it.

“When we both returned home, we were stacked with hospital bills. We had to pay them until our claim settled. We bled our savings dry—the savings we had for building a life together. We had to move in with her parents for a short time. I couldn’t work for nearly a year, and I had to be nursed by Marie and her parents like a fucking… Infirm.” The papers crumple in his hands. “We eventually got back on our feet when the insurance paid us the settlement, but all the damage had been done.” He sighs. “Then I discovered that I was naive. When I signed up for my car insurance years prior to that, I had set my policy in such a way that I couldn’t even sue the asshole for lasting damages.”

“You gambled and you lost?”

“Yes. I lost out on protecting Marie. On protecting us. A family we wanted to have.”

Levi puts the papers down next to him and presses his chin to his knees. “So these papers…”

Erwin puts his papers down and leans to look at all the filing boxes. “There’s a loophole. In some rare cases you can subvert that clause and proceed in a case against the at fault party.”

“All these papers are from that?”

“Yes.”

Levi looks down at his toes, wiggles them once and nods. “She left you.”

Erwin looks over at Levi. His face is closed off, but the energy he’s exerting is treacherously morose. “Yes.”

“You tried to protect her…”

“But in the process I neglected her.”

“It’s been ten years.” Levi says.

“Yes.”

“So why the papers?”

Erwin swallows.

“I won’t judge.”

“You know, Nile is really good for Marie.” Erwin says.
“What does that have to do with the papers?”

“He takes care of her. Looks at her, feels for her, in a way I do not believe I ever did.”

“Bullshit.”

Erwin looks surprised for a moment and chuckles softly. “Levi… I…” He sighs again and shakes his head. “I wonder if all I liked about her was the idea of her.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“She is the idea of family. A wife, children, a big house, family outings, someone to care for. However, I failed to see her other than that at times, and certainly was not able to see her in any other way when she broke the engagement.”

“Did you love her?”

“Certainly. I did for a long time. Times like these, I ask myself if I still do…”

“When you see her…”

Erwin bows his head, holds it in his palm, and offers the shallowest nod. Levi leans over and touches a hand to his, pulls it down from his face, and matches eyes with him. “You need to stop.”

“Stop?”

“Protecting people all the time. Fighting for us like we all need to be saved.” He says it for himself, he says it for the squad, he says it for Marie. “Take care of yourself every once and awhile, you moron.”

“I’ve already tried that once before. I did not go well.”

“Then take another gamble. Fight for yourself.” Levi stands, holds his hand out for Erwin to take. “Clean up these damn boxes and pack them away.”

Erwin stares at Levi’s hand. Levi worries he won’t take it, the contemplation across Erwin’s brows waver as his eyes struggle against closing and opening. Finally, he takes it, and Levi leans back and pulls him up. “Levi…”

“It’s the only way you can move on.”

Erwin looks down at the boxes, rubs his hand along back of his neck sheepishly. “I suppose you’re right.”

“Of course I’m right.” Levi says. “I can help you if you’d like.”

“No… I should do it on my own.”

“Sure. But I’ll be keeping tabs.”

Erwin smiles, and it’s genuine, handsome, thankful. “I may need that.”

“And Erwin… It’s ok that you care for her.” He looks up at him, eyes sunken and tired. “But don’t let the memory of her stop you from living.”

Erwin looks at him intently. Blue eyes stricken with fire, and they shine as they look at Levi. There’s
a layer of ice that melted within that instant, and it heats against Erwin’s cheeks and his lips part slightly. He releases a breath quietly, his chest deflating his shoulders in toward his chest, and he sways closer to Levi. “Levi.”

Levi has picked up the whiskey glass and bottle and a few other things to bring downstairs. “Yeah?” “May I kiss you?”

Levi’s heart skips, the feeling of a frog sliding down his throat, and a chill freezing at the tip of his spine. He looks at Erwin, wide eyed. “The fuck?” Erwin says it slower, clearer. His gaze remains fixed, stern. “May I kiss you.”

Levi puts the things he has in his hands down onto the dinner tray. “I don’t see how it will be different than before.”

Erwin’s shoulders sink, and he nods. “I suppose you’re right.”

Levi looks out toward the hallway. Bites his lips, tries to weigh the pros and cons—the cons coming up as the clear winners. But he wants to kiss Erwin so bad, has since the day he got back, has tried to circle around it, only to trigger himself into pasts that he desperately didn’t want to delve into… He’s wanted to kiss Erwin since the day he first placed a flower crown on his head and claimed him as his own. Levi was Erwin’s, always was going to be, and he wanted to feel it on his lips—everywhere. “It wasn’t a no.”

Erwin’s surprise lasts for a only a second until it’s replaced with a complete lack of understanding of what to do next. He steps forward hesitantly and wraps his arms arounds Levi, his hands resting on the small of his back. He brings him close, Levi sighing out as their chests touch and he bends down to meet him. Their lips hover over the other, Levi’s breath shaking against the feeling of Erwin so close to him, until Erwin quickly presses them together.

It lasts as quick as a lick of a whip, and Levi only feels all but cheated. He looks up at Erwin, eyes half lidded, waiting to see if the number one item on his cons list would make its appearance: regret.

It had before, almost instantaneously. Back when they were teenagers and sitting on Erwin’s bed. Over the months they had gotten closer as Erwin was finishing up his liberal arts classes in college, and Levi was entering his senior year of high school. Levi sat in the crook of Erwin’s arm, his head resting against his shoulder. They were watching a sitcom on the little 13” inch tube TV. Levi fidgeted his fingers on his t-shirt, shifted his head on Erwin, sighing deeply. He knew it wasn’t anything, this platonic closeness they had. It just felt nice to be close to somebody, as Erwin still refused to date any girls while he focused on his studying. It didn’t have to be anything… But he wanted it to be. He bit his lip, swallowed back years of repression, and let it go. “Can I kiss you?”

Erwin didn’t breathe for several seconds, and a chill swept through Levi. He shifted away from Erwin, but Erwin kept his arm tightly around Levi, and Levi made a noise not much unlike that of a trapped animal. Erwin moved his lips, chewed on nothing but a sickness Levi was sure he was trying to suppress. “That is fine.”

It was so sterile. So contractual. Levi settled back into Erwin, figuring he would just forget it. He didn’t want to, really. Levi was just being stupid. Kissing his best friend? How dumb.

“Levi?” “Yeah.”
“Aren’t you going to kiss me?”

Levi looked up at him, and he’d never wanted to be further away from Erwin. Never wanted to take back words so badly. “Forget it.”

“Levi.”

“Fuckin’ stupid…”

Erwin took Levi’s chin with his finger, guided his face to his and tilted it. “Kiss me.”

Levi couldn’t look at him, looked at his lips as if they were white hot iron meant to burn him. Melt him. Break him down into another element, build up into another person completely. Levi nodded and stiffly pressed his lips to Erwin’s. It didn’t feel good, just two puckered set of lips awkwardly smashed together until they parted within milliseconds. Levi shrunk into himself, rolled away from Erwin and brought his knees to his chest, watched for Erwin’s reaction. Would he be mad? Erwin tucked his lips together between his teeth, rubbed them together. The sound of the TV seemed to fill the room, from floor to ceiling, drowning him in noise that buzzed around his head like angry bees. Levi just wanted him to say something.

Anything.

But now… Now, Erwin draws him closer, boosts Levi up slightly to meet him, and their lips touch again. More assured, slower. It feels untrained, years since either of them probably kissed anybody. They stumble against each other, but Erwin is giving Levi the time to do so. Their lips fall apart, until they draw together and piece together perfectly, Levi’s bottom lip under Erwin’s. Fuck, if Erwin’s breath isn’t the most heinous thing, but the sensation of their skin touching has Levi bringing his arm up to hold onto Erwin. He’s so afraid his legs will give out, that Erwin will steal whatever composure away from him, that his fingers ball into fists against the back of Erwin’s shirt.

They part again, but Levi is greedy. Wants Erwin. Needs Erwin. He presses himself up onto the balls of his feet, pulls Erwin down toward him and kisses him again, runs his tongue along Erwin’s bottom lip, and the softest noise emits from Erwin’s nose as he returns the gesture, his legs buckling into Levi. They both stagger toward the wall of the room, and Erwin pushes Levi into it, kisses him long, his hands cupping Levi’s face, his nose breathing in the air around them, his eyebrows drawing tight. He parts and moves his head back. He opens his eyes, and they go crossed before they focus on Levi’s. He searches Levi, studies his face before bending for another kiss and resting his forehead against Levi’s.

Back in Erwin’s bed, Levi tried all he could to catch his breath. Erwin didn’t say anything. Even touched his lips as if to wipe Levi away from them. He nodded. “Maybe… It’s just a phase.” And that was the end of it. Levi turned his head, stared blankly at the television until finally it was too much. Until going back home to a house with a shitty uncle, a healthy helping of negligence, and a lonely bedroom all seemed more inviting than being there with Erwin.

But in Erwin’s house… In the house that always had a spot for Levi… Levi tries all he can to catch his breath. His hands are still knotted in Erwin’s shirt, and they flex as he tries to calm his heartbeat, tries to keep from hyperventilating. He has nowhere to go now. Nowhere. He has nowhere else but here. If this goes wrong. If it goes wrong… “Er… Erwin…” Oh god, just say something.

Anything.

“Forgive me.”
Levi shakes his head, confused and disoriented. The room feels like it’s spinning. This can’t be real.

“For waiting so long.”

Levi’s eyes go wide, and he throws his head forward, his face resting into the crook of Erwin’s neck. He pulls him so close that he can feel the throbbing vein in Erwin’s neck against his forehead, can hear the hollow gusts of his windpipe, the steady warmth he generates wrapped around him. “Shut up.”

“Alright.”

Levi laughs against Erwin’s throat, and he feels so sick and happy and light. Erwin kisses his cheek, and Levi swallows away the bile, the emotions, the years of self-hatred and pain and anxiety and nightmares mixed with all those damn nights wishing he was stronger and... And he just is.

Chapter End Notes

this was a long ass chapter, and it was all pretty heavy, but THEY DID THE THING. THEY DID IT.*SCREAMS*

huge thanks to my roommate and erwinsalive for betaing this, some parts were kind of confusing and needed some polishing. they gave me some guidance. love you, babes.

random notes:

so parts of this story are taken from experiences i’ve had... one being that i basically had a kind of surrogate family for several years as i was growing up because of a deceased family member, etc. anyway. my surrogate sister turns 30 in a couple of days and she had a big surprise party this past weekend, and i found out that she got in a car accident back in december... and i had no idea. she's ok, and so is the other person, she has some lasting injuries that are taking well to therapy. but i just hope that this fic doesn't end up being an omen or anything. holy shit.

also, i hope the insurance stuff wasn't boring to read, and honestly, i understand so little about insurance that i doubt i even got it all right, and tbh i just don't care enough to research enough because i'll never comprehend it. but it is important to note that pennsylvania has a weird little thing where you can opt in or out of "no fault" coverage. that's what erwin is talking about here. basically, he can claim funds for the accident, but he forfeits his rights to sue after that for things injuries that persist, mental counseling, etc. .... or something. lmao

OK ANYWAY HOPE YOU ENJOYED. COMMENTS AND SCREAMING ARE APPRECIATED. I HOPE YOU ARE ALSO EXCITED THEY KISSED. 8*

(oh and i'll be taking a short break from this fic. i need to plan the next 2-3 chapters a little better, and i'll be traveling for a week soon and will need to work through prompts/giveaway gifts as well. so i apologize ahead of time. :) )
Levi returns back to the bikes with a tray full of milkshakes. Nanaba and Mike take theirs before Erwin does. Levi removes his and places the tray on the seat of his bike.

It’s been a couple of months since Mike got his bike. Levi and Mike transformed their Friday routine into garage dates–working on their bikes between classic rock, alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks, and stories about times they never shared together. Mike stopped asking Levi about apartments, but Levi could hear the questions in the way they talked. Still felt the pressure even though the words never came out exactly like they used to. Levi was starting to feel comfortable in his situation, and Mike almost seemed to serve to make him feel otherwise.

The bikes are fixed now. They’ve driven them for over a month down winding state routes and back roads, their bikes purring and barking with each gear shift, the sound dissipating into the leaves of the evergreens canopying over the pavement. They were graced with a moderate August day when they offered rides to Nanaba and Erwin to the popular summer ice cream spot in town. Nanaba was not necessarily impressed. She wasn’t as mad as Mike anticipated it to be, though she did request a few minutes of private time, her strong words about finances and age and safety being whispered loud enough to hear around the corner of the ice cream shop.

Erwin smiles at Levi as he takes a sip of his birthday cake milkshake. Levi watches his lips, the way his tongue sticks out first when he takes the straw in his mouth, the way he slowly blinks at Levi. He sighs a flustered sigh as he averts his eyes to Mike and Nanaba. He drinks down a gulp of his vanilla
milkshake, face set in stone, refusing to let Erwin affect him as he so easily tends to do.

“How’s she driving?” Mike asks. He swirls his drink in his hand as if were a fine liquor, and he takes a sip of his strawberry milkshake as he awaits an answer.

“A little sluggish.”

“It’s all that extra dead weight.” Mike points at Erwin.

“Huh?” Erwin perks up, finally taking his mouth off of his straw. Levi has a strong hand on sweets in the house--Erwin is enjoying his long awaited reward for good dieting. “I’m not dead weight.”

“We are dangerously close to the load capacity with this sack of bricks riding on the back.” Levi captures a sly grin before it escapes.

“Does the uh,” Nanaba smiles into her banana shake, “Height difference make it awkward too?”

Levi looks up at Erwin, and this time he can’t hold the grin back. “He’s like a dorsal fin.”

“He keeps you safe?” Nanaba chuckles.

Levi’s grin fades and he worries his lip. “Sure.”

Erwin steps closer to Levi, his mouth around the straw again and sucking with each breath. He pauses to talk around the plastic, “It certainly is a fun ride. I have never been on a motorcycle before.”

“You hear that?” Mike says, wrapping an arm around Nanaba and drawing her closer to him. He talks against the crown of her head, smiling. “Even Erwin likes it.”

“Erwin doesn’t have a joint bank account with Levi.”

Levi and Erwin look at each other briefly, then turn their attention back to Mike and Nanaba.

“Come on, babe. That doesn’t mean you can’t enjoy it.” He kisses her hair, his thumb rubbing against her shoulder.

Nanaba clicks her tongue. “You’re lucky you’re so handsome.”

“Looks like you have to work on your diet, Erwin. That is if you want to keep getting rides from Levi.”

Erwin wraps his arm around Levi’s waist, draws the sides of their hips together. “I have already lost ten pounds.” He mimics Mike’s affection with a kiss on the top of Levi’s head. “Do you think I am still allowed?”

Levi feels a heat flash across his cheeks. Nanaba is looking at them with a self contained smile, her straw buried in her back teeth as she gnaws without any words. Mike’s expression is shock, his moustache creasing the lines on his face darker in the high afternoon sun. He places his milkshake down on the seat of his bike, his wide nose flaring as he bows his head, his eyes latching up at Erwin’s as if expecting an answer. Levi shrinks, moves away from Erwin, away from his touch.

Erwin seems to recognize what he has done. He shoves his hand deep into his pocket as he siphons the last bit of milkshake from his cup in a collection of popping gurgles.

They all finish their drinks. Mike and Erwin collect their trash and walk to the garbage can as Levi and Nanaba gear up to start riding again. Mike’s back is to them, his hands waving as he talks. Erwin
looks over Mike’s shoulder at Levi, nods a few times before placing his hand on Mike’s shoulder. Mike shakes his head as his shoulders sag a little, and they both make their way back to the bikes, stoic faced and eyes at the ground.

When they get their helmets on, Levi wraps his legs around the bike, situates himself, and waits for Erwin to take the spot behind him. Their thighs lock together, awkward and heavy, but Erwin’s arms come around him, tight and supportive, his weight thrust forward into him. He squeezes his arms around Levi’s midsection in the way that he’s done in the past, a way that speaks to Levi without words. Levi pats a hand on top of Erwin’s before they ride off back toward home.

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Levi’s chopping vegetables when Erwin gets home. Erwin enters the kitchen, pauses, looks at the time, then back at Levi. “It’s a little early, isn’t it?”

Levi doesn’t answer. The knife rocks against the cutting board. The lettuce leaves crunch under the edge of it, green pigment staining the wood with each cut. It’s minced to a pulp, not fit for a salad at all. Not fit for anything. Not good enough. Erwin watches over his shoulder before quietly and carefully folding his hand around Levi’s and drawing in close behind him. Levi stops moving, blinks and looks down at his hand. “How was your day, Levi?”

“Fine.”

“What are you making?”

“Salad.”

“That sounds good. It appears we need more lettuce. I’m a bit famished today.” Levi puts down the knife, and with it, Erwin wraps his arms around Levi, brings his back to his chest and bows his head down to places a gentle kiss to Levi’s neck.

Levi looks at the lettuce, isn’t sure how it got there or when he started chopping. He doesn’t want to keep seeing them anymore. He’s better now. He has Erwin here. Erwin’s here.

But if he leaves... They kissed. What if Erwin hates him? What if he stayed? What if he didn’t command them to go in? What if... What if? What if.

“Or we can perhaps have it tomorrow night. Let’s go out tonight.” Erwin runs his hands up Levi’s arms, rubs them softly. Levi closes his eyes and rests his forehead against Erwin’s cheek.

“I’d like to go out.”

“All right.” Erwin places a kiss on his forehead, and Levi doesn’t understand why. Why he touches him like this, so tenderly and carefully, like he’s some kind of glass thing that will break under pressure. Maybe he will. Maybe he has. “Let me know when you are ready.”

Erwin’s hands move away, but Levi holds his arms there, turns into them and rests his head against his chest. He listens to the long draws of air into his lungs, closes his eyes against the warmth of his chest, bites his lip as he tries to overcome this... This feeling of being alive, where the universe seems so large, and he’s so insignificant. So fleeting. “How was your day?”
“It was good. Thank you for asking.”

Levi nods, holds Erwin so tight, as if he might vanish into cigarette smoke. He flicks his finger against Erwin’s back, tries to snap out of this trance, but it’s real. Erwin’s here. But what if he isn’t?

What if he stays. What if it’s ok. He can’t shake the feeling, the fear, and Erwin tells him otherwise, a kiss on the top of his head, a soft hand on his back, a reassurance of trust.

“Would you like to sit down for awhile first?”

What if he trusts him? What if…

“Levi?”

Levi nods as Erwin guides him into the living room. They sit, Levi curled into Erwin’s side, eyes closed, hand clutching at the folds in Erwin’s button-up. They never make it out the door, and Erwin never asks why.

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One of Levi’s favorite chores is grocery shopping. It keeps him in control of Erwin’s health, because if they didn’t do it together, Erwin would still be living on a diet from the yellow pages. And as stupid as it is, as unlikely as it always will be, it feels domestic. Familiar.

“I can make you love brussel sprouts.”

“I doubt it.” Erwin says, leaning on the cart. He motions it to and fro. Their cart is already full of non-refrigerated boxes of healthy snacks and foods, and they’re at the end of their half hour trip by paroozing the produce section.

Levi grabs a hold of the end of the cart, keeps it in place as Erwin tries to push against it. “When have I ever made you something you didn’t like?”

Erwin seriously considers it. He hums and shrugs. “I suppose you are right. However, they are gross, so I am afraid you can’t convince me.”

“You’ve never even had one!”

“I do not see what that has to do with anything.”

Levi huffs and goes to the plastic bags, pulls one off the spool, and shakes it open. He walks over and grabs three handfuls of brussel sprouts and knots the end of the bag. “There.”

“There’s so many…”

“And you’re going to help me eat them.”

Erwin laughs and nods. “I trust you.”

Levi presses his index finger into Erwin’s chest, pushes on it and Erwin sways slightly. “Good.”

Erwin brings his hand up and squeezes Levi’s hand in his, and he leans down and steals a kiss from
Levi. It startles Levi. He jumps back, dropping the bag into the cart and shoving his hands deep into his hoodie pocket. With his shoulders nearly up to his ears, they finish their shopping and check out. They get to the parking lot and load the car with their groceries in silence, and Levi piles into the passenger seat, looking out the window as Erwin joins him in the driver’s seat.

“I am sorry.” Erwin says softly.

“It’s ok.”

“I shouldn’t have…”

“I just don’t like doing it in public…” Levi trails.

Erwin nods, starts the car, puts his hand on the gear shift before changing his mind and putting his hand in his lap. “We don’t…”

“Shut up, Erwin.”

“I’m serious.”

“I am too. I just don’t…” He rubs his nose in frustration. “Just not in public, ok?” Erwin nods, and his head hangs slightly. Levi leans over the center console, looks at Erwin’s neck before looking him in the eyes with a quiet understanding.

Erwin’s lips go thin and he swallows before he speaks again. “Are you comfortable with kissing me at all?”

Levi looks at Erwin’s lips, his fingers curling around the edge of his seat. “Yeah. Definitely.”

“But not in public?”

Levi nods.

“I will respect that. I am sorry I did not before.”

“I didn’t say anything before.” Erwin drops his eyes to Levi’s lips. “Kiss me.” Levi mutters. Erwin hesitantly leans forward, so Levi meets him halfway and places a kiss on his lips. When they part, Levi is smiling, reassuring and true. He doesn’t want to deny to himself or to Erwin that he enjoys the affection, but he can’t… Not in public. Not with how Mike looked at them, not with how strangers could look at them. Not when he has been conditioned for so long to fear it, has the proof broken across his face.

“Levi…”

“Again.”

Erwin leans in, kisses him longer, steadier, presses into him over the space between them in the car. Levi doesn’t even try to catch his breath when they part and melt together again. Erwin places his hand on Levi’s cheek, hides it from view as he opens his mouth against Levi’s, their lips smiling against each other when the meet again.

---
Levi joins Erwin in the living room, his eyes buried in a book, his other hand holding a mug of hot tea even though the house is above a comfortable level of heat. He feels for the coffee table with the bottom of his mug, sets it there when he finds it, and takes a seat close enough to Erwin that their thighs touch.

“It’s too hot.” Erwin shifts. He moves down the couch, but Levi follows him. He does it again, complains as he does so. “Levi, come on.” Levi scooches next to him again. Erwin sighs, puts his arm up onto the back of the couch, his hand draping down and onto Levi’s shoulder.

Levi turns a page in his book, settles his shoulder into the side of Erwin’s ribs. “You smell awful.”

“It’s eighty five degrees in here.”

“Deodorant exists for a reason.”

“I’m wearing some.”

“Not enough.”

Erwin sighs out his nose. “I can go put some more on if it will shut you up.”

“Then I won’t have an armrest.”

“Well I cannot do both.”

“You’re smart, you can figure it out.”

“A compliment?”

“Sure.” Levi places his book down in his lap and looks up at Erwin. “But you didn’t ask me how smart I think you are.”

Erwin grins. “How smart do you think I am?”

Levi looks to the ceiling, puckers his lips and nods. “Like… You’re like a smart dog. Like one of those bomb sniffing dogs or something.”

“Wow.”

“I know. I was surprised too.” Levi grins, eyes soft and trailing down to look at Erwin’s lips. “At least you have a job.”

“I can pay my dog bills.” Erwin follows suit, looks down at Levi’s lips as he talks.

“For your dog house.” Levi leans up.

“And all my dog children.” Erwin leans down.

“They’re called puppies.” Levi presses his lips to Erwin’s, and Erwin laughs into them. “Idiot.”

Erwin brings his arm down onto Levi’s shoulder, scoops him around and into him. He parts his lips around Levi’s, tongue catching his top lip as they close together. Levi leans in, his legs up on the couch, his book falling into the crevice between them, his chest pointing and pressing into Erwin’s. Their lips move together, carefully, cautiously, precisely. Like a silent conversation, picking words that try to heal, that focus on the sensitivity of their lives that were pressured to keep them from talking at all.
It may be the heat, but Levi swims in the feeling. Behind his eyelids he sees the shadows bleeding around the edges, charcoal fingers of burning flesh, bloody knuckles against broken noses, clawing down and down until it’s just black. And the visions are gone and nothing is there but the feeling of Erwin. Here. On him, around him, with him. He whimpers softly into Erwin’s lips as he presses closer, and the volume of his conversation increases. He shouts the images away, mouth gaping against Erwin’s as he sucks in a breath, meets his tongue with Erwin’s, tastes the bitterness of coffee and the earthiness of saliva. Catalogs it, categorizes it, holds it on his lips as he rests his hand on top of the scar on Erwin’s cheek.

Levi is nearly on his lap when Erwin uses his voice between kisses. “We should get a dog.”

Levi freezes, his head dropping, the tip of his nose resting between Erwin’s lips. He blinks, then pushes himself away from Erwin, lands heavily back into his seat next to him. He fists his shorts in his hands.

Erwin looks at him with a raised eyebrow. “Oh my…” Erwin clears his throat. “I have just been thinking about getting one for a long time, but I’m gone so long during the day…”

Levi’s chest rises and falls. “I’m not gonna take care of your dog for you.”

“I know… I know, I misspoke…”

We? Levi doesn’t even live here. They aren’t… What was… He touches his fingers to his lips and shifts down the couch. “Yeah.”

Erwin goes to reach out for him, but decides against it. He leans over and picks up a stack of paperwork and reading glasses, settles them in his lap and crosses his leg over the other. Levi looks at his cup of tea, clicks his tongue, and gets up to sit outside.

He sits, knees to his chest, sucking down a cigarette. There’s three in his ashtray, and the one in his hand burns to the filter without him before he notices Erwin sitting at the other Adirondack chair, his head bowed in paperwork.

Levi snuffs the cigarette out. He leans his cheek on his knee, an ache piercing up through his leg and vibrating up his spine. “It’s too hot out here.”

Erwin hums in response.

“Go back inside.”

“I would like to be out here with you.”

Levi pulls his phone out and displays the time. 6:30. “Let’s cook something.”

Erwin looks over his glasses at him and nods. “I would like to do that as well.”

Levi gets up, walks over to Erwin and places a kiss on his sweaty forehead. He licks his lips, tastes the salt and a pomade and the taste he’s grown to associate to Erwin. Erwin grabs the inside of his elbow before he walks off, pulls Levi down gently to meet his face. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Levi searches Erwin’s features, for an emotion, for a sign. He sees a small one, faint and almost undetectable at the corner of his lip. “Maybe someday.”

Erwin nods. “Maybe someday.” He kisses Levi softly, and it’s so tender, it aches in Levi’s chest until long after dinner.
“No! No no no!” Levi throws a chair down from the dining table, the back of it smacking into the wall and barricading Erwin away from him. “Knock it off!”

Erwin casually walks around the outer edge of the dining table to the clear path. He drags his finger along the edge of the table, eyes still set on Levi. “What’s wrong?”

“Don’t. When you get that look…”

Erwin fidgets, and Levi flinches toward the doorway.

“Stop!”

“I’m not doing anything.” Erwin says, betraying himself immediately as he darts toward Levi.

Levi springs back, side stepping into the kitchen, keeping his front toward Erwin the whole time. He shuffles back toward the foyer, stumbling over the moulding that separates hardwood from stone. He grabs hold of the bannister to the stairs, but that gives Erwin just enough time to almost catch up. Levi composes himself, scrambles up the stairs on all fours, but Erwin has him by the ankle and he slips down a step, his hands slapping onto wood, his lungs filling with laughter.

“Let go!” Levi chuckles as Erwin climbs up over him, presses his chest down into Levi, forcing his back into the side of a step. “That hurt--”

Erwin kisses him, deep and hot, his knee falling between his legs, and Levi sucks in air through his nose. His eyes draw closed tightly, his arms coming up to wrap around Erwin, his back lifting off the steps and into him. Their lips smack against each other, tongues rolling between teeth and lips, and the soft noises of frustration filter out through the rungs of the railing. Erwin pieces them together, pushes Levi to sit up, his hands falling down around him, keeping him close. So close.

Erwin runs his hand up Levi’s left shin, trails it along until it reaches his knee. He moves his mouth against Levi as he rubs gentle circle into his kneecap, sighs out as Levi presses him closer. His hand continues up, his thumb pressing into the inside of Levi’s thigh, Levi’s hand holding either side of Erwin’s face as he kisses harder, brings his teeth down onto his bottom lip with a sharp intake of breath.

Being this close to Erwin, day dreaming, night dreaming--dreaming in general--about his touch on him. He craves it like a cigarette, breathes him in like one, streams out a breath like one. He’s addicted to the taste, the feel. He wants more, shifts in his spot under Erwin as his hands move up into golden hair, tugs it to the side so he can lap up the taste of Erwin and his warm, inviting mouth. Erwin’s hand moves up Levi’s thigh, to the crease of his leg, splaying and opening to palm against his crotch.

“Ah!” Levi protests. He snaps back, his spine hitting the middle of the step. “Stop!” He shouts it, pushes Erwin off of him, almost forgetting that they are on the steps, grabbing hold of the front of Erwin’s shirt so he doesn’t topple over.

Erwin grabs hold of the bannister, wide eyed, steadies himself and looks down on Levi. His mouth falls open, and for the first time maybe ever, Levi hears him stutter. “L-L-Levi. I-I’m so sorry! I’m… I should have… Fuck. Shit .”
Levi presses his hands to his face. Sighs into them and shakes his head. He groans. “It’s ok.” He says behind his hands.

Erwin doesn’t know what to do with himself. He reaches out for Levi, but retracts it, slaps himself on the thigh and sighs out. “No it is not.”

“It is, Erwin. Stop.” Levi wants to get up, fidgets slightly, but stays grounded.

“I should have asked. I have no idea…”

“We have no idea what we’re doing.” Levi mutters behind his palms.

“Yes…” Erwin sits on the steps. He’s two steps below Levi, his head coming up to Levi’s shoulder. “How juvenile.”

“It’s ok.” Levi still has his hands over his face, cheeks beating a fierce heat against them. It’s too soon. Erwin hasn’t had enough time to think of what a bad idea this is. How much he doesn’t want to be here, with him, touching him. Why is Erwin touching him? He’s had people like Marie.

“I should have asked.”

“It’s ok.” Gorgeous Marie.

“Levi, it’s not.” Erwin looks up at him. “Please, look at me.”

Levi sighs out. He peeks through his fingers at Erwin. Handsome, beautiful, eyes a hollow blue that can say so much or say so little. Ones that have looked on other partners with the same kind of gaze, and he feels so sick and jealous. He feels so second hand. Bottom of the barrel. Broken and wretched. Church smiles. “This is dumb.”

“What is?”

“You doing this… With me.”

Erwin turns his head, looks down the stairs, his jaw moving while he thinks. “I do not agree.”

“It doesn’t bother you?”

“What could possibly bother me?”

Levi glares at the back of his head. “Everything.”

Erwin rubs his thumb against his fingers. “Levi… I’m tired.”

“It’s four in the afternoon…”

Erwin huffs a laugh. “No, I am tired in the metaphorical way.”

“Oh.” Levi puts his hands down onto his lap, taps his toes against the stair step before sliding down one. “How?”

“I want things.”

Levi plays with his fingernails. “Who doesn’t?”

“You are one of them.”
Levi looks up at the back of Erwin’s head. The stairwell presses in on him, slowly, surely, until he swears he can hear his bones cracking, feels them snap through his skin, leave him smashed and broken on the steps. He sucks in a breath, whispers out: “What?”

Erwin turns just enough to show his profile, but he doesn’t look up at Levi. “I recognize that may make you uncomfortable, and I apologize. I feel like it is only fair that I be truthful with you.”

“Sounds so fucking heartfelt when you put it that way.”

Erwin’s eyebrows crease before a smile reveals. “That may be so.”

“What are we doing…”

“I haven’t a clue.”

Levi slinks down another step, wraps his arms around Erwin’s neck and presses a kiss to his temple. He leaves his lips there, kisses him each time he thinks of a when Erwin was there for him. Each time that he felt protected and cared for. For all the times that he regrets pushing him away. Twenty times, down his face and onto Erwin’s lips, for each year that he was gone. He slips into Erwin’s lap, takes his face and kisses him twenty more times for each year he pledges to stay.

They have no idea, and Levi is convinced that Erwin is making a mistake. But his lips are real, and they’re anchors that are holding him steady in his harbor. He tries and he tries, but he has nobody else. Wouldn’t want to be with anybody else. And Erwin asked him, Erwin told him. Levi tries to lose his fear in Erwin’s arms, but it’s so hard. It’s so damn hard.

Erwin holds him when their lips get tired, and Levi’s never felt so at home.

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They’re building a house of cards. Tall and delicate, swaying and ready to topple. Each time Levi adds a card, he feels the anxiety. A touch. A kiss. An embrace. Another triangle to grow taller, another added weight to make it all come crashing down.

Jesus. If he fucks this up... If they get too close... If something happens... He has nothing. Nothing. He barely has Erwin now. And with their boyish hormones seeping into their lives, where keeping their hands off of each other becomes its own source of anxiety… No. They can’t do this. They can’t.

He’ll have nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

He walks to the tub and turns it on, plugs the stopper, and sits on the edge. He locked the door for the first time since he got here. He didn’t like the idea of Erwin walking in on him before, but he knew it was harmless. Now is not one of those times.

It sticks with him--the idea of Erwin on him. How good he feels. Erwin is one of those feelings he’s never quite felt. Comparing him to the men in his past, the ones he met in secret, ones that held him with untrained hands, calloused and chipped like sandpaper, touching and holding him as if he were a tier above an object. No, Erwin talks to him, says to him that maybe, for some reason, he’s special. Wanted. That this time, it won’t fall apart. That he won’t leave. The neither of them will leave--and not because they can’t, but because they won’t.
His hand was so firm, large, and sure when it pressed up against him like that. Levi pulls the zipper down on his pants, his heartbeat sounding over the rushing water in the tub. He doesn’t have to imagine how Erwin feels against him now. Hot breath against his ear, firm lips against his, tongue dragging up his chin to his ear. He shivers as he takes his half hard cock into his hand. Erwin’s broad chest against his, warm and hot, his veins pumping with the same desire that he has for him. It makes him drunk, washes away fears that haunt him on the faces of old comrades, withers away smiles that drag him into his darkness.

He strokes faster. Hair that smells like pine, sticky and stiff, it gets all in his hands, mixes into the sweat on Erwin’s neck as he holds it between his hands. The pumping of his blood against his thumbs as he kisses him deeper, spiralling into space that dares to undefine them. He wants to be closer. Close. Oh god, he’s so close.

He comes against the doors of the sink, his moan catching in his nostril in a strangled sound, and he feels remorse and regret and disgust piling on top of his euphoria. He keeps stroking until it doesn’t feel good, until it hurts, and all the white sticky sin is on the cabinets, on the floor, and in his hand. He imagines Erwin taking his hand, spreading the fingers out and laving his tongue between each digit, blue eyes peering up with him in a seduction fit for fairytales, consuming bits of Levi into him as he sucks the cum off of the ends of each. one. of. them.

Levi’s breath hitches as he rushes his clean hand to his forehead. He closes his eyes tight, lets out a frustrated groan, clutching his dirty fist against cum that’s hardening between the ridges of his palm. He sways off of the side of the tub, turns the faucet on to the sink and runs his hand under water so hot that it reddens it a cherry pink. Looking up into the mirror, he sees a man that looks like Ackerman, a man that looks like Levi, a man that used to be a boy with long hair and a straight nose. But he’s not sure who this is—this house has turned him into something new, and as his heart starts to race, he sees the shine of blood pooling in the bathtub behind him. The drain of the tub sucks down the diluted mixture as it overfills, the sink siphons down the globs of himself. Dirty. Ugly.

He looks away from the mirror and shakes out a breath.

If Erwin wants him, then maybe he wants him too. But he’s nothing, and dividing by zero is an impossibility, and he feels nothing but fear for succumbing to a self that decides to trust.

Chapter End Notes

this chapter also known as "nutting" thanks to erwinsalive. ;P

thanks to my betas sumiscribe and erwinsalive. i was a little nervous about this chapter, and still kinda am, so thank you for giving it a look through.

i couldn't really keep myself from writing this... so here is this chapter like 3 weeks ahead of schedule. i'm just... so in love with this fic, so i'm sorry. the next one might actually be a few weeks out, but we'll see. i'm just clearly a big dumb liar.

thank you so much for all your support. there was just an overwhelming amount after the last chapter, and it means so, so much the amount of people that have messaged me and left comments. it really gets me more and more excited to break your hearts bring you further into the story. <3 you're all just lovely.
“If you had one wish, what would it be?” Mike asks. His feet are up on the coffee table, not a habit that Levi particularly cares for, but he doesn’t feel right telling Mike to knock it off when it’s not his coffee table. Regardless, Levi’s fingers twitch around the rim of his glass, and he can’t quite pry his eyes off of Mike’s wiggling toes.

“The fuck?”

“Answer the damn question, shorty.”

Levi puckers a frown and throws his free hand in the air. “I don’t fuckin’ know. Like... World peace? I dunno.”

Mike snorts. “Really?”

“No! Christ…”

“You’ve never thought of this?” Mike bawks. “One wish... What would you do if you won the lottery... If you could go back in time and change one thing... You don’t daydream about this shit?”

“Why would I daydream about shit that will never happen?”

“Have you no imagination?”
Levi sighs, presses deeper into the couch and folds his arms over his chest. “I have too much of an imagination.”

“Hmmm.” Mike shifts, pulls his feet down off the coffee table and grabs his bottle of beer. He rests it between his legs before tipping his head back and taking a drink. “Well, I’d wish for the squad to be happy.”

Levi looks over at Mike with an eyebrow raised. “Are they not?”

“We’ve all been through a lot in our own way.”

Levi shrugs. “We have…”

“Levi, I don’t really know how else to say this.” Mike sets his bottle back down onto table, folds his hands into the bends of his arms, and doesn’t look at Levi when he sits back.

“What…”

“I really think you need to move out.”

“Why.” Sharp, quick, and it’s certainly not a question.

“Erwin will never tell you to move out, and you’ve… Been through shit.”

“So.” Levi hisses between his teeth.

“He told me about when you pulled a knife on him.” Mike breathes out of his nose. “Not after I had to pry it out of him...” He scratches his face. “That shit’s not all right. I tried to be ok with it, give you the benefit of the doubt or whatever…”

“What the fuck…”

“Because I knew you’d be out of here soon.” Mike turns his head toward Levi, but he doesn’t make eye contact. “I don’t know what’s going on between you two now, but…”

“Mind your own business.”

“If it happens again…”

“It fuckin’ won’t.”

“All right.”

“All right.”

Mike draws his hand down his face and breathes out heavily. “I’m goin’ to go home.”

“Sounds like a good idea.”

Mike stands up and starts walking out of the living room. He pauses at the doorway, shakes his head, then disappears out of view. Levi waits for the front door to close, waits to hear Mike’s truck start and back out of the driveway. He stands up and takes Mike’s beer bottle by the neck and tosses it through the entryway. It smashes against the island in the kitchen, splintering glass and liquid across the floor. Some of the spray archs back into the living room, stains the cardboard of the twenty three boxes that line the partition wall.
He takes a cigarette out of his pocket, sets it in his lips. He chews the filter with his front teeth, brings his knees to his chest, blinded by anger and disappointment and fear. So much fear because... What if Mike is right? What if he hurts Erwin again? The cigarette drops from his mouth and into his lap.

He can’t. He can’t. He won’t. Fuck, he cares about Erwin. At points he’s afraid that he cares too much. And people don’t hurt people they care about.

The glass is cleaned and the kitchen smells of lemons when Erwin gets home from work. Levi doesn’t say anything, welcomes Erwin home in the foyer, kissing him against the front door until they both gasp for breath. The way Erwin smiles is worth protecting from the side of himself that dared for a fleeting moment to take it away. Never again. Never.

Mike doesn’t come over the following Friday. Levi is both relieved and offended, and it sits in the back of his mind like a tumor.

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The summer tourism has slowed down after Labor Day, and Levi putters around the shop cleaning tables and shelves as Petra stages new product. He helps a customer with a glass vase from a high shelf, talks about the art of glassblowing with her, though he does more listening than talking. It’s still a struggle to relate, sometimes he finds his mind wandering outside of the conversation and into other things, but he doesn’t snap anymore. He even smiles weakly at her as he wraps the glass in newsprint, nodding as she talks about nothing to him.

“You certainly are a handsome young man.” She says. She’s older, has salt and pepper hair cropped close to her head. “Are you two married?”

“Ah, afraid not.” Petra comments from the computer at the counter, her mouse clicking across inventory in her accounting program. “Levi came into my life a little too late for that.”

“She has a husband and two little ankle biters at home.” Levi says, his head down.

The lady laughs behind her hand. “Ankle biters, eh?”

“Four and six. Thank god for retired relatives that live in the area. Means the hubby and I can still work.”

“And get away from them for a few hours a day.” The woman chimes in.

Petra exaggerates a nod. “Ohhh yes.” She laughs. Levi’s pocket vibrates and he shoots his hand to his phone. He looks at Petra and she excuses him with a smile--the two of them able to work together with language that doesn’t need to involve words. Bowing off into the back room, Petra continues the conversation with the customer and rings her out while Levi checks the messages on his phone.

*Sorry to bother you. I forgot an important piece of paperwork at home. Could you perhaps bring it to me?*

Levi looks out the doorway, and he bites his lip. He has never asked Petra if he could leave early. He barely asks for time off, seeing as how he works only a few days a week. He sighs, slightly annoyed that Erwin thinks he could drop everything to do something for him--that his job isn’t as important. However, it’s not like Erwin ever interrupted him like this before. He must really need the paperwork
and part of him *does* want to be there for Erwin if he can be.

He works up the courage to ask Petra to leave early. She agrees with a lingering smile that unsettles Levi a little. He hops out the door, Petra practically waving him out the door, requesting only that he gives Erwin shit for stealing him away from her.

Lehigh University is an hour drive down 476 from Erwin’s house. Levi shoulders on his riding jacket, gloves, and helmet and kickstarts his bike awake, returns home briefly to pick up the papers and a quick snack before heading out again. The temperature is moderate and comfortable, and Levi makes it to the school within fifty minutes, standing his bike in a visitor parking spot before searching the campus for Erwin’s office.

The school is known for its engineering programs, or so Erwin has told him, but the buildings certainly would have fooled him. Large and masoned from stone, they stand like castles on the sloping hills down toward the Lehigh River. His boots scuff across the pavement, hits cobblestone as he wanders around courtyards. He finally finds the right building, large wooden doors with wrought iron accents, statues of influential scientists sitting high like gargoyles. He shoulders the door open, enters into a marble foyer, eyes rolling as he searches for a directory of some sort so he can drop off the damn papers and be on his way.

He goes up and down several flights of stairs before finally asking a student where he could find Associate Dean Smith’s office. He’s thoroughly pissed by the time he makes it down the hallway that stemmed directly from the foyer. Levi throws the door open without knocking and Erwin startles to attention in his seat.

“Levi!”

Levi’s hand is already deep inside his jacket, pulling at the folder of documents to slap onto Erwin’s desk. “I hope these were important.”

“They are important enough.” Erwin says, leaning over his desk and picking up the folder. He smiles sweetly up at Levi before placing it to the side of the rest of his paperwork. Much to Levi’s dismay, Erwin’s office is less than organized, and he twists his nose up at it.

“You mean you didn’t need these papers?” Levi asks, annoyed.

“Well, I did.” Erwin clarifies. He taps his fingers on the folder as he casts his eyes back onto his desk. “I just didn’t need them *right now.*”

“You could have grabbed them tonight?”

“Yes.”

“Youfuckin’ asshole. I had to leave work because of this. I’m on payroll now!”

“I will call Petra myself and apologize.”

“The fuck you will. God damn--”

“While you’re here, would you like to get lunch with me?”

Levi juts his jaw, rolls his eyes and nods. “Seeing as how I’m losing three hours of work, I guess it doesn’t fuckin’ matter. You’re payin’, though.”

“Of course. Thank you.” Erwin stands, puts his suit jacket back on and rounds his desk. He leans
down and receives a reluctant kiss before ushering Levi out the office door.

Levi chooses Indian food for lunch. He gets the most expensive thing off the menu out of spite, even though he doesn’t particularly like goat. They talk about work, the papers that Levi had to bring him, the antics of Hange and the new students this semester. Levi eats slowly naturally, but is more steady now, drags as much time from Erwin as he can between soft smiles and low laughs. He likes hearing Erwin chuckle, enjoys seeing him smile.

“Hange is thinking about asking Moblit to marry them.”

“No shit. Don’t the guys normally do that?”

“Hange has never really been the type to conform to much of anything.”

Levi nods, grinning softly. “I can totally see that.”

“They said that they just want the tax breaks.”

“Jesus fuckin’ Christ…” Levi puts his head in his hand. “How will Moblit take that?”

“He’s not much of one to conform either. I think they just feel… What’s the word…” Erwin flicks his forefingers as he tries to think, “Bonded.”

“What kinda hokey shit is is that?”

“You don’t get it?”

“Hell no.”

“I think I do.”

“What, did you feel that way with Marie?”

Erwin shakes his head. “No, no. I loved her, but I don’t know if I ever felt like we were soulmates. That concept always felt so dramatic.”

“But you said you get it.”

Erwin looks down at his meal. “I think I do.” He looks back up at Levi, stares at him quietly before averting his gaze back down to his meal.

“You don’t…”

“I want to ask you if you would like to make this something more, Levi.”

“I… What…” Levi puts his fork down, drags his fingernails down the cloth tablecover. “Did you drag me out here just to ask me this?”

“I did not mean to deceive you. I wanted to treat you to something when I asked.” Erwin’s voice is steady, just as steady as his eyes on him now.

“You’re so damn stupid…”

“So?”

“What? Should we date?”
“Is it such a wild idea?”

“I…” Levi feels a heat wash across his face. “I guess not.”

“We don’t have to. We don’t need labels, it just makes things… Easier. Sometimes.”

Levi worries his lip between his fingers, stares off into his sweating glass of water. Breathes quickly and heavily as he pieces it all together. If they do this, if something happens, if he fucks up, if Mike was right… What if that big nosed bastard was right?

“Sure.” Levi says, finally finding the will to look up at Erwin. “But we’re partners, not…”

Erwin closes his eyes with a grin. He nods. “I prefer that as well.”

“It just… Means more.”

“Yes. Yes it does.” Their eyes meet, and they both smile.

“Partners…” Levi tries it on his tongue, decides that he likes it quite a bit. He hasn’t ever had one before, not like this anyway. Levi nods as he takes a bite out of his meal, covers his mouth as he chews, keeping his eyes on Erwin’s hands as he cuts a large piece of potato in his curry. He swallows, draws his hand down and sets it on the table.

Levi leans over and places his hand on top of Erwin’s, runs his thumbs across knuckles, doesn’t bother looking around the room for wandering eyes. Erwin pays him back with a toothy smile, strong and handsome--designed specially for Levi. Specially for them.

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“What!” Petra nearly screams. She slaps her hands on the glass counter so hard, that Levi’s afraid her wedding ring will cause it to shatter to pieces.

“Calm down.” Levi regrets telling her. It’s never been his thing to boast about personal things, but something about Erwin seems to be changing him--drawing his focus onto a constructing a new life from the rubbles of his past. He feels like the ghosts that whisper in his ear may start to utter different words, their malice turning to gentleness in the face of his surfacing happiness.

“I’m not surprised. I did say I thought you guys were together for the longest time.”

“Shut up.”

“Oh, you shut up.” She flicks her red hair behind her shoulder. “The way you talk about him… The way he always looks at you like he…” She hums and puckers her lips as she nods. “Like he admires you.”

“Yeah right.”

“I’m tellin’ you!”

“I have things to do.”

“Have you guys… You know…”
“Oh my god.”

“Oruo and I did the--”

“Petra! Don’t finish that sentence, or I swear I’ll walk out that door!”

Petra wails a laugh, covers her mouth as the door jingles open and a customer walks in. Levi sighs out. “Saved by the bell.” She winks.

“I hate you.” Levi pulls his cleaning supplies from the counter to do his monthly master cleaning.

“Hey Levi.” Petra says, her voice even and soft.

Levi turns to look at her, grumpy faced and drained of Petra’s overactiveness. “What.”

“I’m really happy for you. I think you really compliment each other.”

Levi looks down at the cleaning supplies in his arms, nods, and sets his jaw. “I think so too.”

---

The house smells clean and fresh, the changing of the season coming wafting and blowing through open windows. Levi presses his arm to his forehead and sighs. He’s been working on cleaning the living room, having just pushed the couch back into place after cleaning the windows. He startles when Erwin places his hands on his hips. “Holy shit!” Erwin chuckles and presses a kiss to Levi’s temple. “When did you learn to be so quiet?”

“I’ve always been this way.” Erwin runs his hands across Levi’s stomach and pulls him in a close embrace, kisses down Levi’s cheek, to his jaw and to his neck.

“Liar.”

Erwin rests his chin on Levi’s shoulder, puts his fingers down into Levi’s pockets and holds him close. “What are you up to?”

“Just finished cleaning the windows. It would be easier if these boxes were out of the way, though.”

Erwin hums.

“When are you going to clean them out?”

“I have something to show you.” Erwin leans up, lets one of his hands wander down to Levi’s ass and pats it once.

Levi sighs, reserving to the fact once again that these boxes will never get put away. “Oh, did you manage to color inside the lines this time?”

“Ha ha. I have been able to do that since I was ten.” Erwin leaves off toward the foyer, and Levi follows with a grin on his face. He catches up and grabs Erwin’s hand as they go up the stairs. They walk toward the end of the hallway, and Levi squeezes Erwin’s hand with anticipation.

“Erwin.”
Erwin nods and turns the doorknob for the spare room and swings it open. He presents it with his hand and lets Levi step in first. “I did it.”

He looks around, his gut twisting with emotions he doesn’t quite know where to place. And he had done it. The boxes with all the insurance papers are all cleaned up and tucked away into the closed closet. The dresser in the back of the room, tidied up and pushed closer to the window. The bookshelf has been sorted, some of the books removed, and a floor lamp has been added to the corner next to the door. Levi notes that the wood floor can use a new polish, some minor repair, but it’s a floor. A floor with no boxes.

“You did it.” Levi steps into the room, and his smile grows so big that it hurts his cheeks.

“I don’t know if I’ve ever seen you smile that big.” Erwin chuckles.

“You did a good job, Erwin.” He walks over to the bookshelf, runs his finger across the wood and rubs his thumb against it. “You even dusted.”

Puffing out his chest, Erwin returns the smile. “I’m capable sometimes.”

Levi looks back at Erwin, his teeth showing with a smile that meets his eyes. Erwin’s eyebrows upturn and he seems to deflate as his mouth drops open with a soft sigh. “Levi, I want to ask you something.”

“Sure.” Levi searches the corners of the room—he even removed the spider webs. He laughs to himself in a weird sort of delight.

“Move in with me, please.”

Levi’s mouth draws shut, and his eyes grow wide. “Huh?”

“This room, it’s yours if you want. We can get you a bed and some furniture.” Erwin takes a step forward, talks with his hands. “I know it’s not much, but you can make it yours and—”

“Erwin.”

“It’s not fair for you to sleep down in the living room. You’ve done more to this house than I ever have.”

“I don’t mind.”

“I know you don’t, but I do.”

Levi thinks of Mike. His words, his warning. Erwin would never ask Levi to leave, but he never expected him to ask him to stay. “I’ve been looking for a place.”

“Have you?” Erwin prods. Levi tries to say something, but he realizes in that moment that those weeks had turned into months since he even looked at any listings. “If you would like to stay here permanently, I would love to have you.”

Levi looks at Erwin’s chest. Tries to process it all. Erwin has put their relationship into perspective over the past couple of weeks. They are partners, and now Erwin is asking for them to live together, make more of whatever this arrangement they had. Erwin wants him around, and he can’t understand. It terrifies him, it overjoys him, it suffocates him. His throat grows tight as he sucks in air. Erwin steps forward, opens his arms as Levi steps into them, wraps his arms around him so tightly he makes Erwin squeak out a laugh.
“Is that a yes?” Erwin says, his hands roaming across Levi’s back, one coming up and cradling the back of his neck.

“I help pay, though.” He has no intention of being a burden. Not anymore.

“We’ll figure it out. I just want to know--”

“Yes.” Levi looks up at Erwin. His eyes are glassy and soft and bright from the smile on his face. Erwin runs his hand up and caresses his undercut with the tips of his fingers. He kisses him, deep and with intention. Levi chuckles against Erwin’s lips, bubbling with a type of happiness and relief that shakes through him as he grabs hold of Erwin. “Yes.” He mutters, his arms wrapping tight around Erwin’s neck. Erwin stands straight, lifts Levi off the floor and holds him against his chest and breathes in deep.

“Thank you, Levi.” His lips flutter against Levi’s, and it feels unreal. Feels unjust. Afterall, Levi is the one that should be thanking him, but for some reason, he can’t seem to find the words.

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“I don’t…”

“No, you gotta press this button.” Eld leans over into Erwin’s lap, his little fingers pressing down on top of big ones.

“Oh. Oh!” Erwin looks over at Levi, a smile bright on his face. “It makes my guy jump!”

Levi rolls his eyes, looks down at Gunther and says quietly, “We’re gonna destroy them.”

“Yup.” Gunther fidgets in his seat on the floor. They’ve built a little nest out of decorative pillows that Levi had purchased for the house, misshapen and crumpled by the bodies that strewn across them. His brother Eld sits on the other side of Erwin, and they’re all huddled in front of the TV, their backs pressed against the coffee table.

Petra and Oruo were in desperate need of a date night. Petra asked Levi if he could watch the kids, a request he fought against initially. He said he had no idea how to take care of kids. At all. And without saying it, he implied he didn’t think he was mentally equipped, couldn’t handle human lives within his hands like he had in the past. Not again. Especially not with kids. But she insisted again, and he said he would if it was at Erwin’s. Erwin was the safety net, more knowledgeable with kids and with Levi, could act as a necessary buffer if needed. She agreed immediately, sent them packing a week later with their WiiU, several controllers, sleeping bags, pillows, and a laundry list of to-dos before bedtime. In the end, Erwin and Levi ended up being the “cool uncles”. Ten pudding cups later and two hours past bedtime, the kids were still wired enough to demand rematches in Smash.

Erwin groans. “Wait… Where did my guy go?”

“Stop calling them ‘your guy’. Christ, what are you, fifty?”

“Almost.”

“You’re old!” Eld chimes up at Erwin.
Levi can’t catch it before lets out a hoot. “He’s right!”

“You all might as well be beating me with this... This...” Erwin trails, shakes his controller in frustration as he tries to get Peach to respond to his movements, “This dang thing.”

Eld leans in his seat, “Boo!” He kicks Levi’s Pit off the screen with his Link.

“Aww crap.” Levi mutters.

“Again!?” Erwin cries, losing his last Peach to a well placed upward blast from Gunther’s Megaman.

“Wait, why am I not coming back?”

“You’re outta guys, old man.” Levi says behind an amused grin.

“But...”

“No!” Levi drops his controller as Eld knocks out his last life. “Such garbage. You guys are cheaters!”

Eld and Gunther giggle, but the air of the living room becomes serious again. They’re still three lives left, too busy with their brotherly rivalry to pay attention to the fake agitation from their adult peers. Levi looks at Erwin, stares at him for a long time with a smile on a face that he doesn’t pay much attention to anymore. Erwin is watching the screen, studying it as if he actually has an intention of understanding it, at getting good at it. His lips seal together into a smile as he turns his head, looks at Levi, and something in Levi’s chest catches.

Those eyes. The soft lines around his mouth. Eyebrows slightly upturned. He looks... Happy. And Levi aches to see him like this every day. Forever.

“Care to help me clean up a little?” Erwin says, quietly.

Levi nods. He picks up the trash on the coffee table as Erwin grabs the used glasses. Eld and Gunther remain on their pillows, playing around each other like a chess match in silent concentration.

The adults walk into the kitchen and deposit their items into the appropriate containers. Erwin grabs Levi by the elbow, looks him in the eyes, still smiling. Still handsome. Levi leans up and kisses him, soft and quick, their lips peeling apart and rushing a feeling up his spine as he places his forehead on Erwin’s chest.

“You’re doing a good job, Babysitter Levi.”

“Do you think?”

“For being such an asshole, you certainly have a compassionate side.”

Levi reaches around and squeezes a large piece of Erwin’s ass in his hand. “Fuck you.” Erwin raises and eyebrow with a devilish grin, and Levi flushes red. He hesitates away and clears his throat. “I guess we should put them to bed.”

“Petra would be furious with you if she knew what you did.”

“What I did? You’re the one that kept feeding them pudding! Pudding pusher...” Levi waves his hand as he goes into the living room.

Erwin smiles, says under his breath as he follows, “I’ll push your pudding.”

“That doesn’t even make sense.”
They get the kids up into Levi’s room after a significant round of whining. Clad in pajamas, teeth brushed and cleaned, nightlight installed, they tuck them into Levi’s twin sized bed and leave the door open. Erwin and Levi make their way back downstairs, and it’s late by the time that Levi settles into the crook of Erwin’s arm, eyes half lidded as they watch the rerun marathon of their favorite cooking competition show. He starts to drift until he feels a finger under his chin. Purring awake, Levi upturns his head with a smile. “Yeah?”

“I just wanted to see if you were awake.”

“I am now.”

Erwin shifts, brings his leg up to tuck under him as he turns to Levi. “You’re cute when you sleep.”

“Don’t say that again if you want to live.” Levi tries to glare, but his smile gets in the way.

“What if I kiss you instead?”

Levi shrugs, is taken so hotly by Erwin that he swallows a moan. Erwin climbs over him, straddles over his waist and pushes him into the couch. He’s gotten good at stealing the breath from Levi, beckons his mouth to open against his, draws Levi’s eyes so pleasantly closed, placing kisses on his eyelids and brushing his lip against eyelashes. Erwin’s hands roam, grow daring, feels Levi through clothes as if he’s trying to sonar for the spots that will make Levi go crazy.

It works.

Levi pushes Erwin’s hands down, squirms up the couch as he breathes in another kiss, lips falling apart from Erwin’s even though he doesn’t want to. “What if the kids wake up?”

Erwin grins, follows Levi up the couch and captures his mouth hungrily. He tugs on his lip between his teeth, his hand tucking under Levi’s shirt, and it’s cold enough to suck the air out of Levi’s lungs. “They’re old enough to sleep through the night. We’ll be fine.”

“How the fuck do you--ahhh.” Levi’s head throws back as Erwin takes a nipple between his fingers, and adds to the torture by sucking softly into the crook of his neck. “S-stop.”

Erwin lavs his tongue up to Levi’s jaw, nips the skin as he pinches Levi hard enough to make him gasp. “I will if it’s because you aren’t enjoying this.”

Levi claws at Erwin’s back, ruts his hips up into him and groans. “Asshole.” Erwin licks up to Levi’s ear, sucks the earlobe into his mouth and slowly tongues it, lets his tongue wrap around the shell and drag back down, his teeth sinking into the skin. “Fuck!”

“Quiet. The boys might hear you.” Erwin whispers into his ear, his finger rubbing against the nub of Levi’s nipple, moving his head to capture lips that eagerly await them. Levi moans softly against them, smacks lips quickly, frustrated, groaning as his hips wiggle. “You’re so beautiful, Levi.”

“S-shut up.” He bites onto Erwin’s lip, deflates a needy noise from his nose as he does.

Erwin runs his hand down Levi’s chest, hovers over the feel of abs against his fingers, applies pressure as it travels down his body, to Levi’s hip bone, latches his finger under the waistband of his clothes. He tugs at the jeans, hooks the elastic of his boxers with it and exposes some of the soft trail of pubic hair that connects from his navel to his groin. “You are, Levi. You always have been.” His kiss is softer now, more careful. His touch is more delicate, more unsure. “Can I touch you?”

Levi’s cock twitches against the restraint of his clothing. He’s hard as hell, and he wants nothing
more to be relieved by Erwin. But the kids are upstairs and asleep, and he’s pretty sure Erwin’s never done this, and it’s been god knows how long since he’s had anybody touch him like that and what if, what if…

“You can tell me to stop whenever. I promise.” Erwin kisses him so softly, Levi lets out a moan louder than he intended. Shaking and eager, Levi nods, brings his hands up to steady his nerves against Erwin’s face.

“Just… We gotta keep the clothes on…”

“Of course.” Erwin kisses Levi again, and he can’t figure what it is about the man’s lips that drive him crazy--that sends his mind floating, sends him flying through trees and spinning in the air. He tries to catch himself, but Erwin has undone the button of his pants, has carefully pulled his cock out from the fly of his boxers, and holds it in his hand. He squeezes his fingers gently around Levi’s shaft, and Levi knows it’s a hesitation. “Is this fine?”

Levi responds with hot kisses and open mouths. Their tongues slide against each other, their breathing heats the space between them. Erwin begins to move his hand, and Levi strangles a moan behind his nose and into Erwin’s mouth. “Erwin.” He arches into the touch, bucks into Erwin’s hand as they melt into a rhythm. It’s slow at first, a gentle roll like a wave onto the shore. Dry, a little rough, until he instructs Erwin to thumb some precum down from his cock to lubricate the motions, however little it may be. Erwin moves down Levi’s body, uses his other hand to pull up Levi’s shirt to drag his tongue against his other nipple. Levi’s hands move to Erwin’s hair, tugs on it as Erwin circles his tongue around the sensitive piece of flesh. Erwin falls out of time of Levi’s growing orgasm, rests his arm against Levi’s thigh, his hand still tight around his cock. He bites down on Levi’s nipple to draw a gasp out so loud that it makes Erwin chuckle.

“Shut the fuck up.” Levi hisses, his toes curling on the couch cushion. He shoves his hand down the back of Erwin’s shirt--awkward but he wants to touch him. Feel his skin. It’s wet with sweat, hot and slick, and Levi drags his fingers across the skin as he clenches his teeth. “Keep… Going.”

“Slower.” Levi breathes out. Erwin obliges. “Mmm… No… A little faster.”

Erwin laughs into his chest. “Make up your mind.”

“As if… I have one…” Levi’s breath hitches as he meets Erwin’s strokes. He wraps his hand around Erwin’s, moves it at a pace that starts to boil the passion in his stomach.

“Like this?” Erwin takes control as Levi’s hand hovers over his knuckles.

Levi nods, drags Erwin up by the back of his shirt, presses his lips to Erwin’s, eyebrows drawn tight. He takes Erwin’s bottom lip between his teeth, gnaws it in an attempt to keep quiet, but it just makes them both moan hotly between each other. All he can think about is coming hot into Erwin’s hand. To feel a release so complete by a man he has never trusted more in his entire life. To feel loved. To feel taken care of. His mouth falls open in quiet gasps. He’s still far away from orgasm, but being touched by Erwin is the closest to heaven he’ll ever get to.

“Levi.” Erwin says, husky and sexy and it drives Levi so crazy that he moves his hands up to cover his face with both hands.

“Erwin.” Levi gasps behind his palms. Erwin kisses his knuckles as he keeps stroking.

“Levi?”
“Fuck!” The tiny voice is like a light switch, and Levi moves with lightning precision. He pushes Erwin off of him and tucks himself back into his pants all in one motion. Shooting upright, he feels sick with denial, his heart racing and beating so hard in his neck that it hurts.

“Levi!” Eld steps down the stairs, the house creaking a warning as Erwin sits up and unmusses his hair. They’re both red cheeked and red lipped, breathing heavy and unsteady.


Eld appears in the doorway of the living room, bleary eyed and pouty. “Gunther wet the bed.”

Levi drags his hand down his face, the bottoms of his eyelids dragging down with them as he looks over at Erwin. “All right. Run back upstairs, and I’ll be up to help in a couple of minutes.”

“Are you mad at him?” Eld says softly.

“Huh? Eld. I wouldn’t be mad at your brother for something like that.”

“He’s scared you’ll be mad at him.”

“I’m not mad. We just need to clean it up.”

“Ok…”

“Go back upstairs. I’ll be up soon.”

Eld nods before turning back and going back upstairs. Levi looks back at Erwin, exasperated, flustered, and embarrassed. “You fuckin’ asshole. I trusted you.”

“You’re a fool.” Erwin grins so wide it nearly reaches his ears.

“We could have scarred those kids.”

“Yes, but now all you have to show for it is a piss covered bed.”

Levi hits the back of his hand against Erwin’s stomach. “Don’t think you aren’t helping.”

“I would never think otherwise.” Erwin leans over and kisses his cheek.

Levi stands up, awkward and shaken, adjusts his feet as he takes a step forward to deal with the erection that is quickly starting to fade against his jeans. “What duty do you want? Cleaning the kid or cleaning the bed?”

“They know you better. I should take the bed.”

“Get a washcloth, some baking soda, vinegar, detergent…”

“I went to college. I’ve had to deal with drunken incontinence before.” Erwin grins.

“With you or…”

“Go take care of the kids.”

Levi wags a finger at him, hides a grin as he bites his lip and turns toward the kitchen. “You really are an old man.” Levi makes his way into the kitchen, then he pauses, and turns to look at Erwin. “I have no idea what to do...
Erwin chuckles as he stands up. “Draw a shallow bath and get him washed up. Be kind.”

Levi scoffs. “I’m not a monster.”

“I know. You are quite the opposite.” Erwin comes up next to him, places a hand on his lower back, and kisses his forehead. “You’ll do fine. Kids are easy to understand.”

Levi slowly makes his way up the stairs, breathes out steadily as he reaches the top and adjusts his clothes before making his way down the hallway. He hears the faint sniffling of a tiny nose, the gurgle of snot sucking up into a throat as he makes his way to the doorway. Gunther is sitting on the floor with his face in his hands crying with Eld rubbing circles on his back. “Hey there.”

“Levi.” Eld stands up. He has their backpack of extra things next to him. For being six, he’s remarkably responsible. He reaches in and holds out a change of clothes to Levi. Levi takes it with a smile.

Levi ruffles a hand on Gunther’s head, and he looks up at Levi, eyes pink and red and wet with tears, his lip quivering as he tries to keep another wail inside. “It’s ok, Guns. Let’s get you cleaned up, all right?” Gunther nods, takes Levi’s hand as they walk into the bathroom. Levi goes into the hallway, grabs a washcloth and a towel and returns to the bathroom. He wets the washcloth, kneels down, and wipes the tears and snot off of Gunther’s face. He boops the end of Gunther’s nose with the washcloth, and Gunther smiles weakly. He stands up and plugs the tub and starts the lukewarm water. After helping Gunther out of his soiled clothes, he lifts him and puts him into the tub. Erwin comes in and takes the clothing and tosses it in the hallway to bring downstairs. He stands in the doorway, shoulder against the wood, smiling as he watches Levi dump a handful of water over the top of a giggling Gunther’s head. Levi catches his eye, and Erwin nods in response, giving Levi a thumbs up with a quirky smile. Levi rolls his eyes but returns an equally crooked smile. Turning away, Erwin shakes his head and goes to clean the bed and leave Levi to his task.

They get everything cleaned up, tears and all, and the four of them end up back in the living room. Levi puts down two sheets on the couch and they lay the sleepy children down onto it, clean and groggy, falling asleep almost as soon as their heads hit the pillow. Erwin piles a bunch of comforters into the nook of the sectional, nests a stack of decorative pillows and invites Levi to lay down with him. He takes it, draws a blanket up to his chin as Erwin wraps an arm around him, draws their bodies close, and he brings his chin to rest in the crook of his neck. “You did a good job,” Erwin whispers into his ear before kissing his cheek. Levi shivers, nuzzles his nose into Erwin’s arm and kisses it.

They all sleep until the sun peeks through the blinds, and Levi and Erwin stir awake to the sound of the soft clicking of controller buttons in front of a muted television.

Chapter End Notes

alternate title provided by erwinsalive: 'jerking'

sooooooo i visited my folks for a week and wrote 20k words and i just don't know what my life is anymore. the next chapter is mostly done (nearly 9k words omg i'm so sorry) and will be posted over the weekend probably. the two after that will take some super extra care. i've started them, but they need some heavy revisions. i'll be happy if i can get a chapter out a week for the next couple of weeks.. BUT NO PROMISES because i'm not good at keeping them. lol.
ANYHOODZLES. look at all this. look at erwin being all vulnerable and shit. mmm. sweet muffin. love it. and the kids kill me. jfc. this chapter makes me die and live again probably.

thanks to erwinsalive for reading this chapter, and for me ranting at my roommate on my drive back home 20 minutes ago with blown out ears from my plane ride about whether or not this made sense. so here i am at 2am on a work night posting this. lmao

I HAVE SO MANY COMMENTS TO REPLY TO AND I SWEAR I WILL. your overwhelming support has been just that--OVERWHELMING. i fucking cry. i just... wow. just WOW. wowowowo. so many wows. i'm a god damn shiba meme rn.

love you guys! <3333
Birthday

Chapter Summary

october

Chapter Notes

a huge, huge thank you to miss_coverly for taking the time to make a playlist for this fic. i got really way too emotional about this, and i haven't been able to stop listening to it. it's really so perfect. thank you for taking the time to do it.

listen to it on youtube || listen to it on spotify

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s Hange’s job every year to plan Erwin’s birthday get together. Rather, it’s Hange’s job to plan everybody’s birthday get togethers, whether they like it or not. Luckily, Erwin is easy to please, and Hange never deviates from the formula. For over a decade they’ve gone to the same German restaurant, filled themselves with tube shaped meat, salty pretzels, and enough beer to fill a few milk jugs.

Erwin drives himself and Levi to the restaurant with the unspoken agreement that Levi will drive them home. Erwin holds Levi’s hand halfway through the trip, compliments it with a soft smile until they park. Levi pulls Erwin in for a kiss before they leave the car, and he gravitates to Erwin to take his hand again when they exit the vehicle.

They make it to the entrance before Levi stops moving and faces away from the door. Erwin doesn’t
notice until he has the door halfway opened, pauses as well to turn. “Levi?”
“Can I talk to you for a second?”

Erwin lets the door handle go and walks over to him. “What is it?”

Levi looks at the glass panels of the restaurant windows, sees their reflection dark and distorted looking back at him. He closes his eyes, can’t look at himself right now. “Has Mike been acting weird around you lately?”

“I don’t believe so. Why do you say that?”
Levi bites his lip. “He told me I needed to move out.”

“Where? Our house?”
Levi hesitates over his words and nods. “Before you asked me to stay. He hasn’t been over since.”

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“I didn’t want to make a thing outta it.”

“I could have talked to him.”

“No, Erwin. No.” Levi shakes his head and motions toward the entrance. “Forget it.”

But Erwin grasps his arm, pulls him back and looks at him. “Levi, I would like you to talk to me when something bothers you. Please.”

Levi swallows, screws his eyes shut as he tries to find the words behind the knot in his throat. “He’s worried I’ll hurt you again. Erwin, I would never… I wouldn’t.” He opens his eyes, stares off, doesn’t focus on Erwin. He can’t slip. Doesn’t want to feel like he’s going to slip. He can’t. The knife against his cheek, the vacant look in Erwin’s eyes. He doesn’t look like that anymore. Not anymore. They’re so bright now, curved in joy and accented with crows feet. All Levi needed to do was give a piece of himself to Erwin, and it will be his for as long as he breathes. He knows it. He wouldn’t...

“I know.” Erwin steps forward.

“If he mentions it…”

“I will talk to him.”

“I won’t have him… Question my…”

“Levi.” Erwin takes his hand in his.

“My… My commitment to you.”

Erwin squeezes his hand tight around Levi’s, brings it to his heart and leans in to kiss his forehead.
Levi’s shaking, trembling with anxiety, and fuck he doesn’t want to look at Mike. Doesn’t want to face him. If he looks at him, he’s afraid he’ll pop off like a cork, find his fist wrapped in his shirt like hand wraps, knuckles bruised against his bone, his big ass nose bubbling blood. Blood. Blood.

“Levi, we can go home.”
“No.”

“What can I do?”

“I don’t know!” Levi’s voice starts strong but dissipates into a whimper. He was doing so well. God dammit. He was doing so well and he tries to breathe but he’s so mad. Why didn’t he talk to Erwin sooner? Why did he let Mike affect him? They were friends, weren’t they? Or was he just fake to his face? Like in the army. Like Nile.

Erwin runs his hand through Levi’s hair, draws his hand down around his cheek and rests his thumb on his temples. Levi doesn’t shy away from it, forgets that they’re out on a busy sidewalk on a Friday night. The only thing that matters is who’s inside that building. “Let’s go for a walk.”

Levi stands there, clenching his fists before finally nodding. Erwin offers his hand, and Levi takes it, grips it so hard his knuckles go white. They walk up two blocks before Levi guides them back, his hand working against Erwin’s, his bottom lip having gone raw and red from gnawing on it. They pause on the sidewalk across the street from the restaurant. They’re a half hour late meeting with the squad. “What would you like to do?” Erwin says softly, squeezing his hand.

“Keep me away from him.”

“I will.”

“Erwin.”

“Yes?”

“I would never hurt you.”

“I know, Levi.” Erwin squeezes his hand. “I know.”

They cross the street and go inside. It’s an open seating restaurant, wood floors, walls, and benches with long tables. It smells heavily of hoppy ale and the room is loud with cheering and laughter. Hange sees them enter immediately, clearly already a few drinks in. “Erwin! Levi!” Their names drag out between their lips that find themselves curled around the edge of a pint. “Where were you!” Their elbow lands heavily on the wooden table, giggling uncontrollably as Moblit wraps an arm around them.

“Happy Birthday, Commander.” Moblit says as they make it to the table.

“Thank you, Moblit.”

Mike stands up and rounds the table, grabs Erwin’s hand and drags him into a hug, his other hand patting heavily against his back. “Happy birthday, man.”

Erwin chuckles as he returns it. “Thanks.”

“Come on, have a seat you two.” Nanaba offers a space next to where she and Mike are seated. Erwin moves to take the offer but gets intercepted by Mike to go order some food and beer at the bar. Levi silently takes the seat next to Moblit across the table.

Hange chugs down their glass of beer and slams it onto the table. “Woo!”

“How many is that?” Levi asks.

“I don’t bother counting on nights like this.” Moblit says, straight faced and staring off in front of
“I’ve seen that look before.” Levi gives a crooked smile. “Are you the designated?”

“I am, actually.” Nanaba chimes in, holding up her glass of water. “Those two are staying with us tonight.”

“So why do you still sound sober?” Levi asks.

“He gets soooo quiet,” Hange leans over Moblit, and Levi can smell their breath from a foot away. Moblit looks at Levi, wide eyed and with an unsettling grin. “Until about the sixth beer, anyway.”

Levi shifts away, eyebrow raised.

“Are we talking about what kind of drunk Moblit is?” Mike says, returning as he swings his leg around the bench and sits on it saddle style. He holds his lager up and takes a swig.

“Oh, Moblit is a strange one.” Erwin says as he sits down next to Nanaba with his large mug of ale. He sets a glass of ice water in front of Levi. “There was one time that he rearranged all of my cabinets by size and material. Then he decided he wanted it by color.”

“And after he did that, he shifted it back to size.” Nanaba adds.

“Where were you all?” Levi says quietly, keeping his eyes away from Mike.

“Outside playing beer pong.” Erwin says.

Levi shakes his head. “How fucking old were you all?”

“Old enough to know better.” Nanaba holds her head in her hand as she looks up at him.

“Well, there’s no plates and dishes to rearrange here, so let’s get trashed.” Mike says, raising his glass. “Happy birthday to the guy that somehow keeps us together.”

“To the guy that is a constant pain in my ass, day in and day out.” Hange holds up their empty glass.

“Thank you for always being the strongest rock to lean against.” Nanaba adds her glass of water to the toast.

Moblit tries to lift his glass, but he sloshes it too much and chuckles as he puts it back down on the table. “You’re one of the best, Commander.”

Levi looks around the table, matches eyes with Mike, and quickly drops them to the table. He holds the rim of his water with his finger tips and lifts it an inch off the table. “Cheers or whatever.”

They all clank glasses, though Levi does not touch Mike’s, and they continue chattering into the night. Mike and Erwin go up to the bar again to order more drinks and appetizers. Levi watches from afar, catches Erwin animatedly talking to Mike, and Levi looks down at his fingers. Everybody else is around him talking, not about him... But what if they are? He shrinks in on himself, looks off at one of the televisions playing soccer, tries to focus on the game, but he’s never been a fan of sports in general. He has no idea what’s going on.

He hears Erwin laughing, and he hangs his head, tries to steady his breathing. What if he’s laughing at him?
Levi gasps in, presses his thumb into his other thumbnail. This is for Erwin. He can’t slip now. It’s his birthday, and he deserves some effort for once. To be a fucking normal human being for this man that has given him a second change. A third chance. A fucking chance at all.

“Yo, Levi. You alive in there?” Hange leans over Moblit to him, slaps the table in front of him. “Mike was talkin’ to youuu.”

Levi’s eyes grow wide as he shoots a glance at Mike. He tries to remember when he got back to the table. He sucks in a breath. He searches for Erwin who is up at the bar getting another drink. He feels a panic in his chest, and he tries to swallow it down. “W-what?”

“You two have any plans tomorrow?”

“I uh… I don’t…”

“If you don’t, you both should come over tonight. We’ll have a big cook out tomorrow or something.” Mike’s voice is a bit loud, even for the surroundings.

“I think we’ll… We’ll be good.” Levi grips his fingers at the edge of a wood plank that composes the table.

“You can sleep on the couch. You’re used to that, right?” Mike sets his eyes on Levi, and it draws serious.

“Mike, not now.” Nanaba whispers.

Levi looks at the bar, wants Erwin to be next to him, and he swallows hard. “I guess.”

“Oh!?” Hange leans in. “What what what?”

“Hange, stop.” Moblit says, suddenly very sober.

“Maybe you can stay on my couch for the next eight months.”

Levi tries to keep it together, feels himself fraying with each passing moment. “Sure.”

“Ah, good, good. It’ll be a blast.”


Erwin returns with another towering glass, this time a high proof beer. Levi makes eye contact, and Erwin comes over to him. Levi takes Erwin by the collar of his shirt and pulls him down, nearly causing Erwin to spill his beer all over Levi, Moblit, and Hange. With determination, Levi sucks in Erwin’s bottom lip between his, kisses him until Erwin’s cheeks grow peachy and his ears red. With determination, Levi sucks in Erwin’s bottom lip between his, kisses him until Erwin’s cheeks grow peachy and his ears red. Erwin tries to part, but Levi drags him in one more time to kiss him more passionately, as if the table and bar full of people were gone and they were alone at home.

Oh, the things he would do to Erwin right now if he could. He thinks of the taste of Erwin’s cum on his tongue. He’d have the pleasure of tasting it now, on his hand, licked up from his fingers as if it were ice cream that had melted its way down a cone. Salty and warm, thick on his lip as he tongued it into his mouth. Erwin’s thighs pressing in around his waist, his large cock pinned against Levi’s stomach, hard and pulsing in Levi’s hand, warm cum sticking between both their bodies. And Erwin’s voice, soft and desperate and needy, panting out his name like a hymnal chant... Oh, Levi has been so hungry for it ever since.
He side glances at Mike under half lidded eyes—in control but his heart still racing. Mike can think as low of him all he wants... But Levi’s the one that’s had Erwin so completely unraveled. Mike can’t take that fact away from him. Mike isn’t the one that makes Magnolia and Church smile less. He isn’t the one that makes Levi see a man in the mirror worth a lick of shit.

The scar was a mistake, and it’s something he tries to make up for every day, and Levi will be damned if it ever happens again.

“Levi?” Erwin says under his breath. His lips are red, and so inviting. He says his name like he does when they’re fooling around. Levi wants to be brash. Wants to take him into the bathroom and fuck him right there. Levi is here for Erwin tonight, just like Erwin’s always there for everybody—like he’s been there for him. Such a kind man deserves such a fantastic present.

Levi blinks, runs his hand down Erwin’s back and slaps a broad hand across his ass. “Nothing.”

Erwin raises an eyebrow and whispers at him. “Is something wrong?”

“Go sit down with your friend.” Levi says, venomous and unsavory. Levi kisses him again slowly, tries to introduce his tongue before Erwin places his glass down and tugs at Levi’s collar to stand up.

“Come here.” Erwin looks at the rest of the table, and nods. “We’ll be right back.”

Hange whistles. “’Atta boys!”

Levi glares over his shoulder at Mike, a pair of daggers staring back at him as they head out the doors of the restaurant. Erwin is talking before the door even closes, his voice stern, concerned, and a little sharp. “What the hell is wrong with you, Levi?”

“I thought you’d like that.” Levi straightens his clothing and licks his lips. “I did.”

“Is this about Mike?”

“This is about me wanting to taste you—”

“Levi, stop.” Erwin runs his hand through his hair, looks back at the door. “What the hell are you trying to prove right now?”

“I like you, Erwin.”

“Levi, don’t do that.”

“I’m not allowed to like you?”

Erwin’s growing frustrated, and Levi doesn’t fully grasp why. “Levi, this… Isn’t you… What happened?”

“You said you’d keep him away from me.” Levi glares up at him, and even though he hasn’t been drinking, he’s drunk on adrenaline. “I tried, Erwin. I tried. But he’s fuckin’ with me and I’m gonna fuckin’ hit ‘im.”

“Do we need to leave?”

“Just go home with them. I can take your car home. I don’t need to ruin your night.”

“You leaving by yourself would ruin my night.”
“Like hell it would. You don’t give a shit.”

“Levi!” Erwin grabs his arm and squeezes it.

“Get your fuckin’ hand offa me, Erwin.”

“I talked to him.”

“What did you say? That I’m gonna fuckin’ slice your throat open in the night or some shit? That you’re afraid for your life?”

“I told him that I love you.”

“You what?”

Levi looks at him for a long moment, has no idea where his brain goes. It’s shattered somewhere on the pavement probably alongside his heart. He stares wide eyed at the ground, at a crack in the sidewalk, and his throat feels so tight he gasps for breath.

“He asked if you moved out, and I told him that I asked you to move in. That we’re together… That I--”

“Don’t say shit you don’t mean.” Levi barks. He doesn’t want to hear it again. Doesn’t want to hear things that Erwin clearly doesn’t mean. Love him? He tries not to laugh, but it comes out, strained out of his throat like a boot pressed against his chest.

“What shit? Levi, what the hell…”

“Fuck him!” Levi shakes, paces once with his fists balled at his side.

“He’s my friend, Levi. He’s helped me through so much, especially in the past two years. He cares about me.”

“And I don’t!?"

“Of course you do. I would never question your feelings toward me.”

“But it’s ok that he does? That he has some kind of right to judge us?”

“He’s not judging us. He doesn’t fully understand our relationship.”

“I need to leave.”

“Levi, please.”

“Gimme your keys. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Erwin looks at him, face set, lips straight. His eyes cold and vacant, like the time Levi held the knife against him. Levi shrinks, holds his hand out but doesn’t look up. He can’t. He won’t. He’s not like that anymore. Can’t be. He’s better for Erwin. There’s a jingle as Erwin rummages through his pocket, and he heavily places his keys into Levi’s hand.

“I will see you tomorrow. Drive safely, please.”

“Whatever.”
Levi opens the door of Erwin’s car, sits down in it, his legs swimming in the space between the seat and the pedals. He adjusts it and the mirrors, does everything he can to ignore Erwin still standing on the sidewalk, watching him with his arms folded. He blinks away tears as he buckles his seatbelt, tries to swallow away the tightness in his throat as he backs into the street, but fails to keep them from falling when he hits the highway, skin so tight across his knuckles the bone might tear through, and he shouts at nothing with the windows down, the cold autumn air providing an excuse for the shaking that rattles through his body.

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Levi wakes up past his alarm, sitting upright and against the wall on his small bed. He doesn't bother exercising when Erwin isn't around, and it’s nearly ten in the morning when he finally reaches for his cellphone to check for messages. Erwin left him several texts, all having no substance, clearly some of them having been written as the night grew darker, less sober. Messages of *I miss you* and *Wish you were here*. Levi feels like he’s going to vomit, hangs his legs over the side of his bed, holds his head as he draws out a groan.

He shouldn’t have left. He wants to do whatever he can to be there for Erwin. They are in a relationship now, and he wants to give Erwin some kind of semblance of a normal one. He tries to rationalize that not getting into a bar fight with Erwin’s best friend was part of that, but he knows it wasn’t good enough. He’ll never be good enough.

His phone vibrates in his hand, the notification lighting up the screen. *I’ll be home around noon*. Levi sighs and puts his phone down.

The house feels lonely without Erwin, especially on his birthday. He wanders downstairs, looks around at what he can do. The house is clean enough, and for once, it’s not something that will sedate his nerves, the waning guilt. He decides to make Erwin a cake, gathers the ingredients from the cupboards and starts on his task. Erwin returns home when it’s still baking in the oven, Levi walking to the hallway and wiping his hand on a dishtowel. “Hey.”

Erwin slips his shoes off and staggers slightly as he shuffles down the hallway. He’s clearly a little hungover. “Good afternoon. I am glad to see you made it home safely.”

Levi nods before turning back into the kitchen. “Same to you.”

Erwin comes into the kitchen and sniffs the air, a smile crossing his lips. “Cake?”

“The best way to overcome age depression.”

Erwin sways up next to Levi, wraps his arm around his shoulder and draws him close, kisses his forehead before dipping down and taking his lips, slowly rolling them, and it makes Levi grab onto him lest his knees give out. He still smells a little like beer. “You being here does that well enough.” He kisses his forehead again before standing straight. “But the cake helps.”

Levi plays with the rag in his hands. “Are you mad?”

“About last night?” Erwin asks. Levi nods. “Not at all. I apologize for handling the situation so poorly.”

“Me too.”
“I missed you. I wish I could have done more…”

“It’s all right.” Levi runs his hand up to clasp around Erwin’s. “I could’ve too. Just forget about it.”

Erwin studies him, and Levi presses a smile to his lips to reassure him. It’s true, he could have done more, wishes he had, but so many things still overwhelm him. The best thing Erwin could have done was let him leave.

Erwin finally nods, runs his hand down to Levi’s ass and pats it a couple of times. “I am going to go upstairs and do some work.”

“On your birthday?”

“Yes, I am afraid so.”

“Erwin. Come on.” Levi nearly whines. “For one day, can you enjoy yourself?”

Erwin looks at him. “I plan to.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Levi,” he turns, holds Levi’s upper arms in his hands, trails his hands down to take Levi’s and squeezes his fingers. “Would you like to go dancing with me tonight?”

Levi snorts a laugh. “Me? Dancing?”

“I think you would be lovely at it.”

“You’re insane.”

Erwin takes Levi’s hand in his, holds it up, settles his other hand on the small of Levi’s back. He sways his hips and Levi follows instinctually. “Perhaps.” He smiles, and damn if it doesn’t make Levi flow with his body like water, their bodies falling into each other as they lazily circle in the kitchen. “But perhaps not.”

Levi rests his head on Erwin’s chest and sighs deeply. Erwin came home to him, forgave him for his outburst on his night. What did he do to deserve this man? The idea of dancing overwhelms him, but he’ll try. For Erwin, he’ll try. “Sure. Let’s do it.”

“We can just do a couple of dances. All right?”

“Yeah, I’d hate to see you embarrass yourself more than you already do.”

“I traded in my second left foot several years ago. This old man will be able to impress you.”

Levi chuckles, dips himself away from Erwin and looks up at him with a sly smile. “Not gonna happen.”

Erwin pulls Levi into him, snugs his hand against his back. “We shall see.”

They part, Erwin’s fingers drifting off of Levi as if he doesn’t want to ever let go and leaves to go upstairs. Levi decorates the cake after it cools with a simple chocolate frosting. He tries to pipe some decoration along the edge from the tip of a sandwich bag, but he cut the corner too large and it blobs out onto the glass plate. Tossing the bag into the sink in frustration, he steps outside to have a cigarette before going back inside and finishing it. He spends ten minutes making sure that the frosting is evenly distributed, that each spatula swipe is beautifully tented, expertly placed. Stepping
back, he spins the plate between his palms before deeming it good enough for Erwin to eat.

Making a detour, he goes into the laundry room and pulls out a small box from the dresser that used to be his. He swallows, nods, and goes back into the kitchen to slice a piece of cake onto a plate, grabs a fork, and brings that and the box up the stairs into Erwin’s office.

Erwin turns in his seat to greet Levi, hand still holding the pen he had been writing with. “Oh! I get to eat the cake too?”

“Against my better judgement.” Levi walks to the desk and places the double chocolate cake onto the surface. “But you deserve it.”

“What did I do to deserve it?”

“You admitted that you like brussel sprouts.”

Erwin grins wildly, takes his plate and cuts a piece of it with the edge of his fork. He puts it in his mouth, chews a few times, and swallows. “Oh, Levi.”

“Don’t do that.”

The smile sticks to his lips, just like the bit of frosting at the center of it. “Do what?”

Levi leans over, sucks Erwin’s bottoms lip between his and cleans the frosting from his lip. He licks his lips before he talks, “Make it sound like I’m touching you in… Unsavory ways.”

“Far from unsavory, I assure you.” Erwin leans back, takes another bite of his cake, and the smile doesn’t disappear. His eyes wonder down Levi, holds the fork upside down as he drags it from his mouth slowly and firmly. “Mmm, what do you have behind your back, pudding?”

Levi startles, rattles the box in his hand before bringing into to his front and hanging his head. “It’s uh… Your birthday present.”

Erwin places his plate down and leans forward. “Oh, you know you didn’t have to get me anything.”

“I haven’t gotten you something in so long… And I just… I just came across it when I was out with Petra…” Levi shoves the box into Erwin’s face, like a child presenting a gift to a parent. “Just open it.”

Erwin smiles softly, takes the box and settles it in his hands. He peels the wrapping paper at the tape, careful to make sure that none of the paper tears. Pulling the box from the paper, he gently shakes it next to his ear as Levi rolls his eyes at him. He takes the lid off of the box and sets it on the desk, gasps softly when he sees what is in it.

“I dunno… It just reminded me of you for some reason. I thought you’d like it.”

“My dad had one like it. You must have remembered the family portrait of him wearing it.”

“That must be it. You look so much like him sometimes.” Levi smiles. “I bet you’re the same age that he was in that picture.”

Erwin hums. “Yes, I believe you may be right. My mother was still alive, and they had me rather late.”

“I was worried that he might have handed it down to you. Just sounds like a thing a father would do to his son--handing down girly jewelry.”
Erwin leans forward and wraps his arm around Levi’s waist, draws him close to rest his head on his hip. He laughs softly. “He actually gave that one to me when I was young.”

“Oh yeah? I don’t remember it.”

“It was before you. I lost it when we went on vacation down south.” Erwin turns the bolo in his hand. It shimmers from under the lamp light on his desk. “I cried all day. I was so certain my father would be mad at me. My mother tried to calm me down. She told me that it was not my fault, and that she would get me a new one.”

“Was he mad?”

“He was disappointed. It had been his father’s. It was irreplaceable.” Erwin looks up at Levi, eyes sad, a little glassy. “It is awful when your parents need to lie to you to try to keep you from crying.”

“I… Didn’t mean to get you…” Levi goes to grab the bolo, but Erwin guards it by folding his fingers over it.

“It’s perfect, Levi.” Erwin looks up at Levi. “It’s so perfect. Thank you so much.” He leans up, Levi meeting him halfway and they kiss so softly that their lips barely touch. “It’s so thoughtful.”

Levi brings a hand to his heated cheeks. “It’s nothing.”

“It is very much something, Levi.”

Erwin places the bolo back into the box, finishes his cake, still smiling as he turns his attention back to his work. Levi remains, sits on the floor next to Erwin’s chair, Erwin’s hand petting absently in Levi’s hair while he works and Levi reads. The light from the window turns orange by the time that Erwin shifts in his seat. “I am going to go get ready.” He says. “Would you still like to do this?”

“Yeah.” Levi hesitates. “I don’t really have anything to wear, though.”

Erwin chuckles as he stands from his chair. “It’s far from formal. Your normal clothes are fine enough.”

Levi gets up, pulls himself up with the ledge of the desk as his knee shoots a shock of pain through his entire left side. He limps a couple of steps behind Erwin into the hallway and stands at the doorframe of Erwin’s room, shifting his weight onto his right leg as he leans. “I want to…” He folds his arms over his chest and bows his chin into his chest. “I want to look nice, though.”

Erwin turns to him after pulling a fresh white dress shirt from his drawer. “Oh yeah?”

“Shut up.”

Erwin chuckles, waves him into the room and leaves his dresser open. “You can borrow some of my clothes.”

“I’ll swim in it.”

Erwin grins. “Yes, I know.”

Levi sighs and rolls his eyes. He regains composure of his leg, walks over and pushes Erwin aside to go through his things. He picks out a shirt, chooses the tie he got Erwin for Christmas ages ago—the same one Erwin wore when he picked him up at the airport—and some unworn suspenders. He goes to his room to change, moves to the bathroom to fuss with his hair, struggles with bitten lip to
accomplish a half-windsor knot before finally getting it right. He smiles at the man in the mirror, awkward and toothy, and doesn’t notice the bounce in his step as he meets Erwin downstairs. Erwin’s in the living room sitting with a glass of water in his hand, one leg crossed over the other watching the television with absent interest. The bolo tie sits on his chest, green and sparkling in the dull light of the room.

“Levi!” Erwin smiles wide, stands up immediately when he lands his eyes on him. He sets his glass down and makes his way across the living room with long strides. “You’re so…”

“Ridiculous looking.” He says with his head down. The arms of the long sleeve dress-shirt are rolled up to his elbows and the bottom tucked deep into his slacks. The red tie and suspenders match the colors of his cheeks that he tries to hide behind soft, dark hair.

“Handsome.” Erwin pulls Levi in by the back of his neck, kisses him tenderly, carefully, the bolo hanging between them as he bends to reach Levi’s lips. “I will have the most handsome lady tonight.”

“Eat shit.” Levi spits, but he melts into Erwin’s touch regardless.

Erwin hooks his finger under Levi’s tie, uses it to keep him close to him with a sharp grin on his lips. “This is still my favorite Christmas present.”

Levi looks down at it. It fits Levi better, falls just above his belt buckle. The tie is a vibrant red, has a soft cross hatched pattern on it that can be felt under touch. But really, there’s nothing special about it. “It’s just a tie.”

“I suppose I just always liked the idea of you being so close to me.”

Levi’s lips fall open, and his heart beats once so hard against his chest he’s afraid it will break against his ribs. “Oh.”

Erwin’s finger trail up the tie, tugs up on it to force Levi onto his toes. “I wore it to prom, too.”

“So you fucked some high school chick while you wore this?”

Erwin chuckles. “Oh, no. I didn’t even kiss her. Honestly, I wish I had been brave enough to ask you.”

“To go to prom?”

“Yes.” He leans down, ghosts his lips over Levi’s before cautiously taking them for a long, simple kiss. He parts, looks longingly into Levi’s eyes. “I regret living so long without being yours.”

Levi does too. It stings a little, knowing that they might have been something if things had just been different. If they both weren’t so young and afraid of feelings that were real and potent, emotions that inverted and turned to fear. Fears that wedged years of separation, silence, secrets, misunderstandings, pain, and loneliness. Levi wishes so badly that he had spent prom night kissing Erwin instead of that asshole Derek. Wishes he had been downing school punch, staining his lips red for Erwin to taste, instead of cheap beer. He just wishes… He wishes things had been different.

But...

“I’m here now.”

Erwin lets loose of the tie, swallows, and smiles brightly. He holds his hand out for Levi to take.
“Yes, you are. So, how about now? Would you like to go to prom with me, Levi Ackerman?”

Levi looks at him, dead faced and unimpressed. “I’m not going to let you take my virginity in the back of your dad’s car.”

Erwin lets his hand fall to his side. “Oh, that’s too bad. I am certain it is a little difficult to make love on a motorcycle anyway.”

“Oh, so I’m driving? I thought the ladies got picked up by their dates.”

“Come now, Levi. We are above those stereotypes.”

“Oh-huh.” Levi quirks a smile, takes Erwin’s hand and starts to lead them into the foyer. They bundle in their riding jackets, scarves tucked inside, and secure gloves on. It’s a little cool out, and Erwin snuggles closely to Levi’s back. It’s something that Levi has come to enjoy very much--having Erwin wrapped around him, trusting him as they ride down roads with enough bends that it sends a rush through Levi’s stomach, jostles it, makes him feel like he’s swooping in the air. Erwin squeezes closer as they exit a curve, and Levi smiles into his helmet.

It takes them about a half hour to get to the dance hall--a large room inside of a neighboring town hall. They bring in their helmets and derobe from their motorcycle gear and place it on some chairs that line along the walls. Levi fidgets with his fingers, looks around at the small crowd of people. The band is tuning their instruments--fiddles, guitars, and a banjo--and the groups of couples congregate around each other across the room. They’re an older crowd, hair graying in some spots. Some are around their age, one man with slicked back hair and an expensive looking dress shirt buttoned to his neck. Two younger college aged couples stay to the sides by themselves, one of the men instructing their girlfriend on a simple step sequence before they all started.

“Well, if it isn’t Erwin Smith!” A man says, coming up to offer his hand. He has a large pompadour and a strong nose. He dresses like he came straight out of the 50s fifty years too late.

“Gelgar!” Erwin takes the man’s hand, pulls him in for a hug and stands back. “How have you been?”

“I should be asking you that.” Gelgar laughs. He’s missing a tooth in his smile, and Levi wonders how it happened. “Wow, it's been forever since we've seen you here.”

“Yes, I am afraid so.”

“Hey, isn't your birthday sometime soon?”


“Oh! Well damn! Happy birthday! What a good time to come back.”

“I thought so too.”

“Do you have a lady with you tonight or are you going with the flow like usual?”

Erwin looks down at Levi, and Levi nods once. “I have somebody. This is my partner, Levi.”

“Nice to meet you, Levi.” Gelgar holds his hand out. Gelgar either knew Erwin before Marie broke the engagement, or he’s only known Erwin as a single man. Either way, Gelgar doesn’t bat an eye at Erwin’s orientation. Levi adjusts his jaw, takes his hand weakly, but Gelgars’s grip is strong and he shakes it once and it’s hard enough to shock a wave across Levi’s shoulders. “Name’s Gelgar.”
“Gelgar.” He says softly.

“Have you ever been to one of these before?” Levi shakes his head. Gelgar pats him on the shoulder and turns to the band. “The caller there will tell you what to do. He keeps things pretty fun—he’s been doing this for thirty something years. It’s always fun, and everybody’s super friendly. Don’t be afraid to mess up. It’ll be a good time.” Gelgar looks up at Erwin. “Plus, Erwin here has been here more than a few times.”

“Guilty.” Erwin grins, puts his hand on the small of Levi’s back.

“You comin’ out for drinks after?”

“Afraid not. I got enough of that last night.” Erwin says, politely.

“Ah, no problem. Well hey. I’m sure we’ll meet again out there. I’ll leave you two be. It was a pleasure meeting you, Levi. Keep this big guy outta trouble. He has two left feet you know.”

“He told me he traded one of them in.”

“Hah! He wishes!” Gelgar shakes his head and laughs as Erwin shouts out a protest at Gelgar’s back.

Levi turns to face Erwin, hooks his finger in the loop of the bolo tie, presses his knuckle into his chest. “So many things I’m learning about Erwin Smith today.”

“Gelgar has never had the best memory.”

“We’ll see, huh?”

More people flow into the hall and the caller asks for all first timers to come to the center to teach the basics. Erwin joins Levi, taking the place of the gent to his lady. Levi struggles at first, gets his rights confused with his lefts. Watches nervously around him at the other couples. He hesitates when they do-si-do, trading partners as they box back out, take each other’s hand and balance. One step forward. One step back. His brow furrows with concentration, but he does well. Gets a hang of it by the end of it, Erwin taking him by the hand and pulling him to the side and looking eagerly at his lips. Levi leans up and gives him a quick kiss, smiles as he laces their fingers briefly and separates.

“So this first dance we’ll partner up. The next one we can switch if you want.”

“We’ll see.”

Erwin nods. The first dance is simple. Repeats four times, each of them dancing with each other, Levi passing hands with the lady of the other pair, smiling as he passes Erwin, stomping his foot in time with the rest of the line. He adds some flair once, spins as he goes into a balance with Erwin. One step forward. One step back. Hands pressed together. Heart beating to something fun. Something energetic. The song ends and Levi drags Erwin to the water fountain.

Erwin chuckles, runs his hand along Levi’s back as he’s bent over the fountain. “Are you having a good time?”

Levi stands up, turns to him, a toothy grin plastered across his face. “Nah.”

“Oh that’s too bad.” Erwin leans down to take a drink. He stands up again, runs a hand through Levi’s hair before placing one on his back and guiding him back to the hall. “Shall we leave?”

“Maybe after the next dance… or four.”
Erwin closes his eyes and laughs softly. “All right then.”

They dance two more, their brows sweating and lungs heaving before Levi tweaks his knee in one of the new choreograph moves. He pushes through the routine, bouncing through steps until the end, frustration rising in his chest so hot he tries not to rush out into the October night. He limps to the wall near the entrance, hangs his head as he stares at the ground. He grits his teeth, fights back the discomfort in his ribs, the dull pain in his joints, and he just wishes he could do this one. This one fucking thing. He wants to for Erwin. He pats his pockets for his cigarettes, but they’re tucked in his jacket and it’s so far away. He sucks in air rapidly, letting a single whimper pass before he catches the rest.

He pushes away thoughts of knife dances and drunken swaying. He beats away smiles that reek of rusty pennies.

“Levi.” Erwin comes up next to him. “What is wrong?”

“My fuckin’… god damn knee.” He hisses, holding it in his hand.

“We can go home.”

“I don't want to…”

“Honestly, I think my ability to impress you has flown the coop, anyway. I am already wiped out.”

Levi laughs quietly, stands straight. Tests his knee but can't hold weight on it still. “You're so fuckin’ old.”

“I'm afraid so.” He smiles gently at Levi.

Levi hesitates and then nods. They gather their things and put their gear back on. Erwin settles in behind him on the bike, holds him so tightly that Levi wishes he would never have to let him go. That there will never be a reason for him to ever have to.

They return home a little after ten. Levi takes a quick shower before settling into his bedroom with a book in hand. Erwin comes in, rubbing a towel against his hair and a smile tight along his lips. “I had fun tonight.” He’s wearing nothing but his boxer briefs, and as Levi looks up from his book, he does his best not to let his eyes wander.

“I'll try to last longer next time.” He smiles easily. “I had fun though…”

Erwin sits at the edge of Levi’s bed, pulls the towel down his head and lets it drop to the floor between his feet. “It takes a little getting used to, but I would very much enjoy going with you again if you would like.”

“Nanaba said you used to dance a lot with Marie.” Levi tries to not make it sound accusatory, like he is a replacement for the beautiful bride-to-be. He knows that’s not it.

“Yes, it was a thing we did every week for a couple of years. It kept us active, gave us something to look forward to every week.”

“Look forward to? Seems like a grim way to look at life.”

“I didn’t see it so easily back then, but I suppose we were already drifting before the accident. Or perhaps I don’t really understand how relationships are supposed to be.”
“Well at least we have that in common.” Levi looks down at his book with a half smile.

“I could never just sit in a room with her like I can with you.” Erwin says softly. He peeks over at Levi, his smile melting into a quiet look of understanding. “I never feel like I need to be anything other than myself with you.”

“You are such a weirdo.” Levi turns a page in his book before Erwin hooks his finger into the spine and pulls it down from his face. “Oi.”

“These have been some of the best months of my life, Levi.”

“Stop it.” Levi tries to pull his book back up, but Erwin takes it from his hands as he leans into him, brings his face close to Levi’s. “I just wanted to relax tonight.” Levi whines, but Erwin kisses him, and his resolve dissolves immediately, his body twisting under Erwin to lay flat on his bed. “Ugh. You’re so old.”

“So are you.” Erwin opens his mouth against Levi’s, dips his tongue between teeth, rolls it there to coax soft noises behind his nose. He closes his lips, pulls them back slowly, fishes a sound from his throat, low and long. “Gross old man.”

Levi shifts up the bed so his head is on the pillow, pulling Erwin up with him, letting his legs fall open around Erwin’s hips. Levi can feel the bulge of Erwin against his work-out shorts, and he rolls his hips as he forces Erwin’s mouth open with his chin. He works him quietly with patience, licks the mintiness of his toothpaste from his tongue. Levi finds himself dreaming of Erwin on him like this, awake and asleep, strong, wide hands trailing up his shirt and over ribs, his thumb landing over his nipple and pressing down to work soft circles into it. Levi keeps his mouth moving slow, breaks for air as he kisses freshly shaved skin. He smells like shave gel, and he has a little in the crease between his ear and jaw that he wipes away with his thumb.

Erwin pins his hips against Levi, causes Levi to whimper out a moan as his head throws back. Erwin takes the initiative to seal his lips against his throat, nipping love marks across the skin as he feels along Levi’s chest. Erwin thrusts once, his growing erection rubbing along Levi’s, and Levi shakes out a breath as his fingers claw against bare skin.

They weren’t shy around each other anymore, or moreso, Levi has overcome a lot of his self-consciousness around Erwin. Erwin made him feel desirable, handsome, took his face between his hands and looked at him for a millenia, whispered on his lips how beautiful he is. How sexy. Irresistible. He said the words as he kissed over the scars across his chest, down his stomach and to his navel. He’d held Levi’s length in his hand with careful consideration, savored every motion and sound that Levi made as he stroked him. Had him spill an orgasm in his hand so hard that Levi had to claw his way back to reality between rose stained lips.

And Erwin mimics those memories across him now. Slides Levi’s shirt up and over his head, breaks the seal of their mouths with agitation, only to meet again, hungry. Erwin lifts himself onto his hands, presses the tops of his thighs to the backs of Levi’s, raises Levi’s hips to meet his hard cock against his ass, draws a gasp out of Levi that Erwin eats greedily. “Levi.” He breathes, drawing his hand up Levi’s left thigh, over ridges of scars, folds in on himself to kiss along Levi’s skin. He presses his other hand against Levi’s cock, cups his hand up along the length before dragging it back down. “I want to suck you dry.” His voice is deep, husky, and it makes Levi shiver.

“It’s your birthday.” Levi says weakly. Erwin hasn’t gone down on him yet, and he’s a little afraid of it. Being jerked was one thing, coming in Erwin’s large hand, kissing him as he moved himself in and out of the loop of his fingers... But having Erwin so close to his business--his cheeks redden in embarrassment. “I should be blowing you.”
Erwin looks down, determined and focused on Levi’s shorts, gently strokes him through his clothes as he bites his lip. “I want to taste you.”

Levi shudders. They both just showered, so he doesn’t have that excuse. Erwin has seen his cock at this point, has had his cum in his hands. But having Erwin’s face down there seems so unfit for a man like Erwin. Something in him still sees Erwin as a straight man experimenting. Afraid that he’ll taste cock and never want to fuck around with Levi again. Or worse, never want to be around him again.

But… Even if Erwin doesn’t like it, he will not leave. This isn’t a test. They’re partners. Levi opens eyes that he doesn’t remember closing. “If you don’t like…”

Erwin leans down and kisses Levi with lips that tell him not to worry. Lips that are so soft that he knows will feel so good wrapped around him. Sitting back up, Erwin shifts off of the bed, kneels on the floor as he pulls Levi around so that his legs are hanging over the edge of the bed. He hooks his fingers around Levi’s shorts, looks up at Levi for a nod of approval before pulling them down. Levi rolls around his shorts and his hard cock bounces from out of the clothing, sits erect and waiting for Erwin. He resists the urge to cover himself as he sits naked and aroused in front of Erwin, closes his eyes to not see Erwin’s face, afraid that he’ll find him horrendous and unsatisfying. He bites his lip as Erwin runs his hands up the inside of his thighs--Erwin’s hand shaking, Levi’s breath shaking. Erwin sits back on his heels, kisses the skin on the side of his thighs, breathes in before reaching Levi’s dick. He looks up at Levi with a gentle smile.

“E-Erwin. Are you sure you don’t want to use a condom or something?”

“We’re clean… And I want to taste you.” Erwin kisses his thigh again. “You’re shaking. Are you really alright with this?”

“Oh god yes.”

Erwin chuckles. “I apologize ahead of time if I am bad at this.”

“Stop teasing, you asshole. Just do it if you’re gonna do it.”

With a nod, Erwin looks at his cock, swallows. He lifts Levi’s left leg up and over his shoulder and presses his chest into the side of the bed, his body leaning forward and into Levi. Mouth open, tongue covering his bottom teeth, he takes the head of Levi’s cock into his mouth. Levi shudders out a huge sigh. He curls his toes of the sensation of Erwin around him, closes his eyes and grits his teeth. Erwin moves his tongue back as he pulls his head back, dips forward to bob his head back down. He takes half of Levi’s shaft into his mouth before it hits the back of his throat, and he draws his head back to circle his tongue around the head. Reaching up, he takes the base into his hand, plays with some of his saliva in his fingers and uses it as lube to stroke Levi as he cautiously continues to bob his head.

Levi presses his heel into Erwin’s back, balls his hands on his bed sheets as he shakes out a drawn out moan. “Holy… Shit.” Levi whines. He looks down at the damp mess of blonde hair atop of Erwin’s head, the large slope of his nose, the hard edge of his browline. He tries to catch his breath--so fucking handsome, and he has his cock in this man’s mouth. “Unreal.” He whispers as Erwin bobs down onto him again. Pointing his chin to the ceiling, he strangles a moan in his chest, but he can’t contain it. It echoes in the small room, “Erwin--aahhh… Shit.”

He screws his eyes shut, his mouth parted as he gets lost in Erwin. He’s received some decent blow jobs in the past. Has had his dick all the way down a man’s throat before, felt the muscles of the esophagus working around him. Twitched an orgasm in the guy’s mouth, his dick recessing from his
mouth with a long stream of semen connecting from the tip of his penis to the corner of the man’s lip. Levi moans loud at the thought of Erwin dripping with his seed like that, marking him with his admiration, having Erwin taste him. All of him.

Erwin slicks his mouth off of Levi’s cock, rests his cheek against Levi’s thigh and breathes out. “I’m sorry.” He chuckles, though it sounds disappointed. “My mouth hurts.”

Levi blinks heavily, raises a shaky hand to his cock and strokes it, the wet warmth of Erwin’s saliva still prominent on it. “Kiss me.” Levi breathes. “Now.” Erwin sits up, pulls Levi down by the back of the neck, fingers digging hard into the bones of his spine, and kisses him hastily. Messily. They barely match lips as Levi groans loudly, whimpers as the orgasm tightens in his groin. “Fuck!” Levi manages to say, almost forgets how to speak as he thinks of Erwin’s mouth around him.

Holy shit, Erwin’s mouth was on him and he’s still here. He’s still here, and he can taste the saltiness of his precum on Erwin’s tongue and there’s something just so fucking hot about that. Erwin has tasted him and he’s not leaving. Here’s here. And he’s going to...

“I’m gonna fuckin’ come--”

Erwin denies Levi a kiss, and he growls so loud as his toes curl that he practically sobs in anger. But Erwin presses his lips to Levi’s cock, sucks him in and presses his tongue hard against the underside of his shaft as he sucks him in and out of his mouth.

“Fuck! Erwin! Fuck!” Levi digs his fingernails into Erwin’s shoulders. “No! No no! Ah!” he loses the chasing orgasm, practically screams at the ceiling as he kicks his heels. “Oh god, Erwin!” He slinks down, saliva trailing down from the corner of his mouth, groaning each time as Erwin bobs his head. “Like that… Yes… Oh fuck yes.”

Erwin slicks his mouth off again. He looks up at Levi, eyes so hungry for Levi it makes him shudder all around him. “I’m sorry.”

“Stop saying sorry. It just… haaa. I just… I was interrupted.” He laughs, and it shakes on his voice.

“Finish yourself off.” Erwin says, running his hands inside of Levi’s thighs.

Levi nods.

“In my mouth.”

Levi gasps, tries to find the part of his brain that triggers thought. “W-what?”

“I want to taste you so badly, Levi. Please.”

“Holy shit…” Levi mutters, takes his cock into his hand again and pumps it. Erwin positions himself, kisses Levi’s thighs, bites them to drag out wails from Levi’s throat. He feels it now. Again. He pulls Erwin’s head up by his hair, and they lock eyes. Erwin’s looking at him behind dusty eyelashes, blue eyes dark and smoldering. “Open your mouth.” Levi commands, dark and throaty. Erwin follows the order, opens his mouth, lays his tongue out flat, and Levi shudders with a moan so loud it turns into a growl. Dragging Erwin up toward him, he places the head of his cock on his tongue as he strokes, fingers tightening at the roots of Erwin’s hair. He wants to close his eyes against his oncoming orgasm, knows he’s going to come so fucking hard into Erwin’s beautiful, warm mouth. And Erwin’s breath is so hot against him, like steam from a geyser, but he wants to watch. Wants to see Erwin take him. Eat him. Devour him.

He moans out short, heaving moans, gasps and struggles to keep his head up as he comes hot into
Erwin’s mouth. He keeps moving his hand, his toes curling, watches behind half-lidded eyes as his load spurts into Erwin’s gaping mouth. His muscles twitch as each wave of his orgasm washes over him, empties blissfully into Erwin, his heel surely pressing a bruise into his shoulder blade. He bows his head down, holds himself back on the bed to grind his hips up slowly into Erwin’s mouth, eyes still latched as if breaking the contact would make it all disappear. Erwin’s tongue remains laid out under the tip of his throbbing cock, cum splattered across it, his lips, and a little on his face, his lips curled into a smile.

Levi laughs, but it comes out hiccupsed and awkward. Erwin closes his lips around the head of Levi’s cock, and cleans him off as they slip off the tip. A trail of jizz connects from the tip of Levi’s cock to the corner of Erwin’s mouth, before it snaps apart and drips onto Erwin’s chin. Levi moans at the sight, presses his leg in on Erwin harder, holding the man tighter against the bed. Erwin rests his hands on either side of Levi’s thighs, swallows Levi down with a slight grimace on his face before looking up and licking his lips. “You have a bit of…” Levi breathes heavily, feels too light headed to really say much else. Erwin reaches over to his towel and wipes his face down, his smile returning again, and Levi can only attribute it to something of pride.

Erwin places his palms on Levi’s knees, allows Levi to catch his breath and for his eyes to focus before he says something. “Was that satisfactory?”

Levi looks drunk at him, a curl at his lips fit for somebody who just got sucked clean by a man he never would have guessed could do such a thing. “Holy shit.” He topples back on the bed, but the twin sized bed doesn’t allow enough space between the end of the bed and the wall. He slams the back of his head on it and yelps. He shoots back up rubbing his hand against it.

Erwin chuckles, brings his hand up tenderly to touch the sore spot. He kisses anything close to him--elbows, knees, forearms, forehead--until Levi slinks down into his lap to rests his head against Erwin’s chest.

“You’re still cranked on.” Levi says weakly. He wiggles his ass a little on top of Erwin’s erection.

“Yes.” Erwin cradles Levi against his shoulder, leans down and nuzzles his nose into Levi’s, kisses him slowly, sweetly, lovingly on the lips. Even though Levi’s never liked the taste of himself on somebody else, everything just seems to be better when it’s with Erwin. “But seeing you orgasm like that was…” He hums as he kisses Levi so long, until they seem to melt together, until they nearly forget that they’re two beings with separate hearts. “Thank you.”

“I can take care of you…”

“Mmmm… I think… I would like to try again.”

“What?” Levi kicks his legs out across Erwin as Erwin runs a hand up between Levi’s legs and cups his hands around Levi’s balls. Levi squeaks, his softening cock twitching as Erwin rolls his fingers. “E-Erwin!”

“I want to do it all with my mouth.” There’s a playfulness in his eyes, a diabolical glint at his canine, and it steals a beat away from Levi’s chest.

“You think I can go again?”

“It’s my birthday, Levi.” He shifts Levi down onto the hardwood floor, on top of their discarded clothes and across his damp and soiled towel. Levi takes note of these things, but Erwin’s lips are so perfect—he’s so perfect --and he just wants him to do anything and everything to him. He looks at him, with those storybooks eyes, those princely charms, and he watches how he seems to fuck the
words out, deep and thick: “Surprise me.”

Chapter End Notes

what a huge chapter. wowie. and sorry it's released so shortly after the last one. i wasn’t kidding about how much i wrote last week. the next two chapters are direly important to the story and even though i've dropped about 5k words between them both, i really need to sit and fuss about order of operations and what exactly needs to happen. i might actually, finally, take a couple of weeks to work those out. so i'm sorry to put you guys on hold for a bit... and i really do need to do a couple of other writing things as well. haha.

thanks to erwinsalive for reading this over in bits and pieces. i'm sorry i insulted you in a previous comment. you know you are the only bitch for me and that my dick gets rock hard when ever i see your pretty mouth. (is that too much? do i need to dial it back? i'll figure this flirting thing out some day.)

oh, secondary title is "sucking" thanks to alivewin. are we seeing a trend yet, fam? *wiggles eyebrows*

thank you as always for leaving your kind comments, your reblogs, your tags, your messages, the fucking coffee purchase, your overwhelming support. i'm going to keep saying it. i can't even fathom the kindness that's been filling my inboxes. i try my best to respond to everything i can. i really love talking about this story because i'm vain as fuck, but i also love to see what you guys are thinking. it helps me tweak things and make this story better.

thanks again so much. you guys are life and love and all the sweet bits in between.
“We should have everybody over.” Levi says as he sets the table in the dining room.

“Why?”

“For a second Thanksgiving.” Levi doesn’t look up at Erwin as he says it. He expects Erwin to bring it up.

“Even Mike?”

“Yeah.” Levi accentuates with a nod.

Erwin hums as he brings in the first plate of sides. “It has been a long time since I had everybody over like that.”

“How long?”
Setting a bowl of salad on the table, he puts his hands on his hips and puckers his lips as he thinks. Levi walks by and gets on his tiptoes to steal a kiss before he continues into the kitchen. “It’s been probably three years now.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Oh goodness… Four years now?” Erwin turns and follows Levi to the kitchen.

Levi hesitates over his words, but he can’t ignore it. Not anymore. “We’ll have to clean up those boxes so we can open that partition. You know, make it so people to move in and out…”

“We can see if Hange will host. You haven’t been there, have you?”

“You’ve been here for four years, you should probably just toss the boxes if it’s been--”

“They have really large dining room and a bigger table than I have. We can invite Petra and Oruro and the kids…”

“Erwin.”

“Maybe even some other people from work…”

“We can just move the boxes into the basement or something.”

“I am sorry, Levi. I would prefer we ask Hange.”

“I live here now, and I want that space--”

“Levi!”

Levi startles against the island. Blinks a few times before narrowing his eyes. Erwin’s not the type to raise his voice, has done it only that one time when Levi questioned his feelings toward him. There were lines not to be crossed, and apparently one of them was lined with shitty, dusty cardboard boxes.

“Fine.” Levi quips. He piles some carved lamb onto a platter, his utensils hitting the porcelain loudly. “Can we at least have your dad over for Thanksgiving?”

Erwin takes a bowl of carrots and peas into the dining room without answering. He pulls his seat out and sits down, leans over the table and silently piles salad onto his plate.

“I asked you a fucking question, Erwin. Can we do anything here?”

“Levi.” Erwin pours some vinaigrette over his salad, brows drawn down with his jaw tight.

“I want to do this.” Levi drops the platter on the center of the table. It rattles the glasses and jitters the silverware. “I’m not asking too much, am I?” Erwin forks a mouth full of salad into his mouth and chews. The crunch of the vegetables fills the dining room, and it makes Levi twitch. “Hello? You care to fuckin’ answer me?”

“Sit down.”

“Excuse me?” Levi slams his fist down onto the table, knuckle down. “I didn’t quite hear that.”

“Sit. Down.”
Levi glares at him. He flares to anger, and it takes a moment for him to compose himself enough to not upturn the platter of meat all over Erwin. He pats his pockets and rushes to the front door. He pulls out a cigarette, lights it and grits his teeth, squeezes his fingers so tight around the filter that it misshapes the tube, ashes falling from the burning tip as the wind chime drawls a melancholy tone. He paces the front porch, leans on the railing, looks at the boysenberry door until the cold November air turns his fingertips numb. He goes inside and heads straight upstairs and into his room, slams the door shut, and sits onto his bed. Crossing his legs he stares at his bookshelf, concentrates on his breathing as he digs his fingernails into his palms.

There’s a knock on his door at half past eight. Levi grunts in response, and Erwin opens the door. Levi has moved and cracked a window to sit next to it with a cigarette burning away in his fingers. Erwin comes over and sits next to him, arms outstretched across his knees and fingers rubbing against each other.

“I am sorry.”

Levi flicks his cigarette into the ashtray between his legs. Takes another drag before resting it over the ashtray, the blue smoke twining into the room as a cold breeze blows through. “If something’s bothering you, how about you take your own advice and fuckin’ talk to me before you turn into an asshole.”

“I think you have a good idea... About doing a dinner with our friends.” Erwin stares at his hands. “Just give me time on everything else...”

“I can help you.”

“No. I can do it.”

“You cleaned this room out. You did a great job. You… Gave me space in your house, and I want to share it all with you.”

“I do too.”

“There’s a lot down there…”

“Levi. I am asking you with this one thing... To please give me some space.”

Levi furrows his brow. “It’s just shit. Four years of shit.”

“Please.” And his voice is so broken and shattered that Levi turns his head to make sure he’s still Erwin. He is stoic faced and thin lipped. It causes Levi to shift uncomfortably against the wall.

Levi leans back and nods. “We should ask Hange if she’ll host it.”

“I’ll ask them at work tomorrow.” Erwin struggles a smile, places his hand on Levi’s leg. “I will call Mike as well and talk to him about us.” He moves his thumb along Levi’s thigh. “I want you to enjoy your time.”

“I like Mike…” Levi trails.

“I know he likes you too. We’ll have a good time.”

“Yeah.” Levi rests his head on Erwin’s shoulder. He brings his cigarette to his lips, drags in a breath and holds it. Erwin places his hand on Levi’s, encloses his fingers around the cigarette and takes it from him and sets it into his lips. He sucks in a lengthy drag, holds it for as long as Levi, and they
both let out a breath that blankets them in a gray mist of smoke.

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Hange’s house is a half hour from the university. It’s a large two story Dutch colonial, painted a sunny yellow and landscaped with square hedges along the dark blue shuttered windows. Levi shoulders the bag of groceries as he closes the car door, scuffs his boots along the exposed aggregate driveway, and waits for Erwin on the concrete steps to the front door. There’s a tacky turkey decoration hanging on the navy door, gnarly bright colored feathers hanging half off the butt of the bird. It’s clearly a decoration that has seen many years of being packed and unpacked from its seasonal storage box.

Erwin closes his door, a large tray covered in aluminum foil cradled in his arms, and walks up to Levi. He adjusts the tray so he has one hand free, takes Levi by the small of his back and scoops him to his chest. Their heights are equalized by the steps of the front door, and he kisses Levi a few times, rubbing circles along his hips before squeezing his hand on an asscheek. “This was your idea, remember that.”

Levi smiles gently, kisses Erwin’s forehead as he presses the doorbell. “And remember, it was your idea to cook our contribution.”

“You said it tasted good, though.”

Levi barks a laugh. “Eventually.”

Erwin grins and nods. “We all can’t be perfect like you.”

Levi opens his mouth to say something, but the front door opens first. Hange is screeching as they push the glass storm door toward them. “Ahhh! You’re both here!”

“Unfortunately.” Levi says, squeezing through past Hange and into the house before they can grab him into a bear hug. He removes his boots, points the toes to the wall and puts the laces inside. He looks back at Erwin, offers a sympathetic shrug as the man struggles with the platter and Hange’s overzealous greetings. He hears the near topple of food when he drops his bag off in the kitchen, and Erwin firmly asking for Hange to let him go so he can deposit the food in the kitchen.

The first room off the hallway is the living room. It is indeed larger than his and Erwin’s. There’s a large couch, a loveseat, and a recliner pushed together to make a giant ‘C’ shape along the perimeter of the room. There’s a decent sized glass coffee table in the center, its legs composed of bamboo and twine, sitting on top of a braided rug across the tan carpet. The decorations and colors seem asian inspired and shockingly well organized. Levi has only heard stories about the tornado disaster that is Hange’s office, and had prepared himself to witness it in their private space. He’s pleasantly surprised.

Moblit’s sitting in the recliner, socked feet up and crossed. Levi has a feeling this is how he looks any other day, the cushion probably sagging in the center when nobody’s seated in it. He greets him, takes a seat on the sofa, his legs bouncing as he watches the doorway that has Erwin’s voice filtering through it. There’s some sounds of tinfoil rustling, some plastic wrap being tugged at, and the click click of the gas stove starting. Levi tries to relax, refuses a glass of water although he didn’t really want to, and gnaws at his lip as he tries to pay attention to the show Moblit has on the
television.

The front door rings and Hange has already scrambled to the door before Levi can even register who it may be. Erwin pokes his head into the living room with a bright smile on his face. “That’s Mike and Nanaba. Levi, could you please go help them bring in their food?”

“What are you doing?”

“Hey, Commander.” Moblit says.

“Hi Moblit,” Erwin nods cordially before turning his attention back to Levi. “I am helping Hange warm up their appetizers. Please?”

Levi shifts and nods. “Think you can handle this on your own?” He tilts his head to the television.

“Oh yeah, I got it covered. My favorite part about dinner parties is that Hange insists on cooking.” Moblit smile gently, and Levi nods in response.

Levi goes back into the entryway and slips on his boots. By the time he finishes tying the laces, Mike and Nanaba are already at the doorway again with bags of food lined on their arms. Nanaba shuffles past him in the hallway and down into the kitchen, giving Levi a quick peck on the cheek before doing so. Mike nods at him as he passes. “You guys need any other help?”

“I don’t think so, squirt.” Mike says.

Levi follows them into the kitchen. Nanaba heaves her bags up onto the kitchen table and lets out a long breath. “Yeah, I think we’re all right.” She rifles through the bags briefly before dramatically slapping her palm to her forehead. “I knew it.”

“What is it, babe?”

Nanaba looks up at Mike, exasperated and distraught. “I forgot the whipped cream for the pies.”

“I’m sure Hange has some…” Mike says.

“Can you go get some?”

“We can ask.” Levi says quietly.

“What what?” Hange pokes their head into the kitchen from the living room. Levi’s slightly disoriented and confused as to why they’re in there to begin with.

“Do you have any whipped cream?” Mike asks.

“Yes–”

“No.” Erwin booms over Hange as he makes his way into the kitchen, his hands rubbing against a dishcloth. He picks up a wooden spoon and stirs a non-descript thing in a non-stick pot. “I didn’t see any when I put our stuff in the fridge.”

Mike looks down at Levi, and Levi looks up at Mike. They both share a disgruntled glare before rolling their eyes. “Fine.” Mike answers, defeatedly.

“Thank you so much, hun. We’ll see you in a few.” Nanaba grins, and it seems a little too proud. A little too obvious... But it doesn’t make it any less contagious.
“She knows damn well what she’s doing.” Levi says as they pile into Mike’s truck.

Mike closes the door behind him, settles into his seat and starts the vehicle. “The best part is how cute she is when she thinks she’s being clever.”

Levi snorts. “Yeah. Can’t disagree with you there.”

“Do they sell whipped cream at gas stations?” Mike says, his arm around Levi’s headrest as he backs into the street.

“I dunno. But I’m sure we can find something there as a replacement.”

“Good answer.”

They make it to the end of the street and are stopped at an intersection before either of them say another word. “Here’s where I apologize.” Mike says, looking both ways before crossing into the street, not looking at Levi as he says it.

“Don’t if you don’t mean it.”

“No, I mean it. I was being an asshole.”

“Ok.”

“It’d be nice if you weren’t one back.”

“Sure. Apology accepted.”

“Jesus…”

Levi sighs, looks out the window and past his reflection to the barren trees and scattered piles of snow on the sides of the road. “I mean it.”

“He’s my best friend.” Mike says, quietly. “I gotta look out for him when he won’t.”

“I know.” Levi plays with his fingers, the side of his forehead resting against the cold glass of the window. “He’s lucky to have you all.”

“We’re lucky to have him.”

Levi peers over from the corner of his eye as they pull into the gas station. He unbuckles himself and nearly stumbles out of the cab as they walk into the convenience store. With their luck, they manage across a canister of whipped cream, but decide to get some butter and a quarter gallon of milk to fool Nanaba and Erwin into thinking they’d have to make some disgusting concoction out of it. Levi sets the bag onto the floor between his feet, buckles himself again, and settles deep into his seat.

“I heard you invited some other people to this thing?” Mike says as he puts the truck in drive.

“Yeah, but they can’t come.”

“Who was it?”

“My boss, her husband, and two kids.” Levi says.

“How old?”
“Four and six, I think.”

“Man, I love kids.” Mike laments.

“These ones are ok.”

Mike chuckles. “I’ll say, you don’t seem like you’d like ‘em.”

“Just never had the chance.”

“I’d do anything to have some rugrats running around.”

“Why don’t you?”

Mike chews on nothing as he turns right down a street. “We can’t. We’ve tried. A lot.”


“Yes.”

“Adoption?”

“It’s selfish, but… We want them to be ours.” Mike side glances at Levi. “How about you?”

“What?”

“Ever wanted any?”

“Again, I never had a chance to think about it… But I guess it wouldn’t be awful.”

Mike laughs.

“I don’t even know if Erwin would ever want any…”

Mike is silent for awhile until Levi looks at him. He hums. “He wanted some really bad. He was trying with Marie at the same time Nanaba and I were. Then… Nothing. He just stopped talking about it.”

Levi stares at the dashboard. “I wonder why…”

“I’m not sure.”

“And now Marie…”

“Has three little ones of her own, yeah.”

Levi shifts in his seat. The seatbelt suddenly feels like it’s cutting into his skin, and he breathes deeply as he rolls the crank window down a couple of revolutions. “We’ve never talked about it…”

“I’m not surprised.”

“Why do you say that?”

Mike shrugs, eases the truck into a full stop at the stop sign. “Given the circumstances…”

“What the fuck do you mean by that?”
“Calm down. I just mean you’re both pretty old. I think he’s just given up on the idea, and you clearly haven’t put much thought into it.”

Levi drifts his eyes out the window, bows his head, and nods. He thinks he would like to have kids with Erwin. They could adopt or foster or something if that’s really want he wanted to do. Levi didn’t need his job, he just needed something to keep his mind off what’s in his head. Twenty years of work away from a place he used to call home, no family or friends to support, Levi’s sitting on a bank account fit to retire on despite the severance pay. But… Having kids was different than borrowing kids, and he… He really probably couldn’t handle it, could he? Erwin would show up one day with Levi mid-episode, the kid somewhere with a Lego caught in their windpipe, dead. He sighs, brings his fingers to massage the bridge of his nose. He can barely trust Erwin’s life in his hands. Mike was right about something, at least.

“Yeah…”

“That’s why we have three dogs.” Mike smiles. “Not quite the same, but we love them like they are our kids.”

Levi twitches a frown, suddenly agitated that he had even leapt to thinking about having such a settled life with Erwin, like it could ever be a possibility. They didn’t even sleep in the same bed--hadn’t even fucked yet. He rolls his eyes at himself in the window and chews at the inside of his mouth.

“Yeah.”

“You should get one.” Mike says. “They train service dogs for veterans, you know.”

A thin veiled insult. Levi can’t handle living without assistance, be it Erwin’s or some beast’s. Levi’s jaw clenches, and he scoffs. He swallows a few times, feels the anger wither enough to say something, “I don’t need one.”

“I’m just saying.”

“Say all the shit you want.”

“Hm.” Mike mutters as he pulls into Hange’s driveaway. He parks the truck and leans over to pick up the bag from Levi. Levi interrupts him, grabs the handles before he can.

“I got it.”

Mike looks up at him, sits back in his seat, his nose flaring as he nods. He gets out of the truck without another word and goes to the door, leaves inside without waiting for Levi to follow.

Levi tears at the plastic bag handles until they rip. He gets out of the truck and stands outside smoking until the cold freezes his cheeks to red bricks. Opening the front door, he goes inside, removes his boots, points them at the wall, laces inside. He walks into the kitchen and dumps the bag noisily on the counter. “We got the shit.” Levi says sharply before he walks off to the dining room.

The dining table is empty and the chairs pulled to the edges of the room. In a couple of hours, it will be covered with plates and platter for the buffet. He walks to the window and pulls the curtain aside, stares out at the suburban boringness of the house across the street. Two stories, white sidings, a wooden door. An inflatable cartoon turkey sitting out in front of the well manicured lawn, giving some kind of false impression of character to the mundanity. The lamp post at the end of the driveway switches on as the sky turns a muddy blue.

He breathes in sharply as Erwin comes up behind him, his large body pressing up in behind him, pushing his chest against the window as he wraps his arms around his hips. He leans down and
kisses his cheek softly. Levi sighs out, melts into the touch and tries not to think of Erwin taking him here, in front of their friends—in front of Mike—how exhilarating it would be to feel full and justified and right for being so close to him. To be his.

“How did it go?” Erwin says quietly.

“He’s an asshole.” Levi bites, but keeps his voice low as well.

“Really?” Erwin runs his hands up Levi, and Levi snatches one and holds it to his chest. He breathes in deep, isn’t sure what he wants to say, so lets the first thing spill from his lips.

“Do you want kids?”

“Levi…”

“Nevermind.” Levi says. He pulls the curtain shut with his other hand and sighs. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Why?”

“Because we’re fags.” Levi mutters, turns and releases Erwin’s hand and starts to walk off to the kitchen.

“That’s not what I meant, Levi.” Erwin says, “And I would appreciate if you did not use that language.”

“Right, because you aren’t one. My mistake.”

“Would you like to step outside?”

“No.” Levi puts his head in his hand, scratches his hairline with his ring finger. “No…” Erwin steps forward, cautiously closing the gap between them. “It sucks.”

“What does?”

Levi blinks, looks down, turns his head to look down the short hallway to the kitchen. He takes a step back toward Erwin. “Everything.”

“I do not follow.”

Levi looks up at him, blinks slowly and sighs air out of his lungs so ragged that it tears up his insides like glass. “I…” He wants to give Erwin everything, wants to have a house and life with him, and he’s not sure why sometimes. Is it because he feels like he owes him something? For saving him when he had nobody else as a kid? Saving him now when he had no place to return to? For making him feel like he was worth anything above a damn. Was Erwin always going to be here to save him? Like a service dog. Like a parent.

But they’re partners. He has to remind himself of that too many times. That Erwin had asked him to be his, to share his life with him. Why… Why? But why? His nose flairs, and Erwin is standing next to him when he looks up. “We’re partners.”

“Yes.”

“What does that mean to you?”

Erwin blinks, looks up past Levi, past the kitchen, out the window above the sink where the sky is a
swirl of hot pink and purple. He looks contemplative and a little distant when he says: “Everything.”

Levi stares at him, and it all doesn’t matter anymore. The things Mike said. The anger in his belly. The hate for himself. For a moment, he forgets. His eyes trail down Erwin, he takes his hand between his fingers and feels the softness of his knuckles, draws a finger up a vein that protrudes through skin, brings the backside of his hand to his mouth and kisses it tenderly—for a long time. Until his breathing steadies and his teeth don’t grit. He breathes out across the skin that smells like flour and cinnamon, and he presses a cheek to it. “Did you ruin anything while I was gone?”

Erwin chuckles. “The whole damn thing. We are getting Pizza Hut now.”

“You dumbass.” Levi smiles into his hand and kisses it one more time before letting it go. “I’ll take over from here.” Erwin bends down, holds his face between his hands tenderly and kisses him softly, draws back and tucks a piece of his hair behind his ear. “You sap.”

“Guilty.”

Levi keeps the smile Erwin leaves him when he exits to the living room to socialize. Levi enters the kitchen and Hange turns to greet him, a white stained apron around their neck that reads “Warning: Hot Stuff Cooking”.

“Sup, Levi.”

“What do you need me to do?”

“Erwin givin’ up already?”

“Figured it was safer that way if we wanted to eat anything at all tonight.”

Hange cackles and nods. Levi washes his hands thoroughly before starting on prep for the mashed potatoes. Levi has been curious about the stories he had heard from Erwin and Mike about Hange’s disorganized behavior, and he realized it quickly when he asked three times for the peeler, Hange going through three draws of clutter and coming up with “just use a knife”. They talk as they cook, or rather Hange talks at Levi, but he finds it strangely interesting. Levi always had average intelligence, a curious mind with no real love for traditional academics. They explain that the science they’re working on researching is rather controversial, and that it was all made possible thanks to Erwin. Levi asks why. Hange birthed the research and Erwin defended its relevancy.

Erwin does well to surround himself around intelligent people. Hange a behavioral neuroscientist, Mike an engineer, Moblit an art history professor, and Nanaba a psychologist. Levi wipes his forehead with the back of his forearm, shakes his head once as he tries to remove the thoughts from his head, but they stick.

What is he doing here?

Erwin comes into the kitchen to pour himself a glass of water, kisses Levi before he leaves back into the living room, and Levi’s eyes linger a little longer on his ass than he intended.

“We have a guest room.” Hange teases.

“Huh? What?”

“He sure is a tall glass of water, ain’t he?”

Levi rolls his eyes. “Sure.”
“Who tops?”

“Mind your own business, shitty glasses.”

Hange laughs as they pull open the oven door, the heat rushing up to steam their glasses as they lean in to baste the turkey. “Lighten up, shortcake.”

“Nobody.”

Hange stops mid-baste and looks up at him bewildered. “Say what.”

Levi looks nervously at the entryway to the living room, a regret seeping into him like thick syrup. He casts his eyes up to the ceiling and buries holes into it. “Nothing.”

Hange closes the oven door and gets close to Levi, face drawn long and lips pursed open into a small ‘o’. “You guys haven’t had sex yet?”

“Hange!”

“Oh my god. Oh my god!”

Levi presses a hand to their face, but they lick his palm in response. Levi yelps and unconsciously slaps them across the face. “Disgusting!”

Hange isn’t phased, despite the redness on their cheek growing with each passing second. “You gotta get on that, boy.”

Levi glares, shifts his eyes again, and says softly through a hiss, “You don’t think I’ve tried?” He leans a hand on the kitchen counter. “Christ, it’s like I need a neon sign on my ass or something.”

“So you bottom…”

Levi throws his dish towel at Hange’s face. “Shut the fuck up, pervert. Why the fuck do you care so much about this shit?”

Hange pulls the towel down from their face, revealing an unsettlingly large grin. “Have you tried installing runway lights?”

“Have you tried eating shit?”

Hange cackles loudly, moves to pull out a casserole dish from a messy cupboard to start on the green bean casserole. “Sex is a fascination to me. It’s the building blocks of all vertebrate life, no matter how unceremonious it may be. And hell, even plants gotta have sex someway, right? I started school in reproductive sciences before moving to behavioral neuroscience. In a way, they aren’t too far removed. One just leads to the other really, it’s just one wondering why it happens at all. But hey, did you know that the chance of you being born was one in 400 trillion? That shit’s insane.”

Levi doesn’t say he wishes he had been one of the other 400 trillion. Instead, he shakes his head.

“Human are interesting. We aren’t the only ones that attempt to mate for life, but we certainly make it more complicated. We’re a nomadic species that has become stationary. We get bored, our survival rate is too high, but we still want to spread our seed. Sow the fields with our genes. Sexuality is an interesting side effect of that.”

“Yeah?” Levi hands Hange the can of green beans and cream of mushroom soup.
“Sex without reproduction, or sex without the intent to conceive, in general is fascinating. There’s studies and studies about whether animals take pleasure in sex like we do. And same-sex acts are seen all over the animal kingdom. Trying to connect that the idea of consciousness, how much control we actually have over our bodies in the face of instinct, is just...” Hange shivers and squeals. “It’s just so cool!”

“Do I need to be afraid of you killing me to dissect me later?”

“Nah. You’re combat trained. I’d never have a chance.” Hange waves a hand. “And I ain’t ever having sex to conceive either. I just do it for fun.” They smile and wink. “But child-birth. What a neat thing that is. I’d love to just experience that.” They grab their tummy in two big handfuls. “I wanna see life comin’ out of this magnificent flesh cage.”

“You’re so fuckin’ weird.”

“Why live if all you’re gonna be is normal?”

Levi grins. “Maybe...”

Hange pours the green beans into the casserole dish. It makes a hollow *thunk* noise as it breaks the vacuum of the tin can and plops into the ceramic. “Have you tried outright telling him?”

“That wouldn’t work.”

“Do it.”

Levi rubs the inside of his arm and draws his eyebrows together, sighs and shrugs.

Hange holds the open can of soup to their nose and grimaces. “Smells like ‘cream of shit’.” Levi laughs, heartily.

They serve dinner a couple of hours later, gathered together in the living room sitting on the floor or with dinner trays eating off of paper plates. Levi sits between Erwin’s legs, his thick calves caging him and making him think of them wrapped around him, holding them tightly as he rides on top of him. Levi stares at his plate for several minutes, tries to tame a hard-on that so often seems to threaten him lately. He takes Erwin’s plate when he’s done, and Erwin’s hand drags off of him and down his ass, flustering Levi even more. He follows Hange into the kitchen, tosses their plates, and prepares a small platter of their potluck contribution—mini chocolate pudding pies.

Erwin had insisted that they make them from scratch, crust and all. Somehow, Erwin burnt the pudding twice, and didn’t put enough sugar into the crust on their second attempt. They finally got to the perfect combination, and Levi tops the last pie with a thick peak of whipped cream before bringing the platter into the living room. “Speciality of Mr. Smith.” Levi says.

“No shit. You made something?” Mike laughs as he takes his pie and spoon from Levi.

“It took us four tries.” Levi says, shooting a sly grin at Erwin.

“We got there eventually.” Erwin nods, a proud smile on his face.

“If you guys had a dog, the mistakes wouldn’t have gone to waste!” Nanaba says with a smile, licking the tip of the whip cream mountain before digging her spoon in.

“Chocolate and--” Erwin starts.
“We’re thinking of getting a dog.” Mike and Erwin look at him with an raised eyebrow in almost comedic unison. Erwin’s suspicious look melts into one of soft joy, a smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

“Yeah…” Erwin says quietly, taking his pie. When Levi sits back down between his legs, Erwin taps his spoon on the crown of his head and forces Levi to look back up at him with a craned neck. Erwin folds in on himself and kisses Levi’s forehead.

Levi grimaces and wipes his forehead, a trail of chocolate smudged against his finger. “You’re such a child.” He whispers.

“I know.” He whispers back, licking his spoon and sticking it to the end of his nose. Everybody follows suit almost immediately, holding an unannounced but very serious contest to see who could hold theirs the longest. Moblit wins.

It’s nearly midnight when they leave. Levi and Erwin hug everybody goodnight, and they thank Levi for coming up with such a wonderful idea. For a moment, he feels less like the misfit among geniuses and like he’s apart of this group of friends--this family--that Erwin has brought together. They get a picture together, Erwin’s phone perched against a glass with a timer set on it. It’s awkward and dimly lit, but it’s all six of them--smiling.

Hange waves him out with pantomimed air traffic control wands, and Levi responds with a proudly stiff middle finger. Erwin asks him on the way home if he meant it about them getting a dog together. Levi says of course. Erwin feels for his hand, holds it tightly in his own the entire drive home as if he has something more to say, but says nothing.

Erwin doesn’t lose his smile all the way up until he goes to bed, and Levi sits against the wall of his bedroom, head slumped to his chest, feeling nothing but the ache in his cheeks of the grin that has yet to fade.

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The drywall presses against Levi’s skull and makes his head hurt, his neck crooked into a curve so deep that his chin reaches his collar bone. He works at himself, toes curled around the edge of the bed, his hips slightly raised and tilted to the side as he slides another digit into his opening. Slick and wet with lube, he mumbles out incoherent phrases and words, but one keeps rising again and again: “Erwin.”

The first time he ever touched himself like this he had thought of Erwin. Sixteen and young and curious. He had only heard about it, heard people throwing around slang terms and insults to people that weren’t like him. Levi wondered if he really was that way, if he liked it up the ass and sucking dick--turns out he really did.

But thinking of Erwin like that--when he was so close all the time, could smell him on his clothes when he returned home at night--just seemed wrong. He tried to ban Erwin from his hand and his fingers and the corners of his mind whenever he felt the cold hotness that curdled in his stomach when he came. It didn’t work until he left, and it took years. It wasn’t until Erwin started to become a fuzzy memory, where his voice faded out of his mind’s ear, until there were days--even weeks--that he’d go without thinking of him.
Now, though. Now … Levi’s cheek pressed to his mattress, a puddle of drool across his skin as he introduces a third finger with a quiet moan. His hard cock settles against his belly, aching to be touched and relieved, but not yet. “No… Ahhh…”

He has other plans tonight.

Fuck him. Yes, fuck him, he wants to feel Erwin in him. Wants to ride him until his cock punches black stars into the back of his eyes. He wants to feel complete, and he knows it will feel like that with Erwin. Wants Erwin’s cum in him if he’ll let him, to buck mindlessly on his spent, slick cock as Erwin chants his name like it’s the fucking gospel.

Levi slicks his fingers out with a shallow moan. He breathes into the covers of the mattress for several minutes before sitting up. Running his clean hand through his hair, he looks at the bottle of lube and the three condom packets next to it, swallows, and picks them up as he stands. Erwin’s shirt hangs low on him, covers him to his knees and does a decent job of hiding his erection. He stops in the bathroom to wash his hands thoroughly before he pads quietly to Erwin’s room. He opens the door without knocking, peeks in quickly before pushing himself into the room.

No turning back now.

“Levi?” Erwin asks, peering over his reading glasses. He’s reading some research book, which is no surprise as Erwin can never be turned off--a fact Levi is hoping is true now.

“We’re doing this.” Levi says. He had rehearsed it in his head, tried to think of other ways to bring it up, but he didn’t have an interest in coyness. And honestly, Hange’s suggestion came to make more sense the more he thought about it. Afterall, he’d rather be rejected upfront before getting into it too deep. He holds up the contents of his hands to illustrate his intentions clearer.

“Oh?”

“Move over.” Levi comes to the edge of the bed before Erwin even has a chance to put down his book or his reading glasses.

“A-are you sure? Levi, wait—” Levi climbs into bed and swings his legs around Erwin’s hips. He watches as Erwin’s eyes grow wide at seeing Levi’s nudity--and arousal--under the shirt. “Oh, Levi.” He places his hands on Levi’s bare thighs and runs his thumbs up the insides of them. “Is this my shirt?” He asks, and Levi nods in response. He pushes the shirt up past Levi’s cock to expose it, and he bites his lip as he shifts under him. “What has gotten into you?”

“You will, if you want.” Levi grins slyly as he leans down, puts his weight on one arm as the other trails down Erwin’s cheek. “Sorry I didn’t have time to install runway lights.”

“What?”

Levi laughs to himself and shakes his head. “I… Listen… I’ve never thanked you.” He takes Erwin’s glasses by the bridge and pulls them off slowly. He folds the arms of the glasses with his chin before placing them on the ledge of the headboard.

“For what?” Erwin’s voice starts to shake with arousal, his fingers digging into Levi’s hip bone. He bucks up slightly, and Levi forces more of his weight down on him.

“Everything.” Levi says, whispers it like it’s a secret, when their life together is anything but. He kisses him softly, like Erwin does to him, barely touching lips, teasing noises out of Erwin that makes his cock twitch.
Erwin leans up to chase the kiss, brings one hand up to sit on the nape of his neck and pulls him down. They kiss slowly, Erwin’s thumb drawing up the crease of Levi’s leg, making Levi press a soft sound from his throat as he laps his tongue against Erwin’s. Erwin breaks, looks groggily at Levi, pulls his hand down from Levi’s nape to caress small circles on his cheekbone. “I want to give you everything, Levi.”

Levi wanders his hands across Erwin’s t-shirt, feels the soft muscles and definition of him under it. Even after all that he has been through, after the accident that tore him open like a sardine can, he’s still the most attractive man Levi has ever set eyes on. He’ll forever be the one he dreams about, even if he’s sleeping right next to him. “I want you.” Levi kisses him again, and it aches. He feels Erwin’s lips and tries not to think about the days that he didn’t. It’s only been a couple of months but it makes those thirty years of pining feels like nothing. “We don’t have to…” Levi kisses him again, long, and he drops his top lip off of Erwin’s bottom as he kisses a gentle line down Erwin’s jaw.

“M-make… love?”

Levi continues down his neck, slowly, agonizingly slow, Erwin softly sighing out of his nose until a well placed nip causes him to whimper. “Sex. Fuck. Whatever.”

“Make love.” Erwin says, firmly.

Levi works his bottom lip against Erwin’s carotid artery, feels it pumping life into him, into them. “Fine. That.”

“I would like to, but… I’ve never…”

“It’s like fucking a woman. But better.” Levi pulls down the collar of his sleep shirt, carefully sucks a purple mark onto his collarbone before looking up into Erwin’s eyes.

“How would you know?”

“How would you?”

Erwin grins. “I would like to find out.”

Levi presses his ass down into Erwin’s arousal—hard and thick and long. A chill shudders up his spine as he arches it across Erwin’s body. “I like that answer.” He swoops down, kisses Erwin carefully, tugs at the bottom of Erwin’s shirt and pulls it up over his head. He sits back on Erwin’s crotch, runs his hands up Erwin’s abs, up his chest, curls his fingers in chest hair and gives a toothy grin. “I’m gonna ride you.” He trails his index fingers down the shapes of Erwin’s muscles, drags his thumb across the spiderweb of scars on his left side. “Slow ‘n hard.”

“Levi.” Erwin practically melts, begs, finds his fingers pressing into hip bones again as he takes his bottom lip fully between his lips.

“I want to hear you say my name.” Levi bends down, shifts himself so his body in between Erwin’s legs. He kisses a line down Erwin, kisses every inch of skin that makes Erwin sigh heavily, lets Erwin card his hands in his hair as he shakes under him. “I want to feel you in me.”

“Oh god, Levi.” Erwin’s fingers tighten at the roots of Levi’s hair.

Levi pulls at the waistband of Erwin’s sleep pants, tugs it down under his hips, bringing down the front of his boxer briefs and springing his cock out from the confines. Levi’s lips part in a soft sigh, his other hand coming up to pull down Erwin’s foreskin, flicks his tongue out to lick up the small pearl of precum at the slit. He settles between Erwin’s legs, looks up at the man that is looking at him
like a man that’s starved, lips parted and eyes wide. Levi wraps his lips around the tip, presses his
tongue tightly against the underside before dipping his head further down the shaft. Erwin’s fingers
grip tighter in his hair, wheezes out a breath that struggles to leave his throat. Levi works him slowly,
Erwin’s legs shifting up and down the bed as he tries to assess his pleasure. Levi holds Erwin’s hips
down, sucks Erwin in until he hits the back of his throat and drags back up, keeps his eyes on
Erwin’s face, all contorted and thrown back. Levi smiles proudly around Erwin’s cock.

He’s been practicing when nobody was around. Sat over the kitchen sink with a banana shoved
down his throat until it passed his gag reflex, swallowed around it until he could do it with relative
ease. But Erwin is much bigger than that, and Levi’s afraid that if he tries, he’ll disappoint Erwin, or
worse, throw up all over him.

Levi bobs his head off of Erwin’s cock, presses his palm against Erwin’s balls, massages them gently
as he strokes Erwin with his other hand. Erwin brings his forearm to cover his eyes, mouth dropped
open as he pants. “You’re so easy.” Levi leans down, shallowly bobs his head around Erwin’s tip,
continues to jerk him as the moaning above him becomes louder, big hands finding their ways into
dark locks again. Levi slides his mouth down around Erwin, opens his throat and swallows Erwin
down, gurgling as he does, screwing his eyes shut to concentrate on the girth that closes up his
windpipe.

He slides down more, nearly takes three fourths of Erwin into his mouth before he gasps, his hips
thrusting up and into Levi’s face. “Oh! Holy shit, Levi!”

Levi groans out unintentionally, smacks at Erwin’s arms and pulls himself up and off. He coughs,
breathes heavily as he rubs his palm into his forehead. “Oi. None of that shit.” He swallows several
times, closes his eyes to focus on keeping control of his body. He is not going to throw up.

“I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to…” Erwin trails his hand down Levi’s cheek, rubs his thumb at some
saliva that corners his lips, and smiles gently at him.

Levi sighs, turns into the hand and kisses it softly. “You idiot.”

“I didn’t ruin the mood, did I?”

Levi shakes his head, crawls up Erwin’s body, his cock touching Erwin’s as he kisses him. “I just
wanted to try.”

“I… I appreciated it very much.”

“Oh yeah?” Levi teases another kiss, hooks his fingers under Erwin’s bottoms. “Let’s get these off of
you.” Erwin leans up and kisses him as he nods, struggles to keep his lips together through his
smiles, and helps Levi to pull his underwear and sleeping pants off. Levi eyes him up and down,
naked and dusted with dark blonde hair across his chest, thickly down his stomach and around the
base of his cock. He feels a bit light headed at the sight, bows down to tease a few more licks and
bobs on the head of his cock, causing Erwin to shudder and moan under him.

Levi reaches over to the lube, sits back on Erwin’s thighs, their dicks touching again and Erwin
moans softly. He pops the cap, keeps his eyes on Erwin, always waiting for him to back out. To run
away. To not be this. But he doesn’t even blink, looks at him like a hungry animal and panting like
one too. Levi squirts a bit of lube in his palm, works it between his hand, lets it warm up to his body
temperature before leaning back slightly, grasping both of their cocks and pressing them together,
slicking his hand slowly up both of them.

“Oh… Oh my god.” Erwin whimpers. He thrusts up into Levi’s hand, folds his fingers into the
crooks of the inside of Levi’s knees, pulls him closer, pushing his cock to more attention in Levi’s hand. “Yes, Levi. Levi!” He groans it out, loses the name somewhere inside the noises from his nose which get muted inside the side of a pillow.

“You…” Levi sighs out, thrusts into his own hand, blinks slowly, his mouth dropping open in soft moans. “You’re so hot.”

Erwin peers up at him from the corner of his eye, like he did when he held a knife to his cheek, the scar burning a hot pink against his pale skin. “A… A compliment?”

“Like a furnace.” Levi strokes faster. Erwin’s cock is almost a full two inches longer than his, and his thumb slicks off the tip of his as he moves to solely stroke Erwin in his full grip. “Fuck me, Erwin.”

Erwin’s breath hitches, his face turning to look up at Levi. “Are you sure?”

“Shut up. Do you want a condom or not?”

“W-what do you…”

“I don’t care.”

Erwin takes Levi’s free hand, closes his eyes and furrows his eyebrows. He kisses each knuckle individually, breathes heavily against the skin while Levi still strokes him. “I would like to feel you…”

The answer draws a moan out of Levi, and he bows over Erwin, laces his fingers with Erwin’s and moves his lubed hand up to rest heavily on his collar bone. He ruts his hips, rubs his cock against his as he kisses Erwin hotly. “You’re so dirty. I bet you want to come in me, too.”

Erwin’s lips part against his, and blue meets grey, and he bites down on Levi’s bottom lip. “You are making it sound like you want me to.”

Levi tuts, but can’t hide the smile. “Maybe.” Levi quips, adjusts his position over Erwin. He steadies himself up on his knees, grabs a hold of Erwin’s cock behind him to position it toward his opening.

“Wait, don’t we have to…” Levi swears that he blushes. “I already worked myself open.”

Erwin chuckles, but it gets lost in his lust. “You really thought I’d say yes to this, didn’t you?”

Levi eases down, feels the head of Erwin’s cock between his asscheeks. “Was I wrong?”

Erwin takes Levi by his arms and drags him forward on top of him. He slaps a hand onto his ass and grabs at it. Levi squeaks, tries to lift himself up, but Erwin has him in his arms, his lips against his ear, his hand squeezing at his ass. “I want to.”

“I took care of myself.”

Erwin kisses his ear and jaw and cheek in ways that make Levi shudder. He struggles weakly, but only to shift his cock up against him so it’s more comfortable. “Your pleasure is mine now, and I want to take care of it the best way I can.”

“Oh, shut up.” But his breath shakes. Erwin never stops surprising him with how much he wants him.
He chuckles, massages his hand on Levi’s ass. “May I?”

Levi shifts and reaches behind him, pats the bed as he keeps his eyes on Erwin, and eventually grabs the lube. He sits up, opens the cap, takes Erwin’s hand in his palm up, and squeezes a stream of liquid into it. “Be gentle. I’m a virgin.”

“Are you?”

Levi leans down, presses his chest to Erwin’s, lets his ass hang in the air. “You really are an idiot, you know that right?”

Erwin grins, massages the lube in his fingers before using his other hand to grab Levi by the ass, shoves him into his chest and presses his lips to Levi’s ear. “Listen…” Grabbing one asscheek, he exposes Levi’s opening to his probing lubed finger, circles it around it gently.

Levi gasps, whimpers and buries his face into Erwin’s neck. “For what…?”

Erwin rubs at it gently, arches his back a little to shift Levi on him and to get better access. “For your moans.”

“Nooo--aaahhhhh.” Levi sweeps his head up, his nose squished against Erwin’s jaw as Erwin presses as digit in. He breathes heavily into Erwin’s skin—he’s so hot and warm and his heart beats heavily in his chest that he fears it might break free from it. It hurts how much he feels for Erwin. “Erwin. Ohhh.”

Erwin slicks his finger in and out slowly, presses his cheek into Levi’s nose. “You’re so loud.”

Levi moves his ass against Erwin, his cock rubbing against Erwin’s bare stomach. He pulls his shirt up so he can feel more of Erwin’s skin, shudders out a long drawn out moan as Erwin experiments with a second finger. He gasps, turns his head so his chin is on Erwin’s shoulder, his face buried into the pillow, his own breath puffing up hot into his face as he pants. Erwin works at him slowly, carefully, in a way so gently that he’s never been touched before, not even by himself. It keeps drawing heightened wails from him until his eyes are swimming in the back of his head and he drives his face deep into Erwin’s neck. His cock slicks against Erwin’s stomach, still coated in lube and dripping with precum. “Fuck me, Erwin.” He begs.

“Manners, Levi.” Erwin teases, hooks his fingers inside him, and Levi nearly screams.

“Please!”

Erwin removes himself, releases Levi who carefully raises himself with his arms. They shake slightly, his hair curtaining his rosy cheeks, and they smile at each other. “You are going to ride me, you said?”

Levi hisses between his teeth—hearing it come out of Erwin’s mouth sends his heart through his stomach. “Yeah, so let me…” He sets up on his knees again, wraps his arm around his back and grabs Erwin’s cock in his hand. “Let me handle this.” Erwin nods, watching Levi with quiet interest and arousal, his teeth caught at the corner of his lip. Levi locks eyes, watches Erwin’s face as he eases down onto Erwin, his thick head pressing against his opening until it passes against the rim…

Levi does everything he can to keep his eyes opened, braces one hand on Erwin’s shoulder as he eases his ass down more onto Erwin’s length. The stretching barely helped--Erwin is so big and it fills him even at the crest. “Ahhhh—” Levi cries, his toes curling as he shifts his ass up, Erwin popping out of him as he adjusts his position. “Fuck.”
“Fuck.” Erwin mimics.

Levi shifts his weight, his hand still on Erwin, and he guides him back in, takes more of him this time with a shallow thrust of his hip. He moans out, throat exposed for Erwin to touch, big fingers trailing down his neck and latching to the front of the dress shirt. Levi fucks Erwin’s tip to work himself open more, shallow gestures that make them sing together.

Watching Erwin get lost in sex has been one of Levi’s favorite things. Erwin is a series of layers, a man that needs to be attended to like defusing a bomb. Snipping the wrong cable could turn him off, snatch the gorgeous smile from his face, cause him to recede into his shell. But during sex Erwin is exposed, and Levi can pull any wire and he’ll still be here with him, looking at him with the same gaze of devotion. Erwin eyelids sink as his lips part, eyebrows drawn in concentration. He pulls Levi down by the front of the shirt, and he thrusts deeply into Levi.

“Erwin!” Levi chokes, slips off of Erwin and slumps forward into chest. “Godammit!”

“Levi!” Erwin wraps his arms around Levi. “Shit! I’m sorry!”

“I said let me handle it!”

“I know! I know…” Erwin kisses the top of Levi’s head. “I just…"

“You really need to learn to control yourself.”

“I’m usually so good at it…"

Levi laughs into his chest, sits back up and presses himself into Erwin’s cock again. “Just sit there and…” The head of his cock pushes into him, and Levi sets down more, slowly, until half of Erwin’s shaft is in him. “And let me take care of you for once.”

Erwin’s eyes are wide, he blinks once and swallows, brings his hands up to Levi’s ass and grabs it. “Fuck me…”

Levi smiles, holds onto Erwin’s forearms as he rolls his hips slowly, draws up and down on him like a lazy ebb of a tide. Levi moans with each buck of his hips, Erwin matching his on every other one. The stretch burns less, the deeper he sets into Erwin, the closer he hits his prostate, and fuck if he just doesn’t feel amazing to be connected to Erwin like this. Completely and utterly his through and through. His fingernails bury into Erwin’s arms, combs through arm hair that causes Levi to screw his eyes shut against his uncontrollable arousal. “So hot.” Levi mutters again, and Erwin responds with nothing but a shallow thrust of his hips up into Levi.

Levi was experienced, but infrequently so. The last time he had penetrative sex was when he was in the states a few years back, when he found himself alone in a hotel in Pittsburgh, angry and depressed and wanting nothing more to get his mind off of things. He had some man he met at a gay bar stay with him for a few days, let him fuck him until they ran out of condoms and had to break to walk to the convenience store to get more. He was tall and blonde, cock thick and long but circumcised like him. But he fucked without consideration or care, held his hair back and opened his throat to fuck the noises right out of his mouth. He curled up on the bed at night, the two of them sleeping a whole body apart on the king sized mattress, and stayed up the whole night wishing to return back to war. Or worse, back home.

And he’d never fucked out of love. Never had the chance to when he was barred from being himself for so long. Sex was out of necessity, and the hole in his chest just grew bigger with each face that passed through it--a rolodex of names that faded over time. Faces and bodies that grew to dust and
left to be nothing but a number he counted off on his fingers of past people he had fucked.

He never fucked out of love.

Love…

Levi stops, draws a long moan out of his throat as he slides up Erwin’s cock, shivering as he does. “What… Erwin…” He rubs his hands down Erwin’s arms and back up toward him. He looks down half lidded at him, lips parted and panting. “What did you say?”

“I love you.” Erwin looks up at him, the tip of his nose red and rosy like his cheeks and his lips. The tips of his ears and the rounds of his shoulders.

“You…”

Erwin runs his hands up the inside of Levi’s shirt, guides Levi’s motions back down on him slowly to keep their motions going. “Yes.”

“H-hold on…” Levi adjusts himself, stops their gyration. “You don’t… You can’t… Mean that.” Erwin’s face contorts, a vision of disbelief and hurt. “Of course I do, Levi.”

“Erwin…”

Erwin wraps his arms around him, pulls him down into his chest, his cock nearly slipping out of him as he does so. “Levi, I love you.” His kisses Levi’s cheekbones, softly down his face and to his jaw, his hands rubbing soft circles on his back. “I love you so much. You are everything. I love you.”

Levi buries his face into Erwin’s neck, eyes shut tight as he tries to keep his emotions in check. The emptiness in his heart, the one that used to be filled with ghostly faces of men that did nothing but serve his animal instincts moved aside, allowed Erwin’s light to fill inside it like a mason jar. Screws the top shut and labels it, preserves it, places a kiss over Erwin’s chest as he begins to sit up again.

“Say it again.” Levi says quietly. He rolls his hips again, faster now, eyes heated and latched tightly onto Erwin’s gaze.

“I love you.” Erwin moves his hands back down onto Levi’s hips, holds him steady as Levi rides him, meeting him with an occasional thrust of his own.

Levi pounds a fist down on Erwin’s chest, leans forward as he moves faster, his cock swaying up into his stomach with each heated move, his thighs hitting Erwin’s with quick slapping sounds. “Keep saying it, Erwin. Don’t stop.”


Levi leans down, takes his mouth as he fucks him faster. Rests his forearm on either side of Erwin’s head as he slams his ass down onto Erwin’s cock, fucked until his eyesight goes black and he’s nearly shouting in Erwin’s ear. “Harder!”

Erwin grabs his ass cheeks, motions Levi hard into him as he thrusts deep up into him. “Levi--” Erwin moans against Levi’s mouth, takes it hotly as he disappears completely into Levi with each needy motion. His legs shake, his chest rattles, his arms twitching with the signs of an oncoming orgasm. “I can’t--”

“Harder, you bastard.” Levi bites hard on his lip, thrusts down hard on him, releasing a moan out
through his nose when it hits his prostate again.

Erwin’s mouth drops open, moaning out deep and long, his orgasm spilling hotly into Levi. Levi moans out, eyes wide and chest filling with giant gasps of air. He’s never had anybody come in him raw, and he can feel it all. Erwin’s cock twitching with each pass of cum, the sensation of liquid heat filling him even more than Erwin has already. He scrambles with his fingers across Erwin’s shoulders, breathes out heavy gasps as Erwin continues to shallowly thrust into him, his cries of ecstasy vibrating against his chest. His mindless chantings of “I love you” getting lost and dissolving into “Love… You… Love… Love… I… You. Levi.”

“Erwin.”

“I love you…”

“Think you can keep going?”

Erwin’s eyes struggle to focus on his. Levi holds his face in his hands, thumbs tracing the sharp definition of cheekbones. He kisses Erwin’s lips slowly, carefully, presses his fingers to the corners of his lips before pressing his thumb down into Erwin’s chin and opening his mouth to dip his tongue in and against Erwin’s. He slides his ass up Erwin’s cock slowly, whimpers of groans spilling from Erwin’s mouth and into Levi’s.

“Wanna make me come too?”

Erwin nods. Tries to find words again, speaks them into Levi, and Levi repurposes them back: “Yes.”

Levi sits up, grabs the lube and squirts some into his hand before grabbing hold of his cock. He’s so slick on Erwin, feels his cum succumbing to gravity and melting around Erwin’s shaft like a candle inside of him. He starts stroking himself, shirt pulled up and pinned under his right arm, eyes focused on Erwin’s as he shallowly fucks Erwin’s spent cock. “Fuck me.”

Erwin’s eyes blow wide, and he’s shaking all over, teeth chattering, dick twitching. But he does it, fucks up to meet Levi as he strokes himself. Follows his instructions, goes faster and harder when he asks, Levi leaning back and using his other hand on Erwin’s thigh to balance himself as he strokes himself into the familiar rhythm he’s always used. They are a symphony of sounds, a chorus of pleased octaves, the hypnotic beat of flesh on flesh, the slick slip of wet pleasure. It doesn’t take long for Levi to reach it. Fucking loses his mind in the syllables of being told he’s loved, lost count on how many times he heard it from Erwin’s lips, but chases it one more time as he reaches his climax. “Erwin--”

“I love you, Levi.”

“Haaaaa!!!” Levi’s chest drops forward, his stomach muscles twitching as he erratically rides Erwin, comes thickly across Erwin’s belly, chest, and neck. “Aaahhh. Haaaaahhhh. Ha–Oh… Fuck … Fuuuuccck.” He heaves like he’s throwing up, body hunched over Erwin as Erwin keeps fucking into him, and he’s wailing, hears his own moans echoing back at him. “Erwin! I…” His orgasm stops with one last spurt before he slumps down full onto Erwin’s softening cock. He looks up at the ceiling gasping for breath, smiling stupidly as his moans slowly start to turn into chuckles.

“Y-you… You okay?”

Levi blinks slowly, laughs in a way that makes him feel more alive than he has ever felt. “Hah, y-yeah. Oh god yeah…”
“You are amazing.”

“You’re uh—not so bad yourself.”

They rest like that for a few minutes, Levi going soft in his hand as Erwin does inside him, before finally raising himself off of Erwin and rolling to his side. What’s left inside of him from Erwin leaks out and down around the rump of his thigh, and he sighs deeply as he presses his nose to Erwin’s side.

“I was not expecting that.” Erwin says softly, brings his hand heavily down and draws Levi closer into him.

Levi curls his fingers on Erwin’s stomach, hides his eyes against Erwin’s ribs. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

For giving him a place to stay. For taking care of him. For returning stability, for making him think sometimes that it wasn’t his fault. For stubbornly being there to hold his hand, for being his partner through the darkness. For understanding him, respecting him… Loving him. “Everything, Erwin. Just… *Everything*.”

“I love you…”

Levi sighs and shifts. He lays on his back to look at the ceiling, white but colorized by the soft orange of the lamp light, dark in the corners of the room. But they are the warmth, they are the light, and the uncertainties that linger at their points are things Levi is no longer afraid of. “I’m gonna clean up and go to bed.” Levi shifts away awkwardly, sits at the edge of the bed and tries to regain composure, but doesn’t move in time for Erwin to wrap his big arms around him. He kisses a trail up his neck and holds him without expectation. A gentle hold that doesn’t request a promise for more sex, a hold that would break if Levi so much as asked.

“Stay with me.”

“But this is your room.”

Erwin chuckles softly into the soft down of Levi’s undercut. “We just made love. I would very much like to sleep with you beside me tonight. If you would like, of course.”

Levi blinks, grips the edges of the bed before finally nodding. “Let me clean up.”

“Will you keep the shirt on?”

Levi turns to look at Erwin with an eyebrow raised. “You like it?”

Erwin grins slyly. “It is cute.”

Levi shoves an elbow into him and groans. “You’re sleeping alone tonight.” He carefully stands up, adjusts his footing before limping around the bed and to the door.


Levi holds the doorknob, grins back slightly. “Sorry, chump. Maybe next time.”

Levi cleans up, puts on a pair of boxers, and stares at himself in the mirror. He used to be Ackerman, a man sworn by duty and piloted by regret. A sad man that had sent his friends to death, that harbored hatred and anger for the man that dared to call himself human that used to look back at him
in mirrors with smokey, dead eyes. But he’s Levi now, found a home within these white walls and in Erwin’s heart. He keeps eye contact, notices for the first time in a long time that his irises are dotted with dark brown, that the shadows under his eyes have seen more light, and the crook in his nose fills him with pride, not disgust. He slicks his hair back and returns to Erwin’s room. The light is out, and Erwin is facing away from the door, piled under covers. He shifts to look back at Levi. “You came back.” He says groggily.

“Yes…” Levi says softly. He makes his way around the bed and climbs into the bed. He peels up the covers and slides in under them, scooches up to Erwin and looks at him in the soft cool light slicing through the windows from the moon outside. “It’s cold.”

Erwin searches his face before smiling gently. “I can keep you warm.”

Levi turns and shifts back into Erwin. “I know.” He says, reaching behind him to pull Erwin’s arm over him. “Don’t let me freeze to death.”

Erwin shifts up into him, places his other arm under Levi’s head, and bows his head into the crook of Levi’s neck. “Never.”

Levi kisses the inside of Erwin’s arm, laces his fingers with Erwin’s. He wants to say more, tries to process the feelings that he has but they’re too fresh. Too new. And somewhere deep down in the dark lining of his brain, he still doesn’t believe it. Still doesn’t deserve it.

“I love you.” Erwin says.

Levi buries his face into the softness of Erwin’s arm, nods, and squeezes his hand until he feels both of their blood pumping heavily, steadying into a restful state, syncing just like their breaths.

Levi falls asleep wondering when Erwin had become everything, and wakes up realizing he always had been.

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Levi uses his day off the following Friday to reconnect with Mike. They hang out at Erwin’s house not saying much, but it’s better than nothing. Awkward and strained, but it’s progress that Levi initiated. Mike isn’t leaving Erwin’s life just as much as Levi isn’t--it’d be in Levi’s best interest to smooth things over to curb any future anger. It’s difficult, but even Mike seems to recognize the stalemate in his own way.

Levi follows Mike out the door with helmet in hand and rucksack slung over his shoulder. He kicks his motorcycle awake, one of the few times left this year he will be able to do it. It’s a beautiful 50 degree day in the middle of November. He goes into town to gather supplies for some projects he has around the house. Gathers a few paint chips to tuck into light switch plates for consideration--wants to change the white walls into something more lively. A couple of decorations, some tools, and makes a note of prices for some new workout equipment.

They sleep together now. They didn’t attempt sex again until a few days later, experimenting with different positions until they grew exhausted in each other’s arms. The routine remains, changing only in the fact that Levi is woken by a gentle kiss on the cheek instead of the radio switching on his digital clock. He likes it, never thought he would, but he does. He lays down when he sleeps, engulfed in thick arms that squeeze him close as if they’re afraid he’ll leave. And even when Erwin
hogs the blankets or snores so loud he startles himself awake—he likes it. Finds himself lingering a
hand on the spot he slept when he leaves to go to the bathroom, feeling the warmth flow up through
fingertips and blanketing his heart.

He wants to make it theirs. Asks Erwin to send him the photo from friendsgiving and goes to the
pharmacy to get it printed. He looks at it, all of them smiling like Magnolia, Church, and himself did,
and it feels alright. He gets two frames at a craft store—one for his new family and one for the old. He
may have fucked up his face in the old photo, but he can remove that man and still remember his
friends. They deserve it. They always deserve to be remembered.

On his way home he finds himself detouring back into Lehighton. Erwin has done so much for him,
and he wants to offer something up to him in return. They are mending, the both of them, and he
might be able to help with the relationship Erwin has with Vincent. Maybe if he can get Vince to
come to Thanksgiving, they can return to the time before the military, college, accidents and deaths
and breakups that shattered their lives to pieces. And for what it’s worth, Levi’s always liked Vince.
Vince did nothing but offer a place to stay and food in his belly. He owed who he is now to that old
bastard, no matter how disappointing of a life it might be. At least he’s still alive, he supposes.

He revs up the steep hills of the town, the Lehigh River valley falling further below him—mountain
ranges rolling across blue skies in the distance. He takes his time getting to the house, goes down
streets of old friends and neighbors and enemies, reminiscing of all the good and bad times, even if
the latter seemed to outpace the former at times. He’s seen some of these places in his apartment
hunting, but the Smiths lived further away from downtown, where trees bordered backyards instead
of fences, and he takes a moment to realize it’s been over ten years since he’s been to this part of
town.

He shifts a gear down as he comes to a stop in front of a small one-story brick house. The brown
grass in front of the yard, the concrete porch covered by a red tin awning held up with wrought iron
poles. The ramp to the left connecting to the side door, the matching awning with chipped paint and
a missing panel. It’s an unattractive house, one that looks like no woman has ever been involved in
its appearance, but it’s familiar. He remembers the days he and Erwin spent on the porch in the old
green Adirondack chair, tall glasses of lemonade sweating in humid summer heat as they carved their
names in it with a steak knife.

But it’s cold now. He removes his helmet and sets it in front of him on his bike. He looks around
blankly, feels a distress seep deep into his bones. Drawing a gloved hand down his face he looks
around, looks back at the valley, at the house, at the past and present and future and he sucks in air
that doesn’t quite stay in his lungs as he leans over his bike. He heaves a breath and presses his
forehead to the dome of his helmet, and tries to erase the sight of the “SOLD” sign in the front yard.

Chapter End Notes

i drew a lot of fanart for this chapter because i was excited. i’ve been waiting 6 months
to write this, and it was the hardest thing i’ve had to do for this fic so far. i really wonder
if introducing sex was such a great idea. :/

thanks so much for my betas on this. i asked for quite a few because this is one of the
biggest and most important chapters i NEED to get right for this fic. thank you to
erwinsalive, sumiscribe, ackersmith, and kittyboo for reviewing. my roommate didn't
read this, but he helped me work through the hange scene, which helped me through
fixing the sex scene. you guys are AMAZING.

there's a lot going on here, so i actually would just love to hear what you have to say about this chapter (even though it makes me hella nervous, god i hope i didn't fuck this up T_T)

the next chapter is 80% written, already has its cover drawn, and has been for a month. but i need to add a couple of scenes and change some things. hopefully turn around for that will be much shorter.

thanks so much for your continued support. i know i say it all the time, but truly... i'm blessed to have you all.
Levi’s curled up in the corner of the balcony when Erwin finds him. He’s staring off at the big skeletal tree outside, its little wooden claws dragging across paned glass with each howl of the wind. His fingers rub at the scars on his shin, and his other hand shakes ashes off the tip of his cigarette.

Erwin takes a seat next to him, leaves a foot between them and keeps his eyes down cast to the floor. “I made us dinner,” he says softly.

The dead lawn and tin awnings rattle in the winds of his memory. Small boys running down the ramp to the side door. Hurdling over the railing and getting his pant leg stuck in the iron ornamenting. Swinging over the edge and slamming his head into the concrete foundation. Kenny making Levi work summer jobs to pay for some of his hospital bills. Erwin having apologized as if it were his fault. Vince paying him generously for the work he does in the yard.

“Would you like me to bring you a plate?” Erwin says, and it’s so gentle, like he’s afraid to even disturb the chilly air they’re breathing with the heat of his breath.

Levi shakes his head, finds his cigarette to his mouth and sucks in. Holds it as he presses the heel of his hand to his forehead. Cigarette smoke curling to the sky. Erwin telling him to put it out. His dad will see. *Levi, my dad will see*.

“Would you like me to leave?”
Levi turns his head toward Erwin, shudders out the smoke through his nose and shakes his head again. Erwin’s dad had seen. Erwin defending him. Levi feeling the guilt so completely that the smell of cigarette smoke turned his stomach for months, nearly a year, until the night Erwin said he was going to leave. With desperation, he stole a carton from Kenny, climbed out onto the roof and smoked down a whole pack before the rain came. He jumped down onto the garage, hopped onto the ground and rolled across wet grass, and nearly dislocated his shoulder in the process. He didn’t care. Nothing was worth caring about at that point.

Erwin nods, rests his head against the wall and looks out at the mangled tree. Erwin had mentioned he wanted to get the tree removed before the winter, but just like the boxes, he never got around to do it. Levi’s eyes fall down across Erwin, clothed, but he knows what he looks like now. All of him. It’s not some sort of secret--no more bashful side glances as they dressed down to their sleeping garments--he knew the density of every muscle, the softness of his stomach, the look and feel of the large scar across his abdomen... But he can’t see his heart, and he finds that he wants that the most.

Erwin says it through words, flutters of lips across his forehead or against the scars on his knuckles, but Levi doesn’t believe it. No… Sometimes he does, feeling full up through his chest that it almost pushes the words out as carelessly as Erwin lets them, falling daftly between the wet slaps of their love making. But he doesn’t. He won’t.

The only four letter words he sees are written in red bold letters in front old ugly houses.

The dusty hair on Erwin’s arms grows dark, and the hollows in his cheekbones suck in shadows like caves. The paleness of his own skin turns blue in the twilight, and he shivers as he pinches his cigarette butt into an ashtray.

He wants to say something, but he can’t. He wants to do something, but he can’t. He’s been through three cigarettes and he thinks about twenty three boxes and he wants to know why four letter words have replaced his entire vocabulary.

“I am going to go get some water.” Erwin says. He shifts in his spot. “Would you like anything?”


“Levi.”

“Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t.”

Erwin stares at the ashtray, rolls his lips into his teeth before nodding. He gets up and leaves the room. Time passes in spent cigarettes--two later and Erwin is changed into his pajamas and has three pillows and two blankets piled underneath each arm. He drops them on the floor, leaves the room, and returns again with a glass of water and wine. He hands the wine to Levi but he doesn’t drink from it, sets the glass down next to him and continues staring.

“Rest, Levi.”

Levi snaps his head up. Sleepovers on crayon red carpet, the smell of dog hair deep in the fibers even though the dog had been gone for years, the wrappers from Twinkies that fell underneath Erwin’s bed. He breathes in sharply. Erwin pulls him into his arms, and Levi untangles from his own mind, gets entwined and snagged in Erwin. His chest is warm against his forehead--breathing in and out. Remembers the aches he had in his own at the side of Erwin’s bed in that house with the red letters
and matching tin awnings. He sucks in air. His fingers dig into shoulder blades.

Twenty three boxes.

“I love you.” Erwin says softly into his hair.

“Don’t.”

Erwin cradles the back of Levi’s head into his hand, presses him further into himself. He doesn’t let go. Why doesn’t he let go?

Levi finds sleep… But sleep is an elusive thing when being awake feels just like a nightmare. The darkness eats at him, morphs his depression into guilt. And it eats him. Like the sickness that ate away the color from his mother’s eyes, or the feeling of inadequacy around his uncle—it eats at him. Levi always finds himself going a step too far, devoted to the name of protection when in fact it’s selfishness. When he hit Nile across the face, got his blood on his knuckles, he felt guilt then. But not at the action, not because he hurt Nile, but guilty that Erwin could be disappointed in him.

And fuck, he had been.

Levi’s always been bad with guarding trust. He had it when he was young—at the age where he was old enough to remember but young enough to forget. Where scraped knees were cared for with soft kisses and large tears were wiped away with fingers that smelled like citrus. Erwin had him, flowers laced around his neck like a chain between their souls. Church and Magnolia eventually shared a piece too, folding their trust into his like mixing paint, proving only that they mixed too well, trusted him too much. Far too much.

And then he was left with nobody but himself… Left only with a person that ended up on dead lawns questioning the validity of trust at all.

Fuck, it eats him. It eats him little fucking ants. It eats at him until the guilt is gone and nothing is left but wilted, tattered pain. Nothing but the hollowness of the loss of acceptance and love—and it crushes him. Crushes him to know that he could only hear the excuses. Imagines the discomfort in Erwin’s eyes whenever he brings up Vince, and it pushes the guilt into anger and he’s mad for feeling guilty when Erwin has done nothing to cooperate. Levi grits his teeth thinking about it, nearly breaks a glass ornament in his fingers before Petra says something.

“You ok?”

“I’m fine.” Levi snaps.

“Yeah, sounds like it.”

Levi scoffs, puts the ornament on the small tabletop Christmas tree near the front door and goes back into the box of product to put up more. “Doesn’t matter…”

“Well, those ornaments sell the best this time of year, so it kinda matters to me.” She stands next to him, intently watching him. He tries not to look at her, because he knows exactly what type of face she’s giving him. She cares too much. He trusts her too much. He doesn’t know when this happened.

“I’ll be more careful.”

Petra fidgets with the bottom of her sweater, takes his hand in hers and squeezes it gently. “Thank you.”
Levi looks at their linked hands, frowns, and squeezes her hand back.

Thanksgiving passes quietly. Levi roasts them some cornish hens, vegetable medley, and creamed spinach. He shares a bottle of wine, breaks the fifteen year streak of sobriety as he drunkenly lays his head to rest on Erwin’s lap in the living room.

Guilt is saying he would never drink again. Anger is being disappointed in himself. Humility is realizing he has never been above any of it.

“It’d been nice to have your dad over…” Levi says lazily. His words slur slightly into each other, and he’s smiling even though he feels miserable.

“Maybe next year.” Erwin says, his head resting against the back of the couch. Levi downs another glass of wine to sedate the anger that boils in him. Succumbs to the fuzzy charcoal fingers that lace his eyesight. Distracts his inebriated mind by pulling Erwin’s cock from his pants and sloppily giving him head, doesn’t even bring Erwin to orgasm before they both fall asleep tranquilized and quiet on the couch.

They discuss plans for the house. Talk about things they can do to improve it, to maybe breathe some life into it. They talk about twenty three boxes and how they won’t move. They fight about it every day for a week. Levi avoids the living room when he can, swears he’ll topple them all over, drag them outside and burn them in the back yard. Erwin raises his voice, and it shakes through the living room like a tremor. Levi stares at him, challenges him, but Erwin never backs down. Like a guard dog, he never backs down.

Anger pools into sadness and it makes it hard to sleep. Levi crawls out of bed and walks on tired floorboards that whine under his weight, down to the end of the hall where the guest room is. He looks back at their room-- Erwin’s room-- and pushes open the door to the guest room, closes it behind him and folds his arms across his chest. He slides down the door, rocks against it with his eyes closed and cheek pressed to his knee.

There’s boxes in this closet, cleaned up but tucked away. All they have to do is move the ones in the living room down to the basement. To a storage unit. To anywhere.

Why won’t they move?

“Can you grab some of that moulding for me?” Levi asks absently, skimming over the list of items he needs to pick up.

“Which one?” Mike asks.

Levi looks across his options. He’s going to start in the fitness room to see how well he can do with DIY projects. Picking the most haggard of the rooms in the house would at least only be an improvement no matter how the results may end up. “The quarter round pine.”

“How much do you need?”

Levi’s mouth drops and he lets a dumb, frustrated noise leak from it. “I didn’t measure.”

“Jesus fuck.”

Levi looks at his list again and he’s so angry the edges of the paper crumble in his hands, pieces of it tearing under his fingernails. He squints at the next item; another thing he was supposed to measure.
He wrinkles the paper in his hand and tosses it into the cart. Did he forget, or did he ask Erwin to do it? Erwin had been conveniently forgetting to do things a lot lately. He must have asked Erwin to do it. Of course he didn’t do it. Of course he fucking didn’t—just like the fucking boxes, and all the times he didn’t call his father to have him over for goddamn dinner. Of course he didn’t. “Let’s go.”

“Knock it off, drama queen.” Mike walks back to the cart and pulls the paper out from the cart and uncrumple it. “You don’t have a drill?”

“Erwin doesn’t fuckin’ have anything.”

“I doubt that.”

“Do you live in the house?”

“I’m pretty sure he has one.”

“Well, you’re wrong.”

“I won’t even ask if you’re always this much of an asshole. I know you are.”

Levi pushes his cart into the side of the wide aisle of the Lowe’s. It crashes into the upright sprigs of moulding, clammering against the tall metal shelves as he spins on his heel and march toward the exit.

“You just gonna leave this shit here, Levi?”

Levi stops, shudders and shakes, hand coming to his face as he struggles to keep upright. Mike’s honesty has always been palpable—his lack of words accounted for it. Although it’s a quality Levi respects, it’s one that does nothing but reveal how little trust the tall bearded asshole has always had for him. He’s not here because he wants to be; he’s here because Erwin would want him to be.

“I’ll walk home.” Levi calls back. Mike takes the cart and swings it around, jogs slightly to catch up to Levi. He leaves the cart and steps up to Levi, places a hand roughly onto his shoulder. Levi spins, snaps his hand up to Mike’s forearm and squeezes it. Mike is big, but Levi’s entire small hand wraps tightly around the muscle. Levi grits his teeth, glares sharply up at him and hisses between his teeth. “Don’t fucking touch me.”

Mike glares down at him, nose flaring. “It’s too far.”

“You can’t.”

“Why not?”

Mike looks at him, his arm twisting in Levi’s grip. “He needs time away from you.”

Levi blinks, his grip dropping from Mike, red fingerprints pressed against his skin as if it were memory foam. He steadies his hand on the cart handle. “What?”

“If you give any kinds of shits about Erwin, today is the day you show it.”

“What?” Levi shakes his head, blinks back the anger, the disbelief, and he feels a little sick. “Who the fuck are you to say that kind of shit to me?” Levi barks, shoots his hands up again, but Mike blocks him. He slaps his hands once on Mike’s arms before taking a grip on his defensive stance and pushing his weight forward. They shuffle back down the aisle, and Mike’s sneakers squeak against
the concrete floor.

“He needs to be alone.”

“Why? What do you know that I don’t?”

“Nothing. Just leave him alone.”

Levi can’t quite catch his breath, and he barks again. “Why?!”

“If you don’t know…”

“Then what!? Tell me!” He shoves Mike harshly out of his grasp and stomps forward, but Mike presses an open palm into his chest to keep him at bay.

“Quiet!”

“Don’t fuckin’…” Levi spits, shakes, steps back and goes to brace himself on the handle of the cart, but it slips forward and he nearly stumbles to the floor. Mike catches him by his arm again, but he’s angry--so angry. He swipes at him, growling like a feral animal, and he just wants to know what’s wrong with Erwin and why the house is sold and why there’s twenty three fucking boxes in their house and why Erwin is keeping secrets. He’s keeping fucking secrets and he wants to know. He wants Erwin to trust him. “Trust me…” Levi mutters under his breath, clawing up Mike like he means to climb him and pummel his face in until his it’s too bloody to be identified.

Mike restrains him, pushes him into the shelves of the aisle, shoving him against a box of sandpaper that shudders to the side, some of the displays spilling across the aisle. “Jesus Christ, Levi! Fucking calm down!” He hisses. “The fuck is wrong with you?”

“You!” Levi snarls, kicks against the display and bends the cardboard, the entire thing buckling and casting product across the floor. Mike loses his step, and Levi ducks away from him and jogs a few feet away. An older couple turns into the aisle, but swerves their cart wide to continue down to the next row with an uncomfortable look on their faces. “You’re the asshole, asshole. Erwin wants me in his life, get the fuck over it.”

“Sure he does.” Mike says, already bending over to pick up the mess, shaking his head.

Levi’s eyes blow wide. His chest fills and he can’t get the air back out. The tears sting behind his eyes but he’ll never let Mike see his weakness. He’s not worth even considering an acquaintance at this point. He pats his pockets and pulls out his phone, his hand shaking as he types in his password and opens his contacts list. It’s a longer list now, longer than he ever wanted it to be... But Erwin is still at the top, and he taps the phone icon next to his name and brings it to his ear.

“Leave him alone!” Mike strains himself to get up, packets of sandpaper in his hands, but Levi has already taken to running off down the aisle. He rushes out of the store, paces in the front between blue pylons before he heads back toward town, jogging a distance with the phone next to his ear. Even when the ringing has stopped and the voicemail times out to the heavy breathing of his running, he keeps calling--hoping.

He gives up when he reaches the voicemail the fifth time. He slows to a weak walk, and it takes him three hours to walk home. His knee buckles every few steps, having to rest against guard rails on the bridge that stretch high above the Lehigh Gorge.

Anger feeds to regret and he wonders if coming home had been a good idea at all. That after all of this, he wonders if it was worth investing his trust into a man that would always hide secrets behind
white walls. He feels small and swallowed whole by this town. The mountains ever imposing on
him, looking down on him, looming over him. This relationship had lost its balance, but he had
found and chiseled the stones of age away to bring them to equilibrium. But now Erwin is standing
on top of these mountains looking down at him. Towering over him.

Erwin doesn’t want him. Doesn’t need him.

He enters the house, slams the door behind him. He removes his boots and points them at the wall
before going down the hall. “Fuck!” Levi screams, and it hurts his throat like sandpaper, and he
pauses in the kitchen to slam his fist down on the granite counter of the island. “Asshole!” He
breathes heavily and swipes his arm out, hits the paper towel stand so hard that it flies across the
counter and collides with the refrigerator.

“Levi?” Erwin says. His voice is quiet and crinkles at the edges like the sound of a candy wrapper.
Like the ones Vince always had in the entryway to the house. The house that’s sold.

“I asked you to take measurements, Erwin! I needed them!”

There’s silence, but it weighs heavily, chokes Levi. Anger, anger overflowing and he’s afraid if he
looks at Erwin…

Erwin comes to the doorway holding himself in such a way that it looks like a burden--like any
moment his legs will give and he’ll fall heavy to his knees like a man void of dignity. “You asked me
to take measurements of what?”

Levi’s brows furrow, and he’s still white hot mad but there’s sympathy and remorse creeping into his
hot pot of emotions and he struggles to keep the boil. “The fuckin’ workout room! I needed it for the
moulding!”

“I do not remember you asking me to do such a thing.” He places his thumb and index finger at the
inner corners of his eyes, and swipes them out along the bottom edges of his eyelids. “I apologize for
not providing them to you, Levi.” He sighs weakly.

“Yeah, well, now it’s a fucking waste of a day. So thanks.”

Erwin sighs again, and he braces himself on the entryway.

“I tried calling you. Why didn’t you answer?”

“You called?”

“What the fuck have you been doing all day?”

Erwin’s eyes rotate in their sockets as he pats his sleep pants for his phone, and his head falls heavily
into his shoulder.

“Have you been drinking?”

“No.” Erwin says weakly, pulls his phone from his pocket, uses his other hand to drag it through his
hair.

“You’re lying.” Levi steps forward. Erwin’s face and neck are red, and his eyes look glassy. “If
you’re going to drink, you drink with me.”

Erwin ignores him, mouth smoothing to a thin line as he considers his phone. “You did try to call
me. I apologize.”

“I’m not a liar. Unlike…”

“Levi.” Erwin brings his phone to his forehead and he breathes out again it almost sounds like a sob. “Please. I can’t right now.”

“Can’t what? Be sober? Don’t give me that shit.” Levi steps forward and Erwin straightens out. His shadow casts over Levi, and he feels small. So small. Under this mountain of a man where their equality has been shaken and cracked to form a fissure that rifts between them so deep Levi’s afraid he’ll never reach the bottom--to be caught in a nightmare where he never shakes awake by hitting the ground.

“Levi.” Erwin matches Levi’s step, and even though they’re arm’s length away, the heat radiates off of Erwin. Heavy and thick, permeates the kitchen like an open stove, and Levi’s breath hitches softly.

Levi loses steam as Erwin advances toward him. “You can’t… Keep any…” Erwin pushes him against the counter, bends his knees slightly to wrap his arms around Levi’s lower body and picks him up to place him on the counter. “What the fuck?” Levi studies Erwin’s face in the darkening room. His cheeks are pink, and his eyelashes are clumped and damp. “Erwin?”

Levi moves to place his hands on either side of Erwin’s face, but Erwin catches his wrists in his hands, draws them back around his neck and pushes their chests together. Equalized and beating against each other like they belong--like it’s always meant to be like this. He kisses him, hand trailing up to the back of Levi’s neck and draws out a breath. Erwin smells unwashed, his mouth earthy and a little rancid. But it doesn’t smell or taste like alcohol.

All the anger and sadness and regret, it shudders out between his teeth as he accepts Erwin’s advances with a bit of bashful remorse, wraps his legs tightly against his back and asks for more with the words that speak across his body.

“I need you.” Erwin says hastily into Levi’s mouth, presses a warm palm into his belly, and it makes Levi shake.

“W-what’s…” Levi tries to say, but Erwin shoves his thumb into Levi’s mouth, juts it open to stick his tongue between soft lips, and Levi fidgets under him. He whimpered and the flush rises into his neck and cheeks to the point that he barely registers the taste of salt on Erwin’s thumb.

“Just say ‘yes’ or ‘no’, love.” Erwin’s finger drags down Levi’s bottom lip, presses into his chin and keeps his mouth agape as he places wet kisses along his neck.

“‘Yes.”’ Levi moans.

It’s not until the next morning, hair matted with sweat from the hours of Erwin’s needy and passionate sex the night before, that Levi notices the boxes. With a cup of tea settled between his fingers, he looks around the living room as his heartbeat picks up. Erwin’s paperwork and laptop sit messily on the coffee table, a typical sight that Levi has grown to begrudgingly accept.

But the boxes.

The little rectangle one that usually sits wedged between the two large square boxes with the cracked corners has moved. It sits on top of the stack closest to the corner of the room now. The tape has been peeled back but replaced, the fuzzy fray of cardboard from the remains patching the side of it like a scar.
That damn scar.

There’s twenty three of them and they’re dusty and bent at their corners. Twenty two unopened. Levi wonders if there’s an outline of dust on the partition wall behind them. Contemplates moving them.

Opening them.

He hangs the photo of them at friendsgiving. He cuts himself out of his photo with Magnolia and Church. He hangs them in the hallway that leads from the foyer to the kitchen. He stares at them for a long time, folds his bottom lip between his fingers, stands there until his feet hurt, and all he can think about are the boxes. Twenty three of them. Slicing them open to make mouths that open to the ceiling. Mouths that smile.

He sits on the Adirondack chair with his legs up to his chest. His legs shake and he rocks, forehead pressed into his knees. Their names carved into the cross piece under the seat. Their chair that belonged on that shitty concrete porch. It should still be there. Under awnings that are red like blood. Where smiles used to accompany laughter.

He doesn’t wake up with Erwin to work out. He doesn’t let him touch him at night. They sleep a whole body apart in the king sized bed. Erwin doesn’t ask why. Levi doesn’t say why. He sleeps sitting up. He sleeps little. He keeps away from nightmares where he sees them smiling again inside of boxes that pile higher than mountain ranges, and he can’t sleep because if he does he’ll become lost.

He misses work.

Petra calls and he doesn’t answer. He looks at the boxes. One two three. Four five six. Twenty. Twenty one. He thinks he miscounts for a second--counts to twenty five but recounts again. And again. Comes to twenty three. Two. Three. Petra calls again but the phone goes to voicemail. He places a hand on the box with the frayed tape, feels the roughness of the patch of ripped cardboard. He breathes out. He moves to the porch and smokes a cigarette.

He takes down the picture of Magnolia and Church. Hides it back in the dresser in the laundry room. Their smiles eat at him. Eat at him like tiny little ants. And there’s so little left of him to eat. He can’t see them smile, he can’t smell their blood. He wants to keep them in a little box to forever hide them away.

Boxes.

He stands before them, arms folded over his chest, a thumb and index finger over his chin. There’s a gray film of dust along their tops, the edges of some of the bottom boxes bowing in under the weight from above. Twenty three boxes. One, two, three…

Four…

Five, six, seven eightnineten…

Levi draws a hand down his face and shakes his head.

“Does your dad still live in the old house?”

“Levi .”

“It’s a fuckin’ simple question.” Levi barks.
“Yes.” Erwin blurts out, waves his hand dismissively as he takes his plate of food into the dining room.

Levi stands in the kitchen, fingers pressed around the rims of his plate. He breathes out slowly, tilts his head as he shakes his head. “The house is a little big, isn’t it?”

“He owns it.”

Levi swallows. “Right.” Levi shakes his head and his chest feels tight and he feels so sick that he can’t even think about eating. Levi throws his fork down, folds into his arms on the kitchen counter and breathes out.

“What is wrong, Levi?” Erwin says, coming into the kitchen.

“When was the last time you talked to your dad?”

“Father’s Day.”

Levi nods shallowly. “Do you think he’d mind if I called?”

“It would be good to not complicate things.” Erwin doesn’t look at him.

“Right…”

“What’s wrong?”

“You know damn well what’s wrong.” Levi looks at his plate. “I just want some fuckin’ answers!”

Erwin blinks, looks down at Levi as he seems to do so often now. “Answers to what?”

Levi howls a laugh.

He just wants to know why he’s being lied to. After all these months, he’s been nothing but truthful and honest. He’s given him fucking everything, right down to the tiny little veins that run through his fingers. Why is he lying about the sign? The house. The painting and the chair. The fucking boxes.

The.

God.

Damn.

Boxes.


“What about it?”

“Your dad, Erwin!”

And Levi’s not sure if this is the same argument or another one, but he’s sitting at the dinner table now and there’s a pork roast carved on his plate he doesn’t remember making and he’s not even sure what day it is. They always argue. They always fight. They never smile.

“It has never been my favorite holiday.”
Being a non-practicing Jew, Levi can relate. The only thing Christmas has for him is his birthday and abandonment. But they could always initiate a tradition. They at least weren’t too old to do something like that. They could try something.

“We’re going to have him over.”

“I believe Nanaba and Mike will be around this year.”

“I don’t care about them.”

“Levi…” Levi stares at him, narrows his eyes and doesn’t back down. “I will call him and ask him.”

“Will you?”

Erwin looks up and gets caught in Levi’s stare.

Erwin looks back down and distracts himself with a pea across his plate. “We will try next year, Levi. I am sorry. I am not ready to talk to him.”

“What the fuck happened, Erwin?”

“That’s the biggest load of shit ever.”

“Perhaps.”

“Talk to me.”

“Whenever I talk with him, we fight. I would prefer to avoid it.”

“Then don’t fight.”

“You of all people should know that it is not that easy.”

Levi glares at him. “You’re an asshole.” He slams his fork down on the table.

“I have been told.”

“God, fuck you. I’m trying to…”

Erwin spears a piece of meat with his fork. “I am aware of what you are doing, and I appreciate it.” His eyebrows draw down, and the uncertainty becomes a warning. “I will not have this discussion again.”

“No what?”

Erwin doesn’t answer. He sticks the piece of pork in his mouth and doesn’t acknowledge Levi any further, like he’s an unfortunate apparition in his house who can’t be exorcised.

It’s almost Christmas and Hange shows up on a Saturday morning. “You sure you don’t wanna come with us, kiddo?”

Levi rolls his eyes. “I could give a shit.”

“When you get to the single digits before Christmas, that’s always the most exhilarating time to go shopping.”
“Being around people is not my idea of a good time.”

“Oh, mine either. But it’s fun to push people’s buttons.”

Levi hesitates a smirk. “I’ll stick to pushing buttons on websites.”

“You even know how to use a computer?”

Levi dries his hands on a dish towel before placing it on the side of the sink. He runs the dishwasher and rests his back against the counter. “I’m not eighty.”

“Halfway there, though. Your birthday is coming up. Erwin told me.”

“I’ll kill ‘im.”

“Oh! Don’t do that! I’m gonna make sure he gets you something real nice.” They hold up their fingers as a measurement. “Something about this big, maybe plug shaped, sparkling pink like a unicorn.”

“I can’t wait until the day you die, shitty-glasses.”

Hange hoots. “Love you too, little man.”

The stairs groan as Erwin lumbers down them. Levi’s eyes snap anxiously to the entrance of the kitchen waiting for Erwin to show up. Hange raises an eyebrow.

“What’s up?” Hange whispers.

Levi looks at the living room and all the boxes. He shakes his head as Erwin walks in. “Ready to go?” Erwin says, smile bright on his face.

“Eruhan Christmas Shopping Extravaganza 2k17. Let’s do this!” Hange holds their arms up to flex what little muscle they have and prances off to the foyer to put their winter gear back on.

Erwin pinches the bridge of his nose as he sighs out. “I really wish you would not call it that.” He side glances at Levi with a half smirk on his face. “They have a celebrity couple name for us.”

“I noticed.” Levi says quietly.

“Do you need anything while we are out?”

Levi’s fingers fidget with the end of the dish towel. He blinks a few times, wants to feel Erwin’s arms around him, for him to stay here and to stop him from what he plans to do. To talk to him and to tell him what’s been bothering him. It’s not that hard. It’s just not. “I’m good.”

Erwin pulls at the cuff of his sweater before he nods. “We’ll be home pretty late. There’s no need to make a plate for me.”

“All right.”

“Have a good day.”

Levi doesn’t realize how much he wants Erwin to tell him that he’s loved when there’s an emptiness in the air where the words would normally be. It aches when Erwin leaves the room, the front door closes behind them. He can hear Hange screaming in excitement from the driveway. He braces himself on the counter, spins and opens the utensils drawer and hastily grabs for a steak knife.
His feet carry him without direction, and he stubs his toe on the moulding that divides the kitchen from the living room. He places his free hand on the first box, the coat of dust is thick, and it makes Levi’s skin crawl. He presses the palm of his hand to his forehead.

*Don’t do this.*

He sticks the knife in the fold of the box and the slick of the tape cracking staggers a breath out of Levi. He leaves the knife in the air, stares at the slit in the box and feels the familiar feeling of regret settling inside his belly. He tries to think of where the packing tape is. He can reseal it. He should be doing this with Erwin. The drawer with the wedding invite. The boxes in the room that used to be his. There’s still parts of Erwin that Levi doesn’t understand. These boxes… These twenty three boxes of varying size and shape—he doesn’t understand.

Leaning up on his toes, he peeks into the dark hole, as if there’s a wild animal inside that might pop out. Setting back down, he rolls his eyes and flips the flaps open and starts rummaging through. It smells stale and dusty inside, kicks up into his face and causes him to sneeze against his arm. He pulls out the first item, a bookend in the shape of a grecian column. He thinks it will go well on the shelf in the guest room, designates a space on the living room floor for it and goes back in.

He makes it through the first two boxes, has seven piles of various sizes building on the floor. He takes a break to drink down a glass of water, smoke a cigarette, and to start moving some of the items into their new homes before he goes back to open the third box. He turns the light on in the living room, the winter sun already waning in the early afternoon. He cuts the tape open, flips the flaps open, and pauses at the item at the top of the stack.

It’s a large fancy frame, dark thick wood ornamented with gold pearls along the edges. The top edges are grey with dust, and the glass has yellowed a little with age. Behind it is a diploma, a large crest of University of Pennsylvania at the top. Masters in History. 1971. Large cursive type declaring the recipient of the paper:

*Vincent Alphonse Smith.*

Levi looks at the twenty other boxes. And he pictures them, wonders if they sat like this inside of Vince’s house before four letter words decorated the lawns. He wonders if Vince is in assisted living. Maybe he has alzheimers. Maybe that’s why they fight all the time. Why else would Erwin have his father’s diploma? He pulls the diploma out and sets it upright next the boxes. He shifts through the other items but doesn’t find anything else that stands out.

He sets the box aside, cuts open another box. Shifts through the stuff. Sees a book he might remember seeing on their bookshelf, but Christ, anything could have been on those bookshelves. He sets that box aside. Slices open the last box in that column. Dish towels, bowls, some silverware. A crooked spoon he thinks he remembers using to shovel Lucky Charms into his mouth.

Just random shit. So much random shit. Shit that Erwin already has throughout his house. Why the fuck is it in these boxes? He doesn’t need this shit. Vince. Red awnings with smiling boys.

He eyes the long rectangle box that had been opened the week before. He pulls the box down, pulls at the tape, pulls the flaps open. A blanket that Erwin’s mother had crocheted. A picture of Erwin, his father, and his mother. Erwin was a baby, sitting in his mother’s arms in a Christening romper. Smiling.

There’s trails of fingers through the dust on the fogged glass.

Smiling. They’re smiling at him.
Levi pushes the flaps closed. Gasps like a fish for air and pushes the box down onto the couch before continuing onto the next one.

slices
opens
rummages
breathes breathes
why
what
Erwin. Why .

What the fuck .

He pulls another box down, places it on the floor. And another. Slices each one open and flips the tops open. He stands back, looks at the first items on top and fuck. This is… What’s wrong with Vince?

Levi steps back, the back of his knees hitting the couch and sits his butt heavily down onto it. He stumbles for a cigarette, shakes it to his mouth. Lights it. Smiling.

He shakes. Feels sick. Swallows thickly as his stomach riles. Erwin. Erwin. Erwin? This is Vince’s stuff. What is it doing here?

Erwin.

“L… Levi?”

Levi shoots his eyes up. The cigarette that is in his fingers is burnt to the filter, ashes scattered across the floor at his feet.

He blinks.
Blinks.
Shakes his head.
Blinks.

Words. He tries to find words. What are words. Four letter words. “ Shit .”

“Levi!” Erwin shouts at him. “What the fuck did you do!” Erwin rests his shoulder against the entryway, eyes wide and wild as his body folds in on itself. “Levi…”

Levi doesn’t look at him, looks past him through to the kitchen. He moves his mouth until the words finally come out. “This…”

Erwin folds down to the floor. Starts to gather the piles of things, collections of a man that Levi has no idea has happened to. He grabs them into his arms and drops them into one of the empty boxes. As he keeps collecting, he gets more agitated, throwing them without regard of their safety. “How many times , Levi? How many times did we have to argue about this? I asked you, Levi. I asked you
to give this to me.” He kicks the box against the wall. It tips on its side, spilling household items across the entryway of the living room. “Why!?”

Levi stands, drops his cigarette butt on the floor and steps forward. He can see the words now, and they are popping from his throat before he can think them over. “Where the fuck is Vince, Erwin!”

“Why did you touch the boxes!”

“Answer my fuckin’ question!”

Erwin stares at him. They’re both furious, but there’s something in Erwin’s eyes that actually scares Levi. He’s never seen him so afraid. So cracked. So utterly broken.

He did this to him. Oh god, he should have left the boxes alone.

“Erwin… Where’s Vince?” His voice is lower. He sidesteps into one of the columns of boxes, hangs his head. He can’t look at Erwin. He’s hurt him again. Why did he do that?

“He passed away, Levi.”

It doesn’t register at first. And when it does, he’s angry all over again. “Dead?” Levi stands up straight, advances toward Erwin. “Dead!? Are you fucking… For how long?”

“Two years.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Of course I’m not kidding.” Erwin kicks the box again, tilts his head down as his jaw clenches. “He’s dead.” And something about that four letter word makes Erwin wince. He backs out of the living room and shakes his head, tries to figure out with to do with himself. He reaches his hands up into his hair and tugs at it, doubles over before stomping his foot and straightening his back back out. “He’s dead, Levi. For two fucking years he’s been dead. And this shit…”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I couldn’t.”

“Oh…. Oh yes you definitely could have.” Levi pushes past the debris of the living room, stands on the moulding that divides the room from the kitchen. “It’s very easy. You could have said ‘Levi, Vince is dead.’ Two years ago. You could have done that. It wasn’t that hard.”

“Yes it would have been.”

“Fucking bullshit. You’re such bullshit.”

“Fuck you, Levi!”

“No, fuck you. Vince was like a father to me. I would have liked to have known, don’t you think?”

“Well it’s not like you ever seemed to give a shit about us back home while you were gone.”

Levi’s eyebrows crease, eyes wide. “What?”

“He was my father. I had to watch him die. I had to deal with the years of… Of…” Erwin throws his arm out before slapping it back on the table. “If I thought for a second that you would have given a shit, I would have told you.”
“I don’t give a shit? I don’t give a shit. Right.” Levi growls, steps into the kitchen. “Yeah, that’s right. You couldn’t even tell me that you almost died, let alone that your fucking dad is dead. I’m clearly the dumbass here.”

“Like you’re any better!”

“At least I told you when it happened!”

“You didn’t tell me shit! Oh my god, Levi.” Erwin starts toward the foyer.

“Where the fuck are you going?”

“Out.”

“No. You get back here.”

Erwin stops and turns. “You have no right to tell me what to do. I asked you to leave that shit alone. One fucking thing, and you couldn’t even do that.”

“Don’t get high and mighty with me. You did the same shit to me!”

“One goddamn thing.”

“Don’t fucking ignore me.” His fist tightens. “And I thought you fucking trusted me. I thought that with you, you… You bringing me into your life and saying you love me and fucking having me live here, that you could trust me enough to tell me about something like this?” Levi’s head swims. He grabs for the edge of the kitchen island and his eyes struggle to focus. “You lied to me.”

“I didn’t lie to you.”

“Father’s Day… Thanksgiving…” Levi tries to catch his breath. “You fucking lied to me.”

“I didn’t deny anything.”

“You know what you did.” Levi balls his fist, his fingernails burying into his skin he feels like the skin might rupture. “I have… Given you everything… Why…”

“It was too hard.”

“No it wasn’t!” Levi slams his fist on the table. Once. Twice. He roars out of his throat and he tries so hard to keep from rushing at Erwin. “No it wasn’t!”

“You have no idea what I went though…”

“You’re right…” Levi laughs. “You’re right… Because you didn’t fucking tell me.” Levi shakes his head in disbelief. Tries to calm his nerves but he can’t. He wants to punch the shit out of Erwin so bad, but he can’t. He’s being so stupid. Such a stupid fucking asshole and Levi just feels like he’s been living inside of nothing but a lie for the past ten months. From Erwin. His best friend. His partner. His fucking lover. What is this shit.

He spins back toward the living room. He scoops up the knife and pulls down another box. He slices it open, and pulls the flap open. With careless hands, he scoops out the contents onto the floor, kicks the items around and throws the box to the side. He does it with the next box before Erwin comes into view while he’s upturning the box and dropping the contents on the floor.

“What are you doing!?”
“We’re cleaning.” Levi squats down and starts haphazardly sorting through the items. He creates piles with no categories. Sees picture frames filled with smiles and red pieces of string to make flies for fishing. They distract him briefly, and he doesn’t notice Erwin coming toward him.

“Stop!”

“This is my house too, and I want—”

“Levi. Stop!” Erwin rushes at him, grabs his arm and pulls him up to his feet. Levi’s eyes flash wide, and his free arm comes up with a balled fist to connect into Erwin’s face. Erwin shakes his head, but recovers in time to cross his arms and restrain Levi’s other arm.

“I just want you to talk to me!” Levi’s voice is shrill like a sparrow’s, and it flutters in the room until it dies.

“I have!” Erwin shoves him, and they both stumble over items that are sprawled across the floor. He pushes Levi against the partition wall, and it sways against their weight. “And I told you to give me time!”

“How much time!?” Levi shouts, and his throat hurts, and he thinks he’s smiling because he doesn’t know why, his heart beating so fast he can feel it in the little veins in his fingers. “When would you tell me?”

“Eventually.”

Levi growls, kicks against Erwin until he wiggles from his grasp, stumbles into a box he hasn’t gone through yet. He tries to regain his step, but Erwin has him by the arm again, and pulling him back. “Don’t touch me!” Levi shouts, brings up his other arm, anchors his weight to the floor, stance wide and strong. His other arm shoots up, creates a fulcrum, and he shifts the equilibrium between them. The mountains that compose Erwin come tumbling down like loose rocks, his body spinning and somersaulting hard into the variety of hard and soft objects strewn across their living room.

There’s a pop, and a gruff scream.

Levi brings a hand to his face to check for blood, and there’s a ringing in his ears.

Erwin balls in on himself, cradles his right arm with his hand as he groans, his forehead pressed into the hardwood, his teeth biting hard into his bottom lip. He rocks on his side, pockets of tears forming in the crater of where his eyes meets his nose.

“Oh god… Erwin…” Levi looks around, pulls his hands up into his hair. He looks around, panicked and confused. How did this happen? How did he let this happen? He promised he’d never hurt him again. He promised him. “Oh god… Erwin. Please…”

Erwin whimpers, and he breathes harshly into the floor before rolling onto his knees and lifting his body up. He holds his arm limp at his side, hand gripping tightly at his bicep, and he slowly gains his composure to stand up. A single tear rolls down his face, but his emotions are wiped clean. Clear. Blue eyes icy and cold. “Get out.”

“W… What?”

“Get out, Levi.”

“Oh my god, Erwin… I’m sorry. Please.”
Erwin’s eyebrows set, cast dark shadows over his eyes and he looks like a demon raised from hell inside his living room. “Get your fucking shit and leave.”

“I don’t… I don’t have anywhere… I…”

“I need you to leave.”

“I have… Nothing…”

“Now.”

Levi backs out of the living room, feels it pushing him out like a disease. He swallows back tears as his back hits the island. “Just talk to me. Please. Erwin.”

“Out.”

“Talk to me. Tell me why it would be hard. Please!”

“God dammit… God dammit, Mike was right.” Erwin covers his face with his hand. “He was right.”

Levi shakes, stumbles toward the foyer, bumps into the entryway table and knocks the green vase over and onto the floor. His head swirls, he leans to go to pick up the pieces, the puddle of water, the single red flower that Erwin had placed in it the day before sitting crushed under a sliver of glass. But Erwin’s words echo in his head and he wants him gone. He wants him out of the house. He wants him to get his stuff and leave and…

“Erwin, please talk to me.” He tries one more time, but Erwin isn’t even there anymore. There’s the sound of clattering coming from the living room. The sound of glass and porcelain shifting as the thud of boxes being thrown on top of each other sluggishly. Missing and sliding to the floor, Erwin growling in frustration as he kicks a box and spills the contents again.

Levi opens the coat closet, digs out his bike helmet, his riding jacket, and his boots. He sits on the stairs, tears streaming down his face, his breathing steady and unaffected, thoughts racing as to what he should do. What he can do.

He stands up and opens the front door. He slinks out while securing his helmet. He has nothing else but his bike for as much as he cares. Everything else belonged to them, to the house… And if they weren’t going to be together anymore, he had no right to stake a claim.

He pulls the garage door open and walks his bike out into the driveway. It’s not the most comfortable weather to ride in, but he has nothing else. And at this point, he has nothing else to live for anyway. He straddles the bike, kicks it awake, and fingers the leather of his gloves.

There’s only one place he can go that makes sense. Only one other place he might be able to call home…

Pittsburgh.

Chapter End Notes

sorry for the delay in this. but we made it. here's the climax. it was really important so this chapter took a lot of changes. i feel pretty good about it though.
thanks to erwinsalive and my roommate for the assistance on this chapter. means a lot.

wow i don't know what else to say. this chapter was exhausting. i'm actually not sure
how long the next one will take me. it could be soon, or it could be somewhere about a
month from now. i apologize ahead of time.

any comments and discussion are welcome as always. the support has been so, so
amazing. i love you all.
“You’re such a fucking girl.” Church said. He kicked back a mouth full from his beer can before resting it back on his knee.

“Fuck you.” Magnolia bit back. She kicked his shin, her entire body slumped in her chair, her back flush to the seat. “Answer the question.”

“Have I ever been in love? Christ…” Church rolled his eyes so hard it was almost audible. “I don’t know. Maybe?”

“You would know.” Magnolia glared at him.

“Then I guess not.” He said with a shrug and killed his third beer with a tilt of his head.

Levi shifted in his seat, played with the edge of his knife with the pad of his thumb. “Don’t even.” He said.

“Com’mon, Captain. You must’ve been in love before.”

Church snorted. “Who could love a guy like that?”

Levi pointed his knife at Church, bobbed it with a hint of a smile on his face. “This guy gets it.”
“Knock it off. Ackerman here is the best kind of man.”

Church leaned forward, squinted an eye, and chuckled under his breath. “You want to tell us something?”

Levi was the one to roll his eyes. “For fuck’s sake…”

“Listen! I’m jus’ sayin’. He’s a nice dude and like… Well. I guess you’re alright lookin’.”

“Wow, thanks.” Levi was full on smiling.

“See! So cute!”

Levi sealed his lips and planted his feet on the ground of their tent. He shook his head.

“Unbelievable.”

“But I mean… Now that you mention it. I’m curious too.” Church mused.

Levi looked up, the edge of the knife eating into his thumb. He spanned his gaze between Magnolia’s and Church’s. Their eyes were wide and attentive like children’s, Magnolia looked like a teenager hungry and rabid for some hot gossip.

They both knew the answer before Levi even spilled it.

Levi dashes a hand to his forehead, sucks in a breath that feels like inhaling glass, and groans loudly into his pillow before throwing it across the room. He can’t stop thinking about them. All of them. Everybody and everything that ever...

His oily hair sticks to his eyelids, burns his eyes as he squints lethargically at the window. He pulled the plug on the digital clock the moment he stepped into the hotel room. He’s been keeping track of time by the light that shines across the floor, though he has lost count of how many times it has gone from light to dark to light again.

He has to piss.

The thought of that sounds like too much, and he’s not sure his legs will be able to carry him the few steps to the toilet. But he tries. He rolls once on the unlinened bed. Closer now to the bathroom than before, but he takes a moment to catch his breath. The muted television flashes blue and yellow hues against his skin, makes him look more sickly and worn, like food left to mold in the back of the fridge. He covers his eyes with the back of his forearm. The grime on his arms is thick, feels like salt water evaporated on skin, or sweat that has been wiped away under high desert suns.

He closes his eyes.

So tired.

His eyes open again, and the light below the curtains has turned orange and angled up onto the wall near the head of the bed. Levi shoots up when he thinks he hears his phone buzz, but falls back down when he remembers it’s been dead for…

How long has it been dead?

… Fuck, he has to piss.

He crawls once up the bed before falling back down. He studies his hand, the tips of his fingernails are black with dirt and dead skin and all other heinously ugly things that make his skin crawl. If
anything, he needs to wash his hands. He lays a bit longer, but he can’t stop thinking about the dirt. Dirty. He’s so fucking dirty and gross and awful. Disgusting.

“Get up.”

His arms wobble under him before he sits up and back onto his heels. His head swivels, feels light like a balloon and floating like one too, and his stomach growls loudly--empty and eating itself away. It aches. It hurts. He has to piss.

Like a man learning to walk again, he unsteadily puts his foot to the floor, tests his weight, and then puts the other one down. He stands, his arms out to balance him, and shuffles slowly toward the bathroom. His reflection is dark behind the white linen sheet hanging over the mirrors, but he’s still there. Ugly. Present. Existing. He keeps his eyes set on the floor as he enters the bathroom.

The tile is cold under his feet, and it shakes a chill all the way up his body. He goes to pull at the waistband of his boxers, fumbles to find it, before realizing he isn’t wearing any at all. He grabs his dick and aims to piss into the toilet bowl. He lets out a satisfied groan as he finishes, and puts the lid down without flushing. He steps to the side to wash his hands, removing the soap from its paper and scrubbing between every little wrinkle in his hand. The hot water burns his skin pink, and the soap has lost its shape by the time he’s done. He looks up, and he can still see himself a little through the linen.

Sees himself smiling.

He starts a bath. The bedsheets bellows like a sail on a ship as the steam rolls from the tub’s edge. Levi steps into the bath and the heat seeps into all of the old little scars that cover his body, rips them open fresh and stings him. He sits, brings his knees to his chest and his chin forward. The tub fills until it hits the drain, and he doesn’t move to stop it. The sound is loud and fevered and angry, and it matches the rushing within his head.

“I never would have guessed.” Magnolia said, quietly.

Church shrugged.

“Like, he sounds like a nice dude.” She added.

Church opened another beer.

Levi bit at his lip and wondered if it was a mistake to say anything at all.

“If he’s important to you, bro, I’d love to meet him.”

Levi looked up at her. He thought he was smiling because she was smiling too, but there was a sneer on Church’s face as he drank down half of his can before letting it rest between his legs.

“He’s got a girlfriend, doesn’t he?”

Levi looked at him, brows creased. “Fiance.”

“Figures.” Church set the can on the ground.

“What?” Magnolia asked.

“How does it feel?” Church said.

Levi’s skin is red. Burning. Through his legs and up his stomach and to his chest. He gasps. Gasps.
It feels… Like suffocating. And he gasps. Grabs his hand on the side of the tub and tries to breathe before he feels the bile rising in his throat. He mutters something in a language he’s used before, leans over the edge of the tub and plants his palm flat on the cool tile of the bathroom. He slinks over the edge, wet and slippery, folds over it and slides hard onto the floor. He’s been trained in this, in ways to prevent drowning. But he didn’t learn how to prevent it when he wasn’t submerged.

Crawling over to the toilet, he hastily snaps the seat up and grasps the edges of the porcelain. It smells like piss. His mouth opens, but nothing comes up. God, it smells like piss and bile and somewhere--somewhere--there’s always blood. His stomach feels tight and light all at the same time, and there’s a knot in it that if he just… He heaves, so strong he feels like his Adam’s apple might drop from his mouth, but it doesn’t result in anything but a broken sob--a wailing of breath that mocks him with its echo. He gasps and cries and tries to catch his breath. But he can’t…

Fucking…

Breathe…

He…

Can’t…

He gasps.

He can’t…

His fingernails bend against the porcelain, his eyes snapped wide and growing dry, and he looks around wildly as if anybody is around to help. His fingers burn against the coolness of the toilet bowel, and he sits up and down on his heels as he feels a snake of fire twine around every muscle in his body to come up and rest around his lungs.

Squeeeezing.

Tight.

He can’t breathe .

“It feels like shit.” Levi said.

Suuuufffooocating. He sucks in a breath.

“He…” Erwin said.

Levi looked up at him, blinked.

“I’m glad you came to visit.”

They were out on the balcony of Erwin’s apartment. Independence Day. Somebody lighting off fireworks that cracked and wheezed and popped. Dogs that barked somewhere behind closed windows. His breath hitched as he blinked again. He had told Levi he was thinking of marrying Marie, and after three shots of whiskey, Levi was finding it hard to stand much less talk, and breathing… Breathing came as it pleased.

“Sure.” Levi croaked. It hurt to talk--it hurt to be around him. He shifted away from Erwin.

“I miss you.”
Levi didn’t look at him. Didn’t want to look at him. He leaned on the railing and hung his head down. “Sure.”

Erwin walked over to the ledge, wrapped his hand around the railing, and stood next to Levi. “I wish you would visit more.”

“I’m ok.”

“You don’t want to?”

“No. What do I have here?”

Erwin was quiet, the silence long enough to taste. “Me?”

Levi snorted and shook his head. “You’ll get married.”

“So?”

“Married men are boring.”

Erwin chuckled, but stopped when Levi did not return it. “Levi.”

“Yeah.”

“I have not asked yet.”

Levi closed his eyes and tightened his grip on the railing. He was unsure of what to say. He tried to steady his breathing, tried to decipher what Erwin was getting at. “Ok.”

“And?” Church asked.

‘And’ what?” Levi said.

“He asked her, obviously.” Magnolia said.

Church shook his head, burped long and low into his hand before waving a finger at Levi. “You knew.”

Levi raised an eyebrow, before his eyes met the ground. The air in the tent grew heavy, humid, thick, and he sucked in a breath that felt like salt water. Drowning.

“I miss you.” Erwin said again. There was a valley between them, but he was shifting, moving, pushing the river away from them and bringing their mountains together. Levi could feel the heat from his exposed arm even in the humid July air.

He gasps.

“What are you doing?”

Erwin placed a hand on his.

He screams.

The street lamp of the parking lot of the apartment complex covers Erwin in gold. Like an angel. Like a demon. Like a man out to steal Levi’s heart and never to give it back. To devour it, consume
it, mangle it until there was nothing but shreds tattered and frayed, hanging like beaten flags inside his rib cage.

“No.” Levi pressed too hard into his blade, a thin trail of blood trickling down into his palm as he grimaced. “Fuck no.”

“Wow...” Magnolia trailed.

“Ackerman. Man...” Church shook his head. “You came back to this?”

Levi stuck his thumb in his mouth, the copper of the blood mixing with the dirt from the atmosphere. Dirt was everywhere. Always dirty. Filthy. Disgusting. “I had no choice.”

“Oh, you’ll fuckin’ regret it.” Church shook his head and leaned back in his chair. “You lost your chance, man.”

“I apologize.” Erwin said. His fingers were hot and a little clammy, but Levi burned that feeling into his memory. The way he softly ran his thumb across his knuckles, the way he didn’t look at him, the way his lips set in angles that looked like flower petals. “I have not always been there for you.”

Levi looked up at him, and he wanted those eyes to look back down at him. “Erwin.”

Timidly, Erwin met Levi’s gaze, pulled gently at Levi’s hand, and their arms were locked around each other. Erwin leaned down, the alcohol strong on his breath, his lips so close to Levi’s, and even though the whiskey was strong, Erwin was stronger and...

“You’re kidding me!” Magnolia shouted.

“What else did you expect to happen? Christ, you’re all stupid.” Church spat.

Levi hurls what little is in his stomach into the toilet. Orange and chunky, smelly and disgusting. Levi heaves again, tears trailing down his face, and it dissipates into child like weeping. He wipes at his mouth with the back of his hand, before gagging again, but there’s nothing. He’s been here too long, slept on the bed for too many hours, his stomach knotted too much. Collapsing to the floor, he sobs heavily into his hands, his voice growing hoarse as he screams into his palms.

“Erwin?” Marie said.

Erwin’s lips were nearly on Levi’s. Oh, he could feel his breath on them, could nearly feel how they would fit together, and his heart seized in that moment. He whimpered, wanting it more than anything, and wanting nothing more for them to go away. Twisting his arm, he tried to recess the valley between them again.

Erwin was slow to move, big and oafish; he was always slow to move. He turned his head to meet Marie’s gaze. “Marie, darling.”

Marie’s mouth dropped slightly. She pushed a piece of long hair behind her ear before letting go of a soft huff. “Uh, Mike says he’s ready to set off some of the fireworks.”

Erwin ran his hand across his nape and nodded. “Right. Right. I’ll be there in a second.”

Marie stood there for a moment. “Now would be good.”

Erwin nodded. “Now is good.”

“I can’t believe she said yes.” Church muttered.
“Fuck you.” Levi raised his eyes, brows furrowed, shadows deeply cutting across his features.

“What? Clearly this Erwin guy is a real keeper. Super trustworthy.”

Levi stood up, the back of his legs kicking his chair back. “Say that shit again.”

Church shrugged. “He’s done nothing but fuck with you your entire life, Ackerman.”

Levi moved across the tent before Magnolia got up between them. “Yo, come on. Stop it, you two. Not again!”

Levi glared down at Church. His fingers twitched into fists before he snorted. “You’re done.” Levi kicked the open can of beer, a foamy mess spilling across the dirt. “Sober the fuck up before the morning. I won’t have you hungover tomorrow.”

Church’s lips pulled tight into an irritated frown. “Yes sir.” He growled.

It was the last night they spent together.

Levi stood alone on the balcony, his eyes stinging with a thousand little needles, until finally the cool trail of a tear curved across his cheek and down his chin. Confused and beaten and abandoned, he left the party without saying goodbye to anybody, content with never seeing any of them again if need be.

It was the last night he saw Erwin for over a decade.

He swallows and shakes his head and it takes awhile.

He shakes his head and leans his forehead on the toilet seat and it takes awhile.

It takes awhile for the tears to run dry, and for the whimpering to turn to breathing.

And it takes awhile.

It takes awhile before he hears the knocking.

And then there’s the sound of the door unlatching and Levi’s eyes shoot open. His hand slaps against the side of the toilet, and he notices immediately how awful his mouth tastes. He smacks his lips, but it doesn’t make the rustling sound from the front of the hotel room stop.

There’s low speaking, and it takes him awhile to realize it’s Indian.

He scrambles up to his knees and pulls down a towel from the rack, tries to stand with the white cloth in front of his groin, but his knee. His fucking knee. Leaning on the bar of the towel rack, he holds the fabric in front of him, closes his eyes tight as he wobbles precariously into the entrance of the bathroom. Sluggishly, his head turns and his eyes squint to the natural light filling the entrance of the room.

“Oh!” The housekeeper startles, her hands at the edges of the sheet that’s hanging from the mirror next to the door. “I’m sorry, sir.”

“Can you…” Levi swallows before his voice croaks. His lips are dry and chapped, and he’s not even sure he has enough moisture left in his body to form the words he needs to. “Leave?”

“I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry, sir. I knocked but nobody answered. I’m sorry.”
“What… Day is it?”

The woman lets the linen fall back onto the mirror, and it makes Levi relax slightly. “The twentieth.”

Levi presses the back of his palm into his forehead, holds the towel in front of him tightly. He’s been here for… A week. “Shit.”

“I’m sorry to bother you.” The housekeeper gathers her spray bottles and rags, tries to keep her eyes away from his indecency. “I can come back. I can come back.”

“Leave it.” Levi mutters.

“Excuse me?”

“I’ll take care of the cleaning.” Levi moves toward the door, and she backs up.

“Sir?”

“Please.”

She looks at him with an eyebrow raised, slowly puts the supplies down and nods. She doesn’t say anything else when she backs out of the room and closes the door behind her. Levi breaks the silence with a soft sigh. He runs a hand down his face, feels the rough scruff of stubble that threatens to turn into a beard, and the empty hollow pit in his stomach.

“Get your shit together, Ackerman.” He says to a man already dead.

He nearly trips over his boots that lay kicked in the middle of the floor as he gathers his discarded clothes and puts them back on, dirty and used, but at least aren’t as worn as the unwashed skin on his bones. He grabs his keys and wallet and opens the door. The ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign had gone missing--probably some shitty kids that had come by and stolen them all. He shakes his head and makes his way to the parking lot. It’s cold, cold enough to snow if it wanted to, but if there is some god, at least he graced the skies with seas of blue. Kicking his bike awake, he pulls into a Sheetz down the road and parks. The convenience store door chimes a tune as he pushes it open.

It’s so bright. Levi shields his face with hand, feels the grease from his forehead on his thumb and shakes his head with a huff as he wipes it off on his shirt. He traverses the aisles for nearly a half hour, looking at the same bag of potato chips and candy bars before deciding on a small bag of trail mix. He ignores the side glances from a young couple, stands next to a gruff older gentleman with a receding hairline and a belly round enough to suggest sober days were few and far between. He smells like tobacco, and it reminds Levi of how many hours it has been since he last had a cigarette.

He stood with his hand on the cooler handle for a long moment when he was finally alone. If he downed a case of beer fast enough, maybe he could stay drunk long enough to not think of anything. He pulls a cheap case from the cooler, and drags his feet along until he pauses the wall of health products. He eyes a bottle of Tyenol, stares at it before picking it up and grasping it in the same hand as his trail mix.

The private in his platoon had gone that way. It took three days for somebody to find him. There were worse ways to go.

Levi waits in line, the weight of the alcohol making his arm sore, and he’s next in line when he realizes he has no way to bring the beer back to the hotel room. He returns all the items and leaves out the door without buying anything at all.
He thinks about heading back to that room; that room that might as well be called his home. But he’s awake now, agitated to be alive, and pissed at the fucking ghosts in his past.

“It’ll make hair grow on your chest.” Kenny said, placing a tall can of beer in front of Levi. “You’re too fuckin’ skinny, kid. You look like a lil fag with your hair like that too.” He roughly rubbed his hand through Levi’s hair, tugged on it, before running it gently as if in some sort of display of affection. “Get it cut.”

Levi wants a fight. He wants to crack a fist across somebody’s nose, just like what had been done to him. And goddamn, if he doesn’t give a shit right now if he fucking kills somebody. What was prison but the military at home? What was guilt when he had enough to last entire life times?

She was so weak. And she smiled at him even when he cried.

It takes him almost an hour to make his way into the depths of Pittsburgh, like a hound following an aged scent. And it takes him even longer to find the street he vaguely remembers being on almost four years ago. His teeth chatter as he parks his bike at the end of a street. He rubs his face with his gloved hands as he starts to walk down the street, pausing at every house to read the names on the mailboxes. The sun is waning by the time he finds the door he’s looking for.

It’s an old brownstone, looks exactly like the other brownstones around it. Brick exterior, green door, green trimming. The front steps are cracked a little, pieces of concrete flaked and loose like slabs made for commandments. He brushes them aside and onto the sidewalk as he walks up the stairs. Looking at the mailbox, he flips open the top to see a couple of pieces of mail. He pulls them out: a medical bill, junk mail, credit card bill. He drops them back into the mailbox and lets the metal top slap down. There’s a doorbell, but it didn’t work the last time he was here, and he is sure it still won’t work if he tries this time.

He eyes the mailbox again, smacks his lips at the name “Reiss” that appears next to “Ackerman”.

Raising his hand, he goes to knock on the door. His hand remains raised until his bicep grows a bit tender. He shakes his head with a dejected sigh and takes a seat on the steps with his jaw cupped within his hands.

Kenny was a shitty uncle, and an even shittier dad. Levi tried to rationalize it--at least the asshole stepped up in his sister’s place to take care of her shitty son when she was gone… And he had stuck around for ten years before blowing away like a fart in the wind. Yes, at least there was that.

“Lemme tell ya, kid,” Kenny said in the living room, sitting in his big armchair in front of the television. If Kenny was good at something, he was good at leaving dents in furniture. “None of this shit matters.”

Levi sat on the couch, old enough to have his folding knife aimlessly opening and closing in his grip. “What the fuck are you on about?”

“What shitty grades you brought home.”

Levi flicked his knife closed. “Yeah.”

“I don’t give a shit. What I do give a shit about is you getting a good honest job. Your mom didn’t work hard to keep you alive for you to fuck up your miserable life, kid.”

Opened.

“I’m thirteen.”
“Back in my day, you could work the mines at eighteen. You’re only a few years away.”

Closed.

“You old fuck, the mines aren’t even open anymore.”

Kenny cackled, and it rumbled and rasped behind bubbles of alcohol in his belly. “Get outta here. I dun wanna see your face tonight, shrimp.”

Opened.

Levi stuck his knife into the arm of the couch and slunk off the couch and down the hall to his room. He closed the door behind him. He packed a bag and snuck out his window and rode his bike to Erwin’s house. Erwin told him he should try harder in school. Go to college. Leave the town and become better than Kenny in every way possible, because…

“You already are.” Erwin said, and he said it in such a way that it felt like he held Levi’s body, cradled him within his very words. Anything else would have dropped the floor from under him and smashed him to the ground. But no… Erwin protected him.

Erwin cared about him.

And Levi felt afraid of Erwin for the first time that night. He hung around his drunken uncle for more nights than he cared to, because being around Erwin meant feeling things other boys felt for girls.

Levi stands up and starts down the steps of the brownstone. He wasn’t going to fuck with Kenny. Not now. Not ever. The fucker deserved a good beating straight into hell, but he wasn’t the reason why he made the choices he did. He’s an asshole, but he knew about survival and how to keep living. If there was ever a lesson he could learn from the cunt, it could be that.

Levi nearly moves aside for an older gentleman with hair so gold it’s almost white, but his elbow catches against his, and he spins to bow his head. “Sorry.” Levi mutters.

The man smooths out his gray wool jacket and smiles back at Levi. Hard lines settle around his mouth, and they look like they have been whittled there from years of too much joy. “It’s fine, young man.”

Levi pauses and stops. He scoffs a laugh. “Young?”

“Well, certainly much younger than me!” He says happily.

“I doubt that.” Levi shakes out the anxiety from his arms and struggles to find a smile. “It’s pretty cold out. You better get home.”

The man adjusts his scarf and nods. He taps his cane on the sidewalk as he goes to turn back toward the direction Levi came from. “I believe I will. Have a good evening.”

“You too.” Levi watches him scuttle up the sidewalk, slow and rickety, like a scarecrow. It takes him a few minutes to get to his door, struggles up the steps and checks the same mailbox that Levi had checked moments before. Levi’s lips press together and he breathes out his nose before heading back to his bike.

The cemetery is a little out of town, skirting a neighborhood that he remembers his mother saying she didn’t want to raise children in. And even though he had only been a few times before, he would always remember the exact place that she lay. He brings his bike to a stop and lingers. He doesn’t
really want to look. He feels a pit of guilt hardening in his stomach knowing that her name sits engraved on the granite--being eaten and filled in by black and green lichen.

She deserved a better son than him.

“Your mother will be ok.”

He was young. He was naive. And the worst thing he could have done was believe them. He watched the stretcher leave the house as he sat on the arm of the sofa. The old woman neighbor came over, the same woman who babysat him more times than he could count. She took him to her house to sleep in her guest room that smelled of mothballs and sugar cookies. She fed him shredded wheat without frosting and grapefruit juice and he wondered if his mother was going to be ok.

She had to be ok.

They told him every day she was getting better. Her breathing, it was hard. They talked to him, told him she needed air to fill her lungs. A mask across her face and a gentle wheeze between her lips. But she’ll be ok. The antibiotics were working.

Like a spectre, he floats across the lawn, and he lands heavily on the ground. He pulls his legs up, digs the toes of his boots into the brown grass shavings around the edge of the tombstone. There’s a single flower on the ledge, wilted and brown, and many of the petals have been peeled back by winds that had been less forgiving than today.

Somebody visits.

He digs the heel of his palm into the greasy pits of his eyes, and he sighs.

“Come on, kid. She wants to see ya.” Kenny said. And it was quiet, and little wounded, and it scared Levi even more. He held on to Kenny’s hand, so tight and with nails so deep into skin that he might have peeled it a little. He stood at the doorway of the hospital room. She looked so small. So large. So small and large and big and tall and she didn’t look like herself and he looked up at Kenny for an answer. “It’s your mom, Levi.”

Clear tubes from her nose to her ears, tucked behind dark hair that cascaded around a white hospital gown. And she used to be so beautiful; and she used to be so strong. Fluttering bed sheets on clothes lines, gentle kisses after bedtime stories, dirty hands in gardens, laughter that sang on the same keys as windchimes. She wasn’t that. Not anymore.

“Baby,” she said.

Levi hid behind Kenny’s back.

“I always…” Levi says quietly. The cemetery is empty except for him and all these ghosts. “I didn’t mean…”

Kenny picked him up and put him in her bed. She held Levi’s hand while he distracted himself by looking at the wall next to her bed. It had cards and drawings along it. Three vases full of flowers sat on the bedside table. A mylar balloon wished with all its might for her to get better.

“I ate macaroni and cheese today.” She coughed hard into her other hand, but she still smiled when it was over. “I like it more when you make it for me, though.” Her eyes were watery and bloodshot. Her lungs fought against her, but she fought harder, and kept the railing of coughs from surfacing for a second time.
“I regret so much…” Levi says softly into his dirty, filthy fucking palms. “I should have been better…” It’s so hard to talk, his bottom lip keeps getting in the way, and when he thought he couldn’t anymore, he feels more tears threatening to surface. “I could have done so much more…”

They told him she’d be home soon. Just one more day. Just two more days. Today. Tomorrow. Today. He’d come home with eager excitement, until one day Kenny got down on one knee. He took his baseball cap off and held it over his heart like a pledge, and he shook his head. Levi dropped his book bag to the floor and didn’t know what it meant. But he cried because it felt like what he had to do, because it looked like something Kenny was ready to do.

“I needed to be strong.” He pulls his knees up. “But I pushed everybody away.” He feels stupid, talking to a dead person, but the ache in his heart swells past the levy of his eyes, and he’s crying.

She had bad lungs, they told him. Ever since she was a kid. He knew pneumonia could be cured. He grew angry. Why wasn’t she strong enough? Why did she leave him? If she just tried a little harder he wouldn’t be so alone.

“I miss them.” He says quietly, and it gets taken away with the breeze as he hiccups a gasp. It’s so hard to breathe and he wonders… He wonders if this is how it felt.

What if he could have done something? What if he got her sick? What if she died thinking he hated her? What if Church died thinking he hated him? What if… What if…

“I understand,” Erwin said. Even back then he was so big. Or maybe, Levi had always been so small. His hand engulfed Levi’s as he used his other one to adjust the crown on his head. “It’s ok to cry sometimes.”

“No it’s not.” Levi said, swallowing down the sobs he had just cried out. The fresh asphalt burn on his knee wasn’t the reason for the tear tracks on his cheeks. “It’s not.” He took his hand away, snatched the crown from his head, and threw it to the ground. He stomped off toward home with eyes heavy with tears. He remembered the word ‘whore’, and it buzzed around in his head. He was barely able to understand it, but he knew it was bad. Ugly. A terrible word that women shouldn’t be. A word a mother shouldn’t be.

“Levi!” Erwin jogged up to him and put a heavy hand on his shoulder. He always imposed his presence on Levi, but it was never threatening. “I hate them.”

“They’re assholes.” Erwin spat. Erwin never swore. He dropped his hand again and took Levi’s. He squeezed it. “I miss my mom too.” Letting go of his hand, he fiddles with the flower crown in his other. It’s a little smooshed, Levi having stepped on it as he made his way away from him moments before. Erwin put the crown back onto Levi’s head. He adjusted it, pulled pieces of his long hair through the loops of stems, tucked dark hair behind his ears and dusted some dirt off from his white, oversized t-shirt. “But we have each other, okay?”

Levi stared at Erwin’s chest. He looked up, but couldn’t see much behind the wall of tears blurring his eyes. He nodded, and a tear fell as Erwin’s arms wrapped around him. Tight. Secure. Steady. And he thought that his mother would have very much liked this young man named Erwin Smith.

He gasps.

“I love you.” She said. And her lips were dry and chapped and ugly, but they felt like heaven against his brow. Her eyes slid shut, too exhausted to keep them open, sleep taking her soundly as Kenny
picked him up and brought him back home to a house that was supposed to be Levi’s and his mother’s. But he didn’t know that in a few days it would be different. It’d be a house just for him.

He can’t breathe.

The air is too cold and he runs his hands up the length of his face until he grabs clumps of his hair.

A final breath as they enter the building, Church looking at him over his shoulder, pale eyes burdened with trust. Magnolia nodding as she entered close behind.

And he wasn’t there for her…

He wasn’t…

His lungs empty, fill, empty, fill, and it wheezes like hers.

Erwin looking at him in the morning, golden hair splayed on the pillow, naked and heaving chest warmed by the dull light of the rising sun. But his cheeks were so flush, and his smile so deep. He extended his hand across the bed, placed the back of his finger against Levi’s cheek, chewing the side of his lip between his teeth.

He does the same, bites back the air and holds it in his chest. Keeps it there. Begs it not to leave.

“I love you.” He said.

And he breathed out, leaned his cheek into the warmth, and found he could smile too.

He breathes out.

And the air isn’t so hard to breathe after all.

Because with him.

Oh god, with him.

He’s never been anything else.

“I love him.” He admits. And it breaks every part of him, like an ice pick hammered through a glass statue. “I can’t... I can’t fuck this up. Not this...” He folds in on himself, buries his face into the folds of his arms, and rattles with the wind that cools his body. “I love him.”

She doesn’t answer because she can’t. But he imagines that maybe, for a moment, she’s proud of him. That even this man, this disappointment of a man, this man that has let so many men filter through his fingers like grains of sand, was a man worth being proud of.

And it feels better.

A little.

It will take awhile. It will be a fight. It will take awhile.

But he can breathe. Right now. This moment...

It’s dark when he manages his way back to the hotel. He’s full of coffee and a single donut, and his pocket bulges with a new charging cable for his phone. He loosens the laces on his boots and kicks them off into the middle of the floor. He makes his way to the bedside table and plugs it into the
socket. Hesitating over the edges of his cellphone, he picks it up and inserts the cable to the bottom of it. He sets it down and sits on the edge of the freshly made bed.

He’s picked at all the dirt under his nails and peeled back hang nails until they bleed before he picks up his phone again to turn it on. He watches the screen as the system boots. Feels his heart hammer as the notification for text messages swipes in; as the notification for voicemail swipes in.

It’s hard to breathe, but he wants to learn again. He needs to.

His fingers shake when he brings up his contacts and presses the number. His entire body shakes, and his breathing times with each ring, until finally it picks up.

“Levi!? Oh my god, Levi!? Are you there? Levi! Where have you been?!” Petra yammers on the other end.

Levi breathes. He keeps breathing, until he sobs out: “Help me.”

Chapter End Notes

thank you so much to my roommate and minxie for betaing this, and a special thanks for the anon on tumblr that gently nudged about an update. it was the push i needed to just... finish this.

i struggled p hard with this chapter. first, i couldn't get levi off of the bathroom floor, then i couldn't bring myself to write the kuschel part. that part is really personal, and i hope it translates ok, and that it feels real.

i don’t really know what else to say. i just hope you all enjoyed it. comments and support are always appreciated. we're just a few chapters away from the end. *sighs deeply*
Levi sits at the kitchen table, one leg crossed over the other, hot mug of tea steaming up into the palm of his hand. It’s dark, the light turned off except for the range light above the stove, and the winter morning has yet to wake and melt the frost from the corner of the windows. He doesn’t belong here. He doesn’t want to be back here. But Petra is kind to him, and she deserves a bit of kindness in return.

The stairs creak, and the scuffle of slippers sound across the linoleum of the kitchen. “Hey there.”

Levi turns in his seat and nods. “Mornin’.”

Oruro takes down a mug from the cabinet and places it on the counter. The timer on the coffee pot goes off, and it starts to gurgle as it begins to brew. “You’re up early.”

“I don’t sleep much.”

“Me neither.” He goes to the fridge that’s covered in photographs of their family pinned under magnets from places they’ve been before, and pulls a half empty gallon of milk from it. He sets it next to his mug and pulls out the sugar from the edge of the counter. He pours the milk and sugar into his mug as he waits for the coffee to finish. It’s the same exact thing Levi does whenever he has the misfortune of drinking coffee. “It just got worse when we had the kids.”

“I bet.” Levi brings his mug to his lips and sips down a small amount before putting it back onto the
table. He feels out of place. He’s ten years his host’s senior, and he doesn’t feel like he should be the one that’s homeless. “But they’re good kids.”

Oruro takes the coffee pot from the cradle and pours some into his mug until it hits the rim. He puts his spoon in and stirs, the hot liquid splashing over the edge and onto the counter. Levi breathes in through his nose. “We lucked out with them.” He brings his mug to the table, rim balanced in his fingers, and somehow he doesn’t spill more coffee on his walk over. “But it’s still early starts. This is the only time of day where we have any peace and quiet.”

Levi breaks a grin. “I’m not helping.”

“You’re our guest. Come on.” Oruro sits heavily in his seat, the chair legs screeching against the floor. “I barely even noticed you guys coming in last night.”

“Just let me know when you want to kick me out…”

“You’re the best babysitter we’ve ever had. We aren’t looking forward to the day you leave!” Oruro laughs.

Levi scratches the scruff on his cheeks. He hasn’t had time to shave since Petra came to pick him up in Pittsburgh with Pixis’ truck. “Well… It’s still too nice of you.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Oruro slurps at his coffee, the liquid finally sitting below a precarious level from the lip. “What do you got goin’ on today?”

Levi swallows and shrugs. “I’m not sure…”

Oruro nods as if he’s working around a conversation in his head. “We’re gonna be gone starting Saturday night. We’re going to my family for the holidays.”

“She told me.” Levi pushes his mug across the table.

“You’re welcome to--”

“I’m not religious.” Levi shakes his head.

“That doesn’t matter.”

Levi scoffs a laugh. “It does.”

Oruro is silent for a few moments before he takes another gulp of his coffee. He’s so loud and tactile, but he covers his mouth when he swallows and wipes away the coffee from his top lip. “We could use somebody to watch the boys for us for the next couple of days.”

“I…” Levi leans forward in his seat. He was so close to giving up on everything. “I don’t know if I can.”

Oruro watches him before smiling. “You’re ok, Levi.”

Levi looks up with an eyebrow raised.

There’s a loud yawn from behind him, and it shakes Levi’s shoulders enough to spill a bit of tea onto the table. He wipes it up with his finger and dries it off on his pant leg.

“Good morning.” Petra says. Her toes wiggle against the kitchen floor before she goes to the cupboard to grab a mug.
“Morning, babe.” Oruro says. “I was just telling Levi we could use some help with the boys the next few days.”

“Ah yeah, we talked about that.” Petra does the same: pours the milk and sugar into the mug before adding the coffee to the rim. Levi wonders if that’s how they came to fall in love. He smiles despite himself. “He might take them Thursday and Friday, right?”

Levi nods. “I just… Need some time.”

“Yeah, of course.” Oruro says. He’s already finished most of his coffee, and he’s up from his seat and across the kitchen to refill it. “It’s just good to have you back. Petra was going crazy.”

“Oruro…” Petra says quietly as she shakes her head.

“Sorry…” Oruro says under his breath.

“I didn’t mean to miss so much work.” Levi says, his hands cupping around his tea mug, his chin hanging practically to his chest. It’s grown cold, but he doesn’t want to disrupt the room. He kind of just wants to fade into corners of the room.

“You think that’s what I was worried about?”

“Petra--” Oruro tries to interject.

“Levi, you’re a fucking numbskull.” Petra says, coming to the table and slamming her mug to the table. Coffee spills out, and Levi shoots back in his seat. “Lookit me.” Petra says, and Levi can’t help but obey. “I don’t give a shit that you missed work.”

“But…”

“Lemme finish.” She takes his mug away from him so he stops fidgeting his fingers around it. “I was worried about you. Nobody knew where you were.” The emotion swells in her throat, and even in the dim light, Levi can see the tears welling at the edges of her eyes. “And what’s worse, is that nobody else…”

“Petra, baby.” Oruro reaches over the table, but Petra slaps his hands away.

“You’re a good person, Levi. We all fuck up, some more than others, but you--you’re good people. And when nobody…” She shakes her head. “I had no idea if you were alive or dead or…”

Levi’s eyes widen, and there’s a brick that forms in his throat that tastes familiar, like he’s been here before. Like he’s done this before. “I didn’t…”

“Can you just give a shit about yourself for a second. Please.”

“Okay, honey.” Oruro is up and rubbing his hands on Petra’s shoulders even though she tries to shake him loose.

“I can’t deal with this right now.” The tears are falling down her cheeks too quickly to keep dry, and she rushes out of the kitchen with Oruro quickly on her heels.

Levi sits in the kitchen, his attention turned to the entryway, his lips parted in disbelief. He brushes away the tears that unintentionally fell, and he looks at his damp fingertips for answers, and he’s unable to come up with any at all.
The afternoon has already melted the snow away by the time Levi leaves. Levi bites at his thumbnail as he finally looks at his phone. There were so many notifications, and his heart knotted up thinking that Erwin may have been trying to get in contact with him. But if what Petra had said was true...

It felt worse when he realized Erwin hadn’t been trying at all.

All the texts and and voicemails were from Petra. He doesn’t bother reading or listening to them… Except for one text that was from Hange.

_Hange Zoe: talk to me if u need to_

Levi sighs as he opens the door to the convenience store. He pockets his phone and goes straight to the counter. He buys a pack of cigarettes, gum, a candy bar, and a lighter. He’s out the door before he can take his change. He taps the cigarettes against his palm, tears the cellophane, cracks open the paper, and hungrily takes the first cigarette from the pack. It tastes like sex, and smells like relief, and it’s the best he’s felt in over a week. He makes it around the corner of the building before the sensation stops him. He sucks it down, feels his limbs shaking and his composure slipping.

Erwin didn’t try to contact him. At all.

Why would he? Levi had hurt him. Levi had fucked it up. Once again, he’d fucked everything up and he can’t smoke enough cigarettes fast enough to calm the shaking in his fingers. He’s in public. He’s in public and he needs to calm down. He puts his hand on the side of the ice cooler, and shakes out a sigh. Erwin… Didn’t…

He takes his phone out and unlocks it. He stares at Hange’s message and bites at his lip. School is out, but Erwin had told him that Hange rarely breaks from the labs at the school—even during holiday. If he sends a message now, he might not get a response back for a few hours. It will give him time to think.

Erwin didn’t try to contact him.

_Levi Ackerman: how is he?_

He barely lights another cigarette when he feels the vibration in his jeans. He licks his lips and hesitates on whether to ignore it or not. But he can’t.

_HZ: not good_

Levi puts his phone back in his pocket and he lights up another cigarette. He paces around the side of the store, pressing his palm to his forehead and shaking his head. This was more difficult than it should have been. His phone vibrates again. It keeps vibrating until it irritates him too much and he pulls it back out.

_HZ: hes got his arm in a sling and basically hes fuckin useless_

_HZ: i mean not as bad as when he got all torn up but_

_HZ: still_

_HZ: mikes been staying with him bc he cant drive_

Levi licks his lips, and the guilt is too heavy for him to figure out what to say.

_LA: oh._
The ellipsis dance on his screen; Hange is active. This has unfortunately turned into a conversation.

HZ: o

HZ: funny thing to say

HZ: u almost broke his arm

Levi’s features go dark and his fingers wrap tightly around the edges of his phone. He snorts out clouds of chilled air that mix with the cigarette smoke inside of his lungs.

LA: how long before it heals?

HZ: ::shrug emoji::

LA: can i visit?

HZ: how would i know

HZ: but i dont know if its a good idea

LA: i need to talk to him

HZ: have u tried calling him?

HZ: jk i know u havent

LA: what can i say?

HZ: something like

HZ: hey erwin

HZ: sorry i trashed ur house

HZ: and for dislocating ur shoulder

HZ: i think thats a good place to start

Levi leans his shoulder on the ice box. His cigarette has burned to the filter, but he still sucks on it for relief.

LA: it was an accident. i want to apologize.

HZ: then call him

HZ: dumbass

LA: i can’t

HZ: do u need his #?

Levi’s eyebrow twitches.

LA: funny

LA: what if he doesn’t answer?
HZ: would u blame him
LA: no

HZ: then try emailing him or something
LA: i thought you would help me
HZ: what gave u that impression
LA: you said i could talk to you
HZ: i didnt say id be nice

Levi sighs. He paces toward the front of the store, drops his cigarette butt into the cigarette disposal, and stokes a new one in his mouth. He takes a couple of drags before going back to his message, thoroughly agitated by Hange’s behavior.

LA: k
HZ: listen erwin is one of my best friends
LA: and what am i?
HZ: ur a friend
HZ: and u fucked up
HZ: and yo im not really one to take sides w/o weighing all possibilities
HZ: thats y i offered to talk to u
HZ: but u fucked up
HZ: u really showed ur colours man
LA: i know that.
HZ: do you?

“Yes!” He growls out at his phone, and brings his cigarette hand to his forehead, closes his eyes as he feels the anger damming and threatening to break. He fights every urge to punch his fist against the brick wall.

LA: yes
HZ: its not just his arm levi
HZ: the shit with his dad
HZ: its real sensitive
HZ: like i think hes feeling really guilty about how it all went down still
HZ: they werent talking for a long time
HZ: kinda fucked him up
HZ: not that i blame him

HZ: if my dad was that overbearing id have lost my shit a lot sooner

Levi reads the messages over and over. He plays with his bottom lip between his pinky and thumb, flicking the end of his cigarette as the ashes start to filter into his palm. Vince had always wanted the best for Erwin, almost to unrealistic proportions. Sometimes it prevented Erwin from being who Erwin wanted to be.

Levi holds in a breath, remembers the feeling of Erwin’s lips on his… Eager and needy, fitting together like they were cut from the same cloth, and he believed him. He believed the regret that shook on Erwin’s voice with his body pressed against his, the sad remorse that glinted in his eyes, as if they were reanimating from a death that settled in so long ago. He knows... He knows it just wasn’t a phase.

LA: i didn’t know

LA: fuck. i’m asking for help hange.

LA: please

HZ: try emailing him

HZ: thats all i got for ya

HZ: he needs time levi give it to him

HZ: and if im being honest

LA: yeah

HZ: i dont know how i feel about u 2 being together again

HZ: but i think he could use some closure

Levi stares at his phone. He shakes. “Fuckin’ stupid …” He hisses, spittle speckling his phone and magnifying little parts of the conversation-

Honest

Together

Closure

Levi sneers.

LA: k

LA: btw our relationship isn’t up to any of you

LA: what happens happens

HZ: u know what

LA: what

HZ: good luck with that
Levi growls and shakes, shoves his phone back into his pocket. He kicks his foot into the wall, the steel toe of his boot taking most of the blow. It tingles a little, but it’s not good enough. Angry, he punches a fist into the brick, and he cries out as he shakes his hand, cups it weakly with his other. The skin’s peeled back and bleeding, and he might have broken something but he doesn’t care.

Fuck, he doesn’t care.

Fucking Hange. Fucking Mike. Fucking Erwin and all his damn little secrets. His tortured past that was apparently too much to handle. As if Levi wasn’t a part of it. As if he couldn’t sympathize. As if… As if.

He clenches his fist and pulls out his phone. “Asshole.” He spits.

He didn’t even try to contact him.

“You… Fucking asshole!” Levi barks out. He starts to leave the convenience store parking lot, and he taps through his phone screens back to his messages. He sucks in a breath, shaking and angry and he wants to cry but he fucking won’t. Not this time. Not ever again.

He makes it away from the store, up the sidewalk, and he knows his direction and what he’s going to do. He didn’t even try to contact him. And he pulls up Erwin’s name and...

Erwin Smith: I’ll be home in an hour. Hange and I didn’t end up getting anything to eat while we were out. The Christmas crowd is too much. Would you like to do take-out?

ES: Also… I’m sorry that things have been so tense lately. I appreciate your patience and understanding, Levi. You’re too good to me.

ES: I love you so much.

He swallows. It takes everything in him to compose himself. He straightens his back, blinks until somehow his eyes grow dry, and he breathes out a big gulp of air that sounds like a laugh.

So stupid. He was so stupid, and every second of every day since it happened, he begged the universe for him to be able to take it all back. He wishes so hard he could have been better for Erwin. That twenty years ago he could have been better. That somewhere between now and then, he could have grown into a man worthy of being part of a greater whole.

Trash. He’s trash. He fucked it up, and he’s trash.

The conviction is gone, and he reads the messages again. He reads them until the words run into each other, until they morph and form new words that are fit for him. Words like “pathetic” and “loser” and “disgusting”, and the message makes more sense. It seems more fitting.

He laughs. He laughs because he doesn’t know what else to do. Because he doesn’t know how else to react to this joke he calls a life. He’s laughing as he types the message, because laughing is easier than crying, and he’s so desperate. Maybe. Maybe he can prove he’s not these things. Maybe Erwin will actually talk to him. Maybe…

Maybe maybe maybe.

He presses the send button.

LA: i’ll be there in an hour

Fear washes over him. He looks at his message as if it’s an apparition. He wills it away, but it
remains. He shoves it in his pocket, his hands shaking as he pulls out another cigarette. He lights it, looks around nervously, and sucks in air.

What was he going to accomplish? He should have listened to Hange. Erwin deserves better than this, more understanding and care to his personal space… Right? If he didn’t try to contact Levi, then there’s clearly a reason.

He hates Levi.

Levi shakes his head.

He hates him.

His pocket buzzes, and somehow he’s made it so far down the road that the gas station isn’t within view anymore. It will take him another half hour to get to Erwin’s house by foot. What is he doing? He pats his pants and pulls out his phone. Erwin… “Erwin…”

_Mike Zacharias: don’t bother._

Levi raises and eyebrow. He looks up and around him. Panic sets in. He’s being watched. Mike is watching him. Where is he? Why didn’t Erwin answer him?

_Levi Ackerman: what?_

The answer is almost immediate, and the panic settles in on his rib cage and he tries to breathe. He was doing so well. He was doing well. The air is so heavy and it sticks to his lungs like glue. It fills all the little filaments in his chest, sets like cement, and he finds himself gasping like a fish.

_MZ: you had your chance, ackerman._

_LA: don’t call me that_

_MZ: don’t show your face around erwin’s house._

_MZ: or i’ll set that nose straight for you._

Levi looks up. Around. Where is he? He’s toward the outskirts of town, and the houses are growing sparse. Is he in a backyard? Hiding on a ledge? In a tree? He wishes he had his knife.

No.

No.

No.

“Call Petra.” He tells himself, but he makes no move to do so. “Call Erwin.” But that sounds worse. Where is Mike?

He’s frozen in place. The trickle of the streams running through people’s backyards intensifies, rushes like white rapids, and Mike’s close… He pushes forward to the ledge that he had run to almost a year ago. Large stone sheets laid like bricks and dusted with lichen, the stream bubbles and tumbles over rocks. A plastic grocery bag fills and deflates with the water like a bloated jellyfish. He squints. If he could just…

Levi gets on the ledge, looks down the eight foot drop. The stream is shallow, the current not too strong. His knife might still be there. And if Mike comes out of the woods to jump him, he’ll be
prepared. He’ll…

“He’s at Erwin’s.” Levi reminds himself, grounds himself, brings himself down to sit on the ledge, the cold stone burning against his skin like a rash. “That’s how he knows. He probably has the week off for Christmas.” It makes sense. Rationalize. He breathes. The cement dissolves a little.

But it doesn’t make him feel better. He needs Erwin to know. He fucking needs him to know how sorry he is.

When Levi makes it Erwin’s house, Mike’s sitting on the steps, legs wide and spanning from railing to railing. He takes his phone down from his ear as he catches sight of Levi. Shaking his head, he looks down at his phone, taps it with his thumb, and holds it loosely in his hand between his legs. Even from several yards away, Levi can see the flaring of his nose as he draws closer.

“I called the cops.” Mike says, loud and stern, and he makes no effort to move.

“I’ll be quick then.” Levi says. His stride widens, but he’s been walking for too long, and his limp is noticeable. “Where’s Erwin?”

“Out.” Mike says, and Levi’s not entirely sure the implication of the statement.

“How’d you know I was coming then?”

“There’s a thing called a phone. You might have heard of it.”

Levi stops to stand a healthy distance from Mike, arms crossed across his chest. He shifts his hip and holds his weight on his good leg. “Quit fuckin’ bullshitting me, Mike.”

“Same to you Levi. I told you not to show your face around here.”

“I just need to say something to him.”

“Do it some other way. The police are coming.”

“I know he’s here! Just let me see him!”

Mike rolls his neck and brings his legs together to hold his palms on his knees. He shakes his head and laughs softly under his breath before standing up. He’s so tall and wide, and if Levi was any other man, he’d be intimidated by Mike’s sheer presence. “I stood by before and let you ruin him. I won’t let it happen again.”

“Is this a joke?”

“You fucking with him?”


“You need to—”

“Maybe… No… Maybe I did! And I gotta live with that, not you. It’s me and him and… What I did, I can’t let him go through it alone. Mike… He’s…”

“I don’t care.”
“I know you don’t! You never gave a shit about me, and because of that, you didn’t give a shit about him either!”

“Watch it…” Mike moves forward, but Levi stands his ground.

“How much do you know him?”

“A lot.”

“Do you? Do you!?” Levi steps forward, and some gravel in the driveway kicks up with it.

“This isn’t a fucking contest, Levi. You attacked him.”

“I fucking know that! I know!” Levi shouts with his hands at his side and he’s so frustrated it could burst from within. “I fucked up, but fucking listen to me for two…” Levi gasps in as he tries to avoid the violence that twines along his muscles. “For two fucking seconds.”

Mike’s lip twitches, but he does nothing else.

“He’s… He’s all I have. And, and I know that…” Levi struggles, and this breathing is working against him, and he just wants to see Erwin… “Erwin…” He breathes deep, and he starts to fold in on himself as he backs away a step. “I hurt him. I left him. And I hurt him… I had no idea… I had no idea what he was going through, and I wasn’t there for him. Do you have any idea…”

“You could have been there.”

“You say that like it could have been so easy!”

“Even just a phone call, Levi. An email!”

“I was so afraid!” Levi grabs at his stomach, shields it like he’s been gutted, and he struggles to stay standing. “Because maybe, maybe… Mike maybe… Don’t you… It’s easy for you!”

“Excuses.”

“Fuck you! Fuck you fuck you!” Levi shouts. “I couldn’t! I literally couldn’t! We tried, he probably never told you, but we tried. But back then… Christ, Mike.” He stumbles over his words and he has so many to say but he can’t align them into sentences. “I hate being like this. I hated how I… I… Felt for him. And now… Now I can. I can and I did and I want to and then, then I just… I fucking…” He gasps in.

“Hey, Levi…”

“I fucked up! I fucked up and you don’t know how badly we’re both fucked up and you can’t see… You don’t want to see how this could change us both. What are you afraid of, Mike? Having a gay best friend?”

Mike’s eyes grow wide at the statement, and he snorts a laugh. “What kind of insane–”

“It’s a joke to you! I bet you, you… You probably cringe every time–”

“You’re being outrageous! That’s not at all what this is about. We’re talking about your psychopathic behavior, Levi!”

Levi heaves in breath after breath into his nose, until he’s forgetting to breathe out, and he’s inflated like a balloon. “My behavior? He couldn’t even fucking tell me about Vince, Mike! What the fuck
happened! He still had all the papers from the accident! Do you think he’s ok?”

“He’s getting help, which miles better than what you’re doing.”


Mike watches past Levi’s shoulder, and Levi hears the crackling and popping of tires over gravel, but he keeps his stare strong on Mike.

“I fucked up, Mike. And I’m here to *apologize,* and you’re in my way. All I want… All I want is the best for Erwin.”

Mike nods at the car that pulled up, the door opening and closing, the radio clicking on and a woman’s voice broadcasting over the electronic. She sounds like Magnolia. “Are you saying you’re what’s best for him?”

“No. What I’m saying is that *I’m* not what you need to protect Erwin from.”

Mike blinks, and for the first time, he shifts, looks toward the door of the house, and sighs.

“What’s going on this afternoon, gentlemen.” The cop says as he rounds the car. Levi tenses at the voice, and his anger spills over.

“No. No no no. No!” Levi swings around and he throws his arms up. “I’m fuckin’ done.”

“Mike, what is going on?” Nile says. His dark blue uniform shines with golden badges and if Levi gave a fuck to look at him, he might be able to find where it says “Sergeant” on the shield.

“Levi is not allowed on these premises. He’s a danger to Erwin.”

Levi spins around and shouts so loud that his lungs give out. “Fuck you, Mike! Shut the fuck up!”

“Hey hey…” Nile puts his hands out in flat plains, like a man trying to tame crocodiles. “Let’s bring the energy down, all right?”

Levi struts back, shoulders forward and his face red. “No, *fuck* you. I’m here to *talk* and you’re--”

“Levi, if you don’t step back, I will be forced to remove you.” Nile says flatly, but Levi swears…. He fucking *swears* he’s getting enjoyment out of this.

“He’s injured Erwin the past.” Mike says. “We just want him to peacefully and quietly remove himself from the property.”

“Really? Does Erwin want to press charges?”

“I just want to--” Levi struggles against his emotions, and everything is so tight along his muscles and throat that it burns. He wants to see Erwin. Just *talk* to him. He dances in his spot and he kicks his feet like a child told he couldn’t have his toy. “God dammit!”

Mike shakes his head. “I don’t think so. But he might want a restraining order.”

“Is Erwin home?”

Mike doesn’t say anything and looks at Levi.
“I know he is!” Levi shouts, but the saliva had built in his mouth, and he spits a big glob of drool onto the ground as he says it. He feels like he’s going to be sick, and he heaves despite trying to stay upright. “I know he’s home, god, Erwin… Please …”

“Come on, Levi. I don’t want to have to force you out of here.” Nile says, cautiously making his way toward Levi.

Levi shrinks like a cornered animal, and he looks up frightened at both of them and they’re… Smiling. Always smiling. Mike as he mocks Levi at the amusement park; Nile as he ribs Erwin in high school. They were always laughing, and they were laughing at who they were and why did he have to be so dirty and why did he have to be so wrong. Fuck, he really didn’t deserve Erwin. Erwin should be with somebody better, someone not like him, somebody that wasn’t even a he.

“Ok!” Levi shouts. The world seems to go quiet, even the branches on the trees make no effort to interrupt. “I’m fucking leaving. God fucking dammit. You assholes. You fucking assholes.” Levi digs his hands into his hoodie and he shakes his head. He stumbles down the driveway, nearly losing his footing, but he keeps going until he hits the road. He wants to run, but it’s so hard to stay upright, and he wants to breathe but it can’t get past the fire in his muscles. He makes it a few hundred feet away from the house before collapsing to his knees with his head in his hands. There’s no tears, not anymore, but he breathes like there are, and he groans like he lost it all.

Because he did. He did, and he doesn’t know… He just has no idea what to do.


Levi swallows in a breath and he sobs out a moan. “Erwin.” He swivels his head behind him, and he gasps at the sight. God, he missed him so much.

Erwin’s right arm sits hugged to his chest inside of a light blue sling. His left hand fidgets with something inside it. He looks like hell—dusty stubble along his cheeks and chin and neck, and his eyes are complemented with heavy bags underneath them. “It’s good to see you.”

Levi smiles and laughs and he tries not to crawl back to Erwin literally, so he stays in his spot and nods, dropping his gaze to Erwin’s knees. “You look like shit.”

Erwin smiles at him and nods. “You too.” He kneels next to Levi before taking a seat on the edge of the asphalt. “I…” He pulls the object in his hand before him and turns it in his hand. “I found this in the laundry room… And I know… It’s not really my place to…”

Levi looks at the picture frame in his hand. It’s the photo of Magnolia and Church, and they look so happy. He always forgets. Every time. It makes him sick. “I…” Levi nods and takes the picture from him. “Thank you.”

“Where are you staying?”

“I’m staying with Petra now.”

Erwin nods and scratches his growing beard. “I can have Moblit bring over your other stuff.”

“I don’t care.” Levi mutters. They’re quiet, and there’s so many words in the air that they almost have a taste. There’s so many words that they weigh down so heavy that it’s hard to pick the right ones to say. “I’m sorry.”

Erwin plays with the fabric of his jeans on his knee. “I am too.”
“I didn’t mean to. I really didn’t. I just… Instinct or whatever, and I just…” Levi buries his face in his knees and grips tightly on the frame of the picture.

“It can’t happen again.” Erwin says.

“It won’t! God, Erwin, I promise!” Levi looks up at him and begs with his eyes, and he hopes that how his appearance is would be enough to prove how fucking sorry he is.

“We can’t.”

“Don’t…. Don’t do that… Not now…”

Erwin looks to the opposite side, doesn’t look at Levi as he speaks. “We aren’t good for each other.”

“You don’t believe that.”

Erwin keeps fidgeting with his pant legs.

“All this time. All this time apart and all the shit we’ve been through. You can’t believe that.”

Erwin sighs.

“You’re all I’ve ever had, Erwin. You’re all I ever fucking wanted.” Levi looks at the picture, sees his reflection centered between his two friends. They knew how Levi felt about Erwin before he even knew, before he could even admit it to himself. He can hear Magnolia shouting at him to just admit it-- admit it you pussy! --and live happily ever after. “I love you.”

Erwin’s breath hitches, and it catches Levi off guard. He turns his head and all he can see is Erwin’s profile. His eyes are wide, mouth agape, and he’s nothing like that night with the knife against his cheek.

Levi lets the picture fall to the ground and he turns in his spot to look at Erwin. “Erwin.”

Erwin blinks a few times before looking toward Levi. He nods and swallows thickly. “Levi...” It irritates him so much when Erwin puts up his wall, as if he has no emotions to ever show. At this one moment, he wants Erwin to break as much as him. He wants him to scoop him in his arms and hold him, cry with him, make this all better again. “I...”

Levi makes a pathetic noise in his nose, laughs out into his knees, and curls his emotions into the tight knot in his throat that threatens to strangle him alive. “Can we please…”

“No.” Erwin says. It shakes a bit, and it hurts Levi to hear it. “No, we can’t.”

“Why the fuck not?”

“I should have been honest with you.”

“About Vince?” Erwin nods. “I shouldn’t have been so upset. I just had no idea and…”

“You have every right to be upset, Levi. I...” Erwin sighs and rubs his hand along his neck. “I want to be good for you, but I need to move on.”

“How about you let me make that decision?”

“Because you need to move on too.”
Levi blinks. “What?”

“We are like…” He laughs softly to himself. “Hange said we are two volatile chemicals, and when we mix, we burn the whole town down.”

“She’s wrong.”

“I agree. But they have a point. This can’t happen again.”

“I know.”

“We need… Help.”

Levi swallows around the pain in his throat, and he knows what this means. It’s not what he wanted. Not at all. “Yeah…?”

“Then maybe…”

“Don’t…”

Erwin sighs. “Right…”

“I miss you so much.” Levi says, and tries to deny to himself that it was a whimper.

“I miss you too.” Erwin says. “Always… Please understand, Levi. This is the best thing for us right now.”

Levi scratches his head, his undercut growing out a bit too long and he tugs at the roots of his hair as he nods. “So this thing we had--it’s over.”

“Yes.”

Levi nods. He keeps nodding until the tears roll back into his head and to keep from falling. “All right.”

Erwin sighs. “But we…”

“I’m done talking about this.” Levi says softly. “Throw my shit away.” He struggles back to his feet, picture frame in his hand, and he fusses with his other hand for the cigarettes in his pocket. He pulls one out, puts his picture under his armpit, and lights the cigarette. He breathes out a plume of smoke and laughs just once. “It was nice while it lasted I guess.”

“Levi.”

Levi shakes his head. “Save it.” He starts down the road toward home--as if he even has one. The only one he ever had is behind him, standing with his arm in a sling and holding a pathetic look on his face--pretending like he doesn’t have the power to change this at all.

The fucking coward couldn’t even put away the damn boxes. Asshole didn’t even care to see where he was. The anger boils in bile, and he feels so sick that he might vomit, but he keeps it together. Keep it together. He’s in control. Breathe.

Breathe. 
“Levi.” Erwin says. It’s defeated and nasally, and the pain is so apparent that it stops Levi in his tracks. “Email me back, please.”

Levi shakes out his arms and his head, and ignores those damn tears that he swore would never fall again, but here they are… Here they are. And he’ll never… It hurts him so much to know they’ll never be humming the same tune because they were never even playing the same song.

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Levi asks Petra, Oruro, and the kids to give him space that night. He says with quiet words that he can’t, he just can’t, and he’s so sorry that he can’t, but he can’t. Petra’s smaller than him, but her personality is big enough to tower mountains, and she fights him and holds him like a rock against a rapid. And fuck if he actually wants to cry, but can’t.

It’s over.

After all this time. After finally admitting to himself and to Erwin that he loved him, they were over. He whispers into her shoulder how he doesn’t see the point. There’s no point, he says. He has nothing. Nothing. He’s never had anything. There’s nothing. He’s nothing. Everything is nothing. He wants to be nothing.

She tries to soothe him with circles on his back and kisses to his temple, and she drags him to a seat in the kitchen and pours him tea. She coaxes him to drink, and she hasn’t stopped crying since he told her about Erwin. His eyes have since lost focus and his lips started spilling words that scared the shit out of her. Words that begged for relief; words that alluded to death.

“I can’t leave you here, Levi. Not alone.” She wipes a towel across her eyes. “I’m not gonna…”

“I’ll be fine.” Levi says. His eyes are blurry but dry, and his lips are chapped but no amount of licking wets them, and he breathes out a sigh that shakes like an old window pane under a winter wind. “I promise. I would never…”

Not in her house, anyway.

“Please come with us.”

“No. I can’t. I can’t do that to your family.” Levi says softly. “I’ll be ok, Petra. Please.”

“It’d be irresponsible of me.” She says.

“I’m not your responsibility.”

“You’re my friend, Levi.” She takes hold of his hand, and her auburn eyes shine around the red and he did this to her. God, why does he keep hurting people? “You can’t be alone right now.”

“I’ll be fine.”

Petra stares at him a bit longer, until her bottom lip quivers uncontrollably and she’s sobbing openly into the folds of her arms on the table. Levi stares at the top of her head, wide eyed, unable to comprehend what to do besides feeling shattered with guilt. Her hand falls limp around his, and the best he can think of to do is squeeze her hand and say “Oh, Petra.”

And it’s a funny thing to say to a person who is utterly broken under his actions.

“I…” His heart has been so torn apart, and he has no idea how to mend, and he can’t see her crying.
He just can’t. Not Petra. “Ok… Ok ok… I’ll go.”

The sobbing quiets down, and they sit in the kitchen until the tacky bird clock on the wall worbles a bird call on the hour. Oruro comes in with a bottle of wine and three glasses, and between the three of them, finish it between discussions of things that don’t involve friends that had turned into enemies.

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They pack up the car a few days later. He takes Petra’s little sedan and the family heads off in their mini-van. He follows close behind on the highway, going three miles under the speed limit. He feels a buzzing in his pocket and he tries to ignore it, but it can’t be anybody else. The anxiety swells in him, and he fidgets in his seat like he needs to pee until they pull into a rest stop. He barely takes his hand off of the gear shift before it’s in his pocket rummaging for his phone.

A new email. He unlocks his phone. Clicks it.

Erwin.

Levi,

You deserve an explanation. It was difficult seeing you the other day, but I’m also very relieved that you came. If I must admit to myself, I feel the same as you about everything. All the things about you and I, and how we came to be. It does nothing to say I love you, if anything, it makes it worse. Despite all that, it’s true.

Things with my father were not good. Awful, actually. I’m not sure how it happened, but I handled it poorly. I don’t know where to begin to talk about it, Levi. Sharing it with you of all people makes it that much more difficult. He was important to you too, and I feel like I might have prevented you from connecting with him while he was sick. I should have contacted you. I should have done a lot of things. I hope someday I can tell you everything. I hope someday you can forgive me.

I want you to heal as well. What you’ve seen—what you’ve been through—I can never begin to relate to. I’ve wanted to save you so many times, and it has done nothing but hurt you. I wanted to be the person that pulled you from your pain, but I’m only one man that can’t even see past his own. I ask for your forgiveness; I plead for your patience.

You are my constant, Levi. No matter what storms come our way, I know you will be waiting there in the rain. I’ll ask you why you are such a fool, and you’ll ask me why I’m standing with you. That’s exactly why this is so important to me. That’s why I’m willing to make this effort and take this intervention. I will keep fighting and gravitating toward you, and we’ll keep orbiting wildly until we are lost in space. That can’t happen. I won’t let it happen.

I understand my limitations. I understand my feelings for you. I understand those two ideas are incompatible. However, I believe it won’t be like that forever.

I’m sorry we could not spend Christmas together this year. I hope you have somebody to spend it with. Petra has been such a dear friend. We are all so lucky to have her in our lives. Please make sure to restrain yourself when giving the children cookies.
Levi stares at his phone for a long time. He reads the message so many time he almost memorizes it. He jumps in his seat when there’s a knock at the window. His head snaps to the side and he scrambles to roll the window down. Petra is smiling at him, her scarf pulled down from her mouth, her gloved hands around the open window. “Almost there, hun.”

“Uh, yeah… Yeah.”

Petra’s eyes wander and grow wide. “Holy shit.” Levi fusses, throws his phone in the passenger side seat before she can snatch it from his hand. “He sent you an email!? What an asshole!”

“It’s not like that…!” Levi says, pushing Petra back from the inside of the car as she tries to climb in and over him. She settles back onto the ground, and she’s bubbling with so much energy he tries to formulate the words to calm her down. “I get it… I get it.” He says softly.

“Get what? He really showed his colors, Levi.” Petra spits.

“We’re both fucked.” Levi says softly. “And all he wants is for us to be the best we can be.”

“And you can’t do that together?”

Levi shakes his head. The knife. The arm. All the shit he said, all the things he put Erwin through. All the lies and the emotional shielding. The shit with Vince. They made progress, but there were some things he couldn’t do alone. There were so many things they couldn’t do together.

But there was love...

“Not this.” Levi says softly. He smiles, actually smiles, and looks into Petra’s eyes. “But it’s ok.”

Petra studies his face, confused and bewildered, but she nods and smiles back at him. “You have such a pretty smile, Levi.”

Levi looks down at the steering wheel, a heat creeping across his cheeks, and he shakes his head. “Don’t make it gay, Petra.”

Over the weekend, Levi sneaks three extra cookies to each kid when their parents aren’t looking. He laughs enough to fill his head with ideas that seem less grim. He thinks, with cautious hope, that maybe someday, they can have this too.

LA: I got them too high on sugar. They didn’t even sleep before Santa came. Does that make me a terrible person?

ES: Quite possibly the worst.

LA: Merry Christmas.

ES: Happy birthday.

Levi hesitates over his keyboard, swallows, and types in his response:

LA: I love you.
hiiiiii

i like how my footnotes are getting shorter as this goes on. i really don't know how i feel about this chapter. i think i'm just like dead inside after the last chapter and nothing is worth living for anymore i dunno.

thanks to my roommate for reading this and giving some tips on my voice in this. and jfc, i've written how much eruri and i still don't understand erwin?? you emotion hoarding asshole, why are you so difficult i just don't

ok comments and everything welcome as always. you guys made me so emotional last chapter i want to hug you all auuggh

two chapters left. fuck.
**Bruises**

Chapter Summary

it's just a phase

Chapter Notes

miss_coverly did it again and updated the final tour inspired playlist!!! it's beautiful and i cry.

[listen on youtube](https://www.youtube.com) | [listen on spotify](https://open.spotify.com)

bonus in the footer notes

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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It doesn’t feel like a new year besides the winter chill. It’s too cold to be outside, but the liquor is still liquid even though his fingers have turned to ice, and it warms him enough on the inside that everything else could snap away for all he cares. As long as he can chase away the thoughts of him, it would be worth it. But his phone is a distraction, his name a scripture, and he writes so many words and deletes them all away, just like he did so many times in the past.

Even now, after he had tasted it all, touched him, lived with him, had him… He still couldn’t fucking keep him. Because the words meant too much, and the fear was too strong, and this prison he had made for himself, its lock had grown too rusted. The key too fragile. It snapped when it turned...

And he’s left with nothing but himself and all these dead memories of things that could have been.
And he’s here with all the failures he could never amend. And he’s here with nothing but the anger and sadness and all of it… All of the damn guilt that sat tender on him like bruises that never healed.

“Hey,” Mike says. The sliding door closes behind him, and a burst of warm air from inside the house ruffles Erwin’s hair. He turns his head to nod an acknowledgement. “It’s almost time.”

“That’s fine.” Erwin says slowly. He shifts in his spot, relieves his weight from his right arm so his shoulder will stop aching. He brings his brandy to his lips and opens his throat to suck the rest of it down. His head floats back to earth, and he closes his eyes. The world is spinning, but it always is, isn’t it?

“You should go to bed.” Mike comes up next to him and leans on the railing. He holds his hand out and Erwin places the tumbler in it. “Before you black out.”

“Wouldn’t that be nice.” Erwin smiles stupidly. “Those were good days, huh? Staying up on Saturday nights and playing flip cup until the sun rose. Fuck, I used to get so much ass back then.”

“You got one ass back then.” Mike quirks a smile.

“She was the finest ass.” Erwin slurs.

“Your problem always was that you drank too fast. You would pass out before women even thought of taking you home.”

“Or men.” The grin is snatched from his face and he hangs his head. He sways in and away from the bannister, as if he’s doing one armed pushups, before he spins and stumbles backward to rest his back against the railing. “I probably could have…”

“Come on.” Mike moves to put his arm around Erwin’s shoulders, but Erwin stumbles away and shakes his head.

“Naaahhh.”

“It’s freezing out here.”

“Yeaaaaah.”

“It’s almost midnight.”

“This was gonna be the year, Mike.” Erwin nods, keeps nodding, and the world keeps spinning. He giggles a little. “This year, I was gonna have him.”

“Erwin…”

“I think… I think too much…”

“True.”

“Like, about other people? I think too much… About other people.”

“That’s not a bad thing.”

“It is… Maybe? I, you know. Mike. Listen.” Erwin faces Mike and puts his good hand on his shoulder, and it’s clear it might be to just stabilize his feet on the porch. “I thought about him every day. Do you… Do people do that?” He’s not looking at Mike, but his eyes can barely stay open, and he breathes heavily through his lips as he grips Mike’s shoulder. “Like twenty years, that’s a
long time. And… He came back. I… I could have had him tonight for the first time in twenty fucking years, Mike.”

“He hurt you.”

“I don’t care!” Erwin pushes Mike back, but he loses his own equilibrium and nearly falls backward before Mike grabs him by his left arm to pull him back and steady him. “I don’t fuuuucking care.”

His eyes squeeze shut in concentration, and he swallows thickly to keep his stomach calm.

Mike keeps him upright, runs a hand gently up and down his arm and he closes the gap between them to act as physical support. “He could have killed you.”

Erwin’s eyebrows crease, and his face contorts, ugly and disgusted. He shakes his head and smacks his lips like he’s tasted something foul. “So what?”

“So what?” Erwin, come the fuck on.”

“R-really. I…” Erwin struggles to open his eyes, and they remain half lidded as he talks. “I knew he wouldn’t and… And… So… So what if he did, right?” Erwin laughs. “He’d have done us both a favor!”

“Jesus fucking Christ.” Mike says. He pushes Erwin toward the chair on the porch and guides him to sit down. Erwin breathes out a plume of booze smelling air as he keeps chuckling. “Is what Levi said… Is it true? About you not taking your medicine?”

Erwin doesn’t look up at him, blinks slowly, and shrugs.

“Why?”

Erwin smiles and sucks in air. “Wine tastes better.” His laugh comes out pained and choked—a pathetic mess of emotions dancing on the coattails of alcohol.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Erwin shrugs again.

“Erwin.”

“Do you think… Do you think he knew I loved him? Do you think he forgave me before he died?”

Mike stands for a moment longer before kneeling down before Erwin’s chair. He hangs his heads and fidgets the tumbler in his hands between his legs before looking up at his friend. “Of course.”

Erwin laughs loudly, and his hand comes up to cover his face as he muffles it behind his palm. He shakes his head. “Fuck.”

“He was proud of you.”

Erwin keeps laughing, shaking his head, and his body shakes as he pulls his legs up onto the chair, his right arm pinned to his chest and his left hand massaging against his forehead. The grin stays on his face as he works through his drunken thoughts, and he keeps his eyes closed so he doesn’t have to see the world spinning anymore. “No he wasn’t.”

There’s a vibration in his pocket of his sleeping pants, and he ignores Mike as he pulls it out. He taps the screen awake and smiles stupidly. “He’s so dumb, Mike.” Erwin shakes his head, and each movement feels like it’s in slow motion, his body moving too fast to catch up with his brain.
He opens the message, and looks at the time stamp. January 1, 2018 12:00:14AM.

LA: happy new year

“He’s… He’s so dumb.” Erwin shakes, and Mike leans up and puts his hands on his shoulders. “He’s so stupid… God, he’s so stupid!” He presses his phone to his forehead, and Mike pulls him forward into a hug. “I’m sorry.”

“Happy New Year.” She said. Her forehead was glistening with sweat, and the bass of the speakers were thumping music through their bodies, possessing them into fluid movements against each other. She couldn’t move like she used to, but she was still good. She was still beautiful.

“Happy New Year.” Erwin said, leaning down, gently pulling her up into him to give her their eighth New Year kiss. Marie’s engagement ring was cool against his neck as they kissed again, and he smiled weakly into her cheek. “I love you.”

They were damaged, poor, strained. He spun her into him, smelled the floral of her hair with a soft groan and then pressed their bodies together. He was sober, and so was she, and they danced until two in the morning, when Mike and the others had slumped drunkenly into sleep on various pieces of furniture.

They were still damp with sweat by the time they got home to Marie’s parents. They shared her childhood room which was far too small for two grown adults. Their entire two bedroom apartment had to be condensed to a 10x10 room, and Marie had been spending the past few months selling their belongings online to pay medical bills.

She wrapped her legs around him, naked and sheened with sweat. She arched her back into his chest as he thrust quietly and slowly into her, the metal bed frame shaking and clacking against the wall. He slowed down, trying to keep quiet as if they were high school students, not two engaged people in their early thirties. She whispered into his ear how much she loved him. He held her hand as he buried his face in her neck, eyes screwed shut and lips parted in a silent moan.

He said he loved her too.

LA: happy valentine’s day. i love you.

Nanaba corners Erwin in the hallway. “He asked me for recommendations.” Nanaba says quietly, as if it’s a secret.

“For what?”

She looks down into the kitchen, the sink still running and dishes clacking as Mike cleans up after dinner. “For therapists.”

“Oh…” Erwin says. He rubs a thumb along the webbing of his thumb and bites his lip. “That’s great news.”
Nanaba puts a hand on his upper arm. “I gave him some names in the area. Let me know… Let me know if you want any too.”

Erwin nods, and the sink water stops, and he shakes in a breath and swallows. He smiles. “Thank you. I’ll think about it.”

LA: look at this damn cat

[picture of a russian blue cat sitting on Levi’s stomach]

LA: her name’s poppy
LA: she thinks she owns this place
LA: i disagree

Erwin looks around his living room. The smell has gotten a little strong, where take-out boxes two weeks old were piling on the coffee table and along the floor. Today’s cuisine: chicken and dumpling soup.

The boxes haven’t moved since Levi left, and despite Mike’s stern and almost judgemental claims to just clean it up, the spilled box from that night still lays strewn across the floor. It was a daily obstacle, but one that started to become an afterthought. He steps on picture frames and old dinnerware to get to the couch.

He eats in silence, not even bothering to turn on the television. He looks at the boxes. Every night, he looks at them.

Tonight will be the night.

Tonight, he’ll make the first step toward getting Levi back.

But the couch has become the same solace as it did back then. Back then, the right side of it had been Erwin’s headquarters for spying. Blankets and books, his backpack up on the back ledge of the seat. It allowed him easy access to the curtains, which he always pulled back in increments of five minutes between the hours of 3PM and 5PM.

“Dinner’s almost ready.” Vincent said from the kitchen. “Bring your homework to the table so I can check it, please.”

Erwin held the curtain between his fingers a little longer. He didn’t show up that day. Hadn’t in over a week. Erwin sighed and gathered his things into his book bag and dragged it lazily behind him into the dining room. He heaved the bag up onto the table and took a heavy seat into a chair.

After a few minutes, Vincent showed up with two plates in his hands and sat one down in front of his son. “Sloppy Joes.” He said with a smile.

Erwin took the plate graciously. His father wasn’t the best cook, but he was trying nonetheless. His mother had only been gone for two years, and most of his diet seemed to revolve around ground beef and salads with various dressings. If all else failed, there was always take-out. “Thanks, dad.”

Vince nodded and took a seat across from him. He held his hand out for Erwin’s notepad, took it, and put it next to his plate of food. He picked up a sandwich and bit into it, pieces of meat sliding
from the bun and onto the plate as he focused his attention on the papers.

Erwin shifted, took a bite of his meal, but he couldn’t get the thought out of his mind. He turned his head to look behind him. He had left the living room curtain slightly open, and he kept his eyes there as he chewed and swallowed, only averting his gaze to take another bite of his meal.

“What are you so curious about?” Vince said. He wiped his fingers on a napkin before bringing it to his mouth.

Erwin jumped and settled forward in his seat. “Nothing.”

Vince looked at Erwin for a moment before quirking a smile. “Your homework looks good, Erwin.”

“Thanks, dad.”

“Is that all you had?”

“Yeah. There’s not much homework this week.” Erwin sighed, put his head into hand and picked up his sandwich again and shoved it in his mouth. He chewed and spoke with his mouth full. “I have so many tests this week!”

“Erwin, please.” Vince shook his head.

Erwin chewed faster and swallowed. “Sorry.”

“Do you need help studying?”

Erwin looked back behind him out the window. “I was hoping I could catch Levi…”

“But he’s not in your grade.”

“He can hold the flashcards.” Erwin turned back in his seat and smiled at his father. “He likes helping me study.”

Vince chuckled. “I’m glad.” He seemingly gave up on his meal as he flipped through Erwin’s notes one more time and slid the book back across the table. “He’s a good kid, but I worry about him.”

Erwin raised an eyebrow, taking the last bit of his sandwich in his mouth, chewing and swallowing before he talked. He nodded his head as he wiped a napkin across his mouth, impatient with himself in his eagerness to talk about Levi. “Why?”

“I’ve seen kids like him countless times before.” Vince nodded with a thoughtful smile on his face. “Keep him straight, ok?”

Erwin looked at his father, eyes wide and lacking true understanding of what he meant. But he knew his father cared about Levi, and that he was asking Erwin to protect him. Keep him. Love him. And Erwin could do that. He vowed to himself he would.

La: you should visit the cat shelter sometime
La: they have me working monday to wednesday
La: so you don’t have to come those days
La: but it’s nice and relaxing
La: they don’t have too many people coming to play with them
Erwin sits outside when the weather warms up and the ground starts to thaw. Everything smells like dirt, the snow melting and the grass still struggling to grow with the coming of the new spring. He sits in Levi’s chair, and he struggles to not get up and open a new bottle of wine. It would be so easy. It would just be so easy.

He closes his eyes.

He asked Nanaba for a therapist, but he hasn’t called to setup an appointment yet. He threw away his old depression medication, and he moved Levi’s stuff out of his room. He finds himself looking at the picture of them at Thanksgiving for too long for too many times during the week. He finds himself thinking of Levi’s warm body tucked against his, and he feels cold even when a warm breeze caresses his cheek and plays a song on the windchime.

He gets up and goes inside the house. He comes back with a tumbler of whiskey, finding the warmth he craves settling around his abdomen, wishing they were small calloused fingers instead.

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LA: i’m going to pittsburgh with petra today
LA: i’ve never visited around mother’s day

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His forehead was pressed to hers when she asked it. It wasn’t a new question, it wasn’t something they hadn’t talked about before. It was something they wanted for so long, but since the accident...

Since the accident.

“Erwin.” She breathed. A new year, a new life. She wanted it; she was tired of waiting. They were in their early thirties, broken and poor, and the engagement ring was so cold against his neck. “Inside me… Please…”

Erwin slowed, his lips planted to her forehead, and his eyes shut so tight he could see stars. He drew back from her, out of her, and looked down into sad eyes he didn’t want to say no to. Not again. It’s been so many times, and he didn’t want to do it again.

But the debt. Their health. Their living situation. It had been all in place before the accident, but now—now they didn’t have any of it. All they had were each other, and he couldn’t lose Marie. Her back was strained and damaged, and she could die. She could die.

“If she died, he’d have nothing.

“I won’t let you risk your health.” Erwin said.

She didn’t say anything, but she slapped his arms and pushed him off her. She gathered the blankets around her shoulders and covered herself, bowed and shaking so hard the rest of the bed rattled. “We can’t…”

Erwin sat on the bed dumbfounded. He reached for her, but she drew away. “I know. I’m sorry…”

“No. We can’t… We can’t do this.” Marie said, and the tears were already thick on her voice. “I didn’t want to… I didn’t want to, but I can’t… Erwin.” She turned her head, her dark hair curling and matting into her tear streaks down her cheeks. “I want a family, Erwin. I would risk everything
for one. I can’t keep waiting. I can’t.”

“Just a little longer. Darling, please.” He scooted down the bed rested his chin on her shoulder. He placed a small kiss to her neck.

“I can’t marry you.”

Erwin ended up at Mike’s, distraught and empty and wondering about phases and which would be the next one he would fall into. “I have nothing.” Erwin said quietly.

“You have me.” Mike said. He straightened Erwin up with a shake to his shoulders. “And Nan, and Hange, and Moblit. You got us all.”

Erwin covered his face with his hand. And he had nowhere to go. No savings, no home, no life that he was supposed to have built. Thirty-three and his carefully laid out plans had gone amuck. He shook his head.

“You can stay here for awhile.” Mike said. “You’ll be on your feet again in no time. You always are.”

“I can’t do that to you.” Erwin said, resting his eyes again with a sigh. “Thank you, but I can’t.”

So he picked up the cordless phone and held it in his hand for thirty minutes before he turned it on. The dial tone sounded long, and it blared in Erwin’s ear. He had to hang up and try again before he finally started punching numbers into the phone.

He was back in the house he grew up in, and he had his whole life boxed up and lined up in his room. It was going to be temporary. It was only going to be a few months. Then he’d be out on his own again like an adult. He would have his own house. He would find a new girlfriend. He could still have kids, or marry someone that had some of her own already. There were possibilities.

But the house was so cramped when he was six inches taller and forty pounds heavier. Ten years spanned a lifetime, and it was too much to handle at times. It cut open old wounds, nagged like bug bites that Erwin couldn’t stop scratching.
“Put the dishes away.”

“Don’t be too loud after ten.”

“It’s been two years, when are you going to find a woman to marry?”

And Erwin shot it out before he could think it—so fast he literally bit his tongue with a wince. “What if it’s not a woman?”

“How do you mean.” It was quiet and even, and Vince kept his eyes forward and his face buried in his newspaper while the television droned on with the local news.

“Nothing.”

“I don’t care what two men decide to do with each other in their own free time, but I don’t want to see it.”

“Especially under your roof.”

Vince looked at him over his glasses, and the crow’s feet perched at his eyes had grown so severely deep they looked like cracks in stone. He dropped the newspaper down into his lap and closed his eyes as he spoke. “You aren’t like this, Erwin.”

“Aren’t like what?”

“Marie was a good girl. Do you think there’s a chance of getting her back?”

“She’s married now.”

“Already?” Vince said, his voice raising an octave. “Would I know to whom?”

Erwin adjusted his jaw and nodded. “Nile.”

“No kidding! The sergeant, huh? Good kid.”

He wasn’t sure how good Nile was. He pictured Levi with bloody knuckles and tears streaming down his face. Shouting accusations about Nile and how he said things about Erwin. Things that he swore weren’t true. Erwin took his hands and told him to quiet down. It was ok. He didn’t mean it.

“We’re just friends.” Erwin excused. Nile had his hand to his eye, and if it was one thing he was good at, it was not crying. “I’m sorry he hit you.”

What Erwin had with Levi… It wasn’t weird. It wasn’t. They were friends.

Erwin looked at his hands and he could still feel Levi’s heightened pulse against his thumbs. He looked back up at Vince. “Yeah. He’s a good guy. He’s good for Marie.”

“Try for that dean position, Erwin. Things will get easier. I’m sure from there, you’ll find the right woman to settle down with.”

And Erwin sank his teeth into the word: settle. And he wasn’t sure why it angered him so much and why he thought of Levi all the time as if he were some kind of ghost haunting the hallways of his mind. “I don’t want to settle.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.” Vince had gone back to his reading. “But you are getting older.”
“I know that.”

“You’re smart, Erwin. I know you’ll do what’s right.”

LA: i’m staying at petra’s for the next few days
LA: i can’t be alone right now. the apartment feels too big
LA: i just want you to know where i am

He had heard of people falling in love with houses—but he didn’t fall in love easy. However, there was a practicality to the white house in Jim Thorpe. “Charming” and “old” and “quaint”—those words were used to describe the listing, and they certainly fit the home well. It was simple and unapologetic, and when he visited the open house, he figured it wouldn’t be a bad place to live in. Three bedrooms, one and a half baths, laundry room, and a big kitchen. It was dated, and the house inspector said it could use some repairs. “It’s an old house. It’s got good character.”

Erwin didn’t understand. It was just a house.

He moved in a month later. He had so little to move in that Vince insisted he take some furniture and decorations to make the big house feel less empty. Erwin didn’t want the help, felt like he was taking items from a stranger’s yard as he packed the things into a moving van. The Adirondack chair, the ocean painting, a few dressers and tables. His father placed a hand on his shoulder and smiled as they unloaded the items. “This is a lovely house to raise a family in.”

Thirty-six and without a wife. Without kids. He nodded. “Yeah, it will be.”

Christmas came that year, and the house felt so big, and everything he did came with an echo. The television droned on and illuminated the room with soft blue hues. He had a table sized Christmas Tree that sat in the corner of the room that twinkled colored lights against the wall. He had so much on his mind. It was all too much to process.

Vince told Erwin that morning that he had pancreatic cancer.

It was too much to process, and in the end, there was only one person he really wanted to talk to. There could only one person that could understand the anger and sadness and pain boiling in his stomach. The laptop ran hot on his legs as he pulled up his email, and he shook out a breath as he started a new one.

December 24, 2013

Levi,

It has been a long time. I hope you are doing well. I don’t even know where you are stationed anymore! I hope it’s some place more arid. You’ve always been rather irritable in the heat.

I have been doing well. I moved into my own house, finally. It’s nice. The next time you come home, you should stay with me. I have plenty of space, and honestly, it will give me an excuse to furnish a guest room. So I’m not sure you really have a choice at this point!
Anyway, it’s Christmas Eve. I wanted to wish you a happy birthday. I hope it is a good one.

Speak with you soon,

Erwin

The email whooshed off, and it didn’t do anything to calm the sadness. If anything, he nearly cried when Levi emailed him back a few hours later.

LA: i’m back home

[picture of both cats look up at Levi with Levi’s feet in the photo]

LA: poop nuggets

Erwin laughs. He pushes the heel of his palm into his forehead, and it aches all through his chest like a familiar and ancient pain. He puts his phone down on his desk and shakes his head. There’s a knock on his door, and he jumps a little as he beckons them in.

“‘Sup, Smithboy.” Hange pokes their head in with a giant grin before sliding through the crack and closing the door behind them.

“That’s a new one…” Erwin mutters.

Hange takes a seat at a chair across from Erwin’s desk. They lean back and kick their feet out and cross their arms. “Mike says you’re being a bum.”

“When am I not?” Erwin says with a half smile, but he hopes the truth doesn’t weigh too heavily on his words.

“Right? That’s what I told him. But it’s almost your birthday. We should fuckin’ do something. Mobu and I haven’t seen you at all.”

“I’ve been busy.” Erwin says, busying himself with a pencil in his hand.

Hange leans up and peers over the desk. “Looking at cat pics?”

Erwin rushes to sleep his phone and shakes his head. “Work things, Hange.”

“Uh-huh. Just be honest, Erwin. You don’t want to see us.”

“That’s not it…” Erwin trails.

But that kind of is it.

He had used them against Levi, and it was a guilt that pressed on him a little too hard, and a little too freshly every day. He didn’t know what else to do, because he wasn’t strong enough to push and keep Levi away. Petra started calling two days after the fight, and he stumbled over his words as he tried to figure out what to say.

He had no idea where Levi was, and it made him sick with worry. He would have taken a million
knives to the gut if it meant he could see Levi again, but he didn’t know. He had no idea.

“He’s not answering his phone. It’s going straight to voicemail.” Petra said. There was a wobble in her voice, as if she had cried for so long she could no longer keep doing so. “Do you have any idea where he could be?”

He shook his head on the phone, and he realized that she couldn’t see him. All he could say was: “No.”

She lingered on the phone in silence, as if they were both waiting for the other to provide an answer. And she was the one that gave up first, gruffing a strangled “thanks” before hanging up.

Erwin called Hange and asked them to text Levi. If he contacted Levi, he would forgive Levi. If he contacted Levi, he would never learn. If he contacted Levi, then it would be acceptable for this to happen again. And again. And again.

“He’s not answering.” Hange said. Mike asked Hange to come over and help ‘raise Erwin’s spirits’ for the weekend. Erwin ended up raising different kinds that they tried to keep him away from.

“It’s better that he doesn’t.” Mike said.

“But he’s not with Petra,” Erwin hung his head, and it was just so much effort to even keep upright. He sunk into the dining room table, ignoring the pain in his right arm as he leaned heavily on it. “What if…”

“He’s a grown ass man,” Mike said.

Hange looked up at Mike. “He is, but the kid’s fucked, man. I feel…”

“Don’t say it.” Mike barked. “If he wanted to not be a fucking psycho, he could have worked on fixing it. Not go around fucking assaulting people and thinking he can get away with it!”

“Mike!” Erwin shouted.

“What, Erwin? What?” Mike slammed his fist on the table and shook Erwin’s gaze up to him. “I can’t even believe you let him come back after that.” He flicked the back his fingers across Erwin’s cheek and scratched fingernails against the scar. Erwin’s eyes wobbled and focused on Mike’s shoulder. “What the fuck were you thinking?”

“He’s…”

“Yo, Mike…”

“It’s irresponsible, is what it is. What were you hoping for, Erwin?”

“He needed me.” Erwin said weakly.

“So do we.” Hange said.

Erwin looked up between Hange and Mike. “You don’t understand…”

“Then tell us.” Hange begged.

“I don’t need to hear it.” Mike barked. “This is bullshit.” He moved up from his seat.

“He’s it!” Erwin shouted. He winced at his on voice and sunk his head down into the crook of his
arm. “He’s the last thing… I have…”

“What do you mean?” Hange said.

Erwin shot his head up, distraught and angry and sad all in one. “He made me happy. I didn’t think I could ever… Be so happy.”

“Erwin,” Mike leaned his arm on the dining room table and bowed into Erwin’s face. “Some people…” He searched Erwin’s eyes, and Erwin did everything he could to keep his throat from clenching around a sob. “Some people are better left in our past.” Mike stood up, straight and towering, and his shadow cast over Erwin. “Don’t let him drag you down.”

“Mike…” Erwin sighed.

“I’ll make sure he’s at least alright,” Hange said, shifting uncomfortably in their seat.

Erwin nodded. “Thank you. Thank you…”

Mike stood for a few more minutes before going into the kitchen and returning with a glass of water. He placed it onto the table in front of Erwin before taking a seat again. “Everything will be ok.”

He had said those words before, and Erwin had believed them. He had no reason not to, but everything turned out badly. Everything was hell. And shit. And garbage.

He sat cross legged on the old red carpet of his old house, and he didn’t know how long he had been sitting there, but his thighs had gone numb and his back hurt. Mike came to him with a bottle of water and sat down next to him.

“How you doin’?”

“Uh...” Is all Erwin could say. He grasped absently for the water bottle before finally taking a hold of it. He twisted the cap and drank down half the bottle before resting it between his legs. “It’s tough.”

“We can stop for the day.”

Erwin blinked and swallowed. He shook his head and sighed. “I can keep going.”

Mike nodded. “I’ve got the study mostly cleaned out at this point. I have a few boxes you should look through first.”

Erwin looked to his side, rolled his lips between his teeth before nodding. Words were so hard to find, and none of them seemed to matter. They were all words he should have said before he passed away. He had so many things to say, and his pride was too big of an impasse.

He wasn’t going to cry again. Not here. He was done crying in this damn house.

“I’ll finish the bathroom.”

Mike nodded. He wrapped his arm across his shoulders and brought him close. Their heads knocked together, and Erwin groaned out a sigh that bordered on a sob.

LA: happy birthday
LA: i made chocolate cake if you want any
Erwin had spent the past several nights in the guest room. He slept on Levi’s old bed, though sleep was a thing that came restlessly and fevered. He tries to ignore the siren call of the boxes behind the closet door, but all it takes is a glass of wine to break down his inhibitions.

He pulls a box out and goes through files he has nearly memorized, with expiration dates half a decade old. They do nothing for him now, and never could, but maybe somewhere in these papers he can find the solutions.

The wife.

The kids.

The house; the job.

So many times he’s been through these boxes. The edges of the papers curled from sweat drenched grips, and so many underlines and highlights that nothing stands out anymore. He places the file folder next to him, and slams his head back into the wall. He closes his eyes lazily, and draws out a sigh that ends in a hitch of anger.

He sat here when Levi had first emailed him. It felt like a dream, and he actually pinched himself when he read the message:

i’m coming home. i don’t have a place to stay. can i stay with you for a few weeks?

He fell deep, and hard, and having Levi around again brought those feelings back. He wanted him to stay, and even when the knife carved into his skin and he saw the madness in Levi’s eyes, he wanted him. Needed him.

Because maybe there had never been anybody else.

Love came easy. It came in on smiles that hid on faces shying away from the light. In candles and vases and pictures that made the house a home. It was in the way Levi cared for him in ways that he could never care for himself. The softness of all his edges that melted under his touch when they were alone. And the way his lips stuck to his when they parted, like the attraction was so hard for them to separate that it snapped away like tape.

He finds himself downstairs, a hand on the box with the frayed tape, with the picture of a happy family tucked within a blanket under the flaps.

A husband.

A dog.

The house; the job.

He considers the wine glass in his hand, blinks slowly as his fingernail digs under the tape. Forty-one and a failure. Would he be settling now?

cool. sounds like things are really going well for you. you’ll need to catch me up when i get there. don’t be afraid to kick my ass out when you get sick of me.
Erwin smiled at the email. His head swum and it wasn’t just because of the alcohol settling in his stomach. He hadn’t felt this happy in a long time. In such a long time.

_Just like old times. It's not a problem at all, you can stay as long as you want. You always have a place here. I can’t wait to see you, Levi._

Every bit of him was covered in sweat as he waited for Levi at the airport. It had been over ten years since he had seen him. His heart jumped to the top of his throat when he saw him, and he bit his lips to keep the swell of emotions at bay.

“Welcome back, Levi.”

LA: _i got stuck with trick or treat duty_
LA: _eld’s going as something called a creeper from a video game_
LA: _guns is just wearing a red sweater and pants and calling himself a naked crayon_
LA: _these kids are gonna be the end of me_

School had just started, and Levi had been grumpy about senior year starting off so shitty. “I have Bio with Jeremy.” Levi grunted and dropped heavily into the couch next to Erwin. Erwin put his arm up on the back of the couch, and Levi sunk into the pit that Erwin’s weight created on the cushion. His head fell against Erwin’s armpit, and Erwin smiled softly. “Thank god it’s Tuesday.”

“I got us some classics.” Erwin leaned to the coffee table and picked up the VCR remote. Levi fell sideways into the space Erwin had been in, and he put his arms up to push Erwin away when he tried to sit back in his seat. “You know, to celebrate.”

“Celebrate what?” Levi asked, hands still firmly placed on Erwin’s spine.

Erwin looked down at him, mouth wide in a grin. “Halloween!”

“The movie or the holiday?” Levi gave up, and Erwin’s back arched up and over his body as his shoulders connected with the back of the couch.

“Both!”

Levi kicked around him and pushed himself up between the couch and Erwin. Erwin leaned back, and Levi took back his position in Erwin’s side--perfectly placed as if he belonged there. “This movie is so boring.”

“It scares the shit out of you, admit it.”

Levi buried his head in Erwin’s ribs and shook his head. “Nope.”

Erwin moved his arm down across Levi’s shoulders, and Levi snuggled deeper into him.

It felt nice, having Levi like that. Erwin couldn’t get involved with anybody. He had to focus on school and extracurricular activities, but he was young man as well. He’d never had a girlfriend. He had desires. He experienced that type of loneliness that accompanied puberty. He wanted to experience what his friends had experienced. A virgin at eighteen? What a disgrace.
The closeness he had with Levi was natural and comforting. Warm and inviting. It was a good substitute until he could have that time. Until he could meet that girl he would marry and have kids with. Have that house and the job and memories stacked inside of photo albums and lining his walls. He wanted that. He definitely wanted that.

So what he had with Levi wasn’t weird.

It wasn’t weird.

Nile had told him years ago: “Everybody thinks you guys are dating.”

And one of his other friends that was no longer a friend said: “You don’t want people to think you’re a faggot do you?”

And Jeremy had beaten Levi’s last baby tooth out of his mouth in seventh grade on his way to Erwin’s house one morning.

“We’re just friends.” Erwin had laughed off.

“He’s like a brother.” He excused.

“It’s just a phase.” His father had said. He came in with Levi sleeping soundly on Erwin’s chest, Erwin’s cheek planted on top of Levi’s head. He shook awake under his father’s command, anxiously casting Levi away and back to his own destroyed home. Erwin lingered at the door as Levi scuttled away, and he was not looking forward to turning around to face his father.

“I was young once too.” Vince said. He ran his hand up the back of his neck and rubbed it. He seemed to be carefully mulling over the words in his head, but they came out harsh all the same. “I’ve experimented with some crazy stuff in the past.”

“It was nothing, dad.” Erwin said, but he couldn’t look at him. He swallowed and toed the tile in the entryway.

“But this is your life, Erwin. If you…”

“We fell asleep!”

“You should go to Philadelphia.”

“Dad.”

“Finish your degree. I went there, your grandfather went there. It makes sense that you do too. Keep it a Smith alma mater.” He didn’t look at Erwin as he talked, but rather looked through him. It wasn’t so much a suggestion as a demand.

“But I…”

“It’s just a phase, Erwin. You’ll wake up and realize it. We all experiment.” Vince shook his head, breathed out of his nose and started off toward his recliner in the living room. “He’s not to be here alone with you again.”

Erwin nodded and felt his heart clench just as tightly as his jaw. He’d get a good education. He’d find a good job. He’d marry. He’d have kids. He’d have photo albums and photographs on coffee tables. He’d have holidays with presents and holidays with memories. Not these ones with a scruffy kid that didn’t believe in anything. One that smiled even though he didn’t want to be there. One that
felt joyful to be with him no matter what day of the year it was.

Levi asked him, huddled close to him on his bed, weeks after his father had caught them doing the same exact thing... Because even though it was weird, Levi was his moon, and they gravitated toward each other endlessly to calm the other’s tides.

“Can I kiss you?”

It fluttered his heart, and he had thought of those lips on his for days and months and years. He wondered what cigarettes tasted like and if lips lined with nicotine would be just as addictive. And when Levi kissed him, it all felt perfect and right, but the words came to his mind.

And they tumbled out: “It’s just a phase.”

And he wanted to believe it, because his dad and the house and the wife and the kids and all those smiles lined on the wall... But the way it broke Levi.

The way he didn’t look at him. His smile faded, his body language tightened. He didn’t know what to say. What could he say? Levi crawled over him, his sweater up over his chin with his hand in front of his face. He wanted to say something. He had to say something.

He said nothing.

And every day became despair. And they ate together in silence, the macaroni and cheese that Levi had crafted to Erwin’s taste. And he felt anger when Levi told him he was going to the military. And he was furious that he had said he was leaving first. And he was miserable that a wife was a wife and kids in the suburbs didn’t involve flower crowns and walking sticks. And he hated that this was just a phase, because he’d fucking push Levi against the kitchen counter and kiss him until they couldn’t breathe anymore. Because suffocating on Levi would be the most real and true thing he could ever do for himself.

It was just a phase.

LA: if you don’t have plans
LA: we’re having thanksgiving at petra’s this year
LA: she said you’re welcome to come

“He’s really quite good.” Moblit says as he leans over the coffee table and picks up an hors d’oeuvre and pops the whole thing into his mouth. He continues after he swallows. “Have you seen any of his work?”

Erwin shakes his head and it doesn’t smoke away the fog that seems to dilute his brain. He tries to sedate it with a mouthful of wine, but it doesn’t do anything. “No, I haven’t.”

“I mean, he ain’t no Van Gogh,” Hange says with a full mouth. They’d already cleared away half of the stuffed mushrooms on their own. “Well, I guess he’s gay too, so that checks out.”

Moblit hits Hange’s shoulder. “Well, no, but he has an eye for it. I’m surprised he hasn’t shown you anything. He says you two still talk.”

Erwin drinks a little more in the face of the lie. “Yeah, we do. I don’t know why he hasn’t shown me
any of his paintings.”

“He talks about those damn cats a lot, though.” Hange mutters, pushing one more mushroom into their mouth before collapsing against the couch. “He’s definitely doing well for himself now.”

Erwin looked down at the area rug in Hange’s living room. He tried to stop the world from spinning, but it was always spinning, wasn’t it?

This year brought their engagement and subsequent visit to the town hall to be wedded. One of Mike and Nanaba’s dogs passed away due to old age, and they fell away for a brief time in grief. Erwin lived alone in his house, woke up early to work-out, stayed late at work. Rinse and repeat. They had all changed little, only the circumstances. Their lives droned on as they always did.

“He thanked me the other day.” Nanaba says to Erwin in the living room later that evening when they’re alone. “He said the therapist is really helping.”

“Yeah?” Erwin says, and his vowels are beginning to elongate as the night wears on.

“Did you ever…”

Erwin plays with the stem of his wine glass and shakes his head. “No…” He feels guilty for not doing more, and worse, he feels guilty of how jealous he is of Levi. Of everybody else in his life that gets to share a relationship with him. Did Levi even need him anymore? “No… Not yet.”

Nanaba nods. She places a hand on the side of his face and rubs her thumb across his cheekbone. She smiles, and there’s tears at the edges of her eyes. “Mike and I… We’re worried about you, hun.”

Erwin sinks down in his seat and nods. “Yeah.”

“Communicating is important. I know that’s obvious, but if something is bothering you, you can constructively talk about it.”

Erwin stares for a minute before saying softly, “He never needed me.”

Nanaba sits back in her seat and stares at him. She takes his hand and squeezes it. “Of course he did.”

“He deserved so much better, Nan.”

“We all make mistakes. Recognize how you handled something in your past and then utilizing it as a tool going forward is what makes you stronger.” Nanaba moves her hand over his and nods as she talks. “We all deserve to be treated with love and respect. I do believe there were moments where you both showed that.”

Erwin scoffs.

“It’s ok to love him...” She says.

Erwin squeezes his eyes shut. He shakes his head. He can’t hear this. Not again.

“I’d just hate to see you never move on from him.”

[picture of Levi’s cats eating turkey scraps from a plate]
The phone falls onto his thigh. Mike drove him home, and Erwin couldn’t make it up the stairs with how fuzzy his head was with alcohol. They had tried to stop him from drinking, but he snuck drinks when nobody was looking, enough so that he had to leave his car at Hange’s. Mike tried to stay, but Erwin shouted him out the door. He wants to be alone with this house and this job and the idea friends that just barely tolerated him and an ex that never stopped haunting him.

Erwin lingers at the refrigerator, door open and blasting cool air into his hot face. There’s nothing but condiments and rotten vegetables and half empty bottles of booze.

He places a glass on the dining room table and he forgets where the light switch is, so he takes a seat in the dark, the glow of his phone illuminating the glass of his drink like a beacon.

He scoffs a smile, and his glass is already empty.

Erwin laughs, and it turns into a giggle he can’t quite stop. He feels like a teenager again, this light feeling in his stomach, where it feels like flirting and Levi always pressing aways his advances.
ES: come oveR.. i miss you.

There’s a long pause, and every minute seems to last forever as he watches it pass on his phone’s clock.

LA: maybe some other time. i have things to finish here at petra’s.
ES: come over after???
LA: erwin. stop.

He looks at the picture of them at Thanksgiving. They looked so happy then. They all did.

ES: i miss you damn it
LA: i’m not replying after this. talk to me when you’re sober.
ES: don’t go please!!!!!!!

He makes it halfway up the stairs, before his arm clings around the bannister and his eyes struggle to focus on the screen.

ES: i did nt mean too

He manages into his bedroom and even though he tried to move Levi’s things out, he didn’t move it all out. He closes his bedroom door and rests his forehead against the wood. One of Levi’s hoodies hangs on it, and it still smells like him—clean and musky, but the cigarette smell has long since faded. He buries his nose in it and closes his eyes.

ES: i shouldnt have never everrr
ES: kicked you out

Erwin makes his way slowly to his bed and he falls on it face first. The phone rests next to him and he fingers at it absently before pulling it toward his face and typing lazily on it.

ES: oulj alasys belogn heree
ES: leiv
He was so beautiful. Sleeping on his bed was like torture because all he could remember was the way it felt to be next to him. He replayed it liked he always did, that winter morning a year ago. Waking up with a soft groan, stretching and cracking every bone in his back before he rested in his spot. Levi laid naked next to him, white linen sheets up over his chest, eyes closed and breathing slow. Erwin traced his features with his eyes—the peak of his lips, the square of his chin, the bump of his nose, the depth of his eyebrow ridge that gave him such a tired look. He reached his hand across the bed, placed the back of his finger against Levi’s cheek while chewing the side of his lip between his teeth.

Levi breathed in sharply, stretched in on himself like a cat, and his eyes drew open with a soft smile.

“Hey.”

“Hi.” Erwin said. He bent down and kissed the morning breath away with an open mouth. They mewed needily before catching their breath, and Erwin couldn’t keep the smile from his face.

And the smile.

That smile.

Christ, Levi was never a phase.

ES: i love you

The morning light is cruel and flashes white hot across his vision. He groans and stretches, and his stomach is upset and his head feels like its been compressed by ten thousand boots. He debates if he needs to throw up. He debates if he should even bother. He doesn’t know how many times he’s slept like this since Levi’s been gone, but he assumes it will be many more.

He groggily wakes up his phone. It’s been over a week since the drunk texts without a word from Levi. It’s fair, really. He had been wildly irresponsible and embarrassing. For now, he is willing to convince himself he is in control. December 2nd has taken a sobering quality over the past few years.

He opens his messages and navigates to Levi’s name. The screen hurts to look at, and all the words blur together, but he double and triple checks his grammar and spelling before sending the message.

ES: Levi, please meet me at my house today. I would like to show you something.

He puts the phone down and rests his eyes. A few minutes later it vibrates, and he reads the message.

LA: i’ll be there in an hour

Chapter End Notes
bonus: erwin's playlist

sURPRISE MOTHER FUCKER AN ERWIN CHAPTER DOTH HAVE ARRIVED

hope you all feel better now jk i hope you're crushed weep for me because fuck, this poor drunk old man. somebody give him a hug please. PLEASE.

all of your comments the last chapter were OUTRAGEOUS. thank you so much for spending so much time writing such thoughtful and lengthy comments, and for sharing your experiences with me as well. i love talking about this fic and seeing how it's effected you all. i've said it so many times--it's a very personal piece for me, so it's just really cool to connect with you all like this. damn.

special thanks to my roommate for making this chapter even nastier, and for miss_coverly and minxiebutt for being my two amazing betas. please don't leave me. ever.

ok i think that's it i'm outta here bye
Promises

Chapter Summary

then and now. forever.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The alarm goes off at 5am.

Levi springs for his phone at the bedside table and taps it silent. He rests on the bed, chest down and breathing slowly before groaning dramatically into his mattress.

It’s another day. There’s so many days, and this is another one. He needs to get up.

Sitting up, Levi shifts his legs to hang off his double bed. Rubbing his eyes, he lets a strangled yawn out before stretching each limb carefully. Poppy stirs awake from her spot at the foot of the bed and prowls over to Levi, butting her head into his arm and then collapsing back down to the bed. He yawns again before standing up, wobbling a little as the sleep still swims around his brain and the stiffness lingers in his knee. Limping, he makes it the short distance to the bathroom, takes a piss with the door open, flushes, then goes back out into the living space.

He does his simple workout routine to wake himself up--weight repetitions for his arms, squats for his legs, and sit ups for his abdomen. Nugget watches from the counter that divides the living space from the kitchen, her tail lazily twitching as her eyes struggle to stay open in mild disinterest. After a half hour, he’s built up a sweat and goes to the bathroom again. Undressing out of his boxers, he hops into the shower stall that’s barely wide enough to contain his shoulders. The water is cold, the old electric water heater taking an annoyingly long amount of time to kick in, to the point that Levi has trained himself in the art of quick showers. Hopping out, he pulls a towel from the rack and
wipes his face dry. He raises an eyebrow with a quirk of a smile when he drags the towel down his face. “What the fuck are you looking at, pervert?”

Nugget sits at the entrance of the small bathroom, yellow eyes shining up at him even in the dark apartment, her eyelids closing slowly and uninterested in her master’s accusation. She tilts her head toward the kitchen, her butt slinking up with raised hairs as the rest of her body follows like a ripple when she stalks away from him.

He slowly moves to the dresser next to his bed and pulls on a fresh pair of boxers, his hair dripping water across the wood surface. There’s a strangled meow from the kitchen, and Levi rolls his eyes.

“I’m coming, I’m coming, brat.” He grabs the cup of dirty paint water from the night before, the easel with his painting still standing uninterrupted a few feet from his bed, and brings it to the kitchen. He dumps the water into the sink and turns to the refrigerator. He nearly trips over the circling cats at his feet, their bodies bouncing in excitement as they purr and mew pathetically at his ankles. He pulls out a can of opened wet cat food and closes the door. The draft from the cool air rushes up the front of the fridge and rustles a picture of Levi and the Bozado family--summer at the zoo with little Gunther perched and grinning on his shoulders.

He grabs a clean dish from the cupboard and upturns the rest of the can into it. He pops open the microwave door, heats it for a few seconds and takes it out to mash the food with the back of a fork. The cats meowing intensifies, and Nugget claws up his leg eagerly as he walks the dish over to where their water is. “It’s like you shits never eat,” he scolds with a smile. The cats nearly inhale the food when it hits the floor, the wet squish of their meal between their jaws having become the familiar morning anthem.

Levi stands at the border of his kitchen to his living space. He taps his fingers along the counter surface as he stretches his back. After a few pops of his spine, he makes his way toward his bed and lands heavily on it. He turns the small television on and lets the Weather Channel drone as he picks up his journal and pen. He flips past pages full of scribbles and dates and drawings before he lands on a blank page. He snaps the elastic marker around his pages to bookmark it before he puts his pen to paper.

It had become part of his therapy to write in the journal--to write down things that bothered him or things that made him happy. It put things into context and made his feelings present and tangible and memorable so he could discuss them with Dr. Rico later. Clicking his pen open, he scribbles:

Today feels good. Today is going to be a good day. I’m going to make it a good day.

He looks up from his paper at his television, the framed picture of Magnolia and Church below it, and he smiles.

I deserve to have a good day. It’s all right to have a good day. It’s ok to have bad days too, but today is going to be a good day. I have people I care about and people that care about me. That makes today good.

He looks up again. He had printed out another copy of them all at Thanksgiving, a photograph of him and the kids at Halloween where he wore a shirt that read “This IS my costume!”, and a selfie of him and Petra shopping at the Farmer’s Market in the spring.

They’re framed smiles, like the stock photos that sat in the frames before them, and he struggles sometimes to remember that they’re pictures of him. That sometimes the man in the mirror is him as well, that those crows feet that wrinkle at his eyes belong to grins that show his teeth and not his tired age… But then he remembers that the smiles come easier. That the smiles hurt less.
I have a good life.

Poppy jumps onto the bed next to him, lands next to his thigh and purrs loudly as she begins cleaning the pads of her front paws, the faint smell of cat food lingering on her breath. He balances his journal on his lap, his pen blotting and resting on his last word as he scratches two fingers along her forehead. He smiles softly as she stops grooming to let him scratch at her ear.

They would want me to be happy.

He closes the journal. Scratching Poppy a couple of more times, he gets up and goes back to the kitchen. He pulls some eggs and bacon from the fridge and pulls out a pan. He starts cooking breakfast as the weather announces again. Sunny but chilly, a high of forty degrees. The heater kicks on and turns off shortly after. Despite the size of the apartment, sometimes it felt too big, and in the days where his meditation exercises didn’t work, he taught himself to call Petra. If she couldn’t come over, she would sit with him on the phone until he could breathe again.

“Just breathe, Levi.”

“It’s… So…”

“In.”

Gasp.

“Out.”

Sigh.

“That’s it, hun. You’re all right.”

“Why am I… Doing this?”

“What?”

“Why am I even bothering?”

“Because you’re worth it.”

Levi looks at his phone between bites of his breakfast. He tries not to. It’s turned into a compulsion. It’s as if all the things he was working on were pushing into different ailments, and the stupid phone he never even wanted became some sort of tome. Inside, he’d be able to create new stories, invent different endings, find the reasons to why he never answered.

He never fucking answered.

Until, of course, almost midnight on Thanksgiving, all drunk and pathetic. Almost a whole year without a single fucking word, and Erwin thought he could just beg for him back. And if the pathetic shit hadn’t guessed correctly. If only he knew that he spent that entire evening and morning huddled on Petra’s couch because he was too afraid to be alone in a studio apartment that felt too large for him. It wasn’t fair. He’d come so far.

He was worth it.

But every day he missed him. Like the scars on his skin, he wore Erwin like a big red gash, tight across his chest, so tight that it ached, and he thought that reading the texts over and over would release the pressure. That somehow reading the emails would fail to hold their weight over his lungs.
And he wondered what he had done, and why Erwin had wanted him to email him back at all when he couldn’t even do it himself.

Nugget jumps onto the bed and takes her place at the corner. A familiar inky black spot upon his gray comforter.

Levi closes his eyes. He turns off the screen of his phone and shakes his head with an agitated sigh. He has more than Erwin now. His two days with Petra at the store, the three days at the cat shelter, the exercises, the apartment, his painting, babysitting… The man that was before him—the man named Ackerman—and all his flaws and anger and sadness, had at least been a man of purpose. And finally he was reborn into a man that had more than rotten smiles that haunted him behind every flash of his eyelids.

There were a lot of days where he was almost happy to be Levi.

Shifting up to the back of his bed, he crosses his arms and watches the television. He reaches habitually for his phone, wakes it up to look at the time--7:13AM--before unlocking it and looking at the text messages again.

Levi bounces between names--Nanaba, Moblit, Petra, Hange. He reads the last few texts, bites at his lip as he goes back to Moblit. He’d taken up texting Moblit because he always felt like he understood the man—or more so, that Moblit understood him. After a long series of texts, he seemed to come around to Levi, even told Levi that he should go to Nanaba if he was serious about improving his mental health. He too suffered from anxiety, and he even joked that Hange’s erraticness was part of his recovery—though Levi was pretty sure he was being truthful.

Nanaba, in her kindness, gave him suggestions. She even talked to him on the phone once when he couldn’t get a hold of Petra and helped to focus his perspective. Her responses were inconsistent, but always returned.

Together they told him that they hadn’t seen Erwin in awhile. They said life had taken their attention, that months passed without noticing, even though each one had been a struggle for Levi. They’d seen him a few times—Mike more than any of them. They said he was doing well, if not a little bit exhausted. But Nanaba told him that she worries about Erwin, and Levi shared what little he knew about the lines of texts that had no recipients. She said she’d talk to him again. Levi hoped. He waited.

Levi rubs his fingers on his forehead, tries to push the thoughts out as if they’re grime on his skin. When his phone vibrates, he almost falls out of his bed. Cautiously, habitually, he picks up his phone and swipes it awake.

New Message from Erwin Smith

He looks down at Poppy who has spooked as well, her head up and staring intently at the device. Levi matches eyes with her and shakes his head in disbelief. “What the fuck does he want?” Poppy puts her head down on her paws, eyes still focused on Levi. “Knock it off. I’ll look at it.” Levi mutters, clicking the button and revealing the message.

ES: Levi, please meet me at my house today. I would like to show you something.

Levi swallows thickly, and Poppy’s head rises again. “He wants… He wants to see me.” She stands up and slinks toward him, as if noticing the spike of anxiety in the room like a tremor. She stands and lazily settles in his lap, Levi’s arms up with his phone still cradled in his hands. “He actually wants to see me.” His heart beats so hard that he feels like he’s going to vomit, but the weight of
Poppy in his lap calms his stomach, steadies the sway of his heart in his chest. However, he still feels like a teenager, flushed and ecstatic at what it means. He really actually wants to see him.

Today can be a good day.

He answers the text with shaking hands. He gets up from his bed and looks around his apartment with his hand tangled in his hair. Poppy jumps down to the floor to follow him through the apartment as he shuffles through the clothes in his drawers. He tries on three pairs of clothes and spends ten minutes adjusting his hair. Poppy loops around his feet and sits next to Nugget when he enters back into the main room. They both watch him put his boots on as he sits on the single high-top stool. After they’re securely on his feet, he sits with his elbows on his thighs and hands between his legs, his breathing steadying as he reminds himself of how to even do such a simple task.

Breathing in and breathing out.

In.

And.

Out.

Nugget meows.

“You’re right.” Levi says. He gets up and grabs his keys from the hook on the wall next to the front door. He turns his head and points at Poppy. “Keep her in line for once, will ya?” He offers a weak smile that isn’t returned, but it helps push him out the door.

Levi’s car is small and a little worn, but it does its job. He gets to Erwin’s house in about five minutes, but he lets off the gas as he coasts slowly up the hill to his driveway. A panic settles in—it’s been almost a whole year since he’s seen Erwin. It had been months of careful self-negotiations of which parts of town were safe to linger in at the risk of running into him. The fear of small talk was too much, when all he wanted to do was talk about their entire lives. Where he wanted to say sorry in every language until he ran out of syllables and painted words in the form of kisses against his lips. Because, fuck, he would forgive Erwin for anything. He’d do anything to be in his arms again.

He is stronger now.

He can’t do that.

He is stronger now.

He’s there, on the porch steps, waiting for him in his long wool coat and his hair barely kept. His head tilts up and he squints, but he doesn’t smile. Levi looks down at his gear shift, puts the car in park and furrows his eyebrows. He doesn’t want to look up but does when there’s a knock on his window. There’s a long hesitation, and his heart beats so fast he wishes it would just kill him. He breathes in deep and lets the air out slowly before he turns to stare out the window.

“Can we take your car?” Erwin says through the glass.

Levi blinks. Hearing his voice again—he grips tight on the handle of the shift. He swallows and presses the unlock switch as he nods. Erwin comes around the car and opens the door and steps inside. He groans a little as he adjusts the seat to accommodate the length of his legs before he pulls on his seatbelt. They sit for a few moments of deafening silence, the radio turning to nothing but the sound of static in Levi’s head. There’s so many words. So many.
“Car seats?” Erwin says. His voice bounces off of the window, unable to look at Levi just as much as Levi can’t look at him. So many words, and he chose those.

“Yeah. I uh, babysit the kids a lot so we just… Figured it’d be easier.”

Erwin huffs a laugh. Levi raises his eyes long enough to catch the plume it creates against the glass. “That’s great.”

Levi bites his lip before looking forward. “What did you want to show me?”

“Right.” Erwin chuckles to himself, but it stays deep in his chest like it’s a struggle to push it out. “Get on 209 North.”

Levi squints before turning his head. “Toward Leighton?”

“Yes.”

“Erwin.” Levi says softly. He swallows again. “Erwin, please look at me.” Erwin breathes in deep, his head hanging slightly. Levi can almost hear the bones cracking as he turns his head toward him. “What are we doing?”

Erwin closes his eyes instead of looking at Levi, and his face tightens. “You deserve to know…”

Levi inflates his chest so much that he nearly whimpers it back out. “All right.”

They leave the driveway and out of town. They sit in silence until Erwin starts to hand out short, quipped directions. It’s not until they’re climbing up the steep hill in the middle of town that Levi can’t keep the questions from buzzing in his head. The blood rushing through his neck chokes him, and he sucks in air. He pulls to the side of the road and parks the car. He pulls the parking brake and rests his forehead against the steering wheel.

“Levi?”

“I…” He struggles around his words and he closes his eyes against the anger in his chest. “Where are we going?”

“A little further…”

“Erwin, tell me.”

Erwin curls his fingers into a fist and looks at his lap. He sighs, and his voice quivers like a bow string. “We’re... Seeing my father.”

A chill rushes across Levi, and he worries his bottom lip between his teeth. He knew where they were going now. Levi had only been there one other time. He had stood on the road looking on at Erwin and Vince, Vince’s hand tight on Erwin’s shoulder, their heads bowed as if standing behind pews. The cross engraved under her name, the date that showed her youth, the inscription of blessings from two men that loved her.

God bless her.

Vince had squeezed his hand, opened it and rubbed it against his son’s shoulder. Levi fidgeted, bent his knees and kicked at some rocks, and time seemed to be a thing that didn’t progress but regressed. His thumbs rubbed hard against the edge of his jean pockets, and he buried his chin into his sweater when he heard the unfamiliar, the completely alarming, and terrifyingly quiet hiccups coming from
his best friend.

Levi looks at Erwin’s hands, his thumb nails scratching slightly along the inside of his index finger. His breathing is steady, and Levi dares to peer up at his face. Calm, collected, but struggling. The lines around his mouth are creased, folded like old pieces of paper, and even though he’s trying to hide it, Levi knows him better now.

He nods at his steering wheel. He disengages the parking brake and forces the car up the steep hill with a hefty push on the gas. The graveyard is not even a block away, and Erwin guides them down the veins of gravel paved roads before raising his hand in a silent command to stop the car. Levi nods and puts the car in park, and he waits for what feels like a decade for Erwin to unbuckle himself and exit the car. He follows cautiously, feeling like an intruder, even though he had been invited, and keeps several yards between himself and his friend.

The graves are bare. Dirty. The headstones had been purchased at the same time--Vince had been a plot with a name, but now he had a date. Age touched them just like Levi’s mother’s headstone, colored the granite black and green with sticky lichen that would be too stubborn to come free. The date is freshly engraved--December 2nd, 2015. Three years ago to the day. There’s no flowers left on ledges or flags stuck in the land. It’s distressingly clear to Levi that nobody visits.

Erwin doesn’t visit.

Erwin bends down and touches the headstone, considers it as if it’s the first time he’s seen it. His fingers trace along the grooves of Vince’s name before falling back to his side. Mother and father, eternally in love even in death. Levi used to harbor jealousy at that idea--he never knew his dad. He stands here now, looking down on a man that, for some reason, couldn’t admit his father’s death to him, and the idea only works to tease him to anger. He swallows and digs his chin into his sweater. Uncomfortable in his memory, he toes at the ground before his head swivels up to the familiar and not so familiar hiccups from the only man he’s ever called his best friend.

Levi steps onto the dead grass, treading as if he’s afraid the dead will rise and drag him down with them--as if they hadn’t been trying to do that for almost twenty goddamn years. He stands next to Erwin, hands at his sides and head hanging down. Erwin brings a hand to his hidden face, curls in around his knees as his shoulders shake. The whimpers are soft, but they’re there, and each intake of air hits like a baseball bat to Levi’s ribs. He falls to his knees next to Erwin, tilts his head to try to see past the cracks of his fingers. The air that he sucks in gets caught along his tongue, wet and lispy, until there’s too much in his chest and it bleeds out, long and heavy on lungs too untrained to handle so much grief.

“Erwin.” Levi says softly.

“I’m sorry.” Erwin sobs. “I’m so, so sorry.”

“What happened?” Levi watches him, and just as fast as it started, it ends. Erwin presses the palms of his hands to face, and the air leaves his nose as his head raises to look out along the cemetery.

“I don’t know.”

Levi wants to touch him. The air is cold and bites at his cheeks. His fingers tingle the longer they’re out here, and all he has to do is reach over. Be there for him. “Even if it doesn’t make sense… I…” Levi focuses on a button on Erwin’s jacket. Looking at Vince seems so… Disrespectful. “For your sake, I think it would be good.”

Erwin groans, tired and throaty. He falls back onto his rear, and slings his arms over his knees. One
hand stays at his face, fingers tented over his forehead and his eyes staring straight. “I couldn’t do it.” The tears on his cheeks are still wet, and glisten ever so slightly like stars when his head tilts. “I wanted to be so many things, Levi. A husband, a father—a man with a career that could provide for both. I’d have a house so big I could fit grandchildren.” He laughs softly under his breath. “We’d… We’d have friends and family over, and we’d have Christmas trees that were so wide they couldn’t even fit through the front door.” He bites his lip and shakes his head. “And he’d be there,” Erwin pauses, and his swallow is audible. “And… And he’d say something like ‘good job’.” He breathes in and it stutters in his chest but the tears stay lodged behind his eyes. “And somehow… _Somehow_ that’d make it all _worth_ it.”

Levi watches him, lips falling apart, and the pressure in his head builds as he feels the emotions shoot to his nose, the heat welling in his eyes. “Make what worth it?”

“Do you ever think about… Why we lived how we did?”

Levi raises an eyebrow.

“I don’t know…” Erwin’s voice goes quiet in the palm of his hand. “I don’t know if I’ve lived a single breath for myself outside of the time I spent with you.”

Levi blinks. He does the same as Erwin, wraps his arms around his knees and places his chin on top. “Is that why you couldn’t tell me?”

Erwin hums and shakes his head. “No. No, not exactly.” He fusses with his pant leg and looks up past the headstones again. He can’t seem to keep his eyes focused on them for very long. “He wanted so much from me that I… It’s so childish. I was so immature.”

“Just tell me.”

“It never felt like the plan for myself was right.” Erwin spits out. “I grew tired of it. I thought that by putting distance, it would mend things.”

“Look where that got us…” Levi says softly.

Erwin laughs above a huff and nods. “Indeed. It did nothing but harm. He got sick, and… I hoped he would pull through.”

“He was a persistent old bastard.”

Erwin grins. “That he was. However, not for this.” They grow silent. There’s a honk from a car so distant that it sounds like a crow. “He became terminal too fast. I wasn’t able to hold a coherent conversation with him the last time I saw him.” He rubs at the bridge of his nose. “It did not go well.”

Levi turns his head and his breath is caught in his chest. It’s quiet for too long before he kicks out an “Oh.”

They sit longer, until the tip of Levi’s nose is so red that he feels like it might freeze off. He glances over at Erwin, and meets Erwin’s gaze as he does the same. “Thank you.” Erwin says.

“For what?”

Erwin leans forward and plants his hands on the ground. He hesitates for a moment before standing up, his knees cracking as he does. He brushes himself off before turning to offer a hand to Levi. “For being here.” Levi takes his hand and is pulled to his feet. “You did not have to.”
Levi brushes off his clothing, attempts to look up at him, but it’s too difficult right now. “I wanted to.”

Erwin smiles just enough that it touches his eyes, and he places a daring hand on Levi’s shoulder. “I missed you.” He squeezes his hand, and it makes him feel younger and smaller and so confused. Erwin releases his hand and turns toward the car. Wide eyed, Levi remains in his spot, studying familiar and unfamiliar gravestones as if they may have the answers to the discomfort in his soul.

“Thank you,” Levi mimics under his breath. “For everything.” Levi kneels and presses his palm to the headstone, the temperature of it running up his arm and shuddering through his body before he pulls it back and folds his arms across his stomach. “I’ll take care of him. I promise.”

Levi makes his way back to the car. Erwin is already inside, head hanging and eyes closed. Levi steps in and sits down. He straps on his seat belt, starts the car, and grasps the steering wheel. Rolling his fingers across the wheel, he sighs. “Thank you,” he says softly.

“It is the least I could do. I’m sorry I did not bring you here sooner…” Erwin sighs out of his nose. “As time continued to pass, the moments seemed to be more inopportune.”

Erwin’s guilt is heady enough to drink, and Levi has certainly been drunk enough on his own for so long. But he’s starting to grow giddy with his promise, that today is a good day because Erwin shared this with him, that Levi can, in a small way, help him. That he is making steps to reconcile whatever had happened in his past and allow Levi in. Finally.

Levi squeezes the wheel and nods. “You’re an idiot.” He cracks a smile.

Erwin turns his head. “Yes. I suppose I am.” He smiles a little in return.

Levi moves his attention to the front of the car as he puts it in drive. “What am I gonna do with you, Erwin Smith?”

Erwin chuckles as he brings a finger to his eye to rub it. He shrugs before turning his head back out his window. “I do not know, Levi Ackerman.” He rolls his neck and adds quietly, “I do hope it means you will stay for tea.”

They make it back to Erwin’s house, fairing with side glances and half smiles along the way. It feels easy like it did before. Silence that begged for no explanation; the weight of secrets having evaporated from their beings. It’s a step. It’s a big step, Levi tells himself. He drives by the hardware store and thinks about the leak in the bathroom sink. He passes the pet store and knows exactly where he’ll put the litter boxes—in the corner of the laundry room where that useless empty shelf sits.

He remembers how oddly comfortable the smell of the workout room is, and how it always ended with the smell of a fresh pot of coffee wafting up the stairs. He remembers the sound of soft scribbles to paper, when a laptop sat nearby, and the turning of pages accompanied by a soft grumble as the night turned into a new day. He remembers warm sheets and kisses to his nape when the sun rises behind sheer curtains, stretching against a body that forms around him like he’s been molded there.

He sighs softly as he pulls into the driveway. He parks the car and sits for a few moments before unbuckling. Erwin does the same and opens the door and steps out.

The house had been an idea, Levi knows that now. It was a milestone to Erwin that was supposed to mean something. When Levi entered, when he started to live alongside Erwin, he liked to think they both had grown attached to it. By now, Levi knows the house. Where all the imperfections are, where the improvements need to be made, where his favorite places are. And for almost a year he
lived within the walls and even started to make them--paintings and photographs and vases and flowers. It turned from a house to a home with a man that he dared himself to love.

They walk together toward the porch, and each step is like climbing further up a mountain with no summit. He wants to stay here, to be with Erwin again. Today, Erwin had given him answers--given him hope. Not just for what he had done for himself, but Erwin as well. With all the advances and positive reinforcements of the day, it does nothing but add weight to body. All together, he feels like he weighs three hundred more pounds, and his posture matches the unfamiliarity of anticipation that wraps around each limb. Erwin meets him at the front door, but he doesn’t work in his pockets for his keys. Instead, he looks down at Levi as the windchime bells deep and low.

The wood of the porch groans as they cross it. It holds everything it did a year ago--the old Adirondack chair, his ashtray, the windchime. Levi knows, beyond a doubt, that he belongs here. Erwin is his home as much as the white house with all the white walls is as well.

“Levi.” Erwin says, mimics the weight of his limbs and the drawl of the windchime. His hands peel from his sides, and the vulnerability in his face reels Levi in like a string toy.

Levi takes Erwin’s hands within his own and looks at them. He’s always been so big, and Levi has always been dwarfed under him. Levi runs his thumbs along soft knuckles that have spent years sorting paperwork and insurance documents, and they look so undamaged compared to his own--chapped and scarred and missing pieces that will never regrow. But Erwin has his own scars, under his clothes and on his face, and Levi puts his hand on top of the one he left, finds that he can’t keep his eyes away from Erwin now.

Erwin’s eyes are pleading, and they’re still red rimmed from crying, and he looks so, so tired. Age almost makes him look ugly in this moment, like he’s waiting every day to lie to rest alongside those headstones. Levi’s fingers curl against Erwin’s cheek, brush against stubble that may be more present now than on those lazy Sunday mornings.

“Erwin… I…” Levi wraps an arm around Erwin’s neck, pulls him down closer to his height. He breathes in the cologne that lingers on Erwin’s scarf, feels a pang rock through his body that he has tried so hard to suppress all year. For ten years. For twenty years. His other arm comes up to close the embrace, and his body falls into place against him, warm and fitted into the closets form of perfection he’ll ever know.

He takes his lips, hesitantly at first, just as they always seem to do with their first kisses, until he remembers them like old stories told around campfires. Top lip to bottom, kissing in winter air that’s dry and dead, but tastes like sweet oatmeal and cinnamon. He opens his mouth slowly, lets Erwin tongue at him like a thing to be savored, warm but unstoned as a pan left to simmer. They kiss like it’s the last time and the first time and all the times in between, humming softly through their noses as their lips draw closed and smack apart. They meet again, each kiss swelling like a riverbed in spring, and his fingers twine in hair that is a few days unwashed and moans as his nails trail against Erwin’s scalp.

Greed overtakes him, as it so often does in Erwin’s arms, and he’s up on the balls of his feet pushing Erwin back toward the railing on the porch before Erwin grounds himself to a floor board. His eyes swirl momentarily before resting on Levi, his lips pink and plush, and Levi reaches up to kiss them again, only to meet the scruff of Erwin’s jaw. “Levi…”

Levi pulls him down again, kisses him as Erwin pushes away, but there’s a soft smile, so Levi takes it as an invitation. They kiss again, and every vein in his body fills with a warmth that cuts through the cold, and he hates how he misses his lips already, even though he has him back. He loosens his grip on Erwin, his nose dragging down against Erwin’s cheek until his forehead rests on his chest.
He’s smiling when he moves his hands down to the lapels of Erwin’s jacket, tugs at them as he breathes deeply into the concrete of his being. “Aren’t you going to invite me inside?”

Erwin draws a hand up Levi’s back, rests an open palm against the nape of his neck and plays with the hair of his undercut. The windchime moans as a branch breaks from a tree somewhere, a crow cawing once, twice, and three times before everything goes deafeningly quiet besides the surge of blood in Levi’s neck. Erwin bows his head and places a kiss on Levi’s hair. “Would… Would you like to come inside for some tea?”

Levi grips tightly at Erwin, swings his head up with a smile that touches every part of his face. They kiss again for so long they begin breathing the other’s air, and each peck hammers at his heart and reverberates like a bell in his chest. He coaxes Erwin’s mouth open again and groans at his taste, until Erwin is absently fumbling in his jacket pocket for his keys. Levi detaches himself unwillingly, but keeps his hands on Erwin, unsure of how much longer he can go without being his again.

Christ, he’d waited so long. Far too long. Somewhere on his lips is the taste of happiness, and despite the anxiety and the tears and the anger, he feels giddy that he had been right. That today is a good day. That sometimes he deserves to have good days.

Erwin opens the door with a shaking hand, his other arm wrapped around Levi’s waist, and guides Levi into the house. It smells a bit stale, like a window hasn’t been opened since the beginning of the year, but it doesn’t smell like burnt toast or old cologne. He steps into the foyer and removes his boots before pointing them at the wall. Erwin takes his jacket and puts it on the coat rack as Levi lets his eyes wander. He expects Poppy or Nugget to come darting up to him, meowing needily for their dinner, but remembers that he’s not actually home, it just feels like it. His eyes snap to a small vase on the hallway table, a single flower settled within the glass, fresh and plump, and it does nothing to settle the flutter in his heart.

Levi catches Erwin’s arm before he leaves toward the kitchen, pulls him down again to kiss, but Erwin’s lips don’t fall in the right place, refuse to play back against his. Levi frees him, blinks confused up at him, but he’s gone before he can say anything.

“I am afraid I do not have anything fresh.” Erwin says as he walks off toward the kitchen. Levi follows behind him slowly, checking to see how much has changed since he’s been gone. He peers into the dining room, his paint chips still tucked under light switch panels from almost a year ago. There’s a couple of empty tumblers on the table, small pools of amber stained at their bottoms.

Levi rolls his lips and nods as he continues into the kitchen. “I don’t care.”

The kitchen is mostly untouched, the tops of the pans from the hanging rack having acquired a thin layer of white dust. The sink has a few stray dishes, the edges lined with take out containers that need to be rinsed before being placed in the recycling. Erwin takes the tea pot and fills it from the tap, clicks the stove on, and places it on top. He moves to the cupboard and pulls down two mugs and a box of teabags. He removes the teabags from their packaging and places one in each mug. He turns and rests his back against the counter, folding his arms over his heather t-shirt and fails to remove the weights that seem to drag down his eyes.

Levi moves toward the living room, and Erwin’s head snaps up. “Do you want to know what he said?”

“Hm?” Levi pauses and turns. He places a hand on the kitchen island and studies Erwin.

“He…” Erwin flexes his fingers along his biceps and turns his head toward the stove. “The last time I saw my father, he was delusional. He said a lot of things that didn’t make sense.”
“Did he know it was you?”

“Yes. Yes, at least he knew that.” Erwin nods, scratching his cheek absently. “He asked me how Marie was doing.” He closes his eyes like the memory causes him physical pain. “He asked when we were going to have children.”

“Hadn’t it been…”

“I told him we were planning on it.”

Levi’s eyes narrow, and he braces his other hand on the island.

“He smiled.” Erwin rubs his fingers along his stubbled cheeks and shakes his head. “He passed away a few days later. He died believing a lie.” The tea pot starts to whistle. “I was never who he wanted me to be.”

“Erwin.”

Erwin moves heavily toward the stove, his movements becoming jarred and quick, frustration rushing through his body and pouring out through the hot water. “I am not sure he would have had good words to say to you if you had tried to talk to him.” His hand starts to shake when he moves to the second mug. “I did not approve of how he viewed you toward the end.” He drops the pot onto the stove with a clatter. “But you still deserved the opportunity.”

“What did I do?”

Erwin chews on his lip and shrugs. “I have no idea.” Erwin picks up a mug and turns and slides it across the island toward Levi. “He didn’t understand our friendship.”

Levi pulls the mug toward him. “Ah.”

Erwin turns back to his mug and cleans up the outside of it with a towel. “It had just been so long… I didn’t know how to… I didn’t know how to bring it up. I cannot apologize enough.”

“Erwin, it’s ok.” Levi looks up at Erwin, pleads for him to look at him and accept his truth, but he feels the guilt settling in and around them, and he shifts his weight between his feet. “I was mad, but I understand now.”

“I see.” Erwin says. He takes a sip of his tea before setting it back on the counter. “Thank you for understanding.”

Levi shrugs as he breathes against the surface of his tea. He fidgets a bit in his spot as he takes a sip and replaces his cup to the island. He turns his head and leans a little toward the living room. He catches sight of a DVD he had set out a year ago on the ledge of the TV stand, and his mouth twitches in concern.

“Do you think you will be staying the night?” Erwin asks. His eyes remain on Levi, and the blue of them are steely and dangerous, matching the sternness of his voice.

Levi looks up at him, but finds it easier to preoccupy himself with his tea again. “Uh, probably not.”

“I can freshen the sheets in the guest room for you.”

Levi briefly wonders how fresh the sheets actually are in the linen closet. “I wish I could.” Erwin crosses the space between the counter and the island. Levi looks toward the living room again and
takes a step toward it, curiosity proving to be too much.

“Levi, please.” Erwin’s heel squeaks against the floor of the kitchen. “Wait.”

Levi peers into the living room. The sight hits him so hard it knocks the wind out of him. His fingers curl into a fist and he breathes heavily out of his nose.

The living room is like how he left it—all the boxes along the wall sitting like exposed granite carved from the side of a mountain. He counts them.

One two three.

Four five six.

Nineteen boxes total. Three that he had put away. One that is still left littering the floor, items pushed alongside the remaining boxes, sticking out like weeds that hadn’t been plucked.

A sob lodges in his throat, thick and strong, like a hand pressing against his windpipe and squeezing. Squeezes. Seizes. Submits.

He blinks and he can’t quite…


Levi blinks and nods. He turns his head toward the front door and he works through what he can do. What he can say. He deserves more. He deserves better. He deserves Erwin at a place better than this. Where all those damn boxes are gone. Where they can live together and create new boxes of shit they don’t need. He wants it. Fuck, he wants it more than anything.

“I have to…” Levi croaks out past the pressure around his neck. It hurts, it all hurts, and he turns heavily on his heel and almost loses his balance. “I have to go… Feed the cats.”

Erwin shuffles toward the end of the island and puts his hand on the side of the refrigerator. Levi doesn’t even want to know what it looks like inside. “Do you have to?”

Levi’s legs feel so heavy, he feels so heavy, and even though he’s upright, he feels like he’s crawling to the door. He ends up in the foyer and he’s shaking when he reaches for his boots. He’s breathing hard when he bends over and starts to slip a foot in. “Y-yeah. Yeah they hate when I’m late.” He pushes a foot in and doesn’t bother tying it before he’s reaching for the second one. “They’re needy little fucks.” He tries to laugh, but it gets caught in his nose, and his eyes sting with tears. He pauses as he clenches his jaw and tries to swallow it down.

“Please.”

“I really…”

“Please stay.” Erwin is next to him, and his eyes are still red rimmed and they’ve grown glassy. “Please.”

Levi stomps his second foot down. He flexes his hands into fists as he stares at the belly of Erwin’s shirt. He fights against the twitches in his lips, the fire behind his eyes, the pressure on his chest. He lets the anger rear before he can snuff it. “Why didn’t you ever answer me back?”

“I…”

“I tried so hard. I was getting better. The bullshit… You pulled over Thanksgiving. What the fuck,
Erwin?" He tilts his head and looks at the vase on the entryway table. The asshole replaced the one that broke, as if what happened a year ago was a thing that could just be ignored. He wants to be angry. But he can handle this now without being angry. He’s fucking better now. “I’m offering you to talk to me right now without being angry. I want to have a conversation. Please accept it.”

Erwin nods, and his eyes catch at various parts of Levi’s person—all but his face. “I… I was scared.”

Levi’s head shoots up, and the sorrow hangs on every syllable. “So was I!”

Erwin bites his lip before speaking, “Do you…” He looks at Levi, and his shoulders sink down as his eyebrows relax. “Really love me?”

Levi’s eyes snap up to Erwin, wide and full of disbelief. He takes a step forward and forces Erwin to focus on him. Of all the the words he could choose, he chose to say those. “What the fuck?”

“I was terrified.”

“Of what?” He bites back his desire to shout, for Erwin to stop making more and more excuses. For him to stop being so fucking stupid.

“You loving me.”

“You stupid fuck…”

“Perhaps…”

“Don’t… Do that shit… Where you don’t think… What do you expect? What’s your deal?”

“I don’t deserve you.”

“What a load of—”


“Stop… Just shut the fuck up.” Levi breathes in sharply, and he moves toward the door. He reaches for it like he’s done so many times. The sound of his footsteps on the gravel of the driveway, beating hard against the concrete of the sidewalk. He’s run so many times, but he can handle this now. He steps back from the door. Not this time. He looks up at Erwin. “I’m sorry… Just… Please stop making choices for us.”

Erwin’s lips fall apart. He seals them again and nods. “I wanted us to get better.” He licks his lips and turns his head toward the living room. “Then you kept texting me, and… Levi…” His chest fills with a deep sound before it seeps out through his mouth and nose. “I’m so happy for you.”

Levi’s nose flairs and he strangles the sob back into his chest as he nods. “It’s been hard.”

“I know.”

“So fucking hard.”

“I know.”

“I wished so many days you could have been…” Levi gravitates toward Erwin. He wants his river to flow to him so badly, for those mountains that Erwin always put between them to erode and for them to meet at a lake. An ocean. “I should have done this before. Then maybe I wouldn’t have fucked it
all up.”

“You didn’t fuck it up. It is much more complicated than that.” Erwin says softly. He reaches for Levi and puts his hand on his shoulder.

“No.” Levi looks down at Erwin’s hand. “No, you’re right. I know that.”

“Please stay.” Erwin says quietly. He steps closer.

“You know I can’t.” Levi says. He whimpers. He rests his forehead on Erwin’s chest.

“I need you.” Erwin says. One hand comes to rest on the small of his back. It brings Levi closer to him.

Levi’s brow furrows.

“I love you.” Erwin says, placing a kiss on the top of his head.

Levi’s entire body tenses, and he says between his teeth, hissing between his lips as he tries not to say it. He can’t say it. He needs to be… “I love you too.”

“Stay with me.”

Levi melts against Erwin, brings his arms up to encircle his waist loosely. “I can’t…”

Erwin moves his hand up, cradles Levi’s head and tilts it back to look at him. Levi stares at Erwin’s lips, scared and hungry and longing. His lips part and he sighs softly as Erwin leans down into him.

“Yes.” Erwin pleads, and he feels the words against his mouth, and he feels his tongue flatten to hiss the answer back at him.

Yes.

For all the smiles and the memories and the times he could be with Erwin, be for Erwin, be around Erwin. Yes. Yes. Three letters. One word. One syllable. He can take it. The heat and the comfort and the only thing he’s ever known. Yes. Yes.

Levi pushes away as he feels Erwin on him. He hangs his head and tries to wiggle free. “No.” He succeeds, and his legs don’t feel like his own, and he stumbles into the wall of the hallway. He shakes his head as he looks up at Erwin. He crosses his arms in an attempt to keep his organs intact. “I…” He thinks of Magnolia. He thinks of Petra.

You deserve to be happy.

“Thank you for everything you’ve told me today.” Levi wears the words like unfamiliar clothes, stiff and tight. “But it’s not enough.” He shakes his head. “Fuck, I mean… Like… You know it’s ok to grieve, Erwin. It’s the only type of shit we know.” He tries to hold Erwin’s gaze, but Erwin wilts back toward the kitchen. “Erwin. The only reason why I came this far was because of you.”

Erwin’s nose twitches as his lips seal to a thin line.

“You gave me a place to stay… People to talk to…” Levi rubs his arms. “You cared about me… When I didn’t.” He looks up at Erwin. “It’s not fuckin’ easy. I know it’s not. You know I know.” Levi shakes his head, squeezes his arms against himself. “Fuck, I don’t know what I’m saying…”

“You want more.” Erwin says softly.
“I want you to deal with this instead of hiding it. If I can do this… I’m not fuckin’ fixed by a long shot, but—”

“You are doing so well.”

Levi looks down at the floor and nods. “I’m doing better.” He scratches at his forearm. “I want you to do this so we can both be better. Haven’t you said that?”

Erwin moves his head from side to side, shifts in his spot before saying firmly, “I do not care.”

“What?”

“About myself.” Erwin adds. “I care about you… But…”

Levi moves away from the wall, prowls toward Erwin who takes another few steps back. “What?”

“Levi…” Erwin’s back hits the edge of the island.

“I want you to say that again.” Levi’s hands land heavily on either side of Erwin. He looks up, eyes intense and strained against his flaring anger.

“I don’t… I am not a good person, Levi.”

“See, that right there. That’s bullshit.” Levi steps back and folds his arms against his chest. “Do you think somebody like me would give a fuck about a shitty person? Fuck no. *Fuck* no! How about Hange or Moblit? Even that fucker Mike—he loves you.” Levi shakes his head. “We care about you Erwin.”

“I do not understand why.” Erwin says softly.

“Doesn’t fuckin’ matter. Like…” Levi shakes his head. “Something about the pot calling the kettle black--whatever. But it opens your eyes when you realize… Erwin, do you respect us at all?”

“What? Of… Of course I do.” Erwin steps forward, but Levi steps back.

“Then respect the fact that we love you. Because we know you’re a good person.”

“I…” Erwin leans back against the island again and moves a hand to cover his face. “I failed. I failed you all.”

Levi shakes his head. “You only fail when you give up.”

“I have. I have, Levi. Can’t you see that I have?” He sputters out a laugh, and his fingers claw into his face. “I have given up, and I have failed. What’s even the use?”


“I am not worth shit without you.” Erwin grumbles.

The anger is too much. Words fly from his mouth before he can process them. “Shut up. You’re such a fuckin’ idiot sometimes, Erwin!” Levi boils, spits fire as he continues. “You fuckin’ ended this. *You* did this. *You* fuckin’ said we could be together again if we worked on ourselves.” Levi barks. “*You’re everything* to me. So fuckin’ *act like it*.”

Erwin’s eyes blow wide, and he tries to catch his breath before he response. “I did not say that.”
Levi plants his hands on either side of Erwin and leans up into him. “Fuck you.” He feels Erwin’s chest expand against his, and his eyes grow wide as Levi presses closer. “Fuckin’... God dammit, Erwin! Just... Just give up on whatever your dad wanted you to be. Just be you.”

Erwin stares at him for a long time. He seems to be thinking and rethinking so many responses. He starts sounds that end somewhere in his throat, come out strained as gentle huffs between his lips. His head falls with a lazy nod. “Help me.” His eyes close and his brow furrows. “Levi, please help me. I don’t know...”

Levi steps back, but keeps his arms on either side of Erwin. “I’ll help you.”

Erwin nods.

“But I can’t stay.” He drops an arm to his side. “Not tonight.”

Erwin nods again. “You’ll help me.”

“Right now.” Levi offers his hand out toward the living room.

“I don’t know...” Erwin says weakly.

“I’m here.” Levi stands back on his heels and looks up at Erwin. “You can do it.”

“Tell me...” Erwin sways forward, folds over Levi, and presses his lips to Levi’s hair. “Tell me we will be fine.”

Levi rests his forehead on Erwin’s chest, his body adjusting and finding balance under Erwin’s weight. He forces his head up, bumping Erwin’s chin as he does. A memory wafts the gentle smell of blue flowers in his nose, and he feels the tangle of stems in his hair.

On the street, in the waning light of the day, Erwin had held him in his arms. Bullies were bullies, but Erwin was his friend. His best friend. “But we have each other, okay?” Erwin had said, his breath tickling the hairs on Levi’s scalp as he talked. Levi cried, soft hiccups that were coaxed out with small circles rubbed on his back.

Levi squeezed his eyes shut, his forehead dragging against Erwin’s shoulder, flower petals fluttering to the ground next to splinters of his broken stick. His fingers let loose of his weapon as his arms came up to wrap around Erwin. Hands balled into fists against Erwin’s shirt, he sobbed in the back of his throat, dug his face deep in Erwin’s chest. For so long he had tried to be strong, played strong, pantomimed the meaning of the word. But with Erwin, he could be himself. Erwin wouldn’t judge him. Erwin allowed him weakness; made him human. Made him feel whole.

“We’ll be fine.” Erwin whispered against his hair. Squeezed his arms until a breath sighed out of Levi’s lungs.

Levi wanted anything to make Erwin feel the same way.

Levi rubbed his tear stained cheek against Erwin’s shirt, sniffled before releasing his grip on Erwin’s shirt. He fought through a pout, relaxed his face out of a scowl, and looked up into Erwin’s eyes. Soft blue and endless, gentle and so compassionate. Levi forced a smile until it felt real, until he giggled once and nodded himself dizzy. A flower came loose and tickled at his cheek until Erwin plucked it away.

“Yeah... We’ll be fine.”
That's it. We made it, fam. Thank you for reading this gigantic fic and offering all of your support and love and ideas along the way. It would not have made it this far without, I assure you. This was a wild ride that has been such an important part of my year and self growth, and I'm happy to have shared it with you.

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I will be working on editing this the next two months in preparation for a not-for-profit self-published book release. There will be minor changes made to the story, and completely new illustrations created for each chapter. I will then be selling the original illustrations at a certain price and donating most of the proceeds to charities (K-9 for Warriors and Carbon County Friends of Animals). Please follow me on Tumblr to follow that progress.

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If you enjoyed this story, please share it with your friends. Please leave a comment. Send me messages. Make fanworks. I'll devour anything. I appreciate everything. You are all so fucking amazing, and thank you again for all of your support. I love you all.

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